

In the Negev Desert a Bedouin herder takes his camels in search of food

Irresistible *Israel*

From the soothing calm of the Dead Sea to the bustle and emotion of Jerusalem, **Clive Nicholls** is captivated by the contrasts of Israel

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS



WHEN GOD spoke to Moses at the Burning Bush, the Land of Israel was described as 'flowing with milk and honey'. What wasn't mentioned was that it is also a land of contrasts: from the dramatic deserts to the nurturing Dead Sea to the complex and captivating city of Jerusalem.

They're all very different but each has a history so rich and enthralling. I'm here for five days to take in a bit of everything, plus some pampering in the spas with special treatments including the Dead Sea mud.

Landing at Tel Aviv airport, a warm breeze envelopes me like a blanket. I'm heading for Ein Bokek on the shore of the southern Dead Sea.

There are two routes: head east, through Jerusalem, downhill all the way to the Dead Sea, turn right and follow the shore of the sea south. Alternatively, go south on route 6 and turn left across the north of the Negev Desert, through Arad until I hit the shoreline. It'll be rush hour in Jerusalem so I go for the Negev option.

As I pass through the desert, a Bedouin on a donkey takes his camels to find food. He's lucky this year – a deluge of rain two weeks earlier has brought some of the desert plants back to life and food is more plentiful. A young goat-herder has the same idea; she's moving her flock along, not with a stick, but by gently lobbing stones at any that stop on the way.

Traditionally the Bedouin were nomadic – following the food and water for their sheep and goats. Today more than half of the 200,000 Bedouin in the Negev live in seven townships built by the Israeli government and most of the others in semi-permanent villages they've built for themselves.

I'll be back in the Negev later but for now I'm leaving the goats and camels behind as I hit the shoreline of the Dead Sea, turn north to Ein Bokek, check in to the Daniel Hotel, and watch the last rays of the evening sun fade on the mountains of Jordan, just across the water.

The Dead Sea is a special place, not just because it's the lowest place on earth – which it is by some margin at more than

Clockwise: The nurturing Dead Sea, the exciting Land Rover tour of the Judean desert, the history of Masada and a mud treatment. Truly a land of contrast



400m below sea level – and not just because its waters have healing and therapeutic properties, but also because of the history that surrounds the area.

King David spent time here (1000BC), Herod built a fortress and palace on its shores at Masada (35BC) and the world's oldest manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls, were discovered in caves here in 1946.

Today therapy comes first: dressing gown on, down in the lift, stroll across the road and the waters are lapping at my feet.

Walking into the sea is like nothing else – it's warm, very warm, silky smooth and incredibly buoyant.

I've never bathed in goat's milk but I imagine this is what it would feel like. It's just before 7am, there are others in the water and I just float along with them luxuriating in the warmth – and all before breakfast. I make a plan to do this every day.

The sea water is made up of 35 per cent salts which not only give it the buoyancy and healing properties, but also a thriving

business a few miles south of here. Potash, magnesium and bromine are taken from salt evaporation pans on both the Israeli and Jordanian sides of the Dead Sea. The industry is hugely important but there are fears that the fall in the level of the water (it's dropping by a metre a year) will harm both industry and tourism.

At the moment water is transferred by canal from the much deeper northern part of the sea to the south, and now Israel and Jordan are working together on a plan to

bring water up from the Red Sea through a pipeline, so its future looks secure.

When I was on the beach I saw couples coating themselves with black mud from the shores of the Dead Sea – I'm going for the more luxurious option in the Daniel Spa – their Mud and Seaweed wrap. The warm mud, rich in minerals, should ease joints, repair skin and offer relaxation. The pleasant earthy smell makes you feel like it should be fixing everything.

From relaxation to excitement. The

Judean Desert is just west of the shoreline.

Ali, my Bedouin driver, runs Land Rover tours of this mountainous and beautiful region. The Land Rover has plenty of miles on the clock but can still take on amazingly steep slopes. It makes for a thrilling ride that is entertaining and informative; we even see a secret British air strip that was used in the Forties, before finishing the tour on top of a plateau with stunning views across to Jordan.

The Dead Sea region is rich in history.

◀ Herod's palace and fortress at Masada is amazing. It stands 1500ft above the Dead Sea and holds a story so tragic that even now, 2000 years later, it is told and retold and is enshrined in Jewish history.

Seventy-five years after the death of Herod and the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, almost 1000 Jewish rebels took refuge in the fort and held out for three years. The Romans laid siege and eventually built a giant ramp up to the fort and, with the help of a huge battering ram, looked likely to be able to breach the wall.

Rather than facing death or slavery at the hands of the Romans, the Jews agreed a suicide pact drawing lots for the last ten who would kill each other. That night almost 1000 committed suicide at Masada – even today that must fill you with sadness.

Another historical site of International importance is at Qumran, just a mile inshore of the northern lake of the Dead Sea near the turning for Jerusalem.

The caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found between 1947 and 1956 are set into the hillside. Story has it that shepherds looking for lost sheep threw stones into the caves to flush them out. Instead of the stone on rock sound (or stone on sheep) they were expecting there was a chinking noise as the stones bounced off the jars and the first seven scrolls were found. Over the next ten years part of more than 800 scrolls were found in 11 caves, some in good condition, some mere fragments. Dating from between 200BC and AD50, many were texts from the Hebrew Bible; the Essenes who lived at Qumran saw the caves as a safe hiding place for their legacy – so safe that it was more than 2000 years before they were found.

The majority of the scrolls are kept at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, including the Great Isaiah Scroll, one of the original seven.

I walk up to caves one and two and am spellbound – standing inside looking out it's amazing to think the history that has been played out here.

From history, back to today and the kibbutz at Ein Gedi. 'Flowing with milk and honey' certainly describes this oasis in the desert. Supplied by four springs, the kibbutz features an international botanical garden with more than 900



Clockwise: Deep in the Negev desert, two of the caves that were home for the Dead Sea Scrolls for 2000 years, Zabo explains the workings of the kibbutz and the crowds inside The Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The tombs of David Ben Gurion and his wife Paula, the amazing Baobab tree and writing by hand the five books of the Torah

plant species. Zabo, who has lived on the kibbutz since 1960, points to a magnificent Baobab tree with pride.

It's 53 years old and more than 30ft around the trunk and, just like in Africa, everything takes place under the tree!

The kibbutz started in the early Fifties and originally made a living from agriculture but now, with 270 members and a population of 600, tourism has taken over as the breadwinner. The 160 guest rooms and a fabulous spa (I couldn't resist

their frankincense and myrrh treatment) make it a 'get away from it all' destination.

The original kibbutz ideal of members getting the same rates of pay whatever their skills or experience still exists in some places but more and more kibbutzim are applying more realistic market rates and a doctor or surgeon would earn more than, say, a farmhand. Despite the pay differentials, however, it's good to know that the spirit and camaraderie of the original kibbutzim still

exists today. For one kibbutz to another: leaving Ein Gedi I travel south deep in the Negev desert. Down to Sde Boker, the home and final resting place of David Ben Gurion and his wife, Paula. Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, was a powerful world leader, and throughout his life he stayed true to his beliefs.

He saw Israel through some troubled times during its formative years and was widely respected, even by his political opponents – he was also included in

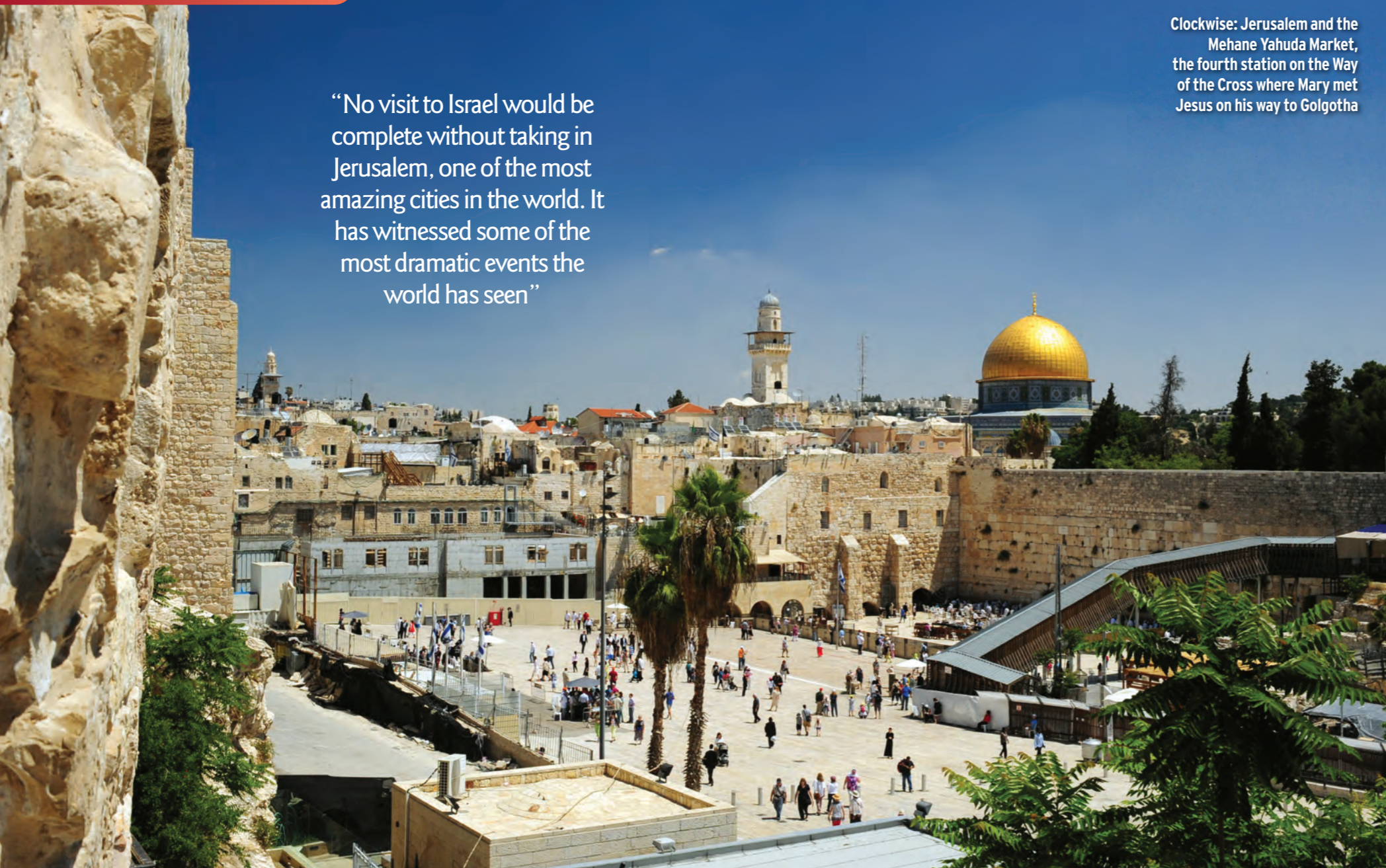
Time Magazine's 100 most influential figures of the 20th century.

As Prime Minister he lived in a simple house in Tel Aviv – you can visit it today, and I have to say it's a rather humbling experience. Not for him the gold-plated taps and crystal chandeliers – it's more like Butlin's in the Fifties: clean, basic and serviceable. He retired from political life and went to live on the kibbutz on the Negev working as a shepherd and helped realising his dreams of bringing life to

the desert. On his death, true to his wishes, he was buried just outside the kibbutz in the Negev on a beautiful spot overlooking the Tsin Valley. Different from the Judean desert, it's more rolling and far larger; the Negev has a beauty of its own. Not only was it a favourite for Ben Gurion, but Abraham also set up home in Be'er Sheva...

No visit to Israel would be complete without taking in Jerusalem, one of the most amazing cities in the world. Coming ▶

“No visit to Israel would be complete without taking in Jerusalem, one of the most amazing cities in the world. It has witnessed some of the most dramatic events the world has seen”



Clockwise: Jerusalem and the Mehane Yahuda Market, the fourth station on the Way of the Cross where Mary met Jesus on his way to Golgotha



Passport to Israel

Getting there

■ El Al offers flights from London Luton to Tel Aviv from £360.40 per person or from London Heathrow to Tel Aviv from £390.95 per person. To book, tel: 020 7121 1400, website: (www.elal.il) or contact your travel agent.

Where to stay

■ Rooms at the Daniel Dead Sea Spa Hotel start from £194.83. For more information or to book, see: (<http://english.tamareshotels.co.il/>)
 ■ Rooms at the Mount Zion Hotel, Jerusalem, start from £153.84. For more information or to book, see: (<http://mountzion.co.il/>)

Find out more

■ For more information on Israel, see the website: (www.thinkisrael.com).

in from the east there are a couple of great vantage points that will give you the layout of the city. Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives are equally dramatic – take pictures but then put the camera down and soak up the view. The city that you are looking at has witnessed some of the most dramatic events the world has seen.

The Dome of the Rock stands out, the Western Wall, just behind that and the grey dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, just to the right marking the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus.

Head down into the city and get rid of the car – parking is difficult and you're

better off on foot. I'm lucky the Mount Zion Hotel where I'm staying is within walking distance of the old town.

The hotel has its own history; next door to my room is a cable car museum. Not a grand affair to take tourists to the top of mountains, but a basic set-up to evacuate wounded soldiers from Mount Zion, 200 yards across the Ben Hinnom Valley, during the War of Independence.

Used only at night to maintain secrecy, the cable was lowered to the valley during the day. It was kept in working condition from 1948 to 1967 in case it was needed again and remained secret until 1972.

Down in the city it's Friday and a busy day for the Mehane Yehuda Market. This is real hustle and bustle – it's heaving, noisy and fascinating at the same time... fruit and veg, almost everything you can eat and drink, and more besides. Friday is frantic as tourists and locals mix to stock up for Shabbat (Sabbath).

If you don't like crowds, this is not for you, but give it a try anyway: it's worth it for the experience.

In Jerusalem you must see the Western Wall and follow the Way of the Cross in the footsteps of Jesus to Golgotha, the site of His crucifixion and tomb – originally in

the hillside but now with the church built over it. Once again it will be busy but take your time and marvel at the history that has gone before you.

Take time out to visit the Austrian Hospice – the view from the roof is excellent. You can see the dome of the church covering the fourth station of the Way of the Cross.

This was where Jesus met his mother on his way to Calvary. Turn 360 degrees and you can take in much of the old city.

So much to see, caught up in the emotion of the city, I realise that I haven't stopped for lunch. Time out, humus and

salad and take the weight off my feet. I've got to save some energy for the Light and Sound Show at the Tower of David tonight.

Jerusalem is amazing, if a little frantic – I did have a slight altercation with a Greek Orthodox priest at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I felt his crowd control skills were a little lacking and he was obviously having a bad day.

That aside, the city is just such an experience: put it on your bucket list.

By contrast, the soothing Dead Sea, the luxury of the spas and the sublime beauty of the deserts make Israel special. I've been before – I'll definitely go again.