

# Luxury travel

## Ancient Jaffa, Israel's coolest new quarter

Chic hotels, amazing food and hip bars are transforming this historic area in Tel Aviv, writes **Bridget Harrison**

It's a balmy evening on Jaffa's seafront and we're in a busy restaurant overlooking a jumble of small fishing boats. Our table is spread with a feast of salads presented Arab-style in 20 tiny metal dishes. There's sweet red cabbage, chilli and avocado, roasted cauliflower, and six incarnations of tahini which we scoop on to pitta bread, washing it all down with a crisp, tangy white from Mount Hermon. On the promenade in front, cool kids whizby on electric scooters. At the bar next door dancing has started.

I may be on holiday with my mum, but I'm in the latest hotspot of one of the world's most happening cities: Tel Aviv, Israel's vibrant metropolis of skyscrapers and beaches — and a white-hot culinary scene.

Jaffa's Old City of narrow, cobble streets and sandstone walls is at Tel Aviv's southern tip. If the action on its waterside is dizzying, the history of this harbour that dates back four millennia is even more so. It was here, according to Greek mythology, that Andromeda was tied naked to a rock to be devoured by a sea monster, before being rescued by Perseus. It was here, according to the Bible, that Saint Peter set sail to take Christianity across the Mediterranean. Napoleon's soldiers laid siege to this port, and slaughtered its 8,000 Arab inhabitants — only to then succumb to the bubonic plague. It's vertigo-inducing to imagine that the place where we are now soaking up the party scene has been occupied by Egyptians, Greeks, Byzantines, Crusaders, Ottomans and the British, to name a few.

As Tel Aviv flew up next to it, the Old City was renovated in the 1960s and became an artists' quarter. Now it and its surrounding largely Arab neighbourhood have become the place to stay. Three luxury hotels have opened here this year in historic buildings and its waterside warehouses are being transformed into bars, coffee shops and art spaces.

I am staying in the gorgeous Jaffa Hotel, which opened in August in a grand 19th-century hospice and convent. Co-owned by

the New York art dealer and real-estate mogul Aby Rosen, it took 15 years to transform this majestic building of arched walkways and vaulted ceilings into a chic, ultra-modern-feeling hotel. It was worth the wait.

In the airy lobby, Damien Hirst spin paintings adorn the walls and a low 13th-century Crusader wall, which was uncovered during the restoration, has been turned into a feature. The heart of the hotel is a large tranquil courtyard, where lime trees climb the walls and flat-topped mulberry trees provide shade for dining tables. The bedrooms, designed by the minimalist British architect John Pawson, are equally serene — cream walls, TVs discretely embedded in mirrors. Metal shutters cast honeycomb patterns across sand-coloured travertine floors. Down-

stairs in another courtyard there's a 15m pool, while the former hospice's vaulted chapel is a swanky bar and nightclub. In the basement the spa is run by the Swiss brand L Raphael, which specialises in oxygen-based treatments. (Two weeks later and my skin is still glowing.)

Anywhere else in the world, it would be hard to tear yourself away from such a hotel. But this is Tel Aviv. My list of recommendations is so long I don't know where to start. So I WhatsApp an expert, Eviatar Gover, whose company, Be Tel Aviv, offers bespoke walking tours in every hip corner of the city. He suggests we meet in the city's famous Carmel market.

To get there, we hop on hotel bikes and pedal past Jaffa's second grand new hotel, the Setai, which opened in spring in a former Ottoman prison overlooking the harbour, with an infinity pool on the roof and 120 slick rooms within the original pock-marked sandstone walls.

Then it's into the bright sea air, and along the boardwalk that sweeps beside the sparkling Med. A cycle route from Jaffa's seafront promenade was linked with Tel Aviv's boardwalk last month. Now you can cycle five miles along Tel Aviv's seafront without touching a road.

It takes a while to find Eviatar in a market that is bursting at the seams with

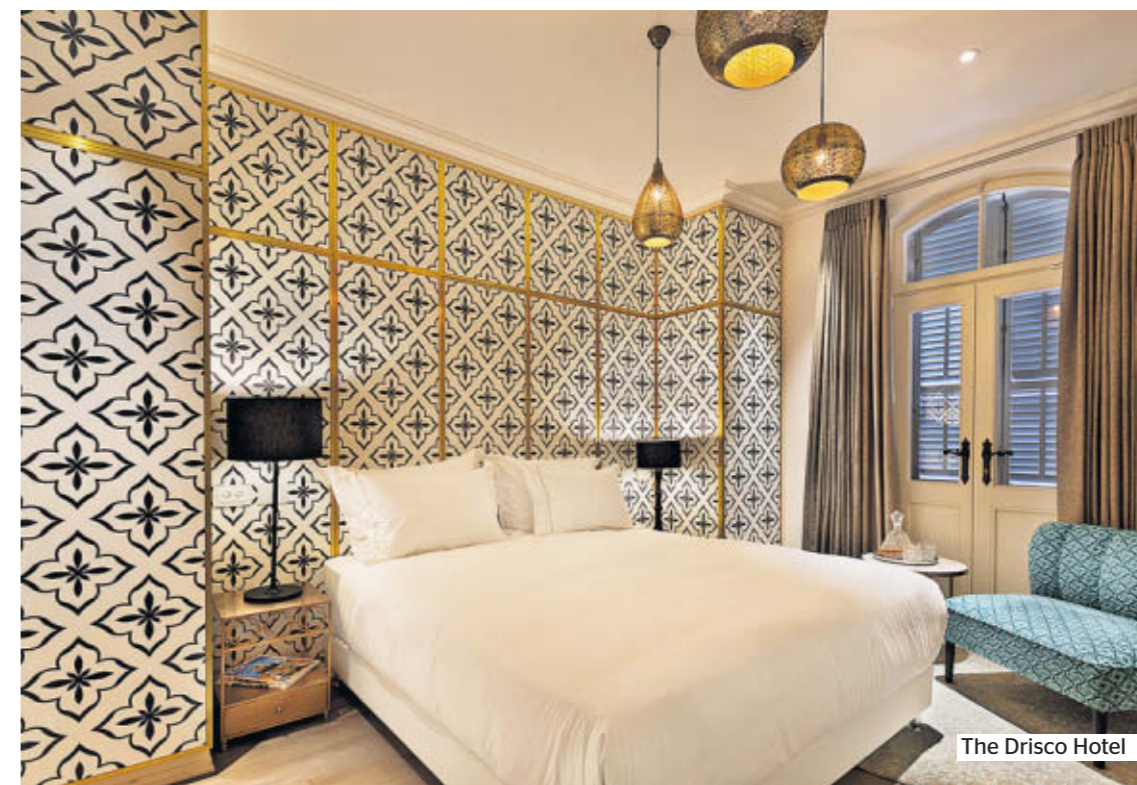


The bar and club at the Jaffa Hotel

people, food stalls and produce. "Israelis love to celebrate life and eat well!" he exclaims, a typical young, smart, enthusiastic Tel Aviver, who is off to a wellness festival in the desert later. He whisks us to spots we might never have found alone. My favourites: the tiny shop of the Jewish shaman Uzi Eli, who squirts our skin with an anti-ageing mist made from lemon pith and hands us pomegranate shots infused with the Yemeni pick-me-up plant khat; Junam, a shack-like café where we tuck into a dish of grilled vegetables, baked egg and fresh

herbs on flat bread that is inspired by the Turkish "pizza" the lahmajun; Pop Up Panda, where handsome tattooed chefs bounce around to hip-hop while loading delicious concoctions of spicy lamb and aubergine into pitta bread; and Beer Bazaar that serves 100 Israeli craft beers. By the time Eviatar has finished with us, we are practically staggering we are so full. We take a breather along the quieter adjacent Allenby Street, where Israeli artisans are selling art, jewellery and cool homeware. A short walk from our hotel out of the

Old City into Jaffa's wider neighbourhood is another famous market, Shuk Hapishpeshim (or the flea market), which is a treasure trove of vintage, jumble and tat. On Saturdays it transforms into an open-air food festival. On a quiet street near by is the chic boutique Drisco Hotel, which opened four months ago. The hotel was originally the Jerusalem Hotel, which had its heyday during the British Mandate. Mark Twain was once a guest, apparently. Today, it has a long, art-deco-style bar that's begging you to order a vodka martini. Marble floors



The Drisco Hotel



The Setai Hotel

and huge potted palms give the place a colonial feel. Upstairs the rooms are low-key and chic with an Arabic vibe.

The Drisco sits on the edge of the trendy Florentin area. Typically the landing point of Tel Aviv's poorest and most transitory, its down-at-heel streets are a-buzz with hipster coffee shops and vegan eateries. Every spare wall and building is adorned with elaborate graffiti (Eviatar takes street-art tours here). Cross a main road and the scene changes as you reach the leafy streets and fancy boutiques of Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv's oldest neighbourhood, established in 1887.

My lasting memory of this city, however, will be cycling along the beach boardwalk in the late afternoon, joining the throng of modern Israel enjoying a glorious Saturday. Large families parading with pushchairs, women in athleisure gear thwacking their way through games of bat and ball, dog walkers and buskers. Just before sunset, I stop at a pumping beach bar and drink a craft beer as the sun, now a great crimson orb, bleeds into the sea.

My mum, meanwhile, has gone on a different mission. Keen to see the places where Jesus lived and preached, she joined a day tour to the hilly north, to visit Nazareth,

Cana, the River Jordan and Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus fed the five thousand with two loaves of bread and five fish. She raves about the trip and found it very moving.

We compare notes over our next culinary adventure, in the downtown restaurant North Abraxas, which is owned by the celebrity chef Eyal Shani and is a favourite of Yotam Ottolenghi. Here, sharing dishes (melt-in-the-mouth chicken livers grilled with green onion; beans perfumed with garlic, lemon and olive oil; sugar-coated bananas) are served straight on to the brown paper covering our table. As we eat, the young maître d' boogies about to Beyoncé. Every so often a cry comes from the open kitchen and it's arak shots all round.

Such is the joie de vivre in Tel Aviv it is almost possible to forget that the Palestinian situation remains woefully unresolved. But not quite. The subject is always in the background and Israelis are not shy of fierce opinion and debate about it. It is when you reach Jerusalem, 45 minutes' drive away in this tiny country, that the intractable, mind-boggling complexity of the Middle East hits home.

We are based a few minutes' walk from the walled Old City in a historic town-

house turned boutique hotel called Villa Brown. It has a tea garden out front, festooned by bougainvillea. On the roof, there's a terrace and a small spa offering excellent massages.

Our exploration of the city begins at 8am when we meet up with Guy Leibovitz, an expert on biblical archaeology who proves a brilliant, and extremely patient, guide. We bombard him with questions. But in a place that has seen so much destruction and reconstruction, and where theology and history are inextricably entwined, nothing is simple. We have asked to see all the main sites, among them the two places where Jesus is thought to have been crucified and buried; the most holy Jewish site, the Western Wall; the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was betrayed and where 1,000-year-old olive trees grow. Everywhere teems with pilgrims.

In the end we get the most out of a quiet museum on the edge of the Old City in the Citadel, also known as the Tower of David, that dates back to Herod the Great. Here we pore over a sequence of rooms that lay out a timeline depicting the key events in Jerusalem's history from the second millennium BC. Then we head up on to the ramparts to look out over the city's vista.

To the north, in the distance, we can see the cheek-by-jowl tower blocks of the embattled Palestinian town Ramallah. In front of us is east Jerusalem and the golden Dome of the Rock shrine, the site from which the Prophet Mohammed made his "Night Journey" to Heaven. Behind it is the ridge that is the Mount of Olives, where the Messiah is prophesied to return. In the far distance there is a glimpse of Mount Nebo, where God showed Moses the Promised Land. To the west, cranes and new-builds clutter the sky over west Jerusalem. I wonder if any other view could capture 3,000 years of the theology and history so vividly.

My mum has one more "must-see" destination — Bethlehem. It's a ten-minute drive from Jerusalem, but a world away, through a checkpoint and past a security wall (or the separation wall, depending on your politics) that now encircles the Palestinian-controlled West Bank. Eight metres high here with barbed wire on top, the wall is a depressing sight.

Guy hands us on to a Palestinian guide, Gorge, a warm, articulate Christian, who drives us alongside the Palestinian side of the wall that is covered with elaborate protest graffiti, and through the busy streets of modern-day Bethlehem to the Church of the Nativity. Gorge helps us to nip in front of a crowd of middle-aged pilgrims from America, through a small doorway to see the dark-walled cave said to be the place where Mary laid Jesus in the manger.

I am more affected by Bethlehem's newer tourist attraction. The Walled Off Hotel (a play on Waldorf) was opened by the street artist Banksy last year in a house right up against the towering wall under an Israeli watchtower. It's part ubercool boutique hotel, part art installation with an unashamedly partisan message. It is filled with Banksy's art, including his piece depicting a Palestinian protester and an Israeli soldier having a pillow fight. There's a gallery showcasing local artists and a museum that uses video footage and personal stories to document the human tragedy that has occurred for the Palestinians in recent history — the latest being the erection of the wall.

We would have liked to stay for tea or a cocktail in the hotel's quirky, elegant lounge that is packed with Banksy treasures. However, Gorge isn't allowed into Israel without a permit, and Guy, who has to drive us back through the checkpoint, isn't allowed to be in the West Bank after dark.

And this somehow summed up for me the tragedy of this hideously complex and utterly compelling part of the world.

### Need to know

Bridget Harrison was a guest of Cox & Kings (020 3642 0861, coxandkings.co.uk), which has a five-night Tel Aviv and Jerusalem short break from £2,245pp (two sharing), and includes five nights' B&B, flights on British Airways, guides in both cities and all transfers. Day trips to Bethlehem and Galilee cost extra. B&B doubles at the Jaffa Hotel cost from £470 (thejaffahotel.com). B&B doubles at the Villa Brown cost from £200 (brownhotels.com)