

# ISRAEL

## A PERSONAL TRAVEL GUIDE



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## INTRODUCTION.

The Israel travel guide you are reading is a greatly expanded version of one I first prepared for an American friend some two decades ago. In it, I have tried to share my experiences and knowledge of Israel based on a lifetime of study and 19 visits to the country, most recently in May 2022. I enjoy independent travel, and this guide was written primarily with such travelers in mind, though the information should be helpful to those on group tours as well. As an American, I have produced a guide that, no doubt, reflects that identity and experience. I hope my readers from other countries will forgive that and will still find useful information to help plan their trips.

I am not in the travel industry. Rather, I am a labor lawyer who loves Israel passionately and wants to encourage others to travel there and experience this wonderful land. My first visit was in November 1988, and I caught the bug; thus, I started visiting every other year or so thereafter, except for 2000-2004, the truly terrible years of the second Palestinian uprising and the terror bombings in Israel cities. Now, with partial retirement, I can go every year, though Covid-19 forced a two-and-a-half-year absence. Even with the mostly peaceful conditions prevailing since then, some friends still asked, “are you sure you want to go back to Israel?” Flare-ups with Gaza or Hizbullah from time to time exacerbate those concerns.

So, how do I answer that? Each trip has been a dream, and travel to Israel is one of the great joys of my life. The security situation is nothing like you imagine or fear. My trips have all been calm and peaceful, and while there is more security than you may be used to in North America or parts of Europe, I have never been afraid, and Israelis are not either. Tourism was booming before the Covid-19 pandemic, and now it is swinging back. I am doing my best to keep up to date with post-Covid closures and business failures, but I am sure I have missed some, so check. But violence, which almost never involved tourists in any event, is *not* generally an issue for you to be concerned about. Even in tense times, Israeli cities are safer than the street crime one would risk in any major American city—before we get to the gun violence and mass shootings now routinely plaguing the US. So, I encourage you not to give in to irrational and uninformed fears, and don’t pay much attention to friends who have never been there who say, “I can’t believe you’re going to Israel!!” Terror can happen anywhere, and does—New York, Madrid, London, Sydney, Ottawa, Paris—that sad list goes on. And while I was in Israel for my last trip, 18 children and two teachers were gunned down in a school. Within hours of your arrival, you will wonder why you ever

worried. So, go already! I hope you find the information I have prepared about traveling in Israel and life in that country interesting and helpful in planning your trip.

This is a personal guide by an amateur writer, not a comprehensive, professional guide, so I suggest some more detailed resources to help you prepare for the trip. In my view, the best guidebook remains **Frommer's Israel** (last edition 2017). **Fodor's Israel** is another good option. Avoid the Lonely Planet Guide for Israel; it has far too many inaccuracies and significant bias against Israel. For an excellent look at life in this complex country, read **Donna Rosenthal's *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land***. While dated, it is the best book of its kind today. If you want to know more about the history of the country from a Palestinian perspective, I suggest **Sari Nusseibeh's *Once Upon a Country***. A magnificent book on the history of Jerusalem in particular is ***Jerusalem: A Biography* by Simon Sebag Montefiore**. It's an exhaustive but fascinating history of this city, which is holy to more people than any other on Earth.



Print guidebooks are fading largely because the Internet offers the most current and helpful information on travel, with unparalleled chances to learn from fellow travelers. **The best resource by far is the Israel travel forum and customer reviews of hotels and restaurants found on TripAdvisor ([www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com));** search for TripAdvisor Israel forums to get there. I seldom travel anywhere without consulting TripAdvisor. I'm a frequent poster on that forum (under the name "Douglas D") as you'll see, and we have many Israelis, including tour guides, who participate and help travelers. I blog my trips under Douglas's Trip Report (2022); search for that term, and you'll find my detailed reports. The Israel forum on TripAdvisor is a great place to pose questions and get answers from people with experience in the country, often within hours. You probably found me through that forum. **Of course, TripAdvisor neither endorses nor is in any way responsible for the content of this guide.**

A podcaster and travel writer named Chris Christensen has a wonderful, Internet interview program on travel at <https://amateurtraveler.com>. My podcast interview on Israel travel is Episode 167, and I also did an interview focusing specifically on Jerusalem at Episode 192. Check out his site for other destinations, by the way—it's an extraordinary (and free) resource. I also recently discovered a **YouTube channel for TravelingIsrael.com**, where a guide named Oren offers a lot of useful and honest, real tips on visiting Israel, so check that out.

Where I recommend specific hotels, restaurants, or guides in this guide, **all I ask is that you tell them that Douglas Duckett of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA sent you.** I receive no compensation, commissions, or kickbacks from these people, but I do like them to know I made the referral, so please let them know. Other than considering a donation to the YMCA as I suggest below, that is all I ask for providing you this information. There are many other wonderful people and places in Israel, to be sure, but I generally list only what I have personally experienced, unless otherwise noted. As noted above, I don't hold this out as a comprehensive guide, and when I call it a "personal guide," it is exactly that. With my guide come my opinions, and they are mine alone, as are any mistakes. But you must admit, the price is right!

Finally, before proceeding to my specific recommendations, many people to whom I have sent this guide over the years have asked if they can pay me for it. The answer is a firm: "Thank you, but no." But if you do find this information useful, you might consider donating \$25 or more to the

**Jerusalem International YMCA** for its Jewish-Arab Peace Preschool, called “**Gan ha-Shalom**,” and please tell them that I sent you. The Jerusalem International YMCA offers interfaith programs that emphasize reconciliation and co-existence in this troubled land, and its work is remarkable. It was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize at one point. You’ll read more about it later in this guide. But I am particularly passionate about Gan ha-Shalom, a program that is committed to building bridges of understanding across the Jewish-Arab divide while children are young and have not yet learned to hate or fear. It is truly remarkable, and many families, particularly Arab families, cannot afford the more than \$8,000 USD annual tuition, threatening the multicultural nature of the program. Please be generous. **The easiest and best way to do this is through the Friends of the Jerusalem International YMCA website at [www.friendsofjiy.org](http://www.friendsofjiy.org). Click “Give,” and then click “Select a designation,” then click “Peace Preschool.” In the comments section, you can write that you are making the donation in honor of Douglas Duckett’s guidebook.**



For more information about the Jerusalem International YMCA and its other, vital programs, see [www.jerusalemymca.org](http://www.jerusalemymca.org). Thanks for considering a donation to this very worthy cause. And for non-Christian readers, I assure you that the YMCA offers programming for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, with members from all three communities, Israeli Jews and Muslims who have served as CEO, and a varied and integrated staff and board that includes Jews, Christian and Muslim Arabs, and expatriates who are living in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem International YMCA is a vital resource for Israel and all the diverse communities that make up the rich mosaic that is Jerusalem.

## GETTING THERE.

You have several carriers to choose from in flying to Israel. Obviously, El Al Israel Airlines serves the country with the most flights, including direct flights from several American cities. The cost is competitive, and El Al also offers an early start to your Israel experience. I also rank El Al’s rigorous security measures as a plus, though the process can feel intrusive to those not used to it. On the negative side, El Al may have less solicitous service and seemingly a more chaotic clientele, including ultra-Orthodox men who sometimes balk at sitting next to women. (Note that I have not flown El Al in over two decades, and I have heard the service has improved since then.) But remember that El Al does not fly on Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, which runs from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. This can cut into your available vacation time, particularly if you need to fly on weekends. I flew El Al the first two times, largely to support Israel, but have since found other airlines more convenient.



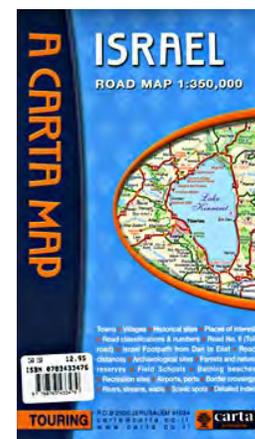
Delta Air Lines offers nonstop flights from New York/JFK to Ben Gurion Airport and back. I have flown this route many times now and just love Delta. United also offers non-stop flights to Israel from Newark, and I’ve heard that is a good option. For Canadian (and even American) readers, Air Canada offers convenient, nonstop services from Toronto (and El Al also



serves Toronto). Lufthansa, Air France, KLM, and British Airways also serve Israel, and they are easy to connect to in Europe via various American carriers. Virgin Atlantic has added direct flights from London for UK visitors and those connecting through London. But note: Israel is not the most competitive market for airfares, and flights tend to be expensive, and post-COVID, the industry is still recovering potentially adding flights that had been cancelled.

## GETTING AROUND.

If you can afford it, I highly recommend renting a car and driving yourself for at least part of the trip. It is the best way to see Israel, particularly if you will be touring Galilee and the countryside in the North or the desert south, which are not practical to tour using public transportation. Israel is very small (about the size of New Jersey), and nothing is very far apart (except for Eilat, at the southern tip of the country on the Red Sea). Indeed, you could drive from the northernmost tip to Eilat in six to seven hours, though no one would ever do that since there are so many amazing places in between. Most road signs are in English as well as Hebrew and Arabic, and it is fairly easy to get around, at least outside the cities. By renting a car, you are not tied to bus schedules or someone else's idea of what you should see and when. That said, bus service is quite extensive, inexpensive, and a good option for intercity travel, and you can even put your luggage underneath in the cargo hold. Trains are also an option for some routes, and you can read more on both below.



If you are renting a car, definitely do so on-line before you leave; you will save a lot of money over waiting to rent once you arrive in Israel. I have often used an Israeli company called **Eldan** for rental cars. Eldan offers with a 20% discount for Internet bookings through [www.eldan.co.il](http://www.eldan.co.il), and I have generally found the service good, but as explained below, they no longer allow waiver of the CDW coverage. Eldan also has a hotel in Jerusalem next to the YMCA; you can book the hotel with the car as a package deal. **Hertz**, **Avis**, and **Budget** also offer rental cars in Israel. Book through each company's Israel web site (**with the suffix .co.il**), **not the US sites or third-party sites**, as you may not get the full price including the required insurance. **Avis is now my favorite** because they do allow you to use your credit card insurance and are responsive to e-mails; see [www.avis.co.il](http://www.avis.co.il). **Hertz** is a good option but tends to be more expensive; [www.hertz.co.il](http://www.hertz.co.il). **Budget** is a newer player in Israel, and I used them in 2006, but I had a terrible customer-service experience with Budget's Tel Aviv office, and others have also reported negative experiences more recently. **At all costs, avoid Sixt Israel**—their Israeli franchisee has **scores of negative reports** on TripAdvisor! I note that **Thrifty** and some other American operators now have a presence in Israel through local franchisees, but reports have been mixed. (Note that in Israel, **Enterprise is Eldan**, so just use the Eldan site to book.) **Note:** You probably don't need an international driver's license so long as your license has your information in Latin-alphabet letters. If not, you may need to obtain the international driver's license, which basically translates the information into English. But confirm what you need directly through your rental car company.

Most US bank credit cards do not offer "CDW" coverage for rental cars in Israel, which allows visitors to avoid part of the expensive insurance coverage sold by the car rental companies. There are exceptions—**MasterCard World Cards** offer the CDW coverage (I have one for just this

purpose) and **all Chase and Citi cards and my Delta American Express Platinum card** in the US now offer CDW in Israel as well. Unless you have a card that offers CDW, you have no choice but to purchase a package of vehicle insurance plus the third-party liability insurance, and this adds to already high costs. (**Note:** even if your credit card provides CDW coverage, you **always** are required to purchase third-party liability coverage, which is usually coded “LI.” For Canadian readers, more Canadian bank cards seem to offer CDW coverage in Israel—check to be sure.) If your card does offer CDW, you will need to bring written verification of that coverage with you; my company sends me a .pdf letter to that effect upon request through the customer service line. But Eldan now requires renters to pay for their full CDW package even they have credit card coverage; you can waive it but won’t save money. (!) Hertz only offers the full CDW coverage online; walk-in customers with credit card coverage can waive it, but walk-in rates are always higher than advance, on-line reservations. **Avis does allow you to waive the CDW if you book online;** write [vip@avis.co.il](mailto:vip@avis.co.il) if you have any problem. Eldan’s change frankly makes no sense, and **for that reason, I have moved my business to Avis, for now at least.** That said, the price differential between purchasing the basic CDW (+LI) coverage and using my credit-card coverage is now small, so on the last trip, I just purchased the basic package.

Here is a suggestion to reduce rental car costs and hassles. If you start your trip in Tel Aviv and end in Jerusalem, you won’t need and do not want a car in either of those cities. (**Remember that despite the “TLV” code, the airport is not in Tel Aviv but between that city and Jerusalem, easily accessible to or from both.**) Both cities are quite confusing to drive in, city traffic is far worse than in the countryside, and trust me—parking in either city is a real nightmare. So, you can rent the car for pick up in Tel Aviv on the day you leave the city to head north (or south), and then drop it off once you arrive in Jerusalem, or vice versa. All the car rental companies have offices in both cities. This approach cuts both costs and stress. I have done this for years now and never missed having a car in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. In fact, just the drive into Jerusalem in 2022 about put me in my grave. 😊 Cab or bus fares are far less than rental costs for those days, and it’s easy to take a cab or train from the airport into Tel Aviv, or a cab, sherut (group taxi), or train to or from Jerusalem, using the new rail option.



Ask for air conditioning—you’ll need it in warmer months or areas. Note that rental costs are high compared to the US at least, particularly with the required insurance. I still find the convenience worth it. Be aware that rental cars (at least the less expensive ones) are much smaller than the cars that most North Americans are used to driving, and there will be more kilometers and dings on the car. (Take pictures or videos to document the car’s condition when you pick it up.) For Europeans, the smaller cars will be no surprise. Gasoline is also very expensive in Israel (as in Europe)—about twice as high or more than in the US—but the country is so small that you won’t use that much. I drive all over and refill no more than two or three times.

Be aware when driving that there are no formal borders or markers as such to mark the limits of the West Bank (the area conquered from Jordan in 1967), nor is it typically indicated on Israeli road maps. Israelis call the old border between the territories conquered in 1967 and Israel proper “the Green Line.” Most up-to-date maps do show the areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority (mainly large cities). You can purchase great road maps from **Carta Israel**. The Carta Touring Atlas and Guide is wonderful as well, and since it is in booklet form, it is easier to use in a car, with touring tips in the margins. Others prefer the more detailed **MAPA** maps, which are

also terrific. (You can do a Google search to find places to buy them on-line.) Both products clearly show the areas under Palestinian control and also the security barrier, which is basically the closest we now have to a “border” between Israel proper and the West Bank, which is far more evident on the ground than it used to be. Of course, Israel has completely withdrawn from the Gaza Strip, now under Hamas rule, and Gaza is closed to tourists. In most places, the security barrier, a high wall in some places, gives you an obvious indication where the point of Israeli control is, but that barrier is not complete all the way around the West Bank. Even where there is no barrier, however, there are IDF checkpoints with big, red signs telling Israelis not to enter at the entrance to the territories. You can’t just wander unknowingly into the West Bank.

You cannot drive an Israeli rental car into the areas under Palestinian Authority control (called “Area A”); as noted above—the cities of Jericho, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Tulkarm, and most of Hebron, among others. I would use some caution about driving on your own in other areas of the West Bank, except as noted below. I have toured Hebron with a guide on two trips and felt safe, though Hebron is at times the focus of disturbances. **Abraham Tours** ([www.abrahamtours.com](http://www.abrahamtours.com)) offers tours to parts of the West Bank, including Palestinian cities such as Ramallah, Nablus, and Jenin, and that’s a good option. Bethlehem and Jericho are very safe to visit on your own, but again, not with an Israeli rental car, because those are in “Area A.”

Most of the West Bank outside of the cities, however, is under Israeli security control (Area C), and neither Area C nor Area B (Israeli security control, Palestinian civil control) is barred to Israeli rental cars. Please note that **it is very safe and permitted to drive on your own to Masada and the Dead Sea through the West Bank from Jerusalem** on Highway 1, then south on Route 90 along the Dead Sea. You can also drive Route 90 south from Tiberias to the Dead Sea through the Jordan Valley, a route I have driven many times. Be aware that it is a winding, two-lane road with lots of truck traffic and the attendant risk of accidents, so don’t drive this route at night. In the winter/rainy season, there can also be the risk of flash floods and washouts. Check with your rental car company on any specific restrictions to be safe. Even if covered, use good sense, and ask locals before setting out. You can take an Arab cab or Arab bus from Jerusalem for the short trip into Bethlehem; more information on that in the Jerusalem section later in this guide.

Israeli drivers are less patient and more aggressive than what most North Americans are used to, at least outside of cities like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. People worry about terrorism when traveling to Israel, but road accidents are more of a risk. That said, driving in Israel is very possible to do; I’ve done it on all but two of my 19 trips. I have found no problem driving in the countryside between cities, but driving in the cities, especially Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, can be daunting and is simply not worth it. To some degree, you must drive like the locals to get anywhere. If you wait patiently for someone to let you in at a merge, for instance, you may miss your flight home! 😊

**A note on using a GPS.** You can use your smartphone for driving directions in Israel (assuming you have a data plan). The two best apps are Google Maps and Waze (an Israeli product). (I far prefer Google Maps; the app even has traffic indicators. Even though Waze can be set to speak in English, the maps are in Hebrew, a problem for most visitors.) A challenge with any GPS system, however, is the spelling of cities or roads in English, which can make them confusing and cumbersome to use. While there is only one way to spell a city or a road in Hebrew, there



may be several ways to transliterate that into English. For example, is it “Caesarea” or “Kesaryia” or “Qesarya”? (Road signs use all three—and more.) A few years back when I used Garmin, I entered in an address on King David Street, one of Jerusalem’s major streets on which the King David Hotel, the YMCA, and all the rental car offices are located. Nothing came up. When I entered “King,” I had a whole bunch of other streets, but not King David Street. When I entered just “David,” there was no “King David Street,” but “David ha-Melech Street” did turn up. Now, I speak Hebrew and happen to know that is how one says “King David” in Hebrew, but a non-Hebrew speaker would be flummoxed. So, be sure to have back-up maps. On my recent trips, however, Google Maps has worked like a charm with very few problems. I love it now.

**Hiring Tour Guides.** If driving makes you nervous, you might consider hiring a guide to drive you for at least a good segment of the trip, with free days in some cities. This works particularly well if you have a group of three or four or more, where the cost can be shared. **Madeleine Lavine, based in Jerusalem, has long been my favorite guide**, and she is licensed to drive tourists throughout Israel. You can contact her at [madl@zahav.net.il](mailto:madl@zahav.net.il) or at (054) 450-4098. **Eyal Amos Reuven is an outstanding guide based in Jerusalem** whom I toured with in 2018 and 2022, and **he has become my other favorite guide**. Eyal is also licensed to drive tourists and has access to larger cars for families and groups of tourists; see [www.TravelingJerusalem.com](http://www.TravelingJerusalem.com); e-mail [eyal@travelingjerusalem.com](mailto:eyal@travelingjerusalem.com); and you can reach him by telephone at +972-2-615-4004 or +972-50-866-3484 (Israelis use WhatsApp extensively, and that’s an easy and free way to call.) **I also love touring with Jonathan (Yonatan) Kohn**, a former American based in Tel Aviv and he is also licensed to drive tourists; (tel. (054) 554-3448, [jonskohn@hotmail.com](mailto:jonskohn@hotmail.com)). **David Wexler** is another driving guide who frequently helps people on TripAdvisor, and he also works with many large, Christian groups; see [www.davidsland.com](http://www.davidsland.com); [david@davidsland.com](mailto:david@davidsland.com); cell (054) 330-0941. I have also toured with **Moti Bar-Tuv** ([moti@travel-israel.info](mailto:moti@travel-israel.info); tel 972-52-226-8331; from the United States, call (213) 293-3794). Moti is a native Israeli with excellent English; while he is based in the north, he works all over and is a terrific guide. I and several friends have used **Richard Woolf** who hails from the UK originally. While he lives and most often works in the North, he tours elsewhere as well. See [woolfr@netvision.net.il](mailto:woolfr@netvision.net.il), tel. 04-693-5377, cell 050-589-4647, website: [www.safed.co.il/woolfguide.html](http://www.safed.co.il/woolfguide.html)). I have also toured Zikhron Ya’akov with a newer guide named **Russell Abel**, and he is enthusiastic and good at his work. You can reach him at (050) 666-6981 or [Russell@russell.co.il](mailto:Russell@russell.co.il). While I have not toured with her, **Oreet Segal** is active and very helpful on the Israel forum, and she is clearly knowledgeable, with many others recommending her. She is also licensed to drive tourists; e-mail [seeingisrael@gmail.com](mailto:seeingisrael@gmail.com); tel. 972-54-2022458 or (914) 294-3888, a local call in the US and Canada. You can also read more about Oreet on her Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/Seeing-Israel-with-Oreet-Oreet-Segal-131182290555972>.

Finally, if you don’t rent a car, consider using a *sherut*, an inter-city group taxi, to travel from the airport to Jerusalem or Haifa, or between some cities. (Sheruts don’t run between the airport and Tel Aviv because the private taxi fare is not that high, but there are bus and rail options except on Shabbat.) Sheruts leave as soon as they fill up with passengers after any flight. They will either take you directly to your hotel (in some order, of course) or to the central bus station for the city, from which you can either take another cab or a bus to your hotel. (Ask which they will do first so you’re not surprised.) They don’t cost much more than taking a bus (about ₪69 NIS or \$21 USD from the airport to Jerusalem), and it’s quicker. (The currency symbol for the New Israeli Shekel (NIS) is ₪, used like \$ or €) You can also get a sherut back to the airport, and you can

arrange this through your hotel. Or course, taxi service is also available, but at a higher cost. A taxi should run about ₪273 (\$82 USD) to the airport from Jerusalem for weekdays; ₪325 (\$97 USD) for evenings, Shabbat, or holidays; there are also small surcharges per-bag or for extra passengers. Maximum rates are about ₪144 (\$43 USD) from Tel Aviv; ₪163 (\$49 USD) on evenings, Shabbat, or holidays. In both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, some sheruts also travel fixed routes within the cities, and there is some intercity sherut service, particularly between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Rates can change, and currency conversion rates were current as of May 2022 (check [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com) or its terrific, downloadable app). Also, a usage note: the plural of the word “sherut” in this context is not “sherutim.” Those are toilets. In Hebrew, the plural would be “moniot sherut” (“service taxis”). Ask for “sherutim,” and you will likely be surprised. 😊



For travel both within and between the cities, the **bus system** is widely used and easy to navigate. Your hotel can help you identify the needed route; you can also post an inquiry on the TripAdvisor forum, because the Israelis who post there are remarkably helpful. Egged is the main company (see logo at left.) For bus information from all the bus companies, see [www.bus.co.il](http://www.bus.co.il). **Note:** For travel on city buses in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, you will need to purchase a smart card called a **Rav-Kav**, which you can buy at the airport from a kiosk or in other places; they don't accept cash. Intercity buses normally do accept cash, but the Rav-Kav is accepted on buses and trains through the country, so it's very handy. See the Rav-Kav thread under Top Questions on the TripAdvisor Israel Forum for more information. Note: you can also download and use the convenient **Moovit** app.

**But it is not practical to tour the north of the country, the desert areas of the Negev, or the Dead Sea/Masada area using public transport and buses alone.** For those areas, you need a rental car, group tour, or driving guide, because the buses don't go to sites of interest outside of the cities. But to get from one city to another, or anywhere within the cities, buses are a very practical, inexpensive, and safe option.



On two trips, I traveled by **train** from Haifa in the north to Be'er Sheva in the Negev region and found that Israel Railways is a delightful way to transit the country. Consider that option when you don't need the rental car at your destination, though a company like Eldan has offices in several cities. On one trip, I took the train from Tel Aviv to Haifa as well. You can check out routes, timetables, and prices at [www.rail.co.il/EN](http://www.rail.co.il/EN). I suggest that you spend the extra ₪5.00 (\$1.50 USD) to get a seat in the reserved car, called “makom shamur” in Hebrew. It is well worth it, as the regular cars can be packed, particularly around the weekends when soldiers travel for free. Unfortunately, the reserved car tickets are not available during peak travel times on Friday or early Sunday mornings—the very time when they are most needed! There is now high-speed rail between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, stopping at the airport, and outside of Shabbat (when it's closed), this is a great option!

**Taxis** are also plentiful, and be advised that taxi drivers are **required by law** to use the meter for travel within the cities. Some drivers may attempt to avoid this by simply not turning the meter on and quoting you a fixed rate in shekels. While quoting a fixed rate is perfectly appropriate for going to the airport, for trips between cities (those rates are regulated), or for trips where you are asking the driver to stop and wait for you, it is neither advisable nor legal for drivers to insist on a fixed rate for a simple trip within a city. You will nearly always do better for trips within a city if you use the meter, so **insist that the driver turn on the meter**. Get out without paying if the

driver refuses, as is your right—the driver is breaking the law by refusing. Don't be bullied. All the drivers understand some English, but you can say your destination when entering the cab while adding, in Hebrew, “im (eem) moneh” (“with the meter”). Or just ask for a receipt (“kabbalah” in Hebrew); they must use the meter to generate a receipt. The problem is less endemic than it used to be, but stick to your guns and make sure that the meter has been turned on. But you can simply grab a cab on the street or through your hotel—just make sure that the driver turns on the meter! You will pay slightly more if you or the hotel calls for the cab rather than you flagging one on the street, but it's a small surcharge. **And note—it is not customary in Israel to tip cab**



**drivers** unless they perform a special service, like carrying bags into the building. If you give a cab driver ₪60 for a ₪59 fare, he will look for a shekel coin to give you; you can tell him to round up if you'd like.

Neither Uber nor Lyft ride-sharing apps are legal in Israel at this point. You can download the app for **Gett** to request and pay for cabs—very convenient! I have used Gett on recent trips, and I'm sold; it works just like the Uber or Lyft apps but calls a regular cab. And no arguments over using the meter!

## WHEN TO GO.

This depends on several different factors. Most of all, of course, it depends on your schedule and when you can travel, perhaps including school breaks. But you should also consider the weather in Israel, what kind of experience you are looking for, costs (peak and off-season), and the calendar of Jewish and Christian holidays (the latter relevant only because of outside tourists; the Christian population is under 2%, and Christian holidays are not observed in Israel).

Let's start with the weather. Israel has only two primary seasons with “shoulder seasons” in between. The summer is from May to October. During that time, it is warm to hot and sunny every day and almost never rains. Sometime in October or November, the “winter” begins with the arrival of the rains (very welcome in this parched land), and this lasts until sometime in March or early April. We had a surprising amount of rain on one October visit, unusual for that time of year, but that is rare indeed and we still were able to do and see nearly everything we wanted. If you are watching costs, November can be a less expensive time to visit, but the weather can be less predictable. On most of my November trips, I've had flawless, warm-to-mild weather; on one, I had quite a bit more rain, including major blocks over several days and temperatures in the 50s F (low teens C). In November, take light sweaters and a light jacket, but remember to take hats for the sun, which can still be intense. (Layering works well.) March can also be quite nice, with wildflowers blooming in the countryside after the winter rains, though it can be cool. I went in March for one trip and loved it, despite some rain, with green vegetation carpeting what would soon be brown desert hillsides! If you go in December through February, know that the weather can be quite cool, wet, and even nasty. Snow is rare (and only in the higher elevations, such as Jerusalem), but temperatures in the 40s F (single digits Celsius) with rain are common—and many buildings lack central heating, making the room quite chilly. From May through mid-October, rain will not be an issue. I have made three trips in late June, and it can be hot, but not brutally so as a rule. May is a great time to go, unless like one friend you have allergies to olive tree pollen, because they're in full bloom then. Temperatures are generally in the 70s F (high 20s C) every day except occasional heat waves, and the evenings are just delightful. The temperatures are also

quite nice in October, though more variable. Even in the summer, we have sometimes needed a light jacket for evenings in Jerusalem, when it cools off in a lovely way. July and August into September will be quite hot, even brutally so, and the country is more crowded with families. The climate is basically very similar to Southern California. At the Dead Sea or Eilat, though, it is warm to hot year around, and extremely hot in the summer, like Arizona or Mexico.

Despite the hot weather, summer is peak season for Israel travel, with more crowding, higher hotel prices, and even minimum stays at some hotels. Unless July or August is the only time you can go, I recommend avoiding it. You will also find peak prices and crowding around the major Jewish holidays, especially in the fall with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur through Sukkot and Simhat Torah and during Passover in the spring. In Jerusalem in particular, prices also go up around Chanukah/Christmas and around Easter, which is usually (but not always) in the same week as Passover. (And remember, in Israel you can have both the Latin/Western Easter and the Orthodox/Eastern Easter—and they can be the same or different Sundays!)

In sum, my favorite times to visit Israel are from late April (after Easter and the end of Passover) through May, and late October (after Simhat Torah—search Google for the date in any civil year) through mid-November, with a recent affinity for green March. But you can have a good trip to Israel in any time of year if you plan appropriately.

## BOOKING HOTELS.

Hotels in Israel generally offer smaller, less opulent rooms than most North Americans are used to, and on top of that, in recent years hotel prices in Israel have really surged. It is harder and harder to travel to Israel on a modest budget, but it is still possible to find good places at more reasonable prices. When planning, just think of what it would cost to travel to New York or London, and you won't be as shocked.

**I recommend two tour agencies whom you can use to book hotels**, and I have generally found that they have negotiated better rates than direct booking, even lower than Internet rates. For many years, I have used **Isram** (formerly Regent Tours), and **you can call Elena Orlovsky at Isram Israel toll-free from the United States at (866) 383-6130, ext. 267. If calling within Israel, dial (03) 694-7777 ext. 267, or from other countries, dial 972-3-694-7777, ext. 267. You can also e-mail Elena at [elena@isram.co.il](mailto:elena@isram.co.il).** Another, newer player in the tour booking market is **Eyal Amos Reuven and his company TravelingJerusalem**, and they guarantee the best price based on that booking date. You can reach Eyal at [eyal@travelingjerusalem.com](mailto:eyal@travelingjerusalem.com) or call him at 972-2-615-4004, and you can use WhatsApp to do that for free. With either company, please mention that I sent you, and I also ask that you mention my referral if you book directly at any of the hotels that I recommend. **Full disclosure:** While I first came to know Eyal as a guide whom I toured with, he has since become a close friend, and while I have not yet used his company to book hotel rooms, I will do so for my next trip in March 2023. Whomever you use, I recommend confirming the reservation directly with the hotel as well to avoid any possible miscommunication on dates and details—being too careful never hurt. Both **Isram** and **TravelingJerusalem** can also plan your tour, connect you with tour guides or groups (remember: Eyal's primary work is as a tour guide), and they can also help organize bar and bat mitzvah trips for families. Both companies can also book **the VIP service to expedite your airport experience**; while I don't usually spend

that kind of money, I used this service on my most recent, return trip because of the Covid protocols, and it made arriving and departing a lot easier!

## ISRAEL ON A BUDGET.

To expand a bit on the cost issue, it is possible to tour Israel less expensively, but it takes careful planning. For accommodations, look for places like the **Abraham Hostels** in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Eilat ([www.abrahamhostels.com](http://www.abrahamhostels.com)), which get excellent reviews. Other options include hostels through the Israel Youth Hostel Association ([en.iyha.org.il](http://en.iyha.org.il)) and religious pilgrim hostels, sometimes called “hospices” (not related to medical care), which are generally open to people of all faiths or no faith. A note on the word “hostel”—in Israel, the good hostels are *not* just for young people or backpackers and are more akin to motels in North America, usually offering private rooms, many with their own baths. Many travelers now use Airbnb or similar sites to rent rooms or a flat at lower costs, and if you are traveling with a family or group and in a city for several days, renting apartments and self-catering may save money. TripAdvisor regulars on the Israel Forum can be a lot of help in this area. You can also try couch-surfing, but I’m 65 and spoiled and have no experience to offer in that area! **But remember: Israel is *not* a “show-up-and-wing-it” destination.** At least plan ahead where you will be sleeping every night.

Nearly all Israeli hotels come with huge breakfast spreads that will likely fill you past lunch, and some hostels provide that. For dinner, you can eat inexpensively with “street food” such as falafel (vegetarian and probably vegan) or shwarma (like gyros). Buses are plentiful and inexpensive, and most museum admission fees are not high. Use recommended “free” tours and audio guides. Hitchhiking was once prevalent in Israel, but those days are over for security reasons, so don’t.

## SECURITY ISSUES.

Speaking of security, this is a constant aspect of Israeli life, and I won’t minimize it. Despite what you may hear and read, however, you are safer in Israel than in most major American cities, and any mass terror-related incidents are long past, unlike the awful years of 2001-03. Any attack is disturbing, but tourists are not the targets, though a handful have been caught up in the violence. But here is a sobering statistic. My hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio sees up to 80 homicides in a year out of a population of 350,000. Extrapolated to a population the size of Israel (about 9,000,000), that would be the equivalent of more than 2,000 dead *in just one year*. **Yet fewer people than that have been killed in terror attacks in all of Israel’s history!** And the per-capita murder rate is more than four times higher in the US than Israel’s homicide rate from all causes. Of course, we routinely now have mass shootings in the US. You don’t worry about going to Las Vegas, Paris, or New York, so unless there is an actual war, don’t worry about going to Israel.

Every time I have traveled to Israel, I always felt utterly safe, even in earlier years when the situation was far worse. Neither I nor my travel companions were ever afraid—even my husband, who is rather risk-averse, to be honest. **Don’t judge by the media image!** Just pay attention to the news when in Israel, ask for local advice on conditions in more sensitive areas and times, and use common sense. For example, when Jerusalem is tense, I tend to avoid the Damascus Gate area

on the north side of the Old City, and on Fridays around the noon prayer time I might avoid the Muslim Quarter. That's it. That does not affect 95% of what you'd want to do while in the city.

You will at times see armed soldiers or civil guards, some in uniform, some not. This does *not* mean something untoward is happening. It is just a fact of life in Israel, and you will get used to it. Some Israeli civilians carry pistols, especially in Jerusalem. Do what I do—if the locals around you look concerned, worry; otherwise, don't. Israelis have no death wish, particularly when their children are around; if they look mellow, be mellow. Some hotels and museums or other public places will have a security guard at the door who will check your bag, perhaps your ID, and you. It's a shame it must be, but their presence makes me feel safer, not less so.

But *never* leave a bag or item of luggage unattended in Israel, at the airport or anywhere else, not even for a minute or two. If you do, you are both taking a risk and may well return to find that the bomb squad has arrived and blown up your bag. Similarly, when approaching many religious or political sites or other public places, you may need to open any bags, back-packs, or purses for inspection, as noted above. While less common now, it happens—just roll with it.

At the airport (for your flight to Israel if on El Al; for any flight going out) you will be subjected to questioning by Israeli security agents, some of which may seem pointless, repetitive, and intrusive. I have been asked where I learned Hebrew and for the names and addresses of my Israeli friends. It can be intense and even a little intimidating. Just answer honestly and keep your cool—don't show attitude or irritation. They are looking for nervousness, unrest, and inconsistency (hence the repeated questions). Your bags may be searched, though the airport now uses more sophisticated X-ray techniques behind the scenes, so you are less likely to be asked to open a bag.

They may open it, as the TSA does at times in the US. But the experience can be quite different from US airport security, and, frankly, it's far more effective. I've often heard Israelis say that "you screen things. We screen people." Don't take it personally—the security agents cannot read minds or hearts. You also need to understand that there is an overt profiling aspect to Israeli security. If you have an Arab name, are Muslim or of Middle Eastern background, or have visited Arab families or areas, you may be subject to more questioning and perhaps searches than others. If you are Jewish, it will probably be easier. Is this racist? Perhaps to some degree it is. Security doesn't know quite what to make of me as a non-Jew who speaks Hebrew, and in 1993 I was very upset when I was pulled out for two and a half hours of intensive questioning and a complete item-by-item search of my luggage, likely because I had stayed with some Israeli Arab friends and don't otherwise fit the profile of most Christian visitors to Israel. After the September 11 attacks, I am far more understanding that Israelis don't have the luxury to debate the niceties of intrusive security in a world where they know that there are so many people trying to kill them. In recent years, perhaps because of technological advances in screening, the questioning seems less intense.



Do not try to photograph soldiers or military installations without permission. And while this is not a security issue, it is also advisable not to photograph Muslim Arabs or ultra-Orthodox Jews without asking for permission since many of them view taking their photograph as a violation of the commandment against graven images (or risking the evil eye). It is also simple courtesy not to treat people like a zoo exhibit. Also, don't take photos on Shabbat (the Sabbath) or Jewish holy days at the Western Wall or in religious Jewish neighborhoods. In short, be respectful.

I suggest that you carry your passport; you will often need it in circumstances you would not expect (checking into hotels, financial transactions, and going to some sites). You could take a copy, but by Israeli law everyone must carry ID, and for tourists, that's your passport. Carry proof of Covid vaccination as well (and currently, Israel issues a "green pass" to vaccinated visitors). I also recommend that you carry a small bag/backpack big enough to carry your passport and wallet, a guidebook, maps, a Bible (you'll see frequent references at historical sites), water, and miscellaneous day-trip items. (Of course, some of this you may be able to carry on your phone or tablet, but be aware of theft risks as you would anywhere.) I carry my bag with me everywhere and know to start opening the zippers as I approach a security check point. Carry something that is secure and can't be easily ripped off. While street crime in Israel remains far lower than in the US, there are occasional pickpockets or thieves. On one trip, a thief lifted a digital camera out of a man's bag in the middle of an Old City walking tour. On another, my friend's day-bag was either lost or stolen in Tel Aviv. Those were the most "dangerous" things I saw in 19 trips traveling on my own all over the country. Things like that can happen anywhere, of course, and they do, far more often, in any major American or European city. You're safe in Israel. You really are.

## CHANGING MONEY.



Israel's currency is the New Israeli Shekel, abbreviated NIS, and as noted earlier, the currency symbol is ₪. If you have an ATM card from a bank in the Cirrus or Plus networks, by all means convert your currency in Israel using an ATM. It is incredibly easy and gives good rates. You simply insert your card, instructions flash up in English (or you choose English, usually a UK or US flag icon), and you enter in the number of shekels you want to withdraw. The system will automatically debit your checking account in dollars at the current conversion rate (as of May 2022, \$1.00 USD = ₪3.33). You can also change cash at authorized money changing stores or the post office, but why risk carrying lots of cash? **Do not** change your money into shekels at home—you will get a terrible rate!



One advantage that tourists from abroad have is that we are exempt from paying the 17% value added tax (VAT) on hotel rooms or any meals or bar bills charged to the hotel room. So, when buying meals or drinks in your hotel, charge them to your room rather than paying cash or using a credit card. Most Israeli hotels and restaurants accept major credit cards. Note, though, that Visa, MasterCard, and American Express may charge "foreign currency conversion fees" that they often fail to disclose. (**Capital One and Delta's Platinum American Express waive those fees**, a major plus, and there are others.) At as much as 3%, this charge adds up, and is a major irritant to me. Banks usually charge that same fee for ATM withdrawals; still, the ATM route is far more convenient and safer than carrying around large sums of cash; plus, converting cash also has a fee. Just check with your bank on fees so you will know up front what you will be paying. Israeli bank ATMs have started to charge flat, per-transaction fees, and all stand-alone, non-bank ATMs do. **But Bank Ha-Poalim does not charge that, so look for Poalim ATMs.** Before you leave, notify your bank and your credit card companies of your travel plans so that the fraud unit doesn't freeze your cards because someone is using them in Israel! You may also wish to ask your bank to increase the amount you can withdraw through an ATM per day as lower limits



might restrict what you need. And if you have a lot on deposit, ask them to waive the foreign currency transaction fees on ATM withdrawals, or set up an account with **Capital One 360** or another bank that does not charge those fees.

## TIPPING.

Tipping is less universal and customary in Israel than it is in North America and much of Europe. But it is more common than it used to be, so here are some guidelines:

- In **restaurants**, where service is not included in the bill (usually clearly indicated, and almost always not included), tip 12-15%. You can leave more, of course, but Israelis do not routinely tip at the customary 15-20% rate found in North America. While some restaurants are now allowing customers to add the tip to a credit card bill, I usually leave cash so that the server actually gets it. Confirm with the server before putting the tip on the card.
- In **taxis**, do not tip but you can round up to the next shekel or 10 shekels, if the fare is something like ₪59. If you don't say something, the driver will hunt for a one-shekel coin. If the driver does a lot of extra work, such as carrying bags into the hotel, or otherwise went "beyond the call," then tip as you would at home.
- For **housekeepers in the hotel**, I tip ₪15 per day. It may not be expected, but these are among the lowest paid workers in Israel, and the tips are appreciated.
- **Sherut** (group taxi) drivers are not tipped. This is like taking a bus.
- For **tour guides**, if they are self-employed, no tip is expected, but if I loved the guide, I might tip around 10-15%. If the guide is employed by a larger company, a tip in that amount is customary. On a big bus tour, it is customary to tip the guide ₪25-40 daily and the bus driver in the range of ₪12-20 daily, per person.

## PACKING.

Obviously, try to pack conservatively for a long trip, and if you do forget something, it is easy to buy it in Israel (though prices may be higher). Airlines are now charging a lot for baggage in excess of the weight limits, so beware! That said, I confess that I'm a congenital excess packer—but even I got it down to 42 lbs./20 kg on one two-week spring trip. If I can do it, you can! Some can even do carry-on only; that, I cannot.



Even in the summer, do not pack too many pairs of shorts—at most holy places neither women nor men can gain admittance in shorts. Overall, Israelis wear shorts less often than Americans, particularly women. Shorts are fine outside of religious sites, but the shorts-and-sneakers look may identify you as American if you care about that. On a recent trip, I showed up looking like that, and a dear Israeli friend asked—with a smile—"Could you look any more American?" On days when you will be touring religious sites, legs and shoulders *must* be covered, for both men

and women. For women, that means skirts or dresses below the knee or long slacks are required, especially at Muslim sites. A shawl or light shirt or jacket that can be thrown over a sleeveless blouse or dress will also work. Capris are fine if they go to at least mid-calf. For men at religious sites, wear long pants and shirts that cover shoulders and upper arms (such as a polo shirt). But in secular areas, less conservative attire is perfectly fine. In Tel Aviv, almost anything goes!

Don't pack formal clothes unless you know you need them for some reason, say a very formal business function. Israelis tend to dress quite informally, though consciously and with style. (I'm reminded of David Sedaris's wry comment that "comfort has its place, but it seems rude to visit another country dressed as if you've come to mow its lawns." I usually pack one dress shirt and maybe one tie, just in case, but never a suit or sport coat. Even at the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, I felt just fine in nice pants and a dressier shirt, and some members of the audience dressed in jeans and tee-shirts! I have never needed more formal clothes at a restaurant, and I often eat at upscale places. A nice shirt with slacks or a skirt or dress will serve you anywhere.



Men will need to cover their heads when entering a Jewish holy site, either with a hat or a *kippa*, also called a skullcap or *yarmulke* (Yiddish). This is true whether or not the men are Jewish. Cardboard ones are always available, but those are tacky. You can buy an inexpensive *kippa* on the street in Jerusalem, so even if you're not Jewish, pick one up. But a ball cap or other hat is adequate; men simply need to cover their heads.

## CULTURAL TIPS.

Israel is an amazingly diverse place. Jews from over a hundred countries have come here, bringing their own cultures and traditions. Also, of course, there is a large Arab population as well, and other, smaller ethnic groups. This makes for a culture that is *very* complex, but infinitely rich and interesting. It is one of the things I truly love about the country. As one Israeli friend, originally from the US, said, "Americans think of themselves as a 'melting pot,' but we're more like a salad. The cucumber still knows it's a cucumber, and a tomato knows it's a tomato. But toss us together in a little lemon juice and olive oil, and we make something wonderful and delicious and unpredictable." What a delightful summary of the wonderful diversity that is Israel!

### The Jewish Population.

Israel is the world's only Jewish state, and it was founded in 1948 as a restored homeland for the Jewish people after nearly two millennia in exile. Zionism is the modern, political movement to re-establish a Jewish nation in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel or Palestine), and the movement began in earnest in the late 1800s, led by a brilliant visionary named Theodor Herzl, a secular and assimilated Austrian Jew who was so shocked by the anti-Semitism he saw in "enlightened" France during the Dreyfus trial that he concluded that anti-Semitism was an incurable cancer in Christian Europe, and that the only answer was for Jews to have their own state. In my view, not only the Holocaust but the frightening resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe and the US in this century proves that he was right.



So, while Jews had longed for two millennia to return and there was always a significant Jewish presence in Eretz Yisrael, waves of immigrants inspired by persecution or dreams of a restored

Jewish homeland (each wave referred to as an *aliyah*) began to return and settle the land, mainly in the Galilee, the coastal plain, and the Jerusalem area, but throughout the country as well. That movement was given a major boost when the United Kingdom, soon to become ruler of the country after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, endorsed the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Increasingly, the Jewish pioneers came into conflict with the existing Arab population, and this triggered a corresponding national awakening among people who would later become known as the Palestinians.

Zionism had many streams, often at sharp odds with each other. The most dominant was the Labor Zionists, led by well-known figures such as David Ben-Gurion, Chaim Weizmann, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres. This movement was socialist in orientation, sharply secular, and it created the kibbutz movement. It went on to become the Labor Party, which in various forms would govern the State of Israel for its first three decades. On the right was the Revisionist Movement, with leaders such as Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, which sought to establish the Jewish State through dramatic, bold means. Some elements of that movement adopted terrorist methods to resist British rule, such as the Irgun and Lehi/Stern Gang. The Revisionist movement eventually evolved into the Likud Party, led today by Benjamin Netanyahu. And there was also a Religious Zionist movement which saw the establishment of even a secular Jewish state as part of God's redemptive plan. While nearly all Jews are Zionist today, this was not true in the pre-State years, and many Orthodox and even some Reform Jews fiercely opposed Zionism. The anti-Zionist Orthodox saw it as a betrayal of their belief that only the Messiah could return the Jewish people to sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael; the anti-Zionist Reform saw it as a betrayal of their universalist world view, where being Jewish was a faith, not a national identity.

Today, Jews comprise 76% of the population of Israel proper (excluding the West Bank). While many are immigrants (especially from the former Soviet Union in the past 30 years), 70% of the Jewish population was born there. The native-born are called "sabras," so called after a native, prickly pear cactus that is "tough and prickly on the outside, but soft and sweet on the inside." This is an apt metaphor for native-born Israelis.

Ethnically, Israeli Jews are broadly grouped in two major categories—the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim. Ashkenazim, from the old Hebrew word for Germany (*Ashkenaz*), are Jews from northern and eastern European origin, including most North American Jews, and most were Yiddish speaking. Most of the original Zionist settlers and founders of the State of Israel came from this group, and they formed the cultural and political elite for most of the State's early history. The Sephardim take their name from the Hebrew word for Spain (*Sepharad*). This term originally referred to Jews of Spanish origin, primarily the dispersion that followed the expulsion of Jews from Christian-ruled Spain in 1492. Later, the term was applied to all Jews of North African and Middle Eastern origin as well, including many Jews in Italy and the Balkans. After the founding of the State, the Arab countries expelled their large, centuries-old Jewish populations, and hundreds of thousands of Sephardim entered Israel, more than doubling Israel's population in just three years. Many Ashkenazim saw these new immigrants, who mostly spoke Arabic or Ladino, as culturally backward, and the Sephardim often resented what they saw as condescending, disrespectful, and discriminatory treatment by the Ashkenazi elite. The Sephardim first gained significant political power with the rise of the right-wing Likud party under Menachem Begin—ironically, a very courtly, Polish-born Jew—and most remain aligned with the Likud and Sephardi religious parties, most notably Shas. This remains a major fault line in Israeli cultural and political

life. Many Sephardim from Middle Eastern or North African countries now prefer the term *Mizrachim*, meaning “eastern” Jews. As an aside, I love Mizrahi food, music, and traditions, and I appreciate their sometimes more tolerant and flexible approach to Judaism.

Two other groups are noteworthy. With the era of perestroika and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, the gates of emigration were finally thrown open to the huge community of Soviet Jews. Since 1989, over a million Jews from the former Soviet Union have made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel), and they now make up roughly 15% of the Jewish population of Israel. While they are overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, integration has proven rough. Many were educated professionals arriving in a country already saturated with such talent and have been unable to find work in their fields (I’ve seen teachers working as hotel maids, as an example). Others are not Jewish according to *halakha* (Orthodox Jewish law) and are thus unable to marry Jews in religious ceremonies (the only way to get married in Israel, which still has no civil marriage option). One sees Russian signs frequently, and you will also hear the language spoken on the street.

Another fascinating group is the Ethiopian Jews. By tradition, this ancient community of black Jews traces its origin to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and this faithful community did not even know that other Jews existed until the late 1800s. In the 1980s and 1990s, virtually the entire community was brought to Israel in two huge airlifts, Operation Solomon and Operation Moses. In a matter of days in 1991, 35 El Al and Israel Air Force cargo flights airlifted the population to start a new life in the Jewish State. Seats were even taken out of planes to bring as many out as possible, and several babies were born in flight. As recounted in Donna Rosenthal’s *The Israelis*, Solomon Ezra, the Ethiopian-born Israeli coordinating the evacuation on the ground, asked the last pilot out



how many were on his plane, and he calmly replied, “Over a thousand.” Stunned, Ezra warned the pilot that this was impossible, that the plane could not take off with more than five hundred aboard. The white Israeli Air Force veteran replied, “It’s okay. I don’t want to leave any of my people behind.” Ezra said, “I never felt prouder to be an Israeli,” and that flight set the Guinness record for the number of passengers on one flight. (Every time I tell that story, my eyes fill with tears.) The reality of integration has proven tougher. The cultural, social, and educational gaps were at least as great as what faced the Sephardim, and then you add to that the issue of skin color and the resulting racism. Still, one sees evidence of Ethiopian Jews making their way in everyday Israeli life, including as soldiers. The Army has always been the great integrator of Israeli life.

Most Israelis are secular and not religious, let alone ultra-Orthodox. But you will see the ultra-Orthodox everywhere, distinctive mainly by the way the men dress—long, black coats, white shirts, often large hats, and side curls. Women will typically wear ankle length skirts, full sleeves, and for married women, either a wig, hat, or other covering to conceal their hair. In Hebrew, ultra-Orthodox Jews are known as *haredim*. Most haredi men will not speak to a woman they do not know, and many dislike dealing with tourists. Some extreme haredim even refuse to recognize the State of Israel, because only God, through the Messiah, should restore Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael. On the other hand, many observant Jews wear modern, Western dress, but the men will always wear skullcaps—these are the modern Orthodox, religious but not ultra-Orthodox. Many of them are nationalistic and right-wing on issues of peace and security, but you can’t assume that, though a hand-knitted *kippa* can be a clue. Reform and Conservative Jews are far less numerous and prominent in Israel than they are in North America, and these branches of Judaism unfortunately receive little or no legal recognition from the government. Religious Israeli Jews

tend to be either ultra-Orthodox (about 10%) or modern Orthodox or traditional (15-30%), but the majority of Israeli Jews are secular and non-observant. There is no real separation of religion and state in Israel, and conflicts between the religious and secular, especially over military service and government funding, create one of the major fault lines in Israeli society.

Most Israelis, Jewish or Arab, speak at least some English, and many do so fluently. If you are having trouble in a shop, ask the 12-year-old son or daughter of the shop owner who is studying English in school (mandatory as of second grade). But if you take the time to learn a few phrases in Hebrew, it will endear you to Israelis. They are very proud of their revived language.

Sometimes Americans, especially from the “heartland,” find Israelis abrasive and even rude at first blush. On the surface, I see why: the country values brash, blunt, open approaches to life. The key aspect of the Israeli character is that people are *direct*—remember that sabra definition—and especially for people like me from the Midwestern US, it takes some getting used to. It is common, for instance, to be asked how much money you make or how much you paid for something, and Israelis will be puzzled why we Americans would think that is private. Israelis also express opinions bluntly and love an argument! But once you get past that surface impression, I find Israelis warm, open, and interesting, and extraordinarily generous and helpful to someone in need. Israelis truly engage in the lives of those around them—without the aloof distance of my “nice” world. Near strangers have offered to help me in a way that would really inconvenience them. I also learned that “nice” is relative, and I have come to value Israeli directness. At one dinner, a friend who is a law professor at Tel Aviv University told me that when studying at Harvard, he was puzzled at the American tendency to say, “Let’s get together some time.” He’d reply, “OK, when?” Then the evasions started. In Israel, when someone says that, he means it, and people start checking their calendars. He learned that Americans often don’t mean what they say; “niceness” can also mask superficiality and a lack of real connection.



Military issues and experiences dominate life in Israel to a degree unknown to most North Americans, at least outside of the nearly gone World War II generation. Even in a post-September 11 world, that aspect of life in the United States or the rest of the Western world is nothing like what Israelis experience. Remember, in Israel, nearly everyone—male and female—serves for two and a half years of military service, then for as much as a month each year in the reserves until their 40s. (Arabs and

haredim studying full-time in yeshiva (seminary) are exempt from the draft, though the exemption for yeshiva students has eroded a little.) For many Israelis, their social circles and key identities are built around the people with whom they served in the Army, much as many Americans make those life-long connections in university. They may continue to perform reserve duty with those same units for several weeks each year—for decades.

Israelis love to discuss politics and to argue, but as an outsider, I suggest caution and sensitivity. This is not the place to pontificate. Issues of peace and security are existential for Israelis—if they guess wrong, they may lose their country and their lives. Nothing holds deeper emotion. Israelis are *very* sensitive to perceived criticism by outsiders, especially North Americans and Europeans, who can preach from a position of distance and relative safety. If you note how much money the US gives Israel, for example, you may be left speechless when a parent replies, “I gave my son.”

My own politics on Israeli issues are center-left leavened with a heavy dose of realism and skepticism in recent years—and I am opinionated!—but I lie low and say things like, “It’s very complex,” and “This is an issue for the Israelis and the Palestinians to work out among themselves.” Really, the same is true when speaking with Arabs. The collapse of the peace process and the extreme violence that followed radicalized both Israelis and Palestinians, and both optimism and moderation are in scarce supply. Even many Israelis who once supported the peace process and concessions to the Palestinians have become very mistrustful and embittered. The Hamas takeover in Gaza, with ongoing violence and open warfare there despite the Israeli withdrawal, the conflicts with Hizbullah, threats from Iran, and the massive instability and violence in the Arab world after the failed “Arab Spring” have all further eroded those hopes. Like most Americans, I am an optimist by nature, but I am not optimistic here, at least in the near term. Few are still looking for “the new Middle East” anymore.

I do not have the space in this guide to talk in detail about the Jewish calendar, including the yearly cycle of holidays, but professional guidebooks and online sites do that well. The Jewish calendar sets the rhythm of Israeli life. But there is one “holiday” that occurs every week and will have a major impact on your travels, and that is Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. Beginning at sundown on Friday evening (Erev Shabbat) and ending with the spotting of the first stars on Saturday evening (Motzei Shabbat), everyday Israeli life slows down—and even shuts down to some degree—for Shabbat. Starting early Friday afternoon, you will notice the banks closing, shops being shuttered, and the rush of last-minute shoppers in the markets getting ready for Shabbat. As the sun sets on Friday evening, you will see observant Jewish families making their way (on foot) to synagogue for the evening service. Car traffic thins, and in some Orthodox neighborhoods, stops altogether. Sirens sound at sundown throughout Jerusalem to announce Shabbat. Even most secular Jews (the majority) make it a point to be at home for the Friday evening family dinner, which is a special one. It is a beautiful part of Israeli life. I love the atmosphere of Shabbat in Israel, and we have nothing like it in most Western countries.



On a practical level, many restaurants (and all kosher-certified ones) close for Shabbat and do not reopen until after darkness falls on Saturday. Banks are closed (ATMs still work, though), and most venues of public entertainment, such as movies, close as well. There is no public transportation on Shabbat except in Haifa or Arab areas, though taxis and sheruts do still operate. Many observant Jews will not answer their telephones. So, keep this in mind when planning your travels. Most of the national parks and many museums are open, but you should check. If you are inclined to tour Christian or Muslim sites, this is a good day to do so, because they remain open (though they may close on Sunday and Friday, respectively). Tel Aviv, the center of secular life in Israel, is far more “open” on Shabbat, but even in Holy Jerusalem, there are more and more pockets of secular defiance. It’s confusing, but it’s Israel.



As for the other holidays, I will mainly note that the fall is the major holiday season, with not only the well-known Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but also followed by Sukkot (the Festival of Booths) and Simhat Torah. Israelis love fall because they get a lot of time off in what is otherwise a five-and-a-half-day work week for many people, but it can be an expensive and crowded time to visit the country. I suggest you travel before Rosh Hashanah (but it still could be quite hot) or after Simhat Torah (generally delightful weather). In the spring, be aware that if you travel over

Passover (Pesach) and Easter (Latin and Orthodox), the country and its hotels will be crowded with tourists (including traveling Israelis), prices will be higher, and many restaurants will close because of the dietary restrictions of Passover. Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks, generally observed in June) is another major holiday, but a short one and therefore less disruptive to travel.

A final, practical tip: Know that if you suggest to an Israeli to have dinner at a restaurant, the expectation generally is that the one who invites will pay. But do seize chances to interact with people. Historical sights and beautiful scenery are wonderful, but the heart of a country is its people, and they are the best part of any trip. Every trip has confirmed for me that truth.

## **The Arab Population.**

Arabs make up 20% of Israel's population, and of that group, more than 90% are Muslim and the rest are Christian. I am talking here about the population within "the Green Line," the pre-1967 borders of Israel, not including the territories occupied in the Six-Day War of 1967. These Arabs are full citizens of the State of Israel, vote and serve in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), and most speak Hebrew as well as their native Arabic. They are not drafted for service in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces), but can volunteer, as two of my young friends from Nazareth did in the 1990s. Arab citizens of Israel suffer significant discrimination as you would expect. Their identity is a very complex one; some say, "My country is at war with my people." While the term "Israeli Arab" is common, one also hears "Palestinian-Israeli" or "Palestinian citizen of Israel." Arabs who live in the occupied territories are called simply "Palestinians" or "Palestinian Arabs." By the way, like most things in Israel, these terms are very political. Israelis do not generally use the term "occupied territories" when describing the West Bank. Some Israelis on the left say "the administered territories" or simply "the territories" (my preferred term). Most Israelis—and all on the right—prefer the Biblical term "Judea and Samaria."

Sadly, the pressures of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict combined with the rise of Islamist extremism are causing many Christian Arabs to emigrate, and that population is rapidly shrinking. This is true even in cities like Nazareth and Bethlehem, where Christians were once the majority but are no longer. Will Christianity survive in the land of its birth? That remains an open question.

If you have the opportunity to be hosted by Arabs, by all means take it. It will be an extraordinary experience. There are "hidden rules," though, at least for those not familiar with Arab culture. I learned by breaking them—the most painful way, of course—so I'll teach you some of them ahead of time.



Arab hospitality is extraordinary and can even be overwhelming. Being a good host is a central value in Arab life, and Arabs will literally spend themselves into debt to host you. You will be waited on hand and foot. Accept that, or don't accept the invitation. There is no middle ground.

- Especially in observant Muslim families, expect strict sex segregation socially. Women will be with the women, men with the men. Women should shake hands with other women, but the men may not take their hand. If perceived as a friend, however, men may be kissed on both cheeks by other men. Male friends may also hold hands. This is not at all indicative of homosexuality; it's just the way friendship is expressed.

- When being served food or beverages, stay seated, unlike North American or Western parties where we mill around. I don't know what the rule is on women guests offering to help in the kitchen, but it would be *unheard of* for a male guest to do so. Not knowing this, I tried once, and I thought my hosts were going to pass out. It was a major faux pas.
- If you are in an observant Muslim home, remember that Islam proscribes the consumption of alcohol, and you should not expect to be served any. It may embarrass your hosts to ask for an alcoholic drink, as they will want to please a guest. Some Muslims, less observant, may offer you alcohol, or drink themselves. Wait to be offered.
- Arab hosts will serve you more food than you can *possibly* eat. This is not a problem—if you understand how the game is played. When you've had enough, leave a good amount of food on the plate. An empty plate in American culture shows appreciation of a wonderful meal, but to an Arab host it means that not enough food was served, and more will be forthcoming. It's a little like a dog chasing its tail; I gained five pounds and major gastrointestinal distress before I learned this. I'm thinking, "Good Lord, will the food never stop coming?" They're thinking, "Good Lord, how much do Americans eat!?" I would guess that family is *still* talking about my appetite.
- Your Arab hosts will *insist* on paying for anything you do while visiting them. Don't suggest anything expensive. While you can offer to pay, don't force the issue—*it will not work and will cause great offense*. So, don't suggest doing things that would strain your hosts financially. You could offer a present for your host or, even better, something for their children. American tee-shirts are often popular. For adults, flowers are a safe gift. Remember that wine is not an appropriate gift for Muslims.
- You will often be asked to stay for at least three days, the traditional minimum for Arab hospitality. If you can't stay, just keep saying so politely, while saying how much you'd love to. You will likely have to refuse several times. That's all right. Just be very polite and grateful while doing so and thank the person profusely for the wonderful hospitality.
- Rave about how wonderful the food was. They lay it on thick as hosts, and guests are expected to reciprocate. And since the food is wonderful, that should be easy.
- But do not admire a specific item in the house, or your host may feel impelled to offer it to you. Just say, "you have a lovely home," and remark on how wonderful your hosts made you feel there. Again, I generally find that true, so saying so will be genuine.
- Some Arabs, especially Muslims, feel it risks fate if their children are complimented directly for their brilliance, beauty, or accomplishment. This is prideful boasting and risks the wrath of God upon whom all things depend (or more superstitiously, "the evil eye"). More appropriate: "God has blessed your children with many gifts," "God has given you a beautiful child," or "God has been very good to your family." Still, children are much loved and generally a very safe topic of conversation. Politics and religion are usually not unless you know a family very well. Listen far more than you talk—always.

- If you don't have any other opportunity to experience Arab hospitality, you may want to contact a remarkable man I met more than ten years ago who lives in a village in East Jerusalem on the top of the Mount of Olives. His name is **Ibrahim Ahmad Abu El-Hawa**. As far as I know, he still hosts people for meals and even for lodging with no real charge, though he accepts contributions for his lovely work of bringing people together across national and religious lines to help heal this land. Staying there would be a bit too much like a very basic hostel for me, but a meal with him is quite an experience. If you accept his hospitality, please leave him ₪80-100 for his work. Contact me if you want to meet him and tell him his friend Douglas sent you. He is truly a lovely man.



## Other Groups in Israel.

In addition to the Jewish-Arab dichotomy, and the Jewish-Muslim-Christian triad, Israel has a several other, distinct groups that make up the balance of the population. The **Druze** are a sect that split off from Islam and keep their religious beliefs and traditions secret. They number some 110,000 and speak Arabic but are a distinct community. The Druze are deeply loyal to whatever country they live in and serve in the IDF, often with great distinction and prominence. There are two major Druze villages on Mount Carmel (see the Haifa section for more information) and others in Galilee. Druze in the Golan, on the other hand, mostly consider themselves still to be Syrians, though the long civil war is straining that identity. The **Bahà'is** are a modern faith founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and their world headquarters are in Haifa with another major shrine in Akko. The Bahà'ì faith teaches that all religious prophets (Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha among them) are from God, humankind is one, and women and men are equal. The Bahà'ì gardens and terraces in Haifa are among the most beautiful sites in all Israel (again, see Haifa section). Don't miss them. The **Circassians** are Muslims who are originally from the Caucasus area of southern Russia, and they settled in the area in the mid-1800s after fleeing the aftermath of a failed war against Tsarist Russia. They speak Cherkesi, written in the Cyrillic alphabet, and live mainly in two Galilee communities. The **Bedouin Arabs** are the famed desert nomads of romantic novels and films such as *Lawrence of Arabia*. They comprise nearly 10% of the Arab population and belong to some 30 tribes, most of them scattered over a wide area in the south. Formerly nomadic shepherds and herders, the Bedouins are currently in transition from a tribal social framework to a permanently settled society and are gradually entering Israel's labor force. This is a controversial policy with decidedly mixed results. You will most notice them in the Negev or in the Judean wilderness on the way from Jerusalem to Masada and the Dead Sea. Many Bedouin serve in the IDF, particularly as trackers, and have a very distinguished record of service. If you tour with Adam Sela in the Negev (see the Negev section) or with Desert Eco Tours out of Eilat, you may have a chance to meet local Bedouin, a fascinating experience.

## MISCELLANEOUS.

- English news is no longer offered on regular Israel Radio (Kol Yisrael) stations, but you can listen on-line at [www.iba.org.il/world](http://www.iba.org.il/world). English news from Israeli newspapers can also be found on [www.ynetnews.com](http://www.ynetnews.com), [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com), or [www.timesofisrael.com](http://www.timesofisrael.com), and the latter two have excellent, free mobile phone apps with push notification news updates, very

useful for keeping up with security-related issues or weather closures. Many hotels offer the English-language *Jerusalem Post* newspaper (center-right politically) or *Ha'aretz* (decidedly left) in English, offered as an insert in the *International New York Times*.

- If you want to take your laptop or tablet, most hotels have wi-fi service, and many cafés and restaurants also offer free wi-fi service. You probably won't need a voltage converter other than what came with the device (check to be sure, but most handle 220- as well as 120-volt current), but you will need the three-pronged adapter for Israeli plugs or at least the two-prong European plug.
- You may find it very convenient to have a cell phone while in the country. If you have an unlocked cell phone that can take an Israeli SIM card, use **Snapir**, who sells the cards at a very reasonable price. You can order your card at <http://simtoisrael.com> or contact him at [snapir@syc.co.il](mailto:snapir@syc.co.il). He mails the card to you with instructions, either to your home or to your first hotel in Israel, if time is tight. His customer service is *extraordinary*! Please tell him I sent you. If you have a locked phone and can't use a SIM card, I have rented phones from **Amigo** several times and find them easy to use and reasonable in price ([www.amigo-us.com](http://www.amigo-us.com)). They mail the phone to you before you leave with a return envelope to return it.
- Speaking of telephones, if you are calling Israel from the US, you dial 011-972 and then the numbers I give you in this guide, dropping the zero on the city code. From elsewhere, the country code is 972. Once in Israel, though, you will need to dial the 0 with the city code, and of course leave out the 011-972. For calls to Israel, you may wish to purchase time in \$10 blocks through One Suite at [www.onesuite.com](http://www.onesuite.com); calls are as cheap as 4.5¢ per minute for land lines and 8.5¢ for cell phones (and can be made to anywhere).
- Take lots of sunscreen, sunglasses, and a good sun hat. Also, don't forget to drink lots of water on hot days. You're dehydrating more than you think because, particularly in the drier interior, you won't feel sweaty—it evaporates immediately. You will need to force water frequently—if you wait until you feel thirsty, it's too late and you won't catch up. The tap water in Israel is safe to drink—no need for bottled water.
- Israeli hotels sometimes do not provide washcloths (face towels), if you care about that. I buy inexpensive ones in bulk and just leave them as I check out of the hotel.
- North American electrical appliances (other than most laptops or phone chargers) require a converter, which can be purchased there or at home. You'll also need a plug adapter. You can find these on the Internet as well. If visiting from a country that uses 220-volt current, you'll only need the plug adapter, and most European plugs work.



## SUGGESTED ITINERARIES:

### Tel Aviv—The “White City” and The Heart of Modern Israel

**Suggested Time: 3 nights.**

Tel Aviv is effectively Israel’s New York (one of its nicknames is “the Big Orange”) and at first glance can seem like any other big city on the sea. But it is the heart of modern, secular Israel, “the capital of Mediterranean cool,” and I have come to truly treasure it. If New York and Miami Beach had a love child, it would look a lot like Tel Aviv! Also, if you start in Tel Aviv, which I recommend, you will have a couple of days to recover from a long flight and jet lag without feeling like you’re missing the must-see historical sites in places like Jerusalem. A good, on-line resource for planning your Tel Aviv is [www.visit-tel-aviv.com](http://www.visit-tel-aviv.com). **Tel Aviv is also the center of gay and lesbian life in Israel**, and LGBT+ visitors should check out <https://www.lgbt.org.il/english> for information **gay life in Tel Aviv and throughout Israel**. Another site is <https://www.travelgay.com/destination/gay-israel/gay-tel-aviv>.



Tel Aviv has many great hotels but prepare for the fact that Tel Aviv hotels are the most expensive in the country (with lots of business travelers as well as tourists). You can save money by staying in mid-range hotels, not the 5-star places. Again, **work with Isram Israel** or **Traveling Jerusalem** to find affordable options; see “Booking Hotels” at pp. 9-10.



I have several recommendations for hotels in Tel Aviv. I have enjoyed the **Herods Tel Aviv**, which is located at 155 Ha-Yarkon Street, tel. (03) 521-6666; see [www.herods-hotels.com/herods-tel-aviv](http://www.herods-hotels.com/herods-tel-aviv). It is a large hotel with a classic 1930s Tel Aviv look, offering good service and nice guest rooms. In my most recent stay in May 2022, the hotel had been spruced up and still offers excellent service. This hotel is in the more northern part of the city, close to the Old Port area, and it directly overlooks the beach. (And I didn’t forget the apostrophe in “Herods,” by the way—it is omitted.) Next door is the **Crowne Plaza Tel Aviv Beach**, 145 Ha-Yarkon Street, tel. (03) 520-1111, at which I stayed in 2017. It’s clean, upscale, and well-maintained with an outstanding breakfast, but it is a Western-style hotel without much local color or character.

If you’d like to try a lovely, smaller option nearby, I recommend the **Shalom Hotel & Relax**, an Atlas boutique hotel that gets rave reviews on TripAdvisor. It’s a little pricier than some other boutique options and is located at 216 Ha-Yarkon Street, (03) 762-5400; [www.atlas.co.il/shalom-hotel-tel-aviv](http://www.atlas.co.il/shalom-hotel-tel-aviv). The hotel is quite nice but what makes it remarkable is its outstanding and very attentive staff. Next door is the **Melody Hotel** at 220 Ha-Yarkon Street, tel. (03) 521-5300; see [www.atlas.co.il/melody-hotel-tel-aviv](http://www.atlas.co.il/melody-hotel-tel-aviv), another well-run and stylish boutique hotel of the Atlas chain. Both hotels offer a great location across from Independence Park, a short walk from the beach, and an easy walk to the port area. If street noise is an issue, get a room in the back or a higher floor. Both the Shalom & Relax and the Melody offer snacks and wine from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., a nice way to meet other guests. Another favorite in the more moderate range is the **Savoy Hotel**, a smaller, boutique-style hotel located more in south-central Tel Aviv and closer to Jaffa

at 5 Ge'ula Street, tel. (03) 514-0500; <http://hotelsavoy.co.il>. This hotel has a charming, sleek, modern look, with spectacular views off the balconies and great customer service. It is a half-block off the beach, and while the neighborhood is not great, the location is good. Other moderate-range options include the **Cinema Hotel** at 1 Zanemhoff Street, tel. (03) 520-7100, or across the street at the **Center Hotel** at 2 Zanemhoff Street, tel. (03) 629-6181. Both are on Dizengoff Square, in the heart of Tel Aviv, and are renovated Bauhaus-architecture buildings, for which Tel Aviv is world-renowned as "The White City." Noise may be an issue there; ask for back rooms away from the square. I also hear good things about the **Art-Plus Hotel**, **Brown Beach Hotel**, and the **Hotel de la Mer**. Finally, for a more budget option for lodging in Tel Aviv, check out the relatively new **Abraham Hostel**; the one in Jerusalem has received great reviews from travelers for years. See [www.abrahamhostels.com](http://www.abrahamhostels.com).

All these hotels are close to the beach and within easy walking distance of a lot of interesting places. On the more expensive side, people also like the **Hilton** (also on Ha-Yarkon, next to Independence Park), or the beachfront **Sheraton**. There is also a **Carlton Hotel** on the seashore and the **David Intercontinental** and the **Dan Panorama Hotel** closer to Jaffa.



Frommer's and other guidebooks offer good suggestions on things to do in Tel Aviv, so I commend those to you. You can also find suggestions on TripAdvisor. I have some personal recommendations, though:

- **Old Jaffa.** This ancient city (5,000 years old) is now part of the combined municipality of Tel Aviv-Yafo, and looking south from Tel Aviv, you will see the old Arab city jutting out into the Mediterranean. Jaffa has many artists' shops, narrow streets, and lots of character. I don't shop much on Israel trips, but Jaffa is a good place for that. I particularly recommend the **Ilan & Daphna Hasson Gallery**, 20 Mazal Arie Street, tel. (03) 681-9726 or (055) 227-3990. This place has very interesting, intriguing modern art with Jewish and biblical themes.

In any event, Jaffa is a wonderful place to explore. The view of the Tel Aviv skyline from Jaffa is magical, both day and night (see photo on p. 24). There are free walking tours of Jaffa offered by Sandeman's every day at 11:00 a.m.; meet at the Ministry of Information Center at Mazouk and Azar Streets under the arches near the old Clock Tower at the entrance to Jaffa. The tour offers a good overview of the ancient city; while there is no charge, plan to tip the guide around ₪50 per person. For more information, check out the Sandeman Tours' website at <http://www.neweuropetours.eu/telaviv/en/home>.

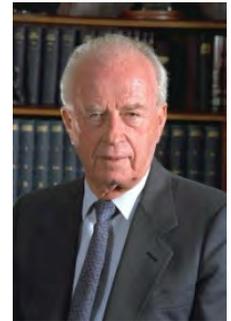
- **Strolling the Streets of Tel Aviv.** One choice is **Dizengoff Street**, once famous as the "main street" of Israel, and after some years of decline it has very much come back. **Dizengoff Square** is also "back," and its iconic Agam fountain has been restored. You can also walk down **Ben-Yehuda** and **Allenby Streets** to **Sheinkin Street**, Tel Aviv's yuppie district (not as cool as it once was). You can also wander down to **Ha-Carmel Market**, where you'll really see "street Israel," a great place to watch people and drink in the sights, sounds, and smells of food and spices. The **Nahalat Binyamin** neighborhood offers arts and crafts markets on Tuesdays and Fridays, which can be fun to explore (though crafts aren't my thing). I really love walking through that neighborhood

and nearby **Neve Tzekek**, though; these are among Tel Aviv's first neighborhoods, and the restorations have made this a great place to stroll, people watch, and take a drink or coffee. Nearby is **Ha-Tachana**, or **The Station**, the renovation of an old, Ottoman-era train station into shops and restaurants. One of my favorite spots in all Israel is **The Rubin Museum** at 14 Bialik Street, which features the beautiful and evocative paintings of Reuben Rubin, one of Israel's greatest artists, in his charming, former home. Tel. (03) 525-5961. Open Shabbat 11:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., but closed on Sundays, which is unusual. This museum is a little gem, and the man's art absolutely captures me.

- **Holy Land Maps and Old Books.** I have a map fetish, particularly old maps. On my previous trip, I visited a shop called **M. Pollak Antique Maps** owned by **Malka Pollak**, located at 42 King George St., tel. (03) 528-1336. Malka also posts on the forum under the avatar Holyland Maps—go figure. Malka is brilliant, interesting, and generous with her time and knowledge. She also showed me **her husband's bookshop** nearby at 36 King George Street, and it's a book-lover's heaven! Old books stacked nearly to the ceiling; I could have spent all day in those two shops. For lovers of old books and old maps, this place is a great stop—call first to make sure it's open. Malka is just wonderful—and she has been a godsent expert on Covid-related travel restrictions on the TripAdvisor forum!
- **Sarona.** This is the renovated German Colony district in Tel Aviv, a real success story in historic restoration, and it is sleek and full of trendy, upscale shops. I write more about the German Templers later in this guide, but I found this place rather sterile and Disneyesque (not intended as a compliment). But it offers much-needed green space in the heart of the city for locals, and if you do go, the Visitor's Center is at 14 Avraham Mendler Street, (054) 498-0252. **Note:** If you want to tour and are not part of a pre-arranged group, you *must* make reservations ahead of time, or you find this Visitors' Center not very hospitable to visitors (part of why I am not a fan of Sarona). While there, get some fine Jem's Beer or the beverage of your choice at **Molly Bloom's Sarona**, an Irish pub at 6 Avraham Mendler Street, (055) 886-0188. I'm not much for pubs, but this is a good one.
- **Walking Tours of Tel Aviv.** Tel Aviv is a flat and easily walkable city, and one of the best ways to explore it is on foot. I have three recommendations for guides—the first is **Jonathan (Yonatan) Kohn**. He is outstanding and now ranks as one of my favorite guides in the whole country. I suggest the tour that he showed me—start with Old Jaffa and explore Neve Tzedek, Ha-Tachana, and into the Bauhaus District, and other parts of early and current Tel Aviv, such as the renovated **Ha-Bima Theater** and magnificent, adjoining public square. This gives you the chance to see how this amazing city evolved in just over a hundred years from buildings started on sand dunes by just 66 families in 1909 to the thriving metropolis of today. We ended with a visit to the moving, evocative **Rabin Square**, where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in November 1995—and Jonathan was there that night. You **can contact Jonathan at (054) 554-3448; e-mail [jonskohn@hotmail.com](mailto:jonskohn@hotmail.com)**. While Jonathan offers Tel Aviv walking tours, he is also licensed to tour anywhere in the country, including driving tourists. Another guide who tours all over Israel but has a special passion for this “capital of Mediterranean cool” is **David Wexler, [david@davidsland.com](mailto:david@davidsland.com); [www.davidsland.com](http://www.davidsland.com); cell (054) 330-0941**. David knows his stuff and is pleasant to be with as well. I have also toured with **Zahi (pronounced Tsakhi) Shaked**, a native-born Tel Avivi, and my husband and I

enjoyed that a lot; we toured much the same route as I listed above for Yonatan. You can reach Zahi at (054) 690-5522 or at [zahigo25@walla.com](mailto:zahigo25@walla.com). He is a terrific guide, and he often makes brief videos of portions of the tour that he posts (with your permission) on YouTube—a lovely memento! To see our video from the 2016 trip, check this out: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLk3tL9beKyZAd1ZoA6kdI33AAi1oMO\\_Ns](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLk3tL9beKyZAd1ZoA6kdI33AAi1oMO_Ns).

- At the outset of the section of the guide, I called Tel Aviv “The White City,” and it takes this name from the **Bauhaus and International architecture** style that this city preserves more than any other in the world, leading to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This style was popular among German planners and architects who fled to Tel Aviv in the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution, and this was the period when much of the city was built. The design of the buildings and the city itself feels very European, with wide boulevards, horizontal designs, sharp angular and curving lines, and white stucco surfaces, also reminiscent of the Art Deco style in Miami Beach. What were once run-down and dowdy neighborhoods have been restored beautifully in places, and you can walk through them and enjoy some amazing buildings. The best streets to see it are Ahad Ha’am and Rothschild Boulevards. The **Bauhaus Center** at 99 Dizengoff Street, (03) 522-0249, [www.bauhaus-center.com](http://www.bauhaus-center.com), offers audio or guided tours of the Bauhaus district if you want a more detailed look.
- **Anu, the Museum of the Jewish People** on the campus of Tel Aviv University. This was the Museum of the Diaspora, but it just reopened after a massive redesign and expansion with three times the exhibit space. “Anu” means “Us, and the focus now is on the Jewish people in all of their dimensions and identities. The university is in the northern section of the city, either a bus, cab, or car ride from your hotel. Tel. (03) 745-7800; see also [www.anumuseum.org.il](http://www.anumuseum.org.il) for more information and visiting hours. I loved the old version when I first visited in 1988, and I am very excited to see it on my next visit.
- **The Yitzhak Rabin Center.** This museum, which is near the Palmach Museum and not far from Bet Ha-t’fusot, tells the story of the State of Israel and its history as seen through the life of Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister who led the effort to reach peace with the Palestinians until his assassination at the hands of a right-wing, Jewish extremist in Tel Aviv in November 1995. That murder seared Israelis, perhaps even more than the Kennedy assassination did Americans, and it no doubt changed the course of history in the region. But the museum does not focus on that terrible crime until the end; it mainly looks at the State’s formation and internal conflicts and divisions through the life of this remarkable man who was at the center of so much of its history. It is a must for those interested in modern Israeli history. **You need reservations to tour the museum**—tel. (03) 745-3358, or e-mail [order1@rabincenter.org.il](mailto:order1@rabincenter.org.il). When I visited this place, I was both fascinated and deeply moved. And the memorial to Rabin’s murder at the end, including excerpts from speeches at his funeral by President Clinton, King Hussein, and Rabin’s granddaughter, left me in tears of loss and gratitude for this great man’s life and work.
- If you are interested in Zionist history and the birth of the State of Israel, go back in time at **Ben-Gurion House** at 17 Ben-Gurion Boulevard, tel. (03) 511-1010. This was the



home of **David and Paula Ben-Gurion** when he became Israel's first prime minister. This simple house contains more than 20,000 books in five languages, a testament to the breadth of the man's mind. Also check out **Independence Hall** at 16 Rothschild Boulevard, tel. (03) 517-3942; <http://eng.ihl.org.il>. Here, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the founding of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, as the armies of five surrounding Arab countries prepared to invade and crush the fledgling Jewish state. Some days the museum closes as early as 2:00 p.m., so plan ahead, and **reservations are now required**, which you can make at [reservations@beitatzmaut.org.il](mailto:reservations@beitatzmaut.org.il). **Note:** The website says that it is closed for renovations until 2023, so that may be out. Also near Tel Aviv University, you can visit the **Palmach Museum**, which tells the history of this pre-State militia affiliated with the leftist Labor Zionist movement. **Note:** Advance reservations are definitely required here. Tours are in Hebrew, but English-language audio units are provided. Like Anu, this is not a museum of artifacts but of visual and auditory recreations of the experiences of one Palmach unit. While a tad over-the-top at times, I found it a powerful tribute to this force that played such a critical role in the fight for Israel's independence—and suffered an enormous casualty rate. It is located at 10 Lebanon Street, tel. (03) 643-6393. For more, see [www.palmach.org.il](http://www.palmach.org.il); click the icon for English. For a look at that period from the right-wing side of the Israeli ideological divide, you can stop at the **Etzel Museum** on the seaside promenade north of Jaffa, 38 King George Street, (03) 528-4001, or the **Jabotinsky Institute** at the same address; tel. (03) 528-6523; [www.jabotinsky.org](http://www.jabotinsky.org).

- **Ramla.** About 30 minutes southeast, in the direction of Ben-Gurion Airport, Ramla is a working-class, Jewish-Arab city that is very different from Tel Aviv. I have gone there twice on a tip from an Israeli friend, as this is quite off the beaten path for tourists. I visited two amazing sites—the **Pools of Ramla**, an underground water reservoir with massive arches constructed during the early Muslim period in 789 C.E.—wow! Nearby is the **Great Mosque**, and I was startled to recognize Gothic arches—this mosque had been transformed from the largest Crusader basilica in the Land of Israel, build in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and converted to a mosque by the great Muslim warrior Saladin in 1266. Be aware that if you arrive around noon, you will need to work around prayer time, but the hosts are very kind if you show respect for the fact that this is an active house of worship, not a “museum.” There is more to see here, but it's fascinating!



- **Apollonia National Park**, not far north of Tel Aviv and its very upscale suburb Herzliya. After all my visits, I just discovered this place a few years ago, and it's stunning. While the site has been populated and fortified off and on since Phoenician days, the Crusader fortifications from 1101-1265 are the center of the national park today. The physical setting, with its remarkable ruins perched atop the cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean, is well worth a visit even without the site's impressive history. There are now accessible paths for people with mobility limitations, a relatively new development at antiquity sites, and Apollonia is a tad off the beaten path, not usually swarmed by tour buses. This is one of the parks that may not sell the multi-park pass cards, however, even though the card covers it; see p. 32 for an explanation of this problem.



Tel Aviv is full of wonderful restaurants, truly a foodie paradise. Every request for recommendations for restaurants sets off a major debate among residents and lovers of Tel Aviv on the TripAdvisor forum, and I usually end up with a list of more than 20 options! You will eat well here. One of my top choices, for both food and wonderful, seaside ambiance, is **Manta Ray** on the seaside promenade, tel. (03) 517-4773 (photo at right). It offers great food (you can order tapas-style dishes to sample several items) with a spectacular view of the sea and the city, and the service is excellent! In good weather, the beautiful patio area is open to the sea. It's been my first meal on several trips. Make reservations—this is a popular place. There are other, casual and fun places along the Tayelet (the seaside promenade, and as one might expect, places close and new ones open fairly frequently, so you may find new options.



For an upscale and truly outstanding kosher dinner, I recommend the **Olive Leaf** in the sea-side Sheraton. It has a great view of the Mediterranean Sea as well, and is located at 115 Ha-Yarkon Street, (03) 521-9300. The sunset view over the Mediterranean is very romantic! A Tel Aviv friend who knew her restaurants took me twice to **Fortuna del Mar** at the Tel Aviv Marina, (03) 523-6730, <http://fortuna-delmar.co.il/fortuna-del-mar> (click US flag icon for English). Along with Manta Ray, this is a upscale favorite restaurant (non-kosher), with great seafood and other dishes right on the beach (enter from the beach promenade or it's a tad tricky to find). Another good choice is **Hola**, at 87 Ha-Yarkon Street in the King David Tower, tel. (03) 575-9060. As I walked into the lobby of the building, I was startled—"I know this place!" This had been the location of a favorite Tel Aviv restaurant Rafael, which sadly closed when its chef-owner became ill, but Hola has taken the space with a new chef-owner Victor Gloger. While Hola is not yet quite up to Rafael's extraordinary level at this point, it's an excellent, Mediterranean restaurant with great fish and meat dishes (not kosher). Of importance to me, they not only have good wine but can make an excellent manhattan! (Cocktails are still not Israel's strong point, but this is improving.) For lunch or dinner, **GooCha** is a reasonably priced seafood restaurant at the corner of Dizengoff and Ben-Gurion, not far from Rabin Square, tel. (03) 522-2886; also a second location at 14 Ibn Gvirol, tel. (03) 691-1603 (non-kosher). In 2016, my husband and I ate at **Café Noir** at 43 Ahad Ha'am Street, tel. (03) 566-3018. It is a good restaurant, off the beaten path for tourists at least, and as far as I could tell, we were the only non-Israelis in the place. We had great fish dishes. While touring the Bauhaus area with Jonathan Kohn, we stopped for lunch at a cute place called the **Espresso Bar Rothschild**, at 8 Rothschild Avenue, (03) 510-8918. We liked it a lot, with great salads and sandwiches, and of course coffee! On a recent visit, while walking in the same area, I stumbled on the **Kiosk**, one of three remaining, original wooden kiosks left in Tel Aviv, built in 1920. I loved this little place—great for salad or a delicious street lunch, and such character! 3 Lilianblum Street in Neve Tzedek, (03) 609-8008.

You might also check out the renovated **Old Port** area north of the Hilton Hotel and Independence Park on Ha-Yarkon. If you are staying in the more northern beachfront hotels, this makes a delightful walk along the beach promenade and the sea walls and great people watching, especially on a Saturday evening as families come out after Shabbat—religious and secular, Jews and Arabs, older couples and families with little kids: in short, a microcosm of Israeli life. Walking there after I arrive for Saturday evening has become a recent tradition. For an earthy, everyday-Israel fish restaurant, check out **Benny the Fisherman (Beni ha-Dayag)**; tel. (03) 544-0518. This place has a great, informal atmosphere and is a particularly great place to watch Tel Aviv life go

by. Another excellent, more upscale choice is **Yulia's**, tel. (03) 546-9777; both the meal and the desserts were wonderful! At the far north end of the port complex, almost to the Yarkon River, there is an informal place called the **Derby Bar Port**. This a great place, particularly for families with children or larger groups, and the fish was excellent. See <https://eatintlv.com/listing/derby-bar-port/>, tel. (03) 624-6050.

**In Jaffa**, I love **Haj Kahil**, a Middle Eastern restaurant at 18 Raziell on the Clock Tower Square at the entrance to Jaffa, tel. (057) 942-8347. The lamb shoulder with rice dish was one of the best I have ever enjoyed in Israel, and with great service! This place is Arab-owned and not kosher. I can also recommend the **Abu Nasser-Hinnawi** meat and seafood restaurant at 130 Kedem Street in south Jaffa near the Peres Peace Center; tel. (03) 507-5539 or (03) 506-7132. It is owned by an old and prominent Christian Arab family and serves wonderful dishes with a Middle Eastern flavor. The fish was to die for, and the meat dishes are delicious as well. Also not kosher, however. If you want to experience some classic Mizrahi cuisine, try **Dr. Shakshuka**, a kosher restaurant at 3 Bet Eshel, Jaffa, tel. (03) 513-6560, <https://www.timeout.com/israel/restaurants/dr-shakshuka>. Bring your appetite and be sure to try the shakshuka for which it is named—a signature Libyan Jewish dish featuring eggs cooked in a tomato sauce—yum! This is one of my favorite Israeli classics (you might see it on your breakfast buffet at the hotel as well—give it a try). Another great choice is a lovely, family-owned restaurant called **Pu'ah**, 8 Rabbi Yohanan Street, tel. (03) 681-1140. Once a small place, it has now expanded to fill the open-air street, and at night it is such a cool place to eat with wonderful food! Another, great lunch stop in Jaffa is **Abulafia**, 4 Yeffet Street, tel. (052) 238-4306—great hummus, falafel, shwarma, and similar delights from the Middle East. On my most recent trip, I found another great lunch place, **Fairouz Café** at 5 Louis Pasteur Street in Old Jaffa, tel. (03) 682-6375. We had a light lunch of a Greek salad that reminded me why I so love the taste of fresh fruit and vegetables in Israel, along with a pizza bread with za'atar on it. And I had a cocktail of limonnana (lemonade and mint) along with arak, the local anise-based liqueur. Moving just outside Jaffa, there are many fun restaurants in the **Carmel Market**; check out a delightful little spot called **Shukshuka**, a pun on the aforementioned shakshuka and the word “shuk” (market). It's at 41 Simtat Ha-Carmel. Nothing fancy; you sit at the counter, but my friend and I both loved it! Apparently, they are famous for their shakshuka, but it was lunch and we had stuffed grape leaves in a delicious yogurt and dill sauce along with fish stuffed “cigars”—fish in an outer pastry layer that is then fried. I had a little arak in pomegranate juice with it as well, and man, was that a good lunch!

As mentioned above, not to be outdone by that young upstart Tel Aviv, Jaffa has now renovated its old port area, and the Jaffa Port is now one of the up-and-coming areas of this always evolving metropolis. There are great seafood restaurants such as **The Old Man and the Sea (Ha-Zaken v'ha-Yam)**, tel. (053) 809-4346. This place is open every day, including Shabbat—obviously not kosher. There are other, fun places in this quite popular complex—the restaurant and bar scene in Tel Aviv is booming and constantly in flux! B'te'avon!—Bon appetit!

## Haifa—The City by the Bay

**Suggested Time: 2 to 3 nights.**

While Haifa on the northern Mediterranean coast is not nearly as much of a tourist center as Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, it remains my favorite city in the world. Many tourists skip it, a mistake in my view. Its beautiful bay reminds many of San Francisco or Naples. And it is a warm, vibrant city with the most successful Jewish-Arab coexistence of any major city in Israel. I absolutely adore Haifa—if I lived in Israel, Haifa would be my home.



My home in Haifa is the **Mirabel Plaza Hotel**, 111 Yefe Nof Street, (04) 835-2351, <https://www.danhotels.com/HaifaHotels/MirabellePlazaHaifaHotel>. It used to be a Crowne Plaza, but now it looks better than ever. I fell in love with this hotel—and this area—based on the view you see in the upper right photograph. The Mirabel Plaza makes three Dan properties in this area of Haifa, starting with the nearby **Dan Panorama Haifa Hotel**, located at 107 Ha-Nassi Avenue, tel. (04) 835-2222, <https://www3.danhotels.com/HaifaHotels/-DanPanoramaHaifaHotel>. This hotel offers the same spectacular views (get a bay view room), and a great staff and breakfast. The room décor is dated and needs an upgrade, but it's fine and does have a spectacular outdoor pool with a bay view. Also nearby is the **Dan Carmel**, another large, upscale hotel. Another, lower-priced option is the Haifa Bay View Hotel (<http://haifa-bay-view-hotel.haifa-hotels-il.com/en/>). There are other guesthouse options in the Central Carmel area and still others on the port level in the German Colony, but I have to have that bay view!



If you stay in this area of Central Carmel, **I suggest you buy some fine Israeli wines** at a terrific wine shop called **Special Reserve** at 109 Ha-Nassi Boulevard in the Panorama Center, a mall located under the Dan Panorama Hotel; tel. (04) 836-1187, e-mail [specialreserveshop@gmail.com](mailto:specialreserveshop@gmail.com). The same owner runs **Wine Bar by Andre Suidan** nearby at 98 Ha-Nassi, (050) 427-4556 and another location in the Ahuva district at 14 Horev Street, tel. (04) 625-5818. **That owner is Andre Suidan**, and either he or his assistant **Moshe** (who runs the Horev Street location) can work with you to find good wines in your price range. They opened a main location in the port area called **Andre Suidan Fine Wine Shop** at Wadi Salib 10, and it's huge compared to his other shops. Andre has wines from all over the world, but go local! Israeli wines are not the sugary sweet types that people associate with Passover Seders; they have really come into their own and have won many awards in European wine festivals in recent years. **Ask for Andre if he is there; he is a truly lovely man who has become a good friend**, and he will show you the wonders of some fine Israeli wines. Just meeting Andre is worth a stop; he is just extraordinary—and his brother Fadi is now the CEO of the Jerusalem International YMCA! **Tell Andre or Moshe that I sent you**, and you might get a taste or two to help you choose. Choose some wines to enjoy with the view from your hotel balcony. Or just buy a case to cover your needs for the rest of the trip! You can even ship a case home—I do so on every trip now (expensive, but I like having Israel wines in my house). As Israelis say when offering a toast, “*l'chaim!*”—“To life!”



## Day trips from and within Haifa:

- **Caesarea** is the seaside city that King Herod built to honor his Roman patron Caesar Augustus, and it was later held by a succession of Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Mamelukes, and Ottoman Turks—and now, the Israelis. These are among the most spectacular ruins in all Israel. The city is also prominent in the New Testament—here Pontius Pilate had his seat of government, the Apostle Paul was tried, and Peter baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius after his vision of God showing him “a new thing.” Jews remember that the Great Revolt against Rome in 66-70 C.E.<sup>1</sup> began here, leading to the execution of thousands of Jewish rebels, and Rabbi Akiva was brought here to be flayed alive during



the Second (Bar Kochba) Revolt in 132-35 C.E. Lots of history! Be sure to see the Roman Aqueduct north of the park (pictured at left). Caesarea makes an easy stop on the way from Tel Aviv to Haifa. While you're in Caesarea, also check out the gorgeous **Old City Caesarea Gallery** with its beautiful paintings and sculptures. Tel. (04) 626-0198; [www.caesareaart.com](http://www.caesareaart.com). Owner-sculptor Leon Bronstein is incredibly talented, and a really sweet man, though he usually is at his gallery in Ein Hod. I particularly recommend the paintings by Bulgarian-Israeli artist Asia Katz. One of her works graces our dining room, to many positive comments, and in an amazing coincidence, we actually met her 24 years after we bought it on our May 2022 visit! (See p. 39.) By the way, since this may be the first national park you visit, you may want to buy an all-park pass, now an electronic swipe card, which is both convenient and reasonably priced at ₪150 (about \$47 USD). You can also buy a six-park pass for ₪110 (\$33 USD) or a three-park pass for ₪78 (\$23 USD); all are good for two weeks. Unless you know you're only going to a few parks, the all-park pass is usually the better deal. You don't have to keep track, and you'll likely see more than enough parks to save money. Note: For some inexplicable reason, some of the smaller parks (such as Apollonia) don't always sell the cards—which makes no sense at all since they are all on the card! If you visit one of those first, keep your receipt—you may get a credit when you do buy the pass at a later park, but that didn't always work for me. I hope this will change with the new, digital passes.

Two good places for lunch, with views of the harbor: Limani ([www.limanibistro.com](http://www.limanibistro.com)) and the more upscale, white-tablecloth restaurant Helena ([www.helena.co.il](http://www.helena.co.il)). The latter would make for a very romantic dinner as well.

- **Akko**—Easily accessible by car, train, or bus from Haifa, Akko is an amazing place that feels like scenes from “The Arabian Nights.” The Old City is simply magical. Akko (also known as Acre) was the Crusaders' last stronghold in the Holy Land, and the Crusader “underground city” with its incredibly well-preserved knights' halls (pictured at right) is one of the most amazing sites in all Israel. **Uri Buri**



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<sup>1</sup>The terms “Common Era” and “Before Common Era” are preferred by Israelis and most scholars because of the obvious Christian connotations of “A.D.” and “B.C.” So, you will generally see “C.E.” and “B.C.E.” instead, including in this guide.

and **Abu Christo** are famous restaurants in the city. It is a wonderful and colorful city to explore on foot, though it is a bit like a rabbit warren (so a tour guide might be helpful here). Also, just outside Akko is **Bahji**, the resting place of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder and greatest prophet of the Bahá'í faith, who was imprisoned by the Ottoman Turks as an apostate from Islam. His burial place is a peaceful and quiet shrine, surrounded by extraordinary gardens.

- **Rosh Ha-Niqra.** On the northern border with Lebanon, these sea-caves carved into chalk cliffs are truly extraordinary. They are only accessible by cable car (unless you kayak there!). The view down the coast, all the way to Haifa and Mount Carmel, is spectacular.
- **Yehi'am Fortress National Park,** east of Nahariya in far northern Israel. This was the site of the Crusader fortress of Judin, built on the heights of Galilee between Akko and Montfort. The fortress, still intact to an amazing extent, is an example of how many of the ancient sites in Israel consist of layers from different waves of history: the first fortifications on this site were Roman and Byzantine. The Crusaders later built a major fortress on this site, which was eventually sold to an order of Teutonic knights. The Crusaders could not withstand the rising Muslim tide, however, and in 1265, the Mameluk Sultan Baybars conquered the fortress and destroyed it. It was later rebuilt by a powerful, local Bedouin sheikh named Dahar al-Omar, and eventually by the Ottomans as well, and they restored many of the fortifications and added some of their own. As recently as the 1948 War for Independence, Jewish defenders of the nearby Kibbutz Yehi'am took refuge in the remains of the fortress to defend themselves against Arab attacks, and nearly 100 gave their lives in the fight for the new Jewish State.
- **Ein Afek Nature Reserve,** east of Akko. This is an area of protected wetlands, right next to a major construction development. For those who picture Israel as an arid desert, this region certainly challenges that assumption! The nature reserve has accessible paths around and over marshlands and small lakes filled with rather large and overly attentive catfish, dragonflies, and at times, water birds. A nice, quiet break perhaps?
- **Ein Hod.** This is an artists' colony south of Haifa, not far off the coastal highway. It is quite charming and full of galleries of artists who live and work there, including Leon Bronstein's, who still has his gallery in Caesarea, mentioned earlier, but now lives here and works out of the Olive Press Gallery, tel. (04) 984-0551, e-mail [art@caesareaart.com](mailto:art@caesareaart.com). Asia Katz may have a gallery here as well.
- **Atlit Detention Camp.** South of Haifa along the coast, this site tells the story of how "illegal" Jewish immigrants trying to enter Palestine through the British blockade from 1933-48 were imprisoned in detainee camps. The initial admitting procedures—separated by the sexes, going through "decontamination" procedures, and then into mass, separate showers—must have been terribly traumatic for Holocaust survivors.
- **Zikhron Ya'akov** is a lovely and charming city on the slopes of Mount Carmel south of Haifa, glistening on the hills above the coastal highway. Like Caesarea, this is a possible stop on the way from Tel Aviv. Zikhron, as it is commonly known for short, was one of the first Zionist settlements in the Land of Israel in the First Aliyah, financed largely by

the Rothschild fortune, and the name (“Memory of Jacob”) recalls the founding baron’s father Jacob. Each major wave of Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel in modern times is called an “aliyah,” and the First Aliyah in the 1880s and 1890s was the only one of the five aliyot that was religious in nature. But unlike the Jewish population already in the Land of Israel (always there), they were also Zionist in motivation, committed to doing more than praying, studying, and dying in the Holy Land, and they insisted on being self-sufficient rather than relying on charity from overseas to finance their lives. Life was hard and many of the first pioneers died; see the **First Aliyah Museum** for more on that story, tel. (04) 629-4777. Start at the **Sarah Aharonson House**, the home of an early Zionist hero who, after seeing the results of the Armenian genocide, was determined to help the British in their campaign against the Ottoman Turks in World War I. She and others in the town formed a spy ring called Nili, which provided information to the British. The Turks intercepted one of her carrier pigeons and tortured her, but she managed to kill herself with a pistol concealed under a tile in a bathroom. It is quite the story.

I noticed right away that several buildings looked much like the German Templar homes in Sarna and in Haifa, and my tour guide **Russell Abel** (contact info p. 7) complimented my eye for detail—they were in fact built by Templars who were hired to construct buildings in the new settlement, including the first synagogue. Zikhron today is really a charming place, with beautiful neighborhoods and a central pedestrian district of shops, cafés, and galleries without the sterility of Sarna. On a future visit, I think I may stay at a guesthouse for a few days for a different experience.



Back in the city of Haifa itself, we have several sites of interest:

- **The Clandestine Immigration Museum** in Haifa on the seashore level, 204 Allenby Road, tel. (04) 853-6249, tells more of the story of the movement for “illegal” immigration of Jews to Palestine through a British blockade before and after World War II. Haifa played a key role in that struggle, and it is one of Israel’s great stories. One of the ships is part of the museum! You can also walk from there to **Elijah’s Cave**, the traditional site of his confrontation with the prophets of Ba’al, a site revered by Jews, particularly Sephardim.
- Also, don’t miss the spectacular **Bahà’i Shrine and Gardens**. Haifa is the world center of the Bahà’i faith, a peaceful, gentle, and syncretic faith that teaches that the prophets of all faiths, including Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha, were sent by God. The gardens are built on nineteen terraces that reach from the port level all the way to Yefe Nof, the street along the top of Mount Carmel near where most of the hotels are located. To see the gardens fully, you need to go on one of the tours offered by the Bahà’i authorities; self-touring is limited to certain areas. For more information and the schedule of tours, see [www.ganbahai.org.il/en/guided-tours](http://www.ganbahai.org.il/en/guided-tours). But if time is limited, you can get a good sense of the breathtakingly beautiful gardens from the overlook on Yefe Nof Street at the top of the gardens. Also, make sure to see what the gardens look like from below at night; it is one of the loveliest



things I have ever seen! You can get great views from the German Colony area along Ben-Gurion Boulevard on the port level, which has many restaurants.

- **Hiking in Carmel National Park.** If you are interested in some exercise and nature, you can drive or take a bus to the University of Haifa, with stunning views of much of Galilee from the top of Mount Carmel. From there, you can hike into the large Mount Carmel National Park on the far side of the mountain, with trails through beautiful mountain pine forests. There is also a wildlife park there called Hai Bar Carmel, where the Israel Nature and Parks Authority seeks to reintroduce into the wild the animals of biblical Israel—Persian fallow deer, wild sheep, gazelles, oryx, wild asses, and Griffon vultures.



Eating out in Haifa is a far more diverse, fun scene than used to be the case for this largely industrial and working-class city. **Jacko's** is a great fish and seafood restaurant down in the port area at 12 Kehilat Saloniki Street, tel. (053) 809-4661; they also have branches in Tel Aviv, Netanya, and Herzliya. This is one of Israel's most famous seafood restaurants—nothing fancy, but very good seafood. Some of my other favorites in the Central Carmel had closed, but for simple food with terrific wine, I do recommend the **Wine Bar by Andre Suidan** at 98 Ha-Nassi Boulevard. The food is simple but the service is great, it's quiet, and there is that terrific wine!

Venturing out a bit, check out the gorgeous and interesting **German Colony** on Ben-Gurion Boulevard on the port-level, a fun area of restaurants and night life. You can take the **Carmelit** funicular (mountainside) subway from the top station in Central Carmel all the way to the last station; from there, it is about a 10-minute walk to the German Colony. You can also take a bus from the Carmel Center area in front of the Dan Panorama directly to Ben-Gurion Boulevard; check with your hotel on what bus to take. Or it's an easy cab ride. My favorite place in the city now is **Fattoush**, 38 Ben-Gurion Boulevard, tel. (04) 852-4930, with excellent Mediterranean and Middle Eastern food and so much character and charm! See the menu at <https://misadot.rol.co.il/images/sites/fatoush/menu/english.html>. It also has a vibrant Arab and Jewish clientele—one of the aspects of Haifa that I love. They also have the **Fattoush Bar & Gallery** at Ha-Namal 6, very popular with a younger crowd. Also in the German Colony, I recommend **Douzan** with its colorful and delightful owner, **Fadi Najjar**. Douzan is across the street from Fattoush at 35 Ben-Gurion Boulevard, tel. (04) 852-5444, <https://douzan.rest.co.il/en>, and it has a wide-ranging, eclectic menu. In nice weather, take an outside table with that spectacular night view of the Bahà'ì Gardens up the side of Mount Carmel—breathtaking!—but interior tables are also available. Fadi is a unique Haifa experience, hovering over the proceedings with careful attention and great affection as he kisses the cheeks of women, men, IDF soldiers, American sailors; it doesn't matter. Whether or not you get smooched (he's not gross, just flamboyant and friendly), tell Fadi “shalom” from me, please! His English is limited, so you may have to have a friend or staff member translate. For inexpensive but very good Middle Eastern food, you can try **Abu Yusuf** near the Ford garage in the port area. It's very informal and in a quiet area but offers plentiful and tasty food at a very reasonable price. It's near the Paris Square Carmelit stop, tel. (04) 866-3723.



Finally, as you travel from Haifa to the Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) region, I have several stops to recommend. You could also do these as day trips from Haifa as well.

- **Nazareth.** This is, of course, the city where Jesus grew up and lived until he started his public ministry, and as such, is important to many Christians. There are several major sites there, and the most spectacular is the Church of the Annunciation, a modern Catholic church in the center of the city. Its dome is the dominant feature of the Nazareth skyline. Don't miss the mosaics in the church depicting the Madonna and child, each donated by the Catholics of that nation. My favorite is Japan's, which incorporates pearls into the design! Other sites include the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, which also contains "Mary's Well," an ancient spring which probably did once serve Jesus' family in what was then a tiny, backwater hamlet with a population of no more than 500. Some visitors love "Nazareth Village," which seeks to re-create Nazareth life in the First Century C.E. It is a bit "Disneyish" for me, but many enjoy it.



- **The Druze Villages, Daliat al-Carmel and Isfiya.** South of Haifa along Route 672, you can visit two major Druze villages on the southern approach to Mount Carmel, a chance for a taste of this important Israeli ethnic/religious group. The Druze are renowned for their hospitality, fine food, and wonderful fabrics and crafts, and these towns are often mobbed by Israeli bargain-hunters, especially on Shabbat. In Daliat al-Carmel (the more southern town), stop for lunch at **Halabi's Restaurant**. Just ask anyone for "**Fuad Halabi's restaurant**"; you'll find it. This meal was *wonderful*—very inexpensive, delicious food with a mezza that will fill you for what feels like days. They offer the best falafel I have ever tasted! It's just off the main road, tel. (04) 839-3576 or (052) 477-6048. Fuad is a lively, gregarious man who loves to host his guests.

And if you come back to Haifa over the crest of Mount Carmel, the view of the city, the bay, and the Valley of Jezreel will take your breath away. As one friend who traveled with me said, "that alone was worth the price of admission."

- **Zippori National Park.** Just a few kilometers outside of Nazareth stood the major First Century city of Zippori, or Sephoris in Greek. Sephoris was the big city in Jesus' day, and since it was constructed during his lifetime, it is virtually certain that he and Joseph, who were carpenters or day laborers, would have worked here. There was also a major Jewish revolt in Sephoris during his youth, which was brutally crushed by the Romans. It is interesting to speculate on what effect that had on his views of the ruling class and how the Roman occupation exploited and crushed the poor. But the city struck a truce with the Romans in the Great Revolt of 66-70 C.E. and thus survived. The ruins contain some of the most spectacular mosaics in all of Israel, including the famed "Mona Lisa of the Galilee" (left). It is an amazing site.



- **Bet She'arim.** This national park southeast of Haifa contains the tombs of prominent rabbis from the Talmudic period. This is not really my period of interest, but these tombs are absolutely *spectacular*. After the fall of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life moved north to the Galilee, and the Sanhedrin (supreme Jewish council) was based here for years. Take a tour if you can—the tombs are not easy to explore or understand on your own. English tours are not scheduled, but call (04) 983-1643 a day in advance and they may be able to find an English-speaking guide (or bring your own).

- **Bar'am.** The ancient synagogue at Bar'am, almost on the Lebanese border, dates from the Fourth Century, and it is one of the best preserved in Israel. Now a national park, the ruins are very interesting, and it is a quiet, lovely place, often missed by the tour buses. For that reason—the quietness—it's one of my favorite sites in Israel. There is also a modern and quite distressing story here.



During the 1948 War for Independence, the new Israel Defense Forces (IDF) evacuated the Maronite Christian villagers from the adjacent town of Birin on the Lebanese border. The villagers had sat out the war, and the IDF promised them that they could return after a few days. IDF officials apparently feared that the villagers would link up with nearby Maronite-dominated Lebanon, which had invaded the new State. Seven and a half decades later, the villagers have never been permitted to return, despite staying out of the war—in the face of the broken promises of several Israeli prime ministers. The villagers continue to try to keep the village maintained and its memory alive, and weddings of descendants are even held in its small church. You can walk through the ruins and feel the unjust story of people caught in the middle—who should at long last be allowed to come home.

As a note, restaurants near gas stations in Israel often offer far better food than we find in North America, and an excellent example is the **Horan** restaurant next to the Sonol gas station on Route 89 in the **Druze village of Hurfeish** not far from Bar'am. Tel. (050) 587-6878, (04) 957-0352. Owner **Mahmoud Zidane** runs an excellent little place with outstanding food and Druze hospitality—well worth a stop!

- **Peki'in.** This is another stop off-the-beaten path, but I try in this guide to appeal to both first-timers and veteran visitors. This town in west-central Galilee is important historically to Jews but is today overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Arab and Druze, with a smattering of Arab Christians. With a good guide (see **Moti Bar-Tuv** in guide section), this makes for an interesting visit. Check out an excellent, simple, family-owned restaurant called **Ra'aya's**, tel. (04) 999-7818, where you can see Druze-style pita bread cooked on a dome right in front of you. (By the way, pita in Israel will ruin it for you back home.) And there is a great place for dessert nearby on the main street called **Conditerie Yosef**, tel. (04) 997-5782.

- **Montfort.** Not far from Peki'in (and easily combined with a visit to it, as I did while touring with Moti) is the Crusader fortification of Montfort, situated atop a ridge with spectacular valleys on all sides. Visiting the ruins in Montfort requires a rigorous hike, particularly ascending to the actual fortress from the deep, dry moats around it, but it's worth it. From the top you can see all the way to the Mediterranean, a magical view. When Montfort fell to the Mamelukes, they allowed the Teutonic knights safe passage to Akko/Acre with their records, from which we learned much of what we know of the Crusader era.



- **Yodfat** (also called Jotapata) is an historic site on a hillcrest surrounded by ravines in central Galilee. It was here that the Jewish general Josephus chose to take his stand in the

fight against mighty Rome during the Great Revolt of 66-70 C.E., which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. The Roman general Vespasian led the siege of Jotapata with his Tenth Legion, assisted by two other legions, an absolutely massive attacking force. The Jewish forces fell but only after a brutal, 47-day siege. Josephus would survive and surrender to the Romans, and he would then betray his people by going over to the side of his Roman conquerors, starting with his prediction that Vespasian would not only become the Roman Emperor but was also the Jewish Messiah. While one of the greatest traitors of history, Josephus was also the greatest Jewish historian of the First Century C.E. His book *The Jewish War* is the primary history of this conflict, which saw the destruction of Israel and the death of hundreds of thousands if not over a million Jews. This place blew me away. The site was made even more evocative with commentary taken from Josephus and other sources as I hiked through the paths. It is a place that sears the soul, much like Masada or Gamla, and very worth seeing.

Now, that said, Yodfat National Park is a little tricky to find. It may be a national park but is unstaffed and “off the beaten path.” Right after you make the turn into the modern settlement of Yodfat, you turn left onto an entry road before you get to the modern community. At least it has a sign now!

## Tsfat (Safed)—The Mystical City.

**Suggested Time: One night, optional, depending on interests.**

This stop is quite optional and an alternative to Rosh Pina (below), depending on both time and specific interests. The city is frankly a little run down, and if you stay here, there are three possible reasons. First, Tsfat (or as it is usually called in English, “Safed”) is the birthplace and heart of Jewish mysticism, often called “Kabbalah,” and if that is something that interests you, there is nowhere better to experience it than here. Tsfat is one of Judaism’s four holy cities, and its spiritual atmosphere is palpable. Second, even outside of that specific, religious connection, Tsfat is also one of Israel’s artistic centers with a very extensive Artists’ Quarter in the old Arab section. Finally, Tsfat, perched high in the mountains of the Upper Galilee, is significantly cooler in the summer, and as such is a major holiday destination for Israelis trying to escape the occasionally brutal summer heat. Rosh Pina, while not as high in elevation, is similar (and better, in my view).



In Tsfat, I recommend you stay at the remarkable **Ruth Tzfat Hotel**, a lovely 300-year old, renovated Turkish khan (inn) that is quite romantic—for years it was called the “Ruth Rimomim Inn.” It is located in the Artists’ Colony, tel. (04) 699-4666. If you do stay there, get a room in the older section, which has more character. My husband and I loved Room 9. (The newer rooms are lovely; they just don’t have the same charm and character.) The region is beautiful, hilly and high, and as noted, is quite a bit cooler in both the summer and winter. While an advantage in the summer, it may be quite a bit less pleasant in the winter.



As I mentioned, Tsfat is significant as the center of Jewish mysticism, and I highly recommend a tour guide named **Aryeh Buznakh**, who offers walking tours of “mystical Tsfat.” While I’m not one to overly rely on tour guides, Tsfat is difficult to access on your own, with many of the synagogues and other sites hidden away in the warrens of this ancient city. You can reach Aryeh at **(054) 638-3309** or at [lilach188@gmail.com](mailto:lilach188@gmail.com). I used him several years ago, and our time with him was very memorable. People I have referred to him since have all been pleased.



In the section on Caesarea, I mentioned the artwork of **Asia Katz**. Her gallery in Tsfat (she lives in the town) can be found at **7 Levanon Street in the Artists’ Colony, (04) 692-2373 or (052) 433-8862**. Taste is personal, but you can see her work; the piece to the right is the one we purchased. Her studio is in the city. And we met her in Caesarea in 2022!



Tsfat is not much of a restaurant town. Many people staying at the Ruth Tsfat take their meals at the hotel, and that is an option. There are some places to eat there, but I recommend a couple of places a short drive away, in the city of Rosh Pina (though neither is kosher if that’s an issue). My favorite is the **Shiri Bistro at Pina Barosh** (see p. 41 for more information), known for its extensive offering of wines and cocktails. As a note, in May 2022, the restaurant was not yet open for dinner because of post-Covid staffing shortages—I hope that changes soon!

## The Kinneret and Eastern Galilee Region

**Suggested Time: Two Nights.**

You have choices here—either the large city of Tiberias or the many communities on or near the lovely Lake Kinneret (the biblical Sea of Galilee), with proximity to numerous historical sites of great interest



to both Jews and Christians. For Christians, this is the area that they will likely feel closest to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, for it was here that he spent all but the last week of his public ministry. For Jews, the Talmud says, “God made the seven seas, but the Kinneret is his jewel.” The city of Tiberias is itself a tad run down—but remains convenient to restaurants and hotels. Other communities have their own advantages and charms, but fewer restaurant options.

Wherever you stay, I recommend that you spend a day circumnavigating the Lake by car using this booklet and Frommer’s or Fodor’s as your guide. The directions here presuppose that you are setting out north from Tiberias, but you can adapt from wherever you stay, and the order is not particularly important. At the outset, don’t miss the exhibit of a 2,000-year-old fishing boat



recovered from the shores of Lake Kinneret during a drought in 1986, which only went on display in late 1999. Because the boat is roughly contemporaneous with Jesus of Nazareth (and is thus often called “the Jesus Boat”), it is the subject of much speculation and interest. It’s on display at **Kibbutz Nof Ginosar**, and the video showing the process of recovering and preserving the boat is fascinating.

As you proceed north along the lake's western shore, key stops may include **the Magdala Center**, where archeologists under Roman Catholic supervision are now excavating the important First Century C.E. Jewish town that gave Mary Magdalene her name (see [www.magdala.org](http://www.magdala.org) for more information). This site is truly amazing—both the archaeological excavations and the stunning, modern worship spaces. There is obvious significance to Christians, but there is much here showing Jewish life in the First Century that would be interesting to Jews as well, and the Franciscans overseeing the excavations are very inclusive and respectful. Next going north (from Tiberias at least) is **Tabgha**, with the **Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes** and the **Church of the Primacy of St. Peter**; and **Capernaum** with its amazing **White Synagogue** from the Fourth Century as well as what are believed to be the remains of Peter's home and the First Century C.E. synagogue in which Jesus taught. Going up the nearby hill, you will see **Korazim** and its ancient synagogue from the Fourth Century C.E. and the **Mount of Beatitudes** with its modern but simple and lovely **Church of the Beatitudes**, which commemorates this traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount. On my first trip in 1988, this was the area that made me fall in love with Galilee. Around the northern end to the east side of Lake Kinneret, you will find **Kursi** with a Byzantine church from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries commemorating the “miracle of the swine”; and **Ein Gev** on the east side of the lake at the base of the Golan Heights, a kibbutz famous throughout the country for its summer concerts and excellent lakeside fish restaurant. At the southern end of Lake Kinneret, you will cross the **Jordan River** as it exits the lake on its path to the Dead Sea—and you'll see that there is nothing “mighty” about it. While dams retain some water here, for most of its length, the Jordan is barely a creek now, mainly because of the water demands of this thirsty country. There is a popular baptismal site for Christian pilgrims at **Yardenit**. Just before you re-enter Tiberias, don't miss the ruins of the **Severus Synagogue** from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries at **Hammat Tiberias**; the mosaics are amazing. You can do all this in a day, though it will be a long one.



If you are staying in Tiberias itself and are looking for an upscale splurge, I recommend the **Scots Hotel**, which is situated downtown on Lake Kinneret, tel. (04) 671-0710, [www.scotshotels.co.il](http://www.scotshotels.co.il). The hotel is owned by the Church of Scotland (the mother church of Presbyterians in the



United States), and in the early 2000s, the church renovated and greatly expanded what was a hospital and pilgrims' inn dating back to the 1880s. Some rooms incorporate sections from the original buildings, and there are new towers as well. The breakfasts are fantastic, and the pool is sparkling clean and overlooks the lake. Unfortunately, prices have gone way up since it opened, so while it may be worth the splurge, be forewarned of sticker shock. Also, note that the Scots Hotel is not kosher. Another, much less expensive option is the resort at **Kibbutz Nof Ginosar**, just north of the city; tel. (04) 670-0320, fax (04) 679-2170, web site at [www.ginosar.co.il/en](http://www.ginosar.co.il/en). This is the place with the 2,000-year-old boat. The kibbutz has both a hotel and a set of small cottages called Ginosar Village. Rooms are priced reasonably, and it is located right on Lake Kinneret just a few kilometers north of Tiberias. I stayed in one of the cottages in Ginosar Village a few years ago; it was quite basic but charming and quiet and far better than the hotel, in my view. But this place is hugely popular with the big bus tours and a bit overfull of large American tour groups for my taste, mostly evangelical Christians. I am fond of my fellow Americans, but I don't go to Israel to hang out with them. Visitors and experts on the TripAdvisor forum also speak highly of **Ma'agan Holiday Village** on the southern side of Lake Kinneret,

and a so-called “dude ranch” called **Vered Ha-Galil**, complete with horseback riding, is located on the north side of the Kinneret. There are also more upscale (and kosher) hotel options in Tiberias itself if you’re so inclined; ask Isram Israel for recommendations and prices.

**Rosh Pina.** In 2017, I stayed for the first time in this lovely town not far north of Tiberias, **and I am now sold on Rosh Pina as my base for this region.** Rosh Pina is the Hebrew word for “cornerstone” (See Psalm 118:22—“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone”), and the name reflects its key role as one of the settlements of the First Aliyah in the 1880s as religious Zionist Jews established new communities in this region of Upper Galilee. The town is hilly with spectacular views to the east over the Hula Valley and the Golan. **My favorite place to stay is a guesthouse called Pina Barosh** (a play on the town’s name), which incorporates some of first stone homes built by those Zionist pioneers (see above right). Located at 8 Ha-Halutzim Road, [www.pinabarosh.com/en](http://www.pinabarosh.com/en), tel. (04) 693-6582. Each room is unique and full of character, with lovely courtyards in between (see picture). For more information or to make reservations, contact [mail@pinabarosh.com](mailto:mail@pinabarosh.com). The **Shiri Bistro** at the guesthouse is one of Rosh Pina’s better restaurants, an open-air courtyard with great views. What makes the place, though, is its incredible staff and service, though the restaurant is not currently open in the evening because of post-Covid staffing shortages; I expect that to change soon. We loved our May 2022 stay, and it is definitely my place in this area.



On the eastern side of the Lake, at the base of the Golan Heights, you have the option of the large **Ramot Resort**. While this side of the lake is a bit more remote, the Ramot Resort is a beautiful facility with spectacular views of the lake from nearly every room. Sunsets over the Galilee hills are stunning! Ramot offers both hotel rooms and private cabins. I stayed there several years ago and liked it a lot—though navigating the hordes of Israeli families at the buffet for meals can be a not-so-pleasant experience. This is a kosher place, run by the nearby moshav of Ramot. (A moshav is a communal settlement like a kibbutz, but property is privately owned.) Another and perhaps better choice within the moshav itself is a small guesthouse that an Israel friend recommends, called **The Best View There Is (Ha-Khi Nof Sh’Yesh)**, tel. (04) 673-1113; <https://www.ramotnof.co.il/en/About.html>. Another option on the eastern side of the Lake is the **Ein Gev Holiday Resort** ([www.eingev.com](http://www.eingev.com)), run by the Kibbutz Ein Gev.

You can have a different experience by staying in a guesthouse, which Israelis call a “zimmer” (from the German/Yiddish word for “room”; the “z” is pronounced “ts”). These are akin to what North Americans would call a “bed-and-breakfast,” though breakfast may incur an additional charge; you need to check. The moshav **Amirim** has many zimmers available. I stayed at **Nof 10 (“View 10”)** in May 2008, and it is one of the most beautiful places I have ever stayed. This was a definite splurge at ₪1,100 a night for a cabin (₪800 a night on weekdays), but it was very much worth it. Just look at that view of the Kinneret, the Golan, and the entire region on the left—all visible while soaking in a Jacuzzi! See [www.nof10.com](http://www.nof10.com) for more information. Prices may vary. You can contact Eran, the owner, at (04) 698-0927 or (052) 236-1011. He lives in another building on the site just up the hill. Note also that these



cabins are for adults only, but Amirim is full of zimmerim designed for families with kids as well. **The entire Amirim community is vegetarian** (residents of the moshav must commit to that). Some visitors will find that appealing, but all visitors are expected to respect and abide by that during their stay.



For meal options in the area, Tiberias has an excellent Chinese restaurant on the shore of Lake Kinneret—**the Pagoda**. Tel. (04) 672-5513; [pagoda@lido-galilee.com](mailto:pagoda@lido-galilee.com). Because it's kosher, it is not open on Shabbat. Another great restaurant nearby is **Decks** (kosher), and it is built out over the lake, with an incredibly romantic view of the lake and the town. The food (mainly grilled meats and fish) is great as well; tel. (04) 672-1538. One nonkosher option in Tiberias for Friday evening dinner would be the restaurant at the Scots Hotel. A little north of Tiberias is a fabulous, upscale place, **the Magdalena Restaurant** in the Magdala Center, one of the best restaurants I have found in northern Israel. Tel. (04) 673-0064, <https://www.magdalena.co.il/magdalen-en/>. Finally, from Rosh Pina you could easily visit the **Shiri Bistro at Pina Barosh in Rosh Pina** (p. 41) for a dinner while staying in Tiberias (not kosher and are thus a Friday evening option). The Shiri Bistro is my favorite restaurant in Rosh Pina, and there are some other options in town as well. **Amirim** has some vegetarian restaurants as well. For a very different experience, you can drive to the Bat Ya'ar Farm. It really is a farm, at 800 m above sea level, a significantly higher elevation even from Rosh Pina. It was about a 20 to 30-minute drive from there and it's not far from Tsfat either, and you can learn more about it at <https://www.batyaar.co.il/batyaarranch>. They have a steakhouse there with indoor seating, but we ate in a small, covered wagon that easily sat the six of us and could have handled eight. That's right, cowhands—a Western feel! Or Israelis' idea of that. The food was really good—unlike Amirim, very meat-heavy, and we had a blast there.

A final note on Tiberias—the city is about 600 feet (182 m) below sea level and is consequently quite hot in the summertime, and it is also warmer in the winter. For that reason, one way to choose between Tiberias or other lakeside towns vs. higher elevation, cooler locales such as Tsfat, Rosh Pina, or Amirim (which are not far apart) is to consider what season you are traveling in.



I already mentioned the lake circuit, which makes for a delightful and memorable day. This area is also the gateway to two other, major regions of Israel, the Hula Valley at the northern end of the Jordan River, and the Golan, the region that Israel conquered from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War. Either is an easy day trip from Tiberias or anywhere in the Kinneret region.

- **The Hula Valley**, known to Israelis simply as “Ha-Hula” (note the guttural h, a kh sound) is an area of marshlands that the Zionist pioneers drained in the 1940s—and eventually Israelis realized that they had inadvertently created an ecological disaster. Israel is the fertile land bridge between the vast Eurasian landmass and Africa, and each spring and fall, millions of migratory birds traverse this tiny land, with many of the water birds landing, feeding, and resting in these marshlands. Now, the wetlands were gone. So, the Israelis reversed course and re-flooded part of the Hula, and if you are lucky enough to tour during late October or November or March and April, you can see the



most spectacular flocks of cranes, pelicans, and storks as they make their way to Africa for the winter or to Europe and Asia for the summer. Go to the **Agamon**, and you can tour either on foot for only ₪3, or you can rent a bicycle or golf cart, or you can tour on a tractor that pulls a viewing gallery (that's how I have done it). See [www.agalili.com/en/](http://www.agalili.com/en/) for more information. You can also rent binoculars there. This experience really is quite breathtaking, particularly if you get up really early and arrive an hour or so before dawn in migratory season to see *tens of thousands* of birds awaken and launch. It is gorgeous and cacophonous and awe-inspiring!

- **Tel Hazor.** I am embarrassed to admit that in sixteen previous visits, I had never visited this extremely important and vast archeological site. Hazor was the largest Canaanite city in what would become the Land of Israel, and it is repeatedly mentioned in the Bible. First, we hear of Hazor in the story of Joshua's conquest and later we hear about how King Solomon fortified the city under his United Kingdom (which only lasted during David and Solomon's reign; thereafter, it split into the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah). Hazor is indeed vast, significantly larger than its contemporary counterpart at Megiddo (Armageddon). The coolest part of Hazor (for me) was a water system with a tunnel that descends 46 meters into the earth, to groundwater level, which provided the city water even in times of siege when it was impossible to access water outside the city walls. Seeing a gate from the time of Solomon at Hazor was fascinating as well. But it was the Israelite tower at the western wall of the fortifications that haunted me. It was built to fend off the Assyrian invaders, but to no avail—in 732 B.C.E., Hazor and Galilee would fall to the massive army from that relentless empire to the northeast, and shortly thereafter the entire Kingdom of Israel would be deported into oblivion, the legendary “ten lost tribes.”
- **Banias and Tel Dan.** In Israel's far north, there are two remarkable national parks. **Banias** is a mountain where fresh-water springs “magically” emerge to create one of the three tributaries that make up the Jordan River. The springs absolutely gush at the end of winter, and this made it a long-revered holy place for pagan faiths, including worship of the Greek and Roman god Pan (the name “Banias” is an Arabic corruption of “Pan”). Nearby **Tel Dan National Park** is near the northern tip of Israel, right on what was the border with Syria until 1967 and where Syria, Lebanon, and Israel came together. At Dan, water gushes up from the ground rather magically in several springs fed by aquifers in the Golan, and even in November at the end of the rain-parched summer, it was still gushing! Water roared down streams that come together and make up the second of the tributaries that feed into the Jordan. It was a beautiful sight however you cut it, but in this arid land, it was glorious to see. Dan is also of great Biblical and historical interest—here the only extra-biblical evidence of King David was found, a stella referring to “Bet David” (the “House of David”). Even more remarkable was the excavated and quite intact shrine that King Jeroboam erected after the collapse of the United Kingdom into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, designed to keep pilgrims of the Northern Kingdom of Israel from going to Judah's capital in Jerusalem, with one shrine at Dan and the other at Beth-El. See I Kings 12:29-33. This was one of the most amazing archeological confirmations of the biblical history and text that I have ever seen.



- **Arbel Cliffs.** Not far from Tiberias (and an easy stop on the way) is the Arbel Cliffs National Park, with its stunning cliff formation that looms over the city and the lake. You can really see the beginning of the Great Syrian-African Rift from these cliffs—and the entirety of Lake Kinneret is spread out before you. The views are breathtaking—even if the cliff-edges can be a tad unnerving. Especially with kids, be careful.

**The Golan Region.** The **Golan Heights**, which Israelis simply call “the Golan,” was captured from the Syrians in the 1967 Six-Day War. On its face, it is a rather barren and sparsely populated plateau but there is still much to see, including the ancient city of **Qatzrin**, its modern equivalent (the capital of the Israeli Golan), and the Israeli portion of **Mount Hermon**, the highest mountain in the country, which is snow-capped much of the year and offers the country’s only ski resort in the winter! Note: Despite the tragic and seemingly endless Syrian civil war across the disengagement zone and border, the Golan remains generally calm and safe.

- For a view over the UN-monitored demilitarized zone into Syria, you can visit **Mount Bental**, which overlooks the Valley of Tears, the site of one of the largest tank battles in world history during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Today, Mount Bental hosts both UN truce observers and a coffee shop called **Koffee Annan** (a pun on the name of the former UN Secretary-General). You occasionally can hear sounds from the fighting in Syria.

If you want to dive much deeper into the geopolitical situation here, consider touring the border zone with **Ilan Shulman**, a resident of Kibbutz Merom Golan who offers geopolitical tours under the banner **No Other Land**, tel. (052) 882-8480, [www.no-other-land.com](http://www.no-other-land.com). In our two hours together, he took me in his off-road jeep down into the UN-monitored disengagement-of-forces zone established between the Israelis and Syrians in shuttle negotiations led by Henry Kissinger after the Yom Kippur War. The kibbutz has fields that go almost all the way up to the border fence, and we toured bunkers that overlook the border as well as seeing abandoned Syrian headquarters from before the war. Most interestingly, Ilan shared his views about how the Syrian Civil War has changed the equation on the Golan border (and beyond) dramatically. I learned more in those two hours than any comparable time in the country that I can think of. I don’t agree with Ilan on everything, but he gave me a lot to think about and I left far more informed. Of note, Ilan briefs military and political leaders from around the world; he is the real deal.

- But the most spectacular historical site of all on the Golan, in my view, is **Gamla**, often called “the Masada of the north.” The historian Josephus (whom I told you about in the



story of Yodfat) tells us that in the Great Revolt of 66-70 C.E., Roman armies laid siege to this city, which sat so high on its crested ridge that “it almost seemed to hang in the air.” The town’s name came from the Hebrew word for camel (*gamal*), because the distinctive hump, seen at left, looked much like a camel’s back. The population at that time was swollen by Jewish refugees fleeing the Roman onslaught, and when the Roman forces broke through the defensive wall, some 9,000 Jews either jumped to their deaths from the far end of the ridge or were hurled into the ravines. The ruins are spectacularly preserved; you can even see exactly where

the Romans broke through the city wall. The hike down to the ruins and back up is very rigorous; you may be able to catch a ride on a tram. The region is also a spectacular nature reserve, with a 51-meter waterfall and one of the best protected habitats of the Griffon vulture, with a wingspan of up to 2.7 meters! These spectacular birds soar soundlessly on the thermal drafts along the ravines on each side of Gamla—on my first visit, I hit the dirt when one swooped just a meter or two over my head! They are among the most beautiful examples of birds in flight I have ever seen. (And a local friend reminded me: “Don’t worry, Douglas. They’re not interested in you. You’re still moving.”)

- On my most recent visit, I toured the newly opened national heritage site at **Ein Kshatot**, also known in Arabic as **Umm el-Kanatir**. This site is *amazing*—but note that both Google Maps and Waze told me that “you have arrived” in the middle of a cow pasture, so keep driving farther along and you’ll find it. Ein Kshatot was a Jewish town in the Talmudic period, and its synagogue was built a couple of centuries later than Korazim’s, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. I was expecting some interesting ruins and maybe mosaic floors, but what I found was by far the most extant, restored ancient synagogue I have ever seen in Israel! The entire town was destroyed in a massive earthquake in 732 C.E. and was thereafter abandoned, so piecing this synagogue back together was a huge jigsaw puzzle with enormous, basalt stones. This was a quite large town; the trail starts at the spring with massive arches, which gave the



town its Arabic name Umm el-Kanatir (“Mother of Arches”). Most of the remains of the town remain to be reconstructed; I would expect that the work will continue, so I’ll be back. But the synagogue!—I thought that Korazim, Capernaum, and other Galilean synagogues were impressive. This one has been almost completely reconstructed (minus a roof), and it’s full of interesting (and inexplicable) details—a column pedestal featuring a lion eating an animal while a rooster watches, and the head and front paws of a cat above the synagogue’s only circular window (see photo on left). And why? Did the main donor covering the construction costs have a cat he loved? Jews of the time generally avoided depicting any humans or animals because of the Second Commandment’s prohibition of “graven images”—why this exception? For a cat? This is truly a **wow!** site.

- **Nahal Meshushim/Yahudiya Nature Reserve.** This was a new discovery on our May 2022 trip, a deep valley stream that forms at one point a natural pool that has hexagonal, basalt columns on the sides (“hexagons” in Hebrew is “meshushim”). Friends took us there, and to be honest, had I known that it was a very steep and challenging, one-kilometer hike down to the pool—and back up, of course—I would not have tackled this, particularly since I had a total knee replacement nine months before. It is beautiful—and the good news is that my new knee passed the test with flying colors! If this sounds like your thing, you might enjoy it. People go into the pool, so perhaps wear shorts and a shirt that can dry (no changing facilities). It was a hot day, I was wiped, and my chagrined friend (to whom I had expressed my displeasure at not knowing how rigorous this would be for my knee) soaked my shirt so that it would evaporate on the way up, and it worked.



Before we leave the Golan, I have to recommend a remarkable restaurant in the Druze town of Buq'ata, not far from the larger Druze city of Majdal Shams. We were driving through the down and randomly picked a restaurant that had a parking spot in front of it. What an amazing surprise awaited us! It is owned and run by a Druze woman named **Samara**; her restaurant is simply known as **Naseeba's Place**. We had dinner reservations near Rosh Pina and were going to have "something light" for lunch. Out came dish after dish after dish, covering the large table that seated all six of us with fantastically delicious food! Brett and I locked eyes, and I quickly called back to Pina Barosh to ask that they cancel our dinner reservations. And yet the food kept coming—easily one of the best meals of the trip. If there were nothing else, that would have easily been the best part of the day. I strongly recommend this place, and you can reach her at [naseebasamara@gmail.com](mailto:naseebasamara@gmail.com) or at (050) 225-3343 or 2028.

But that was not all—Naseeba has an amazing story to tell, which she asked to share with us and another, small American group on the other side of the dining room. When she started her business, the Druze sheikh of the village reminded her of his ban on women driving. But her husband worked in Tel Aviv during the week, and with his support, she went there to take driving lessons and get her driver's license. When she returned to Buq'ata, she encouraged other women to do the same, and she proceeded to open her restaurant, hiring other women along with some men. The sheikh protested—"You're not a man!"—but her business grew. She also started selling cherries from local growers, eventually going into the street to hail tour buses to buy cherries and apples: she became known as the "Cherry Police." Of course, many of those tour bus crowds also came into her restaurant. In the face of this determined rebellion, the sheikh's oppressive control of the village women collapsed, and more and more women in Buq'ata now drive and some have opened their own businesses. Ms. Samara would go on to be honored by Trinity College in Connecticut and Harvard University. Like any proud mother, she shared the other stories of her family's successes, including that a son is currently finishing his studies to be a psychiatrist. I pointed to my husband Brett and said, "Gam hu"—"He is a psychiatrist, too." She smiled from ear to ear! Great food, a powerful story, and an amazing, strong woman—hard combo to beat!



When the time comes to leave the Kinneret/eastern Galilee region and drive to Jerusalem, you have two choices. You can take Highway 65 to link up with Highway 6, the Trans-Israel Highway, a new toll road and superhighway that will take you to Route 1 and the road to Jerusalem. (Be aware you'll be charged the tolls plus a ₪50 (\$16 USD) processing fee, because the tolls are electronic only, and the rental car company has to identify who drove the car that day.) Or you can continue on to Route 4 or Route 2 along the coast, which are non-toll highways but may have brutal traffic near rush hours. Both these routes are completely inside the "Green Line," or pre-1967 Israel. This approach also allows you to easily make two wonderful stops.

- **Mount Tabor.** This mountain, which overlooks the Valley of Jezreel from the north, is the site of two major biblical events. We read in the Book of Judges how Deborah's general Barak vanquished Sisera, charging down from Mount Tabor "with ten thousand men behind him." The subsequent Song of Deborah is widely believed by scholars to be one of the oldest traditions in the Hebrew Bible. Moving to the New Testament, Christian

tradition identifies Tabor as the “high mountain” on which Jesus was transfigured before his three closest disciples, Peter, John, and James, and appeared in glory with Moses and Elijah, representing the Torah (Law) and the Prophets. The drive up the mountain is on a narrow, switchback road that can be quite unnerving—not for the timid! The view of the Valley of Jezreel from the church on the mountaintop is worth it, though.

- **Megiddo.** This national park contains excavations of a *tel* (hill from layers of history) with remains of cities going back to the Canaanite period (c. 3500 B.C.E.). Megiddo guards the southern side of the Valley of Jezreel as Tabor guards the north, and armies have long marched through this critical pass, from Egyptians to Assyrians to Babylonians to Israelites, all the way to the British and the Israelis in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Megiddo is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and the park contains the remarkable ruins of gates from the time of King Solomon, the chariot city of King Ahab (and his much-maligned wife Jezebel), and most amazingly, a water system probably constructed by Ahab in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. with a tunnel cut through solid rock for hundreds of meters. The tunnel guaranteed that the fortress would always have water in times of siege, critical to survival in ancient times, and you can walk all the way through it! (As noted earlier, he also built a similar water system in Hazor farther east.) Of course, Megiddo is perhaps best known to Christians as the site of the great battle at the End of Days described in the New Testament book of Revelation: “Armageddon” is a Greek corruption of the Hebrew “Har Megiddo.”



The other route to Jerusalem is to take Route 90 due south from Tiberias through the Jordan Valley and the West Bank, and then to take Highway 1 west from just south of Jericho for the ascent up to Jerusalem. While the route goes through the West Bank, that part is Area C is under Israeli security control and is safe, though you should check on local conditions first, particularly during winter rains, when the road can be closed by flash floods. If you take that route, you can easily see the following sites along the way (or do so as a day trip from the cities in Upper Galilee):

- **Bet She’an.** Bet She’an is the site of some of the most spectacular Roman and Byzantine ruins in all Israel, with an ancient Roman theater that rivals Caesarea’s. This is also the site of King Saul’s defeat, and here the bodies of Saul and his son (and David’s beloved friend) Jonathan were hung from the city walls as a taunt to the Israelites. The site is remarkable. For lunch, you could eat at **Dag Dagan** fish restaurant at the nearby **Bet Alpha National Park**; see below.



- **Belvoir.** This is the site of a major Crusader fortress that dominated the Lower Galilee. The view of the Jordan Valley and the mountains of Gilead across the river in Jordan is magnificent. The name “Belvoir” in French means “beautiful view,” and it is indeed. In Hebrew, the site is known as **Kochav ha-Yarden**, or “the Star of the Jordan.” This was one of the last Crusader fortresses to hold out against the forces of Salah al-Din (Saladin) after the Crusader defeat at the Horns of Hittin and the collapse of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It is quite spectacular, one of the best Crusader sites in the country.

- **Bet Alpha.** This small national park contains the stunning mosaic floor of a synagogue built in the Sixth Century C.E., complete with depictions of the binding of Isaac, a Zodiac with the Greek sun god Helios at the center(!), and at the top a depiction of the Ark of the Covenant with a menorah on each side. The use of pagan imagery such as the Zodiac and the Greek sun god is very interesting; also interesting is the way that the official explanations try to minimize or explain away the rather jarring incongruity. With the conquests of Alexander the Great and later Rome, Hellenism influenced Judaism in the Land of Israel, just as the devout Jew Saul became the apostle Paul and brought heavy Greek influences into nascent Christianity. Physically, Bet Alpha is a “wow” experience; I literally heard nearly every visitor of every background say that word when he or she entered the room with the synagogue floor mosaic. Behind the park, you can get a great fish lunch at **Dag Dagan Fish Restaurant**. I ordered a fish called “red drum fillet”—I had no idea what was—but in perhaps the best, botched English translation of that trip, I ordered the “red drum filet raped in mustard.” I am pretty sure that they were going for wrapped; I almost snorted some beer out of my nose when I read that one. (The fish was really tasty, though!) As a note, the name literally means “Fish-Grain,” but put those two words together in Israeli Hebrew parlance, and you have a slang term for “clitoris.” My Israeli friends kept telling me that I *had* to have the name of this place wrong, but that is the name—and the place was full of families and children running about. A Google search will back me up on the name; one review called it “an orgasmic fish restaurant.” Oy.
- **Qasr al-Yahud.** While Yardenit just south of the Jordan River’s exit from the Kinneret is the most popular baptismal site for Christians, it is nowhere near the area where John the Baptist based his ministry. For the more “real deal,” stop at Qasr al-Yahud (“the Jews’ Castle”) on the Jordan River just north of Jericho. Many pilgrims go there to be baptized or renew their baptisms, and it’s amazing how narrow the river is, with the Jordanian side perhaps four or five meters away. It’s a lovely spot, and I find it moving to see pilgrims from all over the world share this experience. Just know that the water is quite polluted there.

## The Negev—Israel’s Desert South.

Most people visiting Israel for the first time do not visit Eilat or the Negev desert (the southern half of the country, shaped like an inverted triangle). Of course, your choice depends on your interests. Most first-time visitors tend to focus on the cities, culture, and history, but those who want more desert and wilderness, a more nature/eco-style trip, or year-round warmth may well head south. Because of my experiences touring the wilds of this region with **Adam Sela** and **Desert Eco Tours** (more below), I have fallen in love with the Negev and the desert experience. And while Eilat is in some ways a typical resort city, I have developed an appreciation for it as well. The locale is stunning, so it has become part of my Israel experience in recent years. In fact, I will be heading south again on my next trip, I hope in March 2023.

## The Northern Negev, Mitzpe Ramon, and the Makhtesh.

The Negev is a vast and truly spectacular desert, and if you are so inclined, by all means carve out some time to tour it. Don't miss the **Makhtesh Ramon**, the so-called "Ramon Crater" (a makhtesh is not a crater but a geological, erosion feature unique to this region) near Mitzpe Ramon in the central Negev. This spectacular geological formation is Israel's Grand Canyon, and it's just about as breathtaking.



There are two other, major makhteshim, the "small" and the "large," and **ha-Makhtesh ha-Katan** ("the Small Makhtesh") is in some ways more spectacular because you can see the whole formation in one glance from the rim and that gives a better understanding of how the geology works. There are only seven makhteshim in the world, five in the Negev and two in the northern Sinai, and "makhtesh" is the correct term for this geological phenomenon in any language.

I have had the pleasure of touring with guide **Adam Sela** and his son **Nadav Sela**, who specialize in tours of the north-central Negev, with a focus on the natural and ecological aspects of the central Negev highlands. They live and work in Midreshet Ben-Gurion, just outside Sde Boqer, the kibbutz made famous as the adopted home of Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion. **I cannot recommend Adam and Nadav highly enough**—they have showed me a side of Israel and the Negev that I not only had never seen but could never have accessed without someone like them. I had heard of "off-road jeep tours," but had no idea that one could drive a jeep where they took us! We went up mountainsides and down through winding, dry wadi beds. Adam showed us the Makhtesh Ramon—and for the first time, I really understood the unique process of erosion that created it. He also showed us the remnants of the Nabataean, Roman, and ancient Israelite presence in the region over the centuries, and spectacular vistas that I would never otherwise have found, let alone be able to get to. The jeep tours are not for the faint of heart, but they are unforgettable and totally worth it. He is also a delight to spend time with. **For more information on their tours, see [www.adamsela.com](http://www.adamsela.com), e-mail [office@adamsela.com](mailto:office@adamsela.com), or call Adam or Nadav at (050) 530-8272.** Nadav also works with Adam as a tour guide now, and my friend and I toured with him for a full day in November 2014—he, too, is the real deal! In the picture to the right from my 2016 trip, Adam sits with Brett preparing tea in a cave in the Makhtesh Ramon at the end of an unforgettable day of touring.



Some additional options to discuss with Adam or Nadav for your Negev tour:

- If you have the time and interest, Adam may be able to set you up with a lunch with local Bedouin in their tents in one of the nearby settlements. In several places in Israel, there are "Bedouin experiences" set up as tourist attractions, and frankly I see them as the equivalent of a Disney Epcot experience—sanitized and artificial. (Remember: my guide, my opinions!) This is *not* that; Adam took our group to lunch at the tent of one of the major Bedouin leaders of the region. In an hour or so of conversation, I learned a great deal about the social problems facing the Bedouin, of their struggles with modernity and with the state bureaucracy, and we had a glimpse of the life of these fascinating people. If you are privileged to have this experience (probably in a group), I offer two cautions. First, the food is prepared in genuine Bedouin style—with bare hands, some flies, and bread baked directly on and covered by charcoals. It is not for those who are squeamish or need hyper-

sanitary conditions, but it would cause great offense to decline to eat food prepared for you. If you go, that's the deal, and you need to be respectful that you are in someone's home and honored to be a guest. I did not take pictures of my host or his family because I did not want to make them feel like a zoo exhibit for tourists. I would recommend similar restraint. It was one of the most remarkable moments of that trip.

- Sde Boqer was David Ben-Gurion's home for the last decades of his life, and he and his wife Paula are buried near there on the edge of the vast Valley of Tzin (part of the "Wilderness of Sin" in the biblical accounts of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness). The view, seen at right, is extraordinary. It is worth this brief stop, particularly near sunset.



- Israelis are known throughout the world for their expertise in water management and desert agriculture—or more poetically, for “making the desert bloom.” This water-starved country is now a world leader in desalination technology and recycled wastewater, and Israel is where drip-irrigation was invented. If you would like to learn more about the cutting-edge technology that is changing the world of agriculture, have Adam or Nadav take you to the **Ramat Negev Desert Agro-Research Center**, tel. (054) 620-9040; [www.ramat-negev.org.il](http://www.ramat-negev.org.il); e-mail [gadigr@gmail.com](mailto:gadigr@gmail.com). I learned that the cherry tomato was invented in Israel and was amazed how Israel researchers are learning to use desalinated sea water, brackish ground water, and recovered wastewater for agriculture. When I was there, a large research group from China was there to learn from this pioneering research center. California's huge agricultural industry needs to learn from Israel—and fast.
- A different experience in this area, if interested, is **Astronomy Israel** with **Ira Machevsky**. Almost every night, Ira takes people out for stargazing tours in the pitch-black skies of the central Negev, away from the light-pollution that obscures night skies in urban centers all over the world. The tours are two hours, split between naked eye viewing and views through his telescopes, and are best on moonless nights. For more information, see [www.astronomyisrael.com](http://www.astronomyisrael.com) or contact Ira at [machevsky@gmail.com](mailto:machevsky@gmail.com) or by phone at (052) 544-9789. As a life-long astronomy aficionado, I enjoyed this! Bring warm clothes—the desert grows quite cold at night. Also note that **Nadav Sela** can take you out with his telescopes as well.



I have never been one to spend a lot on posh hotels in Israel or anywhere else. But I have enjoyed stays at a relatively new, luxury hotel built right on the lip of the Makhtesh Ramon called the **Beresheet Hotel**, 1 Beresheet Road, Mitzpe Ramon 80600, tel. (08) 659-8004, fax (08) 659-8008; [www.isrotelexclusivecollection.com/beresheet](http://www.isrotelexclusivecollection.com/beresheet). This place is a true destination hotel and a major splurge—picture a luxury hotel on the edge of the Grand Canyon. This place is just stunning; it is built on the rim of the Makhtesh using natural stone from the region so that it blends in with the look of the area, and some rooms have their own small pools in front. And look at the infinity pool on the edge of the Makhtesh in the photo above right! One constantly sees ibex families grazing on bushes a few feet away—amazing! (Picture at left, next page.) Contact public relations manager **Tal Magen** with any



questions: tel. (08) 659-8000; [talm@isrotel.co.il](mailto:talm@isrotel.co.il). And please do tell them I recommended this beautiful place. I plan on going back in March 2023.



If the Beresheet Hotel is too expensive—and it is pricey!—you have several other options for places to stay in the area around Sde Boqer and Mitzpe Ramon, either of which make a good base to tour with Adam. One option if you are touring with Adam or Nadav but don't have a car is to take the train to Be'er Sheva and ask if they can pick you up there. One good option is a lovely B&B called **Ibex** (formerly iBike) in Mitzpe Ramon, 4 Har Ardon Street in the Spice Route Quarter of the city, tel. (052) 436-7878 or (052) 361-1115, website at <https://www.ibexhotel.co.il>. Hosts Aviva Angel-Scheiber and Menachem Schreiber specialize in hosting bicyclists, but all are welcome, and the environs were as charming as the hosts! You may be able to stay at the **Field School at Midreshet Ben-Gurion**, with youth hostel-style accommodations; my TripAdvisor colleagues who stayed there thought it was fine. Finally, if you want a really different experience, you could stay at the **Naot Farm**, run by **Gadi and Lea Nahimov**, located off of Route 40, Ramat Ha-Negev 85515, tel. (054) 421-8788; <https://www.naotfarm.co.il/en/naot-farm-4/>; e-mail [info@naotfarm.co.il](mailto:info@naotfarm.co.il). This is a working goat and dairy farm that produces wonderful cheeses that are very popular in the region, and while rustic, the cabins offer a true, off-the-beaten-path desert experience with a lot of charm. Since the Negev is an alternative experience, consider alternative accommodations—and have an adventure!



Mitzpe Ramon is not a fine-dining destination, but we had a good meal with friends at **Ha-Havit (The Barrel)**, a nice, pub-style restaurant, which is open on Friday evenings as well. You must reserve a table on Friday or Saturday because it is full. Tel. (08) 658-8226; [www.rol.co.il/sites/hahavit/business.html](http://www.rol.co.il/sites/hahavit/business.html). There are also much more upscale, fine-dining options in the Beresheet Hotel.

## Eilat and Petra/Wadi Rum in Jordan.

Now we move to Israel's narrow, southern tip—the Red Sea port of Eilat. Eilat is a lovely beach and resort city, and I used to think of it as just another city of that type, not remarkable enough to warrant a visit. But my Israeli friends tend to love it, so I decided to open myself to a broader experience with my first real visit in November 2013. Some of my original feelings remain valid, but I also saw Eilat's beauty and charms, so if you have enough time for the rest of Israel or are making a return visit after touring other parts of the country, it is absolutely worth a stay. The city has beautiful beaches on the Red Sea, lots of water sports and related experiences, access to beautiful desert and mountain touring, and Eilat offers warm to hot weather nearly year-round with views at night across the Gulf of Eilat to glittering Aqaba, Jordan as well as the coasts of Egypt (Sinai) and northwestern Saudi Arabia. On my first overnight visit, I would sit on my hotel balcony every evening, gazing at four countries at once. For many, Eilat is also the gateway to Petra and Wadi Rum in Jordan, one of the wonders of the world for many travelers.



Eilat has more to offer than hanging out at a beach resort, though that is the main attraction to many, including Israelis. Some other options:

- One of Eilat’s most remarkable sites is the **Underwater Observatory** on Coral Beach where you can see the famous Red Sea coral reefs and fish life. The reefs have been heavily damaged by pollution from all four countries in this crowded tip of the Red Sea, but the views are still spectacular. Children are particularly enthralled by this—but this “kid” was too!



- Many people also enjoy swimming with the dolphins at **Dolphin Reef**. Snorkeling and scuba diving are available; because I have asthma, albeit well controlled, I had to pass.



There is some controversy about the site because the dolphins are effectively captive (they can jump the barrier, but they stay for the food). But many visitors rave about the experience, which is hugely popular. See [www.dolphinreef.co.il](http://www.dolphinreef.co.il) for more information. The beach there is lovely as well, one of the best in Eilat. You can also rent jet skis there—not sure what certifications or permits may be required.

- There are lots of places to go into the Red Sea for a swim, and it is absolutely amazing how beautiful the tropical fish are swimming all around you (and occasionally jellyfish, so be careful). On our most recent trip, we went to **Barbeach**, where you can rent snorkels or even get scuba equipment to swim along the corralled-off nature reserve area. It’s on Coral Beach opposite the Ambassador Hotel, tel. (08) 632-5058, (057) 646-0111. It also is a good place to get some food beach-side—and try the limonana (lemonade and mint) with arak (anise liqueur)—yum!!!!
- **The Botanical Garden of Eilat** is a quiet and off-the-beaten path, different kind of experience. I enjoyed it. Tel. (08) 631-8788; website <https://eilat.city/en/the-botanical-garden>, e-mail [bgeilat@gmail.com](mailto:bgeilat@gmail.com) for more information.
- Want to go out onto the Red Sea on a private boat? Consider a trip on **Boat Moriah** run by pilot Eitan—e-mail is [eitan@hanafa.net](mailto:eitan@hanafa.net). There are other boat operators available as well at the marina.
- Not far north of Eilat is **Timna Park**, a national park that was the site of copper mines vital to the Egyptians and King Solomon himself. The craggy desert vistas are stunning. You can experience it just by driving through or by bicycling or hiking trails, including nighttime tours. See [www.parktimna.co.il/EN](http://www.parktimna.co.il/EN) for more information. Some evangelical Christians in particular enjoy visiting a replica of the tabernacle in which the Israelites worshiped during their forty-year desert journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel. If you return to Eilat via Route 12 along the Egyptian border, the view of Eilat as you come up and over the mountains will elicit a gasp.

- You can do jeep tours of the spectacular valleys and mountains surrounding Eilat through **Desert Eco Tours** based in that city. I took a four-hour jeep tour of the Arava Valley between Israel and Jordan and the Eilat Mountains in March 2015, and it was a great experience! Desert Eco is one of the finest touring companies in all Israel; see more about the company below. And that is my friend **Angela Herrstadt** and I at right on top of the jeep in this picture. Note: This family have become good friends, even family-by-choice, and they're not letting other customers ride on top of the jeep (thus sayeth the lawyer). 😊



For many people, a visit to Eilat is also the gateway to explore wonders in southwest Jordan, particularly two amazing destinations, **Petra and Wadi Rum**. Petra was the ancient capital of the Nabataeans, a once nomadic people who settled in the Negev and mountains of Edom in present-day southwest Jordan and came to dominate the lucrative perfume and spice trade route that ran from ancient Arabia through this region to Philistine ports in what is now the Gaza area, and from there to the Greek and Roman worlds. You can see evidence of the Nabataean trade route throughout this region—trails, watchtowers, and fortifications, and of course, their breathtaking capital in Petra. Wadi Rum is a vast region of spectacular mountains, canyons, and unforgettable scenery.

- To visit **Petra** from Eilat, you must cross the border into Jordan at the Yitzhak Rabin Terminal in the Arava Valley north of Eilat. The fee to enter Petra is 90 Jordanian dinars for same-day visitors; 60 JDs if staying overnight in Jordan. Visas cost 60 JDs unless you are staying two nights in Jordan, in which case they are free. Visitors to Petra and Jordan without visas will likely be asked to provide their passport details to the touring company by the night before departure so to speed up the crossing, but independent travelers can again get the visa at the border, but check on line to make sure that the procedures have not changed yet again. I note that in addition to the visa being free (and the lower fee to enter Petra), the other advantage of two nights in Jordan is that the Jordanian hotels are less expensive than those in Eilat, and if you use Desert Eco Tours (see below), a transfer service is included in the booking cost. In Jordan, many people stay at the **Movenpick Hotel** just outside the entrance to Petra; it is an expensive, European-class hotel that is conveniently located and quite lovely, but has no local character. I really like the **Hyatt Zeman**, built in the homes of an abandoned Bedouin village and it has such extraordinary color and charm! (No alcohol served, however, so bring your own if you wish.) Ask Desert Eco Tours for other options that can give a much more Jordanian experience, while still being comfortable. Staying in Aqaba is another option. Others camp out with a Bedouin tent experience—not for me, but many enjoy it. Talk with Desert Eco Tours about the option that works for you.

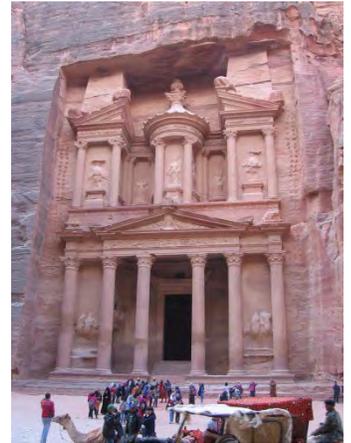
You can tour Petra on your own, and as is evident from my guide, I generally favor the independent approach, but here I do strongly recommend that you use **Desert Eco Tours**, an Eilat-based touring company. Contact them at (08) 632-6477 or cell (052) 276-5753; [www.desertecotours.com/english](http://www.desertecotours.com/english); e-mail [erez@desertecotours.com](mailto:erez@desertecotours.com). I had heard rave reviews of this company for years on TripAdvisor but experienced their work directly for the first time in November 2013, and they are *fabulous*!



**Desert Eco Tours** is run by the amazing **Erez Herrnstadt**, and Erez and his wife **Angela** have become good friends, as I noted earlier—but only after I used and loved their company’s work before I knew them. Erez’s lifelong passion for the desert is deep and driving, and it shows in his work. His company partners with a Jordanian company to take tourists to Petra and Wadi Rum. When you use Desert Eco Tours, the transition from Israel to Jordan is easy and seamless—the Israeli tour operators pick you up at your

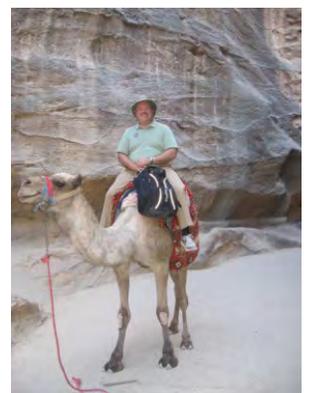
hotel and take you right to the border terminal. The crossing fees are included in the tour price, and the Jordanian guides pick you up on the other side and guide you through the Jordanian entry process. Heading back is the same in reverse—it could not be easier or less stressful.

- **Petra** is a world-renowned site, often called one of the wonders of the ancient world, and its fame was greatly enhanced when it was used as backdrop for scenes in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and, so I’m told, in *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. It is about a two-kilometer hike into the site through the narrow, facing cliffs of the Siq before you reach the most famous site at right, what the Bedouin called “the Treasury”—which it never was (as the Bedouin found when they unfortunately shot up the façade looking for the money). Instead, it was likely a funerary monument, but when you first glimpse it through that narrow opening at the end of the Siq, it really does make people gasp in wonder. It is no wonder the Nabataeans successfully hid the site of their capital from so many—until you are right upon it, it is not at all visible!



Petra is usually crowded with tourists—and with Bedouin merchants unceasingly hawking their wares and animals to ride—and this will be a long and full day. There are places to buy lunch inside and lots of vendors. If you have the time, there is also the option to hike to the famous “Monastery” at left—again, not a monastery in fact but another funerary site—atop a mountain perhaps another kilometer and a half into the site. The monastery is in fact spectacular, as you can see, but I offer this caution. Reaching this site requires an arduous hike up a mountain for about an hour with 850 steps, much of it on uneven and challenging surfaces. I was 56 at the time, and though I work out frequently, this climb up and especially the

climb down about did me in. While taking the donkeys up the mountain might be an option (though I would never do it), taking the donkeys down is *not* safe and I strongly recommend against it! (The donkeys are also poorly treated.) On the other hand, if once down you find your ankle throbbing (as I did), taking a camel or donkey out for the long hike back to the park entrance may suddenly seem like a good idea. Of course, if you are fitter than I apparently am, this may be easier, but I *am* glad I rode out on my camel “friend.” That was never a box I needed to check, but having done so, I need never do that again. 😊



- Many visitors to **Petra** take a one-day tour, and if your time is limited, that is certainly an option (though with higher day fees and visa costs, as noted above). If you have more time, however, I strongly recommend the two-day tour option through **Desert Eco Tours** where the second day is an all-day, off-road jeep tour of **Wadi Rum**. This desert wilderness in southern Jordan with stunning, craggy mountains offers some of the most breathtaking scenery I have ever seen. This is the land of nomadic Bedouin herders, and its romantic landscapes were the scene of filming for *Lawrence of Arabia*, for this was indeed one of the main sites of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks in World War I, assisted by the legendary British officer T.E. Lawrence. One of the major battles of that revolt was the attack on the Ottoman railway (still visible in the area) and the port city of Aqaba to the south. If you take the two-day option and stay one or two nights in Jordan, discuss hotel options with Desert Eco Tours (see bottom of p. 53).

If you tour **Wadi Rum**, ask Desert Eco Tours to assign **Ali Hilalat** to you as your driver/guide/cook if he is available that day. I am sure that all their guides are great—it is that fine of a tour company—but this man is just amazing. He is retired as a major from



the very distinguished Jordanian Army, and he is fascinating and a delight to get to know. Our conversations that day spanned his Muslim faith (only because I asked about the lovely Qur’anic chants he was playing in the jeep as we drove), his army history, and his acquaintance with the late, great King Hussein and the current King of Jordan, Hussein’s son Abdullah. Of course, as a guide who has lived much of his life in that area, he knows the region like the back of his hand, and he took that jeep in amazing places! On top of all that, I have to say that Ali’s grilled chicken lunch over a fire using the mesquite-style brush growing in the area was one of the tastiest meals I have had. But as is

often the case with me, I remember people I have connected with long after a vista or historic site fades from memory, and I will *always* remember the day when Ali showed me his beloved country and landscapes while sharing his life’s story. He is a remarkable person—and I feel the same way about **Erez and Angela**. As the saying goes, meeting them was itself “worth the price of admission.” Because of them, Eilat has become a city that I plan to visit more, a real change from my early visits.



As a major resort city, Eilat has many hotel options, most of them high rise and expensive, though there are some smaller, more-budget options. On our 2016 visit, something of a honeymoon following our legal marriage after being together for over thirty years, we stayed at the **Isrotel Agamim** in the North Beach area, and this is a stunning hotel, even though it is not a beach hotel. But the customer service was just extraordinary; they even gave us “Just



Married” tee-shirts as a gift! (Photo on right.) And look at that view out the back of our ground floor room into the pool area (lower left)! Tel. (08) 630-0300; [www.isrotel.com/isrotel-agamim](http://www.isrotel.com/isrotel-agamim). On my first visit, I stayed at the **U Magic Palace Eilat**, also in the North Beach area. ([https://www.fattal-hotels.com/hotels\\_in\\_israel/eilat\\_hotels/u\\_magic\\_palace\\_eilat/](https://www.fattal-hotels.com/hotels_in_israel/eilat_hotels/u_magic_palace_eilat/); tel. (08) 638-3333. The views there are beautiful, and while this hotel does not have its own swimming beach, the pool facilities are lovely, and there is a nice



workout area and spa as well. A tour guide and friend I trust recommends the **Royal Beach Eilat Hotel** (<https://www.isrotel.com/isrotel-hotels/eilat/royal-beach/>), and I will try that on my next visit to Eilat, though it is a pricey option. There are lots of other hotels; see TripAdvisor for more suggestions or ask **Isram Israel** or **TravelingJerusalem** (see p. 10) for recommendations and prices. Finally, **Abraham Hostels** has just opened a new hostel in Eilat; that is very good news for budget travelers as that is a good option.



I confess that I have still not had much of a chance to sample Eilat's restaurant scene on my visits to the city. But there are lots of places to eat (see TripAdvisor or Frommer's), and here are some dining options I can recommend:

- I have had some of the best seafood meals of my life at **Pago Pago** on the North Beach Marina, tel. (08) 637-6660; [www.pagopagorest.com](http://www.pagopagorest.com). It is not kosher. The food was delicious and the service was absolutely excellent! I was blown away on my 2016 visit with my husband Brett when the server remembered me from more than a year before. Pago Pago also has a beautiful view of the boats in the marina—a great resort experience. Tell owner Adi Ben-Yakir, who runs what is truly one of Israel's finest restaurants, that I sent my best regards! This was Brett's favorite restaurant in the whole country.
- **Entrecote** is a burger and grill place that looks like a strip-mall joint, but it surprised me by having some sophisticated, grilled food, way beyond just hamburgers. It's popular among French visitors; that has to say something about the food, as the French know good food. It is at 68 Agmonim St., tel. (03) 863-4028; <https://m.facebook.com/antrikoteilat>.
- A friend from Jerusalem raves about a seafood restaurant called **The Last Refuge** on Almog Beach, tel. (08) 637-6237. I have not yet been there, but I trust his taste and recommendations. My Eilati friends agree that it's a great place.
- Want a *very* different, offbeat dining experience? Check out the small, hideway café above the relaxation pools at Dolphin Reef, called **Stalbet al ha-Mayim**, tel. (08) 630-0111. You have to ask to find this place, and call ahead—Erez and Angela Hernnstadt showed it to me. It is small, not at all advertised, and has low tables with cushion seating under a thatched roof in front of a small bar. The menu is limited but quite good, the wine is tasty, and the place is funky, fun, and real Eilat. It feels a little like a cross between a backpacker's ashram and some groovy, California-type place trying for an Eastern-mysticism feel. I loved it—definitely not just another mass-market, touristy place!

## Jerusalem—The Holy City

**Suggested Time: 6 to 7 nights.**

Why did I allocate so much time to Jerusalem? Because Jerusalem is the heart and soul of Israel and the Jewish people, and perhaps the most emotionally and spiritually (as well as politically) charged place on Earth. The ancients thought that Jerusalem was the center of the world, the



“navel of the world,” or the very “foundation stone of creation.” From my standpoint, that’s about right. For me, Jerusalem is quite simply the most remarkable city in the world.

Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan after the 1948 War for Independence, and the Old City, with all its holy sites, was held by Jordan and barred to Jews for 19 years. Like Berlin during the Cold War, Jerusalem was a bitterly divided city with walls and barbed wire at its heart. In the Six-Day War, Israel captured the Old City together with the West Bank and reunited Jerusalem, annexing the eastern part, an action not recognized by most of the world. The city is still often referred to by its parts: The New City (West Jerusalem, Jewish); the Old City (the small, walled, ancient city); and East Jerusalem (the modern, mostly Arab section to the east). Whatever its legal and diplomatic status, to a large degree, Jerusalem remains culturally and politically divided and, of course, deeply contested. Safety is not a significant issue, though. While I feel less comfortable walking around the Old City at night, and like anywhere you should always keep your wits about you, don’t be intimidated by the crowds and the frequently chaotic feel. I have walked all over the Old City on every trip and never had problems. If tensions seem to be running higher, I recommend avoiding the Damascus Gate area and the Muslim Quarter around Friday prayer time. That’s it—otherwise, you’re fine.

To make this complex city even more confusing, the Old City has four traditional quarters. They are the Christian Quarter (northwest), the Muslim Quarter (northeast), the Armenian Quarter (southeast), and the Jewish Quarter (southwest). Each quarter has a distinct character, though there are no fixed divisions or markers and there is some diversity of population in each of the quarters.

Jerusalem is a complex and beautiful mosaic, and that is what makes it unique in the world.



I have long stayed at the **Three Arches Hotel in the Jerusalem International YMCA**, 26 King David Street, P.O. Box 294, Jerusalem 91002 Israel, tel. (02) 569-2692; <https://www.ymca3arches.com>. This is not like staying in a YMCA in the United States; this is *not* transient housing or a

hostel. It is in a beautiful stone building (pictured at right), built by the British in 1931 and designed by the same architect who did the Empire State Building in New York City. The location cannot be beat: directly across the street from the King David Hotel (Israel’s most prestigious hotel) and a 10 to 15-minute walk to the Old City. While the YMCA Hotel had declined in the 2000s, this remarkable institution has truly come back under recent leadership, particularly the outstanding hotel and restaurant director Raed Leil. Brett can be picky, but it was his favorite hotel in Israel. The second floor has been renovated with more expensive rooms, while floors 1 and 3 still offer the older rooms, which Brett still liked, at a lower price. In



time, more rooms will be renovated. And in a major, new benefit, **the YMCA has a hugely expanded sports center**, which is as nice as any I have seen at home—and it’s yours to use as a hotel guest at no extra charge. The photo to the left above shows what a plus that is. This is *so* my Jerusalem home!

My loyalty to the YMCA stems primarily from its mission, however. The staff includes Jews, Christian Arabs, and Muslim

Arabs, and the programming is designed for all three faith communities, including the world-renowned Jewish-Arab preschool program that I mentioned earlier in this guide. At breakfast, you can sit on the terrace and watch the parade of parents (mostly daddies) escorting their adorable kids into the preschool; it is one of the real perks of the place! People from all over the world and many Israelis stay here as well. You can get more information about the YMCA and its hotel at [ymca.org.il](http://ymca.org.il). I note, however, that the YMCA restaurant is not kosher for visitors who need that. For more hotel information, price inquiries, or registration, e-mail [y3arches@netvision.net.il](mailto:y3arches@netvision.net.il). If this is your choice, you will need to book directly here.

But in the interest of giving you a range of hotel choices, there are two boutique hotels that have generally received very good reviews on TripAdvisor, though I have no direct experience with either of them: The **Harmony Hotel**, an Atlas hotel at 6 Yoel Salomon Street in the Ben-Yehuda district ([www.atlas.co.il/harmony-hotel-jerusalem](http://www.atlas.co.il/harmony-hotel-jerusalem)); and the **Dan Boutique Hotel** in the German Colony area ([www.danhotels.com/JerusalemHotels/DanBoutiqueJerusalemHotel](http://www.danhotels.com/JerusalemHotels/DanBoutiqueJerusalemHotel)) at 31 Hebron Road. The Harmony's location is great, right off the Ben-Yehuda street mall area, but prices have gone way up, so it is no longer the real deal that it once was. The **Arthur Hotel** is a newer Atlas Hotel entry and I hear good things; it may be more reasonably priced than its sister hotel the Harmony. Another choice is the **Prima Royale Hotel** not far from the YMCA, but again I have never stayed there, though most reports have been positive. The **Eldan Hotel** next door to the YMCA is a clean, modern, and reasonably-priced option, and if you book it with your rental car, you can get a price break. But the hotel doesn't have much character. If you want to splurge and spoil yourself, of course, there is always the option of the historic and very opulent **King David Hotel** across the street from the YMCA or its newer competitor, the **David Citadel Hotel** just down the street. Other upscale choices in the central city area (truly the best place to stay) include the **Dan Panorama** and the **Inbal Hotel**, both well established and fine hotels. If you really want a classic Jerusalem experience, check out the **Mount Zion Hotel** overlooking the Valley of Gehinnom and the Old City, located not far from the German Colony on Derech Hebron Street, tel. (02) 568-9555; <http://www.mountzion.co.il/indexeng.html>. The Mount Zion really does have extraordinary character; I may try it for a different experience on a future trip, though it is currently (May 2022) closed for renovations.

You can find other options on TripAdvisor as well. I would also recommend that you discuss these and other possible Jerusalem alternatives with **Isram Israel** or **TravelingJerusalem**, which probably can get you the best price available.

There are less expensive, guesthouse options in the New City as well. On my 2012 trip, I stayed at **St. Andrew's House Hotel**, better known to Jerusalemites as "**the Scotty**." Located at 1 David Remez Street off King David Street, south of the YMCA and King David Hotel—tell the cab driver you are going to "ha-Scotty" or "the St. Andrew's Scottish Church," or he may not recognize the place. Tel. (02) 673-2401, website [www.scotsguesthouse.com](http://www.scotsguesthouse.com), e-mail [info@scotsguesthouse.com](mailto:info@scotsguesthouse.com). The Scottish Guest House is basic but has charm, and I liked it. Warning—there is no elevator, and walking up to the third floor every day after a whole day of walking the city got a little old for these middle-aged knees. Breakfasts were good but not spectacular. The staff is very helpful, especially the wonderfully warm Jakoub who will bid you "Welcome!!" about a dozen times a day. And the view of the southern parts of the Old City is quite stunning. The most affordable option for budget travelers may be the **Abraham Hostel**, located in the New City at 67 Ha-Nevi'im Street on Davidka Square, tel. (02) 650-2200;

<https://abrahamhostels.com/jerusalem>; [info@abrahamhostels.com](mailto:info@abrahamhostels.com). In addition to a very well regarded, reasonably priced place to stay while offering the chance to meet other travelers from around the world, the Abraham Hostel is renowned for the tours it offers, for guests and non-guests alike. For a Jewish guesthouse, consider **Bet Shmu'el** at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College (the Reform Jewish seminary based in my home city of Cincinnati, I'm proud to say) on Eliyahu Shama'a Street off King David Street, next to the David Citadel Hotel, tel. (02) 620-3455; (02) 620-3456, <https://www.beitshmuel.co.il/en/>.

Finally, while I generally recommend that people stay in the center city area in the New City, some prefer to stay in the Old City for its atmosphere and centrality to the holy sites. Be aware, though, that some people feel uncomfortable walking in the Old City at night, not because it is dangerous but just because it is mostly empty and a little spooky. While the "old city" section of European cities is often the happening place, the Old City of Jerusalem truly shuts down at night. But if you do want the Old City experience, I recommend the **Lutheran Guest House** (affiliated with the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Christian Quarter) on St. Mark's Road, tel. (02) 626-6888. See the website at [https://www.guesthouse-jerusalem.com/en/home\\_en/](https://www.guesthouse-jerusalem.com/en/home_en/) for more information. It is a clean, lovely, and well-run property that has been recently renovated, and it is close to the Jaffa Gate for easy access to the New City. For other options, **The Austrian Hospice** in the Muslim Quarter is another lovely building with clean rooms, but I would find walking in that area at night quite daunting, particularly in times of tensions in the Muslim Quarter. Some people like staying at the **Christ Church Guest House**, an Anglican institution just inside the Jaffa Gate, but I am quite opposed to their historic mission of evangelizing Jews. (Again, my guide—my opinions!)



I strongly recommend that you don't bother with a rental car in Jerusalem; it is a bewildering and difficult city to drive in and even worse to park in! Just return your rental car when you arrive in the city and take cabs, buses, or the new light rail inside the city, which is wonderful! (For a bus or the light rail, remember that you will need to get a **RavKav** card; they don't take cash.) Finding a cab on the street will be safe and fine, but for trips within the city, **always insist on using the meter and get out if they will not turn it on!** One easy way to do that is to ask for a receipt (*kabbalah*) when you get in; the driver cannot generate a receipt without using the meter. I have had fewer fights on this issue recently, but it still happens. **Avoid the cabs that gather in front of the King David Hotel!** Many are sharks who consistently try to charge grossly inflated, flat rates, while claiming ridiculous things like "I don't have a meter." Walk down the street a little bit to the David Citadel Hotel; for some reason, the taxi drivers there are more honest, even though it, too, is a very upscale hotel. You can also use the **Gett** taxi app, which is so easy and avoids the meter issue altogether—Gett is the best way to go, and while it uses regular cabs, the app works like Uber or Lyft. If you catch a cab at the Jaffa Gate, be aware that your driver may be Arab and less familiar with destinations in the western parts of the New City. With GPS programs, that is less of an issue.

Some Israeli Jewish cab drivers may also be reluctant to go to parts of East Jerusalem (for example, the Mount of Olives), particularly at night or on Fridays, and they cannot by law drive into areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, such as Bethlehem or Jericho. You can easily catch Arab cabs or buses near the Damascus Gate to access those areas if needed. In fact, Arab cab drivers may constantly ask if they can take you to Bethlehem; saying "no" repeatedly can get wearying. Jerusalem is endlessly fascinating. Without exaggeration, you could spend weeks in this city and

not run out of things to see and do. I have been there on eighteen visits and am *still* finding new things to explore! But since you don't likely have weeks to spend there, I offer these suggestions for day-to-day itineraries.



### Days One and Two:

Explore the Old City, preferably through a walking tour of the Four Quarters. Your best bet may be the **free Four Quarters walking tours offered by Sandeman's** every day starting at 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.; see [www.newjerusalem tours.com](http://www.newjerusalem tours.com) for more information. The guides are not paid, however, so please plan to tip at least ₪50-60 per person. Another option is to hire one of my favorite guides from the now defunct Zion Walking Tours, an Armenian Jerusalemite named **Aram Khatchadourian**, who can take you into the Armenian Quarter, which is usually inaccessible to outsiders except for a few areas because it's largely residential, along with a more traditional tour of the rest of the Old City. You can reach him at (050) 335-1859 (cell) or (02) 626-4537 (home). Any guide can give you a Four Quarters walking tour, however, and it makes an excellent introduction to the history and layout of the incredibly complex Old City. I strongly recommend it on your first day here, if possible.

### Touring with Madeleine Lavine or Eyal Amos Reuven.

You should consider hiring a good private guide to see all that this amazing city has to offer, and I have two strong recommendations on that score. **The first and a longtime favorite is Madeleine Lavine** (pictured at right.) She is knowledgeable, very pleasant, professional, and has a delightful, dry sense of humor that shows her roots in Leeds, England. Madeleine offers a wide range of tours; even though I have been to Jerusalem 19 times and explored seemingly everywhere, she has consistently shown me aspects of the city that are new to me. Madeleine offers individual or group Four Quarters tours, tours of the Mount of Olives and the Old City, and just about anything you can imagine. Madeleine is also licensed to drive people around the country while touring as well. **You can reach Madeleine at [madl@smile.net.il](mailto:madl@smile.net.il) or +972-54-450-4098 (cell).** You can also learn more about her work by reading her blog at [www.touringwithmadeleine.blogspot.com](http://www.touringwithmadeleine.blogspot.com). **Another terrific option for a guide is Eyal Amos Reuven**, [www.travelingjerusalem.com](http://www.travelingjerusalem.com), [www.facebook.com/TravelingJerusalem](https://www.facebook.com/TravelingJerusalem), [eyal@travelingjerusalem.com](mailto:eyal@travelingjerusalem.com); tel. +972-2-625-4004 or +972-50-866-3484 (cell); he is based in the city as well. I toured with Eyal (pictured at left) for two full days on a recent trip, focused on the military history of the city (1948 and 1967) and for the second day, we had a detailed look at the archeological remains from the Second Temple period. In our May 2022 trip, he drove us for an all-day tour of the Judean Hills ending with wine. Eyal is brilliant and incredibly innovative when coming up with ideas of what to show someone who knows Jerusalem well. As a relatively newer guide, he may be more available than some of his more senior colleagues.



I just love spending time with him, and this man knows his stuff! There are other guides who enjoy good reputations, and still others, including some who are recommended on TripAdvisor, whom I have met and frankly would avoid. Feel free to e-mail me privately for more information on others. (I may not know them at all, which means nothing.) **But you're in good hands with either Madeleine or Eyal.** And the other guides I recommended earlier are also options.

Whether with a guide or on your own, key sites to see in the Old City include the **Arab Market** on David Street inside the Jaffa Gate, and **Burnt House and Herodian House**, the remains of the homes of wealthy priestly families burned when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem at the end



of the Great Revolt in 70 C.E. Of course, you will want to see the **Western Wall and Temple Mount** (which Muslims call **al-Haram al-Sharif**, the “Noble Sanctuary”), pictured at left. The visiting hours for non-Muslim tourists on Temple Mount/ Haram al-Sharif are always in flux but are generally 9:00-11:00 a.m. and an hour or so in the early afternoon as well. It is not open to non-Muslims on Fridays, the Muslim prayer day, or on Shabbat. The **Dome of the Rock** shrine atop Temple Mount is the most beautiful thing made by human hands I have ever seen. When you go onto Temple Mount, you will have to pass strict Israeli security, but remember that the Islamic

Waqf (religious trust) has jurisdiction on the Mount itself. Unfortunately, non-Muslims are not permitted inside either the **Dome of the Rock** or **Al-Aqsa Mosque**. The closure stems from conflicts 22 years ago; it is purely political and very unfortunate, and continual (and false) claims that the Israelis are trying to change the “status quo” on Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif have made tensions even worse. It’s a tense place and conditions can change day to day.

There is one, possible way to get into Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. **Sam Salem**, who worked for years at the UN headquarters for Middle East operations in Jerusalem, now leads tour groups, and through his connections, he **can take occasionally small groups of non-Muslim visitors on approved, “VIP tours” into the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque**. Such visits are limited to once or twice a month and are never guaranteed, but tell him you found him through my guide, and he may be able to do this for you—no promises! Remember that the Waqf (Islamic Trust) that controls Temple Mount may cancel access to those holy sites at any time without notice, even if Sam had prior approval for a tour, and that is a risk any visitor must assume.



Remember that the Waqf (Islamic Trust) that controls Temple Mount may cancel access to those holy sites at any time without notice, even if Sam had prior approval for a tour, and that is a risk any visitor must assume. **You can reach Sam at (054) 482-8207 or at [guide.holy@gmail.com](mailto:guide.holy@gmail.com)**. **Note:** Inside these Muslim holy places and throughout Temple Mount, **it is strictly forbidden to visibly pray or engage in any act of non-Muslim worship or devotion**—to do so will create a major incident and could jeopardize Sam’s access permanently. Sam also offers tours of the Old City of Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem, Herodian, and Hebron. I have used Sam to tour Temple Mount, including the insides of the Muslim shrines (see the photo on right from inside the Dome of the Rock!), as well as Bethlehem and Hebron. Sam is about the sweetest, kindest man you can imagine. **Full disclosure:** Sam is not licensed as a guide in Israel. While this is a matter of considerable controversy on the TripAdvisor forum, I have decided that this is irrelevant to me when it comes to touring sites outside the Green Line (pre-1967 Israel), though I don’t use him within Israel proper. I find Sam delightful to tour with and have received nothing but positive comments from others who have used him. You can obviously decide for yourself as an adult. Some on TripAdvisor have questioned whether he has liability insurance when driving paying passengers; Sam insists he is insured to transport passengers, and I trust him. You can ask him yourself if concerned.

Remember that the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif is holy to more people than any other place on Earth, and it is very contentious. It is a tense place, but if it is not safe to go up, the security

authorities won't allow you to go. This small hilltop is charged with religious emotion, history, and political struggles. But don't miss it—one of the most amazing places on Earth.

### Other group touring options:

While we're on the topic of guides and group tours, I will share contact information for several companies that offer group tours, either walking tours or via vehicles, both for Jerusalem and the country as a whole. I thank a TripAdvisor user who goes by "DC Suburbanite" for this excellent list! I can't personally endorse any companies other than the Western Wall Tunnel Tours (discussed below). But contact information for some tour providers is listed below:

**Bein Harim Daily Tours** (offers both an economy class and a business class)  
Phone: (03) 546-8870  
Website: [www.beinharim.co.il/English.html](http://www.beinharim.co.il/English.html)  
E-mail: [info@beinharim.co.il](mailto:info@beinharim.co.il)

**David Tours**  
Phone: (02) 627-1179  
Website: [www.davidstours.com](http://www.davidstours.com) (note the "s" in the address)  
E-mail: [dtours@zahav.net.il](mailto:dtours@zahav.net.il)

**Egged Tours** (this is the omnipresent Israeli bus company)  
Phone: (03) 920-3998 or (03) 920-3919  
Website: [www.egged.co.il/eng](http://www.egged.co.il/eng) (click on tourism at top of page then select "Line 99 bus tour" or "Tours around Holy Land")  
E-mail: [limord@eggedtours.co.il](mailto:limord@eggedtours.co.il)

**Eshet**  
Phone: (03) 693-7777 (only if you book hotel through them).

**Jerusalem's Municipal Government walking tours**  
Saturday mornings at 10:00 a.m., at 32 Jaffa Street near Russian compound  
Phone: (02) 531-4600, (02) 531-4106  
E-mail: [jereng@jerusalem.muni.il](mailto:jereng@jerusalem.muni.il)

### Day Three:

By rental car, travel to **Masada** on the shore of the **Dead Sea**. (Numerous companies, including United and Egged, also offer small guided tours via vans, and Abraham Tours offers less expensive transportation-only group trips with no guide. Given that you don't really need a tour guide for Masada, that's a very good option.) Masada is stunning, beautiful, and simply unforgettable. Masada or "Metzada", which means "fortress" in Hebrew, was a flat mountaintop fortified by the Maccabees following their revolt against the Greeks in 165 B.C.E. (the Chanukah story), and King Herod later chose this mountain as the site for his fortified winter palace. But it is best known as the last holdout of nearly a thousand Jewish defenders after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The Zealots held off the Tenth Roman Legion for



more than a year, but eventually after the Romans breached the walls, all but six took their own lives rather than face slaughter or to “live” as Roman slaves. New Israeli soldiers often climb Masada to take an oath that “Masada shall not fall again.” You can be a purist and hike to the top via the Snake Path (moderately strenuous, takes about an hour, and the word “snake” refers to the path’s shape, not the presence of slithering reptiles). Or you can take the cable car. The view is unforgettable, and if you close your eyes, you can almost hear the final, defiant speech of Jewish commander Eleazar ben-Yair to his doomed followers. Like most visitors, I find Masada haunting.

**PLEASE NOTE:** The Dead Sea is some 423 meters (1,388 feet) below sea level (the lowest point on Earth) and is hot year around—take *lots* of water and sun protection with you, including hats. If you’re going to hike, start very early, particularly in the warmer months. In the summer, it will be a brutal experience by mid-morning. Be sure to force water—not sips but up to a liter every hour or two. Do not wait until you are thirsty; by then, it is too late to catch up. Because of rapid evaporation, you will be unaware of how much water you are losing through sweat. Not to be gross, but if your urine is deep yellow, you are dehydrating and need to drink more!

In 2006, I hiked to the top of Masada at sunrise, accompanied by an amazing guide from the neighboring kibbutz at Ein Gedi (see below). He is known by one and all as **Zabu**. Zabu is up in years, has a long, gray beard, and looks a little like a gnome. Don’t underestimate him based on age or size; that man hiked Masada in sandals in 50 minutes flat without a break (except to check on me)! He worked on some of the original excavations of the site in the 1960s and will give you wonderful insights on what you are seeing. Note, though, that Zabu’s take on the Masada story is not traditional, and he will give you grist for thought that does not fit the common heroic mythology—he sees the Zealots who made Masada their final stand as religious extremists who brought disaster upon the Jewish people. (He is not alone; the legacy of Masada is now the subject of an intense debate within Israeli society.) But more than that, Zabu is simply a local institution. He has lived on the kibbutz since the early 1960s, he never stops, and just mentioning his name to a fellow kibbutznik brings a smile and a story! Zabu is an Israeli experience in his own right. After the paid tour, he walked my friend Louis and me around his kibbutz and asked how long we had known each other. When I explained we had been friends since our undergraduate and law school days (dating back 30 years at that point), he actually blessed us and made us promise to remain friends for life. It was quite moving. **You can reach Zabu on his cell at (052) 387-5022, or through his son Danny at [dlevyim@netvision.net.il](mailto:dlevyim@netvision.net.il).** I know I say this about everyone I refer to, but truly *do* say “shalom” (and shake his hand) for me. I love this man, as everyone seems to.

After Masada, you can then drive to **Ein Gedi**, an oasis on the Dead Sea with its own beach and spa where you can experience the mineral baths and the mud baths, both of which are reputed to be good for the skin, and then go in the Dead Sea to float. The water is about 30% minerals and it is impossible to sink. Note: Take foot gear (more than flip flops) out with you that you can wear into the water or you’ll cut your feet, and *whatever you do, do not try to swim or put your head in the water!* If that ultra-brackish water gets in your eyes, nose, or mouth, you’ll feel like you’re going to die. Just sit gently backwards in it and bob. It really is cool, and yes, that is me bobbing in the water with the foolish “look, ma, no hands!” pose. I note that young children are sometimes spooked by the unexpected buoyancy, and when spooked, children tend to flail, with disastrous results both for their eyes and those of others nearby. So, please skip this experience with younger kids; I’ve seen them screaming



as lifeguards hold them down to flush out their eyes with a hose. By the way, Ein Gedi's "spa" is very basic, but it was good enough for a quick dip, which is all I ever do. Several of the Dead Sea "beaches" have closed because of the serious sinkhole problem; another option on the northern end is the Kalia Beach. Check for confirmation when you travel.

If you want to stay at the Dead Sea for a night, there are a host of luxury hotels from which to choose, particularly in the Ein Bokek area further to the south. (Note: Ein Bokek hotels and beaches appear unaffected by the sinkhole problem.) Doing so would probably allow you to cut one day off your Jerusalem itinerary, since you would have already visited Masada and the Dead Sea. Of course, you can stay in the luxury spa hotels in Ein Bokek if that is what you are looking for. But if you want a *real* Dead Sea experience in an ancient oasis now settled by a modern kibbutz, check out the **guesthouse at Kibbutz Ein Gedi**. The kibbutz guest house offers very nice, if basic, accommodations. (The highest-level rooms are *arugot* rooms, but the Desert-level rooms are fine and less expensive; don't go below that level, because the other rooms will be very basic and hostel-like.) Staying here gives you a tiny taste of kibbutz life; for example, you will eat in a dining hall, which gives you a chance to interact with kibbutzniks on some level. Ein Gedi is an ancient oasis mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, most famously as the place where the young David hid from the wrathful King Saul, and the kibbutz has a world-renowned botanical



garden. Be sure to hike up the **Wadi David** with its lovely, small waterfall, and visit the ancient synagogue excavated nearby. Even if you don't use him to tour Masada, be sure to ask to meet Zabu while visiting Ein Gedi. Just ask after him; *everyone* knows him. They call him "Saba Zabu" ("Grandpa Zabu.") Can you tell I love this man? They do, too, even the young kibbutz members.

After the Dead Sea, I also recommend a stop at **Qumran**, the community (probably the ancient Essenes) which produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. It's an interesting site, particularly with a recent (and relatively well done, only semi-cheesy) interpretive film, and it's right on your way back to Jerusalem. The community at Qumran hid their scrolls in the caves above the settlement as the Romans marched through on their way to destroy Jerusalem in the Great Revolt. But they never came back to retrieve them, and they lay in the caves until a Bedouin shepherd tossed a stone into a cave in 1947 and heard pottery shattering. Where did they go? Were they part of the group that perished at Masada? History echoes in haunting ways on a day like this. It's quite special.

#### Day Four:



Tour the western parts of the New City. I highly recommend at least a half day at **Yad Vashem**, Israel's Holocaust Memorial. It is terrifying and moving, and very well done. The historical museum added a decade ago truly does justice to the story of the murder of six million European Jews. Be sure to see the Children's Memorial, the most evocative memorial to grief and loss that I have ever experienced. The first time I went through, I was in tears and my knees were shaking, but I was grateful for this remembrance of the one and a half million children murdered in the Holocaust. Another evocative site very close to Yad Vashem is **Mount Herzl**, the national cemetery of the State of Israel, much like that country's Arlington. Here are buried such giants as Yitzhak Rabin, Golda Meir, and Theodor Herzl as well as hundreds of Israel's fallen soldiers and other heroes. This is best toured with a guide. Seeing both would be a full (and emotional) day. If you only see one of those sites, after that you can go to the **Israel**

**Museum**, known as the national museum of the Jewish people. It is best known for housing the Dead Sea Scrolls in the famous Shrine of the Book (pictured at right), but it also has a world-renowned archaeological wing, an excellent collection of Judaica through the ages (including four historic synagogues reconstructed in the museum), and an excellent modern art and impressionist collection. See <https://www.imj.org.il/en>. The Israel Museum is also the home of a famous model of First Century Jerusalem that really helps you picture the city in the time of Herod's Second Temple. Check online or call for the times of free docent tours, particularly of the archeology wing, which really brings this stunning collection to life. The **Bible Lands Museum** next door is worth seeing as well if you have the time; <https://www.blmj.org/en/home-2/>. You can also tour the **Knesset**, Israel's Parliament. Overall, the building is generally unremarkable unless you are interested in Israeli politics (which makes the US and UK look tame, by the way), but there are spectacular murals in the Knesset reception hall painted by Marc Chagall, depicting themes from Jewish history. You need to arrange the Knesset visit in advance because of security screening. **Note:** A recent policy bars jeans, tank tops, open-toed shoes, or revealing clothing while visiting the Knesset. The lawyer in me suggests that you visit the **Israel Supreme Court** nearby, an architecturally interesting building (much more so than the Knesset), pictured at left. You can take a free tour in English at 12:00 noon Sunday through Thursday but must make a prior reservation at (02) 675-9612 or -9613.



You may want to spread this over two days, since Yad Vashem can take most of a day and can be emotionally exhausting. To do that and another site on the same day will make for a fast-paced and long day.

## Day Five:

Explore some more in the Old City. If you're interested, go to the **Church of the Holy Sepulcher** in the Christian Quarter. Be aware, though, that many North American and Western European Christians find this church to feel very foreign and even bewildering and, as a result, they are often disappointed. Six ancient sects share the church today, some of which you may never have heard of. The squabbles among clergy over the use of the church are legendary, sometimes even erupting into fistfights. It is cramped, sprawling, noisy, sometimes smelly (too many people, too little bathing, and too much incense), but it is fascinating. The church is worth touring with a guide, as it's quite confusing on your own. I have been many times and still get lost. See this remarkable site explaining the church in detail: [www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/52-holy-sepulcher.html](http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/52-holy-sepulcher.html). If possible, ask your guide to show you the Chapel of St. Vartan with its "Lord, we have arrived" graffito in the subterranean grottos from the First or Second Centuries. This is below the Armenian section and is not open to the public, but you might get lucky if your guide (such as Aram Khatchadourian) has good Armenian Apostolic contacts. If you get in, you are very fortunate, and please give a donation of ₪20-40 to the priest who lets you in. Also, don't miss a quiet and lovely part of the church, the **Ethiopian Coptic quarters** on the roof. (Access it by going up the stairs, just outside the church to the right of the main entrance.) In the small chapel below the roof, you will see a painting of the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, from which both Ethiopian Copts and



Ethiopian Jews trace their origins. This is the most peaceful part of the church, and the stately and dignified Ethiopian monks seem happier than most to answer your questions and show you around. Leave them a contribution, as they are the decided underdogs in this chaotic place.

Finally, while **the Edicule** is the traditional (and always crowded) tomb of Christ, have your guide show you the small Syrian chapel opposite the Coptic chapel off the rotunda. There you will find a true Jewish burial cave from the Second Temple period. This will give you a sense of how Jesus was buried and why many scholars believe that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is in fact the most likely, historical site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus of Nazareth.



The **Western Wall Tunnel tour** starts at the Western Wall and follows a tunnel underground and along the unexposed part of the Western Wall, and it shows much more of the remains of Herod's Temple complex. It emerges in the Muslim Quarter. You must arrange this in advance through the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. For more information about the Western Wall tunnel tours, including how to reserve a spot, see <http://english.thekotel.org>. To make reservations, call 972-2-627-1333 from outside Israel or 1-59-951-5888 inside the country. The web site also offers live streaming video of the Western Wall, also known as the Kotel (in Hebrew, *ha-kotel ha-ma'aravi*). For Christians, please note that most Jews don't use the term

"The Wailing Wall," and while it is not a slur, many find that term mildly offensive or at least off-putting. Jews have come home; they aren't "wailing" anymore. It's not respectful usage.

The picture at the right is my best man Louis and I at the Kotel on the last day of our trip in 2006. I am the shorter one on the right, in the hat. I offer some notes about **visiting the Western Wall**, which for me at least is an emotional highpoint of any visit to Jerusalem:



- Men and women pray in different areas that are strictly segregated, in accordance with Orthodox Jewish practice. I don't like it, but that is how it is. The limitation on women's roles at the site is a deeply controversial issue in some quarters, accepted in others. A new, egalitarian (and under-developed) prayer area has been established near Robinson's Arch in the more southern part of the Western Wall if that appeals to you.
- If you are male, ultra-Orthodox Jews may ask you to pray with them or to don tefillin (leather boxes containing Scripture worn at morning prayer, but not on Shabbat or most holidays). That might be of interest to you if you are Jewish but is not an option if not. If you aren't Jewish, just tell them that, and that will end the issue. If you are Jewish and still not interested, just say you would like to pray alone, but you may have to be persistent to the point of bluntness. The prayer requests can be rather relentless and irritating.
- Men must wear head-coverings (a *kippa* or any other hat), even if not Jewish. There are free kippot available, but truly any head covering, including a ball cap, will suffice.
- On Shabbat, do not take photographs, use your cell phone, or smoke cigarettes in the prayer area of the Wall. Be respectful at this very sacred place.

## Shopping in Jerusalem.

While I am not much of a shopper on Israel trips, Madeleine Lavine showed me an extraordinary photography shop called **Elia Photo Service** in the Christian Quarter at 14 Al-Khanka Street. The owner is the grandson of an Armenian named Elia Kahvedjian, an extraordinary photographer who took black-and-white photographs of life in Jerusalem and the Land of Israel in the period of the mid-1920s through the 1960s. Check out <https://www.eliaphoto.com/> for a sample of his beautiful work; I was transfixed by these photographs and purchased a stunning photograph of the Old City from the Mount of Olives in 1924. It's worth a visit.



Brett and I love original art, and on our 2016 visit, **we discovered a wonderful artist and art teacher in the neighborhood of Yemin Moshe named Pnina Frank**; her studio is located at 9 Yemin Moshe Street. She is such a kind and interesting person. For information and samples of her work, see [www.pninafrank.com](http://www.pninafrank.com); tel. (052) 891-1642, e-mail [pninart@gmail.com](mailto:pninart@gmail.com). Brett bought one of her paintings of a Jerusalem vista—and we just love it!



Then there is my favorite shop and shopkeeper in all Jerusalem, **Yousef Natsheh of the Josef Natsheh Emporium** at 30 Christian Quarter Street; tel. (02) 627-4537, cell (052) 238-6465. Yousef (pictured with me at left; he is on the right) is from an old Hebron family, and he is warm, welcoming, and doesn't pressure you to buy. Stop and have some tea or coffee with him, and if that is all you do, it will be fine. He will show you things, but takes "no, thanks" for an answer, and he is quite a special man. My guide and friend **Madeleine Lavine** calls him "my mate," and she often stops in after long days of touring just to visit with this kind soul; he has become my friend as well. But beyond that, he has amazing textiles, carpets, and scarfs, and I have purchased three woven table runners of a material called "Suzani." People ask about them on our table!

Another nice place to shop—and to help a worthwhile program in the process—is the gift shop at **Yad La-Kashish**, 14 Shivtei Israel Street, tel. (02) 628-7829 or 628-9737, [www.lifeline.org.il](http://www.lifeline.org.il). This organization is designed to provide meaningful work to elderly and needy residents of Jerusalem, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and South America. You can see the workshop where the artisans work, and the gift shop offers their hand-made items at very reasonable costs, including cards, wall-hangings, mezuzot, and other Judaica.

Many people touring the Old City are interested in souvenirs, particularly religious items, and the shuk (Arab market) is full of them. You need to bargain (start at no more than half of the listed price), and the shuk can be very overwhelming to those not used to it. Consider going to see **Henry or his brother Jack at Rex**, a jewelry and souvenir shop just inside the Jaffa Gate on the left side just after you enter the market; the address is 3 David Street, tel. (02) 628-4865, [www.rexjewelers.com](http://www.rexjewelers.com). These guys will let you shop without hassle or intimidation, and I know and trust them. Tell them I sent you—but still feel free to ask for their best price. As a note, outside of the Arab markets, bargaining is not the norm and the listed price is the price.

If you are looking for a licensed antiquities dealer, particularly ancient coins with certificates of authenticity, check out **Mishirky Antiquities** run by **Zak Samer** at 24 Christian Quarter

Road, tel. (054) 635-3357; [www.oldcityjerusalemgifts.com](http://www.oldcityjerusalemgifts.com). His shop is very close to Josef's Emporium, and for not a lot of money, I delighted some children from our church at home with coins from figures mentioned in the Bible. Be clear about what you want to spend, but Zak is honest and fair.

For fine Judaica, your best bet is the shops along King David Street and in the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall area. You can find everything from antiques to brilliant, modern interpretations of traditional Jewish objects and art. This area costs more, of course, and unlike the market, prices will be fixed unless you're buying a lot. The **Mamilla Mall** area between the Jaffa Gate and the New City, spanning the Valley of Gehinnom, has vastly expanded shopping options near the Old City—this is a very upscale locale. For more information on shopping options, search the Israel forum on TripAdvisor for “shopping,” and you will find whole threads of suggestions on that topic.



For the other days, possibilities include:

- You can also walk around and see some of the other gates into the Old City—there are seven gates altogether. The **Damascus Gate and the Lion's Gate** are the most elaborate and interesting. The **New Gate** is from 1889. That's “new” in Jerusalem!
- **The Mount of Olives.** This site will be of interest to both Christians and Jews. For Jews, it is the site of the massive **Jewish Cemetery**, with graves going back to Second Temple times, and even modern luminaries such as former Prime Minister Menachem Begin are buried there. For Christians, the Mount of Olives marks both the beginning of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as well as the site of his anguish, betrayal, and arrest following the Last Supper, and according to at least one Gospel, his subsequent ascension into heaven. Several churches commemorate these events, but the main ones to see are **Dominus Fleuit** (“the Lord wept”) higher on the hill and the **Church of All Nations at Gethsemane** farther down. The latter is a modern church, quite spectacular, and the olive grove and quiet garden outside is the probable site of ancient Gethsemane, which means “place of the oil press” in Hebrew. It is one of the most peaceful, moving places for Christians in Israel, much more spiritually affecting for me than more famous sites such as the Holy Sepulcher. Just try to time your visit to miss the



tour bus crowds! Finally, if you can get into the gorgeous **Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene**, that is a special treat, but its hours are quite limited, Tuesday and Thursday, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. **Note:** **Sam Salem** (p. 62) has connections in the church and may be able to get you in outside of these times, so consider that if touring with him. But check out the gorgeous, gilded onion domes on left, which are perhaps the most stunning visual when looking at the Mount of Olives!

By the way, a great resource on Jerusalem's array of Christian churches is **Aviva Bar-Am's book, *Beyond the Walls: Churches of Jerusalem*** (Avava Press Jerusalem, 1998). She is a renowned travel writer and former correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post*. You can pick it up in Jerusalem or on [www.israel-catalog.com](http://www.israel-catalog.com), and used copies are

available on Amazon.

- **The City of David.** These excavations are found on the Ophel Ridge, which extends south from the current Temple Mount (ancient Mount Moriah) down into the present-day Arab village of Silwan. This was the original Jerusalem, conquered by King David about the year 1000 B.C.E. to become the capital of his newly united kingdom. After David's death, of course, his son Solomon built the First Temple on Mount Moriah, on land which David had purchased. God denied David the privilege of building the Temple himself because David was a "man of blood" and had sinned through his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the arranged killing of her husband Uriah. Recent excavations have exposed a nearly 4,000-year-old Canaanite tunnel that was used to bring water from the Gihon spring into the walled city; it was probably through this tunnel that David's men infiltrated to conquer the Jebusite city. Now you can walk all the way through it to the Pool of Siloam ("Shiloach," in Hebrew), and you can also walk (or wade, rather) through the tunnel dug by King Hezekiah centuries later to provide a constant source of water to those within the city walls in preparation for the anticipated Assyrian siege, a project which is recorded in the Bible. The City of David is an extraordinary site where biblical stories come alive, and it is indeed where it all began, as you will be constantly reminded. You should go with an individual or group tour; unless you know what you are doing, wandering around the modern-day village of Silwan could be unwise because of political tensions, and you won't know what you are looking at in any event. The City of David (Ir David) Foundation offers English-speaking tours, but you should know that this group has an intensely nationalistic agenda, with which you may or may not be comfortable. You can get more information about the Foundation and the tours that are offered from their website at <http://www.cityof david.org.il/en/The-Ir-David-Foundation> or call (02) 626-2341. The City of Jerusalem also offers tours on the weekends during part of the year, and other groups may offer tours paired with other sites, such as Mount Zion. Any private guide can also take you through the City of David, however—you do not have to use Ir David.

By the way, while you are exploring the City of David, consider stopping at a lovely little shop called **Pool of Siloam Antiquities**, tel. (02) 656-3368, cell (052) 409-0413. Its owner **Abraham Siam** is an authorized deal in antiquities (and a great fellow). He offers a range of gifts for sale, including ancient coins with certificates of authenticity. His prices are fair and his work trustworthy. Since the true Pool of Siloam has been found in a new location further down, much of his business has dried up (pardon the pun) as the crowds go elsewhere, but he is really worth a visit. I bought my then ten-year-old nephew a coin from the reign of King Herod Agrippa (c. 42 C.E.), and this was a *big* hit!

- Interested in some hands-on archeology? You can visit the "rescue dig" at **Emek Tzurim** at the base of Mount Scopus near the "boundary" with the Mount of Olives, east of the Old City. Several years ago, the Waqf (the Islamic Trust which controls the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif) opened a new exit to the underground mosque on Temple Mount in the area (mis)called "Solomon's Stables." In doing so, the Waqf illegally excavated under Temple Mount and dumped some 80 truckloads of debris into the Kidron Valley. This was an archeological atrocity (and completely illegal), as archeologists date artifacts based on their location in layers of soil.



And this was soil from under the surface of Temple Mount, where archeological excavations are prohibited but which presumably contains the remains of two Jewish Temples not to mention vital Crusader, Byzantine, and, yes, Muslim history! Anyway, the City of David Foundation is working on sifting through the dumped material to rescue what they can, and you can participate. Volunteers dump out buckets of debris onto a mesh grid, and sort through looking for items. In every bucket we searched, we found shards of pottery, bits of mosaic, bone, and ancient glass—and some volunteers have made quite important finds. It’s fascinating and would be a great activity for kids as well. You can make reservations to participate in this through The City of David Foundation at \*6033 (free phone in Israel), or 972-2-626-2341 from abroad, or see this website for more information: [www.cityofdavid.org.il/en/tours/mount-olives/temple-mountain-sifting-project](http://www.cityofdavid.org.il/en/tours/mount-olives/temple-mountain-sifting-project). It is very inexpensive—₪20 for adults and ₪16 for children for up to an hour and a half. Staff from the dig will give you an introductory talk and oversee the work.

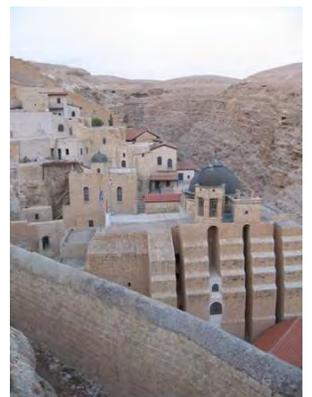
- **The Rockefeller Museum** in East Jerusalem is a fascinating reminder of British rule under the mandate and has a renowned collection of archeological artifacts. Now part of the Israel Museum, this museum was custodian of most of the Dead Sea Scrolls for a long time, and to me it feels like the “museum that time forgot,” with a decidedly 1930s British feel. It even has an old-fashioned card catalogue!



- Stroll the **Ben-Yehuda Street Mall** in the New City near downtown. The area offers lots of restaurants, shops, and people watching. You may see armed civil guards in the area; don’t worry unless the Israelis look worried. Other streets to walk around on include Yoel Salomon and Hillel Street, both off of Ben Yehuda. This is where the younger folks hang out, by the way, meaning I don’t much fit in at this point. 😊 The **Harmony and Arthur Hotels** are located in this area, and it’s a 10-minute walk from the **YMCA or the King David, Eldan, or David Citadel Hotels**.
- If you want to delve more into Zionist history, **the Museum of Underground Prisoners** at the old Jerusalem Central Prison from the British Mandate period might be of interest. Here, prisoners from the pre-State Jewish undergrounds (Haganah, Etzel/Irgun, and Lehi/Stern Gang) were held, and the museum has very interesting tales to tell from the difficult and violent birth of Israel. The museum and prison are located at 1 Mishol Ha-G’vura Street, Russian Compound, tel. (02) 623-3166.
- **The Tower of David Museum of the History of Jerusalem.** This is an excellent look at the extraordinary history of this city. It is in the (misnamed) Tower of David just inside the Jaffa Gate. This really helps put what you will see or have seen of Jerusalem in historical context. The site is actually a citadel from Herodian times, still plenty old! But it is nowhere near David’s city, which lies outside the present Old City walls. Still, it is one of the best museums in the city. Some nights it offers a spectacular light show that you might enjoy—ask for details.
- **The Russian Compound.** In the 1800s, various European nations and Americans tried to gain significant holdings in Jerusalem—in fact, guide **Madeleine Lavine** (p. 59) offers a fascinating “Europe in Jerusalem” tour that explores this history. As part of that,

you can tour the holdings of the Russian Orthodox Church along the **Street of the Prophets**. Some interesting sites along the way include **Bet Sergej**, the guesthouse for visiting Russian royalty (now housing the Ministry of Agriculture), and **Bet Ticho**, a museum housed in the home of two famous Jerusalemites, eye surgeon Avraham Ticho and his painter wife, Anna Ticho, located at 9 Ha-Rav Kook Street, tel. (02) 624-5068 or 624-4186. Be sure to also see the nearby, circular-shaped **Kidane Mehret Ethiopian Orthodox Church** and tour it if you can on your own or with one of the gentle and kind priests who serve there. Built in 1893 by Ethiopian Emperor Johannes I, it is an island of peaceful reflection in this busy city. Be sure to notice the Lions of Judah on the lintel over the entrance—and remember that this community traces its origins to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as do the Ethiopian Jews.

- **Bethlehem**—only about 12 km south of Jerusalem, if you are so inclined. **Sam Salem** offers tours of Bethlehem (he grew up there), and he can transport you there as well. His contact information is on p. 62. Bethlehem is under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and for that reason Jewish Israeli tour guides cannot get you all the way in (except for a limited number with special permits), and certainly no Jewish cab drivers can do so. You can go in with an Arab taxi driver from the Old City or take an Arab bus from the Damascus Gate area. If you take that route, you could also use a Palestinian guide in the city. While in the city, you can have lunch on Manger Square at the **Peace Center Restaurant**, across from the Church of the Nativity. The food is great, the bathrooms spotless, and the view of Manger Square is terrific—especially from the outside terrace area. Tel. (02) 275-8122 and (059) 518-7622. Another option that Sam can set you up with is the **Central Restaurant** operated by George Nassar, tel. (02) 274-4004 or (052) 548-4478. It is open for dinner or lunch by arrangement, and the food is incredible (and overwhelming, in a good way)!
- Day trip to **Jericho and Hisham’s Palace** (now under administration of the Palestinian Authority). You could go on your own via Arab drivers or taxis, but **Sam Salem** takes people there as well, and I have heard very good reports on his visits to those places. Jericho is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.
- **Herodian and Mar Saba**. Sam Salem took me to **Herodian**, Herod the Great’s massive summer fortress south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Herod, the master builder, had this hill topped with an artificial, conical summit and a magnificent palace, and it made the small mountain look like a volcano, which it still does today. The national park there is quite impressive, and in 2007, Herod’s tomb was found on the site! The tomb was relocated to the Israel Museum for an amazing exhibit on Herod; I believe that parts of it have been put permanent exhibition back at Herodian now that the exhibit has closed. Afterwards, we visited **Mar Saba** (pictured at right), a Greek Orthodox monastery built into the cliffs of the Wadi Kidron. It is quiet, spectacular, and very peaceful. It is one of Sam’s favorite places.
- **Talpiot and the Hill of Evil Counsel**. This hillside south of Jerusalem was the seat of the British High Commissioner for Palestine during the Mandate period, and his



spectacular headquarters, known as Government House, now serves as the United Nations headquarters for the entire Middle East. While that building is not open for public touring, the grounds, the promenade, and the overlook are, and offer spectacular vistas of the entire city of Jerusalem. The terrifically evocative name listed above comes from the legend that Caiaphas the High Priest had his home here, that Judas plotted the betrayal of Jesus on this site, and that Jesus's first trial, at least according to some gospel accounts, was also here. This cannot be accurate historically, as the High Priest's home would never have been outside the city walls, but the name has stuck, at least in common Western or Christian usage. Jews usually just call the region Talpiot, and it is seen as a very desirable neighborhood. It's also a prime shopping district.

- **The National Library of Israel.** Touring a library may sound like an odd suggestion, but my tour guide and friend **Eyal Amos Reuven** used to work here, and he gave me a tour even before he was an official guide. This is the national library of the Jewish people, and its most stunning feature is one of the largest stained-glass windows in the world. The

panels are to be read left to right, unlike Hebrew, because most of the world's languages read that way. The blue panel on the left, with colors of peace and calm, show the promise stated in the powerful words of the prophet Isaiah that in later days all the peoples of the world will ascend God's holy mountain. The words appear in many languages, echoing that promise. The middle



panel, in colors of red and blood, shows how the world has gone terribly wrong. Even the Moon is cleft in two, and the diagram in the center, representing Kabbalistic understandings of God, shows that even the Deity is strained and fractured. At the bottom is the scroll of Isaiah, looking like the walls of Jerusalem and echoing the promise of the first panel, but even that has fractures. The final panel shows the coming of peace and reconciliation. The machinery of war is broken into pieces and in its stead are tools of life and growth. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war any more." In a moving note, in the very lower left, the artist inserted a very small memorial candle because his wife died two months before the work was completed. This stained-glass window is entirely illuminated by natural sunlight. And in the morning, when the sun hits the windows, apparently the candle shines forth most brilliantly as a memorial to the artist's beloved wife.

- For a Palestinian Arab perspective on the history of Jerusalem, I recommend **the Wujoud Cultural Center and Museum** on the left side of David Street as you enter it from the Jaffa Gate. This organization is intended to support the lives and work of Palestinian women and has a small museum dedicated to showing the life of Palestinian Jerusalemites in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It is located in a building six centuries old from the Mamluk era, and you must make reservations to visit, tel. (02) 626-0916; website <http://fairtourism.info/packages/arab-orthodox-society/>. The organization has a frankly one-sided, Palestinian perspective, and for what it is worth, I think this Greek Orthodox-sponsored institution downplays the role that radical Islamist pressure plays in making the lives of Christians here hard. But it was still worth a stop to get a different view of this

city, which I see as a complex—and beautiful—mosaic of communities and cultures.

- Jerusalem can present sensory and emotional overload. Want to find a quiet moment of sacred beauty and spiritual reflection, away from all the noise, bustle, and stress? Each day at 3:00 p.m. (except for Sunday) the **Armenian Cathedral of St. James** in the Armenian Quarter, which is not usually open to outsiders beyond the courtyard, opens its doors for a thirty-minute prayer service. The inside is stunning, filled with silver lamps suspended from the high ceiling, each donated by a different Armenian community. Many of these communities were wiped out by the Ottoman Turks in the Armenian Genocide during World War I; the lamps thus make a haunting memorial to those destroyed communities. An Armenian priest in his black vestments and hood says some prayers in the ancient Armenian liturgy, and then the young seminarians file in, in striking black robes



with a single, cobalt blue stole draped over one shoulder. Two at a time, they start singing antiphonal plainchant which echoes through the sanctuary, until suddenly all of them join in from the sides. I had met a lovely Texas couple at the YMCA in 2017 and invited them to come with me. At the moment that the sanctuary flooded with song, our eyes flew open in wonder and flooded with tears. It was one of the most beautiful moments in all of my visits to Jerusalem—a chance to hear the holiness of another tradition. Such a privilege!

- Want a break from all the history and religion? Check out the **Jerusalem Bird Observatory**, a delightful island of protected nature near the Knesset. The programs for Israeli schoolchildren are extensive and fun to watch, and the managers are passionate about protecting the birds of this region as well as migratory birds. Tel. (02) 653-7374 or (052) 386-9488; <https://natureisrael.org/JBO>; e-mail [jbo@inter.net.il](mailto:jbo@inter.net.il).
- It's a real (and common) mistake to treat Jerusalem (and Israel in general) as a busy checklist of things to do and see. Take a break, park yourself in a café just inside the Jaffa Gate for an hour or so, and just people watch. You'll see the world go by; I don't think there is anywhere on Earth with more diversity than here. A good spot for that is **Samara Restaurant**, 23 Jaffa Gate, tel. (02) 628-2050. No reservation needed (or likely taken); just have a glass of wine or a beer (Taybeh Palestinian beer is great!) and watch.
- For another break, tour the wine country of the Judean Hills, with **Madeleine Lavine** or **Eyal Amos Reuven**. There are many wineries, but I most recommend the **Domaine du Castel Winery** in the stunning Judean Hills—the scenery alone is worth the tour. But the wines here are excellent, and the explanation of the process and how the winemaking began was fun and informative. See <https://www.castel.co.il/en/visitor-center/> for more information.
- Also in the Judean Hills, you can tour **Bet Guvrin**, with its well-known “**Dig for a Day**” program. Whether or not that is your cup of tea, there are spectacular excavations and both natural caves and the amazing **Bell Caves**, where ancient miners would punch a hole through hard crust and then excavate massive caves in the shape of bells from the softer, chalk-like rock beneath. If you haven't had too much wine, all of this is worth a

stop! Do the wine on the way back. 😊 And there is a relatively recent excavation of an Israelite fortress guarding the Elah Valley (where the story of David and Goliath takes place); **Queiyafa** dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E., perhaps even to the reign of David and Solomon. Brett and I toured this area (and the Castel winery) with Eyal during our 2022 trip.

- **Hebron**—one of Judaism’s four holy cities, this ancient town is sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike as the burial place of the Biblical (and Qur’anic) patriarchs Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah. (Rachel’s tomb is in Bethlehem.) Hebron is one of the largest Palestinian cities in what is now known as the West Bank (or Judea, to nationalist Israelis), but there was a Jewish community here for centuries, most of whom were murdered or driven out in the Arab Revolt of 1929. In the 1948 War for Independence, this city fell under Jordanian control and it was barred to Jews altogether. With Israeli control since 1967, right-wing settlers set up settlements in downtown Hebron in the 1970s and later founded a nearby Jewish suburb called Kiryat Arba, reviving an ancient name. The result is a seething stew of religion and politics that has at times exploded in violence. Until the last few years, I would have called it too tense to visit comfortably (Jewish settler groups offered tours in armored buses), but on two recent trips, I went there with **Sam Salem** and enjoyed the visit. Check on local conditions during your visit to see if it is a good time to go.

The **Cave of the Machpelah (or Cave of the Patriarchs)**, known to Muslims as **the Sanctuary of Abraham or the Ibrahimi Mosque**, is shared (uneasily) by Jews and Muslims on a rotational basis; this is the site of those sacred biblical tombs, revered by all three Abrahamic faiths. The building (at right) is a Herodian structure from the Second Temple period, with echoes of the Temple’s own architecture and design, making it interesting for another reason altogether. The cave was also where in 1994 Dr. Baruch Goldstein, an American-born physician and Israeli settler, brutally murdered 29 Palestinian Muslim men at prayer, nearly derailing the peace process and horrifying the world, including all decent Israelis. Like the Passover Massacre of 2002, where a Palestinian suicide-bomber murdered 30 members of Jewish families at a Passover Seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, these horrible events show how “religious” extremists will murder people and try to kill the very hope of peace in the name of an evil perversion of faith. This should be a site where all people who call Abraham their forefather can worship in peace. God willing, one day it will be. As noted above, Hebron has been a focal point of disturbances at times, so I do not recommend that you visit Hebron on your own—go with a guide or a tour. I also suggest you avoid the right-wing Jewish settler tours from the Hebron community or the Palestinian “alternative” tours (such as Green Olive), both of which offer one-sided political indoctrination with their tours, in my view. Instead, I recommend **Sam Salem** who, while Palestinian, brings a balanced and respectful approach to the visit reflecting the perspectives of all three faith communities. There are Jewish guides who would also do a great job, with similar balance—but check carefully if you want to avoid political lectures. Another great option is **Abraham Hostel’s** dual perspective tours of Hebron, where you will hear from Palestinian and Jewish resident guides. See <http://abrahamtours.com>.



Under pressure from militant Jewish settlers and the IDF trying to keep peace between them and Palestinian militants, the shopkeepers and merchants of Hebron have suffered a great deal economically. Hebron is renowned particularly for its glass making, and any guide can show you some good shopping options. But I really loved one that **Sam Salem** took me to: **Abed's Shop**, also known as **The Checkpoint Shop**, so nicknamed for its proximity to an IDF checkpoint on Shahada Street, which separates Jewish settlers returning from worship at the Machpelah from the Palestinian vendors on the Arab main street. Abed Elmuhtaseb owns the last Palestinian shop to stay open on this street; if he closes (and he was offered a rumored million dollars to sell out), the street will likely be closed to Palestinians altogether. It is easily found opposite the Gutnick Centre in the square just down the hill from the Ibrahim Mosque (close to the Tomb of the Patriarchs), and is only meters from the checkpoint; locals actually call it "Abed's Checkpoint" because it's so close. Abed and his son Mohammed (who speaks *excellent* English) sell good quality glass, embroidery, pottery, and (very) cold drinks. Sitting outside on plastic chairs enjoying Abed's mint-tea (and jokes) is perhaps the best people watching spot in Hebron. Also note that Abed's wife occasionally cooks makloubeh for guests, and **Sam Salem** can arrange this. Each person can pay about ₪50-60 for a meal. Abed's cell phone is (059) 923-2785. We purchased some lovely vases and decorative tile work, the prices were reasonable with a great selection, and they ship. Expect to bargain. Please stop in and spend some time and money. You'll get some memorable keepsakes, and these folks will get business they very much need to survive—they depend on international visitors. Look, this is not about taking sides in the complex religious and political conflicts that tear at this holy but divided city. Both sides have made terrible blunders here, and many who live here have suffered terribly. There is grief and blame enough to go around. It is about helping good people who are caught in the metaphorical crossfire.



Finally, as always, I have some restaurant recommendations in Jerusalem. The restaurant scene in Jerusalem is a far cry from my unremarkable dining experiences in early visits—one can eat *very* well indeed in this city now. And I always do!

- One of the loveliest, hideaway cafés and bookstores in the city has long been **Tmol Shilshom** at 5 Yoel Solomon Street, in the courtyard upstairs behind this address, tel. (02) 623-2758, <http://www.tmol-shilshom.co.il/en/home-page/>, e-mail at [info@tmol-shilshom.co.il](mailto:info@tmol-shilshom.co.il). It has been a gathering place for Jerusalemites of all kinds—it is both a popular gathering place for gay people, and a favored first-date site for Orthodox Jewish couples! That kind of diversity in Jerusalem is sadly rare. The bookstore used to have bookmarks from all over the world pinned up on the wall. In a late 1990s visit, I was stunned to notice a bookmark from a local Cincinnati bookstore pinned right over my husband's head! It has long been one of my favorite restaurants in Israel, but after the recent and sudden death of founder David Erlich, combined with Covid-19, it had closed. Through a communal fundraising effort (it is that loved), it has reopened and seems to be thriving!



- An innovative, upscale choice is **Eucalyptus** at 14 Hativat Yirushalayim, tel. (02) 624-4331, [www.the-eucalyptus.com/](http://www.the-eucalyptus.com/), e-mail [info@the-eucalyptus.com](mailto:info@the-eucalyptus.com). Under the stewardship

of renowned Israeli chef-owner **Moshe Basson**, the restaurant features ingredients from the Land of Israel, often from the biblical era, prepared in fresh and inspired ways. The atmosphere is fun and festive, and the food impeccable. Some orders may result in a big show coming out of the kitchen! And just so you know, the tasting menu is wonderful—but huge! If you go that route, get the smallest one. Be sure to take the address and phone number with you and tell the taxi driver that the restaurant is below Jaffa Gate in the Artists' Quarter, a development of shops and apartments—it can be tricky to find. Eucalyptus is kosher and, of course, closed on Friday evening.

- The **Archibald C. Harte International Restaurant** at the Jerusalem YMCA, 26 King David Street, has been back as a contender, with good food and drink with excellent service at a reasonable price, and the seating on the terrace across from the King David Hotel, with its views of the gorgeous YMCA Tower and palm trees swaying in the breeze. But right now (May 2022), it has not yet reopened for dinner—you guessed it: staffing shortages—but I expect that to happen soon. Tel. (02) 569-2692; not kosher.
- 
- **Angelica's** is a very fine, kosher restaurant practically next door to the YMCA, at 4 George Washington, tel. (02) 623-0056, <https://www.angelicarest.com/en>. This is an outstanding restaurant, quite upscale, with excellent food, wine, and service. Whether you keep kosher or not, this is a great choice. It was Brett's favorite of the May 2022 trip.
  - **Kikar ha-Musika (Music Square)**. This is a truly delightful, new development that just opened in 2019, a square devoted to music and great restaurants, many of which offer extensive outdoor seating in pleasant weather. Music is performed in the open courtyard area every night starting at 8:00 p.m., and often before that, a pianist or a guitarist and singer will often perform as well. There are several excellent restaurants ringing the square, but I can highly recommend one of them from experience: a glatt kosher, dairy/fish restaurant called **Piccolino**, <http://www.piccolino.co.il/en/>, tel. (02) 624-4186. The service was good and the food very tasty. I used to recommend **Nahman** based on a really good experience in 2019, but when Brett and I visited in May 2022 with our guide Eyal, the rude manager told us that our reservation had been cancelled because a large group of 170 had later booked. "I tried to call you," he said over and over, though Eyal received no call. What the actual hell? In short, **AVOID Nahman** because there, the word "reservation" is meaningless.
  - Looking for coffee? Coffee shops have sprung up everywhere in Israel it seems, and my favorite chain is **Café Aroma**, found nearly everywhere, including in the Ben Yehuda District. I am pleased to say that Starbucks failed in Israel (sorry, not a fan), so instead give an Israeli coffeeshop a try, and enjoy some fine coffee with your wi-fi or book!
  - There are dozens of wonderful places to eat in Jerusalem's amazing **Mehane Yehuda** market, an open-air collection of stalls selling everything imaginable and giving visitors a real flavor of Israeli life. There are cafés, restaurants, pizza, hummus, and falafel stalls, and great wine shops. But a recent innovation is a very fun experience, what is being called

**After Market** on Saturday evenings after the end of Shabbat, when many restaurants and bars in the market reopen for late night partying crowds. We discovered this as the guest of **Eyal Amos Reuven** before he was a guide (he was informally “guiding” even then!), and we had a delightful time!

- Speaking of the Mahane Yehuda market area, **Jacko’s Street** in the Mahane Yehuda market is a wonderful, kosher choice. I loved this place! 74 Agrippas Street, tel. (02) 581-7178. **Eyal Amos Reuven** also took me to **Ishtebach**, a much less formal place with counter seating and a few tables, offering a stuffed Kurdish pastry that you can fill with everything from brisket to Syrian kebobs to chorizo. Yum—it was a fantastic, informal option! Ishtebach is located at 1 Shikma Street, tel. (02) 623-2997. For more information, <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/israel/articles/ishtabach-a-restaurant-that-feels-like-home/>. There are many other dining options in the market, a booming scene.
- The German Colony area of Jerusalem, not far south of the King David Street area with its many hotels, is a delightful neighborhood to explore. There are quite a few restaurants in that area. But the best bet in that area is Jerusalem’s **First Station**, a whole complex of new shops, galleries, restaurants, and entertainment venues built around the old Ottoman-era train station. It’s amazing—and really shatters Jerusalem’s old image as Tel Aviv’s dowdy older sister! My favorite restaurant there is **Ha-Sadna, the Culinary Workshop**, located at 28 Hebron Road, tel. (02) 567-2265; <https://en.sdnrest.com/>. I loved this place—felt like a funky, Manhattan eatery! (Not kosher.) Brett really enjoyed it too, though—as is common at fun, funky places—the music was a tad loud for our tastes.
- **Smadar** is a fun, Italian-Israeli restaurant also in the First Station area, located in a converted Jerusalem cinema from the 1930s. The food is good if nothing fancy, and the atmosphere is fun and informal. 4 Lloyd George Street, tel. (02) 544-3666.
- A beautiful rooftop restaurant with stunning views of the Old City can be found at the **Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center’s Wine & Cheese Restaurant**. This is far more than a wine and cheese place; the menu is extensive. This restaurant in the Vatican-owned complex is open daily, including Shabbat, and of course is not kosher. I really enjoyed my meal there, with beautiful views of the Old City. Tel. (02) 627-9177; [www.notredamecenter.org](http://www.notredamecenter.org).
- If you are interested in experiencing North African cuisine, you might try **Darna**, a well-known (and fairly expensive) Moroccan restaurant. Darna is located at 3 Horkanos Street, tel. (02) 624-5406, e-mail: [il@darna.co.il](mailto:il@darna.co.il); see website at <https://darna.co.il/>.
- Want to try the best hummus and falafel in the Old City? Just asking this question will set off a war, but I will assert author’s privilege and tell you to go to **Lina’s Restaurant** in the Christian Quarter, 42 Al Khanka Street near the intersection with Via Dolorosa, tel. (02) 627-7230. Many swear by Abu Shukri, and the food is indeed good, but I found the service indifferent and even unfriendly (maybe to non-Palestinians?). Lina’s is great, they smile at you, and Madeleine the guide loves it, which seals the deal for me. We bought lunch there and took it to have lunch at the **Josef Natsheh Emporium**—a perfect

combination! Ask Yousef when you stop by; maybe he will let you do the same. You buy lunch; he'll give you some coffee or mint tea. But get your hummus fix *here!*

- **My Favorite Place in the Old City.**



I have given you a lot of options, but I end with a longtime favorite in the Old City. You will be walking a lot in the Old City, and there are a hundred places to stop for a drink and a bite to eat within those walls. **But above them all, I recommend an Armenian restaurant and lounge called Bulghourji** at 6 Armenian Patriarchate Road, tel. (02) 628-2072 or (052) 628-2080, e-mail [bulghourji@hotmail.com](mailto:bulghourji@hotmail.com). After you come in the Jaffa Gate, turn right past the Tower of David and the post office and police station, and continue

down the Armenian Patriarchate Road. You will pass the Armenian Tavern on your left (also reputed to be a good place, but this is not where I am sending you). This place is a little further on the right, with yellow shutters. The owner **Naro** is such a wonderful man; a lot of Jerusalemites just call it “Naro’s Place.” You will see he runs a great restaurant, and the staff is terrific as well. Have a sandwich, some hummus with fresh pita to die for, or a delicious Armenian pizza. Drink some Taybeh (Palestinian) beer, wine, or refreshing lemonade with mint. Want a real kick? Try some arak, the Middle Eastern, anise-based liquor that is like Greek ouzo. Naro has a lovely, open courtyard in back and has opened a “VIP club” (lounge) downstairs. In a city full of great restaurants, I often eat there more than once, and that tells you something about the lovely, warm atmosphere Naro has created. And the bathrooms are sparkling clean, some of the best in the Old City! That is an unbeatable combo.

That wraps up my personal guide. I do hope that you found it helpful. Now that you have read it, I would be happy to try to answer any other questions you may have. Happy and safe travels to you, or as Israelis would say, “nesiya tova!” (Bon voyage!)

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