



Photo by: Vehicular traffic was rerouted to gain more space

Kikar Davidka's vibrant revival

By GIL ZOHAR
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A once-dreary square in central Jerusalem gets new businesses and a chic makeover.

Kikar Davidka used to be Jerusalem's version of East Berlin's Alexanderplatz – a dreary urban wasteland one couldn't hurry across fast enough. Now that's changing, thanks to visionary entrepreneurs like hotelier Maoz Inon, the square's redesign by Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta, and the transformation the long-delayed light rail will engender downtown after it begins service.

Inon – the think-outside-the-box tourism developer responsible for the Fawzi Azar Inn, located in a restored 200-year-old mansion in Nazareth's Old City; the creation of the Jesus Trail, a hiking route connecting Nazareth with all the holy sites of Jesus's mission in Galilee; and the publication of the 2009 guide Hiking the Jesus Trail – recently leased the former Hadassah College residence at Rehov Hanevi'im 67. Last month, after six weeks of renovations and an investment of NIS 2.5 million, Inon and his business partner Gal Mor opened the Abraham Hostel in Kikar Davidka as budget accommodation for independent travelers.

"There aren't a lot of hostels that can compare in terms of price, cleanliness and service [in Jerusalem]," says Inon, the Binyamina-based, 35-year-old father of two boys. "We know our customers, and we know our market."

Currently, the hostel has 40 rooms, including dormitories, singles, doubles and family rooms.

Prices range from NIS 65 per night to NIS 270. The private rooms include breakfast, while individual travelers can eat a morning meal for NIS 15. All rooms have air-conditioning, a shower and bathroom, a locker and a mini-fridge – unheard-of luxuries for Jerusalem's low-end hotels. Similarly, the Abraham Hostel will have amenities like a multipurpose lounge with a billiard table, a landscaped courtyard terrace with tables and chairs, free Internet and WiFi, and a fully equipped kitchen.

"The standard of cleanliness is that of Europe," insists Mor.

The hostel's biggest distinction, however, is its travelers' center, which is being run by Evan Gadol, a staff writer for www.Indie-Travelers.com.

Formerly located at Zabotinsky's Bar in the Ben-Shetah pedestrian mall, the center offers free programming, including a lecture at 6 p.m. nightly, trips to the nearby Mahaneh Yehuda market combined with self-catering and introductory classes in Hebrew and Arabic. In association with Sandeman's New Jerusalem, the hostel offers free (tips only) tours of the Old City every morning.

By next summer, Inon and Mor are aiming to expand their hostel to 85 rooms and achieve 80 percent occupancy. Will having a tram stop at the door in a very central location lead to that high occupancy rate? "We can do nothing but wait," laughs Inon. "In Jerusalem, God has all the answers. You should ask him." "We want to create a special atmosphere here," explains Nathalie Rostaing, the hostel's reception manager from

want to create a special atmosphere here," explains Nathanael Rostaing, the hostel's reception manager from Saarland, Germany. "There are a lot of hostels in Jerusalem but they don't care about the needs of the backpacker."

The staff themselves are backpackers, says Rostaing, who studied tourism management in Saarbrücken, and formerly worked on a cruise ship.

Looking further ahead, Inon is hoping to transform Israel's independent travelers scene just as he has done in Nazareth. In 2000, the Lonely Planet guidebook said Nazareth "is recommended only for pilgrims," Inon notes. "Now Lonely Planet writes that Nazareth is a highlight."

Following his success in the Galilee cradle of Christianity and his new venture in Kikar Davidka, Inon is planning to create an Israel hostel chain, he says. The third one will be in central Tel Aviv, he says without specifying an opening date or address.

Inon makes clear he is a proud Israeli Jew, and has no interest in Christianity or missionary work. Opening the Fawzi Azar Inn was "a business decision based on the power of Jesus. Most tourists in the world are Christians. Everyone is welcome, regardless of their faith."

THE ABRAHAM Hostel isn't the only new business in Kikar Davidka. A branch of the Ne'eman Bakery recently replaced Bank Igud, and a new shwarma shop opened in a commercial block that has barely changed in decades.

The biggest change in Kikar Davidka, though, is the new design of the plaza by award-winning Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta, which combines a stone arcade, water element and trees to change the once-bleak space into something inviting with a feeling of space, air and color. The remake involved rerouting vehicular traffic to gain more space for pedestrians.

Legorreta's transformation is all the more remarkable considering the drab buildings that ring the square. To the east is a four-story building that once housed the Chen cinema and the municipality's finance department.

Legorreta diminished the building's ugliness by hiding it behind an arcade.

No such sleight of hand can disguise the Clal Center on the south side of Jaffa Road facing Kikar Davidka. The 15-story monstrosity, erected in 1978 in the Brutalist style by architect Dan Eitan, was the first attempt in the city to create a prestigious, enclosed shopping center and office tower.

Eitan's confusing design, however, failed to attract shoppers, and the mall became a commercial flop.

The unviable center was forced to lease out space to otherwise undesirable tenants such as the King of Kings Community Jerusalem messianic congregation, and a porn store.

The redevelopment and landscaping of the area near the Clal Center has yet to begin. Replacing the broken pavement and uneven asphalt with something inviting and on a human scale offers the biggest urban design challenge today in downtown Jerusalem.

Perhaps Kikar Safra should consult with Maoz Inon.



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