

Chris Day falls in love with Israel during her riding holiday.

If you are seeking a riding holiday that delivers beautiful scenery, warm, welcoming people, cultural enlightenment and a unique outlook on life, Israel provides all of this in abundance. From the stunning Jordan valley to the haunting scenery of the southern desert, a visit to Israel is more than just a holiday. It is an incredible journey steeped in history and tradition, as biblical characters are brought to life when you ride the sites of ancient battles and visit places from the Old and New Testaments.

As I arrive at Tel Aviv airport, I see two trees either side of the doors that are full of little sparrows, all tweeting like mad. It is the perfect welcome to this spectacular country.

The drive to lower Galilee gives a chance to view the countryside and find out more about Israel from our guide, Yair, who is very knowledgeable about the history of his country and very interesting to listen to.

HISTORY ON HORSEBACK

In Israel, CHRIS DAY finds spectacular riding, some unbelievable sights and an insight into the country's culture and history.

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A ride from the Sirin Heights presents beautiful views of Mount Tabor (below, left), where the Church of Transfiguration (below, right) is a popular tourist attraction.



On arrival at Moshav Sharona, we settle into our rooms and enjoy a glass of wine before heading to bed full of anticipation for the first day of riding.

After a delicious breakfast, we go to the stables in Shedmoat Devora and become acquainted with our horses. I meet my ride, a lovely bay Quarter Horse called Jameson. Most of the horses used are Quarter Horses, mainly because they are very strong and have the stamina to complete long rides over varying terrain.

Partnered with Jameson, I ride on to the beautiful Sirin Heights, which is lush and green after recent rains that have triggered new growth. The terrain is undulating, but we still have some lovely canters while taking in the wonderful views of Mount Tabor.

Lunch is delicious home-made kebabs. Then, we ascend Mount Tabor to the Church of Transfiguration, where we are met by far-reaching views across the vast landscape.



From Mount Tabor, we drive to Nazareth to visit the Basilica of the Annunciation – where the Angel Gabriel spoke to Mary – and the Church of St Joseph, which is apparently on the site of Joseph's house and workshop, and where Jesus was raised.

The trail rides in Israel provide such unusual opportunities, from riding in the waters of the Jordan River to reaching remote archaeological sites such as Masada and Sepphoris. You cannot fail to be wowed by the spectacle of it all!

On Day Two, we ride into the Jordan Valley, where we have some lovely, long canters and catch our first view of the Sea of Galilee. It is awesome – not just beautiful, but highly evocative, too.

Riding down into the valley, we pass a grove of ancient acacia trees, reputedly between 3,000 and 4,000 years old. It is called the Yaela Grove, the site where Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, killed Sisera.

Galilee provides riders and horses with lovely, long canters.

We ride alongside the River Jordan, where our horses take a well-earned drink, to the site of Israel's first kibbutz, Degania Alef, and on to Yair's brother's farm.

The third day sees us riding different horses from the stables at Kibbutz HaZorea. I have a lovely horse called Dawn, who gives me some great canters. We ride through woods and on hillsides through the Ramot Menashe Park, where the hills are covered in wild thyme, which gives off a wonderful scent.

In the afternoon, we visit Tel Mageddo – the site of Armageddon to you and me! It is a fascinating place that has been occupied since about 7000 BC.

We have one non-riding day, when we visit Jerusalem. When we arrive in the city, we go straight to the Mount of Olives, where the view of Old Jerusalem is spectacular.

We go to Gethsemane and visit the Russian Church of Mary Magdalene, the Byzantine Church – in a beautiful ancient grove of olive trees – and Mary's tomb in the Greek

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The city of Jerusalem and the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, are attractions on the non-riding day.



Orthodox Church, next to which is a grotto marking the spot where Jesus was betrayed by Judas in the Bible story.

From here, we go into the old city, following the Via Delarosa, the route that Jesus walked to his crucifixion, carrying his cross. We visit the Dome of the Rock, which houses the sepulchre, and the Western Wall ("wailing wall").

Finally, we go up to a rooftop and have the most incredible views over the old city. As we drive south from Jerusalem towards the Judean Desert, we stop at the site where David slew Goliath. There are "storytelling" stones along the route we walk and it is good to relive this childhood tale again where it happened.

As the week progresses, I fall more and more in love with Israel. On the second to last day, I have a new horse, Neils, who is Jameson's older brother – all the horses are regularly rested to keep them fit and healthy.

After almost two hours, we stop on top of a hill, tie the horses to some rocks and then drop over the edge to shelter in a niche in the cliff. Yair

makes coffee and we eat cake, sausages, fruit and other delicacies.

We climb back to the horses and, as we come off the top, we see a Bedouin shepherd on his donkey, with his sheep and dogs – a different way of life altogether. Then the heavens open! Lightning is flashing all around us and it is spectacular.

Back at camp, we have a nice, warming lunch of shakshouka (eggs poached in a tomato and pepper sauce), with hummus and pitta. By the time we have finished lunch, the skies have cleared and we set off on a walk through the desert to see the sunset.

We walk to a high point between two canyons, where we can see the amazing



Tracy van der Merwe takes a break during a ride to Israel's first kibbutz, Degania Alef.

There are spectacular views for riders passing the Tze'elim Canyon, in the Judean Desert, near Masada.

Tze'elim waterfall at the Tzfira Pool, which is filled by flash floods from the recent rains. Apparently, Yair has never seen water in this river before and the flow will last for only about six hours. It is an amazing sight.

Our last day brings with it a mist in the valley – it is very atmospheric. We ride out by 9am and the mist soon clears to give some spectacular views as we look down into the Tze'elim Canyon.

The desert is very stony, so we walk almost all the way, with the very occasional canter when the tracks allow. We sadly hand our horses back, say our farewells and make our way to Masada, a rugged natural fortress fortified by King Herod more than 2,000 years ago. It is an incredible sight and, again, Yair is an interesting guide and explains the amazing and thought-provoking history well.

After leaving Masada, we drive south to the Dead Sea and change into our costumes. It is a strange, but wonderful experience. You really do float in the



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Riding in Israel provides variety, from the wide-open spaces of the Judean Desert to the tranquility of olive groves near Mount Carmel.



shallowest of water. Swimming is incredibly difficult and you end up doing more of a doggy paddle!

After our dip in the sea, we head north to Tel Aviv, along the shore of the Dead Sea, looking at Jordan on the opposite bank. On arrival, we have a nice dinner, say farewell to Yair and sit for a while in the hotel bar, recounting our wonderful adventures in Israel.

I return from Israel so much wiser about this wonderful country. Seeing how the Israeli people live, the standard of living and the excellent welfare standards to which the horses are kept has opened my eyes. One of Yair's mottos is "no skinny horses" and the quality and condition of the animals has far exceeded my expectations.

Israel is great for trail riding. There is no private property – the land belongs to the state and is leased by the farmers, so you can ride all around the country. You just have to open and close the gates. There is no place you can't visit by horseback.

Although you can ride in the country 365 days a year, the best time is between October and May, and there are several options to choose

from. You can embark on a five-day trip through Galilee's rolling natural landscapes and along the tributaries of the Tabor Stream or take on the more challenging adventure of touring across three distinct geographical locations, staying in comfortable but basic country lodges and desert camps.

The Tour Israel trip offers a life-enriching experience and starts near Nazareth, before you take to the hills of Galilee, to the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. After riding in the Carmel region, the horses are transported south, where you then explore the wide-open spaces of the Judean desert.

More than just a riding holiday, travelling in Israel is a moving and educational experience, made even more special by the wonderful hosts and historical sites you will embrace along the journey.

For more information on riding holidays in Israel, contact In the Saddle, telephone +44 (0)1299 272997 or visit inthesaddle.com.