

WINNER Fauzi Azar Inn, Israel

'People called me insane when I started'

Behind every great responsible tourism idea there invariably lurks an idealistic entrepreneur with the vision and drive to turn the seemingly impossible into the irresistible. Maoz Inon is such a visionary, and the Israeli Arab city of Nazareth is where his dream of creating one of the world's best guesthouses became a reality

Born and raised on a kibbutz in Israel 36 years ago, Maoz Inon did what many young people do: he went travelling. He and his girlfriend backpacked around New Zealand and Nepal before returning home to get married and start a respectable middle-class life in Tel Aviv.

But they couldn't settle. As Maoz puts it, they had 'become infected with the virus of travel'. In 2004, they quit their jobs and went backpacking again - first in Israel, hiking along the Israel National Trail (Shvil Israel). Then, to California and South America, where they visited Machu Picchu, the Galapagos and Patagonia - 'some of the most beautiful places on Earth, but which made us realise that nothing could match Israel for the incredible mix of cultures and people.'

Tourism in Israel then was mostly bus tours and pilgrimages. There was virtually nothing in the way of infrastructure for independent travellers. Convinced, however, that Israel would make a great backpacker destination, Maoz and his wife began searching for a place where they could open an inn, one that, like those they had stayed in on their travels, would become part of the community,

supporting and being supported by it. They picked Nazareth.

Centrally located in Galilee, Nazareth is at the heart of the Holy Land. It is the birthplace of Jesus and is the city of the annunciation. It is an hour and a half drive from Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Ben-Gurion Airport.

It is also the largest Arab city in Israel, one that was emerging from a long depression and was low on self-esteem. And for a Jew to want to open an inn in the heart of the old town, was, on the face of it, a ridiculous idea. 'Surprising as it may seem, there were no guesthouses or hostels in Nazareth,' says Maoz. 'For an Israeli to come and stay overnight in the Old City was unthinkable. Most of the people in the tourist industry, as well as friends and the people of Nazareth, called me a weirdo or insane when I started. And being born Jewish didn't make life any easier.'

He found a property, the 200-year-old Azar Mansion, built around an open courtyard, replete with Ottoman arches and architecture. 'The moment I saw the house,' says Maoz, 'I knew it could be one of the best guesthouses in the world.'

The mansion had been empty for almost 15 years. Mr Azar and his wife



died in the 1980s, and their five daughters moved out of the Old City. Maoz approached one of the daughters, Odette Shomar. It took several long evenings of discussion, while drinking strong Arabian coffee, to make her his strongest supporter and a true believer in his vision.

'From my experience as a traveller, I know that a guesthouse can be a driving force that can transform a neglected area. It creates job opportunities, supports restaurants, cafes, guides, attractions and various types of other business. It can raise the self-esteem of the local community.'

And so it has proved. The Fauzi Azar Inn opened in 2005, though with no fanfare or flurry of bookings. But

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Inside the Fauzi Azar Inn, before the coronavirus outbreak

gradually Maoz got word out and the backpacking community has indeed come to Fauzi Azar and embraced his vision of creating a space where people of all faiths, nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs can come together, face-to-face.

The Inn's style is intimate and relaxed, whether you're staying in the dormitory or one of the guest rooms. Here the all-local staff and guests can meet to share their stories. The Inn also runs a volunteer programme where volunteers from around the world can support both the inn and the local community. It is the base camp of the Jesus Trail, which links Nazareth with Capernaum, and also runs a daily free city tour which introduces guests to local shop owners, enriching the traveller's experience and supporting local businesses.

Maoz has shown himself to be a man of his word and that goes a long way here. With no concept of backpacking tourism, the Arab community feared he might be an advance party for Jewish settlers. Now, the once-sceptical community has taken this maverick Israeli to its heart. 'I was given two great pieces of advice,' says Maoz. 'Respect others and they will respect you; and, "If you are clean and the people that come are clean, you will be fine".'

'We had an open door policy, no secrets, no guards. We encouraged our neighbours and community leaders - Muslim, Jewish and Christian - to come and drink coffee with us. And we would go to them. Gradually we bridged the gap.'

He believes backpackers are the most open-minded of travellers. 'They are most open to experiencing other

cultures, most willing to challenge themselves. As people we don't have to agree on everything but we can talk, not only about our differences but about what we have in common. This way we can have a better future.'

And his dream goes beyond Nazareth, beyond Israel. 'Through tourism we can find what we share and show this to the people who live here and to the world. We also see ourselves as a model for the region, we see ourselves as part of the Middle East. Through backpackers we can open the entire Middle East and transform it into a great tourism destination.'

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