

# HOT ON the TRAIL

First inaugurated by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) during Passover of 1995, the Israel National Trail is celebrating its 20th anniversary this season **Jay Shofet**

The Israel National Trail is now 1,095 kilometers long, stretching from Kibbutz Dan in the north to SPNI's Eilat Field School in the south, nearly the entire length of Israel. Recognized as one of the world's best hikes, Since 2012 National Geographic has included the Israel National Trail in its list of "Top 20 Epic Hikes."

The trail was designed to showcase Israel's varied terrains and environments, winding through the verdant Galilee region along the Mediterranean coast, through urban areas around Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and into the starkness of the Negev desert. The iconic white, blue and orange striped symbol guides hikers along the entire trail.

The Israel National Trail (INT)

was first conceived by Israeli journalist Avraham Tamir in 1980 when he was hiking the Appalachian Trail in the U.S. The Israel Trails Committee, under the auspices of The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, took 15 years to collect ideas from hikers, tour guides and park rangers, working with The Jewish National Fund, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Education, the Israel Survey Center, the Youth Hostels Association and the Israel Antiquities Authority to link existing trails and establish a continuous trail across the country. Israel is the only country in the world with trails marking the entire country.

Although the trail can be hiked in either direction, it officially starts in the north near the Lebanese

border at Kibbutz Dan's Beit Ussishkin Museum – a quaint but fascinating nature museum where hikers can learn about local nature, buy maps of the trail, gain hiking tips and pick up an INT Passport which grants discounted access to parks and reserves along the way. The trail soon ascends to its highest summit, Mount Meron, which is 1,200 meters above sea level. From there it descends through the Upper Galilee region toward the Sea of Galilee. The lowest point on the trail is along the Sea of Galilee at Moshav Migdal, 195 meters below sea level.

From Kibbutz Dan to Eilat

From the Sea of Galilee, the trail makes its way past the Yardenit Baptismal site on the Jordan River, and then veers west through the

Galilee to the Carmel region, passing through the Druze village of Daliat el-Carmel on Mount Carmel. Heading south along the Mediterranean coast, hikers explore the beautiful beaches at Caesarea, Netanya and Herzliya, before heading into HaYarkon Park in northern Tel Aviv.

The trail then heads inland, passing along Modi'in to Jerusalem. Hikers can explore the Jerusalem Hills, winding south of Beit Shemesh through the Elah Valley, before continuing south through the Beit Guvrin-Maresha National Park, with its rich history dating back to the periods of the First and Second Temple.

Passing through the forested areas east of Kiryat Gat toward Rahat, hikers then travel east toward Arad before continuing south into Israel's



Clockwise from left: HaYarkon River, Ramon Crater, Park HaYarkon, terebinth in bloom



Danielle Berkowitz



Don Greenblat



Tali Neuman

## DAY HIKES

While hiking the entire Israel National Trail may seem daunting, many stretches of the trail can be hiked in smaller sections. Day hikes along the northern half of the trail can be as easy or challenging as a hiker chooses. The Israel Trails Committee produces 19 detailed hiking maps of the trail, available for sale from SPNI, which include information about the trail, such as emergency numbers and other resources.

In honor of the Israel National Trail's 20th anniversary, SPNI is offering a variety of day trips along the trail during the Passover holiday. Day trips will take hiking enthusiasts and nature lovers to all sections of the trail, including trips near Hof HaCarmel, the Tel Aviv area and the Judean Hills. With something for everyone, there are challenging hikes and bike rides on the trail, and easy walks for families with small children.



Left: Israel National Trail in Jerusalem  
Below: Alon Tabor

THE ISRAEL NATIONAL TRAIL TAKES HIKERS THROUGH A VARIETY OF HABITATS, FROM FORESTS TO COASTAL PLAINS TO DESERT, ENABLING THEM TO VIEW AND EXPERIENCE ISRAEL'S RICH ARRAY OF FLORA AND FAUNA

Dov Greenblat

drier regions and crossing the entire Negev. Hikers will be surprised at the variety of landscapes in this desert, including natural springs such as Ein Akev in the Zin Valley, and the Ramon Crater, a unique geological formation created by erosion. The southernmost section of the INT passes through Timna Park before arriving at the southern terminus of the trail, SPNI's Eilat Field School.

#### Camaraderie among hikers

A whole culture has developed around hiking the Israel National Trail. Many enjoy the challenge of hiking the trail in its entirety, sometimes all at once, which usually takes six to eight weeks. Others hike it in sections, covering its full length over the course of years.

Perhaps the most unique feature about the culture of the trail is its "Trail Angels," good-hearted Israelis living on or close to the trail who offer a special type of hospitality to hikers, providing showers, meals, water and a place to sleep.

Many accounts of hiking the trail reflect on the special camaraderie among hikers, Trail Angels and locals along the trail. Time and again hikers recount being surprised and overwhelmed by the friendship and generosity of the people that they meet along the way.

The culture of the trail has also built its own unique mythology.

Included among this are interpretations of what the white, blue and orange stripes mean. Although there was no original intention behind the INT symbol that marks rocks, trees and other objects to keep trekkers on track, a common legend is that the white represents the snow of the Hermon, the blue the Mediterranean and the orange the Negev desert. The striped trail blazes are painted on objects facing in both directions.

While the trail makes its way through thousands of years of history, meeting Israel's diverse peoples and exploring their heritage, it also touches a range of environments and eco-systems. The Israel National Trail takes hikers through a variety of habitats, from forests to coastal plains to desert, enabling them to view and experience Israel's rich array of flora and fauna. Hikers

#### HIKING WITH AVSHALOM

The venerable Avshalom Institute, which specializes in courses and lectures about the Land of Israel, offers an Israel National Trail program where participants walk the trail from north to south over a five year period. Participants walk 15 sections per year – each section is 12-15 km – hiking from the Dan River in the north to Eilat in the south. The hikes are led by expert Israel National Trail guides and are a wonderful and fun way to learn about the country.



Tali Ne'eman

may spot otters and badgers along the Jordan River, wild boars between the shrub oaks and terebinth trees of the Galilee, and a Nubian Ibex and Rock Hyrax in the Negev. Leading through protected areas, the trail strives to keep beaches and other beautiful landscapes open to the public and preserved for future generations.

The Israel Trails Committee is part of SPNI's efforts to encourage Israelis and tourists alike to experience and fall in love with Israel's natural landscapes and assets, and is just one part of SPNI's work protecting nature. SPNI has four field schools along the trail: one at

Mt. Meron, the Alon Tabor Field School at Mount Tabor, the Har HaNegev Field School at Mitzpeh Ramon and the Eilat Field School where the trail ends. All of the field schools provide overnight accommodations and have professional guides familiar with the area.

Whether you spend a whole month on the trail or just an hour, this season is the perfect time to get out into nature and enjoy the Israel National Trail.

Jay Shofet is Director of the Partnerships and Development Department of The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. For more information about SPNI, [www.natureisrael.org/events](http://www.natureisrael.org/events) or call 053-2003030.