

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2010

Visit Report by Dillon Mulligan

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This report will chronicle my trip to Israel and Palestine. Travelling to the Middle East was something I had never thought about. I travelled to India as part of a school immersion programme but the Holy Land was a completely different prospect. I had many misconceptions about this troubled part of the world. These had all come from TV, news and radio. Most of my misconceptions and prejudgments were proved completely wrong. Although apprehensive, I was never really worried about travelling to Israel and Palestine. I can't really explain why I wasn't nervous or frightened about travelling, I suppose one of the reasons was the lull in violence but people were still being killed and seriously wounded everyday. Most of my friends couldn't understand why I wanted to go. For me it was quite an easy decision to make. This was a chance to visit a region that divided popular opinion. A place that features in the news almost everyday and an area that has experienced a bitter conflict for over forty years. It's important to visit this highly publicised region and form your own opinions. An objective and informed opinion counts for a lot in today's world of bias and media propaganda.

Writing this report will be difficult because it would be impossible to try and capture the emotions that I felt during this trip. The only way one can really appreciate these two countries is by visiting them. By being removed from the Israel-Palestine conflict it's hard to have an interest, never mind an opinion. But thanks to this trip, when I hear news stories I can now relate it to places I have actually seen. Hebron and Jerusalem are no longer just words or titles, they now have a distinct meaning. Before I left, Hebron and Jerusalem were just names of foreign cities far removed from my sheltered life. This trip opened my mind and made me question things I previously thought were undisputed fact.

As well as learning a lot about myself I also learnt a lot about Israeli and Palestinian culture. Spending time with families is the only way you can get a true perspective on ordinary life. I was lucky enough to spend time with two amazing families. They both made me feel so comfortable and their hospitality was unforgettable. In Jerusalem, I stayed with Elazar and his family. They were really open and made me feel right at home, Elazar lives in one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Jerusalem. It's an area with a rich history and the homes there are very beautiful. I was quite apprehensive and unsure of what to expect but Elazar's family looked after me incredibly well. They were really interested about Ireland and wanted to know my impressions of Jerusalem. I was very well fed and they made sure I had everything I needed.

The experience with Mohammed's family was quite different. I was staying in a neighbourhood called Jabal Johar.. It was quite similar to a rural Irish town in some ways. There was a strong sense of community and everybody seemed to take an interest in other peoples business. The houses in this neighbourhood were built without much planning. Most were just built on the side of a hill. Staying with a Palestinian family was more of a cultural shock. The luxuries that were taken for granted at home weren't available.

The food was completely different, but it made for a truly authentic experience. Mohammed's father was a real character. The family grew a lot of their own food and had planted an almond tree in the front garden. The view from Mohammed's front garden was amazing. Hebron and the surrounding landscape could clearly be seen from their small courtyard. I think the time I enjoyed the most was when I was sitting out on the courtyard with Daniel, Manar, Mohammed and some of his friends. It seemed very peaceful, and everyone was so relaxed. It's hard to believe that their neighbourhood had seen a lot of violence throughout the years.

Myself and Dan were treated like local celebrities in the area. Everyone wanted to meet us. They all shook our hands and welcomed us to Hebron. I think the locals were happy to see us. I doubt many westerners have travelled to this area. It seemed like a poor place but people didn't seem too worried and they were all in high spirits. The resilient nature of Palestinians never ceased to amaze me. As a nation they have endured so much hardship. Despite all this, they know how to enjoy themselves and have a wicked sense of humour. The people of Jabal Johar are an inspiration to us all. As well as a strong sense of community, people are very hard working. There is a strong sense of entrepreneurialship. Many locals have set up small business that seemed to be doing really well. It's a unique place, unlike anywhere else in the world.

Lawlessness maybe be too strong a word but certainly people have a lot of freedom when the Israelis aren't around. Cars speed up and down the street. I remember one night when myself and Dan went for a cruise in a pick-up truck (Hebron style). Probably one of the scariest journeys of my life. Speeding through poorly light streets in an ancient truck wouldn't be considered the safest of pastimes. Another story that makes me laugh every time I think about it was the time I raced a donkey up and down the roads: one of the lads brought his donkey out from the stable and started galloping up the road. Its just one of those incidents that captures the madness of Jabal Johar. It's a place I'll have to go back to. The memories will stay with me forever. I don't want to sound disrespectful but in many ways it was like the Wild West. Life is tough so people need to be able to enjoy themselves.

This part of my report will focus more on the day to day activities. I'll start at the beginning and discuss all the major aspects of the trip. My first day in Israel was spent with David and his family. Elazar was away so David kindly offered to look after me. David had been on the summer camp so it was a good chance to catch up with him. David and his brother Uriel showed me around Jerusalem. I got a good feel for the city and heard what it was like to live there. The next day was when our hectic schedule truly began. Our first port of call was Hebrew University school (Yair, Tal, Roy, Yuval Netai all go to school here). It reminded me of an American high school, there was no uniform and the kids seemed to have a lot of freedom. Students treated the teachers more like friends. This created a really informal atmosphere. I also got a chance to sit through a class of Russian Literature, an interesting experience to say the least.

After the school visit we turned our attention to the Old City. Jerusalem the founding city of Christianity had hundreds of holy sites. The three great monotheistic religions all describe Jerusalem as a holy place. Our tour of the Old City was a bit of a whirlwind with little chance to appreciate the sites. The old city is split into four quarters: Armenian, Jewish, Muslim and Christian. We visited the Western Wall which is the holiest site in Judaism. Pilgrims stuff prayers in between the cracks in the stone slabs.

There was a high military presence in the area. Security was also quite rigorous. Myself and Dan had to wear kippas while at the wall. Directly above the Western Wall is the Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest sites in Islam. The Dome of the Rock is interesting because of its proximity to the Western Wall. Jerusalem really is a melting pot for religions. Unfortunately, people are unable to reconcile their differences. Both sides are guilty of atrocities and many of these crimes have been committed in the name of God. God has been used as an excuse. Religion teaches us to love our neighbour: people look to God and find that violence against another human can be justified.

During the visit to the Old City we also saw the Via Dolorosa, which was the route that Jesus took when he was on his way to Calvary. Each station is marked with a gold placard. It's hard to respect the reverence of these sites because they are located in the middle of busy streets. We also visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which holds the tomb of Jesus. The Church was packed with Christian Pilgrims. We hadn't much time so we didn't get a chance to go into Jesus' tomb. The Church was incredibly beautiful and decorated with ornaments and mosaics.

Even though the Old City is quite a compact place, there are many small communities living within its walls. We saw the Ethiopian Christians who lives in a small village above the Holy Sepulchre.

This small village has been home to the Ethiopian order for hundreds of years. They live in small huts and wear traditional dress. The well of St. Catherine was another site that we saw. The well is part of an underground network of wells and tunnels. Even though it's called a well it's more like a huge pond.

I was so surprised to see ordinary people living amongst these famous religious sites. I never assumed that people lived there permanently. It had been a long day of sightseeing so we decided to go to the Austrian Hospice to relax for a while. The Hospice had an amazing roof terrace with panoramic views of the whole city. Dusk was fast approaching but the weather was still really warm. This was the first time I had got a decent view of the entire city. Nowhere else in the world could you see minarets, churches and synagogues in such a confined space.

Later that day I moved on to Elazar's house, my original host for the four days. The morning of Monday 15th was spent in Keshet School. This was probably my favourite school. It's a really modern building with a huge square in the centre of the school. This school caters for religious and non-religious students. There was a real party atmosphere in the school. This was because everyone was preparing for Purim, a religious festival similar to our Halloween. There was a D.J. and everyone was running in and out of classrooms. All the students were having a great time. I was a little taken back because I didn't expect anything like that. It's hard to imagine a festival like that taking place in Oatlands.

Later that day I met up with some of the students who I'd known from the Summer Camp: Alona and Yarden. It was quite a strange feeling being in Israel. I hadn't expected to go there so soon. I can't exactly remember what day it was but the students from the summer camp decided to take me to Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv is right on the coast and is famous for its amazing beaches. The city of Tel Aviv is very different from Jerusalem: it's a new city that has a really laid-back vibe. I got the impression that it's quite a liberal place similar to any other European city. The day trip to Tel Aviv was great fun. Even though we got there quite late there were still people relaxing on the beach. The weather had been amazing that day and the sand was still warm from the high temperatures. The water was freezing but I didn't want to miss an opportunity to swim in the Mediterranean. After our swim they guys showed me around Tel Aviv. We went out for pizza and then made our way back to Jerusalem.

Tuesday 16th was the day we would travel to Hebron. The morning was spent in Ha Nissui Secondary School. Although there were teachers present, it seemed as if the students ran the place. All the new school groups we visited were really enthusiastic about the programme and the students of Ha Nissui were no different. They were very opinionated and thought the programme would be of some benefit. I had brought my huris over and did a quick exhibition at every school. People seemed genuinely interested and wanted to try out this new Irish sport.

By afternoon, we were packing our bags onto the bus and preparing for the short trip to Hebron. Leaving Jerusalem filled me with mixed emotions. Jerusalem had been such good fun but there was no point in visiting the sites of Jerusalem without visiting the West Bank. For me personally, going to Hebron was when our trip or the true experience really began. The situation in Hebron quickly changed my opinion on many different things.

Going through the separation wall and entering into the West Bank allowed me to experience the Israeli occupation at first hand. The separation wall is one aspect of this conflict which receives a lot of media attention. The Israelis say that the wall has prevented terrorist attacks but I believe that it causes more problems than it solves. For Palestinians the wall is like a cage: it prevents them from visiting relatives on the Israeli side. Throughout history, barriers have been built to help prevent attacks and to reinforce a sense of division. The separation wall should not be seen as a long term solution. It's something that should be removed in the next years. On a lighter note, the wall had seemed to become a hive of economic activity for the Palestinians. The wall which had become a tourist destination was packed with taxis and people trying to sell things. After passing through the separation wall we hopped in taxis and made our way to Hebron. The first thing that struck me about the West Bank was the difference from Israel.

It was obvious that Palestine was a far poorer place. Development had been slow and it was almost like travelling back in time. While travelling through the countryside we saw several watchtowers and many army blockades. In Hebron we meet our host students in at the centre belonging to SAB's partner organisation in Hebron (The International Palestinian Youth League).

I was staying with a guy called Mohammed who had been to Ireland in October. At first I was quite apprehensive because I didn't really know him. However he was really welcoming and immediately made me feel at ease. It was a bit of a culture shock to be honest. We had only travelled a few miles but already things were completely different. There was a new religion, different culture and language to contend with. I have already talked about Mohammed and his family so I won't go into too much detail. My first night in Palestine was spent, chilling out on the deck with Mohammed, Daniel, Manar and some friends from the neighbourhood. It was a great night that set the tone for the days to come.

The next morning we woke at 6 o'clock. We ate a breakfast of flat bread with hummus washed down with sweet tea. Our first port of call was a meeting with the the director of Hebron's education department. The director is Mrs Nisrene Amro. Ms Amro is an inspirational figure who has done a lot to improve education in Hebron. One thing I really liked about Arab culture is the warm hospitality. Every visitor is offered coffee and tea. After our meeting with we headed to Hussein Boys' school (Manar, Mohammed, Sain and Zaid). We meet the principal who had one of the firmest handshakes. We meet with the new students on the programme. Unfortunately they were quite shy and didn't give much away. During the course of the day we visited two other schools: Widaad Nisredeem Girls' School and Khadeeja Abdeen Girls' School. After our school meetings we headed to the centre where we met with all the students who had travelled to Ireland. There was a really good atmosphere. I don't think many of the Palestinians expected to see Irish people in their city.

Thursday 18th: another long and busy day. Our itinerary was so packed it left little time for relaxation. Thursday morning was spent in Mazania and Mohammed Ali Mohtaseb Girls School. After the school visits we made our way to the Old City area (H2). Hebron is a very old city with beautiful architecture and vibrant streets markets. The Palestinian students talked a lot about settlers and the problems they cause. The settlers there are extremists who have colonised Palestinian land and who bully the local population. The settlers make life very hard for the ordinary people. In Qurtuba Girls' school we saw first hand the problems the Israeli settlers caused there. The settlers had built a synagogue and schools directly below the school. On the way up to the school building, the group saw graffiti sprayed on a wall, it read "Gas the Arabs". I've never experienced such outright hatred. The settlers have prevented the girls from getting a good education. There has been a lot of attacks. Missiles/ rocks have been thrown. Settlers have super-glued the locks and the Palestinians feel that soldiers have done little to protect the young children. The Principal, Mrs Shareef could easily close the school, but she has held fast under the directions of the Palestine education ministry, who have told her to keep the school open. Most of the settlers we saw were armed.

Later that day we visited Tareq ibn Zayad School and talked with the group's teacher Marwan. We also visited the Fakhouri pottery shop, a small business that has experienced a lot of intimidation.

After lunch we went on a tour of Hebron with the Palestinian students. Our starting point was Bab Al Zawiya. (market area in H1). During our tour we walked through the Old City streets, saw the markets and the traditional coffee shops. The Palestinian students showed us the metal mesh that had been erected to stop rocks and other objects falling on the Palestinian shoppers. These rocks were thrown by settlers. Bleach and tar had been thrown down. It's impossible to understand the mind of an Israeli settler in Hebron. How can they treat people so badly?

We also paid a visit to the Ibrahim Mosque which contains the tombs of Abraham, his wife Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and his wife Rebecca. There was a high military presence around the mosque. All the students were checked going into the mosque. That evening I went to visit a friend of Mohammed's family. He had a roof terrace with a view of the entire city. Hebron was so peaceful at night!

Friday 19th, last day in Hebron. I really enjoyed myself and felt that 3 days wasn't enough time. Saying goodbye to everyone was quite emotional. We had all got on so well. It's a place that really grew on me. Before we left the West Bank we visited the Al Fawwar refugee camp. A lot of people living in the camp still have the key to their old homes in Israel. Unfortunately most of these homes were destroyed or have Israeli occupants.

The evening was spent with Elazar's family. We had a traditional Kiddush meal which was a great experience. On Sabbath people get a chance to reflect and escape their busy lives. Jewish tradition really centres around the family. The food was so good. Elazar's father blessed the wine and passed it to everyone. Elazar's sister who had been away with the army joined us for Kiddush. After the dinner, I headed over to Netai's house to meet up with the rest of the crew. We weren't sure what to do for the last night so we decided to go to the German Colony and chill out for a while. This was our last night in Israel. The trip had gone so fast. It only felt like a few days. I would have been completely comfortable to stay a lot longer. We said our goodbyes and I made my way back to Elazar's house for the last time.

This trip had really been an eye-opening experience. I learned a lot about the world and a lot about myself. The things I learned on this trip will stay with me forever. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Darran Irvine, Nike Ruf, John Beer, Keith O'Brien, Donal Rooney and Kaethe Burt O'Dea.

Hopefully I will get a chance to go back to the Middle East. It's a place that will always bring back positive memories.