

The Gaza Strip

قطاع غزة

רצועת עזה



For a place so frequently in the news, it's hard to believe that the whole of the Gaza Strip occupies a sliver of land just 45km long and less than 10km wide, along the shimmering Mediterranean coast. There are, however, some 1.4 million people packed into this space, in a conglomeration of eight refugee camps and three towns including the sprawling Gaza City.

Statistics paint a bleak picture of the tiny, turbulent area, which, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is experiencing a period of 'de-development'. Unemployment stands at 38%, whilst 78% of the population lives below the poverty line, existing on less than US\$2 per day. The average Palestinian wage earner supports eight people, but earns five times less than in 2000. In one of the most densely packed camps, Jabalia, almost 107,000 people live in an area of less than 2 sq km. Over 30% of Gaza's adults (as well as a high number of children) suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. On top of this, some statisticians predict that the population will double in the next fifteen years, stretching Gaza's thin resources even further.

Gaza's history, though, is anything but bleak. In its past incarnations it was a highly coveted area with rich natural assets and a population that leant itself to arts, sports and progress under a succession of fiercely dominating forces. You might not immediately recognise them today, but vestiges of Gaza's heritage, though well hidden, do remain. Look beyond the poverty and rubble, and you'll find traces of an illustrious history that spanned three millennia, and though current conditions are dire, Gaza itself has seen it all before. It's believed that the city has been captured, overthrown, contested and rebuilt more than any other city in the world, a cycle in which it remains firmly caught.

So why go to Gaza at all? It's dirty, it's crowded; it can be dismal, depressing and dangerous. The answer is simply because it's here that you can find the human spirit at its most resilient. Take, for example, the 2006 World Cup; directly after the bombing of Gaza's only electricity plant, many Gazans immediately came up with creative schemes in order to watch the next match when power remained sporadic. Similarly, despite the destruction of basic infrastructure in air strikes, Gaza City entrepreneurs continue to open new restaurants on the seashore. In addition, most Gazans are friendly, welcoming, and more than willing to point the way to places of interest. A visit to Gaza, therefore, for a whole spectrum of reasons, is certain to be one you won't quickly forget.

WARNING

Despite the Israeli disengagement from Gaza in August 2005, the Gaza Strip remains an intrinsically unstable place. A broad offensive, to try to prevent Gaza militants from shooting Qassam rockets into Israel, broke out in the northern summer of 2006, spurred by the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Corporal Gilad Shalit. This led to a wave of civilian deaths, and to continued unrest in the region.

Most countries' foreign offices advise against all nonessential travel to the Gaza Strip, and there's no doubt that you should think extremely carefully before attempting to visit. The political situation remains volatile, and foreigners of various nationalities are kidnapped with worrying regularity, though so far they've been released unharmed. Raids by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and Israeli Air Force often inadvertently result in civilian casualties; several of the foreigners injured or killed in Gaza during the last few years, including UK film director James Miller, were victims of Israeli army mistakes.

It should, however, also be taken into account that Gaza doesn't compare to Iraq or Afghanistan in terms of its track record of danger to foreigners. Forbes.com produces an annual list of 'Most Dangerous Destinations' and in 2006 this did not include the Palestinian Territories. Indeed, according to Forbes, Papua New Guinea, Haiti, Pakistan and Burundi are all, perhaps surprisingly, much more risky.

Getting There & Away

There are two main border crossings from Israel into Gaza: the Karni Crossing for goods, and the Erez Crossing for people. Currently, it's very hard for anyone but aid workers, diplomats and journalists to enter, but if you're determined to try, your best bet is to visit the Erez Crossing in advance and apply for a permit in person.

Once you arrive, make your way to the VIP office to the left of the actual checkpoint, ensuring that you have with your passport and preferably a more convincing reason for visiting Gaza than simply curiosity. Then, ask for a civilian entry-permit form. The soldiers on the desk may try to convince you that no such thing exists, but persevere – at the time of writing, at least, it still did. You will have to wait a few days to be granted permission. Bear in mind that this does not guarantee you entry to Gaza; on the day of your visit, you'll have to turn up and try your luck, which is dependent on the IDF's discretion.

To get to the Erez Crossing itself, either take a sherut (service taxi; 50NIS per person; see p143) from the ranks opposite Damascus Gate in East Jerusalem, or from Tel Aviv head south by train to Ashkelon (see p181), from where you can hop on a southbound bus from Ashkelon to Yad Mordechai junction, from which you'll have to jump into a taxi (10NIS, five minutes) for the last 5km to Erez. From the other side of the crossing, it's

about 10km to Gaza City; taxi fares will depend on how busy or deserted the checkpoint is, but you should be able to bargain down to about 30NIS or 40NIS, or less if it's quiet.

Optimists hope that at some point in the not-too-distant future, Gaza's Yasser Arafat International Airport will once again be open for trade. Inaugurated in 1998 with much fanfare and state-of-the-art equipment, it was closed in 2001 after being damaged by Israeli air strikes. Perhaps one day, however, the unlikely-sounding Palestinian Airlines will once again take to the skies.

GAZA CITY

☎ 08 / 469,000

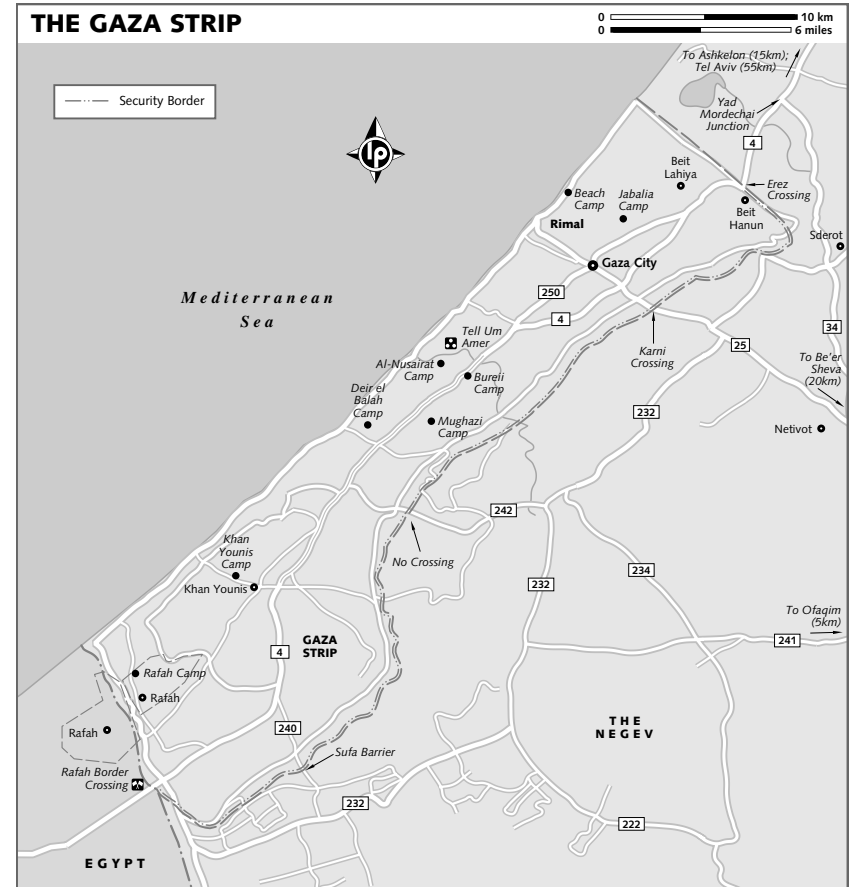
History

'A city so rich in trees it looks like a cloth of brocade spread out upon the land,' wrote 14th-century Syrian scholar, Al-Dimashqi. Though the exact meaning of the name Gaza has been obscured in the depths of time, translations include 'the treasure', 'the chosen place' and 'the ruler's prize'. Throughout its turbulent history, Gaza has indeed always been considered a treasure for invaders and emperors, who have consistently sought control of its magnificent agricultural and maritime resources. As far back into antiquity as 1500 BC, an inscription on the Temple of Amun at Karnak noted that Gaza was 'flourishing', its attractions and allure lasting some 3400 years, until around the beginning of the 20th century.

Gaza's power to attract conquerors stemmed largely from its importance as a commercial port. Its deepwater harbour connected trade routes between Egypt, Africa, Central Asia and Arabia, was one of the best trade routes on the road between Babylon and Persia, and was stationed on the Frankincense Trail from western Arabia and Yemen. Not only goods, but also people arrived in large quantities at Gaza's shores; Christian pilgrims travelled via Gaza to reach Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth, whilst Muslim pilgrims attending the Haj in Mecca made their way through Gaza from North Africa, often stopping off to visit the Gaza City tomb of the prophet Mohammed's great-grandfather, Hashim

(see p360). The second major resource with which Gaza was blessed was fertile farmland, which offered up cereal crops, vegetables and fruit such as figs, dates and oranges in abundance. Perhaps surprisingly, during the Byzantine era Gaza's wines were also highly prized, being traded as far away as France.

By the time Alexander the Great arrived in 332 BC to conquer what had already passed through the hands of the Philistines, the kingdom of David and Solomon, and the Persian ruler Cambyses, Gaza was well established as a departure and entry point for exotic goods such as spices, gold, silk, perfumes, frankincense, and slaves. It took Alexander two months to penetrate

THE GAZA STRIP

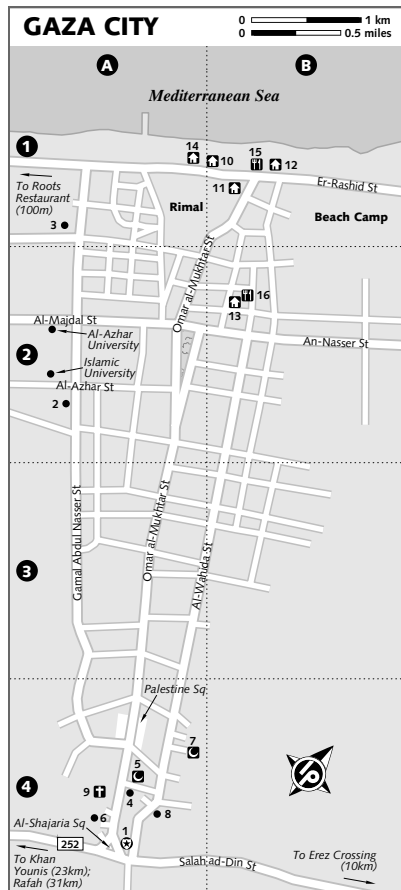
its ramparts, which were fiercely guarded by an alliance of Arabs and Persians. After succeeding, he put to death 10,000 men as punishment for their resistance, and Gaza continued to change hands regularly – and bloodily – until the arrival of the Romans in 63 BC.

Under Roman rule, the city went from strength to strength. The Emperor Hadrian founded a famous wrestling stadium; the Gaza mint was in full swing, churning out new Roman coins; and a 500-man senate governed the city's affairs. Even later, in the 6th century, when Bishop Porphyrius, under the Emperor Constantine, forced Gazans' conversion to Christianity and burned down the famous Temple of Marna

to replace it with a church, the city continued to shine. A school of rhetoric developed, libraries and bathhouses were built and the wine trade, replacing the diminishing spice trade, blossomed.

In ensuing centuries, Gaza once again passed through a variety of hands, and in AD 1100 the Crusaders descended, demolishing its remaining mosques, refortifying its citadel and building a huge church that now forms part of the Great Mosque. Just 60 years later, Saladin (Salah ad-Din) took the city, only to be replaced by Richard the Lionheart in AD 1197, who destroyed Gaza's castle and city walls, which were never rebuilt.

During the 14th century, Mamluk rule came to Gaza, although an attack of plague swept through its streets in the 1340s, reducing its citizenship to a handful. The Mamluks constructed khans (caravan hostels intended to protect trade, also known as caravanse-rai) across the region, and even though Gaza City's historic khan was demolished during the 1960s, the remnants of the khan at Khan Younis are still standing (p362). In 1516, Ottoman Empire rule superseded the Mamluks, and though sea trade declined, Gaza's agricultural economy grew strong. In 1660, Gaza's facilities were even compared to those of Paris, though by the arrival of Napoleon in 1799 – who stayed for just three days before heading on to his Egyptian Campaign – Gaza's economy had begun to decline due to heavy taxation and Bedouin raids.



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RIDING A MODERN ARC

A current problem facing Palestinians is the near impossibility of movement between Gaza and the West Bank. For a Palestinian businessman to attend a meeting in Ramallah, for example, there's not much chance of getting a permit to do the two-hour car journey direct. Instead, many Palestinians travel from Gaza City across the Rafah border checkpoint into Egypt, and then by car across Sinai and the Suez Canal to Cairo. From Cairo, they fly to Amman in Jordan, then travel overland across the Allenby/King Hussein Bridge into the West Bank. They must then negotiate numerous checkpoints to get to Ramallah.

One solution to this problem has recently been offered by the nonprofit Rand Corporation (www.rand.org), which recently proposed a 225km-long communications and transport solution called the ARC.

The ARC would consist of a high-speed rail line, a toll road, an aqueduct, an energy network and a fibre-optic cable line linking the main Palestinian towns in the West Bank and Gaza. Its route would run in an arc from Jenin in the north through Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, and then on to Rafah, Khan Younis and Gaza City, thus linking the main cities of the West Bank and Gaza in just 90 minutes. The corporation's analysts believe that this would not only spur investment and regeneration in Gaza, but that it may also help to ease overcrowding by redirecting population growth more easily to the West Bank and have the potential to employ 100,000 Palestinians for a period of five years. The only drawback? At around US\$6 billion to construct, it's unlikely the cost could be easily borne by the average Palestinian taxpayer.

RECENT EVENTS

WWI, however, heralded the biggest blow to Gaza's economical and cultural significance. As the British air force under General Edmund Allenby pounded Gaza whilst taking Palestine from the Turks, many residents fled and historic buildings were reduced to rubble. Then, in 1927, a huge earthquake finished off the damage done by the war.

Gaza was under British Mandate administration until 1948, when, with the creation of the State of Israel, Palestinian refugees teemed into the area, quickly swelling its population from 35,000 to 170,000 in just months. Between 1948 and 1967 Gaza was administered by Egypt, during which it again grew rapidly, and in 1967 it was occupied by Israel following the Six Day War. During the 1970s, Israeli settlers moved in, and then in 1987, the first intifada was born in Gaza's backstreets and camps. In 1994, Gaza City became the seat of government for the Palestinian Authority (PA), following the 1993 Oslo Accords (see p37 for more details).

In August 2005, former prime minister Ariel Sharon's controversial disengagement plan saw the removal of some 8000 Israeli settlers from Gaza's 21 Jewish settlements. According to the PA, this prime development land, much of which is still covered in the 80,000 tonnes of rubble left behind by the

settlements' demolition, will all eventually be put to public use.

Orientation & Information

Gaza City is based around the long Omar al-Mukhtar St, which runs north to south from the sea, all the way to the main Salah ad-Din St, which takes you out of town. At the southern end of Omar al-Mukhtar, the town's main focus is Palestine Sq, around which most of the sights are clustered. At the opposite end, the Rimal (Sands) area of town has the swishest houses, the city's beaches, and some of its nicest restaurants and hotels. In between the two, Gaza City's mostly badly built apartment blocks spread for around 2.5km, whilst directly to the east of Rimal is the optimistically named, but dismal, Beach refugee camp.

There are a number of things to see in Gaza City, but opening hours, entrance fees and even the state of the structures themselves are all very much subject to change and, unsurprisingly, there's no tourist office. Your taxi driver, hotel receptionist or host will therefore likely be the best source of up-to-date information; otherwise, just drop by the places of interest and see whether there's anyone around. Most shops and services are closed on Fridays, as are mosques to non-Muslim visitors while Friday prayers are in session.

Sights & Activities

GREAT MOSQUE

Also known as Al-Omari Mosque or Jama'at al-Akbar, Palestinian tradition relates that the **Great Mosque** (☒ closed to non-Muslims Fri) was built on the site of the biblical Temple of Dagon, which Sampson pulled down on the faithful Philistines and himself. Subsequently, a number of other religious buildings were built on the same spot, including a 12th-century Crusader church dedicated to St John the Baptist.

Some parts of this church remain and have been incorporated into the current mosque, including the western façade with a beautiful marble doorway, and a number of carved flower column capitals. Damaged in the British shelling of Gaza in 1917, the mosque was subsequently restored in the 1920s by the Islamic High Council, and remains one of Gaza City's most prominent buildings. It's still in daily use, but you should be able to enter if there are no prayers in progress.

GOLD MARKET

The narrow, covered **gold market** passage, running alongside the southern edge of the Great Mosque, was built in AD 1476 by prominent Gazan judge Sheikh Shams al-Din-al-Himsi, and originally formed part of a much bigger covered market. The rest of the market was destroyed during WWI, but today this short passageway is still the place where all spouses-to-be come to pick out jewellery. Sadly, due to recent food shortages in Gaza, the gold market has also started to play host to elderly Gazans, selling off family heirlooms in the hope of raising some sorely needed extra cash.

NAPOLEON'S CITADEL

Local legend has it that this imposing building was built by 13th-century Mamluk sultan Zaher al-Baibars (r 1260–1277), as an impressive house for his Gazan wife, whom he married when he was still a soldier, passing through Gaza to fight the Crusaders. What's for sure, though, is that in 1799, Napoleon, during his Egyptian Campaign, set up camp in Gaza and established his base here. During the Ottoman Empire **Napoleon's Citadel** was then the governor's house, and during the British Mandate it served as a police station. In its most recent incarnation it became a girls' school, though it has recently

been restored with UNDP funding, to be turned into a museum that will house Gaza's archaeological artefacts from the Neolithic to the Roman and Byzantine eras.

ST PORPHYRIUS CHURCH

The still-functioning Greek Orthodox **St Porphyrius Church** was built in the 6th century by Bishop Porphyrius, though much of the current building dates from Crusader and 19th-century additions. Porphyrius himself, who oversaw the closure of Gaza's pagan holy sites and reputedly ordered the destruction of the Temple of Marna, brought about an end to Graeco-Roman worship in Gaza when his imperial forces turned on the city's inhabitants, employing a few hefty clubs to persuade them to comply. The church still serves Gaza's small Christian community of around 1500 people. If it's locked, you should be able to get hold of the key from the priest who lives above the school opposite the church. Porphyrius himself is buried in the Byzantine graveyard surrounding the church, close to its northern wall.

HAMMAM AL-SAMARA

The last remaining of five bathhouses in Gaza City, **Hammam al-Samara** (☒ men 5am-noon, women noon-3pm) is a gorgeous Mamluk-era bathhouse dating back even beyond the 14th century, when, according to a plaque in the lobby, it was restored by the governor Sangar ibn Abdullah. It has managed to retain its vaulted ceilings and inlaid marble tiled floors, and is still heated by a series of wood-fired ovens and aqueducts. Because of ongoing restoration work, opening times may change, but if open, it's a great place for a leisurely steam-clean with the locals.

MOSQUE OF SAID HASHIM

Situated in Gaza's Daraj quarter, the popular **Mosque of Said Hashim** (Jaffa St; ☒ closed to non-Muslims Fri), off the northern side of Al-Wahida St, was built in 1850 under orders from Ottoman Sultan Abdul Majeed, using masonry from mosques and older buildings destroyed by Napoleon's troops. Its name refers to the Prophet Mohammed's great-grandfather, Hashim, a prominent merchant who died as he was passing through Gaza, and whose tomb rests in the mosque's northwestern corner. This is one of Gaza's

A HELPING HAND

Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) are vital in Gaza, and come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, some locally run and staffed and others international. The **United Nations Development Programme** (UNDP; www.undp.ps) estimates that NGOs currently provide 60% of Gaza's primary health-care services, 90% of rehabilitation and disability centres and 95% of preschool education, and manage 42% of hospitals. They contribute to every aspect of Gazan life, from the largest organisations such as **United Nations Reliefs & Works Agency for Palestine Refugees** (UNRWA; ☎ 08-677 7333; www.unrwa.org; Gamal Abdul Nasser St) to smaller concerns dedicated to specific missions, such as the **Qattan Centre for the Child** (www.qattanfoundation.org), which provides Gaza's children with creative and learning facilities.

A number of Gaza's NGOs provide possibilities for volunteering, though these opportunities can depend on the political and security situations. **Al-Dameer Association for Human Rights** (www.aldameer.org) offers internships, particularly suitable for those with a legal background, ranging from one to six months. The **Palestinian Red Crescent Society** (www.palestinercs.org) also has volunteering opportunities, especially for people with medical training.

Also happy to accept volunteers is the controversial **International Solidarity Movement** (www.palsolidarity.org), which advocates 'direct action', and welcomes international volunteers to work on what it calls 'resisting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land using nonviolent, direct-action methods and principles'. Tom Hurdall, killed by Israeli gunfire, and Rachel Corrie, crushed to death by a bulldozer, are sadly the organisation's two best-known volunteers.

If you're interested in finding out about a particular type of NGO, **Middle East NGOs Gateway** (www.mengos.net) offers a searchable list, news and information on current events in the sector. The **Palestinian NGO Network** (☎ 08-284 7518; www.pngo.net) is another excellent point of contact, also holding information on current vacancies with various NGOs in Gaza, and further across the West Bank.

biggest and most attractive mosques, and, like the Great Mosque, you should be able to look in when there's no prayer in session.

ARTS & CRAFTS VILLAGE

A beautiful white-painted adobe complex, the **Arts & Crafts Village** (☎ 2846405; www.gazavillage.org; Gamal Abdul Nasser St) is where traditional Palestinian handicrafts, such as weaving, embroidery, copper work and woodwork, are kept alive. The village runs training courses and summer camps for children and workshops for adults, and regularly hosts local and international exhibitions. Its Abu Nawwas restaurant makes a pleasant place for a laid-back lunch accompanied by a bubbling nargileh.

Sleeping

Accommodation in Gaza City is easy to come by, and the string of decent hotels along the sea front are where most foreigners choose to stay. Though these days they rarely – if ever – experience full occupancy, it's nevertheless worth booking in advance, since many hotels can arrange a pick-up service from near the Erez crossing.

Palestine Hotel (☎ 282 3355; E r-Rashid St; s/d US\$50/60; ☒) Like many hotels on the city's sea-front road, the Palestine offers decent, clean rooms for reasonable prices, along with friendly service and a good location in the quieter, more upscale Rimal part of town. If the Palestine is full, the Adam and Al Quds International Hotels on the same strip both offer similar rooms and services at comparable prices.

Marna House (☎ 282 2624; Ahmed Abdel Aziz St; s/d \$50/70 ☒) A great small hotel with extremely helpful staff, Marna House feels a bit like a home away from home, with an English library available for the use of guests. Rooms are comfortable and airy, with satellite TV and balconies, and rates include tax and breakfast.

Al-Deira Hotel (☎ 283 8100; Er-Rashid St; s/d US\$90/100, plus service charge 8%; ☒) Without question the best hotel in town, Al-Deira is a swish, stylish and tightly run place. Constructed from a traditional Gazan red brick, its architect, Rashid Abdel Hamid, also designed the Arts & Crafts Village (see left) nearby. Meals from its terrific restaurant can be delivered to your room (prices include breakfast). The

beds are comfy, the showers are hot, there's a good sea view from its balconies, and each room has wi-fi.

Eating

Think Mediterranean cuisine and Gaza probably won't spring to mind, but the region has its own particular style of cooking, characterised by fantastically fresh seafood and by a love for all things hot, hot, hot (achieved by liberal quantities of whole green chillies). Aside from the usual run of felafels, hummus and shwarmas (readily available from stands all over Gaza City), there are some particularly Gazan delights worth looking out for, including *sumaggiya* (slow-stewed beef with chard and chickpeas, and flavoured with dill, garlic, chillies and sumac seeds) and the veggie *rumanniya* (an unusual, delicious mixture of aubergine, lentils, tahini and pomegranate juice) dished up at the beginning of autumn.

Delice Café (Sheikh Izz ed-Din-el-Qassam St; ☎ Sun-Thu) Catering to Gazans' taste for sweet stuff, this patisserie is always busy and it's a great place to stop for a quick pastry or two and a strong cup of black coffee.

Al Salam Restaurant (behind Al-Deira Hotel; ☎ lunch & dinner) Many locals swear that this is *the* place for fish and seafood. However, with restrictions sometimes imposed on fishermen, fish dishes may also be suspended temporarily from the menu. In that case, opt for one of the grilled chicken dishes, which are extremely tasty, too.

Roots Restaurant (☎ 288 8666; Cairo St; mains 40-100NIS; ☎ 11am-midnight) By far the most expensive upscale restaurant in Gaza, Roots is where important people dine on steak au poivre and chicken cordon bleu, though, since alcohol isn't served, there's no washing it down with a good vintage of anything other than Coke. Owner Basil Eleiwa and partners sunk US\$1.1 million into Roots, which has a nice outdoor area for evening dining, and incorporates the Green Terrace Café, serving sandwiches, mezze and light lunches all day long in less formal surroundings.

ELSEWHERE IN THE GAZA STRIP

Khan Younis خان يونس
pop 165,200

Once a stopping point on the ancient trade route to Egypt, Khan Younis is primarily a market town and is Gaza's second-largest

urban centre, also incorporating the neighbouring Khan Younis refugee camp. Khan Younis' colourful Bedouin market takes place every Wednesday, offering up everything from fresh fish and locally produced honey to clay cooking pots and embroidered linen. The remains of the ruined khan in the square nearby – from which the town got its name – date back to AD 1387, and were built by Mamluk official Amir Yunis ibn Abd Allah al-Nawrusi, cupbearer to Sultan Barquq.

To get the 30km from Gaza City, your best bet is to hone your bargaining skills on a taxi driver.

Tell Umm Amer

תל אום עמר תל ام عمر
Located in Al-Nusairat village, 8.5km south of Gaza City, the ruins of this Byzantine site cover around two acres and are currently in the process of excavation. The site consists of a monastery and a group of church buildings, including a chapel, a burial crypt and a hammam; construction has been attributed to St Hilarion (b AD 291), a young Christian convert from Gaza. A number of beautiful mosaics (thought to date from the 4th and 8th centuries AD) decorate the floors, and though work on the site is ongoing, visitors are encouraged to drop by.

To get there, take a taxi from Gaza City; a taxi should cost around 35NIS, though it's best to ask your driver to wait while you look around, and negotiate a return fare.

Rafah

רפיח رفح
pop 269,600
Traditionally the gateway between Egypt and the Middle East, and now infamous for its subterranean network of smugglers' tunnels, the main thoroughfare for arms-smuggling into the Gaza Strip, Rafah now encapsulates Gaza's problems at their most acute. Rafah town and its adjacent refugee camp, which are no longer distinguishable from one another, have suffered heavily under Israeli military action in recent years; the UNRWA estimates that since September 2000, more than 1700 houses have been demolished by the IDF in Rafah, displacing over 17,300 people. Living conditions are dire, unemployment rife, and the border crossing to Egypt, though in theory crossable, remains only sporadically open, and is generally closed to all tourists, independent travellers and those on a tour. See p404 for more details.

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