

March 2008

Many of you expressed concern for our safety before this trip to Israel. It's true that in recent weeks, the Palestinians had lobbed numerous rockets on towns near the Gaza Strip. Israel is the land of countless wars motivated by "My God is better than your God" and "My way of worshipping is better than your way." We wanted to see the Holy Lands and decided that if we were to wait for peace in the Middle East, we'd never make it during our lifetimes. Eleven miles is the maximum range of the current Palestinian rockets. So we drew an eleven-mile radius around the Gaza Strip and decided that it would be prudent to remain out of that area.

We flew to Paris and then Tel Aviv arriving on an exceptionally warm spring day with temperatures in the 90's. The airport has extra tight security. People with an Arabic appearance were taken aside and questioned before they even made it down the jet way, but we cruised through customs without delay. Tel Aviv is a modern city that has a wonderful beach on the Mediterranean Sea. We enjoyed a day touring the area on our own. We walked down to the ancient port of Jaffa for some magnificent views. Most prices are about the same as the USA, except for food, drink and gasoline. They cost double what we pay at home.



At 60-years old, Israel is a relatively young country. In 1948 it was designated the Jewish homeland with UN support and US weaponry to back up the claim. All 18 year old Jewish Israeli citizens spend several years in the Army. As part of their training, they are taken to museums and historical sites. We saw several groups of young soldiers in their fatigues carrying weapons. Many were giggling and chatting or texting their friends on their cell phones as they were guided through museums. This is quite an effective initiation into being a Jewish Israeli. Some of the young ladies didn't appear to be quite ready to shoulder this responsibility, and Rich couldn't get the song "Bikini Girls with Machine Guns" out of his head. We found the Israeli Jews to be industrious, efficient, hard-working, but definitely not warm or charming. Of course, if we had spent three years of our lives carrying M16's on the border patrolling for suicide bombers, we might not be charming either. Israel has few natural resources and the people have to manage with just their brains and work ethic.



In spite of the security issues, tourism is thriving. The roads are full of tour buses. Most of the hotels were filled with religious groups from around the world. We spent three days on a group tour with Gate1 Travel (<http://www.gate1travel.com/>). We had a good guide and can recommend their services. We drove into the northern part of the country and visited ancient Roman ruins at Caesarea and Bet She' an. We stopped in Haifa and saw the center of bombing from the 2006 war with Hezbollah; the "state within a state" in nearby Lebanon. We toured Jesus' former stomping grounds in Galilee and Capernaum. We saw the location of the Sermon on Mount, the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, and the place where he supposedly multiplied fishes and loaves.



We stayed in a Kibbutz. This collective farm started life as an exercise in communism, but has recently been privatized and converted into \$200/night countryside hotel rooms. It's pleasant, but the numerous bomb shelters on the grounds are a bit of a distraction. It was 6 miles from both the Lebanese border and the disputed Golan Heights that Israel captured from Syria in 1967. The next morning we had a brief tour of the lookouts and minefields of the Golan Heights, and our guide told us war stories of his youth.





We headed south across the military checkpoint into the West Bank. Israel captured this area from Jordan during the six-day war in 1967, and today, the Israelis and the Palestinians have a complicated arrangement over control of the area. Israel is about halfway done building a new 500-mile-long, 24-foot-high concrete wall that is intended to separate themselves from the terrorists.



We spent four nights in Jerusalem. It has an old walled city with an Arabic style bazaar. We retraced Jesus' final footsteps from his trial by Pontius Pilate down the Via Dolorosa to his crucifixion at the current location of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The old city is bordered by the Temple Mount. It appears to be an otherwise unimportant hill, except that it contains the Western or Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock. Jews revere the place as the former location of Solomon's Temple and the place where God gathered dirt to create Adam. It's also regarded as the launching pad for both Jesus and Muhammad into heaven. The Muslims incensed the Jews by building a mosque with a golden roof over the site of the temple. We also visited three other places claiming to be the location from which Jesus ascended, and two places that claimed to be Mary's tomb. Coincidentally, the room claiming to be the location of the Last Supper is directly over top of King David's tomb. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is fortunately the only place claiming to be Jesus' birthplace. At the Israel Museum we saw some of the Dead Sea Scrolls including the world's most ancient copy of the Old Testament.



We spent more time talking about religion on this trip than during our 14 years of marriage combined. We both had some religious education as children, but seeing the sights rekindled many faded memories of Bible stories. Actually being there also put much of what has happened in recent news into context. Cheryll did her part to promote harmony when she saw an Arabic shopkeeper drop a bag with hundreds of dollars near the entrance to a store. She picked it up and chased him for three blocks to return it. Perhaps he'll see her as a Good Samaritan.



For the last two days, we rented a car and toured the area of the Dead Sea. The scenery reminded us of our recent visit to Death Valley. We visited the area where Sodom and Gomorra were supposedly located and climbed to the top of Mount Sodom. It was an energetic hike, but worth the effort. This was one of the few places that we had to ourselves and the view was fantastic. We found a baby ibis near a natural spring. We also climbed Masada and toured the area where 967 Jews committed mass suicide rather than be captured by the Romans in the first century. This must have been the inspiration for Jim Jones and his People's Temple in Guyana. It's also where the Israeli Army holds swearing-in ceremonies. We enjoyed a float in the super-salty water that has some exceptional buoyancy. On our last evening we were enjoying happy hour on the balcony of our hotel when a swarm of dragon flies enveloped the area. Someone nearby yelled "It's a plague of Egypt; Moses is coming!"





We had to leave our hotel at 2:30 AM for the two-hour drive to the airport. We approached the fortified checkpoint where the road passes from the West Bank into East Jerusalem in the pre-dawn hours. The border guard was a pretty girl of about nineteen years. Her curly blond hair cascaded from beneath her green army cap down onto her bullet-proof vest and the sling of her machine gun. Her finger was on the trigger. She is responsible for keeping the suicide bombers on the other side of the wall. She looked at us, used what was probably an exercise in racial profiling, and waved us through without even looking at our passports.

We later read in the paper that several more short-range rockets had been shot into Israel from the Gaza during our trip, but we didn't have any problems or notice anything unusual. We're not so sure that we need to take any more trips to the Middle East in the near future. Besides, we are now infected with "stamp stigma." People with Israeli passport stamps are not allowed into Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia or Yemen. We'd need new passports before we could go and our current passports don't expire until 2015. Maybe by then, nobody will be fighting to prove that "My religion is better than your religion." On the other hand, telling us that we can't go someplace just makes it that much more alluring.

We plan to head to Bermuda in May and then Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova and the Ukraine in June. Stay tuned for more reports at <http://www.odendahls.com/>.