



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 seventeen years ago. In it, I have tried to share my experiences and knowledge of Israel based on a lifetime of study and eleven visits to the country, most recently in May 2012. I enjoy independent travel, and this guide was written primarily with such travelers in mind, though I hope the information will be helpful to those on group tours as well. As an American, I have produced a guide that is, no doubt, US-centric. I hope my readers from other countries will forgive that, and still find useful information.

I am not in the travel industry. I am a labor lawyer who happens to love Israel passionately, and I want 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. I did not go from 1999-2005, the truly terrible years of the second Palestinian uprising and the terror bombings in Israel cities. Since, I have returned five more times, but even now, some friends still asked, “are you sure you want to go back to Israel?”

So what is the reality? 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 may fear. My trips have all been calm and peaceful, and while there is far more security than you may be used to in North America or Europe, we were never afraid, and Israelis are not either. The country certainly does *not* feel as if it is under siege, despite the “CNN image.” In fact, my most recent in May 2012 saw the calmest, most relaxed security situation I have seen, and the country is packed with visitors! So please don’t give in to irrational and uninformed fears, and don’t listen to your friends saying “I can’t believe you’re going to Israel!!” We don’t refuse to travel to New York after the September 11 attacks; life in the United States goes on. The same is true in London, Madrid, and Moscow. It does in Israel, too. Throughout the country, people are out everywhere, outdoor cafés are packed, the country is full of tourists, hotels are full, and prices are up. So you need to book ahead, or you risk being closed out of things you want to do or see.

So go. And I hope you find the information I prepared about traveling in Israel and life in that country interesting and helpful.

I have some recommendations on guidebooks to help you prepare for the trip. In my view, the best guidebook is **Frommer’s Israel**. The last edition was issued in November 2010—a new edition may be on the drawing board. The Frommer’s guide is significantly better than the other guide books, primarily because of its fine author, **Robert Ullian**. The recommendations for

hotels and restaurants are very helpful for budget and luxury travelers alike, and the historical and site information is also very good. Also, Robert Ullian sometimes posts on-line updates at www.frommers.com, so check those out. Fodor's Israel guide is well written and has good information on sites, but has more limited information on hotels and restaurants. The Lonely Planet Guide for Israel is far weaker—less biased against the country than it used to be, but still inaccurate in places. For an excellent look at life in this complex country, read **Donna Rosenthal's *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land***. It is the best book of its kind today. If you want to know more about the history of the country, including the conflicts with Arab countries and the Palestinians, I would be happy to suggest some other books and resources. A great starting place for the history of Jerusalem in particular is ***Jerusalem: A Biography* by Simon Sebag Montefiore**. It's an exhaustive but fascinating history of this city holy to more people than any other on Earth.



The Internet is a wonderful source for the most current information on travel, and offers unparalleled chances to learn from fellow travelers. Check out the travel forums and posting boards offered at www.tripadvisor.com and www.frommers.com. On Trip Advisor, go to Middle East, then Israel, and then Forums. On Frommer's, go to Community, then Middle East & Africa, and then open the Israel forum. I'm a frequent poster on both sites, as you'll see. Trip Advisor's Israel forum is far more active, and we have many Israelis, including tour guides, who participate and help travelers. On my most recent trip, I posted a trip blog on Trip Advisor's Israel Forum called "Labatt's Trip Reports – May 2012." Both boards also contain extensive information on hotels, restaurants, and sites of interest in the country, including noncommercial traveler reviews of hotels and restaurants at Trip Advisor. The forums are a great place to pose questions and get answers from people with experience in the country, often within hours. I have contacts all over Israel now thanks to those boards, and each trip now features Trip Advisor dinners! Of course, you probably found me through one of those boards. Of course, neither site endorses or is responsible in any way for the content of this guide.

Frommer's® *The best trips start here*

A gentleman named Chris Christensen has a wonderful, Internet "radio" program with interviews on travel at www.amateurtraveler.com. My podcast interview on Israel travel is Episode 167, and I also did a podcast interview focusing specifically on Jerusalem at Episode 192.

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 in the United States sent you. I get no compensation, commission, 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, it is the only "compensation" I ask for providing you this information. There are many other wonderful people and places in Israel, to be sure, but I only list here what I have personally experienced, unless otherwise noted. I don't hold this out as a comprehensive guide, and when I call it a "personal guide," it is exactly that. The opinions expressed in it are mine alone, and so are any mistakes. But you have to admit, the price is right!

Finally, before proceeding to my specific recommendations, many people to whom I have sent this guide have asked if they can compensate me for it. I have declined that, and still do. But if you do find this information useful, please consider making a donation of \$25 or more to the **Jerusalem International YMCA** for its Jewish-Arab kindergarten and preschool program, called "Gan ha-Shalom," and please tell them that it was on my recommendation. The 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 the troubles in recent years have made it difficult for families, particularly Arab families, to afford the \$7,000 USD annual tuition, threatening the bicultural nature of the program. Please be generous. The address is:

Jerusalem International YMCA
c/o Gan ha-Shalom
26 King David Street
P.O. Box 294
Jerusalem 91002
Israel



Please make checks payable to “the Jerusalem International YMCA” and designate it for Gan ha-Shalom/Peace Preschool on the bottom of the check. For more information about the Jerusalem International YMCA and its programs, see www.jerusalemymca.org. Thanks for considering a donation to this very worthy cause. And for my Jewish and Muslim readers, I assure you that the YMCA offers programming for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, has a membership from all three communities, has an Arab Muslim CEO (the first), a Jewish second-in-command, a varied and integrated staff, and a board that is carefully balanced between Jews, Christian and Muslim Arabs, and expatriates living in Jerusalem. This organization is a very good friend to and resource for Israel and all its communities.

GETTING THERE.

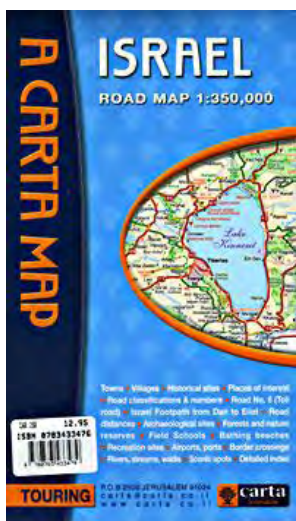


You have a number of carriers to choose from in flying to Israel. Obviously El Al Israel Airlines serves the country with the most flights. El Al flies directly from New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles. The cost is competitive, and El Al offers the most frequent flights, plus an early start to your Israel experience. I also rank El Al's more intensive security measures as a plus, though they can feel like a hassle and can be intrusive. On the negative side, El Al may have less solicitous service and seemingly a more chaotic clientele. In fairness, I note that I have not flown El Al since 1991, 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. I flew El Al the first two times, largely for patriotic reasons, but have since found other airlines more convenient. Delta Air Lines now offers nonstop flights from JFK/New York to Ben Gurion Airport and back. Because Cincinnati is a Delta hub, this is a very convenient option for me, and I liked the service overall. Note: Delta recently eliminated the direct service from Atlanta, which is a real shame. I am grateful that Delta will be upgrading the JFK service to updated 747-400 jets, which will be much better. Continental also offers non-stop flights to Israel from Newark, and I've heard that is a good option. US Airways has added daily non-stop service from Philadelphia recently, giving another option. For Canadian (and even American) readers, Air Canada offers convenient, nonstop services from Toronto. Lufthansa,



Air France, KLM, and British Airways also serve Israel, and they are easy to connect to in Europe via various American carriers. In 2005, I flew Delta to Europe and connected through KLM (going) and Lufthansa (returning), both very good carriers. With tourism to Israel booming again, other options may become available.

GETTING AROUND.



If you can afford it, I highly recommend renting a car and driving around the country. It is hands down the best way to see Israel. 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 five to six hours, though no one would ever do that since there are so many wonderful 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 slave to bus schedules or someone else's idea of what you should see and when. The bus service is quite extensive, inexpensive, and good, though, and you can even put your luggage underneath in the cargo hold. Read more on that 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 recommend an Israeli company called **Eldan** for rental cars. On my last four trips, they had by far the best rate, with a 20% discount for Internet bookings through www.eldan.co.il. 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, Budget, and Sixt** (Israeli) also offer rental cars in Israel. You can at least initially check comparative prices using Orbitz or Expedia or other general sites (though the best prices seem to be through booking directly on the particular company's Israel web site). I have used Avis in the past and was happy with it; see www.avis.co.il. **Budget** is a newer player in Israel, and I used them in October 2006, getting a great rate at www.budget.co.il. We have had a lot of complaints about Budget's service on the Trip Advisor forum, though, and I had a very bad customer-service experience of my own in 2006, so it's not my first choice. We have heard a lot of complaints about **Sixt** on Trip Advisor; I would be wary there, too. I note that **Thrifty** now has a presence in Israel, but I have no experience with them in Israel. You should not need an international driver's license as long as your license has the information in English. If not, you will 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.

Unfortunately, US MasterCard Gold and Platinum cards no longer offer the "CDW" coverage in Israel that once allowed us to avoid the very expensive car rental insurance coverage. (Neither VISA nor American Express have covered rentals in Israel for a long time.) **MasterCard World Cards** do still offer the CDW coverage, and I got one for just this purpose. Unless you have the World Card, you will need to purchase a package of vehicle insurance plus the third-party liability insurance, and this adds to already high costs. (**Note:** even with the CDW coverage, you still have to purchase third-party liability coverage. And for Canadian readers, Canadian bank cards seem to offer more coverage—check to be sure.) But I have a suggestion to reduce both costs and hassles. If you follow the itinerary I recommend, starting your trip in Tel Aviv and ending in Jerusalem, you won't really need or even want a car in either of those cities.

Both are quite confusing to drive in, and city traffic is far worse than in the countryside, plus parking is a total nightmare. So you could rent the car for pick up in Tel Aviv on the day you leave the city to head north, and then drop it off once you arrive in Jerusalem, or vice versa. All the car rental companies have easy to reach offices in both cities. This cuts costs and saves on stress. I took this approach on my last two trips, and never missed having a car in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Cab fares were far less than rental costs for those days.

Ask for air conditioning—you'll need it. If you can drive a stick shift, they are less expensive—up to \$100 or so for a two-week period. I do note, though, on two trips, I was given an automatic at no extra cost even though I rented a manual, so that may be a trend, but one you can't count on. Rental costs generally are high, particularly with the required insurance—as much as \$300-500 USD for a two week period for a subcompact manual, such as a Fiat Uno or Subaru Charade. Larger cars cost more—on my most recent trip, I paid \$309 for a Mazda 6 for just six days. But, again, I find the convenience worth it. Rental cars (at least the affordable ones) are a lot smaller than the cars that most Americans and Canadians are used to driving. For Europeans, it 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 much. On my recent trips, we drove all over and refilled no more than three times in two weeks. For example, Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is less than an hour's drive unless you get stuck in traffic.



Be aware, when driving, that there are no formal borders or markers as such to mark the limits of the occupied West Bank, nor is it typically indicated on Israeli road maps. Israelis call the old border between the occupied territories and Israel proper “the Green Line” (because it was green on the pre-1967 maps). The most up-to-date maps from the Israel Government Tourist Office (which you can get for free through the Internet) do show the areas under Palestinian control, but they're hard to read. You can purchase great road maps from **Carta Israel** through www.israel-catalog.com. You can also buy Carta maps at www.eisenbrauns.com; search for Carta products. You can also reach Eisenbraun's by phone at (574) 269-2011. The Carta Touring Atlas and Guide is wonderful as well. It is in booklet form, making it more accessible in a car, and it also contains touring tips in the margins. Others prefer the more detailed **MAPA** maps, which are also terrific. Both have the areas under Palestinian control clearly marked, and a MAPA booklet map I just bought shows the security barrier, which is basically the closest we now have to a “border” between Israel proper and the West Bank.

That “seam line” between Israel proper and the West Bank is now far more evident on the ground than it used to be. Of course, Israel has completely withdrawn from the Gaza Strip, and that area is now closed to travel from Israel. In most places, the new and controversial security barrier, a high wall in some places, gives you an obvious indication where the Green Line is (or at least the point of Israeli control), but that barrier is not complete all the way around the West Bank. Even where there is no barrier, though, there are IDF road barriers and check points at the entrance to the territories. You can no longer just stumble into the West Bank without knowing, which used to be true. I personally recommend that you stay out of the West Bank unless you are on an escorted tour. Generally, I think it's safe to tour Bethlehem and Jericho, particularly with a guide. I also toured Hebron with a guide on my last trip, and it felt very safe. I would not have said that a few years ago. Second, it is safe to drive on your own to Masada through the West Bank from Jerusalem on Highway 1, then south on Route 90 along the Dead Sea, or to drive Route 90 south from Tiberias to the Dead Sea through the Jordan Valley. I took the latter

route on three trips, including my most recent one, and my drive was both lovely and quiet. While most Israelis seem to think it's safe to drive south on Route 90 from Galilee through the Jordan Valley, some disagree with me. Note also that some car rental companies prohibit driving in the territories or East Jerusalem except for that Highway 1/Route 90 trip from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, so check on any restrictions when renting the car if you intend to drive in the territories. Even if covered, use good sense, and ask locals before setting out. It would be both prohibited and very unwise to drive any Israeli rental car into the Palestinian-controlled areas. You can take an Arab cab from Jerusalem for the short trip to Bethlehem; more information on that in the Jerusalem section later in this guide.

Also be aware that Israeli drivers are more aggressive than what most North Americans are used to, at least outside of the larger cities. People worry about terrorism when traveling to Israel, though it has been quiet for many years—but driving is far more of a risk. That said, driving in Israel is very possible to do; I've done it on all eleven trips. I found no problem driving in the countryside between cities, but driving in the cities, especially Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, can be nerve-wracking (and simply not worth it). To some degree, you have to drive like the locals to get anywhere. If you wait patiently for someone to let you in at a merge, for instance, you may be there a long time!

A note on using a GPS. You can rent a GPS or purchase a chip for your Garmin to make it work in Israel. But the problem is that English-language GPS programs can be very confusing and cumbersome to use. The reason is language—while there is only one way to spell a city or a road in Hebrew, there may be a half-dozen ways to transliterate that into English. For example, is it “Caesarea” or “Kesaryia” or “Qesarya”? When I entered an address on King David Street, one of Jerusalem's major streets and the location for the King David Hotel, the YMCA, and all the rental car offices, 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 you say “King David” in Hebrew, but a non-Hebrew speaker would be flummoxed. So, unless you understand at least enough Hebrew to make educated guesses, I would use maps and skip that expense and frustration.

Hiring Tour Guides. If driving makes you nervous and you are going with a group of, say, four or more, 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 is the approach perfected by my Trip Advisor friend, Kathy Walters (“Kathy4HIM”). We call it “Kathy's Third Way” (between the big bus tours and fully independent travel); feel free to e-mail her for tips at cakywalters@hughes.net. Trip Advisor posters speak highly of **Jeff Abel** (abel@012.net.il; tel. 054-438-3019) and **Moti Dagan** (dagan8@bezeqint.com; tel. 054-805-2266). **Madeleine Lavine**, who is **my favorite guide**, is another option, and her contact information is in the Jerusalem section on **p. 40** (though she has to rent a vehicle for touring). **David Wexler** frequently helps people on Trip Advisor, and he can hire a driver for guiding. He is a former American from Dallas who became an Israeli, and he works with both individuals and groups, including a lot of Christian groups. (david@davidsland.com; www.davidsland.com; cell 054-330-0941). For tours in the North, Madeleine often recommends a driving guide named **Richard Woolf** (woolfr@netvision.net.il, tel. 04-693-5377, cell 050-589-4647, website: <http://www.safed.co.il/woolfguide.html>). I have heard great reviews about him as well.

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 from the airport to Tel Aviv because the private taxi fare is not that high.) 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 ₪50 NIS or \$13 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 ₪200-240 (\$53-64 USD) to the airport from Jerusalem, with higher rates for evenings and Shabbat, and there are small surcharges per-bag or for extra passengers. Rates are about ₪103-118 (\$27-31 USD) from Tel Aviv. In both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, some sheruts also run on fixed routes within the cities. (A usage note: the plural of the word "sherut" in this context is not "sherutim." Those are toilets.)



For travel within and between the cities, the bus system is widely used and fairly easy to use. Your hotel can help you identify the needed route; you can also post an inquiry on the Trip Advisor forum, because the Israelis who post there are remarkably helpful. Egged is the main company (logo at left.) But it is not practical to tour the north of the country or the Dead Sea/Masada area using public transport and buses alone. For those areas, you need a rental car or driving guide. But to get from one city to another, or anywhere within the cities, buses are a very practical—and safe—option. The terrible days of bus bombings were years ago, and I would not hesitate to use them now.

In 2009, 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 as an option when you don't have to have the rental car at your destination; a company like Eldan has offices all over the country. I dropped the car off in Haifa and then took the train from there. You can check out routes, timetables, and prices at www.rail.co.il/EN. A tip—spend the extra ₪5.00 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.



Taxis are also plentiful, but here you may face a problem common to tourists in Israel. For travel within cities, taxi drivers are required by law to use the meter. At times, a driver may attempt to avoid this by simply not turning it on and quoting you a fixed rate in shekels. I have had some drivers tell me that they didn't have a meter—as if! While quoting a fixed rate is perfectly appropriate for going to the airport, intercity trips, or trips where you are asking the driver to stop and wait for you, it is neither advisable nor legal for a simple trip from one place to another within the 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 he won't, as is your right. All the drivers understand English, but you can say in Hebrew, "taf'il et ha-moneh, bevakasha" ("turn on the meter please"). Or just ask for a receipt ("kabbalah" in Hebrew); they have to use the meter to generate a receipt. I will say that this problem has been far less on recent trips, but still stick to your guns and make sure that that meter has been turned on. In Jerusalem, I recommend a driver (**David**

Mizrachi at (054) 481-6950; he is honest, fun to chat with (though his English is limited), and very interesting. Another choice is **Yehuda Levi at (052) 240-7080**; he is honest and good. In Tel Aviv, I recommend **Beny at (054) 303-0700**; he is a very pleasant driver who made good conversation (at least in Hebrew). But you can simply grab a cab on the street or through your hotel—just make sure that the driver turns the meter on! You will pay slightly more if you or the hotel calls for the cab, rather than flagging one on the street, but it's a small surcharge.

WHEN TO GO.

This depends on several different issues. First, of course, it depends on your schedule and when you can travel, perhaps including your children. But you should also consider the weather in Israel, what kind of experience you are looking for, costs (peak and off-seasons), and the calendar of Jewish and Christian holidays (the latter only relevant because of outside tourists; the Christian population is very small, and Christian holidays are not observed in Israel).

Let's start with the weather. Israel really only has two seasons. The summer is from April 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. In October 2006, we had a surprising amount of rain, unusual for that time of year, but 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 unpredictable. On two November trips, I had flawless weather, and even unusually warm on my last one, but in November 1993 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. March can also be quite nice, with wildflowers blooming in the countryside after the winter rains, particularly in the North. If you go in December through February, know that the weather can be quite cool, wet, and even nasty. Snow is quite rare (and only in the higher elevations, such as Jerusalem), but temperatures in the 40s F (single digits Celsius) with rain are common. From May through mid-October, rain will not be a problem. I have made three trips in late June, and it can be hot, but not generally brutally so. May is a *wonderful* time to go, unless, like my friend Louis, you have allergies to olive tree pollen, because they're in full bloom. Temperatures are generally in the 70s F (high 20s C) every day except occasional heat waves, and the evenings are just delightful. The temperatures were also quite nice in October, though more variable. Even in the summer, we have sometimes needed a light jacket for evenings in Jerusalem, which remained lovely. July and August will be quite hot, even brutally so, and more crowded, because that is when families travel. The climate is basically the same as Southern California. At the Dead Sea or Eilat, though, it is hot year around, and in the summer, extremely hot, like Arizona.

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 summer 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 Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur through Sukkot and Simhat Torah in the fall, Passover in the spring, and Shavu'ot in the early summer. In Jerusalem in particular, prices also go up around Chanukah/Christmas and around Easter, which is usually (but not

always) the same week of Passover. (And remember, there is the Latin/Western Easter and the Orthodox/Eastern Easter—and they can be the same or different Sundays!

So, 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—Google it for the date in any particular “Gregorian” year) through mid-November. But you can have a good trip to Israel in any time of year.

BOOKING HOTELS.

Hotels in Israel offer smaller, less opulent rooms than most North Americans are used to, and on top of that, with the return of peaceful conditions and huge numbers of tourists, hotel prices in Israel have skyrocketed. It is harder and harder to travel to Israel on a modest budget, but it is still possible to find good places at 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 book most of my hotels in Israel through a Tel Aviv-based travel agency called Regent Tours. Ask for Chantal Schmucl, who will help you. I have consistently found that Regent Tours, which contracts directly with hotels, can deliver lower prices than direct booking, even lower than Internet “discount” rates. It’s certainly a whole lot easier than contacting each hotel individually. **You can call Regent Tours toll-free from the United States at (866) 383-6130 or Canada at (866) 886-0967. If calling within Israel, dial (03) 694-7778, or from other countries, dial 972-3-694-7778. You can also e-mail Chantal at regent@actcom.co.il, but I suggest you call first.** If you use this 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 I recommend. If you do use Regent Tours, I also recommend later confirming the reservation directly with the hotel as well to avoid any possible miscommunication on dates and details. Being too careful never hurt.

I note that Chantal at Regent Tours can also set you up with tour guides or groups, and can organize bar and bat mitzvah trips for families. She is a terrific resource, and I literally have never heard one complaint about her from the thousands of people I have likely sent her way. Great service that saves you money—you can’t beat that!



SECURITY ISSUES.

This is a constant aspect of Israeli life, and I won’t minimize it. Despite what you hear and read, however, you are safer in Israel than in many major American cities, especially now with terrorist attacks a very rare event, unlike the awful years of 2001-03. Here is a sobering statistic. My hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio had had up to 80 homicides in a year, out of a population of 350,000. Extrapolated to a population the size of Israel (7,800,000), that would be the equivalent of 1,600 dead in just one year. **Yet there have not been that many people killed in terror attacks in 64 years of Israel’s history combined!** So where am I safer?

Every time I have traveled to Israel, I felt utterly safe at all times. Neither I nor the friends I traveled with were ever afraid. **Don’t believe the media image!** Just pay attention to the news,

ask for local advice on conditions in more sensitive areas, and use common sense. Remember—you won't be visiting towns bordering Gaza.

Throughout the country, you will see armed soldiers or civil guards, some in uniform, some not. It does *not* mean something untoward is happening. It is just a fact of life, and you will get used to it. Some Israeli civilians carry pistols, especially in Jerusalem. Do what I do—if the Israelis around you look concerned, worry. Otherwise, don't. Some restaurants, hotels, 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 has to be, but their presence makes me feel safer, not less so.

Never leave a bag or item of luggage unattended in Israel, at the airport or anywhere else. If you do, you are both taking a huge 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 will need to open any bags, back-packs, or purses for inspection, as noted above. It's routine, and you'll quickly get used to it.



At the airport (your flight to Israel if on El Al; any flight going out) you will be subjected to *intense* questioning by Israeli security agents, some of which may seem pointless and intrusive. I get asked where I learned Hebrew and for the names and addresses of all of my Israeli friends. It can be intimidating. Just answer honestly and keep your cool. They are looking for nervousness, unrest, and inconsistency. Your bags may be searched; mine were one year—and I mean *searched*: everything taken out and carefully felt by hand. The airport also uses more sophisticated X-ray techniques these days, and you may be asked to open just one bag because something unusual was seen on the screen. That happened to me on two recent trips, and was no big hassle. But the experience is very different from US airport security, and, frankly, it's far more effective. I've 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 are of Arab ancestry or "look Middle Eastern," or have visited Arab families or areas, you will be subject to far 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 I was very upset when I was pulled out for two and a half hours of intensive questioning and the complete item-by-item search of my luggage in 1993, all because I had stayed with some Israeli Arab friends and don't otherwise fit the profile of Christian visitors to Israel. I even wrote a half-dozen complaint letters to everyone from the Prime Minister on down. After the September 11 attacks, I would be far more understanding that Israelis don't have the luxury to debate the need for this in a world where there are so many people trying so hard to kill them.

Never try to photograph soldiers or military installations without permission. By the way, it is also not advisable to photograph Muslim Arabs or ultra-Orthodox Jews without asking for permission since many view photography of people as a violation of the commandment against graven images. It is also simple courtesy not to treat people like zoo exhibits.

I suggest that you carry your passport with you at all times; you will often need it in circumstances you would not expect (checking into hotels, cashing traveler's checks, going to some sites). I also recommend that you carry a small book bag/backpack big enough to carry

your passport and wallet, a couple of guide books, a Bible (you'll see frequent references at historical sites), water, and miscellaneous day-trip items. I carry mine with me everywhere, and I know to start opening all the zippers as I approach a security check point. Carry something that is fairly 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 our May 2005 trip, a thief lifted a digital camera out of one man's bag in the middle of an Old City walking tour. On our 2008 trip, my friend Joy's day-bag was either lost or stolen in Tel Aviv.

And those were the most "dangerous" things I saw in eleven trips traveling on my own all over the country. That can happen anywhere and does, far more often, in any major or American or European city. You're safe in Israel. Really.

MONEY CHANGING.



Israel's currency is the New Israeli Shekel, abbreviated NIS, and as noted above, 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 machine and don't fool with traveler's checks. It is incredibly easy and a much better deal. You simply insert your card, instructions flash up in English, 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 (approximately \$1.00 USD = ₪3.80 at current rates). In contrast, if you use traveler's checks, you will get the same rate, less a large commission; you will have to wait forever in bank lines; and you will have to encounter the inefficient and often rude Israeli bank clerks. Israeli banks are not known for stellar customer service.



One advantage tourists from abroad have is that we are exempt from paying the 16% 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, but verify this. Note, though, that VISA, MasterCard, and American Express all charge "foreign currency conversion fees" that they often fail to disclose. (As of this writing, Capital One still does not charge such a fee and even absorbs VISA's separate fee—verify this before travel.) At as much as 3%, this charge adds up, and frankly it really irks me. Banks now charge that same fee for ATM withdrawals; still, the ATM route is far more convenient, and this fee is still less than the commission charged to convert traveler's checks. Just check with your bank on fees so you will know up front what you will be paying. And 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.

TIPPING.

Tipping is less universal and customary in Israel than it is in North America and much of Europe. While it used to be rare or non-existent, tipping is growing, so here are some guidelines:

- In **restaurants**, where service is not included in the bill (usually clearly indicated, and almost always the case), tip 12-15%. You can do more, but Israelis don't generally tip at the customary 15-20% rate found in North America.
- In **taxis**, do not tip but round up to the next shekel or 10 shekels, if the fair is something like ₪58. If the driver does a lot of extra work, such as carrying bags into the hotel, or otherwise went "beyond the call," then tip.
- For **housekeepers in the hotel**, I tip ₪5 per day for a single occupancy, ₪10 per day for a double. It may not be customary, 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 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, I would tip the guide ₪25-40 daily, and the bus driver in the range of ₪12-20 daily.

PACKING.

Obviously, you should pack conservatively for such a far trip, and if you do forget something, it's pretty easy to buy it in Israel (though prices may be higher). Airlines are now charging more for baggage in excess of the weight limits, so beware! On my 2008 trip, I got my main bag down to 42 lbs. (19 kgs) (less successful in 2012). I'm a congenital excess packer—if I can do it, you can.



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 my most recent trip, I showed up looking like that, and an Israeli friend said—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, skirts 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. 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 business function. Israelis tend to dress quite informally, though consciously and with great style. (I'm reminded of David Sedaris's comment that "Americans would be respected more abroad if they didn't go out looking like they were out to cut the grass.") I usually pack one dress shirt and 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 far less formally than that! I have never needed more formal clothes at a restaurant, and I've eaten at some upscale places. A nice shirt and slacks or a 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*. This is true whether or not the men are Jewish. Cardboard ones are always available, but those are really tacky. You can buy a *kippa* on the street in Jerusalem for a couple of bucks, so even if you're not Jewish, pick one up. But a ball cap or other hat is adequate; you simply need to cover your head.

CULTURAL TIPS.

Israel is an amazingly diverse place. Jews from over a hundred countries have come there, 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 the former head of the YMCA pre-school 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 add a little lemon juice and olive oil, and we can make something wonderful and delicious." What a delightful summary of the wonderful diversity that is Israel!

The Jewish Population.

Israel is the world's only Jewish state, and was founded in 1948 as a restored homeland for the Jewish people, after nearly nineteen centuries in exile. The modern, political movement to re-establish a Jewish nation in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel, or Palestine) is called "Zionism," and the Zionist movement began in earnest in the late 1800s, led by a brilliant visionary named Theodor Herzl, a secular and assimilated Viennese Jew who was so shocked by the anti-Semitism he saw in "tolerant" France during the Dreyfus trial that he concluded that the only answer to the incurable sickness of anti-Semitism in Christian Europe was for Jews to have their own state.



So, while Jews had longed for two millennia to return and there was always a 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 rulers of Palestine after World War I, endorsed the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Increasingly, the Jewish pioneers came into conflict with the resident Arab population, and this eventually 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 Weizman, and Golda Meir. This movement was socialist in orientation, sharply secular, and created the kibbutz movement. It went on to become the Labor Party, and would govern the State of Israel for its first three decades. On the right, we had 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 today's Likud Party. 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 the 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 Israel's population (excluding the occupied territories). While many are immigrants (especially from the former Soviet Union in the past few years), an increasing portion of the population was born there. The native-born are called "sabras," 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 description of most 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 western, central, and eastern European origin, including most North American Jews. 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, including the dispersion that followed the expulsion of Jews from Christian 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. Following the founding of the state, huge numbers of Sephardim entered Israel after Arab countries expelled their large, long-time Jewish populations, nearly tripling Israel's population in just three years. The Ashkenazim saw them as more 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, and still are largely aligned with the Likud and Sephardi religious parties, most notably Shas. This is still a major fault line in Israeli cultural and political life. Many Sephardim from Middle Eastern countries now prefer the term *Mizrachim*, meaning "eastern" Jews. As an aside, I love Mizrachi food, music, and traditions, and their sometimes more tolerant approach to Judaism.

Two other groups are noteworthy. With the era of perestroika and the eventual fall 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 in Israel). They now make up roughly 20% of the Jewish population of Israel. While they are overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, integration has proven rough. Many were educated professionals arriving in a country already overly 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 has no civil marriage option). One sees Russian signs everywhere, and you will also hear the language spoken on the street.



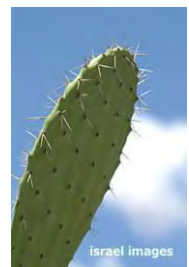
Another fascinating group is the Ethiopian Jews. By tradition, this ancient community of black Jews traces its origin to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and they did not even know that other Jews existed until the late 1800s. In the 1980s and 1990s, virtually the entire community was brought to Israel in two huge airlifts, Operation Solomon and Operation Moses. In a matter of days, over 30 El Al and 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, asked the last pilot out how many were on his plane, and he replied, "Over a thousand." Stunned, Ezra warned him that this was impossible, that the plane could not take off with more than five hundred. The pilot calmly replied, "It's okay. I don't want to leave any of my people behind." Ezra said, "I never felt more proud to be an Israeli," and that flight set the Guinness record for the number of passengers on one flight. Again, the reality of integration has proven tougher. The cultural, social, and educational gaps were at least as great as what faced the Sephardim, and 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.

The largest group of Israelis are secular and not religious, let alone ultra-Orthodox. But you will see the ultra-Orthodox everywhere, distinctive mainly by the way they 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 the 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 return Jews to Eretz Yisrael. On the other hand, many observant Jews wear modern, Western dress, but the men will wear skullcaps at all times—these are the modern Orthodox, religious but not ultra-Orthodox. Many of them are intensely 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 no legal recognition from the government. Israeli Jews tend to be either ultra-Orthodox (about 10%), modern Orthodox or traditional (15-25%), or secular and non-observant (the balance). There is no separation of religion and state in Israel, and conflicts between the religious and secular create one of the major fault lines in Israeli society.

Nearly all Israelis, Jewish or Arab, speak some English, and many do so quite well. If you are having trouble in a shop, ask the 12-year-old son or daughter of the shop owner who is studying it 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 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 think that is private. Israelis also love an argument! But once you get past that surface impression, I find Israelis warm, open, and interesting, and extraordinarily generous and helpful when in need. I have had near strangers offer to put themselves into significant inconvenience when I really needed help. 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 noted 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. He learned that Americans often don’t mean what they say. We see that as politeness, but he saw it as evasiveness or even dishonesty, and he was hurt. So, what’s “nice”? Israelis tend not to value form over substance.



Military issues and experiences dominate life in Israel to a degree unknown to most of us, at least outside of the 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 Israel. Remember, in Israel, nearly everyone—male and female—serves for three years of military service (two for women), then as much as five weeks a year in the reserves until their 40s. (Arabs and haredim studying in yeshiva (seminary) are exempt from the draft.) 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, be cautious. Issues of peace and security are existential ones for Israelis—if they guess wrong, they may die. Nothing holds deeper emotion. Israelis are *very* sensitive to perceived criticism by outsiders, including North Americans and Europeans, who can pontificate from a position of relative safety. If you note how much money the US gives Israel, for example, you may have a parent reply: “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, but I lay 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 in the early 2000s 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, ongoing violence and open warfare there despite the Israeli withdrawal, the war with Hizbullah, threats from Iran, and revolts in the Arab world that have replace régimes willing to make peace with Israel have all further shattered those hopes. Like most Americans, I am an optimist by nature, but I am not optimistic here, at least in the near term. Few if any are 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 the guidebooks I have recommended 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—for Shabbat. Starting shortly after noon on Friday, 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 observant neighborhoods, stops altogether. A siren sounds at sundown throughout Jerusalem. Even 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 sense of the coming of Shabbat in Israel, and we have nothing like it in North America or Europe.

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, and so are most venues of public entertainment, such as movies. 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 plan your travels around this. 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 Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but also Sukkot (the Festival of Booths), Shemini Atzeret, 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 most 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.

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 look for chances to interact with real 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.

The Arab Population.

Arabs account for 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 (the 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 have done. Arab citizens of Israel do suffer significant discrimination as you would expect. Their identity is a very complex one: one often hears “My country is at war with my people.” While the term “Israeli Arab” is common; now 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 everything in Israel, these terms are very political. Israelis do not generally use the term “occupied territories” when describing the West Bank and Gaza. Israelis on the left will say “administered territories” or simply “the territories” (my preferred term). Israelis on the right prefer the Biblical terms Judea and Samaria for the West Bank. So you can to some degree discern political leanings by the terms used.

Sadly, the pressures of both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rise of Muslim 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?—an open question.

If you have the opportunity to be hosted by Arabs, by all means take it. It will be an extraordinary experience. I offer some tips, though, because there are “hidden rules,” 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 serious 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.
- When being served food or beverages, stay seated, unlike North American or European 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 cause embarrassment to ask your hosts for an alcoholic drink, as they will not want to disappoint 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. 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. Kids *love* American tee-shirts. Flowers are always safe as a gift.

Remember that wine is not an appropriate gift for observant 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 the food is wonderful, by the way, so 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 it comes from the heart.
- Many 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.
- If you don't have any other opportunity to experience Arab hospitality, you may want to contact a remarkable man I met who lives in a village in East Jerusalem on the top of the Mount of Olives. His name is Ibrahim Ahmad Abu El-Hawa. He 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 hostel for me, but a meal with him is quite an experience. If you accept his hospitality, please leave him ₪80 or so 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 host of other, distinct groups that make up the balance of the population. The **Druze** are a sect that grew out of Islam but keeps its religious beliefs and traditions secret. They number some 110,000 and speak Arabic, but are a separate community. The Druze are very 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.) Druze in the Golan, on the other hand, consider themselves still to be Syrians. The **Bahà'is** are a modern faith founded in the 19th 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, Muhammed, 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), you may have a chance to meet local Bedouin, a fascinating experience.

MISCELLANEOUS.

- Take an AM/FM radio. Kol Yisrael (the Voice of Israel) offers 15-minute news bulletins in English at 6:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m., and 8:30 p.m. Google “Kol Israel” and “English news” to find the times and frequencies of the newscasts before your trip; they seem to change constantly. Especially if you are driving on your own, you want to keep an ear on the news. Israel Television also has a nightly English news bulletin on Channel 1 at 4:50 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 4:30 p.m. on Friday, and 5:00 p.m. on Shabbat. You can also listen or view on line through Kol Yisrael's websites.
- If you want to take your laptop, many hotels now have wi-fi service, though often at charge of up to \$15 USD a day. Many cafés and restaurants also offer wi-fi service at no charge. You probably won't need a voltage converter other than what came with the computer (check to be sure, but most handle 220 as well as 120 current), but you will need the three-pronged adapter for Israeli plugs.
- You may find it very convenient to have a cell phone, and I have rented several times from **Amigo** (www.amigo-us.com); I found it very easy to use and reasonable in price. They mail the phone to you before you leave, with a return envelope to send it back once you get home. I only spent about \$70 USD in charges each year.
- 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. You may wish to purchase time in \$10 blocks to call to Israel (or anywhere) through One Suite at www.onesuite.com; calls are as cheap as 4.5¢ per minute for land lines and 8.5¢ for cells!
- Take lots of sunscreen, sunglasses and sun hats. 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. 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 water in Israel is safe to drink everywhere, with the possible exception of small Arab villages. I've gotten sick twice in such villages, but that may have been from food that was left out too long.



- Israeli budget hotels sometimes do not provide shampoo or enough soap, so take them. They also seem not to provide washcloths, if you care about that.
- North American electrical appliances (other than the laptops) require a converter, which can be purchased there. You'll also need a plug adapter. You can find these on the Internet as well. If visiting from a country that uses 220 current, you'll only need the plug adapter.

SUGGESTED ITINERARIES:

Tel Aviv—The White City The Heart of Modern Israel

Suggested Time: 3 nights.

Tel Aviv is Israel's New York (one of its nicknames is "the Big Orange") and at first glance can seem like any other big city. But it is the heart of modern 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 jet lag without feeling like you're missing the must-see historical sites. A good resource for planning your Tel Aviv trip is an on-line guide, in English, designed for visitors to the city; the address is www.telavivguide.net. You can find information there on hotels, restaurants, must-see sites, nightlife, and a host of useful tips. The site also has an interactive map of the city; you click on sites, and are referred immediately to a web page on that particular item of interest. Other good sites include www.visit-tlv.com and www.telaviv4fun.com. Tel Aviv is the center of gay life in Israel, and lesbian and gay visitors should check out www.gaytlvguide.com. Finally, print a great discount pass to many Tel Aviv sites and attractions at <http://www.visit-tlv.com> (lower left-hand corner, "City Pass"). You need to get this guide stamped at one of the tourism offices on arrival, but the discounts can save you a lot of money while touring the city.



Tel Aviv has many great hotels, but prepare for the fact that Tel Aviv hotels are the most expensive in the country (lots of business travelers as well as tourists). Note, though, that I tend to stay in mid-range hotels, not the 5-star places. Again, **work with Chantal of Regent Tours**; see "Booking Hotels" at p. 9.

I have two top recommendations, one in the central part of the city, closer to Jaffa, and the other in the northern part of the city near the old port. My favorite hotel in Tel Aviv now is the **Savoy Hotel**, located more in central Tel Aviv at 5 Ge'ula Street, tel. (03) 514-0500, fax (03) 514-0514; see <http://hotelsavoy.co.il>. This hotel was recently restored and renovated and has a charming, sleek, modern boutique look, with spectacular views off of the balconies (mine had both a sea and city view!). The manager Rivka is delightfully helpful, and the whole staff offers great customer service. It is a half-block off the beach, and while the neighborhood is not great, the location is outstanding. In the north near the old port, I recommend the **Melody Hotel** at 220 Ha-Yarkon Street, tel. (03) 521-5300, fax (03) 527-7750. It, too, is a charming, well-run, and stylish little boutique hotel in a renovated building that used to be the Canadian embassy.

The location is great as well, across from Independence Park, a short walk from the beach, and an easy walk to the booming port area. If street noise is an issue, get a room in the back or a higher floor. The Melody offers snacks and wine from 5:00 to 7:00 in the evening, a nice way to meet other guests. Other moderate-range options include the **Cinema Hotel** at 1 Zanevhoﬀ Street, (03) 520-7100, or across the street at the **Center Hotel** at 2 Zanevhoﬀ Street, Tel Aviv, tel. (03) 629-6181. Both are on Dizengoff Square, 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** and the **Hotel de la Mer**. Chantal works with all these hotels, so feel free to ask for quotes.

All of these hotels are very close to the beach, and within easy walking distance of a lot of interesting places. If you want to go more upscale, by most reports the nicest hotel in Tel Aviv is the **Hilton** (also on Ha-Yarkon, next to Independence Park), or the two beachfront **Sheratons**. There is also a **Carlton Hotel** on the sea shore and the **David Intercontinental** and the **Dan Panorama Hotel** closer to Jaffa.



Both Frommer’s and other guidebooks have good suggestions on things to do in Tel Aviv, so I commend those to you. There are also some great suggestions on www.telavivguide.net. I have some personal recommendations, though:

- **Old Jaffa.** This 5,000-year-old city is now a part of the combined municipality of Tel Aviv-Yafo, and you can see the old Arab city jutting into the Mediterranean looking south from Tel Aviv. Jaffa has many artists’ shops, narrow streets, and lots of character. I’m not much of a shopper on Israel trips, but Jaffa is a good place for shopping. In any event, it’s a wonderful place to explore. The view north of the Tel Aviv skyline is gorgeous, both day and night. There are free walking tours of Jaffa every Wednesday morning at 10:00 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. It is a good overview of the ancient city; while there is no charge, plan to tip the guide ₪40 or so.
- **Strolling the streets of Tel Aviv.** While **Dizengoff Street** has lost much of its luster as the “main street” of Israel, I still find it and **Dizengoff Square** a fun place to stroll and people watch. You’ll get a flavor of the mix of Israeli life. A trendier area is **Sheinkin Street**, Tel Aviv’s yuppie district. You can also wander down to **Ha-Carmel Market**, where you’ll really see “street-Israel.” It’s a great place to watch people and drink in the sights, sounds, and smells. The **Nahalat Binyamin** neighborhood offers arts and crafts markets on Tuesdays and Fridays. I also love walking through that neighborhood and nearby **Neve Tzekek**; 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. The **Rubin Museum** at 14 Bialik Street features the *amazing* paintings of Reuben Rubin, one of Israel’s greatest artists. Tel. (03) 525-5961. Open Shabbat 11:00-2:00, but closed on Sundays, which is unusual.
- **Touring Tel Aviv with Yona Wiseman.** On my most recent visit to Israel, I discovered Yona Wiseman, a truly wonderful tour guide to help you explore Tel Aviv and Jaffa. She made her way to Israel from her native South Africa. We spent a day with her exploring Old Jaffa and the districts discussed above, learning how this amazing city

evolved in just over a hundred years from settlements built on sand dunes by just 66 families in 1909. I have seldom enjoyed someone's company as I did Yona's, and my friends loved her as well; she is a delight! **You can contact Yona at (03) 516-3387 or (050) 326-7277; e-mail yonawise@013.net.il; www.yonawise.net. Touring with her is a treat not to be missed!** While Yona specializes in Tel Aviv walking tours, she is licensed to tour anywhere in the country as well. Another guide who tours all over Israel but has a special passion for this thriving, modern city is **David Wexler**, david@davidsland.com; www.davidsland.com; cell 054-330-0941. I have met David and find him knowledgeable and pleasant to be with.



- At the outset of the Tel Aviv section, 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, popular among European émigré planners and architects in the 1930s when much of the city was built, features horizontal designs, angular and curving lines, and white stucco surfaces, somewhat reminiscent of the Art Deco style in Miami Beach. What were once run down and dowdy neighborhoods have been restored spectacularly 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. The **Bauhaus Center** at 99 Dizengoff Street, (03) 522-0249, www.bauhaus-center.com, offers audio or guided walking tours of the Bauhaus district if you want a more detailed look.
- **Bet Ha-t'fusot**, the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Diaspora on the campus of Tel Aviv University. If you are interested in Jewish history in the Diaspora (exile), this is a must. It is one of the most interesting museums I have ever been in, not based on artifacts but on re-creations of Jewish life in exile throughout the world. The university is in the northern section of the city, either a bus, cab, or car ride from your hotel. Tel. (03) 745-7808; see also www.bh.org.il for more information and visiting hours.
- If you are interested in Zionist history and the rebirth of the State of Israel, stop in **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 this man's mind. Also check out **Independence Hall** at 16 Rothschild Boulevard, tel. (03) 517-3942. This is the hall in which David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the country's independence on May 14, 1948 as the armies of five surrounding Arab countries prepared to invade and crush the fledgling state. Some days the museum closes as early as 2:00 p.m., so plan ahead. Also near Tel Aviv University, you can visit the **Palmach Museum**, which tells the history of this important, pre-State militia affiliated with the leftist Labor Zionist movement. **Note:** advance reservations are required. Tours are in Hebrew, but with English-language audio units provided. Like Bet Ha-t'fusot, this is not a museum of artifacts but of visual and auditory recreations of the experiences of one Palmach unit. While over-the-top at times, I found it a powerful tribute to this force that played such a strong role in the creation of Israel—with an enormous casualty rate. It is located at 10 Lebanon Street, tel. (03) 643-6393. See 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.



Tel Aviv is full of wonderful restaurants. Every request for recommendations for restaurants sets off a major debate among residents and lovers of Tel Aviv on the Trip Advisor forum, and I usually end up with a list of more than 20 options! I will share some of my favorites. My top choice in Tel Aviv is **Orna v'Ella (Orna and Ella)**, named after its two women owners. This charming restaurant is at 33 Sheinkin Street (Sheinkin is a fun, yuppie district of Tel Aviv), and its number is (03) 525-2805. It serves comfort food, well and creatively prepared. Be sure to try the yam pancakes! Another fun place along the seaside promenade is **Café Metzada** at 83 Ha-Yarkon Street, (03) 510-3353. I found it a perfect place to eat our first night in the city, with many tasty light dishes in a very attractively designed place. For a really lovely, upscale dinner, I recommend a very fine, kosher restaurant called **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 view as the Sun sets into the Mediterranean is very romantic! 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. GooCha also opened a second location at 14 Ibn Gvirol, tel. (03) 691-1603. Toward Jaffa, check out **Manta Ray** on the seaside promenade, tel. (03) 517-4773. It offers great food (you can order tapas-style dishes to sample several items) with a spectacular view of the sea and the city. In good weather, the patio area is open to the sea and is breathtaking. Make reservations ahead—this is a popular place.

For sure check out the newly renovated **Old Port** area north of the Hilton Hotel and Independence Park on Ha-Yarkon. This area, opened early in the 2000s, features many restaurants, clubs, and shops and just bustles with activity. There is no better place to people watch, especially on Saturday night as the city comes back to life after Shabbat. 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 nice place is **Yulia's**, tel. (03) 546-9777. We just had dessert there, but it was heavenly, and the dinner menu looked great as well. We had lunch at **Comme Il Faut**, a very nice place on the boardwalk on the sea. It's also a shop and a gallery; tel. (03) 544-9211, and is oh-so-trendy, perhaps annoyingly so. People also speak highly of **Gilly's**, but I have not been there yet. I hope to make it there on my next trip.

In Jaffa, I recommend the **Abu Nasser-Hinnawi** meat and seafood restaurant at 130 Kedem Street in south Jaffa near the new 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. It is not kosher. For lunch, I ate at a lovely, family-style restaurant called **Pu'ah**, 8 Rabbi Yohanan Street, tel. (03) 681-1140. It is a small place with character, great, outdoor seating, and very good food. If you want to experience some classic and absolutely delicious Libyan-Jewish food, try **Dr. Shakshuka**, 3 Bet Eshel, Jaffa, tel. (03) 513-6560, <http://drshaksuka.rest-e.co.il>. Bring your appetite, and be sure to try the shakshuka, a signature North African dish featuring eggs cooked in a tomato sauce—yum! You can do far better than one well-known restaurant in Old Jaffa that the guide books push, and that is the **Yoetzer Wine Bar**. For the price, I thought the food was unremarkable and the service was way too familiar, pretentious, and intrusive.

Haifa – The City by the Bay

Suggested Time: 2 to 3 nights.

While Haifa on the northern Mediterranean coast is not as much of a tourist center as Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, it remains one of my favorite cities in the world. Many tourists skip it, a big mistake. Its bay is as beautiful as San Francisco or Naples. And it is a warm, vibrant city with the most integrated relations between the Jewish and Arab sectors of any major city in Israel. If I lived in Israel, I would live in Haifa.



I remain on a quest for a really great, reasonably priced hotel in Haifa. For many years, I had always stayed at the **Dan Gardens Haifa Hotel** on Yefe Nof Street at the top of Mount Carmel, with a spectacular view of the city and of Haifa Bay. I took the above photo from its balcony, where I have spent a great deal of time. But I am sad to say that this little boutique hotel has not been maintained, and has deteriorated to the point where I can no longer recommend it until there is a *major* renovation. If you go there, you have been warned. It's a shame because it's a charming location, and the hotel staff, particularly my favorite Tzipora, are just terrific. On my most recent visit in May 2012, I stayed at the nearby **Dan Panorama Haifa Hotel**, 107 Ha-Nassi Avenue, tel. (04) 835-2222, e-mail panoramahaifa@danhotels.com. This hotel offers the same spectacular views (get a bay view room), and a great staff and breakfast. The room décor is quite dated, and it needs an upgrade, but it's my best option right now. There is a lovely swimming pool, and underground parking is available. **Chantal of Regent Tours** has started placing people in a place called the **Villa Carmel**, a boutique hotel at 1 Heinrich Heine Street, off 30 Moriah Blvd., tel. (04) 837-5777/5778, fax (04) 837-5779, website at www.villacarmel.co.il/?categoryId=35939. I hear it's a lovely place, but you don't have a bay view there. Other, more upscale options with that bay view include the **Dan Carmel** and the **Crowne Plaza Bayview**, all in the same basic area, but more expensive. See what kind of prices Chantal can get—for now, I recommend either the Dan Panorama or one of those alternatives.



If you stay in this area of Central Carmel, you can buy some fine Israeli wines at a terrific wine shop called **Special Reserve** at 109 Ha-Nassi Avenue in the Panorama Center, a mall located under the Dan Panorama Hotel; tel. (04) 836-1187, e-mail suidan@netvision.net.il. Israeli wines are no longer the sugary Mogen David types that people associate with Passover Seders; they have really come into their own, and these fine wines have won many awards in European wine festivals in recent years. **The shop owner is André Suidan**, and either he, Moshe, or one of his other staff can work with you to find a good bottle in your price range. Ask for André if he is there; he is a sweet, welcoming man who will show you the wonders of some fine, reasonably priced Israeli wines. Tell André I sent you, and you might get a taste or two. Choose some to sip while enjoying that view from your hotel balcony. Or do as I have done on my past three trips, and just get a case to cover your needs for the rest of the trip! You can even ship a case home—I did (after a few glasses). As my Israeli friends say when offering a toast, “*l’chaim!*”—“To life!”



Day trips within and from Haifa:

- **Caesarea** is the city that King Herod built to honor his Roman patron Caesar Augustus, and later held by a succession of Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Mamelukes, and Ottoman Turks. 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.” Here, the Great Revolt against Rome in 66-73 C.E. started following the execution of thousands of Jewish rebels, and Rabbi Akiva was brought here to be flayed alive during the Second Revolt (Bar Kochba) in 132-35 C.E. Lots of history! (As a note, use of the terms “Common Era” and “Before Common Era” is preferred by Israelis and most scholars because of the obvious Christian connotations of “A.D.” and “B.C.” So you’ll generally see “C.E.” and “B.C.E.” instead.) Be sure to see the Roman Aqueduct north of the park (pictured above). There have been reports of car break-ins, mostly at the Aqueduct but also in the main lot by the Roman Theater. If your luggage is in the car, keep your eye on it, which is easy to do at the Aqueduct, and if you can’t, take anything valuable with you. Caesarea makes an easy stop on the way from Tel Aviv to Haifa, subject to the luggage break-in warning. (If you can park within easy view of the ticket office at the Roman Theater, I think you’re all right; otherwise, I would drop off your luggage in Haifa and double back. It is not that far, and who wants to risk stolen luggage?) While you’re in Caesarea, also check out the gorgeous **Old City Caesarea Gallery** with its beautiful paintings and sculptures. Particularly if you buy anything (and we’ve bought both a painting and a sculpture), tell the owner/sculptor Leon Bronstein that I sent you. He is incredibly talented, and a really sweet man. I particularly recommend the works by Bulgarian-Israeli artist Asia Katz. One of her works graces our dining room, to many positive comments. By the way, since this may be the first national park you visit, you may want to buy an all-park pass, called “the Green Card,” which is both convenient and reasonably priced at ₪145 (about \$33 USD). You can also buy a six-park pass for ₪105 (\$28 USD), but generally the all-park pass is the better deal. You don’t have to keep track, and you’ll likely see more than enough parks to save money.
- **Akko**—a scene from “Arabian Nights.” The Old City is magical. The Crusader “underground city” with its incredibly well-preserved knights’ halls (pictured at right) is well worth the time.
- **The Clandestine Immigration Museum** in Haifa on the seashore level. This museum follows 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’s one of Israel’s great stories. You can also walk from there to Elijah’s cave, the traditional site of his confrontation with the prophets of Ba’al, and a site revered by Jews, particularly Sephardim. Next
- Also within Haifa itself, don’t miss the spectacular **Bahà’i shrine and gardens**. Haifa is the world center of the Bahà’i faith, a peaceful, gentle faith that teaches that the prophets of all faiths, including Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha, were sent by God. The gardens are 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 a tour offered by the Bahà'ì authorities; self-touring is limited to certain areas. For more information and schedules, see 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.



- **Rosh Ha-Niqra**—on the Lebanese border in the far North, these sea-caves carved into chalk cliffs are truly spectacular. They are only accessible by cable car (unless you swim there!). On the way to Rosh Ha-Niqra, you will pass by the beach resort of **Nahariya**, with the good **Singapore Chinese Restaurant**, tel. (04) 992-4952.



Eating out in Haifa is a far more diverse, fun scene than used to be the case for this largely industrial city. **Jacko's** is a great fish and seafood restaurant in the Central Carmel district at 11 Moriah Street, tel. (04) 810-2355; they also have branches in the Haifa port area (their original place, which locals still swear by) and in Tel Aviv, Netanya, Herzliya, and Tel Aviv. I've also enjoyed a Chinese restaurant called **Tokai**, or **Sea Waves** in Hebrew, at 108 Yefe Nof, (04) 838-3025. Also in the Central Carmel district on Ha-Nassi Boulevard, **Giraffe** is a good, Asian-fusion-noodle restaurant that is one of a chain.

Venturing out a bit, check out the gorgeous and interesting **German Colony** on Ben-Gurion Boulevard down on the port-level, a fun area of restaurants and night life. You can take the Carmelit 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. In the German Colony, I recommend **my favorite Haifa restaurant, Douzan** with its colorful and delightful owner, **Fadi Najjar**. It is at 35 Ben-Gurion, tel. (04) 852-5444, and has a wide-ranging, eclectic menu. Interior tables each have a different, international theme. Fadi is a one-man Haifa experience, hovering over the proceedings with careful attention and great affection as he kisses women, men, IDF soldiers, American sailors; it doesn't matter. Whether or not you get smooched, tell Fadi "shalom" from me, please! His English is limited, so you may have to have a friend or staff member translate. If you would like inexpensive but very good Middle Eastern food, you can try **Abu Yusuf** near the Ford garage in downtown Haifa, the port area. It's very informal and in a dead neighborhood at night, 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 either Tiberias or Tsfat, 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 as such, is important to Christians. There are a number of 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 diamonds into the design! Behind the church



is the Terra Santa College, a very fine Roman Catholic private school at which I met three wonderful 12-year-olds on my first trip in 1988 who became friends and “pen pals” for years. 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. Some visitors love “Nazareth Village,” which seeks to re-create Nazareth life in the First Century C.E. 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 wonderful 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. In Daliat al-Carmel (the southernmost of the two towns), 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 mezze 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. Tell him that I sent you, and mention Moti Dagan (my friend Kathy’s tour guide who told me about the place). He has known Moti for 30 years, and mentioning his name will get a big smile from Fuad and just maybe some dishes you won’t be charged for. 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 my friend Joy 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 young lifetime, 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 they 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” (above). It is an amazing site.



- **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. There is also a modern story here, one that is quite distressing. During the 1948 War for Independence, the new Israel Defense Forces (IDF) evacuated the Maronite Christian villagers from the nearby town of Birin, on the Lebanese border. The villagers had sat out the war, and the IDF promised them that they could return in a few days. IDF officials apparently feared that the villagers would link up with nearby Maronite-dominated Lebanon. Nearly six decades later, they have never been



permitted to return, despite 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 children and grandchildren 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 be allowed to come home.

Tsfat (Safed)—The Mystical City.

Suggested Time: One night, optional.

This stop is optional, depending on time. The city is frankly a little run down, and if you stay here, there are three reasons. First, Tsfat (or as it is usually called in English, “Safed”) is the birthplace and heart of Jewish mysticism, called “Kabbala,” 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 sometimes brutal summer heat.



In Tsfat, I recommend you stay at the remarkable **Ruth Rimonim Inn**, a lovely 300-year old renovated Turkish khan (inn) that is very romantic. It is located in the Artists Colony, P.O. Box 1011, Safed 13110 Israel, tel. (04) 699-4666. If you do stay there, get a room in the older section, which is more romantic. My partner and I love Room 9. (The newer rooms are fine; they just don’t have the same historic 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. Louis and I used him in 2006, 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 left is very similar to the one we purchased in 1997. Her studio is also in the city.



Tsfat is not much of a restaurant town. Many people staying at the Rimonim (and that is where I stay there) take their meals at the hotel, and that is an option. There are some places to eat there, but if you want to experience one of the most enjoyable meals I have had in Israel a short drive away, in the city of Rosh Pina, try **Auberge Shulamit**, or as it is known in Hebrew, **Ahuza Shulamit**. It's about a 15 minute drive from Tsfat, and not much further from Tiberias. You can reach them at **(04) 693-1485**, and you can also check out their web site at www.shulamit.co.il. They also have a small guesthouse with four rooms, and while I have not stayed there, the charm of the place is as infectious as the food is impeccably delicious! And it was at this place that my partner and I first fell in love with good Israeli wine some 15 years ago. It's one of my favorite Israeli restaurants, and my friends Lou and Joy ranked it near the top of their lists as well. It is not kosher, however.

Tiberias—The Gateway to the Kinneret and Galilee Region

Suggested Time: Two Nights.

The prime reason you may want to stay in or near Tiberias is because of the spectacular view of the lovely Lake Kinneret (the biblical Sea of Galilee), and its 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, for it was here that he spent all but the last week of his ministry. For Jews, the Talmud says, "God made the seven seas, but the Kinneret is God's jewel." The town itself is actually fairly run down and unremarkable. But as a base to explore the Kinneret region, it is ideally situated.



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; order is not particularly important. At the outset, don't miss the exhibit of a 2,000-year-old boat recovered from the shores of Lake Kinneret during a drought in 1986, which only went on display in late 1999. Because the ancient boat is roughly contemporaneous with Jesus of Nazareth, 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 and east along the lake, key stops will include **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 synagogue in which Jesus preached. Going up the nearby hill, you will see **Korazim** and its ancient synagogue from the Fourth Century CE and the **Mount of Beatitudes** with its modern but simple and lovely church commemorating this traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount. Around the east side of Lake Kinneret, you will find **Kursi** with a Byzantine church from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries; 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 fabulous lakeside fish restaurant. At the southern end of Lake Kinneret, you will cross the **Jordan River** as it exits on its path to the Dead Sea—and you’ll see there is nothing “mighty” about it. While dams actually retain some water here, for most of its length, it’s barely a creek, in part because of the water demands of this thirsty country. There is a 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.



In Tiberias itself, if you are looking for an upscale splurge, I recommend the **Scots Hotel**, which is situated downtown on Lake Kinneret, **tel. (04) 671-0710, fax (04) 671-0711**, with a web site at <http://www.scotshotels.co.il>. The hotel is owned by the Church of Scotland (the Presbyterian Church



in the United States), and in the early 2000s, the church renovated and greatly expanded what was a hospital and pilgrim’s hospice 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 skyrocketed since it opened in the early 2000s, so while it may be worth a splurge, be forewarned of sticker shock. Also, note that the Scots Hotel is not kosher. Another, much less expensive option is **Kibbutz Nof Ginosar**, just north of the city. Tel. (04) 670-0320, fax (04) 679-2170, web site at 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, friends who have stayed there like it, and it is located right on Lake Kinneret just a few kilometers north of Tiberias. I have toured the cottages in Ginosar Village; they are basic but charming and quiet, and I hope one day there one day. Visitors and experts on the Trip Advisor forum also speak highly of **Ma’agan Holiday Village** on the southern side of Lake Kinneret, and a real-life “dude ranch” called **Vered Ha-Galil**, complete with horseback riding, located on the north side of the Kinneret. There are also a number of more upscale (and kosher) hotel options in Tiberias itself if you’re so inclined, and Chantal can set you up.

On the eastern side of the Lake, at the base of the Golan Heights, I recommend the **Ramot Resort** (www.ramotresort.com). While this side of the Lake is a bit more remote, the Ramot Resort is a gorgeous 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 on my most recent trip, and liked it a lot—though navigating the hordes of Israeli families at meals can be, well . . . bracing. 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.) Also on the eastern side, you can stay at the **Ein Gev Holiday Resort** (www.einge.com).

You can also have a different experience by staying in a guesthouse, which Israelis call “zimmerim” (from the German 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**, which I learned of through my Jerusalem friend Alisa, has many zimmers available. I stayed there in May 2008, and it quite simply was the most beautiful place I ever stayed. My friend Joy and I rented two cabins at **Nof**

10 (“View 10”), and the view of the entire Kinneret region from the cabin and its balcony, shown at right, was simply unbelievable. 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 (to the right)—all visible while soaking in a Jacuzzi! See www.nof10.com for more information, and note that you must book the cabin by telephone and pay by cash in shekels; the owners, just a small family operation, do not take US checks or non-Israeli credit cards. Prices may vary. You can contact Aran, the owner, at (04) 698-0927 or (052) 236-1011. He lives in another building on the site just up the hill. If you stay there, please give him my best. 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 have to commit to that). Some visitors will find that appealing, but all visitors are expected to respect and abide by that.



Tiberias has two excellent Chinese restaurants on Lake Kinneret—**Ha-Bayit (The House)** and the **Pagoda**, which are jointly owned. They share the same menu, but the House is not kosher-certified because it is open only on Erev Shabbat (Friday night). (No restaurant that is open on Shabbat can receive a kosher certificate, no matter what food is served.) The food itself *is* kosher, though, since it the same menu as its kosher sister restaurant. You need to reserve ahead for the House; as one of the few places open on Erev Shabbat, it fills up fast. The telephone number for both The House and Pagoda is (04) 672-5518. Another fun restaurant is called **The Decks** (kosher), and it is built out over the lake. The view of the lake and the town is incredibly romantic, and the food (mainly grilled meats and fish) is great as well. The telephone number is (04) 672-1538. Finally, you could easily visit **Auberge Shulamit**, in **Rosh Pina**, discussed under the Tsfat section, for a dinner while staying in Tiberias. **Amirim** has some vegetarian restaurants, and I found **Dalia’s** to be quite delightful. Dalia herself presides over the evening, hovers and clucks lovingly over guests, the very embodiment of a doting Polish Jewish grandmother. The food is served family-style (whatever she is making that night, and lots of it!), and is *delicious*.

A final note on Tiberias—the city is about 600 feet below sea level and is consequently quite hot in the summertime. It’s also warmer in the winter. For that reason, one way to choose between Tiberias and Tsfat (which are not far apart) is to consider what season you are traveling in. Amirim and Rosh Pina are also cooler in the summer because of their higher elevation.



One great resource on Galilee travel generally is <http://this-is-galilee.com>. 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,” is an area of marshlands that the Zionist pioneers drained in the 1940s—and eventually realized that they had

inadvertently created an ecological disaster. Israel is the land bridge between the vast Eurasian continent 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, they were gone. So, the Israelis later 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 did it). You can also rent binoculars there. This really is quite breathtaking. My late mother, may she rest in peace, was an avid birder, and she would have loved it!

- The **Golan** region, captured from the Syrians in the 1967 Six-Day War, is spectacular, with 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! But the most spectacular of all, in my view, is **Gamla**, often called "the Masada of the north." The historian Josephus 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 name comes from the Hebrew word for camel (*gamal*), because the distinctive hump, seen at right, 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 thrown into the ravines. The ruins are spectacularly preserved—you can even see where the Romans broke through. The hike down to the ruins and back up is very rigorous; you may be able to catch a ride on a tram. In my 50s, I'm getting a bit old for it myself. 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 wing-span 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.

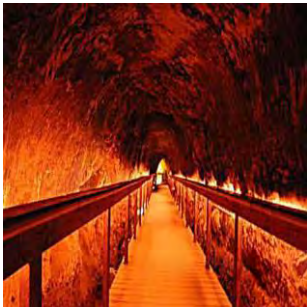


When the time comes to leave either Tiberias or Tsfat and drive to Jerusalem, you have two choices. You can take Highway 65 to link up with Highway 6, the Trans-Israel Highway, a new toll road and superhighway that will take you to Route 1 and the road to Jerusalem. Or you can continue on to Route 4 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. In the Hebrew Bible, we read in the Book of Judges how Deborah's general Barak vanquished Sisera by charging down from Mount Tabor "with ten thousand men behind him." The Song of Deborah is widely believed by scholars to be one of the oldest fragments of the Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament,

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—and it’s not for the timid! The view is worth it, though.

- **Megiddo.** This national park contains excavations of a *tel* (hill) 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 through this critical pass armies have passed, from Egyptians to Assyrians to Babylonians to Israelites, all the way to the British and the Israelis in the 20th 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 9th 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! Of course, Megiddo is perhaps best known to Christians as the site of the great battle at the End of Days 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 south from Tiberias through the Jordan Valley and the West Bank, and then to take Highway 1 from just south of Jericho up to Jerusalem. While the route goes through the West Bank, it is generally viewed as safe, though you should check on local conditions first. If you take that route, you can easily see the following sites along the way (or do so as a day trip from Tiberias, Amirim, or Tsfat):

- **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 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 hanged from the city walls as a taunt to the Israelites. The site is breathtaking. On your way back to the highway, stop at “King Falafel” on the main street, and have a great falafel sandwich in an authentic Israeli hole-in-the-wall. Israelis love to call their businesses “King of [Name Product].” My friend Lou even heard of a place called “King of Falafel,” and a competitor who opened a place across the street called “King of King of Falafel”! As Mel Brooks said, “It's good to be king.” In this guy's place, the word “king” is transliterated in Hebrew letters rather than using the common Hebrew word “melech.” But it is the real thing, not a tourist stop.



- **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 stunning. 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, the best Crusader site in my view outside of Akko.

The Negev—Israel’s Desert South.

Most people visiting Israel for the first time do not visit Eilat and the Negev desert (the southern half of the country, shaped like an inverted triangle). Of course, your choice depends on your interests. Most visitors tend to focus on the cities, culture, and history, but those who want wilderness, a more nature/eco-style trip, or beaches may well head south. And while Eilat is not, standing alone, all that remarkable, the Negev—especially as I experienced it with Adam Sela—is amazing.

Eilat is a lovely beach and resort city located on the Red Sea, Israel’s southernmost point. But there are many lovely beach cities in North and South America, Europe, and Australia, and I don’t see Eilat as all that special. For return visitors who have seen the rest of the country, it may be a different story. I think Eilat’s most remarkable feature is the underwater observatory where you can see the Red Sea coral reefs and fish life. Many people also enjoy swimming with the dolphins at Dolphin Reef. For more information on these sites and hotels in Eilat, see www.tripadvisor.com or the Frommer’s guide. Since I have never stayed overnight in Eilat, I don’t have specific recommendations on hotels or restaurants, but those sources will be very helpful. Destination Expert “Bluesman” on Trip Advisor is also very helpful on Eilat.



The Negev, on the other hand, is a truly spectacular desert, and if you are so inclined, by all means take some time touring it. Don’t miss the **Makhtesh Ramon**, the so-called “Ramon Crater” (it’s not a crater but a geological formation unique to the Negev) near Mitzpe Ramon in the central Negev.¹ 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, and get 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.

In 2009, I had the pleasure of meeting and touring with guide **Adam Sela**, who specializes in tours of the Negev, with a particular focus on the natural and ecological aspects of the central Negev highlands. He lives 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 highly enough**—in two days, he showed me a side of Israel and the Negev that I not only had never seen but could never have accessed without someone like him. I had heard of “off-road jeep tours,” but had no idea that one could drive a jeep where he 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, geological process that created it. He also showed us the remnants of the Nabatean,



¹ Some of the photos on p. 35 and 36 are courtesy of Trip Advisor Destination Expert dw325. Thank you!

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, see www.adamsela.com, e-mail office@adamsela.com, or call him at (050) 530-8272. In the picture above, Adam is in the center with the gray hat—not a great picture, but it was an unforgettable day of touring with Trip Advisor friends!



Some additional options to discuss with Adam 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 shallow. (Remember: my guide, my opinions!) This is not that; Adam took us 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 had a glimpse of the life of these fascinating people. If you are privileged to have this experience, I offer two cautions. First, the food is prepared in genuine Bedouin style—with bare hands, some flies, and with bread baked directly on and covered by charcoals. It is not for those who 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 him feel like a zoo exhibit for tourists. I would recommend similar restraint. It was one of the most remarkable moments of my most recent 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, will take your breath away. It is worth this brief stop, particularly near sunset.



You have a number of 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, by the way, it to take the train to Be’er Sheva and have Adam pick you up there. My pick would be a lovely B&B called **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 www.ibike.co.il, e-mail ibike@netvision.net.il. Hosts Aviva Angel-Scheiber and Menachem Schreiber specialize in hosting bicyclists, but all are welcome, and the environs were charming, as are the hosts! Adam may be able to get you into the **Field School at Midreshet Ben-Gurion**, with youth hostel-style accommodations; my Trip Advisor colleagues who stayed there thought it was fine. For really basic accommodations, you could also try the **Desert Lodge at the Boqer Valley Vineyards Farm**, tel. (08) 657-3483,

web site at www.israeldesertlodge.com, e-mail at nahal.boker@gmail.com. This was too rustic for me to stay overnight, but will appeal to some. It is a great place to have a meal and some good wine, and the view here as well is stunning. On the upscale end, you could try the **Isrotel Ramon Inn**, 1 Ein Akev Street, tel. (08) 658-8822, fax (08) 658-8151. But since the Negev is an alternative experience, consider alternative accommodations—and have an adventure!

Also, many people visit the ancient Nabatean city of **Petra** in Jordan for a day or two out of Eilat, and there are a variety of ways to do that. It is spectacular, but I have not been, so I have no direct information. Search the Israel forum on Trip Advisor, and you will find a number of posts that give information on how to see Petra from Eilat and recommended tour operators as well. People speak very highly of **Desert Eco Tours** (www.desertecotours.com), so I would start with them. I hope to check out Petra on a future visit!

Jerusalem—The Holy City

Suggested Time: 6 to 7 nights.

Why did I allocate so much time to Jerusalem? Because it is not just rhetoric: Jerusalem is the heart and soul of Israel and the Jewish people, and perhaps the most emotionally and spiritually 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 simply the most remarkable city on Earth.



Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan after the 1948 War for Independence, and the Old City, with all of its religious sites, was held by Jordan and barred to Jews for 19 years. Like Berlin in 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 the city, annexing the eastern part. The city is still often referred to by its parts, though: 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). While I feel less comfortable walking around the Old City at night, and you should keep your wits about you at all times, don’t be intimidated by the crowds and the sometimes chaotic feel. I have walked all over the Old City on every trip and never had problems, except the one camera theft I mentioned earlier.

To make it 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.



I have long recommended that people stay 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, Fax: (02) 623-5192. This is *not* like staying in YMCAs in the US; this is not transient

housing. 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 posh hotel) and a 15-minute walk from the Old City. At one time, this hotel was quite upscale following renovations in the early 1990s, and it went from the feel of a two-star youth hostel to four stars at that time, probably the nicest hotel we stayed in during that period. Since the violence of 2000-2003 caused a huge fall-off in tourism, the hotel lost a lot of money, and even with tourism booming again, the quality of the hotel declined to some degree. But under the leadership of the new hotel manager Omri Krongold, the YMCA Hotel is undertaking a much needed renovation, a moderate updating at first to be followed by a major reworking. After bypassing it the last two trips, I would stay there again now—it's on the upswing.



My loyalty to the YMCA also stems from its mission. The staff is carefully balanced between Jews, Christian Arabs, and Muslim Arabs, and the programming is interfaith for all three religions, including the Jewish-Arab preschool program I mentioned earlier in this guide. At breakfast, one has the treat of watching the parade of parents (mostly daddies, actually) 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 as well stay there. The Jerusalem International YMCA is in the New City on King David Street, but only a 15-minute walk from the Jaffa Gate into the Old City. You can get more information about the YMCA and its hotel at www.jerusalemymca.org. I note, though, that the YMCA restaurant is not kosher for visitors needing that. For more hotel information, price inquiries, or registration, e-mail y3arches@netvision.net.il. If this is your choice, you need to book directly here; Chantal of Regent Tours does not work with the YMCA.

There are two, newer boutique hotels that have generally received very good reviews on Trip Advisor, though I have no direct experience with either of them yet: The **Harmony Hotel**, 6 Yoel Salomon Street (<http://www.atlas.co.il/harmony-hotel-jerusalem>); and the **Dan Boutique Hotel** (<http://www.danhotels.com/JerusalemHotels/DanBoutiqueJerusalemHotel>) at 31 Hebron Road. I'm particularly intrigued with the Harmony, and may check that out on my next trip. Its location is ideal, right off of the Ben-Yehuda street mall area. Another choice is the recently renovated **Prima Royale Hotel** not far from the YMCA, but again I have never stayed there. Most Trip Advisor reports have been positive, though. The **Eldan Hotel** next door to the YMCA is a clean, modern, and reasonable 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. You can find other, more high-scale options on www.frommers.com and www.tripadvisor.com as well. I would also recommend that you discuss these and other possible Jerusalem alternatives with Chantal, who probably can get you a significant price break.

There are some less expensive, guest house options in the New City as well. On my most recent

trip, I stayed at **the St. Andrew's Scottish Guest House**, 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 it's the "St. Andrew's Scottish Church," or he may not know it. Tel. (02) 673-2401, website www.scotsguesthouse.com, e-mail to info@scotsguesthouse.com. It is basic, but has tons of charm, and I liked it a lot. 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. Breakfasts were good but not spectacular. The staff is very helpful, especially the wonderful Jakoub who will bid you "Welcome!!" a dozen times a day. And the view of the southern parts of the Old City is breathtaking! I noticed, however, that unlike the YMCA, the staff was not balanced among the three faiths; all of the employees appeared to be Palestinians, perhaps Palestinian Christians. While I understand that it is a church-owned facility and I want to see Palestinians have opportunities in these difficult days, I still prefer the YMCA's conscious diversity. But right now, this is the best price for what you get in the city. A very viable Jewish option is **Bet Shmu'el** at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College (the Reform seminary based in my 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, www.bshmu-el.com/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. But if you want the Old City experience, I recommend the **Lutheran Guest House** that is connected to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Christian Quarter on St. Mark's Road, tel. (02) 626-6888. See the website at <http://luth-guesthouse-jerusalem.com> for more information. It is a clean, lovely, and well-run property that has been recently renovated, and is close to the Jaffa Gate for easier 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 particularly daunting. Some people like staying at the **Christ Church Guest House**, an Anglican institution just inside the Jaffa Gate, but I am not comfortable with 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 and take cabs, buses, or the new light rail inside the city. For cab drivers, I recommend **David Mizrachi**, my new favorite in the city; you can reach him at (052) 481-6950. Other good drivers include **Yehuda Levi** at (052) 240-7080 and **Golani** at (050) 544-9298 or (052) 565-2807, or by e-mail at golani18@hotmail.com. 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 when you get in; the driver cannot generate a receipt without using the meter. I had no fights on this issue on my last visit, a marked change from a few years ago. **Avoid the cabs that gather in front of the King David Hotel!** They 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. 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. That may be an issue if you are not yourself sure of how to get where you want to go. Otherwise, it doesn't matter.

Some Israeli Jewish cab drivers may be reluctant to go to parts of East Jerusalem at night (for

example, the Mount of Olives), and they cannot drive into areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, such as Bethlehem. You can easily catch Arab cabs or buses near the Damascus Gate to access those areas if an issue.

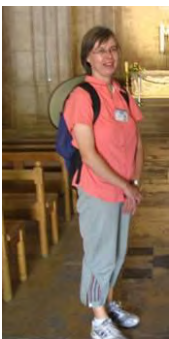


Jerusalem is endlessly fascinating. Without exaggeration, you could spend months in this city and not run out of things to see and do. But since you don't likely have months, I offer some suggestions for day-to-day itineraries.

Days One and Two:

Wander through the Old City, preferably on a walking tour of the Four Quarters. Inexpensive group tours leave every day at 9:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., or 2:00 p.m. from the Zion Walking Tours office just inside the Jaffa Gate, across from the Tower of David Museum. You get a great overview of the Old City right away. My favorite guide for the Four Quarters tour is 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. If you want to contact Aram directly, you can reach him at (050) 335-1859 (cell) or (02) 626-4537 (home). If you are doing the **Four Quarters tour with Zion Walking Tours**, ask for him, though they have a number of fine guides. The company is run by Yoel, and you can reach them at (02) 627-7588, or (02) 628-9524, or (050) 530-5552. See the web site with information about available tours at <http://zionwt.dsites1.co.il> (Note: no "www."). Check the web site or call to verify tour times, as they seem to vary based on season and the ebb and flow of tourism. Zion Walking Tours also offers bus or van tours from Jerusalem to places like Masada, northern Christian sites, Haifa and Megiddo, or Caesarea and Akko, which may be a desirable option if you don't want to rent a car. **Sandeman's Tours** offers some free walking tours of the Four Quarters as well, and they are supposed to be good. You can find out more at www.newjerusalemtours.com; those tours are "free," but tip at least ₪50 or so.

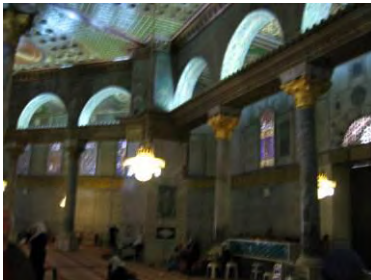
Touring with Madeleine Lavine:



You may want to hire a private guide to see all that this amazing city has to offer, and **my strong recommendation on that score is Madeleine Lavine**, who served for several years on the YMCA staff before taking up full-time guiding. (Madeleine is pictured on the left.) She is knowledgeable, very pleasant, professional, and has a delightful, British sense of humor (she is originally from Leeds). Madeleine offers a wide range of tours; even though I have been to Jerusalem eleven times and explored seemingly everywhere, she consistently shows me aspects of the city that are completely new to me. She also 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 now has her chauffeur's license so she can drive people around the country as well, though she must rent a car or van to do so. **Madeleine is my top recommendation for a tour guide for Jerusalem and elsewhere in Israel, and I cannot speak highly enough of her. You can reach her at madl@zahav.net.il, or at (02) 678-0058 (home) or (054) 450-4098 (cell).** Learn more about her and see her blog at <http://www.touringwithmadeleine.blogspot.com>. There are other guides who enjoy good reputations, and still others, including some recommended on Trip Advisor and Frommer's, whom I would avoid. If you wish, you can e-mail me privately for more information on others. But you're in good hands with Madeleine.

Whether with a guide or on your own, key sites in the Old City include the **Arab Market** on David Street inside the Jaffa Gate; and **Burnt House and Herodian House**, the remains of wealthy homes of priestly families destroyed 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** (to Muslims, **Haram al-Sharif**, the “Noble Sanctuary”), pictured at right. The hours for non-Muslim tourists to visit Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif are erratic at this writing, but generally 9:00-11:00 a.m. and some hours 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 Muslim religious trust (the Waqf) has jurisdiction on the Mount itself. Unfortunately, as of this writing, non-Muslims are not permitted inside either the **Dome of the Rock** or **Al-Aqsa Mosque**, and I have no idea if this ban will ever be lifted. The closure stems from the conflicts of 2000; it is purely political and very unfortunate. When they were open, you had to pay a fee to see the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, but you do not have to have a guide unless you want one. The would-be guides on Temple Mount are *very* persistent, even now. If you’re lucky enough to go when this ban has been lifted, start with Al Aqsa, which is beautiful in its own right, but trust me that after the Dome of the Rock, anything looks plain. (Interior, pictured below left.)



Until recently, the closure of the Muslim sites to outsiders seemed absolute. But **Sam Salem**, who works at the UN headquarters for Middle East operations in Jerusalem, leads some tour groups on the side, and through his connections, he **can take occasionally small groups of non-Muslim visitors along with VIP tours into the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque**. Such visits are limited to once or twice a month, but tell him you found him through my guide, and he may be able to do this for you—though no promises, of course. You can reach Sam at **(054) 482-8207** or at guide.holy@gmail.com. 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(!), as well as Bethlehem and Hebron. Plus Sam is about the sweetest, kindest man you can imagine. Full disclosure: Sam is not licensed as a guide in Israel. I have decided that his lack of license is irrelevant to me when it comes to touring sites outside the Green Line (pre-1967 Israel), though I don’t use him in Israel proper. I find him 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 Trip Advisor have questioned his liability insurance when driving paying passengers; Sam insists he is insured to do so, and I trust him. You can ask 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 may feel tense, and it is at times. This small hilltop is charged with religious emotion, history, and political struggles. But don’t miss it.

Other group guide options:

While we’re on the topic of guides and group tours, I will share contact information for a number

of companies that offer group tours, either walking tours or via vehicles, both for Jerusalem and the country as a whole. I thank a Trip Advisor user who goes by “DC Suburbanite” for this excellent list! I can’t personally endorse any companies other than Zion Walking Tours (mentioned above) and the Western Wall Tunnel Tours (discussed below). But in the interest of providing many options, some tour providers are 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
E-mail: info@beinharim.co.il

David Tours
Phone: (02) 627-1179
Website: www.davidstours.com (note the “s” in the address)
E-mail: 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 (click on tourism at top of page then select “Line 99 bus tour” or “Tours around Holy Land”)
E-mail: 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

Knesset Tours
English language tours on Sunday and Thursday
Phone: (02) 675-3420 or (02) 675-3416
Website: www.knesset.gov.il
E-mail: feedback@knesset.gov.il

Ofakim
phone: (03) 761-0610
Website: www.ofakim.co.il (Hebrew and Russian only)

Tlalim
Phone: (03) 630-6306; in U.S (202) 248-1260 or (800) 600-5194
Website: www.authenticisrael.com – click on “Daily Tours” and then “Bus Tours”
E-mail: info@authenticisrael.com

Western Wall Tunnel Tours
Phone: (02) 627-1333
Website: english.thekotel.org/content.asp?id=226
E-mail: contact-english@thekotel.org

United Tours
Phone: (02) 625-2187, (03) 616-2656, (03) 693-3412
Website: www.inisrael.com/united

Zion Walking Tours
Phone: (02) 627-7588
Website: <http://zionwt.dsites1.co.il> (Note: do not type “www” in the URL)

Day Three:

By rental car, travel to **Masada** on the shore of the **Dead Sea**. (Zion Walking Tours also offers small group trips via vans, and other companies listed above do so as well.) Masada is stunning, beautiful, and unforgettable. Masada, or “Metzada”, which means “fortress” in Hebrew, was a fortification built by the Maccabees following their revolt against the Greeks in 165 B.C.E., 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 Zealot defenders held off the Tenth Roman Legion for three years, but eventually when the Romans breached the walls, all but six took their own lives rather than be 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 speech of the 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, 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—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 not be aware of how much you are losing through sweat. Not to be gross, but if your urine is deep yellow, you're 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 in his 60s or 70s, has a long, gray beard, and actually 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, and will give you wonderful insights on what you are seeing. Note, though, that Zabu's take on the Masada story is not very 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 on the Jewish people. The legacy of Masada is now a subject of debate within Israeli society. But more than all 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 the 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), 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.** I know I say this about everyone I refer to, but truly *do* say “shalom” (and give him a hug) 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 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 out with you that you can take 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 it 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 experience, and when they are, they tend to flail, with quite painful results both for their eyes and those of others nearby. So I'd skip it with young kids, but if you do it, stay with them and watch them carefully at all times. By the way, Ein Gedi's “spa” is exceedingly basic and under renovation. Many people say that Mineral Beach offers better facilities.



If you want to stay at the Dead Sea for a night, there are a host of spas and luxury hotels from which to choose, particularly in the Ein Bokek area further to the south. Doing so would probably allow you to cut one day off of 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 dormitory-like.) Staying here gives you a little 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 the young David hid from the wrathful King Saul, and the kibbutz has a world-renowned botanical garden. Be sure to visit the **Wadi David** with a lovely,



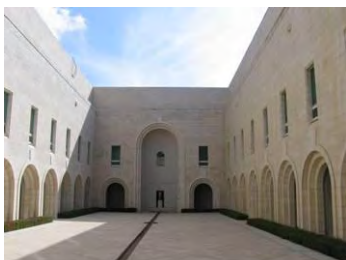
small waterfall, and the ancient synagogue excavated nearby. Even if you don't use him to tour Masada, be sure to meet Zabu while visiting Ein Gedi. Just ask after him; *everyone* knows him. They call him "Saba Zabu" ("Grandpa Zabu.") Can you tell I love this man? So do they, even the young kibbutz members.

After the Dead Sea, I also recommend a stop at **Qumran**, the community of the ancient Essenes where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. It's an interesting site, particularly with a recent (and well done) interpretive film, and it's right on your way back to Jerusalem. It's hard to find more evocative history than this!

Day Four:



Tour the western parts of the New City. I highly recommend at least a half day at **Yad Vashem**, the Holocaust Memorial. It is terrifying and moving, and very well done. The new historical museum 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. After that you can go to the newly reopened **Israel Museum**, which houses the Dead Sea Scrolls in the famous Shrine of the Book (pictured at right) and an excellent collection of Judaica over the ages (including four, relocated historic synagogues), as well as an excellent modern art collection and decent impressionist collection. The Israel Museum is now the home of a famous model of First Century Jerusalem that really helps you picture the city in the time of Herod's Temple. The Israel Museum recently reopened after a major renovation, and it is *so* much better organized and displayed now! This is one of the finest museums in the world. While I have not visited it yet, the **Bible Lands Museum** next door might be worth seeing as well, if you have the time. You can also tour the **Knesset**, Israel's Parliament. Overall, the building is generally unremarkable unless you are interested in Israeli politics (which makes ours 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 new policy



bars jeans, tank tops, open-toed shoes, or revealing clothing while visiting the Knesset. The lawyer in me suggests that you visit the nearby **Israel Supreme Court** nearby, an architecturally interesting building (much more so than the Knesset), pictured on the 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 675-9613.

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 both 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 be 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 Roman Catholics are relative newcomers!). 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 also interesting. Get a guide—that's your best bet. Also, see this remarkable site explaining the church: <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 from the subterranean grottos of the first or second centuries. It 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 Orthodox contacts. If you get in, you are very fortunate, and please give a donation of ₪20 or more to the priest who lets you in. Also, don't miss a quiet and moving part of the church, the **Ethiopian Coptic quarters** on the roof. In the small chapel below, 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 small 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 of 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 are so convinced that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the most likely 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 it mildly offensive or at least off-putting to call it that.

The picture at the right is my friend Louis and I at the Kotel on the last day of our trip in November 2006. I am the short one on the right, in the hat. I offer some notes about visiting the Western Wall, an emotional highpoint of any visit to Jerusalem:



- Men and women pray in different areas that are strictly segregated. I don't like it, but that is how it is. This is a controversial issue in some quarters, accepted in others.
- If you are male, ultra-Orthodox Jews may ask you to pray with them or wear tefillin (leather boxes containing Scripture, worn at prayer). Of course, that might be of interest to you. If it's not, say so. If you're non-Jewish, just say 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 relentless to the point of being irritating.
- Men will have to wear head-coverings (a *kippa* or other hat), even if not Jewish.
- On Shabbat, do not take photographs or smoke cigarettes in the prayer area of the Wall.

Shopping.

While I am not a big 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, an Armenian named Kevork Kahvedjian, is the son of 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 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. On a recent trip, I also purchased a really beautiful, embroidered table runner of a style called "Suzani" from the **Josef Natsheh Emporium** at 30 Christian Quarter Street, tel. (02) 627-4537; cell (052) 238-6465. Yusef (the Arabic pronunciation) 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 often stops in after many long days of touring just to visit with this kind soul. And people rave about my table runner! It wasn't cheap, but an interior decorator from Manhattan shopping at the same time said that they ran three times that price in New York. That was my defense when my partner's eyes widened at the price I paid!

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, e-mail lifeline@netvision.net.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, and the shuk can be very overwhelming to those not used to it. I suggest that you go see **Henry or his brother George at Rex**, a jewelry and souvenir shop just inside the Jaffa Gate right after you enter the market at 3 David Street, tel. (02) 628-4865, www.rexjewelers.com, e-mail rex_s@netvision.net.il. 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 bargain. It's expected.

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. It is not inexpensive, of course, and unlike the market, bargaining is not customary.

For more information on shopping options, search the Israel forum on Trip Advisor for “shopping,” and you will find whole threads devoted to that topic, with lots of suggestions.



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 altogether. The **Damascus Gate** and the **Lion's Gate** are the most elaborate and interesting. The **New Gate** is from 1889. That's 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 the triumphal entry of Jesus 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. A number of churches commemorate these events, but the main ones to see are **Dominus Flevit** (“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 in Israel for Christians, 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 breathtaking **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. (and the church does *not* adopt Daylight Savings Time, or “summer time” in Israel). But check out the gorgeous, gilded onion domes at the 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*** (Avha 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, and used copies are available on www.amazon.com.

- 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 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 he 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 within the city walls in preparation for the anticipated Assyrian siege, a project 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. While the City of David (Ir David) Foundation offers English-speaking tours on Thursdays at 11:00 a.m., this group has an intensely nationalistic agenda, with which you may or may not be comfortable. You can get more information about the Foundation from their website at http://www.cityofdavid.org.il/ContactUs_eng.asp or call (02) 626-2341. The City of Jerusalem also offers tours on the weekends during part of the year, and **Zion Walking Tours** also offers tours on Sunday and Tuesday at 10:00 a.m., paired with a tour of Mount Zion's sites. Joy and I took that tour in 2008 with Aram Khatchadourian, whom I mentioned earlier, and we thoroughly enjoyed it. As always, Aram adds in parts of the usually-private Armenian Quarter, an extra treat. Any private guide can also take you through the City of 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 dealer 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 Zurim** 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 can only date



artifacts based on their layering in the soil. And this was on Temple Mount, where archeological excavations are prohibited but which contains, presumably, 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. It's really quite fascinating, and would be a great activity for older kids as well. You can reserve this through The City of David Foundation at *6033 (free phone in Israel), or 972-2-626-2341 from abroad, or see <http://www.cityofdavid.org.il>. It is very inexpensive—₪15 for adults and ₪10 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 as well a stunning collection of archeological artifacts. This museum was custodian of much 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!



- Walking around the **Ben-Yehuda Street Mall** in the New City near downtown. On some trips, I stop there almost every evening; it 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. The **Harmony Hotel** is located in this area; it is 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 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, across from the Zion Tours office. 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.
- **The Russian Compound.** In the 1800s, various European nations and Americans tried to gain significant holdings in Jerusalem—in fact, in 2006, guide **Madeleine Lavine** (p. 40) took me on a fascinating “Europe in Jerusalem” tour that explored this history. We continued that on my most recent trip with a look at the holdings of the Russian Orthodox Church along the **Street of the Prophets**. Some interesting sites

along the way include **Bet Sergei**, 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. **Bet Ticho has a delightful garden café** that alone makes it worth a stop (see p. 53). Located at 9 Ha-Rav Kook Street, tel. (02) 624-5068 or 624-4186. Be sure to see as well the nearby, circular **Ethiopian Church** and tour it if you can with one of the gentle and kind priests who serve there. Built in 1893 by 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, where he is from originally, and he can transport you there as well. His contact information is on **p. 41**. Bethlehem is under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and for that reason no Israeli tour guide or Jewish taxi driver will be able to get you all the way in. 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, 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.
- 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.
- **Herodian and Mar Saba**. In 2009, 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! As of this writing, it is still being excavated and is not yet open to the public, but should be soon. 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, and I encourage you to visit it with him.
- **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 serve 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 breathtaking views of the entire city of Jerusalem. The terrifically evocative name listed above comes from the legend that Caiphas the High Priest had his home here, and 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 Talpote, and it is seen as a very desirable neighborhood. It's also a prime shopping district.

- **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 and matriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. While Hebron is one of the largest Palestinian cities in what is now known as the West Bank (or Judea, to nationalist Israelis), there was a Jewish community here for centuries, most of whom were murdered or driven out in the Arab Revolt of 1929. Of course, 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 founded a nearby Jewish suburb called Kiryat Arba, reviving an ancient name. The result is a seething pot of religion and politics that has often exploded in violence. Until the last couple of years, I would have called it too tense to visit comfortably (Jewish settler groups offered tours in armored buses), but in May 2012, I went there with **Sam Salem** and really enjoyed the visit. 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, pictured 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 the place where in 1994 Dr. Baruch Goldstein, an American-born physician and Israeli settler, brutally murdered 29 Palestinian Muslim men who were at prayer in the cave, nearly derailing the peace process and horrifying the world, including all decent Israelis. Like the Passover Massacre of 2002, where a suicide-bomber murdered 30 members of Jewish families at a Passover seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, this horrible event stands as a symbol of how "religious" extremists will murder people and the very hope of peace in the name of their twisted, evil perversion of faith. This should be a site where all people who call Abraham their father can worship in peace. God willing, one day, it will be. But for now, while tense, it is safe to visit, though I recommend you go with a tour rather than wandering alone. I personally suggest you avoid the right-wing Jewish settler tours or the Palestinian "alternative" tours, both of which offer biased presentations that are more political indoctrination than tours. 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. **Madeleine Lavine** and **David Wexler** are Jewish guides who would also do a great job, with similar balance.



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 economically a great deal. 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 that 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 Ibrahimi 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 kuftiyehs (from the Herbawi factory), 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 ₪40-50 for a meal. Abed's cell phone is (059) 923-2785. We purchased some lovely vases (I got a shot glass!), and the prices were reasonable while the selection was great. 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 internationals. 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 have suffered terribly. There is grief and blame enough to go around. It is about helping good people who are caught in the literal or metaphorical crossfire.



Finally, as always, I have some restaurant recommendations in Jerusalem. The restaurant scene in Jerusalem is a far cry from my unremarkable experiences in the late 1980s—one can eat *very* well in this city now!

- One of the loveliest, hideaway cafés and bookstores in the city is **Tmol Shilshom** at 5 Yoel Solomon Street, in the courtyard upstairs behind this address, tel. (02) 623-2758, www.tmol-shilshom.co.il, e-mail at info@tmol-shilshom.co.il. It is 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. Our most recent Trip Advisor dinner in Jerusalem was there—such a charming spot! 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 bookstore in Cincinnati pinned right over my partner's head! There are also readings, concerts, and other events here, and you can check on what is happening during your visit at the web site above. The restaurant is kosher, the food is excellent, and the atmosphere unique. It is one of my favorite restaurants in the city. Say "shalom" to owner **David Ehrlich** for me!
- Moving to more upscale locales, an excellent choice is **Arcadia** on 10 Agripas Street (in the alley), tel. (02) 624-9138. It is quite an expensive place, though, especially with the decline in the value of the dollar, and is typically the biggest splurge of my trip. The filleted fish dishes are fantastic. By the way, in Israel, fish is often served whole, with the head and skin still on, and you have to fillet it yourself. Unless the menu says fillet of fish, don't assume that it is, and ask for them to fillet it for you if you are not inclined to



perform a table-side fish autopsy, as you may gather I am not.

- Another terrific and innovate upscale choice is **Eucalyptus** at 14 Hativat Yirushalayim, tel. (02) 624-4331, www.the-eucalyptus.com, e-mail to 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! This may be my new favorite for an upscale night out—it is a special place for a special meal (we celebrated my friend Gina's birthday there on my last trip). Be sure to take the address and phone number with you, and tell the taxi driver that the restaurant is below Jaffa Gate in a development of shops and apartments—it can be hard to find.
- 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. My favorite restaurant there is the **Joy Grill Restaurant**, a mehadrin kosher grill restaurant at 24 Emek Refa'im Street in the German Colony. Tel. (02) 563-0033; e-mail shlomid2000@yahoo.com, web site at <http://www.rol.co.il/sites/eng/joy>. It absolutely deserves its rave reviews. On my first visit to the place in 2008, I succumbed after two weeks of mostly fish and vegetarian dishes and dove into one of the best burgers of my life. The Joy Grill has a wide ranging menu with more elaborate menu items as well. We had our 2009 Trip Advisor dinner here to rave reviews from all who came, and I loved it all over again on my last trip. Please tell co-owner Revital “shalom” for me, and she will be happy to show you around.
- **Te'enim (Figs)** in the Zionist Confederation House behind the King David is an inexpensive, charming vegetarian place, very small with a spectacular view of the Old City walls, particularly when they are illuminated at night. It is located at 12 Emile Botta Street (well back from the street down a path), Yemin Moshe, Tel. (02) 625-1967, www.rest.co.il/teenim (Hebrew site, with English icon). We had a Trip Advisor dinner in a private room there in May 2008, and were not disappointed. If Patrick is there that night, tell him—you guessed it!—“shalom” for me. As a vegetarian place, Te'enim is kosher. Look for the sign off on the right side of Emile Botta as you face the Old City walls, and then follow the path; the sign is small and easy to miss.
- I mentioned **Bet Ticho** in the touring section, but I have to rave about **the Little Jerusalem Café at Bet Ticho**, which offers terrific food at a reasonable price with dining both indoors in an art gallery and outdoors on a garden terrace. What a perfect place to eat on a lovely Jerusalem evening! It is located at 9 Ha-Rav Kook Street off of the Street of the Prophets, tel. (02) 624-4186, www.go-out.com/ticho, e-mail at beitticho@walla.com. I have so many “favorites” now in Jerusalem that it's hard to pick one, but this is up there, particularly more in the mid-price range.
- If you are interested in experiencing North African cuisine, you might try **Darna**, a well-known Moroccan restaurant. I have not yet eaten there, it is fairly expensive, and some recent reviews are more mixed. Darna is located at 3 Horkanos Street, tel. (02) 624-5406, e-mail: il@darna.co.il; see website at www.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 Christian Quarter Road near the intersection with Via Dolorosa, tel. (02) 627-7320. Many swear by Abu Shukri, and it's good, but the service is 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 Yusuf 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 true favorite**. You will be walking a lot in the Old City, and there are a thousand places to stop for a drink and a bite to eat. **But above them all, I recommend an Armenian restaurant and lounge called Bulghourji** at 6 Armenian Patriarchate Road, tel. (052) 628-2080, <http://bulghourji.rest-e.co.il>, e-mail bulghourji@hotmail.com. After you come in the Jaffa Gate, turn right past the Tower of David and the Zion Walking Tours office and post office, and continue down the Armenian Patriarchate Road. You will pass the Armenian Tavern on your left (also reputed to be a good place, but not where I am sending you). This place is a little further on the right, with yellow shutters. The owner **Naro** is very friendly; 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. So go! 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 Arabic 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 always 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. 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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