

Jerusalem

In a city where three of the world's major religions rub shoulders, **Albert Ehrnrooth** explores the churches, temples and markets, catches a Jerusalem-style *Rigoletto* and gets fleeced buying a fleece

For some people Jerusalem is the most spiritual place in the world and followers of three major Abrahamic religions consider it to be a very holy place indeed. There are few cities in the world that offer more museums, churches and dramatic history per square mile. But the city's nightlife is only moderately exciting and the arts are not a great pulling factor for tourists. Jerusalem's mayor Nir Barkat wants to see a change and he has recently pushed the city's municipality to double the financial support for cultural events. Can Jerusalem in the future take on Tel Aviv as the capital of classical music?

Pilgrims will continue to flock to Jerusalem until kingdom come, but secular tourists are, in times of unrest, a bit more cautious. The tension in Gaza is rising once more and Palestinians living in the West Bank can, because of the separation barrier, no longer travel freely into Arab parts of Jerusalem. At the same time it is true that tourists are now rarely deliberately targeted in attacks. You certainly see more police and military on the streets of Paris and Brussels than you do in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Israel established, after the Six-Day War in 1967, new municipal borders in Jerusalem that are, to put it mildly, controversial. But on a positive note the Israelis reopened holy Jewish and Christian sites that had been inaccessible under Jordanian rule. According to the latest census Jerusalem

remains a strongly religious city with 62% Jews, 35% Muslims and 2% Christians.

Just like in Rome, you only need to amble around the Holy city to soak up the history. King David captured a small Jebusite settlement around 1000 BCE and his son built the first Temple on the Mount, which makes Jerusalem one of the world's oldest living cities. To get an idea of the multi-layered archaeological remains start off by visiting the Citadel and the Tower of David museum next to the Old City's Jaffa Gate. Try to catch a performance of the Night Spectacular which with sound, light and projections on the ancient walls succinctly tells the story of Jerusalem from King Herod's reign, through the Ottoman period to the time when Palestine became a British Mandate.

I am told that Jerusalem has been captured and recaptured over 40 times over the centuries. When you enter the Old City's Jewish Quarter and pass through the Zion Gate you can't but help notice the pockmarks from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. After the Jordanians were driven out in 1967 the Israelis rebuilt the heavily damaged Jewish Quarter in style, preserving the narrow alleyways. But first they bulldozed the Moroccan Quarter which took up the whole area in front of the Western Wall. The Kotel (as the wall is called by Jews) is basically all that remains of the external retaining wall of the Second Temple which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. But it is the most



**TRAVEL INFO****Average Temperatures:**

Winter: 8°C – Summer: 24°C

Currency: Israeli Shekel (AUS1=ILS2.88)

Best time to visit: May through November is ideal to enjoy outdoor events, performances and wander the city, but be sure to cross-check with religious Holy Days.

TOURIST INFORMATION

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sacred site in Judaism and the plaza that was created becomes a very busy open-air synagogue at the start of the Sabbath on Friday evenings. Traditionally men and women pray separately but earlier this year a mixed-gender prayer area was designated.

On the other side of the Wailing Wall (the old Christian name) is the Temple Mount with the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third most sacred site for Muslims. The prominent Dome of the Rock with its gold-plated cap is the oldest surviving Islamic monument anywhere in the world. Unfortunately non-Muslims are barred entrance and because my visit coincided with Ramadan I couldn't even get near these architectural treasures.

“DESPITE HAGGLING LIKE AN OLD PRO I WAS FLEECEED BUYING A BEDOUIN CARPET”

I strongly recommend a guided tour of the Western Wall Tunnels, which must be booked in advance. You get to walk along a 2,000-year-old street, now underground, that follows the continuation of the Western Wall. There is even a small synagogue, which is thought to be the closest place to the original Holy of Holies. Archaeologists are still digging and making new discoveries that add to the city's already incredible history.

If you aim to follow in Jesus' footsteps from his trial to the site of his Crucifixion, you start just inside the Lion's Gate in the Muslim Quarter. There are signs for the 14 Stations of the Cross, but alternatively follow the constant stream of devoted pilgrims, nuns

and monks, who retrace the Way of Suffering. It does get a bit confusing here and there, and sometimes very crowded, so to save the pain, join a guided tour. Even if you skip a number of Stations don't miss the ninth, which is at the entrance of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate. Continue up to the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where you may be surprised to find a mud hut village that wouldn't look out of place in Ethiopia.

Winding your way down through one of the five churches in this sacred labyrinth, you end up in the plaza outside the mighty doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Here the last Five Stations are located. The original part of the Church of Resurrection, as it is also known, dates back to the time of the Crusaders (12th century). Over the centuries a myriad of altars and side chapels have been added by many different Christian communities. It is a chaotic place, to say the least, and the renovation work going on in the central rotunda doesn't help. An objective observer wouldn't guess that within this church the two holiest sites in Christendom can be found; Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified and the tomb from which on the third day God raised him from the dead.

From here it is a hop, skip and a jump through the busy souk to the grandest of the seven thoroughfares into the Old City that mere mortals are allowed to use (the Messiah will eventually enter through the walled up Golden Gate). Damascus Gate forms an imposing 16th-century entrance to the Muslim Quarter and it is the best place for people-watching in Al-Quds (the Arabic name for Jerusalem). The lively Muslim bazaar is the place for souvenir shopping and it was here that I, despite haggling like an old pro, was fleeced buying a Bedouin carpet and some flowery Palestinian embroidery.

But I'm not complaining – my dog has happily adopted the camel hair rug.

It is early evening and time to make my way to the Sultan's Pool, a short stroll from the Jaffa Gate. This is an old reservoir that has been converted into an amphitheatre and as a show opener the setting sun imbues the nearby Ottoman ramparts with a dusky orange hue. This is where the main events of the annual Jerusalem Opera Festival are held.

Unfortunately the magic of the venue had not inspired the Festival's production of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. The Duke is decidedly unexciting and barely keeps it together. On the other hand Boris Statsenko gives a solid and believable performance as the tragic jester Rigoletto, but in the end it is Gilda, a radiant Hila Fahima, and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the talented Francesco Cilluffo, that save the evening. The beautiful Israeli coloratura soprano Fahima has a voice clear as a bell and she is a star member of the ensemble of the Vienna State Opera. Israel needs to see and hear her more often.

Jerusalem has experienced many wars and tumultuous times but it remains uniquely the place where three great religions rub shoulders. There is a lack of tolerance and harmony, despite the fact that these religions have so much in common. The arts do bring people together and Jerusalem could do with more of that. Walking back to my hotel (the marvellous Mamilla), I come to think of what Israeli Opera's general director Hanna Munitz told me recently:

“In this country we need something for our souls. It is not only about the Bible and the traditional reasons for living in Israel. The new generations really need something for the heart, the soul, the brain. You want culture, otherwise what is the point?” ●



Opera in the Sultan's Pool

Israel's principal opera company is based in Tel Aviv, while Jerusalem strangely enough lacks an indoor venue to accommodate large productions. But the long summer months are ideal for al fresco performances at the Sultan's Pool, where next year the *Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves* will soar (*Nabucco*, June 21-22, 2017). They will be accompanied by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra – the Israeli Broadcasting Authority's in-house band. I recommend the orchestra's Liturgical Series in the Autumn and Spring. Israel Camerata Jerusalem are the country's best chamber ensemble and they will visit Australia in September. Back home they occasionally perform at the iconic YMCA hotel, designed by the Empire State Building's architects.