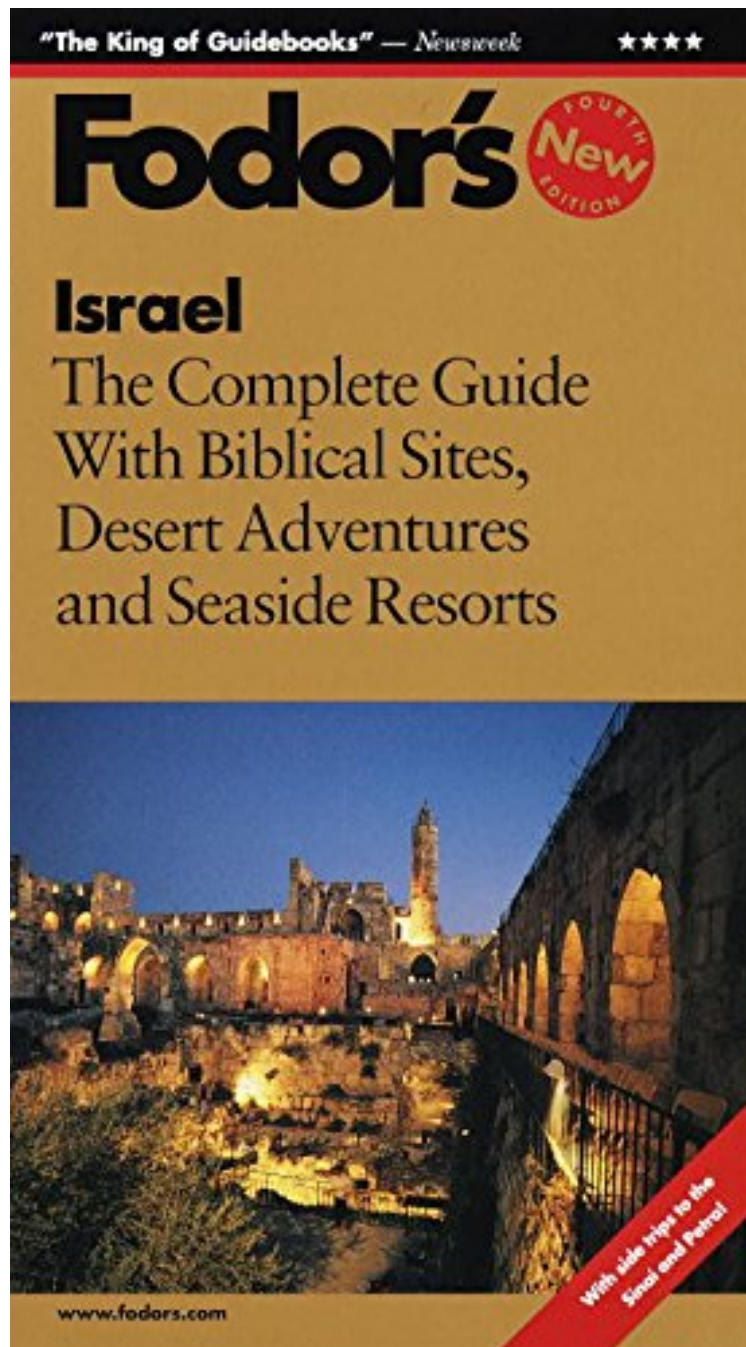


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Souks and shops for jewelry, fashion, and religious items
Israeli music -- classical, jazz, folk, and techno
Where to stay and eat, no matter what your budget
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Excerpt.
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This excerpt, from the Pleasures and Pastimes section, gives you a taste of what Israel has to offer and the sights and scenes that make it a great place to visit.
Antiquities
For some, ancient sites are a chore; for others, such sites bring to momentary life the clash of ancient arms, the roar of long-dead crowds, and the boom of silent orators. In Israel this is even more true. Not everyone comes here with Bible in hand, but a vast majority of Israel's visitors have at least a childhood familiarity with the names that mark the country's history. Jerusalem, Beersheva, Bethlehem, the Jordan River, and Armageddon are as much concepts as map references. To walk in the footsteps of Abraham, King David, and Jesus of Nazareth is to relive significant chunks of the history of Western civilization. And where stone remains of the past can be connected -- whether scientifically or by tradition -- to the very well-springs of religious faith or cultural identity, the experience is often exultant.
Beaches
Beach-lovers have their choice of an appealing variety of shorelines. The long Mediterranean coast has many excellent public beaches. Eilat, on the Red Sea, has its sandy North Shore for sun worshipers, and the pebbly beaches near the coral reefs for snorkelers. Beaches around the freshwater Sea of Galilee tend to be rocky. At the Dead Sea, don't miss the unique experience of floating in the intense brine; facilities are good, and the better beaches are sandy.
Culture
Classical music is Israel's strong suit, with several excellent orchestras -- most notably the Israel Philharmonic -- and smaller ensembles performing a variety of programs. Many Russian immigrants have made their mark here, and young native virtuosos seem to be maintaining the tradition of Israeli superstars such as Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zuckerman, Daniel Barenboim, Shlomo Mintz, and Gil Shaham, all of whom periodically reappear on Israeli stages. The revival of opera in Tel Aviv -- new location, new company -- recalls the days more than 30 years ago when a young tenor named

Placido Domingo got his start here. Jazz and blues are popular, and their excellent summer festivals have gained international recognition, though the lineups consist largely of foreign artists. The local pop scene tends to be of the softer type, but superstars from abroad help heat it up. Middle Eastern sounds remain very popular, and fusions that incorporate Western musical elements have won adherents. Folk music is also alive and well, both the native Israeli and the "Anglo" variety. There is very little English-language theater, but quite a few Hebrew productions provide simultaneous translation. Dance -- particularly modern -- can be very good; look especially for the renowned Bat Sheva company. Dining Israel's culinary scene has undergone a revolution in the last decade or so. Traditionally, Israeli food was a grab bag of Middle Eastern specialties: a meze (appetizer) of well-flavored salads with warm pita bread, some fresh grilled fish, or a skewer of shish kebabs. But soaring tourism and a new, more affluent generation of Israelis have created a demand for a more cosmopolitan range of specialty restaurants. Add to that the country's rainbow of cultural influences and year-round availability of first-rate local produce, and the burgeoning food scene seems a natural development. Fine steaks and tasty pies, the cuisines of France and Italy, of China and India, and even (perish the comparison!) international fast-food chains -- it's all here, though obviously more so in the cities (with Tel Aviv in the lead) than in the country. Museums Throughout Israel, museums help bring the past alive. Local museums tell the story of a particular site or display archaeological artifacts found there; regional museums do much the same thing but often add the area's natural history. At national museums, the art of museology is more finely honed; these include such historical or ethnographical museums as the Diaspora and Eretz Israel museums, both in Tel Aviv; and, in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and memorial, and the Tower of David Museum of the city's history. Jerusalem's marvelously eclectic and world-renowned Israel Museum is a repository of many of the nation's finest art and archaeological treasures. Outdoor Activities Israel has become known to adventure travelers as a real destination for everything from desert treks to scuba diving. Many Israelis are avid hikers, and the country has several thousand miles of officially marked hiking trails as well as national parks and nature reserves. In the process of development is a long route called the Israel Trail, running the length of the country from the village of Metulla, on the northern border with Lebanon, to Eilat, on the Red Sea. Cliff rappelling has developed a following, particularly on the precipices of the Judean and Negev deserts. Scuba diving and snorkeling are popular among the world-renowned coral reefs off Eilat, but also off the Mediterranean beaches at Ashkelon, Tel Aviv, Caesarea, Haifa, Akko, and Nahariya. While you're here, you can take advantage of pools and gyms, tennis and squash courts, sailboats and Windsurfers, scuba equipment and Para-Sails, horses, and canoes; trek the Negev by jeep or camel; and, in early spring, water-ski on the Sea of Galilee and snow-ski on Mt. Hermon on the same day.