

High and low TEL AVIV



Wartime Israel is a place no tourist is advised to journey to. But when peace is restored, Israel's most vibrant city, Tel Aviv, is a safe and welcoming haven.

By Lee Suckling

The ever-persistent Israel-Gaza conflict escalated once again back in July 2014, with rockets firing from both sides of the strip, kidnappings, and casualties numbering more than 2,200 – this is the Israel we see on the news.

Shortly after the 2014 truce was called, flight prices to Tel Aviv plummeted in a bid to get tourists back to Israel's hub of finance, business, culture, and arts. Reassured that travel insurance would cover the cancellation costs if violence did re-ignite, my husband and I – both seasoned budget travellers – booked return flights from London to Tel Aviv

at almost half the standard price (less than €600, or NZ\$850, round trip for two).

Six months later, in early 2015, we embarked on our 4-hour flight and arrived in 'wintertime' Israel, what locals called a 'chilly' 18 degrees. We were wary about getting through customs – we had heard rumours such as "Don't you have to be Jewish?" and "They will grill you for a full itinerary to ensure you're not a terrorist" – but these turned out to be just that, rumours.

Our host, a Belgian-Israeli friend who had flown from London ahead of us, had prepared





a tour of 'high' and 'low' Tel Aviv to give us a real insight into daily life in the real Israel. This meant a forewarning text message in the taxi on the way into the city, "Don't worry about the graffiti!" he wrote, "It's everywhere in Tel Aviv. People don't care about the way their houses look from the streets – but they take a lot of pride in what's inside."

Our host was right. Graffiti was everywhere, dominating the lower parts of almost every apartment block. The streets are lined with 4-5 storey Bauhaus residences, built initially in the 1930s, with many additions in the '50s and '60s after Israel declared independence in 1948. Such prevalent architecture, visible in over 4,000 buildings across Tel Aviv's 52 square kilometres, gives the city a dominant alabaster hue that's reflected in its nickname, 'The White City'.

When we arrived at our apartment – two blocks back from the magnificent Mediterranean beach that stretches the city's width – we are privy to another slice of Israeli history. "The streets are all facing the wrong way," our host told us. "They're parallel to the coast, rather than running towards it. We had all these European artists come down here to build Tel Aviv, with no idea of how important



airflow is in the Middle East. That's why it's so hot in the summer."

Such oppressive Middle Eastern heat is one of the reasons to visit Israel in winter. The ideal months to travel are September through May, where temperatures sit comfortably in the high 20s, hovering into the late teens for only a few weeks in January-February. In the height of summer (June-July) temperatures rise well into the 40s and the humidity is stifling – often over 90 per cent – making for a wet hot Israeli summer few Kiwis could cope with.

Though there's a certain charm to them, if graffiti-covered buildings are 'low' Israel, Tel Aviv's dining scene is a very quick jump to 'high'. Tel Aviv is surprisingly secular: we were worried restaurants would all be closed from sundown Friday for Sabbath, but the city's reputation for 24-hour nightlife rings true.

Claro, a 4-star restaurant in the district of Sarona (one of the earliest modern villages established in former Palestine, which has been painstakingly restored and preserved since 2003), is popular and crowded with locals. While our host spoke some Hebrew, and we made every effort to use the local lingo such as *bevakasha* for please and *toda* for thank you, we discovered not only does every menu come in English, but also all the *sabras* (Jews born in Israel) we met speak it fluently.

High-end restaurants like Claro feature prices on par with similar eateries in New Zealand, around 100 shekels (NZ\$33) for a delicately smoked sea fish, and 148 shekels (\$NZ49) for a seared lamb plate, each enough for two to share. At the similarly high-end restaurant in The Norman Hotel two days later, we found comparably priced European dishes, offered up in a glorious modern dining room that could have been lifted straight out of *Wallpaper* magazine. Like in many other Mediterranean countries, we never dined before 10pm and often stayed into the wee hours.

Tel Aviv offers many low-cost experiences as well, the best of which can be found in the ancient port locality of Jaffa. Assimilated into the wider city of Tel Aviv-Yafo since 1950, Jaffa is the oldest port in the world, famous for its mention in the biblical stories of Solomon, Jonah, and Saint Peter. Inhabited since roughly 7,500 BC, the ancient cobblestone streets lead from the sea – where the Al-Bahr Mosque and St Peter's Church are located – into cavernous alleyway shops where local silver jewellery is in an abundance, and reasonably priced (around 300 shekels or NZ\$100 will buy a good-quality silver necklace).

Through the alleyways we found Shuk Hapishpeshim, the Jaffa Flea Market, which stands out like no antiques heaven Kiwis will ever experience close to home. The market is an Aladdin's cave of trinket shops, all jammed with lamps, clocks, and other ancient curios. In true Telavivi 'high-low' fashion, luxury design stores and top-name Israeli and European interiors labels are wedged between the thrift-friendly antiques stores.

While some laudable low-end food does exist in central Tel Aviv (Falafel Gabay, which we visited three times, fries up the best falafel in town), Jaffa is where you'll find the best street food in the city. At café Dr. Shakshuka, nestled among Jaffa's flea markets, we ate *shakshuka* which is a traditional Israeli breakfast dish on a shared pan combining tomatoes, eggs, and hummus or meat in the middle, to be dipped with pita.

Nearby, in the Shouk Harcarmel (a covered market similar to central Marrakesh, Morocco), we found hundreds of stalls selling potted hummus – the tastiest is seasoned with *za'atar*, a popular mixture of a dozen Middle Eastern herbs, olives, dried fruit, and other traditional Israeli delicacies.



The most enticing dining experience to be had in Jaffa, however, is at the restaurant Itsik Hagadol. For around 85 shekels (NZ\$28), we ordered our meat of choice in kebab and were served with around 20 small mezze plates: grilled eggplant, pickled carrots, chopped liver, hummus, Israeli salad, Turkish salad, sautéed mushrooms, falafel and roasted potatoes or French fries. The dishes were piled so high, they not only covered the entire table but stacked on top of each other to the point they resembled a plate-spinning balancing act.

But Tel Aviv isn't just about market food and mezze dishes. As the cultural hub of the nation, it's home to national centres of dance, theatre, and art. We only had time to devour one arts experience and chose the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which features a wondrous collection of recognisable modernist works



by artists such as Modigliani, Chagall, Picasso, and Kandinsky, juxtaposed with new works by modern Israelis and others living in the Jewish Diaspora.

Walking Tel Aviv's streets, you find that the stereotypes about Israel are misleading. On every busy boulevard you'll see Hasidic orthodox families walking alongside gay couples, graffiti artists working alongside businesspeople, and – although less frequently than in nearby Jerusalem – Palestinians sitting safely and comfortably alongside Israelis.

The Israel we experienced isn't the warzone we'd feared. After five days, countless falafel, and dozens of kilometres walked at all hours of the day and night, it was the exciting, safe, and accepting country we'd dreamed of.

