# Israel

The State of Israel was established in 1948 as a homeland for the Jewish people, Israel lies at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, it is bordered by Egypt on the southwest. Jordan on the east, Syria on the northeast, and Lebanon on the north until the early 1990s Israel was in conflict with its Arab neighbors, including five wars from 1948 to 1982. Israel also has had to forge a nation from diverse Jewish people from all parts of the world, while trying to integrate a large Arab minority. While striving to perpetuate the religious and cultural traditions that contributed to the Zionist rebirth, the tiny nation was also forced to become a first-rate military power.

Israel has a diversity of landforms. The highest areas are found in the mountainous regions of Galilee in the north, where Har Meron at 3, 963 feet is the highest point in the country. South of Galilee are the rocky limestone terraced hills and valleys of Samaria and Judea. The mountains of Galilee are separated from the hills of Samaria and Judea by the Plain of Esdraelon. Samaria’s highest mountain is Mount Ebal at 3, 084 feet, while Judea’s highest is Tall Asur at 3, 333 feet. The Negev, a partly mountainous triangular desert, makes up 60 percent of Israel’s land area and extends southward from Judea to the Red Sea and the Sinai Peninsula

In the east the Jordan River flows southward through the Great Rift Valley from the Hula Panhandle through the Sea of Galilee and the central Jordan Valley to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea, which is 1, 315 feet below sea level, is the lowest place on Earth.

The climate is Mediterranean is mild, moist winters and hot, dry summers. Its subtropical desert, the Negev, is hot and dries year-round. The northern mountainous areas have great temperature variations with some freezing and even occasional snow.

Parts of the south may receive but 1 inch of rain annually. However, the coastal and Upper Galilee regions receive from 25 to 45 inches.

Israel’s plant life is among the world’s richest. The hills produce vegetation that includes six kinds of natural forests with pine and oak the most common. Citrus trees are grown along the coast and on the coastal plain. More than 1000 plant species thrive in the Negev and Sinai deserts. In the Jordan Valley there are at least 40 varieties of tropical plants.

Israel’s animal life includes elements from several geographic regions and thousands of species, among them leopards, hyenas, polecats, wolves, jackals – coneys – ibex, porcupines, antelopes, and wild boars. Reptiles include agamas and gecko lizards and vipers. Birds include partridges, cuckoos, bustards, sand grouse, and desert larks. Eagles ospreys, and vulture’s nest in the mountain crags. There are more than 500 rare tropical marine species.

Population is unevenly distributed. The central and Tel Aviv coastal districts have 46 percent of the population, the northern hill and valley districts 16 percent, the Haifa district 14 percent, Jerusalem 12 percent, and the south 12 percent. Despite Israel’s many small rural settlements, almost 90 percent of the people live in cities. In 1909 Jewish immigrants built Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean. In 1950 Tel Aviv and Yafo to the south merged; the 1986 estimate of population was 322800. Haifa, 50 miles to the north with a population of 224600, is a seaport and heavy industrial center.

Jerusalem has had a Jewish majority for the last century. The Jewish population now makes up more than 70 percent of the 1992 estimate of 544200. In 1967 Israel reunited Jerusalem, which had been split into two parts–one controlled by Jordan, the other by Israel. Since then the Jewish population of the eastern section has grown to more than 50, 000, compared to an Arab population of 117, 000. Jerusalem has been proclaimed Israel’s capital since 1967.

The 1993 population of Israel was 5451000 of which 82 percent was Jewish. The remainder was largely Arab. Although Judaism is the principal religion, Muslim, Christian, Druze, Sunni Muslim, Samaritan, and other religions have freedom of worship

The Chief Rabbinical Council, which is the highest Jewish religious authority, has two chief rabbis–one each for the Ashkenazic, or European, and Sephardic, or Eastern-Oriental, communities. About 77 percent of the non-Jewish population is Arab Muslim. The next largest grouping is Arab Christian, especially Greek Melkite and Greek Orthodox. The Druze, about 1 7 percent of the non-Jewish population, are a 1 11th-century non-Muslim Arab religious sect.

Hebrew is the main language of Israel Arabic is the second language, and English is widely used Israel is a major publisher of books and has a growing motion-picture industry. There are 80 museums, 30 official archaeological and historical sites, 750 public libraries, six major theatrical companies, a number of orchestras and dance groups, and two music academies. Sports are a national pastime, with soccer and basketball the most popular.

A National Insurance system provides old-age pensions and industrial injury, maternity, and other benefits. The Histadrut, or General Federation of Labor, includes most Israeli workers. More than a trade union, its health system, called Kupat Holim, insures 83 percent of the population and, along with the government, runs most of the hospitals. It also owns factories, banks, and construction companies as well as wholesales and retail cooperatives.

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# Economy

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## Agriculture

The three types of agricultural settlement systems are the kibbutz, or collective; moshav, or cooperative; and moshava or private farmstead. Kibbutzim, the plural form of the word, total 270, with a population of 130. 000. They are communal settlements with property owned in common, work done without direct payment, and all members’ needs met from common income. Probably the world’s most successful example of voluntary socialism, the kibbutz has achieved a high standard of living that provides group housing, dining, education, culture, recreation, health, child rearing, and other sends. While the kibbutz began as a Zionist-pioneering instrument of agriculture–and advanced scientific agriculture remains a mainstay–many kibbutzim now owe much of their prosperity to modem high-technology industry and tourism. Approximately 20 percent of Israel’s industrial exports come from kibbutz-owned production facilities.

The moshav, or cooperative system, consists of 410 moshavim, with a population of 155, 000. Every family has a share of the village but owns its own home, farms its own plot, and manages its own budget. Machinery, purchase of supplies, and marketing are cooperatively organized.

The moshava is a traditional farm village based on individually owned farmsteads. The total population of the moshavot is 10, 600. Many moshavot have developed into towns and even cities.

Israeli agriculture is highly intensive, based on irrigation, water recycling, hothouses, scientific experimentation, crop management, mechanization, and marketing Only 3 percent of the nation’s population work in agriculture, but yields are very high. Citrus fruits are the leading export. Flowers, subtropical fruits, vegetables, and wines are also exported The country is self-sufficient in cotton–the most extensively grown crop–and dairy products, poultry, potatoes, and olives. It is nearly self-sufficient in meat and fish.

## Manufacturing

Israel is a modem industrial country. Nearly 20 percent of its people work in manufacturing. The country is a leading international diamond center, accounting for one quarter of Israel’s exports. Heavy industry is centered in Haifa: petroleum refining, cement, iron and steel, and petrochemicals. Tel Aviv-Yafo is the center for such industries as food processing, diamond polishing, and printing and publishing, as well as such manufactured goods as clothing, automobiles and transport equipment, and electronic equipment.

## Mining and natural resources

Israel’s mineral deposits include phosphates, potash, clay, glass, sand, sulfur, manganese, and building stone. There are also small deposits of petroleum, natural gas, and copper, but Israel must import most of its raw materials. Dead Sea waters contain potash, bromine, and salt. Potash, the most important mineral, is a major export

Israel’s petroleum and natural gas production are small. The country’s two large refineries in Haifa and Ashdod depend mostly on imports. One quarter of all import expenditures is for fuel. To reduce dependency on imported oil. a large coal-burning electric power plant was built on the coast at Hadera. Nearly 300, 000 homes have rooftop solar heaters.

Water is a vital resource, and 75 percent of it is used in agriculture. The National Water Carrier, a system of pipelines and open canals, brings water from the Jordan River’s headwaters and from the Sea of Galilee to the coastal plain and the northern Negev. The system supplies one quarter of Israel’s needs. The remainder comes from ground water, the Yarkon River, the storage of rain and floodwaters, and wastewater reclamation. Israel also uses desalinated seawater.

The economy is troubled because of war and defense burdens, heavy foreign debt. And an annual trade imbalance. Inflation is rampant, and defense expenditures and foreign debt repayment absorb a large portion of the government’s annual budget. Debt per person is among the world’s highest. For years Israel had nearly full employment and provided work for thousands of Arabs from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but the arrival of thousands of Soviet Jewish immigrants in the late 1980s and the 1990s swelled the labor force and caused widespread unemployment.

## Transportation and Communication

National and local governments maintain more than 8, 000 miles of well-developed roads for use by the country’s 1. 013, 000 trucks, buses, and automobiles. Taxis and jitneys, or small buses compete with buses as the major forms of public transportation. Rail lines totaling 323 miles are government-operated.

El Al, Israel’s national airline, and foreign airlines provide international service at Ben-Gurion Airport at Lod. The airports at Elat and Jerusalem also handle international flights.

Israel’s merchant fleet of some 70 ships includes refrigerated vessels and tankers. The three major deep-water ports are Haifa. Ashdod, and Elat. The nation’s 2.4 million telephones provide one telephone for every two people. There are 22 daily newspapers, five radio networks, and one television channel.

# Education

Israel has a high standard of education that begins with free and compulsory primary schools for ages 5 to 16. The state elementary school system has general and religious schools, the former enrolling 70 percent of the pupils. Arabs attend separate state schools.

There are seven institutions of higher education: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, the Weizmann Institute of Science, and the University of Haifa. Total enrollment was almost 80000 students in the 1990s.

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# Government

Israel is a parliamentary state. The Knesset, or parliament, is the only legislative body. It has 120 members elected every four years through proportional representation. The Knesset elects the Prime Minister, who heads the cabinet, and the president whose post is largely ceremonial. All local authorities are elected. The Supreme Court heads the civil and criminal judicial system Judaism and Islam have independent courts with jurisdiction over religious matters, including marriage and divorce.

Israel has no written constitution. A number of laws concerning various aspects of government are considered part of an evolving constitution. Political life is organized around parties. Until 1977 the Labor and allied Workers’ parties dominated Israeli governments. In 1977 the nationalist Likud party, with religious and small right-wing allies, took control of the government. Likud is a coalition of which the backbone is the Herut party, or Zionist Revisionists, founded in 1948 by former Prime Minister Menachem Begin. It also includes Liberal parties plus smaller factions. The Labor and Likud parties are about evenly divided in popular appeal

Economically the Labor party stands for socialism and strong government intervention, the Likud for free enterprise On Arab-Israeli relations. Labor generally seeks accommodation with the Palestinian Arabs through territorial compromise and linking the Arab West Bank with Jordan. Likud stands for an undivided land of Israel to the Jordan River based on Jewish historic claims to Samaria and Judea and for full-scale Jewish settlement there.

# Active Holidays

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## Water sports

The Mediterranean shoreline and the Sea of Galilee are ideal for swimming, surfing, sailing and water skiing. The Tel Aviv marina offers yachting as well as sailing.

Skin and aqualung diving are especially popular along the Gulfof Eilat, where the season extends throughout the year. The area is usually free of large and strong waves; currents and tides are moderate, with variations of up to 80 cm between high and low tides. These variations do not affect the diver's movement. Visibility is generally excellent, ranging from 15 to 40 meters and even more. Water temperatures range from 21 °C in February to 27 °C in August. A dozen diving schools serve the Red Sea. Prices are comparable to similar undertakings elsewhere in the world.

Apart from diving in the Red Sea, the Mediterranean also offers the possibility of combining diving with archaeological exploration. Underwater Roman ruins are amongst the destinations offered by the diving schools in Ahziv, Acco, Ashkelon and Caesarea.

The Mediterranean has two good diving seasons: autumn and spring. Visibility on good days averages 10 meters, with calm waters. Water temperatures range from 16 °C in February to 29 °C in August.

## Basketball

Basketball fans should not miss the chance of attending a game. Few players can match the standards reached by this sport as Israel is as leading basketball nation.

## Golf

The Caesarea Golf Club, 40 minutes by car from Tel Aviv or Haifa, welcomes tourists. The full-size 18‑hole course is open all year and a driving range is available. Details:

# Archeology

Those who enjoy physical work and who also take an interest in archaeology can spend a day or several weeks assisting Jerusalem University in its excavations. Experience or background knowledge in archaeology is not necessary. The digs take place under expert supervision at a number of locations throughout the country. Go in search of Roman ruins in the Old Town of Jerusalem, for example, or look for remains from Biblical times at Hazor in Galilee. Those interested can apply each spring to obtain an up-to-date list of current archaeological projects, possible locations and work conditions.

Information concerning participation in excavations can be obtained from the Israel Antiquities Authority, PO Box 586, Jerusalem 91004, tel: 5602627, 292628.

# Kibbutzim

Voluntary work is also accepted in other spheres: young people up to 32 years of age can 'help out' in a kibbutz or a moshav at virtually any time. Food and accommodation are free, working clothes are provided and pocket money is often also included.

If you plan to work in a kibbutz, a minimum period of commitment is a precondition, usually at least four weeks. It is also necessary to submit a negative HIV test result with your application. The working week averages 36 hours. Travel costs are borne by the applicant.

# Getting There

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## By air

Ben-Gurion International Airport is situated in Lydda near the Mediterranean coast, 20 km southeast of Tel Aviv, 50 km west of Jerusalem and 110 km southeast of Haifa, and is the main hub for international air traffic.

About half the international flights in and out of Ben-Gurion International Airport are operated by the Israeli government-owned El Al Israel Airlines, which carries more than 2 million passengers a year. The airport is also served by many other major airlines, including British Airways and TWA. Charter aircraft mostly uses Eilat’s temporary airport at Uvda.

Luggage checks are always very thorough. The Israelis do not rely on radar luggage checks but search all items by hand – one reason why El Al maintained such a good safety record in times of terrorist activity. It is therefore recommended that you arrive at the airport in good time.

## By sea

Since 1993 it has also been possible to enter Israel by sea. Israel's main ports are Haifa and Ashdod. Official ports of entry for foreign yachts and boats also include Eilat and the Tel Aviv Marina. The Stability Line and Sol Line offer sailings from Europe to Haifa port and many Mediterranean cruises include Israel in their itinerary. Between June and September the Arcadia Line operates sailings from Limassol, Rhodes and Piraeus to Haifa.

## Overland

A 'green card' insurance certificate is required for cars temporarily imported into Israel. There are few border-crossing points where one can enter Israel from the surrounding Arab countries. From Jordan, the main routes are via the AIlenby Bridge near Jericho or the border crossing point at Eilat, which was opened in 1994. The Damiya Bridge, between Bet Shean and Nablus, has also been opened up to general traffic. For other points of entry from Jordan, check the latest details with Israel's Ministry of Tourism. From Egypt, one can enter the country along the common frontier on the Sinai Peninsula at Netafim, Nizzana and Taba. Near Rafiah there is a crossing point into the new autonomous region of the Gaza Strip, through which it is possible to continue overland to Israel.

## Getting Around By air

Inland Hights in small and medium-sized propeller aircraft can be booked through Arkia Airways. The airports served are Beersheba, Eilat, Haifa, Jerusalem, Rosh Pina, Sodom and Tel Aviv.

## By car

Driving in Israel is easy and convenient, as the road network is comprehensive and well maintained. The only difficult aspect, as elsewhere in the world, is the parking situation in the town centers. Traffic regulations differ only minimally from those prevailing in Europe. It is advisable; however, to pay attention as infringements can result in a heavy fine. The main rules to remember are that speed limits are in general 40–50 kph in the built-up areas, 80 kph on country roads and 90 kph on motorways. Parking spaces are marked by blue-and-white pavement markings; prohibited parking by red-and-white ones. To assist orientation most road and information signs are written in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic and English.

Car rental is relatively expensive, and fuel is not exactly cheap. Parking is restricted at all times of day and night. Cars, however, provide independence from public transport, which does not run from Friday afternoon until Saturday evening. The minimum age for renting a car is 21 years; a national driver's license is sufficient if you aren't staying in the country for more than one year.

## Public transport

Buses are infinitely superior to all other means of public transport, including trains. For this reason, every town has its own bus station. Egged, the government-run bus company runs timetable services with its blue vehicles to almost all towns in the country and to Cairo. Tel Aviv is also served by the Dan bus service. All bus companies offer inexpensive rover and tour tickets.

Israel also offers an unusual form of transport for short distances: a synthesis between taxi and bus. Sherut taxis are multiple-occupancy taxis which run along specific routes and which do not set out until all seats have been taken. Depending upon the distance traveled, each passenger contributes to the cost.

Compared with the comprehensive network served by the buses and multiple-occupancy taxis, the train link between Tel Aviv and Nahariya-Haifa seems very modest.

# Fads for the Visitor

## Visas

The only requirement for entry is a passport valid for at least six months. Tourists are permitted to stay for up to three months in Israel without further formalities. For longer periods the Ministry of the Interior readily grants residence permits.

If you want to continue your journey from Israel through an Arab country, you should insist that your date of entry into Israel is not stamped into your passport but on a separate form. With the exception of Egypt and Jordan, most Arab countries refuse entry to tourists who have visited Israel. Should you wish to travel on to Egypt or Jordan, make sure you obtain a visa in advance from the embassy in Tel Aviv. Visas for southern Sinai can be obtained in Taba.

## Customs

Apart from items for personal use, visitors may import duty free one liter of spirits, up to two liter’s of wine, 250 cigarettes, 250 ml perfume, 10 films and gifts to a total value of US$125. Items such as video recorders of all kinds, computers or diving equipment must be declared. If these are intended for personal use, no duty will be charged but a deposit linked to the value of the goods in question must be paid.

The shekel and the Agorot are the official units of currency.

There is no limit to the amounts of foreign currencies, which may be imported, but Israeli shekels may be imported up to a maximum value of only US$500. In view of the currency losses resulting from the considerably less favorable exchange rate offered outside Israel, it is unwise to export shekels. Before leaving the country, however, only a maximum, again, of the equivalent of US$500 may be changed back into foreign currency without a receipt. If receipts are presented, however, unlimited amounts of NIS can be changed. The moral: keep currency receipts.

Credit cards are widely used and accepted. Traveler’s checks will also be accepted without difficulty.

Foreign currency can be changed in any bank and at the specially designated bureau de change, as well as in most hotels.

## Tipping

There are two attitudes to tipping in Israel. Firstly an appropriate tip is given for good service. Included in this category is the obligatory tip for porters. The second variation is that based on the Arab tradition: guests hoping for particularly friendly service during their stay offer the tip upon arrival, thus opening up the prospect of an equally high tip upon departure. Sherut taxis are not tipped; cab drivers don't need to be, but it will be appreciated.

## Opening times

All shops and institutions are closed during the Sabbath.

Normal Business Hours: Sunday to Thursday 8. 30 am‑1 pm and 4 pm‑7 pm, Friday and public holidays 9 am-l pm. Bazaars close at dusk; department stores are open all day.

Banks: Sunday to Thursday 8. 30 am-l 2 noon and 4 pm‑5.30 pm; Monday, Wednesday and Friday: mornings only.

Official bodies: Sunday to Thursday 8 am‑12 noon.

## Newspapers

Most newspapers are written in Hebrew, including the Maariv and Haarnen. The English-language daily newspaper Jerusalem Post and the weekly magazine Jerusalem Report are amongst the most reliable sources of information in the country.

# Literature

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/Israel
2. Trenneld, Martin. 2007. Israel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press