

Israel – 2011

Friday 4th November

After a long wait for the Immigration Authorities to come on board and scrutinise each passenger individually, we set off at about 8.45 a.m. for Jerusalem. The city is about 40 miles from Ashdod where we had docked, and involves crossing the Coastal Strip, the Central Lowlands, and the mountains.

Jerusalem is 2,500 feet above sea level.

The land is very rocky and seemingly quite naturally barren but the lowlands provide for much cultivation of vegetables and fruit.

The whole country is only the size of Wales and has a population of around 7 million.

Leaving Ashdod, we first skirted Mount Carmel which apparently shelters the port from the east wind.

Our first stop was on a part of the Mount of Olives and close to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This gave a good view across the Kidron Valley to the city walls and the Dome of the Rock.

The old city of Jerusalem is relatively small but there are a considerable number of new buildings surrounding it. Leaving the view point, we were taken on a drive around the city walls and past, amongst other places, the Church of All Nations.

Once deposited by the coach, we entered the city on foot via the Jaffa Gate and our guide led us first to a tourist shop (!) where we purchased a Menorah and also a book that David Bascott had recommended about the Holy Land. We then walked to visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is the supposed site of the Crucifixion, anointing of the body and the burial of Jesus and therefore also of the Resurrection.

The Church was very crowded indeed and it was therefore not a great spiritual experience for us. We moved on through the narrow alley ways and out through the Jaffa Gate to be picked up by the coach for our lunch stop at the Grand Court Hotel.

After lunch, we took the coach to be dropped outside the city walls from whence we then walked to the Garden Tomb. This was discovered in the 19th century by General Gordon and is considered by many Protestants to be the real Golgotha (Place of the Skull) and burial place of Jesus. We were delighted to see from our Guide's name badge that he was Victor Jack – whom we remembered as being an author of Christian booklets of the 1960s and 70s. He gave a very good account of the reasons for believing this to be the correct site. He also explained that its authenticity was not fundamental to our faith and gave a clear Christian message.

We left the tranquillity of the Garden and the Tomb and returned to the hustle and bustle of the narrow streets within the old town. We walked to the Via Dolorosa, stopping at various key places – such as the Church of the Flagellation and also being led into a Muslim School (El Omariya School) which offered, through the iron bars of a window aperture, a magnificent view of the Dome on the

Rock, the Walls and also other areas of Old Jerusalem – indeed the view was superior to that from the top of the Mount of Olives.

Our final stop in Jerusalem was at the Wailing Wall. As we neared it, there were armed soldiers in the streets and we then had to pass through Security complete with bag scanners and searches. At last we emerged at the square in front of the Wailing Wall where we saw many people arriving – Jews of all descriptions in relevant attire as prescribed by their sect. We took the opportunity to go to the Wall itself although this meant to separate sections – Men and Women.

The Sabbath was fast approaching as it was nearing Sun Down on a Friday, and photography is banned once Shabbat begins.

We left the area walking past the Jerusalem Archaeological Park where the Western Wall excavations are taking place and where the Secondary Cardo has been exposed (one of Jerusalem's main thoroughfares in the Byzantine period of the 4th – 7th centuries A.D.)

We then re-boarded our coach for a speedy journey back to Discovery – arriving only about 10 minutes before our evening meal was to begin at 6.30 p.m.

Saturday 5th November

We docked early at Haifa, the third largest city in Israel after Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and were soon off on our all-day trip into Galilee.

We travelled through an agricultural area flanked by hills and arrived in Nazareth, one of the oldest cities in Israel. Once a small village, it is now a town of 65,000 inhabitants. 70% are Muslim and 30% are Christian.

We visited the Church of the Annunciation, which is a modern building with a plethora of mosaics depicting biblical scenes from the perspective of many different nations. The church is built over the place where the Angel Gabriel is said to have appeared to Mary.

After that we went to the Church of Joseph, which is built over what is believed to have been Joseph's house.

As we left the area we looked at the remains of humble homes with some parts dating back to the 8th Century B.C.

We left Nazareth and drove through Cana to the Mount of the Beatitudes. This overlooks the Sea of Galilee and gave a wonderful insight into the geography of so many of the Biblical stories. On top of the Mount, a church has been erected and we went into this.

At Mid-day we embarked upon a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. The vessel was based on an ancient boat that had been discovered nearby and was on exhibition in the adjacent Visitors Centre.

The sun was shining as we left the shore but very quickly the skies darkened and there was thunder and lightning followed by torrential rain. It became apparent to us how easily the weather here on

the Lake changes and storms come seemingly out of nowhere. We bought a CD of Hebrew music on the boat and also a small pebble necklace for Jill.

The Storm on the Lake had been a very memorable experience.

After lunch at a nearby restaurant we were to have gone to the Church of the Multiplication (the loaves and fishes) but this had closed early due to the Sabbath.

Therefore we went straight to the ruins of Capernaum where we could see much of the Synagogue building dating back to the 3rd century AD and therefore very similar to the one that Jesus would have known. There were also the ruins of many houses – our guide told us that over 1000 people used to live in the village. Amongst these was a circular house, covered by a protective shelter, that is said to be that of Simon Peter, whose statue welcomes visitors on entry to the village.

Perhaps half a mile from Capernaum is the Church of St. Peter's Primacy; by the shore of Lake Galilee. This is built around and upon the rock where it is said that Jesus reinstated Peter after his denial of Jesus.

Our final stop of the day was at Yardenit, the baptismal site on the Jordan river. Clearly this was not where Jesus was baptised although it seems to be a major baptismal place today. Whilst we were there we saw several baptisms taking place.

There were eucalyptus trees in the area and a great noise of birds roosting in them. We thought how reminiscent it was of Australia and were surprised to see that indeed the birds WERE parakeets!

Other wild creatures that were very evident were otters – swimming in the river and also coming ashore in quite large numbers. They were actually far from wild in that they exhibited no fear of people and appeared almost tame.

We then took our leave and headed back to Haifa in our waiting coach, again arriving without too much spare time before supper.

Thoughts on Israel:

On the ship we had some lectures from an Arab lady, teaching at Exeter University. She presented a different view on Israel. Our own impressions were of a bustling country with many modern buildings, yet combined with some of the markets more typical of Arab souks.