

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2010

Visit Report by Daniel Egan

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The purpose of our trip to Israel & Palestine was to be able to get the message of the students from each side of the conflict to the opposite sides because it is not at this time possible for them to do so themselves. It wasn't a holiday for us and the whole time we were over there we felt the responsibility of our task on our shoulders. Schools Across Borders (SAB) is one of the most amazing programmes I have ever been involved with and it is revolutionary in its ways: there are no other organizations in the world that are doing what SAB is trying to do, which to me is mind-blowing, because in order for the two countries to move on, this is what is really needed.

We arrived in Israel extremely early on Sunday the 13th February to a dark and quite Tel Aviv where we were hurried into a taxi bus that would take us to Jerusalem. We were all very tired, having not slept on the plane because of the amazing videos there were on offer, so I think we all fell asleep on the way to the city in which we would be staying for 4 days. When we woke a few hours later, still on the bus it was like we had entered a new world. Having not seen the sun in a few weeks in wintery Ireland, the blistering sun gave our senses a jolt like lightning and was such a welcome surprise. Thankfully the weather only got better as the trip went on, which enhanced the experience for us.

On arriving in Jerusalem, the amazing architecture of the buildings took our breaths away, as it continued to do on the rest of the trip. Being Sabbath it meant there were hardly any people on the streets. My host, Yair Foldes and his family were pretty relaxed about the rules of the Sabbath and quickly informed me that I had two hours to sleep before we were on the road again going sight seeing. We stopped in a forest to go for a quick walk before arriving in Abu Ghosh.

Upon arriving there I was staggered to see the amount of people out on the streets; it seems that the country as a whole has become a little more relaxed with the rules of their religion, especially in the newer cities. This is not to say there were not many people who did observe the rules; it was just that I thought the country as a whole would be a lot more strict. I was told by a few people on the trip to Israel before that this place did the best falafels in the world. If only the Israelis could have tasted the falafels in the West Bank because there was really no contest.

We arrived back to Jerusalem and I was taken by Yair to his scouts meeting. He's a senior scout and when I was there they were all learning how to pass on to the younger kids the 'tricks of the trade' because Yair and his friends would be leaving the following year. All of the people I met made me feel very comfortable, obviously they already knew a lot about me because they would tell me stories that knew of events which had occurred when Yair was in Ireland, and this was rather amusing.

They did their lesson and in the meantime Yair gave me his phone and I was able to talk to almost everyone of the Israeli students who had come over to Ireland with SAB. They sounded really excited to see me and it was arranged that we were to meet that night in a place in the centre of Jerusalem called the German Colony. I met most of the Israeli students from the programme that evening and it was great to catch-up with everyone. We walked through the streets and talked about how each of our lives was going and for that night the conflict didn't come up at all and the streets were peaceful.

The next morning we went to Yuval's, Neta's, Roy's, Netai's and Yair's school: Hebrew University Secondary School. We met some of the students who were hoping to be a part of the SAB next programme and trip: they seemed like really lovely people. We also got a chance to meet the students who missed out in the project last year and they admitted that they were extremely disappointed to have missed the opportunity. We discussed at length with them what they thought of Palestine and what their impression of the Palestinian students were. I was relieved to hear that for the most part none of them seemed to have prejudices and found what we had to say and what Darran had to say about the Palestinian people extremely interesting.

From there we went to Yuval's house to have pizza with many of the Israeli students who had come to Ireland. It felt so good to be back around these people again. The Irish group then went for a tour of the Old City of Jerusalem by ourselves because the secondary school wouldn't allow the Israeli students to come with us as they didn't think it was safe enough. We did however meet Noa and Rotem from SAB as they were given permission to come with us from their school. The Old City was such an amazing place. We went to the place where Jesus was crucified and buried, and in the same church there was an Ethiopian settlement on top with a handful of monks living there. We went to the Wailing Wall and although it did feel a little intimidating we got the once in a life time opportunity to go up and touch the wall and say a prayer of our own. We then left through the Damascus Gate, something I only ever heard of on video games before then.

Monday looked like it was going to be our most hectic day as our own schedule with our friends was shaping up. We were up bright and early to go to Keshet School so we could join in with the morning prayers. We found out that in the Jewish religion this month it was the month of joy, so after prayers they had a party in the reception area. I have never experienced anything like it, the atmosphere and the joy in people's faces was something to behold. In the afternoon we went on a tour of West Jerusalem into the ultra orthodox area of the city. This was extremely uncomfortable for me because I felt like the people looked down on us for being a different religion or for not being as orthodox as them, which I thought was wrong.

We didn't think it possible but when we were told the schedule for the next day we were even more busy than the one before. We had our stuff packed for three days in Hebron from the previous night and before we left for the West Bank, we went to visit the school of Adam, Erez, Ariella and Maya - Ha Nissui Secondary School - which was by far my favourite. We met the new SAB students here too and they were full of talking and wanting to know what the Palestinians had to say. A lot of them were taken aback by the stories we had to tell and again it became clearer for us that what the young people thought was not exactly the reality.

We then left and got a bus to the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank. When we were on the Bethlehem side we were met by at least one hundred taxi men trying to get business. They were so fixated on the opportunity of having tourists in their taxi that wherever we went there they went until we finally asked three to take us to Hebron. We took the three taxis to Hebron where we met our hosts in a centre there. And let me tell you it was SO good to see Manar again.

It was a little bit of a culture shock I have to admit. The dissimilarity between the two cities was incredible, considering they are only 30 minutes away from one another. Hebron seems far from reality, even though you can see it with your own two eyes. Manar's house was quite large but very basic and it seemed everything they had was second or third hand. There was one bed for 5 boys and the mother and father slept with the smallest brother.

On the first proper day we met the Director of the Ministry of Education office in Hebron and got our picture taken for the newspaper. This was a small example of how excited everyone in Palestine was to see visitors from abroad, some people did think we were just over for a holiday and didn't really bother with us but a lot of people saw it as an opportunity to voice their opinions in the hope they would be shared somewhere else and their situation would be highlighted in other parts of the world.

We met with some of the students in each school involved in SAB and they all seemed really excited by the prospect of being able to speak out about their situation. There were times where they wouldn't talk and it was a shame because some of them we knew would have had good stories to tell. The girls seemed a lot more open than the boys, I think in one particular school this was because of what one girl called Hanane. She said 'If you do the programme it makes you more proud to be a Palestinian because you have the chance to voice what's happening with your people and try to get support and help and understanding from abroad.'

One of the most outstanding schools for me was a school that was located in the Israeli Army-controlled area of Hebron (H2) called Qurtuba School. The head teacher there was quite a remarkable woman and told us many stories of the difficulties they encountered having the Israeli settlers living literally across the road from them. The school had even been set on fire a few times. I don't think I've met a woman as open as this teacher was in my life: she really wanted to get her story across to us. It turned out the choice of students for next year's SAB programme is very small because there are only four people in the year good enough in English. The reason for this was that there had been a major curfew at the time these students were due to start school, this led to a lot of parents deciding to wait a year and send them the following year, instead of endangering their children.

From here we went to the old city with all of the SAB students who came to Ireland and that was such a great experience. We then passed a check point and stood by an old school. Mohammad said on video that he wanted to thank Darran and SAB for giving him the opportunity to stand where he was standing because he had never been able to enter that area in the 16 years of his life as it was controlled by Israel. I think this helps to sum up really a lot of what this whole programme is about, it gives opportunities to do things and go places these Palestinian people may never have dreamed of doing in reality.

We left Hebron the following day and there was a lot of sadness around, but the Irish students and I have already started to make plans of returning to these great people and even though our plans are in the very primary stages it shows just how much these people mean to us now.

We arrived back in Jerusalem and it was very hard to focus on what was reality when we knew how close we were to practically another world. Our last night plans were to go to Netai's house for a meal. Everyone brought food and some dishes were better than others. Every Israeli student though came to us and asked us the same thing: "Do you hate Israel now?". Of course the answer was No, but it makes me think that maybe the Israeli people know more about what's happening in Palestine and the cause of it than they care to admit. We had a very nice evening and there were again some tears.

The next morning we packed our bags and we went to do our final video diary of the trip and our last bit of sightseeing. We went up to the top of the Mount of Olives, and though this was one of the hardest walks I have ever done in my life and in the sweltering heat, it was worth it though for the view. We went into the Garden of Gethsemane and it felt really special to be in a place as historically famous and important in our faith.

I don't regret anything about this programme and am extremely happy to have been given the opportunity to be involved. It's something that I will never forget for the rest of my life. I think the main thing I have learnt from visiting Israel and Palestine is that it gives you the chance to take a look at your own life and be thankful for it, for our freedom and our education: this is not something everyone in the world can take for granted.

I have also found out that while we get all these negative images on TV and in newspapers of what the two sides of this conflict are like, the real people are some of the nicest and most genuine that you would ever meet in your life. The whole experience and the new friends I have made are something that I will keep in my heart for years to come and later on in life I know that it will affect the way I live and the decisions that I will make.