

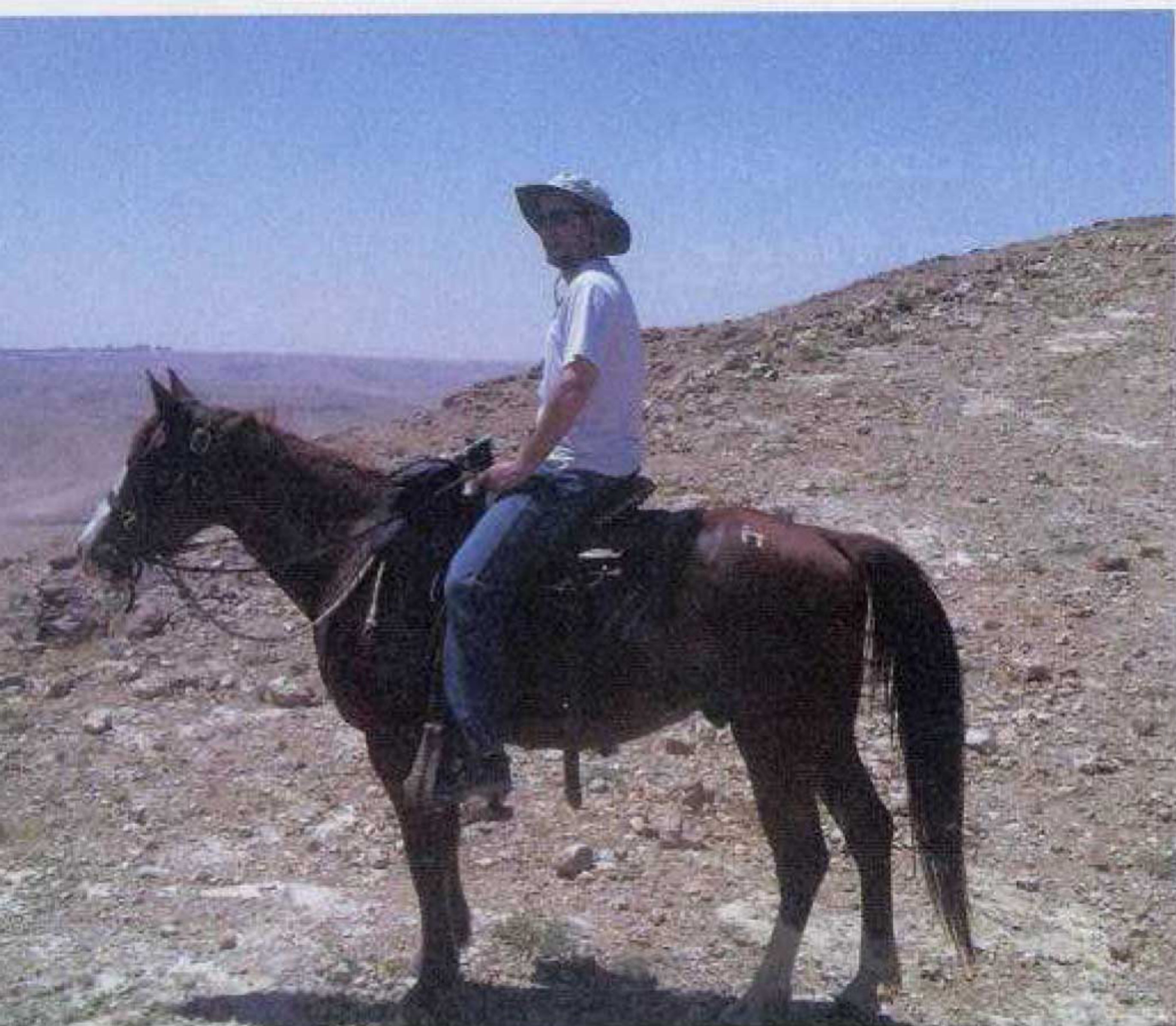
# Seeing Israel on an American Quarter Horse



**An Israeli tour company and its customers appreciate the dependability and durability of these four-legged guides.**

**By Tom Moates**

**Photos Courtesy of Yair Sharef**



THE HOLY LAND OF ISRAEL IS A POPULAR PLACE FOR TOURISTS and pilgrims, with destinations like Galilee, Caesarea and the Judean Desert. That's no surprise. What might be more of a shocker is that you can get there on horseback, on board an American Quarter Horse.

Yair Sharef owns the horseback riding tour company [Sirin Riders](#), based in Magal, Israel.

"Most of the horses that my business is based on are Quarter Horses," Yair says. "The Quarter Horses that we use sometimes really surprise me because this is a horse that is born outside – they are not stable horses, much more like the American ranch horses. Quarter Horses are very, very strong horses. I'm sometimes really amazed how they take a seven-kilometer (4.35 miles) contour uphill and, of course, how they function in the desert. The Israeli desert is not a sandy desert. It is a desert with a lot of terrain. They are so reliable in the way that they are taking our customers. I really admire them."

Yair, 50, grew up with horses, having owned one from the age of 11. In his mid-20s, he went on a trail-riding trip four times a year with friends, at locations around Israel. Those experiences inspired him to start Sirin Riders in 2010.

"All the time, the horses were not a hobby but a way of life – but not a way to make a living," Yair says. "And then two years ago, I finished my work as a hired manager (he was executive vice president of global marketing and sales, overseeing 35 countries for the multinational company Mul-T-Lock), and I was looking for something to do that will combine all my loves. I love horses, I love this country, I have some background in international businesses, then one night

I saw an ad for a riding vacation in Chile. If it works in Chile, why shouldn't it work in Israel? Then I started to work on it. I designed the website, and I designed all the routes.

"For me, **It's** is a continuation of the activities I did for friends. (Now) we are making a business out of it to present Israel as I love it and show these special places to people from abroad. This is actually the vision and the dream, and now it has come true. In December 2010 was the first customers to come from the States."

The trail ride tours can provide such unusual opportunities as riding a horse in the waters of the Jordan River and reaching remote archeological sites like Masada and Sepphoris. Yair says he enjoys seeing his clients develop a new understanding about Israel when they take a riding vacation with him and his crew.

"I bring them back to the airport, and their knowledge about Israel is totally different," he says. "I find it quite amazing for me, as an Israeli, to make this shift in peoples' minds. It's also a perception about horses, perceptions regarding political situations – on many occasions, people are sure we're riding on camels and living in the desert. When they come here, they see how we live. They see how democratic and western we are and the standard of living and the horses, as well. The regular reaction to my riding vacation is, 'It's

the best vacation I ever had!' Sometimes, it is people that have had riding vacations all across the globe."

Yair is very serious about the health of the horses under his care and declares up front in his advertising, "No skinny horses!" His string of American Quarter Horses is provided by Israeli ranchers who work closely with Yair. These hearty mounts include: Mr Limepit, a German-bred grandson of Doc O'Lena and Dry Doc; Dits Balue, a grandson of Jaz Poco Goldun Blue; and Mr Passover Doc and Tasha Peponita Doc, both grandsons of Gallo Del Cielo.

The most popular riding excursion **we offer** is Tour Israel. It is an eight-day horseback tour with stops at two ranches. Two sets of horses are alternated to allow the mounts ample recuperation time between work days. This trip covers a vast variety of geography. It begins in mountainous Galilee in the area of the Jordan River and includes many important sites in Christian history. Travelers then go to western Galilee, which has a rather Mediterranean feel and looks much like Greece. Next is a day in Jerusalem, and from there, the group rides out into the Judean Desert.

"We camp in the Judean Desert," Yair says. "In the other places, we have a country lodge close to the stable that we use. In the desert, we tie (the Quarter Horses side-by-side on a high line), and they can stand all night long. They are





properly calm. When a Quarter Horse gets to a complicated situation, he reacts slower, which is such an advantage. In general, we don't want to go on the edge with customers, but sometimes it happens. On one hand, the horses we work with are well bred, and they are very good Quarter Horses; on the other hand, they have a lot of experience. They are in very good shape. The result, I can say, is they are the perfect trail riding horse."

There are a couple reasons for the prominence of registered American Quarter Horses in this small country in the middle of the Middle East. First is that Israel has plenty of cattle ranching, and when farmers decided to import horses for ranch work, they chose the best horses available in the world for the job. It's no surprise that Quarter Horses from America topped that list, and many were brought in. Their breeding stock is now plentiful, and the majority of the Quarter Horses in Israel these days are foaled there.

Second, Yair explains that western riding, including competitions for reining, western pleasure, working cow horse, team penning and so forth, are now very popular mainstream equestrian activities in Israel. Natural horsemanship recently has found widespread interest in the country.

Specifically, the Quarter Horses used are provided by the company's chief horseman, AQHA life member Uri Shama. Aside from working as a trail guide, Uri also is a welder, horse trainer, experienced riding instructor and manager of the Double Saddle Ranch located in Kibbutz HaZorea.

Other horses come from Nitzan Peleg, whom Yair calls "one of the best western riders and riding instructors in Israel."

"Israel, in a way, is a great country for trail riding," Yair says, "and the reason is, we do not have private property here. The land belongs to the state and is leased to the farmer. So, you actually can go all around Israel, and you just have to open the gates and close the gates back, otherwise the farmer will kill you," he says with a chuckle. "But, there is no place you cannot visit with horses.

"Also, it is a country you can ride 365 days a year. The best time to come to Israel to ride is from October until May. June is OK. In September, we ride. The winter is not so problematic. We sometimes ride in the rain, but it's not like riding in the snow in Montana. In the Jordan Valley, it's average (107.5 F) in the summer. I have a strong discipline of not riding over 32 C degrees (90 F). I don't like it, and it's not good for the horses and, for sure, it's not good for the riders. In July and August, (we sometimes ride) in the morning or afternoon or full-moon night.

"At the end of the day, the most important element is the horses. Because it's a riding vacation, if people don't like their horses, it can be an awful vacation. And this Quarter Horse, actually, it's about them. They are the foundation of my business. If they were tricky horses, unreliable, not strong, that had colic in the desert, I would close my business after a few months.

"They are great horses." ■

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*See Page 10 to learn about AQHA's international activities, including information on the Israel Quarter Horse Association, which has been an AQHA affiliate since 2001; it currently has 221 members and 2,455 registered horses.*