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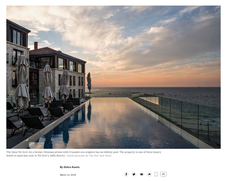
Jaffa Is Tel Aviv's Unexpected Luxury Hotspot

Just last year, the ancient neighborhood saw the opening of three high-end hotels.



The ancient port of Jaffa is the Mediterranean that is a popular tourist destination. Tsafrir Abayov for The New York Times

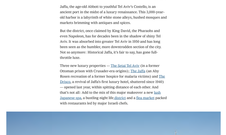
By Maria Abreu

March 14, 2018

Jaffa, the age-old shtetl in youthful Tel Aviv's Cumulus, is an enchanting place to lose oneself in a maze of narrow streets and lanes and harbor is a crossroads of what some always, bedouin strangers and markets brimming with antiques and spices.

But the decrepit, once claimed by King David, the Pharaohs and even Napoleon, has for decades been in the shadow of shiny Tel Aviv. It was absorbed into greater Tel Aviv in 1950 and has long been seen as the humble, more deterministic sector of the city. Its population—Historical Jaffa, it's fair to say, has gone full-Arabic-Israeli.

Three new luxury properties — The Jaffan Tel Aviv (in a former Ottoman prison with Crusader-era origins) The Jaffa and Abu Rozen restoration of a former hospice for malaria victims) and The Jaffan Tel Aviv (in a former Ottoman prison with Crusader-era origins) — opened last year, within spitting distance of each other. And that's not all. Add to the mix of this major makeover a new Sushi Japanese spa, a bowling night-life district and a fine-dining jewbed with restaurants led by major Israeli chefs.



The ancient port of Jaffa on the Mediterranean has a popular tourist destination. Tsafrir Abayov for The New York Times

"Jaffa is the hottest area in Tel Aviv — the energy and authenticity, coupled with the creativity seen in the ancient architecture, the local artists, galleries and we're-mention the amazing food and the vibe, is what is attracting people to Jaffa," said Ofer Ben-Ami, a City-based real estate magnet with a portfolio of more than 75 property investments and developments across the globe. "Jaffa has all the components to be the next big thing."

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The gentrification hasn't pleased everyone. Jaffa for centuries has been a multicultural place, home to Muslims, Christians and a mix of Israeli ens Sunnis, most of Jaffa's Arab residents were forcibly removed from their homes. Today the district is one of the few areas of the country with a mixed Arab and Jewish population, and as luxury projects have moved in, so have accusations that the city's Muslim history is being erased.

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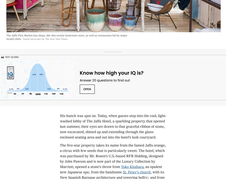
The Israeli architect and conservationist Kamy Gil recalled that 20 years ago, when he began restoring Jaffa's ancient buildings, people observed with one of them: a jeering 20th-century price that sees Ismael The School of the Sisterhood St. Joseph's Convent and Jaffa's French Hospital, so named because its founder, the Lyon-based Francois Latour, insisted on using entirely French building materials. Gil recalled that at the time, the neighborhood was a terrain packed with garbage, and creeping weeds covered former malaria wards. Deep beneath its structure, however, Mr. Gil was sure there was a buried treasure: an intact sister wall, dating back to the Crusader period, that had once formed the perimeter of a Gilboaiency between



The Jaffan, the former Ottoman prison, has 50 crusade-inspired rooms, as well as a restaurant led by Yossi Elkayam. Tsafrir Abayov for The New York Times

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His bunch was spot on. Today, when guests step into the cool, light-washed lobby of The Jaffa Hotel, a sparkling property that opened last summer, their eyes are drawn to that graceful ribbon of stone, the ancient wall that now forms the backbone of the hotel's reclaimed seating area and not into the hotel's lush courtyard.

The five-star property takes its name from the famed Jaffa orange, a citrus with few seeds that is particularly sweet. The hotel, which was purchased by Mr. Bonen's U.S.-based RFR Holding, designed by the Israeli firm Kimmel Eshkolot and Tel Aviv-based Studio Yaniv, opened a year's three from Yossi Elkayam, an modern-new Japanese spa, from the handsome Ze, French church, with its New Spanish Baroque architecture and towering belfry; and from Jaffa's elegantly restored Old City, anchored by its Ottoman-era clock tower.

Jaffa's resurrection began in 2007, when the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality decided to revitalize the area. Today, the Jewish set out to open his shtetl — and brought in restaurant businessmen and a food hall. The municipality then invested $220 million in its downcobbles Hua markets, which today is a crossers-river of antiques by day and a bustling hub of twinkling lights, al fresco cafés and impossibly trendy bars by night.

Mr. Yossi Ben-Ami offers a little people watching scene at the Jaffa Flea Market stall. Tsafrir Abayov for The New York Times

In 2016, OCD, a well-appointed experiment from the Tel Aviv prodigy Ron Rubaev, raised the culinary bar. In Jaffa, and a slew of restaurants followed, including Mizlala, Ezra and Ezra, Kaminsky — a buzzing gathering space that is part artists' studio and part bar and restaurant, housed in a 19th-century villa. Lately, the pace of new bakeries (like the Instagram-ready Milk Market), restaurants like the chef Uri Levy's Basta Bar, and creative spaces like Ezra and Ezra have slowed considerably.

But the prolifer ut of this development moved at a much slower pace. Mr. Gil spent years trying to convince the Israeli authorities to allow excavations underneath the French Hospital before finally earning a permit to unearth the Crusader wall as well as original stone columns and a slew of archaeological treasures that he must now hand over.

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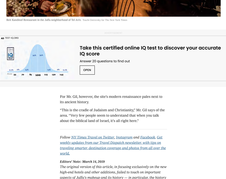
Today, The Jaffa Hotel, materializing from that decade-old dig site, is a quest inventory of ancient walls and sheik modern lines. The facade of the original hospice has been restored and now forms the backbone of the hotel's lobby and its new courtyard, a sunken garden and pool deck, and a dead-ot-arm tree has bounced to the convent's former chapel and decorated with pieces of famous Israeli contemporary pieces. Its pattern and patchwork is of second and creative.



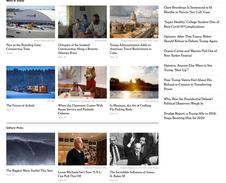
Ofra is a contemporary gallery in Jaffa that offers an artistic collection of original ethnic-art from Asia, and Central and West Africa. Tsafrir Abayov for The New York Times

"This is artwork enough," Mr. Gil says of the site. "You don't have to embellish an embellished product."

A short walk away in Jaffa's American Colony neighborhood, Ofra, a gallery of contemporary ethnic-inspired artwork from African regions, from New England who-cotton to Asia, Ofra, another restorer building has been restored, in a grand hotel, The Ersten, a 42-room property beneath the back into a majestic Ottoman building from 1866. Formerly known as the Jerusalem Hotel, it was the place where Lawrence of Arabia and Mediterranean headers who wanted a luxury sojourn by the pilgrim-to-Rome way to Jerusalem. The building, which was converted into British military headquarters during World War II before sitting abandoned for 50 years, now sports elegant tiling, sophisticated décor and hand-painted murals commissioned by the building's original owners.

And across the street from the hotel's Jaffa Clock Tower, a former Ottoman-era prison, The Jaffan, has been restored by Ottoman-raga in Palestine, site the sprawling Jaffa Gate Hill. The resort has lopsy-spec layers of history. The basement level spa and pool area, with its contemporary Japanese design, and its ancient brick ground seams have been converted from a former Turkish prison, which later became a Jewish-run prison after the founding of the State of Israel, and housed notorious criminals including the Nazi Adolf Eichmann.

The Jaffa Hotel opened to guests in August, and shortly after, The Chapel bar — housed in the convent's original chapel — followed. Its owner, the Israeli-Canadian Ofer Ben-Ami, also runs an elite restaurant run by the New York-based Major Food Group, is also packed each night.



Mr. Ben-Ami's Mediterranean-style Jaffa neighborhood of Ramat Aviv. Tsafrir Abayov for The New York Times

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For Mr. Gil, however, the site's modern restaurants pales next to its ancient history.

"This is the cradle of Judaism and Christianity," Mr. Gil says of the area. "Very few people seem to understand that when you talk about the biblical land of Israel, it's all right here."

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Editors' Note: March 16, 2018
The original version of this article, in January exclusively to the new high-end hotels and other additions, failed to touch on important aspects of Jaffa's makeup and its history — in particular the history and continuing presence of its Arab population and the exploitation of Palestinian workers in the city's gentrification. We regret the omission and acknowledge the continuing controversy about new development and its effect on Jaffa. After readers pointed out the problems, editors added some of that background information to the version.

A version of this article appeared on June 24, 2018, in The T Magazine of the Sunday Times Magazine, Travel & Entertainment section of the Sunday, June 24, 2018 The New York Times Company

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