

# THE PROMISED LAND

Forget any visions of endless Saharan sand dunes and instead picture mountains, rocks and incredible singletrack — the Israeli desert offers some of the best technical riding we've ever experienced

Words Matt Papp Photo Marc Gauthier and Alex Rios

**T**he word desert, and all mountain don't feel like they belong in the same sentence, and the Middle East isn't the most obvious place for a mountain bike adventure — but that's just what we were offered in Israel. I arrived to find an old mountain bike. I'd cynically thought "all mountain" was one of those buzzwords like "enduro" that sounded cool on press releases but turned up with a lightweight 220mm

travel fork. I soon realised I'd brought a knife to a gunfight...

## Step this way, sir

I've visited rougher countries to know that you should take what you hear about them with a pinch of salt, and with media attention plentiful right now, I headed to Israel with an open mind. This naivety was halted before I even arrived.

Every foreign visitor passes through strict security screening before being allowed to board a flight to Israel, and because Egyptian and Pakistani stamps in my passport

## ISRAEL HAS JUMPED TO THE TOP OF MY LIST OF RIDING DESTINATIONS



The canyons and craters that the trails pass will blow you away



Riding into the desert sunset is as beautiful as it gets



another 'new' destination when the whole world seems to be opening its arms to mountain bikers, luring them in with promises of new adventures, unique landscapes and something different from the last place. And Israel has an uphill battle ahead to overcome public preconceptions. It won't be an easy task, but for those who are a little more open-minded and adventurous, a welcoming and open culture is there to greet

you, with friendly locals eager to show you the amazing terrain on their doorstep.

The reliably good weather during our typically gloomy British winter is an obvious pull, but the variety and quality of terrain is world class and the real standout factor. Israel has certainly jumped right to the top of the list as my favourite riding destination to date, and I definitely plan on another visit in the future. ☉

## IF YOU LIKE THE LOOK OF ISRAEL...

You'll love these places too

While Israel offers a unique landscape and riding experience, we couldn't help drawing similarities with other riding areas. If you've ridden in any of these spots and enjoyed it, you'll probably love Israel.

### Utah, USA

The riding in Utah, with big sandstone cliffs and canyons, bears an uncanny resemblance to the riding at Samar in the south of Israel, so it's no wonder Mike Hopkins felt so at home on these trails!

### Andalucia, Spain

Another area that offers rocky, technical riding and a good year-round climate. It's also home to the Andalucia Bike Race, a six-day UCI stage race. Several areas within Israel offer a similar riding experience.

### Atlas Mountains, Morocco

This North African kingdom is another country that offers technical, remote singletrack riding with plenty of elevation on offer and a completely different culture to the western world.

The camel tracks  
are full of seemingly  
endless descents



our group, including *Life Cycles* star and Red Bull Rampage competitor Mike Hopkins.

After the obligatory float in the Dead Sea we headed south, to a different desert called the Negev. It was here that I started to realise that not all deserts are equal. A desert doesn't necessarily mean sand, or even heat. It's simply an area where precipitation is rare — there's even a desert in Antarctica!

The Negev is a large expanse filled with incredible rock formations, but it can't be as inhospitable as it looks because people have lived and farmed the area for thousands of years, and the incredible techniques they use for capturing water are still visible. With just a few hundred metres' elevation to play with, the riding is less extreme, but the trade-off is that the descents are rockier and more technical — this isn't camel country!

For sheer awe factor, the Ramon Crater has to be visited. It's a natural landscape to rival anywhere in the world. Over 40km long and 500m deep with sheer, cliff-like walls, it's one of those places that makes you just stop and stare in total disbelief, with your eyes struggling to register the scale.

### Hummus habit

After riding at a few places in Israel you soon realise this isn't a

Taking a well-earned  
breather to soak up  
the surroundings



Back on the trail to  
cross more ancient  
rocky landscapes



Stopping off  
for some mid-  
desert repairs



It's good to escape  
from the desert sun  
for a bit now and then

'new' destination at all — people have been riding mountain bikes since the early days and across all disciplines of the sport. Most towns have a bike shop, with every brand you can think of represented. Trails are waymarked and locals are knowledgeable. This isn't a place where you'll have to fend for yourself — it's all here, ready and waiting for you.

Heading further south, we reached Kibbutz Samar, close to the Red Sea and the resort of Eilat. A kibbutz is a collective »

IT'S A NATURAL  
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RIVAL ANYWHERE.  
YOU JUST STARE IN  
TOTAL DISBELIEF

## ADVENTURE

Year-round sun makes Israel a tempting option, even in winter

'BEST TRAIL EVER' WAS SOMETHING I HEARD FROM SEVERAL RIDERS IN OUR GROUP



Organising the camel train into formation



probably didn't help my cause! It took a full three hours to get through three checkpoints and bag checks and on to the plane, and then another two hours at passport control in Tel Aviv.

Once out of the airport, I realised Israel has something pretty special to offer – year-round sun and winter temperatures above 20°C. While Tel Aviv is proudly a 24-hour city, once you're away from the modern high-rise buildings it feels like you're in a different country – the real Israel, if you like. You can't help but be awed by the area's history and culture. The place names you'll certainly have heard of – our first ride

Trail? Tick. Bike? Tick. Rider? Er...



Learning to love chasing the camel's hoof



started near Jerusalem and finished near Jericho, on the edge of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth at 420m below sea level.

### Following the herd

Who knew camels built singletrack? As it happens, the trails they've been walking along for hundreds and thousands of years suit mountain biking perfectly. That's because they follow the contours of the ground, gaining or losing height only gradually, meaning the climbs are a breeze but the descents feel endless! These beasts of burden also choose to avoid the sharp rocky areas,



### PLANNING YOUR TRIP

The hardest part of a biking holiday in Israel is getting there! Flights are easy to find and relatively cheap, with British Airways, easyJet and El Al all offering regular departures from the UK to Tel Aviv. The flight time is around six hours.

The difficult part comes at the airport, where you'll be greeted by the tightest security you're ever likely to encounter. You'll feel like you're being treated like a terrorist, but just remember that everyone gets the same treatment. Make sure you have a firm itinerary planned, with any local contact details to hand.

The country is so diverse that you can experience lots of different riding with just a short trip between locations. From the forests in the north to the deserts of the south, it isn't all big-bike terrain. For those looking for less technical riding, work has begun on a 1,200km Israel Bike Trail that'll run the entire length of the country. Over 300km is already in place, with the full route due to open within four years.

which means buff, swept trails and less chance of a puncture spoiling the fun.

The final descent of day one was 10km of amazing camel track, which endlessly flowed and twisted through rocky outcrops and past herds of camels on a route through the Judean Desert known locally as the Sugar Trail. "Best trail ever" was something I heard from several riders in »



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travel 29er, I soon realised I'd brought a knife to a gunfight...

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