

A LAND OF MILK AND HONEY – AND SEA...

If you like to start the day with a swim in the sea, visit Israel. By **Mikhal Heffer**

Two dolphins, enjoying a peaceful swim in the clear, fresh water of the Red Sea, suddenly found their tranquility disturbed. Their eyes opened wide in surprise and amusement at the sight of a large group of humans, swimming vigorously along the length of the colourful coral reef. Terrific – some playmates at last!

I was there too, torn between concentrating on the rhythm of my strokes and gazing at the incredible beauty beneath the surface of the Red Sea – coral of an infinite

range of shades, schools of fish of all shapes and spectacular colours, and two cute dolphins who suddenly found themselves some playmates.

Eilat is Israel's southernmost city and chief vacation resort. Until 60 years ago, it was a neglected Egyptian police station at the northernmost tip of the Red Sea. Nowadays, it's a thriving tourist resort, bustling with hotels, restaurants, clubs and thousands of tourists, who come to enjoy the endless sunshine, the beaches and the clear blue sea, with its underwater paradise.

THE SEA TEMPERATURE IN EILAT IS ALWAYS 23 DEGREES, WHATEVER THE SEASON



Open water training camp at Eilat

I always experience Eilat as two separate worlds: the world above the water, teeming with people, noise, music, shopping and entertainment, and the world below, of deep silence, tranquility and indescribable beauty.

The group I was swimming with alongside the dolphins was part of an open water training camp that was held over a long, activity-packed weekend: twice-daily training sessions, open-water swimming techniques, navigation, drafting, diving techniques, overtaking, and to top it all, a 4.5 km swim along the spectacular coral reef.

The sea temperature in Eilat is always 23 degrees, whatever the season: in other words, pleasantly cool during the summer and pleasantly warm in winter. The sea in the bay is also usually calm, so that, all in all, swimming there is a highly enjoyable experience.

While swimming in the ocean, I feel like one of the fish in the giant schools that surround me, a primal sensation of being at one with nature and clearing my head of all the junk that daily life leaves. No work, no running around, no bills or mortgage, just me, the water and the fish, and of course, my friends around me (that is, of the human variety).

This feeling accompanies me when I leave the water too and gives me a tremendous boost of energy to continue with my daily life.

SWIM, EAT & CELEBRATE WITH US

SWIMMER'S PARADISE

For a swimming enthusiast like myself, Israel is a great country to live in. Admittedly, it's not always easy living here, with numerous challenges, but there are two things that compensate for all the drawbacks, in my opinion: sunny weather for most of the year and wonderful beaches.

From almost anywhere in Israel you are never more than about an hour's drive away from a beach, and most of Israel's big cities are by the coast, so that you can roll out of bed straight into the sea for a swim and still have time to get to work before the boss. Before my workday begins, I leave my husband sleeping in bed, sling my holdall over my shoulder, and take a 15-minute drive to the nearest beach – Palmahim.

This is a natural beach and nature reserve, beyond the reach of the long arm of the tourist industry, except for changing rooms and a small café. It is the natural habitat of giant sea turtles that lay their eggs here. The moment when the baby sea turtles are hatched and start making their way toward the waves is a treat for visiting nature-lovers, who make sure that the newborns head in the right direction.

Palmahim is frequented by a small group of regular morning swimmers, and the WhatsApp group we share is full of messages and even bits of juicy gossip... There is nothing quite like the pleasure of sitting around at the end of a strenuous swim and sipping a steaming cup of tea prepared on a camping ring, chatting with your swimming mates about life and the universe, before continuing with the day's routine. This is my daily vacation time.

Many more groups of crazies like us are springing up all over Israel's beaches, people who like a wet start to the day. I meet them at events, such as the open water swimming competitions that are held on different beaches.

There are many reasons to visit Israel: the varied landscape of hills, water and desert; the history of the major Western religions; wonderful weather; and a warm, fascinating human mosaic. And if you like to start the day with a swim in the open sea, now you have yet another good reason.

SWIMMING EVENTS IN ISRAEL

4 OCTOBER 2017, The Island Adventure, Maagan Michael – 0.7km, 1.5km, 3km, 4.5 km

20 OCTOBER 2017, Tel Aviv Port to Port – 1.8km, 4.5 km

MAY 2018, Achziv Beach – 0.75km, 1.5km, 3km, 5km

JUNE 2018, Haifa – 1km, 2.6km, 4.5km, 7.6 km

SEPTEMBER 2018, Lake Kinneret swim with 10,000 swimmers, an event that has been held for 65 years consecutively – 1.5km, 3.5 km

See bit.ly/1XhhXFa for more info on open water swimming in Israel

JINGLE JINGLE, COLD WATER TINGLE