

## TRAVEL

# Chewing his way through the country

TV personality and food writer Simon Majumdar eats his way through Israel – and is ready to come back for more

By AMY SPIRO

Before I could give Simon Majumdar an ad hoc tour of the Jerusalem *shuk* (market), he had a stop to make first.

Majumdar, a food writer, author and TV personality, had received a Facebook message a couple of days earlier from a Bengali family with a food shop in Jerusalem (Majumdar's father is from the Bengal region of India). They invited him for homemade samosas and piping-hot chai at their storefront on Agrippas Street – and when he actually showed up, they were grateful, emotional and overwhelmed.

Such an experience is par for the course for Majumdar, a former book publisher who – at age 40 – chucked it all away to devote himself to traveling the globe and exploring its culinary possibilities. Wherever he goes – topping 70 countries by now – the affable Brit seeks out authentic, local and – of course – delicious cuisine.

"We've met a lot of really interesting people" along the way, he said. "The more opportunity you have to connect with individuals," the richer the experience.

And Majumdar and his wife, Sybil, finally fulfilled a long-time dream by spending just over two weeks traveling and eating their way around Israel (plus a stop in Petra in Jordan) at the very end of 2015.

"It's been on both our lists forever," said Majumdar over a

traditional Iraqi lunch in the heart of Manar in Tenuqa late last month. "We were genuinely really excited about coming here and it's definitely lived up to it."

The pair traveled all over the country, from Tiberias to Beit She'an, Haifa, Nazareth for Christmas, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and even down to Arad and Eilat. And while they'd heard good things about the country's food scene, they were still impressed by "the freshness of everything, the ingredients," Majumdar said. "They're not just using the terms local and seasonal as a market term – that's just how you live. There's an authenticity to the food because of that."

The pair visited the Volcani Center's Agricultural Research Organization and sampled citrus varieties and fresh herbs. In Nazareth, they tried knafeh, in Tel Aviv they chowed down on both sabich and hummus topped with shakshuka, and in Acre they ate at the famed Uri Buri fish spot.

And for Majumdar, it's not just about the food, but about the people and cultures and experiences along the way. He lives his life by a powerful Mark Twain quote: "Travel is fatal to prejudice."

"I think food is an incredibly powerful weapon to bring people together," he said. "You can't have an argument with someone over a mouthful of ribs. Once you're sharing a meal, it doesn't matter. You find out more about someone from how they eat and how hospitable they are. What I like to do is sit down and eat with people, and let the greater minds sort out the politics of things."

In this little corner of the globe, it can be hard to separate

out the politics, and even harder to ignore the realities of a unnerving security situation. But none of that fazed Majumdar, who was determined to visit Israel despite any warnings against it.

"Everywhere has got its dangers and if we keep worrying about it you'd never come – Israel is always going to be Israel," he said. "So we decided we really wanted to go, we're gonna go and as long as we're sensible," we'll be safe. After close to two weeks in the country, Majumdar said they "haven't felt unsafe at any point at any time."

Majumdar's extensive traveling is always part work, part play; he funds his trips himself, but uses them to boost his foodie credibility and often writes about his travels. His first book, 2009's *Eat My Globe*, documented a year of his journeys, while 2015's *Fed, White and Blue* took a closer look at the US and its modern foodways.

For now, Majumdar has been writing Facebook posts along the way and posted photos of his meals to social media – which can get mixed reviews.

"Every time I put a post about being here [in Israel] there'll be some kind of low-rent pedants who come on and go... 'none of that food is from Israel it's from Lebanon,'" he said. "If that's the case you can never talk about an American breakfast because it's Belgian waffles and German pancakes and coffee from Nigeria."

But Majumdar says the troublemakers are in the minority, and he chooses to focus on the incredible experiences – and "amazing hospitality" he found in Israel.

"Every time we've stopped to look at something at the market, the thing that we've noticed – for all visitors – there's a sense of gratitude that we're here," he said.

He also came away with the sense that – despite the wide gaps that can be seen between Arabs and Jews in Israel, "when you sit down with people of different faiths, you realize that we aren't that different."

During a visit to Jordan's Wadi Rum, near Petra, Majumdar and his wife spent time with a Beduin guide, who picked a chicken from his farm, killed it, cooked it and served it to

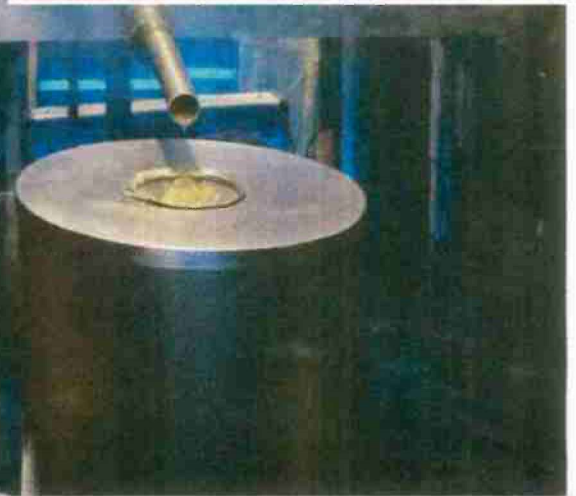


them for dinner.

"He was telling us about how his daughter plays music too loud; how his son wanted to borrow money to go to KFC," Majumdar recalled. "He could have been anywhere in the world; he could have been anyone. We kind of focus on the differences between ourselves and we don't focus on the fact that we're all part of this family."

For someone so well-traveled, it may seem hard to impress Majumdar. But Israel, it seems, has done it.

"There are very few countries I feel a longing to return to, but Israel is definitely one of them."



Above: Simon Majumdar at the 'Tehina King' in Mahaneh Yehuda. (Photos: Amy Spiro)

Simon Majumdar and his wife, Sybil, sample samosas in Jerusalem.