

Hello, sunshine:
Tel Aviv beachfront.
Opposite, fresh
pomegranates at
Carmel Market

BREAK WITH TRADITION

Hip bars, hot beaches, fab food — and the ancient gravity of the world's most historic, holiest ground. With Tel Aviv and Jerusalem now joined by fast train, you can have it all, says **Alicia Miller**

Photography: **Sivan Askayo**



The jazz tinkles softly

in the background, its soothing bass tones and swirling high notes mingling with the symphony of weekend brunch. Silverware clinks on plates; locals gossip over piles of fluffy eggs; servers pour orange juice the crayon-box colour of sunshine. Here, in the dining room of the Hotel Montefiore, palms fan out along windows. Beyond the vast panes, in the street-art-splashed Bauhaus roads, men hold hands with men, women with women. Not far away, blue waves froth over golden sands, and bronzed, chiselled bodies strut along the beach in skimpy suits.

Where in the world am I? I could be in Barcelona. Or Miami, definitely. Nice? *C'est possible*. But no, this is Tel Aviv – Israel's new city-break superstar. Forget everything you think you know about the Middle East, Tel Aviv shatters preconceptions. Sophisticated, vibrant, liberal, fun and cool, it's the best bits of your favourite cities rolled into one. New York's swish restaurants? Check. LA's beaches? You bet. London's trendy hotels? Berlin's nightlife? Yes and yes. But don't think Tel Aviv just plays copycat. This pocket-sized metropolis, do-able in a long weekend (it's less than five hours' flying time from the UK) has a soul that's all its own. Rambling markets overflowing with dense halva (sesame sweets), rickety street-side hummus joints, crumbling buildings and roaming street cats – all lend a distinctive, exotic flair. And, crucially, it has one of the world's oldest, most atmospheric cities – Jerusalem – on its doorstep, so close you can visit on a day-trip.

I touch down in the cobalt early evening. My airport taxi scoots me along grey highways towards the sunset-hazed city. Glassy skyscrapers draw nearer and low-rise white edifices sprout below them like boxy mushrooms. We turn onto a street lined with restaurants. Revellers throng terraces, spilling from one packed table to the next. This is Thursday night – the start of the Israeli weekend – and all of Tel Aviv is out toasting its arrival. No-one, myself included, wants to miss a moment.

After a swift check-in at the Montefiore, I dive out into the electric night. My destination: Opa, one of the city's hottest new restaurants. It's just a 10-minute walk away – as are most things in compact central Tel Aviv – and in the warm evening air, I stroll down elegant tree-lined boulevards, past hip burger bars, jewellery shops and balconied Bauhaus buildings with peeling paint. Pushing open the restaurant door, I am plunged into

a plaster-and-concrete dining room. It's merrily humming with life. Couples swill wine. Plants festoon a white-brick internal patio. Young chefs flit around an open-plan kitchen; photogenic vegan dishes – pumpkin with aged apple vinegar and macadamia milk – are slid onto tabletops. The scene is pure millennial catnip, a trendy tableau I'd expect of Hackney or Brooklyn. Only, as I soon find out, it's much friendlier. 'Welcome to Tel Aviv,' exclaims my waiter, glugging a zippy Israeli white wine into my glass. 'You will love it.'

Next morning, relentless Middle Eastern sunshine floods through my window. My head hurts. At dinner last night, I got chatting – to my waiter, to the couple next to me. And on their recommendations I carried on bar-hopping. In the balmy Tel Aviv night I drained glasses of wine and hoovered up sticky *knafeh* – a honey, pastry and cheese dessert – at Santa Katarina, an alfresco gaggle of tables in the shadow of the austere Tel Aviv Synagogue. With the affable locals I drank Japanese plum Negronis at Herzl 16, an open-air, foliage-cloaked courtyard. I went to bed far, far too late, and now it is nearly noon, the dining room downstairs is full of soft jazz and brunchers, and there isn't a table left for me. No problem – I want to get out and explore.

I fix a walking route, cutting through Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv's Soho, all cute homewares shops, cappuccino-scented cafes and trendy clothing boutiques. If I were in London or New York, I'd have to hop on the subway to reach the city's coolest district, but here, it's just a stroll away, past creamy, curvy Modernist buildings and bicycle-lined lanes. Last night's energy is still going strong. Restaurant terraces are licked with Tel Aviv's reliable sunshine; the retro-chic ice-cream shop has a queue out the door. But I can't let the designer-cushion window displays, artisan delis and eclectic street art waylay me for too long. I am en route to Jaffa.

Technically a separate city, but in practice Tel Aviv's historic core, Jaffa has embraced modernity with aplomb. Ancient honey-stone alleyways, once home to biblical characters, brim with art shops; old nunneries have been turned into five-star hotels; former chapels house trendy bars. But not everything has changed: bakeries fragrance the air with the same fresh *challah* bread they have for years, and pomegranate juice is still hand-pressed at street stalls. This is a scene you won't find in LA or Nice, >

SHOPS WORTH THE STOP
 The best of Neve Tzedek's shops are on Shabazi Street. Visit Badim TLV for homewares, Numéro 13 for fashion or Epicerie Fine Neve Tzedek for edible treats. And you'll find some of the city's most popular ice cream at Anita



and so enticing, I can't help but stop for a glass – the juice red as rose petals – before heading to the flea market.

A Middle Eastern souk gone cool, Jaffa flea market is a delicious jumble of, well, anything and everything. Need a battered suitcase? How about a £3,000 designer sofa? Whether it's artisan soaps or dusty silver teapots, here the costly and coveted are given equal billing with the jaded and junky. I peruse the treasures greedily, though I can't concentrate for long – it's lunchtime, and my tummy is rumbling. There is no shortage of restaurants to choose from: everywhere I look, clusters of tables teeter on cobbles, diners pile plates high with falafel and tabbouleh. I am tempted by one Greek-style outpost, where music pumps from speakers and, fuelled by wine, sunshine and platefuls of calamari, friends dance tableside, laughing. But in the end, it has to be that local specialty, hummus, at a bargain roadside joint where the pita is warm and the chickpea purée so smooth and tahini-rich that it is like eating whipped butter.

JAFFA'S HOT SPOTS
Besides the flea market, when in Jaffa make sure you visit the Ilana Goor Museum, a private art collection in a historic home (ilana.goormuseum.org; £7), and pretty Jaffa port, with its bobbing fishing boats

It turns out all of Tel Aviv celebrates on Fridays. It being an expensive city, many people, young especially, have multiple jobs, and all that nose-to-the-grindstone means they need to blow off steam at weekends. But unlike in Stockholm or Berlin, where alfresco parties are limited to a few high-summer months, here in sun-drenched Tel Aviv they take place nearly all year round. In the north, concerts rage in cavernous event spaces; at central Carmel Market – a warren of food stalls fashioned into a restaurant hot spot – generations merge in preparation for Saturday's Sabbath, the Jewish holy day. Millennials prop up beer kiosks and queue for wedges of buttery bread stuffed with beef at M25, a butcher-owned grill. Wrinkly grandmas nip between vendors on a last-minute run for sticky honey-nut desserts, carting bagfuls home before the sun sets and the Sabbath begins. Anticipation builds.

By late afternoon, the party is moving to the beach. Shops have shut – even though it's largely a secular city, much of Tel Aviv closes from Friday afternoon until

Sunday – and it's time to watch the waves roll in. Along the long, creamy expanse, tanned bodies play volleyball; at promenade lookouts, couples smooch; under cafe parasols cocktails are sunk and numbers are exchanged. There is so much bustle, but in that moment when the sky finally turns gold and the sun plunks down into the sea, everyone sits quietly and watches. It's only brief, a single collective pause in this 24/7 place. Then the promise of the warm Tel Aviv night – rooftop bars, all-night parties – kicks the city back into gear.

Despite its jewel-box size – and the fact that I've already ticked off its main sights in just a few days – I could spend longer in Tel Aviv. I could spend weeks. But I have just another couple of days before I'm due back in London and it would be a shame not to see more. So, after a lazy Saturday – lying on golden sands, joining strollers on leafy Rothschild Boulevard – on Sunday morning I hop on the new speedy train to Jerusalem. It is just a quick dash inland through undulating green and gold

countryside – about an hour, including a quick change at the airport. But arriving in Jerusalem, I realise that I have, in fact, traversed a thousand years.

Stepping through the crenellated stone archway of the Damascus Gate, I immediately feel swamped, lost. Jerusalem's old walled core is a warren of criss-crossing alleys, winding and ancient, as vast as an ocean to the uninitiated. Along the snaking cobbled streets, I see Hasidic Jews in fur hats and starched black suits, Orthodox priests laden with rosaries, and women in hijabs carrying fruit. Shops heave with golden crosses and leather sandals, silver menorahs and patterned tallits (prayer shawls). Here is the Israel of imagination, its ancient gravity, unfathomably rich history and walls built from faith. I can't believe I'm just an hour from hip Tel Aviv and a half-day's journey from London. If Tel Aviv is fun and frivolous, Jerusalem is solemn and mystic. If Tel Aviv is all about this life, Jerusalem is all about the next. >

Along the creamy expanse, tanned bodies play volleyball and couples smooch...





Here in Jerusalem, where kingdoms and religions have been born, everyday life has to go on

It doesn't matter what you believe. Other people's beliefs imbue every inch of Jerusalem with such significance that even an atheist would feel their sober weight at every turn. After an hour of wandering the narrow, darkened lanes, I round a corner and stumble upon the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Crowds from every corner of the world, speaking a Babel of languages, throng outside, waiting to enter this most holy of holy Christian places, built around Jesus's supposed crucifixion point. A surprisingly modest, crumbling construction, it appears from the outside to be held up by nothing but prayers. Inside, the decor is spectacular. You can touch the stone Christ's body is said to have been laid on. If you don't mind a long queue, you can enter the cave from which he rose. I shuffle in silently, taking in the ornate, Crusades-era frescoes, flickering lanterns and tearful nuns rapidly whispering a Latin litany. I am only sightseeing, but for many of the dozens who squeeze past my shoulders, standing here is a life-long pilgrimage realised.

A few minutes' walk away lies the Western Wall. Approaching the holiest place in Judaism, I pass through a security tunnel and am thrust into a vast open square. The wall, beautiful in its austerity, rises epically ahead. At its base men don kippas, restlessly bowing and reciting Torah passages to the towering limestone edifice, the only remains of the sacred Second Temple. Women kiss its cool bricks and tuck hand-written prayers and wishes into its cracks. And, dozens of metres above all the hubbub, beyond the wall, surges the glinting gold Dome of the Rock – the Islamic shrine complex built where Herod's temple once stood: a tangible reminder that this is one of the most hotly contested patches of earth on the planet.

But here in Jerusalem, where kingdoms and religions have been born, where people have, and sometimes still do, fight for things bigger than themselves, everyday life has to go on. The city may be ancient, but it's no museum. Hole-in-the-wall cafes turn out meatballs and smoky aubergines to lunching workers, and kids kick footballs in sleepy squares. That night, my head swirling with the profundity of the day's sightseeing, I head to my final Israeli dinner – a last supper, if you will – outside the Old Town.

On the dark, quiet street I crack open the door to Mona and am bombarded with moody lighting and upbeat music. Plates of beautiful, modern food – delicate pasta sheets, tuna sashimi – land on the bar. Friends laugh; servers shake cocktails. Just when I thought I understood Jerusalem, it catches me off-guard. This place isn't staid, it certainly isn't serious and it feels full of life. Where in the world am I? Well, I could be in Tel Aviv. ■



Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go packaged

Kuoni (kuoni.co.uk) offers an eight-night Highlights of Israel tour with Heathrow flights, transfers and some meals, from £2,664pp, B&B. **Tui** (tui.co.uk) has a seven-night Israel holiday that includes visits to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and the Dead Sea from £1,048pp, B&B, with Manchester flights, some meals and touring.

Go independent

Virgin Atlantic flies from Heathrow to Tel Aviv from £299 return, and **BA** flies from £279 return. Or try **EasyJet**.

Get around

Trains from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem take 50 minutes (from £10 return). There's no service between Friday lunchtime and late Saturday night.

Where to stay

In Tel Aviv, try **Mad Men** – modern **Brown TLV** (brownTLV.com; doubles from £199, B&B); buzzy **Hotel Montefiore** (hotelmontefiore.co.il; doubles from £342, B&B); or the slick

new **Vera Hotel** (theverahotel.com; doubles from £155, B&B). In Jerusalem, find old-world cosiness at **Villa Brown** (brownhotels.com; doubles from £199, B&B), or glam modernity at **Mamilla Hotel** (mamillahotel.com; doubles from £310, B&B).

Where to eat & drink

In Tel Aviv, have pre-dinner courtyard drinks at **Herzl 16** (herzl16.co.il; about £11), and post-dinner cocktails (about £12) at the **Chapel**, a former church in the **Jaffa Hotel** (also with a good Italian restaurant, Don Camillo; marriott.com). In Carmel Market, the grilled meats at **M25** are excellent (m25meat.co.il; mains about £15). Try hip vegan cuisine at **Opa** (opatlv.co.il; dishes about £12) and sublime Jewish-Arab food at **Santa Katarina** (Har Sinai St 2; mains about £17). In Jerusalem, **Mona** (monarest.co.il; dishes about £18) is unmissable, and 'speakeasy' **Gatsby** (Hillel St 18) has creative cocktails (about £10).

Further information

See info.goisrael.com.

Ancient walkway: clockwise from above, alley in old Jaffa; records in Jaffa's flea market; city palms; Jerusalem's Western Wall – the women's side; the golden

Dome of the Rock; nun at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; Israeli tarts; Jaffa port; lunch at Santa Katarina; crab bruschetta; potted cacti outside a house in Jaffa

