

The Resilient Corner

Tel Aviv's Jaffa district has a long and tumultuous history. Yet, as **Chris Fitch** discovers, its ancient heritage is finding new ways to hold out against the threat of modern development

LEFT AND BELOW: Jaffa's historic streets sit in stark contrast to the modern lines of Tel Aviv's high-rises





ABOVE: The 'gentrification' of Jaffa has come about through an influx of artists from around the world, finding a home among its labyrinthine alleyways; **RIGHT:** Tel Aviv has become a cosmopolitan home for nearly half a million people

The name 'Tel Aviv' in Hebrew literally means 'old new land'. It's an effective summary. Tel Aviv is both a very old and very new city. Its oldest neighbourhood, Jaffa, situated upon a headland along the southern portion of the city's coast, dates back many thousands of years. Yet Tel Aviv itself was only founded in the early 1900s, barely more than a century ago. It's an oxymoronic paradox which crops up here time and again.

ANCIENT WAYS

Maybe it's the dry heat, but there's definitely a laziness to Jaffa (also sometimes known as 'Yafo' or 'Joppa'), a far slower pace of life than the rest of the city. Even the cats don't bother to move, barely lifting a head as camera-wielding tourists step over their prostrate bodies and gradually meander their way from the famous Shuq Hapishpeshim flea market, past the principle landmark of St Peter's Monastery, down to the historic port.

Jaffa is among the oldest cities in the world, and the tiny streets and crumbly old walls which adorn this neighbourhood illustrate that legacy well. Throughout history it has been demolished and rebuilt multiple times, including a conquering by the Egyptians in 1469BC, swapping hands during the years of the Crusades, falling under Ottoman rule in 1517AD, and being crushed by Napoleon's invasion in 1799. For millennia it has been a key landmark, a centrepiece of the ancient world. Arguably its most famous legend is as the launch point for the Biblical tale of Jonah, as he sailed off towards his encounter with the whale (or 'big fish' in Hebrew). As the docking point for many people making their first pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Jaffa became famous as the spot where many worshippers would kneel and kiss the scared ground.

By the turn of the 20th century, Jaffa was booming, led in part by a burgeoning orange trade (exports of which grew ten-fold between 1885 and 1913). Its population was also escalating, from a mere 5,000 in





1866, to more than 47,000 by 1909 (a figure roughly consistent with the present day), making the settlement increasingly crowded. However, its fortunes were set to pivot that same year, when, after waves of Jewish immigration stoking tensions with the resident Arabic populations, a small congregation of Jewish settlers established a new town – Ahuzat Bayit, later to become known as Tel Aviv – just along the coast to the north (declaring their actions by writing official deeds on, of all things, seashells).

This new, modern city would, over the following half-century, quickly grow to eclipse and eventually swallow-up Jaffa. The neighbourhood was at the centre of a series of clashes in 1948, following the uneasy official establishment of the State of Israel in the aftermath of the Second World War, before the two settlements eventually became a single municipality – Tel Aviv-Jaffa – in 1950.

A ‘city of gardens’ is how Tel Aviv was first envisaged by Scottish urban planner Sir Patrick Geddes, back in the 1920s. His pioneering master plan led to the construction of the ‘White City’, an urban hub of more than 4,000 buildings which was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2003 for being ‘an outstanding architectural ensemble of the Modern Movement in a new cultural context.’

Under his visionary plan, the development of the city was controlled for many decades, utilising the craft and experience of numerous European architects and planners to create an eclectic yet unified mix of Bauhaus and other styles of architectural modernism. It’s a sign of how far ahead of his time Geddes was that so many of the values and attributes he embraced for his master plan – such as the integration of urbanism and nature through permanent green foliage and pedestrian promenades

– are so similar to those popular among many contemporary 21st century urban planners, as cities around the world compete to be the most ‘liveable’. Tel Aviv adopted that approach from the very start, with Geddes baking it into the foundations.

In the years since the merger, the old Jaffa neighbourhood has repeatedly faced modernisation threats, as the rapidly-expanding Tel Aviv looms over this ancient headland, testing its resilience. The fact that there are still cobbled old streets for visitors to meander down today is thanks to the activism of a great many artists and journalists who campaigned on behalf of ancient Jaffa’s heritage and oversaw essential restoration of the old town from the 1960s onwards. Perhaps by virtue of this artistic connection, the majority of shops you encounter as you nose around, sticking your face through open doorways, happen to be an eclectic mix of galleries, craft shops,



and fashion boutiques. While critics call this gentrification, a washing away of Jaffa’s Arabic roots, the counter argument suggests that without such economically-productive cultural recognition, the neighbourhood would have long since become fodder for eagle-eyed developers to move in and redevelop the land entirely.

MOVING UP

‘Tel Aviv is a city you don’t fall in love with at once, but little by little,’ enthuses local guide Marion Bleiberg. Bleiberg is a prime example of the transformation which Tel Aviv – indeed, which Israel as a whole – has historically experienced over the past century, and continues to do so to this day. Born and raised in Belgium, her Jewish roots eventually drew her back to the ‘homeland’, a pilgrimage-like process known as *Aliyah*, which literally translates as ‘the act of going up’ (moving to Israel from literally anywhere else in the world is seen as a spiritual elevation – the opposite action, leaving Israel, is therefore logically described as *Yerida*, or ‘moving down’).

Like many before her, Bleiberg moved to Jerusalem for university and simply never left, instead making Israel her home. Figures from the Jewish Agency for Israel reveal 31,000 people made *Aliyah* in 2015 – a 17 per cent increase on the year before – half of whom were under the age of 30 (7,700 of these immigrants relocated from France, making them the largest group from a single country, followed by Ukraine and Russia).

Many cities claim to be so-called ‘melting pots’, and the mix of ethnicities and cultures which are brought together in Tel Aviv under the banner of Judaism, and the unique Hebrew language (not to mention the city’s booming start-up and tech industries) makes the description highly apt here. Currently 420,000 people call the city home (over three million if you include the surrounding suburbs) and data from Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics shows it to be the number one destination for people making *Aliyah* into the country, absorbing more than 20 per cent of new immigrants in 2015 (primarily from France and Russia, but also smaller numbers from Romania, China, the Philippines, and Central America). Overall, more than a

ABOVE:
Jaffa’s port district was founded over 3,000 years ago

TOP RIGHT:
Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv’s first Jewish suburb, has been steadily renovated since the 1980s

quarter of Tel Aviv's residents were born abroad, around 30 per cent of whom are of either African or Asian descent, evidence that there is a far wider diversity of cultures than simply Western European and North American Ashkenazi Jews moving to the city.

According to Bleiberg, this entrenched multiculturalism makes Tel Aviv far more socially liberal and tolerant than the more conservative heartland of Jerusalem. It may be overly simplistic to focus on Tel Aviv purely as 'Israel's global city', yet by adopting an undeniably more internationalist approach, it has tried to move beyond the local tensions of its immediate environment, and forge links with other cities and cultures around the world. How successful this strategy is remains a contentious point of discussion.

Of course, while Tel Aviv-Jaffa is a far cry from the severe warnings the FCO issue against all travel to places such as the West Bank, Gaza, or the Golan Heights, it would be foolish to pretend that the city is free of tensions, or that violence in this region is restricted to those more provocative parts of the country. This is especially evident when I'm later having my bag thoroughly searched by a burly security guard before entering the stylishly modern Saron Market. Once a German colony, it's now full of trendy cheese, coffee, and craft beer shops that, aside from the many 'Made in Israel' labels stuck liberally across the various products, wouldn't look out of place in London's Soho.

However, just a few weeks earlier, four people had been killed in a restaurant shooting at this very spot, one of a handful of attacks in the city in recent years. Warnings against using Tel Aviv's public transport, especially buses, have frequently surfaced in connection with potential and genuine terror attacks, while the Jaffa boulevard itself was the scene of a knife attack in March last year, when a 'lone wolf' assailant embarked upon a series of stabbings, an incident which ended in the death of an American student.

Despite all these headline-grabbing stories, the 2016 Global Terrorism Index placed Israel as the world's 33rd most terror-inflicted country, only one place ahead of the United Kingdom. The Jaffa attack particularly raised eyebrows, being labelled as 'unusual' by the *New York Times*, given that it occurred in 'a place where Arabs and Jews often mix along the usually crowded seaside boulevards'.

Bleiberg backs this up, insisting that there is generally an amicable and friendly relationship between the majority Jewish population of Tel Aviv, and the minority Muslim Arabic communities which make up a third of the residents of Jaffa - in sharp contrast to much of the wider Middle East.

GROWING PAINS

As the evening draws in, I'm standing high on the Jaffa headland, surrounded by sandstone and ancient history. The metal and glass pillars of Tel Aviv to the north twinkle in the fading light, tributes to the developed modernity of 21st century Israel. While the original street plan, as envisaged by Geddes and recognisable by the distinctive boulevard layout, remains the foundation of the urban landscape, Tel

Aviv is not immune to the rampant high-rise boom which has hit cities around the world, from the 238m Azrieli Saron Tower, to the 158m Meier Tower on Rothschild Boulevard - another long and tree-lined street curving through the centre of the city. Towers continue to sprout out of the ground and shoot into the sky, creating a new and shiny skyline.

Further south, older neighbourhoods tell the story of Tel Aviv's spectacularly sporadic growth, such as Neve Tzedek, the first Jewish neighbourhood of Tel Aviv, which was also allowed to fall into disrepair before being rescued by gentrifying artists, similar to Jaffa. The Yemenite Quarter, established by Yemeni immigrants, is the neighbourhood which has most recently become popular among young residents, initially attracted by the low cost of living, but who now see the potential to redevelop it in the same way. For a city already recognised for being rich in cultural heritage, Tel Aviv remains in constant flux, rapidly evolving and re-evolving in response to its surroundings and external influences, just as Jaffa has done for thousands of years.

From my vantage point, it is impossible to ignore the vast juxtaposition on display; old and new, historic and modern, Arabic and Jewish. What will this city look like in another hundred years? Can Jaffa withstand the economic forces unleashed by Tel Aviv's ever-expanding urban landscape? Or will it eventually be consumed by them, becoming a mere footnote in the history of the unstoppable Tel Aviv metropolis? The obvious symbolism only serves to further underline the unique heritage of this most resilient corner of the city. 

CO-ORDINATES TEL AVIV

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When to go

During spring and summer, Tel Aviv can become uncomfortably hot during the day and care should be taken to avoid heatstroke. The rainy season begins around October.

Getting there

Pegasus Airlines (www.flypgs.com) operates 21 weekly flights from London Stansted to Tel Aviv (via Istanbul's Sabiha Gökçen airport), with return flights from £216 until the end of June. The airport itself is actually some 20 minutes outside the city and you'll need to take a train or taxi (there are no buses running the route). Jaffa is found south of central Tel Aviv.

More information

Visit Tel Aviv: www.visit-tel-aviv.com

Old Jaffa Visitor's Centre: www.oldjaffa.co.il