

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by Abiola Olaniyi

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Although the trip was on the 18th of February the adventure all started for me on the 17th of February, I had so much going on, it was my birthday, I had a talent show going on in school, I needed to pack my bags, and I had a bit of research to do on Israel and Palestine: it was like everything was one minute after the next to me.

All I had in my head was continuous excitement and happiness; it was one of those feelings that came once in a blue moon. I went to bed around 1 am the next day. I was so anxious to see what Palestine and Israel was like with my own eyes. On the morning of the trip we were to be at the Dublin airport around 2 pm, our flight to Amsterdam was taking off at 5:10pm. Yemi (my friend) and I both got a lift to the airport, but we were late.

We saw all the other students at the Terminal 2 Queue to get their bags checked in, and their passport scanned. The whole journey to Amsterdam was about 2 hours 45 minutes. Then immediately from Amsterdam we had to take the KLM flight. From there our trip was about 4 hours: for me it wasn't very long because I expected it to be a longer trip.

When we arrived at the Ben-Gurion Airport we were questioned what our purpose of the trip was and lots of other question and I think this was because of our nationality. We stayed back at Ben-Gurion airport for about 4 hours waiting for Darran (S.A.B), because he was getting further security checks. During this time we waited patiently for him, but we also had our own tour around the airport. Above all I just could not wait to step my foot outside the airport. We were picked up by a bus , and on our way , we saw McDonald's, which was quite surprising and unexpected .

We were dropped off at the Hotel Victoria in East Jerusalem. On the bus I had a beautiful view of Israel. Everything seemed beautiful and the colour was cream to me because the buildings were that colour. I was in love with this place already. Some people were dropped off in their host family's homes. Most of us slept in the hotel through the morning.

Throughout our stay in Israel we visited 3 schools: Hebrew University Secondary School, Ha Nissui School and Keshet School to learn about the conflict and hear other's opinions about the conflict, which was one of the most important thing about the trip. We saw how reality was like for the people, their everyday lives, culture and their situation.

I think this trip is a once in a lifetime chance and I am glad I got the chance to experience it, especially visiting places like Jerusalem, Hebron, the Ibrahimi Mosque, the separation barrier, Bethlehem, the Old Cities and the Western Wall. I am so glad that I encountered all this, it was like all amazing Kodak moments, an experience that you can never forget.

Throughout this trip me and all the other students started bonding after the third day, so all these times we had our good and bad times, and all the people that made us feel so welcome. Although Israel is a very Jewish state, it wasn't everyone that was religious. This trip taught me life's greatest lesson – to help others in need and also helped me build my relationship with, teachers, friends and other students.

I am very appreciative and thankful of Darran bringing us to this trip, and I would recommend it to anyone because it teaches you on morality and relationships. Looking back to peoples' views before the trip it was mostly negativity with comments like "You're not going to come back" "You're going to get bombed" or questions like "Israel and Palestine? What are you going to do there"? But here I am today to tell the story of the fantastic trip. This was one of the most difficult things about the trip, but if anyone was to ask me again I would tell them it is as anywhere else, it's just that you must be careful of pick pockets, just as you would in any big city. The only scary thing is seeing 18 year olds leaving school and carrying guns as soldiers.

Travelling to Palestine I was even more interested in seeing the separation barrier, and when I saw it I was amazed. Not the normal type of amazement: it made me think of how peoples' jobs, lives, family have been separated. When talking to the Palestinians you can understand that they feel oppressed and occupied by this wall and that all they want is peace and they are very hopeful of this.

Going through the separation barrier took about 15 minutes to get to the other side, but we were told if you were Palestinian you could be questioned much longer. Stepping out of the barrier we saw the Palestinian people selling foods just to make a living. There were also many kids outside the barrier selling things as well. They seemed very curious to know what we were doing there. There was also a lot of graffiti on the wall. One thing that took me in surprise was one of the pictures drawn on the wall: it was graffiti of a pyramid with writing that says "We Love Tourists" and I think this was because we bring money into the country. Everywhere we went we were welcomed . This was important because we felt safe.

We visited the H1 and H2 areas in Hebron. It was said that life was harder in H2. We saw how people's lives were difficult because of the settlers. I think out of all the places we had been to so far, the West Bank was the hardest and most emotional for us, but it got all of us thinking of their circumstances.

In all of the trips I have been on, Israel and Palestine was my favourite because we had many activities. Even if I were asked what I did, I would reply "So many things that I cannot even remember for myself". I did not only suffer from mental emotions but also physical ones. We walked so much

that my feet were in pain! But this was good for me because I have not exercised in a long time. I'm sure this counted for all the food I had already eaten on the trip.

We also visited 5 schools in Palestine: Khadeeja Abdeen School, Maznia, Widaad Nisredeen, Al Hussein School and Qawasmeh School. There were no mixed school's for religious reasons, as most of the people were Muslim . I felt like I had a closer relationship and bond with the Palestinian student. Seeing Noor (my host family's) house I was amazed. It was a very massive building, beautiful on the inside and the outside. I loved my family: they were very nice but we did not really have family meals which was one thing I expected. I really appreciated the fact that they let Denise and myself stay at their home.

Noor's dad told us that "We should feel at home and that we are like his daughters." When I heard this I felt even more comfortable staying there and I felt like that I fitted in. They had a big family. Noor's brother and sister went to university in Egypt, both studying medicine. This also inspired me because it is the same thing I want to study in the future.

I also enjoyed shopping in Palestine, everything was so cheap. I loved everything about Israel and Palestine. In fact if I were to be asked to stay, I would be the first person in favour of this.

Palestine and Israel is the place to be. Everything is amazing, exotic, the food, the people. And I think it should be witnessed with your own eyes before you can judge whether it is nice or not. In five years time (hopefully) I will return, and I pray that before this five years the conflict will have ended. I have hope for them that there will be peace and unity between the two nations, because in my eyes and opinion the conflict is worthless. From this conflict I see innocent people dying and kids witnessing things that a child of their age should not see or hear. 'IsraPals' is my little quote for faith of this unnecessary conflict ending and it means Connection or friendship between an Israeli and Palestinian.

Once again I will like to thank Darran, Aisling, Ms Duggan, and Pascal for their help and support throughout the trip. If it wasn't for their commitment, we wouldn't have witnessed all this.