

VETERANS

BEN JULIUS, 22
FROM LONDON TO TEL AVIV,
JULY 2012

BEN JULIUS. Israel is 'a very special place for me.'
(Gloria Deutsch)



COOL TRAVEL AGENT

Ben Julius turned down other career opportunities to pursue work in tourism and, through his popular travel website, aims to present another side of Israel

• GLORIA DEUTSCH

Ben Julius is only 22, but he is already making waves on the Israeli travel scene with his Tourist Israel website, which now has 135,000 views a month and reaches 35 percent of English-speaking tourists.

He made aliya in July 2012 and settled in Tel Aviv. The site has been going since 2008, so he was a teenager when he started the enterprise. He never really knew it would turn into a successful business.

"I started it as an exercise in learning to build a website," he says. "I had no goal of making it a business, and I feel somehow that if I'd set out to do it to make money, it wouldn't have worked so well."

Today his company is one of the biggest sites for tourist information about Israel, with over 20,000 organic social media followers. It's mainly his own work – developing the site, writing the content and dealing with the business side and all-important advertising. He gets a little help with some of the writing and photography, but as he says, it's 90 percent his own work.

Born in London in 1990, he studied at the London School of Economics, earning a bachelor's with honors in geography and economics.

"I decided I didn't want a life in investment banking, finance, law or teaching, as so many of my fellow graduates opted for," he says. "I had a computer background and began to develop the tourism site with no firm idea what I would do with it."

For independent tourists who come to Israel, the site emphasizes another face of Israel – not the one most people know.

"Someone once said that Israel is religion, war and politics, but I present another side," he says.

Not for nothing is the TouristIsrael.com site dubbed "Israel's Cool Travel Guide."

"I don't come from a religious background, and I see Israel in a different way," he explains. "I have no religious or political connections to Israel – to me it's just another place. I get a lot of traffic from all over the world, and I don't know if the clients are Jews or non-Jews – it doesn't matter, as I try to highlight places that appeal to all tourists."

While tourism has traditionally emphasized Israel as a religious and historical destination, Julius likes to send people off the beaten path.

"Most tourists see Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and parts of the Negev, and I feel that 50 percent of the country is never seen," he says. "I try to bring a different, young-at-heart focus."

As an example of a little-known site, Julius describes Shivta, a well-preserved Nabatean city in the western Negev about 45 km. outside Beersheba.

"It's a national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site," he explains. "It's so far away from other, more visited places that there isn't even an entrance fee."

A friend living in the area took him there, and he was thrilled to discover the site – the only ancient city that was never destroyed, according to his sources.

"I try to find places people would go to and say, 'Wow, I never knew this existed,'" he says.

Another place on his travel itinerary is Sakhne, or Gan Hashlosha, well-known to Israelis but virtually unheard of in conventional travel plans.

Much of his time is spent visiting new places, writing content and meeting with other people in the tourist world, including curators of museums and art galleries where there are special exhibitions. This is a world with which he is familiar, since his father's work

in London involved putting on museum displays.

Advertising is a vital part of his work, and he is in touch with other tour companies as well as public relations and marketing experts.

Every month, Julius produces a chatty newsletter about what is going on in the country. It has 3,000 active subscribers and 10,000 fans on Facebook. At the moment, he is working to promote the brand-new "Hop-On, Hop-Off" tour of the country. In Tel Aviv, he is busy trying to show that there are less well-known niche destinations, like the Florentin district and the cafe scene, which have appeal for the younger market.

"There's a great energy in Tel Aviv," he says. "Just walking the streets feels different from back home in London – and I never know what interesting things I'm going to stumble on."

Julius's Hebrew is improving, but much of the work is in English anyway.

"I never had time to go to ulpan, so I have a private teacher, and I think I can learn the language better one-on-one," he says.

In addition to his own tourism work, he also runs an independent online marketing consultancy, working with travel businesses to improve and optimize their online presence. Among his clients are Abraham Hostels and Abraham Tours, for which he oversees online sales and marketing and develops social media strategy for promoting them.

"Travel is one of the biggest online markets," he says.

For the future, he hopes to continue to develop his site even more.

Julius has made many friends and loves living here.

"As a tourist destination, I treat Israel like any other country," he says. "But outside my work, it's a very special place for me." ■