

Serenaded by Salt

By Ananya Bahl

I stepped out of my hotel lobby, enthusiastic and armed with sunblock, knowing it was going to be no ordinary afternoon. Bubbling excitement and a mishmash of thoughts floated through my mind. I remember smiling at this thought while making my way to the Ein Bokek beach: ‘floating’ sure seemed to be the order of the day. The sun—not one to be left out of the limelight—scorched down on us relentlessly as our bare feet braved the blazing sand. We were in Israel, on the banks of the legendary Dead Sea, eager to give in to nature’s buoyant forces.

Situated at a depth of about 400 meters below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on the Earth; ensuring summer temperatures stay consistently high, often reaching the forty mark on the Celsius scale. Owing to the fact that water evaporates from it faster than the rate at which it is replenished, the sea’s salt concentration is about 34%, making it one of the most saline water bodies in the world. This has two repercussions: first, it prevents the growth of any life form in its waters, a fact that led to the coinage of its morbid name, and second, the sea is a natural health spa, drawing millions from around the world for its therapeutic properties.

As I stepped into the warm water, the first thing I noticed was its somewhat greasy texture. The idiom, ‘rub salt in the wound’, comes to life here, literally: do not walk into the sea with open wounds! Once waist-deep in the water, I simply had to sit back as if on a chair and voila! I was floating on my back. As a general rule, avoid splashing around lest the wrath of salt be invited into your eyes and mouth. The salinity of the water can cause prickliness on the skin and so, after every ten minutes, it is advisable to step under one of the many fresh water showers dotting the beach. As I floated on my invisible raft, a delightful German couple in their mid-fifties befriended me. From them I learnt that several European insurance companies offer trips to the Dead Sea for patients suffering from skin ailments like psoriasis and eczema, giving impetus to thriving medical tourism in the area. Adding to the momentum are numerous spas and hotels that have sprung up in the vicinity.

I couldn’t help but feel connected with the divine in the sea’s awe-inspiring setting. On one side are the Jordanian hills and on the other is the Judean Desert, a famous site for many Biblical stories. I do wonder how Jesus and His Apostles walked for so many hours—and sometimes days—in the torrid desert heat! Perhaps it wasn’t so bad in those times and global warming is playing villain today. That being said, the winter months offer ample opportunities to hike, cycle and camp Bedouin-style in the rocky desert terrain. Furthermore, the Qumran caves—in which were unearthed original Hebrew and Biblical texts dating back to the times of the prophet Isaiah and which are now called ‘The Dead Sea Scrolls’—are located just about two kilometres away.

Having had my fill of the water, I relaxed on a beach chair and breathed in the fresh sea breeze. Children ran around making sand castles, older couples floated in the water, young people smothered themselves with the sea’s curative black mud and made monster-like poses for pictures, and I just sat there; marveling at how Mother Nature managed such a feat as the Dead Sea. Encouraged by the buoyant force of the

waters, I began to think; perhaps I could go a step ahead and try walking on water? All it needs is a little faith, right?

Fact File:

Getting there: The Dead Sea is roughly a two-hour drive from Jerusalem and a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Tel Aviv. Comfortable private taxis can be hired for the journey.

Where to stay: The Daniel Hotel, The Ein Gedi Hotel and Spa, and the Isrotel are good options.

What to do: take a dip in the sea, shop for Dead Sea products, visit a kibbutz, indulge yourself at a spa, take a jeep tour through the Judean Desert with a Bedouin, visit the ancient town of Massada.

Important information: www.goisrael.com offers all the necessary information for travellers. Additionally, there are websites like <http://www.aisrael.org/> , <http://www.israel4all.com/> and <http://www.milbat.org.il> that assist in specialized tours.