



Step back in time

Akko, Israel

YOU cannot help but watch in awe as Akko bursts into view from the coastal railway line. A long-favoured weekend spot for Tel Avivians, the walled Old City seems to rise from the Mediterranean, whitewashed buildings and swaying palms set against an impossibly cyan water. Ask me about the best first impressions in the world and I'll tell you about Akko.

‘Every cobbled street and crumbling façade has a story to tell’

Situated in Israel's far north, it's among the world's oldest settlements and, as is Jerusalem, is so laden with history that every cobbled street and crumbling façade has a story to tell. Yet the dense tourist throngs have, for the most part, yet to venture here and it's still possible to drift along the close-set streets in relative solitude. Although Akko is a prize for those who want to leave modernity on the train, it isn't all ancient minarets and Crusader museums. In recent years, the city has developed a reputation for its food, from terrific seafood to traditional street-stall offerings. *Harry McKinley* ↪

Where to stay

In a city rich with boutique hotels, The Efendi is not only Akko's finest, but, for me, one of the global greats. A series of Ottoman-era mansions turned into a 12-room hotel in the heart of town, it's an enchanting spot, brimming with history —from the 400-year-old Turkish baths to the 19th-century fresco depicting Istanbul. Rooms feature cloud-colliding ceilings and, when the light from a crimson sunset pours through the arched windows on the first floor, it is nothing short of magic. *From £280 per night (00 972 74 729 9799; www.efendi-hotel.com)*



What to do

Wander the city's *shuk* (market), where overflowing bags of spices and trays of baked treats line orange-lit alleys. The atmospheric Kurdi Spice Shop sells ready-made blends and owner Marwan is always on hand to talk about the time-honoured trade. For unrivalled views of Akko and the surrounding sea, scale the city walls and stroll on stones that tell a tale of the city's cycle of destruction and rebirth. Alternatively, descend below ground and explore the 1,100ft-long Templars' Tunnel (*below*), built almost a millennia ago by the famed Christian order.



When to go

Sidestep the often brutal summer sun and visit in spring or autumn.

Where to eat

Chef Uri Buri's eponymous fish joint is among the best in the world. The local icon is easily recognisable thanks to his navel-grazing grey beard. Don't leave without trying the ice cream, served with olive oil. No trip to Israel is complete without trying some local hummus and many say Hummus Said is the country's top spot. For falafel, head to Hummus Shamsia; afterwards, stop by Kashash for syrup-heavy *knafeh*. Try Mercato for classic Italian cuisine made with local ingredients.