



Thessaloniki – a home away from home

• By MARK GORDON and DAVID ZEV HARRIS

With Turkey essentially off limits for Israelis since October 7, 2023, Greece – already popular with Israelis – has become the go-to destination in the region. With half a dozen airlines offering regular flights from Ben-Gurion Airport to Thessaloniki, this northern Greek coastal city is an obvious choice for Israelis who want to travel but remain close to home during these difficult times.

Thessaloniki offers visitors 2,300-plus years of history, tremendous shopping, and a Jewish story like no other in Europe.

From our base at the welcoming Teight Hotel, the sea front is no more than 50 m. away and it's where everybody wants to be seen. The narrow boardwalk follows the arc of the coastline with myriad cafes offering panoramic sea view. On a clear day, Mount Olympus rises to the clouds some 100 km. in the distance.

Downtown Thessaloniki is very walkable with roads crisscrossing around the central Aristotle Square, which is shaped like a long wine bottle.

Mock pirate ships ferry tourists around the busy port from the dock opposite the famous White Tower. Originally called the Red Tower because of its bloody past, the fortification affords stunning views across the bay. However, be prepared to walk up a broad spiral staircase to reach the wondrous 360° view.

THIS CENTRAL district of the city was once the main hub of Jewish life. For some five centuries, Thessaloniki was the world's only city with a Jewish majority. That all came to a crushing end with World War II, during which 96% of the community was wiped out. However, the city's Jewish story dates back to the founding of Thessaloniki in the 4th century BCE.

Jews are believed to have joined Alexander the Great as he made Thessaloniki his own. The city is named after his half sister.

The city's first synagogue is said to have dated back to the 1st century CE. Tradition states the Jewish locals gave Paul of Tarsus a hard time when he gave the sermon for three consecutive Sabbaths.

In 1170, Benjamin of Tudela also passed through town, reporting on the 500 Jewish residents.

However, the story really took off in the immediate aftermath of the 1492 Expul-



THE SYNAGOGUE in the Jewish community center holds prayers twice daily. (@MarkDavidPod)

sion from Spain, with 20,000 Spanish Jews settling in Thessaloniki. The rest, as they say, is history – largely a positive story, compared with that of the rest of Europe.

Jews from Italy and elsewhere in Mediterranean Europe also found a new home in this city on the Thermaic Gulf. Kabbalist Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz was a Thessaloniki native before moving to Safed. His liturgical poem "Lecha Dodi" is the centerpiece of Friday night prayers across the Jewish world.

The left wall of the new Yad Lezikaron Synagogue in the Jewish community center, in the heart of the city, summarizes the story by simply listing the telltale names of the dozens of synagogues (Castilia, Lisbon, Sicily etc.) that existed prior to the 1917 fire that engulfed much of the city, and onward to the Holocaust. Morning and evening religious services take place daily here.

The only sanctuary to survive the Holocaust is the Monastir Synagogue, used for the High Holy Days, communal occasions, and celebrations. The Red Cross used the sanctuary as stables during World War II.

"My parents were married on these steps, as were my husband and I," says the wonderful tour guide to Jewish Thessaloniki, Hella Kounio-Matalon.

Her father survived Auschwitz and her

mother was hidden in Athens. Her husband is also the child of survivors.

The Germans deported 50,000 Jews to their deaths. They are memorialized by a seafront sculpture, with a Holocaust museum in the works. The Nazis destroyed what was the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe, containing 350,000 graves. The area is now the site of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Here too, a haunting sculpture marks the "spot" that covered an area equivalent to 80 football fields.

The modern Thessaloniki Jewish community numbers around 1,000 but their number is declining. However, there's a school, kosher senior residence, and regular events. There's also a small but growing Israeli community. And it wouldn't be a popular tourist destination without an active Chabad presence and its kosher restaurant in the Astoria Hotel.

TO GET THE best overview of the city, take the short journey by taxi to the city walls in the upper town from where you can understand how Thessaloniki grew from a sizeable city of some 100,000 people in the 11th century to a bustling metropolis of more than a million souls in 2024.

Historic monasteries and vine-covered pergolas pepper the path down the narrow



A MEMORIAL in the center of the Aristotle University marks the site of the former Jewish cemetery. With 350,000 graves, it was the largest in Europe until its destruction by the Nazis. (@MarkDavidPod)

alleyways, leaving behind the walls, which in their heyday extended some eight km. and still run half that length.

The locals are a friendly bunch. Expect a wave and a friendly grin as they sip coffees on the verandas overlooking the steep pathways that lead down to the modern part of the city.

While most people under age 60 speak some English, offering them a cheery "kaliméra" greeting will go a long way. Don't be surprised if you're invited to join them for a glass of ouzo.

Talking of aperitifs, the downtown outdoor market includes a wondrous Aladdin's cave of olive oil products, with potent local alcohols for sale from steel Greek urns. Just ask for Alexandra and you're guaranteed a warm welcome and detailed explanation of the products in faultless English.

Nobody is quite sure where Demetrius was killed by Roman soldiers at the demand of the emperor. Nevertheless, his conversion to Christianity and subsequent martyrdom are commemorated in the magnificent Holy Church of Saint Demetrius, the patron saint of Thessaloniki. A museum recalls the incident along with other ancient artifacts beneath the altar. This subterranean space has been used

through the ages as a public bathhouse, prison, and storage area.

Walking through any city can be hard work for tourists, making food stops along the way a must. Estrella is an excellent all-day brunch option, heavy on the eggs, with mouthwatering desserts. Closer to the waterfront is Moldee, a fancy restaurant that prides itself on serving dishes based on local seasonal produce, which means the menu is regularly updated.

As the sun sets over the busy port, with the outline of Mount Olympus beckoning another evening stroll, there's something very familiar about Thessaloniki. There are hints of Haifa, Tel Aviv's Neve Tzedek neighborhood, and Jerusalem or Acre. Perhaps it's the architecture, or the layout of the streets, or the selection of locally-owned stores. Or maybe it's a certain Mediterranean *je ne sais quoi* that leaves visitors unable to pinpoint why Thessaloniki feels just like home.

The writers host *The Jerusalem Post Podcast Travel Edition* (jpost.com/podcast/travel-edition). They were the guests of the *Thessaloniki Tourism Organization* (thessaloniki.travel) and the *Greek National Tourism Organisation* (visitgreece.gr).

DC hotels are nearly sold out for inauguration, even before Election Day

• By LEBAWIT LILY GIRMA

WASHINGTON – This may be a "sensationally unpredictable" US election season, but travelers are confidently betting that they'll see their candidate's hand on the Bible on Inauguration Day. In this case, they're not just ponying up for the usual gambling that happens around major events – it's big-ticket travel to Washington, DC, that they're splurging on, particularly for the week leading up to January 20, 2025, when either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump will be sworn in.

At least five months ahead of the 60th presidential inauguration, a majority of the city's luxury hotels appear to be fully sold out, showing their reservation calendars blocked out for dates ranging from January 14 to January 21. According to multiple online searches that Bloomberg News ran from late September through October 9, only a handful have remaining availability – at gangbuster prices, even for entry-level rooms.

The Kimpton Hotel Monaco in downtown DC has rates from \$2,800 a night, the nearby Sofitel is charging upward of \$1,400 and the Ritz-Carlton Georgetown is going for around \$1,700, representing price hikes of up to 1,047%. None of those prices are for rooms larger than 42 sq.m.; in mid-February 2025, when the buzz has died down, the same accommodations start at \$244 and top out at \$656.

A spokesperson for Hilton Hotels Worldwide Holdings Inc. confirmed that if Hilton.com is showing as sold out – as 17 out of 25 of the company's DC hotels currently appear online – the hotels likely have no availability for those dates. Other luxury properties, including the Four Seasons, Rosewood, and Fairmont in town, also appear to be sold out, but representatives from those brands declined to discuss demand around the big event.

While Destination DC, the city's tourism marketing arm, says it's normal for presidential inaugurations to stoke tourism, Elliott Ferguson II, its chief executive officer, says this election cycle has already commanded "significant interest" that stands apart from recent history.

Because of pandemic restrictions, he says, "the public hasn't been able to participate in an inauguration since 2017." Worth acknowledging, too, is the momentum tied to the potential of the first female president "and the

public's ability to take part in history."

It's not just the traditional glass ceiling that Vice President Harris would be breaking; for onlookers of many different backgrounds, that she is also Black and of Indian descent multiplies the historic importance of her potential inauguration.

To that point, Google searches for "2025 presidential inauguration" show a spike starting on July 21, 2024 – the day Harris received President Joe Biden's backing to take his place as the Democratic presidential nominee.

For Nicole Ratliff, a US expat who resides in France with her 14-year-old twins, it was that moment – when Harris was moved up on the presidential ticket – that inspired her to book an international trip back to her onetime home of Washington.

"I would have booked regardless if it was Biden as well, but with Kamala it's a historic moment that I want my kids to witness," she says, adding that she'd long felt regret over taking such historic events for granted when she lived in the capital.

Exclusive data from Booking Holdings Inc.'s metasearch site Kayak shows that Ratliff is hardly alone. Interest in DC during the week of January 17 is five times greater in 2025 than it was in 2024, based on searches for flights to Washington.

While the company was unable to pull data comparing that to search volume leading up to the 2017 inauguration, Google analytics suggest that there also was a frenzy of interest in Inauguration Day travel after Donald Trump accepted the Republican nomination on July 22, 2016. This year that interest has been sustained since Harris's confirmation on the ticket; in the 2016 election, the spike in interest halved almost immediately and dwindled further within days.

"Americans are traveling for the inauguration, with Kayak data showing searches into Washington, DC spiking after major political events," says Kayak CEO Steve Hafner, citing the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and the presidential debates as reliable explanations for spikes in flight searches.

ELECTION SEASON aside, Washington has been drawing record tourist crowds: In 2023, the nation's capital received 25.95 million visitors, representing a 4% increase over its pre-pandemic levels and resulting in \$10.2 billion in

visitor spending.

The boom is set to continue: Hotel occupancy was up 3% year to date through July 2024, compared with 2023, a spokesperson for Destination DC confirmed.

Adding to the buzz of a January 20 inauguration: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday, this year coincides with the presidential swearing-in. That same day, an inauguration parade will make its way down Pennsylvania Avenue, adding to the pomp and circumstance.

Those who choose to venture to the nation's capital for a three-day weekend, albeit in frigid weather, will find plenty of additional reasons to do so, starting with a slew of enticing restaurant openings in the city – including Dogan at the Salamander hotel, by chef Kwame Onwuachi of New York's acclaimed Afro-Caribbean restaurant Tatiana; La'Shukran at Union Market, a Middle Eastern bistro from 2024 James Beard Outstanding Chef Michael Rafidi; and Arrels, a Spanish restaurant from Michelin-starred chef Pepe Moncayo.

On the attractions side, The People's House is a free immersive museum that opened in September 2023 and focuses on White House history. A crowd that's enticed by the inauguration will no doubt enjoy a section where you can sit inside a full-scale replica of the Oval Office.

With both candidates commanding a passionate base, there's reason for both hotels and vacation rentals to expect significant waves of cancellations on November 6, or whenever election results are made final. But don't expect providers to slash their prices as a result. Given the fervor around inauguration travel from voters on both sides of the aisle, rooms given up by one party's loyalists are likely to be quickly scooped up by the other's.

Kayak's Hafner says the trick to experiencing it all is to avoid DC all together. "Consider a hotel outside of DC or in Baltimore," he advises, with the promise of "cheaper rates and more availability."

That's what Ratliff, the US expat, did. She booked a suite in McLean, Virginia, for a better value and space to spread out with her teens. But she isn't married to her plans. If her candidate loses, she says, she'll likely cancel her reservation. "Or we may still go to see friends who live in the area instead."

(Bloomberg/TNS)



Ramat Gan's animal rescue and bonding farm

• By ITSIC MAROM

We are all familiar with the Safari in Ramat Gan. However, not too many people know that just north of the Safari entrance is another special place for animals. For the last two years, "Natural Bonds" has operated as a unique animal rescue farm.

Their project is mainly to rescue abused or neglected animals that have suffered in a variety of industries such as food, entertainment and even animal slavery. An example is donkeys.

Natural Bonds, a non-profit organization, focuses on livestock farm animals and does not deal with domestic pets such as cats and dogs, which have other organizations that take care of them. Suf-

fering livestock animals are brought to the refuge usually in very poor shape, injured, sick, starved, and weak. At the center, they get excellent medical help and the majority recuperate after a while in their new safe surroundings. The refuge serves as the animals' new home, and they can spend the rest of their life at the friendly site.

Natural Bonds is not only a home for animals, however: It is also a home for people.

A second initiative, and no less important, is the welfare of the human people involved with Natural Bonds. Through creating an educational rehabilitation animal farm, this magical place welcomes people of all ages to learn, share, understand and renew the ancient bond with animals in the best way. The

concept leads humans to be better to all beings.

With this in mind, Natural Bonds is expanding its activity to also serve as a center of "seeing the other." The Ramat Gan Department of Education, in close cooperation with Natural Bonds, has organized over sixty classes to visit during the year. In addition to Ramat Gan, other schools in the country have sent young students to visit and learn at the rehabilitation educational farm.

It is easy to fall in love with this place, where hundreds of animals have been rescued, both physically and mentally. The whole family is welcome to this place of hope and rehabilitation.

For more info, go to <https://www.naturalbonds.org.il/visit>