For two millennia, Jews around the world have yearned for Jerusalem. But when it comes to modern-day living, their loyalty seems to be shifting. Over the past few years, many thousands of Diaspora Jews have made Tel Aviv their base. In this special project, Haaretz spotlights this growing community of young “internationals” living in Israel’s urban and cultural center. It also reveals what’s drawing them to the White City and where you should be hanging out, if you want to meet them.

If I forget thee, O Tel Aviv

Increasingly, Tel Aviv is becoming the city of choice for new immigrants from English-speaking countries. And it is developing a wide variety of services to help them integrate in a locale that once was once nearly impenetrable for ‘internationals’

Judy Maltz

For young Jews around the world, Jerusalem is a spiritual home. But for many, it’s also a place where they find other English-speaking like themselves, the best job and learning opportunities, and an obvious connection to their religious and cultural roots.

No longer. In recent years, Tel Aviv has become a bustling city for new immigrants from English-speaking countries. And it’s not just the young who are being drawn to this cosmopolitan hub. Increasingly, the city is becoming a magnet for professionals and families, leading to a growing list of businesses, startups, and neighborhoods where other English-speaking residents have settled.

The city is growing, and so are the opportunities for English-speaking residents. But it’s also important to note that the city’s attractions are not limited to English-speaking immigrants. Tel Aviv is a vibrant city with a rich cultural and sporting life, as well as a thriving startup scene.

Discovering a need

North African-born Kevin Balti, 26, is one of the new immigrants who have chosen to live in Tel Aviv. Balti moved to the city from New York City where he worked in advertising before deciding to pursue a career in technology.

“I came here because of the opportunities and the vibrancy of the city,” Balti says. “I’ve always been interested in entrepreneurship, and I think Tel Aviv is the perfect place to start a new business.”

Shuttle: Tel Aviv is a cool city, and it’s where the jobs are. But until the past five years, there was no real community of English-speakers from Jerusalem who had been moving here.

One such transplant is 26-year-old Tanya Dovlin, a graduate of the University of Michigan, who moved to Tel Aviv in 2016. She says, “I came here because of the opportunities, and I think there’s a growing community of people who are interested in working here.”

Dovlin is one of many English-speaking transplants who have chosen to live in Tel Aviv. She says, “I think the city is becoming more cosmopolitan, and there are more opportunities for English-speakers.”

When I first came here, the only other English speakers I knew were from Jerusalem. But now, there are many more English-speakers here, and I’ve made a lot of new friends.”

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has an amazing nightlife, and that there are lots of English-speaking jobs here." Since then, he notes, an entire infrastructure of services has sprouted up to serve this community, whose membership he also puts at 10,000-15,000, but "probably more toward the lower end."

Adding to the city's allure, no doubt, have been the accolades showered on it by the likes of The New York Times, which crowned Tel Aviv "the capital of Mediterranean cool"; the Lonely Planet travel-guide publishing company, which ranked it No. 3 among the top 10 cities to visit in 2011; and American Airlines, which named it the world's best city for travel destination that same year; and more recently, the research group Startup Genome, which hailed it as the second best place on earth after Silicon Valley to launch a start-up.

A key factor behind the city's emergence as an international hub, some observers say, is the success of Taglit-Birthright, the 13-year-old program that offers young Jews around the world a free 10-day trip to Israel. Although precise numbers are not available, according to Birthright activists, a significant share of Tel Aviv's new English-speaking residents are alumni of Birthright who return to the country via internships or volunteer programs, and then simply stay on—after getting hired for a job at the same organization that initially took them on. Since Birthright's main constituency is unaffiliated Jews who have never visited Israel before, Jerusalem, the nation's religious capital, is not as big a draw for them as it was for immigrants and potential immigrants of previous generations, who typically had stronger Jewish connections.

The fact that its population has grown increasingly poor and more secular has only reduced Jerusalem's appeal among secular Israelis as well. Also feeding the trend are children of Israelis living abroad, who, by contrast, likely grew up with a very strong connection to the country thanks to one or both of their parents. It's not surprising, then, that many members of this "international" community have Israeli names, though they don't necessarily speak the language.

Religious newcomers, too

According to figures gathered by Nefesh B'Nefesh, the nonprofit organization that provides services to new immigrants coming from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, the number of young singles moving to Jerusalem from these countries in the past two years slightly outnumbers the number of such people who opt for Tel Aviv, but the rate of increase in the latter group is higher. "Tel Aviv has come a long way from the old stereotypes," says Marc Rosenberg, who heads Nefesh B'Nefesh's recently established division for young professionals. "It used to be very difficult for Anglos to penetrate the Tel Aviv bubble, and if you were religious, it simply wasn't an option. Today, that simply isn't the case. What we're seeing is that Tel Avivians have become more open to Anglos, and Anglos are more ready to integrate."

Among the single immigrants who immigrate here through Nefesh B'Nefesh, says Rosenberg, about one-third are Birthright alumni and another third have at least one Israeli parent. What is bringing many of them here, he adds, is the combination of a weak job market and the rising cost of university tuition in the United States. "These factors are drawing a bumper crop of young people to Israel," he notes.

Indeed, what Tel Aviv offers young Jews today—something not widely available 15 years ago—are opportunities to work and to study in English. The local high-tech boom, centered in this metropolitan area, has created numerous jobs in marketing, sales, and communications that require fluent English. Moreover, two major local institutions of higher learning—Tel Aviv University and the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya—offer a growing number of full-degree programs in English, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, in addition to the traditional year-abroad options.

Masa, an organization run jointly by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency, offers dozens of post-collegiate internship and community-service programs here to young Jewish adults from around the world. Avi Rubel, the director of Masa's North America office, says the clear preference among participants is for programs based in Tel Aviv.

"We have 2,500 participants in our programs right now, and close to 1,800 of them are based in Tel Aviv," he explains. "There's a huge interest in Tel Aviv, and part of the reason is its reputation being a young cosmopolitan city where things are happening."

One such Masa program participant is Danielle Longo, who spent a year volunteering in a Ramon Letzion school before getting hired at a school in Tel Aviv full-time. She describes it this way: "I'll never be back to Israel before, so I looked at a map with my sister, and she said to me, 'You obviously want to be in Tel Aviv.'"