

Yalla Basta

TASTES OF ISRAEL

WADI NISNAS FOR PROFESSIONALS

A special guide to the tasting card
In Wadi Nisnas



WELCOME TO WADI NISNAS!

Welcome to Wadi Nisnas!

In this tour we'll go on an especially tasty journey, gathering and intertwining stories, flavors and people. We'll go through the alleyways and the streets of the neighborhood as well as the small and surprising Wadi market at its center.

During the tour we'll be exposed to the story of the neighborhood, walk its narrow alleys, some covered with vines and fruit trees, works of art and poetry decorating its walls, providing a village-like Mediterranean feel to the heart of the city.

The culinary variety of Nisnas is constantly developing and flavored by the stories of the shop owners there, some second and third generation, alongside creative culinary entrepreneurs who offer their goods with a smile and the neighborhood's famous hospitality.

Before we start, take a look at the map on the back of your tasting menu. There you'll find audio signs in the shape of headphones. Whenever you reach each one of those physical milestones, you can press on the audio link and hear the story of the spot you are at, whether on your headphones or your phone's speaker. We recommend using the audio guide for enriching the experience of touring Wadi Nisnas.

To listen to the audio tour, please scan the code.



The numbers in blue represent the tasting number

The numbers in green represent the matching audio segment

TASTING CARD

Your tasting card contains six coupons that are arranged in the recommended manner for your tour, but you can use them as you please. Some of the coupons include a selection between two possible tastings. When arriving at the tasting, rip out the corresponding coupon and give it to the business owner or employees. Note the comments on the back of the card regarding opening hours and workdays of some of the locations. The stalls are busier than usual during the weekend. In case you arrive at an especially busy location, we recommend visiting the equivalent tasting or coming back later.

Ready? Let's go. And have a fun, experiential and extremely tasty tour.



WADI NISNAS, HAIFA COEXISTENCE

Nisnas is loosely translated from Arabic as “mongoose” or more exactly, “valley of mongooses”, that used to roam here unhindered, between the lower border of the Hadar neighborhood and downtown.

Wadi Nisnas was established in the 19th century as a simple working class neighborhood and quickly became a business center and the most vibrant quarter around. The neighborhood kept its Arabic identity to a large extent and the architecture and Mediterranean structures that characterized her in the past, until this very day.

With all the demographic changes the neighborhood underwent, Wadi Nisnas remains a clear example of Haifa’s coexistence and its welcoming residents. It’s the only Arab neighborhood that has managed to preserve its original atmosphere, making it very interesting to visit.

Once a year there’s a winter festival throughout December, called the “Holiday of all Holidays”. The festival joins together the Jewish Hanukkah, the Christian Christmas and Muslim Ramadan, and signifies the religious and cultural coexistence that is inseparable of the city of Haifa. The hypnotizing neon lights on Ben Gurion boulevard combine the Christmas tree, the Muslim crescent and the Jewish menorah, and signify the welcoming atmosphere in Haifa better than anything else.



A TRUMPET IN THE WADI BY SAMI MICHAEL

The story “A Trumpet in the Wadi”, written by author Sami Michael, shows the aspiration and vision of Haifa’s coexistence here, in this neighborhood. Sami Michael won the Ze’ev Literature Award in 1992 and lived in the Wadi for a while. He was the former editor of the local newspaper, “El-Atihad” and is commemorated in this neighborhood in various ways. In one of the alleys, you can see a segment of his famous novel “A Trumpet in the Wadi” engraved on the board.

But before we talk about the plot, let’s get to know the author a bit better: Sami Michael was born in Baghdad in 1926. He was a member of the Communist movement and an underground activist against the Iraqi regime. He immigrated to Israel in 1950. He graduated from the Psychology and Arab Literature departments at Haifa University and started publishing his works in 1974.

His involvement in the underground and the Communist movement, which brought together Arabs and Jews, his role as an Arabic newspaper editor and his participation in Israeli wars, all made the Israeli-Arab conflict the focal point of his works. Three of the romance novels he wrote are on the backdrop of a war. “All Men are Equal – But Some are More” is on the backdrop of the Six Days War; “Refuge” is on the backdrop of Yom Kippur War and “A Trumpet in the Wadi” is on the backdrop of the Lebanon War.



The novel “A Trumpet in the Wadi” is a realistic one about the Arab and Jewish relationship and is the main plotline. The main issue occurring in his works is the relationship between Jewish and Arab people. Is a romantic relationship between Jewish Alex and Christian-Arab Huda possible in Israel? Can love bridge the hatred between two people? The novel’s title is such since Alex, the new immigrant, plays the trumpet and that’s what makes Huda fall in love with him. The trumpet is a symbol; music usually bridges between people and cultures. However, Alex’s trumpet playing – an instrument alien to Arab society – is a nuisance and inconvenience to the neighbors. Placing the trumpet in the Wadi means changing the sounds heard there, but it also symbolizes an attempt to change the world view that love, which started with the sound of a trumpet, will bridge the two people, Arabs and Jews.

THE WADI MARKET

Yohanan Hakadosh is the “wadi’s market”. To be honest, it’s not really a market. There are no alleyways and peddlers shouting or the noise and commotion of other urban markets, but there’s a kind of magical intimacy here and multiple culinary gems. All you have to do is stroll along, look up, walk in, expose yourself to the world of tastes and smells.

Along the street and near the green grocers, you can see the local residents emptying out and preparing the vegetables for stuffing. They sit in colorful packs at the side of the road and smile at the passersby. There are bakeries with intoxicating scents spread around the market, small restaurants rolling vine leaves, cabbage, making kibbeh and stews out of simple yet loveable, home-made flavors.

Here, in the small market street, you can find seasonal local and Galilee produce, and some surprises you won’t find anywhere else. The green grocers who sell original Baladi vegetables, with one of the more unique ones being Um Elias, which has special seasonal produce.

There are also colorful and unique spice shops around the market, but the most impressive one is Bedouin Ziyad’s. The shop might not look attractive, but it contains real culinary treasures. Down the road you can see Rimon, making hand-made pickles; Mustafa, filling the air with coffee scents and the bakeries – all the way from the top wadi street and all the way here – making great local baked goods. You can obviously not visit Wadi Nisnas without visiting its famous falafel stands that feed hundreds of hungry people a day, coming from all over the country.

This entire experience is accompanied by a sense of magical urbanity and unassuming welcome, with a constant smile and the will to serve and share more stories. Most of the eateries in the wadi are ‘institutes’, even if they are relatively “young”, but while being creative, taking pride in local culinary and maintaining the identity of the Arab cuisine.



HAZKENIM FALAFEL

The old establishment, “HaZkenim Falafel” is considered by many to be one of the best falafel shops in Israel, and was opened as early as the 1950’s. The founders of the veteran shop are a childless couple named George and Najalaa Afara. The Arab residents of Haifa call the place Najalaa, despite it never having an official sign upfront. The Jewish residents of Haifa have always said, “let’s go to the Zkenim” (old people).

The story of HaZkenim Falafel starts back in the early 1950’s. Najalaa and her husband lived in an alley close to the location and she decided to make a living selling falafel. The story goes that the couple used to make the mixture every day in their house, in set batches. Back then there was only a small space where they only fried the falafel balls. The wadi residents remember the long line that formed there every day since the “old people” were slow. That is how it ran. Either no more mixture left by 13:00 or they would close up and go rest, whichever came first.

At the end of 1948, one of their frequent clients, Afif Sabit, decided to buy the place and the secret receipt from George and Najalaa, who grew tired of running the place. Afif put up a sign for the first time, expended the location and added a little kitchen that is now used to make the mixture. The opening hours changed and Afif was joined by his little brother, Alif, who always welcomes both veteran and new clients with a big smile.

A nice tradition that started here, at the falafel shop, and remained until this very day, is greeting everyone who comes in with a falafel ball dipped in tahini, as a way of saying ‘welcome’. The great tahini comes from Nablus and wonderfully completes the falafel. The tahini is also being used in the mixture, which remains a secret. Afif keeps the receipt to himself and never tells anyone, not even his partners or wife. The only one who knows the secret is his son, Jenan, who works there, acts to take the place even further and keeps the receipt a secret and the warm hospitality close to his heart.



BEDOUIN ZIYAD, A SPICE PHARMACY

Wadi Nisnas is famous for its spice shops. There are several well-looking and designed shops, which offer a rich array of spices, legumes, incense for religious ceremonies and more. Those in the know tell their friends about Ziyad's shop. The shop might be small and inconspicuous, but we promise you it holds all the treasures of the materials and unique knowledge of the man who established it – Ziyad Fendi, nicknamed 'the Bedouin'.

Ziyad sells dozens of herbal tea mixtures, each with its own therapeutic properties. He can also make specific mixtures for you or fresh species for you to use in the kitchen, as well as alternative uses. We recommend you tell Ziyad what you need, and he'll know which tea or spice best suites you. He dries most of the fresh herbs himself, making it a real culinary-medicinal ward. Some of them are maintained on the plant rather than their common industrial form, such as sage, sumac flowers or rue, which is called ruta in Arabic. This plant is great for reducing fever, inflammation, detoxing and some even use it to spice olives.

You should visit Ziyad's small shop since the quality of his products is undeniable. From organic eggs from the family farm to excellent organic olive oil made by a friend of his; home-made labneh balls (with that said olive oil); great pressed olives; especially fresh spices; ground zaatar without any additives; local real honey or honey with grapes made from cooking the grape juice. You can also mostly find the famous Kishk, or Jameed, which is the dried-up yogurt cone originally meant to sustain the rich goat and sheep milk during the foaling season.



A WADI BUTCHERY CINDERELLA STORY: ABU SHKARA'S BUTCHERY

The meat scene at Wadi Nisnas has a long-standing reputation. The clients of the local butcher shops know their way around and some were even clients for the current owner's father or grandfather. It is the only neighborhood in Israel where you can find over 15 butcher shops in such a small radius, all working together nicely.

The golden age has dawned on the butcher shops of the wadi, and we'd like to tell you about one of them. You're likely to come across a family member of the Abu Shkara family anywhere in Wadi Nisnas. The family is one of the pillars of the neighborhood and has many family members.

Abu Shkara is originally from Majar village, in Galilee. His family members all crossed the border to Lebanon in 1948 and later on five brothers came back and settled in Haifa. One of those brothers was the grandfather of Marwan, the butcher shop's current owner and next generation. Along with his cousin, Jean, they're leading the deli to the media era, Instagram and improving the quality of the famous butcher shop. Here, at the heart of Huri Street, they've created a meat scene known by every carnivore and quality-meat enthusiast.

The deli started in 1986, when Victor Abu Shkara, Marwan's uncle, decided to open a store for frozen foods in the wadi, along with his brother Fuad, Marwan's father. That's how they started, without knowing much about meat. As the food consumption changed and people became more aware of quality and freshness, the clients started asking the brothers for special cuts of meat, such as lamb shanks, fillet, sirloin as well as fresh rather than frozen. That's how they started developing the quality, which is part of this place's DNA. Marwan's been working here since he was 16 years old, and beyond his professionalism and knowledge is meat, the most important thing Marwan's inherited from his uncle is service – welcoming people with a smile and giving them patient and professional service.

The place underwent a great renovation in 2018. A see-through glass partition was installed so people can see the work being done backstage. A nice niche was built up front, where they sell great sandwiches and treats, meat platters and Instagram-able lollipop skewers that Marwan displays to his followers at any chance he gets. Everything is made with love, and even with a chaser to go with it. The butcher shop is squeaky-clean and with a wide range of meats, it's no wonder the place is not only a popular shop but also a hanging spot for locals and anyone who appreciates top quality, fresh, hot and tasty meat.



SWIDAN'S DELI

This shop on Derech Allenby might not seem like more than your ordinary grocery store at first, but you don't have to be a local to know Swidan family's story. This Christian Haifa family has been trading since 1889, when their great-grandfather Michel opened his first shop downtown, where trading in the city began. The family expanded and opened warehouses in today's Check-Post area, which used to be all swamps, where they'd send retail all over the country.

The vast family is still trading, and all of its members are still active in Haifa. You can say that they get better with time, just like wine. Once you walk in and get used to the place, you find 70-years-old brown wooden shelves that still bear great products from all over the world. Michel Swidan sits at the entrance to the shop and greets the shoppers. It's enough to say a few words to him in order to understand he's a proud professional who values the good life, and the quality products in his shop are testimony to that. There are over 1,500 products in the shop, some are daily consumed but many of them are unique and are personally imported.

Michel tells that when his father passed away, in 1970, his mother started running the business, and what started as selling retail food supplies to sailors who arrived at the city went on to importing products and treats never seen before in Israel, with their help. Such as quality cognac, artisanal chocolates, Ortiz smoked tuna or blue Roquefort cheese with its previously unknown scent. Horizons were expended and the business became a deli, focusing on high-quality imported products.

The location still focuses on quality food products, with great home-made food, wines, spirits like champagne and cognac, freshly-ground coffee, spices, unique dried fruits and of course, the famous halva. A shipment of freshly made sourdough bread arrives at the store every day, as well as boutique cheeses from Israel alongside imported ones from France, Italy, Spain, England, Holland and Germany.

The inside fridge gets filled with home-cooked foods, such as vine leaves and other stuffed vegetables, made by the women of the neighborhood. Vegetables filled with goat cheese, artichoke a la Romana and more. A culinary heaven on earth. This place will last for many years, since it is a culinary, historical and true landmark of Wadi Nisnas, as it was once said about it: they built Wadi Nisnas around this deli.



ST. ELIJAH CATHEDRAL

Elijah the Prophet Cathedral, or Mar Elias Cathedral, is a Greek Melkite Catholic church for prophet Elijah, on the border between Wadi Nisnas and downtown. The cathedral serves as the residence of the city's Greek-Catholic archbishop, heading the Melkite community, which is the biggest Christian community in Haifa.

Prophet Elijah is also known as Elijah of Gilad, from which he came, as well as Elijah of Tishbe, after the city of Thishbe. Elijah was a prophet during the time of King Ahav and was known for being devoted to God and his victim-full war on paganism.

For that reason, many traditions were linked to his name. He's often perceived as the redeemer; it's said he appears at every briss, and we also leave a cup of wine out for him at Passover, out of the belief that he visits houses on the Seder night. Prophet Elijah is probably the only character from the scripture whose birth is known and who also rose to the heavens while still alive, riding the chariots of fire straight to the gates of Heaven. You can see a depiction of his ascendance to the heavens in the mosaic at the front of the cathedral.

Prophet Elijah also has a place in the Christian faith. When Jesus was sanctified on Mount Tavor, as the New Testament states, two characters call on to him: Moses and Elijah. He joined them and he's in their image, in that sense. Elijah is also considered as marking the return of Jesus as messiah. He also doesn't have a clear father, family affiliation and he also comes and goes.

The Islam sees Elijah as the "green prophet" with his power to make it rain, symbolizing water, life and oasis. They also see Elijah as a "wondrous salve" performing strange acts and holding supernatural insights. Prophet Ilyās of the Quran seems to be the equivalent of Elijah.

The impressive structure before you was planned by architect Sammihom Atallah and was built between 1938 and 1939, at the days of Archbishop Gregorios Khagar. The downtown a-Sayda church, near Paris Square, was used as Haifa's Greek community's main church until the War of '48. The Christian community left the area during the war and some of them moved to Wadi Nisnas. A-Sayda church was abandoned, and the archbishop's residence transferred to St. Elijah's church.

THAT'S IT? DONE ALREADY?

Our tour at Wadi Nisnas may have ended but every ending is a beginning of a new culinary adventure

Congratulations on the badge you've earned!



Have great day, from us at Yalla Basta

Want to travel to other markets with us?

Yalla Basta has a range of great tasting cards at Israel's most beloved markets: Mhane Yehuda, Carmel Market, Flea Market, Lewinsky Market, Acre, Nazareth and the Jerusalem Old City.

You can also tour with us on the weekends as part of open guided tours.

For details and ordering: <http://www.yallabasta.co.il>

