

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2010

Visit Report by Keith O' Brien

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This year I took part in the Schools Across Borders programme with my 6th year students. The programme itself was an eye-opening and fruitful experience for the students. It allowed the students to investigate and to take part in a programme that deals with real issues that allow students to take ownership of their learning and experience of the project.

I was lucky enough to have been invited over to Israel and Palestine to visit schools and meet the young people who have been caught up in the conflict. This trip was also the first time Irish students went over to stay with Israeli and Palestinian families. The students hosted Israelis and Palestinians when they were over so this was a chance for four students to see the life their friends live. We visited Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron. In the morning time we would go visit schools telling the students about the programme and also listening to their experiences of the conflict. We also gave them a sample of some of our Irish culture with the help of the students and a fellow teacher. In the afternoon we would go visiting places like the Church of the Nativity, The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Western Wall, Ibrahim Mosque and Dome of the Rock.

Jerusalem is a wonderful city split into the eastern side that is the Arab side and the western which is the Jewish side. The city is a hot bed of religious traditions and as a Religion and History teacher it gave me a chance to visit the places I have read about. I found that it was really interesting to witness the different cultures trying to coexist in a city that means so much to so many people. The Israeli students were very eager to show off how wonderful their city is and to show everyone that Israel is full of hospitable people. I found the Jewish side of the city to be like a lot of European cities. The shops and palm trees and even the decoration of homes reminded me of being in Spain or other Mediterranean countries. The Israeli students were very welcoming and willing to show us a city they clearly love.

Hebron is a completely different to the Israeli side of Jerusalem. Hebron is in the West Bank which is being controlled by the Israeli army. The West Bank is surrounded by a wall and entrances that are protected by soldiers. Hebron is a vibrant city in parts. The people in Hebron were extremely friendly. They were very hospitable and kind. The big problem in Hebron is that there is a section called H2 which has Israeli settlers in it. They are protected by the army but the Palestinian people are not free to walk the streets. The school we visited spoke of stones thrown at kids on their way to school, the school being set on fire and midnight raids on children's homes. There are streets closed that if Palestinians walked on would be arrested. They had to put covers to stop the settlers throwing paint, bottles, stones, wood and rubbish on the people as they try to go about their business. While we were there, we saw tar and feathers that were thrown at people. The students spoke of beatings by the army and we also heard of how people have been killed by soldiers. I found this hard to comprehend that students the same age as the girls I teach had not got the freedom to walk through a street without the fear of being hurt.

The overall experience was excellent. I got to see the conflict from both sides and my eyes were opened to the realities of what is happening. I got to meet some wonderful people who want peace and are willing to take part in the project in order to obtain this. It was an experience that I will never forget and I will always be grateful to Schools Across Borders for the opportunity to meet wonderful people and to experience and see first hand the situation in Palestine and Israel.

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