

The Negev

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Where the Judean Desert ends, the Negev begins, a spectacular region of low sandstone hills, rocky peaks and fertile plains furrowed with narrow canyons. Far from being a simple expanse of sand, the Negev is a seductress.

The Negev was once the heart of the Nabatean empire, and you can still follow the ancient trade route along which incense and spices were brought from southern Arabia to the Mediterranean. The archaeological sites of Avdat, Mamshit and Shivta reflect the way the desert was colonised for agriculture by the Nabatean people.

Someone else who recognised the potential of the desert was David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and 'father of the Negev', who launched a development program to turn a wilderness into fertile farmland.

The Negev constitutes 62% of Israel's land areas, but despite Ben-Gurion's view that if the state does not put an end to the desert, the desert may put an end to the state, it is home to only 10% of the population. This emptiness is its greatest attraction. Explore lofty plateaus and deep wadis on foot or from atop a camel on a Bedouin-style safari. The region's most outstanding features are the world's three largest craters. The biggest, Maktesh Ramon, can be visited from the peaceful town of Mitzpe Ramon, which clings to the crater's edge. The Arava Valley, usually seen only from the bus window, is a stunning area worth discovering for its national parks.

Finally there's Eilat, a razzmatazz of flashy hotels, suntan and sleaze parked on the coast of the Red Sea, an underwater paradise that makes up for the carbuncle on the shore.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sleeping in the open under a thousand stars in **the Arava** (p343)
- Exploring the Negev the traditional way on the back of a camel during a Bedouin-style desert safari at **Kfar Hanokdim** (p328)
- Savouring that first awe-inspiring glance into **Maktesh Ramon** (p339)
- Drinking fresh herb tea and taking time out to enjoy Israel's last piece of primordial landscape in **Mitzpe Ramon** (p338)
- Frolicking with Flipper – diving with dolphins in the Gulf of **Eilat** (p345)



Hiking in the Negev

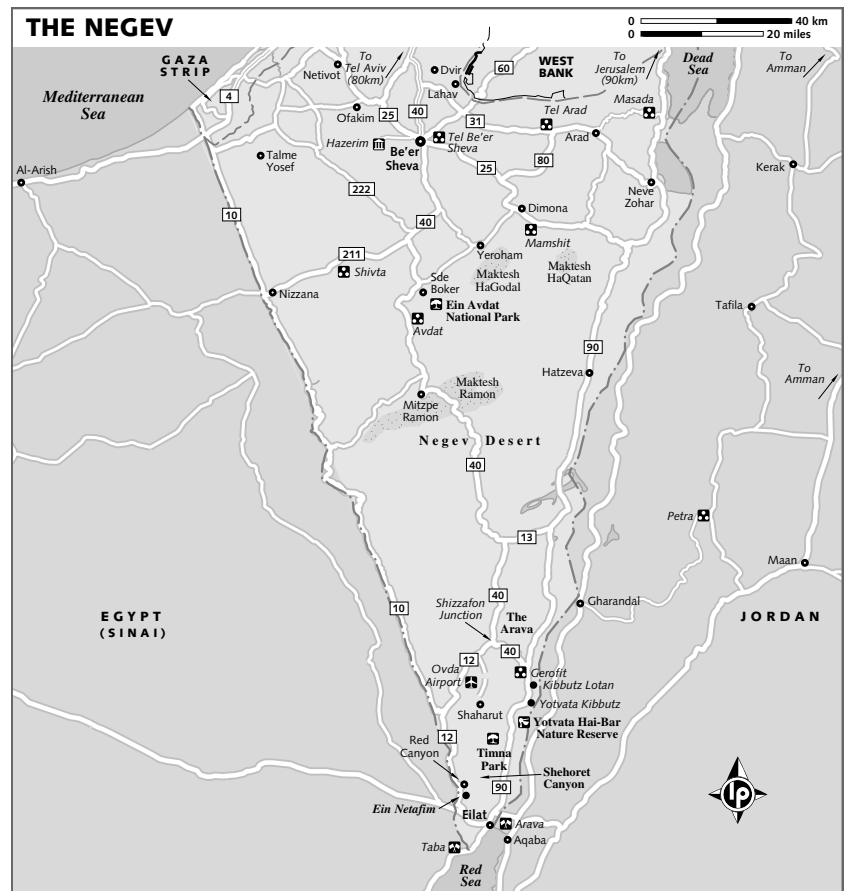
There are some excellent hikes in the Negev region, taking in a surprisingly wide variety of landscapes. Particularly recommended are those around Sde Boker (p335) and Ein Avdat (p336), Eilat (p345) and Mitzpe Ramon (p338).

There is a very good 1:50,000 map of the Eilat mountain region produced by the Israeli Trails Committee of the SPNI (Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel), which contains information on the flora and fauna of the region as well as individual trail maps for some of the more popular hikes across the region. This map, No 20 in the very popular *Israel Hiking and Touring Maps* series and one of the few that are

produced in English, is available from any office of the SPNI.

SPNI has field study centres at Sde Boker, Mitzpe Ramon and Eilat, and at Hatzeva, 50km south of the Dead Sea on Rte 90 – these are the places to visit for detailed maps and information, and for recommendations on routes and desert sights.

SPNI also runs interesting **Yarok Tours** (☎ 03 638 8625; www.aspni.org) of the Negev region for individuals and families. While the tours are held in Hebrew, many of the guides and participants speak English. Tours range from hiking, abseiling and cycling day trips to weekends away snorkelling in Eilat. Check the website for the latest schedules.



THE NEGEV

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The Negev is a harsh desert, but due to its rapid development visitors can easily be lulled into a false sense of security and forget to follow the safety guidelines. It really is best to make an early start, avoid physical exertion in the middle of the day (say noon to 3pm), cover your head and drink plenty of water.

Presumably due to the demands of IDF personnel (the Negev is highly militarised), bus services pass by most of the places of interest but they are very infrequent, so check the timetables to avoid too much waiting around.

ARAD عراد תרד
☎ 07 / pop 21,600

On the road between Be'er Sheva and the Dead Sea, this lethargic eastern Negev community benefits from its surrounding wealth of mineral deposits. Situated on a high plateau with commanding views of the desert, the town itself doesn't offer too much to either see or do. The **Arad tourist office** (☎ 995 4160; ☹ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu) is behind the Paz petrol station.

Visitors to the Masada sound-and-light show (see p323) will necessarily pass through Arad, since the venue is not connected by road to the main north-south highway linking the Dead Sea and Eilat.

An attractive addition to the city is Eshet Lot Artists' Quarter, being developed in an abandoned industrial zone 2km southwest of town. Nearly 20 artists have transformed the old hangers, garages and factories into gift shops, studios and workshops. Check out the **Glass Museum** (www.warmglassil.com; Sadan Rd; ☹ 10am-5pm Sat-Thu, 10am-2pm Fri) opened by artist Gideon Fridman, and **Studio 11** (☎ 054 554 0002; Sadan Unit 4), a bar and concert hall featuring live music on weekends.

Sleeping & Eating

Blau Weiss HI Hostel (☎ 995 7150; arad@iyha.org.il, 34 Atad St; dm/s/d/tr 65/165/200/250; ♿) Typically modern hostel with clean, comfortable rooms and a distinctly institutional atmosphere. Reception is closed between 8am and 2pm. To find it walk east from the bus station up Yehuda St, and follow the signs before turning right on HaPalmach St. Breakfast is another 31NIS.

Kfar Hanokdim (☎ 995 0097; www.kfarhanokdim.co.il; tent 60NIS, r/s/d 150/300NIS; ♿) About 10km

from Arad on the road to Masada, this is the perfect place to stay the night if you are planning on catching the sound-and-light show (Tuesday and Thursday; see p323). A sprawling oasis of palms in the stark Judean desert, this Israeli-/Bedouin-run venture offers a wonderful desert experience, sleeping in stylish cabins with handmade furniture or on a mattress in an authentic Bedouin tent. Hanokdim can take both groups and individual travellers, who are free to use one of the three kitchens, relax in the palm-shaded cushion areas or get cosy with the camels. Drop by for a coffee and a camel ride (one hour, 50NIS).

Inbar Hotel (☎ 997 3303; www.hotel-inbar.com; 38 Yehuda St; s/d 357/447NIS; ♿) Guarding the entrance to Arad is this huge edifice that won't win any prizes for interior decoration – perhaps if it was 1976 – but gets top marks for friendly service, comfy rooms with cable TV and a spa featuring a Dead Sea pool and black mud treatments.

Muza (☎ 997 5555; www.muza-arad.co.il; Rte 31; mains 48NIS; ☹ noon-5am) Tucked behind the Alon petrol station, this Arad institution is a haven for the parched traveller. The flower-filled courtyard is a great place to tuck into hearty pub food such as salads, grilled sandwiches and towering burgers while watching the local seniors playing boules next door. Inside, the sporting action is on the big screen, the ceiling lined with football colours and the bar with beer bottles – a cosy place to kick back with a few drinks.

Mr Shay (☎ 997 1956, 32 HaPalmach St; mains 70NIS; ☹ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Tucked underneath a market is this unassuming little Chinese restaurant, which locals say is the best in the Negev. Before you order the banquet ask yourself, how many Chinese restaurants are there actually in the Negev? Yes, stick to the honey chicken and tasty noodle dishes. The soups are also pretty good.

Getting There & Away

From the central bus terminal on Rehov Yehuda, buses run twice per hour to and from Be'er Sheva (No 388, 14.80NIS, 45 minutes). Buses depart for Ein Gedi (No 384, 29.50NIS, 1½ hours) at 10.15am, 1pm and 3.45pm.

To access the sound-and-light show at Masada (30-minute drive) take Rte 3199 from the back of Arad.

A DROP IN THE DESERT

There has not been such excitement about wine in the Negev since ancient times. In the last decade vineyards have sprung up all over the northern Negev hills, with innovative computerised watering methods (drip irrigation) turning the dust into fertile land. The semiarid area is best for growing Merlot grapes.

A joint venture between major Israeli wine producer Carmel and local grape growers in the cool climate Judean Hills, the boutique **Yatir Winery** (☎ 995 9090; www.yatir.com) at Tel Arad has had unparalleled success since its first wine was launched in 2004. Known for its Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Merlot, it is the first Israeli winery to be listed in the main selection of Selfridges in London.

Next door, the large Ramat Arad Winery is also kicking up a sandstorm with its red varieties. The 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon recently won awards for excellence from the *Wine Spectator*.

At Sde Boker, what started as a Ministry of Agriculture experiment to see if it was possible to irrigate a vineyard with brackish water (apparently it isn't) has turned into a small but successful enterprise for ex-San Franciscan Zvi Remak. The **Sde Boker Winery** (☎ 051 579 212; www.sde-boker.org.il) is a great place to stop in for a tasting if you are visiting the kibbutz.

TEL ARAD תל ערד תל ערד

Keen archaeologists will be excited to hear that **Tel Arad National Park** (☎ 07-776 2170; adult/child 12/6NIS; ☹ 8am-4pm Sun-Thu, 8am-3pm Fri) is the country's best example of an early Bronze Age city from the 3rd century BC. Mentioned in the Old Testament accounts of the Israelites' attempts to penetrate the Promised Land (Numbers 21:1-3, 33:40; Joshua 12:14), ancient Arad was then an important fortress guarding the southern approaches to the country.

The site covers several hectares and consists of a lower and an upper city. The upper city is called the 'hill of fortresses' and was initially settled during the Israelite period (1200 BC). Archaeologists have found an Israelite temple with a sanctuary and a small room that served as the Holy of Holies. The Arad temple is a smaller version of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Remnants include a metre-high red gravestone found on the tiled platform of the Holy of Holies, an altar in the courtyard outside the temple and shards inscribed with the names of priestly families.

The site is 8km west of Arad. Take any bus towards Be'er Sheva, get off at the Tel Arad junction and walk the final 2km to the site on Rte 2808.

BE'ER SHEVA באר שבע

☎ 08 / pop 184,800

There's no denying that Be'er Sheva (*Bear Share-Vah*) is a hot and ugly town, developed quickly in the '60s and still growing. It's a city that is constantly being built – a

vast construction site of shoddy grey apartment blocks built to house the swelling population of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. But it is also the fourth-largest city in Israel, the 'capital of the Negev' and home to the pioneering Ben-Gurion University, a major centre for teaching and research with over 17,000 students.

High-tech research and development is now big business in Be'er Sheva, with multi-million-dollar investments and industrial parks attracting global companies such as Intel to the area. The young, educated population is starting to stay on after graduation and the city is slowly gaining a reputation for its active nightlife and unpretentious desert atmosphere.

Be'er Sheva also has a rich history, receiving mention in the Old Testament several times (Judges 20:1; I Samuel 3:20; II Samuel 3:10, 17:11, 24:2), though little of that is detectable today. The one surviving ancient monument, a well on Hebron Rd, attests to the town's association with the story of Abraham (Genesis 21:25-33), in which the name Be'er Sheva is given as meaning 'the well of the oath' after a covenant believed to have agreed in this place between the patriarch and Abimelek the Philistine.

In fact, until the late 19th century, Be'er Sheva remained little more than a collection of wells, used by the Bedouin to water their flocks. Changes came when the Turks began to develop this remote desert spot as an administrative centre. During WWI the