

HOLIDAYING IN THE HOLY LAND, ISRAEL!

The beauty of Israel lies in its varied terrain, pilgrimage places, picturesque landscapes and culture

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THE VERY MENTION OF ISRAEL EVOKES A melange of emotions, mostly owing to the history of the region, dating back a few thousand years. When you divulge your plans to go to Israel, the nears and dears have stock questions to ask you like “Why Israel?”. “What will you eat there?”, “Are you going there on a religious tour?”, “Isn’t it all desert?”, “What is there to see?”, “Is the Dead Sea really dead”, and so on and most will eventually come back to the initial question, “Why Israel?”.



WE SAY “WHY NOT?”.

Let the size of Israel not fool you. Although you can travel from North to South in under 8 hours, the beauty of Israel lies in its varied terrain, from desert to lush oases, flora and fauna unique to this region, green mountains to the North, beaches on the Mediterranean sea and the Red sea, which can be enjoyed all through the year. As one Israeli gentleman said, Israel is the land of three seas, the Dead sea, the Red sea and the Med sea, which is short for the azure blue Mediterranean Sea and let start from the med sea. There is also a fourth sea about which we will talk later. Israel is also steeped in the three Abrahamic religions and wherever you go, you cannot miss reference to one or the other.

ALONG THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA TEL AVIV

The international airport in Israel is almost equidistant from its two biggest cities, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. One can start the tour from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, however, we recommend starting from Tel Aviv and keep the best, Jerusalem, for the last!

Tel Aviv, is the second most visited city and also the second most populous city in Israel. A visit to Tel Aviv almost always starts with a visit to one of the oldest cities of the region, Jaffa or Yafo as it is also called (Joppa as per the Bible). It is so old that even Greek Mythology mentions it! At the seaside, there is a long finger -ike rock, on which Princess Andromeda was chained to appease Neptune and who was subsequently saved by Perseus!

Jaffa is a beautiful town restored to its old glory. The clean but narrow streets of Zodiac Alleys are the hallmark. On one such street, a living sculpture exists, that of a Floating Orange Tree. The creator, Ran Morin excels in live-art. The orange tree was selected for Jaffa because Jaffa was one of the biggest producers of Oranges in its heyday. Another street leads to the Artists' Colony, where one can see all kinds of art forms on the doors of houses and where almost every door houses an art gallery. Apart from the Floating Orange Tree, The Clock Square is the most photographed structure here. This was built during the late



Ottoman era. Kikar Kedumim, the excavated ruins tell the tale of its almost 4,000-year-old history, in the heart of Jaffa.

Head towards the market nearby or to the Carmel Market further North, for olives, fruits and Middle-Eastern spices and other exquisite items.

Tel Aviv is also known for all night partying and is often called the city which does not sleep. These clubs and bars are quite modern and safe.

Who can say no to the beachfront of Tel Aviv, one of the cleanest we have seen, with its cool blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. There are many beaches in Tel Aviv but in reality, it is almost an unbroken stretch of 14 km from Jaffa in the South to Metnitzim beach in the North. The night time view of the lighthouse in Jaffa is truly an amazing sight. The well-lit white lighthouse is set off against the dark sky and the sea is enchanting to say the least and is not to be missed.

CAESAREA AND HAIFA

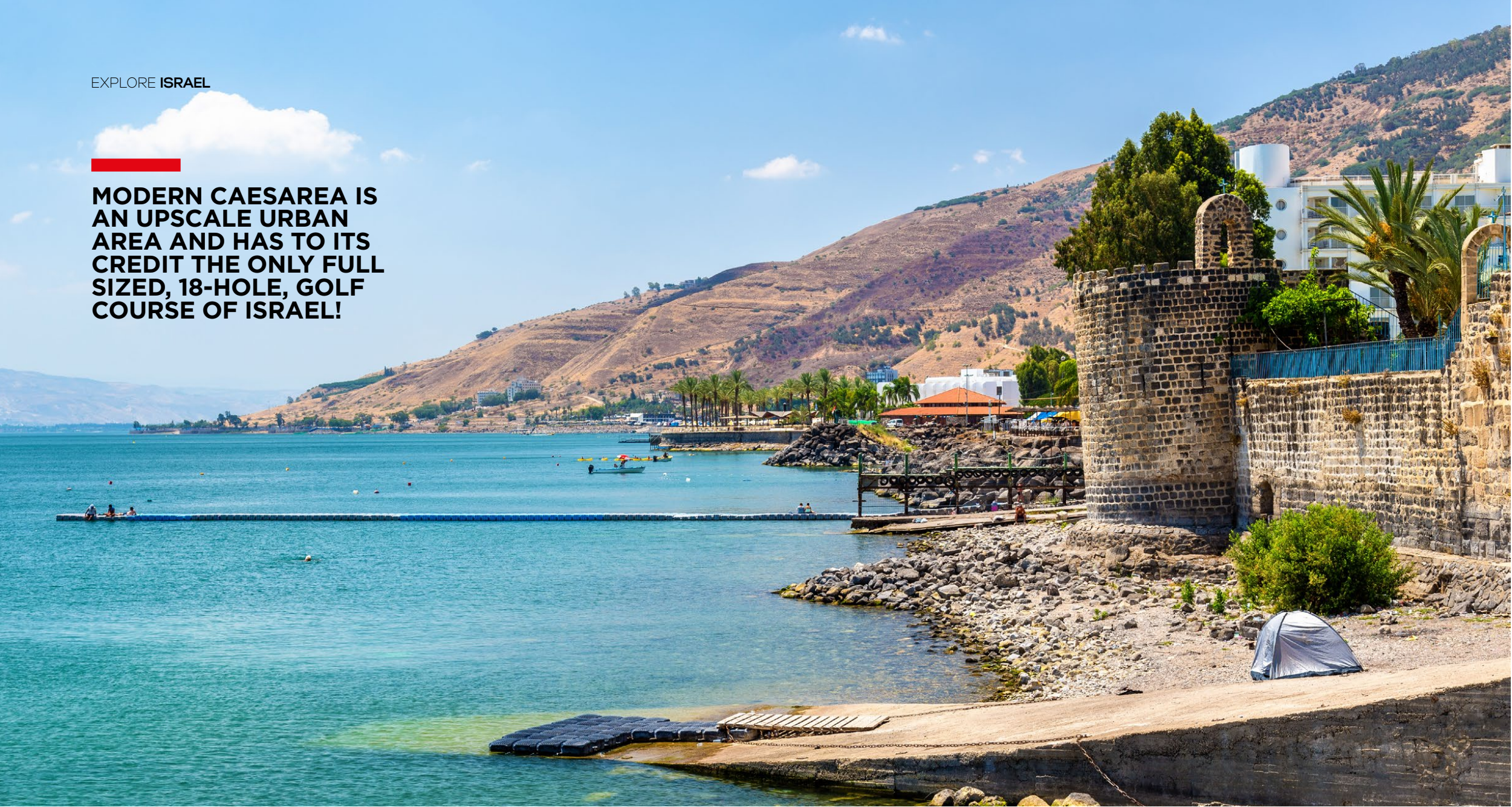
The current city of Caesarea gets its name from Caesarea Maritima, a 2,000-year-old Port on the Mediterranean sea, built by Herod the Great, one of the client kings of the Roman empire. This port was strategic for the efficient administration of the Judaea Province of the Roman Empire.

Caesarea has had its ups and downs over the years. The ubiquitous Roman Theatre has been restored to its past glory and even now there are performances held there. There are wells, mosaics, fort walls in ruins. Another highlight is the 5km long aqueduct used for bringing water to the city was in use for over 700-years before it broke and was abandoned.

Another important exhibit here, is a broken block of stone with an inscription in Latin, which is translated to English as “To the Divine Augusti [this] Tiberium...Pontius Pilate...prefect of Judea...has dedicated this”. This was probably a dedicatory note for a building or a temple built in the honour of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Pontius Pilate is perhaps best known for presiding over the trial of Jesus and ordering his crucifixion.



MODERN CAESAREA IS AN UPSCALE URBAN AREA AND HAS TO ITS CREDIT THE ONLY FULL SIZED, 18-HOLE, GOLF COURSE OF ISRAEL!



Modern Caesarea is an upscale urban area and has to its credit the only full-sized, 18-hole, golf course of Israel!

Haifa is the third largest city in Israel and is best known as the seat governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. Most of us may have seen the Lotus Temple in New Delhi. We can only say that the Bahá'í temple and its gardens on the slopes of Mount Carmel in Haifa are truly incredible.

Haifa was and still is a major seaport on the Mediterranean sea and has a couple of stunning beaches. The Sculpture Garden consisting of 29 bronze sculptures of children playing is unique and probably the first in the world. The mood of the children cavorting in the park is brought out is extraordinary.

NORTHERN DISTRICT

The two most important cities in the Northern district are also important to the Christian Pilgrims.

NAZARETH

Jesus Christ is often referred to as Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph. Nazareth is believed to be the childhood home of Jesus and is also believed to have lived here after his baptism by John the Baptist. It has several important churches for the pilgrims. Of these, the Church of Annunciation, built over the grotto of annunciation, the place where Angel Gabriel announced to Virgin Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus.

Other notable pilgrimage sites are Mary of Nazareth International centre, St Joseph Church, Church of Jesus the Adolescent, the Synagogue church and St. Gabriel's Church and Mary's well. The other site where it is believed that annunciation took place. It is also said the place where Jesus performed his first miracle (turning water into wine), Cana, is near Nazareth.



AT OVER 200M BELOW SEA LEVEL, THE SEA OF GALILEE HOLDS THE RECORD OF BEING THE LOWEST FRESHWATER LAKE IN THE WORLD

SEA OF GALILEE

The Sea of Galilee is not a sea but a lake (in Hebrew there is no distinction), a freshwater lake at that. At over 200m below sea level, it holds the record of being the lowest freshwater lake in the world and is frequently called Lake Tiberias because of the small town of Tiberias on its shores. There is a small museum which has a fisherman's boat from the 1st century CE and is called the Jesus' boat, probably because it belonged to the same period.

For pilgrims, the most important place is where the lake's water exits into the River Jordan. Near the mouth is believed to be the baptismal site, Yaardenit, where Jesus was Baptised by John the Baptist. In fact, most ministries of Jesus after he was baptised was around this region only.

Across the Jordan river is the country of Jordan, just a few metres away!

If you plan to stay the night near the lake, as we did, don't miss the most beautiful sunrise over the lake.

**DEAD SEA REGION
DEAD SEA**

Dead sea, again, is a lake and is called so because of the unusually large salinity in its waters. This prevents any life forms from thriving in the water. It is 10 times saltier than the oceans! The only life form you will see are human beings. One of the favorite pastimes of the visitors here is to float on the water with a book in hand. Another is to apply the dead sea mud on the body as it is supposed to have healing properties.

Just a note of caution here. Please do not stay in the water for too long as it would dehydrate you by pulling out water from your body.

Dead sea, at 430m, is also the lowest point on earth and is also the oldest health resort in this region when Herod visited this place.

There are other points of interest in the region like Masada, the hilltop fortress, Ein Gedi, one of the biggest, greenest and well-maintained Oasis and a nature reserve.

**FOR ADVENTURE AND ACTION
CITY OF EILAT, RED SEA**

Eilat is the southernmost point of Israel and is on the shores of the Red Sea.

Coral Beach in Eilat is listed as one of the best diving sites in the world! You can also snorkel around to see the beautiful underwater marine life. If you are lucky you will have the company of dolphins.



Timna Park, is a 15,000 acre desert park, with lots of hiking opportunities. A visit to the now defunct copper mine is an adventure by itself. For the photographers, there are odd-shaped sandstone formations and columns. Walk along the trails to observe the flora and fauna typical of this place.

One can also enjoy water activities on the Timna lake, tight in the middle of the desert.

THE SOUL OF ISRAEL, JERUSALEM

Elhanan Leib Lewinsky, a Hebrew writer, once said “Without Jerusalem, the land of Israel is as a body without a soul” and it is so apt.

WALLED OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

The city of Jerusalem is an important city politically and strategically. It is more so because it is a major centre for all the three major Abrahamic religions. The city has been destroyed and rebuilt 23 times but the spirit of what Jerusalem stands for, could not be crushed and it has risen stronger every time.

A visit to Jerusalem is an emotional affair. It is a potpourri of several cultures but each also showing its individuality. It is impossible to walk through the narrow streets of Jerusalem without the intense vibes affecting you.

The walled city is divided into four quarters, Armenian, Christian, Jewish and Muslim quarters. Each with its

uniqueness in terms of the people living there and the food. Depending on the day of the week or year, one or more parts of this city may be closed. For example, starting Friday evening till Saturday evening, the whole of Jewish quarters will be closed for Sabbath and for Ramadan, the Muslim quarters will be closed and so on.

The Most important religious structure for the Jews is the Western Wall. At any time hundreds of devotees would be praying facing the wall. On the other side of the wall is the Dome of the Rock which is an Islamic structure and is important for Muslims. It once had a Jewish temple built by Herod but now Jews are not allowed inside hence they pray outside along the wall.

For the Christians, retracing the path Jesus took from the place where he was sentenced to the place of Crucifixion. It is also called Via Dolorosa (path of suffering) which zig-zags through the streets of Jerusalem. The Church of Holy Sepulchre in the Christian quarters contain two of the holiest sites for Christians. The place of crucifixion and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ.

The street markets in all the four quarters are places to pick up souvenirs or eat authentic Israeli and Arabic food.

NEW JERUSALEM

The three most important places to visit outside the walled city are the viewing point at mount Scopus, the holocaust

memorial museum Yad Vashem and the Israel Museum Complex. Mount Scopus is a mount not very far from the old Jerusalem and offers a sweeping view of the city and also has the Hebrew University. The best time to visit is before the sunset when the golden light of the setting sun hits the Golden Dome of the Rock.

Yad Vashem is Israel’s official memorial to the victims of the holocaust. A visit through the various areas of the complex is sure to extract tears and is an emotional journey.

Israel Museum Complex is a storehouse of knowledge for history buffs. The Museum is divided into the Archaeology wing, Shrine of the book, Sculptures, Jewish arts, and a 3D-model of Jerusalem old city.

One of the most notable exhibits is a sculpture called “Turning the world upside down” created by Anish Kapoor. It is a 3D Concave structure made of polished stainless steel which inverts the subjects that are in front and the base. In fact, it appears as a living object and changes the scene every moment of the day.

BYE BYE ISRAEL

It is time to bid goodbye to the land of milk and honey (not to forget the olives)! Israel, as we said before, can shake and stir your emotions and there is a lot more than what we have written about. We are sure that you will enjoy a visit. 🇮🇱

