

Pondering the promised land

Starting in 2018, **Patrick and Marie Gurney** set out on an 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. After exploring Turkey, they shipped their Hilux to Haifa for a two-week circuit of Israel.

Wild camping doesn't get much more isolated than the vast and desolate Judean Desert. The only recognisable human traces are Kukuza, the track and spent cartridges.





The ship was called *Beryl*. I boarded, along with 10 truck drivers, and we left Turkey for the Israeli port city of Haifa. I was on my own for this part of the trip – Marie had flown to South Africa for a quick business trip; she'd be joining me in a few days.

Beryl was on her final journey before she was to be scrapped in Bangladesh. She looked every bit the part. It was noisy and hot inside and the cramped, four-berth cabin had little airflow and a large population of mosquitoes. I snored the loudest, apparently, so the truck drivers deserted the cabin and left me to face the mozzies alone.

The voyage was supposed to take two days, but bad weather made it five before we dropped anchor just outside Haifa. Standard Israeli Customs and Immigration is preceded by an on-boat "interview", which is more of an interrogation. If you don't clear this, tough luck – you're not going anywhere.

I was woken at 3 am (a common tactic) to face three young and fiercely intimidating military officials who conducted my interview. It went something like this:

"Why are you coming to Israel? Give me your phone, unlock it!"

"What do you want to see in Israel? How long are you here?"

"What?! You have your own car?"

The questions came thick and fast, making it hard for me to gather my thoughts. It felt like a physical assault. One exhausting hour later, I texted Marie in Joburg: "I think I blew the interview; I doubt I'll get in tomorrow with the car."

On our trip through Europe and Turkey so far, we'd usually just muddled our way through border posts. But things were different in the Middle East. Reliable information was hard to get beforehand, and my confidence was low. I simply wasn't sure if I had all my ducks in a row to bring our Hilux, Kukuza, into the country.

In anticipation of this problem, I had arranged to meet two local port

agents to assist with the clearance process. After we docked, I met them both. The first agent seemed sketchy but the second was a personable 72-year-old named Yoel Gilead. I breathed a sigh of relief as Yoel requested the immigration official not to stamp my passport. We were still planning to drive through Egypt and Sudan – both of which wouldn't let us in if we had recently visited Israel. Instead, I was given an official paper with my details and a stamp.

"If you lose this, there is trouble," Yoel warned me. "When you exit Israel, you hand it back in."

During the vehicle inspection Kukuza was surrounded by 15 heavily armed soldiers, with more arriving every minute. I was ordered to unpack the entire vehicle and everything down to our mattress got scanned.

All was seemingly going well; I even managed to get a coffee. But suddenly everyone got spooked. A wild-eyed soldier marched towards me clutching a bunch of stickers. Immediately, I understood. Our pack of country flags, which we stuck on the Hilux as we went along, included many of Israel's enemies: Iran, Palestine, Egypt. . .

"Throw away the flags you don't like," I said, my heart pounding.

He scrunched them up without hesitation.

Anticipating another intense interrogation, I asked: "Who wants to stick the Israeli flag on the car?"

This diffused the tension as a couple of excited offers came forward from the crowd.

It was a stressful, seven-hour ordeal, but I managed to enter Israel with Kukuza. Our trip was on! But it would have to be short: The officials had only given us two weeks to blast through this biblical landscape.

As I drove out, handing over the gate pass, Yoel turned to me and said: "We are done, but your first taste of Israel will be with me. You are my guest for the best hummus in Haifa!"

Then he took me out to dinner.

Opposite page: The Hanging Gardens of Haifa.

Right, from the top: HaZkenim falafel takeaway in Haifa. The Church of the Multiplication in Galilee is built on the spot where Jesus performed the miracle of five loaves and two fish. Marie and Patrick on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The ancient city of Hippos still contains Greco-Roman ruins dating back to the 3rd century BC.

To Galilee for a tuna sandwich

Marie flew into Tel Aviv and caught a train north to join me at Haifa Hostel – a well-run, budget-friendly place with great staff. We spent two days exploring the city's beaches and the beautiful Hanging Gardens of Haifa, which is the major attraction.

The site is central to the Bahá'í faith and was built in 2001 atop Mount Carmel, offering incredible views of the city. A special irrigation system maintains 19 manicured gardens over cascading terraces that stretch for a kilometre. In the centre is the shrine of the Báb, who founded the Bahá'í faith with a goal to achieve a unified world order that ensures prosperity for all.

Climbing the 1 500 steps through the gardens was energy-sapping. Our guide recommended a poky takeaway joint called HaZkenim, where falafel was the main fare. We joined the queue outside and soon tucked into the tasty, crispy snack.

It was time to get moving. We drove east for 320 km (about four hours) towards the Sea of Galilee. A tarred mountain route took us through Safed, which once was the centre of Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah). Today, this Crusades-era fortress city is home to a community of sacrosanct Jewish religious scholars and bohemian artists. We browsed the impressive number of art galleries. The streets were filled with Jewish men wearing little black leather boxes, called *tefillin*, on top of their heads. Randomly, we bumped into a man called Dale who claimed to be Barbra Streisand's cousin. Dale was intrigued by our Hilux and wanted to know more about our long overland journey.

From Safed, we drove down to Tabgha on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. As a child, I was captivated by the story of Jesus feeding 5 000 people using a mere five loaves and two fish. The Church of the Multiplication, with its beautiful 5th-century mosaics, marks this spot. Galilee attracts many Christian pilgrims, as several of the miracles that Jesus performed occurred in this region.

It was strange to sit at the water's edge munching a tuna sarmie while contemplating miracles. (I tried the walking on water one, but it clearly takes practice!)

Having navigated the entire Galilean coast (passing through Tiberias along the way), it was early evening and we still hadn't found our first wild camping spot in Israel. We're always a tad nervous in a new country – not everyone approves of wild camping – but we eventually found refuge at the ancient city of Hippos. We settled down stealthily in a parking lot, trying not to attract unwanted attention. But at 5.30 am, we heard a heavy rumble. I was up in seconds, out of the rooftop tent, pretending to make coffee. Four military Hummers rolled up! I waved and smiled and thankfully they seemed uninterested.

We spent the morning exploring the ancient Greco-Roman ruins of Hippos – a small, fortified city built in the 3rd century. The city has massive red granite pillars from Egypt and a 50 km aqueduct to channel spring water into huge underground cisterns.

Later, we found out that the Hummers belonged to an army base on the hill that we'd camped below the night before! Considering the militarised country we were in, they probably had the best night vision equipment money could buy. You always think nobody is watching when you take that late-night pee!





Wine tasting in the Golan Heights

Once Syrian territory, the Golan Heights was the site of a fierce war with Israel. The latter was victorious and autocratically annexed the land in 1981. There were signs all over saying, "Danger! Mines!" and there were bunkers and abandoned tanks next to the road. We scrambled through the deserted Syrian bunkers, looking through peepholes. It was unfathomable to think that the majestic valley below was the site of a war not too long ago.

A sombre mood usually requires an elixir of sorts, so we signed up for wine tasting. We turned into Pelter Winery, a family-run business established in 2001. They produce 150 000 bottles a year. Their white varietals were great – chardonnay, riesling, gewürztraminer – but the reds a little less so.

We ordered a cheese platter and promptly made friends with a table of well-oiled twenty-somethings. The conversation flowed freely: One man called the compulsory two-year military service "a waste of time". He said, "Us young people are tired of all these wars. We need to drop all this army stuff and start speaking to our neighbours."

Indeed, every checkpoint we passed was manned by young men and women. They looked too innocent to be kitted out in flak jackets, helmets and M16 assault rifles.

That night, we were asleep in HaSolelim Forest Reserve when, at around 2am, we woke up to what sounded like hoofs but turned out to be more than 30 soldiers running past on a training exercise.

To get a taste of Israel's neighbour, Palestine, we had arranged a date with a Palestinian family whom we knew from Cape Town. We crossed over to the West Bank and things changed immediately. It felt rural and neglected. We met up with Anis Daraghma (49, the youngest son in the family) and drove up to the final checkpoint. A big sign warned: "Zone A: It is forbidden for Israeli citizens to enter".

We spent three nights with the Daraghma family in the town of Tubas, where they have been shopkeepers for generations. We were spoiled rotten with delicious food and Marie was given a few Jilbab dresses (a loose-fitting tunic). These became priceless later on our journey in Jordan, Egypt and Sudan, where dressing like the locals made a big difference in how she was received, especially as a woman.

We laughed and sometimes cried at the family's stories about the ordeals they had gone through over the years. Before we left, they loaded us up with cardamon coffee, dates and grains. We also stocked up on our new favourite sweet – home-made Palestinian chocolate, which tastes like Nutella on steroids. It's made by mixing one part carob molasses with one part date syrup, one part tahini paste, and a good dose of toasted sesame seeds.



From the top: In the Golan Heights, an old bunker and danger signs are stark reminders of the war that was fought here. Pelter Winery, Golan Heights. On a visit to Anis Daraghma on the West Bank, the Gurneys shopped and shared meals with his family.

To Banksy's Bethlehem

Travelling to Jerusalem, we took a winding desert route via Jericho and Ramallah, both in the Palestinian West Bank (170 km, five hours). The GPS struggled to find a route and kept taking us to dead ends against a section of the 700 km Israeli/West Bank barrier. Eventually, a Good Samaritan directed us to the closest, quickest checkpoint.

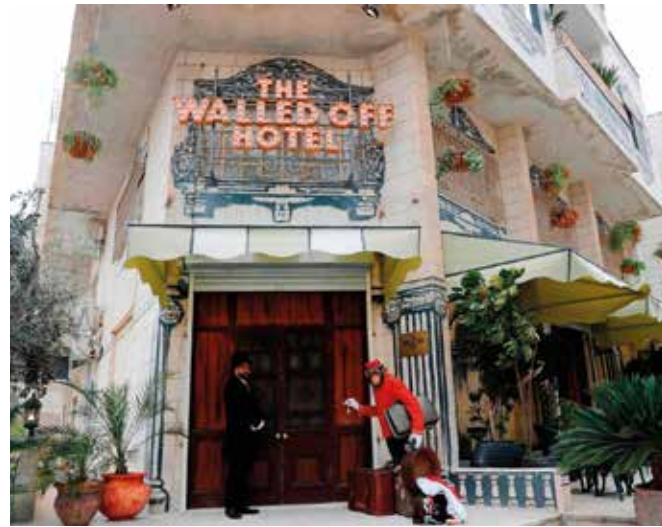
We had scheduled a night and two days in Jerusalem, which might seem insufficient, but it was all we could handle in the end. What a crazy, conflicted city! The Old City is split into four quarters – Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Armenian – and was frantic with tourists seeking their religious fix. We managed to squash into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, tick off the Wailing Wall, see the Dome of the Rock, and jostle along the Via Dolorosa.

When evening arrived, most of the tourists retired to hotels elsewhere, leaving us to soak up a less chaotic and more spiritual atmosphere. The Old City has buckets of charm, with narrow streets and tiny shopfronts where you can pick up anything from a toilet brush to food, clothes and souvenirs. It's this lived-in aspect that allows you to see it as much more than just a "museum town". It's extraordinary to think of all the tumultuous events that this city has experienced over the ages.



Clockwise from top left: Some of Jerusalem's attractions include: The Western Wall (Wailing Wall); the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (site of the tomb of Jesus); the Al-Aqsa Mosque; Dome of the Rock (where Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven), and the Old City.





Travelling from Jerusalem, it was a quick 45-minute drive (and one checkpoint through the security barrier) to get to Bethlehem. Budgets are always tight on a journey this long, but sometimes you must splurge. We booked into the quirky Walled Off Hotel (a play on the “Waldorf”) designed by British street artist Banksy.

The hotel is a thought-provoking artwork in itself. It claims to have “the worst view in the world” as most rooms look onto the divisive concrete wall – seen by one side as a security measure and by the other as a way of enforcing apartheid. The location of the hotel is a slap in the face for Israelis: The site is officially under Israeli military control, so it’s 100% legal for Israelis to stay there, but all the roads to reach it involve an “illegal” journey through Palestinian territory. (Israel prevents entry to its citizens, I am not sure why.)

This provocative space provides visitors with much-needed context for confronting the complicated Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Walled Off Hotel is an art gallery, museum and a political protest all rolled into one.

We stayed in the famous Pillow-fight Room where Banksy painted a mural. The artwork is so highly valued that we were charged a R10 000 security deposit upon check-in!

Our breakneck tour of Israel was heading towards its conclusion. We were desperate for some respite from tourists in congested spaces, where historical conflict imbued everything. We turned east, driving along a disused track for about 60 km, high up into the stunning Judean Desert. Here, we could breathe again. It was a place of spiritual, eerie beauty. We camped wild for two nights (one on the plateau; the other next to the ruins of Zohar Fortress) taking in the vast open space.

Next, we entered the Negev Desert in southern Israel. It covers 60% of the country and is full of amber-coloured canyons and concealed valleys. We had only two days left on our visas and we opted to spend our last night camping in the Ramon Crater Nature Reserve. This huge crater (10 km wide, 40 km long and 500 m deep) was formed by erosion over millions of years. It also contains a curious black hill in the centre, which was once an active volcano.

At the visitors’ centre, the receptionist asked whether we had 4x4 driving experience, which of course we did, so we signed up to drive the 30 km 4x4 route down to the crater floor. The descent was hair-raising but doable. After camping in the crater for the night, we took a different, more difficult route out. We had to build sections of road where the rock steps were too high for the Hilux – a good test of Marie’s sense of humour! Thankfully we spotted some Nubian ibex for cheer, and eventually, a tar road again.

This reserve, with its rugged beauty, was the perfect place to end our trip through Israel. We could easily have stayed for much longer – it’s an eye-opening destination to visit; rewarding and complex. For every picturesque photographic moment, there’s another sight that boggles the mind and breaks the heart.

Up next? The ancient city of Petra in Jordan was calling...

From the top: The Banksy-designed Walled Off Hotel on the Palestinian side of Bethlehem is quirky from the front entrance to the themed rooms – like the Pillow-fight Room depicting an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian youth – and lounge. Although Bethlehem is in Palestinian territory, it is under Israeli military control and segregated by means of this eight-metre-high barrier wall.



Clockwise from top left: The road towards the Dead Sea and Aqaba, Jordan. A steep decline (4x4 only) takes you into the Ramon Crater. The crater has a black volcano mound in its centre.

Fast facts

These prices are from 2018 and are meant to provide a rough idea of what the Gurneys spent on their trip. Prices would have gone up since then.

HAIFA
Haifa Hostel: R1 600 per night for two people.
Falafel: R120 per pita (at HaZkenim).
Entrance to Hanging Gardens of Haifa: Free.

GALILEE & GOLAN HEIGHTS
Entrance to Hippos: Free.
Pelter Winery: R65 per person for a tasting of five wines; R300 for a cheese platter for two.

JERUSALEM
Hotel HaRova: R2 200 per night for two people.

BETHLEHEM
Walled Off Hotel: R2 400 per night for two people, breakfast included.

RAMON CRATER
Entrance: R100 per person.
Camping: R300 per person per night.
4x4 trail: Free.

SHIPPING
RoRo (roll-on, roll-off) shipping for the Hilux: R8 000 (Mersin in Turkey to Haifa in Israel).
Accommodation on board: R2 250 (one person, including meals).
Customs clearing: R6 200 (Yoel Gilead, atlaslogistics.co.il)

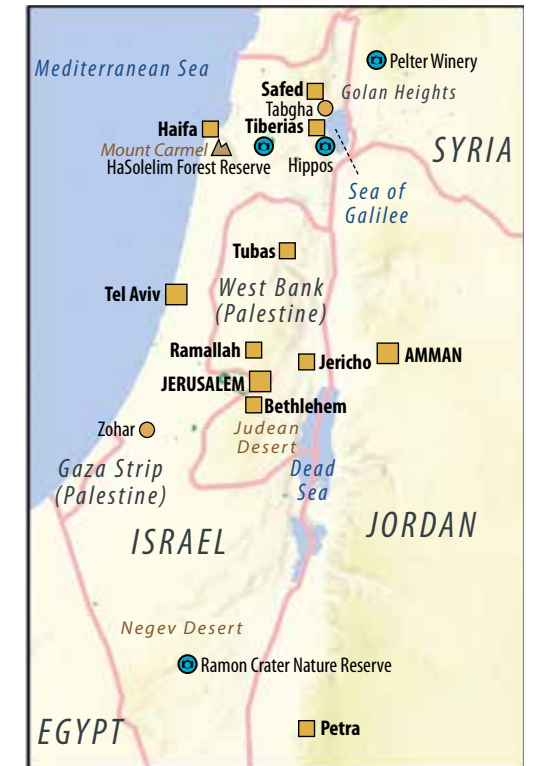
OTHER
Cup of coffee: R45 – R55.
Simple lunch: R300 p.p.



NOTE
 We have already published the African leg of Patrick and Marie’s journey – see issues #158 to #166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issues #175 to #178 for their travels through France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Joburg on 19 December 2019.



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