

# The Dead Sea

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It's the ultimate Israeli cliché, the picture of the swim-suited bather lying in – almost on – the water, feet up and newspaper open, like a Sunday morning in bed. But unlike a camel ride at the pyramids or wrapping a *keffiyeh* (chequered scarf) around your neck, this is one Middle Eastern cliché well worth indulging in. Floating in the Dead Sea is a sensation that cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world.

Beyond the obligatory float, the soothing mud bath and a soak in the sulphur, the approximately 65km-long shoreline is one of the most mythic places on earth. Believers say that Jesus Christ was baptised where the Jordan River meets the Dead Sea. It's where the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are thought to have been located and it's where the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest copy of biblical texts, were found in a mountain cave.

But the No 1 attraction is Masada, a solitary monolith rising from the desert; the fortress in which Jews martyred themselves and their families rather than become slaves of the Romans nearly 2000 years ago. This Unesco World Heritage site is one of Israel's most enigmatic locations and watching the sun rise over the Dead Sea from the ancient ruins at the top is an experience not to be missed.

Ein Gedi's nature reserves are perfect for beginner hikers with their refreshing pools, endangered animals and ancient sites. For adventure seekers there's a wide range of walking trails that offer stunning coastal views and the chance to explore the spectacular canyons of the Judean Desert.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Feeling like you could float forever at **Kalia's uncrowded beaches** (p314) in the northern Dead Sea
- Appreciating idyllic plunge pools after a sweaty hike through the **Ein Gedi Nature Reserve** (p316)
- Indulging in a sulfur soak and a soothing Dead Sea mud wrap at one of the many **day spas** (p315)
- Trudging joyously upward on the snake path to **Masada** (p320) before dawn, which leads to humbling views, incredible sunrises and a haunting history
- Taking on the **Judean Desert** (p325) – unforgiving for beginners, unforgettable for those who respect it



## History

Awareness of the Dead Sea's unique qualities goes back to at least the 4th century BC; luminaries such as Aristotle, Pliny and Galen all made mention of the sea's physical properties. The Nabataeans also knew a good thing when they saw it and collected the bitumen from the surface of the water and sold it to the Egyptians, who used it for embalming. Records show that this industry continued well into the Roman period.

Despite scientific interest and small-scale commercial activity, the sea was largely regarded as an unhealthy thing (common wisdom had it that no bird could fly over its waters) and shunned. This made the area a favoured retreat of religious ascetics and

political fugitives – the future King David, King Herod, Jesus and John the Baptist all took refuge among its shoreline, mountains and caves.

Because of its 'Sea of the Devil' tag, the area remained desolate and untouched until it was finally explored by the US Navy in 1848. Still, it wasn't until the arrival of the British in Palestine that any real activity around the sea began. They set up two plants to tap the abundant mineral wealth and during the 1920s the Dead Sea provided half of the British Commonwealth's potash needs. One of the plants was destroyed in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War but the other, at Sodom, is still working.

The luxuries of modern roads and air-conditioned vehicles make it easy to overlook the fact that the region is a barren desert with an inhospitable climate. The heat and aridity, as well as political factors – half the area is in the Palestinian-controlled West Bank – have meant that other than in Ein Bokek, the Israelis have been slow to exploit the enormous potential here for moneyspinning tourist and health facilities.

## Geography

Known in Hebrew as Yam HaMelah (Sea of Salt), the Dead Sea is the world's lowest point, lying at some 400m below sea level. The sea is approximately 65km long and 18km across at its widest point, although its water level fluctuates, dropping about one metre a year. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War only about a quarter of the Dead Sea fell to the new State of Israel, but as a result of the Six Day War, almost half of it is now under Israeli control, with the border between the West Bank and Jordan running virtually straight down the middle.

The Dead Sea is fed mainly by the Jordan River, and is supplemented by smaller rivers, underground springs and floods. With no outlet, the inflow is balanced by a high rate of evaporation caused by the hot climate. The water arrives with normal mineral concentrations (mainly magnesium, sodium, calcium and potassium chlorides) but evaporation causes the levels of minerals to rise dramatically. Ten times more salty than the ocean, the Dead Sea's salt concentration is about 30%, making it easy to sit up in and comfortably read this book (for more statistics see *A Salty Tale*, p315).

Contrary to the sea's 'dead' tag, 11 species of bacteria manage to survive – but no fish. Its shores are dotted with springs and oases, which provide water for 90 species of birds, 25 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 24 species of mammals, as well as more than 400 species of plants.

There are two very different sections to the Dead Sea. The northern basin is over three times the size of the southern one, and at some 400m is a lot deeper. The southern basin is only about 6m deep and has a higher salt level, resulting in iceberg-like crystal formations. The Lashon (Tongue) Peninsula, which juts out from the Jordanian eastern shore, now acts to separate the two sections.

At one time the lake was four or five times the size that it is today. Fluctuations in the water level were once due only to natural conditions, (mainly variations in rainfall) but the construction of Israel's National Water Carrier System, which draws on the Jordan River, has now disturbed the natural balance. Inspired by the Israelis, the Jordanians went on to build a similar project on the Yarmuk River, and together the two neighbours deprive the Dead Sea of over 600 million cu metres of water per year (see *Dead Healthy?*, p323). This has all but dried up the Dead Sea's southern basin and the sea has been shortened by over 25km in length.

## Dangers & Annoyances

When you are about 417m below sea level this is no ordinary desert climate. Despite the high temperatures and around 300 cloudless days a year, the high atmospheric pressure filters the sun's burning ultraviolet rays, making it harder to get sunburnt. Which isn't to say it's not possible; we met a few people with boiled lobster complexions who had wrongly presumed that their fair skins were safe without sunscreen.

The hot, sticky weather can also be incredibly dehydrating, especially if you're hiking. A hat and sunglasses are vital, as is drinking as much water as possible (about a litre an hour).

Flash floods are no joke either, especially from November to March, when they can turn dry riverbeds and walking trails into fast-flowing rivers. For more climate info see p17.

For those who are planning on spending heaps of time floating in the Dead Sea,

there are some health precautions to consider (see p315).

Finally, theft is rife in Ein Gedi; we cannot warn you enough to keep not only your eyes, but your hands on your valuables at all times.

## Tours

A cheap, but not terribly relaxing way of sampling the Dead Sea region is to sign up for the tours you'll see advertised in many of the hostels in Jerusalem. The tours usually leave around 3.30am, heading straight to Masada in time to climb the mountain and watch the sun rise over the desert. You get about an hour at the site before being shuttled to Ein Gedi for a float in the Dead Sea and a walk through the nature reserve. Then it's a brief photo stop at Qumran, the site of the Dead Sea Scrolls. You arrive back in Jerusalem at about 3pm. Despite the stopwatch schedule most travellers find that they see all they want; those who want to slow down can always drop out at Ein Gedi and make their own way back later using Egged buses. The tours generally take a minimum of five people and can also be organised as a day tour, but that means you miss out on the spectacular sunrise. The cost of the general tour is about US\$30 per person, excluding entry fees.

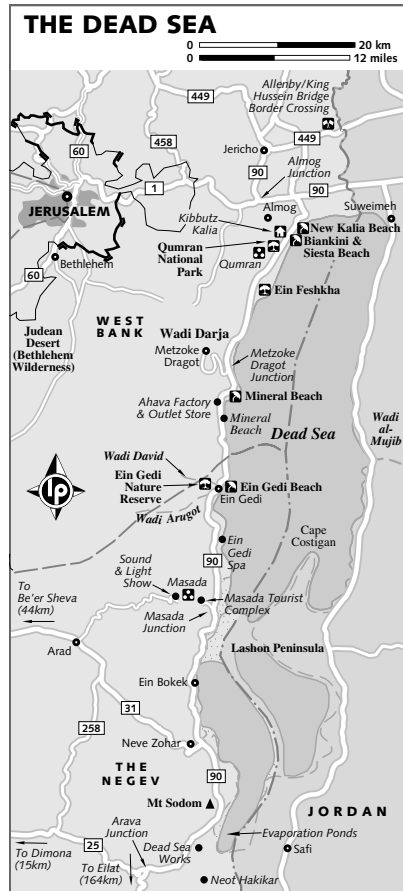
**Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI);** ☎ 09 774 8670; spni@amitravel.com) On the first and third weekends of the month SPNI operates a two-day program with a focus on hiking in the Dead Sea region. The cost is US\$385 per person and includes accommodation, food and entrance fees.

**United Tours** ☎ 03-693 3412, 02 625 2187; www.unitedtours.co.il) Does one- and two-day trips all over the country, plus city tours of Jerusalem. Also runs a daily tour of the Dead Sea region (excluding Qumran) for US\$70 per person, leaving Tel Aviv at 7.15am and Jerusalem at 9am.

## Getting There & Around

Bus services in the Dead Sea region are infrequent and to avoid hanging around waiting under the sun, make sure to plan your itinerary in advance.

Although you can reach the Dead Sea by direct bus from Haifa, Tel Aviv, Be'er Sheva, Arad, Dimona and Eilat, the most comprehensive service is from Jerusalem's Egged central bus station (see p143). Buses to Eilat and Be'er Sheva go via Qumran, Ein Feshkha, Ein Gedi (No 421, 444 or 486,



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32NIS, 1¼ hours), Ein Bokek and Masada (No 444 or 486, 39NIS, 2½ hours, five daily) and there should be a bus heading from Jerusalem this way departing at least every hour or so (intermediate fares and travel times are proportionately less).

Buses stop on request at all the major sites along the Dead Sea shoreline but it is important that you keep a sharp eye out for the place that you want. The Egged drivers speed along so fast that you can fly past Qumran or Ein Feshkha, for example, without realising it. Leaving Jerusalem on Saturday, no buses operate until the late afternoon.

## KALIA BEACHES חוף קליה ساحل قاليا ☎ 02

Only 25 minutes from Jerusalem, the northern Dead Sea is a world away from the packed tourist beach at Ein Gedi and the flashy hotels of Ein Bokek. Driving through the bombed-out remains of Jordanian homes from the 1960s and the rusty, broken slides of Atraktzia, a failed water-park venture, the row of peaceful private beaches comes as a pleasant surprise. Here you'll find excellent facilities, and lots of space for lounging around at the lowest point on earth.

After a float on **New Kalia Beach** (☎ 994 2391; adult/child 25/15NIS; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8am-5pm winter), take advantage of the free mud or relax on the couches in the breezy café-bar shaded by grape vines. Towel rental and beach chairs are available, as are massages (Thursday to Saturday).

**Biankini & Siesta Beach** (☎ 940 0033; admission 30NIS; ☎ 8am-8pm) is a Moroccan paradise on the Dead Sea, and is the perfect place to sip some mint tea and while away the afternoon. Lots of greenery, a traditional Moroccan restaurant with hanging lanterns and cushioned eating area, as well as a wonderfully laid-back atmosphere, are just some of the highlights of this camp run by the ebullient Dagan Dina. Stay overnight in the Sinai-style huts (basic wooden bungalow/shacks) by the water (80NIS for two people), or newly built rooms (600NIS). Bringing your own tent will set you back 40NIS.

If you are coming by bus make sure you tell the driver you want to stop at Kalia beach, otherwise you will end up at Kibbutz Kalia. The beaches are about a 2km walk from the bus stop.

## QUMRAN קומראן قمران ☎ 02

Described as 'the most important discovery in the history of the Jewish people', the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, now on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (see p119), were discovered inside earthenware jars in a high cliff-side cave at Qumran in 1947, by a Bedouin shepherd boy searching for a stray goat.

Excavations at **Qumran National Park** (☎ 994 2235; adult/child 18/8NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm) have revealed the settlement and caves of the Essenes, the Jewish sect that authored the scrolls, which included books of the Old Testament, the Apocrypha and the Essenes' own texts. The Essenes were members of a breakaway Jewish sect who hid here to escape the liberalism and decadence they believed were corrupting their fellow Jews. The Essenes lived here from about 150 BC, working the land, tending their sheep and studying the Old Testament and other religious texts, until they were disbanded by Roman invaders in AD 68.

The Essenes were ascetics, and as such, were into ritual bathing and purification. The ruins are not that extensive, nor terribly impressive, but from a wooden bridge you can clearly make out the aqueduct, channels and cisterns that ensured the community's water supply. Elsewhere are the ritual baths, refectory, a council chamber, the scriptorium where the Dead Sea Scrolls were probably written, a pottery workshop with kilns and a cemetery.

The caves themselves are higher up although none of those in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found are marked. If you want to walk up make sure you arrive very early in the day and take plenty of water. Give yourself about 1½ hours for the return climb.

The small museum (and its seven-minute multimedia program) next to the entrance to the national park will give you a good potted history of the site (plus temporary relief from the heat outside). There is also a café and souvenir shop at the site.

### Getting There & Around

Coming from Jerusalem, this is normally the first stop the bus makes after the road hits the Dead Sea shoreline. As soon as you spot the water remind the driver that you want to get off at Qumran – you're only minutes away. Arriving from the south, Qumran is about 10km after Ein Feshkha.

### A SALTY TALE

Hailed by the PR companies as the largest 'natural spa' in the world, the Dead Sea is a lot more powerful than the old facial, that's for sure. Compared to regular sea water, the water of the Dead Sea contains 20 times as much bromine, 15 times as much magnesium and 10 times as much iodine – it is, in effect, 33% solid substance. Bromine, a component of many sedatives, relaxes the nerves, magnesium counteracts skin allergies and clears the bronchial passages, while iodine has a beneficial effect on certain glandular functions – or so it's claimed, especially by local health spa owners and the various Dead Sea cosmetic companies.

If this was not enough, the Dead Sea's extremely dry air has 10% more oxygen than at sea level. Combine this with high temperatures, low altitude and relative lack of pollution, and it all works to increase the body's metabolic rate for an alleged bracing effect. However, the misty haze of evaporating water over the Dead Sea contains large amounts of bromine, which supposedly also soothes you.

Make the most of these therapeutic properties by indulging at one of the many Dead Sea health spas. Each spa has an indoor Dead Sea water pool (or beach access), thermo-mineral pools, Jacuzzi, dry sauna and steam baths, fitness facilities and a variety of treatments, such as mud wraps, massages and traditional treatments from the Middle East. Check out Mineral Beach (p316), Ein Gedi Spa (p319) or the luxury hotels in Ein Bokek (p324). Health tourism is also on the rise and many hotels offer extended-stay health packages for everything from psoriasis to arthritis. Ahava (see p320), DSD and Jericho are the big names in Dead Sea cosmetics and are available throughout the country.

The Dead Sea might have some fantastic healing powers but tell that to the person who dives face first into the murky green water. If this happens head straight to the freshwater showers (if you can actually see!). Wade in to the sea with any exposed cuts or grazes and you will gain instant enlightenment as to the meaning behind the phrase 'to rub salt into one's wounds'. We guarantee that you are going to discover scratches and sores that you never knew you had. Don't shave the morning you go swimming and if you have a pair of waterproof sandals, they will protect you from cutting your feet on the jagged salt.

From the bus stop the site is just a 200m walk up the signposted approach road.

## EIN FESHKHA עין פשחיה عين فشحة ☎ 02

Ein Feshkha's pretty freshwater springs were a favourite holiday spot for King Hussein of Jordan during the 1950s and early '60s, but today the site is falling into disrepair. Also known as Einot Tzukim (Spring of Cliffs), this area is unique in having freshwater pools adjacent to the highly saline Dead Sea. Often made to sound more attractive than it actually looks, **Ein Feshkha** (☎ 994 2355; admission 23NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm) is an area of salt-encrusted reeds and grass, with several small pools of spring water, leading down to the shore which, due to the effects of a rapidly drying Dead Sea (see Dead Healthy?, p323), is moving further and further away. Note the sign on dry land that says 'The sea was here in 1967!' The pools tend to become quite murky by the middle of the day and become crowded pretty

quickly. Popular with large groups of young men, women may not feel that comfortable swimming solo.

## METZOKI DRAGOT מצוקי דרגות متسوكي درجوت (درجة) ☎ 02

A narrow twisting road (with vistas so spectacular they make safe driving difficult) leads up to one of the most magnificent spots along the Dead Sea coast. Perched right on the edge of a cliff is **Metzoke Dragot** (☎ 994 4777; www.metzoke.co.il in Hebrew; camp sites per person 70NIS, dm/s/d, with breakfast 85/280/400NIS; ☎), a centre for desert tourism. The rooms are nicely set up with bedside lamps, fridge and coffee-making facilities, and the delicious breakfasts feature *shakshuka* (a Moroccan dish of eggs poached in tangy stewed tomatoes) served hot in the pan and with fresh juice. Dinner is available (65NIS) and there needs to be a minimum of four people to take a dorm room. At the reception, the stone deck filled with colourful

lounges and cushions takes advantage of the amazing views and is a nice place to crash with a drink after a day of walking. Unfortunately all of the centre's activities, such as jeep tours and abseiling, are for groups only these days. But this is still an excellent base for hiking or climbing **Wadi Darja** with its soaring cliffs and ravines. The centre has a lot of information about different walks, but this area is really for serious hikers only.

The Metzoke Dragot turn-off along Rte 90 is about 18km north of Ein Gedi, and is well marked – it's next to a military check-point. There are no buses from the turn-off up to the centre (and no taxis; it's a difficult 5km-long walk up a very steep hill).

In the same area, but south along the coast road a couple of kilometres (there's a bus stop but you need to ask the driver to let you off), you can find the health spa **Mineral Beach** (☎ 994 4888; www.dead-sea.co.il; admission 35NIS; ☞ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, 9am-6pm Fri & Sat). Run by the Mitzpe Shalem Kibbutz, Mineral Beach has pools, mud- and sulphur-baths.

## EIN GEDI לַיִן גֵּדִי עֵין גֵּדִי

☎ 08 / pop 650

One of the country's most attractive oases, Ein Gedi (Spring of the Kid) is a lush area of freshwater springs, waterfalls, pools and tropical vegetation nestled in the arid desert landscape of the lowest place on earth. It's a haven for desert wildlife, which hangs in there despite the terrifyingly raucous coach-loads of kids that rampage through the reserves on an almost daily basis.

Still, the animals have had a while to get used to human intrusions – archaeologists reckon this area was first settled during the Chalcolithic Age (3000 BC) when tribes just out of the Stone Age worshipped the moon at a temple here. The encounter between David and Saul at Ein Gedi is described in Samuel 1:24, and the place crops up again in Solomon's 'Song of Songs' (1:14). Human habitation continued at Ein Gedi until the Byzantine period when it stopped, resuming only in 1949 with the establishment of an Israeli military presence. Apart from the odd machine gun-fitted jeep, today that military presence is low-key and instead Ein Gedi is now a decidedly high-profile, coach party-guzzling tourist attraction.

## Orientation & Information

Ein Gedi includes the most (undeservedly) popular beach on the Dead Sea, the Ein Gedi Spa, a youth hostel, a SPNI field school, the Pundak Ein Gedi restaurant, a kibbutz guesthouse (which has an ATM in the reception) and a petrol station.

Ein Gedi is spread over 4km and is served by four bus stops, so it's important to get off the bus at the right place to avoid a long, hot walk or wait. The nature reserves, youth hostel and field school are to the north, on the western side of the road. At the next stop, 1.5km further south, are the bathing beach, the restaurant at Pundak Ein Gedi and the petrol station. A kilometre further along is a stop for Kibbutz Ein Gedi, while another 1.5 to 2km to the south is the Ein Gedi Spa.

## Sights & Activities

### SPNI FIELD SCHOOL

Israel's first **SPNI Field School** (☎ 658 4288; ngedi@spni.org.il; ☞ 8am-3pm) is the place to come for information on hiking in the region. There's also a small museum of local flora and fauna, and a sound-and-light show (5NIS) about the Judean Desert, which, despite what you might imagine, takes place in an auditorium, not outside. The SPNI centre is a steep climb up the hill above the youth hostel; see also p319.

### EIN GEDI NATURE RESERVE

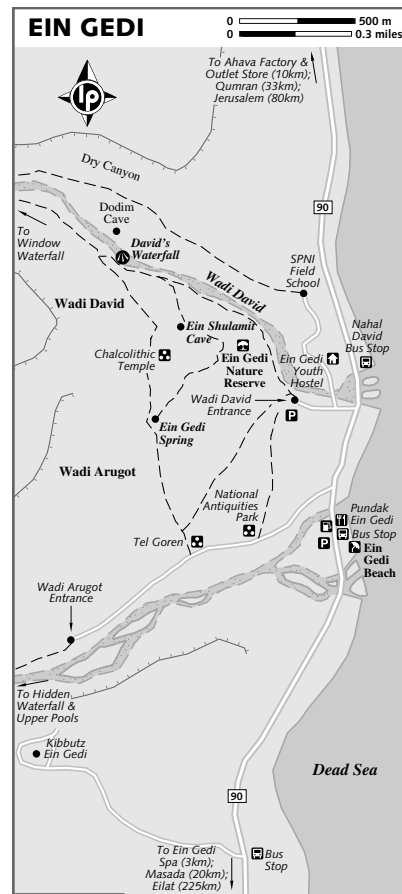
This is the place most people associate with Ein Gedi – a pretty canyon in the desert near the Dead Sea, with lots of trees, plants, flowers, animals and cascading streams of water. Compared with some of the country's other great natural beauty spots, it may seem a little tame, as it's signposted and well trodden. However, if you can get here early in the morning when it opens (beating both the masses and the heat) it's like a little Garden of Eden.

The hikes in the **Ein Gedi Nature Reserve** (☎ 658 4285; adult/child 23/12NIS; ☞ 8am-4pm winter, 8am-5pm summer) are not particularly difficult or strenuous in themselves but you do need to bring along plenty of water to combat the heat. The reserve offers hikers opportunities to cool off in its plunge pools, too, but bring swimwear (come wearing it, there's nowhere to change) and towels. The ticket offices can provide you with a

free map, which includes a series of hikes in the area. Definitely pick one up before you set off.

Note that there are two ticket offices or entrances to the reserve and its trails. The **Wadi David entrance** (Nahal David; ☞ 8am-3pm winter, 9am-3pm summer) is beyond the car park at the end of the road leading from the bus stop. The road off to the right goes up to the youth hostel and the field study centre. The **Wadi Arugot entrance** (Nahal Arugot; ☞ 8am-2pm winter, 9am-2pm summer) is a good 4km inland from Rte 90, which is to the left and behind the car park.

Food is not allowed in the reserve so you should ensure you eat well before you attempt any lengthy trekking.



## Wadi David Hikes

Once inside the Wadi David entrance, follow the signs to **David's Waterfall** (Nahal David), the reserve's biggest attraction for most visitors, which is about a 40-minute walk up past a series of pools and waterfalls. Some sections of the path are steep, but there are steps and railings in place in the rock. From here, follow the path around to head back towards the Dead Sea and pass another path leading up the slope. Climb up an extra 20 minutes to reach the **Ein Shulamit Cave** at the top of the cliff. Just beyond the place where water bubbles out of the ground, the path splits. For a longer walk, take the path to the right that leads to **Dodim Cave** (Lovers' Cave), just above the waterfall in a lovely setting. Give yourself about 40 minutes to make the side trip there and back. The steep main path to the left leads up to the fenced-in ruins of the **Chalcolithic temple**, which, judging from artefacts discovered here, was most likely dedicated to the worship of the moon.

Continuing down the slope, signs point to the **Ein Gedi Spring**, reached after about 25 minutes. Find your way through the trees and reeds to join another path where there's a choice of going left to return to the main entrance, or going right to **Tel Goren**, the remains of the first Israelite settlement here (dating from the late-7th century BC). Beyond Tel Goren are the ruins of an **ancient synagogue** (see National Antiquities Park, p318) with an interesting mosaic floor. Continue down to the road and either turn right to reach the entry to the magnificent deep canyon of **Wadi Arugot** or turn left to reach the main road, a 15-minute walk. From here it's a 10-minute walk northwards along the main road to return to the Nahal David bus stop and the turn-off to the main entrance.

Note that you are not allowed to start the climb up to Ein Gedi Spring and Dodim Cave after 2.30pm.

## Dry Canyon Hike

This beautiful four- to six-hour hike takes you to less-visited parts of the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve. It involves straightforward walking over slightly rough ground, a few steep slopes and some scrambling over rocks here and there. Regular sports shoes are suitable footwear – sandals are not. It can be muddy underfoot in places, especially in winter, and you can also end

up getting your feet wet wading through shallow water.

Flash floods are a danger in the winter months (November to March); it may not be raining at Ein Gedi but downpours in the hills further west can result in rushes of water through the canyons – make sure that you keep an ear out for the sound of rushing water and that you are ready to climb to higher ground. Don't start the hike later than noon during summer and winter.

The hike starts at the end of the road leading up past the field study centre. Follow the black-on-white painted trail markers past the reconstructed agricultural terraces. After 500m the trail reaches an intersection; go straight ahead, now following red painted markers. As you climb the small cliff, you can look down to the lush greenery between the David's and Window Waterfalls. The trail leads down to the dry canyon through a small gully. Take the left path down to Nahal David, with the springs a little further along. The canyon gets deeper and narrower and stakes have been provided to help you get past the waterfall.

The canyon ends at the picturesque **Window Waterfall**, which overlooks Nahal David. Come back to the stakes to climb the small ravine to the south. After 100m you come to a trail running parallel to the dry canyon. Turn left on this green marked trail, taking a right up the small hill. From the top you look down upon Ein Gedi and the Chalcolithic temple.

Follow the trail on your right down to the temple. About 250m to the right is the **Ein Gedi Spring**. You may well see hyraxes (dassies) here. From the spring, you can choose to either return to Nahal David via the upper part of the reserve and/or the **Ein Shulamit Cave**, or continue down through Tel Goren and past the ancient synagogue (see National Antiquities Park, right).

To reach the upper part of Nahal David, take the wide path north from the spring, passing underneath the ledge of the Chalcolithic temple. After 350m you intersect with the trail; continue straight down the southern bank and come to Nahal David Spring, with the Window Waterfall's overhang nearby. Take the path to the right across the stream until you reach a large boulder at the top of David's Waterfall. You can climb down the ladder to reach Ein Shulamit Cave.

To return to Nahal David, follow the path to your left and head down through Ein Shulamit Cave. The path eventually reaches David's Waterfall. Follow the path from here to reach the main entrance and car park.

To continue south, return to the Ein Gedi Spring and pass through a tunnel created by overhanging reeds. Note the ruins of a Crusader flour mill here. Follow the yellow marked trail, heading southeast, and crossing a dirt road. Take a right on the next dirt road you come to, and exit through the gate. To your left is a war memorial. The adjacent ruins are Tel Goren. Follow the dirt road till it intersects with a paved road. Turn left and pass by Tel Goren and the former field study centre and kibbutz buildings. At the next intersection, turn left, and go through the gate. After about 100m the road curves to the left. Head down to the right for another 100m and cross the fence to reach the ancient synagogue. Return to the paved road to make your way down to the main road, where you finish the hike about 3km south from where you started.

#### Wadi Arugot Hike

From the Wadi Arugot entrance there is a larger area for walkers with more time and energy. Hikers can head up to the lovely **Hidden Waterfall** (two hours return). Another 30-minute hike beyond the Hidden Waterfall leads you to the **Upper Pools**. It is possible to make a loop by hiking up to the plateau on the northern side from the Hidden Waterfall and exiting the reserve via Nahal David. However, this is a difficult and long trek (five to six hours), you will need at least five litres of water per person and you must advise the reserve office before you leave.

#### National Antiquities Park

The grandiloquent-sounding **National Antiquities Park** (adult with/without reserve admission 26/12NIS, child 124/6NIS; ☎ 8am-4pm) describes an essentially small archaeological attraction featuring only one historic find: possibly the oldest synagogue discovered in Israel. Dating from the 3rd century AD the original synagogue was a trapezoid building paved with a black-and-white mosaic floor containing a moveable Torah Ark. The northern wall faced Jerusalem. The excavated remains that you see today date from the middle of the 5th century AD, and are

fairly well preserved, particularly the mosaic floor in the prayer hall.

#### EIN GEDI BEACH

The popular but unpleasantly stony public beach (bring beach footwear) fulfils the bare requirements of those after a float in the Dead Sea in that it has changing areas, large plastic shade umbrellas, toilets and showers (8NIS). It also has a 24-hour snack bar and restaurant (see right), and is adjacent to a bus stop. What this beach lacks is the slightest hint of aesthetic appeal. Never mind, just keep your eyes shut while you float – although on second thoughts, better not; theft on the beach is rife.

#### EIN GEDI BOTANICAL GARDEN

For an impressive example of 'making the desert bloom' stop in at the botanical garden at Kibbutz Ein Gedi. There's more than 900 plants – from strange biblical species, such as frankincense and myrrh, to ornamental palms and unusual tropical trees. There's also a cactus garden. **Night tours** (☎ 658 4444; admission 24NIS; ☎ 8pm Tue & Thu) of the botanical garden are free for guests of the kibbutz.

#### EIN GEDI SPA

After a float the next best thing is to roll around in some black Dead Sea mud, which is rich in minerals and feels great on the skin. A popular place to swim and then get covered is at the **Ein Gedi Spa** (☎ 659 4813; adult/student Sun-Fri 60/48NIS, Sat 65/62NIS; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8am-5pm winter). Beach-goers are shuttled to and from the private beach and mud area by a little train, now that the shoreline of the Dead Sea has receded so much in recent years. At the spa it's also possible to soak in the hot sulphuric water from nearby mineral springs or relax by the freshwater pool. There's a range of natural cosmetic and massage treatments available – but book ahead. The complex belongs to the adjacent Kibbutz Ein Gedi (see right); guests have free use of the facilities.

#### Sleeping

**Ein Gedi Youth Hostel** (Beit Sarah; ☎ 658 4165; eingedi@iyha.org.il; dm/s/d, with breakfast 97/250/280NIS; ☎) The sensational setting and clean, contemporary rooms means this hostel is madly popular with everyone from 14 year olds on school camp to elderly religious women taking R and R at the sulphur pools. If you

are adverse to Israeli folk songs until 2am or snoring, incontinent seniors keeping you up all night, then check out the newly renovated 'guest house' area, which has rooms with private balconies and great views. Dinner is 45NIS. Ask at the reception about the 15% discount for admission to the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve and Ein Gedi Spa. The hostel is uphill and 250m from the bus stop.

**SPNI Field School** (☎ 658 4288; ngedi@spni.org.il; dm/s 75/130NIS, d 250-395NIS, with breakfast; ☎) Perched on the hill side above Beit Sarah amid wandering ibex, this place enjoys great views over the Dead Sea and of the Ein Gedi waterfalls. Rooms are not as swish as at the youth hostel, but it's an excellent launching point for early hikes. Stay a few days and watch the magical light and changing scene over the sea. Dinner is an extra 38NIS to 45NIS.

**Kibbutz Ein Gedi** (☎ 659 4222; www.ein-gedi.co.il; s US\$125-150, d US\$156-210, with breakfast; ☎) Surrounded by tree-filled gardens and only a skip and a hop to the Dead Sea (slightly more to the spa and hot springs, see left), this is one of the most popular kibbutzim in the country. Efficiently managed by superfriendly staff, it offers a host of activities, such as nightly entertainment (belly dancing is a favourite), guided walks, yoga classes and a wellness centre. There are a range of rooms but they are all a step up from standard motel-like kibbutz accommodation; the recently renovated Desert Rooms have painted murals and homemade furniture. Unfortunately there are very few rooms with views. A meat buffet dinner is 80NIS. If you're on the cheap, ask about the self-catering 'country lodgings' (d 360NIS).

#### Eating

There are very few eating options in Ein Gedi, a bit of a problem if you arrive late and miss dinner. The beach **snack bar** (☎ 24hr) serves pre-packaged sandwiches, and beers (and they will card you!).

At lunch you can try the blessedly air-conditioned **Pundak Ein Gedi** (☎ 659 4761; mains 39NIS; ☎ 10am-6pm), a self-service cafeteria next to the petrol station. Pundak offers uninspiring meat dishes, but has colourful salad-bar options, which are fresh and tasty.

The café-bar at the reception of the Kibbutz Ein Gedi guesthouse has outdoor seating and is open late. Otherwise, if you plan ahead or are in the area for a few days try **At**

**Home with Chaya** (☎ 052 832 5495; 🍽 dinner) for delicious home-cooking in a private house on the Ein Gedi Kibbutz.

## Shopping

**Ahava Factory & Outlet Store** (☎ 994 5117; Kibbutz Mitzpe Shalem; 🕒 8am-6pm Sun-Thu, 8am-4pm Fri, 8.30am-6pm Sat) Want to enjoy the benefits of Dead Sea mud at home? Drop by the Ahava

factory for great bargains on its excellent skin- and hair-care range that is based on Dead Sea minerals. It's approximately 10km north of Ein Gedi.

## MASADA

مصاדה 7737

📍 08

Masada, a desert mesa rising high above the Dead Sea, figures prominently in the Israeli

psyche. Shorthand for describing a kind of 'they'll never take us alive' attitude, the term 'Masada complex' is part of modern-day Israeli parlance. The story of the siege that took place here has been adopted as a symbol for the modern Jewish state. Israeli school children visit the site as part of their curriculum and some Israel Defence Forces (IDF) units hold their swearing-in ceremonies here,

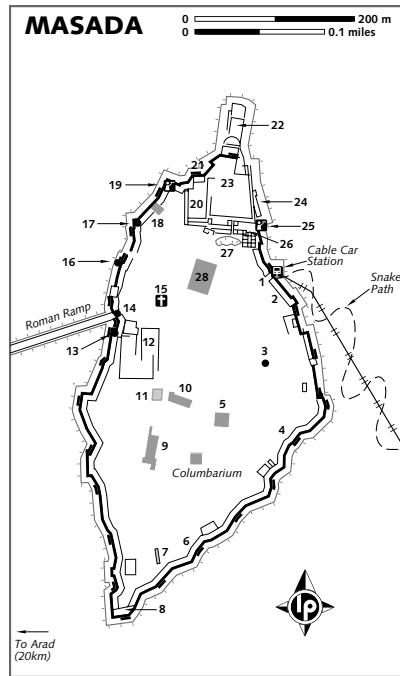
replete with the oath that 'Masada shall not fall again'. For travellers Masada is an absolute must-see. Set amid spectacular scenery, the site exudes a haunting ambience (especially before dawn) that is unforgettable.

## History

A freestanding, sheer-sided plateau high above the Dead Sea, Masada (in Hebrew,

### MASADA COMPLEX

- Snake Path Gate** The stone slab floor, wall benches, guardroom and white plaster wall made to resemble marble, are typical of Masada's gates.
- Eastern Wall** This section of the Herodian wall allows you to see how it was designed, with an outer and inner wall connected by partitions and the occasional tower. Herod's layout was, befitting a king, rather spacious, and the Zealots also built partitions to create more living quarters for themselves.
- Byzantine Dwelling Cave** Monks built this living space in an existing crater, believed to have been a quarry for plastering material.
- Southeastern Wall** In this section of the wall, there's a tower with a little room built on to it. Inside, a small niche bears what might be a Roman inscription.
- Royal Family Residence** One of a few examples of the luxurious residential villas built for Herod. Designed around a courtyard, it had a wide roofed hall at the southern end, separated by two pillars. Frescoes cover the walls of the three rooms here. Again, the Zealots divided up the big rooms to accommodate their large numbers.
- Southern Wall** There's a lookout tower here, with what was probably a bakery added by the Zealots. The Zealots were strictly religious and built ritual baths for themselves. The bath here has a dressing room next to it (note the narrow niches for clothes). The southern gate led to cisterns and caves outside the wall.
- Water Cistern** This is an example of Herod's clever water supply system that was necessary to allow such a community to live in comfort in this barren location. There are another 12 cisterns up here, on the western slope.
- Southern Citadel** This defended Masada at its weakest spot.
- Southern Villa** An unfinished Herodian structure, the Zealots built more living quarters around it. One of the rooms has been restored to the state it was in when excavated, with pots left beside the kitchen hearth. A long hall with benches was built on to the north by the Zealots and may have been used as a study hall.



- Building No 11** The Zealots dug water reservoirs out of this Herodian villa's floor.
- Swimming Pool** This is a good example of the luxury Herod thought he could not do without.
- Western Palace** The largest building on Masada, covering over 4000 sq metres, this was both the main administration centre and the king's ceremonial palace. The western wing had storerooms and a kitchen, with an underground system of cisterns. The northern wing, built around a courtyard, had servants' quarters, storerooms and workshops. The southern wing was for royalty, with waiting rooms, a throne room, bed chambers and a bathhouse.

**13 Tanner's Tower** This is believed to have been where the Zealots treated hides, with basins built into the walls to store the liquids needed for the job.

**14 Western Stairs & Gate** This is where you enter if coming from the Arad road, via the Roman Ramp. From this side of the mountain you look west to Wadi Masada. Turn left to pass through the Western Gate and the wall that surrounds the whole site. The gate you see today is Byzantine. The Herodian gate and the gate the Romans breached are to the north.

**15 Byzantine Church** Dating back to the 5th century, this church consisted of a hall and three rooms. It had a tiled roof, glass windows and a mosaic floor.

**16 Tower** Byzantine monks constructed the wall around this tower, which was built out of sandstone.

**17 Scroll Casemate** Archaeologists found several items of value left by the Zealots here, including scrolls, silver coins, a prayer shawl, weapons and sandals.

**18 Synagogue** This is the oldest synagogue found anywhere in the world, and the only one dating from the time of the Temple in Jerusalem. Pillars supported the roof, and you can see the base of the wall that divided the large hall.

**19 Northern Palace Lookout** Affords spectacular views north to Ein Gedi and the various wadis making their way to the Dead Sea. Herod's Northern Palace is just below on the lower slopes of the mountain.

**20 Administration Building** The Zealots built a ritual bath in this Herodian courtyard. Following strict Judaic law, rainwater was collected in the southern pool until it reached a certain level. It then trickled through a slit into another pool, and could be used for the ritual immersion. The Zealots washed in the smaller pool to the west before taking the ritual bath.

**21 Water Gate** With another great view to the north, this gate also featured a stone floor and benches around the walls for people to sit on while waiting. The walls were covered with white plaster to imitate marble.

**22 Herod's Northern Palace** Spectacularly built on three separate terraces on the northern slopes of the mountain, this was the king's private villa. The lower

terrace featured a courtyard, bordered by a double row of columns. Frescoes covered the walls to imitate marble, and the floor of the small bathroom was heated. Evidence of the Zealots' fate was found here: archaeologists dug up the skeletons of a man, a woman and a child, and the plaited scalp of another woman, along with a prayer shawl, arrows and armour. The middle and upper terraces were Herod's private quarters.

The upper terrace had black-and-white geometrically designed mosaic floors. Fragments of the wall and ceiling frescoes can still be seen. Restoration of the palace is currently underway with all the Roman frescoes from the lower part of the palace – the part most susceptible to wind and rain – removed at the time of research.

**23 Bathhouse** Herod's luxurious bathroom boasted pillars, a black-and-red mosaic floor, a dressing room with frescoes on the walls and ceiling and a black-and-white tiled floor, a lukewarm room with a pink-and-black tiled floor and more frescoes, and a cold room with just a pool. The largest of the rooms was the hot room, which had a suspended floor making it possible to heat the room by blowing hot air from the furnace outside under the floor and through clay pipes along the walls.

**24 Storehouses** This is where a year's worth of supplies were kept. Archaeologists found hundreds of storage jars that once contained large quantities of oil, wine and grains.

**25 Snake Path Lookout** Look down to see the Snake Path, and across to the Dead Sea to the point where it is now split in two.

**26 Villa** A residential villa at the time of Herod, it boasted a courtyard, pillars and spacious rooms. The Zealots later divided up the rooms to house themselves.

**27 Quarry** Some of the stone used in Masada's construction came from here.

**28 Officers' Family Quarters** Three separate living quarters lead off a central courtyard. Again, the Zealots built more rooms within the existing setup. Valuable remains were found here, including silver coins, indicating that probably the wealthier Zealots lived here.

*Metzuda*, meaning 'stronghold') was fortified sometime between 103 and 76 BC before passing into the hands of Herod the Great in 43 BC. He saw the fortress as a potential refuge in the event of either a Jewish revolt or trouble from Cleopatra and Mark Antony. Herod beefed up the defences with a casemate wall and towers, and added barracks, arsenals and storehouses. To make sure any enforced retreat would not be suffered in discomfort he added two luxurious palaces complete with swimming pools. After all that work, Herod died of natural causes in 4 BC without needing to use his desert hideaway. In AD 66 the Jews rose up against the Romans in what's known as the First Revolt. A group called the Zealots captured the lightly guarded Masada, which became a sanctuary for fleeing Jews. After four years the uprising was finally suppressed and the Romans then turned their attention to the mountain-top stronghold.

The sole account of what happened next comes from the chronicles of Flavius Josephus, a 1st-century historian who was not a man to let the truth stand in the way of a good story. Josephus writes that under the command of Flavius Silva the Romans set up 8000 men in eight camps around the base of the mountain and, using Jewish slave labour, began building an enormous earthen ramp up to the fortress walls. Inside the walls, the defenders of Masada numbered 967 men, women and children with enough food and water to last them for months. Once the ramp was complete, the Romans brought up their siege engines and prepared to breach the fortress. It's at this point that the Zealots, according to Josephus, began to set fire to their homes and all their possessions to prevent them falling into Roman hands. With that done, 10 men were chosen by lots and given the task of killing all of the others. Nine of the 10 were then executed by their companion before he finally despatched himself. When the Romans broke through they found alive just two women and five children, who had survived by hiding. The mass suicide of Masada marked the end of the Jewish presence in Palestine.

Byzantine monks occupied the site during the 4th and 5th centuries, after which Masada faded into legend. It was rediscovered in the early 19th century: in 1838

it was seen from Ein Gedi and correctly identified, and in 1842 it was climbed. It wasn't, however, until 1963 that a major investigation was undertaken during which the site was excavated, preserved and partially rebuilt.

### Information

Once a dusty outpost, Masada is now guarded by a massive **tourist complex** (☎ 658 4207/8; gl.masada@npa.org.il; 📍 8am-4pm Apr-Sep, 8am-5pm Oct-Mar), which has a theatre that shows a short introductory video on the history of the site, an impressive model of the site and coming soon, a small archaeological museum of discovered artefacts. There's a souvenir store that sells snacks, and a lovely outdoor juice bar. Just in case you thought a Unesco World Heritage citation would maintain a pristine environment there's talk of a McDonalds also moving in (presumably sans golden arches).

Top up with water before you start out, even though there is drinking water available on the summit. The heat really does get going by about 10am, so the earlier you set off, the better. The sunrise over Jordan and the Dead Sea is very special, so it's well worth setting your alarm so that you're in time to view it from the summit.

### Sights SUMMIT RUINS

Depending on the level of your interest in archaeology, you could be up here for hours. The summit ruins are accessible on foot via the steep and sinuous **Snake Path** (adult/child 23/12NIS), which takes about 50 minutes to walk up, and 30 minutes back down. The Snake Path opens one hour before sunrise, and during summer (April to October) closes at around 10am because of the harsh conditions. Considerably more popular is the **cable car** (adult one way/return 45/61NIS, child one way/return 22/34NIS; 📍 8am-4pm), which takes about three minutes and runs every half hour. On the western side of the mountain, the easier **Roman Ramp** is only accessible by the road from Arad. It opens 45 minutes before sunrise and takes about 15 minutes to climb. Hand-held audio guides are available in 6 languages for 15NIS.

A very good map is available at the tourist complex but it's perhaps not necessary as all the excavations are well labelled in English.

### DEAD HEALTHY?

Water diversion for agriculture, mineral extraction, tourism and wildlife all compete for the Dead Sea's limited natural resources. Because the Dead Sea crosses international borders, this competition takes place not only between the different sectors but also between the different countries. This unregulated competition has led to the 'Tragedy of the Commons' – the over-exploitation of a shared resource. The near drying up of the lower Jordan River that used to flow into the Dead Sea, the 1500 sinkholes that have opened up around its shores and the loss of wildlife are the result of these competing policies.

However, the tragedy can be reversed and the sea saved through regional cooperation. EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME), a unique Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli environmental organisation, has launched a campaign to 'Save the Dead Sea'. FoEME, with the help of leading experts from the region, has developed a concept document for the Unesco World Heritage listing of the Dead Sea.

Though the Dead Sea is yet to be registered with Unesco, decision makers are having to respond, especially to the consequences of the falling sea level. Two options are presently being discussed: either allow the natural source of water, the Jordan River, to flow again (at least partially) and rehabilitate the Jordan River and Dead Sea at the same time, or pump in marine water from the Gulf of Aqaba and use the drop in elevation to produce energy/desalinate water. Both options have their supporters, but clearly environmentalists favour the first mentioned solution.

The River Jordan, holy to half of humanity, cannot be allowed to run dry. Dealing with the water problems of the region, fair and sustainable allocations between peoples and nature will result in both the rehabilitation of the Jordan River and stabilisation of the Dead Sea. Saving the Dead Sea by working out the details over water can only assist in advancing peace in the Middle East.

For more information on the 'Save the Dead Sea' campaign visit [www.foeme.org](http://www.foeme.org). For details on other water-management initiatives see p75.

*Gidon Bromberg is the Israeli Director of EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East*

The lines of black paint you'll see indicate which parts are the original remains and which parts are reconstructed. For details, see Masada Complex, p320.

### SOUND & LIGHT SHOW

For a dramatic recount of the history of Masada, check out the 40-minute **sound-and-light show** (bookings ☎ 08-995 9333; admission 41NIS; 📍 9pm Tue & Thu Apr-Aug, 8pm Sep-Oct), staged in a specially built open-air theatre on the Arad side of the mountain. Booking is possible through the tourist information office in Arad (p328), from where you can also pick up round-trip transportation. The performance is in Hebrew but you can rent earphones for simultaneous translation into English, French, German or Spanish. Refreshments are available at the site.

Note that there's no connecting road from the sound-and-light performance area with the main highway along the shore of the Dead Sea (Rte 90). If you are coming from Arad, driving time to the sound-and-light show is about 30 minutes (see right).

### Sleeping

**Isaach Taylor Hostel** (☎ 6584349; dm/s/d, with breakfast US\$25/48/66.50; 📍 📍) What was once a hostel so utterly depressing you couldn't wait to get out at 3am and rush up the mountain, is now one of the finest in the country. Extensive renovations have created a luxury hotel-style reception with floor-to-ceiling windows and a fabulous balcony overlooking the Dead Sea. Downstairs the spacious dorm rooms have huge TV, kettle and excellent bathrooms, but best of all, they lack the all-too-sterile feeling of other HI places. Landscaped gardens and courtyards lead to the swimming pool (open on weekends) built into the mountain, and the basketball court. Dinner is US\$12 and guests get a 25% discount on the cable-car entry fee to Masada.

Sleeping out on top of Masada is not permitted, but the hostel does have some tent-pitching space.

### Getting There & Away

You can approach Masada from either the Dead Sea (for the youth hostel, tourist

complex and summit access) or Arad (for the sound-and-light show only). For the former, there are bus services from Jerusalem (No 444 or 486, 39NIS, 2½ hours, five daily), and from Eilat (55NIS, four hours, four daily). To access the sound-and-light show take road 3199 from the back of Arad (see p328); from Arad it's about a 30-minute drive to Masada.

## Ein Bokek עין בוקק 08

An unappealing gated community of five-star hotels and private beaches with the revolving arches of a McDonald's franchise as a centrepiece, it's difficult to get excited about the package-tourist ghetto of Ein Bokek.

It's even harder when you find out that the shallow water in front of the hotels isn't actually the Dead Sea, which dried up here in the 1980s. It is a reservoir maintained by Dead Sea Works, a company that pumps water from the northern to the southern part of the lake, where it is evaporated to extract minerals such as potash and bromide – a process hastening the sea's demise (see Dead Healthy?, p323).

## Sleeping

There's no budget (or even midrange) accommodation in Ein Bokek, but if you want a splurge, you're in for a night of pure luxury, with gorgeous swimming pools, state-of-the-art spas and a buffet bonanza as given features of the top hotels. All the big chains including Caesar, Crowne Plaza and Sheraton have hotels here – for huge savings check the discount travel websites before you arrive.

**Le Meridian Dead Sea Resort** (☎ 659 1234; reservations@fattal-hotels-israel.com; half-board s/d US\$145/170; 📶 📺 📺) This rates as one of the best places to stay in the world, and without a doubt it offers the greatest value on the Dead Sea. The most sumptuous of the many hotels in Ein Bokek, it is set on 12 landscaped acres with no less than three swimming pools, a private beach and more marble than an Italian sarcophagus. Some of the plush, modern rooms have private balconies, and they all face the water. An on-site medical centre offers everything from post-op care to acupuncture, while the Mineralia Spa has 21 treatment rooms for massages, Dead Sea salt scrubs and mud wraps.

**Hod Hamidbar** (☎ 668 8222; www.hodhotel.co.il; s/d, with breakfast US\$225/265; 📶 📺 📺) This Israeli spa resort has gone all neo-Roman with a walkway leading down to the beach marked with 10ft-high pillars; surprisingly it actually looks quite elegant. As does the rest of the hotel, which has a slightly more intimate feel than some of the larger chains. The large swimming pool overlooks the sea and the swanky glass-enclosed spa offers sulphur pools, hydrotherapy and a dry Finnish sauna. The tasteful rooms are on the small side but are nicely decked out in blonde wood. There are a range of night-time activities, from interesting lectures to the -400 nightclub.

## Sodom סדום 08

This area is traditionally thought to be the site of Sodom and Gomorrah, the biblical cities that were destroyed in a storm of fire and brimstone – a punishment from God because of their people's depravity (Genesis 18-19). It's also a place where the interesting sites are off the beaten track so you really need your own transport or to take an organised tour. With your own car, follow the signs for a scenic drive with an eerie landscape and great views of the Dead Sea.

If you are visiting Sodom via the southern route you will pass the unsightly Dead Sea Works, one of the world's leading producers of potash for agricultural fertiliser (3.5 million tonnes a year), employing around 35,000 people. The company's plant is a massive industrial complex surrounded by a 29km-long maze of evaporation ponds and mountains of chemicals.

## Mt Sodom & the Flour Cave

This mountain range (11km by 3km) is 98% salt. In most climates, salt dissolves and disappears, but in the dry Dead Sea region these salt rocks remain. The run-off that collects on the surface cuts through to form a series of potholes that drains into a maze of caves.

The largest of these is next to a noticeable salt rock formation that has been dubbed 'Mrs Lot' in reference to Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at the burning city (Genesis 19:26). Due to the danger of avalanches access to these caves is only possible with a guide.

You don't need a guide to visit the **Flour Cave** in the beautiful Nahal Perazim (gorge), which has been carved out of soft limestone

## PLUNGING INTO THE JUDEAN DESERT – THE POOLS OF NAHAL PERES

Hiked Ein Gedi and your legs are aching for more? The southern part of the Dead Sea has some moderately challenging walks that are well marked and offer excellent views and impressive landscapes. If you enjoy wandering through narrow gorges and splashing in waterholes, hike the Nahal Peres (four hours one way). The red-marked trail starts at the parking area beside KM111 on the Dimona-Dead Sea Rd (Rte 25). During winter the rains fill a string of beautiful pools within the gorge. The 10m-high waterfall is great to admire over a packed lunch. Continue along the green-marked trail, bypassing the waterfall from the left, to the point where it meets the black-marked trail. Follow the black-marked trail into the riverbed and on until you reach a metal ladder attached to the rock. Climb the ladder to the green-marked trail leading to the top of the Peres Lookout, where there are spectacular views of the Dead Sea and the Moav Mountains in Jordan. The trail then descends to where the hike ends at the Arava Junction.

into a variety of shapes by water currents. The Flour Cave got its name from its powdery chalk lining, which you still find all over your clothes several hours later. The cave is pitch black, so it's best to carry a torch.

It's 8km south of the Dead Sea Works on Rte 90, then along an unpaved but signposted road that ends at a car park – further signs direct visitors to the caves about a 15-minute walk away. There is no public transport to the cave but you can easily reach it by car.

## NEOT HAKIKAR נאות הכיכר 08

An agreeable place to stop on the drive to/from Eilat is **Neot Hakikar**, a remote (well, for

Israel and the Palestinian Territories) moshav on the border with Jordan. Surrounded by rugged hills at the end of a desolate stretch of road, the moshav has a handful of good sleeping options and is home to a small artistic community. It's also a great place for doing some mountain biking or short hikes. If bird-watching is your game, the nearby saline oasis and fish ponds are home to a number of rare feathered friends.

For rustic wooden cabins head to **At Belfer's Place** (☎ 655 5104; michalbel@yahoo.com), though families might like the **Cycle Inn** (☎ 052 899 1146; www.cycle-inn.com; s/d 125/250NIS), where you can take over the whole house (six bedrooms) as well as rent bikes (100NIS per day) from cycling enthusiast Uzi, who will give you the low-down on trails in the area. For both these places it's best to ring ahead.

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