

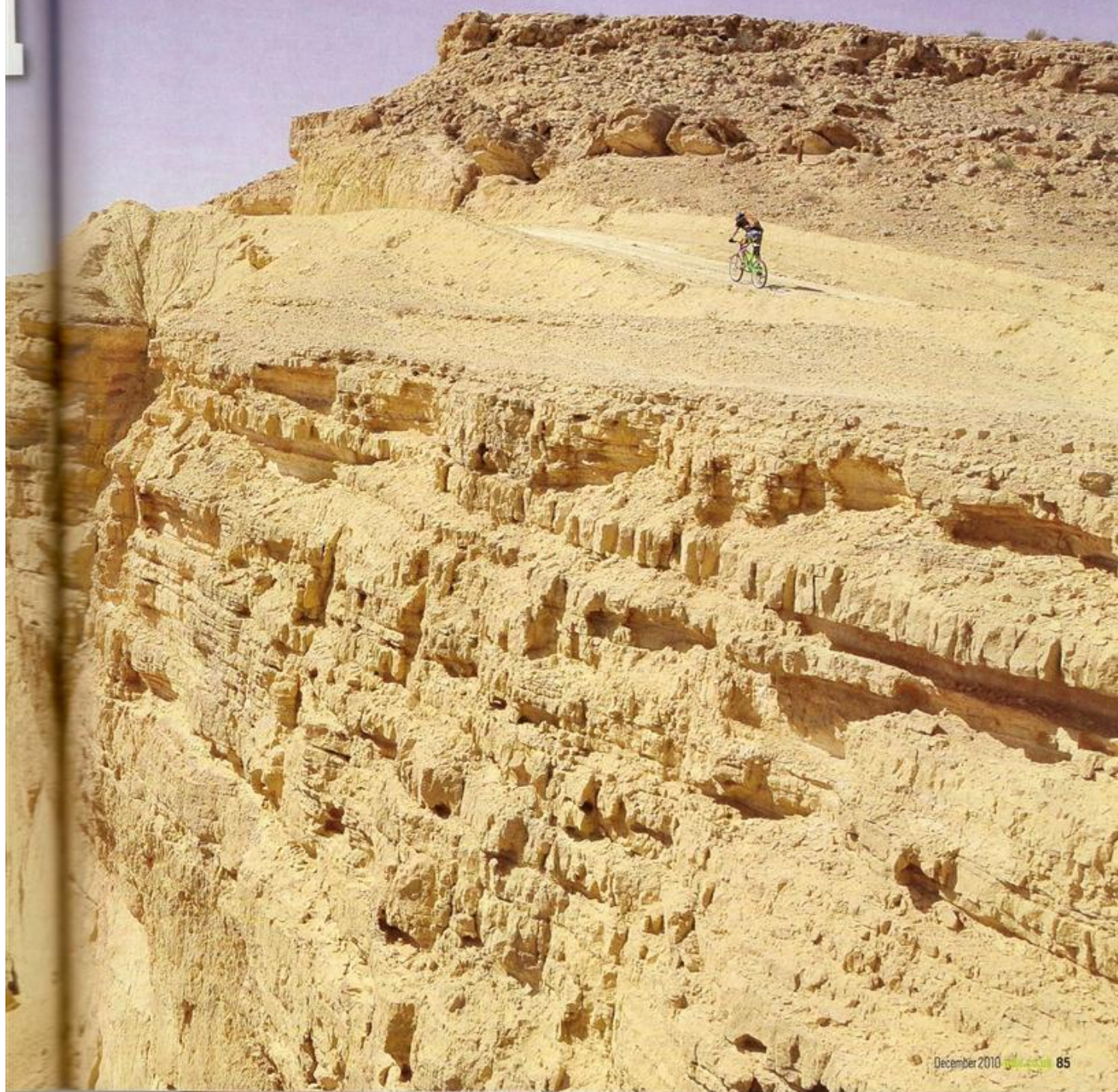
# THE SEARCH FOR THE Holy Trail

Forget your preconceptions: a superb winter climate, fascinating history and burgeoning mountain bike scene make Israel a great off-season destination

Words: Ben Smith Photos: Rod Fowler

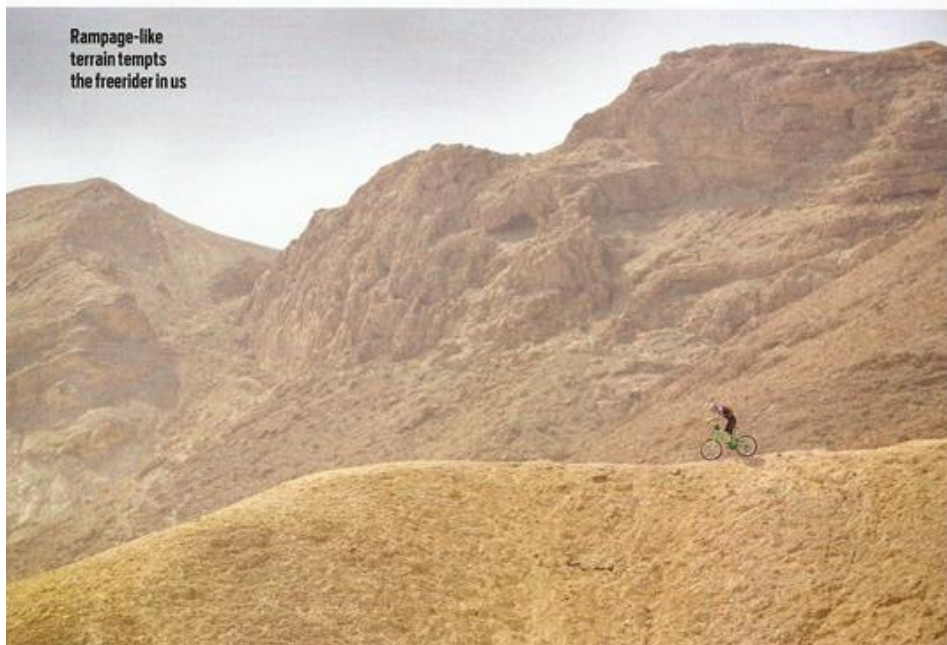




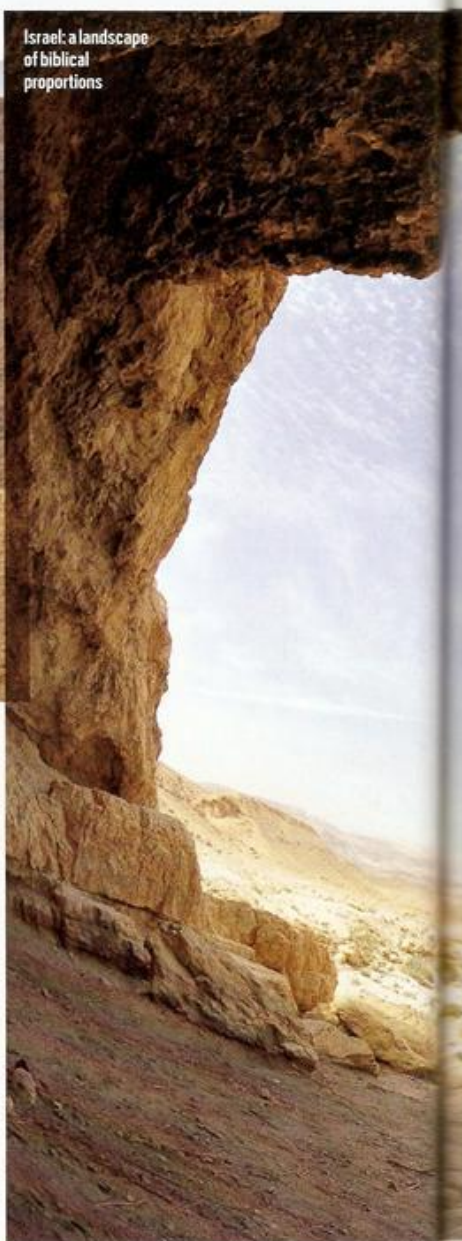




Rampage-like terrain tempts the freerider in us



Israel: a landscape of biblical proportions



**S**PD sandals. Not seen a pair of those for a while. But from the look of our guide's well used and abused Marin hardtail — complete with panniers — it seemed our ideas of mountain biking might be at the opposite ends of the spectrum.

Later, as we rode through the Negev Desert in 30°C heat, sweating in just jersey and shorts, it scarcely seemed to matter. Yes, it was different, and certainly a far cry from the UK winter we'd just left behind, but a few days spent blasting dry trails in the desert sun was a welcome diversion

indeed. Welcome to the Promised Land.

Our three-day whistlestop tour of Israel had begun with an overnight stop in Jerusalem and the first of many history lessons from our guide, Haim (pronounced 'Hime'). Haim is a grey haired gentleman and walking encyclopaedia who runs his own cycle touring business. He had been asked by the tourist board to show us around and make sure we didn't behave too badly.

Switching from his SPD sandals to the more familiar variety, we loaded the bikes into the van and left Jerusalem with Haim behind the wheel. The road dropped further and further down as we headed towards the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth. Our destination was Masada, the site of King Herod's castle, perched atop a cliff overlooking the Dead Sea.

History has not been kind to Herod (Matthew, verse two; chapter 16). But we tried not to dwell on the past as our first proper bit of riding beckoned. We pulled up in a car park and met Isik, a larger than life character with a big white beard and a four-by-four. Haim had roped in his mate to follow us down the trail and provide

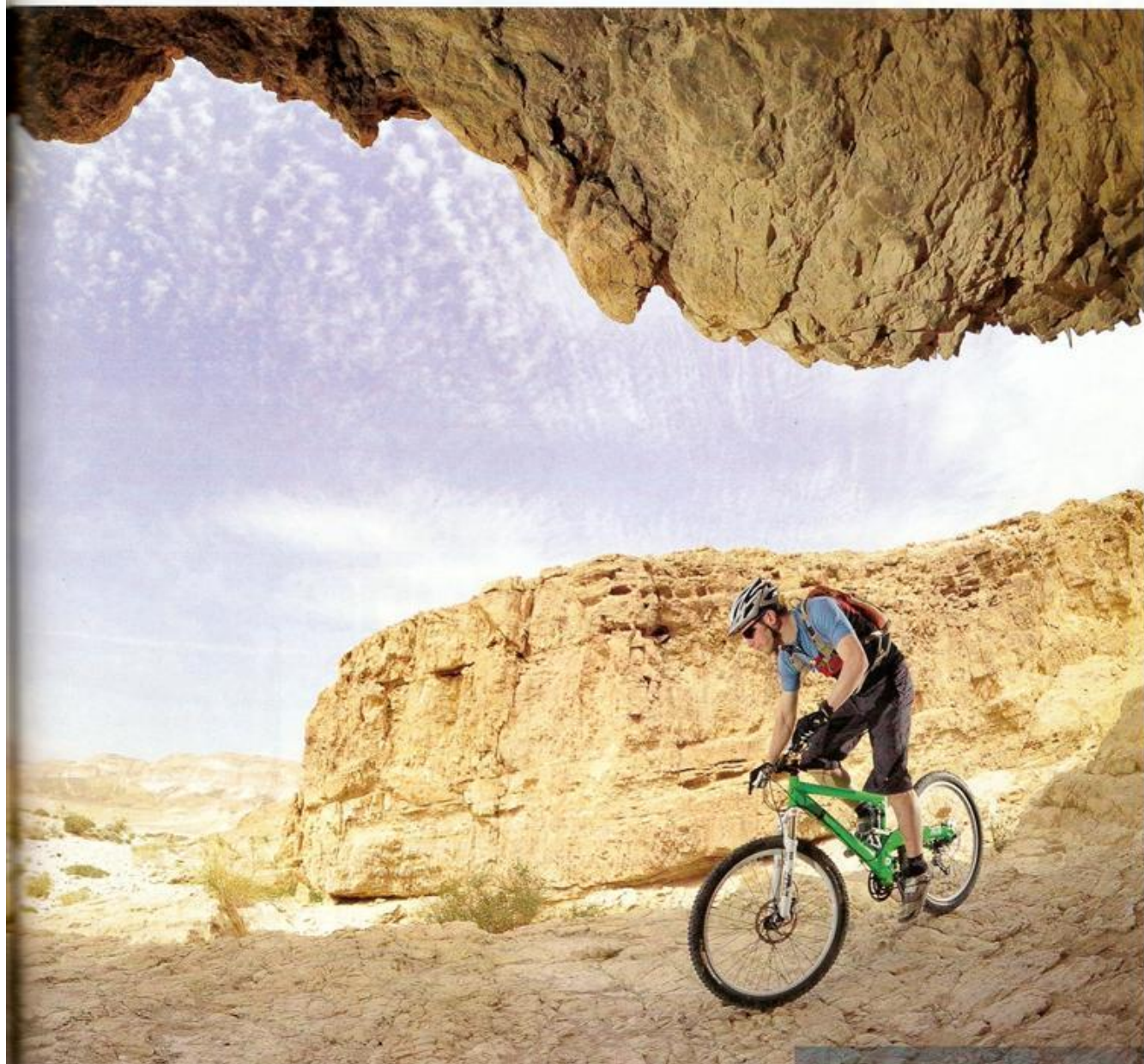
back-up, a service that was apparently normal in Haim's line of work but made us wonder what was up ahead.

Greetings done, we set off and quickly turned onto a rough, rocky doubletrack that disappeared into the Judean desert. The massive dunes on either

side of the trail soon had snapper Roo and me drooling; images of the Red Bull Rampage coursing through our minds. Haim discouraged such foolishness. Evidently, if riders crash 'off-piste', the Israeli rescue services are not obliged to help. This was a risk we were willing to take though and as Haim plodded gently on down the trail, we scrambled up the dunes and bombed back down, daring ourselves to go higher and steeper on the surprisingly firm sandy slopes. After a few passes and a couple of photos, we'd get back on track and chase down Haim, catch up then dive back onto another bigger, steeper dune for more fun. We followed this rhythm all day: a bit of doubletrack, a bit of a play, catch up, repeat to fade...







### Leaf tea lunch

The only break was for lunch. We stopped under a large Joshua tree, the only thing with leaves for miles around; something so rare, in fact, it was marked on the map. Isik was in charge of catering and to our surprise pulled an enormous gas stove from the back of his truck, wedged the burner between two rocks and began brewing some leaf tea, the blue flame roaring away behind us.

After a delicious lunch of pitta, hummus and pickled cucumber (better than it sounds), Haim and Isik left us to get on with it. We were pointed down a three-kilometre steep, super-rocky track that ended up at the hotel. Haim begged that we proceed with caution. We promised we would, gave each other a wink and then bombed off down the

hill, bouncing from rock to rock, dropping down steps and having a ball. All too soon we rolled up at our hotel tired but buzzing. And while we were waiting for Haim and our bags, what better way to while away the time than to take a relaxing dip in the Dead Sea? All visitors to Israel are required to do this, by law, preferably reading a magazine such as the one you are holding.

An early morning drive the next day took us away from the Dead Sea and south to the Negev Desert for an appointment with GeoFun, a bike shop based at the Kibbutz Sde Boker, former home to Israeli political revolutionary Ben Gurion. Ben wasn't known for his love of mountain biking, but GeoFun has built, with government backing, a network of graded singletrack in the



The Dead Sea beckons below

surrounding desert. We met up with shop owner Asaf, the man responsible for getting these trails up and running, and our guide for the day, Dani. Dani was quite different from Haim, a tall athletic guy in his thirties who spoke with a slight twang that hinted at his time as a seasonaire in Canada. It was





this experience that helped shape the GeoFun trails and today promised a bit of the singletrack we were used to, only drier and dustier than ever before.

### Halukim trail

The ride we set out to do was based on the 25km Halukim trail, currently the hardest graded route in the network, and following a snaking ribbon of singletrack straight out of the kibbutz. Disappearing straight away into the apparently featureless desert, it immediately put a smile on our faces as it ebbed and flowed through the rocky terrain. As we criss-crossed a couple of other trails, Dani pointed out they had been designed so that riders can plan their own route, taking sections of one trail and combining them with parts of others using the excellent maps available at the shop. We stuck closely to Dani's wheel and the trail soon dived down into an area used for farming many years ago. It became bit more lush through here, with even a bit of greenery sprouting from the bare desert floor. Beautiful though it was, we couldn't admire the view for too long — the trail continued twisting and turning over a maze of low, dividing walls that required either a huck or a hop to negotiate.

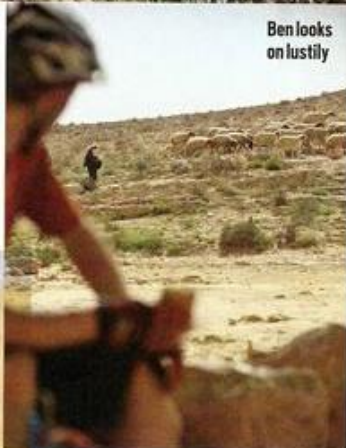
All too soon lunch beckoned and we paused under the shade of a Joshua tree for some sandwiches and more tea, this time brewed on a stove stashed in Dani's trail pack. The singletrack continued after lunch and we were buzzing at the quantity and quality of the trails on offer. Mid afternoon and we were heading towards the kibbutz once more. As we approached, Dani peeled off the waymarked track and took us on a



Lush grass encroaches the dusty singletrack

detour to an oasis he had told us about. We met with Asaf from GeoFun near the oasis, parked our bikes on his Land Rover and walked the final few hundred yards to the oasis, an icy green pool tucked into a cliff at the end of a dry river bed where a refreshing dip and some casual nudity from Dani made for an interesting end to the day!

Day three and another drive, this time to the edge of the Ramon Crater, a spectacular hole in the middle of the Negev Desert, caused by thousands of years of erosion. Our destination was the iBike Hotel in the town of Mitzpe Ramon, which, as the name suggests, caters specifically for cyclists and is one of the first



Ben looks on lustily





Ben sticks close to Dani's wheel as the sun dips



of its kind in Israel. Dani was again along as guide and would take us down to the Wadi Hava trail before looping back to Mitzpe Ramon, a route that Both Dani and iBike owner Menachem listed as their favourite. It didn't take too long to see why.

### Wadi Hava trail

We began on fairly wide doubletrack that gradually narrowed to gentle singletrack as we made our way down the wadi, or riverbed. Hard to believe, but the massive wide valley that we were riding down can fill with water when it rains. We made our way down the valley, the sides gradually getting higher and closer and dotted with caves, the trail becoming twistier, rockier and more technical. Rocks carried downstream by rivers past acted as obstacles and the rocky



Sheer cliffs frame the Wadi Hava trail



On the edge: the Ramon crater

riverbed provided ever-increasing levels of difficulty with trials skills occasionally becoming more relevant than trail skills. It was a challenge to make it through clean and I almost did until Dani stalled on a tricky step. I went to unclip from my SPDs, failed and toppled onto the sharp rocks below. The paint chip from my Commençal's down tube made the Negev a little greener that day...

Before the wadi ebbed off to the valley below, we turned right and made our way along to the crater's edge where we stopped to admire the view, eat some food and have a brew. No Joshua trees this time but the epic view more than made up for the lack of shade. The trail back to Mitzpe Ramon followed the cliff edge, with the view over the Negev Desert to our left and memories of the day's singletrack more than enough to put smiles on our faces.

In three days we had experienced three massively different rides: gentle point-to-point-desert doubletrack with off-piste silliness; man-made, fast flowing singletrack and one of Israel's best natural trails to finish with. And, having spoken to other mountain bikers we met on the way, it seems there was still plenty we hadn't seen. Near Haifa in the north, among the greener, forested hills there is a huge interest in trailbuilding, again government funded, with miles and miles of fresh singletrack being constructed. Evidently, our search for the holy trail had only just begun.

## FACTFILE

### Getting there

■ El Al and BA both fly regularly to Tel Aviv. Extra security checks aside, the journey was pain-free with bike bags. Easyjet would be your budget option.

### Getting around

■ Hiring a car would definitely be worth doing. There's not a great deal of public transport in the desert and each day's riding was a good drive from the last.

### Where to stay

■ The iBike Hotel in Mitzpe Ramon is great for bikers and is right on the Ramon Crater. The trails at Sde Boker are only a short drive away. Rooms from 225 shekels pp/pn. [www.ibike.co.il](http://www.ibike.co.il)

### Where to ride

■ The best riding we did was from the Kibbutz Sde Boker with its waymarked trails and maps. The ride around Mitzpe Ramon was a belter too. For more riding in the area the good folk at iBike should be able to point you in the right direction.

### What to ride

■ We rode 120/140mm trail bikes which made sense on the rough terrain, although Dani swore by his ti hardtail. Big tyres and some form of tubeless pinch protection were no-brainers.

### When to go

■ It gets very hot in the desert and from spring through to autumn, even for locals, riding is limited to early morning and late evening. Our winter is the perfect time to go and ride all day.



## THANKS TO

■ Melissa at the Israel Government Tourist Office for booking flights and accommodation.

■ Haim for being a great host. [www.inisrael.com/walkways](http://www.inisrael.com/walkways)

■ Dani and Asaf for top guiding and trail knowledge. [www.geofun.co.il](http://www.geofun.co.il)