

ISRAEL PRACTICAL INFORMATION AS AT **NOVEMBER 2013**

Languages

Hebrew and Arabic are Israel's two official languages, but it is rare to find an Israeli who isn't bi-lingual (at least). The country is a melting pot, with citizens hailing from nearly every single country on the face of the earth - many of whom speak the language of their parents. In addition, English is a required subject in the majority of the country's compulsory education institutions, through the end of secondary school, with most students starting to study English before the age of 10.

Money and Customs Matters

The Israeli currency is the New Shekel (NIS). It comes in 20, 50, 100 and 200 shekel notes. One shekel is divided into 100 agoroth, and coins come in 5, 10 and 50 agoroth denominations, as well as one shekel, five shekel and 10 shekel pieces.

Money can be exchanged in just about any bank in Israel. All are open mornings, Sunday-Thursday, from 8:15 or 8:30am. Afternoon hours vary. Many are closed on Friday, and all on Saturday and most Jewish holidays.

Quite a number of banks in Israel's major cities have automatic tellers that change foreign currency money into Israeli money 24 hours a day.

Companies specializing in money changing are plentiful in the country. Each maintains its own business hours, so check.

Whether native or foreigner, anyone bringing electrical appliances valued at more than \$200 into Israel, must go through the red channel at customs. This is true of everything from laptop computers to video camcorders. (Regular cameras are just about the only exception). This rule also applies to diving equipment. At the customs desk at Ben Gurion Airport, the tourist will fill out a form recording the items he or she is "importing" and will be asked to leave a credit card imprint filled in with the sum of the customs duty for the goods in question (in lieu of a cash deposit). This form will not be cashed, but will be cancelled when the tourist leaves the country and shows the customs authorities that whatever was brought into the country is being re-exported. At Ouvda Airport, for travelers to Eilat, the procedure is the same, but instead of the credit card, customs authorities will be satisfied with a signed declaration that the tourist will be leaving the country with the "imported" goods. Upon departure, he or she will be required to show that this is the case.

Adult visitors to Israel may import, duty free, 250 cigarettes or 250 g of tobacco products, two liters of wine and one liter of spirits, plus 250 mg. of perfume. Please note that animals, plants, firearms, fresh meat and raw materials may not be brought into Israel, unless a permit has been obtained in advance.

Weather

Israel enjoys long, warm, dry summers (April-October) and generally mild winters (November-March) with somewhat drier, cooler weather in hilly regions, such as Jerusalem and Safed. Rainfall is relatively heavy in the north and center of the country, with much less in the northern Negev and almost negligible amounts in the southern areas.

Regional conditions vary considerably, with humid summers and mild winters on the coast; dry summers and moderately cold winters in the hill regions; hot dry summers and pleasant winters in the Jordan Valley; and year-round semi-desert conditions in the Negev.

Weather extremes range from occasional winter snowfall in the mountain regions to periodic oppressively hot dry winds that send temperatures soaring, particularly in spring and autumn.

The Average temperature in April is 21C and in May is 25C

Clothing

When packing for a trip to Israel, be sure to take the country's climate into consideration.

Some other practical clothing tips: a practical head covering and sunglasses for touring under the sun. Sensible shoes would be another worthwhile idea. Modest clothing and often a head covering for visiting the holy places, too; shorts and sleeveless dresses just won't do. For men, unless you're coming on business, it's doubtful you'll ever need to wear a jacket and tie.

Don't worry that you'll overlook something. In recent years Israel has gained a reputation as one of the world's fastest-developing fashion centers. Clothing is marketed in European sizes and any item of dress you may need - or just want - is sure to be available at a decent price.

Driving in Israel

All drivers from abroad are required to be in possession of a valid local or international driver's license. Driving in Israel is on the right and sign posting is in Hebrew and in English in most places, and in keeping with international standards.

Speed limits on Israeli roads are: 90-110 km per hour on inter-urban highways; 80 km per hour on other inter-urban roads; 50 km per hour in built-up areas. Seat belts are mandatory at all times for both driver and passengers, front and back; children under the age of 14 are forbidden to ride in the front seat.

During the winter months, headlights are compulsory on all inter-city roads, even during daylight hours.

Gas stations in Israel, especially those in the major cities, remain open most of the time. Nevertheless, for religious reasons some do close early on Fridays and do not open on Saturdays and Jewish holidays, so it is wise to check this information in advance. At night and on holidays a small gasoline surcharge is added to the bill at most petrol stations.

To and From the Airport

Most travelers to Israel will arrive at Ben Gurion Airport, just off the highway connecting Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. For those not being met and who are not interested in taking a taxi, there is regular bus service - direct or connecting - between Ben Gurion and the rest of Israel and regular train service too, though the frequency of this service is less than what is available to and from European airports.

For trips to the airport, a number of companies provide door-to-door service 24-hours a day, either on a taxi basis or as a shared ride (from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv).

Shops

In Israel's major cities shops are usually open from 9:00 am until 7:00 pm, Sunday through Thursday; some, especially small neighborhood shops, still close for an afternoon siesta from 1 (or 2) until 4 in the afternoon. On Fridays shops usually close between 2:00 -3:30 pm, and most places of business in Jewish areas do not open on Saturdays.

A large number of modern shopping malls have springing up throughout the country in recent years, with business hours that are even more flexible.

Post Office

Most post offices open at 8:00 am Sunday through Friday and remain open until 12:30 or 1:30 in the afternoon, depending on the day. Afternoon hours vary; some branches are open from 3:30 pm until 6:00 pm. The larger branches of the country's post office system offer the possibility of foreign currency exchange.

Museums

Opening hours vary from museum to museum. Some are open on Saturdays.

Credit Cards

Most shops, restaurants and hotels accept credit cards. The most common are Visa, Eurocard/Mastercard, Diners Club and American Express.

VAT

Today, the Value Added Tax in Israel stands at 15.5 %. Unless otherwise stated the amount listed on all bills is inclusive of VAT (although non-Israelis paying in foreign currency are exempt from VAT payment at hotels, on flights, organized tours and car rentals with or without chauffeur).

Tourists using foreign currency when purchasing more than \$50 worth of goods at Israeli shops listed by the Ministry of Tourism are entitled to a 5% discount at the shop and a VAT refund at Ben Gurion Airport upon departure. In order to obtain the refund, it is necessary to place the (unused) goods purchased and the receipt in a sealed, transparent bag and present this to the bank official in the departures hall. He or she will break the seal, verify the contents and refund the VAT in U.S. dollars to the nearest dollar (less the bank commission). At other ports of departure, Israeli customs officials will handle the matter and the refund will be mailed to the tourist's home address.

Time Difference

Israel two hours ahead of GMT and seven hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time the greater part of the year, although during the switch between regular time and daylight savings time, there may be some variations.

Tipping

Tipping is fairly standard in Israel, though at a current norm of 10 percent the accepted rate is still fairly low. A service charge may or may not be listed on your restaurant bill. When it is not included, a tip is expected, and at better-quality establishments, 12-15 percent is now considered more appropriate.

Taxis

According to law, all taxis in Israel must be equipped with a meter, which must be operated for all local rides. Passengers are entitled to a printed meter receipt. The meter can be operated according to three distinct fare rates: including a telephone surcharge; the regular fare; a surcharge imposed for Saturdays, holidays and at night (between 9:00pm and 5:30 am). There is a surcharge for luggage as well. Inter-city fares are determined by an official price list which the driver must show upon request. In Israel it is not customary to tip in taxis.

Electric Current

In Israel, electricity is mostly 220 volts, 50 cycles though in major hotel rooms there is usually a built-in 110-volt electric razor transformer. Most sockets in Israel are three pronged, but different from that used in Europe or the U. K., and the tourist bringing electrical appliances to Israel would be well advised to bring an adapter from home.

Jewish Religious Customs

Except for East Jerusalem, Haifa and Nazareth, public transportation doesn't operate on the Jewish Sabbath - from sundown on Friday night until Saturday night. The same is true on Jewish holidays - from sundown until sundown. However, except for one day of the year (Yom Kippur) private transportation does operate, in the form of taxis and (in some major areas) jitney taxis ("sherut" service).

Just about every major hotel in Israel operates under rabbinical supervision, which means that only kosher food prepared according to Jewish dietary regulations, is available. Among other restrictions, pork and shellfish products are not available and meat and dairy products are not combined in a single meal - and most often, in a single dining room.

Outside the hotels, there are many fine restaurants in Israel serving both kosher and non-kosher meals, and in the major cities there are restaurants which remain open on Saturday.

In Arab centers of population, shops, restaurants and cafes remain open on Saturdays and nearly all Jewish holidays.

Phone Service

Public telephones take phone cards or coins, depending on type. Most, however, take Israeli telephone cards, available in a number of denominations, and can also be used with international telephone cards. Israeli cards are easily available from any post office and at various shops.

International calls can be made from phone card telephones, or from special telephone company offices in Israel's major cities. Major telephone companies have toll-free Israeli phone numbers. Telephone books are available in English as well as in Hebrew.

As a result of competition and deregulation, Israel's international phone rates are among the lowest in the Western world. Information on specific rates is available by dialing "188."

Reversed charge (collect) phone calls can be made from any public telephone. Dial "188" for the international operator.

Of course, telephone calls to just about anywhere in the world can be made from any of Israel's hotels, but in keeping with international practices, calling from a hotel room phone may be fairly costly. However, more and more properties offer the opportunity of international phone card holders to place calls from the room via their phone card telephone operators.