

The Negev Desert



The Negev, which extends over Israel's southern region, accounts for over half of Israel's land area. Due to its desert character, however, this region is sparsely populated.

Even so, the Negev has seen its share of history. Abraham built his home in Be'er Sheva, the Nabateans passed through here on caravans of camels laden with precious trade goods. For these and other reasons, the Negev has become one of Israel's popular tourism sites.

Various peoples have lived in the Negev since the dawn of history: nomads, Canaanites, Philistines, Edomites, Byzantines, Nabateans, Ottomans and of course Israelis. Their economy was based mainly on sheep herding and agriculture, and later also on trade.

The story of the Nabateans is particularly fascinating. The Nabateans were lords of the desert, where they established a trade route known as the "Spice Road." Caravans of camels traversed this route carrying spices, perfumes and salt from Yemen in the East to the port city of Gaza. Rest stops were built along the route and their remains still beautify the Negev expanses today (Avdat, Mamashit and others).

The modern Israeli settlement of the Negev began about 100 years ago, when a few communities were built. These were joined by another 11 settlements whose founding members built the first homes in a single night. After the establishment of Israel, the new country's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, promoted the settlement of the Negev and after he moved to live in Sde Boker a few more settlements were built.

The Negev is defined as a desert due to the small quantities of rain that fall here (less than 200 millimeters annually), and is divided into several regions, starting with the Be'er Sheva-Arad rift in the north, to mountain ridge in the center and the Arava and Eilat in the south. Although the Negev is barren most days of the year, its expanses desolate and its river beds dry, nature here is very surprising. In the winter, despite the small quantities of rain, the Negev is covered with amazing flowers, including luscious red anemones. When there are heavy storms they can cause flash flooding along the riverbeds.

Today the Negev is the gateway to the desert. It offers charming nature corners, historical and archeological sites, springs and the remains of agricultural compounds. Tourism in the desert is a developing industry and many tourists explore its expanses on foot, on bicycle and in all-terrain vehicles.