

Even the incessant honking can't ruin the mood as the baby pink moped weaves in and out of impatient cars trapped in their lanes. Aside from the anxious drivers, everything seems to be moving in slow motion in this small Mediterranean city. Sweat and dust are roused from the pavement by sandaled-feet as if from a siesta. Shabby white buildings line the street, resting among pink and orange hibiscus bushes with a mind of their own. Palm trees laze in the sunlight overhead, oblivious to the ruckus below.

I clasp my fingers around the edge of the smooth leather back seat with one hand and adjust my spaceman helmet with the other as the Vespa speeds up. Israelis say you're not a real Tel Avivian unless you cruise around town on one of the pastel-coloured scooters that seem made for the city's narrow, cluttered streets.

The bike stops at a red light and the other mopeds join us at the front of the queue, sharing in a sort of superiority over the cumbersome cars. The breeze has settled and a mild heat covers us like a blanket, thankfully lacking the fierce humidity of a Tel Aviv summer.

It's the middle of the afternoon in the middle of the week, but the outdoor café a few feet away is crammed with people taking in the warm winter sun. Clouds of cigarette smoke mingle with the comforts of a good cappuccino and butter-soaked pastry.

Two young mothers hidden behind oversized sunglasses gossip loudly while their babies nap. At the next table a solitary, leather-skinned older man drags on his cigarette, filling in his crossword puzzle like it's his job.

The light changes and we zoom away, turning onto Dizengoff, one of the main shopping hubs in the city. The succession of shoe shops, hair salons and fresh fruit stands blur together like a cartoon flip book as the bike whizzes by.

Up ahead, a mid-century abstract fountain painted in rainbow colours as proud as the city's strong gay community dominates the roundabout. The monument is overrun by pigeons and American tourists, who strike a prom picture pose somewhat spoiled by their baseball hats and cargo shorts.

A hint of deep-fried chickpeas and slow-roasted lamb shank pierces our noses as the falafel and shawarma stand appears like a mirage in the desert.

A quick peek in between the restored 1930's white Bauhaus flats with balconies curving around the building like a dangerous U-turn among the palm trees reveals impromptu outdoor bookshops down dusty alleyways. Tables nearly buried under pulp fiction beckon to savvy passersby.

The soft whirr of the Vespa is the only sound as we careen down the hill towards the shore. The sea breeze whips through my hair and packs my lungs with saltiness as the engine stops its grumbling. The peeling of bare skin off the now sticky leather upholstery is like ripping off a band-aid, but with the reward of an afternoon on the beach in December.