

DIARY

Sam Lipski

Tel Aviv

In Hebrew, going from Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport to Jerusalem you 'ascend', literally — Israel's capital is about 800 metres above sea level — and religiously. When you come back to Tel Aviv, just an hour by road, you 'descend'; literally, because it's down on the Mediterranean coast, and by universal agreement, religiously. Having 'ascended' after flying in from Hong Kong, and jet-lagged at 2 a.m., I read that *Traveller's Digest* has just ranked Tel Aviv in the Top 10 'Sexiest Cities' for 2012. It's tenth for the best men, and seventh for 'the hottest women', although the magazine warns that the women are 'beautiful but fierce', having been army-trained. Hmm.

Now I claim no expertise in these matters. But when I read that Stockholm ranks first for the men, and Kiev for the women, I begin to wonder about the magazine's criteria. Kiev? Really? But then I had similar doubts when the *Lonely Planet Guide* ranked Tel Aviv third among the 2011 'World's Hottest Cities'. New York was first. Fair enough. But Tangiers was second. Tangiers?

I suppose that when it comes to cities, what's hot and what's not depends on when you take their temperature. So after a few cool days, literally, in Jerusalem — the city's marathon is run in a freezing downpour — I 'descend' to Tel Aviv eager to feel the heat. Having visited regularly since the 1970s, I've known it as a cosmopolitan town, with a European café culture and improved restaurants, a relaxed beach scene and a suburban sprawl that houses half of Israel's seven million people. But I never thought of it as a global city. If anything, with a core population of just 400,000, Tel Aviv struck me as quintessentially provincial, straining to be a mini New York, even adopting the slogan 'The City That Never Sleeps'.

Certainly it has always been the world's most Zionist city, the heart of ancient Hebrew's miraculous revival as a contemporary street language and home to a thriving literature, theatre and music industry. Yes, it had discos and Jerusalem didn't. Yes, it was secular



and Jerusalem wasn't. And, since 1948, it has been the country's financial, cultural, media and political powerhouse. Start-Up Nation, Hi-Tech and Tel Aviv have been synonymous. But to me the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem divide mattered only to Israelis, and maybe to Jewish tourists.

Until the Lonely Planet people spoke: 'Tel Aviv is the total flipside of Jerusalem, a modern Sin City on the sea, rather than an ancient Holy City on a hill. Hedonism is the one religion that unites its inhabitants. There are more bars than synagogues. God is a DJ, and everyone's body is a temple.' A bit over the top, but it captured something. Clearly. Since the word about Sin City went out, tourism to Tel Aviv has jumped by about 30 per cent. Together with the Bank of Israel's formidable Governor Stanley Fischer, who doesn't like budget deficits, the tourist influx has helped the country weather the global financial crisis. That it took an Australian travel guide published in Footscray to ignore the growing international anti-Israel campaign, and capture the real Tel Aviv zeitgeist, is cool. And hot.

The Tel Aviv Hilton's lobby is not hot. It has been the same pseudo-Miami Fontainebleau scene for more than 30 years. But if we're into world rankings, it's definitely first for people-watching, networking and doing deals. I'm here for the 2012 Jewish Funders' Network conference, which has brought some 400 delegates, mainly from the US and Israel, but also from Australia, to talk about philanthropy and Israel's civil society. Over the past decade the JFN, a New York-based non-profit organisation, has signed up more than 1,000 Jewish foundations and private donors interested in more innovative and creative

giving. A serious program lies ahead for the next three days. But for now, it's time for great cheesecake — in this Tel Aviv leads the world — good coffee, shmoozing with colleagues and theatre-in-the round.

And what theatre. Would-be Russian oligarchs and their glitziyly dressed children and wives; Israeli generals and government ministers; elegantly coiffured and gowned Frenchwomen; American Jewish leaders holding court; and affluent ultra-Orthodox young men and women on 'shidduch-dates', a ritual which enables them to meet without supervision in a public place and check each other out before the arranged marriage. According to comedian Jackie Mason, Jews won't stay in a hotel without a lobby. It explains a lot.

At the closing session, Professor AManuel Trajtenberg calls on Israelis to 'unleash the same creativity that created the kibbutz' to solve their serious social problems. Trajtenberg argues that last year's 'Israel Summer' protests, which began in Tel Aviv and then spread to cities across the country, were truly revolutionary because they changed Israel's political landscape. The hundreds of thousands of demonstrators against prohibitive housing costs, limited social services, over-concentration of wealth and heavy taxation, surprised the country and the demonstrators themselves. Shaken by the protests, Benjamin Netanyahu appointed Trajtenberg to head a commission which recommended real changes to the economy.

Trajtenberg tells us that before last summer, Israel's 'left-right' divide was about the Palestinian conflict. Now, for the first time in more than 60 years, social and economic issues have prevailed. 'We can no longer wait for the resolution of issues that haven't been solved in 100 years. This is the time to build a normal society.' For a new generation of Israelis, Trajtenberg's message is hot.

Sam Lipski is chief executive of The Pratt Foundation and the founding publisher of The Jerusalem Report, an Israeli news magazine.