

# Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2012

## Visit Report by Marcus Cooney

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I'll start from when we landed in Ben Gurion airport. We were all tired from a long flight and I was first to get dropped off at my host families house in Shoeva along with Adrien, another student who'd I have the company of knowing over the next few days. We came in, said hello and went to bed. The next day was the Sabbath: Jews don't work on a Saturday for that reason, so Shauli (my host) and his mother took us out to Tel Aviv. We saw Jerusalem's beautiful woodland on the way up, and took a couple of pictures on the way as well. We reached our destination and went to Tel Aviv harbour, got splashed on by the waves, and also ate dinner in the one of the loudest restaurants I've ever been in. The reason I'm starting my report with this is because this day kick-started a ten day experience that I'll never forget.

For the rest of my stay in Jerusalem I developed new senses, feelings from a totally different perspective compared to my own. We visited schools like Hebrew University Secondary School and Ha Nissui Secondary School, which were both eccentric and crazy (the good kind) at the same time. I enjoyed my time in both schools; the students were interested in what we had to say and what we were doing. I especially liked the eighth grade group we met in the Hebrew University, who had been to Hebron for a visit to the Cave of the Machpela (or Ibrahimi Mosque), that was nice. There was also fun in the streets as well, like when we ate ice cream in the Mahane Yehuda or when we went shopping.

Then there were the emotional parts, the strong spiritual parts in Jerusalem. Like seeing the Dome of the Rock from rooftop while also watching on duty soldiers pass by or going to the Western Wall (which is probably one of the greatest moments in my lifetime that I'll never forget) and to see the church of the Holy Sepulchre and leaving a stone for Bnayahu Zuckerman ( a student from Ha Nissui School who had been killed by a suicide bomb attack in 2004) was powerful as well. Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum was indeed a highlight also.

Checkpoint 300 at the entrance to Bethlehem was a shock to say the least, the great barrier wall that technically split a country in two was decorated in metaphoric graffiti that compared it to Germany's Berlin Wall. The artist Banksy had pieces as well, but the graffiti that was my favourite was written in pencil on a watchtower pillar, it said "MAKE LOVE, MAKE SEX, WHATEVER BUT STOP WAR!" I thought it was powerful. When driving to Hebron I saw differences on the spot, like barely no trees anywhere, only sand, and there being a settlement almost every second mile.

When we reached Hebron it was like a different planet, planet Hebron. Hebron looked as if the apocalypse happened and then the land and people were given a shot of adrenaline to kick start it all again. It was quick, loud and very enjoyable. My host family's father was the Director of IPYL, the partner organisation for S.A.B. in Hebron. Mister Adli Daana took me in and treated me like one of his own and I'm forever grateful to him for that.

The whole Hebron trip was a lifestyle switch. Schools are split so we visited the girls' schools on the first day, some to say thank you and then some to have discussions with the students. One school I remember very clearly was Al Qawasmeh School, where they performed a traditional dance. But all

schools had their own little features that made them unique. Going into the H2 area was again like another world. It was quiet, very quiet like a forced silence. As I walked down a street that came known to me as "Apartheid Street" I saw kids younger than me walking through metal detectors and getting searched almost every day on their way to school. While staring out of the partly broken fence of Qurtuba girl's school I saw a teasing sight because for Palestinians living in the H2 area, from where I was standing, I could see a market bustling with life while being blocked from the side by a giant concrete wall. It had a sad emotional quality to it. I saw the intentions of the settlers on the hard working Palestinians who worked below them. For instance there was protective netting above where Palestinians worked that holds whatever was thrown down on them from the settlers.

We also walked down Avraham Avinu (a street that is illegal to Palestinians by Israeli military order). Ibrahim mosque was a huge highlight in Hebron.

But what I really loved in the places I went to was the atmosphere, fun and loving: whether it be singing Molly Malone in Jerusalem or Wonder Wall in Bethlehem, it was always fun.

And finally the last piece I want to say is this: before I embarked on the trip I had to write a personal aim. Honestly I really didn't think of what I was writing, I just wrote what came to mind first. I wrote without thinking or having a long thought about it. My aim was: "to gain an experience, to see what I've been told in the meetings with the Israeli and Palestinians students. Also to know the cultures on both sides". After going there and now writing on my experiences, I can say I didn't succeed in my aim: I did more than just that. I experienced two sides of life, two different worlds. With both people having differences and similarities while staying true to themselves and some believing that there could be peace and harmony. I was taken by surprise. I was excited!