



A ROAD TRIP IN ISRAEL: Following The Footsteps of Christ

A nine-day tour around Israel touches upon landmark spots recorded in the life of Jesus.

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Bethlehem

A young woman carrying her newborn son is hiding in a cave. Accompanied by her husband, there they wait until it is safe to go out again. The Holy Family took shelter on their flight to Egypt to escape the Slaughter of the Innocents ordered by Herod, the King of Judea at the time of Christ's birth. There's a plaque at the cave entrance where it's written that when Mary was nursing the baby Jesus, a drop of milk "fell to the floor of the cave, turning the rock white and giving rise to the chalky stone." This is the Milk Grotto.

We are in Bethlehem, eight kilometers south of Jerusalem. The scenery has turned into deserts – whiter, flatter. We are amazed by the sight of camels roaming freely. We take pictures. The caretaker waves at us, and we wave back.

The parking lot is full of taxis. For a pre-agreed price, our taxi driver takes us to some of the tourist sites in Bethlehem, which is presently under Palestinian authority. Our driver tells us that in two days, Palestine will be declaring their independence. In the news, we read later, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has formally applied for Palestine statehood before the UN Security Council.

About two kilometers east of Bethlehem is the Shepherds' Field, where angels announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds on that first Christmas Eve. Today, what you see is a Roman Catholic church, designed to resemble a shepherds' tent.

The highlight of this trip is our visit to the Church of the Nativity. You enter through a low doorway, which was designed to prevent unbelievers riding on horseback from entering the church. You look up to see the marker where, it is believed, Jesus was born.

Jerusalem

We check in at the Abraham Hostel in the city center. Guests enjoy a free breakfast as well as a free walking tour of the Old City. We meet our local tour guide at the Jaffa Wall.

From a rooftop, we get a view of the Old City, divided into four quarters: Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Armenian. At a distance, we could see the Dome of the Rock, the Wailing Wall and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, said to be the second oldest mosque in Islam, as well as a Tiberian synagogue with no roof.

Our local guide leads us through the Old City's labyrinthine pathways. Near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is Station 9 of the Way of the Cross, where Jesus fell for the third time. We pass through a Muslim market. A guy has left his store with only a chair blocking the doorway signaling the shop is closed. People respect the warning, our guide says. They don't steal. They know the man has left for prayers. In the afternoon, we take a three-hour paid tour of the Mount of Olives. The Chapel of the Ascension is built on the site where the Risen Christ ascended to heaven. Inside is a slab of stone imprinted with the right footprint of Jesus.

The Pater Noster Church was built over a cave where Jesus taught his disciples the "Our Father". Around us, we see ceramic colored tiles with Our Lord's Prayer inscribed in different languages. The Philippines is well represented with "Our Father" inscribed in Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilongo, and Pampango.

In the afternoon, we hear the call for prayer from 30 mosques. We pass by a Jewish cemetery where the prophet Isaiah is buried. For thousands of years, the Mount of Olives has been used as a Jewish cemetery.

(top left) The Milk Grotto in Bethlehem where the Holy Family hid (bottom left to right) The dome at the Chapel of the Shepherd's Field; Salt deposits at the Dead Sea; An abundance of spices being sold at the Carmel Market (top right) Arches at the Caesarea National Park



We visit the Dominus Flevit, Latin for “The Lord Wept”, which is shaped like a teardrop symbolizing the tears Christ shed while walking toward the city of Jerusalem and foreseeing its destruction, as well as the diaspora that would ensue. A classic photo taken from a certain vantage point shows it is aligned with the Dome of the Rock in the Old City.

At the foot of the Mount of Olives is the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus and his disciples prayed on the night Judas betrayed the Lord. I am fascinated by the ancient olive trees growing in the garden which some say have been there since Jesus’ time. Next to the garden is the Church of All Nations, where a section of the stone where Jesus prayed is enshrined. At the base of the Mount of Olives is a church marking the tomb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

After the guided tour, we explore more of the Old City on our own. The Western Wall, which was built by Herod, is also known as the “Wailing Wall”. Like many others, I write my wishes on a piece of paper and insert it inside a crack in the Wall. Inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, we see devotees kissing the floor. It is believed to be the site where Jesus was crucified.

After dinner in a Thai restaurant, we watch the spectacular light and sound show at the Citadel, which uses the ancient walls beneath the Tower of David as a stage. The history of Jerusalem unfolds through sophisticated computer technology.

The next day, we drive several miles away

from the old city to the Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum. It is a real eye opener. I highly recommend everyone who can to visit this place at least once. Among the thousands of artifacts displayed in the museum, those that stand out for me are an old typewriter with a swastika key, and the “instruments for racial determination.”

As we leave, I see two young girls in military uniform outside the museum, sitting and reading. One girl has a gun casually resting on her lap. Military men and women on the streets, going about their daily business, is an everyday sight in Israel.

Dead Sea

The Dead Sea is located about 24 kilometers east of Jerusalem. We drive down to the Eid Gedi Spa. After paying the entrance fee, men and women go to separate locker rooms to change. We ride an open train and after five minutes, we reach the Dead Sea. People float in its dense salt water. I do not go in, though. I just take pictures.

Because of its dropping level, experts warn that the Dead Sea could dry out by 2050. Days after our visit, a thousand nude swimmers join a photo shoot there to communicate this message.

Overlooking the Dead Sea is the ancient fortress built by Herod in Masada. We drive up to the Masada National Park. You ride a cable car. If you’re up for the challenge, you can walk up, as there is a trail. Allot at least three hours here, as the

view is really nice.

Sea of Galilee

In Tiberias, we visit the Tabgha Monastery, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, the setting for the miraculous Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes. The next morning, we drive to Capernaum where we see the white and black stones made of lime and basalt. At the Mount of Beatitudes, priests are saying Mass. This was where Jesus delivered His sermon starting with the words: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...”

We visit the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, built where the archangel Gabriel announced to the Blessed Virgin that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Savior Jesus Christ. We hear bells ringing and see Muslims gather at the square for their midday prayers.

Haifa

From Capernaum, we drive to the port city of Haifa. Everything is closed because of the Shabbat. From the street, we take pictures of the Bahá’í Gardens, stunning with its lights.

Dinner is at an Arab restaurant in the German Colony, an upscale dining and shopping area for tourists. We have rice with liver and meat kebabs and we are given dessert, melon and grapes, for free. The waiter translated the phrase, “no service charge” written in Hebrew on the bill, to make sure we leave him a tip. We do. Early the next morning, we head for the Stella Maris viewing deck, where we get



a magnificent view of the sea. Also on the slopes of Mount Carmel is the Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery. We see a group of Filipino pilgrims from Australia. A Filipino priest is saying mass.

We proceed to the Bahá’í Gardens, a UNESCO world heritage site, known for its flower bed terraces and manicured hedges. Located in the heart of Haifa, it extends all the way up to the northern slope of Mount Carmel. I climb up the steps to the upper garden where I get a panoramic view of the city and beyond it, the Mediterranean Sea. The golden-domed shrine of the prophet Bab stands on the central terrace.

Caesarea

Caesarea, another ancient city built by Herod, is now an archeological park located off the Tel Aviv-Haifa coastal highway. Before I left Manila, Mr. Yaniv Revach, Israel Deputy Chief of Mission, recommended that I should visit the Aqueduct in Caesarea. It is gorgeous. There’s a beach right in front of it. I also visit the Caesarea National Park where I see more ruins, and a bride in a photo shoot.

Tel-Aviv

Back in Tel-Aviv, we have a kosher dinner at a McDonald’s. We stay at Florentine Hostel, the same place where we stayed on our first night when we arrived. We had driven in a rented car from the airport and I remember my first impression was that the Israelis are quite serious. They don’t smile a lot.

That first night, we had an early dinner at the Fisherman’s Restaurant at the Jaffa

Port, right next to the water. We had salad, calamares, and fish. It was an expensive meal, 220 shekels plus 20 shekels for the tip, but we considered it our welcome dinner. The next day, Sunday, we walked to church in Old Jaffa. Along the way, we passed by the flea market. I noticed a lot of people biking. We attended the 9 AM English Mass at St. Peter’s Church. A song was sung in Filipino. A part of the readings was also read in Filipino.

In the afternoon, we drove from the hostel to a “mall”— it was so small – where we had salad for lunch. Then we walked for about 30 minutes before reaching Carmel Market where we saw assorted dry goods, fruits, vegetables, sweets, and spices. At the entrance, there were a few stalls selling souvenir items. I bought a small *kippah*, the skull cap that Jewish men wear, for my mom’s hat collection.

On my last Sunday in Israel, I am back in Old Jaffa, a short ten-minute walk from my hostel. My travel companion, who lives in Germany, has left ahead. After lunch, I walk to the park near St. Peter’s Church where I see a fascinating installation, the *Oranger Suspendu* by artist Ran Morin, and the wishing bridge with zodiac signs made of brass.

I attend the 6 PM Mass. It seems a fitting way to bookend my journey through this holy land. The Mass is in Polish. Although I did not understand the words, I know its meaning by heart. A child was born. He offered His life to save mankind. He will come again. ☪



Israel 101: Things To Know Before Your Trip

* “Shalom” is a very useful greeting to learn when you go to Israel as it means both hello and goodbye

* Shekel (Nis) is the unit of currency in Israel, 1 Nis equals approximately Php 12

* Hostels are available all around Israel, you can check out the Israel Youth Hostel Association at www.iyha.org.il For those going to Jerusalem, I recommend Abraham Hostel which has a great combination of location, amenities and ambience

* Power supply is 220 volt AC-50 cycles, bring the necessary adaptor

* Shabbat is from 7 pm Friday 7 pm Saturday, most establishments are closed and public transportation are limited

* When visiting religious sites such as the Church of Nativity, Bahai Gardens, etc, appropriate attire is required, i.e., knees and shoulders have to be covered. You can bring a shawl or a wrap skirt for these occasions.

* Have your passports ready at all times since there are several border checks in Israel

* Dead Sea products are good gifts to take back home for family and friends



(top left) Encountering camels along the way (top right) The Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed before Judas’ betrayal (above) Bahai’ Gardens at Haifa