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TRAVEL

LATEST NEWS AT CALGARYHERALD.COM/TRAVEL

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SATURDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2010

TRAVEL
NOTESSound the
alarm on your
baggage

GEAR • The last hurdle after a long and tiring trip is jockeying for position at the baggage carousel with fellow cranky and impatient travellers.

Two new devices, the Easy 2 Pick Luggage Finder and the LED Luggage Tag, aim to eliminate that hassle. It's especially helpful if you own one of those ubiquitous black suitcases.

The Luggage Finder's fob can be attached to your key chain, and a thin, hard plastic tag is affixed to your suitcase.

You can head to the bathroom or go grab a coffee while waiting for your bag. Once it lands on the carousel and you're at least 30 metres from the bag, the alarm sounds on the fob. It's not loud enough to attract the attention of anyone but you. (\$24.99)

Natali, the same maker and distributor of this product also makes the Easy 2 Pick, a Flashing Luggage Finder using LED lights. Attach the hard plastic card to your bag and deactivate it when checking in your bag.

Once it lands on the carousel, it will start to flash. Chances are you'll be the only one able to identify your bag this way.

The products are available in Calgary at Office Depot and Bed, Bath & Beyond.

Can you dig
a Caribbean
vacation?

VOLUNTEER • Here's a unique holiday that requires a little digging of the archeological kind.

If you've ever wanted to dabble in archeology, here's your chance to learn a little about it on the beautiful Caribbean island of St. Vincent, one of the 30 Grenadine Islands.

SVG Digs is looking for volunteers in early 2011 to help unearth more fascinating artifacts at its Argyle 2 site, about 20 minutes south of the capital city Kingstown. Since digging began in 2009, a rectangular longhouse and more than 700 artifacts revealing the past of the island's inhabitants have been found.

The dig is happening due to the construction of an airport that will eventually accommodate international flights (currently only small planes from neighbouring islands can land). Funding has all but dried up after several organizations, including the University of Calgary, has lent financial support. Now, the group is looking for volunteers to continue the work.

No previous experience is required. Participants receive training to participate in the dig.

Cost for one week is \$1,795 (excluding airfare to the island). That includes accommodations (with kitchen and laundry facilities), all meals and a boat tour to The Falls of Balmaine, one of St. Vincent's most spectacular sights. The trip goes Jan. 9 to Feb. 5. Participants can opt for a week or more. Details at svgdigs.com.

—Lisa Monforton, Calgary Herald

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Outdoors adventures in Kanan. Go to calgaryherald.com/travel



Top: A Palestinian man walks in an alley in Jerusalem's old city.

Above: Palestinian worshippers pray outside the Dome of the Rock at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem during the first Friday prayers.

A
walk
to stir
the
SOUL
Taking in Jerusalem's maze
of religion and politics

TYRONE BEASON
MCCLEARY NEWSPAPERS
JERUSALEM

The rabbis see me before I see them.

As I catch their gaze, the two rabbis bound up a flight of stairs to where I stand admiring the astonishing religious spectacle that is Jerusalem's ancient, walled Old City.

Just below, tourists approach the Western (Wailing) Wall at a solemn pace, tucking folded-up written prayers in its time-worn crevices. Just above, the golden Dome of the Rock, which covers the place where Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven, shimmers in the heat.

In the background, on the Mount of Olives, the equally lustrous onion-dome Church of St. Mary Magdalene completes the spiritual panorama.

"What's your name?" one of the rabbis, now

standing uncomfortably close, asks with a thick, jaunty accent.

I tell him, and without warning each man places a hand on my forehead. Then they begin to pray, loudly, in Hebrew, for what seems like a full minute.

"What's your mother's name?" the other rabbi says, ignoring my embarrassment over this very public display. I tell them and once again they lay hands on my forehead and pray vigorously in Hebrew.

I've come to Jerusalem with the more tourism aim of exploring the Israeli capital's rich history and faith-spiked culture. But before this episode is over, God has received prayers on behalf of my dad and brothers, too.

It's said that some first-time visitors to Jerusalem come away with delusions of grandeur and divinity, so intoxicating is this most multifaceted of sacred cities.

Whether or not Jerusalem Syndrome is real, this "city of God," this "shining city on a hill" is certainly feverish with a spiritual energy that makes even a casual stroll a soul-stirring experience.

SEE SOUL, PAGE F2

Photo-illustration, Darren Finney, Calgary Herald
Photo of Jerusalem alley, Gail Tibbon, AFP-Getty Images
Photo of Israel's separation barrier and worshippers, Ahmad Gharabli, AFP-Getty Images
Scroll courtesy stockxchange

Israel's desert adventures

MARK SISSONS
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

"This is where Jesus spent part of his 40 days in the desert," explains guide Israel Ariel as we follow winding goat paths and scramble over boulder fields.

Far above us loom the towering burnt orange limestone walls and craggy cliffs of this eerily silent desert canyon called Wadi Ze'Elim, part of Israel's Judean wilderness. We're only a few kilometres from the Qumran caves, where the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947.

Hiking through this hypnotically beautiful moon-

scape — believed by some to be the earthly crucible where Jesus warded off Satan's temptations before launching Christianity — is a 2,000-year step back through time.

Wadi Ze'Elim trekking is just one of many adventure travel experiences available in Israel, better known as the land of the Bible. Local adventure tour specialists now offer guided programs for everyone from novices to experts.

You can hike, rappel down cliffs, go caving, kayak, dive in the Red Sea, join desert jeep and camel safaris, and explore some of the Middle East's most spectacular scenery on foot.

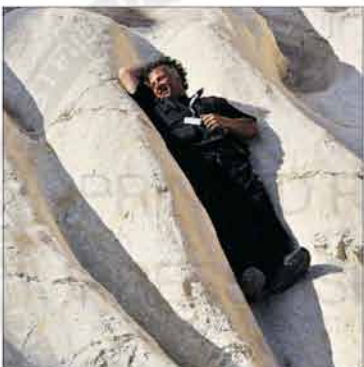
And because Israel is so compact, nearly every activity is within a few hours' reach. You could have breakfast at your Mediterranean waterfront hotel in Tel Aviv and watch black goats scramble up steep cliffs in the Negev Desert by lunch. Or take in the sunrise over Old Jerusalem and the sunset that evening at a remote campsite deep within the Judean wilderness.

"The Judean is where you can begin to reach the deepest depths of your soul if you're open to inner exploration," explains Ariel as we break for lunch in Wadi Ze'Elim.



Mark Sissons, for the Calgary Herald
Animals like the rare ibex are found in the Negev Desert's Ein Avdat National Park.

SEE ISRAEL, PAGE F5



Photos: Mark Sissone for the Calgary Herald
Flamboyant guide Israel Ariel takes a break in the Judean Desert.

ISRAEL: Wild vistas

FROM FI

If You Go

Ariel is a self-styled human potential guru cum guide who often leads German encounter groups far into Egypt's Sinai Desert.

As a raptor glides high overhead in the shimmering sun, Ariel suddenly exclaims the desert lives within him, grabs my camera, and begins snapping photos of rock and cloud formations. Half-expect my eccentric guide to command a nearby bush to burst into flame.

But no spontaneous combustions occur. Instead, we ascend from the canyon to a flat rocky plateau overlooking the turquoise waters of the Dead Sea in time to see fiery sunset. In the distance, the mesa-top fortress of Masada juts out from the surrounding landscape like a stone barge about to launch into the water a thousand feet below.

This isolated tabletop mountain is a 2,000-year-old symbol of Jewish resistance in the face of overwhelming odds. It was here in 70 AD that a fanatical sect of Jews called the Zealots endured the Roman army's two-year siege, opting in the end to commit mass suicide rather than surrender.

During our hour-long climb up the winding trail to Masada's summit, Ariel explains that Israel's army recruits who have successfully completed their Israel Defense Forces basic training are sworn in here in torchlit ceremonies, which culminate with the defiant declaration: "Masada shall not fall again."

The outlines of the Roman army's encampments encircling Masada are still visible from its ramparts. So is the Dead Sea, where people have been coming for thousands of years to soak in its restorative waters. At 422 metres below sea level, it's the lowest point on Earth. You don't swim in its waters; you float, buoyed by the incredibly high salinity levels.

The Dead Sea is a dramatic contrast to where we've been for two days — the austere Negev Desert, a few hours to the south. This desolate region comprises nearly 50 per

cent of Israel's land mass, but contains less than six per cent of its population.

The Negev's beautiful nature reserves offer superb hiking and trekking. The most popular is Ein Avdat National Park, a series of deep desert canyons rich in fertile vegetation and animals, including rare ibex. Visitors can descend a steep staircase cut from the cliff side and explore the canyon's dry riverbed floor, divided by a series of waterfalls flowing into deep, dark pools.

An even more impressive Negev adventure destination is Ramon Crater, the so-called Grand Canyon of Israel. Five hundred metres deep and 40 kilometres long, it is considered the world's largest crater, although it was formed by natural erosion rather than an asteroid impact. Local operators can arrange single and multi-day treks, as well as camel or jeep safaris deep into the crater's heart. Mountain biking tours are also possible, as is rappelling from the crater's edge.

"Amazing," proclaims Ariel as we admire this primordial landscape. "When you enter biblical desert lands with me, you are searching not with the mind, but with the soul," he continues. Sending another of Ariel's esoteric lectures coming, I excuse myself and wander off to where the silence is complete. Ariel has one thing right — exploring wild places like Ramon Crater and Wadi Ze'elim offers a fresh way of experiencing this ancient land. You may not fancy spending 40 days wandering there, but Israel's deserts definitely offer adventures galore.



According to the Bible, Jesus spent 40 days in the Judean Desert near Wadi Ze'Elim.

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