

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Emer Gardner

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This year I participated in the Schools Across Borders programme with my fifth year students. The programme is very well organised and structured and promotes the use of many skills by the students. It is an excellent way to educate students and teachers alike about the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

A major part of the programme is the visit by Israeli and Palestinian students to Ireland in November and January respectively, and then over the February midterm, Irish students and teachers visit Jerusalem and Hebron. I was lucky enough to be offered a place on the trip this year.

I had three aims for the trip

- 1) To see the realities of the conflict and listen to both sides of the story.
- 2) As a religion teacher, to gather resources to enhance my teaching.
- 3) As a person of faith, to see the Holy Land.

I can safely say all three of my aims were achieved.

On the trip itself, we spent four days in Jerusalem and four days in the West Bank, staying in Hebron and a day trip to Bethlehem. We visited schools each morning to discuss the work we had done with the Israeli and Palestinian students and also to listen to their opinion, hopes and dreams for their futures. In the afternoons we would visit such sites as The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, The Western Wall and The Church of the Nativity.

We also visited sites on both sides of the conflict where lives had been lost due to acts of violence. In Jerusalem, we visited the spot where Bnyahu Zuckermann (who had been a student at one of the schools involved in the project) lost his life as the result of a suicide bomb on a bus. In Hebron, we visited The Ibrahimi Mosque, where 29 people were massacred in 1994, the bullet holes still visible in the walls. At both spots we had a moment's reflection.

Jerusalem is a very vibrant city, modern and busy. The Israeli students were eager to welcome us and show us the city that they love. It was great to experience a city with so much culture and history. The western part of the city is the Jewish side and I found it to be very much like a lot of European cities.

Hebron, which is situated in the West bank, is very different to Jerusalem. Here, the Palestinians live under the control of the Israeli army and as a result do not have the kind of freedom that you and I take for granted on a daily basis. Seeing the treatment of these wonderful people by the soldiers and the settlers was very hard, and certainly makes you think twice about complaining about a recession. However, the welcoming and positive nature of the Palestinian students, teachers and families was extremely uplifting!

Overall, my experience working with Schools Across Borders has been the highlight of my professional career, it has been an amazing experience which has changed the way I think and feel about certain aspects of life and it is one which I will always be grateful for having!

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