



THE GRITTY AND PRETTY OF ISRAEL

MIKE SHINE TAKES US ON HIS NEWEST ADVENTURE

ISRAEL IS AN AMAZING STUDY OF CONTRASTS, WHERE beautiful beaches meet urban concrete, religious holy grounds meet intolerance and violence, fear and anxiety meet music, dance and art. It's a region where human conflict has existed from the year 0000 to today, yet it's this pervasive tension that makes it such a fascinating place.

FLORENTIN, TEL AVIV

The capital city is a vibrant and gutsy Mediterranean metropolis—Bauhaus architecture slightly past its prime. I found the urban decay to be a part of the city's charm. Unpolished, unpretentious, occasionally abrasive, much like its inhabitants. I stayed in the Florentin neighborhood, sort of the Middle Eastern version of Williamsburg or The Mission, where a bustling artist scene is crowded with bars, cafes, music, feral cats and street art. Many of the ancient workshop buildings have been taken over by artists. In other words, it's a bohemian utopia.

STREET ART

It's everywhere in Florentin. Obviously, there's a lot for artists to say. And there's a striking harmony between the youthful art and the peeling facades of the old buildings.

In fact, many structures seem to be held together by little more than spray paint and posters. Much of the art is very good, which quickly reveals the vibrant underground scene beneath it. I met Eli Edri, founder of the Under A Thousand Gallery on Abarbanel Street, whose gallery is stocked with many of the artists you see on the buildings nearby. My partner Casey Lee Thorne and I spent a couple of weeks muraling on Eli's gallery rooftop and outside walls. Street art seems to be a widely appreciated practice there. Not a single day passed where we didn't see guided street art tour groups passing by on foot, often including classes of young Israeli soldiers, an observation that many US cities could perhaps learn from.

CAFÉ LIFE

Most cafés spill out onto the sidewalks, and curbside tables abound. We spent many mornings at the Florentin 10 café on Florentin Street. I can recommend the traditional Israeli breakfast, Shakshuka. In downtown Tel Aviv, many good cafés and restaurants line Rothschild Avenue. Also noteworthy is the buffet at The Old Man and the Sea in the scenic nearby port town of Jaffa. It's an affordable crash course in the best of Middle Eastern cuisine.



MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS

Israel takes art seriously, and is renowned for its music and dance. It has its own contemporary music scene, which spans a mix of traditional vibes with rock, folk, blues, hip hop, electronica, etc. We checked out a sold-out performance of A-WA, a trio of Yemenite sisters, whose catchy hit song could be heard hourly in the Florentin cafés.

JERUSALEM

We took a bus to Jerusalem to explore the beautiful, ancient Old City, where Christians, Muslims, and Jews practice their beliefs and sell their wares. You can buy foods, spices, and trinkets, and experience some amazing places like the Arab Quarter, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Dome of the Rock, and the West Wall. The West Wall is divided in two parts to separate men and women. It's tradition to write your wish or prayer on a small piece of paper to stick between the bricks. Plan on spending an entire day in the Old City. There's a lot to see and do. (Images 10,11,12)

WEST BANK

To truly understand the region, one really should experience Palestine, on the other side of the Separation Wall. We took a bus through the checkpoint to Ramallah, and got a taste of what Palestinians deals with daily—gun-toting Israeli soldiers entering your bus to check your passport. It's unnerving, to put it mildly. But the vibrant colors and cultures on the other side of the wall made it worthwhile.

From Ramallah, we took a taxi to Bethlehem, where there are a lot of Christian sights, obviously. We checked out the Church of Nativity, an ancient holy spot, heavily trafficked with Christian pilgrims. Afterwards, we hired a cab driver to take us to Jericho. He was a warm-hearted Palestinian elderman named Youssef. In Jericho, we rode the gondola up to the high caves, which gave us a stellar bird's eye view of the landscape below. Youssef also happened to know where half a dozen Banksys were located, and he proudly stopped and showed us each one. It was interesting to experience the importance of Banksy to the people of Palestine. His clever humor exposes their plight so concisely.

In fact, it seems street art in general plays an elevated role in Israel and Palestine. In places where violent protest can have dire consequences, it seems crucial that a more subversive voice can express itself. Perhaps like America's protest songs of the 1960s, Israel's current street art scene will emerge to be the vanguard of cultural discontent.

JUX

In our June 2015 issue, Mike Shine took us pint-ing and painting through Ireland. Stay tuned for more travel tales in the coming months.