

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by Alex Brophy

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Friday 18 February

The journey started in the afternoon of Friday the 18th; we met up in Dublin airport at about 2.30pm and went straight to check in. We left Dublin at 5.20pm on our flight to Amsterdam, Kate and I were sitting together and got to know each other for the first time. There was quite a short changeover in Amsterdam and then we were on the plane to Tel Aviv. I sat with Solenn who I was already quite well acquainted with. The flight did not feel as long as it actually was but even so the excitement and anticipation were building constantly.

Saturday 19

We arrived in Ben Gurion airport at 2.15am local time. It was very exciting to have finally reached Israel but unfortunately there was still a considerable amount of waiting to do. Darran had warned us that he would have to go through security checks by the Israeli authorities on arrival. Darran was taken aside at passport control as the rest of us continued closer to the exit. We collected our bags and sat down on some seats beside one of the carousels to wait for Darran. It was about 3 and a half hours until Darran was finished with the authorities and came out to us. We stepped through the doors of the airport at about 6.30am. It was a wonderful sunrise and a beautiful breeze that greeted us, immediately I felt a different air and sun that of at home. For me this really marked our arrival.

We were split up into two different taxis. We were driven to Jerusalem taking in the beautiful scenery on the way, upon arriving into Jerusalem we found it rather quiet and this was due to the fact that it was Shabbat and everyone was at home resting. I saw my first soldier with a gun after about five minutes in the city. I felt strange looking at him and thinking he was not much older than me. We arrived at our hotel, the Victoria Hotel Jerusalem, went to our rooms and had some much needed rest after some breakfast. We slept for several hours before getting up and going around the Old City of Jerusalem.

This was all located in East Jerusalem which is a largely Palestinian area and was far busier than the rest of Jerusalem. This is because they are not Jewish and as a result do not observe these religious restrictions. It was absolutely magnificent to walk around the city and take in all the wonderful sights and smells from the markets. We visited an Austrian Hospice and took in the view from the rooftop. We were able to see things such as the Mt. of Olives and the Dome of the Rock. We walked around for a while then went back to the hotel before going out again for dinner. We went to a place called the Jerusalem Hotel which was rather nice and was a really good atmosphere for conversation. It was only a short walk back to our hotel. I went to bed and the overwhelming thought was "I can't believe I'm actually here" followed with a wave of utter bliss.

Sunday 20

I got up at 6.30am and we all went to breakfast together. We got a taxi after breakfast to the Hebrew University Secondary School, also known as Leyada, and set up for our discussion. I had been looking forward to seeing Yotam and Tamar again as I had not seen them since their trip to Ireland and I had gotten on well with them both. Our discussion then took place, we discussed our identities and learned how politics proved to be very important to the Israeli students.

We then had a short break followed by our culture section which consisted of a hurling demonstration which I did myself, Irish dancing, some singing from both groups and Pascal played the fiddle.

Afterwards we gathered our group in a room to state our personal objectives and expectations for the visit. I said that in the past activities of the SAB programme I felt like a mediator and that I would also like to apply that further with the two groups involved in the project.

In the afternoon we visited the Old City again, starting at Damascus Gate and the Muslim Quarter and passing by the 7th station of the cross on our way to Jaffa Gate. We met up with Yotam and Tamar there and continued through the Armenian quarter into the Jewish quarter and to the Western Wall. We stopped at a view of Temple Mount or Haram Al Sharif where the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque stand. Yotam spoke about the two Temple periods before we visited the Western Wall. The Wall is divided into two sections, one for men and one for women. I thought to myself that it was strange to be standing in front of something I had only read about, one of the holiest things in the world. We had to wear kippas that were provided as we approached the Wall. Yotam provided us with paper and a pen to write prayers on which we stuck into the cracks in the Wall.

As we walked away from the Wall several men tried to force Yotam to do a religious thing and they got quite aggressive, holding Yotam back and speaking rather rudely. We managed to get away from them and then Yotam explained that if they get someone to do this it is seen as a good deed for them by God. This rather shocked me.

We continued further away towards the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which is built on the site of Calvary where Jesus was crucified. This was quite a nice building and it was filled with tourists while Franciscans held a prayer session. We went back outside and the group continued into a small chapel next door and onto the roof where there is the Ethiopian Coptic village and also visited St. Catherine's Well. But I waited outside for this period as Tamar was uncomfortable going inside and I did not think she should be left on her own. The group returned and went back inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to visit where it is claimed Jesus was buried but this has been disputed.

We left and walked to Aroma café in the shopping mall of Mamilla. We got some food and coffee there while waiting for the other host students to arrive. Hamutal and Avital arrived after about 30 minutes and I got to see them for the first time since they left Ireland. It was great to see them both again. We sat together and caught up for about another 15 minutes before the other girl from the delegation to Ireland arrived, Ayla. We greeted each other also and enjoyed each other's company for a while longer. We then took taxis back to East Jerusalem, had dinner then went back to the hotel and to bed.

Monday 21

We got up for breakfast at 6.30am again and afterwards went to Ha Nissui School. We waited in a nearby café until we were expected in the school. We were welcomed in the school by Ayla and Avital among other students and were shown to the room in which the discussion was to be held. We had another interesting discussion with the students of the school and had our culture section also. We stayed a little after the end of the discussion to chat with the students as Darran organised everything.

We left for the Old City again to visit the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque. We got there and walked around the buildings. It was a magnificent site to take in as the Dome of the Rock is one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen and probably will ever see. We did a short video message to the Palestinian students because they are unable to visit and it is one of the holiest places in the world for them.

After this we walked back to Zion square near Ha Nissui to meet up with the Israeli group. We discussed how this area had been a sort of hot spot for suicide bombs in the past. We went further through the main shopping area and into the Machane Yehuda market for lunch and shopping. We visited Mea Shearim after that which is an Ultra-Orthodox area, I felt a bit uneasy but it was very interesting to visit this area. The group went back to some of the main shopping areas and had time to shop and talk together. It was at this point that I came down with the flu. I felt very sick and went back to the hotel earlier than the others. I was taken care of very well by everyone and got some

much needed bed rest.

Tuesday 22

I was still rather sick when the morning came and didn't go to breakfast. I thought it best that I didn't go to the school that morning which was Keshet School. I went back to sleep again and got up about an hour before the others returned so I could get ready and pack for the trip to Hebron.

The others returned and we travelled to checkpoint 300 at Bethlehem. This was our first time seeing the Separation Barrier. I couldn't believe I was in front of such an infamous structure. The Wall was quite an intimidating thing, a big grey bare wall sprung right up in front of us. We travelled through the checkpoint itself into the West Bank and we saw the other side of the Wall.

This was completely different: there were buildings almost right up to the wall whereas on the other side there were none for a while and the West Bank side was covered in graffiti. Some of this was messages of peace and support, others were political messages and others were messages of hate and racism. There were many languages on show: I remember seeing English, French, Arabic, Hebrew, Russian and Spanish.

Travelling from Bethlehem to Hebron was quite interesting, Darran pointed out all of the settlements, watchtowers and other points of interest, and I was personally fascinated by it all.

We arrived in Hebron and met with the students that had travelled to Ireland as well as the other host students and it was really good to see all of the students I knew again.

My host student's name was Zaid who had been in the programme several years previous. He drove me back to the family house where I was greeted incredibly warmly by the whole family. Zaid and I sat down for dinner after which we took the car out so Zaid could show me around the city. He showed me the local stadium where he plays football with his team who I also met. We went out with his brothers for some Arabic sweets, he showed me a local settlement but he was afraid to go too close and many other points of interest. We traveled home again where we relaxed for a short while before going to bed.

Wednesday 23

Zaid woke me up at 6.30am for breakfast with most of the family. We got ready and then walked up to the centre we had all met at the night before and where everyone was waiting again. Once everyone had gathered together and our host students had left, we went to the Widaad Nisredeem School which three of the girls attend, Nour, Mai and Ghada. We had our discussion there and it was fascinating to see the views of the other side as it were.

However I suffered a kind of relapse of my illness and I felt pretty sick by the end of the discussion. We left the school and I was taken by Aisling to the hotel that the teachers were staying in where I got some rest. It was much later in the day when I got up and Zaid, Amir and Jamil had come to see me. Darran and the teachers decided it was best that I should be brought to the hospital to be checked out. Zaid drove us there and the doctor looked at me and concluded that it was influenza. He prescribed me medicine and then we left. We dropped some of the others off and then went straight home. I got some more rest and some of the others met up in a café to spend some time together. Zaid and I decided it was best that I stayed in and rested.

Thursday 24

We got up at 6.30am once again and after breakfast met up at a school. We visited one boys' school: Al Hussein School and two girls' schools called Mazania and Qawasmeh School. They were all fascinating discussions which I really enjoyed. After the last school we went to see the Palestinian Ministry of Education, had a small talk and took some pictures together.

We left and found a place for lunch while waiting for our host students to arrive. Once we were all together we visited the Old City of Hebron where we saw some fascinating markets, shops that were

forced to close, the wire mesh overhead to stop rubbish thrown by settlers from reaching the ground and so many more things. We continued further and went through the checkpoint into H2.

We visited the house of a girl called Samah Sharabati whose university education is being sponsored by King's Hospital School. This family's home was one of the saddest places I've ever been and that was because she lives in such a difficult situation. Her home is right beside a settlement and these settlers get very aggressive at times and have thrown many things into her garden including poison to kill what was growing there. There are always Israeli soldiers stationed on the rooftop of her home. Denise and Kate sang a song and the soldier came to the edge of the roof to see what was going on.

After this we walked further until we reached Jamil's house and met his family. Jamil was one of the boys on the delegation to Ireland and was hosting Ciaran. He lives on the other side of the same settlement which is called Tel Rumeida settlement and also beside his home is an Israeli military post. His garden is under constant surveillance from a motion sensor camera. We stayed and talked with him and his family for a while. We left H2 after that and went back through the Old City and bought some things from stalls. We went shopping later in a mall before going home and getting ready before we had a final group gathering. All the students then met in Ghada's and enjoyed what was our final evening together. It was a fun but also kind of a sad event. We were there for several hours before Zaid brought us home and we went to bed.

Friday 25

Before leaving I said my goodbyes to the family who I still miss very much and were the most welcoming and friendliest people I have ever met. We all met up in the Hebron hotel and said our final goodbyes to the students before travelling back to Bethlehem. We visited the Church of the Nativity where Jesus was born. We then continued onto the house of another woman that lives in a difficult situation. This woman owns a house which is surrounded on three of four sides by the Separation Wall and she is struggling to run a shop out of her home. One thing she told me which I found shocking was that the Wall itself only took one day to surround her house. We left this woman's house and went to the checkpoint. We stopped for a final reflection on the wall before travelling through the checkpoint itself again.

After going through the checkpoint we returned to Jerusalem, went to the hotel to put our bags away and then went for lunch and had our final reflection on the trip. After that we met up with four of the Israeli students again, Ayla, Avital, Yotam and Tamar. We stayed in a café in the Armenian quarter of the Old City and discussed what we had seen in the West Bank among other things. We walked through some of the city and said our final goodbyes before returning to the hotel. We did our final packing, had showers and caught some sleep once we got back.

Saturday 26

We were only able to catch about an hour of sleep before we got up to get taxis to Tel Aviv. We took our bags out of the hotel and loaded them into the taxis before saying goodbye to Darran who I respect hugely and owe a lot to. I just hope I thanked him enough for everything. We collected Solenn on our way to Tel Aviv and I got out to say goodbye to Hamutal. Then we continued with everyone to the airport. We took our flight to Amsterdam and I was sitting beside Kate. We had quite a long stop-over in Amsterdam before the flight to Dublin. Kate and I sat together yet again and had some final reflections of our own. We got back to Dublin and it seemed to me that everyone, especially myself, was sad to come home. It was the most amazing trip I have ever been on and the experience of a lifetime.