Start-up central

For high-tech types wanting to live in this country, settling in Tel Aviv seems like a natural choice. Even for the religiously observant

Allison Kaplan Sommer

Mark Zuckerberg was a late bloomer – compared to Ben Lang.

At 19, Lang already has a list of start-ups and websites to his name, experience that led to his current position as a growth specialist at a Tel Aviv venture capital company, Lool Ventures, which specializes in user growth. But today, that’s his second job: At the moment, the former New Yorker is serving as a soldier in the Israel Defense Forces.

A Zionist from a young age, Lang spent a year in Israel with his family while growing up, and had always planned to sign up with the IDF after high school. By relocating to the Tel Aviv area for his service, he doesn’t feel he had to sacrifice his promising digital future just because he decided to make aliyah.

"Tel Aviv is an amazing place. I really like the mix. It’s a place where people are serious about start-ups, can still have fun, and the fact that everything is very close to everything else really helps," he says.

Lang’s most recent project illustrates that point: “Mappedinisrael.com: The Israeli Start-up Map,” offers an impressive visual image of the local start-up scene, as well as a networking hub for companies, services and job-seekers, several of whom, like him, are recent immigrants to the “start-up nation.”

Lang’s wunderkind story began at the tender age of 14, when he discovered Ebay and began selling items online for himself and others. From there he moved into professional Web design, an online site for high-school students to share class notes, and other ventures. He has also written extensively, contributing to such prestigious publications as Business Insider, TechCrunch and Forbes. After graduating from high school, he took part in a program in Silicon Valley called Teens in Tech Incubator. It would have been very easy for him to stay on there, attend college and seek his fortune. But instead, he traded in Silicon Valley for the Silicon Wadi.

Start-up culture in Israel is quite different from that of northern California. “The biggest difference here is the impact that the army makes on the way people act,” he says. “In Tel Aviv, I feel people are more serious about their work, and more focused. For Israelis, everything seems easier after the army. After that, staying up all night working, not sleeping for weeks on end, the sacrifices entailed in building a start-up are, in comparison, not so difficult.”

Lang himself doesn’t get much shut-eye between the army and Lool Ventures. Yet, he manages to find time to socialize at high-tech networking events and in the high-tech hub of Herzilya. At such events, he might bump into Zachary Bouaziz.

Bouaziz, 23, originally from Englewood, New Jersey, found himself in the Tel Aviv start-up world as the result of a decision to attend college in Israel. After a year of “standard” yeshiva study in Jerusalem, he had been set to enroll in college in the United States, when he made a last-minute decision to enroll in a communications program (taught in English) at the famed Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He quickly gravitated towards the hub of high-tech in Tel Aviv.

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at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. While a student, he began an internship at Newsgeek, a Hebrew-language news site, which led to his current job at 3Pix, a mobile application start-up about to launch its product.

The transition from university to workplace was so seamless that Bouaziz never seriously considered leaving Israel after graduation. While it is a challenge living far from family, and the cost of living is high in Tel Aviv, while salaries, even in high-tech are lower than in the U.S., there are some clear advantages.

“It is such a young and vibrant community here. You can get from point A to point B, easily, you can wear a T-shirt to work, you go out with the people you work with ... In some ways, life would probably be easier in Silicon Valley or New York, but here you are in such a concentrated atmosphere, one that is so small, you are able to stand out here and shine in a much brighter light.”

‘Vibrant shul scene’

Farrah Fidler came to Israel six months ago, neither as a soldier nor as a student, but with the clear intent of living in Tel Aviv and working in her field: social media marketing.

Fidler, in her 30s and from New York, caught the Israel bug on a Birthright trip, which she followed up with extended visits to the country. During those visits, she spent time in different regions, but when she decided to move here long-term, her job search was limited to the Tel Aviv area.

She wasn’t taking any chances when it came to finding employment, having seen others move to Tel Aviv, only to struggle to support themselves. She wanted to work in her field and she wasn’t interested in an unpaid internship to “break in.”

“I was very determined to have a job before I came here, so I conducted a job search. I was really interested in the company I work for now, and had the offer before I came here,” she says. That was at Pravda Media Group, which specializes in social-media marketing. Fidler says she feels utterly comfortable living as a modern Orthodox 30-something in Tel Aviv, though “I wouldn’t mind some more kosher restaurants.” On Shabbat, there is a “vibrant shul scene.”

“There’s something here for everyone. It’s not the ‘Sin City’ that a lot of people paint it as. There are a lot of places to go as an observant person, especially if being observant is not all of who you are, but a part of who you are ... Being from New York, I think there is something about the city life in Tel Aviv that is very similar, and I like that.”

Sitting in her office, in the northern Ramat Hahayal neighborhood, where much of the Tel Aviv high-tech and digital media world is concentrated – as one can see on Ben Lang’s map – Fidler says she believes she came to the right place, both personally and professionally: “I love being in this area. In New York, everything is just really big and spread out. It is exciting to think about how many important start-ups and businesses are right here in Ramat Hahayal. The fact that so many breakthrough companies are right next to me, that’s pretty cool.”