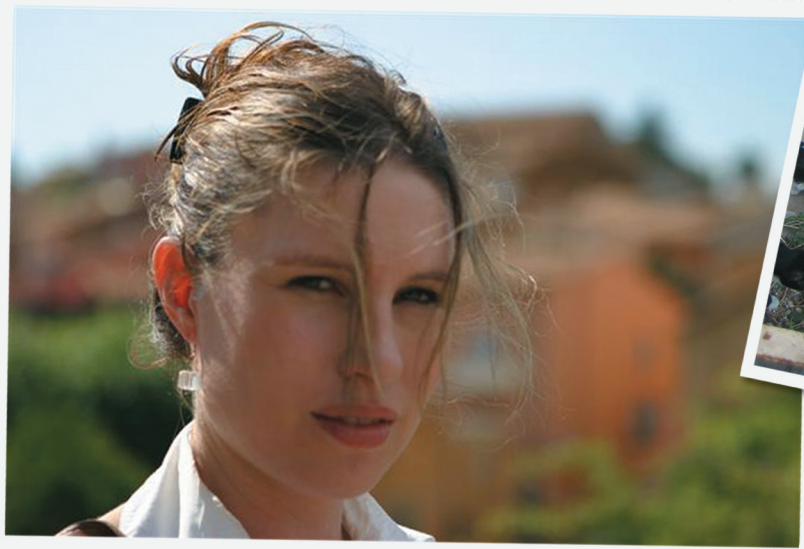


LETTER FROM ISRAEL



From left: Meredith Price; feral cats lying in wait on trashcans is a nuisance not only in Tel Aviv, but throughout Israel; beachgoers nonchalantly soaking up the sun are a common sight in Tel Aviv.

From Tel Aviv, With Love

By Meredith Price

"So, what's it really like to live in Israel?" a friend of mine from Atlanta asks. It is the beginning of July, which slightly changes the answer. She leans forward as if to hear a secret. I have no idea where to begin.

Her question is both the most frequently asked and the most difficult to answer. After all, what is the most important aspect about life in a specific place?

Is it the people who elbow you out of line in the bank one minute and scrape you off the sidewalk after you fall off your bike the next, or the elderly citizens who are not afraid to tell you that you should be married by now, but only after you kindly help them read the expiration date on a carton of cottage cheese?

Is it the long stretches of Mediterranean beachfront that frame Tel Aviv? Is it the relentless humidity that reminds me so much of home? Is it the city that never sleeps, the city with more nightclubs per capita than any other in the world?

Does the political mumbo jumbo created by the mishmash of Jews, Arabs and Christians have something to do with it? Do the ingenuity and the determination of the Jewish people who forged a state out of sand and give their lives in its defense make the media biases so much more infuriating? Not knowing where to start, I opt for sarcasm.

"I just finished an M-16 training course, and next week when I return, I'll look into a combat with terrorism class," I say.

"Really?" she gasps. "Is that part of the university curriculum over there?"

"No," I say, disappointed that my explanation was credible.

Just as San Francisco is nothing like New York, life in Israel depends on where you live. Moshav and kibbutz living is not the same as in Jerusalem, and there's nowhere like the Tel Aviv bubble, where I've made my home for four years.

"I may make a living as a journalist, but I can tell you firsthand that you shouldn't believe everything you read and even less of

"I just finished an M-16 training course, and next week when I return, I'll look into a combat with terrorism class."

what you see on television," I say. "I myself am afraid to return to Israel after a few hours of CNN, but it's not really like that. It's not a war zone. Well, not all the time."

Considered a fallen city by some in the ultra-Orthodox community, Tel Aviv is the secular, hedonistic, liberal, cultural capital of Israel. It is its own city, aside from a few common phenomena that span Israel, such as the overabundance of feral cats in every city or the chaos that reigns on the roads.

But worst of all is the threat of terrorism that pervades every nook and cranny of the country. You can board a trans-Atlantic flight in a time of relative peace, and within the few hours it takes to fly home, a soldier's kidnapping can spark a war.

While people are sipping an afternoon coffee, traveling on a bus or buying vegetables in a crowded market, a suicide bomber could run in and blow him/herself up. This, unfortunately, is reality.

Nevertheless, while Tel Avivians were keenly aware of the war and extremely upset by the displaced masses (largely because of the annoyance of terrible traffic and even less parking) and the possibility of being bombed by long-range Iranian missiles, even then the bubble was maintained. After a few days of not being bombed, life went on as usual. Even the

constant whirl of Apache helicopters no longer gave pause to beachgoers.

One elderly woman sat on a stool in our apartment complex garden from morning until dusk, staring out into the chaos of Arlozorov Street, a disjointed look on her face. Perhaps it was the absurdity of the situation. A few hours to the north, a war was being fought, and soldiers were dying, but in Tel Aviv, life hardly hiccupped. Roaring buses and whining mopeds continued along their routes. Pedestrians hurried to their destinations, cellphones glued to one ear. Businesses opened, and restaurants, many of which gave 15 percent discounts to northern residents, were full.

Between the sunbathers, the tourists and the morning power walkers, the beaches hit critical mass. Frisky dogs fetched balls in the park, and children played on swing sets. On the outside, it was life as usual.

On the inside, everyone felt an added

pressure in their chest, panicked when the cellphone rang at odd times, jumped out of their chairs when police sirens blared.

Now, six months later, it's long forgotten. That is the way people cope here — by not dwelling on the past. They simply dig into their never-ending well of hope and pray that the future will be better.

So how do you encapsulate daily life in Israel's cultural capital, where people listen to the news every hour with nervous anticipation and are used to opening their bags before they enter any public place? How do you tell someone what it's like to attend vibrant film festivals, see hot Israeli bands, watch experimental dancers, and stand awestruck before the swell of emerging Israeli high-tech companies and medical technologies, all the while knowing that just a few miles away in every direction, dangerous neighbors are looming, planning and scheming for your destruction?

"You get used to it," I tell my friend. You learn to appreciate the good things. You stop thinking that every hooded juvenile is a terrorist. You learn to drink your coffee and read your paper without glancing up. You stop being suspicious and settle on vigilant. You become aware but not afraid.

"It's complicated," I say. "I've lived there for four years and I still haven't figured it out."

Meredith Price grew up in Marietta and bought a ticket to Tel Aviv on Sept. 10, 2001. She writes a column on Israeli innovations and cultural features for The Jerusalem Post. You can reach her at meredithmprice@yahoo.com.