

Not too many animals in the desert - but
it pays to stay alert!

FROM THE JORDAN TO THE MED

Despite the war, motorcycle travel
is still happening...

BY IAN LLOYD NEUBAUER



Normally, former secret service agent Raz Tsafir of Desert Road, the only motorcycle touring company in Israel, runs 10 to 12 guided tours every year. But since Israel started battling Hamas terrorists who butchered 1160 people in late 2023 (including 32 Americans), business has been a little slow. This year he’s only had two tours. The first, in April, coincided with the April 14 attack by Hamas’ sponsor Iran, which launched more than 330 missiles and drones at Israel. “That night we were sleeping in tents by the Dead

Sea,” Raz recalls. “We had a nice dinner, sat by the fire and at about 11PM, went to bed. Two hours later I woke up to the sound of explosions. We all got out of our tents and looked at the sky. “For half an hour we saw non-stop *Star Wars*: missiles coming in from Iran and interceptor missiles from Israel, Jordan and American warships on the Red Sea meeting them in the air. Most of the Iranian missiles were intercepted inside the atmosphere by our Iron Dome defence system. Those blasts were red and yellow. But our new Arrow 3

"...THROUGH A MAZE OF ALLEYWAYS AND COURTYARDS IN THE NEW PART OF THE CITY WHERE I STACKED IT RIDING DOWN A CURVED FLIGHT OF STAIRS..."

system gets them outside the atmosphere where there is no oxygen, so the blasts are purple. Ninety-nine per cent of Iran’s missiles were shot down by our technology and allies.” Raz’s second tour of the year, which I was invited to join, took place in May. And, like clockwork, Israel was attacked again.

BOMBS AND DRONES

We’d just completed a first day’s ride that kicked off with a quick dash along the Mediterranean coast from Tel Aviv to the 2000-year-old Roman city of Caesarea. After checking out the ancient theatre and hippodrome, where the sports-mad Romans entertained their subjects, we veered inland on a gravel road through the Lower Galilee region to the highest navigable point on Mount Carmel. From there we slalomed down a series of steep hairpin turns overlooking the port city of Haifa and tore around the Sea of Galilee, a gigantic lake where Jesus is said to have walked on water, before calling it a day at a holiday farm with rustic wood cabins and lake views.

There we were, chilling around a picnic table, sharing stories and a bottle of Glenmorangie 12-year-old single malt, when my phone started going nuts with notifications from Tzofar, an app that alerts users of enemy incursions into Israeli air space.

The world’s largest terrorist organisation, Hezbollah, which had been attacking Israel from its headquarters in Lebanon since October 8, was at it again, this time launching a volley of 10 anti-tank missiles and at least one suicide drone at a town about 30km from our position. Moments later, Israeli fighter jets streaked across the sky, their roar echoing for miles. But Raz didn’t even blink.

“Shouldn’t we like, run to a bomb shelter?” I asked.

STAYING SAFE

“Don’t worry. We’re out of range here,” Raz said. Standing 6ft 8in tall and with hands the



Historic areas abound in Isreal.



There are good dirt roads too, it's not all sand.



Just in case...



size of dinner plates and a body like a double-door refrigerator, it doesn't take a great leap of the imagination to understand why he was selected to guard various former Israeli prime ministers during his stint in the Secret Service. "Normally I take riders right up to the Lebanese border; it's so beautiful up there. But right now it's an active military zone and I'd never put any of my customers in danger."

It was a surreal start to a five-day, 1200km whirlwind tour through the Holy Land that took in more than 20 national parks and ancient cities, the best of which are situated in the Negev Desert, a sparsely populated region known as the Wild West of Israel.

But the Negev is in the south and to get there from the Sea of Galilee, we had to cut through the simmering furnace that is the Jordan Valley. Bordered by escarpments that rise 1700m from the valley floor, the Jordan Valley is the lowest place on earth — down to 400m below sea level — and one of the hottest. The thermometer read 36°C as we entered the valley but felt more like 46°C. It was like riding through gas and so bloody hot that the landscape appeared almost in black and white, a monochromatic world where mirages shimmer on the horizon and you're always thirsty no matter how much you drink. Add harsh desert winds that batter riders from all directions and the risk of being sideswiped by trucks thundering past at 120km/hour, and you start to understand how nuts riding in Israel can be.

SWIMMING POOL KIBBUTZ

It was with great relief that we pulled into Kibbutz Kalya at dusk. Established in the

Maybe a full height off road boot would have been wise!



1930s and 1940s by Jewish refugees from Europe, "kibbutzes" are collective farming communities where people voluntarily live and work together, and which represent the only successful example of socialism in contemporary history. Kibbutz Kalya's business plan was originally all about date farming and the Jordan Valley produces the best dates in the world. And while they still grow dates, they also earn coin by renting small houses to tourists like us. Best of all: the swimming pool.

The next morning we followed winding tarmac along the banks of the Dead Sea, a landlocked salt lake that forms part of the border between Israel and Jordan. People come here from all over the world to soak in the super-

DIY

Raz charges US\$3750 for a five-day tour of Israel on a Yamaha Ténéré 700cc with twin-share accommodation and everything included, though you need to bring your own gear. Seven-day tours and private tours are also available. They take place in March, April, May, October and November only because during all the other months, it's too hot or wet to ride in Israel. Visit desertroad.bike for more information.

salty water with therapeutic qualities that have been used to address otherwise incurable skin problems. But for riders like us, the Dead Sea simply offers the opportunity to tear around on salt flats, shoot bone-white roost into the air and take some pretty awesome photos.

HEAT AND HAIRPINS

From there we detoured inland along a steep series of hairpin turns to reach the top of an escarpment with mind-blowing views of the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley, stopping every time we passed a gas station or kiosk to buy water and energy drinks in a never-ending battle to fend off dehydration. My lips were dry and starting to crack and at times even breathing became a labour. But the eerily beautiful landscape more than made up for these trivial discomforts. The Negev is cut right out of a Roadrunner cartoon, with towering rock pinnacles, dramatic saw-tooth mountains,



Empty twisting bitumen (above) and some loose stuff to keep you on your toes (below).

“FOR HALF AN HOUR WE SAW NON-STOP STAR WARS...”





impossibly steep peaks and the most heart-stopping desert roads I have come across in two decades of adventure riding.

Tom, a former professional enduro rider from the US and member of our group, felt the same way. “I’ve done a lot of desert riding in Southern California and the Baja Peninsula down in Mexico,” he said. “But there’s something special about Israel, riding along baked riverbeds with the hot air blowing into your helmet. Also, I have to say it was much more challenging than I expected. At the end of every day, I felt like I’d done an honest day’s work. And that’s not even including all the historical sites we visited. They add another dimension to Raz’s tours.”

The most memorable site we visited was Masada, an isolated fortification and palace built on a rock plateau overlooking the Dead Sea that we reached via cable car. Masada was the site of the final Jewish resistance to the Roman occupation of the country previously known as Judea. In the year 74 AD, an army of 15,000 Roman troops laid siege to Masada for six whole months to reach the diehard Jewish zealots holding out there. When the Romans

finally breached the walls and entered Masada, they were left aghast: all but three of the 960 zealots had committed suicide rather than be captured and enslaved.

BIKES, TRAVEL AND HISTORY

We learned all of this from Raz, who came up with the idea of combining his love for motorcycles, travel and history after studying for two years to become a licensed tour guide in Israel. “At the end of it, the organiser asked me what I wanted to do,” Raz said. “When I told him I wanted to do motorbike tours that take in all the famous sites, he was pretty dismissive. But my tours are normally sold-out. Well... at least they were before the war.”

Raz may have kept us far from the ongoing battles against Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the Gaza Strip in the deep south, but the war never left his thoughts or those of the Israeli riders in our group. There is seemingly not a single Israeli who did not lose a friend or family member on October 7, or who has not been deeply impacted by the aftermath. “I went to the funerals of eight of

my friends’ children in one week,” Raz told us. “Five more friends have family members who are still in intensive care.”

That night, while sitting in front of a campfire at a farm stay in the Negev Desert where we sleep not in rooms but in repurposed culverts — massive concrete rings used to channel water underground — an Israeli rider in the group called Amir told us the most incredible story about how he rescued his daughter on October 7.

On the morning of the attack, his daughter was at the Nova Music Festival near the Gaza border where 364 people were murdered by Hamas. About half an hour after the carnage began, Amir received a call from his daughter; she had escaped the killing fields and was hiding in a ditch in a fruit orchard a few kilometres to the east. And like many of those who fled, she was being hunted like a dog by the terrorists. Amir grabbed his pistol and eldest son, jumped in his Land Cruiser and drove down to the festival site at 180km/per hour, at times cutting through rock fields to avoid military roadblocks.



A desolate coastline.



MY RIDE — YAMAHA TÉNÉRÉ 700

I had never ridden a Ténéré before and after a few hours on it, I understand why, in some countries, there’s a waiting line of up to six months to buy a new one. Late-model Ténérés are kings of the road. The riding position reminds me of the way one sits on a horse, upright and tall, with full command of the environment. It accelerates effortlessly on the open road; I cranked it up to 140km/h on some isolated stretches and the donk still had plenty more torque to spare. The suspension is so perfectly tuned that on the trails we did in Israel, I didn’t even bother choosing a line nine out of 10 times; the Ténéré just gobbled up whatever was in its path. Another big plus: it’s relatively cheap. “The Ténéré 700 isn’t the best ADV on the market,” said Raz, “but it’s perfect for the riding we do and about half the price of a BMW, which means I don’t have to overcharge my customers and can run a viable touring business. No other ADV bike offers better value for money.”



He was only 20 minutes' drive from his daughter's GPS signal when a group of six terrorists found her. They pulled her out by her hair and were trying to figure out what to do with her when a farmer came out of nowhere, blowing the horn on his car. It distracted the terrorists and allowed Amir's daughter to run away. Soon after, Amir was reunited with his daughter, and they cried with joy as they hugged.

If my body had even one drop of moisture to spare, I too would have cried with joy the following day when Raz led us off the highway for a crazy romp into the desert. With riders in their 50s and 60s, I hadn't anticipated much off-roading on this tour. We took in several kinds of gnarly terrain, though none more unique than the Sodom Riverbed. There, flood waters that cascade down the Jerusalem Mountains two or three times a year have carved a kilometres-long half pipe-style channel through chalky white limestone.

Before hitting the riverbed, Raz warned us not to ride our heavy Yamaha Ténéré 700s up the walls. Most of the riders paid heed though I did not, sneaking to the back of the queue where nobody could see me and climbing about a quarter of the way up the walls. The temptation was just too great. At

one point the rider in front started doing the same and floored it up a wall, getting fully horizontal. But he wiped off much speed before the next curve and, after climbing up the wall, his motorcycle stalled and tipped, momentarily pinning him to the ground under 205kg of metal and rubber.

After wriggling his way out, the rider, who shall remain nameless, gave us the thumbs up. Then the lower part of one of his pant legs began turning red from blood rushing out of a puncture on his quadricep. Raz bandaged it up with his first-aid kit as best he could and we made a beeline for the nearest hospital for some stitches.

RIDING THE STAIRS OF JERUSALEM

We spent the last night of the tour in Israel's capital, Jerusalem, a sprawling city of one million where every building must be faced with white Jerusalem stone that literally glows like gold under the sun. The following morning, we tailed Raz through a maze of alleyways and courtyards in the new part of the city where I stacked it riding down a curved flight of stairs — something I'd never done before and won't try again. Eventually we hit one of the towering gates of the Old City of Jerusalem, which is

surrounded by 4km of 9m-high, 2.5m-thick walls built 500 years ago by Suleiman the Great, a ruler of the Ottoman Empire.

Riding through an ancient bazaar with stalls selling hand-painted ceramics and all kinds of religious knick-knacks and catching views of the ancient tombstones and churches over the ramparts of the wall could have been the highlight of the tour if there weren't already so many other highlights beforehand.

"Like you, I've ridden all over the world," Raz said once the tour came to an end at his house not far from the beach in Tel Aviv. "But Israel is unique because, for whatever reason, this country is on the news 24/7 all over the world. Everyone seems to have a very strong opinion about us but unless you come here and see Israel for yourself, you'll never understand what's going on. Throw in the motorbikes and the world's most famous historical sites, and you'll start to see how much we bring to the table. I think Israel should be on every adventure rider's bucket list." **ARR**



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