

GUNS AND MOSES, where so much began! Pros and Cons

Magnificent landscapes and perfect riding roads are part of what Israel has to offer. Add to that a crash course in history from the Holy Bible to contemporary politics. Either way, it is an exotic destination that probably leaves no-one cold. It is where the writer was on a scouting tour - nine days on the road with no idea of what would happen after his return.

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"To Israel? How can you go there? That is the last country where I would go on a holiday!" thought my Turkish hairdresser. "To Israel,

on a motorbike! Cool! I envy you!" comments a buddy, Andreas Kumpel on the tour to a country that is polarized as no other. On June 26th came the news that the Israeli army swept through the West Bank searching for three kidnapped teenagers.

Sunday, June 29 – Marc Marquez just won the eighth MotoGP at Assen; Israel flies air-strikes on the Gaza strip in response to five Palestinian rockets. At Dusseldorf airport a free-church priest distributes leaflets promoting short sermons by telephone! Man does not live by bread alone!

Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv: small talk with a staffer, Linoy who has already been to Italy and Poland. "Poland?" Yes, Poland. She has visited Auschwitz with her high-school. "Motorcycles?" yes, she likes them too and rides pillion with her uncle – but you always wind up at a closed border "because of the bad neighbours!"

Welcome party: Eytan has recently founded a touring company now offering motorcycle tours through Israel. Lutz and Nicole from Kiel, Daniel and Simone from Bucharest are the first customers. There are also Avi and Axel who are our guides together with Eytan, with years of experience riding in Israel. Danny is the driver of the support van and the press is represented by Alisa from the USA, Nathan from England and myself, a former choir boy from Niederrhein

Monday, June 30 – Lined up in front of the hotel are the motorcycles: Versys 650 and 1000, 1200 Super Teneres. Traffic and infrastructure of bustling Tel Aviv are very similar to any other south European city – apart from the posters and signs in Hebrew.

Stop on Mount Carmel where according to the Scriptures the Prophet Elijah challenged the gods Yahweh and Baal to a duel to prove their power. Each one was to set alight the other's altar. A fascinating story particularly when Avi compensates for his memory lapses with theatrical quote from the Old Testament stored on his Holy I-Phone app. Because the Holy Land, historic Palestine, is full of such biblical sites, it acts as a magnet for student trips. Dusty earth then becomes the stage for a two thousand year old cinema of the mind.

Back in the here and now, our enthusiasm cools somewhat as we encounter a column of tanks in sandy camouflage and a row of jeeps with mounted guns manned by boy soldiers who still need to grow into their uniforms and helmets. All Israeli youngsters have to enlist into the forces, boys for two years and girls for 18 months.

The Hula reserve – a glimpse of paradise! This is a way station for varied species of birds in their thousands on the migratory route from Europe to Africa and back. There is symbolism

in the fact that this is the place where the Jewish people finally settled after decades of wandering and genocide!

"There are no more orange groves", we are told by Buffy, co-founder of Kibbutz Snir only three kilometres from the Lebanese border.

In the 1970's the kibbutz was an idea of a better life based on communal agricultural society. Today, collectives are not very popular and often converted into holiday villages. The playground and swimming pool that liven up the grounds cannot hide the two bunker (air-raid shelter) entrances! After a muggy but jolly barbecue a news flash from the internet reports the three Israeli teenagers abducted to the West Bank have been found – murdered.

Tuesday, July 1 – On to the Golan Heights, internationally recognized as part of Syria, under Israeli control since the Six day war of 1967. Since 1974 there is a buffer zone manned by UN troops. Today, the UN soldiers from Nepal, wearing their blue berets, like any other tourist "shoot" only the former military post on Mt. Bental under the signpost that reads Damascus 60 kms., Baghdad 800 kms. Washington, D.C., 11800 kms. You get some feel of the past through the silhouettes of the tin-soldier placed there. Zombies???

Like a fata morgana the Sea of Galilee shines turquoise, an oasis for body and soul. We drop anchor on the shore of kibbutz Genosar, surging into the wonderfully air-conditioned Yigal Alon Museum. The star exhibit is the Jesus boat – a fishing boat from the time of Jesus, similar to the one in which he and his disciples crossed the lake. This really fires your imagination....

Heavenly surprise at the junction south of Tiberias, curved asphalt like manna on earth, Switzerland indeed! Ideal stuff for motorbike riders moving on their winding pursuit of an earthly Nirvana! It seems to be not too far from Haifa. This multicultural seaport is regarded as a prime example of peaceful co-existence of Jews and Arabs. We stroll through the balmy summer night to down-town

Where restaurant tables are set out, reminiscent of those in Siena around the Campo. We drink a toast: Lechaim – to life! Only a seismographic nature would be thinking there about the eye of the hurricane.

Wednesday, July 2 – Panoramic view of the hanging gardens of the Bahai, Haifa's main attraction and Center of the world's eight million Bahai believers. Several hair-pin bends on the way to the next stop the grottoes of Rosh Hanikra carved by the waters flushed from the shimmering blue Mediterranean Sea from a rock-face that ends at the Lebanese border.

20 kms. South of Rosh Hanikra, 60 steps lead down into the underground city of Acre an ancient crusader fortress with a long history.

The culinary delights of the tour: falafel, humus, Tabuleh and all the other colourful treats ever present on the table deserve a song of praise!

Thursday, July 3 – Briefing: From green to yellow and brown, today we shall be experiencing a dramatic change of scenery as we go from Haifa to the Dead Sea and the Negev desert. But first of all a touch of apocalyptic mood at Megiddo, according to biblical interpretation the site of the Apocalypse (Armageddon). Then it feels like Sardinia as the scenic road over Mt. Gilboa winds through a wooded ridge to the great delight of our four teams that sweep

round the curves in riding as synchronized in a Sport arena!. But you soon realize you are on an island as we reach a turnpike on the new road dipping down to the Jordan valley. Route 90, a steel barred hut guarded by an attractive girl soldier fully armed right to her flashing white teeth! Welcome to the West Bank. Here we are in the midst of the subject of conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis, a smouldering fire-brand about to re-align!

The West Bank is an area of about 5800 square Kms. in Israel's east (Berlin is 890 square kms.) Together with the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean coast it forms territory, greatly reduced over the last decades, where according to the UN resolution of 1947 a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel founded in 1948. Since the Six Day War of 1967, Israel has occupied the West Bank, part of which is under Palestinian administration since 1994. In a population of around 2.4 million, there are approximately 400,000 Jewish settlers. There is the tendency to pour more and more of these settlers, mostly National-Religious hardliners who with Bible in hand and under military protection, take over and build on more and more, leaving little room for a two state solution. And so you get hopelessly tangled up with your own opinion about this jungle of the Middle East. The hermetically sealed off West Bank is suspiciously reminiscent of an open-air prison. While Israelis have pretty much unhindered access, mobility and free passage are possible only for a limited number of Palestinians.

Cut: Picnic under the shady thatched roofs of Mineral Beach on the Dead Sea, 404 meters below normal sea level. Dry 38 degree air, water so salty that the chef who cooked this "soup" must have been extremely in love! Probably with the "graces" having fun painting their bodies with the black mud .Quick! The obligatory group-photo: all my bikers on your backs, feet in the air – then back to the desert that way the tires will not overheat.

Is this still Israel or are we in the Arabia as imagined by the layman? What a contrast to the last few days Instead of intensiveness and smallness of the country, there is the feeling of infinity. You can ride comfortably through the desert on asphalt roads - no need for pseudo-enduros to plough through sand and pebbles In conclusion, there are camels at the Bedouin camp at Kfar HaNokdim, our star accommodation for the night, just this side of Africa.

Friday, July 4 – Like glow-worms the lights of the motorcycles haunt their way to Masada, the ruins of a fortress from the time of King Herod. Like ants, we trim trot up the stairs as if to be on time when the chief glow-worm makes his appearance at a sun-up as spectacular as the fall of the mountain fortress. The Romans lay siege to the fortress held at that points by Jewish insurgents, and breaking through the walls encountered 960 corpses. The besieged had preferred collective suicide to surrender. To this day, Israeli recruits take the oath: Masada shall never fall again!

From the Negev desert to Jerusalem. On the outskirts, a vantage point. Next to us, Segways scrape the around the curve. In the distance, up and along the hill like a grey snake winds the wall. Israel built it nine meters high as a bulwark to denote the West Bank. It cuts into the scene like the wall that once divided Berlin. Planned as a protection against Palestinian terror, it is certainly very obvious but the number of suicide bombings has indeed been drastically reduced since its erection.

A worried call from home: The Foreign Office as issued a travel advisory for Jerusalem because of the escalating conflict in Gaza. I ask Avi whether this is new or the way things are normally. "We never have normal unrest. A Palestinian boy has been kidnapped and

burned" It later transpires that this was revenge by Jewish extremists for the killing of the three Israeli teenagers

Saturday, July 5 – Shabbath shalom! This is the greeting of the time-out between Friday evening and Saturday evening when Jewish life largely comes to a stop. No standstill for us. On the contrary as we hike through Jerusalem's Old City .A sense of frenzy in this navel of the world, a Jewish, Christian, Muslim and anything else marks this microcosm of holy roofs and profane bazaars. Even an ordinary parking lot seen with sparkling eyes will be revealed to you as the place from which Jesus left the city in the direction of the Mt. of Olives on the eve of his crucifixion. In the midst of all the human turmoil, a baby cradled in the arms of his orthodox father, sucks happily on his bottle. A touching sight which makes you wonder why with so much love for their own children, there is no sympathy or understanding left for their neighbours.

Sunday, July 6 – Back on the bikes we are on the road to Yad Va Shem,The most important holocaust museum in the world but meant ??????? The translation makes no sense and I am struggling with the German – you will have to figure it out the translation reads:

Could reasonably be expected to just German guests at their express request. I think the text is saying something about hoping for such a reaction from Germans, but am not sureXX

The museum, dedicated to the six million, killed by the Nazis and their collaborators, opens at 9.00, a good time to pass silently though the halls. The spectrum ranges from the tear-provoking, moving children's' memorial to the photos of joy showing French women dancing after the victory of the Allies in 1945. Among it all, a quote from Pastor Andre Trocme who ensured the safety of 5000 Jews at the cost of his own life ended in a concentration camp. "I do not know what a Jew is, we only know what human beings are"

Monday, July 7 – farewell to Eytan and Avi who put together a tour package with great commitment to showing the sweeter side of their country and perfectly organized. The occasional glimpses of what lays behind the dazzling facade of this extraordinary

Country reveals the dilemma of what do you mean by travel. What would a tour to Berlin before 1989 have been without a detour to the wall? Or do you follow the maxim: leave out politics! If you go to Burma, do you write about a military regime? How about a compromise, each one is different.

Tuesday, July 8 – Just as we landed in Dusseldorf, Israel launched operation Rock of Fire (Zuk Eitan), the 50 day Gaza war of 2014, ostensibly triggered by the killing of four youngsters.

Thursday, October 9 – Somehow it seems appropriate to wind up this travel report with a conciliatory conclusion. Perhaps hope dies last or don't worry. Be happy. I opt for the line of a song half as old as the Arab-Israel conflict: no time to breathe, history must be made!

INFO

Anyone who decides to visit Israel with no pre-conceived ideas will experience a mixture of Western and Arab lifestyles and history of a thousand years. This small country is not the ultimate motorbike paradise such as Corsica, but the

Negev desert offers spectacular nature. The explosive political situation in the Middle East is ever present below the surface, but if you want to overcome that, it is possible to do so

ARRIVAL rather than going by land through Jordan or Egypt, most visitors opt for direct flight to Tel Aviv. Various European airports offer this service and there are cheap flights for less than 100 Euros..

It is not recommended to visit Israel at the height of summer as temperatures that prevail in all regions along the Mediterranean Sea are the same there. Summer temperatures can go as high as 40 degrees. Significantly more pleasant temperatures are normal for the months before or the months after. The northern areas of Israel can have snow. Ski heil!

Security: For those of us on the July 2014 tour, the only indication of the Israel-Palestine conflict was only what we heard in the media. We did not feel it at all en route. We rode extensively along the Gaza Strip and crossed into the Wet Bank through a corridor on the Dead Sea. The police and military presence that are part of the local scene are there from consideration of national security . The Gaza war caused many operators to cancel trips to Israel as a precautionary measure. There is currently a cease-fire in place between the sides to the conflict. For further development contact the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or a travel agent you consider reliable.

Documents For entry into Israel you need a passport valid for at last six months. International driving licence is not required. Gasolene Costs 1.60 Euros, as of October 2014.

Language: Hebrew and Arabic are official languages. As a traveller you can get by very well with English

Making Reservations: Through Edelweiss Bike Travel (www.edelweissbike.com) enquiry can be made about the innovative Israel-Trip with the successful premiere scouting tour (1300 kms, in nine days; 4490 Euro, plus air-fare) as planned in the official publicity For competent logistics and motorbike rental the cooperative on site partner Tamar Mediterranean Motortours (www.tamarbikes.com) is confident that this tour, or a variation thereof, will be frequently available in 2015. In addition, this company can arrange personal tours on an individual basis.

Literature and Maps: First choice from the Travel Know-How Travel Guide Israel and Palestina , cost 21.90 Euros, the map of 1:250000 scale, cost 9.90 Euros. For atmosphere and up-to-date information: "Israel, Portrait of a Country" by Ruth Kinet, cost 16.90 Euros, "In A Foreign Land" by Assaf Gavron, 22.99 Euros. In addition, I recommend two prize wining films about the situation in Israel, one from the Palestinian and one from the Israeli point of view: "5 Broken Cameras" and "The Gatekeepers".