

As you can tell, it all involved a lot of work and some risk. Each difficulty made me more determined, and in the end it was a great success. It was well attended, the mayor came, and I think it was genuinely enjoyed. Apart from the cost of the flyers, and the fact that the room was free, it more or less paid its own way, with a chunk over for local children's charities. When I first had the idea, I asked an artist friend about doing it. 'Don't,' she said but relented a little when I explained that all the artists were safely dead, and she agreed I had a chance. By the way, does anyone need any clip frames?

Kind friends said they would love me to do another! They have no idea how much my wonderful family and close friends had to do and put up with to get that particular show on the road. It was all worth it, but only just.

Gilia Slocock (*Whitehead* 1955)

The Eight, Cyril Power: limited edition giclée print (1/950) £215.00 and *Water Jump*, Sybil Andrews: limited edition giclée print (1/850) £138.00 both available from The Bookroom Art Press: www.bookroomartpress.co.uk; T: 01273-682159

Discover Israel

HANNAH BLUSTIN

Batten down any misgivings and discover the delights and complexity of Israel in the hands of an unusual guide

At the beginning of last year, I abandoned my carefully cultivated finance career to launch Pomegranate Travel, a luxury travel company focused on one of the world's most controversial and poorly understood destinations: Israel. A year into this journey, I recognise that time at St Anne's (albeit 11 years ago) prepared me for this radical change in all sorts of unexpected ways.

Like many of my contemporaries, on graduating I embarked on a 'sensible' career. I started as a lawyer, but with an eye for business soon moved to banking at Merrill Lynch (later to become Bank of America), a US investment bank. The overall package at the bank was appealing. It would, however, be telling a lie to claim that the stock market ever stirred my inner passions.

My true passion was always travel. Many of my happiest and most vivid childhood memories are of family holidays, near and far. Oxford and law school provided ample opportunity for lengthy backpacking adventures in Africa, Central America and Southeast Asia. Then the City spoiled me

with a taste for luxury travel, my multi-screened trading floor desk always a window to a luxury travel offering in addition to Bloomberg and Outlook.

Indeed, in today's world where reality is interfaced through technology, travel presents a rare opportunity for unmitigated sensory being in the world. There is something about the newness of a place that opens us to strange smells, unfamiliar noises, bright colours and unusual tastes. When post-Oxford reality calls and we embark upon the greater predictability and stability of 'adult life', the imperative to travel redoubles itself as an opportunity to learn, to see the world afresh.

Sure enough, travel was in my destiny. In 2006, I met and fell in love with an Oxford DPhil student who happened to be from Israel. Some years later, I found myself living in Tel Aviv, and falling in love all over again, this time with my new home. The relationship was, and is, rich and complex. Tel Aviv's intellectual intensity (it boasts more tech start-ups per capita than anywhere else on earth) is somehow perfectly offset by the *joie de vivre* and sensuality one finds here. When, together with my first love, I started to explore the wider – but still tiny – country, we would return from each

weekend flabbergasted by our wondrous finds: UNESCO world heritage sites, buried deep in the desert, showcasing ancient Nabatean water systems and Byzantine churches. Crusader castles, halls and other 'ruins' so complete you'd swear you were on a period drama set. Prize-winning family wineries self-consciously modelled on ancient traditions. Astonishing waterfalls and hikes alongside the sources of the River Jordan. The list could go on and on, but one thing I simply cannot omit to mention is the food. I swear to the God of the Jews, Christians, Muslim, Druze, Bahai and any other peoples with a claim to this land, that the food in Israel is heavenly. All over the country, it is outstandingly fresh and somehow simple and creative all at the same time.

From a career perspective, moving to Israel and becoming a mother provided a natural break and opportunity to evaluate. As any good PPE student would have done, I turned to my bookcase of philosophical texts, and spent some time with Victor Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning*. The following particularly resonated:

Don't aim at success – the more you aim at it ... the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue ... Listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to



The Heights of Masada, Israel

see that in the long run – in the long run, I say! – success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it.

Some of us found ourselves at Oxford precisely because we are the type of people who care deeply about excelling, about success. Yet Frankl's point, which I had not quite appreciated in my 20s, is that it is dangerous to let the outside world define what success means; each of us must be successful according to our 'own specific

vocation or Mission'. I understood that I was done with banking.

As a good philosophy student, I was also not afraid to embark on a vocation which would ask people to challenge their preconceptions. In philosophy we are mindful to challenge our most basic assumptions about existence (Does this laptop exist? Do I exist?) and knowledge (but do I really know that I know?). I was ready to challenge some assumptions



Nimrod Castle, Israel

about my new home. Israel often receives an unflattering press in the UK. This is not the place to discuss politics, but my observation from living here is that the area is riddled with complexity, and that it is more interesting to open oneself to the multiplicity of often-contradictory human narratives, than to proclaim absolutist motifs.

Whatever one may say, Israel is a democracy where free speech is sacred and readily accessible in English. Engaged visitors can easily talk with people across the political spectrum: Christian Israeli Arabs, East Jerusalem Arabs who refuse Israeli nationality, Jewish pioneer Kibbutzniks, Israeli soldiers on active duty, Palestinians in refugee camps, traditional

Druze who follow the Seven Pillars of Islam but serve in the Israeli army, Jewish West Bank settlers who relate to the land as sacred and politically apathetic, secular Tel Avivians who hold only partying as sacred. Narratives are multifarious, fascinating and rich. Unlike Myanmar, China or other travel destinations, in Israel you won't find people guardedly whispering their histories; here a cacophony of oral biographies is readily shouted out and served up.

Returning to my own narrative, having decided I was done with finance, I was ineluctably drawn to the idea of running my own business focused on high-end, deep content, travel in Israel. And so, at the start of last year I opened a spreadsheet

and made an enormous 'to do' list. Again my Oxford education served me well. The tutorial system makes self-starters of us, and meshes nicely with the prevailing entrepreneurial culture of Tel Aviv.

Today, the list has developed into a fully-fledged specialist tour operator providing personally tailored, complete Israel itineraries. We nurture our close local relationships with the managements of leading luxury and boutique hotels, owners of smaller characterful properties, engaging and sophisticated tour guides, and the best restaurants in the country – of which there are many. We have a healthy client list, which includes academics, journalists and culturally-engaged types, and are starting to sell through some of the UK's leading luxury travel providers who had not previously offered Israel as a destination. We were also recently featured in *Condé Nast Traveller*.

Life does not seem to flow in straight lines and my path towards the right kind of fulfilling and challenging career has been meandering. However, I do believe there is a direct connection between having spent time at St Anne's and my willingness and ability to bring about this change.

Hannah Blustin (1999)

Pomegranate Travel can be found at: www.pomegranate-travel.com