



living history

NAVIGATING ANCIENT TERRAIN
(AND ADVENTURE) IN THE HOLY LAND

BY JIM CORNFIELD PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHERINE KIVIAT

A sweeping view of
Makhtesh Ramon
from Mount Gevanim
in Mitzpe Ramon

Heading southbound on Israel's Highway 90, our little sedan breezes through the lowest spot on the surface of the earth. Sheer cliffs of the Judean Desert rise on our right; on our left, the Dead Sea. Beyond that, farther east, Jordan's Edom Mountains dominate the horizon, looking like gigantic broken teeth silhouetted in the afternoon haze.

Like many visitors to Israel these days, I'm here as a would-be adventurer rather than a pilgrim or student. Think Walter Mitty meets Indiana Jones.

I'm lured by the prospect of trekking through pin-drop-quiet deserts, mountain biking over trails that follow the routes of spice caravans and Roman soldiers, and scuba diving the caverns and coral reefs of the Red Sea. I've come to do it all in one trip. And, as it turns out, to do it with one very talkative tour guide.

Meeting Mrs. Lot

"Jimmy, there she is. Up ahead."

This gravelly voice from the front seat, accented with equal parts Hebrew and French, has become my background music over the last few days. It belongs to Yitzhak — tour guide, raconteur, and veteran of the historic Six Day War.

"There who is?" I ask. Yitzhak's nonstop rap is dense with facts, folklore, names, dates, and statistics. He's an encyclopedia with feet.

"That is Lot's wife," he exclaims. We pull over near a tower-shaped rock sculpted from the salt cliffs by erosion.

"And how did this woman get herself in such a lamentable state?" he asks.

I don't do well on Yitzhak's pop quizzes. But this one is easy, a first-round *Jeopardy!* question: "Lot's wife," I answer, "turned into a pillar of salt for defying God's command: don't look back on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah." (We're near the presumed sites of these ill-fated cities.)

Thanks to Yitzhak, my adventure travel has become Total Immersion Israel. In the length of road we've covered just this afternoon, Yitzhak has pointed out Mount Nebo, where Moses is said to be buried; the

caves at Qumran, where the Essenes stashed the celebrated Dead Sea Scrolls 2,000 years ago; the oasis of Ein Gedi, prized by Cleopatra herself; and legendary Masada.

The Gateway City

My entrée to this crucible of history is Tel Aviv, set along an arc of Mediterranean beachfront north of the ancient port city of Jaffa.

Tel Aviv (which means “hill of spring” in Hebrew) is named for a novel by Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, and has great meaning for Israel’s predominantly Jewish population.

The city also has ample physical charms, including beaches whose sand originates in Egypt’s Nile Delta, and reclaimed historic neighborhoods like Neve Tzedek, where pioneer families settled in the late 19th century. The familiar high-rise skyline sweeps among seaside shopping arcades, surfer hangouts, and the hustle and bustle of the

This page, from top: the Montfort castle, which was built by crusaders and destroyed in the 13th century; enjoying the beach in Tel Aviv. Facing page: Dead Sea salt mounds at Ein Gedi.



In this quiet corner of Israel, the keening of some far-off jackals and the wind passing through the Montfort castle’s broken remnants are the only sounds I hear.

Carmel Market, Tel Aviv’s clamorous, much-loved bazaar where locals and visitors shop for fruits and spices of all colors and fragrances.

Tel Aviv is also a central launching point for adventure travel to Israel’s interior. Details, like lists of outfitters and activities of interest, and instructions for booking a guide or special vehicle, are available through the Ministry of Tourism (tourism.gov.il). My own Web research has led me to an excellent driver, Motti, as well as the redoubtable Yitzhak, my personal translator, historian, tour guide, and de facto father figure rolled into one.

Mountain Biking to the Crusades

Israel has seen increased interest among thrill-and-spill adventure hounds and is especially popular with offroad cyclists. So today Yitzhak and I head north from Tel Aviv, toward a mountain biking venue near the village of Shavei Zion in western Galilee.

Yitzhak won’t be navigating the trails with me, but the lecture he delivers as we drive is predictably rich with details. Among the notable sites he points out is the traditional spot of Elijah’s fiery “sacrifice,” which is visible as we pass Mount Carmel.

North of Haifa, Israel’s third-largest city, we park amid a row of empty tour buses on our way to visit Akko, or “Acre” (akko.org.il). Once a chief port, and a key site of the Crusades, Akko is being lovingly unearthed and restored to reveal battlements, crusader quarters, and a banqueting hall that once echoed with the voices of King Richard the Lionheart and the Knights Hospitaller.

Finally, up the road from Akko, near the Lebanese border, I leave the car and rendezvous with a full-suspension

mountain bike. My trek begins on the well-worn earth and pebbles of the Keziv River valley. There are a few dry, rock-strewn streambeds to cross, but the trail is uncomplicated, giving me freedom to scan the buckthorn, maple, and laurel trees that grow wild in this dense forest.

As the trail climbs, the Montfort castle comes into view, perched on a cliff. Montfort was built by crusaders, the Knights Templar, but a Mamluk sultan captured the castle in the 13th century and destroyed most of it to prevent its re-occupation by the Western invaders.

I dismount at the base of a switchback that’s too steep for riding and hike up to the castle ruins. On the lonely hilltop, Montfort’s walls, dry and wind-blown, command a lordly 360-degree view of the surrounding hillsides, with the Mediterranean shimmering far to the west. Briefly, I can hear the keening of some far-off jackals. In this quiet corner of Israel, those jackals and the wind passing through Montfort’s broken remnants are the only sounds I hear.

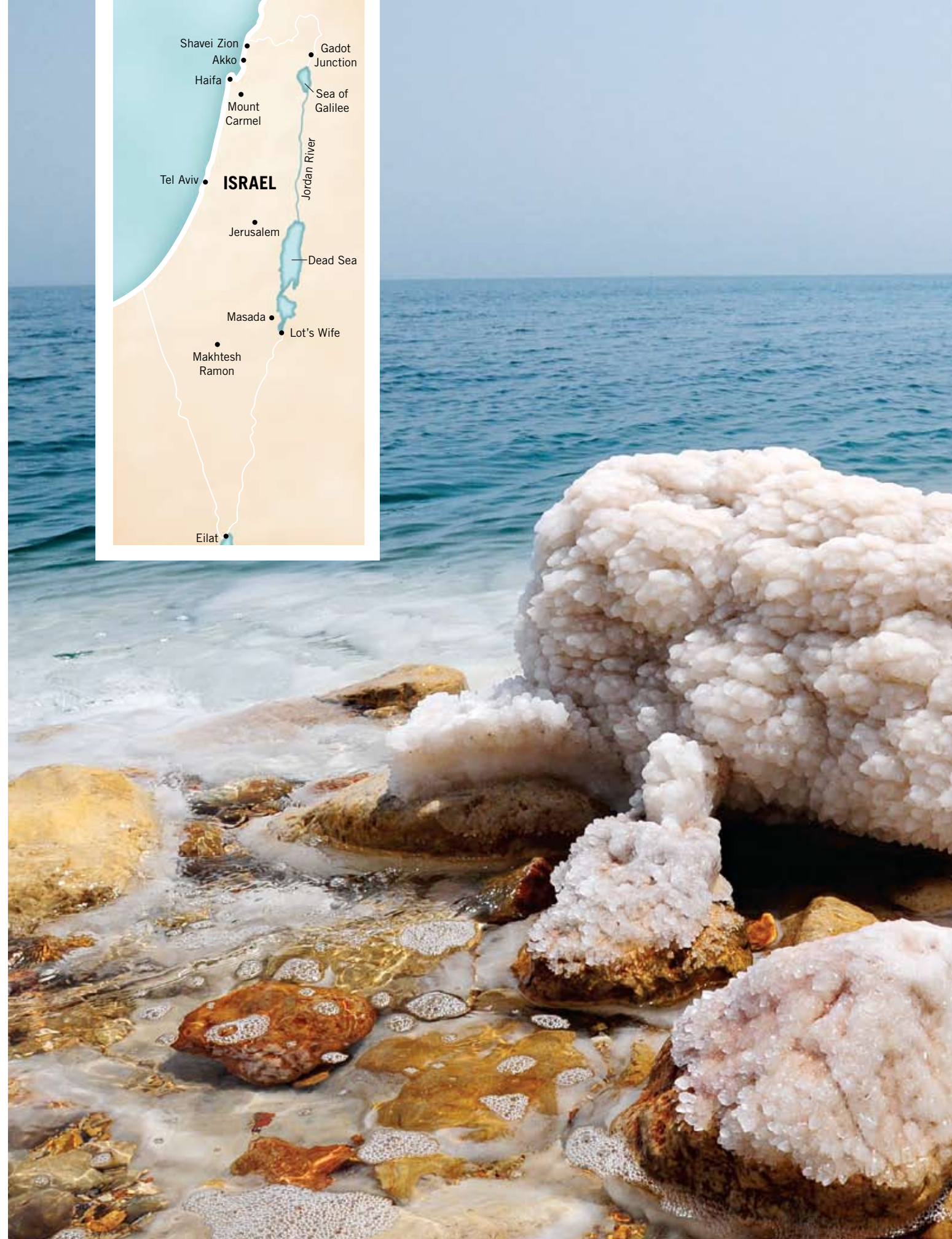
Paddling the Sacred River

The Jordan River is mentioned nearly 200 times in the Old and New Testaments, although never as a whitewater rafting venue. According to the Bible, Joshua crossed the Jordan to enter Canaan, the prophet Elisha sent a leper to be healed in the river’s waters, and John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan. Scores of Christian pilgrims visit the river every year to commemorate the last event.

Skirting the Sea of Galilee, I drive northeast with Yitzhak en route to my next Israel adventure, a short kayak trip on the Jordan. The Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake — Lake



© ISRAEL IMAGES/ALAMY (MONTFORT CASTLE); FACING PAGE: KEN HANSEN (MAP)





Choose Your Own Escape

The **Daniel Hotel Dead Sea** has pools inside and out, filled with the area's renowned salt water. It's located just minutes from the beach, so you can experience Dead Sea buoyancy right at the source. Ein Bokek, 972.8.668.9999; 3disrael.com/daniel_dead_sea_hotel

The home cooking of the desert inspires the everyday fare at the charming **Ramon Inn**. Close to the Makhtesh, the Ramon Inn offers a cozy fireplace bar plus wonderful home-style dishes — try the exotic tomato and eggplant jams. Mitzpe Ramon, 972.8.658.8822; isrotel.co.il/english

Beachside suites at the **Dan Eilat Hotel** overlook the Gulf of Aqaba; enjoy the scent of the dwarf orange trees that line the decks. The hotel offers easy access to the beach promenade and Eilat's nightlife. Eilat, 972.3.520.2552; danhotels-israel.com

One of the most famous hotels in the world, the **King David** offers elegance, luxury, and history. There are views of the walled city of Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, and Gethsemane. Jerusalem, 972.3.520.2552; danhotels.com

— J.C.

Kinneret — fed by the Jordan; New Testament accounts locate Jesus and his disciples on its shores. As we pull off the road into a riverside grove of eucalyptus, near Gadot, I have to admit I'm a little in thrall to these modest bits of earth that have cast such imposing shadows over human history.

This particular one appears modest indeed. A small stucco bungalow and a couple of outbuildings house Jordan River Rafting. My guide, a jovial lad named Tal, escorts me to a muddy bank, from which we slide a rugged two-person kayak into the river.

"Sure you don't want to join me?" I inquire of Yitzhak, who's napping in the car with the *Jerusalem Post* draped over his face.

"Don't bother me," he mutters, "I'm reading."

In Hebrew, *yarden* means "descending," and the name Jordan refers to the 2,000-foot drop the river makes from its northern source near Mount Hermon to its terminus in the Dead Sea, 1,300 feet below sea level. The drop keeps the current lively, and we paddle mostly just to hold our course between thickly wooded riverbanks. Apart from the sounds of our paddles in the water, and an occasional low pass by a dragonfly, the quiet is intense. To ancient Israelites, a desert people, this valley would surely have seemed like the Garden of Eden.

Tal's English is limited to one word, "OK." When he raises the volume ("OK!"), I know we're approaching the little rapids that crop up where the river shallows over rocks. A couple of spots provide a minor adrenaline rush, pushing our bow down and spinning us around. In a few kilometers, we round our last bend toward a span of flat water.

"OK?" Tal asks.

I'm one word up on him: "*Metzuyan*," I reply in Hebrew. Terrific.

Climbing the Snake Path

Soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces all swear an oath:

"Masada shall not fall again."

There's no ancient site with more traction in the collective Israeli sensibility than the remains of Masada, the celebrated mountaintop stronghold, close to the Dead Sea, where it is believed that 967 zealous defenders chose mass suicide over defeat at the hands of Roman legions.

The way most people access this spectacular site, now a national park, is via a modern cable car. A far more adventurous approach is the ancient Snake Path, the original access route to Masada. The Snake Path is a challenging switchback trail that winds over a distance of roughly two miles (and 1,300 vertical feet) to the ruins. On Yitzhak's recommendation, I make the

climb at dawn. "You'll of course be taking the cable car?" I inquire. He nods sagely, and points me to the trailhead.

The mountain was formed by two deep adjacent wadis, and from the base, in the bone-gray predawn light, its steep sides do look menacing. But the feeling of trekking over a path that's 2,000 years old is electrifying, despite the cold breeze and an unnerving sense of solitude as I begin to climb. A hot speck of rising sun soon peeks over a bank of clouds drifting behind the Dead Sea, and the towering cliff sides gradually change to pink, then a rich ochre, as light finally clears the cloud tops. I stop for a swallow of water before plodding up the last rocky pitch.

At the top, Yitzhak greets me and we march off to explore the ruins.

Above: Hikers travel down the roughly two-mile-long Snake Path. Below, from left: Masada, the former fortress; a detail of the zealots' quarters at Masada.



Eat Your Way Through Israel

A so-called "country" restaurant, **Kimmel** offers fare that's far from rustic: pate in calvados brandy, honey-and-carrot marmalade, and a filet of beef with sweet mustard glaze. 6 HaShahar St., Tel Aviv, 972.3.510.5204

Decks Restaurant uses locally grown ingredients to craft barbecued breast of mullard, lamb, or beef filet. Lido Beach, Gdud Barak Road, Tiberias, 972.4.672.1538; lido-galilee.com/decks

Seafood restaurant **Uri Buri** is right on the ocean, near the lighthouse in the Old City. 93 Haganah St., Akko, 972.4.955.2212

At the **Last Refuge**, ignore the anguished name and focus instead on the sea bream, an Eilat specialty. Coral Beach, Eilat, 972.8.637.2437

Eldad Vezehoo is a French-infused find in the quaint old Nahalat Shiva neighborhood. 31 Jaffa Road, Jerusalem, 972.2.625.4007; eldadvezehoo.co.il

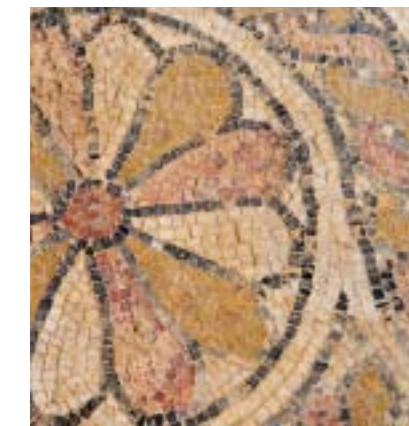
— J.C.

Ahead of us, a crowd of probably 100 files happily into the remnants of Masada's ancient synagogue. They gathered here the evening before, one explains, for a bar mitzvah, the traditional rite of passage for Jewish boys.

Into the Negev: the Makhtesh

The following day, I undergo my own rite of passage at the edge of Makhtesh Ramon, a massive crater in the Negev desert. Harnessed into rappelling gear I nervously ease out my belay rope and start to back down the Makhtesh's gusty rock face. It's a toss-up between terror and awe as I ponder the immensity of this spectacular desert.

Dotted with Bedouin villages and the lush oases of roadside *kibbutzim*, the Negev's triangle makes up Israel's sparsely populated southern half. Its crown jewel is the Makhtesh. At 1,650 feet deep and about 131,000 feet long, it's the world's largest erosion crater and has long been a major attraction.



Later, aboard a four-by-four, I head to the bottom, descending through 220 million years of geologic history. The Makhtesh floor offers a look into the truly ancient origins of Israel. Striated bands of color, each from its own primordial epoch, march up the rock walls. Ammonite fossils are embedded in the ground, and a score of plant species sprout underfoot. A few, I am told, are good for making tea. Returning to the Land Rover, my climbing partner gestures at the majestically quiet flats beyond. "This seems like emptiness to some," he says, "but to me, this is a profound fullness."

From the remoteness of the Makhtesh, our next stop is the high-amperage seaside resort of Eilat, on the Gulf of Aqaba. On the way we stop at Kibbutz Yotvata, about 25 miles north of our destination. Ever-informative Yitzhak tells me that this site is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as an oasis where Moses and the Israelites camped during their desert wandering. But for me, Yotvata will always mean dates. They're so succulent that I purchase the clamshell mega-package, and we gorge on them all the way to Eilat.

Diving Moses Rock

Desert is the memory of water: About 300 million years ago, the Tethys Sea

Rappelling off a cliff near the visitor's center at Makhtesh Ramon




covered the Negev. I contemplate this bit of natural history as I descend from the tepid desert air into the blue Gulf of Aqaba.

The dive site, known as Moses Rock, is a beautiful, mushroom-shaped bank of reef rising from a fairly shallow, sandy bottom and bustling with schools of gaudy sergeant majors, damsels, and angelfish. Close to the rock, clownfish dart among colorful anemones and ornate corals. As I glide down to inspect a bashful sea snake it occurs to me that, swimming among these exotic life forms, I still haven't left the Negev.

Topside, the resort district of Eilat is a Vegas-Cancun hybrid, with flamboyant architecture dominating the pristine beach. That night, I join the crowds strolling the shore and browsing through tiny souvenir and curio shops.

The next day, it's a fond *shalom* to Yitzhak, and I return to my hotel room to pack. From my deck, I watch sailboats in the morning breeze and a pair of oil tankers riding at anchor in the gulf. There are still a couple dates left over from my Yotvata stash. I slowly savor these with a cup of strong coffee.

For a moment, I feel like a Bedouin prince. 

Writer Jim Cornfield is a frequent contributor to Continental.

For Further Exploration

Whatever your level of skill and daring, Ran Gefen at **Ran-O-Fun** will custom-tailor your cycling adventure. Mosad Shavei Zion, Western Galilee, 972.4.560.0212; ran@ranofun.co.il

Would-be Jordan River joyriders can kit up for the splash zone at **Jordan River Rafting**. Gadot, Galilee, 972.4.693.4622; rafting.co.il

Expert desert tour operator and conservationist **Adam Sela** takes explorers to the wondrous Negev and the Makhtesh Ramon. 972.5.530.8272; adamsela@netvision.net.il; adamsela.com

Dolphin Reef Dive Center offers rental equipment and professional instruction for scuba diving — all skill levels — or any aquatic adventure you choose in the Gulf of Aqaba. Southern Beach, Eilat, 972.8.630.0111; scuba.co.il/eng — J.C.

Getting There: Since 2004, Continental has offered two daily nonstop 777 flights between New York/Newark Liberty International Airport and Tel Aviv. Service to Israel started in 1999, and Continental has consistently been the first choice for travelers on the route.

web exclusive

Want to share your own adventure photos of Israel? Visit us at continental.com/magazine and add to our virtual photo album.

