



# ISRAEL CALLING

New hospitality and cultural initiatives are carving out compelling spaces amid the beauty of the country's ancient landscapes – and the tangled narrative of its society. **Gisela Williams** reports

It's a balmy early summer evening in Tel Aviv. The artist Guy Yanai, the young fashion designer Maya Reik of cult label Marei 1998, her boyfriend Ross Belfer, founder of a local PR firm, and I are squeezed around a small circular table on the terrace of a restaurant called Port Said. It's heaving, but the actual interior space is tiny – just a bar and a DJ working the turntable. The restaurant's large window is like a small stage, the city's creative set spilling out across the terrace to the pavement beyond. In between sips of cooled Israeli white wine we dig in to a flurry of small plates that materialise at 20-minute intervals: garlicky Jericho green beans with lemon and olive oil, a sublime msabbaha, its whole chickpeas floating in a creamy tahini sauce. All this euphoric revelry is happening just steps away from – and with a dramatic view of – a theatrically lit, monumental Great Synagogue, built in the 1920s and then radically reinvented with striking, sculpted modernist façades by the architect Aryeh Elhanani. Welcome to Tel Aviv, a hedonistic and booming little Miami on the Mediterranean that sits around 50 miles from the Gaza Strip, one of the world's most incendiary

**Clockwise from above: a view across Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. The Chapel bar at The Jaffa and one of the hotel bedrooms**



regions. Throughout its streets, tower cranes swivel above construction sites, and tourism numbers keep breaking records. Even the Duke of Cambridge paid a visit recently to meet the city's entrepreneurs and young artists.

Although Port Said is located in Lev Hair, the centre of the city's Bauhaus architecture district, for years now Tel Aviv's creative scene has been moving south: interestingly the “newest” dynamic, compelling neighbourhood is its old city, Jaffa (pictured overleaf), which dates back several thousand years. (Modern Tel Aviv, in contrast, was founded just over 100 years ago). Traditionally populated by Arabs, Jaffa is one of the places in Israel where Muslims, Christians and Jews have co-existed, albeit often uneasily, for centuries. Its crumbling, luminous sandstone and limestone buildings are built like layers of honeycomb around its ancient port. In recent years its flea market, Shuk Hapishpeshim, which dates from the 1890s, has evolved into a hipster nexus on a par with east London, with industrial storage buildings and cavernous antique shops being taken over by cafés, restaurants and independent boutiques. Jaffa is also now the neighbourhood to stay in –







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and, for the first time here – in great style. In 2018 alone, the area has seen three major luxury hotel openings, all in pristinely renovated landmark architectural sites: The Drisco, a 42-room boutique hotel (the garden suite pictured right) in two elegant 19th-century buildings that were formerly the Jerusalem Hotel; The Setai (pictured on final page), a remade 12th-century fortress replete with restored stone arches and a beautiful courtyard shaded by potted orange and olive trees; and The Jaffa (pictured on previous pages), a much-anticipated and extraordinary property co-owned and developed by US-based real estate developer and art collector Aby Rosen, which finally opened in August. It took a massive human effort and investment, and more than 10 years, to turn this former 19th-century hospital and hospice into a 120-room destination hotel with a grand, light-filled lobby featuring an excavated 13th-century Crusaders’ wall. Designed by the celebrated minimalist John Pawson, the building was renovated by the local preservation architect Ramy Gill. For both men, retaining its layers of history was crucial to the project. “Exposing a building’s history exposes who we are,” Gill said. “We are not the first or greatest to live on this land. We are at the end of a long list of conquerors, from the Egyptians and Persians to the Romans and Ottomans, who ruled here 400 years.”

My compulsion to travel through Israel, as is the case for so many others, was to understand its future as well as its past. The country often appears to be on the verge of totally unravelling in the face of political contention (not least after the Israeli government’s recent, controversial ratifying of the Jewish Nation-State Law) – which all but dictates that there’s little that is actually relaxing about a trip to this



part of the world. Instead, it’s a journey of surprising, provocative and sometimes unsettling contradictions – one that combines profound history with a vigorous and dynamic contemporary art scene, ancient sacred landscapes and world-class food that fuses Arabic influences with those from the diverse regions of the Jewish diaspora. Tova Wald, founder of one of the country’s most exclusive travel operators, who has designed trips for the likes of Denzel Washington and DreamWorks co-founder Jeffrey Katzenberg, says, “In Jerusalem you can

walk along the same paths that King David and Jesus did. You can explore newly unearthed archaeological finds” – like the recently uncovered Roman theatre near the Western Wall, buried for almost 2,000 years – “or surreal modernist architecture like the Shrine of the Book, home to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Or villages of the Druze community, a unique, Arab-speaking, monotheistic religious minority that branched off from Islam around the 11th century.” For years, however, Israel as a tourism destination has had two problems, she notes. Service was a bit problematic; and there was a dearth of hotels. “But now there are several excellent hotel options in both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; and others opening in Galilee and beyond, finally allowing for a singular, and comfortable, circuit of the country,” she says. The fact that by the end of 2019, Six Senses will be launching one of its most dramatic resorts to date – the Six Senses Shahrut (pictured overleaf), a surreally beautiful property carved into the Arava Valley of the Negev desert – confirms the growing global fascination with Israel’s ancient physical landscape, its troubled contemporary political one notwithstanding.

What’s equally compelling is the impressive number of world-class contemporary cultural sites the country is now home to, from the newly opened Memorial Hall of Israel’s Fallen on Mount Herzl – a monumental swirl of bricks that spirals into the earth – to the Suzanne Dellal Centre, the headquarters of the internationally renowned Batsheva Dance Company, due to complete a major renovation this month. On my way south to Jerusalem, I visited perhaps the best known of these: the Design Museum Holon (pictured left), in a nondescript Tel Aviv



**Clockwise from top: Two adjoining Ottoman palaces were transformed into the light-soaked Efendi Hotel that overlooks the Crusader port of Acre. The old city of Tel Aviv, Jaffa is fast becoming its most trendy neighbourhood. The garden suite in the city’s Drisco hotel. Ron Arad’s joyful Design Museum Holon, south of Tel Aviv**



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From top: The Cave Bar in Jerusalem's year-old Villa Brown hotel and one of its bedrooms with private terrace. The dramatic Sixth Senses Shoharut, carved into the Arava Valley in the Negev desert, will open in 2019.

suburb, a Ron Arad-designed building that's a joyful loop of giant ribbons of painted Corten steel.

After I checked into my attic suite, plush with velvet chairs and brightly patterned carpeting, in Jerusalem's sleek, year-old Villa Brown (pictured above and right), Wald accompanied me just outside the walls of the old city to Mount Zion. It was here 3,000 years ago that King David established the city and placed the Ark of the Covenant; it's said this is where the Virgin Mother's life ended, and Jesus had the Last Supper with his disciples. "This is such a holy place, whether you are Jewish, Christian or Muslim," Wald said. "And at night you have it almost to yourself."

Under a gnarled mulberry tree meant to represent the Tree of Life, in a small square outside the Chamber of the Holocaust Museum, we met Yizar Hass, a guide with Wald, and a philosophy scholar. It was dark; I could just make out his face as he served us tea. Sounds of lecturing Orthodox Jewish rabbis spilled out of the open windows of the Diaspora Yeshiva; the lights of Jerusalem spread below us; the air was redolent of tea and old stones, still warm from the day's sun.

"Some people, even non-religious people, have significant spiritual experiences here," said Hass as he led us into King David's Tomb. The only remaining tourists were Orthodox families; the women in the female prayer room rocked gently, their lips moving as they prayed. We made our way through the massive Zion Gate into the Old City and wandered a maze of alleyways to the Western Wall. Approaching it this way allowed us to peer into the newly excavated Roman theatre, while also observing the hundreds of pilgrims praying, singing and crying at the Wall. In a place where mythical, religious and historic narratives are nearly impossible to untangle, an ancient theatre was an apt allegory, one that left me with a vertigo completely unrelated to the height from which I was looking down at this new fissure onto the past.

The road from Jerusalem to Galilee, following the Jordanian border, is a journey through biblical



landscapes: vast undulating rocky deserts, majestic date palm groves. After a couple of hours, I arrived outside the fortified walls of Acre, a small, slow-paced port city reminiscent of the Barbary coastal towns of Morocco. During the 11th century, Acre was a chief port used by the Crusaders, a gateway to the Holy Land, and the city is still marked with beautifully preserved sites: the Templars' Tunnel, which snakes under Ottoman-era mosques, and Turkish baths. We entered the Old City through a towering gate and followed open alleyways to the modest door of the light-filled lobby of The Efendi Hotel (pictured on previous page).

The Efendi's story is one of faith and perseverance. The owner – eminent Israeli chef Uri Jeremias, also known as Uri Buri – likes to say that when he first bought these two old Ottoman-era buildings in 2003 with several "silent partners", everyone thought he was crazy. Now it's one of the most elegant, original boutique hotels in the country. My room was a high-ceilinged space with a mirrored chandelier and a deep enamelled cast-iron bathtub. The public spaces feature





beautifully lit reading nooks under massive arched windows and elaborate paintings on the ceilings.

That night I dined with Jeremias and his friend Efraim Lev, a medieval Arabic pharmacology and medicine professor, with whom Jeremias sometimes creates historical tours based on stories of the Crusaders. Several small plates of food arrived at the table: dried watermelon rolled with basil, an explosion of vinegary sweetness; a zingy ceviche with capers, lemon and olive oil.

“Everyone is talking about co-existence here,” Jeremias said. “In Acre co-existence is in practice.” He waved towards the open kitchen: “Around half our workers are Jewish and the others are Arab. Ali Marin, my sous chef of the past 13 years is Arab, born in Acre, and the best I’ve ever had.”

Although it may seem necessity rather than altruism that motivates a Jewish Israeli to mastermind such experiments in co-existence – especially in a place like Acre, where more than 90 per cent of the Old City population is Arab – the reality includes both. My local guide, Abdu Matta, whose Arabic Christian family has lived in the same house here for 10 generations, later told me: “Uri is a phenomenon. If everyone were like him all conflicts could be solved without violence.” Ten years ago Matta co-founded Keshet, an NGO created to foster dialogue between the various ethnic and religious communities here. While Acre has for many years served successfully as a laboratory for co-existence in Israel, he says, he was very concerned about the recent Nation-State Law. “If the government won’t respect and embrace its minorities, it just adds fuel to the fire.” Matta has suggested to the local municipality that an actual academic subject called co-existence be taught in schools, like maths or science. “The name of the game is respect and forgiveness,” Matta said, “and that understanding needs to start in the schools.”

It’s individuals like Matta and Jeremias who can, and who wish to, quietly colour the narrative for a visitor



From top: The Setai hotel in Jaffa was originally a Crusader fortress dating back to the 12th century. The presidential suite at the hotel has panoramic views over the Mediterranean and the city

like me – even if (perhaps especially) just over a shared meal. We finished that evening with kanafeh, a traditional Arabic dessert of thin, shredded pastry soaked in a sugary syrup and served with cardamom and rose ice cream, its piquant contrasting flavours as ancient and memorable as the place itself. ♦

#### GENERATION NEXT

Gisela Williams travelled as a guest of **Tova Wald** (+972-4629 1878; tovawald.com), which creates customised itineraries from £11,000 for two for a six-night trip, including transfer from Tel Aviv, car and driver, private guide, dinners and breakfasts. **Six Senses Shaharut**, sixsenses.com; prices yet to be set. **The Drisco**, Auerbach St 6, Tel Aviv-Jaffa (+972-3741 0000; thedrisco.com), from \$300. **The Efendi**, Louis IX St, Old Acre, 24124 (+9727-4729 9799; efendi-hotel.com), from \$320. **The Jaffa**, Louis Pasteur St 2, Tel Aviv-Jaffa (+972-3504 2000; thejaffahotel.com), from \$600. **The Setai**, David Razi’el St 22, Tel Aviv-Jaffa (+972-3601 6000; thesetaihotel.co.il), from \$289. **Villa Brown**, Ha-Nevi’im St 54, Jerusalem (+972-2501 1555; brownhotels.com), from \$350.



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