

Short synopsis

A Queer Country explores the development of Israel's buzzing LGBTQ community in Tel Aviv – recently crowned the gay capital of the world – and what this means in a religious state. Using interview access to Tel Aviv's mayor, who is controversially credited with pioneering its LGBTQ scene, the film uncovers how liberal attitudes are often at odds with the country's religious laws.

Despite hosting one of the world's largest gay Pride events each year, Israel's LGBTQ citizens face an uphill battle to achieve political victories such as the right to marry. They face continued violence – as demonstrated at Jerusalem Pride 2015.

Interweaving the personal and political, the film builds an intimate portrait of Israel and its internal struggle between liberal and conservative attitudes, often drowned out by the conflict at its borders.

The very question of Israel being an LGBTQ "champion" is controversial; some accuse the country of "pinkwashing". This is an allegation that promoting LGBTQ culture is a way of detracting from human rights violations in the Palestinian Territories. Some people believe you cannot celebrate the rights of some minorities while ignoring others' lack of them.

The documentary raises these questions and seeks to answer them by telling the true story of how Israel's LGBTQ community came into being.

Longer synopsis

The documentary explores the dichotomy that weaves its way through all aspects of Israeli life – a nation governed by Orthodox civil law, and yet, one which hosts the world's biggest gay Pride. In daily life, two very different worlds exist shoulder to shoulder.

Investigating this apparent contradiction, the film takes director Lisa Morgenthau and producer/reporter Harriet Davies on an extraordinary journey into Israel's Bohemian side, and into the social revolution that challenges the foundations of the Jewish state.

Harriet and Lisa began their journey in Israel two years ago, when they met the first gay man to adopt and get divorced. They heard his heartbreak when the Orthodox authorities refused his divorce money (a decision later overturned by the Supreme Court). They went on to meet pioneers who are trying to reconcile LGBTQ identity and religion in Israel.

These include the mayor of Tel Aviv, Ron Huldai, a huge promoter of the city's LGBTQ community, who explains his political decision to create an environment of liberalism and tolerance in Israel's second city; members of a Kibbutz who are part of a movement to reform Judaism along socially liberal lines; the mother of a young man killed by anti-LGBTQ violence who has gone on to campaign inspirationally for the LGBTQ community.

The film also examines the idea that Israel's progress on LGBTQ rights is "pinkwashing" – a claim that Israel promotes its LGBTQ community as a cynical means of detracting from the conflict with the Palestinians. The film explores some of the claims thrown up by the pinkwashing believers and seeks to answer them through the experience of Israel's LGBTQ community itself.

It challenges the assumption that everything Israel does is inherently connected to the conflict. However, it also questions the legitimacy of Israel's claim to "embrace" its LGBTQ community and the Israeli government's wish to publicize its LGBTQ record abroad whilst still refusing to allow gay marriage. It highlights the conflict at Israel's heart: the desire by many for a truly liberal social code and a deep belief by many that Israel must be defined as a Jewish state. Can these visions of Israel ever truly be reconciled?

Looking at the history of the LGBTQ movement within Israel, the filmmakers unveil the struggles within the LGBTQ community and establish the facts about Israel's LGBTQ movement as it is today.