

# ISRAEL

*Dan Savery Raz, author of Lonely Planet's Israel & the Palestinian Territories, samples the sweet taste of Haifa and the Carmel Mountains in Israel*

For many, Israel means the Holy City of Jerusalem, the mud spas of the Dead Sea or biblical Bethlehem. Yet, away from the stereotypes and global headlines, there is so much more to this tiny, diverse country. And Haifa - Israel's third largest city - makes a surprisingly relaxing base from which to explore the rustic north's world-class wineries, art galleries and national parks.

Just over an hour north by car or train from Tel Aviv airport, Haifa emerges from the forest hills of Mount Carmel, framed by the glistening Mediterranean Sea. Often overshadowed by Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Haifa is an extraordinary city in its own right: an industrial, medical and technological hub, that's also home to a wealth of museums, temples and hillside havens.

Haifa's port, the biggest and busiest in the country, is the gateway for Israel's commerce. But it wasn't always this way. Historically, nearby Akko was favoured over Haifa as the main port, for almost two thousand years. When the Crusaders conquered in 1100 AD, Haifa became an important town, but it later fell to pirates and degenerated during the Mameluke and Ottoman periods. In the 1920s, British engineer Sir Frederick Palmer stated that Haifa's deep waters and natural secluded bay made it the perfect place for large industrial shipping and the port was officially opened in 1933. The city hasn't looked back since.

Today, Haifa has come to symbolize modern multiculturalism: religious and secular Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze Arabs intermingle on Haifa's streets. Perhaps, the most visible sign of this cultural mix is Wadi Nisnas, a bustling marketplace where Hanukkah, Christmas and Ramadan are celebrated together.

No visit to Haifa is complete without a trip to the Bahá'í Gardens and Temple. One of the most beautiful gardens in the world, Bahá'í is as close as Israel gets to Eden. With over half a million visitors a year, the Bahá'í Gardens - a one km staircase of nineteen terraces, gently scaling the northern slope of Mount Carmel - is one of the most popular sites in the Middle East. The golden-domed Shrine of the Báb, a glorious temple built with Italian stone and Dutch tiles in the 1950's, sits in the middle of the gardens and dominates from every angle.

The Shrine marks the resting place of Báb (meaning 'gate'), the spiritual founder of the Bahá'í Faith, who was executed in Persia in 1850 for his 'heretical' teachings.

The Bahá'í Faith, one of the world's youngest religions, is based on the unity of humanity and comes from the Arabic word baha ('glory'). Bahá'í now has over six million followers worldwide, but people from all faiths make the pilgrimage up the 1,700 steps, past cascading fountains, to the Shrine.

Another popular pilgrimage is to Elijah's Cave, a small domed chapel on the slopes of Mount Carmel, where it is said that the Prophet Elijah lived and taught. The cave is situated below the Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery, with its exquisite Basilica and painted ceiling depicting the chariots of fire ascending into heaven. The Monastery can be reached by climbing the slopes by foot or taking the free cable car.

Directly below the cascading Bahá'í Gardens lies the 'German Colony', a string of boutique shops, cafés and restaurants lining the promenade of Ben-Gurion Boulevard. For a touch of the Far East in the Middle East, visit the Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art, next to the Dan Carmel

"Haifa emerges from the forest hills of Mount Carmel, framed by the glistening Mediterranean Sea."



Hotel. The museum, founded by Felix Tikotin in 1957, is dedicated to purely Japanese art and exhibits everything from 14th-century Buddhist scrolls to pottery, metal work and new animation.

After a long day of sight-seeing, the Carmel Forest Spa Resort - Israel's largest luxury spa - is the perfect place to recuperate. Set in 15 acres of private woodland around 20 minutes' drive from the downtown Haifa, this secluded resort offers dozens of health and beauty treatments, yoga workshops and gourmet cuisine. Alternatively Villa Carmel, undoubtedly Haifa's most prestigious hotel, is within walking distance of the city



Bahá'í Gardens and Temple, Haifa

centre. Originally built in the 1940's (and recently renovated), the Villa was the hotel of choice for Haifa's aristocracy, and Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

**H**aifa is ideally situated for day trips around the north of Israel. 15 km south of the city is Daliyat al-Karmel, the largest Druze village in Israel. The Druze - a separatist Arabic community living in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel - began life as an off-shoot of Islam and are widely considered to be a peaceful people. The main street in Daliyat al-Karmel is lined with shops selling Arabian rugs, jewellery and also serves

some of the best hoomous in the region.

It's worth taking a short detour to the hillside artist settlement of Ein Hod, which was founded in 1950 by the Dadaist painter Marcel Janco, and is home to the Janco-Dada Museum. This picturesque village is an art-lover's paradise, and you can buy unique pieces straight from a studio or simply stroll around the numerous small galleries.

Israel's best-known wineries can be found 35 km south of Haifa in the quaint hilltop town of Zichron Ya'akov, founded

in 1882 by a small group of immigrants from Romania led by the Rothschild family. The name Zichron Ya'akov (meaning Jacob's Memorial) was given by Baron Edmond James de Rothschild in memory of his late father. Today, Zichron still exudes an air of extravagance, its upscale villas resplendent in the southern Carmel hillside.

The original Carmel Winery was built in 1882 and continues to make award-winning wine in Zichron. The largest winery in Israel in terms of grapes received at harvest, Carmel produces 15 million bottles a year

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Dor beach, Israel



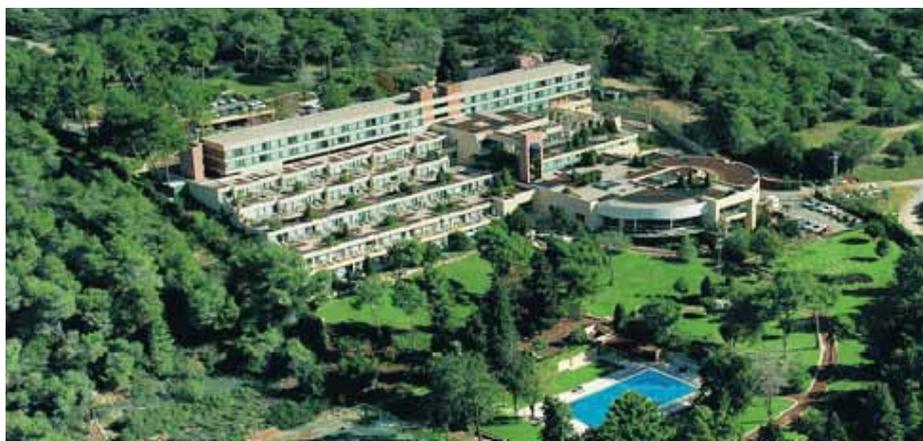
Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery, Israel



National park, Caesarea



Zichron, Israel



Carmel Forest Spa Resort



## ISRAEL FACT BOX

**Location:** The Levant area of the Middle East, bordering the Mediterranean Sea, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt

**Population:** 7.5 million

**Languages:** Hebrew, Arabic & English

**Time:** GMT + 2 hours

**Money:** Israeli Shekel (NIS or ILS) currently 5.82 to £1

**When to go:** Spring and autumn are the best times for sightseeing.

**Where to stay:** There's a range of luxury hotels in Jerusalem. The King David Jerusalem Hotel, is one of Israel's most famous, steeped in history and bursting with character. Alternatively, the Mamilla Hotel is one of the city's newest and most stylish places to stay.

**What not to miss:** Visit King Herod's mountain palace at Masada.

**Best meal:** Tel Aviv's colourful farmers' market each Friday, is full of tasty local produce and pastries.

**Insider tip:** Tel Aviv, also known as the 'white city', has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its large number of Bauhaus style buildings.

**Best Cox & Kings tour:** 8 day escorted group tour *Israel: A Journey to Jerusalem* priced from £1,995 per person. Includes international flights, accommodation, varied meal plan, fully escorted tour. Price based on 2 people sharing.

**For more information about Israel, visit [www.thinkisrael.com](http://www.thinkisrael.com)**

**At the time of going to print, the Mount Carmel region was affected by wildfires. Check with Cox & Kings for latest updates.**

as well as unique blends of olive oil. The newly opened Carmel Wine & Culture Centre includes a wine shop, bistro, and two specialist tasting rooms, as well as running wine workshops in the Rothschild's underground cellars.

Further down Zichron's main pedestrian street, the Tishbi Cafe has an outdoor terrace, where wine enthusiasts can sample the range of aromatic, fruity wines (bring a bottle and have it refilled with the excellent house wine). The Tishbi Cafe also sells delicious wine jams such as 'Cherry Shiraz' and 'Strawberry Merlot' made at its winery just out of town.

Opposite the Tishbi Cafe, the Aaronsohn NILI Museum houses a collection of exotic plants. This small but nonetheless fascinating museum also tells the story of NILI, the resistance movement who fought alongside the British against the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

**D**espite its turbulent history, Zichron is now one of the most serene spots in Israel. The sound of wind chimes and the occasional flamenco guitarist coming from a cafe balcony fill the town an almost dreamlike quality. And there is no shortage of places to dine. HaNeshika ('The Kiss') is a gorgeous bakery cum restaurant in a converted old country farmhouse and courtyard. Dishes include saddle of lamb on a bed of Jerusalem artichokes and lentils, breast of pork and pork stew of shoulder. For strictly kosher dining, the newly-opened Besarim restaurant - which started life as a butchers - offers gourmet meat and fish dishes, and wonderful sea views.

Immediately beneath Zichron are the glorious sands of Nahsholim and Dor, widely regarded as two of Israel's best

“Elijah's Cave - with its exquisite Basilica and painted ceiling depicting the chariots of fire ascending into heaven”

beaches. The idyllic Dor Beach is set on a quiet bay near the ruins of an ancient harbour, where fishing boats bob on the waves and small islands are only a short wade away. The neighbouring Habonim Nature Reserve makes for a delightfully scenic, coastal walk, and is a bird-spotters delight amongst the sand dunes and protected rocky coves.

**A** ten-minute drive south of Zichron leads to the Roman ruins of Caesarea. This impressive national park houses the well-preserved ruins of a harbour settlement: its labyrinthine white fortress walls, arches and giant pillars are complemented by the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. Named after Augustus Caesar, this large port city was built by Herod around 30 BC and eventually became the headquarters of Roman Palestine. The most outstanding site at Caesarea is the huge U-shaped Herodian amphitheatre, traditionally used for chariot races, gladiatorial and animal combats to the delight of some 10,000 spectators. These days the ancient theatre plays host to less gruesome events, including classical music concerts and a lively jazz festival.

Round off your day at the Somek Winery in Zichron. Owned by the Dahan family, Somek - meaning blush - uses old-growth vines dating back to 1892, to produce rich, highly-prized reds, such as their classic Carignan. The hills are studded with boutique wineries; their terraces offering panoramic views of the rolling Carmel valley, out to the glistening Mediterranean coastline beyond. Looking out to the sea, gently nursing a glass of Carmel Vintage, time falls away as you fall under the spell this corner of the world has been casting ever since the ancient Greeks and Romans first came ashore.