

An adventure for all

A country of significant importance to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Israel is not all about spirituality. It is also a place where you can float in the sea, party at hip spots and see history come alive

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO





The holy town of Jerusalem



PHOTOS BINDU GOPAL RAO

The Dead Sea

Israel, a country the name of which evokes emotions galore and innumerable reactions, is still a wonderful revelation when you visit it. A place of spiritual significance, Israel offers so much more to the intrepid traveller as I found out on my recent visit. Here are some must-do's when in the country:

Soak in the history at Jerusalem

My first stop was Jerusalem, which was the perfect precursor to a trip full of delightful surprises. Our first destination here was the Old Jerusalem Railway Station, which is now a shopping hub and has a nice vibe thanks to new age art deco cafes and music performances that happen here. It is also a good place

to shop for quirky accessories or simply lounge around. But the primary attraction lies in the historical and religious sites of the Old City. It needs a whole day and is best done on foot. Start at the Tower of David Museum that gives you a detailed insight into the history of Jerusalem through the ages. The place is well laid out across different galleries marking the various periods in history. The interactive museum has interesting displays and traces the history of the temples of this place across periods. After this, it is a great idea to walk on the Via Dolorosa (Stations of the Cross) path, which is believed to be the path that Jesus walked on before he was crucified. Set amidst a bustling local market, there are 14 stations that show the major milestones of his walk. Of



The Ramparts Walk

special interest is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which houses the now empty tomb where Jesus was buried and is also the site of crucifixion. The church has stunning architecture and the sense of divinity here is palpable. A stop at the Western Wall (Kotel), Judaism's most sacred site is another must do. You can leave a note for your wish and locals believe it is bound to come true! The Western Wall Tunnels is another interesting stop that needs prior reservation and a guide for you to see the excavations that show the underground portions of the wall. Finally hop on the Ramparts Walk—a walkway atop the Old City walls that offers a unique panoramic view of the Old City and its surroundings. The Arab Market (Shuk) here is a good place to stop by for interesting local souvenirs.

Float in the Dead Sea

The Dead Sea region, said to be the lowest exposed land on earth, at 421m below sea level, is rich in minerals and salt and naturally is home to a thriving cosmetic industry. The Dead Sea health and beauty products Visitors' Center in Kibbutz Mitzpe Shalem is a good place to stock up on gifts. The Dead Sea itself is easily the world's best outdoor spa whose waters are so dense that you can float in them, thanks to the fact that the salt content is 32 per cent compared to 4-6 per cent elsewhere! You are, however, advised not to dip your face in the water. You can also head to the sulphur pool here for a dip that is good for your skin. The mud of the Dead Sea also makes for a great face pack and I was rather amused to see a group of young girls



The ruins of Massada

with mud on their faces running alongside the shore while I was here. Once you have a fill of the sea, take a hike in Nahal David in the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve, a Biblical oasis with a spring and waterfalls, where David hid from Saul. Also, take a tour of the Kibbutz Ein Gedi's ecotourism botanical garden where you can see some unique flora and fauna, including the Baobab tree whose beautiful white flowers bloom in the night. The abundance of avian life here left me surprised and I was lucky to spot several sun birds, kingfishers, yellow throated bulbuls and more.

Visit the ruins of King Herod's fortress

The site of Massada or the ruins of King Herod's mountaintop fortress

and last stronghold of the Jewish revolt against Rome in AD 73 is another place that you must visit. A cable car takes you atop the mountain and the ruins are spread all over the place. On your way back, do stop at the museum that showcases some interesting relics including Biblical scrolls. Driving through the Negev desert which has arid landscapes that are dry and barren, I was surprised to see specks of green. Going closer, I realised that I am in the midst of a vineyard and to my fortune it was harvest season and the vines were bursting with white and purple grapes. As we stepped into the winery, I learned that Israel's deserts have a few boutique desert wine places that manufacture their own blend of wines and the Carmei

Avdat wine cellar is one of them. This place is a delight as apart from the grapes, you will also see fruit trees like pomegranate, figs, peaches and olives. There is a wine tour and wine tasting as well here and if you have more time, the place also offers eco-friendly accommodation. While the desert is extremely hot, a stop at the Arava Agriculture Center will cool you off. The detailed research and development activities here have resulted in watermelon being grown vertically as well. A short tour will showcase how vegetables and herbs are grown and it is impossible to take your eyes off the arresting sun flowers that bloom.

Swim with the dolphins at the Red Sea

Eilat, Israel's southernmost resort



The southernmost tip of Israel Eilat

town on the Red Sea has a holiday mood to it. The sea itself is one of the best, especially if you want to swim in it. The calm waters here are almost therapeutic and the canals and waterways interspersed with landscaped gardens and flowering shrubs, make a wonderful sight for sore eyes. The musical fountain at Eilat is a must visit while you are here and the show of music and water is synchronised to perfection and it is where families bond together as well. I was quite charmed by little children dancing in front of the fountains to the music, getting drenched and having a whale of a time! And to get up close with nature, visit the Dolphin Reef, a beach with water attractions and an opportunity to swim with the dolphins. In fact, the dolphins come close to the staff and you can actually touch them! In Eilat,



Eilat's Underwater Observatory

PHOTOS BINDU GOPAL RAO



PHOTOS BINDU GOPAL RAO

Sunset in Tel Aviv

a visit to the Underwater Observatory Marine Park, with underwater museum, aquarium, shark pools and coral reefs, is a must as well. This is where you can also see how the underwater beings are fed and take a lesson in deep sea diving.

Party till you drop at Tel Aviv

Tel Aviv, Israel's commercial, cultural and financial centre is always buzzing with life. Here the beach welcomes you and the water of the Mediterranean Sea is simply breathtaking. In complete

contrast to the rest of the country, this is where you have tree lined walking paths, buzzing restaurants and a vibrant night life where the party never ends. And no, it is not just all glitz and glamour. As you walk around you will see that this place also has some lovely

UNESCO-listed Bauhaus buildings, the calm Neve Tzedek quarter and Jaffa that has an interesting Arab heritage. The atmosphere here is pumped up and the fun vibe is impossible to miss. As it was my last day here, I decided to head to the beach next to my hotel

that was abuzz with all kinds of activities—people swimming, playing with a frisbee and children having a great time. And to my pleasant surprise I was treated to a sunset like no other. The sky morphed into myriad shades of orange and red and yellow and

as I stood transfixed, I saw a man in a wheelchair enjoying life's little moments as it is meant to be. Truly, Israel was a revelation in more ways than one and I have come away with memories that will always make me smile! □



Candies at a local market

Fact File

How to reach: Turkish Airways flies from Mumbai to Istanbul with an onward connection to Tel Aviv.

Where to stay: Israel has a number of options and Dan Boutique Hotel, Jerusalem, Ein Gedi Hotel, King Solomom Hotel, Eilat, Carlton Hotel and Tel Aviv are good luxury options.

Travel Tips

- › Israel's currency is the Shekel that is not traded in India. However, you can carry US dollars and get it changed in Israel. Just make sure you spend all the currency while you are there.
- › The summer is quite severe so adequate sun protection is a must. Carry a hat with you at all times.
- › Try the local food and desserts while you are here, especially the Israeli salads that are a great vegan option, too.