

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2010

Visit Report by Sadhbh Burt Fitzgerald

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Saturday 13th

We arrived in Israel, Tel Aviv Airport on the Sabbath. The airport was really modern with a large fountain in the middle and a lot of expensive duty free. I wasn't expecting this so it came as a shock, I wasn't expecting it to be much better than Dublin airport, and that's not saying much at all. It was a warm morning and we took a bus to Jerusalem.

It was a long enough journey but maybe it seemed longer due to the fact that we were all absolutely wrecked from the long plane ride and I don't think the adrenalin kicked in until later. The surroundings during the journey were enough to keep me awake (along with the right soundtrack from my i-pod). I wasn't nervous at all, I was excited. A lot of my friends said to me "Don't die" before I left but I thought that was a huge exaggeration: we were going to Jerusalem and Hebron, not the Gaza Strip.

The route we took, though it was mainly highway, was surrounded by really lush country side with fields and hills. There was a lot of open space. I was told by my host before I came over that the place was mainly desert with rock, a lot of grey, but it was nothing like that, I was later told that during the winter/spring season it is usually quite lush and then in the summer everything dries up, leaving it dusty.

Coming up to Jerusalem was very beautiful as it's on a slope and next to it is a huge green valley. Jerusalem looked somewhat like a Greece/Rome mix, with grape and olive vines and old buildings made from Limestone. We each got dropped at our hosts houses. The houses there were very very beautiful, with plants and trees around them. All the houses were a mix of modern and old, bringing a rich but antique feel to them.

Tal's house had a beautiful view of the valley through a huge window in her sitting room. It was brilliant re-uniting with Tal, we had a lot to talk about, going over what had happened during the time we were away from each other, but I'm afraid I was a bit lousy with talk and I quickly went upstairs, had a shower and went to bed. I usually take ages in the shower so I was very worried. I found the fact that they were complaining and apologizing about the lack of water annoying since I had heard they get their water from Palestine and it made me think about the lack of water I would be facing in Palestine when I got there.

After a rest we went downstairs to have lunch. We took part in the breaking of the bread ceremony, which was nice, but awkward since I didn't know any of the prayers. Tal's parents eat a lot like I do at home so there was no huge difference, they don't eat typically Israeli food, but it was all very very nice. We then went on a really long walk into the "forest" as they called it which was the valley. As I expected there were a lot of beautiful plants and everything seemed to be in season except for the almond trees.

We passed by a scouts event, people walking their dogs and people mountain cycling on our walk and it felt like I was in central park until we got a little higher and there was a view of the Arab houses. It was a beautiful view of the mountains and trees and it was really warm and sunny, the only problem was the Arab houses which didn't seem to be in great condition, scattered across the hill. The houses, like all others, were made from limestone but looked like they hadn't been renovated in a long time.

We continued on our walk to a memorial park for soldiers killed during an attack. Some boys as young as 10 were being commemorated. I encountered an emotional block when I was there, which I

kept experiencing later, and couldn't feel anything, I think its because its hard for me to link the slabs of stone with a real person. The park was absolutely huge, we travelled through garden after garden of plaques.

We then walked through a huge open memorial square where there were steps up to a large piece of writing. We then walked back to the house. I went back to bed for a while and then Cliona came over with her host's Mom. Apparently her host, Noa, was away so we were to take Cliona with us to town to meet up with the other Israelis and Irish. Before we met up with others we went on a tour with Tal and her sister, which was brilliant. We went to an area which was very beautiful, with probably the most beautiful buildings I saw in Israel.

This place was apparently one of the first communities built outside the wall and so the architecture of the buildings is different to a typical Israeli house, more Spanish almost.

We got to see inside one of the houses as one of Tal's mother's students lived in one and invited us in! Her husband turned out to be a very famous author who had written books about his time as a Jewish child under Hitler's control in Europe. They then brought us to the walls of the Old City. We didn't go in, but walked around the outside, which was beautiful but very eerie at night. After that we carried on to Jaffa street and got some falafel which I think was the main thing we ate on the go there and met up with the other Irish and Israelis.

Sunday 14th

In the morning we made our way to Leyada, Tal's school to meet up with the others. The school was big and apparently is very hard-working and focused on academics, but there was lots of art work and advertisements for plays around the school giving it an arty feel.

Everyone arrived late so I got to sit through Tal's Hebrew class. It was nice to hear them speak even though I couldn't understand anything. After about half of the class the others arrived and we headed on to Hebrew University Givat Ram, one of the two biggest universities in Jerusalem. It was a large campus with lots of greenery and a collection of separate buildings, a bit like Trinity College, Dublin but modernized. Yair, one of the students, was our tour guide for the day, and he told me that it is in the top 50 universities of the world. We went into the library building which had a absolutely huge, very beautiful, stain glass window. Apparently there are over 50,000 books in the library, and some dated back to the 1400s.

After lunch at Yuval's house (one of the other Israeli students), we went on to get a tour of the Old City. I was expecting the Old City to be in the middle of nowhere next to a desert, and at night it seemed like that but really it was seemed like the heart of the city.

It was full of loads of really small streets and little shops and stalls and people yelling trying to sell bargains to you. Alot of things were dusty and there was alot of glass necklaces and leather goods. we passed all the shops, not having much time and continued down to the Western Wall, where I think I had one of the most awkward experiences of my life. We had to cover up and then we went down into the women's side. It was very intense and people were moving backward and forward and praying aloud and putting their messages into cracks in the wall. You weren't supposed to walk away with your back to the wall. As a person not involved in that religion at all made me feel really dis-respectful and I didn't know how to act while I was there.

On the men's' side we could see lots of soldiers praying. It was weird to see men with their huge guns leaning forward and praying intently. We then walked through the old street on the "Via Dolorosa", up all the streets Christ apparently walked through on his way to the place where he was crucified. On this spot there is now a huge extravagant church with many rooms. They also apparently have the tomb of Jesus, which was interesting . People were leaning down and kissing the ground. Once again I felt seriously out of place, but I really like churches so I enjoyed that. We then went to "St, Catherine's Well" which was a really nice area. Priests in robes were walking around, we passed through many different rooms and it felt like we were on a rooftop. Eventually we came to the well which was pretty creepy to be honest. A set of stairs lead down to an underground pool of water. No-one is really sure of what's under the water. A priest sang a religious song, which

added to the atmosphere. It definitely felt like a holy place, that's all I'll say.

After that we went to the roof of the Austrian Hospice which was amazing because we could see the whole of the old city from it, and all the prayers were playing through the speakers of the religious buildings as the sun went down.

Monday 15th

That morning after going to Tal's school first we went to Keshet, one of the other schools. I arrived in at the morning prayer and it was, once again awkward. The older students carried out the ceremony as opposed to the teacher and the boys and girls were separated. After the prayers all the students broke out into singing and ran around classrooms in conga lines.

The school is mixed between very secular and non-secular students so the other students had class while the prayers were on. Rotem told me the reason for the singing and the dancing was because it was a celebration of Adar, the "happy month" where everyone is supposed to be happy! The particular day was Purim and it celebrated the battle of Shushan. They had a big dance in the middle of the school playing Israeli songs. After that we went to talk to the 10th Grade students about doing SAB next year. They all seemed very enthusiastic and we showed them some Irish sport and music.

Afterwards we took a taxi and walked to the Mahane Yehuda market. On the walk we got food and I got wheeled around in a trolley with a Palestinian scarf wrapped around my head for a while (Cheers Yair!). We ate in a park which was a bit of a mess next to a main road, but it was a warm sunny day and the food was nice so that made it pleasant... Once again we had falafel! We were then taken to a plaque on the main road which was for a boy around our age who was blown up on a bus on the way to school. Once again I had a problem linking emotion to this monument which I found really frustrating. We put a rock onto the plaque in respect and then took a taxi the rest of the way to the markets.

We met most of the other Israelis on Jaffa street and went to have ice-cream. Adam showed me around the streets as he lives nearby and so I got better insight into the area, which was really cool! I got a real sense of community in these areas, everyone seemed to be out talking to each other or playing chess on the street or football in these narrow alleys with some courtyards.

Moving on, we went to an Ultra Orthodox area. Before we went we were made to believe that this area would be really creepy and uncomfortable, but it wasn't that way at all, a few even smiled at me as if saying hi. There were no men or women who looked at us shamefully, and it seemed normal, I mean, if you focused and paid attention to the fact that all the men were wearing these hats and suits and the women wigs and long skirts then you noticed it as being different, but it all became a blur otherwise, like a normal street. The women's wigs were a bit weird because you don't notice them at first, they look so real! The area was called Mea Shearim.

Later all the Israeli and Irish students took us to Tel Aviv and they showed us around. It was night and we walked up and down the piers. The Israelis bought us these giant syringes that had melted chocolate in them that you squeezed into your mouth. They were amazing. Tel Aviv itself was very modern and like any other city, it wasn't as rustic as Jerusalem, which I personally preferred, but it was still beautiful to be there at night.

Tuesday 16th

In the morning after packing we went to Ha Nissui, the last Israeli school and left our luggage there. It was defiantly my favorite school, as it reminded me of my own school, Mount Temple, in Dublin, which it was very similar to. The atmosphere was very relaxed, with a smoking area in the school yard, a basketball court and they had brought huge stage speakers out into the yard and were playing music.

The school itself was very cool with large murals and paintings on the wall that students had done, but not terrible graffiti, actual art. We had a class where we talked to the younger year about SAB, they all seemed very enthusiastic and loads of them were very upset about the fact they might not be able to go to Ireland.

The students in this school had more to say than any of the other schools, I have no idea why that was, they all seemed very confident. We then went on for our first interview with John while the teachers went off to get their luggage.

After that we carried on to the bus station where we had... guess what?...falafel for lunch. The area was the more dodgy than anywhere I had been in in Israel and was really edgy. It was a Palestinian area and all the men seemed very intimidating. We got a bus to the checkpoint which was a shorter journey than I expected.

The checkpoint almost felt like I was entering into a prison, a high security prison. A soldier checked our passports and let us through. Looking at the wall properly on the other side was pretty shocking. It was extremely high with watch towers and graffiti all over it. I think I found it really awkward knowing that there was someone watching us at that moment from the tower, because I didn't see it as a person, it felt more like something out of a sci-fi movie, or big brother's watching you type thing.

We then got a taxi to the centre in Hebron where a few of our Palestinian friends and our hosts were waiting for us. We all had a very, VERY welcoming hello and then went home to our hosts houses. Hanane and I were very happy to see each other and spent a few hours talking, I then checked my e-mails, had a shower and had some dinner with Hanane. Her mother wasn't home from work yet.

Hanane lives in a very modern apartment at the top of the slope of Hebron which means you could see the whole of Hebron from her windows. Her mom is French and so the family speaks French to each other. The house is very modern and Mom and I had our own apartment to ourselves which was really nice. This separate flat belongs to a French friend of Hanane's mom who is the director of the Hebron-France Association for cultural exchanges. Because this woman lives in France and only visits, he regularly gives the apartment to people visiting. Later that night Hanane showed me around the city and took me to a place where you can see the whole of Hebron. It was at night so it was really beautiful.

I found that when I went out on the balcony the smell of Hebron was really nice ... maybe that's a little weird, but it's true, i have no idea why. We met Hanane's mother and brother later that night and we had a long talk.

Wednesday 17th

We walked to Hanane's school which was interesting because I got to see the same area in daylight. We met Hanane's friend Shada on the way and walked with her. It was weird on arrival to the school because most of the students just stopped and stared when they saw me. I must have looked like an alien. I talked to a few of her friends but they seemed really embarrassed by their English. Quickly all the girls got into lines and a prayer from the Koran was said. Afterwards a song was sung and acted out by two students. Then all the students went to class. The school was very old and beautiful. It is a school dedicated to scientific stream students, which is a new system in Palestine. Of course, the whole school is girls because girls and boys schools are separated.

We met the principal, who fed us and gave us tea. I had already eaten so it was a bit too much, and then the boys arrived and we carried on to meet the director of the Department of Education in Palestine, Mrs. Nisrene Amro. She welcomed us to Palestine and gave us a quick talk on how the education system is run and what state the schools are in. She told us that seeing is better than hearing and it is better if we go out and see. She said a lot of schools are threatened by settlers and how the SAB program is really important in that it helps them get their students thinking more broadly about the situation they are in. She said it also makes students feel like they are finally connecting with the outside world properly.

Cliona, Nike and I then went to Adii Dana's office because Cliona felt sick and the boys went on to the boy's school. After we met up with the others and went back to Hanane's school. We had a talk with our hosts and the younger students who will be doing the project next year. The students talked about how they felt it was unfair that outsiders like us could travel freely into Israel and they couldn't.

They also talked about their hatred towards the Israeli army for what they had done to the Palestinians. The general gist was that they disliked everything to do with the Israelis and I felt very annoyed by this because they were seeing Israeli people not from a personal perspective but as a 'thing'.

I knew we were going to be getting this in all the talks. I wished there was more that could be done to help Palestinian and Israeli students speak to each other, I felt that if this was achieved, opinions would broaden and solutions could be found more quickly. They are all seeing each other through the government's eyes and I wish that would change because we Irish could see the change in the Israeli and Palestinian students participating in the course.

Maybe we were acting as mediators but we still were able to help them see each other on a more personal basis, and it worked, it began to dull down the negative output.

We then moved on from that to school to another girl's school where the girls were very quiet and didn't speak as much English. The school was smaller and there was only about five girls there so it was a little more awkward and less possible to have an open discussion....but they taught us some Arabic phrases and how to write our name and stuff which was really nice.

We then went to meet all the other Palestinians in the Centre. It was really fun to see each other, and we got an introduction to Palestine by Aidi! Afterwards we went to Shada's house and then to a Palestinian cafe to get food and drinks and meet up with everyone!

Thursday 18th

In the morning we went to Fakrya's school which was Hanane's old school until the system changed and they based schools on subjects. We had a class with students from the 10th Grade. They expressed a lot of the same points as the last schools, and were really keen on the programme as the last two schools had been.

We then went to the Old City which was beautiful except for the fact that the settlers had made it their dumping ground. Fresh petrol from the morning had been thrown at someone and also onto the street. There was a massive net above all the streets catching rocks and rubbish thrown down by the settlers onto the Palestinians below. The small streets had shops on the bottom floor of people's houses. They seemed not very busy. The houses were all really old and pretty. You could see settler kids playing in a school yards not too far away.

We then visited a school in the old city called Qurtuba which was close to Shuhada Street. It has had many attacks by settlers but the Palestinians insist on staying there because they feel they have to stand their ground and serve a community that has been there for a long time even though quite a few people have moved away.

We talked to the principal who was a very independent woman. She spoke about the students that go to the school and how they feel very strongly about living in this place. They are not moving because the Israelis want them to. She told of different incidents where kids had started throwing rocks at the pupils in the school and had tried to burn the school down. You just feel really frustrated by it all because it's one thing attacking adults but to jeopardize kids lives in a school is really savage. The students that came in to talk to us could barely speak any English and the principal went on to tell us that that was because they didn't have a school for about a year due to the curfew and fell back on their studies. Apparently it shows in all their exams.

After visiting Qurtuba we went to a boys school in the H2 area where they couldn't speak very much English either. The teacher translated for us and they were very enthusiastic about the project. We then walked around Shuhada street which was really weird. It's a ghost town really, nobody is there except for wild dogs and the occasional soldier.

It's also intimidating in some way. You can tell that some really horrible things had gone on there. We then did some Old City viewing and went to a really nice old pottery shop and got to try and make some pottery. We also visited a Turkish delight shop.

We then went to the Ibrahimi Mosque to see the tomb of Abraham. We had to wear big robes covering our heads to show respect in the temple. Also buried there were Abraham's wives Rebecca and Sarah and his sons Isaac and Jacob. There are Jewish and Muslim sections. That night we then went to Sami's house and his mom made us lots and lots of food, it was really nice, and afterwards we went to cafe again for a get together on our final night in Hebron.

Friday 19th

We visited Al Fawwar refugee camp in the morning and it was a different experience. I think the thing that shocked me the most were two little kids playing and one was pushing the other around on the inside of an engine or something and there was petrol all over them. Talking to Bayan the refugee was fascinating. We had a really great conversation with her, she was really nice. Her father still had the key to their grandfather's house which he is keeping in the hope of returning some day.

Bayan's dad works with with the Department of Health investigating preventative healthcare measures in Palestine. He knew alot of the causes of sickness in that area. One situation that was very upsetting was the fact that related to us that Israelis are dumping nuclear waste in a local tributary causing infection in the water causing illness in villages close to it. We had a long talk with Bayan's family and then we headed back to the Centre where we got our bags and said a very sad goodbye to our Palestinian hosts. I think everyone was crying except for me, which was really annoying.

On the way back to Israel we stopped off in Bethlehem to see the birth place of Jesus which was packed. Apparently there were only a small amount of people compared to what there usually is! It was all very extravagant and I was glad to get away from the crowds of people.

We then continued on to get food and look at another section of the wall where they had gone around a person's house, literally the wall goes in a straight line and then around a person's house in a circle! It was bizarre to see. We then went on to Israel, and on the way the Israeli Army checked our passports, but not our bags and we kept going.

That night we out to Netai's house for Kiddush. All the students had contributed to the feast. There was so much food! Then we went to a local playground and hung out there for a while messing about which was really fun. We all said goodbye to the students that weren't hosting that night which was very sad also, except there were no tears this time, thank God, and then we headed home.

Saturday 20th

We went to the Mount up Olives, climbing up and down the mount several times to find the right place to film, which was very tiring, but there was a beautiful view of Jerusalem. We did our small interview. Adam came with us. We then took a quick glance at the garden of Gethsemane before getting a taxi to get our bags and travel to the airport.

It was really weird looking back because everything was so rushed. I would have preferred more time to get a deeper experience but it was wonderful to have the opportunity to go. I think it has persuaded me to think differently and made me want to make a change there.