

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2010

Visit Report by Cliona Weltecke

Transition Year student at St. Kilian's Deutsche Schule, Dublin

The trip to the two conflicting countries Israel and Palestine was absolutely mind-blowing. It was a very educational experience and I learnt so much from being hosted by families on either side, visiting all the different schools and just from being there; experiencing everyday life for the people in either country. The group consisted of Darran and Nike, the four Irish students Sadhbh (Mt. Temple), Daniel, Dillon (both Oatlands College) and me (St. Kilian's), the two school teachers Keith O'Brien (St. Dominic's) and Donal Rooney (St. Kilian's), Jon Beer, our camera man, and Sadhbh's mum Kaethe.

I will start off my report of the trip with a detailed description of the activities which we undertook every day. The trip lasted from 12th - 20th February 2010.

Friday, 12th February was the date of our departure from Dublin Airport, via Frankfurt Flughafen, to Tel Aviv. We departed Dublin at 6 p.m. Everyone was in a good mood and very excited about the journey, however some of us, including me, were also feeling a little nervous, as we had never been to the Middle East before. I think I must have been a little bit afraid of the unknown. However I was really looking forward to seeing all the students that had participated in the programme in Israel and Palestine again.

Saturday, 13th February. We arrived in Tel Aviv at 3 a.m. We were all jet-lagged, however far too excited to have a rest! Darran had to go through major security checks and we had no idea how long it would take; once Nike had told us it could take up to five hours. We all swore we would sleep in that time. However, obviously none of us were able to close our eyes. Darran triumphantly returned after only about one hour and a half, and we all set off to get a taxi to our various host families and hotels in Jerusalem.

I arrived at Noa's house at about 7 a.m. I was a little nervous about meeting her family at the start, especially because Noa was busy at a school trip and wouldn't be there the first day, and I even had no idea how many siblings she had. However, as soon as I got out of the taxi and was greeted by her mother Orly, I felt immediately integrated and very welcome. Noa's two younger sisters Netta and Adhi got out of bed to say hello to me, as did Noa's father Yoav later on. I was overwhelmed by their hospitality! Their apartment was also beautiful, with a magnificent view from the balcony and the many windows that surrounded the main living space.

The first thing I did was sleep for four hours, and after that I had a shower and accompanied Noa's family in their Shabbat lunch, which was delicious. They then brought me on a tour around the kibbutz in Jerusalem, a collective community found all over Israel, which was interesting.

In the evening I met up with Sadhbh, Tal, Tal's sister and Kaethe and we all went to explore the city. First we visited the only Jewish neighbourhood outside the Old City. The beautiful white stone houses and paths and palm trees everywhere fascinated Sadhbh, Kaethe and me. We were even invited inside one of the houses of a former teacher of Tal's sister, whom we randomly met! The inside of the house was beautiful too. The teacher and her husband, who turned out to be a famous author, had hardly renovated or changed anything about the architecture and the floor. We were offered tea and were informed a bit about the history of Jerusalem by the teacher. Again we were overwhelmed by how hospitable the people were; even their 3-legged cat made sure we felt welcome.

Later on Kaethe went home and Tal's sister left us to meet up with her friends, so we got together with Yair, Daniel, Yuval, Netai, Adam and Erez and we all went to Adam's house. It was great fun. Yoav and Noa then collected me as soon as Noa had arrived home. It was great to see her again!

Sunday, 14th February (Valentine's Day). I had to get up really early; at about half past 6. Lucky Noa was able to sleep for longer because she had been on the school trip the last day and her school started later for her. I should have gone to bed earlier on the 13th because I felt absolutely wrecked the next day. I hadn't had a proper long sleep yet.

We visited the Leyada School in the morning, where we met Yair, Tal, Netta, Netai, Roy and Yuval. We all sat in the school corridor on a bench for a couple of hours, which was great fun, and Yair also introduced me to a German friend of his. Then we had our first group discussion in a dark room with a circle of tables, where we also met the students who will be taking part in the programme next year. Jon didn't film us during the discussion, however he did while Daniel had to sing a song from 'Little Shop of Horrors' and Sadhbh and I had to sing Dublin Saunter, which we had never rehearsed together and hadn't sung in about 3 years. That was embarrassing. Daniel, Sadhbh, Yair and I also demonstrated some Irish dancing and Donal played 'The Lonely Boatman'...

After Leyada we visited Hebrew University, which Yair seemed to know almost everything about, so he gave us a guided tour. We visited the huge library with over 5 million books in it and had a look at newspapers from over 80 years ago on a projector. Yuval kindly invited us back to his place for some pizza later.

After that we visited the Old City of Jerusalem. I absolutely loved the atmosphere and the hustle and bustle of the place! The stalls were lovely to look at because they were so vibrant and detailed. We saw a lot of tourist attractions on that day. We met Noa and Rotem at the Jaffa Gate and they then accompanied us to the Western Wall, where quite a lot of soldiers walked about and men were separated from women while praying. We also visited numerous other tourist attractions, such as the beautiful golden Dome of the Rock, Al Aqsa Mosque, the Via Dolorosa, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an Ethiopian Coptic priests' village on a rooftop, St. Catherine's Well, Palestinian Christian Community apartments, the rooftop of the Austrian Hospice and we passed through Damascus Gate at the end of the tour. We also visited both Jewish and Muslim as well as Christian quarters. I vividly remember it being really hot that day even though we were mostly in the cool shade of the markets.

In the evening Yoav and Netta were going to Tel Aviv to watch a play, so they gave Noa, Jon and me a lift, where we met up with the others again, including Mina and Ariella, who I hadn't seen yet. I was so tired that I hardly said a word before getting into the car, however after sleeping for 40 minutes I was fresh and awake again. Tel Aviv was great. First we went to the Israeli equivalent to Starbucks called Aroma and then we headed to the beach. Yair introduced us to an Israeli sweet which was basically warm chocolate in maximised syringes, so we just sat at the shore, enjoying the warm chocolate (and some shisha). In the evening Yoav also gave Erez a lift home.

Monday, 15th February. In the morning we visited Keshet School, which is Noa, Mina, Zimrat and Rotem's school. We first took part in the Morning Prayer, and after that joined in the celebrations for a Jewish festival similar to carnival. We ran around the corridors and classrooms singing something like "Nisha nisha nisha nisha..." and later on everyone danced in the assembly hall. That was great fun.

After that we had a group discussion which went very well, where we also got to know some summer campers and again some future candidates for next year's programme. Each of us performed again, (except this time the 'Lonely Boatman' got a couple more laughs), and Dillon also demonstrated how to play hurling, and a couple of the Israelis had a go at it.

After Keshet school, Elazar, Elona and Yair accompanied us as we started walking towards West Jerusalem (in the blistering heat), and we stopped off at a falafel bar. I had an ice-cream instead though as I didn't feel like eating something hot when it was already something like 30°C! We later headed to a park where we sat and ate our falafel as well as eating a strange grapefruit/orange type

of food, which was really tasty. We then went to a memorial of a group of people who had died in a suicide bombing, and one of the victims had been a young boy called Ben who had been our age, and had gone to a school just around the corner from where we had been standing. Jon filmed Alona and Yair explained it and our opinions on it. I found it very upsetting.

Mina then came to join us as we got taxis to the city centre, where we met most of the other people who had come to Ireland again. I also met another German girl from Berlin! The whole group then made its way to the Mahane Yehuda market, where I tasted the most exotic flavours of ice-cream, including basil, spices, poppy seeds and many more. Jon filmed Noa and me as we casually walked through the market's streets. At the top of the road we went 'busking': Donal played the tin whistle, Yair was on the drum, Darran and the Irish students were singing "The Fields of Athenry" and later on we even took to some Irish dancing, however we didn't make a shekel.

We then walked through Mea Shearim, which is an ultra Orthodox area of Jerusalem. I found it a bit too extreme, especially as the Orthodox Jews did not even glance at us and we had to cover up to our chins. When we left the quarter Noa and I had to say goodbye to the rest of the group.

We strolled around Jerusalem a bit more, looking around the shops, before we got a taxi to Noa's drama class. Even though I couldn't understand a word it was interesting for me to watch. In the evening I showed Noa a few pictures of Maysam which I had copied onto a USB stick, and Noa admitted that she would have loved to accompany me to Hebron, Palestine, where I would be going the next day.

Tuesday, 16th February. In the morning we visited the last Israeli school: the Ha Nissui Secondary School, which was my favourite of the Israeli schools. Even though it was not as picturesque as Keshet the atmosphere was what struck me as to being the most laid back and friendly! The place was practically run by the students, with graffiti permission and a 'smoking corner'. We had a group discussion in the school's library with Adam, Erez, Ariella, Maya, Yair (though he does not go to that school) and the new students for next year's programme.

After that we slowly made our way to Hebron. En route Darran and Nike needed to collect their bags from the hotels and meanwhile Jon filmed us about our impressions of Jerusalem and Israel in general. That was my favourite evaluation session with Jon. Dillon also taught some hurling to me and some enthusiastic Palestinian boys who happened to pass by!

After that we got a bus to go to Hebron. However, just as we were about to board the bus I realised in a horrible moment that I had forgotten my passport in Noa's room! At first I thought this meant I couldn't go to Hebron and I was really disappointed, because I had been looking forward to seeing the Palestinians, especially Maysam, again. But it all turned out fine; Noa only lived 5 minutes away from where we were and Orly dropped the passport down to us.

After we passed through Checkpoint 300 into Bethlehem we were overwhelmed by people who were trying to sell us things, including little boys who tried to help us with our bags and kept asking us where we were from. We also got a proper view of the separation wall.

The wall was about twice as high as I'd expected it to be. I really did feel like I was in a cage standing at the foot of this massive concrete block that stretched across the land as far as the eye would go. Some of the phrases sprayed or drawn onto the wall, especially "I want my ball back" which had obviously been written by a child, conveyed the general Palestinian feeling towards the barrier.

Sitting in a taxi to Hebron I noticed the immediate difference between Palestine and Israel. Palestine was not as developed; the hills were mainly green, and the only major buildings to be seen on these hills were the settlements. They did not fit in with the rest of the scenery. Another thing which struck me was the amount of dirt and litter in the streets of Hebron. Maysam later explained to me that this is due to the fact that Palestine does not have a proper rubbish collection service.

We arrived at the centre of the International Palestinian Youth League (the partner organisation of Schools Across Borders in Hebron) in Hebron in the late afternoon and were greeted warmly by Maysam, Manar, Hanane, Mohammed, Shada, Sami, Aya, Fakrya and Adli. It was fantastic seeing them all again. Maysam and I then took a taxi to her aunt's and uncle's house. She explained that we would be staying in their apartment because Maysam's place would have been too small for both her parents, her, her sister, her three brothers and me.

Maysam's aunt's and uncle's apartment was quite spacious and comfortable, though I found it a bit cold, and there were hardly any windows. Her aunt, Fofu, was quite shy at first, and I was surprised when Maysam told me she had never met a foreign person in her life. Maysam's younger cousins, Mohammad and Toto, also did not know what to make of me at first, but I think everyone loosened up after the first day. Maysam's uncle had not arrived home from work yet. One thing that startled me was that Toto, who was about three, followed me wherever I went and would never take her eyes off me!

Fofu and Maysam tried their very best to make sure I was always 100% satisfied and felt fully comfortable. At times their immense hospitality overwhelmed me, like when they would ask me no less than every five minutes whether I was too hot or too cold. And when I admitted I was a little bit hungry, they served a gigantic, yet delicious, traditional chicken and rice dinner. I felt like I didn't deserve all the attention which I got from them.

Wednesday, 17th February. In the morning I walked with Maysam to her school. The people I met again there who had been in Ireland were Sondos, Shada, Aya and Hanane. No sooner had I said hi to those people and drawn even more attention to myself, a huge group of girls crowded around me and weren't afraid to just stand there and stare!

Some of them asked me simple English questions, like how I was or what I was called, and others giggled in groups and pointed at me and were speaking Arabic. I liked the attention, but sometimes it could get a bit irritating or overwhelming. For example, all the girls had to line up, and I was standing beside Dina when a girl from behind just appeared right in front of me and pointed at my eyes! I was very surprised about that. However as soon as Sadhbh arrived, the girls turned all their attention to her instead because she has blonde hair.

Darran and Nike arrived a couple of minutes later, and brought Sadhbh and me to a meeting with the Director of Hebron Office of Department of Education, Mrs. Nisrene Amro. She was totally in favour of the programme, as she had taken part in it herself a couple of years ago, and was very welcoming to us. During the meeting I had to step outside for a while because I felt a bit nauseous. I don't know what it was, I think that the surroundings and everything were just so new for me that my body wasn't used to it at all and couldn't take the air, the water, the milk or whatever didn't agree with me.

After that meeting all the boys visited Manar, Mohammed, Sami and Zaid's school, the Hussein Boys' secondary school and Adli brought Sadhbh, Nike and me to his office, where we had to wait. We couldn't go to the boys' school because they would have probably given us too much attention! Even though we just talked and had a coffee in Adli's office, it was fun.

As soon as the boys were finished they collected us and brought us back to the Widaad Nisredeem Girls' Secondary School, where Sadhbh and I had already been in the morning, to have another group discussion there, in a science room. I thought personally that that was the best group discussion of the whole time we had been in Hebron. All the girls participated in the discussion and had emotional things to say.

After the traditional chicken and rice to eat we made our way to Khadeeja Abdeen Girls' Secondary School, where Ishraq and the teacher Maha Bader were the only people who had come to Ireland. The group discussion there was with quite a small group; all of us and only about five more girls; and the girls were very shy and did not say very much, but I think that was because their English wasn't very good.

In the afternoon we met up in the IPYL Centre with all the people who had come to Ireland in the last couple of years. Adli introduced the meeting there, welcoming us to Palestine, and he said how happy he was that the project had at long last managed to bring some Irish students over.

After the discussion Shada invited all the people who had been to Ireland this year to her house, where we all had a great time playing football and hurling and just sitting in the living room. Shada has such a lovely house. Later Shada's brother dropped Manar and Daniel and Maysam and me home, where Maysam's aunt Fofa had cooked some gorgeous fish and lots of other delicious foods.

After dinner Maysam and I got a taxi to the Café Plaza, where we met up with Manar, his brother, Daniel, Shada her sister, Hanane, Sadhbh and another guy who I didn't know. I was surprised to see that the café was divided in two sections, and when the boys came to join us we got quite a lot of disapproving looks from the women around us. But it was a really fun night. When we got home we watched an American thriller on TV and played with Maysam's baby cousin Mohammed. It was really enjoyable, and even though Fofa couldn't speak any English, I was able to talk to her with Maysam acting as a translator and came to find that she is really funny and nice. On that day it was probably about two a.m. by the time we were lying on the mattresses in the guest room and asleep, but it was one of the most fun days of the whole trip.

Thursday, 18th February. In the morning I unluckily felt really sick when I woke up, and felt too weak to head out and go to the Mazania and Mohammad Ali Mohtaseb Girls' Secondary School, Fofa's school, and also to the Qurtuba School and the Old City, where the others met Mrs. Reem Shareef, the principal of school, and Tareq ibn Zayad Boys' Secondary School where the others went in the morning, which I am extremely sorry and disappointed I missed.

In the afternoon I met the others again, and we took another tour through the Old City so that Darran could kindly show me. Even as we walked through the Bab Al Zawiya market area in H1 I noticed a significant difference to these markets and those of Jerusalem; there weren't as many stalls, as many goods, as many colours or as many people. There was also cloth hanging over the stalls, to apparently protect the goods from the sun, however as we entered the H2 area much worse things were above our heads.

I was extremely shocked when I noticed the mesh that hung over us, absolutely covered with rubbish. The Israeli settlers who live on either side of the Palestinian market area below throw all their waste down, and it all stays there, blocking out the sun, giving the whole area an incredibly tense atmosphere. Of course, some smaller items or even liquids can fall through the mesh, and Mohammed showed us a place where someone had poured a huge amount of oil. I was gob-smacked how the Israeli settlers could have the will to do that to other people.

After we got out of the almost tunnelled Old City area, we came up to a checkpoint where Muslims couldn't turn left, where the beautiful Fakhouri pottery shop was situated. I remember staring angrily at the Israeli soldier who told us the restrictions. Darran explained that there were four Irish students who wanted to see the shop, and asked whether they would be allowed to see it even if they were Muslims, and to our surprise the soldier said no. So only the four of us, Nike, Darran and Hanan were able to pass through, however Manar and Shada pretended to be foreign too and made it. They were really excited about having made it past the soldier for the few minutes in it and were really happy too, as they had never been to the shop in their lives.

I remembered as I walked back to the others who had to wait for us by the checkpoint how angry I felt. I felt like I was too privileged to be allowed to go into this shop and they simply couldn't because they were Muslim. I felt mean, and I knew it wasn't my fault, but I felt like they must hate me for being able to move around so freely, for example being allowed to visit Jerusalem. I also felt mean towards my fellow classmates who could not accompany me on this amazing trip, and I kept wondering, "Why me?"

After we passed the checkpoint and went to the right, even past the limit to where the Palestinians were allowed to go. All of them were wide-eyed and excited, as they had never walked those streets before. Apart from our big group and another small group of tourists the place was practically

deserted. Sadly, we were caught out and sent back, but nothing happened. We then made our way to the Ibrahim Mosque, which is where Abraham, his wife Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and his wife Rebecca are buried. We all had to wear big blue or brown cloaks that made us feel like monks! The inside of the church was comfortably decorated, with all of the ground carpet-laid.

In the evening, Sami invited us all over to his house for dinner, where we also met the principal of the Qurtuba School again (as she happened to live in the same building and was a friendly neighbour). All the students then made their way to another coffee shop, which was another great evening. However everyone was quite sad because it was our last night in Palestine. Maysam and I did not go back to her auntie's house, because she had guests over, so we had to stay the night in Maysam's small apartment.

Friday, 19th February. In the morning we visited the Al Fawwar refugee camp, which is where Bayan and Ibrahim live. Again, we were invited to sit in Bayan's home and were given so much lovely food. Sadhbh and I had a really good chat with Bayan. We then sadly had to leave Al Fawwar, and make our way to the Centre, where some of the other Palestinians were waiting with our bags.

We then had to say our final goodbyes to the people we had already not said goodbye to in the coffee shop the night before. I was so sad to leave Maysam that I cried! She is the person that I miss the most from the whole trip: she is one of the sweetest and most kind people I know. Her family had also loaded me with gifts on that morning, even though I didn't deserve any, and they even gave me a carpet! It was a very nice gift, though probably not the most practical to bring with me on a plane...

Before going back to Jerusalem we visited Bethlehem, where we saw the place where Jesus was born in the Church of the Nativity. Once we got back to Jerusalem, we walked around the Old City one last time, where Sadhbh and I finally bought our authentic gladiator sandals! In the evening I accompanied Noa's family to Noa's grandparents, where we had a Kiddush meal. It was very strange food for me such as huge aubergines that you have to eat a special way, but I really enjoyed the evening. Noa's grandparents could even speak really good German, so we talked for ages. Later on we went to Netai's house, where the others had just finished their Kiddush dinner and were just making their way to a local playground. That was so much fun – we went on a thing where you had to hold on, and then Adam would spin you around, and you literally had to hang on for dear life! After that we had to say our last goodbyes to the people who weren't hosting, such as Rotem, Erez, Yuval, Netai, Ariella and many more, and I really didn't feel like going home the next day at all.

Saturday, 20th February was sadly the last day of our fantastic trip. After saying my very last goodbyes to Noa and her family, who said I was welcome at any time and again gave me a huge bag filled with food, we walked up the Mount of Olives, from which we could see all of Jerusalem. However, it was extremely tiring getting up there, because the hill was really steep and it was unbelievably hot. If that type of weather is considered winter to the Israelis, then I don't want to be around for summer! Adam was the only Israeli who came with us. After walking up and down the Mount of Olives looking for a suitable spot to do our last filming, we finally settled down in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jon asked us some final evaluation questions of our whole trip. Having done that, and after having said goodbye to Adam, we all sadly got into the taxis to collect our bags from the hotel and make our way to Tel Aviv airport. Hardly anybody said a word during the journey, because we were all thinking about the incredible new experiences we had made during the 9 days in Israel and Palestine. Darran and Nike stayed on until April, so it was just the four of us, Jon, Donal, Keith and Kaethe who had to leave Israel.

However, our time together was not over yet! As we were just hovering over Dublin airport, preparing to land, all of us completely wrecked from the 5 and a half hours of flying, the captain announced that our flight was being transferred to Manchester. At first we were annoyed by the news, because we just wanted to go home and rest and think about our trip, but then we started to find the situation really funny and ridiculous. By then it was probably **Sunday, 13th February**, and while the plane was refuelling in Manchester, which took about an hour, I was able to text my Mom, who said that it had only snowed in Dublin for about 3 minutes and that it had all melted again anyway. Just as we rolled onto the runway and were about to take off again, Dublin airport contacted the Lufthansa plane and

said that they were sorry, but they were closing, and that they couldn't even keep the airport open another twenty minutes until we landed.

Then we had to roll back to the terminal and wait in the plane for another one and a half hours before the airport got it together to organise customs, hotel accommodation and buses to bring us there.

At first all the passengers and our group were annoyed by what had happened, but if we look back I think we would agree that it was a fun night. Sadhbh and I shared a room, and had loads of fun. In the morning we met up with Dillon and Daniel for a swim in the pool, before rushing back to get packed and get to the terminal building before 9 a.m. However, once we got there the flight kept getting delayed for another two hours, and another two hours, until our plane finally left Manchester at about 3 p.m. The security and check-in also took one hour each, and that combined with the fact that we had gotten near to no sleep the night before and were still jet-lagged from our flight from Israel, meant we were very, very exhausted. However all went well, we got home safely, said our last goodbyes to some of the group at the airport, gave Dillon and Daniel a lift home, and when my parents started bombarding me with questions, all I could say was, "Not now. Tomorrow I'll tell you everything", and fell asleep.