

A Hands-On Tour of the Jewish State

Seeing the country through the eyes of children is not only fun, it broadens the view.

By Hillel Kuttler

“

ey, Poppa, come here and look at this!”

My 8-year-old son Gil was perched last June atop yet another tank at Israel's Armored Corps Museum in Latrun, just west of Jerusalem. It was a British one, a Centurion, and he mimed maneuvering the tank's machine gun into position and mowing down the enemy. His mission complete, Gil scampered off to examine a Soviet T-55, a model that Israel captured during the War of Independence and the Six-Day War.

Five minutes later, his brother Yossi, 9, announced, “I'm bored.” Knowing what would catch my little sports fanatic's interest, I marched him over to a plaque I'd just noticed, planted beside another tank. It revealed that the site's renovations were partially funded by a 1948 armored corps communications officer, Ted Arison. I explained that the late Mr. Arison went on to found the NBA's Miami Heat. His interest piqued, Yossi asked about the man and about what he had done during the War of Independence.

Unlike at some amusement park kiddie ride, the tanks are not props. The country's existence has depended, in large measure, on the Israelis in tanks stopping the bad guys in theirs. Inside the former British police fortress, we watched a film on the tank corps' role in defending Israel. In a back room, a taped voice intoned all the tankistim who had fallen in Israel's wars as a projector shone their names.

Back outside, we scanned the panels listing all the fallen, the white stone a reverse of the black granite at Washington's Vietnam Memorial. The list included a Yom Kippur War fatality who shared our last name, and we wondered whether he might be related. From an overlook, we gazed at the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway to grasp how crucial was the Israel Defense Forces' seizure of this position in 1967, and their failure to conquer it 19 years earlier.

For children, especially boys, this is as hands-on as touring gets. So it went during two-and-a-half weeks of experiencing





Israel as I never had during 13 previous visits: through the eyes of my children. One does not shlep youngsters to the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay — but, presumably, parents and little 'uns find other ways to tour Paris together. Same for Israel. Tel Aviv Museum and Yad Vashem: out; child-friendly destinations: in. I could convey Israel's layered significance, but subtly.

A change of orientation was needed. Instead of the latest exhibitions and hot restaurants, I asked friends and relatives in Israel where they liked taking their children. I bought Barbara Sofer's excellent book, *Kids Love Israel; Israel Loves Kids*. From Zichron Yaakov, my mechanic's brother even e-mailed descriptions of his favorite places, along with telephone numbers and Internet links.

In months of planning, I amassed a bulging folder of attractions and designed an itinerary, organized geographically to limit backtracking and minimize gasoline fill-ups. (Please, no more whining about prices at U.S. pumps.) I didn't overschedule. Such activities as horseback riding, rafting, touring the Mini Israel complex and visiting a beekeeper will wait for next time.

Being on vacation, we went with the flow. One day, we had a wonderful time at Gan HaShlosa, a gem of a national

park in the Beit Shean Valley, featuring winding, natural pools, interrupted only by a waterfall here, an ancient flour mill there. The kangaroo park on the grounds to which I'd purchased tickets for late afternoon? My boys were having too much fun — okay, I was having too much fun — to contemplate toweling off and packing up, so we stayed until closing time.

Another great family-fun excursion: In Rechovot, we visited a little-known (even to Israelis) but fascinating site called Kibbutz Hill.

You think Paul Newman's character hoodwinked that British officer in *Exodus*? On the grounds of this kibbutz-training site, the Haganah ran a phony-baloney laundry to cover for a clandestine factory that manufactured more than two million bullets from 1945 to 1948. Behind a movable washing drum, we climbed down the ladder to see for ourselves. Everything remains: the machinery, furniture, testing range — even a tanning salon where the young ammunition makers assumed the hue of supposed kibbutznik field workers. Then we climbed up the far end of the 68-foot-long tunnel to the equally faux bakery. The adult and child in you will love every minute of the visit, especially hearing the guide relate how British authorities were tricked into issuing ad-

vance notice of visits.

Throughout our trip, I wanted my sons to experience Israel's natural beauty, so I de-emphasized urban areas. We swam in a pool at the Hamat Gader hot springs and saw an alligator show there, spent a whole afternoon splashing along at Nachal Snir National Park and frolicking in its lone waterfall, climbed up a 1930s-era replica of a tower-and-stockade defense, walked on a natural bridge, poked around the Rosh Hanikra grottoes and watched cows being milked on our cousins' kibbutz.

Because of Israel's hold on the Jewish imagination, my boys, in the countdown to our trip, settled on their own must-see sites. One, Jerusalem's Old City, offers abundant stimulation for children. We toured the Western Wall tunnels, traipsed along the city wall's ramparts from the Jaffa Gate to the Dung Gate and imagined soldiers crouching in the parapets, shopped for chess sets and kiddush cups, ate lunch and people-watched at an outdoor pizzeria in the Jewish Quarter and even spent hours in the simplest of childhood and parental pursuits: on the slides and swings of a lovely playground along the quarter's walls. My values and all those tuition bills were redeemed a thousand-fold at the kotel (Western Wall) when Yossi and Gil spontaneously re-

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tried their siddurim from my backpack and prayed.

We had read together a library book on Masada, and the Jews' struggle captivated them both. From school discussions, Gil just had to visit the Dead Sea and experience the magic of floating on its minerals. We spent one day experiencing both sites. Gil, for whom nine hours' sleep never suffices, jumped out of bed at 4 a.m. so we could make the 10-minute drive south from our Kibbutz Ein Gedi hotel. Masada opens one hour before dawn, so we grabbed flashlights and crunched along the Snake Path. Yossi, who deems full-body exertion pointless unless it involves a ball, led the way up, cajoling Gil and me when we lagged.

At 5:20, we reached the flat summit just as the sun rose over the Dead Sea and Jordan. Masada's peak opens onto a vastness that took three hours to explore. Children will love Masada's nooks and crannies. Even without a guide, and with minimal signage, Yossi and Gil were enthralled, dashing from one ruin to the next while imagining how the Bar Koch-

ba Revolt survivors lived and died.

We raced back to the kibbutz to wolf down a late breakfast, then played a round of miniature golf (not a phrase often heard) on the kibbutz's 17-hole (don't ask!) course and escaped the brutal sun in the sparkling pool overlooking the Dead Sea. A stay at the hotel includes admission to a nearby changing facility and spa at the Dead Sea, so we headed there. When in Venice, you take a gondola ride; when at the Dead Sea, you slop on the mud, get horizontal and revel in the novel experience, like an astronaut going weightless.

On that note: I brought Yossi and Gil to see the burial site of an Israeli hero. A five-minute drive from our cousin's kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley, we visited the cemetery of Moshav Nahalal. We found the grave of Ilan Ramon, Israel's first astronaut, who died with six crewmates aboard the space shuttle Columbia. We had closely followed the 2003 mission and mourned its shocking end. At the gravesite, my sons exhibited proper reverence. We talked about Ramon's values and contributions and placed stones atop his birth date, then just five days away.

We also spoke about Moshe Dayan at his grave, a few paces from Ramon's. Inscriptions on the gravestones of the settlement's founders led to a discussion on why many Israelis (including Ramon) had Hebraicized their names.

From space, where Ramon could see his homeland, he urged Israelis to add to the country's greenery. And so we did. A short drive north of Nahalal sits one of the two Jewish National Fund forests where foreign visitors can plant trees. I emptied every coin we'd saved in our JNF tzedakah box and purchased three bulbs.

A guide took us to a large, parched field and let us select our holes. We recited a prayer, deposited each bulb and scooped in handfuls of dirt. Yossi would later write in our synagogue's newsletter, "It was very special for me to help shade the hot country of Israel."

He also added this note: "We had a great time in Israel! You definitely should go." 

Hillel Kuttler last wrote for Inside about the Jews of Lisbon.



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