

Worldwide, food is source of comfort and bonding

Sarah Lipman, Special Correspondent

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TEL AVIV, ISRAEL -- Forget the sights and sounds of the countries I have visited, it's been all about the food. From the som tam of Thailand to the dim sum of Hong Kong, I may not have seen every single temple in Asia, but I certainly did my best to try out all of the cuisine there was to offer.

I've since given up the confines of my 1970s-decorated Bangkok apartment and moved locations from Thailand to Israel's capital city, Tel Aviv. I've been to Israel before, so this time around I'll be catching some of the sites (and foods) that I missed last year. I already find myself hummused-out, however, and reminiscing for kick of spices from Thailand. Regardless, I've learned that if there is one way to get to know a city or a culture, your stomach is most certainly a good place to start.

For those who are weary of eating foreign foods, Starbucks, McDonald's and other Western fast food chains are plentiful. Since traveling abroad, though, I've learned that half of the fun is in the foods to try.

Why settle for a McChicken sandwich -- which in Thai is known as a McGai -- when you could walk across the street down a small soi and find a tiny, if not slightly grungy-looking, metal cart set up with lawn ottomans and chairs as makeshift seating? The knives look filthy, the water undrinkable and the stove looks as though it has not been washed in ages. The food, however, is some of the best you will find in all of your travels.

Opening your mind -- or in this case your mouth -- to street food, offers new opportunities to try local and authentic dishes that are otherwise unheard of. For those not as adventurous, the usual Westernized dishes are usually still available, with a twist of authenticity.

One of the perks of eating street food, especially as a budget traveler, is a low price. At less than \$6 a day in Thailand, it's possible to indulge in a three-course feast of grilled pork skewers, a noodle dish, fruit shake and coconut cream dessert. Falafel sandwiches in Israel go for about 12 shekels, or \$3. For one of my last weekends in Bangkok, a group of friends and I ventured down to Chinatown for our own seafood fest. A group meal of king-sized prawns, yellow curried crab, morning glory, three plates of seafood fried rice, shrimp tempura, squid with lemongrass and a few sodas ran us each about \$8, and that was considered a pricey evening on the town.



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A visa run to Hong Kong in early May found me in a constant food coma, eating every few hours -- running around to try all the dim sum and udon I could find. What was spent on accommodations in Hong Kong (one of the more expensive cities to visit in Asia) was easily made up for in the cheap food I was eating ... and I ate a lot.

Even more important than prices of food, the natives serving up the dishes, or community members also seated around the tiny tables, appreciate the willingness of those seeking out local flavors and trying new dishes. On more than one occasion I have been invited to a local's family kitchen for dinner after dining at their street cart for lunch, or was offered the opportunity to practice my language skills and help others learn English.

In Southeast Asia and the Middle East especially, food is something that many bond over and see as a time to share. I forged relationships with everyone from the man who cooked my fried rice or yellow curry to the woman who made the best mango shakes on my favorite street corner. Not only were the foods delicious, but also getting to know those who prepared the food offered great insights into the cultures and lives of those I ran into daily, even if it was just exchanging basic pleasantries in each other's respective languages.

After only three days back in Israel, the importance of food is duly noted. Arriving on the eve of Shabbat, sitting down to a family lunch in a friend's home was the first thing I experienced upon coming back to the Holy Land.

Despite feeling it most in Asia, all over the world food is seen as a means of comfort and bonding. From the traditional American Thanksgiving dinner to a nightly potluck of Thai food with friends, food is an important aspect of all cultures, and when traveling it's something worth investing your time and taste buds in.

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