

Our First Trip to Israel (and Jordan)

By Larry Martin

Part 1

[Note: This account of our October 2017 Road Scholar trip will be in several parts. All completed parts are on the internet, at www.lakesidepress.com/IsraelTrip.html. Pictures copied from the internet are indicated by a red border. All the other photos were taken with my smart phone or a small point-and-shoot camera.]

Introduction

I know, the title sounds like it's going to be a high school essay. A student's first trip to the Holy Land, taken with his parents, or a camp group, or one of those religious organizations that arrange to have young people visit the faith's origins

Well, not quite. This, our first trip to Israel, took place in October 2017. My wife and I, both retirees over 70 and Jewish, joined a Road Scholar tour for a two week trip that included not just Israel's highlights, but five days in Jordan as well. Jordan was a welcome part of the tour, but not our main reason for going.

We first thought of visiting Israel shortly after getting married in 1970, and often since then. But it was never the right time. We honeymooned in Europe, which in 1970 seemed both more attractive and easier to get to. Then came excuse after excuse for not going to Israel: careers and medical training; children (born 1973, 1977, 1983); and wars, like the 1973 Yom Kippur war. "Not safe, let's wait until things quiet down," we said.

But there always seemed to be turmoil in the Middle East. In January 1991 the first Gulf War broke out and Tel Aviv was bombarded by scud missiles. Clearly, not the time to go.

Then there were the intifadas – coordinated Palestinian uprisings against Israel. The second and longest-lasting intifada began September 2000 and finally petered out in February 2005. Some 2000 Palestinians and 1000 Israelis were killed, as well as several dozen foreigners.¹

Among the victims in the second intifada was my good friend David Applebaum, shown in this internet photo with his daughter. David was chief of the emergency room and trauma services of Jerusalem's Shaare Zedek Medical Center. He had trained in Cleveland's Mt. Sinai Hospital in the 1980s, where I was chief of Pulmonary, and moved to Israel shortly afterwards.



David returned to Cleveland twice a year, for several weeks each time, to work in our emergency department, which gave him ample funds to supplement his salary in Israel. I got to know him well.

On September 9, 2003 he was sitting with his 20-year-old daughter at Café Hillel in Jerusalem; they were celebrating, for she was to be married the next day. A suicide bomber walked into the café. They were both killed. He was 51.

Ironically, David had just returned from New York, where he addressed a symposium on terrorism marking the second anniversary of the September 11 attacks. He ended his remarks with: "From one moment to the next, we never know what will happen in the ER [emergency room], but it's in Jerusalem that real reality occurs."²

David's death and the surrounding intifada squelched any desire to visit for a long time. But our kids went. Our oldest daughter spent a college semester in Tel Aviv. The other two daughters

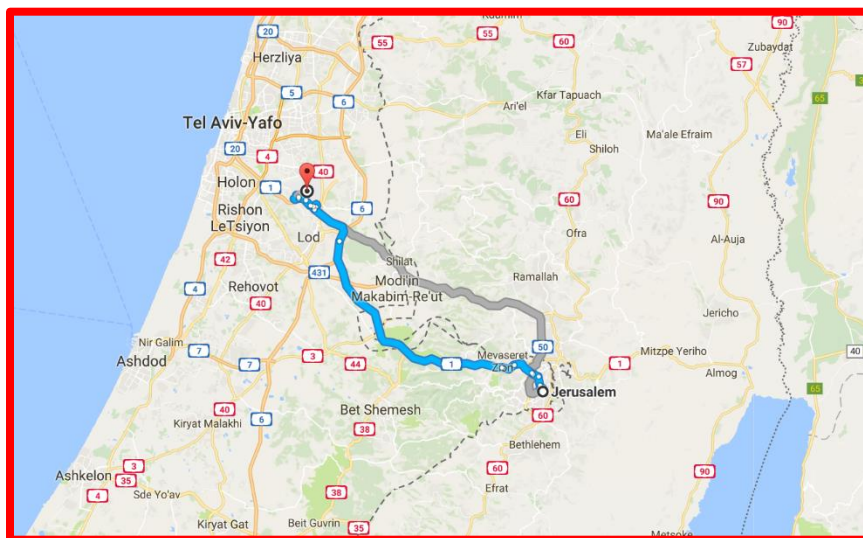
went as teen-agers on camp-sponsored trips. The parents – well, it just never seemed the right time. Even after the intifada, there was always something. We made it back to Europe, visited Japan and India even, but never went to Israel or the Middle East.

The kids grew up and left the house and then had kids of their own. We retired, fortunately with our health intact. “Look,” we finally said, “if we don’t go now, we may never make it.” So in spring of 2017 we booked the trip.

The Itinerary

Being a Road Scholar trip, it was secular, with visits to sites representing all the three major “Holy Land” religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam. We also had several evening talks from representatives of each religion. There were two main guides – an Israeli (originally from the U.S., fluent in Hebrew) in Israel, and in Jordan a native of that country. We had 23 people on the tour, all seniors from the U.S., nine of whom are Jewish. We traveled by motor coach and stayed in five different hotels for the two-week period. Here is a summary of the schedule.

Oct 14-15 - Fly from Newark to Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion Airport; picked by RS and taken to our Jerusalem hotel, an hour away. (This image is from Google Maps, showing routes from airport to Jerusalem, and also proximity of Jerusalem to Tel Aviv.)

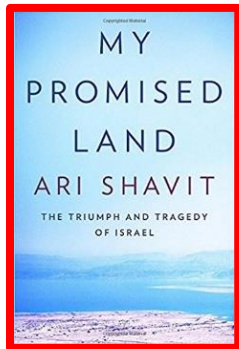


- Oct 16 - Jerusalem: Mount of Olives, “Old City” Christian Quarter; Bethlehem (Church of the Nativity)
- Oct 17 – Old City Jewish Quarter and Western Wall; Yad Vashem
- Oct 18 – Masada, Qumran and Sea of Galilee:
- Oct 19 – Ruins of Capernaum, Kibbutz Degania Bet and Nazareth (Church of the Annunciation)
- Oct 20 – CROSS INTO JORDAN. Tour Jaresh, one of the Decapolis (Ancient Roman) cities; arrive to Amman and visit The Citadel, where Amman began
- Oct 21 – Abdullah Mosque in Amman; Madaba; Mount Nebo
- Oct 22 – Petra, Jordan: World Heritage site of the ancient Nabataens
- Oct 23 – Wadi Run National Park (jeep ride through desert, camel ride); travel to resort on Dead Sea
- Oct 24 – Dead Sea: Bethany on Jordan River where Jesus was baptized; “Swimming” in sea water with 38% salt
- Oct 25 – RETURN TO Jerusalem: Archeology sifting; visit Israel Museum which houses Dead Sea Scrolls
- Oct 26 – Tel Aviv: Old port of Jaffa; new city of Jerusalem, a Mediterranean “hot spot.”
- Oct 27 – City tour of Tel Aviv, including old Jewish quarter Neve Tzedek and Tel Aviv University
- Oct 27 – 11 pm – fly home; Tel Aviv hotel to home in 24 hours

What is it about Israel that is so special?

For one, there is the history. Whether Christian, Jew, or Muslim, if you have any interest in religious heritage or world history, “you’ve got to go,” as they say. And yes, there is the fact that Israel is the only true democracy in the Middle East, and has developed remarkably in its short existence. Those two aspects alone make it a unique and compelling destination.

But there is something else that makes Israel so special, succinctly explained by Israeli Ari Shavit in his best-selling *My Promised Land*.



...Israel is the only nation in the West that is occupying another people. On the other hand, Israel is the only nation in the West that is existentially threatened. Both occupation and intimidation make the Israeli condition unique. Intimidation and occupation have become the two pillars in our condition

Most observers and analysts deny this duality. The ones on the left address occupation and overlook intimidation, while the ones on the right address intimidation and dismiss occupation, but the truth is that without incorporating both elements into one worldview, one cannot grasp Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Any school of thought that does not relate seriously to these two fundamentals is bound to be flawed and futile. Only a third approach that internalizes both intimidation and occupation can be realistic and moral and get the Israel story right.³

I can gush about all the wonderful things we saw and did, about the amazing people we met, about the history we learned, but in the back of your mind, if you have any curiosity at all, you’re going to wonder: Interesting stuff, but...what about the occupation of the Western Bank? What about the threats to Israel’s existence? What about the ‘Conflict’?

You can wonder, and throughout the travelogue I’ll be offering a personal perspective, in part gained from this trip. Yes, it is highly presumptuous to offer any opinion after just two weeks in the Holy Land, but so what? That’s one reason people travel, to get a new or fresh perspective. This trip raised many questions and gave very few answers, if indeed there are any to give. All I can say is that I remain mindful of Shavit’s cogent explanation of “duality.” The future of Israel as a sovereign nation is not secure, but the Israelis we met live life in a way that does not suggest uncertainty or even worry. It is an amazing and paradoxical country.

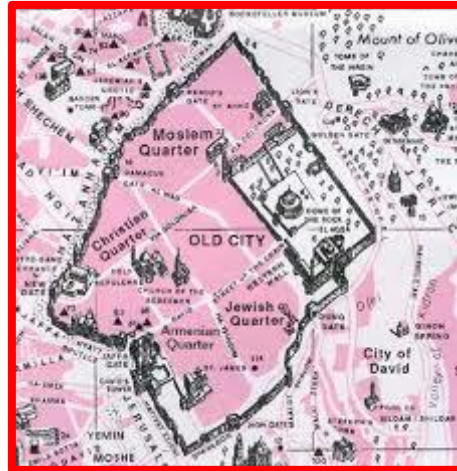
East Jerusalem and the “Old City”

Jerusalem is a much bigger city than I imagined, with a metropolitan population of close to a million. The “Old City” refers to the walled city of antiquity, and is the goal of every tourist who comes to visit for the first time. It contains sacred shrines of the three main religions. It is also an archeological treasure trove, layered with history, and is still being dug up to investigate the occupations by the Romans and Ottomans. Jerusalem was more than once described by our guide as a layer cake, with each succeeding civilization building on top of – literally – the previous one.

It did not take long to realize that, with so much history, one could “prove” if not “support” any sovereign claim as regards the Arabs and the Jews. In this regard, the first two paragraphs of the Jerusalem Wikipedia entry are particularly cogent, and bear quoting. I have placed bolded italics for emphasis.

During its long history, Jerusalem has been attacked 52 times, captured and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times, and destroyed twice. The oldest part of the city was settled in the 4th millennium BCE, making Jerusalem one of the oldest cities in the world.

Notwithstanding the political complexity, our few days in Jerusalem were endlessly fascinating, and wish we could have spent more time there. All first-time tourists, at least on guided tours, are taken to the Old City. Its outside walls are still in place, as are many of the buildings from antiquity. There are four main “quarters” to the Old City: Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Armenian. The Armenian Quarter is low profile, and most visitors make a point of exploring at least one of the other three Quarters; each of them contains a significant holy site.⁶



Muslim Quarter – Dome of the Rock

Significance: The Dome of the Rock is an Islamic shrine in the Old City of Jerusalem. An ancient mosque with a gold-plated dome, it is considered the third holiest site in Islam, the first two being Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. The Dome of the Rock is located on the Temple Mount in the Old City, which is also where the second Jewish Temple was located. The Dome of the Rock was completed in 691 A.D. and was rebuilt in 1022.

Although Israel controls East Jerusalem and the Old City, an Arab ministry based in Amman, Jordan, controls access to The Dome. You can get outside the Dome but not inside unless you are a Muslim. We did not visit this site.



Aerial view and close-up view, Dome of the Rock, Old City of Jerusalem



Looking toward the Western Wall, with the Dome of the Rock behind it.

In any skyline shot of Jerusalem the Dome of the Rock is as iconic as is the Empire State Building in New York or the Eiffel Tower in Paris.



My wife and I on Mount of The Olives, overlooking Jerusalem; the Dome of the Rock is seen on the right.

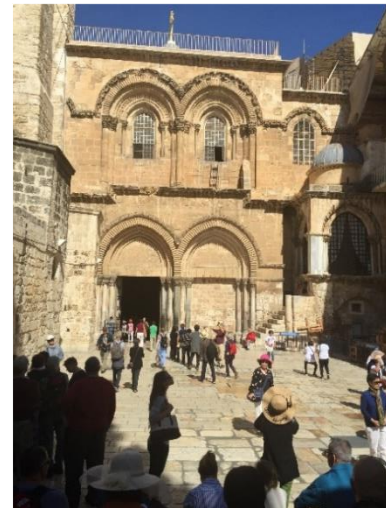
Christian Quarter - Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Significance: This church was built on the site where Jesus was crucified and where, according to Christian religious tradition, he was buried and later resurrected. Like every Christian church we visited that is located on the site of an historically-significant event in Jesus' life, the structure was built hundreds of years later, in this case the 4th century A.D. Also, like all other ancient churches, Holy Sepulchre has been rebuilt several times.

Holy Sepulchre (and all other churches we visited) was crowded with tourists. With a lull in the fighting between Israel and its neighbors, Israeli tourism is soaring. An article published two years ago stated that Christians accounted for 56% of Israel's tourists.⁷ I suspect the percentage is even higher now.



Above: Aerial view of Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Christian Quarter, Old City
Below: Sign indicating Christian Quarter, and view of Church entrance



Below: The Edicule inside Church of the Holy Sepulchre where, according to Christian religious tradition, the body of Jesus was buried and resurrected. There was a long line to get inside the Edicule.



Jewish Quarter – The Western Wall

Significance: A single remaining wall of the Second Jewish Temple (destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70), and now one of the holiest sites in Orthodox Judaism. Men and women come to pray at the wall. Many leave small notes in the cracks between the stone blocks (prayers, comments, questions), which are collected daily and buried without being read. As in Orthodox Synagogues, women and men are segregated at the Western Wall.



Left: Sign on entrance to the Jewish Quarter. Right: Western Wall of the Old City; above and to the left is the Dome of the Rock



Above: two photos of left side of Western Wall where men pray
Below: two photos of right side of Western Wall, where women pray; the fence separating the sexes is clearly visible in the 2nd photo





Left: Our Road Scholar group in front of entrance to Western Wall prayer areas
 Right: Our guide Jonathan explaining an ancient mosaic map of the Old City. Below, he is holding up a drawing showing that the Western Wall extends far below the current floor. Archeologists digging below ground are still making new discoveries. The following news item and picture appeared in *The Times of Israel* while we were there.



FIND MAY MEAN TEMPLE MOUNT WAS USED EVEN AFTER DESTRUCTION

Massive section of Western Wall and Roman theater uncovered after 1,700 years

Sought for 150 years, the remarkable discovery of the small theater changes archaeologists' perceptions of Roman-conquered Jerusalem after the fall of the Second Temple

By AMANDA BORSCHEL-DAN | 16 October 2017, 12:33 pm | 17



In looking back I am reminded of the rapid pace of our trip, made possible by superb guides and logistics, and a sprightly group of tourists eager for new knowledge. In our first two days in Jerusalem we not only toured the Old City twice, but took a bus ride to Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity, and managed several hours at Yad Vashem, Israel's world famous Holocaust Museum.

There were also informal evening presentations, one of them by a seasoned Palestinian tour guide who spoke without notes on the current Palestinian situation in the Holy Land. The secular nature of the tour made it possible for us to hear different perspectives, and this talk was welcomed by all. By the end of his presentation, which included a lively Q&A, I had, indeed, gained a new perspective. The rest of trip only confirmed an opinion formed that evening – the Palestinian “situation” in Israel is unstable and impossibly complex, and there is never going to be a solution acceptable to both sides.

References

1. Wikipedia: Intifada
2. Wikipedia: David Applebaum
3. Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land*. <https://www.amazon.com/My-Promised-Land-Triumph-Tragedy/dp/0385521707>
4. Wikipedia: Jerusalem
5. Wikipedia: East Jerusalem
6. Wikipedia: Old City (Jerusalem)
7. The Holy Land's Surprising Wave of Tourism. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-holy-lands-surprising-wave-of-tourism-1436554101>

Next: Part 2 - Masada