

36

WORD ON THE STREET

Tricia Welsh tours Tel Aviv with food-loving locals to feel the pulse of Israel's vibrant Mediterranean city, Ottolenghi-endorsed eateries and all.

Flying into Tel Aviv, the flight-path video playing on my personal screen resembles a map of global hot spots: the Syrian cities of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus are to my left; Gaza City to my right while Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and the holy city of Hebron are directly ahead.

Being at the epicentre of this long list of historically troubled regions doesn't seem to slow the lives of the Israelis who I see going about their daily lives as I leave the airport (in spite of two rockets being fired into Tel Aviv overnight). And, it hasn't deterred tourists either. In recent years, the country's tourism figures have gone through the roof with a 42 per cent increase in the past three years (to 2019), and a staggering 4.2 million visitors in 2018 – nearly half the population of the entire country.

I have arrived a few days early for an organised tour of the country to spend time exploring Tel Aviv with friends who live here. I am booked into the very stylish The Norman Tel Aviv, which offers chic accommodation in two beautifully restored 1920s residences, with two convivial restaurants, a rooftop pool with fabulous city views and the low-lit Library Bar where I meet my friends, Jason Heaney and Yaron Zeidle, for cocktails.

Originally from Michigan via 20 years in Chicago, Jason has been living in Tel Aviv for 10 years working as a consultant to philanthropists, mostly for family foundations. His Israeli partner, Yaron, is a tech teacher.

WORD ON THE STREET

Spread over nearly 52 square kilometres, Tel Aviv is an easy city to get around. You can be anywhere within half an hour and you can cycle for a large part of the year due to the Mediterranean climate which boasts 300 days of sunshine a year.

It is a young person's city with 22.2 per cent under 20 years old and 18.5 per cent between the ages of 20 and 29 years. Current figures show that less than 15 per cent of the population is over 65 years of age. When the cost of living soared in the 1960s, residents were forced to move. As older people left, younger ones moved in.

According to Jason, Tel Avivi are young and stylish, fit and active and go out a lot. Rather than being slaves to fashion they have a comfortable sense of style that is neither New York nor Paris. "No one wears a suit unless they are a diplomat or a foreigner," Jason says. "Casual" is how Tel Avivi describe themselves, and it's more than just fashion. Plans are casual. Dates are casual. Time is observed casually (except with reservations at good restaurants where you'll lose your spot after 15 minutes).

While the Holy Land itself is as old as God, Israel as a country is only 70 years old and Tel Aviv just over a hundred, being founded in 1909 by just 60 Jewish families.



PHOTOGRAPHY: TRICIA WELSH (BAUHAUS BUILDINGS, HUMMUS AND PITA, THE NORMAN, KIOSK, ORANGE AND POMEGRANATES)



It's only really been in the last 35 years that the country has been able to operate on the global stage. And in one particular field, it has taken the world by storm. Tel Aviv has the highest number of start-ups per capita in the world, and has been tapped by *Fortune* magazine as one of the best places in the world to start a business. Most drivers navigate the roads using Waze, a local traffic and navigation app that Google snapped up seven years ago for US\$1.3 billion. It also has the highest investment of GDP in research and development with more than 300 multinationals, including Microsoft and Amazon, having set up R&D centres in the country, according to *Forbes* magazine.

Geographically, one of the first things you notice about Tel Aviv is its incredible coastline along the Mediterranean. White-capped waves rhythmically roll in along its 14-kilometre stretch of white sandy beaches down to the ancient port of Jaffa, which at some 3500 years old is one of the oldest ports in the world and one of the oldest settlements on the eastern Mediterranean. Where once pilgrims in the Middle Ages disembarked from ships that might have come from Venice, today its narrow cobblestone streets and lovely stone buildings house galleries, boutiques and atmospheric restaurants and bars.

In summer, a vibrant beach culture draws locals at weekends to show off their fit and tanned bodies, to go for a beer with friends or indeed just to watch the sunset especially on Saturday afternoons. The mild climate means people can swim comfortably for six months of the year. A boardwalk extends the full length of the beaches. "It's a gorgeous walk," says Jason, "both for the tranquillity

of the water and the beautiful bodies that litter the beaches on any given day."

As you move around the city, you will notice the proliferation of white blockish Bauhaus buildings. There are more than 4000 of them, the greatest concentration of such buildings in the world. Designed by immigrant architects trained in Europe, particularly in Germany, home of the modernist Bauhaus School between 1919 and 1933, they were largely erected in the 1930s and 1940s after the Nazis closed the design school down and German-Jews left the country. In 2003, its Bauhaus legacy was recognised by UNESCO who declared the 'White City' a World Heritage site. Fine examples can be found around Dizengoff Square and tree-lined Rothschild Boulevard. You can take a walking tour of Bauhaus precincts through the Bauhaus Centre.

Tel Aviv's mild climate favours the city's vibrant cafe culture, with a proliferation of outdoor eateries, as well as an exciting nightlife. Intimate club-like bars are de rigueur in Tel Aviv for pre-dinner drinks – locals rarely drinking more than a glass of wine with dinner, I am told. Highly recommended is the Imperial Cocktail Bar with its little book of hand-mixed cocktails and crooner tunes that transport you to another era.

It's easy to see why modern Israeli food has taken the world by storm in recent years – thanks to chefs such as Israeli-Brit Yotam Ottolenghi who now operates six restaurants in London, and local Israeli TV chef Eyal Shani who owns not only some of the most popular restaurants in Tel Aviv, but has opened casual pita cafes in New York, Paris and Melbourne that also serve, among other dishes, his trademark whole roasted cauliflower. >>





As in most food-loving cities, any worthwhile establishment requires a reservation. Since I wanted to dine at some Ottolenghi-recommended restaurants, Jason booked weeks ahead to secure tables.

One night, we dine at 'hip and loud' Dalida in the Levinsky Market where we savour tender octopus and Palestinian *arum* stew, plump scallops with white sweet potato and Arab cabbage in champagne with calamari, bacon and Jerusalem artichoke crumble. But the highlight was joining the throng of eager young diners at Abraxas North which Ottolenghi suggests might well be the best in the city. Owner Eyal Shani eschews plates, diners eating directly from the butcher's paper that covers the table. The menu changes twice daily with dishes such as carpaccio of roasted beetroot with fresh horseradish and crème fraîche, whole globe artichoke, six-hour roasted lamb and always his signature whole roasted cauliflower.

"Tel Aviv is really a food lover's city," suggests Jason. "Everyone has their own favourite falafel and/or shwarma place and will argue all day that it's the best in the city. My favourite is near my house in the Nachlat Itzhak neighbourhood. OCD is also another personal favourite restaurant," he adds, "while Miznon is a delicious quick and easy bite in a pita."

A visit to vibrant Carmel Market is a good opportunity to appreciate the abundant and diverse fresh local fruits, vegetables and produce, but it also offers up another Middle Eastern taste treat. For breakfast we share freshly baked pita bread with creamy hummus and spicy peppers and tomato *muhammara*, and later enjoy tabouleh-filled pastries (the Israeli equivalent of *gözleme*), crispy-fried Libyan pastries filled with mashed potato, peas and an egg, and freshly cooked falafel with tangy pomegranate juice.

Although I didn't come to Tel Aviv just to eat, my visit here has been a truly local experience, which means eating, drinking and eating some more. And who am I to argue?



A traveller's checklist

STAYING THERE

The NORMAN TEL AVIV is located on King Albert Square in the heart of the city centre.
thenorman.com

EXPLORING THERE

ABERCROMBIE & KENT's 11-day Classic Israel private journey takes in the major highlights of the country including Tel Aviv, staying at The Norman and a Bauhaus experience.
abercrombiekent.com.au

SPEAKING THERE

The dominant language in Tel Aviv is Hebrew (H) and Arabic (A) can be heard in certain areas such as Jaffa. English is widely spoken. Useful words include:
Shalom (H) or *As-salamu alaikum* (A) – Hello
Boker tov or *Sabah el-khair* – Good morning
Erev tov or *Masa' el khair* – Good evening
Lehitra'ot or *Ma'salama* – Goodbye
Ken or *Na'am* – Yes
Lo or *La'* – No
Toda or *shukran* – Thank you

SPENDING THERE

The official currency is the new shekel, divided into 100 agorot. Currency should be exchanged only in banks or hotels and the receipt retained.

VISA REQUIREMENTS

Australian passport holders are not required a visa to enter Israel, rather a B2 loose-leaf Stay Permit is issued on arrival which you must retain in your passport until you leave the country.



WHEN TO GO

Temperatures in Israel are pleasant year round, but the country's mildest seasons are spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November). Springtime sees flowers blanketing the hillsides and wildlife coming out of hibernation. The two big Jewish holidays, Passover and Rosh Hashanah, fall March/April and September/October respectively which means parks, museums and attractions are busy and some businesses close. For Christians, being in the Holy Land at Christmas or Easter is a magical experience that attracts large numbers of pilgrims. For beachgoers, June, July, and August are almost guaranteed to give clear blue sky and the hottest temperatures.



INTERVIEW: ELSPETH CALLENDER



DJIBOUTI CITY, DJIBOUTI

Abdallah Ali, tour guide with Intrepid (intrepidtravel.com), on the meeting of cultures through food.

For those who do not know, Djibouti is an East African country with a population of 900,000 people across an area of 23,200 square metres. Three-quarters of the country's population live in its capital. I love the meeting of our various ethnic groups, such as Afar and Issa and Arab, within Djibouti City. One of the many ways I appreciate the coming together of these cultures is through food. Here are three traditional dishes I recommend you try during your visit:

Cambaabur (Somali crêpe) is a fermented pancake flavoured with onion, garlic, saffron, turmeric, cumin and sometimes chilli. It's generally eaten for breakfast with yoghurt or sugar.

Fahfah is a Djiboutian stew people typically eat for lunch. The meat is usually goat and that's cooked with vegetables, herbs and green chilli and eaten with *labooh* (flatbread).

Yemini-style grilled fish is a popular dish. Many restaurants serve it in the evening or you can join the local lunch crowd at Mukbassa Central, Chez Youssouf.

When you leave Djibouti City, take home the sense of solidarity we have as people of different cultures living here together, our shared love of the country and our smiles.



37