

For R35 000 you can spend a week in Israeli hotspots learning what it's like to live with terror



Queuing up for a holiday in hell

CRITICS call it "terror tourism" or "a blast of a vacation" – but there's no shortage of people eager to experience for themselves what it's like to live under the constant threat of attack in one of the most dangerous places on Earth.

For about R35 000 you can spend five days living in Israeli hotspots, experience a virtual terror attack, helicopter flights over flashpoints such as Hebron and the Gaza Strip, firearms training and antiterrorist instruction from top Israeli defence force reserve officers.

Operation Shiloh was developed by American Jews Jay Greenwald and Yehoshua Mizrahi after Yehoshua's wife Yael came up with the idea. She'd narrowly escaped a bomb blast and decided there was a definite need for ordinary people to get basic anti-

Activities include hand-to-hand combat, small-arms training, helicopter flights over flashpoints and a virtual terrorist attack. And there's more

By Paula Slier



terrorism training to protect their families. Now people from all over the world – but especially the States, Canada and Australia – are clamouring to take advantage of the scheme.

"What we're offering is a unique, (Turn to page 202)

MAIN PICTURE: Participants are trained to handle any eventuality – including having to ride a so-called "zip line". **ABOVE:** Small-arms training is part of the daily routine.



LEFT: The day starts with lessons in hand-to-hand combat. **ABOVE:** It's not all terror and hard work. Here participants take time out to relax around a campfire. Most of the men and women who do the course come from the US, Canada and Australia.

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serious training course. Terrorism is on the increase – and if it hasn't already hit South Africa it's only a matter of time until it does," Jay says.

"Since 11 September everyone has to look over their shoulder. The FBI and people in the know are preparing for a kind of terrorism war in the States that we in Israel have had for a long time. People sometimes think they're immune because they live in a certain place but there have been attacks in Europe and South America. The reality is everyone is a target now."

Response to the course has been generally positive but there are Israelis who're critical of people who travel halfway round the world – and pay a lot of money – to experience a terrorist attack.

"Israelis don't need this," Yehoshua concedes. "They have the real McCoy. Unfortunately we've become the experts in the war on terror. There are modalities for coping with it and it's not as if we're going to be giving away any family secrets. Our course is designed to empower people when they come face to face with terror."

And judging by the reactions of course graduates, it works.

"After 9/11 I realised we're very vulnerable in the States and it scared me," says a mother of two who recently completed the course. "Here I got to hear it from the people who know it best, who live it every day and who fight it every day."

Yehoshua says it's a course for the man – or woman – in the street with little or no experience in urban terror but also for retired army officers who want to hone their skills.

"But we have to be careful with who comes on this training. We wouldn't want the information to be used against us. This is no joyride and we can't be giving automatic weapons with live ammunition to just anyone."

The course has the backing of the Israeli defence force. Top Israeli soldiers, police officers and antiterrorism experts helped in its design although some of the content is born out of first-hand experience. Like the time Jay went to visit a friend in hospital and got caught in Israeli/Palestinian crossfire.

"I was in a tunnel and didn't know what to do," he says. "I could hear the bullets ricocheting. I phoned the army commander who told me to stop the car, get under the dashboard and switch off the headlights. Part of me felt like Rambo, like wow, this is exciting, and I was calling my friends from my cellphone to tell them I was in a shoot-out."

"But it was serious stuff and I was pretty shaken up by the end of it. It took the army half an hour to come and fetch me but it felt like for ever."

On another occasion he was on the receiving end of a hail of stones being thrown by Arab villagers.

"When that happens you just get the hell out and worry about things later. Protecting yourself should always be your first priority."

Which is easier said than done, particularly if it's the first time you've ever been in a terrorist attack. More

often than not people are numbed with shock.

"The idea is to expose participants to as many terrorist situations as possible so if they ever find themselves in a real-life attack, knowing how to react will be second nature," explains Yehoshua who had been in Israel for only two weeks when he experienced his first suicide bombing.

"My wife and I were with our six-month-old baby, finishing up some bureaucratic stuff in Jerusalem's main pedestrian mall. There was this huge noise and I remember my wife saying to me, 'Is that what I think it is?' At first I didn't really know what was going on until a nearby storekeeper ushered us in and locked the door. We hid for about half an hour behind the counter."

In such situations seeking shelter is the correct thing to do but most course participants learn this only after experiencing one of two terrorist attacks organised at the beginning and end of the week's training.

Designed for a maximum of 20 people over 21, the course is no picnic.

A typical day starts at 6 am with hand-to-hand combat lessons. From there it's off to the shooting range where participants learn how to use everything from pistols and Uzis to M16 rifles and AK-47s. The new Israeli army assault rifle, the "Tavor", is also demonstrated.

Participants learn to clean and disassemble weapons and one afternoon is spent shooting at one another with pellets of dry paint to master hitting a moving target.

Night firing from a facility in the north of the country used by the defence force to train elite troops, an advanced driving course, a shopping mall attack and plenty of debriefing sessions complete the training. Each participant is presented with a certificate and a video.

"It's all about being prepared. When you're aware, the chances of something bad happening decrease," Yehoshua says.

"It's the same with places that are well protected. They have less of a chance of becoming a target."

"Five days isn't a long time to learn what takes most Israelis a lifetime to master but it does at least take the edge off being in a terrorist attack." □