

# JOURNEY to JERUSALEM

By Jayme Otto



THE JERUSALEM HALF MARATHON DRAWS RUNNING'S MOST FAITHFUL PILGRIMS.

PHOTOS BY ISRAELI MINISTRY OF TOURISM



Admittedly, most people don't come to Jerusalem to run. They come to walk the path Jesus trod when he carried the cross to his own crucifixion. They come because Muhammad miraculously traveled to Jerusalem by night, then ascended to heaven. They come because the stone mentioned in the Bible upon which Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac rests in Jerusalem. Millions of tourists come to the Holy City every year, the only place where the three major monotheistic religions of the world converge. And once a year, in the spring, hundreds of them are runners.

The Jerusalem Half Marathon has been run through the city's streets and parks for 18 years. Originally started as a way to promote civic spirit, the number of runners increases every year. This year, the mayor himself ran, as well as 1,500 members of the Israeli military and visitors from all over the world. Plans are already in the works to expand the course to a full marathon in 2011, Israel's first.

### THE PRE-RACE MUST DO'S

The half marathon course winds its way through the modern section of town. So, spend your pre-race days experiencing Old City Jerusalem. Surrounded by towering stonewalls up to 50 feet high, Old City is only a third of a square mile in size, but loaded with history, myth and sacred sites. Not to mention shops. Until the 1860s, this area contained the entire city of Jerusalem. Today, no car traffic is permitted inside.

Start at the Jaffa Gate, one of the seven stone portals leading inside the 10-foot-thick city walls. Legend says that every conqueror of Jerusalem will march through this gate. You'll enter into a small square, head north or left into the Christian Quarter on David Road. Here, you'll stroll past a mass of bazaars, coffee shops and restaurants. Hang a left on Christian Quarter Road past several monasteries until you reach the



most important Christian church in the world: the Holy Sepulchre. Calvary, the place where the New Testament says Jesus was crucified, is said to be inside, as well as his tomb.

From the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, head west through the Muslim Quarter, the most heavily populated area in the Old City, to the Temple Mount. If there is political unrest in the city, this is one area you may not be able to access. Temple Mount is considered the holiest site in Judaism, and the third holiest site in Islam, and as such is hotly contested property in the Arab-Israeli conflict. If you can, visit the Dome of the Rock, which was built around the stone Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac on, and believed to be the center of the Earth according to some maps. This is also the

place where the Koran says Mohammed ascended to heaven, his footprints still on the stone.

Next, walk south to the Jewish Quarter to the Western Wall. Once upon a time, there was a Jewish temple atop Temple Mount. It was the most sacred site in the Jewish world until the Romans destroyed it in 70 C.E. Luckily, they missed a portion of the outer wall, which Jews now regard as the closest they can get to the holiest spot in Judaism. Prayer at the Western Wall can get so fervent that it is often referred to as the "Wailing Wall."

Head west down through the Armenian Quarter where you'll see shops full of beautiful handmade ceramics. Be sure to grab a falafel, a popular middle-eastern dish, on your way back to the Jaffa Gate.

### THE RACE COURSE

The half marathon was designed to give visitors a sense of the 48 square miles of Jerusalem outside of Old City, taking runners through the most important modern sites. The course starts and finishes at Hebrew University's perfectly landscaped Givat Ram Stadium, against a backdrop of statuesque government buildings built from sparkling white limestone. At the starting whistle, racers dash out into one of the campus' idyllic neighborhoods, quickly coming upon Gan Sacher, a large public park and garden in central Jerusalem. Taking the path that follows the park's perimeter, runners loop past The Supreme Court of Israel, as well as the Israeli Parliament buildings, and the ministries of Finance and the Interior.

Runners then head for the hills, literally, as the course turns west to Mount Herzl, a hilltop national cemetery. Racers make their way up into the Judean Hills, sprinting among the pine trees of the Jerusalem Forest before turning east again, to the treat of sweeping city views. Passing the most celebrated museums of the city, including the Yad Vashem Memorial Site and the Holocaust Art Museum, half marathoners come around the bottom side of Mount Herzl before heading south.

Next, it's like a city park tour as runners cruise down streets lining one picturesque park after another. Jerusalem's most beloved civic structures start to pop into view to the observant racer as the course turns north back toward Givat Ram Stadium. First, the Biblical Zoo, which draws the largest number of local tourists to Jerusalem, followed by Teddy Stadium, The Tennis Center and even the Fire Department. When runners cross the bike path, they know they're at the home stretch

and kick it into overdrive back to the stadium. Crossing the finish line, it's off to turn in the timing chip in exchange for a race finisher medal that doubles as a keychain, and peruse the race expo that's set up in the center of the stadium.

Now that's one unforgettable way to tour a foreign city.

When she's not traveling, Jayme Otto writes and runs in Boulder, Colo. Follow her adventures at [JaymeOtto.com](http://JaymeOtto.com). Next up, Egypt.

### LODGING

The trendy Mamilla Hotel is hard to beat in the glam department, and hosts the decadent pre-race pasta dinner. Located only one block from Old City Jerusalem, the hotel affords an easy walk to the section of town you won't see on the race course, plus fabulous views of the Old City walls, the Tower of David and the Jaffa Gate. [mamillahotel.com](http://mamillahotel.com)



Mamilla lobby

If Mamilla is sold out, head one block farther to the stately David Citadel Jerusalem. It's just as elegant as the Mamilla, with the same great views and the best breakfast buffet in town. [thedavidcitadel.com](http://thedavidcitadel.com)

### POST-RACE RECOVERY PLAN

After the race, head an hour and a half southeast of Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, one of the world's first health resorts. A salt lake located between Israel and Jordan, the Dead Sea is 8.6 times saltier than the ocean, with shores 1,385 feet below sea level, the lowest elevation on Earth. The salt and mineral content of the water, combined with the low altitude and year-round sunshine, have proven a powerful combination for healing many diseases. Most of the Dead Sea is pristine and undeveloped. Book a room any place in Ein Bokek, a small cluster of high-end hotels, spas and restaurants along the shore. Besides soaking in the Dead Sea, get a mud-wrap treatment and spend some time sunbathing at the pool or on the beach.



The Dead Sea

### SET A PR

How would you like to race at the lowest elevation on Earth? Israel's Ein Gedi Half Marathon, held every February along the shores of the Dead Sea, has been around for nearly 30 years. It was originally organized by two brothers to promote peace in the region. Save the world and set a PR. [deadsea-race.co.il](http://deadsea-race.co.il)

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