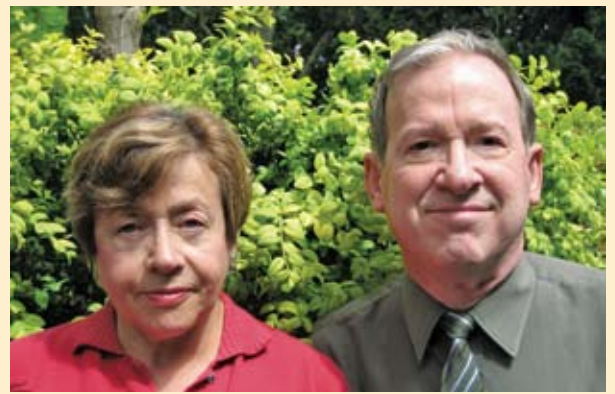


Susan and Charlie Pitchford

Israel: To Go *or Not* To Go



Israel, currently celebrating 60 years of independence, attracts a lot of international attention.

Yet for over 4000 years, the land of Israel has been the destination of travellers from far and near, including crusaders, conquerors, and wanderers. Now tourists and pilgrims are once again going to that amazing land in greater numbers than ever.

The country of just 8000 square miles encompasses an extraordinary contrast of landscapes, is packed with 5 millennia of archaeological treasures, and is sacred to three monotheistic faiths.

Although many would love to visit Israel, there is that ever-present concern . . . *is it safe?* My husband and I visited Israel this January so I can answer that question very simply. Yes, it is safe.

I feel there is a major misconception of the travel realities in Israel.



Church of the Beatitudes

Literally millions of North Americans have visited that country over the last 10 years, building a tourism safety record second to none. At no time during our 10-day visit did we or anyone else in our group of 30 fellow travel agents feel at risk. A word of advice, though, to first-time visitors: To fully experience all that Israel has to offer—and for safety reasons—you should always travel throughout Israel on a tour with an experienced Israeli guide.

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Because our group had an excellent guide, we were able to see a significant number of historical sites and Holy Land attractions in our classic 9-day tour. We experienced the four main regions of the country: Modern Tel Aviv; the Galilee region; the Dead Sea; and Jerusalem, one of the holiest cities in the world.

Tel Aviv

The first city you enter when you leave the Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv can be a bit surprising. The antiquity of Old Jerusalem is a sharp contrast to the modern, trendy city full of Western-style amenities on a beautiful 10-mile Mediterranean coastline. Right now, the city is gearing up for its centennial celebration in 2009, so it's livelier than ever.

Old Jaffa, the original port in ancient Israel, overlooks the sea and

nearby Tel Aviv. Here, cobblestone streets offer access to the artist quarter, cafés, and shops as well as the famed St. Peter's Church.

The Port of Tel Aviv, once known as the Gate of Zion or entrance to the Jewish homeland, has undergone a complete overhaul.

The White City area of Tel Aviv—a UNESCO World Heritage site—was built in the 1930s by graduates of the Bauhaus School of Art and Design. A walk along Rothschild Boulevard shows the world's largest concentration of Bauhaus architecture.

The North

Heading north from Tel Aviv, we took a step back in history at Caesarea, the ancient Mediterranean port built by King Herod. Today, the Caesarea National Park boasts the remains of the former Roman capital and Crusader city. Here we enjoyed an amazing multimedia presentation with high-tech, interactive computer kiosks where we learned more of Caesarea's history and had a tour of the Roman Theatre.

Nazareth, in the lower Galilee, is considered the cradle of Christianity,



Capernaem

believed to be the hometown of Jesus. Here we visited the Basilica of the Annunciation and Mary's Well.

Tiberias is a historic resort on the Sea of Galilee where it is said Jesus walked on water. We had the unique experience of sailing in a reproduction of the famous "Jesus Boat." At more than 600 feet below sea level, Tiberias is one of Israel's most popular resorts where cafés and shops line streets full of life.

Nearby we visited the Mount of Beatitudes, believed to be the site where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. The beautiful church and grounds offer a view of the Sea of Galilee. Definitely a place to listen, meditate, and reflect on life.

The Dead Sea

Masada National Park—the remains of the mountaintop fortress that looms as an eternal symbol of Jewish history and heritage—is probably one of the most dramatic attractions in Israel.

The onsite visitor centre provides a detailed history, including a sound-and-light show depicting life at the time of the infamous battle of Jewish Zealots 1900 years ago. It was originally built, however, by King Herod as an opulent refuge for himself. We ascended the mountain by cable car but it is possible to climb the serpentine path to the top. Masada was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001.

The Dead Sea is famous for its distinctive mineral composition. At 1300 feet below sea level, it is the lowest place on earth, emits 10 to 25 percent more oxygen than is normal, and is believed to have healing powers. Once you are immersed in the Dead Sea, it is impossible not to float on the mineral-laden waters.

At the nearby Kibbutz Ein Gedi, we visited the botanical gardens and had a wonderful lunch of fresh-caught Tilapia fish.

Jerusalem

The capital of Israel and birthplace of the three monotheistic religions, this 3000-year-old city houses the most revered sites of all three—the

Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and the Dome of the Rock.

Mount Scopus—a UNESCO World Heritage site—offers a panoramic view of Jerusalem's old city and its walls.

The Western Wall, Judaism's most sacred site, is the actual remains of the Second Temple destroyed by the Romans. This open-air synagogue, which segregates men and women, hosts thousands of worshippers in continuous prayer.

Old Jerusalem is an amazing experience. We were in awe as we explored the Arab Market, with its winding alleyways of stalls selling souvenirs, food, and spices.

And in the Christian Quarter is the Via Dolorosa—the route Jesus took from the time of his condemnation by Pilate to his crucifixion. Here, we walked the 14 Stations of the Cross and toured the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Nearby is Yad Vashem, the National Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust. It presents the chronology leading up to this tragic event using over 2500 authentic artifacts, including testimonies and photographs. No matter your religious persuasion, this memorial is a very emotional experience.

For many on our tour, including ourselves, this trip was life-changing. Isn't that what travelling is all about? ▲

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Inside the Jerusalem Market



Walking along the Via Dolorosa



Scale model of Old Jerusalem