

Students' and Teachers' Visit to Israel & Palestine 2011

Visit Report by Yvonne Duggan

Teacher at The King's Hospital School, Dublin

This is a day-to-day account of the visit from the time we left Dublin to our return. I, being a teacher at The King's Hospital school had five female teenagers in my care but it was very beneficial in itself to have a mix of students from different schools in Dublin and to have three teaching staff on the trip itself.

Saturday 19

We all got away safely from Dublin although I was a little concerned about the time allocated to change planes in London, one hour is very tight and we also had the added worry that Darran had not been given a boarding pass for the second part of the journey. As a group we insisted that we would not leave without all members and particularly Darran, as he was the group leader but without a minute to spare we made it.

The questioning in Tel Aviv was interesting. Aisling, the other female teacher was asked a huge number of questions, I was asked nothing really and neither were my students. Darran took 3 ½ hours to be checked – not sure if I would return on a yearly basis if this is what I had to go through personally, so well done on his perseverance. Left the airport at 6.30am and dropped a few of the students off as we went to their particular home-stays and then we got to Victoria Hotel, in East Jerusalem.

After breakfast and a few hours sleep the group of us in the hotel headed off for the Old City of Jerusalem to see a few of the sights. I was taken away by the wall that surrounded the Old City and the numerous gates in to it. We saw many shops trying to sell a few things and endless cobbled streets. It was essential to keep a watchful eye on where we were going as you could easily get lost. We had a spectacular view of the city from the rooftop of the Austrian Hospice. Dinner was good and very much welcomed and we headed to bed reasonably early.

Sunday 20

We visited the Hebrew University Secondary School (Leyada) in the morning. This was the group's first encounter with a group of Israeli students in a school. The discussion went extremely well, lots of questions asked and lots of contributions from all the students. It was lovely too for the students to get a chance to mix, chat about everyday things in their own life and then we had some music and singing, a little bit of Irish dancing and showing them the hurley stick and how to play. It was a very

welcoming experience. I was taken aback by the motivation of some of the students and what subjects they do at the school. We had a short de-briefing on the visit and then headed for lunch.

In the afternoon we met a few of the students - Yotam and Tamar - who came with us around some of the Old City. We saw the Muslim Quarter, passed through the Armenian Quarter and went on to the Western Wall. We managed to get an opportunity, although it was raining to go to the Wall, say a prayer and write a note too which we could then put into a free space in the wall. This was all quite moving.

We got a view of the Temple Mount or Haram Al Sharif, where stands the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque. Yotam kindly gave us a short history lesson on a few things. We then went on to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This was built on the site of Calvary where Jesus was crucified. There are lots of little chapels in different parts of the building. We then headed up to a roof area where there is the Ethiopian Coptic Village. Then on to visit St. Catherine's Well and some students visited the Tomb where it is claimed Jesus was buried. For me being a teacher of religion, seeing all these places and sites brought so much of the section on Christianity that I teach to life. We ended the day at Aroma Cafe, giving everyone a chance to laugh, talk, share views and opinions, and to rest up too. A superb day!

Monday 21

Today the school we visited was Ha Nissui School. This was a very different experience to yesterday – referred to as the 'experimental school'. We were under a time constraint here so the amount of discussion was limited and there were very little opportunities for the students to mix and relax and chat initially. Students appeared to come and go and afterwards while we waited for Darran. Pascal sat and played his fiddle and nobody seemed to say anything or enquire what we were doing. At this point a few of the students from the school stayed around and chatted which gave an opportunity for both myself, the other two teachers and the students to ask lots of questions about school life and their life in general in Jerusalem. Not sure if I could work in this sort of school myself – a bit too liberal!

In the afternoon we headed off to a different district of Jerusalem and started our tour from Zion Square and we met the Israeli students here. We moved to the main shopping area, went to Machane Yehuda Market, had lunch here and ice creams and then went on to visit Mea Shearim, the Ultra-Orthodox area. Some of the Israeli students initially issued concerns on visiting here but in the end all in the group of Irish students went. We then allowed some free time for all the students to do a little shopping and for me and Aisling to sit and have a coffee and just watch people walk up and down the street. Another busy day!

Tuesday 22

Our final school in Jerusalem today, we headed off to Keshet School. The building and layout of the rooms were just wonderful in this school and there were quite a few similarities to my own school and that it is very much community based. The discussion here was excellent; a lot of very valuable views and opinions were shared and discussed. I think too that the fact that the group was not too big gave an equal opportunity for everyone to speak and share their personal views on the conflict and the settlements and what might the future hold as regards moving forwards. There was time too for the students to mix and chat together. I was really moved by the hospitality and warmth of the school and the main teacher who was in charge and the overly generous spread of refreshments.

At this point I must thank all the three schools in Jerusalem for their hospitality and that they all provided some refreshments.

We then headed back to the hotel, had lunch and got our bags together to leave and head off to Hebron. Prior to leaving there was a discussion about taking public transport but a group decision was made to take taxis to Checkpoint 300. Describing this is a challenge as I have never seen anything like it. The height of the wall was just shocking and the different parts to the checkpoint and going through the turnstiles, a frightening experience really and to think that some people do it on a daily basis was even more unbelievable. A very different landscape existed on the other side and it was clear immediately that there is less money for infrastructure and the maintenance of buildings. There was also an opportunity to see the other side of the separation/security wall and how it has just been built in the middle of a developed area cutting off certain building and housing areas – shocking really.

There was a wonderful welcome waiting for us with Adli Daana, being the organiser of it all and partner organisation to SAB. He is the Director of the International Palestinian Youth League (IPYL).

From here the students met representatives from the families that they were staying with and after an opening address and a few pieces of information, everyone went to their destination places and Aisling, Pascal and I headed to our hotel.

Wednesday 23

Our morning was spent in two different girls' schools. The Widaad Nisredeen School was an insightful experience. A great opportunity was had by all students to express their views, interests and to look and discuss the life that is currently being lead by the young people of Hebron. It was an emotional drain here too listening to real life stories of some students and I was taken away by their ability to speak so articulately and confidently to the group about their everyday struggle living in Hebron and to also here their internal motivation to succeed in school and to better themselves and to educate themselves to the highest level possible. I was personally blown away by being present in the room and watching it all unfold.

We then headed to Khadeeja Abdeen School, here a shorter meeting and discussion took place, which was probably needed after the early morning experience. There was an opportunity for the students to chat and laugh and Denise and Kate sang a song in the playground. I got a brief opportunity to ask the principal various questions about the educational system, discipline, school structures and the subjects offered. As a teacher this was a really good experience.

In the afternoon, we headed off as a group to see some of the old city. A number of the Palestinian students came with us, as well as a few volunteers from Adli's organisation. We walked through areas that were once very busy and full of life but now many of the shops were closed and the buildings left empty. I also got to see the overhead mesh which is used to protect passer-bys from rubbish being thrown on them. It was also easy to see the cameras and watchtowers where the soldiers observe everything going on.

We visited the new museum that has now been open and what was originally the Turkish baths. As a group we then visited the rooftop of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee where we got a good view of the old city including the Ibrahimi (Abraham) Mosque. We then crossed one of the checkpoints, where only Jews and Christians are allowed to go. This was really unbelievable, just crossing the road really and yet not everyone is allowed to go. It was a little emotional as we headed in to the Fakhouri pottery shop and heard the horrendous stories of what this man and his family have gone through over the last number of years. I just could not believe it that through it all they still wanted to stay and would not sell the property for any amount of money. For them I could really see the importance of land to these people. We managed to take Ghada, Mai and Noor, three students, with us to this shop. This was the first time that the soldiers had allowed them to cross the line.

For me it had been an emotional day and so much learning to take in, but as I lay in bed and tried to take it all in, I just fell asleep with complete exhaustion, following a wonderful wholesome family meal with Adli and his family, a sharing of experiences and talking about life in Ireland and in Palestine and Adli's experiences while in Ireland.

Thursday 24

We started our day today visiting one of the boys school in Hebron – Hussein School. A very different experience to everywhere else and I was particularly taken by how quiet it was for a school. They took a little while to get organised but good discussion was had when we all got together. From there we headed off to Mazania School and Qawasmeh School. Again in both of these girls' schools good discussions were held and I was very much taken by the energy and enthusiasm of the final principal in the last school. It was a fascinating morning.

For the afternoon we visited the old city (H2 area), first calling to Samah Sharabati's home as the students in my school are funding her university education. It was a humbling experience just to see where they live and to hear their story and what they have been through. Pascal played the violin and Kate and Denise sang a song. It brought a tear to many members of the group. We then

headed to Jamil's house beside Tel Rumeida settlement. We were warmly welcomed and Jamil's mum had prepared some snacks for us. The hospitality and warm welcome were what touched me.

From there we headed to Ibrahimi Mosque. To get here we had to go through turnstiles and all were checked by soldiers and police. Here we got an opportunity to view the tombs of Sarah, Abraham, Issac and Rebecca and the tombs of Joseph and Jacob are housed here too.

Some free time was then given to everyone to purchase some handicrafts from the local shopkeepers. That night all the students met together at Ghada's for a final evening.

Friday 25

It was now time to leave Hebron and head back in the direction of the security barrier. We stopped off in Bethlehem and visited the Church of the Nativity. As we then made the final journey we took a few minutes to stop and look at the separation/security Barrier and its impact on the local people and how it has changed their lives. We got the chance to meet one shopkeeper whose property is now surrounded by this high wall and she and her husband had to change their type of business in order to survive.

Back in Hebron we got together after lunch and made some final reflections on the whole experience. Even as I listened to the various members of my group I could hear in what they were saying of the impact that this week had on them and that they were moved by the whole experience.

Later that evening we arranged to meet up with four of the Israeli students for a final gathering. This was a difficult evening I feel as the students in my group had now experienced the other side and sharing this was challenging and brought many unanswered questions and emotional tears.

The students in host families then left to spend their final hours with these families and the rest of the group had something to eat and caught a few hours sleep before our taxis arrived to take us back to the airport.

For me there was so much learning in this whole week. It opened my eyes culturally and there was a great deal of emotion involved too. The experience of seeing both Jerusalem and Hebron was quite amazing and yet I felt that I only got a slight touch of it all and would hope someday to return if the opportunity arises.