

Expat lives | London to Tel Aviv

Israel though another lens

A love of photography led UK ambassador's wife Celia Gould to design her own scarf range. By *Sheila Pierce*

While waiting at traffic lights in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square, Celia Gould snapped a photograph of the city hall and something clicked: she wondered how its façade might look on fabric.

A year later, the 39-year-old has transformed her life-long passion for photography into a high-end scarf collection, bearing her photographs as the patterns and her name as the brand. None of this would have happened, she says, had she not lived in Israel, a country with an entrepreneurial spirit that is perfectly suited for start-ups.

Five years ago, Gould arrived in Tel Aviv with her husband, Matthew, the then newly appointed UK ambassador to Israel. It was their first foreign posting together, and the first time she had lived outside the UK, where she grew up in north London.

Newly married and pregnant, she had to adjust not only to embassy life but also no longer being able to introduce herself as either an equities stockbroker or a corporate headhunter, the two jobs she had held since graduating.

Penned into her diary were now appointments such as a weekend visit from the British foreign secretary or dinner with Israeli politicians. Friends encouraged her to write about her new lifestyle, but she found taking photographs was more energising. "I started to discover Israel through photography," she says. "My walks around Tel Aviv became focused on looking for

things to photograph that taught me something new about the city."

It is a city that has since become familiar to Gould: roads are well-paved, she says, but Tel Aviv traffic is "lively," and prone to "road rage right before Shabbat" as people rush home for the sabbath. She recalls one friend's description of Israel as a "fender-bender country". The oppressive heat and humidity in the summer months took some getting used to after London's cooler climate — air conditioning is a must. And despite daily Hebrew lessons in her first few months, she has now given up trying to learn the language, she says with regret, but she is able to decipher menus and street signs, and people speak English in most areas, especially Tel Aviv.

Through her husband's job, Gould has seen parts of the country that others might not necessarily have encountered. Never leaving home without her camera, she photographed these areas for her own personal records, and posted one photograph every day for a year on the 365project website.

Her early photographs show kaleidoscopic details of Israel's diversity: taffeta dresses worn by Ethiopian Jews, a day care centre for child refugees in southern Tel Aviv; hummus in the Arab village of Abu Ghosh. There are also glimpses of Gould's role as both a new mother and the wife of an ambassador.

As she travelled about taking these photographs, she talked to many expats and locals who were interested in volunteer work. Gould went on to establish two online networks, Visits and Volunteering and Tel Aviv Mothers Make a Difference, both of which she manages.

"Finding my role has been a big challenge," she says over coffee at the ambassador's residence in the Ramat Gan neighbourhood of Tel Aviv, while



Celia Gould on the roof terrace of The Norman hotel in Tel Aviv — Eyal Warshavsky

'I was trying to find something that was sustainable and that wouldn't disappear the moment I left the country'

two Labradors snooze at her feet. "Being busy is one thing but actually achieving something is something else. I was trying to find something that was sustainable and that wouldn't just disappear the moment I left the country."

Last summer, when regional tensions mounted as Israel carried out air strikes and sent ground forces into Gaza in response to rocket attacks, Gould and her family stayed put in Tel Aviv.

"It was a difficult and stressful time, and having only ever lived in London before, I was entirely unfamiliar living with sirens and rocket interceptions over the city, and had certainly never had to spend time in a bomb shelter before," she says. "Although the eyes of the world were focused on the region at that time, it was difficult sometimes to explain to people living elsewhere what it was really like to be here, and at the embassy we tended to find support from each other and from the broader expat community."

At no time did Gould think about leaving in that difficult period, she says, though, as a mother, she certainly thought hard about the question.

Gould's daughters, Rachel, four, and Emily, almost two, were born in Tel Aviv. Since many nurses in the city's hospitals speak only Russian and Hebrew, Gould was relieved to find an English-speaking midwife for her two deliveries, and numerous English-speaking doctors trained internationally and locally at the highest level.

"Loads of medical discoveries and research innovations come out of Israel," she says. "And, as an expat, you can benefit from all that as the doctors and the healthcare in Israel are first-rate."

One day, en route to her daughter's nursery in downtown Tel Aviv, Gould daydreamed about how everyday details from her photographs of the city might look as dynamic patterns on a silk scarf.

INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

What you can buy . . .

\$500,000 A one-bedroom apartment in the centre of Tel Aviv

\$1m A three-bedroom penthouse in a northern suburb of the city

\$2m A seafront villa with five bedrooms

Gould's verdict . . .

Pros

Entrepreneurial environment

Excellent healthcare system

Culture and history

Cons

Intense heat and humidity in August

Hebrew is a challenging language to learn

Sunday to Friday working week

Favourite places

The roof terrace of **The Norman hotel** is a great place to view the city's skyline

Best place for horse riding and desert skies: the **Alpaca Farm** in Mitzpe Ramon

Best place for labneh, hummus and fresh pomegranate juice: **Haj Kallil** in Jaffa

Most dramatic scenery: **Ma'aleh Akrabim** (Scorpions Ascent) in the Negev

That night, she googled digital printing on silk, and found suppliers in China who were willing to print minimum quality orders. After a year of experimenting with online orders, she hired three suppliers in Italy and one in China, and produced about 100 digitally-printed scarves of her photographs from her travels, ranging from a Galilee peacock to a Cairo façade. She launched her collection of 100 per cent Italian and Asian silk scarves in December last year.

"I honestly believe that had I not been in Israel I may not have had the courage to set up a business," she says. "They have a really healthy attitude here in that it's OK to fail."

This June, Gould and her husband will move back to the UK, and she is currently wrestling with the preparations for their departure. "When you're an expat, everyone always asks you how you settle," she says. "But, these days, I'm wondering: how do you leave a place that has really become your home?"

An exhibition of Celia Gould's photographs and scarves takes place this month at the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design in Ramat Gan, Tel Aviv

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