

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

Visit Report by Keziah Hill

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This trip was a trip of a lifetime. Even though it was the scariest yet most exciting thing I have ever done. I've learnt and have accomplished so much from being there. My aims for the trip were to learn more about the conflict and experience it first-hand. I wanted to know more about Jewish and Muslim religion traditions and to experience Israeli and Palestinian life. I had heard lots of different stories about the conflict and of life in Israel and Palestine. I also wanted to meet new people and have fun. I accomplished all that.

Going on the trip I didn't really know much about the conflict or its realities. I knew all about the basics, about the separation wall, but I didn't know about the settlers or how scary and big the separation wall was. Ireland is very pro-Palestinian and I wanted to hear both sides of the story. I didn't want to make a biased opinion, I'm glad I got to see both areas in real life.

Each day held a different thing and was very exciting to see what we were doing.

Well the day finally arrived when it was time to depart for the trip. It was Friday the 10th of February. So we all arrived at Dublin Airport with eagerness and excitement to meet the other people on our team. We had 2 separate flights, one from Dublin to Istanbul and then Istanbul to Tel Aviv Airport. When we finally arrived at Tel Aviv, I was super excited, I couldn't wait to get into a taxi and meet my host family. So I said goodbye to my Irish friends and hopped into a taxi that I was assigned.

My host family was staying at Rish Lakish. Tamara, who is 16 years old, loves acting, volleyball, is fun loving and very outgoing. Her mum and Tamara welcomed me into their home with open arms. I felt at home immediately, I loved the experience already. She showed me where I would be sleeping and a quick tour of her home. I then showered and went straight to bed!

Saturday 11th February

Today is the Jewish day of rest or the Sabbath; I slept in until 2 o'clock in the afternoon, waking up feeling refreshed and ready to do some touring. Tamara and I took our time getting ready and she was organising something to do. Finally we decided to meet up with Tamara's friend Maya who was hosting my friend Stacey who was on our team from Ireland. So we went to a lovely village just outside of Jerusalem called Ein Karem. It was a beautiful place, the weather was just nice and the atmosphere was appealing. We went for a walk to a visitation church and after we sat down and ate some delicious ice-cream.

That night we went out and met some of the other host families and the other Irish people from the group. We went to Jerusalem city where we just bought some coffee and had some good chats and got to know each other properly.

Sunday 12th February

Today we went to Hebrew University Secondary School, where we had a briefing session to confirm everyone's aims for the week. We met with the Principal, Dr Gilead Amir in his office where he told us a lot of information about the school, what they do and how they do it. We then had a group discussion with the 10th grade of that school. We focused the project aims and the students' identities. Overall we had a good discussion we got to know the students more and understood their

views on the conflict. After that discussion some of the students wanted to get photos of with us, they were all so friendly and welcoming to us.

Then we talked to the 8th grade students who went to visit Hebron. We focused on the subject of the Israeli Ministry of Education encouraging all students to visit the Cave of the Machpela (Jewish name for the the Ibrahimi Mosque), but the teacher in this group wanted the students to meet a group called 'Breaking the Silence' a group of ex-Israeli soldiers who had done service in Hebron and wanted to show the discrimination their against and how hard it is for them to go to Hebron and stop people at check points. However, due to a local protest by local settlers, the police prevented the students from meeting the group 'Breaking Silence'. One of the parents heard about the trip and complained to one of the local newspapers and word got out. The students gave their opinions on the project visit and they gave messages to the Irish people to give to the Palestinian students.

After that we visited the Old City where some of the Israeli students joined us, firstly, we went to a grave yard which was where some Muslims had been buried and we saw some of the graves which were all damaged, we walked through an outdoor shopping centre called 'Mamilla' and then onto the Old City where we met Oren our tour guide-who was also Pippa's sister's boyfriend.

We started off at Jaffa Gate and from there we went to the Armenian and Jewish Quarter and from there we saw the first sightings of the West Bank Barrier and then onto the Jewish Quarter again, in which we saw the Wailing Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built on Calvary/Golgotha where Jesus was crucified.

We also saw the Dome of The Rock which is sacred to Muslims, but which almost all Palestinian Muslims cannot visit because they are forbidden from entering Jerusalem under Israeli Military Law.

We exited by the Muslim quarter and Souk-the market, where we ate Kanafe, a Palestinian desert speciality. The evening all of us including the Israeli host students went to Teddy Stadium to do rock climbing. It was so fun, just being all together and having a laugh!

Monday 13th February

Today we went to Ha Nuissui School, which is the school Tamara attends. We spoke with the 10th grade group there and we talked mainly about the military and one comment I found interesting was that 'Palestine doesn't have an army because they don't have a country'.

Judy the teacher there then showed us the memorial plaque of a student Bnayahu Zuckerman was killed on a bus by a suicide attack in 2004. We then visited West Jerusalem where some of the Israeli students joined us, we started off in Zion Square then onto Montefiore Village. We visited the Mahane Yehuda market where we bought some really good ice-cream then we had a sing-along with Jake in the middle of the square. We visited Mea Shearim where the Ultra Orthodox (Hassidic) communities live. We then had a timeout for some shopping and some free time. Then we ate at a coffee shop in the German Colony.

I spent the evening with my host family and gave them their gifts and ate some really nice food and packed my bags.

Tuesday 14th February

I said my goodbyes to my host family and brought my bags to Hebrew University School. From there we went to The Holocaust Museum-Yad Vashem. Some of the Israeli students joined us and we had separate discussions and a briefing session before and after. I really enjoyed the museum, found it very interesting. The museum was very well laid out and I found it very interesting and learned lots of new facts and very touching stories.

We then took taxis to Checkpoint 300, it was the way to get into Bethlehem and was our first taste of the West Bank. The other side of the wall was completely different to the Israeli side. We were then welcomed by the Palestinian families. My host girl was Diana, who is extremely energetic and her and her family was very welcoming.

Wednesday 15th - Friday 17th February

The next days while we were in Hebron were life changing, it was so amazing to see the daily life of the Palestinian students. The people there are so lovely and generous, I was so overwhelmed by the love and hope in their lives. They are so proud of Hebron and where they are from. And it gives everyone hope. We went to a lot of different schools talking to the girls, for me, was fantastic they are so very bright and talkative. One girl said 'make bridges not walls' which is correct because this conflict has been built up by hate and it has gotten so out of hand that everyone needs to talk calmly together. I know its not that easy.

We saw the views of the wire mesh above alleyway to protect shopkeepers and public from rubbish thrown by settlers living above them in the market area of the Old City. We walked onwards to rooftop of Hebron Rehabilitation Committee where everyone got a view of the Old City it was our first sighting of Ibrahimi Mosque. We walked onwards, stopping by Abu Ala, who makes Turkish Delight where I bought some for my Granddad who loved it, passing through turnstiles and a soldier checkpoint.

One thing that we did that I found very moving and scary yet exciting was the walk we did with the Palestinian students down Avraham/ Shuhada Street. Palestinians cannot walk down here, as where we were walking had barriers up beside it to stop people from walking over to the other side. The Israeli soldiers were there and asked us our religions after the walk and we said Christian of course, but the Palestinian students who were with us were Muslim and were not allowed by Israeli Military order to walk in this area. The soldier then let us over the other side to visit Darran's friend Khaled Fakhouri's pottery shop. I bought a few gifts there for my mum and a souvenir for me to remember that important and special moment.

We visited the Ibrahimi Mosque; we saw tombs of Sarah, wife of Abraham, tombs of Isaac and his wife Leah; tomb of Abraham; the building is divided in two: on the Jewish synagogue side, there are the tombs of Joseph and Jacob.

We saw the bullet marks on the wall from the massacre on 25 February 1994 when Dr. Baruch Goldstein killed 29 people with his machine gun. We then had a moments silence to remember the families of those who were killed in that massacre.

We went to Bethlehem on one of the days, which was a fantastic experience, we saw where Jesus was supposedly born and we had a sing-song with the students.

On the last day- Saturday the snow fell, and boy it was crazy, so we said our goodbyes and off we went back to Jerusalem. After we had our final reflections and went back to Shauli's house where we just hung out with some of the students there until midnight.

In conclusion, this trip was a trip of a lifetime, I honestly did not know anything about the conflict or how serious it is. Staying with a host family on either side added to the experience and made it more enjoyable. I got to know the other students from my school even better and have made friends for life.

Thank you so much Darran for allowing this trip and for bringing us to the places that we saw. I now know so much about the conflict, including Settlers/Settlements, Jewish and Muslim traditions, the Old city and what that means to people. I thoroughly enjoyed myself, and even though it was very hard at times I never had a dull moment. We were like a family and we got on all so well. I wanted to experience the conflict for myself and I didn't want to form a biased opinion at all.



Robert Shaw, me, Pippa Peters and Neil Boles