

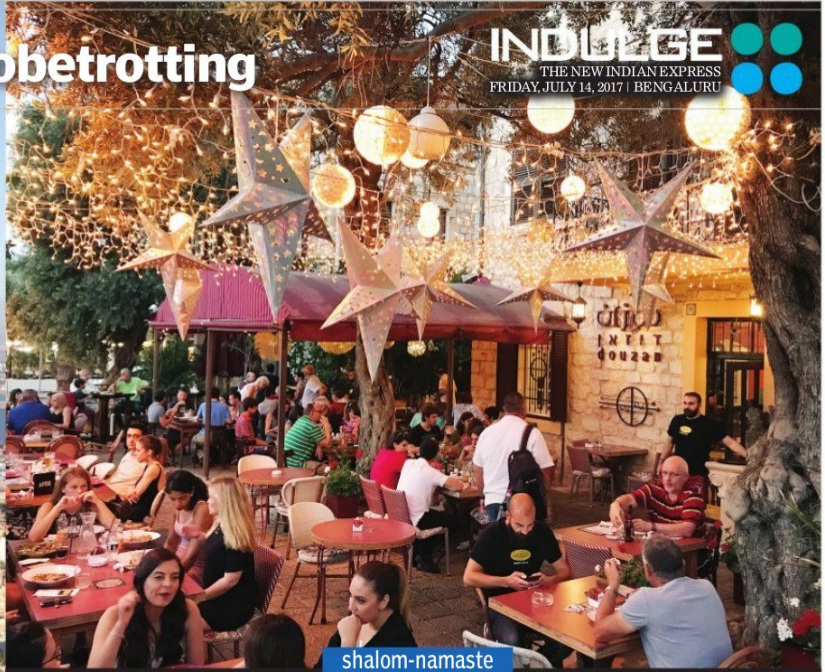
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INDULGE
THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS
FRIDAY, JULY 14, 2017 | BENGALURU



India enjoys popularity and equity across Israel



shalom-namaste

So long and thanks for all the hummus

In trademark lightning swiftness, Israel has made the evolutionary leap from the Land of Creation to the Land of Recreation
Text & Photos: Anurag Mallick



By the Mediterranean waters of Tel Aviv



At a bread store in an Arab market

As Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched down last week at Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv, amidst unprecedented excitement, I couldn't help thinking about my own trip to Israel just a few weeks before his. Modi is the first Indian PM to ever visit Israel and the trip's geo-political importance is undeniable. But I am just an ordinary traveller - definitely not the first from India to visit Israel and surely not the last - but memories of my warm welcome with open arms everywhere are still fresh.

India enjoys unbelievable popularity and equity across Israel. Unlike other countries, the reason is not Bollywood or cricket, but pure unbridled, unabashed love for India and all things Indian - be it yoga, food, culture, history or hashish. Much of this stems from the three years compulsory combat training in Israel that is usually followed by a 'mandatory' (sic!) year-long holiday in India!

You from India?

"You from India?", they enquired effusively wherever I went. The waitresses, restaurant owners, bartenders, DJs, drivers, in hipster bars and sandy beaches, all welcoming me with the warmth of a long-lost relative bringing tidings from their homeland.

They showed the same manner of excitement with which we spot Indian names in the end credits of a Hollywood flick!

"I went many years ago... Beautiful country, beautiful people! It's been too long!" sighed Inbara, the naturalist at the Agmon Hula Birdwatching center as we leisurely

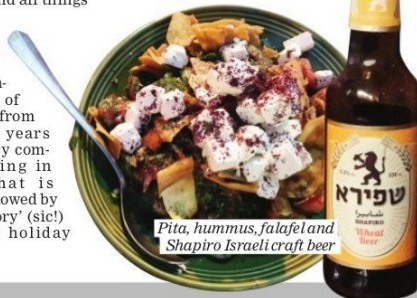
explored the park in golf carts. At a candle shop in the town of Safed (Tzfat), former center of Cabalistic learning and one of the four holy cities in Israel, Gabriela reminisced about her trip as a teenager and was looking forward to taking her teenage daughter to India on her maiden visit.

Tzfat is also the highest city in Israel and offers a close look into Jewish culture and traditions. "So, your PM is coming! You the advance party, eh?", joked an art shop owner in the Artist Quarter.

Some rattled off names of places they visited in India. "One time in Delhi, you know..." Everyone had a favourite India story he or she was dying to narrate...

And the love is being well reciprocated. Since 2015, the number of Indian tourists visiting Israel has seen a jump of 49%. In 2016, it touched 45,000. The numbers were only rising each year...

Our amazing guide Ofer Moghadam, who specialises in Holy Land tours and often caters to German and American tourists, mentioned that he too had seen a rise in Indian arrivals in recent times. What started off as a trickle of pilgrim tours to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth, was now a flood that went beyond the holy trail to more offbeat locations.



Pita, hummus, falafel and Shapiro Israeli craft beer





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Scenes from the Armenian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem

The ant and the elephant

The recent bonhomie seems like some strange fairytale love of species as disproportionate as the Ant and the Elephant. India is massive, like a lumbering pachyderm; Israel is tiny in comparison, but swift like a bee. India has the highest mountain ranges in the world in the Himalayas while Israel has the lowest point on earth's surface – the Dead Sea. Yet, there were uncanny similarities. Ancient lands of spirituality and enlightenment, both India and Israel were birthed in violence, mid-wifed by the British. Both countries run on organised chaos, a concept Ofer explained as balagan, Hebrew for 'bedlam' or 'absolute pandemonium'!

Tel Aviv is the main international port of entry and many assume the vibrant city to be the capital of Israel (which actually happens to be Jerusalem!) But Tel Aviv was conceived as a secular anti-thesis of overtly religious Jerusalem and Tel Avivians are often blamed for being on a different planet. The local adage goes that while Jerusalem prays, Tel Aviv plays. From the time we landed at Ben Gurion Airport, named after Israel's first Prime Minister, any place seemed a short drive away.

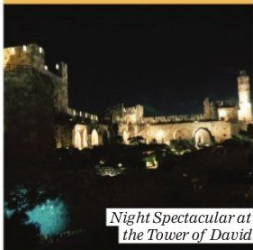
You could have lunch at Israel's northern tip at the cliffs of Rosh Hanikra that has a cable car descent into sea grottoes carved out by seawater into limestone cliffs. And be in time for dinner at Eilat in the south on the Red Sea. One could drive from north to south and be out of the country in a matter of hours. At one moment we are at the border with Jordan, the other instant with Lebanon and Syria.

An Indian connection

Haifa, Israel's third largest city and a port town in the north, shares an interesting Indian connection. During World War I, lancers of the Jodhpur and Mysore cavalry regiment overran Turkish Ottoman and German machine-gun positions in a dramatic horseback charge to win the Battle of Haifa for the British. Many Indian soldiers who valorous-

Modi's pit stops

- Ben Gurion International Airport
 - Danziger Dan Flower Farm
 - Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum
 - King David Hotel
 - Synagogue Route at Israel Museum
 - Indian War Memorial, Haifa
 - Water Desalination Unit, Olga Beach
- For more info visit goisrael.in or tel-aviv.gov.il



Night Spectacular at the Tower of David

ly took part in WWI in Egypt and Mesopotamia lie buried at the Haifa cemetery, their sacrifice not forgotten.

Today, the same hillside of Mount Carmel is covered with landscaped gardens of the Baha'i world centre, a UNESCO world heritage site. Haifa is proud of its Jewish-Arab coexistence, exemplified in Douzan restaurant in the old German Colony, renovated into an avenue of bars and restaurants. Owner Fadi explained that douzan was the term for the tuning of the oud, a stringed instrument. The alfresco restaurant with a convivial air was where he fine-tuned people so that they remained in harmony.

All the furniture at Douzan was sourced from Italy, Germany, Lebanon and Syria and no two tables were alike. Each piece, like an individual, was special and unique. The food is hybrid – a shared Mediterranean legacy of Palestinian, Arab and Lebanese dishes with a smattering of French and Italian cuisine. Its friendly

vibe recreated what is called the 'Haifa atmosphere.' Our hunt for the best hummus took us from Café Ziad in Jerusalem to Abu Hassan in Jaffa and Osul Restaurant (literally, genuine) at Yesud HaMa'ala to Magdalena, voted as the Best Arab restaurant in Israel, which serves fresh Tilapia from the Sea of Galilee. Puaa, whose furniture is sourced from the Jaffa flea market and every item is for sale, has been wowing gourmards for 16 years in a country where trends don't last 16 months.

Jewish Biblical cuisine

In Jerusalem, Chef Moshe Basson of Eucalyptus restaurant, who fondly remembers his encounter with Chef Sanjeev Kapoor, dishes out meticulously researched Jewish Biblical cuisine. The chef harvests his own herbs like sage, rosemary, mint, using them in dishes like fish falafel, figs stuffed with chicken, eggplant and cream, pate macaroon and maklubah – like a potato and chicken biryani!

For me, Israel was a childhood dream come true – reading a book while afloat in the Dead Sea, visiting Jerusalem, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, the Wailing Wall, the Dead Sea Scrolls, sailing on the Sea of Galilee, eating a 'Jaffa' orange! And yet, there was so much more Israel offers... from the Negev desert to the beaches of Eilat, old Crusader towns of Akko (Acre) and Sfad, erstwhile Roman outpost of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, Segway rides down Tel Aviv's Sea Shore Promenade to food tours through Carmel *shuk* – the only authentic Arabian style market.

There's craft beer on offer at Israel's first microbrewery The Dancing Camel or Beer Bazaar, architecture tours in the Bauhaus district or White City, a Tel Aviv Port Tour, a street art tour in Florentin and night tours through the hip quarter of Rothschild to hipster clubs like Kuli Alma, Sputnik.

In trademark lightning swiftness, Israel has made the evolutionary leap from the Land of Creation to the Land of Recreation. So long and thanks for all the hummus!

GETTING THERE

Israel's national carrier El-Al flies direct from Mumbai to Tel Aviv thrice a week and takes less than 8 hrs. Turkish Airlines has daily flights to Tel Aviv via Istanbul – a journey of 11 hr 45 min while Ethiopian Air flies via Addis Ababa (12 hrs). Haifa is just over 90km north of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem 72 km SE.

WHERE TO STAY

- **Carlton Hotel, Tel Aviv**
Ph +972 3 5201818 carlton.co.il
- **Dan Panorama Hotel, Haifa**
Ph +972 4 8352222 danhotels.com
- **Prima-Royale Hotel, Jerusalem**
Ph +972 2 5607111 prima-royale-jerusalem.hotel-rrn.com
- **Rimonim Galei Kinneret Hotel, Tiberias**
Ph +972 4 6728555 rimonimhotels.com
- **The Scots Hotel, Tiberias**
Ph +972 4 6710710 scotshotels.co.il

WHERE TO EAT

- **Douzan Restaurant, Haifa**
Ph +972 539443301
- **The Eucalyptus Restaurant, Jerusalem**
Ph +972 2 6244331 the-eucalyptus.com
- **Magdalena Restaurant, Magdala**
Ph +972 4 6730064
magdalenarest@gmail.com

Puaa Restaurant, Tel Aviv
Ph +972 3 6823821

WHAT TO DO

Holy Land/Tel Aviv/Dead Sea tours
Ofer Moghadam Tours
Ph +972 587833799 ofermog.com

SEGO Segway Tours, Tel Aviv
Ph +972 528551932 sego.co.il

Tel Aviv Night Tour & Graffiti Tours
Dror Shores Ph +972 507814575
GetRealTLV@gmail.com

Cable Car Ride, Rosh Hanikra
Ph +972 732710100 rosh-hanikra.com

Ancient Galilee Boat & Museum
Nofalon Tourist Centre, Ginosar
Ph +972 4 9119585

thegalileeboat.com
Galilee Sailing, Tiberias
Ph +972 509397000

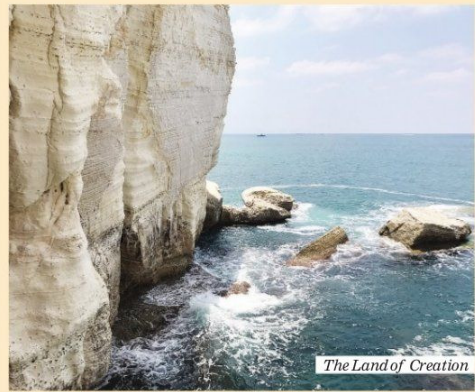
Agmon Hula birdwatching centre
Ph +972 4 6817137 agamon-hula.co.il

The Night Spectacular Sound & Light show

The Citadel, Tower of David, Jerusalem
Ph +972 2 6265333 tod.org.il

Wine tasting at Adir Winery & Dairy
Ph +972 4 6991039
adir-visit.com

Iilana Goor Museum Tour, Old Jaffa
Ph +972 3 6837676
ilanagoormuseum.org



The Land of Creation

