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## Going to a Spa? Mazel Tov!

By SARAH WILDMAN

DEFYING bans on both smoking and cellphones, two women sat on an expansive terrace with a view stretching from the Sea of Galilee to Mount Hermon, nursing teas brewed with fresh herbs - lemon grass, spearmint, hyssop, chamomile - from the farm of the Galilean spa Mitzpe Hayamim. Leaning back in a wrought-iron chaise, made comfortable by crisp white linen cushions, Irit Heruti twisted her thick, black hair into a knot at the base of her neck. It was evening, and this fourth-floor patio - a secret oasis reached after a short walk through a trellised garden - was cool and lush. The lights of nearby villages glittered below.

"There is dangerous [Israel](#) and there is normal Israel," said Ms. Heruti, a regular visitor to the spa and a trauma psychologist who recently left 11 years of emergency room work in Tel Aviv for a new, somewhat less crisis-focused, practice. "We live in that split."

Two days later, I was reminded of this moment - separate from Israel, but not disconnected from it - as Nediva Kochavi, a massage therapist, began my treatment using oil infused with home-grown myrrh. I told her that I was feeling a little anxious in the days surrounding the end of the Gaza disengagement. "Sarah, this is Israel," she said, without condescension. "Everyone who comes into my room is completely stressed out." She encouraged me to breathe.

Spas and Israel - let alone "relaxation" and Israel - might seem an unlikely pairing. Israelis are known for their aggressive driving, living and politics, in addition to the very real stress connected to terror and military maneuvers. But Israel has fully embraced the worldwide interest in spa vacations: well beyond the famous Dead Sea mud, hotels across the country now offer spa services, and a number of full-service spas have opened or expanded over the last decade.

The primary spagoers are Israelis themselves, seeking respite, nourishment and something approximating rest and enlightenment - and these resorts may come as a surprise for American travelers who, when they go to Israel, think of the Western Wall and not of herbal body wraps. (In fact, the names of these spas, most of which have opened in the last few years, often don't even appear in the most popular guidebooks. The major English-language guidebooks haven't been updated in five years. Fodor's, Frommer's, even Lonely Planet and Rough Guide all stopped putting out new editions of Israel guides in the wake of the intifada that began in 2000.)

"Things are improving with the matsav," said Yael Biedermann, marketing and sales manager for Isrotel, the company that owns the Carmel Forest Spa near Haifa, using the Hebrew word meaning situation, a catchall term used during the intifada for terror and its consequences. "Tourists are coming back and looking for new things."

The spas, particularly those in the north, are more than just new, they tap into a part of Israel that is separate from the high-strung cities. "It's different in the Galilee," Ms. Heruti said. "People here are like Steve Austin." She imitated the slow-motion movement of the "Six Million Dollar Man" to indicate slowing down.

That's not to say spas are cut off from news. At Mitzpe Hayamim, on a hot, dry mid-September day, guests in their terry robes and slippers sat around the pool looking over the Hula Valley, reading newspapers with lurid headlines about the burning of Gaza's synagogues or comparing notes on whether their children served during the disengagement.

"My son is in the Army," said Jenny Cole, a British-born Israeli wearing a floral bathing suit and a gold necklace that spelled her first name in Hebrew letters. "He begged not to go to Gaza."

These Israeli spas do not avoid the "situation," but react to it. There is an emphasis on calm, on not doing something as much as doing it. Classes are gentle, exercise not particularly extreme; gyms are tiny or underemphasized. Massage offerings reflect the travel many Israelis do after their time in the Army: ayurveda from [India](#), Thai massage, twina and shiatsu from the "Far East," as Israelis refer to it. Holistic offerings abound. Cultural performance evenings are common, and their informality feels like a distant echo of cultural nights from the heyday of the kibbutzim. This is not a rejection of Israel, it is an antidote.

When I arrived at Mitzpe Hayamim, the first of three spas I would visit on my recent trip, I was hot, dirty and frustrated. The directions friends in the Tel Aviv suburb of Herzliya had given me and my partner, Ian, were terrible; what should

Pina, curved through a moonscape of desiccated earth and rock that seemed so unlikely to give way to greenery we doubled back twice, certain we had made a wrong turn.

I was saved by a call to an accommodating reservations person who stayed on the phone with me until we found the entrance to Mitzpe Hayamim's 37-acre oasis. A guard checked our name off a security list, and the barrier was lifted on a private, wooded, winding road. The spa-hotel is one of only two Relais & Chateaux hotels in Israel, and it is expensive by Israeli standards, but there is no stuffiness. The luxury here has a light touch.

With an hour before my first treatment, I wandered around the quiet main lobby on stone paths, past the bakery where organic breads are baked daily, into the "galleria," a cavelike studio and shop that houses four artisans - two silversmiths, a sculptor and a painter. Standing behind a jewelry counter, Rivka Alfasi, a small salt-and-pepper-haired woman with striking blue eyes, overheard me speaking English.

"Oh!" she said with genuine warmth. "It's so nice to hear English again. For so long we didn't hear it."

Rivka may have welcomed me, but it was Alex Aluf, a gentle, Russian-born, hot-stone-massage therapist, who calmed me. Hot stones were part one of my "Indian Steps" package. (Others are more indigenously named, like the "Song of Songs spa series," with therapies named for biblical phrases - among them, "His lips are like lilies, dropping flowing myrrh.")

Aluf was the master the spa manager had promised, digging deep but not too deep, loosening tightened muscles with the warmed river rocks. I left his space a little greasy from the almond oil, but revived. He encouraged me to rest in a quiet solarium on wicker divans with white cushions; or to lounge in a comfortable rocking chair (or in the Jacuzzi) on one of the many sheltered terraces perfectly perched to watch the sun fading over the landscape. After a shower, I had my first taste of what Mitzpe Hayamim is most famous for: the organic kitchen.

Dinner - like breakfast and lunch, as we were to discover - was like learning a language. Words like "fresh" and "salad" and "bread" took on entirely new meaning. Almost everything is grown on premises, and the field-to-table time is measured in hours. The main dining room serves only vegetarian, dairy and fish meals - what the staff called "nonoffensive" dining. (It is not overseen by a rabbi, and there is a meat restaurant, Muscat, that is explicitly unkosher.)

The main chef, Amit Bar, is a tall, blond, bearded man who immigrated to Israel eight years ago from [Germany](#). "Today, we cut vegetables for soup tonight," he explained, by way of illustrating how "we do everything here ourselves" including "our own marmalades, pastas, ice cream."

The list went on and on. "Nothing smells of the refrigerator," he pointed out, because there is no time to refrigerate. Even the olives are theirs, cracked and pickled in a nearby Bedouin village; local kibbutzim provide anything that cannot be grown on site. The next day, we hiked into the fields to see the vegetables as well as the goats, sheep and cows that were producing the varied cheeses, yogurts and ice cream.

The next stop was Vered Hagalil, a dude ranch of sorts, laid out in a series of guest houses well situated for visiting the whole of the Galilee and the Golan. As we drove onto the property, Vered Hagalil first emerged as a series of horseback riding rings. Cantering in formation was a team of ranch hands dressed for [Texas](#), down to the cowboy hats and boots.

Vered Hagalil was opened in 1963 and the cottages and studios seem to have been designed then. There's a very Brady-Bunch-goes-to-Israel feel about the low-slung couches and earth tones - but any kitschiness is made up for by the view of the Sea of Galilee from each room's big stone porch. At night, the lights of Tiberias and surrounding kibbutzim glowed; during the day, small groups of horseback-riding visitors emerged from below the bluff, creating a striking tableau.

Four years ago, Noa Ronen opened Karov Lateva (Close to Nature), a minispa offering massages, reflexology and holistic therapies, in a bungalow on the Vered Hagalil campus. Noa, barefoot with waist-length hair, has a neo-hippieness about her, and the spa itself is all low Indian print couches and wall hangings. It is clean and small and has the feel of a Berkeley cooperative.

Intrigued by the holistic options, which seemed to be on the menu at a number of spas, I persuaded her to perform spiritual energy healing. Noa was leery; she prefers to do energy healing only with her regular clients who come from Tiberias or Rosh Pina. For the most part, she explained, plying me with mint-infused water after our session, Vered Hagalil guests come for relaxation: the hot stones or Thai massages, occasionally reiki or reflexology.

Vered Hagalil is by far the most family friendly of the places we visited. Beyond horseback riding, there is plenty to do. So much, in fact, that two Israeli friends eagerly took the bus north to meet us. The next day, the four of us, armed with

Kfar Blum, which is itself opening a spa next spring, to kayak down the Jordan.

After parking and having our bags searched, we were herded onto buses that drove us still farther north. Once we got off, we listened to an Israeli river guide shout directives in rapid-fire Hebrew - "don't do anything stupid!" - before the every-man-for-himself rush for life preservers, paddles and the boats themselves. Most of our trip was leisure boating; there were only three spots that could be legitimately called rapids. This was swimmable, clean water (if shallow and a bit muddy at times), and Israeli families, couples and teenagers were camped out in groups all along the way.

The drive to our next and final stop, the Carmel Forest Spa (Yaarot Hacarmel) brought us on a relatively short, if perilous, climb into the Carmel Forest Mountains to a complex that is cut into the mountain, giving many of its rooms views of the valley below. As Irit Heruti said to me earlier, you are either a Mitzpe Hayamim person or a Yaarot Hacarmel person. Arriving in the hushed halls with signs everywhere warning that children under 16 were not permitted, I understood why. You could be in Palm Springs or the [Berkshires](#); there is less here that says Israel, other than the language.

Our hotel room was newer than ones we had stayed in at our two previous spots, with crisp white duvet covers and a recently renovated bathroom. The expansive lawns, unusual in such a dry country, were exquisitely manicured and the pools were immaculate - one indoors, with a whirlpool bath and a Turkish hammam, and one outdoors. In late afternoon, large terry-covered mattresses were scattered on the lawn near the outside pool. But the crispness can border on sterility - nothing is out of place, from the perfectly scattered terra-cotta gravel on the paths to the marble hallways.

The spa itself is the draw. At quarter to each hour, terry-robed spagoers begin to congregate in the sunny room that faces the indoor pool, waiting for their treatments. At the hour mark, the specialists emerge, also dressed in white, whispering the names of their charges, who shuffle up to meet them. My first afternoon I had Liat, a facialist from Haifa, who talked to me about the guests who came to Carmel during the intifada - mostly religious people, she explained, if they were foreign, or Israelis.

Liat was aggressive about my pores, telling me, "Israelis really know how to clean a face." She ran out of time, unfortunately, and had to send me, final mask still drying, into the women's lounge to remove the clay myself.

That afternoon, sitting in the Jacuzzi, we quickly realized that we were hearing much more English. A foursome of British Jews who were on their third visit to the spa told us of their strong commitment to Israel. Ivan, a semiretired 60-year-old triathlete, was the most gregarious of the bunch. He attended every class - including the two I took, stretch and nia (ecstatic dance), and had no shyness about imploring the instructors to "speak in English, please!" (For those less group-oriented, Carmel has mapped several hikes just off premises; the loops designated by color as 10k, 5k or 2k, depending on motivation level. Ivan took to those as well.)

Unlike the Israelis, Ivan and his friends were more interested in exercise than spa treatments but were quite enthusiastic on hearing about ours. On Day 2, I went for the indulgent ayurveda massage, which was conducted by a taciturn, pregnant British woman. She told me many women are surprised by the massage, which includes pouring of warm sesame oil over the body after it has been scrubbed with a bean exfoliant - not because of the oil, but because there is little more than a loincloth between you and your therapist.

That night, sleepy and sated from massage and steam, we ate our dinner on a terrace. The kitchen at Carmel is kosher; breakfast and lunch are dairy meals, dinner is meat. As at Mitzpe Hayamim, the meals are expansive, but the comfort and casual openness of the former is replaced by formality. At Carmel, timed dinner reservations are required.

The food was excellent, the night air warm, and the lights from the closest towns felt very far away. On the menu for the evening was barbecued fish, chicken, meat, even tofu, prepared outdoors on huge grills. An Israeli Arab woman prepared zaatar-spiced breads, pulling them, steaming hot, from a stone oven for each plate.

In a room one flight up, Uri Harpaz, a folksinger, was the "evening activity." We joined and suddenly found ourselves back in Israel. Mr. Harpaz sat on stage with his guitar; a PowerPoint presentation put the lyrics - 1960's Naomi Shemer ballads, songs about war, peace, love and youth, all in Hebrew - on a screen behind him. And the audience, unabashedly, sang along with every tune.

The singer closed his set with David Broza and Yonatan Geffen's 1970's paean to peace, "Yehiyeh Tov" ("It Will Be Good)," which includes the line "Children wear wings and fly off to the Army and after two years they come back with no answer." It brought the house down.

## **Where to Relax**

### GETTING THERE

Continental, El Al and Delta fly nonstop to Tel Aviv from [Newark](#) Liberty and Kennedy Airports. In September, direct flights were above \$1,000 and can be close to \$1,300 from Rosh Hashana through Sukkot in the fall, at Passover and in the summer. A random Web search in late October for mid-November flights turned up an \$872 nonstop from Newark on Continental. Less expensive flights can often be found by connecting through a European city on Lufthansa, Alitalia, British Airways and KLM, among others.

We arranged to rent a car through Travelocity from Budget. We were unprepared for what we were told was a mandatory insurance charge that doubled the cost of the car. Avoid our mistake by checking with credit cards - and personal car insurance - about coverage in [Israel](#) before leaving the [United States](#). Budget Israel insisted our insurance would not cover collision damage. Driving in Israel can be a harrowing experience since drivers are aggressive and most highways have only two lanes, but a car makes getting to these spas a great deal easier.

#### WHERE TO STAY

In Israel higher rates are in effect on Thursday and Friday nights; Saturday is usually considered a weeknight. High season refers, generally, to Jewish holidays, as well as secular seasonal highs.

The dialing prefix for the telephone numbers are (972-4); within Israel, it is (04). The spas post some prices in dollars and others in Israeli shekels.

Mitzpe Hayamim, Rosh Pina, 699-4555, fax 699-9555; [www.mizpe-hayamim.com](http://www.mizpe-hayamim.com). Established in 1966 as a sanitarium by Dr. Eric Yaros, a German émigré and homeopath, Mitzpe Hayamim maintains his vegetarian philosophy in its organic kitchen. The hotel offers an impressive view of the Hula Valley. It is recommended that spa services should be booked two weeks in advance, but the staff was very accommodating about changes when we arrived. Double rooms with breakfast and either lunch or dinner start at \$280 or all three meals at \$330. Spa services start at 250 shekels, about \$50, at 4.7 shekels to the dollar. Children older than 4 are welcome.

Vered Hagalil, Korazim Junction, 693-5785, fax 693-4964. Built in 1963 by a [Chicago](#) transplant, Yehuda Avni, and his Jerusalem-born wife, Yonah, Vered Hagalil is as close as Israel gets to a dude ranch. There are 50 horses on site, and tours of the region are available. Lodging rates range from \$65 for an off-season weeknight in a room, double occupancy, to \$185, in high season, for a cottage with kitchenette that sleeps four. Children of all ages are welcome. The four-year-old spa on site, Karov Lateva, can be booked by calling 686-0283. Spa services start at 160 shekels.

Carmel Forest Spa, 830-7878; [www.isrotel.co.il](http://www.isrotel.co.il), is a luxurious spa that opened eight years ago in the Carmel Forest, a nature preserve about an hour from Tel Aviv just before Haifa. It has two pools, a fitness center and an on-site nutritionist, as well as facials, massages and all manner of beauty rituals. Rooms range from \$360 to \$450 on weekdays and \$455 to \$545 on weekends. Average spa rates are 270 shekels. Guests must be at least 16 years old.

#### WHERE TO EAT

At Mitzpe Hayamim and Carmel Forest Spa, dining is included in the room price; at Vered Hagalil, dinners are not, though many guests opt to dine at the resort's steak restaurant.

In nearby Rosh Pina, where there is a handful of restaurants, we tried Ja'uni, 30 David Shub Street, 693-1881. The large outdoor stone terrace is a draw, as is a staff that seems as earthy as the town. While you wait for your food, the waiters bring over puzzles and other games. Gimmicks aside, the food was fresh and delicious, and portions were huge. Dinner for two with wine is about 170 shekels.

On Road No. 789 in Ramat Hagolan, we tried Mor V'kinamon, which is near Moshav Bnei Yehuda; 682-2166. The setting is minimalist chic, with blond wood and high ceilings. Two restaurants in one: upstairs the emphasis is on meat, downstairs on dairy. Dinner for two with wine runs 250 shekels upstairs and about half that downstairs. Try to get there to watch the sunset over the Sea of Galilee.

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