

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by James Doyle

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Day 1 (Friday, 18-2-2011) and Day 2 (Saturday, 19-2-2011)

After our hour and a half flight to Amsterdam, we only had forty minutes until our flight to Tel Aviv so it was a bit of a rush. After we arrived at 2.15 am, Darran was taken off for Israeli security checks for three and a half hours, so the rest of us just waited in the baggage collection area. At about half six, we got mini-bus taxis. Ciarán, Kate, Rebekah and I were brought to our host families and the others were brought to the hotel.

On the way, we saw our first group of Israeli soldiers. It's really weird to see them sitting so casually, holding their machine guns. The army vans were huge and armoured too. We saw a big, concrete wall separating an Arab neighbourhood from a Jewish one. Because we arrived on the Sabbath, we got to see lots of Orthodox Jews on their way to the synagogue.

The taxi dropped Ciarán and I to Yotam's house where we met his family; his mother, Noorit, his father, Itai, and his two younger brothers. Yotam brought us to a small hill near his house with a great view over the Old City of Jerusalem. We then went to a nature reserve and oasis called Ein Gedi. We had to drive along the Dead Sea to reach it. There were lots of animals there, like ibexes.

Day 3 (Sunday, 20-2-2011)

We had to get up at 6.45 this morning. After we got ready, Itai took Yotam and us to the Hebrew University Secondary School (Leyada). Along the way, we saw a lot of the government buildings. Yotam's school did not seem strict at all but apparently it's one of the strictest. There were students sitting on benches outside classes, lots of wall murals and artwork and the students just walk into the staff room. Most of the buildings in Jerusalem look similar, made out of a light brown stone. It kind of reminds me of Rome. We walked through a forest that was on campus too. We went back to Yotam's school then.

We went to the room where we were going to have the discussion and sat with the students and waited for the others. Once everyone was settled, we introduced ourselves. Darran then asked some ice-breaker questions (who are the sporty ones, who are the big mouths, etc.). We then went on to talk about the importance of religion in our lives. You could begin to see a contrast here, with the vast majority of the Israeli students being practicing Jews and most of the visiting group being non-practicing Christians. The politics question really showed the contrast. All the Israeli students were interested in politics, believing their politicians control the army, the economy, their education, etc. The visiting students felt they had lost faith in the Irish politicians and felt politics did not have a huge influence on their lives.

We took a fifteen-minute break before we used out cultural items. Alex showed the Israeli students a hurley and sliotar. Pascal played the fiddle and some of the girls did a small céilí with the Israeli students. Darran then got us to sing some Irish songs, like Molly Malone and The Fields of Athenry.

We walked through a busy market with really narrow streets to get to Jaffa Gate where we met Yotam and Tamar. We saw some of the Stations of the Cross. There are four sections within the Old City: Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Armenian.

We went through more security to get to the Western Wall. The boys and girls are separated. The boys have to cover their heads with kippahs, but the girls don't. It was surreal to see Israeli soldiers

praying at the wall too.

We walked around the Jewish Quarter more and saw the Via Dolorosa. We went to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where some people believe Jesus is buried. We got to see some Franciscans in the middle of a prayer session. We walked through the Ethiopian Coptic Village before visiting St. Catherine's well in a smaller church.

Yotam brought us to see a Palestinian Muslim house, which had been taken over by a radical group of settlers. It was impossible to imagine what it must be like to have your home taken from you. The settlement had a playground behind barbed wire and they were precariously built. We went back to the church and some people visited Jesus' tomb.

Day 4 (Monday, 21-2-2011)

Today, we got up again at 6.45 and went with Yotam to his school. We got to Ha Nissui School at half eight. We had to come up with some of the questions we were going to ask at the meeting. We then headed over to the school where we met Ayla, Avital and other students who were previously involved in the programme.

The 10th graders were only able to come for twenty minutes so we had to start without them. When the 10th graders arrived, we went straight into what the programme was about and the pros and cons of it. The main con seemed to be that the Israelis do not meet with the Palestinians. The main pro was visiting Belfast and seeing a resolved conflict.

Then we had the entertainment, which was much the same as yesterday. After visiting the school, we walked to the Old City, through many security points, to get to the Dome of the Rock. Everyone was staring at Alex's hurley, even though they were really casual about the machine guns.

The Dome of the Rock is a famous mosque where the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to Heaven. Non-Muslims are only allowed visit it for a few hours a day. The building itself is beautiful. Darran explained to us that this is where almost all Palestinians want to visit, but can't. We made a short video message to show the Palestinian students we were thinking of them.

We went to an ultra-Orthodox Jewish area. The people who lived in this area had no TVs, iPods, mobiles, etc. The people were dressed in the Orthodox Jewish clothes with long hair and beards. We then had an hour for shopping. Yotam, Ciarán, Denise and I went to tourist shops. We went to a restaurant for a while before going home. We had a traditional African- Jewish meal with couscous and tomatoes with sauces. Noorit was really interested to hear about how religion was taught in schools in Ireland.

Day 5 (Tuesday, 22-2-2011)

We packed our bags for Hebron and brought them with us to Yotam's school. On the way, Itai explained to us that he trains some Palestinian (and different nationality) doctors, even though some of them don't have passports (people just tend to ignore this).

There are a lot of Palestinian patients, particularly for cystic fibrosis, because there is no hospital specializing in this in Hebron. The hospitals in Hebron are also not as technologically advanced.

Itai dropped us off to school. We got to Keshet School at about nine. The school is for both primary and secondary students so it's really big. When the rest of the group arrived we went to the library. Three students showed us around the school. The classrooms and class sizes are fairly similar to at home.

We went into a small room to start our meeting, which went really well. We talked about our hobbies and almost all the Israeli students drew, sculpted, painted or animated which was really cool. We talked about why the project was important. We talked about the settlements, and "how some Israelis do in fact pay the Palestinians for the land". We were also told that the Israeli government

does condone some settlements and does not condone others. We finished off with the same entertainment as the other days.

We went for refreshments in the teacher's room and got a chance to speak with some of the students.

After lunch we went back to the hotel to get taxis. We got the taxis to the Separation Barrier, which we got to see for the first time. You have to walk through passages of chain mail to get to the entrance point. You're kind of herded through a spinning door. Our passports weren't checked or our bags searched.

Stepping out of the passage is like stepping into a new world. This side of the wall is completely covered with graffiti (including some of Banksy's work).

We got taxis to the centre of Hebron to meet with the Palestinian students. We had a short briefing before going to our host families' houses. I met the family, who were some of the most welcoming people I've ever met. Amir's brother, Nour, went with me for a walk for an hour. Nour told me he's never travelled outside of Palestine and he doesn't really want to. He knows people who live in Israel, including relatives. We went to a soccer pitch and saw Amir's school. Amir was also really impressed that we'd been to the Dome of the Rock.

Day 6 (Wednesday, 23-2-2011)

Me, Amir and Nour walked to the centre. Lots of people were looking at us because we were tourists. We went inside and explained our trip expectations to Adli. We then started walking to the school, Widaad Nisredeem School. When we arrived at the girls' school we were shown into the principal's office where we were given refreshments. The discussion today was more intense. Many of the students feel meeting the Israelis is pointless because, whilst they can be friends, it isn't going to make any difference to the conflict. Solenn made the good point of saying if the Israeli government sees the Israelis and Palestinians meeting, then they will change things. The girls also want a united Palestine, with all refugees living here but that is not possible with settlers taking so much of the land. One girl felt Israel treated Palestine as a land with no people.

We went to Khadeeja Abdeen School and Denise and Kate sang for some of the students in the yard.

We went to the Old City where we saw Israeli watchtowers and checkpoints. We also met a man who works under the covered part of the street where settlers throw rubbish down. He says that they also throw eggs, urine and dirty water on top of him and his products.

We continued and visited a museum about the Old City. We sat on the rooftop of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, which gave us a view of the entire city. We could see four Israeli watchtowers from the roof as well as an Israeli Apache helicopter. We went to the Ibrahimi Mosque where Abraham's tomb is. We had to go through a few metal detectors and get searched by soldiers to get in. There was a thin partition in the mosque, which separated the mosque from a synagogue. The girls had to wear capes to cover their heads. We saw bullet holes in the mosque from a massacre, which killed 29 people.

After that, we went to Fakhouri pottery shop. We had to cross over a checkpoint where only Jews and Christians may pass. Mai, Nour and Ghada also came with us. It was the first time they had been able to come here.

Day 7 (Thursday, 24-2-2011)

Today, we went to three schools in the morning. The first school was another all-girls school (Mazania School). The opinions were pretty similar to yesterday: proud to be Palestinian, generally political and religious and didn't trust the Israelis.

We were running late when we arrived in Amir's school (Al Hussein School). This talk was just what

the programme was about.

We went to the last school then, Qawasmeh School. The principal really was a character! She did wear a headscarf, but she also wore jeans and make-up. It was funny seeing the students try to find Ireland on a map.

We went to the Ministry of Education Office Director after this. After lunch we crossed through the checkpoint into H2. All the soldiers did was check our passports. It was like a completely different country. The place was completely empty, just silence. We went to Samah's house. King's Hospital has sponsored her education. Her story was very hard to hear. Soldiers live on her roof. They cut off her electricity sometimes. Some of the settlers have thrown rocks at her and made fun of her. There has to be one person in her house at all times or else the settlers would come in and take it. But they were so nice and welcoming to all of us.

We went to Jamil's house then. It's surreal being in such a peaceful place, surrounded by orange trees and then finding out that there's a motion sensor camera watching our every move. On the way back to H1, we saw a stop sign, which Palestinians know not to walk past or they will have rocks thrown at them by settlers.

At night, we all went to Ghada's house as kind of a goodbye party.

Day 8 (Friday, 25-2-2011)

I got up just before eight this morning and said goodbye to Amir's family. We went to the hotel and waited for the others to arrive. We said goodbye to all the Palestinian students, which was really hard. We got taxis to Bethlehem. The taxi driver was a refugee and he told us how much he wanted to return to his village. We went to the Church of the Nativity. We got taxis to the Separation Wall. We met a woman whose house is surrounded on three sides by the wall. She used to own a successful business and then the wall was built and she was cut off from it. We went through Checkpoint 300 again. We had our bags x-rayed and our passports checked.

We gave our final messages during our lunch. We met up with the Israeli students and went to an Armenian café. We said goodbye to everyone before going back to Yotam's house for a Kiddush.

Day 9 (Saturday, 26-2-2011)

The taxi arrived at Yotam's house at about one. We arrived back in Ireland in the afternoon and all said goodbye to each other. We all said we'd go back to Israel and Palestine again some time, hopefully by then the conflict will be resolved.