Tighten the Bible Belt

Operators must drop prices and agents raise awareness if Israel's tourism business is to flourish. ANDREW DON reports.

ISRAEL can be a hard sell outside of the winter sun destination of Eilat and concern is growing that the high cost of holidays, especially in central and northern parts, could seriously damage the country's tourism.

Ady Hanouka, manager of Pall Mall Travel, in Golders Green, north London, sums up the predicament. "There is no reason to choose Israel over any other destination," he says. "It is an overpriced country."

And he believes Israel will kill its own tourism industry if prices did not come down.

Hanouka, who sells most Israel trips to the Jewish market and is suffering from the growth in kosher hotels all over the world. "If you are Jewish, you do not have to go to Israel any more," he says.

But Dawn Shindler, manager of AMG Travel, thinks Hanouka is overstating the problem. "I do no think the pricing will kill tourism," she says. "People will still go to Israel."

All Abroad managing director David Krisch says Israel is a destination where you can do everything and enjoy a summer holiday as well. "People look on it as the Middle East but it is one of the most modern countries in the world," he says. "Someone asked me if they could drink the water over there. When Israelis come to England, they don't drink our water!"

Myles Hazebroek, product manager, for Wintersun at ... world, says Israel is slightly more unusual than the ever-popular Canaries in winter.

...el is perceived as expensive because it is not a mass ...et destination. Most of the hotels are of four or five ... calibre in a country which is the size of Wales and two-... desert.

...ian Cohen, managing director of Israel Travel Service, ...anchester, says 54% of Israel's tourists come from ...th America whereas UK visitors make up just 11%-12% ...isitors. Although small, compared with the US, the UK is ...netheless Israel's second largest market.

Cohen believes some agents have the wrong perception of this biblical country. "If the perception of the agent is it has to be sold as a holy land visit, that can be difficult to do," he says. "But if it is marketed as a summer fun destination to which you can add trips and tours, it is more easily sold."

People who are unfamiliar with the country tend to think of personal safety, aggravated by acts of terrorism and the ongoing Iraqi problem.

Operation Desert Fox at the end of last year prompted the home office to advise against travel to Israel and Thomson Holidays flew its customers home.

Around 2.3 million visited Israel in 1997, 3% less than the previous year, although tourism from the UK increased 2% in the first half of 1998 before the Iraq crisis wreaked havoc.

Eliezer Hod, director, of the Israel Government Tourist Office (IGTO), predicts four million tourists will visit in 2000. Shabtai Shay, director general of the Ministry of Tourism, Jerusalem, believes the revival of tourism to the country will begin this year.

The IGTO is not alone in treating the new millennium as an exceptional marketing opportunity.

The Ministry of Tourism is preparing an extensive tourism promotional campaign during the summer and autumn in a bid to position Israel as the official destination of the millennium.

"Since the event that marked the first day of the first year of the first millennium took place in Israel, our country is the obvious destination to visit to celebrate the second millennium," says Hod.

The Ministry is spending £48m on funding projects and the IGTO is investing in agents' educationals to boost bookings. "There is nothing like being there so when you come back you know what you are talking about," says deputy director Sara Hopenfeld.

Seminars will be held throughout the UK and information is available on Teletext and Viewdata.

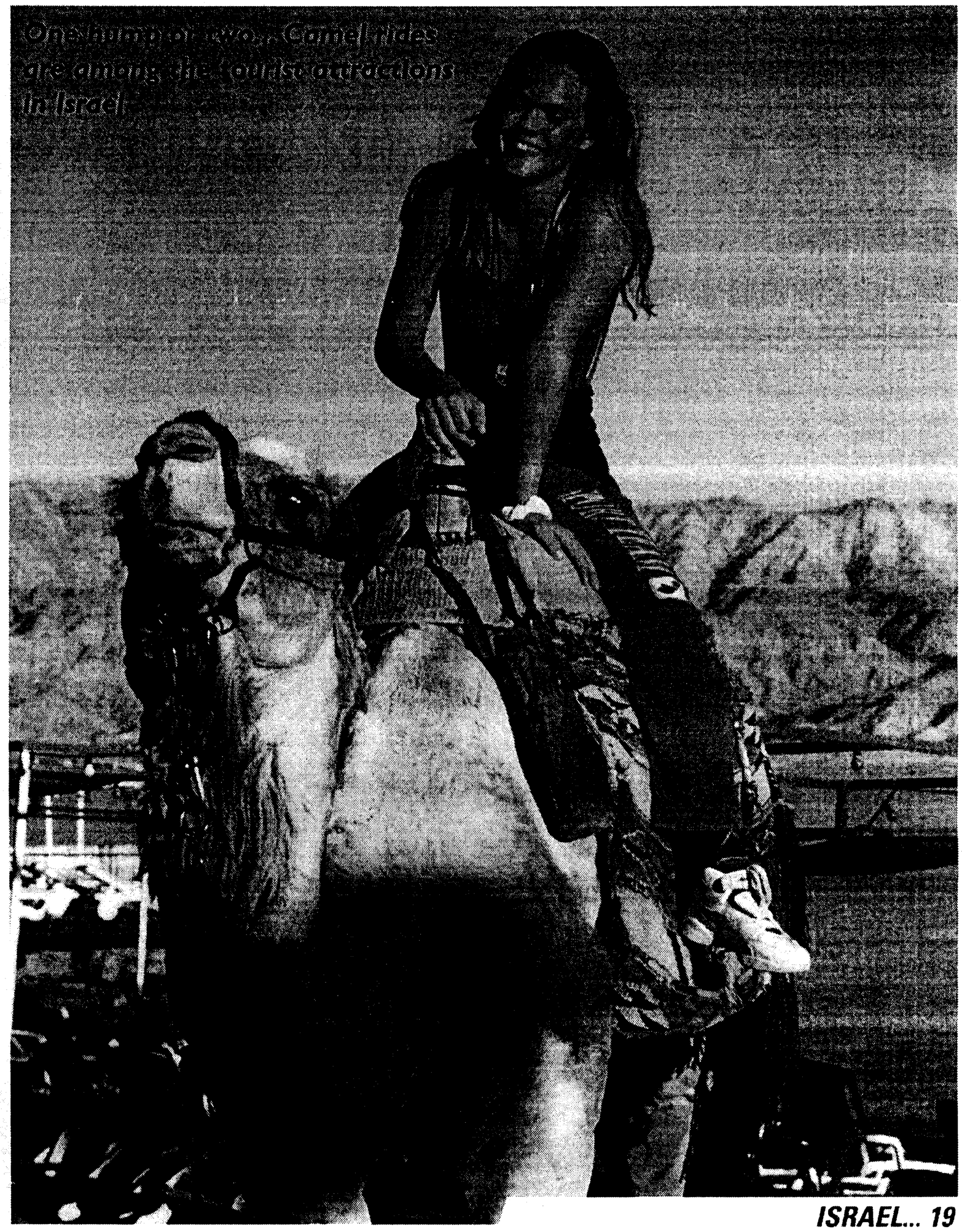
Scenic beauty and adventure trips spearhead Israel's tourism

ISRAEL has many gems that are unfamiliar to the masses such as the lush north, the Sea of Galilee and rejuvenating spa qualities of the salt-ridden Dead Sea.

Specialist activities, such as white water rafting in the River Jordan and skiing on Mount Hermon, are also coming more to the fore.

Pilgrimages, kibbutz fly-drives, ornithology trips and cycling tours – under the theme of gathering water from the five seas – are among the other principal draws.

Tourists can also opt to stay in the desert in a Bedouin tent, go on archaeological digs, join a camel trek, snorkel and swim with dolphins, or enjoy wine making at Zichron Yaakov, up in the hills on the way to Haifa.



ISRAEL

Israeli authorities have approved plans for a 240ft-long platform two inches blow the surface of the Sea of Galilee, near Kfar Nahum where tourists can follow in the footsteps of Jesus and walk on the water.

Those who stay in Eilat can enjoy a three centre holiday that takes in Petra, in Jordan and the Sinai, in Egypt.

With so much going for it, promoting Israel comes down to agents' sales pitches – at least that's what tour operators believe.

Simon Blutstein, managing director of Pullman Holidays, London, says independent travel agents need to be trained more. "We've taken a few on educationals but there is a long way to go," he says. "Staff changes mean that people you take to Israel move on so we just have to keep on at it all the time."

Angela Labie, travel consultant at Peltours in Finchley, north London, complains that "half independent travel agents don't know Israel. A lot of people do not even know Eilat is in Israel".

Labie says most Israeli destinations outside of Eilat operate on a tailor-made basis which makes it difficult to bring costs down.

This, however, provides the travel agent who really pushes Israel with a potentially bigger opportunity for profit.

Tour operators pay a flat 10% commission rate, although they can rise to over 16% depending on volume bookings and individual agreements.



Sell it

If clients ask about Israel remember to tell them:

- 50 flights go to Israel every week from Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester and Luton via El Al, BA, Monarch, Air 2000 and Caledonian and Sundor to Ben Gurion, in Tel Aviv and Ovda, in Eilat
- the country combines sun with historical interest and specialist activities
- Israel provides the opportunity to cross over into Egypt and Jordan from Eilat
- most people understand English and there is plenty of variety of international cuisine and national dishes
- the country's transport infrastructure is first rate
- it is possible to drive from north to south in a day and experience dramatic contrasts from the lush greenery of the Galilee in the north to the desert in the south.
- Commissions are on a par with other destinations and some tour operators will give extra commission if you belong to an association and book large volumes
- The Dead Sea and surrounding area has recognised health benefits which has provided relief for people with psoriasis and other skin complaints when all else has failed
- Israel is expected to be particularly popular to celebrate the new millennium
- Two new hotels are opening in Eilat: The Queen of Sheeba and Herods Palace – fully themed and staffed by actors.

Operator round-up

- Peltours is offering a £500 package from April 18 in the Center Hotel Tel Aviv (no pool) by scheduled El Al flight from Heathrow, including transfer for two people sharing, seven nights B&B. It is also offering £558 pp in the Mercure Tiberias, in the north of Israel b/b by scheduled El Al flight from Heathrow. There is a £65 discount if a Monarch chartered flight is taken from Gatwick. 0181 343 0590
- Pall Mall Travel is offering a holiday in Tel-Aviv for one week at the end of March for two including flights, staying in the Holiday Inn at £500 each and from mid-March at the Hilton for £670. 0181 905 5005
- Pullman Holidays is offering Gatwick to Eilat from £295 staying in the Nova Eilat, self-catering, for a minimum of five passengers for 7 nights during March. It is also offering Gatwick to Tel Aviv £159 return flight during March. 0171 630 5111.
- All Abroad is offering an all inclusive half-board package for two weeks up to 31 March for £695pp sharing a twin room, including transfers and taxes, staying at the Park Inn, flying from Heathrow on an El Al scheduled flight to Ben Gurion or Ovda. 0181 458 2666
- Sunworld is offering from March 18-31 10 or 11 nights at the Dan Eilat hotel B&B £1,215, or 14 nights at £1,489 from Heathrow, flying El Al. It is also offering an all inclusive at the Hotel Laguna in Eilat from March 18-31 for 10 and 11 nights at £919 or £1,049 for 14 nights. 0113 255 5222
- Israel Travel Service is offering from April 1-7 one week in King Herod's Palace, Eilat, £959 B&B flying from Heathrow, and £1,117 from the end of April for a full tour of Israel and Petra in Jordan for 14 nights, staying in tourist class hotels half-board. 0161 839 1111
- Longwood Travel & Holiday has a three-day Carmel Forest deal including full board two-way transfer by chauffeur-driven limousine. The package includes one free treatment from a choice of body peeling, reflexology, Swedish massage, back, neck and shoulder massage or a Carmel Forest deep cleansing facial. Free use of spa and sports facilities, access to two swimming pools, jacuzzi, dry and wet sauna, plunge pool, music room, reading room, terraced-solarium, tennis courts, guided hikes in the forest, yoga and tai-chi classes and movies. 0181 551 4494