

## TRAVEL

# 'Promised Land' a country of interesting contrasts

BY DIANE HANSON  
SPECIAL WRITER

A chaos of religions, nationalities, politics and history, Israel has certainly had more than its share of conflicts. The recent election of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in June has offered more promise for peace and, along with millennium fever, more tourists are venturing to the Holy Land.

The first thing to prepare for on a trip to Israel is a long flight. Connections from Detroit Metro—along with layovers—add up to about 17 hours of traveling time.

Traveling through the bustling streets of Tel Aviv, Nazareth, Jerusalem and other cities brought me to the realization that I had more to fear from the Israeli drivers than from any terrorists. Horns honk regularly, and many drivers tend to ignore the physical law that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

Still, security is a factor in the lives of those who live in the country.

"This idea of security sits actually very, very heavily inside every person, every child in this country," said Oded Geva, our tour guide. Geva, 42, is a first-generation Israeli on his father's side and second-generation on his mother's.

"I remember my father saying, when I was a little child, 'When you arrive at the age of 18, you won't need to go into the army anymore because there will be

peace by then,'" said Geva. "He was convinced about it, but that was far and away from being the case." Geva, like other Israeli young men, served three years in the army from the time he turned 18.

Israeli women serve two years. And each year Geva is still called back to the reserves. "Even though I am now dressed in civilian clothes, I am still part of the army," he said.

I became accustomed to the site of soldiers dressed in army camouflage and carrying M-16 rifles everywhere in Israel—not just along the West Bank area, but from the museums to the holy sites.

## Project tourism

There are still high hopes for continued peace in Israel. "Tourism for Israel is huge, along with high-tech," said Geva. "If there is a country which should be based on tourism, it is Israel."

Archaeological and holy sites and ideal weather that dominates most of the year makes Israel enticing.

Promised Land. In 1999 Israel hosted 2,200,000 visitors, he said. Three to four million are anticipated for the year 2000. There are currently 30,000 hotel rooms available in Israel with plans to bring that number to 40,000 during the millennial year.

Tzion Ben David, Director of North American Operations for the Israeli Ministry of Tourism,

## Plan ahead

If Israel is a destination you have set your sites on, start planning now. Make an appointment with a favorite travel agent and check out the Web sites below:

- The official website of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism is [www.goisrael.com](http://www.goisrael.com) or call their toll-free at 1-888-77-ISRAEL.
- Other sites with helpful information are:
  - [www.vacationsinrael.com](http://www.vacationsinrael.com),
  - [www.jesus2000.com](http://www.jesus2000.com)
  - [http://travel.yahoo.com/Destinations/middle\\_east/countries/israel/](http://travel.yahoo.com/Destinations/middle_east/countries/israel/).

## TRIP OF A LIFETIME

said, "Forty-eight percent of Americans who come to Israel are repeat visitors," and added that everyone is welcome.

As a first-timer to the "Promised Land" I was amazed at the contrast of landscapes, people and religions in the tiny country.

Slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey, within hours one can travel from the green, fertile lands of Israel's Galilee to the barren brown mountains of the Judean wilderness. In a day's travel, one can take in the sparkling blue Mediterranean, the Sea of Galilee (Israel's only body of fresh water) and the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth and the highest salt concentration of any of earth's bodies of water.

And scattered throughout the countryside are some of the most fascinating excavations of ancient civilizations and the most holy sites of the three

major monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. And it is these amazing and holy sites that have drawn so many visitors and pilgrims to the age-old land for thousands of years.

## Ancient cities

Many of the ancient cities in Israel are still being excavated and have been declared national parks under the Israel Nature and National Parks Protection Authority. To touch the ruins of these ancient cities is to touch history.

Nearly every town we visited in Israel was steeped in history that dated back thousands of years. Traveling north from Tel Aviv along the Mediterranean coastline, we came first to the ancient seaport of Old Jaffa, claimed to be the oldest port town in the Western World—at least 3,200 years old. Jaffa is where Jonah set sail on his way



On the sea: A tour boat took our group out onto the calm waters of the Sea of Galilee: Diane Hanson (front); Melissa Harmon, (middle row left to right) Kate Blain and Oded Geva; Matt Sedensky, Bob O'Steen and Soni Tick (back row left to right).

to meeting up with the whale. When the Jews came to Jaffa in 1200 BC, it was known as Canaan.

Haifa is Israel's third-largest city and contains its largest port. Haifa is a busy city filled with industry and commerce. Sitting atop Mt. Carmel and overlooking the Mediterranean, the city is a harbor of harmony between the Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Bahai faiths—something not as evident at some of the other holy sites in the land.

Traveling the narrow streets of Nazareth was an experience all by itself. We visited the Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation, the site where it is believed Mary was told by the Angel Gabriel that she would be the mother of God. The church is modern (completed in 1969) and is built

over the site, a cave known as the Grotto of the Annunciation, in the lower part of the church.

## Bethlehem

Even though I was certain Bethlehem was no longer "little" or "still," it was a bit disconcerting to get caught in the horrible traffic jam there after driving through an equally congested Jerusalem. Bethlehem is the place where the Christmas story began.

Bethlehem is also a holy city for the Jewish people as the birthplace of King David, the burial place of Rachel, and the hometown of Elimelech in the Book of Ruth.

Diane Hanson is a Canton resident who visited Israel in November. Follow her to Jerusalem next week.

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