

travel



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ANCIENT BLEND

Story and photos by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

Following my grandmother's sudden death in Tel Aviv in the 1970s, my mother briefly returned to Israel. While standing in Jerusalem's Old City, she explained to her cousin's friend that she and her family now lived in Hawaii. An elderly man overhearing the conversation turned to my mother and asked in Yiddish, a language he had no way of knowing whether she understood (she did) — "Do you know Steve McGarrett?"

Israel is a place like no other. Whether you are a Christian, Jew, Muslim or atheist, you will be deeply moved by Jerusalem. If you are a cosmopolitan, hipster, art-loving foodie, you will swoon over Tel Aviv. If you're a history buff, you'll love strolling Old Jaffa. If science or archaeology floats your boat, there are the Dead Sea and the Judean Desert to explore.

Jerusalem

This 10-day journey commenced in Jerusalem, Israel's largest city with nearly a million people. Needing sun after the long flight, I headed to Jerusalem's Biblical Zoo. In a gorgeous, parklike setting of 62 acres, the zoo holds more than 200 species of animals, 40 from the biblical era — like oryx, Persian fallow deer and peacocks — including a Noah's Ark section. Unlike most zoos, this one provides such a natural habitat that it doesn't resemble a zoo, but rather a savanna where animals roam freely, including lemur aplenty that were surprisingly friendly and photo hams.

Following nature's marvels came a visit to Yad Vashem — Israel's official memorial to Holocaust victims, which pays homage to the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis during World War II. The museum's architecture is striking, and its educational displays and exhibits convey a faint hope that history will not repeat itself.

From there I strolled through the crowded Yehuda Market, which offered a colorful display of local fruits, olives, nuts and sweets. Devouring a falafel sandwich, I headed to the famous King David Hotel. Built in the 1920s, it was used as the British civil and army headquarters during the Mandate period. Inside the stately, elegant hotel is a "walk of fame" with dignitaries' signatures: Barack Obama, Margaret Thatcher and Wolf Blitzer, among others, including Stephen Hawking's footprint.



Before heading to dinner at Jerusalem's Old Train Station — a historic depot repurposed with trendy restaurants and shops — I wandered the old German quarter. Built in the mid-1800s by Templars who stayed until WWII, this section reflected a distinctly European architecture.

Loving both art and history, I visited the Israel Museum the next morning. Founded in 1965 by Jerusalem's charismatic former mayor Teddy Kollek, it houses the world's largest Dada exhibit and is the world's leading archaeology museum. It's also home to the Dead

Sea Scrolls — 1,000 scrolls found in 11 caves by Bedouins between 1946 and 1956 — and the Aleppo Codex, ancient biblical manuscripts written around A.D. 930 and smuggled from Syria to Jerusalem in 1958. Also impressive were the Picasso and Gauguin collections; the Belfer ancient, pre-blown glass and Greco-Roman antiquities collection; and the bridal costumes and circle-of-life items of diaspora Jews the world over, including Yemen, India, Libya, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kurdistan and Iraq.

Heading just outside Jerusalem's Old City's Zion Gate, I arrived at Dormition Abbey, where the Last Supper is said to have taken place. It is also where the Virgin Mary is said to have died or "fallen eternally asleep" and been carried to heaven. Built by Kaiser Wilhelm II and completed in 1910, it contains a large church full of beautiful mosaics, a bell tower and, downstairs, a crypt and rotunda honoring Mary Magdalene with a deathbed sculpture made of ivory and cherry wood.

Near the Western Wall, an outer wall surrounding the Temple Mount, and the holiest place for Jews — not far from where the McGarrett question was posed — I smelled the familiarly intoxicating aroma of fresh bread. Following my nose down an alley, I saw a young boy removing enormous bagels from an old stone oven. I bought one that came with an envelope of za'atar.

Please see **ISRAEL, G4**



Al-Bahr Mosque overlooks the Mediterranean in Old Jaffa. Top, some of the results of the many workshops on offer at Galita Chocolate Farm at Kibbutz Degania.

Israel offers visitors a mix of grand scenery, art, religious sights and great food



ISRAEL

Continued from G1

a deliciously pungent Middle East spice blend.

Sustained, I continued to the Holy Sepulchre Church. Built originally by Constantine in A.D. 330, it is Christianity's holiest site and commemorates the Crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus' burial. Four of the last five stations of Christ's walk are inside this beautifully ornate and crowded church.

That evening under clear skies, in the magnificently restored ancient Citadel courtyard at the Tower of David, I enjoyed the unusual sound and light show depicting 4,000 years of Jerusalem's fascinating history.

Nearby at Eucalyptus Restaurant, chef Moshe Basson creates 12-course meals such as eggplant, pomegranate salad and filo dough stuffed duck, based on historical events that the server explains. Certainly I gained 5 pounds that night and relished every moment.

The Judean Desert

Driving east I arrived in Masada, a UNESCO world heritage site. From the highway it appears like other Judean Desert mountains. However, it was here that King Herod built his palatial fortress between 37 and 31 B.C., including pools, bathhouses and sophisticated reservoirs. It's also where 967 Jews, known as resistant Zealots, preferred death to Roman pagan rule. In A.D. 72 they burned their belongings and committed mass suicide. Masada has since become a symbol of courage for the Jewish state.

Meeting up with my Jeep driver, Harel, we drove through the southern part of the desert. Almost immediately we saw a masked shrike — one of nearly a half-billion birds that migrate through Israel. Driving along Wadi Sedom (stream), we saw 70,000-year-old badlands rock formations on one side and 3- to 5-million-year-old salt formations on the other. Upon our arrival at Wadi Pratzim, a mini-Grand Canyon emerged.

The Dead Sea — which borders Israel and Jordan — is Earth's lowest point, 400 meters below sea level and famous for its hyper-salinity. I jumped in and marveled at my inability to sink. Many covered themselves head to toe with the mineral rich dark mud known for its therapeutic properties.

The Sea of Galilee

After another massive Israeli breakfast, I headed north. Near the Galilee's southern shore was Yardenit, where water flows into the Jordan River and Christians believe John first baptized Jesus. From the world over, people come to this idyllic spot to be baptized, re-baptized or to obtain holy waters.

Next on the itinerary was Kibbutz Degania, the Jewish state's first collective agricultural settlement, established in 1909. It represents the region's earliest attempt to create a community based on democratic socialist and economic ideals.

Today a private enterprise, the Galita chocolate farm operates on a part of the kibbutz originally built to herd cows. Galit Alpert



JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR ADVERTISER

Lemurs relax alongside the walkway at the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo.

leased the property nine years ago, and a profitable enterprise was born. For chocoholics like me, visiting this farm is an informative, creative and deliciously caloric experience.

The chocolate aroma is intoxicating. There's a cafe and a kiosk offering take-away chocolates and homemade ice cream. There's also a display window where you can observe the production line. I joined one of the nearly dozen different hands-on chocolate-making workshops offered at the farm. I attempted not to eat everything in sight, but to instead create something pretty. I was not successful on either count, but it was certainly fun.

On the Galilee's north-eastern shore, I joined a foursome for an hourlong raft ride down the Jordan River. Though a tad more intense than advertised — we got completely soaked and stuck along the edges several times — we also laughed heartily.

The day ended at Nof Ginosar's Museum, which exhibits a boat discovered in 1986 in the Galilee but is dated between 40 B.C. and A.D. 80. Alternate theories about its history suggest it was used by disciples of the Nazarene Christian sect to spread the gospel or is merely an ordinary boat used in a Jewish rebellion against the Romans.

Tel Aviv and Old Jaffa

Tel Aviv is one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities, possessing an abundant nightlife, art scene, foodie culture and famous Mediterranean coastline. On any given street one can hear a dozen different languages being spoken.

Starting at Shalom Meir Tower — Israel's first skyscraper — visitors can see the Middle East's largest mosaic displayed in a lobby lined with retail shops. Along Rothschild Boulevard is Independence Hall, where Israel's declaration of independence was signed May 14, 1948. This wide boulevard has numerous outdoor cafes and excellent displays of German Bauhaus architecture. At night the area transforms into a millennial hangout.

A turn onto Sheinkin Street revealed more shopping opportunities in a haven of eclectic boutiques and local designer shops.

It was Tuesday, so I made my way to the twice-weekly open-air craft market on Nahalat Binyamin, where I bought gifts made by local artists. Naturally I drifted inside nearby Carmel Market, containing abundant displays of sweets, fruits and dozens of "Made in China" stalls.

Old Jaffa, where my mother was born, is a port city with 4,000 years of history marked by, among others, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Ottoman Turks and the British. Today it has a heterogeneous population of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Commencing at the Clock Tower, I traversed the maze of antiquated streets passing St. Peter's and St. George's churches. Making my way to the Ilana Goor Museum, a magnificent example of 18th-century Ottoman architecture, I stepped into an orgy of incredible art and awe-inspiring architecture with sweeping Mediterranean views.

Founded in 1995 by Ilana Goor, an artist, designer and sculptor, it is unlike any museum anywhere. Goor's entire personal residence, except for her bedroom, is open to the public. Her eclectic art and sculptures are intertwined with the works of several other artists. On the third-floor ceiling the artistic circles overhead are actually pipes surrounded by cement for air circulation. Nearby are photos of Goor with world figures such as former President Bill Clinton, former Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the Dalai Lama and others.

The final two days in Tel Aviv were spent recovering nicely on the balmy Mediterranean, enjoying the hip Brown TLV Urban Hotel situated near the galleries and shops of the artsy Neve Tzedek neighborhood and scouring Jaffa's interesting flea markets. The last evening called for dinner at Salva Vida where Napa-trained chef Yuval Fachler prepared mouthwatering lamb chops with bacon ragout and a dessert of apple caramel popcorn served with semifreddo that made me cry with delight.

On the flight home I thought of that popcorn, my mom and McGarrett.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer and legal columnist based in Los Angeles.

IF YOU GO ...

Israel

- >> **The best way:** Fly to L.A., then take El-Al Airline's nonstop to Tel Aviv; round trip starts at \$1,223.
- >> **Telephones:** From U.S., dial 011 (overseas access), 972 for Israel, city code and number.
- >> **Getting around:** English-speaking taxi drivers are plentiful. Extensive bus system. Rental car easiest if exploring outside Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. All signage in English, Hebrew and Arabic.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

JERUSALEM

Mount Zion Boutique Hotel, 17 Hebron Road. A lovely lobby with views of the Old City a 10-minute walk away. Doubles start at \$179. Tel. 2/568-9555, MountZion.co.il

Eucalyptus Restaurant. Unforgettable dinner near Tower of David, Hativat Yerushalayim 14, Felt Alley. tel. 2/624-4331, the-eucalyptus.com

DEAD SEA

Isrotel Dead Sea Resort & Spa, off Highway 90, Ein Bokek. Doubles start at \$187, including breakfast buffet. Tel. 8/638-7797, Isrotel.com

GALILEE

Kibbutz Degania Guesthouse, doubles start at \$120, including breakfast buffet. Tel. 4/675-5660, dganit.co.il

Nof Ginosar Kibbutz Hotel, doubles start at \$212, including breakfast buffet. Tel. 4/670-0320, English.ginosar.co.il. Excellent restaurant Ktsy Hanahal at kibbutz's entrance. Tel. 4/671-7776, katsyhanahal@gmail.com

TEL AVIV

Brown TLV Urban Hotel, 25 Kalisher St. Trendy hotel with rooftop deck. Walk to Carmel Market, artsy Neve Zedek area and seashore. Doubles start at \$300, including breakfast at one of four nearby restaurants. Champagne arrival, 24/7 lobby cappuccino machine. Tel. 3/717-0200, BrownTLV.com

Salva Vida. Talented chef Yuval Fachler serves innovative farm-to-table cuisine. Tel. 3/778-8996. Check info@salva-vida.com for the location of this pop-up eatery.

Dan Panorama Hotel, 10 Kaufman St. Large, sea-facing hotel. Doubles start at \$362, including Israel's most extensive breakfast buffet. Tel. 3/519-0190, DanHotels.com

TO DO

Galita Chocolate Farm. Kibbutz Degania. Farm entry and film are free. Chocolate workshops \$15 to \$20 per person, \$48 for four. Tel. 4/675-5660, dganit.co.il

Jeep Tours, hiking or camping in Judean Desert, excellent guide Harel Zelcer. Tel. 52/273-9779, deserttrails.co.il

To learn more: For tourism information and trip planning, go to visitisrael.com.

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