



Report on Trip to Israel and Palestine 2013

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I don't really know where to begin to be honest... Words can't really describe effectively the impact that the trip to Israel and Palestine actually had on me. Many people viewed it as simply a holiday or time off, but for me it was something so much more than that. Not only was it educational and inspiring but it opened my eyes to a world, and things that happen in the world, that I never would have experienced had I not gone there.

Before we got there, I have to admit, I had no idea what to expect. I had done a lot of research before we went, about matters that have happened and are happening now, such as the West Bank Barrier and Palestinian refugees but I didn't know how I was going to feel about it as soon as I saw it. I think what I wanted to know was how do the people over there feel about it and how it actually effected their everyday lives, because that's information that you can't get from the news or Internet.

Not only do I feel that I achieved my aims from being in Israel and Palestine, I feel I surpassed them! I learned so much about the culture and how people live in different parts of the world, not only in terms of the conflict. I got a first hand view of how the teenagers in Palestine and Israel feel about the conflict and how it affects their everyday lives. One thing I really love about the programme is that you have to really think about the questions that you want to ask and therefore it becomes a lot more interesting for you. We did everything that I wanted to do and I feel like I got a perfectly equal amount of time to experience both sides of the conflict. The people also had a huge affect on me, I still stay in contact with a few people and I feel like I made connections with people that I will have for a long time if not forever and have made genuine friends. This all adds up to me being completely satisfied by the trip.

Jerusalem:

We arrived in Jerusalem very late in the night, and so as soon as we got to the hotel, we all collapsed into bed and woke up the next afternoon. This was Friday evening, so Sabbath (Shabbat) for the Jews and so it was an interesting way to begin the trip. There were so many new things to take in! We were staying in East Jerusalem, so the Palestinian part of Jerusalem. This was completely new to me especially because I have never been to a country in the Middle East.

It's actually quite bizarre though, the difference between West and East Jerusalem literally occurs within 100 metres! You'd be walking along a street with lots of bustling people, everyone buying things in markets and kebab stalls and the next minute everything is all Jerusalem stone (we learned from the Israeli students that every building in West Jerusalem had to be made from Jerusalem stone!) and much more modern (with a tram running through the street similar to the Luas) and you have a completely different culture, within such a small distance.



The Israelis are very westernized, they wear the same clothes as we would, most of them speak very good English and walking through West Jerusalem, you could easily be walking through a street in Dublin. There are of course, exceptions to this, one example would be that you see a lot of men wearing Kippas. So where the Israeli side is more progressively occidentalised, the Palestinian side is a typical Middle Eastern city. Now in the same way that there are exceptions to Jews being completely the same to Westerners, Palestinians also wear western types of clothes, apart from the obvious items of clothing such as headscarves for women and jilbabs.

The only thing that was a huge culture shock, which I think intrigued us all, was the Orthodox Jews, which obviously you wouldn't find a huge amount of in Dublin. We were walking through an area on the West side of Jerusalem called Mea Sharim where this difference was very obvious. The way they live was something that fascinated the group and that was actually one of the interesting topics that we talked about in the school groups, seeing how they feel about Orthodox Jews, because we wouldn't encounter them anywhere else.

The Mahane Yehuda Jewish market was a beautiful market that we walked through. There were so many different spices and foods being sold and it was very busy and crowded, on part due to the fact that of course it is a market but also because it was nearing 5pm when Sabbath begins. Therefore, all of the Jews were rushing to get last minute supplies because the shops would not be opening until the next evening. We saw two men whose job it was to run around the market and surrounding area calling for everyone to close their shops. This was quite an exciting experience because there was so much going on around us that we had to work very hard to keep up, but thankfully we stopped for "the best ice cream in Jerusalem" to relax and take everything in!

We were lucky enough to be in the Old City on the evening of the Shabat, so we witnessed the Orthodox Jews, running through the city to get to the Western Wall to pray. It is quite impressive that they dedicate their entire lives to pray and to study, it's really quite something to see them running with such purpose to get to the wall.

The religious sites in Jerusalem are quite overwhelming. For someone who isn't religious, even I was shocked at how overcome you feel when walking into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Western Wall or the Dome of the Rock. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, was a very interesting experience, one thing I loved was the door of the church was so incredibly small (I'd say it was about 5 foot tall)! Our 6'6" camera man, Big Ben trying to get through that tiny little door was one of the funniest things on the trip, among many of course. I think it comes from the fact that everyone around you is so emotional and devoted to their religion, and I felt a little out of place and intimidated but in awe of these people and the way they can devote themselves to god and how their belief is so strong. That was one of the moving things about the schools in Hebron, in any of our discussions if we mentioned the important things in their lives almost all of them would say religion. You would go anywhere in Hebron, schools, houses, shops and they would have pictures of the Dome of the Rock and they see it as a huge hole in their life that they can not and maybe never will be able to see it. Religion affects their everyday lives and it matters a lot to them. This is quite different to how the majority of young people in Ireland would feel about religion, and so it intrigued me.



Our visit to Yad Vashem was one of the more emotional activities we did. It is one of the saddest places I may have ever been. The exhibitions are absolutely spectacular and paint such a vivid and fascinating story. When you are walking through Yad Vashem, you can really see how the Holocaust is built into the Jewish people's mentality and why it is something the Israeli students all thought was necessary for us to do during our time in Jerusalem.

Hebron:

When we crossed the checkpoint from Jerusalem into Bethlehem, this was our first real view of the West Bank Barrier up close. It is incredibly intimidating, I mean one minute there is lovely green grass and everything is quite quaint and pretty and then all of a sudden there is a giant, grey and grossly out of place wall (which stands at between 8 and 10 metres tall)!

When you cross over into Bethlehem, it is fascinating how different the two are. Bethlehem is a bustling and vibrant city, as my fellow student Ben described it so perfectly, it's like controlled chaos. This describes the city so well, and it was something that I really liked when we arrived in Bethlehem. It's hard to explain but something about the town just makes you feel happy and excited, I know it sounds ridiculous.

That doesn't change or distract you for too long from the fact that the wall is so intrusive. One minute, we were in our taxi, soaking up our unusual surroundings, camel heads in shop windows, colourful street stalls and lots of busy people, and then all of a sudden you are right up beside this giant wall, you just can't really imagine how intrusive the wall actually is until you see it up close.

One thing I found very hard to accept was the fact that Palestinians are not allowed to go where they want and are essentially at the mercy of the Israeli soldiers when it comes to certain things. From talking to Palestinian students and getting to know them and chatting to them while we visited the old city in Hebron, they are so opinionated and passionate about what is going on in their country and so politically aware. However, as soon as they encounter an Israeli soldier, they completely change. They can't say a word against the soldiers and due to the fact that I am a very articulate and argumentative person I found that very difficult to stomach. In a way it outraged me that people, in their own city are being oppressed in this way and it made me wonder if the Israelis knew exactly how people in Hebron were being treated.

This leads me on to the second matter in Hebron that frustrated me: the settlers. From talking to the Israeli students about the settlers, I was quite intrigued to see how the settlers lived and naively didn't really see the problem with them since technically it is occupied territory. A lot of the right wing people in Israel are quite convincing in their arguments about why the settlers deserve to be there. However, when you see for yourself what the settlers do in Hebron it's a whole different story. I was nothing short of incensed! The settlers that live in buildings above the old city in Hebron, live above shops. You are walking down the streets in the old city, beautiful, old and full of character and then you look up and you see this ugly, metal grate shielding you from the buildings on top. It's the strangest thing. When the explanation for the grate was given, I was left speechless...



The settlers throw down dirty water, acid and urine. They throw down rubbish and broken bottles from their windows and this was becoming so dangerous for passing Palestinian customers and shop owners who were trying to run a business, that they actually had to put up protection because Palestinians were being injured. This would never be tolerated anywhere else so why on Earth should it be accepted here! Maybe the settlers do have a right to be there, but do they have any right to treat the Palestinians the way they do? Do human rights mean absolutely nothing?

We were walking down a street in Hebron, called Shuhada street. As this is the main street in Hebron for settlers, Palestinians are only allowed to walk on a section of it. The group of us were walking down the street (including Palestinians ex-SAB students), we managed to get permission from the Israeli soldiers to walk down the street and all of the students looked so happy to be able to walk down this street because they usually wouldn't have been able to do this. However, further down the street many Israeli soldiers came running after us looking really frantic, asking us how we managed to come this far. It was extremely intimidating, all the soldiers have guns and you can tell they have all the power, Palestinians can't say one word against them or they could be arrested. As soon as the soldiers saw my Irish passport, they said "no problem, go ahead, enjoy your time here" but as soon as they saw the Palestinian ID the reaction was more like "are you joking, who do you think you're kidding coming down here?". I could feel my blood start to boil. Looking at their faces made me want quite upset because they looked so defeated, and a few moments previously they were so fiery about what happens in their country and so passionate. I was glad that Darran said that we would not be continuing without the Palestinian students because I wouldn't have gone on without them either. To add to the shock, a settler woman came driving past and started asking the soldiers what was he doing letting the Arabs here and to get them away! This kind of treatment towards Palestinians was just so unexpected and the fact that they are not allowed to walk in certain areas of their own city was just so difficult for me to understand.

Aida Camp:

Our visit to the refugee camp, Aida, was one (of my many) favourite parts of the trip. Naturally you can tell that it wouldn't be the usual residences of Palestinians, the buildings are very tall with many families in one building. All the buildings are very close together and crowded and there are many people, mainly children, playing on the street. Everyone was very interested in what we were doing there, they were all so friendly and trying to speak to me in Arabic, but the underlying issue is that these people live in severe poverty and that is obvious when you visit this refugee camp. They are so close to the wall and so many of their lives have been ruined by the wars that's it's hard not to feel an overwhelming sense of sadness for them. The graffiti in Aida symbolises their never ending struggle to obtain justice and freedom, the graffiti for me, depicted so well their struggle and exactly how they feel. The slogans are also very moving: "here only tigers can survive" and "here only birds and butterflies are free" were some of the many phrases that were painted in the refugee camp, but I was grabbed by these particular ones because they were painted on the walls of a kindergarten.



While we were in Aida we also encountered a few issues, a tear gas grenade and a stun grenade. Now we didn't experience the full effects of either, the tear gas had floated in the wind (but it would still burn your throat and make you cry) and we only witnessed the Palestinian people running away from the stun grenade. Something that struck me about these incidences however is that how calm everyone looked, how everyone just did what they usually did and walked in the opposite direction.

This is something that also struck me about the soldiers in Hebron and Jerusalem. These are men, walking around with possibly loaded guns that could kill you and yet people don't give it a second glance. How can children become accustomed to this? This was really frustrating for me because I don't think anybody let alone children should be exposed to this kind of treatment and for them to consider this normal was just astonishing to me.

Visits to the schools:

The schools that we visited in Jerusalem were Leyada and Ha Nissui. We had fascinating discussions with the Israeli students. What strikes you about the Israeli students is that they are incredibly politicised, they know what parties they support, they know whether they are right or left wing and they know exactly what has happened in the past. What I felt about the Israeli students was that, no matter what they believed (right wing/left wing), they all wanted to persuade us that they were right and to give us the bare facts about the conflict. It would be unfair to not mention that they also were very forthcoming with information and wanted to answer all of our questions on the settlers, the West Bank barrier, religion, military service and other core concepts that we focused on in our discussion.

In contrast, the Palestinians, while also being politically aware, were very focused on trying to convince us onto their side. They told us many touching stories of killings and massacres in Hebron and about family members that have been affected by the soldiers. I was suitably impressed by how aware they were of human rights. This was a huge topic for the Palestinians. They all spoke very clearly and passionately about human rights and how they feel they are being ignored in Hebron. Again with the Palestinians we spoke mainly about religion, the West Bank barrier, Palestinian refugees, but one thing that I was particularly interested in was the relationship between girls and boys which came up frequently in discussions in the Palestinian schools.

The overall impression that I got from the schools was that everyone in these two countries are extremely aware and want to express their view to other people, the Israeli's because they don't want to be perceived badly and do not feel that the news represents them properly and the Palestinians just want to get their message out there because they feel that no one outside of their country listens to them, all they want is their freedom.



Minute Silences:

One thing that was very emotional for all of us was the minute silences that we did in both Jerusalem and Hebron.

We remembered the massacre that occurred in the Ibraheemi Mosque, that killed 29 people and an incident in Jerusalem, where a suicide bomber killed 8 people on a bus. I think it was important for us to see this because it was drawing our attention to the fact that people of all ages have died because of this conflict and it was bringing the conflict to a more human level. It was very important to do these minute silences, in order to keep the memory of these students alive. A lot of them were children, of course there were adults as well, but it's quite overwhelming to think that so many children were killed in this conflict, under tragic circumstances.

In Hebron, we did minute silences for many people. Sabreen Abu Sneineh who was 9 years old, was killed by Israeli Army gunfire in 2001. Omran Abu Hamdieh who was 17 years old, was beaten to death by 3 Israeli soldiers in December 2002. Our final minute silence was for the 29 victims and many wounded, of the Ibrahimi Massacre in 1994, this massacre occurred when Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a radical Jewish settler in Hebron opened fire on Muslims praying in the Mosque.

The minute silences that we did in Jerusalem were for a suicide bomber on a bus and a separate one in a pizzeria. The site of the Sbarro restaurant suicide bomb attack, on the corner of Jaffa and King George streets, this occurred in August 2001, 15 civilians were killed (including 7 children and a pregnant woman) and 130 were wounded. The site of the attack on a bus was also very emotional. 8 were killed on this bus, one was 18 year old Bnayahu Zuckerman who was taking the bus back to school (which happened to be Ha Nissui which we visited) after receiving his driving license. This was in 2004.

These are the minute silences that we did but we also remembered many other victims of tragic deaths in both Jerusalem and Hebron.

Conclusion of the trip:

It annoys me when people at home ask me what "side" I'm on, because in truth I am on neither. My sympathies would of course be with the Palestinians because they are the oppressed in this situation, but the conflict is not black and white. My aim while being there was to listen, take on board everything they had to say and to see the conflict through their eyes.

My trip to Israel and Palestine is a memory that I will keep forever and I will treasure. It had an effect on me that I didn't think was possible and it changes the way you think about things. I feel that not only have I become more mature, but I now know see this conflict and the various issues that come with it, as real and affecting real people, who each have emotional and moving stories to tell, not just the bare facts that you hear on the news. This is a benefit of the trip that I hope other people like me get to experience in the future.



Coming home was actually quite difficult for me because I suddenly felt that my whole life was just very trivial and all I wanted was to be back there. The feeling of not being able to do or say anything else was something that just killed me, all I wanted was to talk to them again and listen to them even more. The one thing I have been doing is trying to keep the trip alive and telling people what we saw over there, also sending on the messages that they told us they would like people in Ireland would like to know. Staying in touch with my friends over there has also really helped me with the "withdrawal symptoms" and proved that I made connections with people I thought I wouldn't or couldn't have done.

It opened my eyes to how things really are in the world and that we live in a very small microcosm of a country and therefore not only do we never experience issues of conflict but we see the same things everyday and nothing ever really simulates us or has a big impact on our lives. It makes you appreciate how incredibly lucky we are to have grown up here in Ireland and to have the freedom to be able to say what and go where you want.