

## The Best of Israel, Jordan & Sinai

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**A** journey to Israel is a journey to a place where the past and present call out to travelers in astonishing ways. There are layers of meaning everywhere you turn in this intense land, and why not? The history and legends of this country lie at the very heart of Western civilization's consciousness.

Israel is amazingly dramatic and diverse, the more so when you realize the entire country is the size of New Jersey. When you find yourself in the silent, haunting desert landscape near The Dead Sea, spotting ibexes on sheer cliffs that are dotted with caves like those in which the Dead Sea Scrolls lay hidden for more than 18 centuries, it can be hard to believe that less than 60 minutes away is the 19th-century East European ghetto world of Jerusalem's Orthodox Mea Shearim quarter. A few blocks away from Mea Shearim you'll find the labyrinthine medieval Arab bazaars of the Old City, with ancient church bells and calls to prayer from the city's minarets punctuating your wanderings. Hop into a sherut (shared taxi) to Tel Aviv on downtown Jerusalem's Jaffa Road, and in less than an hour you're in a world of white skyscrapers, surfboards, and bikinis on the beach, with the Mediterranean lapping at your feet. Two hours to the north, and you can be exploring ruined Crusader castles in the green forests of the Galilee mountains.

As a visitor and long-term resident, I have had the opportunity to see Israel from a number of different perspectives. Thirty-five years ago, the country was an austere, no-frills society—Israelis lived with few luxuries, and the spartan life was part of the national ideology. Today, Israeli society is frenetically inventive, the country's economy is booming, the standard of living has skyrocketed, and many surveys rank Israel's per capita income among the top 20 in the world. Israel is becoming a nation with a lively sense of style and a taste for the good life. Luxury and better-quality hotel accommodations and resorts have popped up all over the country, and visitors will find an interesting array of fine restaurants and shopping opportunities geared to Israeli society at large rather than to visitors. With the Israeli-Jordanian and Israeli-Egyptian peace treaties, a journey to Israel can also easily include an excursion to the fabulous ancient Nabatean city of Petra in Jordan, or a diving or snorkeling odyssey off the Sinai Peninsula. But amid Israel's busy swirl of exoticism, ancient sites, shopping malls, and crowded highways, you can still find young, idealistic kibbutzim and communities in the Negev, where new immigrants and old-timers are reclaiming the land from the desert as they learn how to live on it, appreciate its wonders, and make it truly their own.

This book will help direct you, as an independent traveler, to some of the best and most authentic experiences Israel has to offer. Israel is an easy country to explore and get close to if you know the ropes. I hope to lead you to experiences that will be both personal and rewarding.

## 1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **Visiting the Dome of the Rock and the Temple Mount** (Jerusalem): Built by the early Islamic rulers of Jerusalem in A.D. 691 on the site of the Temple of Solomon, the Dome of the Rock is one of the most beautiful structures ever created. It is the crown upon a 4,000-year tradition of Western monotheistic belief. One can spend hours on the Temple Mount soaking up the atmosphere and the dazzling views. You might first visit the Temple Mount on a tour, but come back and experience the power of this extraordinary place on your own. See p. 173.
- **Journeying into the Past at Mea Shearim:** Mea Shearim is the Hasidic Jewish quarter of Jerusalem, little more than a century old, but in the dress and customs of its inhabitants and in its tangle of courtyards and alleyways, it is a miraculously surviving fragment of the world of Eastern European Jewry that disappeared forever into the Holocaust. A visitor to Mea Shearim may feel like a dreamer wandering the past. Many visitors will revere the strict discipline and religious devotion evident in Mea Shearim; others will be troubled by its many constraints. But a walk through these streets will give you insight into the powerful traditions that continue to make Israel unique. See p. 205.
- **An Evening Stroll through Old Jaffa:** The beautifully restored Casbah of Old Jaffa is probably the most romantic urban spot in the country, filled with galleries, shops, cafes, restaurants, and vistas of minarets and Crusader ruins set against the sunset and the sea. See p. 276.
- **Exploring the Eastern Shore of the Sea of Galilee:** The Sea of Galilee is

Israel's greatest natural treasure, and its lyrical shores were the birthplace of Christianity. It is also almost miraculous in its loveliness—a sapphire/turquoise freshwater lake surrounded by the mountains of the Galilee and the Golan. The eastern shore is less developed and gives you a better chance to feel the lake's poetry. There are eucalyptus-shaded beaches where you can have a late afternoon swim and picnic and watch the silver-and-lavender twilight descend behind the mountains on the western shore of the lake, which sparkles with the lights of farm settlements and kibbutzim. See chapter 10.

- **Freewheeling in the Galilee:** This is the place to rent a car for a few days and explore Israel's most beautiful countryside—forested mountains, rushing streams, waterfalls, and oceans of wildflowers in late winter and early spring. Among the region's treasures are ruined Roman-era synagogues, Crusader castles, ancient churches, and the walled Casbah of Akko beside the Mediterranean. There are also the warm, sparkling waters of the Sea of Galilee to swim in from April to early November. See chapter 10.
- **Touching the Desert:** These are not just endless sandy wastes; the deserts of Israel encompass the unworldly and ethereal Dead Sea; the mysterious, abandoned Nabatean cities of Avdat and Shivta; the haunting fortress of Masada; canyon oases; and vast erosion craters that are geological encyclopedias of past eons. These landscapes were the crucible in which monotheism was born. Don't let the desert be just a 45-minute ride to The Dead Sea on a tour bus from Jerusalem. If you can, spend the night at

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the guesthouse at the base of Masada before you make the ascent at dawn. Camp overnight in the dramatic Ramon Crater, or visit one of the inventive, idealistic Negev/Arava Valley kibbutzim. See chapter 11.

- **Snorkeling in the Red Sea:** The Red Sea, with its coral reefs, is an awe-inspiring natural aquarium. Rich with tropical marine life, it's one of the best places on earth for scuba diving and snorkeling. At the Coral Beach Nature Reserve just south of Eilat, there's enough to fascinate experts, yet wonders are accessible to all levels of swimmers—dazzling fish abound even in waist-deep water. Experienced divers can scuba dive at the Coral Island, a few miles down the coast from Eilat, or make an excursion into the Egyptian Sinai to the even more extraordinary reefs off Nuweiba, Dahab, and the legendary Ras Mohamed at Sharm el Sheik. See chapter 11.
- **Sampling the Music Scene:** Israel has an oversupply of magnificent

musicians; even suburbs of Tel Aviv and small cities such as Beersheva are home to orchestras that would be the envy of many world capitals. You may find the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra performing at Tel Aviv's Mann Auditorium, or the acclaimed Rishon-Le-Zion Symphony Orchestra giving a visiting concert at the Haifa Auditorium. But also look out for an outdoor performance of *Car-men* in the Valley of the Sultan's Pool, just at the foot of the walls of Jerusalem; a night of Mozart at the 2,000-year-old Roman amphitheater beside the sea at Caesarea; Yemenite wedding singers or Arabic oudists performing at free municipal concerts inside Jerusalem's Jaffa Gate; Israeli African-American blues and jazz musicians at clubs in Tel Aviv; or festivals such as the Chamber Music Days at Kibbutz Kfar Blum, the Red Sea Jazz Festival in Eilat, or the Jacob's Ladder Folk Festival held each summer in the Galilee.

## 2 The Most Evocative Ancient Sites

People come to Israel to touch the past. The events that occurred here in ancient times and the stories and legends that arose in Israel are firmly planted in the minds of more than a billion people throughout the world.

- **City of David:** Now the Arab village of Silwan (in the Bible, Siloam), this is the oldest part of Jerusalem, located on a ridge that slopes downhill just south of the present Old City. David, Solomon, and the prophets walked here. By late Roman times, warfare had advanced to the point where this area was too low to be easily defended and it was left outside the walls of Jerusalem. The ancient gardens of Siloam inspired the *Song of Songs*. Now an overgrown orchard of fig and

pomegranate trees, watered by the same Gihon Spring that was used by the prophets to anoint the kings of Judah, the gardens still stand at the foot of modern-day Silwan. The City of David is best visited on an organized tour or with a guide. See p. 213.

- **Northwest Shore of the Sea of Galilee:** This enchantingly lovely corner of the lake, in many ways the birthplace of one of the world's great religions, was the landscape of Jesus' ministry. Centering on the ruins of Capernaum (once a fishing town, and the site of St. Peter's house), and Tabgha, where the multitudes were fed with the Miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes, the shoreline is dominated by the Mount of Beatitudes.

Churches and archaeological excavations mark the locations of New Testament events. See chapter 11.

- **Bar'am Synagogue:** In the northern Galilee, near the Lebanese border, this is the best-preserved and perhaps most beautiful of the many ruined synagogues of antiquity. Built in the 4th century A.D., it was once the centerpiece of a small town in the breathtaking wooded mountains of this northern region. See p. 407.
- **Masada:** Located on an almost inaccessible mesa/plateau high above the

shores of The Dead Sea, Herod built this legendary palace fortress in about 10 B.C. In A.D. 73, more than 75 years after Herod's death, it became the final stronghold of the First Revolt against Rome. Here the last Jews to live under their own rule (until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948) committed suicide on the eve of their conquest by Roman armies. Even without the drama of Masada's last stand, the site is one of haunting, audacious magnificence. See p. 444.

### 3 The Most Important Holy Places

The great sacred sites all possess extraordinary power, mystery, and beauty, at least partly conveyed upon them by centuries, if not millennia, of reverence. The ownership and histories of Israel's holy places are often a matter of contention and debate, not only among the three great monotheistic religions, but also among sects within these religions. These listings are in the order in which they appear in this book.

- **The Western Wall (Jerusalem):** Part of a vast retaining wall built by Herod around the Temple Mount, this is the most visible structure remaining from the Second Temple complex. Judaism's great legacy to the world is spiritual, but the massive stones of the Wall, each with its perfectly carved border, are testimony to the physical grandeur of the ancient Jewish world. Over the centuries, this enduring fragment of The Temple complex has come to symbolize the indestructible attachment of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. For more than 1,000 years, under Islamic governments, the Wall was the closest point that Jews were permitted to approach to the place where the ancient Temple of Jerusalem once stood. Because of the sanctity of

the Temple Mount itself, very observant Jews do not go farther than the Wall to this day. See p. 172.

- **Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem):** A gloriously beautiful Islamic shrine, built in A.D. 691, covers the rock believed to have been the altar or foundation stone of the First and Second Temples. According to Jewish tradition, the rock was the altar upon which Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac; Islamic tradition holds that it was Abraham's first son, Ishmael, the father of the Arabic people, whom Abraham was called upon to sacrifice, either at this rock or at Mecca. The rock is also believed to have been the point from which the Prophet Mohammed ascended to glimpse heaven during the miraculous night journey described in the 17th Sura of the Koran. See p. 173.
- **Al Aqsa Mosque (Jerusalem):** On the southernmost side of the Temple Mount, built in A.D. 720, this is the third-most-important Muslim place of prayer after Mecca and Medina. See p. 174.
- **Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Jerusalem):** Christianity's holiest place, this church covers the traditional sites of the crucifixion, entombment, and

### **Tips Important but (Currently) Off-Limits Sites**

Two very important religious sites in Israel are set in the chaotic West Bank. At press time this is an area for which the U.S. State Department has issued the highest warning against visiting (and we subsequently do not review anything in this area inside this book). Check the State Department website before you head out, and do not attempt to visit the following spots unless the warning has been lifted.

The **Tomb of the Patriarchs** in Hebron, on the West Bank, is the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as their wives, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah (Rachel, the second wife of Jacob, is buried in Bethlehem). It's surrounded by massive walls built by King Herod, and venerated by both Jews and Muslims. Rights to this place are a point of bitter contention between the Islamic and Jewish worlds.

The **Church of the Nativity** in Bethlehem marks the site of Jesus' birth-place. It is the oldest surviving church in the Holy Land; the Persians spared it during their invasion in A.D. 614 because, according to legend, they were impressed by a representation of the Magi (fellow Persians) that decorated the building.

resurrection of Jesus. Built about A.D. 330, the complex is carefully divided among the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopian churches. See p. 181.

- **Mount of Olives** (Jerusalem): Overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem from the east, the mount offers a sweeping vista of the entire city. Here, Jesus wept at a prophetic vision of Jerusalem lying in ruins; in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the lower slope of the mount, Jesus was arrested; and the ridge of the Mount of Olives is the place from which, according to tradition, Jesus ascended to heaven. An encampment site for Jewish pilgrims in ancient times, the Mount of Olives contains Judaism's most important graveyard. See p. 209.
- **Baha'i Gardens** (Akko): At the northern edge of Akko, this site marks the tomb of the founder and

prophet of the Baha'i faith, Baha' Allah. As such, it is the holiest place for members of the Baha'i faith. See p. 319.

- **Baha'i Shrine & Gardens** (Haifa): The shrine was built to memorialize the remains of one of the Baha'i faith's martyrs, Bab Mirza Ali Muhammad, who was executed by Persian authorities in 1850. See p. 345.
- **Mount Sinai** (Sinai Peninsula, Egypt): Controversy still rages over which of the Sinai's mountains is the true site where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses, but the traditional identification of Mount Sinai is very ancient. An isolated Byzantine monastery at the foot of the mountain adds to the mysterious aura. The view from the top of Mount Sinai at dawn is among the most awe-inspiring sights you will ever see. See p. 481.

## 4 The Best Lost Ancient Cities

Israel and neighboring Jordan are filled with ruins of lost, ancient cities from every part of their long histories. In Herodian-Roman times, the population of Judea and the Galilee may have been around three million. Almost 2 millennia of wars, religious rivalries, persecutions, and misgovernment drove the population down to less than half a million by the start of the 19th century. Even knowledge of the location of many ancient sites was forgotten. Now, dazzling physical monuments to the past are being recovered at a rapid pace.

- **Caesarea** (on the coast between Tel Aviv and Haifa): Built by Herod as the great harbor and seaport of his kingdom, this was the splendid administrative capital of Roman Palestine. There are vast impressive ruins of the Roman city (including two theaters), as well as of the Crusader-era city, made all the more romantic by the waves lapping at the ancient stones. Caesarea was an important Byzantine Christian city, but it is not a biblical site. See p. 302.
- **Zippori** (Sepphoris, near Nazareth): Though not an overly dramatic site, this cosmopolitan Jewish-Hellenistic city, close to Nazareth, was the capital of the Galilee in Roman and Talmudic times. Especially interesting because it may have been familiar to Jesus, Zippori's highlights include a colonnaded street; a mosaic synagogue floor depicting the zodiac; and the beautiful mosaic portrait of a woman dubbed "the Mona Lisa of the Galilee," recently discovered in a late Roman-era villa. See p. 362.
- **Megiddo** (Armageddon, about 32km/20 miles southeast of Haifa): This town stood in the path of invading armies from ancient to modern times. It is an encyclopedia of Near Eastern archaeology, with more than 20 levels of habitation from 5000 B.C. to A.D. 400 having been discovered here. Among the newest discoveries here are the detailed mosaic floor of a Byzantine-era church—perhaps the earliest building specifically designed as a church ever discovered. The famous ancient water tunnel of Megiddo, dug from inside the fortified town to the source of water outside the walls in the 9th century B.C., is a miracle of ancient engineering. See p. 367.
- **Korazim** (Galilee): A Roman-Byzantine-era Jewish town in the hills just northeast of the Sea of Galilee, this is a beautiful place, with sweeping views of the water. Portions of ruins still stand. A black basalt synagogue, with beautifully carved detailing, and some surrounding houses, also of local black basalt, give a good idea of what the more than 100 towns once located in this area must have been like. See p. 388.
- **Gamla** (Golan Heights): Little remains of this small Roman-era Jewish city located on a dramatic ridge in the Golan Heights. This site has a story chillingly similar to that of Masada—but the number of dead was far greater. In A.D. 67, at the beginning of the First Jewish Rebellion against Rome, Gamla was overrun by Roman soldiers, and as many as 9,000 townspeople flung themselves from the cliff, choosing death over subjugation. This dramatic site is especially beautiful amid late-winter wildflowers and waterfalls. A ruined synagogue, one of the few that can be dated from the Second Temple period, survives and is a good place for contemplation. See p. 419.

- **Bet Shean** (Jordan Valley): This place has been continuously inhabited for the past 6,000 years. A vast, Roman-Byzantine city with colonnaded streets and a theater that could house 5,000 people once stood here, although by the 19th century, Bet Shean was a small village. Remnants of earlier civilizations can be seen on the ancient *tel* (Hebrew for a mound composed of layers of cities) above the Roman ruins. See p. 421.
- **Petra** (Jordan): One of the great wonders of the world, yet forgotten for almost a thousand years, this legendary 2,000-year-old Nabatean city

carved from the walls of a hidden desert canyon is now the highlight of excursion tours into Jordan from Israel. The entire Petra experience, including the trek into the canyon, has an air of adventure and mystery—especially if you plan 1 or 2 nights (or more) at Petra and give yourself time to get a feel for the place early in the morning and in the evening, before the hordes of visitors arrive. Petra and other treasures in Jordan are easily accessible from Israel by tour or independent travel arrangements. See chapter 12.

## 5 The Best Nature & Outdoor Experiences

Israel's diverse landscapes and unusual natural phenomena provide opportunities for interesting outdoor pursuits, many of which you might never have thought of in connection with a trip here.

- **Digging for a Day:** Joining an archaeological dig as a volunteer requires a definite commitment of time, money, and backbreaking labor. However, you can often arrange to dig for a day and get a close-up look at the hard work and thrills involved in bringing so much of Israel's history to light. Contact the Municipal Tourist Information Office in Jerusalem for current options. The digging season is during the dry summer months. See p. 85.
- **Hiking to Gamla:** A beautiful trail throughout the year, in late winter this 1- to 2-hour hike in the Golan takes you past wildflowers, streams, and waterfalls. The reward at the end of the trail is the dramatic ruined city of Gamla (see "The Best Lost Ancient Cities," above). The countryside is also dotted with prehistoric dolmens and Stone Age tombs. This walk brings you into contact with nature, archaeology, and a very moving piece

of Israeli history. Plan additional time for the return walk, although a shorter trail is also available. See p. 419.

- **Camel Trekking in the Ramon Crater** (Negev): In the Negev Highlands, near Mitzpe Ramon, this geological encyclopedia can be visited on a speedy, bone-dismantling jeep tour or on a rather arduous hike. Or you can experience the mysterious quiet of the desert as you explore the crater accompanied by a guide, with a camel to carry your water and equipment. This traditional approach to trekking can be arranged for a variety of itineraries as well as for overnight camping and Bedouin-style cookouts. Travel agencies in Mitzpe Ramon can set it up for you at reasonable prices. See p. 451.
- **Diving and Snorkeling the Reefs of Eilat:** The Red Sea coral reefs are among the most interesting and easily accessible in the world; anyone who can swim even moderately well can snorkel and enjoy the underwater scene. Eilat is home to a number of diving schools offering short- and long-term programs, plus classes in underwater photography. Once you've



seen the coral reef just off the shores of southern Eilat, you can graduate to a dive cruise of the more extensive reefs of the Coral Island. See p. 462.

- **Diving at Dahab** (Sinai Peninsula): Just across the border from Eilat are the Sinai Peninsula's extraordinary reefs and clear, light-filled waters. Reefs teeming with exotic marine life extend all the way down the coast; perhaps the most famous is the suicidal

Blue Hole, off the town of Dahab (but not recommended by this book). At the southernmost tip of Sinai, just beyond the resort center at Sharm el Sheik, is the reefy paradise of the Egyptian National Park at Ras Mohamed. Diving schools in Eilat and good Eilat travel agents and discounters can arrange diving-package excursions to Sinai. See p. 483.

## 6 The Best Beaches

Israel's four seas (the Mediterranean, the Sea of Galilee, The Dead Sea, and the Red Sea) offer an amazing variety of swimming experiences. The beaches of Israel look beautiful, but be careful about going in the water. Unusually strong riptides, whirlpools, and undertows along the Mediterranean coast can claim the strongest swimmer. Never swim in unguarded areas. Along much of the coast, especially north of Tel Aviv, the beaches seem sandy, but a few steps into the surf, and you're standing on a rocky shelf—not a good place to be when waves come crashing down. Pollution is also a serious problem, as it is throughout the Mediterranean. Israel's beach standards are much higher than those of most Mediterranean countries, but on many days, garbage from other countries swirls along the coast. At Nahariya, Akko, and the Poleg Nature Reserve (8km/5 miles south of Netanya), which have no sewage-treatment plants, I would hesitate to put a toe, no less my head, in the water. Expect beaches to be lively; Israelis play compulsive paddleball on any stretch of beach they're on, regardless of sleeping sunbathers in the line of fire. And watch out for sea urchins and stinging coral in the Red Sea and the burning medusas (jellyfish) that attack the Mediterranean beaches in July.

- **Gordon Beach** (Tel Aviv): Perhaps the most accessible place to sample

the Mediterranean, this free municipal beach has showers and a friendly mix of Israelis, new Russian immigrants, and tourists from luxury hotels. There are nearby places to take a break for a snack or meal, the sand is passably clean, and when the tide is clear, the beach is a pleasure. See p. 278 for more on the city's beaches.

- **Aqueduct Beach** (just north of Caesarea): An ancient Roman aqueduct gives this beach its name and travel-poster ambience. There are no showers or amenities except on summer weekends, when vendors sell drinks and snacks. Not good for swimming if the water is rough, but on calm days, as you float in the Mediterranean and gaze at the romantic ruins, you know it's not Blackpool or the Jersey Shore. See p. 305.
- **Ein Gev Resort Village Beach** (Sea of Galilee): The freshwater Sea of Galilee is warm and cleansing, spiritually as well as physically. You have to be a guest at the Ein Gev Resort Village to be allowed to use the beach here, but it's the prettiest one on the lake, with a date palm grove and thick lawns stretching down to the water, which is relatively free of foot-stubbing rocks. Just to the south of Ein Gev are several miles of eucalyptus-shaded beaches along the road (in

summer there's a parking fee); they're rockier underwater, but very pleasant when not crowded with weekenders. Late afternoon often brings real breakers to the eastern shore of the lake; twilight here is soft and magical. See p. 391.

- **Ein Gedi Beach** (Dead Sea): Everyone should experience swimming in The Dead Sea, the amazing body of water at the lowest point on the face of the earth. Extremely high salt content makes you feel like a cork, and it's impossible to keep much of yourself underwater. The mineral-rich sea is believed to be therapeutic, but will sting any cuts on your skin, and if you stay in too long, you'll be pickled. Ein Gedi Beach offers freshwater showers as well as a cafe. Even in winter a desert dip may be possible. See p. 442.
- **Coral Beach Nature Reserve** (Eilat): The nature reserve has staked out a strip of beach alongside Eilat's best reefs. Here you can snorkel among dazzling fish and coral formations,

and even take interesting scuba expeditions. Snorkeling gear is for rent, and there are showers and changing areas. Not good for ordinary swimming—you must beware of burning coral and spiny sea urchins. See p. 460.

- **Dolphin Reef Beach** (Eilat): A good choice for everyday swimming in the Red Sea, Dolphin Reef is the most picturesque beach in Eilat, with thatched *palapas* and a resident dolphin population, free to come and go, leaping and frolicking not far from where people can swim. See p. 460.
- **Hilton Dahab Resort Beach** (Sinai Peninsula, Egypt): If you want to really beach out for a few days at a comfortable resort with a quiet, distant, end-of-the-earth ambience and views of the Arabia mountains facing you across the Red Sea, this is the place. The waters here offer good opportunities for swimming and snorkeling. See p. 483.

## 7 The Best Museums

Israel's museums are relatively new, innovative, and interactive. They display the discoveries of the past, of the self, and of nationhood that are happening so intensively every day in Israeli society. The most interesting museums are those that could only be found in Israel.

- **Israel Museum** (Jerusalem): Although it only opened in 1965, in 4 decades the Israel Museum has made its place on the world museum map. Its greatest treasures are beautifully exhibited and include a number of the Dead Sea Scrolls; a dazzling, all-encompassing collection of archaeological finds from Israel; a vast treasury of world Judaica and costumes; and excellent collections of primitive, pre-Columbian, European, and modern art.

There's also an enticing Children's Wing. Much of the museum will be closed for renovation through 2009. See p. 196.

- **L. A. Mayer Memorial Museum of Islamic Art** (Jerusalem): An under-visited treasure with an excellent collection of Islamic and Middle Eastern art, clocks, and well-chosen special and visiting exhibitions. See p. 198.
- **Sir Isaac and Lady Edith Wolfson Museum** (Jerusalem): Right in the heart of Jerusalem, this little-known gem consists of a large but intimate private collection of Judaica from all over the world. It is exhibited on the fourth floor of Heichal Shlomo, the Great Synagogue complex on King George Street. See p. 198.

- **Yad VaShem Memorial and Holocaust Museum** (Jerusalem): This large complex is a memorial to the six million Jews killed by the Nazis during World War II. A major focus of the complex is the new (2005) museum. Here, in ways that put a human face on the staggering numbers of victims, the history of the Holocaust is traced using actual film footage, videos of personal interviews with survivors, historical documents, artifacts, and personal items—some donated by survivors and accompanied by stories of unimaginable heartbreak. Other parts of the complex include an archive that gathers and stores information about individual victims, memorial structures, gardens, and commemorative installations. No visitor can leave here unaffected. See p. 199.
- **Bet Hatfutzot/Diaspora Museum** (Tel Aviv): Not a museum in terms of displaying actual genuine artifacts, Bet Hatfutzot is rather a vast ensemble of multimedia exhibits that illustrate the histories of Jewish communities throughout the world. It's fascinating and fun, and the special visiting exhibitions are always worthwhile. See p. 269.
- **Eretz Israel Museum** (Tel Aviv): This museum covers many aspects of the land of Israel, including its natural history, flora and fauna, archaeology, folklore, and traditional crafts. Highlights include a bazaar filled with craftspeople demonstrating skills from antiquity such as glass blowing, olive pressing, weaving, and pottery making; an extraordinary collection of ancient glass; and excavations of a *tel* (ancient mound) located right on the grounds of the museum. See p. 272.
- **Tel Aviv Museum of Art** (Tel Aviv): Notable for strong collections of Israeli and contemporary European (including Russian) art, as well as its Jaglom Collection of Impressionist and post-Impressionist art. There is a lively program of public events, performances, and special exhibitions. See p. 273.

## 8 The Best Luxury Hotels

The hotel scene in Israel is presently in the process of a change. After 6 years of a tourism slump, when almost no hotels were renovated or rooms redone, tourists are returning, and with them, carpenters, plumbers, and decorators to brighten establishments that had become worn and shabby. During the time span of this edition, many hotels we've described as needing to redecorate will probably do so. International chains have been better at keeping up standards and have already begun ambitious renovation programs. Although new hotel construction has been at a standstill in Israel since 2000, these plans are ready to go forward if the quiet security situation continues to hold. Inside Israel, hotel rates are beginning to

rise in response to higher demand. In Jordan and Sinai, you'll find wonderful new hotels with rooms still going at bargain rates.

- **David Citadel Hotel** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/621-1111). Rival to the King David (see below), this newest luxury hotel in Jerusalem is architecturally interesting, lively, and offers excellent food services, including a great sushi bar. Most of the light, modern rooms offer Old City views. See p. 126.
- **King David Hotel** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/620-8888): Built in 1930 during the British Mandate, the King David has outlasted the British Empire and continues to sail on; it's elegant and

up-to-date in every way. The Nubian, fez-adorned lobby attendants of the 1930s are no longer here, but the King David is thick with atmosphere and ambience, and VIPs from Henry Kissinger to Barbra Streisand seem to pop up here. The gardened swimming pool and views of the walls of the Old City are a real plus. See p. 126.

- **American Colony Hotel** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/627-9777): This beautiful, atmospheric, gardened enclave was a 19th-century pasha's villa. As an international meeting place between the worlds of East and West Jerusalem, it attracts journalists, writers, archaeologists, and all sorts of VIPs. It's probably the most savvy, romantic spot in the Middle East. Some of the suites, furnished with antiques and traditional crafts, are as splendid as anything you'll find in the region, yet prices are comparatively reasonable. The hotel's Saturday-afternoon luncheon buffet is famous throughout the country. See p. 133.
- **Mount Zion Hotel** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/568-9555): This lesser-known four-star standout features lovely gardens, interesting architecture, a large swimming pool, and the most dramatic vistas of the Old City, Himmom Valley, and the Mount of Olives of any Jerusalem hotel. See p. 131.
- **Tel Aviv Sheraton Hotel & Towers** (Tel Aviv; ☎ 03/521-1111): The most fun of Tel Aviv's luxury hotels—right on the beach, but steps away from the city's restaurant and gallery district—feels like an urban resort. The restaurants here are probably the best of any hotel in the country, topped off by the inventive (and kosher) **Olive Leaf** (p. 251). Mediterranean views from many of the guest rooms, complete with dazzling sunsets, are a plus, as is the very efficient business center. See p. 244.

- **Tel Aviv Hilton** (Tel Aviv; ☎ 03/520-2240): With an unequaled staff, business center, and CYBEX health club, the Hilton is the doyen of Tel Aviv's beachfront hotels. Suites and better-category rooms are beautifully furnished and decorated; the sheltered beach offers a resort atmosphere; and the kosher sushi bar hints at the Hilton's role as a center for business and tourism exchanges between Asia and the Middle East. See p. 248.
- **Dan Carmel Hotel** (Haifa; ☎ 04/830-3010): With sweeping views from its site at the top of the Carmel Range, as well as a careful staff and a relaxing, gardened pool enclave, this hotel, built in the 1960s and a bit dated for some, reigns as Haifa's best. The better guest rooms, with views of the bay, are nicely decorated and worth the extra money. Lower-category rooms still have a style that recalls the Eisenhower era. See p. 334.
- **The Scots Hotel** (Tiberias; ☎ 04/671-0710): With its 19th-century buildings, beautiful terraces, and gardens looking out on the Sea of Galilee, this well-run, four-star hotel seems almost like a villa on the Italian coast. Run under the auspices of the Church of Scotland, it welcomes visitors of all faiths. All rooms were totally rebuilt in 2004, but the "antique rooms" in an older building have special character. See p. 377.
- **Herods Palace Hotel Complex** (North Beach, Eilat; ☎ 08/638-0000): Opened in 1999, this blockbuster's public areas are the most sumptuous in Israel. With architectural touches echoing Middle Eastern traditions and staff at times costumed in "ancient" garb, the effect may seem a bit Hollywood-esque, but the gorgeous spa, the vast pool, and the

excellent service are not fantasies. The Red Sea is steps away. See p. 468.

- **Four Seasons Sharm el Sheik** (Sharm el Sheik, Sinai, Egypt; ☎ 69/360-3555): This establishment is the most atmospheric and luxurious of Sinai's many new superluxury resorts. It's designed in a low-rise, garden style that suggests a whitewashed Egyptian/North African village. The Four Seasons offers rooms, suites, and private villas overlooking the Red Sea; a good snorkeling reef; diving, swimming, and snorkeling facilities; and every amenity you could want. See p. 484.
- **Mövenpick Resort Petra** (Petra, Jordan; ☎ 962-03/215-7111): Right at the entrance to Petra National Park (which makes more than one foray into Petra each day possible), the

Mövenpick is the best blend of contemporary and traditional Middle Eastern design in the region. Without being kitschy, public areas are atmospheric and exciting. The rooftop cafe at night is an easy place for travelers to meet and swap experiences under the stars. See p. 498.

- **Taybet Zaman Hotel and Resort** (Petra, Jordan; ☎ 962-03/215-0111): The stone houses and lanes of an abandoned Bedouin village in the mountains above Petra (a 20-min. drive away) have been turned into the rooms and passageways of a charming, atmospheric, quality resort. Vistas are awesome, and each room is uniquely decorated with Bedouin crafts. The village market is a shopping arcade, and local country musicians serenade at night. See p. 498.

## 9 The Best Value Hotels

This selection of hotel choices runs from splurges to economy strategies; each establishment offers something special.

- **Saint Mark's Lutheran Guest House** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/626-8888): Beautiful, atmospheric, and immaculate, with gardens above the main Arab bazaar, this is the best possible place to stay in the Old City and one of the most remarkable little hotels in the country. See p. 121.
- **Jerusalem Inn Hotel** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/625-2757): Just a short walk from the Old City, and 1½ blocks from Zion Square and the bustling Ben-Yehuda and Yoel Salomon malls, this small hotel offers tidy, no-frills doubles with a touch of style and excellent beds (blankets covered by duvet sheets). The management constantly upgrades rooms with new equipment, yet rates are kept reasonable for this level of quality. See p. 124.

- **YMCA Three Arches Hotel** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/569-2692): This is in no way your average YMCA; instead, it's a respected hotel frequented by savvy travelers. You get a well-appointed double in a landmark building (designed by the same architect who created New York's Empire State Building), right across the street from the famed King David Hotel. Rooms are scheduled for updating. See p. 129.

- **Saint Andrew's Church of Scotland Guest House** (Jerusalem; ☎ 02/673-2401): With its own gardens and vistas of the Old City, this Church of Scotland hospice is one of the most dramatic vantage points in West Jerusalem. Rooms are simple but comfy, and open to guests of all faiths. Public areas are freshly renovated. See p. 132.
- **Jerusalem Hotel** (East Jerusalem; ☎ 02/628-3282): A small place run

by a well-informed, attentive family, the Jerusalem Hotel offers a pleasant garden restaurant with live music a number of times a week and a general atmosphere that makes it seem like a very affordable version of the renowned American Colony Hotel. See p. 137.

- **Hotel Cinema** (Tel Aviv; ☎ 03/520-7100): This new, amusingly inventive hotel, right on Dizengoff Square, is a monument to the Bauhaus and art moderne movements that are so much a part of Tel Aviv's heritage. Though it's great fun and centrally located, the Hotel Cinema is a few blocks from the beach, where most of the city's hotels are clustered. See p. 249.
- **Hotel de la Mer** (Tel Aviv; ☎ 03/510-0011): In a city with an oversupply of faceless medium-range hotels, this new little gem, just across the road from the beach, is a real find. The fresh, pleasant rooms are designed according to the principles of feng shui. See p. 247.
- **Ein Gev Resort Village** (Sea of Galilee; ☎ 04/665-9800): The Ein Gev kibbutz has bungalows, caravans, and basic doubles set amid eucalyptus and date palm groves right on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It's a paradisiacal place to unwind and swim the warm waters of the lake. The kibbutz runs an excellent fish restaurant a mile down the road. Book this on a kibbutz package, and the price becomes very reasonable. See p. 391.
- **Vered HaGalil Guest Farm** (Galilee; ☎ 04/693-5785): Set in the hills a few miles north of the Sea of Galilee, this intimate, family-run place began as a simple horseback riding lodge and over 4 decades has slowly been turned into a small Garden of Eden. It offers a variety of rustic, charming accommodations and well-informed,

personal attention; you don't have to come here for riding, but if you do, the programs are probably the best in the country. See p. 393.

- **Ruth Rimmon Inn** (Safed; ☎ 04/699-4666): In a country with few really romantic, atmospheric hotels, this inn, a collection of beautiful buildings from Ottoman times, is a winner and an example of what might be done elsewhere in the country. A stay here helps make the often-elusive magic of Safed more tangible. See p. 402.
- **Masada Guest House and Youth Hostel** (Masada; ☎ 08/995-3222): Right at the base of Masada, overlooking The Dead Sea, this new, beautifully designed Israel Youth Hostel Association establishment is virtually a hotel. The hostel gives you the option of overnighting in the desert and making the ascent to Masada in the cool dawn hours. See p. 448.
- **Kibbutz Ein Gedi Resort Hotel** (Kibbutz Ein Gedi, Dead Sea; ☎ 08/659-4222): A wonderful alternative to the big spa hotels along The Dead Sea, Ein Gedi Kibbutz is a beautiful, internationally recognized botanical garden of rare plants and trees that have been planted in a once-bleak piece of desert over the past 45 years. There are indoor and outdoor swimming pools; spectacular desert vistas; archaeological sites; and free use of the kibbutz's Dead Sea Spa and Dead Sea beach. Look for discounts on kibbutz packages. See p. 443.
- **Isrotel Ramon Inn** (Mitzpe Ramon; ☎ 08/658-8822): This efficient, comfortable hotel close to the wonders of the Ramon Crater opens up the interior of the Negev to travelers who do not want to stay in rudimentary accommodations. The staff will connect you to all kinds of hiking,

biking, and nature activities, and the indoor swimming pool and outstanding home-style buffet are nice to come home to after a day exploring the desert. See p. 452.

- **Three Arava Valley Kibbutzim: Lotan, Yabel, and Ketura** (Arava Valley): Half an hour north of Eilat, these kibbutzim, founded largely by North Americans, are known for organic farming and inventive recycling projects. They offer wonderful programs in desert touring and ecology, a blanket of stars at night, simple accommodations, and delicious meals. Each is a paradise in its own way and a

chance for travelers to experience the vision and idealism at the heart of Israel's rebirth. See p. 455.

- **Isrotel Riviera Club** (Eilat; ☎ 08/630-3666): A block from the beach, this informal hotel has units that can accommodate two to four people and are equipped with kitchenettes, TVs, and other useful amenities. Although not a kibbutz guesthouse, a room here can be booked as part of the Kibbutz Guest House Package (p. 90), making this the most affordable way to have nonscruffy accommodations in costly Eilat. See p. 470.

## 10 The Best Luxury Dining

Until the 1980s, it was almost considered anti-Zionist to spend money and effort on gourmet cuisine. Israel was a practical, egalitarian society, and good, healthful fresh food was all that was necessary to create a sturdy population. But people cannot live by falafel alone, and Israel has developed a group of truly fine, personal restaurants, many rooted in French tradition, but also exploring the cuisine traditions of Mediterranean cuisine.

- **Darna** (Jerusalem): Craftsmen and interior designers from Morocco were brought to Jerusalem to create this authentic, atmospheric glatt kosher restaurant that celebrates the traditions of Israel's large Moroccan Jewish population. The fine Moroccan cuisine matches the graceful service and ambience. Totally wonderful. See p. 142.
- **Canela** (Jerusalem): A chic, carefully designed, contemporary setting; a pianist at a white grand piano (Mon nights); and pampering service that includes valet parking are touches that help make this the best of the city's new crop of top-drawer kosher restaurants. The menu is Continental

and strong on meat; prices are not nearly as exorbitant as at the competition. See p. 151.

- **Arcadia** (Jerusalem): Jerusalem's most sublime French and Mediterranean restaurant offers a charming, unique setting and an ever-changing menu that's elegant and inventive without being pretentious or glitzy. See p. 154.
- **American Colony Hotel Arabesque Restaurant** (Jerusalem): The Saturday luncheon buffet in the Arabesque Restaurant is a Jerusalem tradition, with a romanticized atmosphere as well as a vast, all-you-can-eat buffet of excellent Middle Eastern and Continental choices. Sadly, this treat is only for lunch and only a once-a-week affair. See p. 133.
- **The Olive Leaf** (Tel Aviv): With an inventive menu of nouvelle cuisine that's actually hearty, filling, and prepared within the rules of kashrut, plus a view of the Mediterranean, this is the best hotel restaurant in Tel Aviv (in the Sheraton Hotel and Towers), and one of the three best kosher choices in Israel. The decor, like the



menu, is elegant without being phony or glitzy. Great luncheon deals. See p. 251.

- **Carmela Be Nachala** (Tel Aviv): Set in an antique, veranda-laden building that might have been transported from the 19th-century American South, this is a top choice for charm, ambience, and an ever-changing, inventive menu in the French/Mediterranean tradition. Half-portioners are encouraged so you can sample more of the menu. See p. 255.
- **Orca** (Tel Aviv): Chef Eran Stroitzman serves a constantly changing menu that's the toast of Tel Aviv, amid a marvelous 1930s art moderne setting. The downstairs bar is among the most chic in town (with amazing tapas); the restaurant's food is filling, delicious, and fascinating. See p. 256.
- **Catit** (Tel Aviv): Fabulous Chef Meir Adoni has created a menu filled with some of the richest, most lavish dishes in Tel Aviv to critical acclaim and awards. The setting is quiet and charming but not dramatic. See p. 259.
- **Cordelia** (Jaffa): Located in an eclectic and candlelit romantic Jaffa building, Cordelia is an example of food as theater and like nothing else in Israel. Chef Nir Zook's ever-changing menu is designed to surprise, amaze, shock, and usually please. See p. 266.
- **Mul Yam** (Tel Aviv): The seafood here is the freshest and most exotic in Israel, jetted in from all over the world, expertly prepared, and served in a comfortable, informal setting. Israelis love it. See p. 264.
- **Margaret Tayar's** (Jaffa): This place has an unpretentious terrace by the sea, and an internationally acclaimed chef who's a Tel Aviv legend and has won international acclaim. The prices are upper moderate, but Margaret can cook up a leisurely tasting feast

for you. See also "Best Moderate Dining," below (p. 267).

- **Yoe'ezzer Wine Bar** (Jaffa): Set inside the cavernous arches of a Crusader-era building, this is a gourmand's paradise created by noted Israeli journalist and food writer Shaul Evron. Here, at your leisure, you can sample from an Elysian collection of European and Israeli wines, accompanied by wonderful breads and cheeses, or feast on a select menu of classic, richly prepared Continental cuisine. See p. 267.
- **Helena** (Caesarea): With vistas of the sea and a great young chef designing its menu, this restaurant, set amid the ruins of Caesarea, is the most romantic spot in Israel for a gourmet meal, especially when the sun sets over the Mediterranean. See p. 307.
- **Picciotto** (Zichron Yaacov): Named for its founder and former chef, an ex-fighter pilot who has moved on to the world of computers, this is a delightful Mediterranean restaurant set in a 19th-century cottage. It's not cheap, but by Israeli standards is a very good value. See p. 310.
- **Uri Buri** (Akko): Chef/owner Uri Yirmias is a man who knows where to get top-quality fish and seafood and how to prepare it, and who loves to see customers enjoying his dishes. Seaside sunsets and the ambience of Old Akko are extra pluses of this quality, informal place. See p. 320.
- **1872 Hashmura Restaurant** (Haifa): Named for the year in which the quaint stone mansion it occupies was built, this rustic French restaurant, strong on meat dishes, is an atmospheric choice for a special night out. It's also surprisingly affordable. See p. 342.
- **Decks** (Tiberias): With a setting that floats on the surface of the Sea of Galilee like a Fellini dream, Decks offers luxurious meats expertly grilled



over olive- and citrus-wood fires. As an extra, you get a complimentary post-dinner disco cruise. Decks is

kosher and a great choice for a memorable evening at upper moderate prices. See p. 380.

## 11 The Best Moderate Dining

Israel is filled with interesting, affordable restaurants ranging from authentic ethnic and natural Mediterranean to kosher Indian or Mexican and gracefully inventive French. In order to be accessible to kosher diners, many Israeli restaurants offer vegetarian-only menus that are imaginative and affordable. The following is a selection of unusual choices for atmosphere, good food, and good value, but you'll find many other fabulous restaurants listed throughout this book.

- **Adom** (Jerusalem): An atmospheric old Jerusalem stone building houses a relaxed place with heavenly food and upper-moderate prices that should be higher (but don't tell them that). See p. 149.
- **Chakra** (Jerusalem): The decor here is inventive eclectic, and so is the cuisine—unique dishes created by a chef who loves spices and cooks his heart out, creating new tastes and mixing influences from all over the world. Besides the standard menu, there's a nightly tour de force of a dozen specials. See p. 152.
- **Village Green** (Jerusalem): This inexpensive vegetarian cafeteria right on Zion Square is virtually a public service, and is the best place in town for a healthy, hefty, fast meal. Lasagna, veggie pies, tasty soups, and salads by weight top the menu at this kosher L'Mehedrin restaurant. See p. 148.
- **Spaghettim** (Jerusalem): This fabulous restaurant offers a vast array of spaghettis in fantastic sauces loaded with fresh ingredients. The Jerusalem branch, set in an old Ottoman-era mansion with a delightful dining

garden, is an especially romantic location, but there's also a branch in Tel Aviv. See p. 147 and 258.

- **Levan at the Cinémathèque** (Jerusalem): The view of the Old City walls from the terrace here is breathtaking, the crowd is intelligent and stylish, and the menu is very affordable. Salads, peasant sandwiches, and a good, reasonably priced pasta and fish menu are offered. In cold weather, the indoor dining room can be smoky, but in good weather, a meal or dessert on the terrace is a must. See p. 161.
- **Kohinoor** (Jerusalem): This kosher Indian restaurant provides a rare opportunity for kosher visitors to sample well-prepared Indian cuisine. The all-you-can-eat luncheon buffets are very affordable. The nonkosher Tandoori restaurants (Tel Aviv, Eilat, and Herzlia) of the same chain are equally excellent, elegant, and a good value. See p. 154.
- **Manta Ray** (Tel Aviv): On an empty stretch of beach between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, this beach pavilion is open to the sea, the sound of the waves, and the Mediterranean sunset. It serves great medleys of tapas, stylishly prepared fish and seafood, and is a good choice for breakfast or leisurely lunches and dinners. See p. 266.
- **Margaret Tayar's** (Jaffa): This is a small, authentic place a short walk from trendy Old Jaffa, with a covered terrace overlooking the sweeping Tel Aviv shoreline and a master cook who loves to see people enjoying her creations. Jaffa's fishers adore Margaret—she gets first choice of the

catch. This is a one-woman tour de force whose hefty, unforced dishes (including exquisitely grilled fish) have been lionized in *Gourmet*. Always call to confirm hours. This is one of the very best restaurants in the country at any price. See p. 267.

- **Erez** (Herzlia): Erez Komarovsky has created a one-man world of contemporary Israeli cuisine served in a functional but bright, imaginative space. The entire concept draws on Israeli traditions of brashness, pragmatism, and a touch of poetry. It's always exciting, blessed with heavenly breads, and moderately priced, which makes the taxi ride up from Tel Aviv a worthwhile investment. See p. 293.
- **Abu Christo** (Old Akko): Fresh fish and a covered dining terrace right beside the sea give this restaurant a delightful Greek Island harborside ambience. You can put together a

feast here, complete with Middle Eastern appetizers, for the price of a single main course elsewhere. See p. 320.

- **Ramon Inn Restaurant** (Mitzpe Ramon, Negev): This hotel restaurant serves the best food to be found from The Dead Sea to the outskirts of Eilat. The evening buffet (get there at 7pm) is filled with gently ethnic, home-style offerings. The large breakfast buffet, open to outsiders, offers exotic jams and fluffy, gourmet pita made less than a minute before it's on your plate. See p. 453.
- **Eddie's Hideaway** (Eilat): In a tourist town at the end of the earth, where most restaurants plan for customers they'll never see again, Eddie puts his heart into every meal and keeps coming up with Continental and Asian-touched menus that are delicious and inventive. See p. 474.