

## Eilat *By Peter Abelow*

Photo: Jack Hazut-IsraeliImage



“**W**e present the Gulf of Eilat to the State of Israel.” With these dramatic words in a cable sent

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from Palmach soldiers on the evening of March 10, 1949, Israel’s War of Liberation was brought to a close. Earlier in the day, a unit of the Palmach Negev brigade, approaching from the Negev, and a Golani brigade, coming down the Arava Valley, had arrived—one hour after the other—at Um Rash Rash (Eilat’s Arabic name), a mostly deserted beach on the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba. To their chagrin,

they discovered that no one had brought an Israeli flag. The innovative soldiers took a white sheet and drew two stripes and a Magen David. The flag was hoisted and Eilat, with all of its three buildings, was officially ours.

In truth, while the United Nations allocated Eilat to Israel in the Partition Plan of November 1947, Eilat dates back to Biblical times. During the period of the United Kingdom (9<sup>th</sup>

century BCE), Eilat was an important southern port. As we read in I Melachim 9:26, “And King Solomon built a fleet of ships in Ezion-Geber, which is besides Elath, on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom” (trans. by Davka Corp., the Soncino Talmud CD). After being reconquered by Edom (II Melachim 8), it appears that the city was restored by King Amaziah (II Melachim 14:21) “And all the people of Judah took Azariah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king instead of his father Amaziah. He built Elath, and restored it to Judah, after that the king slept with his fathers.”

In 1950, the Israeli government officially turned Eilat from a military outpost into a new city. Since then, in a little more than half a century, Eilat has grown into one of Israel’s most

popular tourist resorts. With a population of about 38,000, Eilat boasts some of the country’s most beautiful and luxurious hotels. Residents and visitors are also attracted to Eilat since it’s a tax-free zone. Purchases are exempt from the 17 percent VAT (Value-Added Tax) that is added in other parts of the country.

When most people think of Eilat, they envision hotels, beaches and swimming pools. In truth, there is much more to do and many things to see. Visitors can take a boat ride on or parasail high over the Gulf, tethered to a 100-meter rope. They can enjoy paddle boating, banana boating, jet skiing and water skiing.

One of the highlights of any trip to Eilat is a visit to the Underwater Observatory. Visitors are treated to an underwater experience in the natural

coral reef, where they can view hundreds of colorful and unusual fish through windows that are 20 feet beneath the surface of the Gulf of Eilat. There is also a large shark tank, a fascinating exhibit of marine life and the Oceanarium, a Disney-style ride through the depths. Another way to see the fish and the reef is from one of a number of glass-bottom boats which have regularly scheduled cruises. One of my personal favorites is “Diving with the Dolphins.” Visitors wear wetsuits and scuba tanks and, accompanied by their own personal instructor, descend for a 30-minute incredible swim with the dolphins. (Advance reservations are necessary.)

The hills surrounding Eilat are spectacular. Timna Park, one of Israel’s national parks, is located 30 minutes north of Eilat on the Arava Road. The



Photo: Peter Abelow

*Eilat's steep hills are great for hiking.*

park contains the famous Solomon's Pillars, an unusual formation of tall, red-rock pillars. There is also a hike through the area of ancient copper mines and an interesting film and exhibit on the first millennium BCE art of copper refining. You get a real sense of Israel being a land "...whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig bronze" (Deuteronomy 8:9) and where "Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from the ore" (Job 28:2). Other features of Timna Park are the unusual mushroom-like rock formations, ancient sand drawings and a picnic ground alongside a beautiful lake, in the shadow of the mountains.

Take the other road north from Eilat, the Moon Valley Road, to an amazing view, from Mount Hizkiyahu. In just a few minutes, you will rise hundreds of meters above the Gulf and over the city. On the western side of the parking lot, next to the army observation post, you are standing right on the Egyptian border, looking

into Sinai. From the other side, there is an even more spectacular view of the Gulf, and a broad panorama including Eilat, Aqaba, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Each spot includes a map as well as a description of what you are seeing. This look-out point is just 50 feet off the main road and completely accessible by any car. And the view is worth the effort! On a clear day, you can literally see for miles in every direction.

Another way to appreciate the scenery is to get "off the beaten track" and hike. One of my favorites is the hike at Red Canyon, a short drive past Mount Hizkiyahu on the right side of the Moon Valley Road. Follow the sign off the main highway along a dirt road (about a half of a mile) to the parking area. The trail begins rather benignly along a wadi (dry streambed) but soon reaches the canyon itself. The hike then involves a series of increasingly steep descents using ladders and handholds with the ever-higher walls of the canyons on both sides. This hike is not advised for children under the age of

eight, but older children will find it exhilarating. Please note: Anyone interested in hiking in the Eilat area should first visit the local Haganat HaTeva office (Israel's Nature Society), located directly across from the Coral Beach. There you can find detailed trail maps and explanations, as well as advice about which hikes are appropriate for you and your family.

For those seeking a more sedate way to see the sights, there are a number of companies that offer Jeep trips of varying lengths through the Eilat hills and to places that would be otherwise inaccessible except by foot.

When your day is almost finished, take a few minutes to stop at the Ink Flag monument. It is located less than 100 feet south of the Eilat mall, at the spot where the first Israeli flag was raised just 54 years ago. Sit in the plaza and as you look at the replica of the flag with the modern city in the background, spend a few minutes contemplating the magnitude of the miracle of modern Israel. **JA**

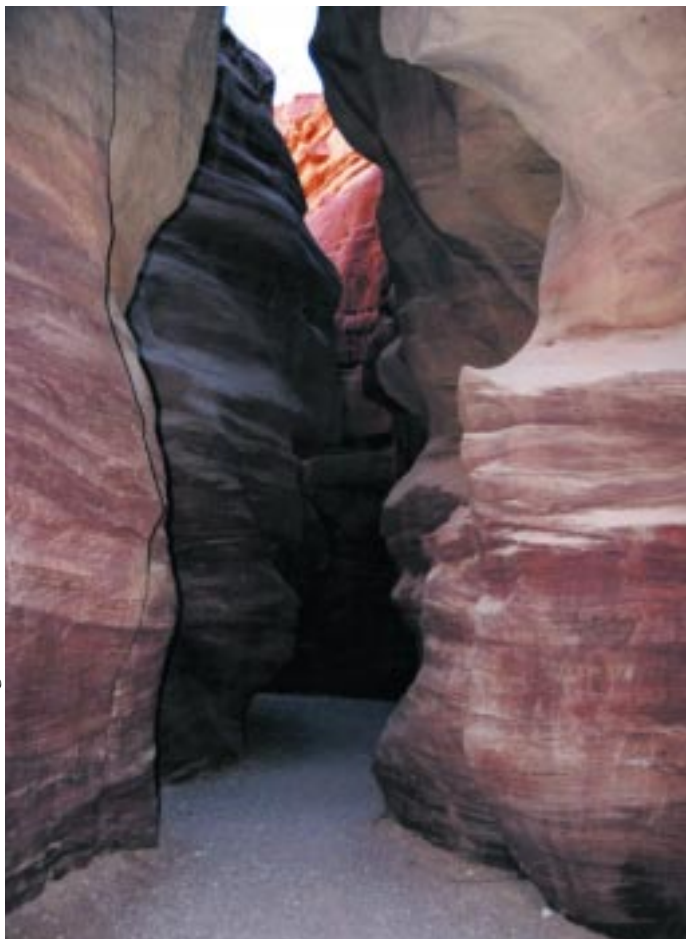


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*The hike at Red Canyon is a favorite among tourists.*