



GETTY IMAGES/MOMENT OPEN; FLICKR/AFIR SIVAN; ISRAELI TOURISM

THE HATACHANA RAILWAY STATION IS MY PERFECT INTRODUCTION TO TEL AVIV's never-say-die spirit. It is late in the evening, and the molten sun is poised low over the sea right across the road. Tel Avivians who have been out walking and jogging, biking and barbecuing—in other words, making the best use of their summer weekend—are slowly winding down for the day.

Israelis elsewhere derisively call this city 'The Bubble,' but Tel Avivians wear it as a badge of honour. Not surprising, given that Tel Aviv—meaning 'spring hill'—itself was established in 1909 with the objective of being secular, modern, and inclusive. Today, it lives up to that promise, with its liberal attitudes, reflected in everything from its colourful Gay Pride marches to casual dress codes.

And inside the premises of what used be the old Jaffa train station, where passengers from Jerusalem once alighted, the fun is just beginning. Patrons head to dozens of al fresco cafés, buzzing bars, and upscale boutiques, right in the midst of truncated railway tracks and refurbished warehouses. It is impossible to imagine that for several decades this was a derelict site. When the railway line between Jerusalem and Jaffa was shut down in 1948, the entire site was abandoned and left to decay.

It was only in 2010 that the city municipality decided to breathe fresh air into this space, turning it into a vibrant shopping, eating, and entertainment complex. From the impossibly hip Vicky Cristina tapas and wine bar located in an open patio under a sprawling ficus tree to the earthy Greg Café Bistro selling a range of coffees and quick eats, each has its own loyal clientele. And then there are the dozens of designer boutiques like Hella Ganor & Dorit Gray with its exquisite handcrafted jewellery and Ronen Chen's ready-to-wear collection. In particular, I find it impossible to resist the siren song of the Ahava boutique, which stocks skincare products made with minerals from the Dead Sea; I walk out of the store in a cloud of perfume (not to forget super soft hands).

The HaTachana Complex is only one of the several examples of Tel Aviv's urban revival and regeneration projects, where the old constantly morphs into the new, and nothing is allowed to remain boring, even for a brief time. Not surprisingly, it is as popular among discerning residents as it is among curious visitors like me, who also want a glimpse into the Neve Tzedek neighbourhood it is located in. Established in 1887 as a Jewish precinct, it predates the contemporary city of Tel Aviv by over 20 years.

I take a leisurely stroll through its narrow lanes, stopping to admire the cheery and quirky wall art on display.

Soon, it is time to head on from one urban village to another. Dinner is at the old port area of Jaffa, now one of Tel Aviv's most vibrant suburbs. A couple of days ago, I had gone on a food pilgrimage of sorts to Jaffa, in search of the city's best hummus—although that is a contentious question—at Abu Hasan/Ali Karavan, who has been dishing it out since 1959. As I dipped my soft pita bread into the oh-so-creamy, slightly tangy hummus topped with a handful of mashed fül (fava bean) and laced with a generous dollop of olive oil, I could understand the reason for the long and loyal lines outside.

I had followed the meal with a lazy amble through Jaffa's cobblestoned lanes, listening with half an ear to my guide's stories about the region's Biblical connections to Solomon (of wisdom fame) and Jonah (of whale fame). For while Tel Aviv itself may be only over a hundred years old, the history of Jaffa can be traced back several millennia. Its laidback Mediterranean feel charmed me with ease, complete with a clock tower from the Ottoman period still standing at what used to be main entrance of this port city. ➤

CITY BY THE SEA

Witness to history and a stellar example of modern urbanity, Tel Aviv is always alive, always new
By Charukesi Ramadurai



(Clockwise from top) A beach in Tel Aviv; a doorway in Old Yafa in the city of Jaffa; ruins by the beach in Tel Aviv.



(Clockwise from far left) A Gay Pride Parade in Tel Aviv; a street in Jaffa; a music concert in Tel Aviv; the refurbished HaTachana Station.

Every street is lined with dozens of art galleries, chic boutiques, secret gardens, and quirky museums. I made a mandatory pit stop at the Abulafia Bakery for a taste of the traditional halva. Opened in 1879 by an Arab-Israeli family, the bakery is a Jaffa landmark that employs a mix of Jews, Muslims, and Christians—some of whom proudly wear T-shirts that proclaim ‘Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies’.

Later, at the Shuk Hapishpeshim, the popular flea market, I mingle with the tourists out to strike a bargain on the array of products on offer, ranging from the truly unique to the stunningly kitschy. Tiny blue Star of David pendants laid out in large piles jostle for space with antique furniture inlaid with elegant mother-of-pearl work. And all of it seemed to find its own quiet space within the chaos of the market.

In the evening though, I find that Jaffa assumes a completely different character, with a buzz to rival that of Tel Aviv’s famed nightlife. Every café and bar worth its name has set up tables out on the streets, with peppy music mingling with the muted laughter of the city’s young and restless. Our dinner is at Puaa, a casual café serving Mediterranean cuisine, right in the heart of the market area with cheery and chatty wait-staff and mismatched furniture and crockery. (I find out much later that everything inside the café is up for sale, including the plate I ate from.)

The party continues late into the night, the bars slowly filling up as the hands of the clock move towards midnight. “Tel Aviv makes no difference between week days and weekends,” says Dror Shores, a savvy local who conducts nightlife tours of Tel Aviv. He particularly recommends Kuli Alma and Speakeasy as two of the most happening spots in the city: Places to be seen that come alive only in the wee hours of the night.

There is another kind of party on at Tel Aviv’s beaches, especially on Saturdays, when the city observes Shabbat (the Jewish weekend, traditionally a time for rest and prayer) in its own unique fashion. True to the old adage that while Jerusalem prays, Tel Aviv plays, I see locals heading to the beaches bright and early on Saturday morning. Picnic baskets? Check. Surfboards? Check. Suntan lotion? Check.

Those not riding the waves or paddling on the calm waters are running furiously or working out at the makeshift gyms found every hundred metres along the crowded shore. Why does nobody seem content just to borrow a book from the mobile libraries along the promenade and curl up under the shade of a large umbrella on the powdery white sand?

Just as I am musing over this mystery, I see a solitary young woman in a cheery red bikini stretched out by the shore, a sophisticated camera set up on a tripod a few feet away from her. And in front of my astonished eyes, she proceeds to pose for this camera, languidly turning this way and that, pouting prettily one moment and then breaking into a bright smile the next. Even more astonishing—for me—is that nobody else seems to care.

How can I not love this city that manages to be at the same time impossibly defiant, quirky, ambitious, and vivacious? ■

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