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Israeli website helps travellers connect worldwide

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Special to The CJN

The best way to see a city is by meeting the locals. That's the idea behind Jewgether, a website that connects Jewish travellers with Jewish locals around the world.

"Local people know the best places so it's nice to go with them and really get to know the place," said Boaz Albaranes, one of three Israeli co-founders of Jewgether.

The Israeli-based site allows travellers to create profiles and search through a database of people who could host them while on a trip abroad.

Hosting could be anything from inviting the traveller for a Shabbat dinner, showing them around the city, or giving them a space to sleep.

It all began after two of the founders travelled to the United States to attend two different Jewish summer camps. After spending weeks at the camp, they travelled around the country visiting their new friends.

If the two of them enjoyed this type of travelling so much, why not spread it around the world, said Albaranes, who runs the site along with fellow co-founders Doron Samish and Tamir Einy.

The project began as part of a year-long Stand With Us fellowship in 2007-2008. In it they learned about Israel advocacy, the media and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It was a program for leaders in the Jewish world, said Einy. "They would like to empower people to be the next leaders of Israel."

The final assignment had students, in groups of 20, create a project that somehow relates to the Jewish world, Albaranes explained.

When the fellowship ended, the three students decided to continue with the project, opening it to the public in the summer of 2009.

To ensure the safety of its users, profiles

require everybody to post a photograph that makes their face clear.

When a new person registers, they undergo an approval process, in which the co-founders work to determine if the applicant appears safe. Einy described the process as quite a long one, taking up to 24 hours per applicant.

"We [also] suggest people to meet in a public place, or they can ask for a password from the guest," Einy said.

Additionally, users can write reviews of either their guests or hosts, vouching for the user or explaining to others what to expect from a visit with that person.

"People write their profiles including where they live, their kosher level, if they keep Shabbat or not, and they tell about themselves," Einy said. "They also mention their family members and there are many pictures."

While the co-founders receive notification when a host accepts a meet-up request, many make the initial connection on the site and then move to e-mail or telephone to come up with the details of their plan, explained Albaranes, so they can only speculate about the number of meetings that the site has led to. However, he estimates the number to be several hundred.

Someone interested in making a connection can register with the website. After approval, they can specify which continent or country they would like to visit and then get a directory of users in those places, with the option of contacting them to arrange a connection.

So far, about about 1,500 users from around 40 different countries have been approved. Much of the advertising has come through Facebook and other websites, as well as through word of mouth.

Mike Klein is one user who has hosted a family he connected with through the website. He described the guests as a young couple who had probably been couch-surfing throughout most of their travels around the United States.

He said he would typically give them freedom to do whatever they wanted, but might meet for dinners and spend some time together in the evenings.

He had also hosted Einy and several other Israelis through the mishlachat program at the Reform movement's Camp Newman in California, in which Israelis, generally after serving in the army, attend as staff to teach campers about Israel.

"It brings a little bit of Israel to our local communities," said Klein, who is based in Monterey County, Calif.

The Jewgether website also features blog posts and col-

Boaz Albaranes in Samuc Champai, Guatemala



umns by Albaranes and Teddy Weinberger, a columnist on Jewish life who also helps with fundraising and English-language materials for Jewgether.

The organization recently gained non-profit status, allowing them to accept donations to maintain and further develop the website. Additionally, they recently received a grant from the ROI Community, an organization that supports Jewish innovation.

All of the founders have made connections through the website. Albaranes said he met a family when he visited Guatemala who spent some time teaching him about the city and the country, and what it's like to be a Jew in Guatemala.

He learned that it's very different from living as a Jew in Israel, where being Jewish is the norm.

It takes a lot more to be Jewish as part of such a small minority, he said.

"If you speak logistically, they have to bring their kosher food from Mexico City every week," he said. "It was a different Judaism."

He said that's part of what makes Jewgether so special. Not only do you get to connect through religion and culture, but also get to know the country you're visiting.

"We have many members who are religious, but it's not necessarily for religious things," said Einy, who pointed out that only about 27 per cent of the site's users observe Shabbat. "It's for people to meet on Friday, but also on Tuesday and on Sunday. It's not just for Shabbat, but every day."



Doron Samish traveling in Israel



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