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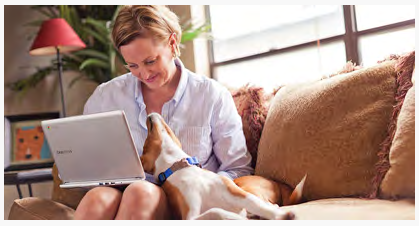
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# In the Heart of Israel's 'Start-up Nation,' an Exclusive Scene Opens Up

Tel Aviv's flourishing tech sector is expanding and diversifying, offering travelers a surprising new lens on the city.

In the Capsule, a virtual reality tunnel at The Israelii Innovation Center, travelers get a feel for the future by trying to solve impending global challenges. Tzachi Ostrovsky for The New York Times

By Sarah Amandolare

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Tel Aviv is known for its thriving tech scene, drawing venture capitalists and start-up founders to events like Cyber Week, a cybersecurity conference, and Muni Expo, focused on tech for "smart cities." A decade ago, the best-selling book "Start-up Nation" spotlighted Israel's booming high-tech sector, and the industry is still going strong.

But the scene remains fairly exclusive, centered around Tel Aviv and employing mostly non-Orthodox Jewish men. Now, there are promising efforts underway to expand and diversify Israel's tech sector — and to open it up to travelers.

Increasingly, there are opportunities for travelers to discover the city through its entrepreneurial side. A new museum, a start-up-inspired restaurant, boutique tours and myriad formal and informal events around Tel Aviv and beyond are some of the ways travelers can explore this evolving tech landscape.

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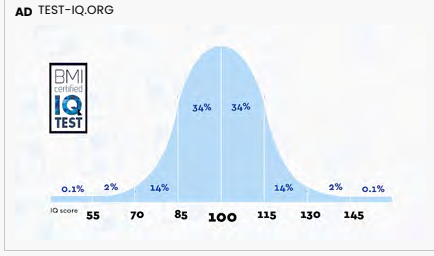

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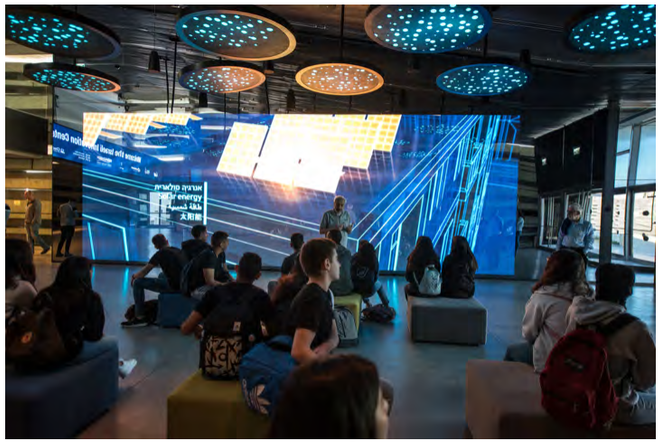
Tel Aviv has tried tech-tourism before, offering tours of start-up offices and establishing a permanent exhibition on Israeli innovation in the Stock Exchange building, for example. But new opportunities encourage travelers to dig deeper into the roots of the industry, as well as reconsider its place in Israeli culture.



The Israeli Innovation Center opened in February 2019. Tzachi Ostrovsky for The New York Times

"Everyone knows that Israel is the Start-up Nation. Most people, both Israelis and internationals, don't necessarily know why," said Yarden Leal, deputy director general of The Peres Center for Peace & Innovation, home to The Israeli Innovation Center, which opened in February 2019.

The "Dream Big" sign is in front of the Mediterranean-facing entrance of The Peres Center for Peace & Innovation. Tzachi Ostrovsky for The New York Times

Part museum, part homage to the former president Shimon Peres, the new Mediterranean-facing venue in the Jaffa neighborhood makes the idea of Start-up Nation "something tangible," Ms. Leal said. An interactive hologram exhibition, for example, lets visitors converse with Israeli innovators, such as the USB flash drive inventor, Dov Moran, while another exhibition showcases Israeli products ranging from autonomous vehicles to a space telescope. And inside a virtual reality tunnel called the Capsule, travelers can get a feel for the future by trying to solve impending global challenges, like food shortages, with technological tools.

Ms. Leal hopes visitors leave with an understanding that "at the core of entrepreneurship is the belief that 'I can make a difference.'" That idea is underscored in a documentary film about President Peres, an advocate for bottom-up change and cross-border knowledge-sharing, that is screened in a replica of his office. The Center has also hosted entrepreneurial workshops for ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, and teamed with the Danish Foreign Ministry and Palestinian partners for an ongoing incubator-accelerator for Palestinian companies in the West Bank. "President Peres always said, 'Why don't we make the start-up nation into the start-up region,'" Ms. Leal said.

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Start-Up Nation Central is a nonprofit that connects young companies from throughout Israel with funding sources and offers meeting spaces. Tzachi Ostrovsky for The New York Times

Another organization spreading entrepreneurial energy beyond Tel Aviv is Start-Up Nation Central. Occupying a modern building on Lilienbaum Street, near tech-centric Rothschild Boulevard, the nonprofit connects young companies from throughout Israel with funding sources, and offers meeting spaces and professional workshops. In November 2018, the organization opened L28, a start-up-inspired restaurant next to its offices. Every six months, a new chef-entrepreneur will occupy the light-filled eatery and experiment with Israeli cuisine. Druze Israeli chef Naifa Mulla is currently at the helm, creating contemporary spins on traditional Druze dishes, which blend Arab and Middle Eastern elements, such as seafood Shish Barak, a yogurt-based soup with drum fish dumplings — rather than the traditional beef or lamb — and crispy squid.

L28 is a startup-inspired restaurant that opened in November 2018. Tzachi Ostrovsky for The New York Times

Additionally, the new venture ACT (Art, Culinary and Tech) aims to be an epicenter for Israel's growing food-tech sector, offering guidance for start-ups and "a lab for chefs," while hosting events ranging from pop-up dinners to talks on women in agriculture and food technology, according to co-founder Carmit Oron.


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Such endeavors speak to the fact that more travelers are looking to experience how culture and tech collide in Israel, according to Tova Wald, a tour operator who creates customized itineraries for luxury corporate and leisure clients. In recent years, she said, both business travelers and tourists have requested that tech be somehow woven into their itineraries in Tel Aviv and beyond. "About half are coming to travel, but they've heard so much about the innovation and are curious to see it firsthand," Ms. Wald said.

She has guided travelers through the hub of cybersecurity companies known as Cyber Spark, located about 70 miles from Tel Aviv in the Negev desert city of Beer Sheva, and on tours with Orthodox Jewish women entrepreneurs of the city of Bnei Brak, 30 minutes from Tel Aviv. But Ms. Wald's itineraries might also explore innovations from thousands of years ago, such as Caesarea, an ancient city on the Mediterranean, and Masada, a fortress in the Judean Desert used against the Roman army in 73 A.D. "High tech is a great bridge between people and cultures and ideas," Ms. Wald said.

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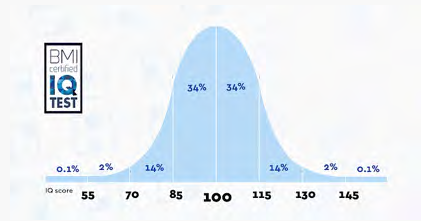


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That possibility fuels organizations working to expand Israel's tech sector, such as The Hybrid, which helps Arab-led start-ups scale up, and WMN, an advocacy and mentoring organization for women entrepreneurs in Tel Aviv and the north of Israel. Tech has also taken hold in Jerusalem, and is growing in Nazareth as well as cities near Tel Aviv like Herzliya and Ra'anana-Kfar Saba.

And the entire industry has been throwing its doors open, according to Orlie Dahan, executive director of Tel Aviv-based EcoMotion, an organization trying to build Israel's smart-transportation sector. While in the recent past, companies might have done everything in-house and under wraps, "the new world is all about consortiums; everyone bringing something to the table and together creating bigger, greater things," Ms. Dahan said.

She encourages travelers to sign up for one of EcoMotion's twice-a-year hackathons, where teams spend 36 hours trying to solve a mobility challenge presented by industry heavyweights, such as auto manufacturers, or France's national rail operator S.N.C.F., which in the past has invited teams to personalize the travel-booking experience for riders.

"There's room for all types of players," Ms. Dahan said. "Even if you're not a coder, you can be the one doing the presentation, managing the project or designing the mock-up to show how the app will look."

If a hackathon sounds like too much, less formal tech events abound in the evenings throughout the year. Many opportunities can be found through Meetup.com, and offer travelers a peek behind the industry curtain. The soaring Azrieli Sarona Tower, where numerous tech companies have offices, hosts gatherings, as does Rise Tel Aviv, one of the British bank Barclays' financial-tech work spaces, in the financial district.

"It's very easy to get into the Israeli tech scene through Meetups and events," said Erez Gavish of TLV Starters, which guides new entrepreneurs from early idea to up-and-running businesses from its office at Google Campus, the Israeli outpost of Google's international chain of start-up hubs, another venue for tech events. The tight-knit culture means that one conversation can open the door to yet another gathering. Most evenings offer between five and 10 free event options, often within walking distance of each other and in English; Israeli start-ups generally need funding from outside Israel and create pitches in English from the get-go, according to Mr. Gavish.

As for the origins of Israeli innovation, he points to a combination of factors, from tech-savvy military alums to the desert environs that inspired the invention of drip-irrigation in the 1960s.

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Given its vulnerable setting, Mr. Gavish said, Israel needs to cultivate an ethos very much aligned with tech: "create something."

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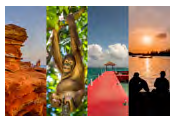

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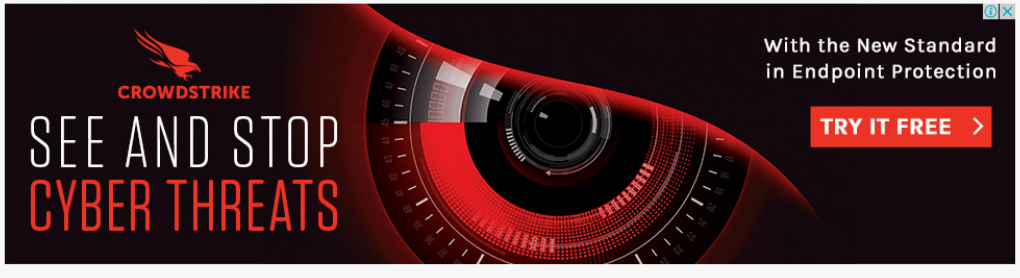
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