



‘Time Out’ in Jerusalem

Penny Johnson

“These narratives worked to secure the ideology of discovery and to realign the threatening political geography of the Arab Middle East as a cartography of leisure.”

—Rebecca Stein on Israeli tourist guides written after the Oslo peace agreements¹

Rarely have writers on Jerusalem, of whatever political cast or character, viewed the city of stone as a city of fun, partying, upscale consumption or youthful glamour. Growing up in the 1940s in very different settings, both Edward Said and Amos Oz bemoaned their Jerusalems’ melancholy provincialism. Since then—several wars, one occupation, an illegal annexation, two intifadas and a Wall later—Jerusalem’s reputation continues to get drearier, as the oxygen of commerce and conviviality in Arab Jerusalem is increasingly turned off, while Jewish Jerusalem is marked as ever more provincial, Orthodox and angry.

The April 2007 issue of *Time Out Jerusalem* featured the Old City marketplace.

However, party-goers, clubbers and boutique shoppers were in luck in 2007: *Time Out Jerusalem*, a monthly guide, came to present us with a new and better Jerusalem, one where restaurant ratings triumph over building demolitions, and “hip cafes, happening bars and designer boutiques” form a “Trendy Jerusalem” (March 2007) that has no trace of Jerusalem’s recent history, where such cafes were truly sites of danger. Jerusalem is no longer contested, bitter, or even bounded by the Wall – Jerusalem, it turns out, is a party city and destination of choice for youthful and affluent tourists.

Time Out Jerusalem (and *Time Out Tel Aviv*) are monthly publications of an Israeli company, the Yuval Sigler Media Group, under “exclusive license” from the UK-based Time Out International – although, perhaps because of low demand or a sense of discretion, these editions are not listed on Time Out’s main website², which does include *Time Out Dubai* and *Time Out Abu Dhabi*. All issues of *Time Out Jerusalem* to date contain the same potted history of Jerusalem (“In Context”), noting, indisputably, that the 5,000 year history is “fraught with turmoil, conflict and bloodshed.” A laundry list of conquerors follows, with Israel’s capture of the city in 1967 noted simply: “to this day the city remains under Israeli government.” Indeed, except for a brief mention of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles in 1993, the 1967 war seems to have brought Jerusalem’s history to an end, leaving the way open for more familiar ground, i.e. where to find the best bars and restaurants, boutiques, clubs and a scattering of cultural events. A comparison with an equally brief, but more honest, history of Jerusalem in the UK-based Rough Guide series is telling. Noting Israel’s “unilateral” annexation of Jerusalem, the Guide points out that “most of the international community does not recognize Israel’s jurisdiction over East Jerusalem” and adds that Israel has “ringed East Jerusalem with three bands of settlements to forestall the Palestinian claim to the east.”³

The magazine’s brief foray into history is more unrevealing than directly objectionable; it’s shaping of the new Jerusalem comes more through the heart of the matter – what to buy, where to go, what to see, what is happening. It is in these “cartographies of leisure,” to use Stein’s apt term, that we discover how “Things are happening in Jerusalem, a multi-cultural melting pot”. Lest the reader imagine that the guide is about to introduce Jerusalem’s diverse populations, identities and cultures, “The Melting Pot” section in December 2006 included “European decadence,” (a waffle shop), a spice and nut haven in Maoz Zion (“colloquially know as the Castel”) and a suggested trip to “fab wineries” in the Judean Hills (“you don’t have to go all the way to Tuscany”). A click on the suggested map route shows a stop at that Tuscan-like Israeli settlement, Gush Etzion.

Counting Game: Israel In, Palestine Out

The counting game – the number of Israeli versus Palestinian items mentioned in the guide – is perhaps a dull and nit-picking business but it is a compulsive undertaking in this world composed of lists, must-sees, picks of the month, and other accoutrements to help the hip and credit-card heavy. Only one Palestinian cultural institution (institution) is listed (Hakawati), no Palestinian art galleries or exhibits, no exhibits in Palestinian-run museums, no Arab restaurants (except for a small one-time feature: inevitably on an Old City humus joint), no hotels in East Jerusalem except the American Colony, and no musical events in Arab Jerusalem. One wonders how *Time Out* could have missed the Mozart Festival in March 2007 – after all, the London Choir singing the Mozart Requiem (in Hakawati) is not a hideaway event – or failed to note the al-Hoash Gallery – a subject of features in *The Independent* and *The Los Angeles Times* – or the well-advertised Jerusalem Music festival in July, among others.

“All souq up” trumpets the cover of the April 2007 issue, inviting readers to “play the market inside the Old City Walls”. At last the Old City is acknowledged in the all important “Consume” section of the magazine. Here *Time Out* enters (through Jaffa Gate, of course) to explore – and here we pause – “the infamous Arab souq.” Alas, the article is subtitled “braving the shakedown at the Arab Souq” and abounds with cautionary tips, including not going alone (particularly for women) and not being intimidated by the “aggressive sales technique” of Old City merchants. Well, perhaps all publicity is good, but *Time Out*’s version of the Old City as a site of bargains for a “savvy shopper with a “bit of chutzpah” is singularly unappealing.

We must recognize yet another breakthrough in the June 2007 issue where two Old City establishments – Photo Elias and Humus Lina – are included in a “few of Jerusalem must-sees.” Indeed, it all boils down to humus: “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the only issue that evokes more emotional arguments than the debate over the best humus joint” – and *Time Out* valiantly enters the latter debate with a vote for Humus Lina.

In its first five issues, the Wall Israel is building through Jerusalem is the great unmentionable – as indeed must surprise the hip tourist as he or she takes the advice of *Time Out* and explores wineries in the Judean Hills, enjoys the view from the Cinematheque or simply gets into the wrong taxi after a pleasant evening at the American Colony. But in a way, the Wall and the regime of checkpoints, new ‘border’ terminals, and forbidden roads that undergird it, is the underlying logic of *Time Out*’s Jerusalem. With these in place, Israel’s “trendy Jerusalem” can, it assumes, party on.

Postscript: The Wall in the Great Outdoors

Urging its readers to leave the urban hubs of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and “get acquainted with Israel’s quieter and more obscure side,” *Time Out*’s October 2007 issue offers “ten glorious and little-known havens in the Israeli countryside.” After reviewing havens for a range of tastes – from “the pedaling tourist” to “the beach bum” to “the flower child” – the ninth recommendation is for “the activist”. Perhaps acute readers can guess where *Time Out* is heading – yes, it’s “a tour of the separation fence,” recommending a drive up Highway 6 as “the best road to see a significant stretch of the fence.” This is indeed – on the Israeli side only – likely the most visually pleasant part of the Wall, in that it has been painted and decorated to remove its more unsightly features. While *Time Out* acknowledges that that the “aesthetic value of the wall” is in doubt in its more towering manifestation at the northern entrance to Jerusalem, the fixture remains a day’s outing for the adventurous tourist, rather than a lifetime sentence for those who live behind it.

With this issue, *Time Out Jerusalem* seems to have exhausted itself. In 2008, the eager shopper and excursionist must make do with *Time Out Israel*.

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Endnotes

¹ Rebecca Stein, “First Contact and Other Israeli Fictions: Tourism, Globalization and the Middle East Peace Process,” in eds. Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg, *Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press) 227.

² www.timeout.com. The site asks for “Comments on Guides” but to date a query sent by the author on 19 July, 2007 expressing concern over *Time Out Jerusalem*’s lack of coverage of Palestinian cultural sites and events has not received a reply.

³ See Daniel Jacobs, *Israel and the Palestinian Territories* (London: The Rough Guides, 1998) 305-308.