

## The Holy Land

The Middle East has some remarkable history, as exemplified by modern day Israel. Although few of the original sites remain, it is astonishing to think that this is where all these miraculous events took place. On display is where Jesus preached and performed the loaves and fishes' miracle, where he was betrayed and where Jesus was born and crucified.

Waking up every day in Jerusalem to church bells and calls to prayer, it is difficult to decide where to go first. Many Christians start at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This is where Jesus was to be crucified, buried and rose again. The crucifixion area is on the second floor with many people lighting candles. The burial area is a slab on the ground floor and the resurrection area is in the middle. The church is shared by Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Ethiopian and Coptics which sometimes lead to tension and officially there is a status quo agreement amongst the groups which makes any renovation difficult. The Syrian Orthodox followers have not been able to repair an area they control that was destroyed by fire and the Ethiopians are confined to a monastery on the second floor outside the main complex.

South of the Christian Quarter is the Armenian Quarter and Mt. Zion. St. James Cathedral can only be visited during masses. Other parts of the quarter detail the post World War I war between Turkey and Armenia which is sympathetic to the many Armenians died. In the Mt. Zion area is the Coenaculum which is where the Last Supper was to have taken place. It is small room without any distinguishing features but obviously historically important. King David's Tomb is nearby as is the Monastery of Dormition where Mother Mary was to have passed away. Also in the area is the stone covered grave of Oskar Schindler, who was made famous in the movie *Schindler's List*.

The Jewish Quarter is dominated by the Western Wall which has a different aura during different times of the day. In fact, there are cameras here linked to a website so one can see what is happening during any time of the day. In the morning there is a lot of action here with many different type of Jews visiting. In the midday it is usually less busy and is a good opportunity to write a prayer on a piece of a paper and stick it in the numerous crevices of the wall. The pieces of paper are cleared out once a week. During sunset and early nighttime, the masses return although they are segregated as men and women pray separately. Also, in the Jewish Quarter is a



long and impressive cardo, which harkens back to Roman times and the rebuilt Hurva Synagogue.

Overlooking the Western Wall is the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque, part of the Temple Mount in the Muslim Quarter. Neither are open to non-Muslims, but the multi-colored exterior of the Dome of the Rock can be viewed by all. Also in this quarter is the Via Dolorosa which is the route that Jesus took before he was crucified. On Fridays, Franciscan Friars walk this route with hordes of followers, explaining the Stations of the Cross in multiple languages. Along the route is St. Anne's Church which was to be the home of the Virgin Mary's parents and near this church is a small Orthodox church where the Virgin Mary herself was to have been born. I was fortunate to be in Jerusalem during Ramadan so much of the Muslim quarter's private homes had illuminated stars of blue, green and red as a way to celebrate.

Leading out of the city is the Kidron Valley. The Tomb of Virgin Mary is accessed via a deep cave. Many of the items hanging from the ceiling are Muslim in nature and the candles next



to the tomb are tall and thin, which are more typical of the Orthodox religion.

Immediately next to this large cave is a smaller cave where Jesus was to have been betrayed. Across a modern road is the Garden of Gethsemane with a series of olive trees where Jesus was to have gone after the betrayal; this event is commemorated by a large church. Other churches leading up the Mount of Olives include the Church of All Nations and

the Church of the Ascension. In the area is a Jewish cemetery with a lookout and more caves where people are buried.

Moving away from the Mount of Olives and just outside the old city is the City of David. The Pillar of Absalom which traditionally has been thought of as a tribute to a son of David. The main attraction in the City of David is Hezekiah's Tunnel which is an interesting look at how water was supplied in past times and includes a walk through the watery tunnels. The tour ends with a visit to the Pool of Shiloh.

Bethlehem is a charming little city which receives hordes of tourists due to being where Christ was born. The basement of the Church of the Nativity within Manger Square contains a small glass star to mark the place where Jesus was born. To the right of the star are some candles and a painting of the Three Wiseman to commemorate the coming of the Three Wiseman.



Just a few minutes' walk from Manager Square is the Milk Grotto Chapel where the Holy Family was to have taken refuge during the Slaughter of the Innocents. Mother Mary was to have been nursing Jesus here when a drop of breast milk fell to the ground turning it white. A longer walk is Shepherd's Field which is the area where the shepherds saw the Star of Bethlehem. There is a large church and some smaller churches in caves as well as the actual fields. Heading back to Jerusalem, the security wall separating Israel and the West Bank has a lot of mostly anti-Israeli graffiti; one is a Palestinian child patting down an Israeli soldier. Closer to the checkpoint any graffiti is covered in blue paint so most organized tours wouldn't see the part of the wall with graffiti.

Another city related to life of Jesus is Nazareth. The Basilica of the Annunciation is where Mary was to have ascended into heaven and is a large church built over the rock where Mary was to have ascended. In the courtyard there are several paintings depicting Mary from different countries all with a unique touch that makes them distinctive to that country. Mary's Well is the place where Greek Orthodox followers believe Mary ascended into heaven and includes a smaller church and the actual well where Mary was to have ascended. Outside the city is a hill where Jesus was to have been chased by angry locals. I stayed at the Fauzi Azar Inn which is a beautiful old house turned into an inn. Anyone that had traveled to Syria or Iraq could stay free for one night.

Moving north to the Sea of the Galilee is Tiberias. The city has a waterfront, St. Peter's church, old walls and Hamat Tiberias National Park which has a synagogue dating to the Fifth Century BC as well as mosaics. Tiberias is the gateway to the Sea of Galilee which can be accessed by public transport or bicycle. I choose to bike around the northern half of Galilee which was difficult in the 100-degree heat. In the area around Tabgha on the western side of the sea is the Church of Beatitudes, Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes and Church of the Primacy of St. Peter. Beatitudes related to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and within the church grounds are several of the important phrases related to these teachings. The Church of

Loaves and Fishes is dedicated to this miracle performed by Jesus. The Primacy of St. Peter commemorates the importance of Peter to the church.

The amount of religious history in the Holy Land is mind-numbing. One drawback is the numerous loud and obnoxious tourists snapping pictures and not seemingly caring about the religion. I noticed this in the Christian sites, whereas the Jewish sites seemed more solemn and non-Muslims weren't even allowed in Muslim sites. Even though many of the places are just a couple rocks with a church built over them, it is still an intense feeling when visiting.