

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by Rebekah Roe

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FRIDAY 18:

On the 18th February, 11 students (including myself), 4 teachers and the SAB Director set off on our cultural experience trip to Israel and Palestine. The group of us met in Dublin Airport at 3pm, from there we checked in and then we were on our way. We flew from Dublin to Amsterdam, then got on another flight and flew from Amsterdam to Tel Aviv during the night, landing early Saturday morning.

SATURDAY 19: (Sabbath)

We arrived in Tel Aviv Airport at 2am on Saturday morning and were finally able to leave at around 6am, as Darran had to go through security checks by the Israeli security for about 4 hours (even though they told us he would be fifteen minutes!!). Once we were all together again we went and got two taxis which split us into two groups; people who were staying in the hotel and the people who were staying at host families. I was in the taxi which was dropping us at our host families. There were 4 of us. We said our goodbyes and of we went in the direction of Jerusalem, as this was where we were going to be staying until Tuesday evening.

As we were driving down the road we stopped at traffic lights, just as we were coming into Jerusalem. Sitting in the traffic lights, Kate (another girl on trip) and myself noticed something odd in the corner of our eyes. When we took a closer look we noticed something which was quite odd, two men were walking across the road, one wearing a huge furry hat with a long black jacket and another wearing a long black jacket and one long curl coming from in front of each ear. To us this seemed extremely odd but to the people living in this part of the world this was just like any other Sabbath day in Israel. In one way we were lucky to arrive on their Sabbath as we could relax that day because hardly anything is open on a Sabbath and then on the other hand it was kind of annoying because we couldn't do anything!

I was the first to be dropped off at my host family. I was greeted by my host Avital and her father. I was so nervous as I had never stayed with somebody who I had never seen before, in a foreign country knowing that my family was thousands of miles away. I was really shy and at first it felt really awkward. I went to bed nearly as soon as I got there as I hadn't slept since the morning before (I know this sounds kind of rude but they were expecting us to want to go to bed!!).

By the time I had woken up, late afternoon, Avital's mother and brother were home. Avital, her mother and her father brought me out in their car to explore the city of Jerusalem. It is an amazing city with many buildings built upon hills. When it got dark the city's lights were turned on and the city just lit up like nothing I'd ever seen before.

By the time we had gotten home it was late so Avital and myself went and talked in her bedroom until we finally fell asleep.

SUNDAY 20:

Today was officially our first day in the city of Jerusalem. I woke up and went into the kitchen where I met her family once again getting there breakfast. Even though I was warned I still wasn't expecting to see Avital's 19 year old brother dressed in Army clothes. In Israel each person has to do at least 2-3 years service in the army at this stage of their life.

I was collected at Avital's school at 8 o'clock that morning. The first school that we visited was Hebrew University Secondary (Leyada) that morning. This was our first discussion with the Israeli students. It went well but it seemed a little bit unorganised on their part, which was expected for our first day. We all were asked questions about politics, religion and our own experiences that have happened in our life.

At the end of the discussion Alex (another guy in our group) demonstrated his hurling skills, Pascal (a teacher from the French school, another member from our group) played the fiddle while a few of us got up and did some Irish dancing. The discussion ended well and afterwards our group got together and we had our own group discussion afterwards to state our own personal expectations for the trip.

In the afternoon we visited the Old City of Jerusalem. We started at the Damascus Gate and Muslim Quarter. We passed by the 7th Station of the cross. We made our way to Jaffa Gate where we were being joined by two Israeli students, Yotam and Tamar. From here, we made our way to the Western Wall. This is a very important wall for religious people and it is also known as the Wailing Wall. We all placed our own private prayer on a piece of paper into the cracks of the wall, this is done by many people. After this we continued on until we reached the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on the site of Calvary where Jesus was crucified. This was such a wonderful place.

We saw where people believe that Jesus was crucified and also where he was believed to be buried. I will never forget these moments, they will stay with me forever.

After that, Yotam pointed out a Palestinian Muslim house which was taken over by a radical settler group. We then made our way to a coffee shop where we met up with our hosts and got a taxi back to our host family's house.

MONDAY 21:

That morning, we visited Ha Nissui School. The school which my host Avital goes to. We all met up there at 10 o'clock. We did the same type of discussion as the previous day in the Hebrew University Secondary School. Except this time we were much more prepared for the questions and the other activities which would take place. In the afternoon we met up with some Israeli students and started our tour from Zion Square- we reflected on the fact that so many suicide bomb attacks had taken place in this central shopping area. We then made our way to the Machane Yehuda Market (where we made a lunch and ice-cream stop!!)

After this we went to Mea Shearim (we debated on whether or not we should go down here as we weren't sure if it would be safe or not) In the end we decided as a group to go, which ended up being a good idea as we experienced this Ultra-Orthodox area. This lasted the rest of the day so when we arrived back at the Market we went to a corner restaurant on King George Street, (where a suicide bomb attack had happened) where we reflected on what had happened that day. We then went home to our host families.

TUESDAY 22:

We got up as normal, except we had to say goodbye to our host families as we were travelling to Hebron in the afternoon. The group collected me at Avital's school, as usual. This morning, we visited Keshet School in the morning.

This discussion was particularly interesting with the Israeli students. We discussed the settlements and how it affects their lives. In the afternoon we traveled to Hebron through Checkpoint 300 at Bethlehem. It was an opportunity that most people who were not from Palestine wouldn't get to see, as people who are not from the country (like us) would go through a different entrance which wouldn't allow them to see the full impact that the checkpoint holds on so many people's lives.

When we crossed the checkpoint and went into the Palestinian side of the wall, we were met by many taxis and people trying to sell random items! (i.e. flutes!!) Once we decided on the 4 taxis to use we were on our way to the Israeli Palestinian Youth League centre, in Hebron, where we were

going to meet our host families in Palestine.

I noticed that the drivers in Palestine are crazy! They drive like mad men and there is never a minute when you don't hear a horn beep!! When we arrived at the centre we had an informal meeting with the Palestinian students who had visited Ireland and other host students. We were welcomed by Adli Daana, Director of the International Palestinian Youth League. This is where we were put with our hosts. Thankfully this time I was sharing a host family: Kate and myself went to Mai Hasans' house. I was thankful not to be on my own as I was a little more nervous now that we were in Palestine, because I felt so closed in by the wall, I kind of felt as though if anything happened we were trapped! We all separated and went to our new host families. When we arrived we were greeted by Mai's family. We sat down and had a meal (rice and chicken!). Then we went upstairs, talked and fell asleep!

WEDNESDAY 23:

On our first day in Palestine, the group met up at the Youth Centre (which we had previously organised) where we all got ready for the day ahead. We first visited the two girls schools: Widaad Nisredeem School and Khadeeja Abdeen School. In the first school we had quite a deep discussion, in fact the most intense discussion of the week! Then we went to our next school where we met for a brief discussion. Denise and Kate sang a song in the playground out the back where we also got a few pictures with the students.

In the afternoon we visited the Old City: inside this area the Palestinians can move freely, except where there is overhead mesh to protect passers by and shopkeepers from rubbish etc. thrown down by settlers above them. We saw soldiers and the watchtowers from the rooftop which we went onto. We visited the newly opened museum ,inside the Old City, where we saw Turkish Baths. Overall we had a very interesting day, we saw lots of things and we also got a little emotional over the whole issue. This was quite an amazing day full of different aspects of the conflict. Later we joined up with our hosts again and went back to their houses.

THURSDAY 24:

As arranged we all met up at the Youth Centre, early that morning. We visited Hussein School, a boys' school in Hebron. Afterwards we visited Mazania Girls' School, the final school that we were visiting on the trip. This was quite a sad feeling, as we knew that our time was running out on the trip, we would be going home in a few days!. This was an overall interesting and fun discussion. They were the most bubbly and fun school of them all!

After this, we went back to the Old City of Hebron (H2). We first went to Samah's house (whose University education is being funded by my school, The King's Hospital). Samah's family is very poor, so poor that even though she is terribly smart, they would not be able to send her to college. This was the most emotional aspect of the trip, as we realised just how real this conflict is.

We all had our emotional moments, and I am not just saying that, we all did find this quite overwhelming. Afterwards we walked just a few metres over to Jamil's house (a student hosting).

We had a light snack, while discussing what we had just seen. We then went back to the Old City again towards the Ibrahimi Mosque. While on our way here we passed through a security gate, which was our first encounter with the Israeli soldiers pointing guns at our heads. This was quite strange and scary as nothing like this had ever happened to us before, we were not used to it.

When we got to the Mosque we (the girls) had to bow our head and shoulders as a sign of respect. Inside we saw the tombs of Isaac and Rebekah, Sarah and Abraham and the tombs of Joseph and Jacob.

After this, we visited shopkeepers selling crafts. Some of us bought these as gifts.

To end the day, all the students went to Ghada's (student hosting) house for a little party as the following day we would be returning to Jerusalem.

FRIDAY 25:

This was sadly our final day. To start the day of we went to Bethlehem, in the morning, on our way back to Israel. We visited The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Here, we queued to see the birthplace of Jesus Christ. This was another amazing point of the trip, which I will never forget. We made a final reflection at the Separation/Security Barrier, before entering back into Jerusalem. When we arrived back in Jerusalem, we went to a pizza restaurant where we all sat down enjoyed a pizza and made a last reflection, which we recorded. As a final gathering the group met with some of the Israeli students in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem. This was sad but as had to say our final goodbyes to the Israeli students as we were leaving extremely early the following morning.

SATURDAY 26:

Our flight was a very early flight to begin our journey back home. We left Jerusalem at 12am Saturday morning and got back to Ireland at around 3:30pm.

REFLECTION:

The whole trip was a once in a life time opportunity. Not many people my age get to go to a place like Israel or Palestine. I do appreciate the fact that I was one of the lucky ones that was chosen for the trip, I really do appreciate it. I would recommend anybody to go out there and experience what we did. Before I went out I took things for granted, the experience showed me that I should be thankful for what I have. Overall, I really enjoyed myself, I had my happy and sad moments. The trip really touched me.

THANK YOU :)