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# HEAVENLY RIDING IN THE HOLY LAND

by Alisa Clickenger

I traveled with *Edelweiss Bike Travel* and their Israeli partner, *TAMAR Mediterranean Mototours Ltd.* One of our tour guides was Eytan Magen, the founder of *TAMAR* and an Israeli native, and at varying times we were joined by Avi Ben Yosef, an Israeli professional tour guide and motorcyclist. Our bikes for the nine-day tour included *Yamaha Super Ténérés* and *Kawasaki Versys*. I selected a *Versys 1000* because they're not available in the U.S. Also, we'd been warned that there are many kinds of "hot" in Israel and my *REV'IT!* mesh gear was a terrific choice because it was full-on summer. Still, there were times when the only way to beat the heat was to get off the bikes and seek out air-conditioned buildings.

Eytan led us high above Tel Aviv to take in a sweeping view of the city, then North along the coast. Our first stop was the Muhraka Monastery at Mt. Carmel where Avi made history come alive with biblical excerpts while pointing to the very locations where the events took place.


After the Carmelite monastery we rode to the Hula marshes and walked the boardwalk. Later at our northernmost destination we spent the night at Kib-

butz Snir. A founding member took us on a tour and spoke of life on the kibbutz that included a walk along a tall chain-link fence laced with concertina wire. Such is life for the idyllic farming community barely two miles from the Syrian and Lebanese borders.

The next morning we hiked to the lovely Baniyas Waterfall. Starkly contrasting the morning's verdant countryside, less than an hour later we found ourselves riding through the desolate desert landscape up to the Nimrud Crusader Fortress. Bus loads of tourists walked the grounds, seemingly immune to the unnerving machine gun turrets and their panoramic view of the Golan Heights.

Bomb shelters scattered throughout the countryside were immediately forgotten upon our arrival at the Bay Club Hotel in Haifa. The posh hotel served as our base for two nights, enabling a ride to the old city of Acre the next day. The fort and ruins date back to the time of the Crusaders, with remnants of Templar, Ottoman, Turkish and British civilizations thrown into the mix.

We left Haifa via the Giboa Panorama Drive in order to take in its extraordinary view of the harbor, then to Qumran to tour its ruins. Lunch was one of the famed



Layers of history remain at the Elias Sourasky Archaeological Garden: Starting in B.C. with the Hasmonean, Herod, Roman, Byzantine, Early Muslim, Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman Periods. The Tower of David, built by the Ottomans in the 17th Century on an earlier Mamluk structure, now serves as a symbol for Jerusalem.

*Edelweiss* picnics in a spectacular location overlooking the Dead Sea, and I really appreciated the opportunity to relax at Mineral Beach. Mineral Beach at the Dead Sea is famous for its supposedly reduced UV rays, the healing salt water and its therapeutic beauty mud. Just across the water were the calm cliffs of Jordan. At thirteen hundred feet below sea level, it marked the lowest geographical point of our journey.

As we left the inland sea behind we headed for the Hanokdim Bedouin Tents Resort to spend the night in large communal tents. The Bedouin way of life is slowly disappearing, and the resort is an attempt to educate travelers while helping to keep their nomadic lifestyle alive. At sunset our group traded motorcycles for camels to take in some of the twilight desert sights. Then dinner, where we stuffed ourselves on Mediterranean treats and sweets under a massive tent before taking part in the evening's storytelling. Bedouin tents are always open to travelers, no matter what the hour. Coffee is brewed, and the rhythmic grinding of the beans alerts others that there are guests.

Rising well before dawn we rode to Masada, the mighty fortress, hiking the mountain to watch the sunrise over the Judean Desert. We were awestruck by the colossal ruins and marveled at their remarkable engineering. Built by King Herod to withstand any conceivable siege, the irony was not lost in that the "Roman Ramp" that made it so easy for us to hike up to the "impenetrable" fortress had ultimately been how the Romans gained entry and conquered the stronghold.

## LOST AND FOUND

Riding down the mountain with Masada at our backs, I somehow got separated from the group. It was then I realized my road map was on the support truck, and that I didn't have a cell phone or any way to contact the guides. But having ridden alone in various parts of the world, I'd been in far worse situations. Serendipity and the kindness of strangers usually got me through tough situations while opening the door to whatever adventure came my way.

From the morning briefing I recalled mention of a crater we were to visit, and that we'd end the day in Jerusalem. So I formed a plan: find the crater, and if I did not find the group there, I'd head to Jerusalem.

Israel was full of helpful people, and thanks to a crew of construction workers, a policeman and a herd of camels that forced me to re-route, I finally found the main road south. Riding alone felt terrific and allowed me to stop whenever I wanted to take pictures, something that wasn't possible with the group. Along the way I bumped into a trio of sport bike riders who led me to the correct turn for the Ha Makhtesh Crater. And somewhere along Highway 224 I was reunited with the tour. I'm pretty sure the huge smile on my face wasn't entirely appropriate as the tour guides were far more alarmed at my disappearance than I was. Besides, I had a delightful time connecting with the local people while having an adventure of my own.

## HOLY LAND

Layer upon layer of history can be found in Jerusalem, and arriving in the Holy Land via motorcycle felt like a pilgrimage of its own. Avi met us outside the city and escorted us

A bit of levity at the otherwise solemn Nimrud Crusader Fortress overlooking the Golan Heights.



up to the Goldman Promenade for its commanding view of old Jerusalem and beyond.

We spent two days exploring places such as the Western Wall, the Jaffa Gate, King David's Tomb, the Holy Sepulcher Church, the Sephardic Synagogue of Mt. Zion, and the Prison of Christ. Picture taking is not allowed at some sites; in others the raw emotions of others sometimes did not invite photography, either. I find human history interwoven with religious beliefs inspiring. Jerusalem is a city to be experienced—but two days was not enough.

On our last night in Jerusalem I took a walk through the old city. The bustling streets and clamorous outdoor cafes were full of late night revelers. Good cheer was in the air, shoppers reveled in their late night purchases and young people milled around the park benches. The old city teemed with the sounds of modern civilization. But back at the hotel I received a desperate email from my mother asking if I was all right. Evidently in the U.S. news there were reports of a kidnapping, and the subsequent riots and demonstrations in Old Jerusalem. It was difficult to explain to her that the city I'd just explored was not the Jerusalem of the U.S. media—that I was perfectly safe and happy.

The next day I flew home where I watched CNN reporting on rockets being fired over the Tel Aviv airport. The Israel I left behind will undoubtedly be changed yet again, although there's one thing that will remain the same—Israel's long fabric of history, holiness and humor. As travelers, it's not our job to judge, ours is to observe and absorb. And motorcycle touring is a fine way to do it. Shalom. **ADV**

## MOTORCYCLE TOURING IN ISRAEL

It's an easy flight from the U.S. to Israel and entering the country is stress-free. You're issued a ticket rather than a permanent stamp into your passport to ward off potential border crossing "misunderstandings" in other countries. Highway signage is excellent, making it easy to navigate around the country. And, locals are friendly and the majority speak at least some English.

### Riding Tips:

- The white line is sacred.
- Beware of speed traps.
- Hot highway paint is very slippery.
- Asphalt does melt in extreme heat. Watch for road damage.
- Beware of camels.
- Because of the brutal sun, mesh gear makes the most sense. Rain is not a large concern, so pack light right down to your perforated leather boots. Breathable or mesh gloves make the most sense as well.
- Pack a wide brimmed sun hat and don it as soon as you take off your helmet.
- Ladies, bring a large scarf for covering tank-topped shoulders in the holy places, or buy one there. Discreet dress is best.

For more adventurous motorcyclists interested in touring Israel on two wheels without a tour guide, **TAMARBIKES** has a self-guided tour option. **TAMARBIKES** will arrange everything—a full package of maps, road directions, hotel vouchers, and a pre-loaded GPS with your routing. **TAMARBIKES** can customize each trip to your personal liking. Israel is easy to tour because most road signs are in English. **TamarBikes.com**



Our fun international group consisted of two Romanians, four Germans, one Brit, two Israeli natives (Eytan and Tamar) and me as the sole American. Brand new bike choices included Yamaha Super Ténéré and a Kawasaki Versys 1000 or 650.