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The Lowest Airfield on Earth

Masada, Israel - where it's hot, historic, and hilarious

By Bill Clark

Masada, Israel (31 degrees, 19.92 minutes north; 035 degrees, 23.41 minutes east). Minus 1,240 feet msl. One north/south aging asphalt strip (1/19), about 3,900 feet long and 100 feet wide. Hot as hell—probably because it's so close. In fact, this is as close to hell as any living pilot is likely to bring his airplane without boring a very substantial hole through the crust of the Earth.

Located about 1,000 feet lower than Death Valley, Masada should have density altitude that provides absolutely superlative takeoff performance—if only the thermometer would cooperate. But the thermometer almost never cooperates. On a typical summer day with the temperature stewing at about 111 degrees Fahrenheit (and it can get warmer), the density altitude calculates to plus 1,000 feet msl. The mercury just gobbles up one of the airfield's conspicuous advantages.

That said, the intense heat is agreeably dry and visits the region only during the summer months. The rest of the year is pretty much what most Americans would consider pleasant summer weather.

Masada also has another type of sunshine. His name is Haviv Matziach, and he serves as the airfield's irrepressible manager, air traffic controller, welcome wagon, and chief cook and bottle washer. He is the entrepreneurial spirit behind the airfield's revival. Matziach is usually seen with a portable Icom transceiver in one hand, a skillet with a cooking omelet in the second hand, and his third hand extended for a friendly shake. The fourth hand is busy at work keeping the airfield's accounts and filling in certificates for pilots who have just landed at the lowest airstrip on Earth.

"Like some peppers and onions with the omelet?" he asks. Then, speaking into the Icom with a shift to a professional ATC voice, "Charlie-Gulf-India, clear to land on one-nine, wind light from the south." He releases the PTT and returns to normal voice. "Oh, yes, the Israeli Opera is planning a performance of Verdi's Nabucco here in June 2010. Should be a spectacular event!" Such is a typical multi-tasked conversation with Matziach.

A commercial pilot with instrument and multiengine qualifications, Matziach is a chronic optimist with a broad smile who is making a go of a small airstrip in one of the most desolate parts of the volatile Middle East. "The runway is going to be resurfaced very soon," he announces, while pointing with the Icom antenna. "They're also going to pave a new apron and install night lights. A fence is going up around the entire airstrip. And the world championship for radio-controlled jet models will be conducted here from 16 to 24 June [2009]. They've reserved 400 rooms over in the hotels! How about something to drink?"

Moments later, Matziach passes me a paper cup brimming with sweet kafe botz—Israeli "mud coffee." It's a social drink because nobody wants to drink the stuff right away. You've got a few minutes to wait and socialize while the swirling grains of undissolved coffee settle to the bottom and create their characteristic layer of mud. It offers opportunity to relax and talk.

We renew our friendship. "What's new?" I ask. He responds by gesturing toward one of the world's very few air-conditioned Bedouin tents. It stands just 20 or 25 paces from the apron where my Piper Super Cub is parked. The tent is a delightful place, well appointed with authentic Bedouin carpets, cushions, and ornamental tapestries. Today it has about 40 Israelis lounging around, celebrating some young man's bar mitzvah. Children love the place because they can bounce uninhibited from cushion to cushion.

"People can stay overnight," Matziach says. "They pass some time around a desert campfire before going to sleep in a Bedouin tent. Breakfast in the morning includes fresh baked bread, labane [a type of goat cheese], and rich Bedouin tea."

Call it the 500-shekel cup of tea—the Israeli pilots' response to America's iconic hundred-dollar hamburger.

"We unfurled the world's largest flag here. Two hundred meters long! It's in the Guinness Book of Records!" he recalls. "Oh, and President Bush landed here in Marine One." Not bad for a hot and dusty old airport down in a hole at the bottom of the Earth.

Matziach's operation is part FBO, part desert resort, part balagan. A balagan is the ancient Hebrew term for caravanserai—a desert way station where camels and their drovers and all of their bundles and parcels of silk and spices would gather together to pass the night. They're usually characterized by good-natured indiscipline and people speaking so many languages that they end up talking with their hands. The enterprise is called SunAir, and it is certainly descriptive. Masada surely has more sun than Florida, or even Arizona. The number of overcast hours each year can be counted on your fingers.

SunAir now has a freshly painted and well-maintained Cessna 172 (4X-CGI) that is available for both rental and tours. And another 172 has just arrived from America (former N114SV, in the process of becoming 4X-CWP). "The next step is to acquire a 207," Matziach says. "We now have authority to start skydiving here—and given our low altitude, there's an extra 1,000-plus feet of jumping space for any diving from 10,000 feet."

Matziach managed Kanfei Yerushalim (Jerusalem Wings) at Jerusalem's Atarot Airport for a decade before September 2000. Then came the violence of Intifada, which included a few rounds of 7.62 mm Kalashnikov ammunition spraying around the ramp, tower, and offices. The airport was closed, and there is no indication of it reopening soon. So Matziach pulled up stakes and moved down to the desert.

The airstrip at Masada was built in 1962 after some German and Austrian health groups discovered that the name Dead Sea was a misnomer. "Actually, it's a very healthful place," Matzliach proclaims. "The Dead Sea is rich in mineral salts that have very therapeutic values for people who suffer from psoriasis and similar conditions." A few hotels were built, and Europeans started to arrive on a regular basis for treatments. Back in those days, the overland trek from Tel Aviv to Masada could take longer than the flight from Frankfurt to Tel Aviv. The solution, of course, was to build an airstrip at Masada and, once that was accomplished, Arkia Airlines began DC-3 service.

But a new road built after the 1967 war cut the overland journey time, and the air link lost its competitive edge. Masada's airstrip fell to disuse and just baked in the sun until January 2006, when Matzliach acquired permission to reopen the field. Today, there are numerous temptations that attract about 1,600 general aviation and ultralight landings a year. Simply touching down at the lowest airstrip on Earth is an accomplishment to be noted in a logbook. And all the hospitality at the Bedouin tent provides a convivial destination for a recreational flight.

The Dead Sea lies just a few hundred yards to the east, and it attracts many visitors. Some tourists come from abroad to slather themselves with the mineral-rich mud (said to be not merely therapeutic, but also salutary for improving normal skin—several companies now pack the stuff into tubes and export it worldwide). Some people come to float in the hyper-saline waters (8.6 times saltier than the ocean). It's impossible for a human body to sink here. Some physicians prescribe physical therapy in these exceptionally buoyant waters for people with serious joint problems.

But my own favorite tonic is just to breathe the air here. It's laced with bromine salt vapors, and two or three deep breaths can be irresistibly relaxing.

If you travel about 10 miles north, you can visit En Gedi, an oasis with fabled springs gushing from the craggy faces of desert canyons. The mountains here support a very good population of Nubian ibex—a muscular mountain goat with spectacular horns—and also a few leopards. There are ruins that date back to the Chalcolithic Age, about 7,000 years ago. En Gedi has several biblical links—it was a refuge for the young David when King Saul was angry with him. And its orchards produced fragrant balsam that was highly prized around the ancient world.

The site of biblical Sodom is about 18 miles south. But there isn't much to see there after all that fire and brimstone, plus a few millennia aging under the not-so-gentle Israel sun. There's also a pillar of salt that tour guides insist is all that remains of Lot's wife.

But the principal attraction in this region is the solemn mountain of Masada, which sits about a mile to the west of the airstrip. The flattened top of the mountain served as a fortress where Jewish rebels fled after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. They were pursued by Gen. Lucius Flavius Silva and the entire Roman Legio X Fretensis with 5,000 veteran legionnaires plus another 10,000 auxiliaries who laid siege. Some 936 Jews held out until the spring of the year 73 when, stone by stone, the Romans built an assault ramp. The night before the final attack, the Jews committed mass suicide rather than submit to Roman slavery. The melancholy mountain has become an icon of Israeli history—something like a Jewish Alamo.

Masada is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority maintains the site and an impressive archaeology museum there. Visitors can climb the daunting 1,300-foot vertical Snake Path to reach the ruins at the summit or opt for the cable car that operates on a regular basis.

But not all is somber in these parts. Matzliach's infectious enthusiasm has attracted a reasonably constant flow of Israeli pilots who fly across the desert and make the steep descent to his ever-sizzling airstrip. They come in Cessna singles and twins, ultralights, or, in my own case, a Super Cub.

Last year, in 2008, just for a day, Masada even became an "international airport" when a rally of 23 general aviation airplanes from Europe transited Israel en route to Jordan. Israeli customs and passport control set up a special facility to launch the rally on its international departure to Jordan, which can be easily seen just on the other side of the Dead Sea.

For those not keen to brave a night in a Bedouin tent, there's also a nice selection of multistar hotels and health spas a few miles to the south. But I think the Bedouin tent with all its colorful tapestries—and colorful host—is a better adventure.

"I am *meshugeneh!*" Matzliach admits. "This is what crazy people do. But my wife hasn't thrown me out of the house yet, so I'll keep at it!"

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ISRAELI AIRPORTS

Masada is one of Israel's 14 civil airports. Israeli pilots can opt for 500-shekel hummus-and-falafel hops to Kiryat Shemona in the Upper Galilee (comfortably nestled within the Katyusha range of Lebanon) or to the well-developed resorts of Eilat on the Red Sea. Between them, there are a dozen civil airfields, each with its own unique character—and characters.

Israeli pilots often jest that they know they are flying in the Holy Land because it is the only place where they can communicate directly with the Almighty—who speaks through their headsets. ATC in Israel is run by the Air Force, and instructions are delivered with the severity of the Ten Commandments.

Everyone is on the radar, and the soldiers watching the radar aren't allowed to even blink on duty. Woe to the aviator who strays from the straight and narrow CVFR or IFR routes. But it keeps all active pilots plenty sharp with their nav skills.

AOPA-Israel—in Hebrew Agudat Hate'ufah Haclalit—was founded in 1976 and now has about 600 members. The association sponsors a vigorous series of rallies, competitions, seminars, and technical lectures on a near-weekly basis through the year. Its Web site (www.aopa.org.il) provides some basic information about flying in Israel; the organization will host the International Council of Aircraft Owners and Pilot Associations' next World Assembly in June 2010.

Advice to foreign pilots contemplating the joys of tangling with Israel's ATC: Forget it! A simple validation requires multiple theoretical exams on everything from Israel's air law to some challenging navigation exercises. Once that's done, you'll have to jump through several hoops of fire, persuade a skeptical security guy that you have no evil intentions, and then pass a memorable sojourn with an even more skeptical CAA flight examiner. The

process usually takes some weeks. And, if you want to land in Herzliya, you'll also have to speak Hebrew. The price of 100LL has recently gone down to 8.12 shekels per liter—which translates to U.S. \$7.52 a gallon. Welcome to the Land of Milk and Honey!

—*Bill Clark*