



Uriel Heilman

Harry Rubenstein, center, who writes about rock music in Israel, talks with U.S. entertainment journalists during their Israeli tour.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Israel junket courts the cool kids with party tour for foreign journalists

By Uriel Heilman

TEL AVIV, May 21 (JTA) — The foreign journalists traipsed into the Jerusalem restaurant one by one, exhausted from a full day's work on assignment in the Middle East.

Weary though they were, these reporters on an eight-day, whirlwind tour of Israel had none of Gaza's dust on their clothes, no Palestinian tales of woe to share, no stories of Israeli sorrow to recount.

Rather, they carried bags bulging with Israeli hip-hop albums, their bellies were mostly full from a steak lunch and a few of them still seemed to be trying to recover from a night of carousing in Tel Aviv. And there were many more nightclubs, pubs and hot spots to visit tonight.

"I'm actually having a really, really great time," said Andrew Coutts, an editor at Stuff, a raunchy men's magazine published out of New York. "I keep feeling that it should feel more strange to me that I'm drunk in Jerusalem right now, but it feels very natural at the moment."

If the pre-dinner drinking was any indication, it would seem that far more alcohol would have to be imbibed for these hard-working reporters to make it through the night.

As part of a novel approach to try to improve Israel's image abroad, a coalition of groups sponsored this press junket to generate positive media coverage of Israel beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Rather than take news journalists to Israel's border zones, army bases and Knesset meetings on the trip earlier this month, this tour brought reporters from hipster music magazines, racy publications and teen glossies to Tel Aviv nightclubs, meetings with Israeli rock stars and into the heart of Israel's avant-garde scene.

The goal: to show the other, cooler Israel to American entertainment journalists with a broad reading public.

"We want to build an image of Israel in America different than it is now, or more expansive than it is now, not just conflict related," said David Brinn, editorial director of Israel21c, which organized the trip in conjunction with Israel's Foreign Ministry, the America-Israel Friendship League and America's Voices in Israel.

"They're saying, 'We didn't think Israel was like this,' which is exactly the kind of response we were hoping for," Brinn said.

Jessica Hopper, a radio journalist, writer and publicist from Chicago, said she hadn't really thought much about Israel at all until she began telling friends about her planned trip here. They warned her in very stern tones to be careful.

"I think I only had one preconception: that we'd get blown up," Hopper said. "Being members of the media we consider ourselves more enlightened, but we didn't really have an accurate picture."

"We're seeing that the country and people here live totally normal lives despite the conflict," she said.

The carefully choreographed trip included meetings with Israeli musicians like world music artist Idan Raichel and hip-hop group Hadag Nahash, walks down Tel Aviv's trendy Sheinkin Street during the day and through the city's underground indie rock scene at night, and visits to Army Radio's broadcasting station, a gay and lesbian rights group and avant-garde performing arts centers. The group also visited the city of Safed, billed on the itinerary as "the home of Kabbalah" and stopped by a house in Rosh Pinah that Madonna reportedly is interested in buying.

They were shepherded through the early part of the trip by Eytan Schwartz, winner of last year's popular Israeli TV show "The Ambassador," a contest program modeled on Donald Trump's "The Apprentice" that aimed at finding the country's best young advocate for Israel.

"Coming here, I'm sort of pleased to see that Israelis come across as being positive and energetic. They don't seem depressed," observed James Katz, a music critic from Vibe magazine. "That's very encouraging for an overseas Jew like me."

Of course, the tour also included landmark Israeli sites like the Western Wall, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and Israel's West Bank security barrier, but politics were kept to a minimum.

"They're trying to correct the public image, to fight bad press with other press," Hopper noted. "It's an interesting idea."

Still, many of the journalists said they felt a bit overwhelmed by plunging into a country's pop culture without fully understanding the politics and history at play. Well aware that their hosts were showing them a stage-managed version of Israel, they said they wanted to learn more about Israel beyond the polish and glitz.

"We have to understand how people live with the conflict before we can

understand how the pop culture is here,” said Jennifer Nuccio, whose public relations firm helped recruit the journalists for the trip.

Asked Aliya King, a reporter for Giant magazine, in New York: “I can’t help but wonder, what do the Palestinians have to say about things?”

Carlo McCormick, an art critic and youth culture writer for the New York-based Paper, also noted the absence of Palestinians from the tour.

“We met with one Palestinian this whole trip. They don’t seem to have any voice in the media,” McCormick said. “This is the most racist country I’ve ever seen.”

Still, McCormick said, he supports the Zionist idea. Like many of those on the tour, McCormick said the culture here did not seem foreign to him.

“Nashville was way more exotic to me. I’m from New York,” he said. “People don’t talk about Moses or Abraham here half as much as they talk about Jesus in Nashville.”

The junket, of course, was not so much about these 10 reporters, but their influence on readers back home. They write for magazines like Urb, Bust, Flaunt, Seventeen and MTV’s Urge Web site.

“I hope this will inspire other groups to do missions like this,” said Allison Kaplan Sommer, associate editorial director of Israel21c.

Midway through the trip, it seemed some of the journalists already had become advocates for Israel — particularly the Jewish reporters.

One of them, Lauren Brown, who has written for Cosmogirl and Seventeen magazine, said she was surprised that the trip felt like something of a homecoming.

“I’m thinking: How have I not been here before and when can I come back?” she said.

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