

ife

feast : Israel
tales of adventurous gastronomy by Samantha Wilson

I arrived in Jerusalem not really knowing what to expect. Biblical stories played out in my mind, mingled with news headlines of bombings, terrorism and religious instability. Was I going to encounter a city teetering on the precipice of war, whose residents were openly hostile to one another? Was I going to walk into a city where religious adherence trumped all else? And, as the plane touched down, I couldn't help but wonder: what am I going to eat?

Wandering through the cobbled lanes of

Jerusalem's Old City felt like being in the halls of a living, breathing museum. Every step seemed to bring me closer to sacred buildings, fervent worshippers, ancient architecture, and people exhibiting centuries-old traditions. The Old City of Jerusalem is an approximately one-square kilometer jumble of buildings and labyrinthine paths surrounded by ancient walls that date back to the sixteenth century. It's historically broken into four rough quarters: Christian, Armenian, Jewish and Muslim, forming a decoupage of

ornate architectural styles from every corner of the globe. As I made my way down the ancient streets I saw holy men, pilgrims, tourists, and street vendors bustling along the cobbled alleyways and shopping at the bazaars and souks, their unique customs and dress adding yet more color to this eclectic mini city.

To define Jerusalem is impossible, as it is above all else a city of contrasts: A city where Judaism, Christianity and Islam meet; where ancient neighborhoods tumble into shiny new

ones; where the devout and the secular exist side by side and where modern and traditional somehow flourish together.

Far from my original, naïve preconceptions, I soon discovered that, despite its historic, archaeological and religious treasures, its centuries of turmoil and conflict, and its political tensions, Jerusalem is first and foremost a vibrant, living city. Outside the walls of Old Town, Jerusalem is a mesh of modern neighborhoods, replete with bustling cosmopolitan shopping districts, world-famous museums, and high-class universities. Jewish Orthodox, secular and Arabic neighborhoods exist in close proximity, each emanating their own traditions, and, for the most part, respecting each other's day-to-day lives.

With such a diverse population, it shouldn't have come as a surprise to me to discover how much the varied street dishes form an integral place in the lives of those who live in Jerusalem. Humus and falafel were, of course, the staples; that much I had already known. The modest chickpea holds the culinary crown in Israel, seemingly sustaining a population of 7 million. Yet, as I wandered through the age-old streets of Jerusalem's Old City, I began to realize that if you scratch just below the chickpea surface, a whole new range of street food comes into play.

In Jerusalem, *Sabich* is the new trend in quick eats, demoting falafel to so-last-year. The dish itself, believed to have arrived in the country with Iraqi Jews who would eat it on Shabbat morning, consists of fried aubergine, hard boiled eggs, hummus, tahini, salad, potato, and parsley all soaked in a variety of dressings and stuffed inside a fluffy, freshly-baked pita bread. Sitting down on a rickety plastic chair outside one of the many fast-food stalls serving up great quantities of sabich I looked around with interest at those polishing off their street-side snack. Old and young alike, the traditionally clad and the obviously secular, Jews, Muslims, Christians and probably a myriad other religions stood side by side, in quiet mastication. I was starting to understand that in this city, and indeed country, of great variety the traditional was becoming trendy. Simple, inexpensive, home-cooked street food isn't just for those who can't afford more lavish fare; it's the hip and fashionable thing to do.

Baklava, a sticky, sweet mesh of filo pastry and finely chopped pistachio nuts soaked in honey decorates the crowded, buzzing lanes of the Muslim Quarter souks. Its origins are contested, and many, from the Lebanese to



the Turkish, to the Armenians to the Greeks, will passionately attest to being its creators. Unsurprisingly, its presence in Israel is firmly established, and it makes for a tantalizing and, in my case—I must admit to being drawn to all things sweet like a bee to, well, honey—irresistible snack.

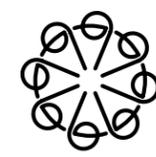
As I ambled deeper down the winding streets of the Old City, a strange yet somehow familiar smell caught my attention. Wafting along the lanes of the more serene Jewish Quarter alleyways was the warm, alluring scent of freshly baked pastry. Big business in Israel, and now a popular Friday morning, pre-Shabbat treat, *Burekas* are little parcels of puff pastry stuffed with a variety of fillings including feta cheese, mashed potato, spinach, aubergine and mushrooms. They are eaten hot, straight from the oven. Burekas, thought to have originated in Turkey, were brought to Israel with Jewish Sephardic communities from the Mediterranean

region and are today a popular, inexpensive and incredibly delicious start to the weekend.

Yet it wasn't just the scent of burekas that was filling my nostrils and drawing me into the small, traditional bakeries. Throughout Jerusalem's Old City and throughout Israel, pita bread forms a staple comparable to the Western World's sliced bread. In the same way as Westerners might discern a loaf of freshly baked, thick-cut fresh bread from a supermarket saver loaf, Israeli's know a good pita from a mediocre one. The Old City's bakeries have had plenty of practice at getting it right and I soon discovered that a piping hot pita dipped in a bag of *zatar* (a centuries-old powdered mixture of dried herbs, spices and sesame seeds used in Arab cuisine throughout the Middle East) can satisfy any mid-afternoon hunger. Eaten with humus, stuffed with falafel or sabich, used to mop up *shakshuka* (a popular breakfast or lunch dish brought to the country by Tunisian Jews

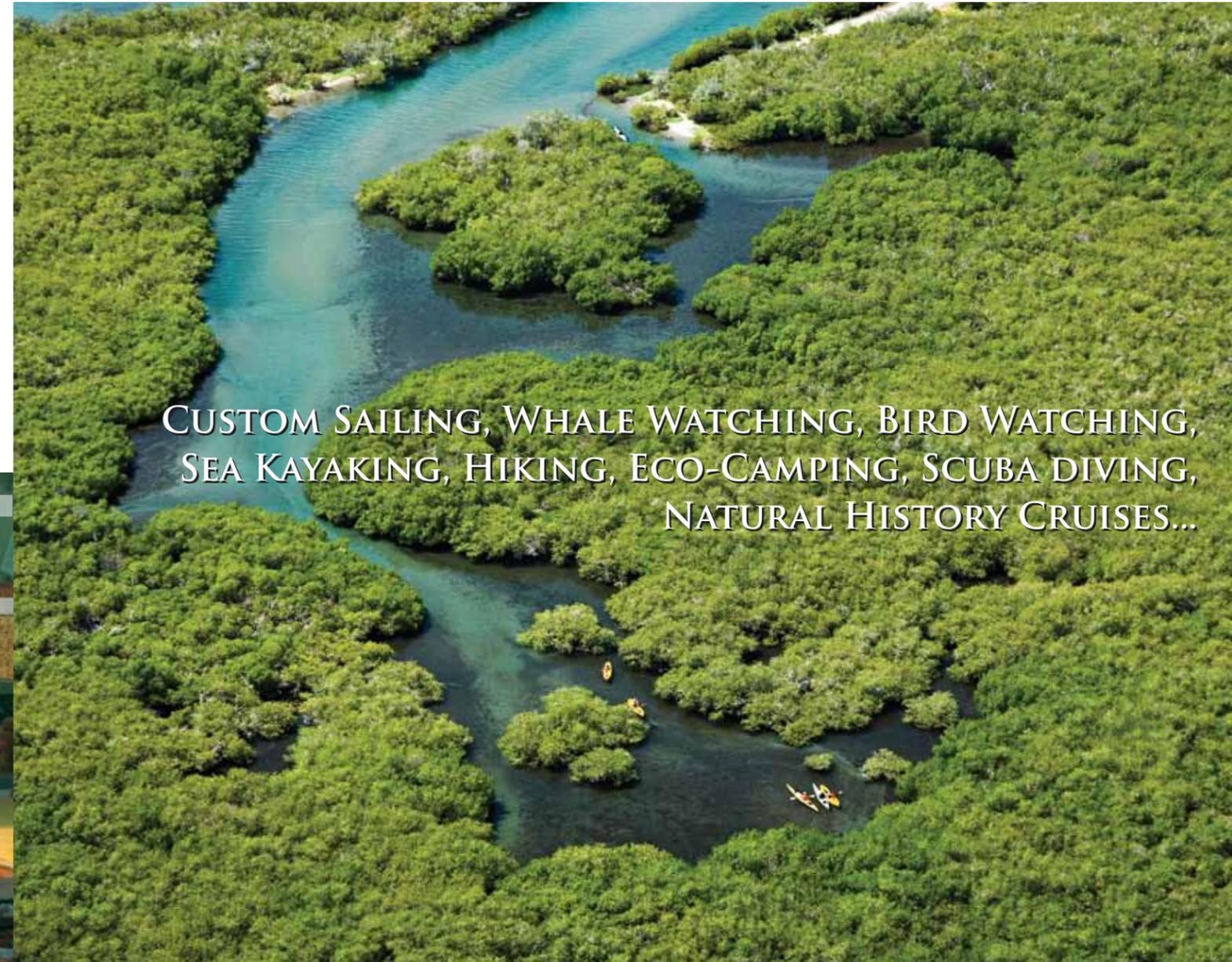
consisting of a large pan of poached eggs in a tomato based sauce of onion, peppers and spices) or piled with *labane* (a sour-tasting yoghurt-cheese, often eaten for breakfast, that I found to be somewhat of an acquired taste) pita is not only a staple in Israel, but also a bridge to many of its other street foods.

I left Jerusalem with a fascinating taste of an ancient city where the mix of different faiths, backgrounds, ideologies, and traditions, has created a deliciously unique demographic patchwork unlike any place I have previously visited. And nowhere is this cacophony of cultures more clearly reflected than in the city's eclectic array of street foods, the varied origins of which are a reflection of the beautiful complexity that is Israel. Irrelevant of religion, creed or political affiliation, residents enjoy these dishes indiscriminately, the centuries-old recipes managing to retain their traditional quality and fulfill the latest in food fashions.



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