

The Negev

النقب

הנגב



Where the Judean Desert ends, the Negev begins, a spectacular region of low sandstone hills, rocky peaks and fertile plains furrowed with narrow canyons. Far from being a simple expanse of sand, the Negev is a seductress.

The Negev was once the heart of the Nabatean empire, and you can still follow the ancient trade route along which incense and spices were brought from southern Arabia to the Mediterranean. The archaeological sites of Avdat, Mamshit and Shivta reflect the way the desert was colonised for agriculture by the Nabatean people.

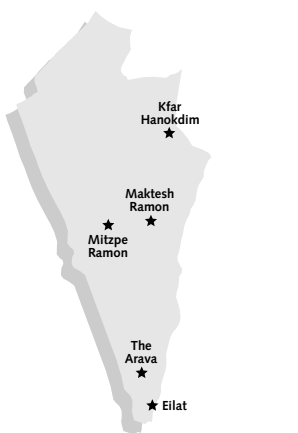
Someone else who recognised the potential of the desert was David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and 'father of the Negev', who launched a development program to turn a wilderness into fertile farmland.

The Negev constitutes 62% of Israel's land areas, but despite Ben-Gurion's view that if the state does not put an end to the desert, the desert may put an end to the state, it is home to only 10% of the population. This emptiness is its greatest attraction. Explore lofty plateaus and deep wadis on foot or from atop a camel on a Bedouin-style safari. The region's most outstanding features are the world's three largest craters. The biggest, Maktesh Ramon, can be visited from the peaceful town of Mitzpe Ramon, which clings to the crater's edge. The Arava Valley, usually seen only from the bus window, is a stunning area worth discovering for its national parks.

Finally there's Eilat, a razzmatazz of flashy hotels, suntan and sleaze parked on the coast of the Red Sea, an underwater paradise that makes up for the carbuncle on the shore.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sleeping in the open under a thousand stars in **the Arava** (p343)
- Exploring the Negev the traditional way on the back of a camel during a Bedouin-style desert safari at **Kfar Hanokdim** (p328)
- Savouring that first awe-inspiring glance into **Maktesh Ramon** (p339)
- Drinking fresh herb tea and taking time out to enjoy Israel's last piece of primordial landscape in **Mitzpe Ramon** (p338)
- Frolicking with Flipper – diving with dolphins in the Gulf of **Eilat** (p345)



Hiking in the Negev

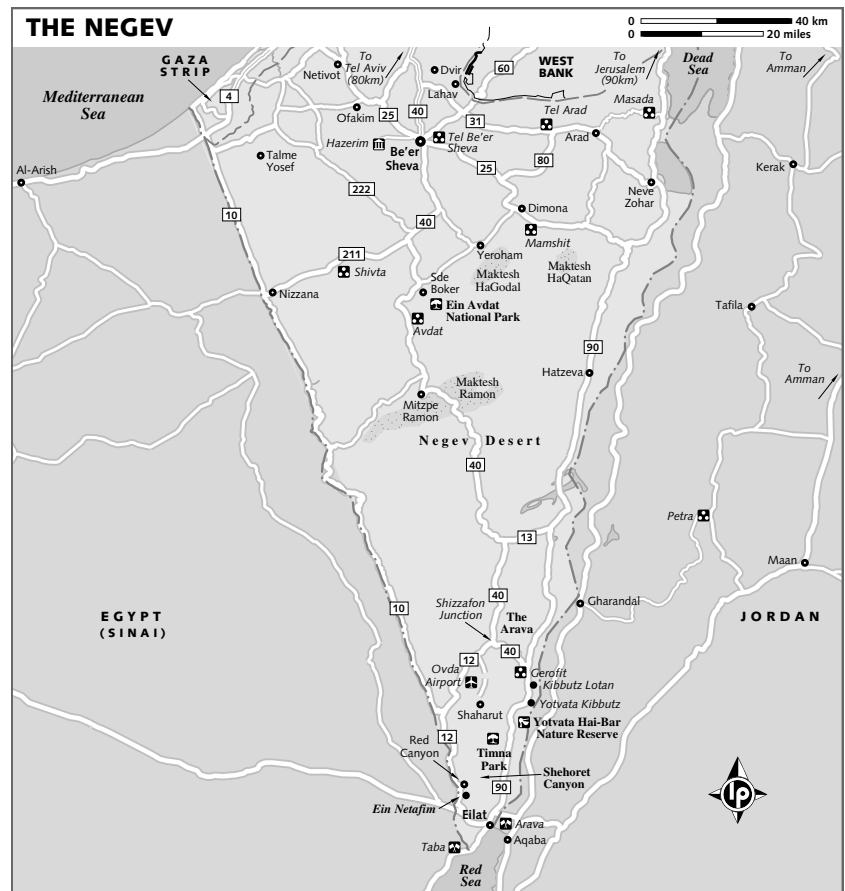
There are some excellent hikes in the Negev region, taking in a surprisingly wide variety of landscapes. Particularly recommended are those around Sde Boker (p335) and Ein Avdat (p336), Eilat (p345) and Mitzpe Ramon (p338).

There is a very good 1:50,000 map of the Eilat mountain region produced by the Israeli Trails Committee of the SPNI (Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel), which contains information on the flora and fauna of the region as well as individual trail maps for some of the more popular hikes across the region. This map, No 20 in the very popular *Israel Hiking and Touring Maps* series and one of the few that are

produced in English, is available from any office of the SPNI.

SPNI has field study centres at Sde Boker, Mitzpe Ramon and Eilat, and at Hatzeva, 50km south of the Dead Sea on Rte 90 – these are the places to visit for detailed maps and information, and for recommendations on routes and desert sights.

SPNI also runs interesting **Yarok Tours** (☎ 03 638 8625; www.aspni.org) of the Negev region for individuals and families. While the tours are held in Hebrew, many of the guides and participants speak English. Tours range from hiking, abseiling and cycling day trips to weekends away snorkelling in Eilat. Check the website for the latest schedules.



THE NEGEV

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The Negev is a harsh desert, but due to its rapid development visitors can easily be lulled into a false sense of security and forget to follow the safety guidelines. It really is best to make an early start, avoid physical exertion in the middle of the day (say noon to 3pm), cover your head and drink plenty of water.

Presumably due to the demands of IDF personnel (the Negev is highly militarised), bus services pass by most of the places of interest but they are very infrequent, so check the timetables to avoid too much waiting around.

ARAD عراد תל ארד
☎ 07 / pop 21,600

On the road between Be'er Sheva and the Dead Sea, this lethargic eastern Negev community benefits from its surrounding wealth of mineral deposits. Situated on a high plateau with commanding views of the desert, the town itself doesn't offer too much to either see or do. The **Arad tourist office** (☎ 995 4160; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thur) is behind the Paz petrol station.

Visitors to the Masada sound-and-light show (see p323) will necessarily pass through Arad, since the venue is not connected by road to the main north-south highway linking the Dead Sea and Eilat.

An attractive addition to the city is Eshet Lot Artists' Quarter, being developed in an abandoned industrial zone 2km southwest of town. Nearly 20 artists have transformed the old hangers, garages and factories into gift shops, studios and workshops. Check out the **Glass Museum** (www.warmglassil.com; Sadan Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Thur, 10am-2pm Fri) opened by artist Gideon Fridman, and **Studio 11** (☎ 054 554 0002; Sadan Unit 4), a bar and concert hall featuring live music on weekends.

Sleeping & Eating

Blau Weiss HI Hostel (☎ 995 7150; arad@iyha.org.il, 34 Atad St; dm/s/d/tr 65/165/200/250; ☎) Typically modern hostel with clean, comfortable rooms and a distinctly institutional atmosphere. Reception is closed between 8am and 2pm. To find it walk east from the bus station up Yehuda St, and follow the signs before turning right on HaPalmach St. Breakfast is another 31NIS.

Kfar Hanokdim (☎ 995 0097; www.kfarhanokdim.co.il; tent 60NIS, r/s/d 150/300NIS; ☎) About 10km

from Arad on the road to Masada, this is the perfect place to stay the night if you are planning on catching the sound-and-light show (Tuesday and Thursday; see p323). A sprawling oasis of palms in the stark Judean desert, this Israeli-/Bedouin-run venture offers a wonderful desert experience, sleeping in stylish cabins with handmade furniture or on a mattress in an authentic Bedouin tent. Hanokdim can take both groups and individual travellers, who are free to use one of the three kitchens, relax in the palm-shaded cushion areas or get cosy with the camels. Drop by for a coffee and a camel ride (one hour, 50NIS).

Inbar Hotel (☎ 997 3303; www.hotel-inbar.com; 38 Yehuda St; s/d 357/447NIS; ☎ ☎ ☎) Guarding the entrance to Arad is this huge edifice that won't win any prizes for interior decoration – perhaps if it was 1976 – but gets top marks for friendly service, comfy rooms with cable TV and a spa featuring a Dead Sea pool and black mud treatments.

Muza (☎ 997 5555; www.muza-arad.co.il; Rte 31; mains 48NIS; ☎ noon-5am) Tucked behind the Alon petrol station, this Arad institution is a haven for the parched traveller. The flower-filled courtyard is a great place to tuck into hearty pub food such as salads, grilled sandwiches and towering burgers while watching the local seniors playing boules next door. Inside, the sporting action is on the big screen, the ceiling lined with football colours and the bar with beer bottles – a cosy place to kick back with a few drinks.

Mr Shay (☎ 997 1956, 32 HaPalmach St; mains 70NIS; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Tucked underneath a market is this unassuming little Chinese restaurant, which locals say is the best in the Negev. Before you order the banquet ask yourself, how many Chinese restaurants are there actually in the Negev? Yes, stick to the honey chicken and tasty noodle dishes. The soups are also pretty good.

Getting There & Away

From the central bus terminal on Rehov Yehuda, buses run twice per hour to and from Be'er Sheva (No 388, 14.80NIS, 45 minutes). Buses depart for Ein Gedi (No 384, 29.50NIS, 1½ hours) at 10.15am, 1pm and 3.45pm.

To access the sound-and-light show at Masada (30-minute drive) take Rte 3199 from the back of Arad.

A DROP IN THE DESERT

There has not been such excitement about wine in the Negev since ancient times. In the last decade vineyards have sprung up all over the northern Negev hills, with innovative computerised watering methods (drip irrigation) turning the dust into fertile land. The semiarid area is best for growing Merlot grapes.

A joint venture between major Israeli wine producer Carmel and local grape growers in the cool climate Judean Hills, the boutique **Yatir Winery** (☎ 995 9090; www.yatir.com) at Tel Arad has had unparalleled success since its first wine was launched in 2004. Known for its Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Merlot, it is the first Israeli winery to be listed in the main selection of Selfridges in London.

Next door, the large Ramat Arad Winery is also kicking up a sandstorm with its red varieties. The 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon recently won awards for excellence from the *Wine Spectator*.

At Sde Boker, what started as a Ministry of Agriculture experiment to see if it was possible to irrigate a vineyard with brackish water (apparently it isn't) has turned into a small but successful enterprise for ex-San Franciscan Zvi Remak. The **Sde Boker Winery** (☎ 051 579 212; www.sde-boker.org.il) is a great place to stop in for a tasting if you are visiting the kibbutz.

TEL ARAD תל ארד תל ערד

Keen archaeologists will be excited to hear that **Tel Arad National Park** (☎ 07-776 2170; adult/child 12/6NIS; ☎ 8am-4pm Sun-Thur, 8am-3pm Fri) is the country's best example of an early Bronze Age city from the 3rd century BC. Mentioned in the Old Testament accounts of the Israelites' attempts to penetrate the Promised Land (Numbers 21:1-3, 33:40; Joshua 12:14), ancient Arad was then an important fortress guarding the southern approaches to the country.

The site covers several hectares and consists of a lower and an upper city. The upper city is called the 'hill of fortresses' and was initially settled during the Israelite period (1200 BC). Archaeologists have found an Israelite temple with a sanctuary and a small room that served as the Holy of Holies. The Arad temple is a smaller version of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Remnants include a metre-high red gravestone found on the tiled platform of the Holy of Holies, an altar in the courtyard outside the temple and shards inscribed with the names of priestly families.

The site is 8km west of Arad. Take any bus towards Be'er Sheva, get off at the Tel Arad junction and walk the final 2km to the site on Rte 2808.

BE'ER SHEVA באר שבע בئر שבע

☎ 08 / pop 184,800

There's no denying that Be'er Sheva (*Bear Share-Vah*) is a hot and ugly town, developed quickly in the '60s and still growing. It's a city that is constantly being built – a

vast construction site of shoddy grey apartment blocks built to house the swelling population of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. But it is also the fourth-largest city in Israel, the 'capital of the Negev' and home to the pioneering Ben-Gurion University, a major centre for teaching and research with over 17,000 students.

High-tech research and development is now big business in Be'er Sheva, with multi-million-dollar investments and industrial parks attracting global companies such as Intel to the area. The young, educated population is starting to stay on after graduation and the city is slowly gaining a reputation for its active nightlife and unpretentious desert atmosphere.

Be'er Sheva also has a rich history, receiving mention in the Old Testament several times (Judges 20:1; I Samuel 3:20; II Samuel 3:10, 17:11, 24:2), though little of that is detectable today. The one surviving ancient monument, a well on Hebron Rd, attests to the town's association with the story of Abraham (Genesis 21:25-33), in which the name Be'er Sheva is given as meaning 'the well of the oath' after a covenant believed to have agreed in this place between the patriarch and Abimelek the Philistine.

In fact, until the late 19th century, Be'er Sheva remained little more than a collection of wells, used by the Bedouin to water their flocks. Changes came when the Turks began to develop this remote desert spot as an administrative centre. During WWI the

small town fell to Allenby's allied forces after a spectacular and celebrated charge by units of the Australian Lighthorse.

The Israelis captured Be'er Sheva in 1948, then still an Arab village of approximately 2000 inhabitants.

Orientation

If you are avoiding the airconditioned malls where most of the city hangs out, the not so old Old Town is about 15 minutes' walk west of the central bus station. It's laid out on a tight grid pattern, and centred on the pedestrianised Keren Kayemet Le-Y'Israel St.

The Bedouin market is south of the Kanyon shopping centre (opposite the bus station) on the main Eilat Rd. The ancient site of Tel Be'er Sheva is 5km outside town, to the east.

Information

EMERGENCY

The **police station** (☎ 642 6744; Herzl St) is at the northern end of Keren Kayemet Le-Y'Israel St in the Old Town.

MONEY

There are banks in the Kanyon shopping centre, and a Bank Hapoalim on the corner of Ha'Atzmaut and HaHalutz Sts (Old Town).

POST

The main post office is just north of the central bus station on the corner of HaNessim and Nordau Sts. There is also a convenient branch in the Old Town, on the corner of HaHistradut and Hadassah Sts.

Sights

BEDOUIN MARKET

The much-vaunted **Bedouin market** (☎ 6am-4pm Thu) was traditionally where hundreds of the Negev's Bedouins came to town to sell their livestock, carpets, clothes and jewellery. Today there's no better place for buying Nike and Yves St Laurent knock-offs, and third-hand electronics. If you get up really early you may see the odd camel, but it's definitely less a cultural than a commercial experience. While that's fair enough, it's not an especially interesting visit.

It's south of the central bus station, where you can see the arched rooftops across the main road.

NEGEV MUSEUM OF ART

This small, contemporary **art gallery** (☎ 620 6570; 60 Ha'Atzmaut St; adult/child 12/10NIS; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 8.30am-2pm & 4.30-6pm Tue, 10am-1pm Fri & Sat) is housed in the elegant Governor's Mansion, which was built in 1906. The building has been beautifully restored into a superb configuration of stone and glass, creating an intimate space for the four halls, which house works from Israeli artists who have spent time in the city, as well as travelling exhibitions.

NEGEV PALMACH BRIGADE MEMORIAL

On a windswept hill northeast of town is a stark, modern tribute to the Jewish soldiers killed while taking Be'er Sheva from the Egyptians in 1948. Designed by Israeli artist Dani Karavan in 1963, the **Negev Palmach Brigade Memorial** (also known as the Andarta Memorial) has Hebrew inscriptions that explain the significance of the images – a tent, a well, some battle maps, a narrow passage, a bunker, a bird, a watchtower, an aqueduct and a snake that represents the enemy. It's worth scrambling up to the monument for the excellent views of the city and the surrounding desert.

The memorial is difficult to reach by public transport. Near the Arad road, you can get off bus No 388 and walk the 750m, or take local bus No 4 to the train station and cut across the tracks to reach the hill.

TEL BE'ER SHEVA

Some 5km east of the city, **Tel Be'er Sheva** (☎ 646 7286; adult/child 12/6NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) became one of three Biblical sites (hill-top ruins) to be declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 2005.

The archaeological digs of the tels (Megiddo, p214, and Hazor – both in the Galilee – are the others) reveal meticulously planned cities protected by enormous fortress walls with impressive gates, castles, temples, storage rooms, stables and water cisterns.

At Tel Be'er Sheva archaeologists have uncovered two-thirds of a settlement dating from the early Israelite period (10th century BC), when a fortified administrative city was built on the hill. The best-

preserved parts are the well-engineered cisterns and a 70m well, the deepest in Israel. Large parts of the buildings have been rebuilt by SPNI, with mud blocks. There are great views to be had from the observation tower.

Tel Be'er Sheva National Park is on the Be'er Sheva–Shokat junction road, south of the city of Omer and near the Bedouin settlement of Tel Sheva.

Activities

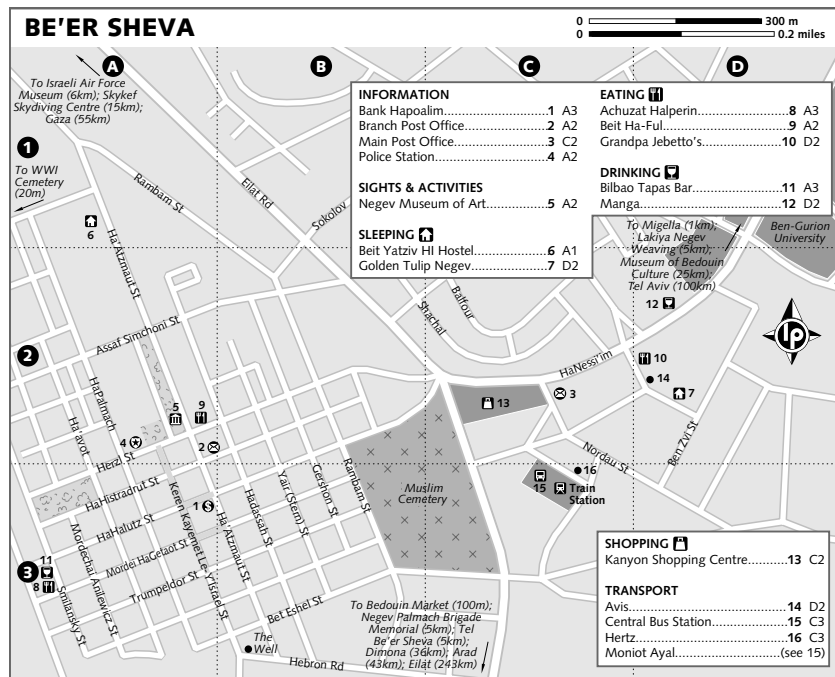
Skykef Skydiving Centre (☎ 1 700 705 867; www.skykef.com) at Sde Tieman Airport is the largest professional parachute centre in Israel. Every Friday and Saturday they offer tandem skydiving (990NIS) and once a month they have a full-day course (1390NIS) for those who wish to jump alone for the first time. As you can imagine, there are spectacular desert views and a good chance of blue skies. The airport is 15km northwest of Be'er Sheva on Rte 25.

Sleeping

Be'er Sheva has an extremely limited selection of accommodation – what's available is often taken over by Russian migrants and other temporary residents. So despite the good nightlife it's hard to recommend staying overnight.

Beit Yatziv HI Hostel (☎ 627 7444, 627 5735; www.beityatziv.co.il; 79 Ha'Atzmaut St; dm/s/d, with breakfast 110/195/280NIS; ☎ ☎) Mainly used by visiting academics and groups from the Open University, the dorms and guesthouse rooms at this bustling hostel are well equipped, with fridge and TV. The pleasant gardens and swimming pool (open May to August) are a blessed relief on a scorching desert day. Book ahead as the rooms fill up quickly. Lunch and dinner (48NIS) are available during the week. Take bus No 12 or 13 from the bus station. The hostel can be hard to find – look for the three large radio antennae.

Golden Tulip Negev (☎ 640 5444; 4 Henrietta Szold St; s/d US\$115/125) When you have the monopoly on accommodation in a town as large as Be'er Sheva you don't have to offer too much to be a success, but this towering, modern complex delivers with an airy bar and café area, a huge pool and gym, as well as cosy rooms featuring all the usual creature comforts.



Eating

Beit Ha-Ful (☎ 623 4253; 15 HaHistradrut St; mains 15NIS; ☎ 8am-midnight Sun-Thu, 8am-3pm Fri, dinner Sat) For a quick bite in the Old City you can't go past what locals say is the best fuul (fava bean paste) joint in town. Dig into some decent shwarma and felafel in piping-hot pita while you're at it – stand up or sit down, inside or out.

Grandpa Jebetto's (Yaakov Rager; mains 25NIS) Convenient to the bus and train stations, Jebetto's is famous locally for its super-sized, super-tasty sandwiches. Several menu pages attest to the myriad of fillings and sauces on offer, or pick out your favourite ingredients. Non-meat eaters should definitely chance the vegetarian chopped liver. The omelettes and stir-fries are great for dinner, while the fresh lemon mint slushy is refreshing at any time of the day. The café is in the Rusko City pedestrian mall.

Achuzat Halperin (☎ 0507 515 154; 23 Smilansky St; mains 80NIS; ☎ dinner) You may be hard pressed finding a table for dinner at this excellent Old City restaurant, which serves an interesting range of French-inspired dishes in a prized setting – a gorgeous stone house with soaring ceilings, indoor plants and an attractive courtyard. Start off with the delicious home-made bread, before trying the salmon tartar or the entrecôte steak. Save room for the *crème brûlée*, which tends to run out fast. The wine is very good value – a decent bottle will only set you back 50NIS

Drinking

Manga (Yitzhak Rager; ☎ 6pm-late) Tucked into the side of the Teacher's Centre, this is Be'er Sheva's hottest nightspot, especially on Wednesday and Friday nights. The covered outdoor area with its plants and slick white couches is for relaxing with friends. Inside

is for trying to pick up while you fight your way to the bar. The cool crowd perches at tiny dark-wood tables and nibbles on plates of sushi, which after 8.30pm are only 29NIS plus a glass of wine.

Migella (Arlozorov St; ☎ 4pm-late) For the best chill-out zone in town, follow the university crowd to this funky bar in a red lantern-lit Bedouin tent. The comfy floor cushions and low couches are perfect for puffing away on an apple nargileh or picking at a plate of watermelon and Bulgarian cheese. It's behind Coca Bar, which is near the student dorms.

Bilbao Tapas Bar (☎ 623 8135; 25 Smilansky St) The tapas is pricey and not that great, but this bar more than makes up for it with a great atmosphere to kick back with a few wines or bottled sangria. Understated boho-chic, the bar is inside an old stone house with mosaic floors, mismatched furniture and hanging plants. The service is also charming, and the waiters will guide you through the Hebrew menu.

Getting There & Away

BUS

On business days, buses run every 30 minutes to Tel Aviv (No 370, 13.70NIS, 1½ hours) and at least half-hourly to Jerusalem (No 446, 32NIS, 1½ hours). For Eilat (No 397, 55NIS, three hours), buses depart more or less every hour and a half via Mitzpe Ramon (23NIS, 1¼ hours). Bus services for Dimona (9.80NIS, 30 minutes) and for Arad (14.80NIS, 45 minutes) run at least every half-hour.

CAR

You can rent a car by calling the following organisations.

Avis (☎ 627 1777; 8 Henrietta Szold St)

Europcar (☎ 623 1013; 1/9 Hebron Rd)

Hertz (☎ 628 8828; 7 Ben Zvi St)

SHERUT (SERVICE TAXI)

Moniot Ayal (☎ 623 3033) operate sherut (shared or service taxi) services to Tel Aviv and Eilat for the same fares as the buses, but there's nothing running on Saturday and you have to wait until they fill up. They operate from a booth just outside the bus station.

TRAIN

From Be'er Sheva's central **train station** (www.israil.org.il), which is adjacent to the central bus station, you can travel comfortably to

Tel Aviv (25.50NIS, 1½ hours) hourly on business days.

Getting Around

You can easily walk from the central bus station to the Old Town and the market; otherwise, the local buses leave from outside the central bus station's main entrance. Local bus No 13 departs every 20 minutes for the Beit Yatziv HI Hostel.

AROUND BE'ER SHEVA Museum of Bedouin Culture

With Israel's push to develop the Negev, the nomadic existence of the Bedouin is fading fast. The aim of this **museum** (☎ 08-991 8597; www.lahavnet.co.il/joalon; admission 20NIS; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, 9am-2pm Fri) is to preserve and present samples of the Bedouin's threatened culture and to represent their life as it is today. Most of the museum guides are Bedouins from the area.

The idea for the museum came from Jews and Bedouins interested in promoting Bedouin culture and heritage. The collection, consisting of a variety of traditional items such as clothes, household utensils, tools and jewellery, was part of a private collection of the Jewish founders of the museum. Bedouins have also donated some items.

Other museum attractions include a 12-minute audiovisual program detailing the Bedouin existence in the Negev and Sinai, a demonstration of traditional home-making activities like bread-making and weaving, and a Bedouin tent of hospitality where visitors can sit with a local Bedouin, drink coffee and talk.

The Israeli and Bedouin curators are young and energetic and have recently planted a Bedouin medicinal garden. They also offer donkey rides for kids.

There is also an interesting archaeological section with a display of the cave culture dating from the Mishnaic and Talmudic eras. Kids will love clambering through the different caves from the Chalcolithic, Israelite, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. Don't leave without climbing the stairs to the observation point.

The museum is part of the Joe Alon Regional & Folklore Centre, which is a combined museum, research institute and field school.

NEGEV BEDOUIN

When Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, put forth his great vision for the Negev it did not include the estimated 140,000 Bedouin Arab minority, who have lived and bred livestock in the desert since prior to 1948.

In the 1960s war hero and politician Moshe Dayan famously called for the Bedouin to 'become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on', and successive Israeli governments have made no secret of their desire to move the Bedouin off the land and into settlements of their own.

Over 80,000 Bedouin have been lured into seven 'recognised villages' in the Negev, cramped clusters of houses established in the early 1980s with no scope for expansion. Despite being officially 'recognised' these shanty town developments remain incredibly poor, with a terrible lack of facilities such as proper sewage and roads, and no jobs. The transition to a modern way of life has been particularly difficult for the Bedouin because they lack skills and education. Bedouin adult male unemployment is estimated at over 60%, while for women it is over 90%.

For the Bedouin who remain in the desert, life is even harder. The Israeli government has never recognised Bedouin ownership of the land, and they have therefore suffered a series of land expropriations, evictions and housing demolitions, forcing their communities into smaller and smaller areas. Estimates say that less than 10% of Bedouin are now able to maintain their traditional pastoral way of life, because of lack of access to land and water. Those who try to continue farming the land are often up against the so-called Green Patrol, an Israeli environmental paramilitary police and the Israel Lands Administration, who have been known to spray Bedouin crops with pesticide.

Some of these 46 'illegal/unrecognised villages', which are predominately located in the Be'er Sheva region, have existed for over 40 years. They have no water or electricity and their inhabitants are forced to travel long distances to school or for health care. They are also denied basic rights such as being able to vote. A positive turn has been the establishment of the Regional Council for Unrecognised Villages, which aims to ensure basic living conditions in these villages and to create a population capable of shaping its own future.

Meanwhile, the Israeli tourism industry long ago twigged to the appeal of the adjective 'Bedouin', and without a trace of irony operators offer accommodation in 'authentic Bedouin tents', and some upmarket hotels welcome their guests with their 'traditional Bedouin hospitality'.

To support a true Bedouin-run enterprise visit Lakiya Negev Weaving (see p334).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The complex stands behind the property of Kibbutz Lahav, which is near Kibbutz Dvir; both are off a side road that intersects with the Be'er Sheva–Kiryat Gat road.

Bus No 42 (14.80NIS) runs directly to the Kibbutz Lahav twice daily, but immediately heads back to Be'er Sheva without allowing time for a visit. Alternatively, use bus No 369 towards Tel Aviv, which will drop you at the junction 8km from the kibbutz.

Israeli Air Force Museum

Even if you don't have a strong interest in military history, the **Israeli Air Force Museum** (☎ 08-990 6855; www.iaf-museum.org.il in Hebrew; admission 26NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm Sun-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri) at the Hazerim Israeli Air Force (IAF) base is one of Be'er Sheva's most worthwhile attractions. Young soldiers take the interesting one-hour tours of the museum and the country's aeronautic history, which is illustrated by about 100 different planes including several that were captured during the various Arab-Israeli conflicts. Probably the best part of the tour is a film screened in the Boeing 707 used in the 1976 rescue of 100 mainly Israeli hostages, held by pro-Palestinian hijackers at Entebbe airport in Uganda.

Hazerim (sometimes spelt Khatserim) is just 6km west of Be'er Sheva. From the central bus station take bus No 31 (9.80NIS, 10 minutes) which leaves every hour; the air base and museum are the last stop.

Lakiya Negev Weaving

Lakiya was established in 1991 as an income-generating project for Palestinian Bedouin women living in villages in the Negev Desert. Lakiya provides them with an opportunity to develop the tradition of spinning and weaving, and to acquire new roles and skills in dyeing, production and business management. The project currently provides work for 146 women.

You can visit the **Lakiya Negev Weaving showroom** (☎ 08-651 9883; www.lakiya.org; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sun-Thu), which is in the Bedouin village of Lakiya, about 6km north of Be'er Sheva. Share a cup of sweet herb tea and check out the vast range of high-quality woven rugs, wall hangings, cushions and bags. Weaving demonstrations and a guided tour for up to 20 people costs 160NIS. For more information see Negev Bedouin, p332.

NORTHWESTERN NEGEV הנגב המערבי

The northwest corner of the Negev is a vast expanse of natural steppe and semi-desert (this is where you come if you're after proper sand dunes!), which during the winter and early spring is transformed into a technicolour carpet of flowers. The area is also popular area with birdwatchers.

Another great reason to take the trip out here is the **San Pedro Cactus Farm** (☎ 08-998 2989, 0507 549 648/9; www.cactusfarm.co.il; d 380NIS, 450NIS for up to 5 people) at Talme Yosef, a remote moshav close to the Gaza and Egypt borders. The farm has thousands of different types of cacti; they even sell the 'magic' Hoodia plant used by the San (formerly Bushmen) of the Kalahari. Tours can be arranged in English. San Pedro also offers accommodation in the form of luxury tepees, making it one of the most peaceful and interesting places to stay this side of Be'er Sheva. The tepees contain everything from DVD player to kitchenette with running water. Guests can admire the desert sunsets or relax in the shaded hammock area, which also has a barbecue. During the summer the **San Pedro pub** (☎ Thu-Sat) is a great place to kick back with a beer or some home-made wine. Talme Yosef is off Rte 232, which heads towards the Rafah border checkpoint (not in use).

DIMONA

דימונה דימונה

☎ 08 / pop 33,800

Unless you're involved in espionage (Dimona is the site of Israel's no-longer-secret nuclear weapons facility), the main interest in this bleak development town is the African Hebrew Israelite Community (see Shalom Brother, opposite). In one small enclave, this motivated and self-contained group of around 2000 American-accented immigrants operates its own school, and members make their own jewellery and natural-fibre clothing. Dietary restrictions are a variation on veganism, as African Hebrew Israelis don't eat meat, dairy products, fish, eggs or refined sugar or flour. Visitors are welcome but you will get better attention by calling first. There's a **guesthouse** (☎ 657 3286/87; www.kingdomofyah.com; half-board 100NIS) and a small vegan café (meals 25NIS).

Thirteen kilometres east of Dimona is the infamous film factory (known also as the 'chocolate' factory), a mysterious establishment reputedly at the centre of Israel's

SHALOM BROTHER

Every year in mid-May the African Hebrew Israelites hold a celebration; two days of picnics, sports, entertainment and family fun to mark their exodus from America to the Holy Land.

This is one of the biggest events on the calendar for this community, who believes they are descended from Israelites expelled from Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 who then migrated for more than 1000 years before reaching West Africa and later the USA as slaves.

This idea is based on the revelations of spiritual leader Ben Ammi Ben Israel, a former Chicago steel worker called Ben Carter, who had a vision in 1966 that it was time for African Americans to return to their land of origin. Acting on his epiphany, Ben Ammi gathered 400 followers and moved to Liberia for a two-year 'purging period' before finally arriving in the Holy Land in 1969. The Children of Israel were not greeted warmly by the government, who dumped them in the bleak development town of Dimona while their claims of Jewish heritage were assessed.

In the meantime the community, who are commonly referred to as Black Hebrews, set up a vibrant base observing their strict customs – some of which share aspects of Judaism (rites of circumcision, celebrating Jewish holidays and the Sabbath, studying the Old Testament) and others unique (practising veganism, children born under community midwives, several families living in one home, a hierarchy of ministers and princes).

When they were joined by a second and third exodus of pilgrims from downtown Detroit in the early 1970s, branches sprung up in Mitzpe Ramon and Arad and the Israeli government came down hard, refusing them citizenship unless they converted to Judaism.

Hunger strikes and petitioning from American politicians ensued for twenty years before Israel finally granted them temporary residency. In 2003 this became permanent with the option of applying for full Israeli citizenship. Many of the young people are now serving in the army, and the Black Hebrews had their first star when Eddie Butler became Israel's entry to the 2006 Eurovision contest (after performing in 1999 with the band Eden) – in Israel a sure a sign of acceptance.

nuclear power industry. It was here that whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu worked before revealing in 1986 to an incredulous public that the chocolate produced here contained more radon than proteins. Needless to say, there are no visits allowed and you will almost certainly be pulled aside if you are caught lingering too long around the barbed-wire fenced perimeter.

From the central bus station, buses run frequently between Dimona and Be'er Sheva (9.80NIS, 30 minutes).

SDE BOKER שדה בוקר שדה בוקר

One of the best known of all kibbutzim, Sde Boker is synonymous with Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who passionately believed that 'the future of Israel lies in the Negev'. The kibbutz was established in 1952 by young pioneers who planned to breed cattle in the desert; its name is Hebrew for Ranchers' Field. Ben-Gurion joined this lush oasis the following year at the age of 67, ready to start practising what he preached about literally building up the new independent state by cultivating the Negev. Only 14 months later he returned to the political

scene as minister of defence and then went on to serve a second term as prime minister, returning to kibbutz life in 1963.

Envisioned by Ben-Gurion as a place of learning in the Negev, Sde Boker is well known for its environmental research and education. Now part of the main Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, there are more than 20 different institutions working in Sde Boker including the Institute for Desert Research, the National Solar Energy Centre and an environmental high school and college.

About 3km south of the kibbutz and overlooking the Wilderness of Zin nature reserve is the university campus, with the graves of Ben-Gurion and his wife, Paula, and the Ein Avdat spring nearby.

Sights & Activities

BEN-GURION DESERT HOME

At the entrance to Sde Boker there is an **information centre** (☎ 08-656 0469; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Sun-Thu, 9.30am-1pm Fri, 10am-3pm Sat), which shows a 20-minute film (7NIS) about the kibbutz. Follow the sandstone walkway through a pistachio grove marked by famous Ben-Gurion

quotes, until you reach the 'old man's' (as he was known) home.

When Ben-Gurion died in 1973 he asked in his will for his kibbutz quarters to remain exactly as he left it, and that's what you see when you visit the small **desert home** (☎ 08-656 0320; adult/child 10/7NIS; 🕒 8.30am-4pm Sun-Thu, 8.30am-2pm Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) he shared with his wife Paula. As you enter the site there's an exhibition about Ben-Gurion's life with a fascinating collection of correspondence he had with everyone from high-school students to the author Amos Oz and Arab leaders. You can then tour the modest hut where he lived and check out his photographs, thousands of books (he was very fond of philosophy, especially that of Spinoza) in nine different languages, and personal items that are on display in the simply furnished rooms.

BEN-GURION GRAVES

The **graves** of David and Paula Ben-Gurion (1892-1968) lie in a spectacular cliff-top setting overlooking the stunning Zin Valley and the Avdat plain. The well-signed path from the parking area to the grave sites leads through a landscaped garden filled with plants that have successfully adapted to the dry and saline desert conditions.

The graves can be reached from the northern entrance of Ein Avdat National Park, which is in the university campus (turn right at the main gate), about 3km south of the kibbutz.

EIN AVDAT NATIONAL PARK & WILDERNESS OF ZIN NATURE TRAIL

Hidden from the main road and missed by most visitors, **Ein Avdat National Park** (☎ 08-655 5684; adult/child 23/12NIS; 🕒 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) is one of the highlights of the Negev. Ein Avdat is a freak of nature – a pool of icy water in the hot expanse of desert, fed by waters that flow through an intricate network of channels. Dominated by a steep, winding canyon, reaching it involves an easy hike through incredible scenery.

The area on top of the cliffs is where prehistoric tribes made their camps for over 100,000 years. They lived in huts made from branches and their flint tools can be seen protruding from the earth – especially on the northern rim of the canyon. Here and nearby, archaeologists have found evidence

of dwellings from the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods (35,000 to 15,000 BC).

The best way to reach Ein Avdat is by the beautiful **Wilderness of Zin nature trail**. There are two entrances to the national park and the trail leads from the lower entrance at Ben-Gurion's grave on the university campus, along the river to the upper entrance, which is 5km south along Rte 40.

From the upper entrance follow the zig-zagging road 3km down into the Wilderness of Zin until it ends at the car park. Follow the path that leads off beyond, and about 40 minutes after leaving the campus you will see the large cave up on your right. Ibexes and gazelles can often be seen along here, too. Simply follow the water and after another five minutes you will come to a spring. Despite the 'no swimming' warning sign, many ignore the dangers and are tempted by the refreshing dip. If so tempted, be aware of the danger caused by the extreme difference in temperature between the hot sun and the cold water.

This is a dead end, so return the way you came and on your left look out for steps cut into the rock leading up the cliff (hidden behind a tree). Climb the steps to the paved ledge where there's a great view.

Carry on walking and after another few minutes you will reach the top of a waterfall, which in winter can be spectacular.

Some more steps have been cut into the rock to lead up the cliff to the right (not always easy to find – for the caves up above). There is a steep climb up steps cut into the cliff to reach the top of the canyon, or you can head back to the car park. The best views of all are from the steps, rather than at the very top, so be sure to take a good look around before the end of the climb. An observation point has been provided a short distance away.

The whole hike usually takes two to three hours, allowing plenty of time for relaxing by the springs. The main road is a 10- to 15-minute walk along a side road from the observation point. You come out south of the university campus. Note that this is a one-way hike, so if you need to return to the northern entrance you'll need to hitch or wait for a bus (one every 1½ hours) back to the upper entrance. Check the bus schedule before heading off, to help time your hike.

FOLLOWING THE INCENSE ROUTE

Follow the smell of frankincense and myrrh through the Negev by exploring the Nabatean strongholds of Mamshit, Avdat and Shivta, which were built along the ancient incense and spice route to protect travelling caravans bringing this hugely profitable trade from south Arabia to the port city of Gaza on the Mediterranean coast.

Despite the hostile desert environment, the Nabatean towns flourished as remains of forts, caravanserai and sophisticated agricultural systems attest. All three towns also have rich Roman and Byzantine history.

These towns (along with Haluza) became Unesco World Heritage sites in 2005.

Avdat

عبدات عבדת

This well-preserved city is perched on a hill that dominates the desert skyline. The rich combination of impressive ruins and incredible vistas at **Avdat** (Avdat National Park; ☎ 08-655 1511; adult/child 23/12NIS; 🕒 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) makes the steep climb well worth the effort. Parts of the film *Jesus Christ Superstar* were shot here.

Named for the admired Nabatean monarch Avdat, the city was built in the 2nd century BC as a caravan stop on the road from Petra to the Mediterranean coast. Prosperous throughout the Byzantine period, the city was abandoned in 634 when it fell to the Muslims.

The ruins include the Roman bathhouse, which has cold, lukewarm and hot baths, a burial cave with 21 double catacombs and one grave dug in the floor and an elaborate Byzantine winepress. There's also a pottery workshop and several 4th-century churches.

The visitors centre has an interesting 10-minute video introduction to the Nabateans and the spice route.

On the Be'er Sheva-Mitzpe Ramon road, Avdat lies 10km south of the Ben-Gurion home and 23km north of Mitzpe Ramon. Bus No 60 passes by in each direction about every hour.

Shivta (Subeita)

سبیطا שיבטה

The most isolated of the Nabatean towns, **Shivta** (adult/child 12/6NIS; 🕒 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) was not fortified and therefore can be considered a large agricultural village.

Shivta was founded during the early Roman period (1st century BC) and Roman-period ruins are visible in the southern part of the city. Most of the findings, however, are from when it was an important Byzantine town (4th to 7th centuries BC) on the caravan route between Egypt and Anatolia.

While the ruins include Byzantine churches, houses and tiled streets, the main feature is the impressive systems created to use run-off water, as Shivta has no natural water sources. The streets leading from the northern part of the city drain into double collection pools.

Shivta is some 58km southwest of Be'er Sheva. From Rte 40 continue from Telalim junction on Rte 211 for about 15km. At the junction near the petrol station, drive approximately 9km south. We really can't recommend visiting without a car, but if you are keen take the infrequent bus No 44 from Be'er Sheva to Nizzana, get off at the Horvot Shivta stop and walk the rest of the way.

Mamshit

ممشيت مמשيت

Visually less impressive than Shivta, **Mamshit National Park** (☎ 655 6478; adult/child 18/8NIS; 🕒 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) is, however, the smallest but best-preserved Nabatean city in the Negev – here entire streets have survived intact.

The Nabateans built their city here in the 1st century AD and it was later used by the Romans, who bred Arabian horses that brought great wealth to the city. The excavations include Nabatean remains, reservoirs, watchtowers, Roman military and Byzantine cemeteries, jewellery and coins, churches and mosaics.

The city is also particularly renowned for the engineering skills that were used in its constructions. About 6km southeast of Dimona, an abandoned British police station marks the site where the Romans built a series of dams to store rainwater to supply the town's inhabitants year-round.

Before the founding of the state of Israel, David Ben-Gurion planned for Mamshit to be the capital of the future country.

Mamshit is on Rte 25 (Be'er Sheva-Dimona), about 8km from Dimona in the direction of Rotem junction. Any of the buses heading to Eilat via Dimona will drop you at the signposted turn-off for the site.

A less ambitious option is to walk from the lower entrance to the Ein Marof pools at the foot of the waterfall, return along the same path, and then drive to the upper parking lot where you can admire the view from the observation point, clearly signposted, north of the Avdat archaeological site and just off the main highway.

SDE BOKER FIELD SCHOOL

The **Sde Boker field school** (☎ 08-653 2016; www.boker.org.il; ☎ 7.30am-4.30pm Sun-Thu, 7.30am-noon Fri) on the campus of the Ben-Gurion University is mainly responsible for nature conservation in the area. The young staff are extremely knowledgeable and enthusiastic and, once you have shown an interest, will tell you all about the local wildlife and where and when to see it. Sights include griffin vultures having their breakfast of raw meat provided by the field school, ibexes and other animals coming to drink at a spring, and sooty falcons nesting in the cliff side.

You should also inquire here about the various hikes in the desert, where you can see a lot of this natural activity as well as some beautiful scenery.

Sleeping & Eating

The Sde Boker Field School (above) runs a **hostel** (dm/s/d, with breakfast 90/220/260NIS; ☎), which although often filled with noisy school groups is available for travellers. The rooms are clean and bright and have use of a kitchenette. Alternatively they also offer accommodation in the slightly more comfortable **Hamburg House** (s/d 260/330NIS; ☎), with TV and fridge in each room.

Dinner is available for 47NIS, or you can try **Zin Restaurant** (☎ 8am-11pm), which serves meat dishes, *barakas* and fresh sandwiches. Get in quick at night as the food runs out fast.

For a more personal atmosphere try the British-run **Krivine's Guest House** (☎ 052 271 2304; krivjohn@netvision.net.il; s/d US\$39/51), also on the Ben-Gurion campus. The airy rooms are nicely decorated and there is a pretty garden and outdoor area to eat breakfast (US\$6) or dinner (US\$16). Speaking both English and French, the charming Krivine family provides excellent tourist information and transport from the Sde Boker bus. Advance booking is essential.

Getting There & Away

From Be'er Sheva (bus Nos 382/392, 21.50NIS) buses leave at least every hour between 8am and 3.45pm. The bus makes three separate stops for Sde Boker: heading south from Be'er Sheva it first stops beside the turn-off to the main entrance of the kibbutz, then at the turn-off for the Ben-Gurion Desert Home and, finally, at the turn-off for the university campus, the Ben-Gurion graves and Ein Avdat. Warn the driver in advance where you want to get off.

MITZPE RAMON

מצפה רמון מנסבה רמון
☎ 08 / pop 5700

Mitzpe is Hebrew for 'watchtower', and accordingly, this small but engaging desert town is perched above the dramatic Maktesh Ramon crater. All along this spectacular 'watchtower', you'll find far-ranging views and an extensive network of hiking routes. Pick up a Maktesh Ramon Nature Reserve map at the visitors centre and set off into the desert on foot; this wild wonderland is good for days of wandering.

A failure of the desert development program since it started life as a remote Moroccan community in the 1950s, Mitzpe Ramon hasn't taken off as planned, despite many attempts at incentive schemes to attract new businesses and residents. More recently the government resettled large numbers of Soviet immigrants in the town but that has only served to exacerbate the problems of severe unemployment.

The town is slowly revitalising itself without the help of 'well-meaning' government strategies. Today Mitzpe Ramon is styling itself as an all-seasons ecotourism destination, but it has also become a haven for an eclectic mix of artists and city-escapists who have reclaimed the unlettable industrial zone, where they have set up galleries, stores, restaurants and even a small planetarium.

With its excellent range of accommodation, Mitzpe Ramon is the best place to base yourself for visits to nearby Avdat, Ein Avdat and Sde Boker.

Orientation

The town is centred on the wide Ben-Gurion Blvd, off the Be'er Sheva-Eilat road. On Ben-Gurion Blvd is a small commercial concourse with a few shops, a Cafeneto franchise and a

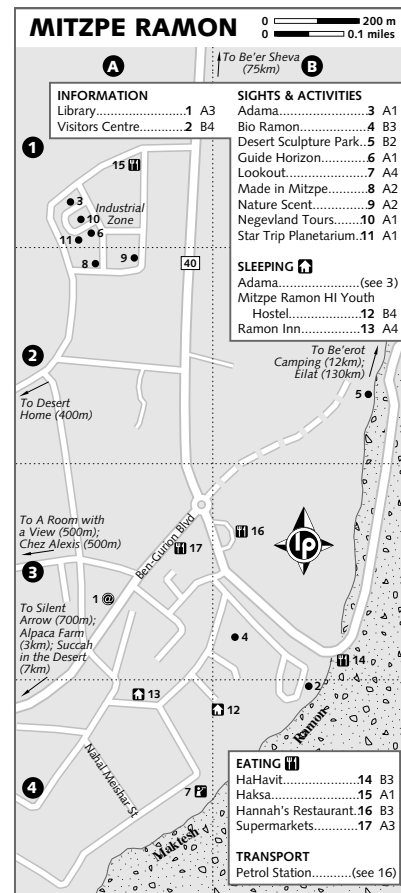
bank. The youth hostel and the visitors centre are south of the commercial block, overlooking the Maktesh Ramon. All these places are within easy walking distance of each other.

Information

The **SPNI Har HaNegev Field School** (☎ 658 8615; har@spni.org.il; ☎ 8am-5pm Sun-Thu, Fri 8am-1pm) on the edge of the crater is worth visiting for anybody planning any serious hiking. The study centre is about a 2km walk from the southern end of Ben-Gurion Blvd.

Free internet is available in the **public library** (Ben-Gurion Blvd; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Sun-Thu, 9am-noon Fri).

The ammonite-shaped **visitors centre** (☎ 658 8754; adult/child 28/14NIS; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu,



8am-3pm Fri), perched on the crater rim, has a tourist office and presents an overview of Maktesh Ramon's intriguing natural history, along with a 20-minute film about the nature reserve. The helpful staff at the centre have maps (2NIS) and information on adventure activities. Ask about the '10 most popular hikes' booklet that was being written in English at the time of research. The roof of the building serves as an excellent viewing platform and is also home to a gleaming sun dial.

Sights

BIO-RAMON

If you missed out on seeing desert creatures during your time in the Negev, don't worry as the entrance fee to the visitors centre includes the very worthwhile **Bio Ramon** (☎ 658 8755; adult/child 12/6NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm Summer, 8am-4pm Winter), where you can see scorpions, porcupines and snakes all in a rather scaled-down version of their natural habitat. The 'bedroom hatches' mean you can even view nocturnal animals, but the knowledgeable staff recommend coming as late in the day as possible for best sightings. The Bio Ramon is just down from the visitors centre.

About 300m south of the visitors centre along the crater promenade is a breathtaking **lookout**, which juts out over the edge of the crater. Don't look down from the platform if you're faint-hearted as there's nothing between your feet and the bottom of the crater. The views are indescribable, but better enjoyed early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the angled light casts fantastic shapes and shadows across the crater floor.

DESERT SCULPTURE PARK

North of the visitors centre is a rather stark collection of stone sculptures assembled on the lip of the crater, by Israeli artist Ezra Orion. You have to walk over rocky and unforgiving terrain to reach them but they're photogenic and add colour to otherwise hard-to-reproduce crater shots. The interactive sculptures where gongs and bells are set in motion by the wind are particularly haunting.

MAKTESH RAMON

The **maktesh** (crater) will remind visitors a little of the Grand Canyon and a lot of the moon. It is 300m deep, 8km wide and

40km long. Millions of years old, it presents a unique opportunity to walk through the stages of the earth's evolution in reverse.

A few nature trails have been marked out, which lead through some of the most attractive and interesting sections. Hiking maps in English and other languages are available at the visitors centre.

Nahal Gewanim–Ein Sharonim

The **Nahal Gewanim–Ein Sharonim trail** is recommended as one of the best. The various rock formations seen along the way and the variety of colours are simply awe-inspiring. Taking about 4½ to 5½ hours, the walk covers occasionally steep rocky terrain and is usually walked in very hot conditions. Do not overestimate your stamina – take along plenty of water, wear a head covering and start as early in the day as possible.

To reach the trail, take the southbound bus from the petrol station in Mitzpe Ramon (to Eilat) and get off when you see the second orange signpost on the left-hand side of the road in the crater – about a 10-minute drive from town. You will pass mines on both sides of the road just before you get to the two signs. There is no bus stop, so tell the driver when you want to get off.

Follow the jeep track away from the road for about 30 minutes, then take the right fork after the electricity pylon on the left.

At the top of the steepish slope follow the green-on-white trail markers to your left. This narrow path takes you along the ridge, giving you excellent views across the crater to your left. There is a pleasant shaded spot for that necessary drink and rest after about 10 minutes – climb up to your right here.

It should have taken you about an hour to reach this spot from the road. After a further five minutes, the path splits in two, but both the high and low paths go the same way. Scramble up the rock face briefly to the top of the ridge for a commanding view in all directions. Here you can see all at once the variety of contrasting rock formations and colours with the maze of wadis and canyons wending through them. If you took the high path, climb down after about 20 minutes to join the low path and save an even steeper descent later. It's possible to take any of the three paths here as they all join up eventually to lead down to a wadi (Nahal Gewanim).

Follow the wadi to the right and around to the left. After 25 minutes it narrows considerably, with large and small caves on both sides of the canyon. Another 15 minutes and you come to a Hebrew signpost. Follow the track just past it to the left, away from the wadi. The track forks after about five minutes; take the left track to the sign with the coloured trail markers. Go straight ahead, following the blue-on-white trail markers.

After 20 minutes you should reach another signpost. Again, go straight and then follow the path to the left. Follow the wadi for 20 minutes and you will come to a couple of water holes. Follow the track to the left 10 minutes from here – there is a blue-on-white sign. After five minutes you will come to a jeep track going left to right with a signpost. Go to the left and after 25 minutes you will reach the electricity pylon that you passed at the start of the walk. Go to the right here and the road is 30 minutes away.

Scenic Pass

The **scenic pass** is part of the Israel National Trail, a series of hikes designed to run the length of the country. It is a leisurely and very scenic two-hour hike that takes you down into the Maktesh Ramon to the Carpenter's Workshop and on to the main road. From the youth hostel, follow the path along the edge of the crater until you see the sign pointing down. Follow the green trail markings and you'll eventually come to the Carpenter's Workshop. Continue to reach the main road, where you can either hitch back to town or flag down one of the infrequent buses.

Carpenter's Workshop

Shortly after the road from Mitzpe Ramon zigzags down into the crater, an orange signpost points to this site of geological interest, 500m to the right. The **Carpenter's Workshop** is a unique rock formation that has been shaped by pressure and is said to resemble wood. The rock eventually breaks up into pieces, but among the rubble you can see unbroken parts.

Follow the jeep track from the road that ends with a car park. From here take the path up the hill to the left (past the refuse bins). This leads you around the hill to a wooden observation platform, which gives you a close-up at the rocks in question. You

can either take the Eilat bus or hitch from Mitzpe Ramon, or stop here on your way down on the Scenic Pass hike.

OTHER CRATERS

There are two other craters in the Negev, **Maktesh HaQatan** and **Maktesh HaGadol**; both are south of Dimona, but neither is accessible by public transport. The best option if you want to hike in the area is to hire a car in Be'er Sheva (see p333). Maktesh HaQatan is, as the name suggests, the smallest crater (*qatan* is Hebrew for 'small', *gadol* is 'big'). Roughly circular in shape, it looks more like it was caused by a large meteor than erosion. It offers more hiking opportunities than Maktesh HaGadol, which is the easier of the two to reach.

To get to Maktesh HaGadol head to the town of Yeroham (take Rte 204 south from Dimona towards Sde Boker) and follow the signs to the 'Great Crater'. It's a short but beautiful drive right through the crater on Rte 225. Turn left at Rte 206, which takes you back to the main Dimona road (Rte 25). Turn right and head towards the Dead Sea for about 25km until you see the signs for the small crater. There's a short walk from the car park to a spectacular observation point. There is also a free camping site here.

ALPACA FARM

Inspired by their love for South American wildlife and culture, Ilan and Na'ama Dvir flew 188 camelids (llamas and alpacas) here from Chile. Starting with 188 creatures, they now have over 500 at their beautiful **Alpaca Farm** (☎ 658 8047; www.alpaca.co.il; adult/child 25/23NIS; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm summer, 8.30am-4.30pm winter) tucked into a hidden valley about 3km from Mitzpe Ramon. The animals are being raised for their wool, which is for sale as hats and scarves. If your timing is right, you can see such activities as shearing, washing, spinning, weaving and, for kids, there is a llama ride (20NIS for 20 minutes). These charming, woolly quadrupeds wander around freely and will no doubt approach you fearlessly looking for handouts to nibble on.

The farm also offers horse riding in the desert. Ride to the crater's rim (1½ hours, 130NIS) or the more experienced can take a 25km, two-hour trail ride (250NIS) into the Negev Highlands. Call the day before to arrange the trips.

INDUSTRIAL ZONE

To see regeneration in action, check out the **industrial zone** at the entrance to town, where an assortment of artists and urban-escapists have transformed the old hangars into studios and galleries.

Stop by **Made in Mitzpe** (☎ 659 5111; 21 Har Boker St; ☎ 9am-6pm Sun-Thu, Fri 9am-3pm) studio for local ceramics, jewellery and clothing. Out the back a designer makes mud furniture. In the next street, **Nature Scent** (☎ 653 9333; www.naturescent.co.il; Hangar 22; ☎ 7am-4pm Sun-Thu, 7am-1pm Fri) is a family-run workshop creating over 50 types of handmade soaps from natural ingredients, as well as delicious-smelling bath products.

Producing interesting modern and interpretive dance is **Adama** (☎ 659 5190; www.adama.org.il), a company that runs monthly festivals during summer and regular dance/meditation workshops during the rest of the year. See also p342.

To get closer to the Negev's amazing night skies drop into the small **Star Trip Planetarium** (☎ 659 5959; 12 Har Boker St; admission 20NIS; ☎ 9am-midnight).

Activities

Desert Archery (☎ 658 7274, 0505 344 598; www.desertarchery.co.il) A beautiful and intriguing sport, not dissimilar to a game of golf, but with a bow instead of a club and desert terrain instead of a putting green. Training is provided and it's 50NIS per person for two hours with a guide and equipment.

Tours

Lots of companies run rugged jeep tours, but they come and go with the desert wind and you may need to muster a group; see the visitors centre for the latest offerings.

Guide Horizon (☎ 659 5333; guidmi@netvision.net.il; 27 Har Boker St) Hires out desert dune buggies for excursions into the Negev; a three-hour trip with breakfast goes for 350NIS while an overnight trip, including cook-out and sauna upon return to the home base, goes for 800NIS.

Negevland Tours (☎ 659 5555; www.negevland.co.il; Har Ardon St) Best all-round adventure company in the area. It offers jeep crater tours (130NIS per person), abseiling (60NIS for two descents), paintball (100NIS for 120 bullets) and licensed hiking guides who speak English, French and Spanish (US\$140 per day). Negevland also has the only professional bike-repair shop between Be'er Sheva and Eilat and rents 21-gear mountain bikes (70-150NIS day).

Peter Bugel Tours (☎ 658 8958; www.shunra.net/peter.html) Caters for travellers who are interested in desert culture, geology and botany. It's a sophisticated outfit run by a fellow who speaks Dutch, German, English and Swiss-German. Overnight trips cost from US\$350 for a group of seven.

Sleeping

BUDGET

From desert tents to boutique luxury, there are some great accommodation options for every price range in Mitzpe.

Be'erot Camping (☎ 658 6713; www.beerot.com; campsites/Bedouin tent beds per person 25/40NIS) The only place to sleep in the crater; what this camp lacks in atmosphere it makes up with its dramatic setting. Popular with groups, there's traditional tents, clean bathrooms and a modern shower block. The camp is Bedouin-run and there's good local food. It's 12km south of Mitzpe Ramon on the highway to Eilat, and then 5km down a bumpy access road. Meals are available for 30NIS but call ahead.

Silent Arrow (Hetzba Sheket; ☎ 052 661 1561; www.hetzbashket.com; Bedouin tent beds/dome tents per person 80/120NIS) A magical place where you can choose from a mattress in the communal Bedouin-style tent (fully heated in winter) or a dome 'suite' tent, in the desert outside the camp, which have a comfortable double bed and are half open to let you do some serious star gazing. Owner Dror is a real character who gives this place a special touch, from the cosy lounge area with its hanging lanterns (there is no electricity) to the herb tea made fresh from the garden and his wonderful stories about the Negev. Shared bathroom and kitchen facilities are incredibly clean. Best to bring your own food, or if you order ahead breakfast is 45NIS, three meals 120NIS. Dror also takes volunteers (week minimum). The camp is 700m from town or ring for a lift.

Chez Alexis (☎ 658 8002, 052 546 0661; 7 Ein Saharonim St; r per person 100NIS) This villa on the western side of town has been converted into a cosy family-run guesthouse and offers the best value for those who like four walls and a bed. The four rooms are immaculately neat and share one large bathroom with bathtub. The living room and kitchen are a great place to lounge around in winter while you warm yourself next to the old pot-belly stove heater. The family doesn't live on the property so phone ahead and make a reservation if you are heading this way.

Adama (☎ 659 5190; Har Ardon St; camping 50NIS, r per person, with breakfast 100NIS) Not everyone's cup of herbal tea but definitely something different is the indoor camping at Adama, a modern dance company housed in an old hangar in the industrial zone (see p341). For as little as 50NIS per night you can crash on a mattress in one of their airy studios, or for a bit of privacy crawl into one of the foam tepee-like structures. Those with tents can set them up in the garden. Guests are welcome to participate in dance and meditation activities. If you're really on the cheap, volunteer around the place and eat and sleep for free.

Mitzpe Ramon HI Youth Hostel (☎ 658 8443; mitzpe@iyha.org.il; dm/s/d, with breakfast 100/195/280NIS; ☺) A short downhill walk from the visitors centre, this hostel is beautifully located near the edge of the crater with most rooms having an inspirational view. Reception is open from 3pm onwards.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Rooms in this section are at least 100NIS cheaper in the middle of the week.

Alpaca Farm B&B (☎ 658 8047; www.alpaca.co.il; d 450NIS; ☺) For some unique accommodation (not that it's hard to find in Mitzpe) stay overnight on the Alpaca Farm (see p341) in their attractive hillside suites. Each cabin is decked out with wood floors, cable TV, kitchenette and a great balcony for enjoying the views of the desert and all those fluffy creatures. When the farm closes this place offers the perfect mix of comfort and serenity, but during working hours it could get a little noisy when there are groups visiting.

Succah in the Desert (Succah HaMidbar; ☎ 658 6280; www.succah.co.il; half-board d 550NIS) Set 7km from town on a poor track, this is the place to stay if you're intrigued by any sort of mysticism. The collection of seven *sukkot* (small dwellings) built of stones and palm leaves sits on the rocky slopes of a wadi amid some typically beautiful desert scenery. There is one larger *sukkah* that houses a kitchen, lounge and dining area, while the others provide accommodation that's tastefully furnished with rugs and other fabrics. Known for its ecological sensibilities, each *sukkah* has its own solar energy system. The tariff includes a gourmet vegetarian dinner, which all the guests eat together. Reservations are essential and will avail you of a free lift from Mitzpe Ramon.

Desert Home (Bait BaMidbar; ☎ 052 322 9496; www.baitbamidbar.com; 70 En Shaviv; d, with breakfast 600NIS; ☺) Run by the same people as Succah in the Desert, this is for travellers who really enjoy their creature comforts. On the edge of a quiet residential neighbourhood, the five units are decorated straight from the pages of a *Vogue Living* special on desert life. The minimalist style incorporates bleached-wood floors, locally made furniture and a private collection of art and photography. Each unit has a balcony that overlooks the beautifully landscaped courtyard, but the desert views are slightly obscured by neighbouring houses. There is an on-site treatment room for massage and alternative therapy.

Also recommended:

A Room with a View (☎ 658 7274; desreta@netvision.net.il; 6 Ein Saharonim; d 300NIS) As the name implies, this cosy room in a modern townhouse has a gorgeous garden with stunning sunset views over the desert hills.

Ramon Inn (☎ 658 8822, fax 658 8151; 1 Ein Akev St; US\$121/146; ☺) The standard hotel option; efficiently run with comfortable units and a wide range of adventure activities on offer.

Eating

Self-caterers will find joy at the Hyper Neto and Supersol supermarkets in the town centre.

Hannah's Restaurant (☎ 658 8158; mains 25-35NIS; ☺ 9am-6pm Sun-Thu, 9am-3pm Fri) This simple roadside diner at the Paz petrol station turns out surprisingly decent dishes with a Moroccan-French twist. It's self-service and there are also standards such as schnitzel and pasta available.

HaHavit (☎ 658 8226; mains 30-45NIS; ☺ 8am-2am) Located next to the visitors centre, the inviting HaHavit (Barrel) serves up huge portions of fresh salad, soups, sandwiches and pasta dishes. On Tuesday nights, young soldiers leave their Uzis in the corner and dance up a storm. By the way, it's not the well-stocked bar making you drunk; those views are for real.

Haksa (☎ 0507 565 063; Har Adon St; mains 40NIS; ☺ lunch & dinner) Enjoy delicious home-style grill dishes such as meatballs with aubergine and couscous at this friendly restaurant in the industrial zone. There are no real vegetarian options but the owner will happily bring out salad, hummus and oven-hot pita if you ask. The library in the next room has every Marxist/feminist/

anti-globalisation handbook there is translated into Hebrew, but also some English magazines that can be read on the couches out the back.

Getting There & Away

Mitzpe Ramon lies 23km south of Avdat and 136km north of Eilat, via the Gerofit junction. From Sunday to Thursday bus No 392 travels to Eilat (44NIS, 2½ hours) at 8.55am, 10.25am, 12.55pm and 4.40pm. There is no bus on Friday. Catch the bus from the petrol station. From 6am to 9.30pm, bus No 60 shuttles hourly to and from Be'er Sheva (26NIS, one hour), via Sde Boker and Ein Avdat. You can pick this up on Ben-Gurion Blvd.

THE ARAVA العربة ارافا

The Arava is a beautiful, sparsely populated desert that runs from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, and is part of the Great Rift Valley (which runs north to south for some 5000km from northern Syria to central Mozambique). Often seen only from the window of a bus, it has many hidden treasures that are well worth taking time to explore.

The **SPNI Hatzeva Field School** (☎ 08-658-1546; arava_shmirateva@arava.co.il) has information on hiking and bird-watching in the Arava.

Timna Park פארק תמנע מנתزه تمنع

About 25km north of Eilat, **Timna Park** (☎ 08-631 6756; www.timna-park.co.il; adult/child 38/33NIS; ☺ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu Sep-Jun, 8am-1pm Fri & Sun, 6-8.30pm Mon-Thu Jul & Aug) is the site of some stunning desert landscapes, enlivened with multicoloured rock formations. It's best known as a source of copper for 5th century BC Egyptian miners – the park is dotted with ancient mine shafts – but it also includes a wonderland of geological phenomena. The most intriguing are the Natural Arch, the eroded monolith known as the Mushroom and the photogenic Solomon's Pillars. There is also a range of excellent day hikes through one of Israel and the Palestinian Territories' wildest desert landscapes.

Information about walks is available at the visitors centre, which also has a multimedia presentation; 'Mines of Time' tells the story of copper mining and its significance to the culture of Ancient Egypt.

Buses between Eilat and Jerusalem pass the park turn-off, 2.5km from the park entrance. From there, it's a long walk to anything of interest. This is one place where it really makes sense to hire a car.

Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve

פארק חי-בר יוטבטה יוטבטה
Located 35km north of Eilat, the **Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve** (☎ 08-637 3057; adult/child 23/12NIS; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Sun-Thu, 8.30am-4pm Fri & Sat) was created to establish breeding groups of wild animals that are mentioned in the Bible, as well as for other threatened species.

The reserve has three parts; a three-acre penned-in area where you can observe the animals (mainly African asses, addax, ostriches and oryxes) in their 'natural state'; the predator centre (23/12NIS per adult/child), where reptiles, small desert animals and large predators such as wolves and leopards are on display; and the desert Night Life exhibition hall, where night and day are reversed so that you can watch nocturnal animals like the pygmy gerbils and the fat sandy rat during their active hours.

The reserve includes a variety of different habitats including sand dunes, an acacia forest and a salt marsh. A private car is needed to navigate its gravelled roads, and an audio CD (5NIS) is available with English explanations about the animals. A visit takes about an hour. It's recommended to visit at feeding time, which is between 11am and 1pm.

A combined ticket for both the wildlife reserve and the predator centre is 39/18NIS.

The reserve is on Rte 90 between Kibbutz Yotvata and Kibbutz Samar.

Kibbutz Lotan

לוטן לוטן
One of the youngest kibbutzim in Israel, **Lotan** (☎ 08-635 6935; www.kibbutzlotan.com; Rte 90) is committed to a strong ecological vision known in Hebrew as *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). Kibbutz Lotan members operate a compost pile; maintain a bird reserve; tend an organic vegetable garden; construct buildings out of old tires and clay; and are in the process of installing a series of ponds to reclaim and filter used water from showers, cooking, and cleaning. Through the Centre for Creative Ecology, the kibbutz runs regular workshops in subjects such as alternative building methods, as well as half-day and full-day tours that show visitors how to put

environmental theory into practice. They also have a 'Green Apprenticeship', a 10-week intensive work and study experience.

Complimenting the ecology program is the Holistic Desert Health Centre, which offers courses and sessions in Ashtanga yoga, massage, reiki, reflexology and watsu (water shiatsu), among other therapies. Check out the kibbutz website for 'holistic holiday' packages.

Sleeping & Eating

Camel Riders (☎ 08-637 3218; www.camel-riders.com; Shahrut; Bedouin tent per person 60NIS, huts 120NIS, r170NIS; ☎) If you're searching for peace in the Middle East this is where to look. Perched on a cliff edge far above the Arava, Camel Riders is located at Shahrut, one of the most remote spots in this crowded country. About 60km north of Eilat and then another 22km off the main highway (Rte 12), it's a Sinai-style retreat where you can choose to sleep on a mattress in a main room with wall-to-wall Bedouin carpets, or in new mud-brick huts that are beautifully designed, capturing the awesome views and refreshing desert breeze. Managed by the charismatic Yonatan, this is a popular spot for Tel Aviv exiles with an artistic bent, who come to cool off in the mountain-side plunge pools, eat excellent Bedouin-inspired food (dinner 80NIS, breakfast 40NIS) or participate in monthly workshops such as yoga and creative writing. And as the name suggests, camel rides are on offer, from two hours (75NIS) to 14 days. If you're coming by bus (No 392 between Eilat and Mitzpe Ramon), Yonatan will pick you up from the Shizzafon Junction.

Kibbutz Lotan Guesthouse (☎ 08-635 6935; www.kibbutzlotan.com; s/d, with breakfast 200/300NIS; ☎) If you want to take part in some of the exciting eco-activities at Kibbutz Lotan, or even if you are just after a base for exploring the Arava region, this pleasant guesthouse is a lovely place to stop for a night or two. Located in the middle of one of the kibbutz neighbourhoods, the rooms are simply decorated with a kitchenette. Unlike other kibbutzim there is a quite a bit of interaction between guests and members, who will happily discuss local desert hikes, environmental issues, or just point you towards the dining hall.

Neot Semadar Inn (☎ 08-635 8180; Shizzafon Junction; mains 33-40NIS; ☎ 6.30am-9.30pm Sun-Thu, 6.30am-

3.30pm Fri, 5.30-9.30pm Sat) This inviting roadside inn sells the organic produce grown on Kibbutz Neot Semadar, a young, very alternative community nearby. Try the delicious goats' cheese lasagne or the nectarine and plum ice-cream. There's also homemade olive oil, wine and dates for sale.

Yotvata Restaurant (Yotvata Kibbutz, Rte 90) This famed dairy kibbutz lives up to its name with mouth-watering ice-cream, belt-widening puddings and a full menu of blintzes, cheese platters and pizzas. There's also a small supermarket and sandwiches for takeaway.

EILAT

ايلات ايلات

☎ 07 / pop 34,700
Wedged between Jordan and Egypt, and separated from the Israel of international headlines by 200km of desert, Eilat is a resort town where glitzy, ziggurat-like hotels line an artificial lagoon and glass-bottomed boats ply deteriorating coral reefs.

Its founding fathers – convicts sent here in the 1950s to build the city – now mix with tie-dyed beach bums selling trinkets from India and weekend holidaymakers in search of sin. With an average winter temperature of 21°C, the town is heaving all year, but come summer the temperature rises and so does the sounds of shrieking 14 year olds in bikinis, soldiers on R & R and elderly Russian women who brook no age limit in the wearing of short shorts.

The Miami-style scene is somewhat diminished by coarse and cluttered beaches, and for most visitors Eilat's real appeal is in its surrounding desert mountains and canyons. Divers, snorkellers, sunbathers and anyone else searching for the Red Sea's magical underwater should head posthaste for the Egyptian Sinai.

Orientation

Eilat consists of a town centre, the hotel-fringed lagoon and beaches, and the 5km coastal strip between the town centre and the Egyptian border. The massive Jordanian flag down the coast to the east marks the town of Aqaba; on clear days it's possible to see King Hussein's mansion.

The backbone of the town centre is sloping HaTamarim Blvd. The bus station is off HaTamarim Blvd, with the main hostel area just to the north across Hativat HaNegev Ave. Downhill from the bus station is the

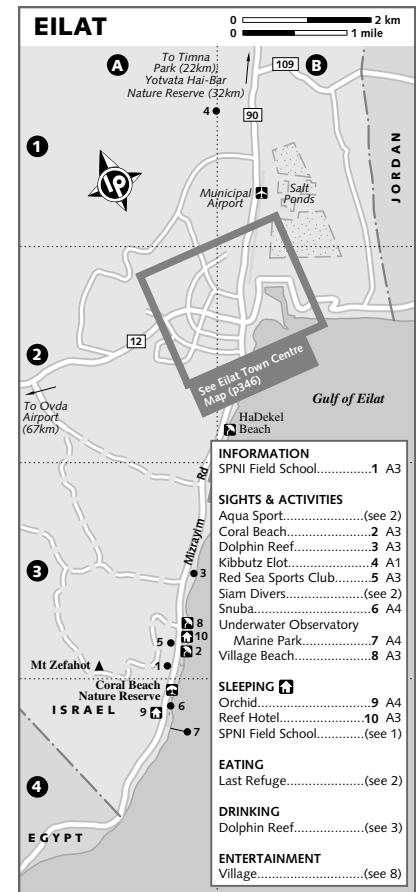
main shopping area, with the Shalom and Red Canyon malls on one side of HaTamarim and the older commercial centre across the street.

The airport runway serves as the no-man's-land between the town centre and the hotel area. The hotels are dotted around a purpose-built lagoon and marina. Nearby are the most accessible beaches, known collectively as North Beach.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Steimatzky (Map p346; ☎ 9am-7pm Sun-Thu, 9am-2pm Fri) Has branches in the bus station and on the ground floor of the Shalom Centre. Sells Lonely Planet guides to Jordan and Egypt.



EMERGENCY

Police station (Map p346; ☎ 100) Located at the eastern end of Hativat HaNegev Ave.

Tourist police (Map p346; ☎ 10am-3am Sun-Wed, 10-6am Thu-Sat) This station is near the tourist information office at North Beach.

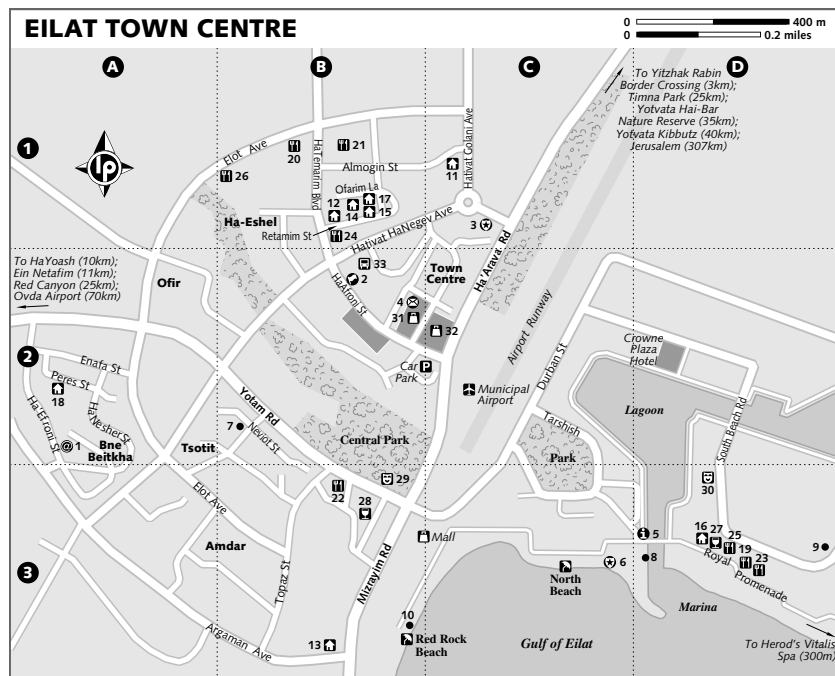
INTERNET ACCESS

Capish (Map p346; ☎ 632 6977; New Tourist Centre; ☎ 24hr) Internet is available at this coffee shop.

E-Surf (Map p346; ☎ 634 4331; central bus station; per hr 14NIS; ☎ 10am-11pm Sun-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri, 5-11pm Sat) Internet café.

MONEY

To change money, head for the many non-commission exchange bureaux in the old commercial centre off HaTemarim Blvd. The post office in the Red Canyon Centre also changes money. ATMs are widespread.



INFORMATION		DRINKING ☎	
Capish.....	1 A2	Three Monkeys Pub.....	27 D3
E-Surf.....	(see 33)	Underground Pub.....	28 B3
Egyptian Consulate.....	2 B2	Unplugged.....	(see 28)
Police Station.....	3 C1	ENTERTAINMENT ☎	
Post Office.....	4 B2	IMAX Theatre.....	29 B3
Steimatzky.....	(see 32)	Platinum.....	30 D3
Steimatzky.....	(see 33)	SHOPPING ☎	
Tourist Information Office.....	5 D3	Red Canyon Mall.....	31 B2
Tourist Police.....	6 C3	Shalom Centre.....	32 C2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		TRANSPORT	
Desert Eco Tours.....	7 B2	Arkia.....	(see 31)
Israel Yam.....	8 D3	Car Rentals.....	(see 32)
King's City.....	9 D3	Central Bus Station.....	33 B2
Kisuski.....	10 B3	Israil.....	(see 32)
SLEEPING ☎		New Tourist Centre.....	(see 28)
Arava Hostel.....	11 C1	EATING ☎	
Corrine Hostel.....	12 B1	32.....	19 D3
Eilat Guesthouse & Youth Hostel.....	13 B3	Co-Op Supermarket.....	20 B1
Hotel Pierre.....	14 B1	Eddie's Hide-A-Way.....	21 B1
Nathan's White House.....	15 B1	Ginger Asian Kitchen & Bar.....	22 B3
Royal Beach.....	16 D3	La Cucina.....	23 D3
Spring Hostel.....	17 B1	Pizza Lek.....	24 B1
Villa Kibel.....	18 A2	Regata.....	25 D3
		Shibolim.....	26 B1
		Spring Onion.....	(see 5)

POST

Post office (Map p346; Red Canyon Mall; ☎ 8am-4pm Sun-Thu)

TOURIST INFORMATION

SPNI Field School (Map p345; ☎ 637 1127; eilat@spni.org.il) Just across the street from Coral Beach on the coastal road to Taba, in the Sinai. They have information on hiking and bird-watching in the area.

Tourist information office (Map p346; ☎ 630 9111; zipiv@tourism.gov.il; Bridge House, Yacht Marina; ☎ 8am-6pm Sun-Thu, 8am-2pm Fri) A helpful place with loads of maps and brochures.

Sights**DOLPHIN REEF**

Have you heard the one about the woman who married a dolphin? No, it's not a bad joke – it really happened at the **Dolphin Reef** (Map p345; ☎ 630 0111; www.dolphinreef.co.il; South Beach; adult/child 46/32NIS; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu, 9am-4:30pm Fri & Sat), where visitors can observe dolphin training, feed the dolphins and even snorkel or dive with them in their 'natural habitat'.

There is currently a group of eight bottle-nose dolphins at the reef, several of which are the children of dolphins purchased from Russian and Japanese fishing interests and brought to the Red Sea in the early '90s with the aim of eventually releasing the mammals into the open water.

The management of Dolphin Reef likes to make it clear that it is the animals' 'choice' to approach guided groups of snorkellers or divers, that it is not based on any reinforcement by feeding. Dolphin Reef is also actively involved in petitioning the government for official protection of wild dolphins and other marine life in the Red Sea.

Admission includes the use of the lovely private beach, as well as a documentary film screening. There are floating piers and observations points from where you can view the dolphins. For 227NIS you can snorkel with the dolphins or do an introductory dive for 274NIS. Five-day PADI and SSI open-water courses are also available for US\$450.

Another feature of Dolphin Reef is the gorgeous Relaxation Pools (150NIS for 1½ hours including refreshments). Surrounded by lush greenery, the three pools (rainwater, sea water and Dead Sea water) are all heated and have underwater music, making for a rather blissful experience!

You must make advance bookings to swim or snorkel with the dolphins as well as to use the relaxation pools. During the high season and holidays they recommend you book at least two weeks in advance. There's also a strict cancellation policy.

CORAL BEACH NATURE RESERVE

With over 100 types of stony coral and 650 species of fish, the **Coral Beach Nature Reserve** (Map p345; ☎ 637 6829; adult/child 23/12NIS; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a utopia for snorkellers. A wooden bridge leads from the shore to the beginning of the reef (which is over a kilometre in length), where you can follow several underwater trails marked by buoys.

The reserve stretches from the Underwater Observatory to the Reef Hotel, and the entrance is opposite the SPNI Field School. Snorkelling equipment is available for hire and the beach has showers and lockers. There is also a 15-minute film screening, which is a good introduction to the Red Sea marine environment.

UNDERWATER OBSERVATORY MARINE PARK

For as much aquatic action as you can handle without getting wet, head to the **Underwater Observatory Marine Park** (Map p345; ☎ 636 4200; www.coralworld.com/eilat; Taba Rd; adult/child 79/69NIS; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-4pm Fri), south of Coral Beach. Aside from standard aquarium features such as shark tanks, turtles and stingray pools there are highlights like the magical glassed-in observatory, 4.25m below the water's surface, through which you can view the usually rich Red Sea marine life. In case the fish outside fail to put in an appearance there are plenty of captive specimens in the accompanying aquarium. There's even a pitch-black room for viewing phosphorescent fish. Kids will get a thrill out of the petting pool and the regular feedings that take place between 11am and 3pm.

The Oceanarium submarine simulator should be next on the list if you want to experience a virtual ride under the sea. It's a true theme park-style attraction with jolting seats and a squealing audience.

Slightly out of place, but fascinating nonetheless, is the Amazon exhibition, which has piranhas (fed daily at 3pm), anacondas and a weird-looking alligator-snapping turtle.

For more sea-bed cruising jump on the **Coral 2000** (adult/child 39/29NIS), which has

48 windows for optimal marine-life viewing. The 35-minute tour leaves from the observatory at 11am and 1pm Monday to Saturday.

KING'S CITY

It took four years and US\$40 million to build this biblical theme park. **King's City** (Map p346; ☎ 630 4444; www.kingscity.co.il; East Lagoon) is an opulent showcase for the stories of King Solomon and Queen Sheba among other monarchs. The attractions are high-tech and interactive featuring mazes, kaleidoscopes, 3D films and a heart-thumping water ride. There are no less than six fast-food outlets on hand if all those Bible stories are making you hungry.

Activities

Other than hanging around an air-conditioned mall the Red Sea is the best place to cool off with a range of fun activities to have you in a splash. For those who prefer dry land, nearby hikes offer a peaceful alternative to the beach scene.

BEACHES

Eilat's main beaches are less than impressive. North Beach (Map p346) is great for a drink in the sun, but considering it's so cluttered and crowded, you'd be best to stick with the hotel pool. If that's not an option head down the coast towards the Egyptian border.

Village Beach (Map p345) is particularly pleasant, with free umbrellas, clean water for snorkelling and attentive waiters who will keep you hydrated all day long. Week-ends can feel like a scene from MTV Spring Break with ex-army boys flexing their pecs and big-breasted girls sunning themselves on the pontoon, but during the week it's a great place to chill out. Another good option is the free **HaDekel (Palm) Beach** (Map p345).

Outside these seaside operations the coastline looks like a building site of stones, gravel and muddy furrows. Our advice for die-hard beach bums is to head for Taba and the rest of the Sinai.

WATER SPORTS

Boating

A popular excursion from the main hotel area is the **Israel Yam** (Map p346; ☎ 637 5528, 050 531 0090; Yacht Marina; adult/child 60/40NIS), a glass-bottomed boat that cruises between the

Egyptian and Jordanian borders, before heading to the Coral Beach Nature Reserve. It lasts two hours and operates at least three times daily. The underwater scenery is fairly spectacular and there's an accompanying English-language commentary.

For some fun in the sun, the **Red Sea Sports Club** (Map p345; ☎ 637 6569; www.redseasports.co.il; Ambassador Hotel, Coral Beach) offers scenic day trips on their cruiser to the beaches at the Taba border or to Coral Island off the Sinai Peninsula. There's also swimming, snorkelling and water sports. The price (adult/child from US\$28/32) includes a barbecue lunch.

If you want to control the action then Red Sea Sports Club rents out small motor boats for US\$40 per hour. If there is a need for speed, a skipper and speed boat is yours for US\$140 per hour. For something more sedate, **Aqua Sport** (Map p345; ☎ 633 4404; www.aqua-sport.com; Coral Beach) has kayaks for US\$10 per hour.

Scuba Diving

Despite the enthusiastic PR, Eilat's waters do not offer world-class diving. If you've dived in Asia or Australia you're likely to be disappointed with the quality of the coral, which, due to the sheer volume of divers, has seen some inevitable damage. Serious divers should head to the nearby Sinai desert.

However, there's still underwater excitement to be had. The best thing about snorkelling and diving in Eilat is how close the marine life is to the shore. This accessibility makes it a great place for kids as well as for beginners wanting to do an introductory dive or open-water course.

Two of the oldest dive companies in Eilat are Red Sea Sports Club and Aqua Sport. **Aqua Sport** (Map p345; ☎ 633 4404; www.aqua-sport.com; Coral Beach) offers an introductory scuba dive for US\$45, a five-day PADI open-water course for US\$295, daily shore dives for US\$40, thrice-weekly boat dives (two tanks US\$70) as well as one- to five-day Sinai excursions from US\$95 to US\$495.

Red Sea Sports Club (Map p345; ☎ 637 6569; www.redseasports.co.il; Ambassador Hotel, Coral Beach) offers 3- to 6-day packages for certified divers from US\$100, including a Red Sea Triangle package where you dive Aqaba, Eilat and the Sinai in one week (US\$680 including all accommodation). They also offer standard courses, and have live-aboard cruises

to the Strait of Tiran, Ras Mohammed and Gulf of Suez.

The friendly **Siam Divers** (Map p345; ☎ 637 0581; www.siam.co.il; Coral Beach) is one of the best value, with the PADI open water going for US\$200. For certified divers there are two guided dives a day, which are US\$23 including all gear. There are live-aboards such as the three-day Sinai experience for US\$370.

All operators have great accommodation deals for divers who use their services, so if you're interested in diving get in touch with the clubs first before locating a hotel.

Snorkelling

Snuba (Map p345; ☎ 637 2722; www.snuba.co.il; South Beach) is a guided underwater adventure for beginners who have no proficiency with tanks but would love to see some of the aquatic sights. Guides take snuba divers to the Caves reef, considered one of the best coral reefs in Eilat. It costs US\$40 and includes two hours of snorkel rental after the activity.

At the dive centres you can hire snorkel equipment for around US\$8 to US\$10.

Water-skiing & Parasailing

Both the dive centres organise water-skiing (US\$28 for 15 minutes) and parasailing (US\$30 for 10 minutes). At **Kisuski** (Map p346; ☎ 637 2088; www.kisos.co.il; Red Rock Beach) you can rent all the other water toys you hadn't thought of such as jet skis, jet boats, pedal boats, ski tubes and bananas.

DESERT HIKES

Although overshadowed by the activities on the beach and underwater, there are some marvellous hiking possibilities in the Eilat region. Marked nature trails enable visitors to explore the colourful mountains and valleys just outside the town.

When you go hiking in the desert be sure to abide by the safety guidelines: follow a marked path, take sufficient water, cover your head, beware of flash floods and avoid the Israel-Egypt border area and army installations – do not take photographs or hike at night near here.

Mt Zefahot Circular Trail

This almost circular hike is within reach of nondrivers and is best enjoyed towards the end of the day. It involves about three hours of easy walking to give you a superb view

of the Gulf of Aqaba and the four countries whose borders meet here: Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Take bus No 15 from the central bus station and get off by the Texas Ranch (opposite Coral Beach). Follow the sign pointing to Wadi Shlomo and walk upstream along the dirt road for about 2km, ignoring the numerous side paths, until you see the concrete buildings on your left. Now vacant, they were used to quarantine animals. Go left along Wadi Zefahot and follow the green trail markers. You pass by a dry waterfall on your right, and after 300m the path forks with a black marked trail veering off to the right. Keep going straight ahead on the green marked trail for another 200m. It then turns to the left and starts to climb quite steeply. Head up this path and keep climbing for about 15 minutes to reach the **Mt Zefahot** summit at about 278m.

From this vantage point, Sinai is visible to the south – for the Crusader castle on Coral Island – while across the gulf are the Jordanian port city of Aqaba and the Saudi border. To the northeast, the greenery of Kibbutz Elot and the reefs off Coral Beach can also be seen. Although the sunset can be beautiful from here, hikers are advised not to return after dark as the trail can be difficult to follow. The path continues down to bring you to the field school on the main road.

Tours

A good choice for wilderness tours is the reputable **Desert Eco Tours** (Map p346; ☎ 637 4259; www.desertecotours.com; Zofit Centre, Neviot St), which does half-day to multi-day jeep, camel and hiking tours in the Negev, Sinai (St Katherine's Monastery, p382) and southwest Jordan. Plan on spending about US\$45/100 for a half-/full-day (plus any border taxes) trip.

Festivals & Events

The **Red Sea Jazz Festival** (☎ 1 599 525 354; www.redseajazzilat.com) is an international four-day jazz festival held annually in the last week of August. Outdoor performances are staged around the Eilat Sea Port and cost between 130 and 180NIS a ticket. The festival's legendary jam sessions are free and take place poolside at the Riviera Hotel each night.

Sleeping

As a resort town, the cost of hotel rooms in Eilat rises by about 25% or more on weekends, and 25% to 50% (or more) in the months of June and August. Reserve ahead or you'll be out on the street, or avoid the place altogether at peak holiday times, particularly Passover and Sukkot.

BUDGET

Hostels

There seems to be an idea in Eilat that a shed, air-con and a flea-ridden mattress a hostel doth make. These can be found behind every mixed business in town and unless you book ahead during the high season they may be your only option. Travellers are often greeted on arrival at the bus station by hostel and private room touts who have been known to fight over prospective guests. Be sure to see any accommodation before deciding to stay there.

Arava Hostel (Map p346; ☎ 637 4687; arava.hos@actcom.co.il; 106 Almogin St; dm/s/d/tr 40/100/120/150NIS; 🍷) A tightly run ship, this hostel is one of the best budget options in town as the queue of young Israelis at reception can attest. The warren of super-clean rooms is nothing to get excited about, with low ceilings, little light and a dire lack of floor space, but the bustling family atmosphere more than makes up for it, as do the ample kitchen and laundry facilities. The efficient staff can advise on dive courses (as can most of the guests) and there's a pretty outdoor setup with views of the Jordanian mountains.

Spring Hostel (Map p346; ☎ 637 4660; www.avivhostels.co.il; 126 Ofarim St; s 150-175NIS, d 180-220NIS; 🍷 ☑ 🚿) When the communal areas of a hostel are so flash – stylish lounge setting, pool table, kitchen and a slick lap pool on the first floor – it cuts like a knife to see poky but clean rooms with tiny windows and an overriding smell of cigarettes. The curt reception from the management on the day we visited doesn't help either.

Corinne Hostel (Map p346; ☎ 637 1472; 127 Retamim St; dm/s/d 45/50/200NIS; 🍷) Eilat's oldest hostel is an atmospheric place and a quiet escape from the blaring city centre. The double and dorm rooms in the main block are in the basement, bomb shelter-style, but they are still light-filled and cool. Out the back, small wood bungalows are topped with wooden reindeer cut-outs, as if Santa

had just arrived in Eilat. There's also a colourful tiled kitchen, cable TV and good common area for meeting other travellers.

Nathan's White House (Map p346; ☎ 637 6572, 0507 262 532; Retamim St; r per person 100NIS; 🍷) Not so much white as exposed fake brick, this friendly hostel has five small apartments that sleep up to four people. They are recently renovated – improvements were ongoing at the time of research – and have neat kitchenettes, futon beds, modern bathrooms, TV and the usual depressing lack of light. There is a pleasant outdoor courtyard filled with half-naked Israelis and plans to put in a bar.

Eilat Guesthouse & Youth Hostel (Map p346; ☎ 637 0088; eilat@iyha.org.il; Mizrayim Rd; dm/s/d US\$20/35/60; 🍷 ☑ 🚿) Nothing out of the ordinary as far as Israeli youth hostels go – modern and immaculately clean – but in Eilat that stands out a mile, as do the comfortable rooms with fridge and the good views out over the gulf from some of the balconies. The location, just south of the New Tourist Centre, is also handy for the better beaches. The main problem is that it generally attracts huge groups of school kids, not exactly the sort of place you want to laze around with other travellers discussing the price of beer in Cairo.

Camping

Camping is illegal on most of Eilat's beaches and it's a law that is enforced. Exceptions are the areas towards the Jordanian border and north of the port. These beaches are rocky and unshaded and if that is not enough to turn you off, there's also a high theft rate and a bit of a rodent problem to boot.

Those who wish to pay for a rat-free, amenity-served camp site should head for the Coral Beach area. **SPNI Field School** (Map p345; ☎ 637 1127; eilat@spni.org.il) has a shaded camp site that is open year-round. Cost is 40NIS per person. It has clean bathrooms and showers, and a basic cafeteria.

MIDRANGE

The tourist office has a comprehensive list of all private rooms and apartments.

Villa Kibel (Map p346; ☎/fax 637 6911; www.villakibel.co.il; 18 Peres St; ste US\$70-118; 🍷) This is a friendly and quiet private home divided into a collection of comfortable holiday flats with kitchenettes and cable TV. South African owners Russell and Michelle Kibel have a range of apartments large and small to cater

to all tastes and numbers of guests. Some of the flats are wheelchair accessible. They even offer a 13-bed house for 760NIS. The rooms tend to fill up, so bookings are highly recommended. Russell will happily pick you up from the bus station or airport if given notice.

Hotel Pierre (Map p346; ☎ 632 6601; www.eilat-guide.com/pierre; 123 Ofarim Lane; s/d, with breakfast US\$50/80; 🍷) For something quick and easy try this well-managed place in a quiet laneway about ten minutes' walk from the beach. It's friendly and unassuming and the French management are charming to say the least. The 34 small but comfortable rooms all have fridges, phones and cable TV and there's a lobby bar.

Reef Hotel (Map p345; ☎ 636 4444; www.reefhotel.co.il; s/d, with breakfast US\$111/130; 🍷 ☑ 🚿) The hotel brochure doesn't lie when it says the Reef, between the Village and Coral Beaches, is on one of the nicest stretches of sand in Eilat. There's also good snorkelling, a huge pool, a gym and an unpretentious summer-holiday atmosphere all year round. The comfortable rooms, all with balcony, are modern and spacious. If you're going to be hitting the southern beaches every day this is a great-value and really laid-back place to stay.

Orchid (Map p345; ☎ 636 0360; www.orchidhotel.co.il; Coral Beach; d/tr, with breakfast from US\$130/180; 🍷 ☑ 🚿) Definitely the most architecturally interesting of the Eilat hotels, the Orchid is set up like a Thai island beach resort with bungalows clinging to the hillside and a tropical pool dotted with palm trees. Some of the more expensive units have a loft area that is perfect for families. A golf cart runs guests up and down the hill and they also have free use of bikes, great for riding down the coast to the different beaches. There's a restaurant and spa on site – Thai, natch!

TOP END

If you enjoy the over-the-top luxury of a five-star hotel, Eilat has plenty to choose from. There are more than 40 complexes along North Beach and on the road to Taba, with more being built every day. Unfortunately, despite the marble and the glitz, the shorts-and-thongs ambience is all wrong. As one harsh tour operator put it, 'these are five-star hotels in a three-star resort'.

If you want to stay for more than a day or so, check the holiday brochures at home

first, since inclusive deals might well be cheaper than booking privately.

Royal Beach (Map p346; ☎ 636 8888; www.isro.tel.co.il; North Beach; s/d US\$344/406; 🍷 ☑ 🚿) 'A holiday beyond your imagination' is the theme for this gargantuan hotel complex, which has 363 rooms and purports to be one of the most luxurious in Eilat. Despite opening in the early '90s it manages to not feel dated with a vast glass lobby, a tastefully decorated terrace for sunset drinks and no less than three swimming pools, with waterfalls and underwater tunnels. Other than the private beach, there are a lot of green areas for relaxing in the sun.

Herod's Vitalis Spa (☎ 638 1500; www.herods.co.il; North Beach; d from 1380NIS; 🍷 ☑ 🚿) Indulge in the dramatic opulence of Herod's Palace next door, then retreat to this boutique hotel within a hotel to enjoy personal service and an exceptional range of spa treatments. Accepting guests only 18 years or older, you can happily enjoy the mineral pool and hot and cold waterfalls toddler-free. As a health and lifestyle resort that is part of the Starwood Luxury Collection, there are plush rooms with Jacuzzi, a gorgeous roof garden for treatments and a juice bar and restaurant serving 'spa cuisine', just in case you were worried about a felafel ruining the detox.

Eating

Shibolim (Map p346; ☎ 632 3932; Elot Ave; mains 14-30NIS; 🍷 breakfast & lunch Sun-Fri) For 26NIS Shibolim serves up the sort of breakfast you'll dream about for days to come. This rustic bakery makes a variety of interesting breads and pastries, a few of which will turn up on your plate along with home-made jams, tasty salad and dips. Coffee comes with a sample of their biscuits and the service is as sweet as the yummy range of cakes.

Spring Onion (Map p346; ☎ 637 7434; Bridge House; mains 35-60NIS; 🍷 9am-3am) This is a popular two-storey dairy and vegetarian place beside the lagoon bridge in the hotel area. In addition to a great Israeli breakfast (38NIS), you'll find fruit shakes, salads, pizza and fish dishes. The huge portions should tide you over for most of the day.

Regata (Map p346; ☎ 636 2293; Promenade, North Beach; mains 45-70NIS; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Unless you want to deal with a snarling maître d and an hour-long wait, don't even consider turning up to this colourful Italian trattoria on

the weekends without a booking. During the rest of the week it's a popular place for wood-oven pizzas, big bowls of pasta and plates of fish that you can eat outside or in the inviting multi-level dining room.

Ginger Asian Kitchen and Bar (Map p346; ☎ 637 2517; Park Ave; www.gingereilat.com; mains 58-72NIS; ☺ lunch-late) A slick restaurant with black leather banquets and a wraparound bar, this is where the beautiful people come to nosh on late-night Japanese gyoza (dumplings) and sip Asian-infused cocktails. Food crisscrosses the Far East, from Thai curries to Indonesian noodle dishes and seafood tempura.

La Cucina (Map p346; ☎ 636 8932; Promenade, North Beach; mains 75-85NIS; ☺ lunch & dinner) Eat with the angels at this elegant Italian restaurant under the Royal Beach hotel with its heavenly murals, mood lighting, smooth suede furniture and bougainvillea-draped terrace. Decoration aside, the food is very good, with highlights being the wonderfully thin pizzas and fresh pasta dishes. Deserts such as lemongrass consommé with passionfruit are a refreshing change and certainly worth saving room for.

Last Refuge (Map p345; ☎ 637 2437; www.hamiflat.co.il; Coral Beach; mains 80-150NIS; ☺ lunch & dinner) If you're planning on a seafood dinner while you're in Eilat, locals and returning Israelis have been wholeheartedly recommending this cosy but kitsch fish restaurant for over 20 years. Try the catch of the day grilled over the charcoals or the spicy crab speciality, or tuck into seafood soups a Bostonian would be impressed with. Order ahead for specials such as lobster; in fact, ring ahead anyway, especially if you want a table on a Friday night.

Eddie's Hide-A-Way (Map p346; ☎ 637 1137; 68 Almogim St; mains 90NIS; ☺ dinner Mon-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat) For more than 30 years Eddie has been hiding in the back streets of Eilat making really good steaks and turning out inventive dishes such as delicate Shanghai fish with spicy soy paste. Vegetarians are not excluded, with an excellent meat-free lasagne on the menu as well as soups, and a mouth-watering stuffed mushroom dish. The intimate dining room is great for romantic dinners, the sort of place you can easily sit over a bottle or two of wine. The entrance to the restaurant is on Elot Ave.

A number of small restaurants, cafés and shwarma stands can be found in the New

Tourist Centre, opposite the IMAX theatre, as well as the food court inside the Red Canyon Mall. If a sandwich is sufficient – and it probably will be given Eilat's appetite-busting temperatures – try the **co-op supermarket** (Map p346; cnr Elot Ave & HaTemarim Blvd), or the one in the Shalom Centre. For really good takeaway pizza, head to **Pizza Lek** (Map p346; ☎ 634 1330; HaTemarim Blvd).

Drinking

Three Monkeys Pub (Map p346; ☎ 636 8800; Promenade; ☺ 9pm-3am) The beating heart of Eilat's nightlife can be found at this wannabe English pub, which has 12 types of beer on tap (whether they can pour them is another question) and enough fruity cocktails to keep the sunburnt punters happy. Sit out on the sand under the fairy-lit palm trees, until you are drunk enough to think that the live cover band is good enough for a boogie.

Underground Pub (Map p346; ☎ 637 0239; www.underground-pub.com; New Tourist Centre; ☺ noon-4am) A travellers' favourite, pub grub, easy music and nightly live entertainment including a popular Wednesday-night karaoke party. Cheap beer (9NIS until 9pm) fuels a lively crowd. There are several outdoor pool tables and live sports on the big screen inside.

Unplugged (Map p346; ☎ 632 6299; New Tourist Centre; ☺ 7pm-3am) Next door to the Underground Pub, this place has a main bar plus a popular outdoor tented area that attracts rowdy young things pretending to be drunk, and sleazy soldiers who commandeer the picnic tables with impressive MTV rip-off dance moves. While it would be an OK place to puff on a water pipe and relax on the couches, the music is so loud it makes chatting with friends a distinct impossibility.

Dolphin Reef (Map p345; ☎ 637 1846; Dolphin Reef; ☺ 11am-late) For something with more of a tropical flavour head south to this thatched-roof beach bar, where you can drink cocktails on the sand and enjoy great sunsets over the Gulf of Eilat.

Entertainment

IMAX Theatre (Map p346; ☎ 634 8080; www.imax.eilat.co.il; admission 55NIS; ☺ 4-11pm Sun-Thu, 11am-5pm Fri, 9pm-midnight Sat) For a family-friendly activity, or if the temperatures reach unbearable heights, take cool respite in the pyramid-shaped IMAX theatre.

Village (Map p345; ☎ 637 5410; Village Beach; ☺ 8am-late) After a big Friday night, the action gets started early with a beach party gearing up around 11am on Saturdays. It's cheesy but lots of fun, with a sandy dance floor, a DJ playing Israeli rap and staff hosing everyone down just in case they get too hot, hot, hot.

Platinum (Map p346; ☎ 636 3444; Antibes Rd; admission 60-100NIS; ☺ 11pm-6am) Located in King Solomon Hotel, this has been the most popular club in town for the last few years. Monday is Hebrew music only, Thursday is reserved for 25-and-overs, and on Friday the club hosts a gay party.

Getting There & Away

See p364 for details on how to cross the border from Eilat to Petra (Jordan).

AIR

Step outside of Eilat's municipal airport (Map p345; ☎ 637 3553) and you are already downtown. Both **Arkia** (Map p346; ☎ 638 4888; Red Canyon Mall) and **Israir** (Map p346; ☎ 634 0666; Shalom Centre) fly several times daily between the municipal airport and Tel Aviv (from US\$50), and to Haifa three times per week (from US\$80).

Ovda Airport (VDA; ☎ 08-637-5880) is about 60km north of Eilat. It serves occasional charter flights from Europe as well as Arkia and El Al flights but its distance from town means it's not the most convenient landing post.

BUS

The central **bus station** (Map p346; ☎ 636 5120; HaTemarim St) offers service to Tel Aviv (65NIS, five hours), with buses departing every hour from 5am to 10pm, with an additional overnight service at 1am. The last Friday bus is at 3pm and the first Saturday bus at 11.30am; this bus also stops in Be'er Sheva (55NIS, three hours). To Mitzpe Ramon (45NIS, 2½ hours), buses run more or less hourly on weekdays and at least twice on Saturday. To Jerusalem (65NIS, 4½ hours), there are four to five buses per day plus one leaving at midnight. On Saturday the first bus departs at 4.30pm. There's also a service from Eilat to Masada (55NIS, four hours, four daily).

All buses pass by the Timna National Park, Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve and the Yotvata visitors centre. There are no direct buses from Eilat to Cairo. Bus No 15

goes from the bus station to the Taba border (stopping at Coral Beach).

Getting Around

The town centre is walkable, but you'll need a bus or taxi for locations along the Taba road. The hourly bus No 15 connects the central bus station with the Egyptian border at Taba (6.40NIS) from 8am to 6pm Sunday to Thursday, 8am to 3pm Friday and 9am to 7pm Saturday. To reach the Rabin border crossing into Jordan, you'll have to get a taxi (25NIS).

CAR

You can rent a car by calling any of the following:

Budget (☎ 371 063)

Europcar (☎ 637 4014)

Hertz (☎ 637 6682)

Reliable (☎ 637 4126)

Thrifty (☎ 637 3511)

TAXI

Eilat's taxis can be an inexpensive and comfortable way to get around, especially when there are two or more of you. Although distances are short, much of the town is on a hill and, worn out by the heat, you could well decide to take a smart Mercedes ride rather than walk. Fares are roughly 6NIS per kilometre; a taxi from the town centre to Taba is 28NIS.

AROUND EILAT

Eilat is surrounded by incredible landscape due to the Great Syrian-African Rift, which terminates here with the Arava Valley. The result is a desert environment with glorious colours and a huge variety of flora and fauna. Of the Negev's 1200 recorded plant species, only 300 exist in this southern, more arid, area. These include palms, acacia, tamarisk, pistachio and the very rare horse-radish tree. Animals found here include gazelles, wolves, foxes, ibexes and Israel's largest bird, the almost extinct lappet-faced vulture.

There are also many archaeological sites in the area that show that ancient people managed not only to live here, but also to dig copper mines in these harsh surroundings. Hikers will want to head for the Eilat Mountains, but be sure to pick up a copy of the 1:50,000 SPNI Eilat Mountains hiking

map (82NIS), which is sold at the SPNI Field School in Eilat.

Any of the following places is accessible on a 38NIS to 50NIS taxi ride from Eilat. The small spring and 30m waterfall at **Ein Netafim** (☞ running Apr, May, Oct & Nov), which attract wildlife with their perennial water, lie less than 1km off the main road. From here, hikers can follow the Israel National Trail to the spectacular **Shehoret Canyon**, 15km away; make arrangements with a tour operator to pick you up at the trailhead at the finish. Near the mouth of Shehoret Canyon lie the impressive **Amram Pillars**, also along the Israel National Trail, where there's an official camp site (no water).

An excellent six- to seven-hour hike will take you through the spectacular **Nakhal Gishron** (part of the Israel National Trail)

from HaYoash to the Egyptian border. In the early 1990s the Dalai Lama walked part of this route, lecturing to a small collection of adherents atop one of its upper crests. Get an early start and carry at least 3L of water per person.

Further north, the 600m-long **Red Canyon**, a slot canyon 1m to 3m wide and 10m to 20m deep, is readily accessed on foot via a 1.5km walking track from the car park. It makes a great short hike.

If you'd prefer to take to the mountains under an alternative form of transport, **Camel Ranch** (☎ 08-637 0022; www.camel-ranch.co.il in Hebrew; Nakhal Shlomo; ☞ 9am-1pm & 4-8pm) organises 90-minute (98NIS per person) and four-hour (180NIS per person) camel treks from its base, less than 2km inland from the Eilat-Taba road.