

The Best and the Worst of our Israeli Experience

Living in Israel (after 41 years of absence) for nine months in a tiny rented flat in the heart of Tel-Aviv as a full time student at Tel-Aviv University, at our age, sounds like a script for a feature film or at the very least a reality show. That's exactly what we did since landing in Israel on October 17, 2011. We have now begun the countdown towards our return home from what has been the most fantastic experience of our lives. By contrast to my prior blog entries this one is a highlight reel of the little and big things we experienced in our daily life and priceless impressions we are bringing home from Israel.

On our top 10 Best things we included (not necessarily in priority order)

Best Friends

We are fortunate to have the Cohen family as our (almost) life-long friends. If it wasn't for their hospitality, friendship and the good time we had travelling across the country to some of the most beautiful places in Israel, the rest of the list wouldn't have mattered.

Dairy products

We venture to say that if there were a world-wide competition for the best dairy products, Israel would win the top prize. Cottage cheese to die for, yogurt so refreshing, goat and Bulgarian cream cheeses dominated our breakfast and dinner table.

Bread Products

-Ditto-

Vistas

We have seen some gorgeous vistas in our travels around the world. Many of them more spectacular than you could find in Israel. Yet we dare say that in Israel there are more gorgeous sceneries per hour drive than anywhere in the world. Within a 4 hour drive you can see almost any imaginable scenery. From a snow peaked mountain, to water falls, to arid desert, to beautiful beaches, to lush valleys, to (a) lake, to water parks and manicured gardens. There are no two ways about it – Israel is a beautiful country.

Culture

There are likely more cultural events going on in Israel any day, evening and night in Israel (or more accurately Tel-Aviv) than anywhere in the world. From the world renowned Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, the national theaters of Habima and the Cameri, museums and art exhibitions, open space sculptures, street art, Jazz, dance and international films. Culture in Israel is virtually an industry and many say that its popularity (with young and old) is at least partially attributed to the Russian immigrants for whom culture is second nature. We have taken more of all of it during our stay than in any nine months period in our lives.

Walking the City

This was the only period in our adult lives where we did not own a car, did not rent a car and travelled only in public transportation (buses, taxis, trains). But most rewardingly we walked the city, miles and miles of it. Strolling along the beach, in quaint neighborhoods, to farmers markets, on the streets of the “White City” Tel-Aviv and its non-homogeneous architecture (some fascinating, some great and some awful). We walked to the theater, we walked to the Laundromat (yes indeed), we walked to the supermarket, we walked to and on campus. You might say we walked the walk.

Lectures/Seminars

This is probably the most impressive thing we encountered. Intellectual stimulation for the “Third Age” (euphemism for retirees or old folks) is a plenty. In fact by contrast to the North American “Golden Age” industry that focuses on leisure, entertainment, cruise travel and such, in Israel it is all about expanding knowledge, learning new things, going on educational tours with professional guides (culture, architecture, history, archeology, you name it.) We have taken our share of same from which we learned so much about life in Israel. We documented many of our excursions in prior blog entries, so no point repeating but in addition to our full time university studies we have to say that we learned more about the country, the people, the issues, the attitudes than from any other source (including news media and TV)

University experience

Well, this is what we came here for and it has been everything we expected and much, much more. The intellectual challenge, the learning experience, the campus atmosphere, the young, energetic crowd, the lectures themselves and the lecturers were for the most part superb. Getting excellent marks is a rewarding feeling especially when you don’t do it for the marks. Studying Jewish studies in Hebrew, in Israel for mom was the pinnacle of her learning aspirations. If we could do it full time, even in Canada we probably would.

Flowers

Following one of the wettest winters on record Israel is blooming. The assortment of flowers we discovered is unparalleled. In fact we were told that there are more flower species in Israel than anywhere else. Let’s put it this way: when you see an old man walking down the street and every so often bending over flowers and taking close-up shots of flower heads – you know it is something special.

Original Designs

Creativity, imagination and innovation are abundant in Israel in almost all walks of life. From fashion design, jewelry, household goods, open space sculptures many that we get to see and enjoy daily on campus, interior décor. You could at time (Jaffa comes to mind) mistake street graffiti for fine art. There must be something in the water or better yet the Israeli DNA that spurts innovation and original designs.

Possibly the same strain that drives a "start-up nation" high-tech industry and many other technological and scientific achievements for which Israel and Israelis are so renowned.

By now you must realize that our living in Israel was not necessarily representative of life in Israel in general. While we were immersed, engaged and involved socially, academically, culturally and politically, we were not subjected to the day to day grind of fighting bureaucracy, paying bills, making ends meet, worrying about children serving in the IDF, attending to grandchildren and many other aspects of daily life that people experience everywhere including ourselves in Canada. In short we were living a bit of a fairy tale. While the competition for the top 10 Best things was fierce and could easily include many more, the same can be said for the 10 Worst things that we found hard to handle, adjust to and sometimes accept or tolerate, but this is us.

Another important caveat has to do with the absence of commentary on Israel's truly big picture existential issues: Palestinian conflict, Iran, radicalism, fundamentalism, illegal immigration, (un) just society, increased crime and violence and more. We wrote on some of them in prior blog entries. But as a summary there is a feeling in the country of security and economic stability if not prosperity. So life goes on.

The 10 Worst things list (again not in any priority order)

Noise Pollution

Israelis are known to be loud. We now understand that they have to. While with the roaring bus engines, the revving motorcycles, the honking cars, the sirens of police, ambulances and fire trucks and the endless construction work day and night, it is no wonder that Israelis are loud. Restaurant patrons on sidewalks screaming (talking) to each other over the blasting music, youngster bidding each other good night (morning for us if it's after 3 AM) under our window on their way back from an all-night (and seemingly every day) party are just adding to all of the above. "Sorry I can't hear you" is a title of a blog entry dedicated to this phenomenon. Nobody cares (and why should they) that we came from a quiet suburban Toronto neighborhood with sealed windows. We were determined to get used to this reality – sorry, we failed.

Driving

We didn't do any driving in Israel whatsoever. In fact this was a condition precedence to us going to Israel. However that does not mean that we were not at times (almost) victims of the notoriously aggressive driving habits of Israelis. A cross walk many times is mostly at your own risk. Passing lanes are defined as anything that allows the car to pass you (left, right, shoulders). Traffic lights in very light traffic periods (say 4 in the morning) are only a recommendation. When in traffic jam (most hours of the day in Tel-Aviv) honk your horn. It lets people know that you are in a hurry, pissed off and suffering from road rage. Do not challenge bad drivers or any drivers on the road or at a traffic light the consequences are totally unpredictable and include violence. No stop signs in Israel as all 4 cars at the intersection

claim to have arrived there first and are not going to yield to anybody. Roundabouts are more common but only for gutsy drivers. If you behave strictly according to the rules of the road you're liable to create an accident as no one anticipates such foolish behavior.

Language

Kid you not. In a recently published survey the single most popular word in the Hebrew language is in Arabic – “Sababa” The most frequently used two word phrase includes one word in Arabic and one English word: “Yalla Bye”. A good looking girl by her own description let alone others (male or female) is known as “pussy” – yes that kind and proud of it. The English language is not an official second language or anything, but both in speak and print many English words that have perfectly matching Hebrew synonyms have crept into the Hebrew language. This is particularly confusing for the Hebrew reader who hasn't lived in Israel for a long time as intuitively (and lacking Hebrew vowel signs) you attempt to pronounce the unfamiliar word (written phonetically in Hebrew letters) in Hebrew only to find out that it is an English word. “Your piss has gone to your head” literally translated from Hebrew is a perfectly acceptable and understandable expression and it sounds even more vulgar in Hebrew. So if you haven't lived in the country for a while and want to understand the language buy yourself the Hebrew slang dictionary (I kid you not) to get by.

Television Programs

This is not a particularly Israeli thing. Like in most Western countries Reality Shows reign supreme on most channels. The more stupid and/or bizarre, embarrassing and/or demeaning are the shows -the better.

Discourse i

Reference here is made to people talking to each other. This could be one-on-one, or in groups, on the street, at home, in restaurants on TV talk shows. To participate in a discussion you must understand the basic rules: first, listening is not required and frankly not recommended as you may lose your turn to speak. Interrupting someone else as soon as any thought crosses your mind is a legal rule of engagement. If the other person refuses to stop talking, increase your volume and deafen his or hers voice so that you may be heard. Remember that most people are not really interested in what you have to say and would rather talk about themselves, knowing full well that you could not care less. Refrain from demonstrating any knowledge or offer valuable advice. Israelis have all the knowledge they need and any attempt to out stage them could be considered as an insult. Do not attempt to persuade Israelis of an opinion or even a fact that contradicts with theirs as you may have just invited a shouting match. Remember that any attempt to add value to a debate (aka shouting match) may be interpreted as deterring value from the other and this is highly not recommended. In Israel if you want to be heard - SMS

Law and Order

Israel has lots and lots of laws like any Western democracy or may be more as it does not have a Constitution like the United States. The laws we refer to here are the everyday civil laws or regulations: Don't walk on the grass; No parking; Do not enter the water without a lifeguard present; No jaywalking; No right turn; Do not park on the sidewalk; No loitering offenders will be fined; No passing on this lane. We are not talking about criminal offenses or other serious violations. They exist everywhere and Israel is no exception. What we're talking about is civil law and order. Most Israelis would agree that such laws and regulations are probably warranted except that they do not necessarily apply to them personally, each one with their own story as to why he or she are exempt. But some get caught and may have to pay a fine and hopefully learn a lesson. Not necessarily. The second line of defense after not being caught in the first place is to think of anyone that you know (and everybody pretty well knows everybody or at least someone who knows everybody) that could close your file, void your parking ticket and get this nuisance out of the way. All it takes is a phone call and there are more cellular phones per capita in Israel than anywhere in the world.

Consideration

This is somewhat related to law and order but on a person-to-person level: consideration for the "other". Yes, you could stand in line to board the bus and yes, you were one of the first ones in line but this in no way guarantees that you would get on the bus. This is not simply a matter of "cutting lines" it is a direct function of the strength of your elbows that will determine the outcome. "Excuse me I only have one simple question!" is the magic phrase to allow Israelis to get to the top of the line in order to get the attention of the attendant (bank teller, cashier, box office, information...) cut the person being attended to in mid-sentence and get your business done. Does it always work? Not necessarily but that's the first thought that comes to mind. What's the worst thing that can happen? By contrast if you were forced to stand in line (by the attendant or the other irate fellow men) and you finally being attended, now you "own" the attendant. It is not just "get my business done and go". This is the time to think of anything that you would like to know that the attendant may or may not know and squeeze as much face time as possible and let the people behind you boil. After all you were one of them once and the same was done to you, so what's the big deal? By complete contrast, Israelis more than anybody will come to your help and assist you if you slipped on the sidewalk, in distress, injured in an accident and such. But this kind attitude comes from a different part of the brain and is not at all contradictory to former attitude. Go figure.

Politics:

Once again this is not what you would expect by way of "high politics". This is covered by the media in print on radio, TV and the Internet. While politics in Israel is an extreme body contact sport as in many other Mediterranean (hot, hot) countries, may be a little less civil. Believe it or not we have never seen the Israeli parliament (Knesset) in session and we finally did. We sat in the gallery with a bunch of high school students (field trip in Citizenship studies?) overlooking the general assembly hall. There are 120 Knesset members at this session 4 were present but the session was just about to be dismissed as the

designated cabinet minister to answer for the government did not show up. The transport Minister was finally “hailed” into session (no apologies for being late) and a vote was taken on passing a particular law. The result of the voting: 2 for 1 against 1 abstained. The law passed. We do not have all the special channels on TV just the basic cable offering. For that reason and our own desire to understand the politics in Israel we are one of the few viewers of the Knesset channel (CSPAN). Thank goodness that we do not have small children anymore as the language used and the decorum exhibited should in our opinion to be “R” rated.

Education

This should have probably been first on the list. It is too easy to say that many of the “bad” things about Israel has to do with the need for better Education from K-12 and beyond to high learning. Yes, times have changed since we went to school but we were absolutely floored by how little school children and even university student know about almost anything. Sure there are exceptions or there would not have been possible for Israel to excel in so many areas of science, technology and innovation. But in our opinion general knowledge of history, geography, geo-politics, religion (in the secular sector) etc., etc., has reached an all-time low. Have popular culture and the Internet left no room for general education? When we say education we don’t just mean learning and curriculum. What about core values, the one we were brought up with both in school and at home? Something is amiss.