

Benjamin and Arnon cruising at Eilat with Jordan in the background.

EXPLORING ISRAEL'S WINDSURFING

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Boasting 275 km of coastline with access to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, Israel enjoys solid wind statistics all year round and offers everything from flat water to waves. It has a buoyant windsurfing community, but outside of the country relatively little is known about it as a windsurfing destination; **Eric de Cruz** made a trip there with PWA slalom sailor **Benjamin 'Babou' Augé** and **Esteban de Cruz** to find out more.

Benjamin gybing at 'the church', Bat Galim, Haifa.

“ISRAEL HAS MUCH TO OFFER A WINDSURFER, STARTING WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENT – WIND!”



Benjamin and Arnon foiling at Eilat.

Israel has much to offer a windsurfer, starting with the most important ingredient – wind! Originating from Greece during the summer, the winds are strengthened by several thermal effects, while winter brings regular low pressure systems. Israel has over 10,000 windsurfers, mostly in the north of the country and there are many windsurfing schools who enjoy a brisk trade, especially in summer. Back in 2004 Gal Fridman put Israel on the windsurf map with a gold medal in windsurfing at Athens. He had already won bronze in 1996 in Atlanta, but his 2004 Olympic title was the first in the history of Israel, which earned Gal a hero's welcome on return to his country.

Our trip to Israel came about after a meeting with another famous Israeli windsurfer, Arnon Dagan. Arnon is Israel's windsurf champion who has been a top ten PWA racer for many years. With Arnon enthusing over his home country, we were keen to check it out for ourselves and booked tickets to Tel Aviv, considered the economic and technological centre of Israel. Many airlines fly here, but we found Turkish Airways to be the most board bag friendly one. We flew from Nice and it was just a three and a half hour direct flight, travelling light with three 32 kg board bags!

Our base for the trip was to be the city of Haifa, a popular windsurf spot an hour's drive north of Tel Aviv and home to the wavesailing beach of Bat Galim where the infamous 'Storm Rider' wave competition is held. Haifa is also famous for being known as Israel's 'Silicon Valley' and is home to many global corporations like Google and Microsoft, whose huge glass-fronted offices dominate the skyline. Arnon told me that local sailors ride from 12 to 2 p.m. or after work and business units are often deserted while everyone goes in the water to enjoy a session! A few raindrops started falling at our base camp in Haifa and motivated us to push further to Eilat, the second most iconic riding spot in Israel.

EILAT

Eilat is at the far end of the country, down in the south. It was a four and a half hour drive, but the road system was smooth and well maintained and the time flew by. We drove through Netanya and Tel Aviv, but the most impressive part of the journey was the Negev desert with its endless stretches of beautiful rocks. Camels and antelopes have made this area their home too and at sunset it was amazing as the light glowed across the land.

Eilat works all year round with winds anything from 15-35 knots depending on the time of year. The wind comes down from the valley blowing side onshore and in the summer there are strong venturi effects to accelerate the breeze. This is Israel's mecca for slalom, foiling and freestyle. The most extraordinary aspect of sailing in Eilat is that you actually ride between four different countries. Jordan and the old city of Accaba, Saudi Arabia and then Egypt with Dahab a bit further down the coast. The atmosphere is relaxed in the town with many different types of accommodation on offer that cater for all budgets. There are plenty of places to rent windsurf gear as well as sunbeds on the beach for those just wanting to relax. A highlight of sailing here was the sublime light after 3 p.m., which made the windsurfing experience on offer feel even more unique.

ISRAEL

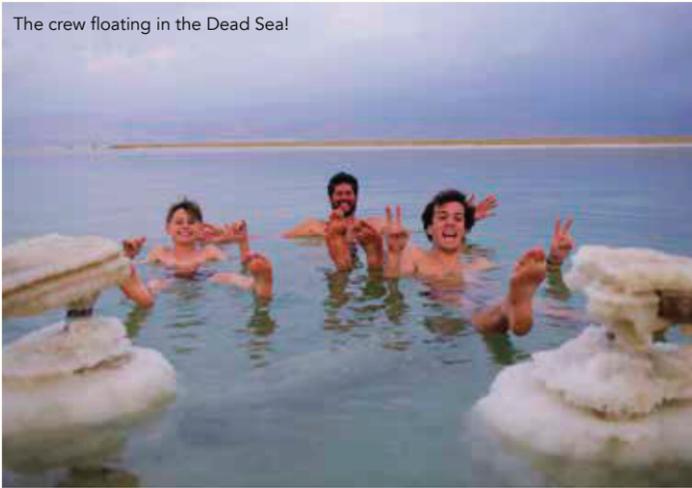
Benjamin hacks into the surf at 'the church', Bat Galim, Haifa.



Esteban in flight at Bat Galim.



The crew floating in the Dead Sea!



THE DEAD SEA

After two days of perfect windsurfing we decided to move on and travelled back up north. We stopped midway through the journey at the Dead Sea. This is a salt lake bordered by Jordan to the east and Israel and the West Bank to the west! The surface and shore of the sea are 430m below sea level making it the lowest place on earth. It is one of the world's most salty bodies of water, 9.6 times more salty than the ocean and that means that your body just naturally floats and levitates. The density of the salt makes for a harsh environment where plants and animals can't flourish, hence the name Dead Sea. We arrived back in Haifa in the evening and stayed the night at Bat Galim, which translates as the 'Sea's Daughter'. There was no wind forecast the following day so we decided to spend the day in Tel Aviv, Israel's second largest city after Jerusalem and meet up with Arnon Dagon.

FUTURE FLY

After twenty years of riding for major brands Arnon was scheduled to sign the legal registration documents for a new brand he has set up, 'Future Fly'. This was quite a major milestone in the career of this record breaking Israeli champion and we did not want to miss out on celebrating with him! Our day started in the Jaffa district, a wonderful Arab-Jewish melting pot of old and modern architecture. The seafront here is a major surf spot packed with

surf shops and mobile surf schools. Later in the day we met up with Arnon's business associate Ilan and set out on a pub tour where we stayed for hours reminiscing over our most memorable windsurfing moments. Ilan showed us the windsurfing photos he treasures and keeps on his phone, explaining how he had once taught the legendary Francisco Goya how to forward loop! We soaked up the cool music and atmosphere before heading up to Rotschild street where the party rocked into the night!

ACTION

The next day at 8 a.m. the wind was already blowing 25 knots when we arrived at a spot called 'The Church' offering some of the best windsurfing in the Haifa area. I was amazed to see around twenty sailors already on the water. It turns out they were mostly Intel staff. They and others gather here as early as 6 a.m. to make the most of conditions before heading to work in the 'Silicon Valley' at 10 a.m. The day flew by with some amazing sailing, with the boys flying around in the blue water having a blast.

“THE DAY FLEW BY WITH SOME AMAZING SAILING.”



Celebratory drinks!

ISRAEL



Akko beach.

AKKO

The next day we were invited to visit the old city of Acre (Akko), a large walled city on the shores of the bay of Haifa. A UNESCO World Heritage site and the largest natural port in Israel, it has a long history of conquests and ruling empires and the city, like many others in Israel, still preserves the remnants of its 2000 year old history. Akko used to be the port of entry into Jerusalem during the crusades, repeatedly conquered and retaken by the Ottomans and the historical centre still preserves the unique remains of this period. Akko is hoping to host a round of the PWA Slalom World Cup next year and intends to take advantage of the public's interest and extensive media coverage to get its 2000 year old heritage known about !

WAVES!

After the tour we headed back to 'The Church' without further delay. The waves were already 2m high with 25 to 30 knots of wind waiting for us. Arnon sailed a 5.0m, Babou a 4.6m and Esteban a tiny 3.3m. The boys had an amazing session with jumping and riding all day, with front, back and push loops and wave smacks right until sunset.

On our last day the wind was a solid 35 knots with mast high waves. So we drove down the coast to our next spot. We sailed out from behind the 'Sea Research Centre' and Esteban aged 14 had butterflies in his stomach when he looked at the daunting conditions. The sea was relentless with well formed waves and during this session we had many wipeouts with the guys swimming a lot for their boards. Despite the rough conditions the spot was relatively safe and the reef not too sharp. Looking for a change, the crew decided to finish the day at 'The Church' as they all wanted to concentrate on jumping and a few last rotations before heading home.

**“ISRAEL IS WITHOUT DOUBT
A GREAT COUNTRY FOR
WINDSURFING!”**

Crew session at Bat Galim, Haifa.



Arnon mid loop.

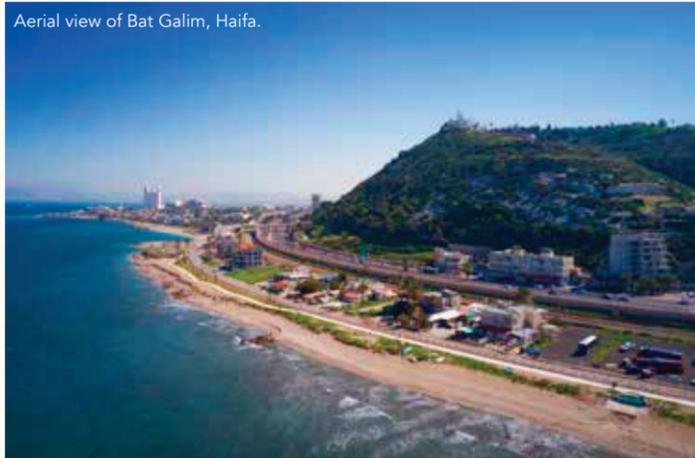


ISRAEL

Benjamin and Esteban having fun at Bat Galim, Haifa.



Aerial view of Bat Galim, Haifa.



FAREWELL

The atmosphere in Israel and the places we visited was very relaxed and friendly, far from what you would expect when you look at the news. You can travel safely and really enjoy the windsurfing conditions on offer. The only spot we wanted to check out, but did not get the chance, was the Sea of Galilee. Did you know that Israel's famous Sea of Galilee is actually a lake? It's had a variety of names since biblical times, but in Israel it's called Lake Kinneret, and it holds several distinctions: the largest freshwater reservoir in Israel, the only natural freshwater lake in Israel and the lowest freshwater lake in the world. We were told there are sometimes as many as 200 windsurfers there as every day during May through to August the wind blow 25 knots after 2 p.m. This place is supposed to be a real wind machine and a must if you stay in Israel during the summer.

Before flying home we were treated to a farewell dinner with Arnon's family. His father is a truly excellent chef and treated our taste buds with his amazing food. Late in the night we started the long process of editing the shots to illustrate our adventure in this amazing country. In one week we crossed Israel from north to south and enjoyed the diversity of the spots,

temperatures and climates. We discovered a destination with a 2000 year old history and above all a country that shares our passion for the sport of windsurfing with a welcoming heart. The sport of windsurfing is in full growth in Israel and just like Arnon Dagan is really focussed on the future of our sport! Israel is without doubt a great country for windsurfing!

The crew with local Bat Galim legend 'Haï'.



ISRAEL

Eilat beach.



FACT BOX

SUMMER SPOTS

Summer is very hot and August not recommended. The Sea of Galilee offers freeride, slalom and freestyle and summer time from mid may to august is almost 100% wind every days, averaging 25 knots. The lake is one of the most consistent windy places Arnon has ever seen!

Bat Galim, Haifa offers freeride, slalom, freestyle, wave and foil. Summer time from June to July has a thermic wind of 15 to 20 knots and sometimes small waves to ride (like Jeri in Brazil size).

Eilat Reef beach offers freeride, slalom, foil and freestyle conditions; works all year but August can be too hot.

WINTER SPOTS

Bat Galim, Haifa offers freeride, slalom, speed, freestyle, waves, foil and good surfing too.

Conditions come from southwest low pressures and you can easily pick a cheap flight from Europe for 150- 300 euros to come on a forecast for a week of wavesailing / surfing. Conditions are similar to Klitmøller in Denmark and dare I say it, can be much better and warmer for sure! The rest of the time you can enjoy flat water with strong east winds which can get up to 50 knots, perfect for speed sailing!

The water is still pretty warm and you just need a 3/2 or 4/2 wetsuit.

Eilat Reef beach works great all year round, with just a shorty wetsuit needed for winter.

SPRING/AUTUMN SPOTS

Nahariya / Betzet beach; Caesarea, Sdot Yam; Tel Aviv - Hilton beach; Haifa; Bat Yam - Laguna beach club; all offer freeride, slalom, freestyle, foil and sometimes waves. Shorty wetsuit at worst, but normally only shorts and lycra needed. Thermic north winds usually from 2 p.m. till dark. Betzet and Caesarea can come up to 25 knots, rest of the coast 15 to 20 knots average.

OTHER INFO

Eilat Reef beach and Tel Aviv - Hilton beach have windsurfing centres, as well as Caesarea, Sdot Yam beach club and BG Surfing shop in Bat Galim, Haifa.

All standards of sailor catered for in Israel. Bat Galim requires good sailor skills, but the rest of the spots are very easy. Very easy to launch in most places as sandy beaches. Haifa - Bat Galim has a reef bottom but not sharp.

Local currency is Israeli shekel, £1 = 4.75 shekels at time of writing.

No wind alternatives for family and fun – check out the old history of Jerusalem and Akko. For more modern adventures go to Tel Aviv or Haifa for parties and great nightlife. Take a surfing course when no wind or check out the culture of Tel Aviv or the Dead Sea.

No particular insects or animals to watch out for, sometimes mosquitoes in summer but nothing abnormal.

Airlines recommended for bringing gear -Turkish, EasyJet, Ryanair and Norwegian Air.

WEBSITES

- www.ff-boards.com – Future Fly boards.
- www.surfcenter.co.il - Surf Center Eilat – shop, lessons, rental.
- www.laguna.co.il - Laguna Sea Sports Club, Bat Yam - shop, lessons, rental.

