

the Jordan, the site where John baptized Jesus. Religious tourists flock to this holy site and Jordan is spending more than \$7 million to construct a visitor's center, marketplace and memorial. The muddy river looks more like a stream; the Israel flag flaps in the wind just across the water. An armed guard sits under the wooden landing watching as I dunk a toe in. We exchange nodding glances. In the footsteps of so many religious pilgrims, it seems ironic that soldiers now walk these banks separating the two countries.

— Suzanne Wright

## ○ ISRAEL

As so often my travel adventures begin, I am sitting on a beach watching the afternoon sun sink lower before my eyes and digging my bare feet into the silky soft brown sand. In the crashing surf before me are a group of surfers catching the last waves of the day. It's an idyllic picture and one that I never thought I would be experiencing in Israel. Yes, the Holy Land. While I have come to discover its ancient history, it's on this Tel Aviv beach I sit, discovering for the first time "The Med," as it is affectionately called across the pond. Israel surprises me with its beauty, from my first day on a beach in Tel Aviv to my final day within the walls of Old Jerusalem.



Rooftop view of Jaffa and the Mediterranean Sea

### A Lush Oasis

Tel Aviv was not my final destination, just my introduction to Israel. My visit to Tel Aviv is brief, allowing me just enough time to visit the aforementioned beach, peek into the Tel Aviv International Museum of Art to glimpse Impressionism works by Van Gogh, Monet and



View of Galilee Valley from the Mitzpe Hayamim Hotel

PHOTO COURTESY OF LISSA POIROT

Matisse, and meet new friends for dinner at the trendy old port area filled with nightclubs and fine dining. Had it not been for the Hebrew flowing from the mouths of strangers, and a welcoming wine toast — "L'chaim!" — I would've sworn I was sitting in a Manhattan restaurant on a Friday night. Of course, what should I expect from a city of nearly 400,000 people but a completely cosmopolitan beachside town that reminded me in look and feel of Miami, with its pale-colored International-style condos and high rises.

Waking early the next morning to sunshine and warm spring weather, we set off for the northern mountains of Western Galilee. Following the Via Mare ("Way of the Sea"), I catch glimpses of the sparkling blue Mediterranean as we climb higher and higher past gardens of reds, pinks, whites and yellows. It is spring here, and although Israel does have plenty of deserts of rock and sand, the northern portion of the state is a lush oasis of trees and flowers. Arriving at the Mitzpe Hayamim ("Sight at the Seas") Hotel in Rosh Pina, I am surrounded by perfumed fragrances from the flowers, as well as the herbs growing near the entranceway of the romantic inn nestled into the mountain and overlooking the Sea of Galilee. More than 100 rooms — no two the same in décor and style, including my own room with wrought iron, canopied bed and bathroom outfitted with a claw-foot tub — are found here, but the inside of the hotel is as lush as its outdoor surroundings and I hardly notice the other rooms or guests.

The inn is located on a working organic farm and I stroll the grounds, quiet except for the sounds of birds chirping their spring mating calls, stopping to pet the baby goats and watching cows being milked in the cool,

crisp morning. I leave the comfort of this beautiful place to go on a vineyard tour at Galil Mountain Vineyards. Bordering Lebanon, a variety of vineyards are found in this region, and Galil is one of the best, creating mainly red wines like Cabernet, Merlot, Shiraz and Pinot Noir, as well as Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. After years of jokes about Jewish table wines being utterly undrinkable, the wines and cheese selection I sample at Galil is truly savory.

From here, we climb back into the mountains to visit Safed, Israel's highest and one of its four holiest cities. As the former center of Kabbalah learning, the cobblestoned, narrow winding paths bring us through a Jewish Orthodox neighborhood, where children are gaily running through the streets. With panoramic mountain sunset views, the town is filled with beautiful old synagogues and art galleries with paintings and sculptural Judaica.

### Warm, Desert Air

Leaving behind the cool, mountain air for a couple hours by car to the Dead Sea, the landscape changes dramatically, going from a vivid green to nothing but yellowed sand. Dust settles around the car and canyons carved by flash floods and the Jordan River create an alien landscape. Then, in the distance, the turquoise blue of the Dead Sea emerges, beckoning us to get away from the desert and jump into her beautiful waters. These waters are so filled with salt and minerals that nothing can live in this sea, and people entering for its therapeutic benefits are advised not to spend more than 15 minutes "swimming." Swimming is not frowned upon, just difficult to do, as the salt makes our bodies buoyant. After a few steps into the cool water, I lift my feet only to feel a rush as gravity is released and my legs whip to the top of the water in just an instant. Like that I am floating.

While staying in the Dead Sea, we are introduced to Gil, who looks as if he belongs in the Caribbean — long curly hair, deep, dark tan, and Pink Floyd playing on his Jeep radio. The Jeep is covered inside and out with desert dust, which is to be expected, for he is going to take us off-roading in the desert. We twist and turn the dried riverbed, flying over rocks and stones as "The Dark Side of the Moon" blares from the stereo.

Sure, there is a rich history for the Jews, Christians and Muslims, and before we leave we make a pilgrimage of our own to Jerusalem, where we discover the ancient old city, walk the stations of the cross, stand before the tomb of Christ, say a prayer before the Western (Wailing) Wall, and listen to the sounds of both church bells ringing and the call of Muslims to prayer. After roaming bazaars selling trinkets, we make our way to an upscale artist community filled with galleries and designer shops like Versace and choose to dine under the stars on the outdoor patio overlooking Old Jerusalem. It's an amazing site to behold,

## Long Cane Group, Inc.

Landscape Architects & Contractors,  
Custom Pool Builders

Serving Atlanta for Over 28 Years.

Naturally spectacular pool, spa  
and waterfall environments

• The Outdoor Kitchen Artisans •

The complete design/build source for Atlanta's  
finest outdoor living spaces.

Arbors and Pergolas • Georgia Registered Landscape  
Architects • Detached Pool Houses • Screened Pavilions  
Complete Pool Renovation Services

Long Cane Group, Inc. | 770.998.2066  
info@longcane.com

Visit us on the web at: [longcane.com](http://longcane.com)

and a far unexpected view of Israel. Considering I could have joined the busloads of tourists I have witnessed to visit historic sites, including Jaffa, Caesarea, Haifa and Acco, I am honored to have traversed this country with a couple from Jerusalem as my guide and friends just as eager to discover the lesser-explored and wonderfully beautiful countryside of Israel.

— *Lissa Poirot*



*Hagia Sophia*

## ○ TURKEY

Standing in front of the crowds, the gladiator Maximus awaits the decision. Thumbs up, he lives. Thumbs down, he dies. The scars of the battle lie in ruin throughout the pit. But this gladiator isn't Russell Crowe. It's my good friend Sandy. And our jury-of-four all give a hearty thumbs-up. Save for the five of us, there is not another living soul in this ancient amphitheater in southwest Turkey. The lion's cages are vacant. Intricately carved stone reliefs are scattered around the stage area. Two centuries ago this amphitheater held 5,000 enthusiastic spectators. Any other site of equal importance in Greece would be filled with throngs of tourists, each clamoring for the best photo op. But in this sleepy section of Turkey, known as the Lycian coast, the crowds are non-existent. And on this day, it's the playground for five travelers discovering Turkey.

### **Once Constantinople**

With its scenic beauty and unique culture, Istanbul is a jewel that can be easily navigated on foot. My entry into the country of Turkey is here, in its capital, formerly known as Constantinople. Every guidebook lists the world-renowned Grand Bazaar market as the "must-see"

attraction in the city, and it is my first stop after depositing my bags at the hotel. Directions to the bazaar, given by the hotel's front desk, were vague, especially since my complete knowledge of the Turkish language was just provided by the taxi driver on our way from the airport. Armed with my internal sense of adventure I set off, wandering through streets in the general direction that the front desk clerk had pointed. Instincts bid me to follow a small crowd entering the gated grounds of a mosque. Following the crowd through the grounds and out the other side, I was standing at one of the 11 entrances to this shopping Mecca: 4,000 shops and cafes under domes of elaborately painted tiles selling everything from carpets to Izmet pottery and leather apparel. Rows of gold jewelers vie with souvenir vendors and pickpockets for the Turkish lira in your wallet.

C.S. Lewis mentions Turkish Delight in "The Chronicles of Narnia" as the treat that tempted Edmund to follow the wrong path. My son had requested that I not return home without this mysterious candy, so I leave the bazaar in search of the spice market, where each vendor tempts you to try his version of the local gooey sweet confection, sold in a range of flavors from pistachio to rose to orange. As you enter the 350-year-old Spice Market, also known as the Egyptian Market, you are accosted by the colors and aromas. Exotic stalls boast vividly colored mounds of saffron in varying grades from India, Turkey and Iran. Floral teas in hibiscus and rose vie with oregano and sage for space in this colorful cornucopia of herbs and spices. Small independent stalls line one after the other down the covered passages, each with its boisterous shopkeeper beckoning you to enter.

In the center of the old city, a park marks the spot where the Hippodrome once stood. Erected in A.D. 203, the Hippodrome was the center of politics and sporting events not only for the Romans, but the Ottomans as well. Still standing, several obelisks and statues, erected more than 1,500 years ago, commemorate the establishment of Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman Empire. Directly opposite, spires rising from two very important religious centers situated across from each other punctuate the skyline of Istanbul. The Blue Mosque, which was built in 1616 and takes its name from the 20,000 blue Iznik tiles that decorate its interior, and Hagia Sophia, or Church of Holy Wisdom, which was built in the 4th century as an Eastern Orthodox cathedral, represent the cultural changes the Turks have