

WorldDenver Presents:

# STAYCATIONS

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## ILLUMINATING ISRAEL

Happy (early) New Year and Shana Tova! We are just over a week away from Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and the first of the two High Holy Days. Though the Gregorian calendar plants us firmly in the year 2020, according to the Jewish tradition we are in fact about to celebrate the beginning of the year 5781. Unlike modern New Year traditions, Rosh Hashanah is a holiday of reflection and contemplation, with the sounding of the shofar acting as both a call for repentance and a cry for freedom. So as we wait for the shofar to sound, let us venture into the vibrant land of Israel

"A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey;" (Deuteronomy 8:8).

Whether you are seeking the spiritual by walking in the footsteps of the prophets, exploring magnificent ruins that are still being excavated, floating in the Dead Sea, or partying on the beach in a global cosmopolitan city, Israel is the destination for you! Israel is a unique combination of old and new, religious and secular, and tradition and innovation all wrapped into 8,500 square miles – 13 times smaller than Colorado – inhabited by just 9.2 million people on the eastern Mediterranean coast. Israel's population is a fascinating mosaic including a Jewish majority (75%) with a large Muslim population (20%) and many smaller ethnic and religious groups.

## CULTURE

Israel's location on the map is considered one of geostrategic significance as it serves as a land bridge connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe. It has been conquered and lost by a succession of rulers over the last 5,000 years, giving it a rich religious and cultural history and present. Its geography provides more ecological diversity than one would expect in such a small area, with an extremely arid climate in its south and subtropical Mediterranean mountains in its north. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, millions of Jewish immigrants and refugees from all corners of the world have chosen to make it their home. As a result, Israeli culture blends east and west as a way of life. Not sure what that means? Check out this hit by the band A-WA where they mix Yemenite folk music – which they learned from their grandmother – with hip hop.



## CUISINE

Falafel, goat cheese, and bourekas are just a few of the staples of Israeli cuisine. They are not “Israeli dishes,” per se; but they are emblematic of what Israeli cuisine is: a mixture of local Arab cuisine and the cuisines millions of immigrants brought with them and adapted based on what ingredients were available (Chef Michael Solomonov explores this phenomenon in the documentary *In Search of Israeli Cuisine*). Tahini, a paste made of ground, hulled sesame seeds, is one of the most popular sauces in Middle Eastern food. It is simple, healthy, delicious, and best of all, it does not need to be refrigerated! How one turns raw tahini into tahini sauce can be a controversial issue. It can spark intense debate between those who say, “just add water and mix,” and those who declare, “it’s not tahini without lemon and garlic.” Tahini works well on falafel, kebabs, and even as a salad dressing. But the real experts go with green tahini. It’s super easy to make – here is a recipe that will add flavor to almost any meal.

## COCKTAIL

For many young Israelis, hot summer nights mean one simple thing: freezing cold arak (which, ironically, means perspiration in Arabic). But arak is much more than a drink at bars and clubs; it is what many Israelis of North African origin drink on Shabbat (Saturday) after morning prayers or even at the end of the Yom Kippur fast (Could you imagine breaking a fast with hard liquor?). Arak is a potent liquor which originated in Lebanon; it is made by distilling grapes into neutral alcohol, after which anise (fennel seeds) is added. The result is a clear, licorice-flavored beverage which most Israelis keep in their freezers and drink extra cold. If Arak proves a bit too potent, adding grapefruit juice to it is a very popular combination in Israel.

## SPECIAL THANKS

*This week’s Staycation was written in partnership with Itai Divinsky at JEWISHcolorado. JEWISHcolorado is the umbrella community organization inspired by the collective responsibility to build and sustain Jewish life in Colorado, Israel, and around the world. To learn more, visit, [JEWISHcolorado.org](http://JEWISHcolorado.org). To connect to Israeli-related programs contact Itai at [idivinsky@jewishcolorado.org](mailto:idivinsky@jewishcolorado.org).*

