

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Adrien Dunnion

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First of all, my personal Main Aim for the trip to Israel and Palestine was to learn more about the people's opinions on the conflict on each side. I think that the group discussions that we had as well as being around locals a lot of the time helped me achieve this aim, and I feel much more knowledgeable about the conflict now than I did before going there, even though I had some knowledge about it before.

The first Saturday when we arrived, I went to Tel-Aviv with my host family, to visit the coast. For me, this was an important and enjoyable experience as this enabled me to get to know Israeli culture better and to see their way of life in more than one city and if it differed in any way to Jerusalem. On the Sunday, we went to the Leyada school to have group discussions. I found these very interesting, especially the talk with the 8th graders, as this made us realise that not all ex-soldiers had wanted to be there, and that some were against occupation. We learnt about an organisation, Breaking the Silence, and what they do in order to make others listen to their story as well as all of the other people's stories.

The visit of the Old City of Jerusalem, followed by a trip to the Wailing Wall and to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was really interesting and great fun. It shocked me a little bit as it was a bit surprising to see so many communities and religions living so close together and living relatively peacefully with each other. The souk was a big culture shock for me, a very animated place a something I didn't expect to see in Jerusalem. The Monday gave us the chance to go to the Ha Nissui school. Again we had discussions, but only with the 10th grades. I thought that these students opinions were slightly different to the Leyada students' opinions as incidents have happened to people in the school (Bnayahu Zuckermman's death in Feb. 2004) or in proximity to the school (March 2011), so I thought that some of the Ha Nissui students' opinions were more hostile to the other side, but on the whole, the opinions were quite similar. For me, it was intriguing to see the students' reaction to the events, and the way that even in classrooms their opinion changed a lot.

Afterwards, we visited West Jerusalem, and the Ultra Orthodox area of Mea Shearim. Unfortunately, I was feeling ill at the time, so I only re-joined when we reached the corner of King George Street. I was surprised (to say the least) when I found out that the bakery/café where I had just got a coffee was previously a pizzeria that had been bombed in a terrorist attack. It felt a little bit weird afterwards, but as this wasn't entirely new to me, I wasn't too shocked by it. After a brief shopping "spree", we went to the Bnayahu Zuckermman memorial, placed there as it was where he and 7 others were killed by a terrorist bomb. After a minute silence, we each placed a stone around the memorial, as that is Jewish tradition. It was quite an emotional experience, especially as it touched some of the Israeli students that were with us.

The next day, Tuesday 14, we went to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. This was a shocking and eye-opening experience, as it reminded me of just how cruelly the Jews were treated, and that this period has not been forgotten. Some of the films displayed were a bit disturbing, as it showed what was happening in the concentration and extermination camps. The silence most of us had afterwards summed up the awed feeling we had had.

After this, we took taxis to Checkpoint 300 in Bethlehem. This was my first sight of the Separation Wall, and I was truly surprised by the size of it. It is very imposing and stretches out until the eye could see. After going through the Checkpoint, we reached the other side and, I must say, I had never seen such a culture change in a couple of metres than when we first went into the Palestinian territories.

The dirt roads and general chaos of people and cars were, for me anyway, a massive change to the smooth surfaces and order in Jerusalem.

When we arrived in Hebron, we went to the Media Centre of IPYL (SAB's partner organisation in Hebron), where we met everybody we would be staying with. We were really happy to see each other again, especially Taiyseer (he must have missed my non-stop talking!). We spent the remainder of the day finding more about our families.

The next day, we went to the Ministry of Education offices. It wasn't as I expected, as I thought that as a government building, it would be big and imposing! Afterwards, we went to the Widaad, Khadeeja and Yakoubia schools for brief discussions, before a more detailed discussion at the Al Qawasmeh girls schools and some of their 10th graders. The talks revolved around the Separation Wall and their views of the Israelis. Their opinions were much more hostile and aggressive towards the other side than the Israeli groups. Afterwards, we were treated to songs and traditional dance, which I found very entertaining.

We went to the Qurtuba school afterwards, and I was shocked when we entered H2 for the first, as Qurtuba is in that part of Hebron. The virtual emptiness of the streets was an massive contrast to the animated streets of H1, and for me, this was one of the moments that I found made the conflict appear the most. After a brief session in Qurtuba, he had lunch, then visited the souk of Hebron, as well as the Old City. I found it very enjoyable, the good-humoured nature and enthusiasm of the locals being another good part of the experience.

The visit to the Ibrahimi Mosque was quite surreal, especially the entrance, which was guarded by soldiers. The inside of the Mosque was very well-decorated, and I really liked it. Looking around the inside of the building, I was quite surprised to find that the bullet-holes and their marks had not been patched up. Afterwards, we went onto a street that only Jews were allowed onto in normal times. For me, this was probably the moment that struck me the most during the trip, as I felt that it was good to see Palestinian people being in places that they had never been before, even though they live right next to it.

I also thought that it was nearly a statement of intent, that sort of said "we aren't afraid". The nervous Israwli soldiers helped me reinforce this view slightly. The pottery shop (also out-of-bounds for Muslims in normal conditions) was a great experience, and to see the smiles on the faces of the shop-keepers was really great.

We all returned home. Taiysser, Jake and I went of a bite to eat with Gassan, then we went back home for a quiet night in.

The next day, we went to the Hussein Boys' School where we met with the 11th graders for talks. These talks were very interesting as the students had many different and interesting stories to talk about. They were also curious to find out what we knew about the conflict, and how a solution came up to our conflict in Northern Ireland. We also went to the Mazania Girls' School, and spoke to the 10th graders about the same main topics.

I thought that these two talks were very interesting and factual, and they helped me understand even more about daily life in Hebron. After that, we went to Bethlehem. While there, we visted the Church of the Nativity, which I thought was an important and incredible experience, and as a Christian, something I had to do at least once in my life. The inside of the Church was very surreal, and I found out more of the Church's history with our guided tour. After a small walk around Bethlehem, we grouped in the Square, and had an enjoyable musical moment...

On the last full day in Hebron, we had planned to see more of the Old City after a rest and lunch with our host families. Unfortunately, typical Irish weather greeted us, and the downpour meant we had to cancel the plan and instead we all went to Taiysser's house for a party and food. It was great fun, but the knowledge that it was our last night together was in our minds the whole time, so we were a bit sad as well.

On the last day in Hebron, we woke up to... SNOW!!!!!! The locals thought that it was fantastic, but us Irish couldn't really see the good side... The final meeting at the Media Centre was a very emotional one where everybody, and there were tears from most of the people present. I got two t-shirts from Yara and Jomana, which wasn't what I was expecting but a very nice gesture by them.

Back in Jerusalem, we had an hour for shopping in the souk, before going on the bus for a final party at Shauli's house. Before that, we had our final reflections about the whole trip, which I found summed up the trip extremely well in just 10-15 minutes. The party then took place, and at the end of it, another emotional goodbye from both parties signalled the end of our trip.

The 5 hour wait in Tel-Aviv airport wasn't the most enjoyable way to leave this wonderful part of the world, but the whole trip was just an absolutely unforgettable experience, and I thank SAB so much yet again for giving me the opportunity to make this trip.