

Top 10 Things to Do in the Melting Pot of Israel

BY SUCHETA RAWAL



CITY OF JAFFE

Israel is a country built by immigrants and a melting pot of cultures, languages and traditions. It has a diverse population concentrated in a small area. Just walking through the food markets, one can see an array of influences from Mediterranean, North African, Middle Eastern and Asian cuisines.

The country is the birthplace of many religions and attracts visitors of all nationalities and cultures. African Hebrew Israelites, also known as Black Hebrews, began settling in Israel in 1969. Between November 1984 and January 1985, 8,000 members of the ancient Ethiopian Jewish community from refugee camps in Sudan were airlifted to Israel to start a new life. Additional efforts in the 1990s rescued thousands more. Today, Israel is home to the largest Ethiopian Beta Israel community in the world with more than 130,000 Ethiopian Jews.

From the bustling nightlife of Tel Aviv and award-winning wineries in Galilee, to the religious landmarks of Jerusalem and therapeutic waters of the Dead Sea, there is a lot to experience in the Holy Land. If Israel is on your travel list for this year or the near future, here are 10 experiences that should be on your itinerary.

TEL AVIV

1. Eat at Carmel Market or Shuk HaCarmel in Tel Aviv. The Carmel Market is one of the most popular open air markets in the country, where locals shop for fresh breads, cheese, olives, nuts, meats, pastries, fruits and vegetables. Browse around on your own or take a food tour through Delicious Israel where a guide can direct you to a 100-year-old Syrian bakery and the best hummus, falafel, shawarma, knafeh and baklava vendors.

JAFFA

2. Step back in time at Jaffa Port. Jaffa is one of the world's oldest port cities located along the white sandy beach shore and easily walkable from Tel Aviv. Its narrow cobblestone streets are dotted with art, craft and jewelry shops. A small museum tells the history of the traders and settlers who came to Jaffa and a row of restaurants on the dock sell the best fish and chips.

The Jaffa flea market has the same look and feel of ancient bazaars, selling everything from rugs and clocks to sweets and spices.



DEIR EL-SULTAN - AN ETHIOPIAN MONASTERY IN JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM

3. Soak in the views from Mount of Olives. The lookout point at Mount of Olives offers panoramic views of the Old City of Jerusalem. It is also the location where many biblical events took place, as mentioned several times in the Old and New Testaments of The Bible. More than 150,000 Jewish graves can be seen along the slopes covered with olive trees as it was a resting place for Jewish pilgrims before the destruction of the Temple.

4. Soak in history and culture in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Old City of Jerusalem is one of the holiest places in the world, packed with diverse cultures and places of worship in only .35 square miles. It is divided into four quarters – Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Armenian. In the Christian quarter, visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Jesus was said to have been resurrected. The Tower of David, a medieval citadel and museum, offers a spectacular sound and light show every night that tells the 3000-year history of Jerusalem.

Perhaps the most well-known icon is the Western Wall, a remnant of the ancient Jewish Temple, which attracts Jewish pilgrims from around the world who come to pray for peace. The Muslim quarter is home to a traditional Arabic bazaar, century old Middle Eastern eateries and the stunning blue and golden Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Armenian quarter is mostly residential, with a few bars and taverns and the sacred Saint James Monastery.



CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE IN JERUSALEM



8. Drink at wineries in Upper Galilee. More than 200 wineries in Israel produce excellent red and white vintages and sparkling wines. In 2008, Wine Spectator magazine published a feature on Israeli wine and summed it up by affirming that “Israel’s wines are world-class.”

The nonprofit organization Western Galilee Now allows you to create a custom day trip to Western Galilee where you can stop for wine, beer, arak, honey, cheese, and ice cream tastings at your own pace. Routes are also mapped out so you can follow different historic and scenic trails. There are also places to swim, camp and hike around the freshwater lake.

9. Learn the local life at a kibbutz. Visiting a kibbutz is a great way to learn about Israeli culture and society. A kibbutz is a collective community traditionally based on agriculture, although many have diversified into modern businesses now. Israel has more than 270 kibbutzim in Israel and many welcome visitors. You can stay at a kibbutz hotel or book a private kibbutz tour.

10. Ride one-humped camels in the Negev Desert. The Negev covers over half of Israel’s land area and is a must-see for those who enjoy nature and adventure. Explore the sand dunes by riding camels, or rent a bike or an ATV. Stop for a photo opportunity at Timna Park, the Ramon Crater and Ein Avdat desert valley.

HAIFA

5. Stroll in the Bahá’í Gardens of Haifa. Israel is also a holy site for the Bahá’í faith (which originated in Persia), and the Bahá’í Gardens and World Center is a peaceful place that offers great views of the city, the Hills of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. After a stroll through the flower-filled gardens, grab a coffee or beer on tap at one of the many German cafes and restaurants along the main promenade of Haifa known as Ben-Gurion Boulevard which has had a bustling German colony since 1868.

DEAD SEA

6. Float in the healing waters of the Dead Sea. Several luxury resorts and hotels are situated along the shores of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth, known for its natural health and healing properties. Swathe yourself with the mineral-rich mud and float in the salty waters, pamper yourself with wraps and massages at the spa, and enjoy beautiful sunsets overlooking the desert. Most hotels offer private beaches, but there are also public beaches that are convenient for day trippers.

7. Watch the sunrise from Masada. Take a cable car to the ancient fortress of Masada, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and watch the morning sunrise over the Dead Sea and mountains of Jordan on the border of Israel. There are also many hiking trails nearby.

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