

Israel

Recent troubles have put it back in the spotlight. We went there for a ride, just before those troubles began...

For this issue we travelled to Israel, joining Austrian tour company Edelweiss, who had teamed up with local company Tamar Motorcycle Tours for a seven-day circuit around the country. We would be joined by journalists from two other magazines – one from Germany, one from America – as well as two pairs of paying customers, one from Romania, the other from Germany. It was the first tour of its kind and the first time it had been run. We were to be the guinea pigs, part of an experiment to see if a guided motorcycle tour around Israel would be successful and of interest to motorcyclists around the world.

The trip took place just before the recent troubles, with us departing two days before the first proper day of conflict. During our time there we were witness to the build up of it; the three Israeli settlers murdered in the West Bank, and the Palestinian boy killed in retaliation. But we didn't see any real signs of trouble or violence. Had we not read the papers or seen the news, or spoken to anyone about it while we were there, then we would never have even noticed that such troubles existed, and that the warm and prosperous land we were riding through was

actually victim to so much bloodshed and ongoing (now 2,000 years and counting) suffering.

The trip was both informative, and upsetting. Upsetting because the world really shouldn't be like this, and humans by now – you would have thought – should have learned to live alongside one another, and be decent to one another, rather than fighting and killing and dying in the manner, and the volume, that they do. The trip to Israel revealed to me that we in the UK are shielded from the realities of life for so many other people around the world. We take our existence for granted. We never feel it to be under threat. But there, in Israel, whether you live on the Israeli side of the wall, or on the Palestinian side of the wall, it seems like turmoil and war is just around the next corner. That's just how it is. That's just how it's always been. Get used to it.

Our journey began at Luton airport where you are made to converse with a member of the Israeli Defence Force before even being allowed to approach the check-in desk. The young and polite lady wanted to know why I was travelling to Israel, what I was going to do there, who I was going to meet, what I was going to see. Did I know

anyone who lived in the Middle East and why had I been through Pakistan on recent travels? A motorcycle trip, I explained, much like this one. Pass the test and you are allowed to check in.

On the flight I read the newspaper, the Jerusalem Post, where the top story was 'Indyk quits as Washington's special envoy to peace talks.' The other big stories were 'Gaza rockets ignites Sderot plastics factory' and 'As Iraq troops push to retake Tikrit from Islamist extremists, parties pursue talks.' Finally 'Arab protesters against IDF should be treated like terrorists.' The rest of the paper was the same: almost every story about the existence, survival and current state of the country and the region. There is no Israeli answer to Posh n Becks or TOWIE, not on the front pages of the newspaper at least. As I said, the world out here is different.

We landed in Tel Aviv, and what a city it is. Like many other people I have seen it on the news over the years and almost imagined it to be a desert-like hell-hole, with a war correspondent permanently on stand-by. It's not like that at all. Tel Aviv is modern, cosmopolitan, clean, seemingly safe and, as it's on the banks of the Mediterranean, offers an excellent strip of harbour

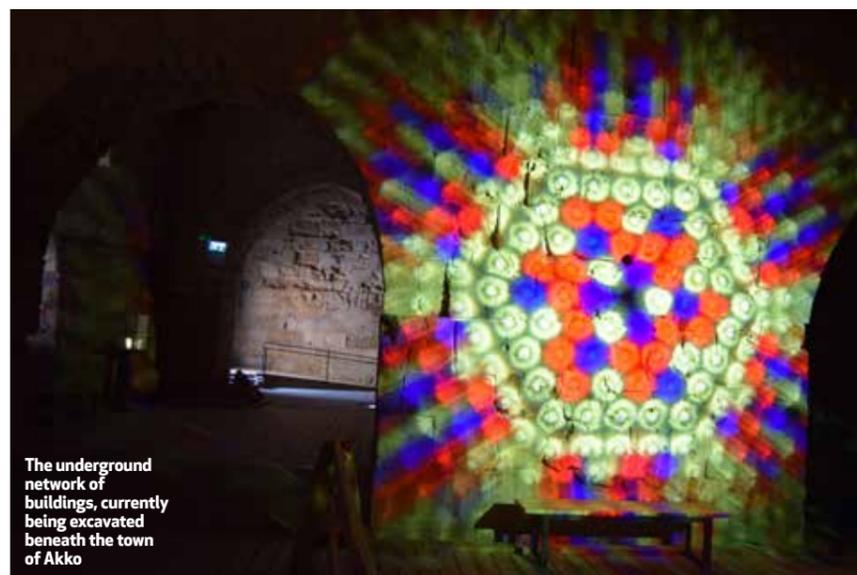


Heading towards the Golan Heights, just to the east of Kibbutz Snir





Jerusalem; inside one of the main religiously significant buildings (we can't remember which one)



The underground network of buildings, currently being excavated beneath the town of Akko

restaurants and beaches, much like you would find anywhere else in the world. My preconceptions were wrong. And it was here in Tel Aviv that our 1,200 kilometres adventure would begin, and end.

Checking into the hotel we met with Eytan Magen, the owner and founder of Tamar Motorcycle Tours (named after his wife, Tamar), and Axle (not Rose), the German representative from Edelweiss. Aytan is a family man with kids and a past in all sorts of industries and businesses. Like most Israelis he has completed his mandatory service in the army and is passionate about his country. Axle has been travelling around Israel by motorbike since the nineties, so he was the perfect choice when Edelweiss were looking for help to guide the tour. At the hotel we also met the journalists from Germany and America (Klaus and Marisa), as well as the two sets of customers from Romania (Simona and Daniel) and Germany (Lutz and Nikki), both of whom had been on Edelweiss tours before so knew what to expect. All were looking forward to the trip, if not the heat, which in the height of summer was up around 40-degrees centigrade at its hottest.

The bikes were a choice of three: a Yamaha Super Tenere; a Kawasaki Versys 1000 or the Versys 650. Asked why not BMW and KTM, Aytan explained that these bikes offered the best deals and with no off-road riding as part of the circular route, they would be more than up to the job. All the others opted for the big Yamaha and Kawasaki, but as I'd ridden those two bikes recently, I decided to give the 650 a try. We were, after all, only going to be covering on average 200 kilometres a day, with all our luggage taken to the next destination by a support van, which for certain parts of the trip would shadow us.

Be in no doubt, this wasn't a hard-edged adventure, living rough, doing it on the cheap. This tour was about the enjoyment and relaxation, so good hotels, decent restaurants and local guides at various destinations to help bring the country and the land to life. At 4,490 euros (currently £3,500), plus flights, it's not a cheap tour, especially when compared to other countries around the Med. But you know this is going to be different when the places marked on the map are Jerusalem, the contested Golan Heights, the Dead Sea,

the Sea of Galilee, King Herod's temple of Masada and a night spent beneath the stars at an authentic Bedouin camp. Israel is nothing if not unique, and if you are religious – of any persuasion – then you are certainly in for a treat.

Riding out of Tel Aviv gives you a taste of what to expect on the roads. Traffic drives on the right. It is relatively quick but not aggressive, with lane discipline good and plenty of scooters and mopeds in and around the cities to ensure car drivers know to look out for those on two wheels. Other than the occasional cruiser or sports bike we see very few other big bikes, especially of the adventure variety. This is a new market to Israel with there said to be plenty of off-road potential, but for the meantime we find the main roads well surfaced and surprisingly uncongested. The pack rode north, along the edge of the Mediterranean on Route 2; the three-lane motorway giving good opportunity to get a feel for the bikes, for the way of the pack, for the weather, the temperature and the atmosphere. We're in Israel, on motorbikes, how cool is that!

Not far past Hadera we turned right and headed inland. The land is flat and arid, rising towards the Yizrael Mountains. Our destination was Mount Carmel, where Elijah challenged 450 prophets of a particular Baal to a contest at the altar to determine whose

6 The land is flat and arid, riding towards the Yizrael Mountains 9

deity was in control of the Kingdom of Israel. On the south-eastern side of Mount Carmel is Keren-Carmel (horn of Carmel), a hilltop on which stands a Carmelite order church, built to commemorate Elijah's victory over the Baal prophets, with a statue of Elijah in the grounds.

Stood on the rooftop of the church, tour guide Avi Ben Yosef read out Passage 1 Kings 18, about the confrontation Elijah had with Ahab, the seventh king of Israel (reigning from 869–850 BC). As he does, Avi points out across the valley land beneath the mountain

top, telling us that this is where it all took place. And in that moment, for the first time, I get an understanding of the importance of land and territory, especially when it has religious significance, and therefore why someone would dispute and fight over it so passionately, because it means so damn much to them. Whereas to me, an agnostic, all I saw was the dirt of the earth. And I could just as easily move to the next valley as stay in this one. Or perhaps we're all territorial to some extent.

We parted the country, riding along Route 77 running from west to east. The Sea of Galilee was ahead of us, though we diverted away from it before it came in to sight, taking the 65 north, through road works – the road relatively straight but undulating with the contours of the land. There is not much to look at out here. Away from the cities and towns Israel is rather sparse, with no particular nests of interest. What beguiles you is the size of the expanse, and the vastness of the horizon line. It has that 'epic' feel about its terrain, and the further east you ride, the



Views of Syria, from Mount Bental, in the disputed Golan Heights

HISTORY OF ISRAEL (OTHER INTERPRETATIONS ARE AVAILABLE)

2 million BCE Hominids inhabit Tel Ovia, 3km south of the Sea of Galilee.

9000 BCE abundant water and good climate attract early Neolithic people to Jericho.

4500-3500 BCE Chalcolithic people inhabit small villages in Jordan Valley and on Golan.

1250 BCE Estimated date of the Israelites' biblical exodus from Egypt.

10th Century BCE King Solomon rules Israel and builds First Temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant.

Late 10th century BCE Northern Kingdom of Israel splits from the southern, Jerusalem-based Kingdom of Judea.

586 BCE Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, destroys the First Temple and exiles the Jews to Babylonia.

516 BCE The Second Temple is consecrated in Jerusalem.

4th century BCE Nabataeans, a nomadic tribe from Arabia, establish Petra, now in Jordan.

63 BCE The independent Kingdom of Judea becomes a Roman client state after Pompey captures Jerusalem.

37 BCE The Roman Senate appoints Herod the Great as king of Judea.

c4 BCE A Jew known as Jesus is born in Bethlehem. He is later crucified by Pontius Pilate.

55 - 70 CE Jewish anger at Roman oppression sparks Great Jewish revolt.

73 CE Masada falls to the Roman legion.

2nd century With Jerusalem in ruins, centres of Jewish learning are established in other parts.

313 Constantine the Great grants religious freedom to all religions, including Christianity.

638 Six years after death of Prophet Mohammed, Muslim armies capture Jerusalem bringing Islam to Palestine.

1095 - 1099 The First Crusade brings Christian armies from Europe to Muslim ruled Jerusalem.

1187 Saladin defeats the Crusaders and captures Jerusalem.

1291 The Mamluks take Akko, the Crusaders' last stronghold, ending Christian rule in Palestine until the arrival of the British in 1917.

16th Century Tsfat becomes a centre of Jewish scholarship and Kabbalah.

1799 Napoleon captures Gaza, Jaffa and Haifa but fails to take Akko and doesn't get anywhere near.

1799 Napoleon captures Gaza, Jaffa and Haifa but fails to take Akko and doesn't get anywhere near Jerusalem. He leaves and returns to France.

1837 Massive earthquake hits Galilee, flattening much of Tsfat. Over 2000 people are killed.

1882 - 1903 Pogroms in Russia spark the First Aliya, the first organised Zionist immigration to Palestine.

more engulfed in it you become. Only the heat holds us back, forcing us to stop and take shade, our first encounter with the locals – away from the cities at least – finding the language barrier no issue as most Israelis speak English, and coffee prices about on par with the UK. Costs in general are about the same, with a litre of fuel costing around 80 shekels; roughly £1.25.

Travelling briefly on Route 90, then 89, we turned off on to 886, a glorious twisting road running alongside the border with Lebanon to the left, the sun somewhere overhead as we stopped for a lunch of chicken kebab (the food in Israel is excellent), before taking a stroll around the Hula Nature Reserve. This is a vast expanse of waterways in the basin of the Hula Valley. It was dredged back in the sixties, only to discover the water was the only source of life for birds migrating south for the winter. Now the waterways have been restored, with this an excellent place to come and watch almost 400 varieties of birds respite during their vast adventures into Africa (carpets not required). As a break from the

fierce sun it was necessary.

That evening, after a ride of around 250 kilometres (which was enough in this heat), we arrived at Kibbutz Snir, our accommodation for the evening. A kibbutz, to my mind, was a simple dwelling in which a good number of people lived rather primitive and basic lives. The reality was somewhat different. This reminded me of a holiday camp, with a communal swimming pool, large grass sporting areas, a residential street behind it and quaint holiday chalets that our group would be staying in, one each, with a balcony at the rear offering a stunning view of the sunset as it sank beneath the hill-top behind which was Lebanon.

The kibbutz was established as a Nahal settlement during the Six Day War of 1967, in what had formerly been a demilitarised zone. This was when Israel took on Egypt, Syria and Jordan, emerging victorious and defining much of the narrative, as well as the land borders, to this day. The kibbutz was converted to a civilian community in 1968 by Hashomer Hatzair members, its name derived from the Hebrew

name for the nearby Hasbani River. We were given a tour of the grounds by resident ????, who explained how the co-operative nature of the typical kibbutz has gradually morphed into something more capitalist, with most kibbutzim trading on a particular activity, such as livestock or crops. Still, it looked to be a decent way of life, living among a community of around 400, the shadow of Syria looming just over the mountain top to the east, which is where we were heading the following morning.

The Golan Heights is still contested. The international community doesn't recognise it as part of Israel, but in Israel it is considered Israeli land. It was once Syrian, until the Six Day War of 1967 when it became a demilitarised zone that partitioned the two nations; the zone is controlled by the UN. From on top of Mount Bental, at what is now a disused military installation (the driver of the support van – Danny – was stationed here during his time in the military, back in the sixties), you can look down across the valley to see Syria on the other side, impossible to

imagine the terrors that were taking place there, with news of Isis and its atrocities so incomparable to the peace and prosperity of this land – the same land, just the other side of a manmade border. To me this only highlights the insanity, and inhumanity, of man.

6 We drank coffee at the rest stop - appropriately titled Coffee Annan 9

That a line in the sand can define, and change, so much. Madness.

We drank coffee at the rest stop – appropriately titled Coffee Annan (after the former UN Secretary-General) – before heading down the mountain (after picking up a fallen Tenere), and making haste for the Sea of Galilee (along Route 98 and 87). It was up in the Golan Heights that someone said to me, 'There will not be peace in the region until we are eating hummus in Damascus.' This made me think, a lot, about when this will all ever end.

The militarisation of the country

is evident out here, and had been ever since we entered the north. It wouldn't be uncommon to see fleets of armoured vehicles, mostly open-topped 4x4s, with machine guns, or even mini-cannons mounted on top. The vehicles were driven by children. Or at least that's what it looked like; their sun-bronzed faces sat beneath a sand-coloured helmet that seemed two sizes too big for them; young eyes cast out across a war-weary bonnet. Israeli citizens must serve a minimum of two years in the army, including the girls, and even afterwards can be called upon as reserves if crisis requires it. After their service, usually around the age of 21 and before they go to university, it's not uncommon for Israelis to go travelling, commonly to India and South America. The need to learn how to fight completely disrupts their lives, but equally it defines their lives and to an extent who they are and, arguably, how they see the world. Imagine if we still had conscription in England. For better or for worse?

The Sea of Galilee, the largest fresh water lake in the country, was a bright



Views over the Walling Wall in Jerusalem

HISTORY CONTINUED...

1909 Sixty-six families found Tel Aviv on sand dunes north of Jaffa. The five hectares bought by the group are parcelled out by lottery.

1910 The first kibbutz, Degania, is established by socialist 'pioneers' from Russia at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee.

1916 The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement divvies up the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence. Palestinian, Transjordan and southern Iraq are earmarked for Britain; France gets Lebanon and Syria.

1917 In the Balfour Declaration, the British government expresses support for a 'Jewish national home' in Palestine'.

1918 British forces take northern Palestine from the Ottomans.

1929 Arab-Jewish riots erupt over Jewish access to the Western Wall.

1939 - 45 Six million European Jews are murdered by the Nazis.

1947 The UN General Assembly votes to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. Fighting engulfs region.

1948 British leave Palestine, Zionist forces hold five Arab armies at bay.

1948 - 70s Some 600,000 Jews leave, flee or are expelled from Arab countries and find refuge in Israel.

1967 In six days Israel defeats Egypt, Jordan and Syria, more than tripling its territory.

1978 Israel and Egypt sign Camp David Accords. Israel opens embassy in Cairo.

1987-93 Palestinian frustration with occupation explodes in the First Intifada.

1993 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat sign the Oslo Peace Accords.

1995 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated by right wing Jewish extremist. Oslo peace process breaks down.

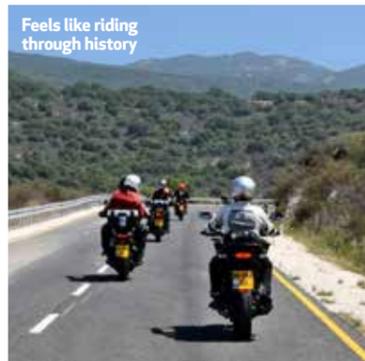
2000 - 05 The second Intifada brings suicide bombings to Israeli cities and towns.

2005 Israel unilaterally withdraws from the Gaza Strip. Palestinians condemn Israel for continued control of land, sea and air access.

2006 Attacks on the Galilee by Iranian-backed Hezbollah leads to Israel's Second Lebanon War.

2011 Israel demolishes illegal settlements in West Bank.

To be continued...



Feels like riding through history

and vivacious blue. There is a visitor information centre here (as well as a beach), with an old wooden boat that was discovered buried beneath the shoreline and excavated, as it is thought that it could have been a boat Jesus used as it originated from around the same time period. Conversely, it could have been something completely different – no connection to Jesus at all. Though it is perhaps this desire to relate everything to religion that seems to define your experience within the country. That's not to say you have to be religious to appreciate it; just that, where some would see Jesus's boat, others would see just a boat. Regardless of which perspective you take, the power of the place to conjure up these images is unique. I'd never experienced anything like it on my travels before. For the pious, you are almost in God's shoes.

Two nights were spent in Haifa, an old industrial port-city back on the west coast, split much more evenly between Jews and Arabs than the rest of the country. To my eyes it benefited from this. It made it more fascinating and vibrant. In the 2013 census there was said to be 1,658,000 Arabs living in Israel, 44,000 of those living in Haifa. There is a great night life here, with ex-

cellent bars and restaurants. The place is strange in a way. It almost seems a mixing of the vibrancy of somewhere like India, but with the calmness of a regular Mediterranean city. It feels safe. Friendly. Though there have been tensions here. We saw none as we gazed out across the city from the top of Bahá'í Gardens, an elaborate terrace of gardens (also known as the Hanging Gardens of Haifa) that only opened in 2001. Now it's hard to imagine the city without it, as it defines the view from so many different angles. We spent a day up near the Lebanon border, exploring the Rosh HaNikra grottoes – cavernous tunnels formed by sea action on the soft chalk rock – before returning to Haifa and preparing for an epic ride through the desert the next day.

It was to be the longest day, some 280 kilometres, working back across the country from west to east, along Israel's own Route 66, before turning off to take the incredible 675, a mountain road through the Gilboa Mountains and as good as any I'd ever ridden, running along the ridge overlooking the city of Afula and the Harod Valley, where it is said Jesus healed ten lepers. We also passed the 'tell' (an archaeological mound created by human occupation) of Megiddo, the significance

being that the Book of Revelation mentions an apocalyptic military amassment at Armageddon, a name derived from the Hebrew 'Har Megiddo' meaning 'Mount of Megiddo'.

Joining Route 90 we speared south through the desert, Jericho and the Dead Sea all in sight. This, for me, was where it started to get interesting, as we would be running alongside the 'border' with the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, not to be confused with Gaza (see map). The West Bank is a landlocked territory, with a landmass of 5,640km² (twice the size of Luxembourg) and a population of some 2.7 million. It is in effect a country within a country. In June 1967, the West Bank and East Jerusalem were captured by Israel (from Jordan) as a result of the Six Day War. With the exception of East Jerusalem, the West Bank was not annexed by Israel, but has remained under Israeli military control.

On the map it would appear that the West Bank butts right up to the shores of the Dead Sea. That's not the case. Instead, the road running along the shoreline is part of 'Israel', effectively partitioning the West Bank from the Dead Sea by the width of a good bit of road. The significance of this is that those living in the West Bank can't



The waterfall on the Hermon Reserve

travel freely in and out. They need permits, with intensive road blocks and armed personal patrolling and regulating the various roads to the West Bank. As I would come to see it, rightly or wrongly, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (though we didn't go down as far as that) resemble something of an open-air prison. While we were told it would be too dangerous to enter the West Bank, unlike Gaza, it is a relatively common thing to do, with many tourists going in to visit Bethlehem. The guidebooks just instruct you not to tell the Israeli authorities you are going there as it could lead to extra questioning, and refusal of entry to the country.

It is within the West Bank that the dispute over Israeli settlers is taking place. In 2012 over 350,000 Israelis had settled in the West Bank. The international community considers the settlements in occupied territory to be illegal and obviously the Palestinians don't want them there as they see it as further encroachment of their already shrunken land. As an outsider the situation upset me, and confused me. How can it be, in this day and age, that such things are happening? That a man can't have his land, and call it his land, without others claiming right? But in this dispute it seems incredibly



The modern beach front, Tel Aviv

INFORMATION

■ **Currency** Israel and the Palestinian Territories use Israeli shekel. There are currently 6 shekels to an English pound.

■ **Visas** For UK residents Israel grants on-arrival visas, as they do to most nationalities. Just be prepared for the extra questioning at check-in, especially if of non-Jewish background. Stamps are no longer placed in passports as this can cause problems when entering Muslim countries. You now get a separate slip with your photo and details on.

■ **When to go?** High season is July to August, where hotel prices spike and rooms are scarce. Jewish holidays of Passover, Rosh, HaShana and Sukkot are also high season. Shoulder season is October to November and March to June. Not as hot, and April ideal for hiking. Off-season is December to February, when it can be cold in the north. Believe it or not but there are even ski resorts in Israel!



■ **Language** The official language is Hebrew and Arabic, though we found most people spoke reasonable to good English. You also hear many American accents, as that's where many tourists seem to originate from.

■ **Crossing into Palestinian Territory**

It is possible and some say quite safe to cross into the West Bank (less so Gaza), with you just needing to show your passport at the checkpoint. If you've rented a vehicle check first, as most don't cover you for driving in the PT. You're also not advised to mention you've been to PT at the security interview on your departure from Israel as it will only lead to further questioning. You cannot fly directly into PT.

difficult to define right and wrong. It is a land dispute dating back so many centuries and eons. There are too many interwoven stories to either justify or denounce another's actions. It is warfare, endless warfare. And as you ride along that border; the Dead Sea to your left, Palestinian Territory to your right, you just wish things could be right. And no doubt many of you have your own opinions – however varied they might be – on how that can be achieved.

The Dead Sea, for what it's worth, is a phenomenon. Because it has nowhere to drain to, the water over the years has become increasingly salty, so much so that at 34% salinity you now float on the water. It is impossible to sink. Even the worst swimmer or the fattest man in the world won't end up at the bottom. Just don't get it in your eyes, mouth, ears or nose, as it's quite potent stuff. Worryingly, the water level of the Dead Sea is dropping one shoreline metre per year, due in a large part to the increased redirection of its source water for irrigation. It's already been said that the next major conflict will be over supply, with desalination plants in the Med the possible solution to Israel's woes.

It was good to sit on the beach and relax though. The biking had been taking its toll. The heat was just so fierce. The shoulder seasons would be a better time to do this. As it was we were having to seek shade during the hottest



hours of the day, then ride later into the evening. Though a desert seems to come alive at dusk, as did this one – the Judaeen Desert – as we turned off the coastal road just beyond the suspected site of Sodom (of Sodom and Gomorrah fame), taking Route 31 in the direction of Arad, where just outside the town we spent the night with the Bedouins.

Bedouin tradition is dying, the nomadic people being forced to relocate to fixed abodes in new-built towns. Like most indigenous groups, they seem misunderstood and at odds with the modern world. The Aborigines

of Australia, the Native Americans of North America; I'd seen it before. This lot seemed to be doing okay though, running an educational camp for Jewish tourists and school children to learn about another culture. We arrived on motorbikes, switched them for camels and rode a short way across the desert, before waking up way before the sun the next morning to get to nearby Masada and see it rise above this ancient and significant Jewish fortress, built by King Herod.

There was a mythical power about this place, built on an isolated rock plateau overlooking the Dead Sea. Much of the foundations and the wall work remain, and you can take a long hike up a steep and winding path to get there. The significance is that in 73CE (Common Era, the Jewish equivalent to AD), Masada was under siege by the armies of the Roman Empire. For a long while it looked like they could survive the siege, with a unique network of tunnels and pipes feeding the fortress with fresh water. Finally, the Romans built a battering ram and created a significant ramp on which they were able to break through the fortress walls. Rather than be taken alive and made prisoner, or raped and murdered, legend has it that the remaining 960 Sicarii rebels (an extremist splinter group of the Jewish Zealots) took each other's lives, drawing straws to be the last one standing, and thus needing to take their own.

Masada is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and quite simply breathtaking, especially as you stand and watch the sun come up, spreading across the Dead Sea and the Judaeen Desert before working its way up the remaining walls of Masada. One of the highlights of the trip; that and the excellent falafel.

We were nearing the end of our adventure now. Six days of riding done. One and a half left to go. To get the opening picture for this feature we headed south briefly along the 258, then the 25 and finally the 206 and the 226 until we were looking out across Ha Makhtesh Ha-Gadol, otherwise known as the Large Crater. This is not volcanic, or even meteoric. Instead it is a 'makhtesh'; a geological eroded landform common to Israel's Negev desert. The road up to this lookout was as stunning as the view. There really are some incredibly roads in Israel, not hard to find and most serviced well enough to exploit. This one, the 226, was probably one of the best, and the reward at the end – the view – unparalleled with almost anything else I'd seen. But the group by this point were growing weary, and while there was much terrain south of here to explore, the route of this excursion now led back north, to Jerusalem and then back to Tel Aviv.

Jerusalem was spectacular. A melting pot of everything. It really is the centre of the world and all its troubles. That

said; as we were there you couldn't hope or wish for a more pleasant city to explore, from the Wailing Wall to the Muslim Quarter and the fancy shops and kosher McDonald's that are springing up. We had a guide take us around the important sites. All it did was confuse me further. As an agnostic all I heard was layer upon layer of fairytale, different ones told by the various factions that claim right here in order to justify their belonging. Why can't they all just eat McDonald's together and be done with it? Why the need for the four-storey wall built around the eastern flank of the city,



Sunrise over the Dead Sea, looking out from the ruins of Masada



THE ROUTE

The ride was around 1200 kilometres in total. It started in Tel Aviv, up Route 2 coastal road, then off at 70 for Keren Karmel. From here along 77, up 65 and 90 all the way to Kibbutz Snir. From here down 98, through Golan Heights and 87 across to Sea of Galilee. From here along to 65 and 77 to Haifa. From Haifa along eastern flank of West Bank, along shores of Dead Sea, all along Route 90. Masada is just off Route 31, near Arad. To get to Jerusalem we rode alongside the Palestinian Territory fence on 368. The large crater on the opening picture is south of Dimona, on route 225. So literally a circuit around the West Bank.

why the need for the fence I'd spent that day riding along? Why the need. Simply why the need.

This had been an incredible experience. It had shown me the world, and revealed how little I knew about it. The riding here isn't exceptional, though the tour and its implementation were exceptional. From the bikes to the food to the accommodation to everything that was within their control, it was, without doubt, faultless. For anyone wishing to be pampered while doing a bit of riding and seeing something completely different then this - Israel - will blow your socks off. Some people boycott Israel, punish them for what they're doing the Palestinians, and part me

6 Israel will blow your socks off 9

of wishes to agree. I came away with very little respect for what they are doing and how they are doing it. But to see it and experience it for yourselves, to make your own mind up, is far more important, and beneficial, than reading and hearing about it on the TV, which is just full of bullshit and agenda. If you want to get out there and see the world, there's no better place to start than Israel. It seems to be the fountain from which all water pours.

For more information on the tour and to see a day by day itinerary visit www.tamarbikes.com **ABR**

