

Israel-Indian ties Goa-ing forward

As diplomatic relations between New Delhi and Jerusalem mature, Israeli tourism matures on the beaches of Palolem, Anjuna and Arambol, in Goa

• ORIT ARFA

It's hard to tell if Amir Pagi, a partner at a popular Israeli café in Palolem, is from India or Israel.

First there's the name, Amir, which in addition to its popular Hebrew incarnation means "prince" in Hindi. He has that swagger that most Israeli tourists seem to possess along the tropical beaches of Goa, India, a confidence that comes from having served in the army but now living it up in a country known to be kind to Israelis – and their wallets.

With dark "Sephardic" skin and a scraggly beard, Pagi's English accent is not immediately identifiable.

Pagi, it turns out, is an Indian native, having grown up in a family of fishermen in a Goan beach town. But he seems to have taken on Israeli characteristics by osmosis. He has spent the last few years expanding the popular Café Inn, where on any given night, tourists from England, France, Germany, Scandinavia and of course Israel can drink a real cappuccino, not the watery instant stuff served at most beachside cafes.

This is also where they can get some authentic falafel, *shipudim* (Israeli shish kebab) and hummus – not the imitation kind prepared by Indian cooks at almost every restaurant along the shore, which prominently feature Israeli comfort foods.

Pagi and his Israeli partner, Sharon Salman, are like brothers now. Salman, originally from Rishon LeZion (and unavailable for the interview), took up residence in India several years ago and went into the hospitality business with his brother, Benny.

Pagi considers himself an honorary Israeli. Just last summer he came to Israel on vacation and stayed, even as Operation Protective Edge raged on. He has lived in Jerusalem for over a year, and had an Israeli girlfriend for three.

"Israel is home for me; I have more friends there than I have here," Pagi said one evening in November at the Café Inn. The eatery was quieter than usual; November is low season. Tourists, especially from wintry Northern Europe and Russia, flock here for Christmas and New Year.

Pagi's inn immediately comes off as a more Western establishment. The roof is made out of tin, but the colorful chalkboard menus written in perfect English reveal an urbane touch.

An affinity for Israel is also felt a few storefronts down at the Spicy Bella restaurant, which is adorned with a sign in Hebrew advertising the establishment's famous "kosher" fish. (Red snapper and kingfish seem to be the only kosher selections among the fresh baby shark, crab and prawns.) The design, however, is a bit

fancier, with cushioned seats giving it a more old-school, upscale feel.

Owner and chef Kamal Varma prides himself on being the first Indian to have opened an Israeli restaurant. HaSukkah, as it was called, debuted in 2001 in Pune; another branch opened later in Panjim, the capital of Goa. Both have since closed. His love for Israel and Israeli food was inspired by his first real Israeli friend, whom he describes as a kindred soul named Ziona. As befits her name, she turned him on to Zionism.

"[Ziona] was crying and told me that 50 years ago, she had no country. 'We Israelis came from all over the world, and Israel is our home – we have no other place.'"

At her request, he pledged he would take care of Israeli tourists. Spicy Bella has since hosted holiday and Shabbat meals for free, in tandem with Chabad.

"I found that Israelis are like little babies," said the round Varma. "They need love and care because they are frustrated. There's a lot of war... and they have a sense that people in India are open to all religions."

But both he and Pagi did not always view Israelis this positively. Pagi entered the restaurant business near Palolem at age 14. In the 1990s, the Indian state of Goa, a former Portuguese colony, became

an attractive destination for Israelis right out of the army. Most came for the trance scene – and the drugs.

"When I was 14 I'd see more Israelis, coming on bikes, being rude to the waiters," Pagi recalled. "But since I've started working with Sharon and Benny, I began to see new people coming; since then, it's amazing people. I love Israelis, they're so nice."

Varma wants Israelis to represent their country well. "The Israelis just need to understand one thing – to mix with the people. I find they're a bit isolated. Indians love Israelis, but sometimes they misbehave; youngsters from the army don't care."

Those who "misbehave" generally have substance abuse to blame. "India has a lot of respect for the Israelis; if they're not liked, it's because they were caught getting drugs."

As Indian-Israeli diplomatic relations have matured, so has Indian-Israeli tourism.

In May, Narendra Modi was elected prime minister with a pro-Israel stance. This past fall, Israel beat out the US to win India's \$500 million purchase of tactical missiles.

New Delhi and Jerusalem have parallel histories. Both are dominated by one ancient religion (Hinduism in India's case), with Muslim and Christian minorities. (One rabbinic tradition has it that *Hodu*, India in Hebrew, is the word *Yehudi*, Jew, without the letter *yod*, which signifies the one God.) Both lived under British control until they declared independence – India in 1947, Israel a year later. Both have had violent encounters with Muslims; neighboring Pakistan is often likened to "India's Gaza."

The tropical beach of Palolem in southern Goa has now become a destination for clean-cut, young Israeli professionals, as well as young families seeking a cheap, relaxing, low-maintenance vacation.

Beach huts go for anywhere from NIS 50 to NIS 150 a night, depending on location and whether you want unlimited hot water at will. The scene is reminiscent of the Sinai coast that Israelis miss – beach huts and bungalows facing a clean ocean – but



WOMEN RELAX outside the Crystal Goa cafe in Palolem. (Courtesy)



INBAL 'BIG MAMMA' Asher is the Israeli proprietor of her self-named cafe and inn in Arambol. (Courtesy)



GOA IS a popular destination for Israelis looking to 'escape.'

the tropical Goa has more palm trees than sand.

“India is passé,” remarked one Israeli woman as her kids ran around naked on the sand during one of Palolem’s beautiful sunsets. She’s referring to how India is perceived among Israeli 20-somethings. Indeed, Central America has supplanted India as the hot spot for post-army treks. More Israeli families now make the trek to India; this woman is renting a house in Palolem for several months. She loves how the kids can be free.

The cliché junkies and hard-core stoners opt for the even cheaper, party-centric, northern Goa. Anjuna and Arambol are visibly more Israeli than Palolem, where Brits seem to dominate.

In Arambol, signs advertising yoga classes and mopeds for sale appear in Hebrew. While rumor has it that “cold” turf wars between Israelis and Russians have diluted the Israeli scene, Arambol is where the younger Israeli seeker lands for drum circles, trance parties, and yoga and meditation retreats.

But Inbal “Big Mama” Asher, a 27-year-old Sabra, is there to take them in if they ever get into trouble. Just last month she founded, together with her Nepali boyfriend, Big Mama Café and Inn on the Arambol shores. It’s designed with that attractive zula quality – cushioned seats surrounding low tables. She’s enjoyed full occupancy ever since.

“A lot of Israelis come here because it’s Israeli – so it gives them a sense of safety. The food and rooms are clean; they have someone with whom to talk in their language. I’ve heard many of them say that the fact I’m here makes it easier for them.”

And they may need even more motherly TLC in hectic, sprawling Arambol.

“I think they tend to stay here because life is more vivid and interesting than in Palolem, and prices are a bit lower. And most of the Israelis are looking for cheap prices, food-wise.”

She admitted to another attraction. “We have to be honest and say that drugs are the main attraction in India. Also, it’s a cheap destination for Israelis, and a lot of them are attracted to the magic of India, the unknown, the adventure.”

Asher says she hasn’t seen any non-Israeli Jews around – but if anyone wants to meet a non-Israeli member of the tribe, they could have a bite at the Crystal Goa café back in Palolem, right near Café Inn. The founder is a 36-year-old British Jew named David Tomkins, who retired early from a career in finance so he could travel. The fact that Israelis and Brits dominate Palolem didn’t play a role in his decision to eventually start a business there.

“India is like a ‘big mumma,’ which embraces everybody that comes into contact with her,” he said in an email, a bit press shy. “In Palolem, I felt immediately comfortable and at home; it’s a romantic and magical place that attracts all kinds of people. I love the palm trees, the peaceful sunsets, the dolphins and the beautiful beach. I fell in love with this place immediately; starting a business here came naturally.”

He has traveled to Tel Aviv many times, but for now Palolem is home, one from which it’s hard to get away. He works 60 hours a week – a far cry from early retirement. For now, his Israeli customers provide a taste of the Jewish home.

“I have lived in London my whole life, but I get the impression from my Israeli friends that they come to India out of curiosity about the spirituality and the culture – and also for the climate, the yoga classes, the food and the enormous diversity.”



KAMAL VARMA outside his restaurant Spicy Bella, which serves ‘kosher’ fish. (Orit Arfa)



A SERENE sunset on the shores of Lani Matsil. (Orit Arfa)