

Go Mediterranean

GO
GADGETS

ADAM HARVEY

At the cutting edge



Leatherman's newest multitool, the Surge, has stronger pliers and scissors, longer knives, and four outside-opening blades to save unfolding the tool to access a cutting edge (€145, 53 Degrees North, Carrickmines and Blanchardstown, Dublin, www.53degreesnorth.ie). A limited edition to mark the company's 25th anniversary has silver grips hand-tooled to designs by Argentine silversmith Adrian Pallarols. You may want to think twice before using the €695 knife to prise open a tin of paint.



Relaxed travel? You've got to be joking. But even the check-in queue at Dublin airport will seem a little more serene when tuned in to a series of locally produced guided relaxation CDs that aim to ease the burden for adults and kids (€20 per disc, downloads €15, www.ichievement.com, 087-2402599). Mags Corbett uses music and imagery to bring you on an inwardly serene journey, even if your outward-bound experience doesn't quite match. There's guided relaxation for adults and a "dolphin escort" to lead your youngster through a trip of the imagination. Topics include exams, pregnancy and sleep.



The Grobag Egg baby thermometer changes colour with a room's temperature, so that travelling parents can ensure baby doesn't overheat. It comes free when you buy two Baby Sleeping Bags (€36 each, www.babytravelshop.ie), which are wearable blankets – with zips and arm holes – that are designed to stop babies escaping their blankets on cold nights.

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Eye opening voyage

Michael Parsons gets a chance to see the Holy Land during a cruise from Cyprus that stops off in Israel

IN THE LITTLE town of Bethlehem there will be plenty of room at the inn this Christmas. Tourism has plummeted in areas of the Holy Land under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Locals say the biggest drop has been from Ireland and the US. Walid, a Christian Arab tour guide, recalls when he used to have groups of Irish a few times a day. Not any more. At the Herodian souvenir shop, on Manger Street, the anxious sales staff proffer hand-carved olive-wood cribs and mother-of-pearl rosary beads while its owner, Costandi Canavati, says: "We are in a very bad situation due to the lack of tourists."

For the first time in history the Holy Land is physically divided. The Palestinian West Bank of the River Jordan is enclosed by the Israeli "security barrier", a 600km internal border comprising a mix of concrete wall and fencing that resembles a combination of the Berlin Wall and Belfast's "peace lines". Getting through the Checkpoint Charlie-style entry points requires planning, patience and determination.

Both the Palestinians and Israelis want Irish pilgrims – and tourists – to return. If you'd like to visit the biblical sights but don't fancy flying to Israel, you have an alternative: go by sea from Cyprus. You can combine a traditional beach holiday on the eastern-Mediterranean island with a mini-cruise to the Holy Land, involving two nights at sea and a day's sightseeing in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Limassol, an old port city on the south coast of Cyprus, was once a staging post for European crusaders en route to liberate the Holy Land from Islamic occupiers. Today it is one of the Mediterranean's busiest resorts. Almost 1,000 years ago the English king Richard the Lionheart disembarked here and tasted grapes that he pronounced "very good". The chuffed islanders misheard the compliment and named the vine "Veriko" in his honour. The grape variety retains the name.

We board the MS *Sapphire* destined for the Israeli port of Haifa. Cabins – even the superior – are basic but spotless, with ample storage, serviceable small bathrooms with shower, and surprisingly comfortable beds. Outdoor seating overlooks a swimming pool filled with brackish water the colour of absinthe. Nobody ventures in. Smoking is permitted pretty much everywhere except the restaurant, to the evident satisfaction of the mostly Russian passengers.

Below deck are a gym and a library with well-thumbed paperbacks by Maeve Binchy and Cecelia Ahern. We're under the capable command of Capt



Dikeos Fokas and Greek officers dressed in Daz-white uniforms, shoulders reassuringly dusted with copious quantities of gold braid. *HMS Pinafore* meets Homer's *Odyssey*.

This is an informal cruise, so pre-dinner drinks are taken on deck as the ship slides into one of the world's oldest and most fabled shipping routes. Then it's down to a single-sitting dinner of the bland international type.

Later the Marco Polo lounge fills to the gills for a floor show that could be a dress rehearsal for the Moldovan song contest. Dancing girls wear Sinbad costumes and singers murder Sinatra in Slavic accents.

In the bowels of the vessel, posters for an unexpectedly spacious and comfortable cinema display unintentionally grim humour. Tonight's film will be *Hurricane*. But, mercifully, the sea remains calm.

At dawn the lights twinkle in Haifa, Israel's principal port and third largest city, which is built on a series of rolling hills collectively known as Mount Carmel. The Promised Land. What a sight this must have been for exhausted Jews arriving from Europe after the horrors of the Holocaust.

On the quayside this morning we walk past tour buses from the Nazarene Express coach company and speed down Yitzhak Rabin Highway towards Jerusalem in an air-conditioned, leather-upholstered German people-carrier, passing kibbutz villages, long stretches of golden beach and precious farmland. Sixty per cent of Israel is desert, so every square centimetre of fertile soil is assiduously cultivated. There are cotton fields, banana and orange

groves and endless hectares of plastic tunnels shielding crops of soft fruits and vegetables. Freshwater fish farms have developed a hugely lucrative sideline exporting koi to Japan. But the Land of Milk and Honey has also become a country of silicon chips and high tech.

Our Jewish guide, Roni, is passionately proud of his country's achievements – and idiosyncrasies – commenting: "Israel is a weird country. We have six satellites in space, but you can still

see people riding donkeys."

We are crossing a landscape once traversed by the ancient world's great trading routes, which linked Cairo to Damascus, Jaffa to Petra and beyond to Mesopotamia and Asia. At a service station, armed guards, their waists slung with pistols, sit at the entrances to both cafe and shop. A policeman cradling a machine gun sits sunning himself on the terrace while motorists fill up. The Palestinian area is visible behind the meandering security barrier on the other side of the motorway. Questioned about it, Roni explains: "It doesn't look good for the image of Israel in the world, but terrorism has dropped by 100 per cent. So which is best?"

The road ascends into the Judean Hills, and to reach the summit of the Mount of Olives is to survey one of the most extraordinary and thrilling vistas on earth. "This," says Roni, "is where faith begins." He points out the sacred places, and both Old and New Testaments come alive. There Abraham built his altar. Here Jesus wept. Below is the Garden of Gethsemane, where He was betrayed and arrested. Across Kidron Valley is the epicentre for three of the

Go there



Michael Parsons was a guest on a cruise organised by Louis Cruise Lines (www.louisclines.com). For more about visiting Cyprus, see www.visitcyprus.com or call 01-6629269. You can ask travel agent to add a mini cruise to the Holy Land to a package holiday or other trip to Cyprus.