

Oh, Holy Land: Israel awaits the return of tourists.

Source: Detroit Free Press (Detroit, MI)

Publication Date: 16-APR-07

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JERUSALEM – For once in my life, I am having trouble describing a country.

The religious sites are gloomy and far different than I imagined – except for the Sea of Galilee, which is a Bible picture postcard.

The atmosphere of Israel is bustling and busy, but there's a constant thread of – what to call it? – alertness – all over the country. And it is hard to get used to seeing teenage soldiers carrying M16s around the streets.

The dry and dusty image I had of Israel is totally wrong. In early spring, before Passover, the country is green and glorious. Wildflowers bloom on Mt. Tabor and even in the Negev desert.

And the simplistic vision I had of a completely Jewish Israel? Another error. Yes, Israel is a Jewish state – but it is also 16 percent Muslim, and its language, its savory food, the city populations are all scrambled up like falafel, with spicy sprinklings of Druze, Christian, Ba'Hai, ancient Egyptian, Crusader, Phoenician, Turk, Persian, Roman, Greek, Syrian, British and who knows what else floating in the breeze.

Marco Polo slept here. So did Mark Twain. So did King David, Saladin, Salome, Jesus and Napoleon.

Most of all, I am dizzy with the time warp. History is undead here: An Israeli horticulturist recently planted a 2,000-year-old pit of an extinct Judean date, just to see what would happen.

It sprouted. Now it's three feet tall.

So I will try my best to explain Israel. But really, you need to see it for yourself.

On the Via Dolorosa, a steep old Jerusalem street where believers say Jesus of Nazareth carried his cross 2,000 years ago, a certain Muslim shopkeeper has a shop.

The owner of the Mike Store sells wooden manger scenes. Kosher prayer shawls.

Scarves in the black-and-white pattern of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Whatever you want, 25 percent off, and he'll throw in a good-luck Jewish key chain, a Hamsa hand, for free.

I buy the prayer shawl. And the PLO scarf. And a couple of yarmulke skull caps. All of it.

In return, he gives me a cup of sweet tea and the carbons from my credit card receipt – "for safety," he says kindly.

But the Mike Store is just one paradox of Old Jerusalem, a walled warren of secrets and holy places. Today's Muslim Dome of the Rock shrine is built atop where the Jewish Second Temple was 2,000 years ago. But that temple was on top of another temple, which was likely on top of another religious spot.

"Holy places stay holy," my guide, Jacob Firsell, says the first day. And it's true, no matter where you go in Israel.

The holiest spot for Jews in Jerusalem, of course, is the Western Wall, the remnant of the glorious Second Temple expanded by King Herod in 18 B.C. Jerusalem also is the site of important Jewish cultural sights, including the Shrine of the Book Dead Sea Scrolls Museum and the busy Jewish quarter of the old city.

Meanwhile, the holy spot for Muslims is the Dome of the Rock, a shrine built in 690 A.D. where believers say Muhammed ascended to heaven.

For Christians, huge Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches lie atop sacred sites. In Jerusalem, that means the soot-stained, ponderous Church of the Holy Sepulchre is atop the spot where believers say Jesus was crucified and buried. In Bethlehem, it's the Church of the Nativity atop his birthplace grotto. The Church of the Agony dominates the Garden of Gethsemene, and in Nazareth, a church sits on one of two spots where competing stories say the angel came to Mary at the well.

The thing is, Israel is not Colonial Williamsburg. It's not that orderly. Daily life churns atop ancient sites. Every century, the cities get higher as things are built on top of other things. Landscapes change. Everything old is way down in grottos or caverns.

Standing outside the walls of Old Jerusalem, I ask about one place I recall.

"Where is the Beautiful Gate?" I ask, proud to recall a story of a beggar sitting at such a gate in the New Testament.

"Up there," my guide says, pointing to a wall. You can see where the gate used to be, now stoned in.

"Ah," I say. The Beautiful Gate.

That is one cool thing. All those places mentioned in the Bible? This is where you realize they're real.

Will this be the year tourism rebounds in Israel? Many American visitors have been waiting since 2000 for things to stabilize, for suicide bombings to stop, for peace to be made. Visitors have avoided Israel for six years.

The war with Lebanon's Hezbollah last summer alone drove away an estimated 900,000 tourists and cost the hotel industry here \$1 billion in lost revenues.

And so far this year, "tourism is sputtering," says Firsell, my guide, who has been in the business 18 years and who had to go back to teaching high school during the lean times.

But Israel's tour guides, attractions and store owners are willing and waiting. Many new attractions have opened in the last four years. Although most tourists to Israel visit family or come with Jewish or Christian tour groups, I traveled alone, hiring a private car and driver.

Did I feel safe? Yes. Absolutely.

Still, visitors must accept certain things. When you visit Israel, you are constantly – and sometimes uncomfortably so – reminded that the nation is always on the alert.

The Israeli people have a constant wariness that comes from living for generations with neighboring nations pointing guns at them. All non-orthodox Jewish citizens join the military at age 18 to serve, and all over Israel you see young soldiers carrying M16s, Army bases, jets overhead and Black Hawk helicopters patrolling the borders.

Have lunch on Jerusalem's Agrippas Street and visit the Mahane Yehuda Jewish market where shoppers are buying oranges and onions, and then you find out that the market was the target of a suicide bomber in 2002. Visit the old Crusader city of Akko on the Mediterranean, and you'll hear stories of how Hezbollah missiles landed in the town just last summer.

And of course, the new Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem tells the horrific story of the Holocaust. The stark, prism-shaped building opened in 2005 to hold the collection. Its final room is a gigantic round space where the names of all those who died are listed in volumes and volumes and volumes on the high, round shelves, weighing on you, pressing on you, pushing down on you with their sorrow.

But here's the thing: Israel is like Egypt in that it has more history in its little finger than most countries will ever have. It is a country for travelers, not just for tourists.

If you went just to Jerusalem, you would be cheating yourself in your experience of Israel.

I loved all of Israel's old markets in places like old Jaffa, Akko and Nazareth, with their tiny winding streets and shops. I loved floating in the Dead Sea and seeing the mighty Negev desert. I loved Mt. Tabor in northern Israel, with its riot of spring wildflowers and luminescent views.

I loved Caesarea on the Mediterranean. It once was a fabulous port built by King Herod, with a gigantic harbor, a hippodrome, temples and luxury baths. This is where Pontius Pilate lived most of the time. It is where the Apostle Paul was held before he was shipped off to Rome. A tidal wave wiped out Caesarea centuries ago, but most ruins have been unearthed, and the coast there still is chosen by Israeli millionaires as a place to call home.

I loved all the history, beyond religion. In Akko (pronounced Acre) in northwest Israel, visitors shop for spices and visit a 1,000-year-old Crusader fort on the Mediterranean Sea.

It is astonishing to realize that Marco Polo, Richard the Lionhearted and the Muslim conqueror Saladin all set foot in this place, and now so can you.

When we came to the green and blooming Galilee, the northeast region of Israel where the Bible says Jesus launched his ministry, I was shocked. In early spring, it looked like California – vineyards and hills, flowers and blue sky.

At Tabgha, there is a beach, with reeds and grasses swaying at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. My shoes crunched over the stones. My guide was describing the

area's history when I suddenly said, "Can I take a minute?" and just walked away.

The air was misty, still, the gray-blue water calm as a prayer. I walked to the water's edge. Saw a tiny boat floating way out. A strange lump in my throat came. I felt teary.

Why, after feeling no overwhelming sense of the holy in the Holy Land the whole week, should I feel it here?

I think it was because I recognized it. The shore of the Sea of Galilee looked exactly like the Bible image ingrained in my mind since childhood – the walk-on-water, do-unto-others, fishers-of-men place. A holy place.

But, that's just me.

The strange magic of Israel is that somewhere in this country is a place you will recognize, too.

IF YOU GO:

GETTING THERE: You can fly Continental from Newark or Delta from Atlanta (and get partner NWA frequent flier miles), or fly El Al from New York's JFK. Cost is about \$900-\$1,400 round trip, depending on the time of year. You need a passport but no visa. (One tip: If you are not an Orthodox Jew, try to fly Continental on a Saturday or Sunday; they are quiet days.)

TIME AND MONEY: Israel is six hours ahead of Eastern time. Money is the New Shekel; about 4 NIS equals \$1. Exchange money when you get to Israel or use an ATM at the Tel Aviv airport to withdraw cash.

TELEPHONES: Calling cards work in Israel; you can also buy international phone cards at drugstores there. There's also a counter at the airport to rent a cell phone.

LODGING: In Jerusalem, try the beautiful YMCA Three Arches hotel (www.ymca3arch.co.il, about \$110 per night double); or stay at the Dan Hotel's flagship King David Hotel (www.danhotels.com, about \$350 per night double). In the Galilee, the best hotel is the Scots Hotel in Tiberius (www.scotshotels.co.il, about \$220 per night double.) If you hire a private guide, ask if he or she can negotiate rates with hotels.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Get insurance to cover your flight and the cost of your trip to Israel in case you have to cancel. Many tour guides are flexible about cancellation policies to Israel, but read the fine print.

GUIDEBOOKS: Use the colorful 2007 edition of "Exploring Israel" (Fodors, \$22) or "Fodor's Israel 6th Edition Gold Guide" (Fodor's, \$21.95, 2006).

WHAT'S NEW IN ISRAEL:

Even though tourism has been lackluster, the last four years have seen a lot of changes to tourist sites:

Mahane Yehuda Market, Jerusalem. The vibrant market (in Hebrew called a shuk) still has vegetables, fruits, fish and all the old bustling flavor. But it now has been gentrified with the addition of designer boutiques, Italian coffee shops and jewelry stores. They've all moved in during the last 18 months.

Old Jerusalem Model Display, Jerusalem. A huge model of what Jerusalem looked like around 1A.D. has been moved from the Holyland Hotel to the grounds of the Israel Museum just in the last six months to give it a wider audience.

Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum, Jerusalem. The new museum section of Yad Vashem was finished in 2005. Sober and emotionally draining, its highlight is the Hall of Names, a visual attempt to convey the enormity of the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Hertzl Museum, Jerusalem. The Hungarian father of Zionism inspired the formation of Israel. Now he has his own little museum that combines creative videos with artifacts to tell his story.

Security Fence/Wall between Israel and West Bank. For tourists, it's particularly noticeable at the entrance to Bethlehem.

Renovations at Old Port, Tel Aviv The shopping and dining district has gotten a face-lift ; good new restaurants and shops.

Caesarea Visitors Center, Caesarea. King Herod's grandest city had everything from Pontius Pilate's luxury digs to a hippodrome for chariot races. Wander the ruins, and don't miss the visitors center where projection images of ancient characters answer audience questions.

For more information, see www.goisrael.com.

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