

Desert Discoveries

Behind the scenes with a Lonely Planet author in the Negev, Sinai and Petra
By Dan Savery Raz



I received the commissioning email from Lonely Planet on January 8th 2009 while the Gaza War was still raging. The good news was that I was selected to be one of the four authors of the new *Israel & the Palestinian Territories* guide book. The catch was that I needed to go on a research trip through the Negev desert, which was still under fire. Of course, as a travel journalist, this was an opportunity too good to miss. After all, Israel is the land of the Bible and Lonely Planet is the bible of travel.

Before my 'holy quest' I downloaded and read the expansive 80-page Author Manual. Lonely Planet authors have to adhere to a strict set of rules - no free meals, no free nights in luxury hotels and no special treatment. Authors travel incognito and are required to personally visit every place they write about, ensuring they get real first-hand travel information, rather than relying on the internet or PR spiels.

After reading the manual, I was more than daunted by the task ahead of me. The Negev is by far the largest region in the country, spanning 62 per cent of Israel's landmass, so uncovering every good hostel, restaurant and Bedouin tent was going to be a challenge. After doing some research on bus timetables, it became clear that there were only two real ways to travel through the Negev - camel or rental car. I went with the latter.

Armed with my blank notepad, laptop and Kibbutznik hat, I left my home in Tel Aviv and set off on the month-long journey in early March. First stop was Be'er Sheva - city of students, soldiers and not much else. My first impression was 'what on earth am I going to write about this place?' There appeared to be nothing of interest to travelers, just high-rise apartment blocks and air-conditioned malls.

But the more time I spent in the city, the more I learnt about its fascinating history. Be'er Sheva is mentioned in the biblical books of Judges and Samuel, the hilltop ruins just outside the city at Tel Be'er Sheva date from the early Israelite period and it was the site of key battles during WWII and Israel's War of Independence. Somehow I had to squeeze five thousand years of history into 250 words. I quickly learnt that the real work of a guide book author was not writing, but careful editing.

A few days into my trip I was joined by Yaniv, my cousin-in-law and co-pilot for a week. We drove through Dimona on the way to Maktesh HaGadol, one of three notable craters in the Negev. Yaniv pulled over on the highway to point out the site of Israel's no-longer-secret nuclear weapons facility. "This whole area is radioactive," he told me. Naturally, I wondered why a group of schoolchildren were hiking on a field trip so close by.

Continuing south to Sde Boker, we arrived at Ben-Gurion's Desert Home, kept as a museum since his death in 1973. Inside, photographs of Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and a map of Israel provided his inspiration. I couldn't help but notice the book left lying on the coffee table - N.S. Khrushchev's memoir on his 1959 visit to America, *Let Us Live in Peace and Friendship*.

Nearby, while walking around the Zuckerberg Institute for Water Research campus I met Ronit Arbel, a student on the MA Environmental Engineering program. After five minutes of talking, I asked Ronit if I could interview her for a new section in the book called 'Local Voices'. Fortunately, Ronit agreed and was a terrific interviewee. She explained how she studied with Chinese, Kenyan, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Argentinean, Russian, Jordanian and Palestinian students in Sde Boker. She said that water shortage is a unifying global issue and how great leaps were being made in researching membranes and bio-films. It seemed the pioneering spirit of Ben-Gurion, who once called the Negev 'the cradle of our nation', was still alive.

Inspired, I went back on the road again. My quest was to find a genuine Bedouin tribe. During my trip I came across a number of Bedouin tents claiming to be 'authentic', but they all felt like tourist traps. That was, until I was tipped off that there was a real Bedouin family living off the main highway near Avdat. Pulling into the camp, I was surprised to be greeted by a grey-bearded man called George, a Zimbabwean guide who lives with the Kashkhar family.

Eventually, I was taken to meet the Sheik of the tribe in his tent. Not quite knowing whether to greet him in Hebrew, Arabic or English, I shook the Sheik's hand and drank the customary three cups of Bedouin coffee as old George explained the history and

hierarchy of the tribe. 'At last,' I thought, 'I am sitting face to face with a real desert nomad!' But then my illusion was shattered when the Sheik's cell phone rang and he picked up.

Perhaps the biggest revelation of the whole trip was Maktesh Ramon, a 40 km-long erosion cirque, a geological phenomenon. Standing on the lookout, it was impossible to imagine how millions of years ago this giant dustbowl was once an ocean. The Dead Sea may be the lowest point on earth but, in my opinion, Maktesh Ramon should be a contender for one of the New Seven Natural Wonders of the World.



Often passed by on the way down to Eilat, Mitzpe Ramon is perhaps Israel's biggest secret. This small town is gradually developing itself as an adventure tourism destination with companies offering cycling, desert buggy and 4x4 trips. The old industrial area had been transformed into a holistic backpacker haven and Isrotel were building a new luxury hotel on the edge of the *maktesh* called Genesis.

However, I chose to sleep at the peaceful Alpaca Farm, a few kilometers from town, home to over 400 llamas and alpacas from the South American Andes. These docile, multicolored creatures freely roamed around the farm, mingling with groups of visitors. When the farm closed at 6 PM, I was left alone with my new fluffy friends. The Negev has an extraordinary array of wildlife and at Mitzpe I saw an ibex (*yael* in Hebrew) and a desert eagle.

Overall, my stay on the farm was pleasant, except in the morning I awoke to find that my rucksack had been ruthlessly ransacked by mice. The evidence showed that they had eaten my entire supply of bread and Bamba. Although this incident set me back slightly, I forgave nature and was even inspired to write a poem about this 'farm of harmony'.



I became quite attached to Mitzpe Ramon but there was still so much to see and do. Driving down to Eilat, I listened to Bob Dylan, whose Midwestern songs seemed to compliment the sparse Negev backdrop. Yet, this seemingly empty desert was full of surprises.

In the Arava Valley, I found plenty of groundbreaking eco-projects to write about from the self-sufficient organic community of Kibbutz Neot Semadar to the mud houses at Kibbutz Lotan and Kibbutz Ketura. The most outstanding eco-project was the 'Solar Flower', a tall yellow tower at Kibbutz Samar near Timna Park. At the time of my visit Yuval Susskind, from AORA, the company behind Israel's first solar power station; was being filmed by a BBC TV crew. He took time out to explain to me how the 'Solar Flower' uses heliostats to track sun rays. I began to see that although well-known for its hi-tech industries, Israel could also be a leader in green-tech.

Eilat and the shores of Coral Beach marked the end of my Israeli odyssey. After so long in the desert, Eilat seemed a bit like Las Vegas, artificial and out of place. Nevertheless, I was happy to be in civilization again, even if it was overpriced.

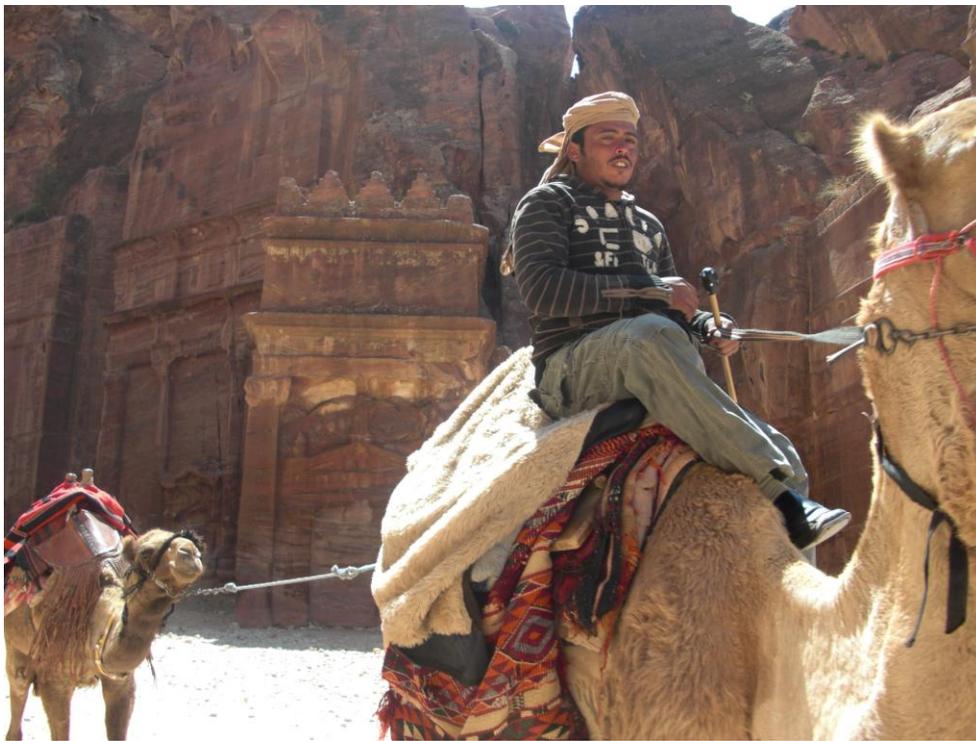
The next leg of my trip was Sinai, the mystical peninsula that bridges Asia and Africa. I crossed the Taba border at 5.30 AM and just one hundred meters inside there was a notable change of atmosphere. If Eilat felt Westernized, then Egypt felt like a developing wilderness. In Sinai, most of the buses were old, there was no air-conditioning and the Egyptian police carried out passport checks at every major junction.

On the journey down to Dahab, the driver stopped at the East Delta Bus office in Nuweiba, turned off the engine and got off the bus. Just as I was wondering what was going on, I saw him suddenly collapse to the ground, his tired legs simply gave way. He laid face-down in the dust for five minutes until some locals helped him back to his feet. Almost unable to walk, he staggered back onto the bus, wiped the dirt off his face and, to my amazement, continued driving for two more hours!

Now, there is something to be said for traveling alone. At times, isolation increased my paranoia but it also forced me to talk to fellow travelers. In doing so, I found out a lot of useful information. For instance, in Dahab some backpackers told me that the so-called

'fast' ferry from Nuweiba to Aqaba was actually slower than going overland via Eilat. I met all kinds of travelers in Sinai, from experienced scuba divers to gap-year students. On the sand dune beaches of Tarabin I met Mohammed, a former investment banker from Amman who gave up the rat race to manage a backpacker retreat called 'Sababa'. He told me that Sinai was still a deeply spiritual place of healing.

The highlight of Egypt was undoubtedly St Katherine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai, dating from about 330 CE. The Monastery Museum houses an amazing collection of ancient handwritten books including the Codex Sinaiticus, an early Greek manuscript of the Bible, as well as paintings of the two theophanies - Moses at the burning bush and the Ten Commandments. These two events are at the heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, so not surprisingly, the site was swarming with thousands of tourists. But then at midday the Monastery closed, all the tour buses left and there was a great exodus.



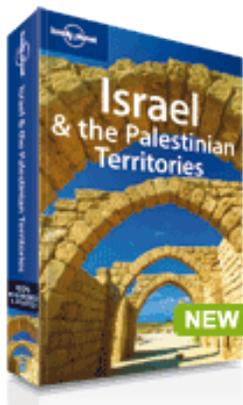
Across the Red Sea, in Jordan, the ancient Nabatean capital of Petra is another major Unesco World Heritage Site. My wife joined me for this, the last leg of my research trip. After crossing the Yitzchak Rabin Border in Eilat, we took a two-hour taxi ride to Wadi Musa (the Valley of Moses). From here, we walked down the Siq, a narrow alleyway that leads to the Treasury, a breathtaking temple familiar with viewers of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Out of all the places I visited, Petra had undoubtedly changed the most since the last edition. Wadi Musa had grown into a fully-fledged backpacker hub serving Petra's overflow; I added five more hostels in the book and could have easily included more.

Room rates had almost tripled since 2006 and the friendly locals were clearly making the most of Petra being included in the New Seven Wonders.

On the journey back to Tel Aviv, my luggage was weighed down with hundreds of leaflets, business cards, menus and maps that I had collected. Somehow, I had to turn all this information into a concise guide with accurate maps, as well as make it fun to read. Lonely Planet encourages its writers to be opinionated, but never biased. This creates an interesting dichotomy for the author. For example, whatever I experienced in a place, I had to bear in mind that not every traveler would necessarily feel the same way.

Often in the headlines for all the wrong reasons, I wanted to show that Israel was not just the warzone it is portrayed as in the media. Yes, Israel is a troubled nation but it is also a beautiful country with a unique landscape, history and wildlife. Writing this book gave me the opportunity to visit places I would never have visited otherwise. But more than that, driving through the desert and crossing borders gave me a real sense of freedom and, dare I say, hope for this region.



Lonely Planet Israel & the Palestinian Territories 6 is out now, for more details visit www.lonelyplanet.com or www.danscribe.com.