

# Israel and Palestine

By Stefanie Yuen Thio



Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem



On Temple Mount



**I**srael and Palestine. Two words that, more often than not, monopolise the front page news, with tales of suicide bombings, Intifada and the constant threat of war.

In my mind's eye, I expected Jerusalem to be chaotic; historic in a rundown way, with traffic back to back, and the constant checking of vehicles by soldiers carrying loaded AK47s.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. After the vehicular frenzy of Egypt, where we had just escaped a demonstration which saw Christians clashing with the police, arriving at Tel Aviv was a little like returning to Singapore. The airport was shiny, new and uncluttered; the highway was well lit and well paved. OK, so maybe this is Tel Aviv, I thought to myself; Jerusalem is where the disputed territory is – be prepared for that. But driving through the streets of Jerusalem, past its modern Supreme Court building and the Knesset, with the landscaped driveways and modern roads, graffiti-free walls

and streets so free of litter they could be in Disneyland, it was clear that we had arrived in a first world country.

Jerusalem is a city that both Muslims and Christians consider holy. Its most sacred site, the Temple Mount, was where King Solomon built the first Jewish Temple. Jews believe that this is where the new city of god will be established. For this reason, wealthy Jews from all over the world buy burial plots on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple Mount, believing that they will be reborn near the New Jerusalem of the Bible.

Yet, this plateau is now wholly a Muslim shrine and religious complex. The famous golden dome crowns a mosque, the third holiest site for the Muslims in the world, after only Mecca and Medina. It is so sacred, that the entire site is ringed off and protected by armed guards. Visitors may only visit within certain hours of the day (on our visit, we were only allowed in between 12.30 and 1.30 in

the afternoon), and everyone must be fully covered (a street vendor sells pashmina shawls for tourists who come unprepared). Unlike the rest of touristy Jerusalem, it is a place of quiet reflection, and no tourist traps ply their “My friend went to Jerusalem and all I got was this T-shirt” mementos. You get the feeling that this is a sacred site, where visitors are only tolerated, perhaps because the authorities recognise the deep spiritual significance this place has to followers of different faiths.

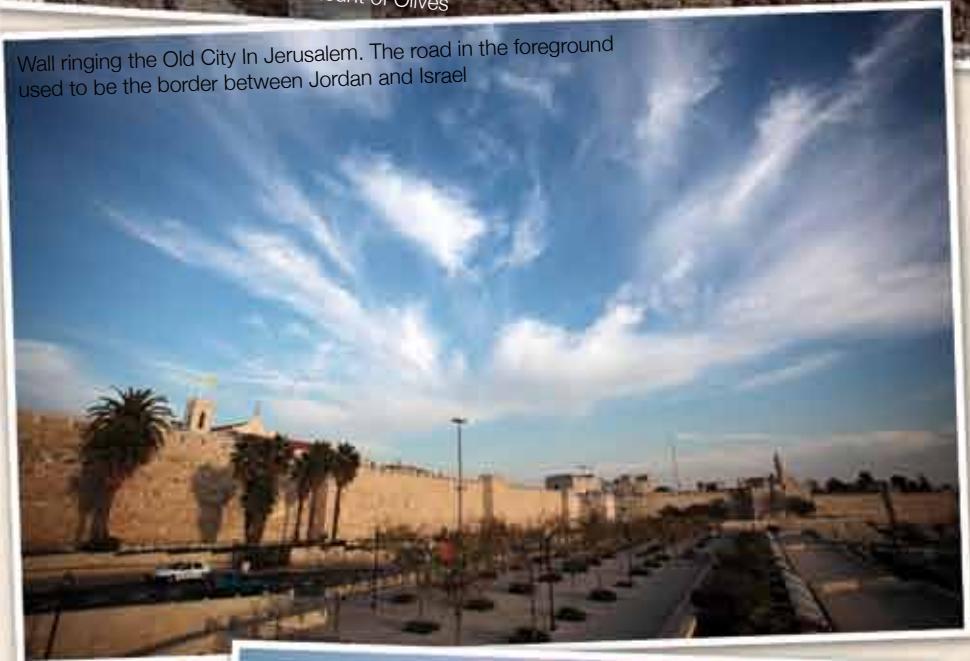
You never get very far away from the issue of religion here. This is a country which has seen much bloodshed over something much more intrinsic than money or land; it is a country where people have fought and died over faith. This was the chosen land of the Bible, which Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to find. Over the years, it was the subject of many wars, variously conquered by the Romans, then Arab warriors, falling to Crusaders (in a disgraceful land-grab by impoverished second sons), and re-taken by mighty Saladin in the 12th century. Its boundaries have been drawn and re-drawn, more recently after World War 2, and the various bloody skirmishes that have occurred since then. Its modern highway, named simply, Road 1, used to be the border between Jordan and Israel, but this was land that Israel conquered after the Six Day War. Jerusalem Gate, one of the gates along the wall that encircles the Old City, is pitted with holes from Jordanian soldiers during the siege.

But just as religion underpins so much of the life here, and even as the international press plays up the disputes between the Israelis and the Palestinians, Jerusalem itself seems to have worked out a way for the many different races and ethnic groups to co-exist peaceably.

The ancient city of Jerusalem is a case in point. This is the walled enclave that houses the streets and buildings from ancient times, and where the Temple Mount is situated. Many of the buildings here have stood for centuries, and some of the flagstones were apparently laid in the days of the Roman occupation. The Old City is divided into four quadrants: housing the Jewish quarter, the Armenians, the Christians and the Arabs. Each section has its distinct characteristics and the people who live and work here belong to the relevant community. But at the same time, the quadrants ebb and flow into one another, with stall keepers displaying Jewish artefacts alongside Christian symbols and Arab



Temple of the Mount, seen from Mount of Olives



Wall ringing the Old City In Jerusalem. The road in the foreground used to be the border between Jordan and Israel

souvenirs. There is a harmony and a gentle neighbourliness that belies the tough talk and ferocious fighting of the Arab-Israeli conflict outside these ancient city walls.

This undercurrent of brotherhood is confirmed by our tour guide, a mountain of a man, who used to serve in the Israeli SEAL team and who answers to the unlikely nickname of “Doubie”, meaning “Teddy Bear”. He has only good things to say about the Arabs, many of whom are his close friends, while he castigates the Hasidic Jews for paying no taxes and being a drain on the country (these are ultra Orthodox Jews where the men spend their time studying the religious Jewish texts). After our tour, he encourages us to visit Bethlehem, which is in the Palestinian Authority controlled sectors, so that we can help his Arab friends who



Sunset over Jerusalem

work there. He explains that their economy is suffering and if we could give a small tip to the guide who shows us the church there, and buy a few souvenirs from the gift shop, that would be a blessing to them. He speaks with a depth of feeling that seems to flow from a genuine compassion, rather than any agreed fee sharing arrangement he may have with a fellow tour guide.

His friend, George, picks us up in his rather beat up old car just before the border

Bethlehem - in the Palestinian Authority controlled city



crossing between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. George is a Palestinian Christian, and a cross hangs from the rearview mirror of his car. Israelis cannot enter Palestinian territory so we have to be brought through by an Arab. 15 minutes later sees us in the main square of Bethlehem, at the Nativity Church, where it is believed Jesus' manger lay. Here, another guide takes over – an Arab, this time, more swarthy in appearance, and dressed in well-worn clothes that have seen better days. Bethlehem is a far less affluent neighbourhood, filled with unfinished houses and badly paved roads. The careful landscaping of Jerusalem is missing, and dust curls on the road as cars drive by.

The Church of the Nativity, the main tourist attraction of Bethlehem, is another strange amalgam of faiths on one piece of real estate. It houses three distinct sections: one Greek Orthodox section (as it was originally built by the Byzantines), an Armenian section and a spanking new Roman Catholic section. Each of these portions of the church is administered by the different branches of the faiths and seem to co-exist in relative harmony. Thankfully, they have different religious holidays (Christmas, for example, falls in December for the Roman Catholics, January for the Greek Orthodox and February for the Armenians), which makes celebrating mass less complicated.

In the main city of Jerusalem, Arabs and Jews live in clearly demarcated sectors, and their children study in different schools. The Hebrew that our guides speak has incorporated many Arab phrases. Our Jewish taxi driver instinctively refers to the Arab parking attendant as “habibi”, roughly translated into “buddy” or “dear friend” in Arab. When we ask about the conflict, our hosts generally speak of the dark days of the Yom Kippur War, but say that today, they live in harmony with their Arab friends and neighbours, the conflict being more real in the international press than in Israeli daily life. That may be a pat and convenient line to feed the ignorant tourist, but it is



The remains of the fort and the Palace at Masada



The Western Wall (formerly known as the Wailing Wall) where devout Jews come to pray



also probably true to say that these political enemies are managing to co-habit relatively peacefully as neighbours.

The Jews we meet are a loud and expressive bunch. We see this in our tour guide's shouting out a sarcastic, "Thank you very much!" at a rude driver who has just moved his hands in a universally understood gesture of vehicular one-upmanship, and in our well-built 30-year old bartender who is preparing for the Israeli Bar Exams. The latter looks like Michael Phelps, only handsome, and has a ready laugh as he keeps up a congenial conversation with us. But his story is a sad one – he has been through two tours of war duty, and seen friends die. He says he believes in his future "because my mother, the best person on this earth, has taught me well". He has a twinkle in his eye and his charm is infectious, but there is an edge to his voice when he mentions the two wars he has been through and says, "Israelis, we can travel anywhere. We go to Columbia, and hear gunfire, we shrug out shoulders. So what? We keep going." Was there the slightest hint of desperation in this need to live life to the fullest, grab it while the grabbing is good? By and large, the people we meet are more mature than their counterparts in other countries. All male Israeli children serve three years of national service, and the girls, two years. Theirs is not a theoretical enemy and a training for "just in case". Their worst case scenario could play out on any given day, and it is for survival that they undertake basic military training. A sobering thought as I look at my 11-year-old son, whose only knowledge of warcraft is from Star Wars and computer games.

The Jews have a long history of martial conflict. About 90 minutes outside of Jerusalem, on a flat arid rock in the desert overlooking the Dead Sea, stands the remains of Masada, a Roman fortress built in the time

of King Herod. The Romans had put down the Great Revolt of the Israelites in 66 AD with typical effectiveness. A few remaining rebels fled to the cliffs of Masada, which became the last rebel stronghold. Eventually, the Romans built a ramp up the fort, using Jewish slaves (on the premise that those in the fort would be less likely to kill them), and breached the defences. The remaining Jews in Masada took the decision that it was better to die as free men, than to live as slaves. The women and children were first put to death, then ten men were chosen to despatch the rest. Finally, the ten drew lots to determine who would kill the nine and then fall on his sword. When the Romans eventually broke into the fort, they found a storehouse full of supplies (the Jews' way of showing that they had not committed suicide because they had run out of provisions), and men and women who had died on their own terms. In the words of the historian, Josephus: "Here encountering the mass of slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve, and the contempt of death displayed by so many."

This same heartbreaking spirit of principle over pragmatism continues to prevail in the present Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I cannot pretend to understand these complex people with their rich spiritual and historical heritage, or the complicated issues surrounding the present international disagreement. But I am inspired and encouraged by the pockets of peace and friendship I have seen. This visit has also given me a renewed appreciation for all that I take for granted in Singapore – the racial harmony and social cohesiveness so hard

won by our leaders of an earlier time.

So this Christmas, I will give thanks for the peace that we enjoy in Singapore, and will say a prayer for all those who continue to soldier on, in the fight for peace, in Israel and Palestine.

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graffiti on the wall, as you leave Bethlehem for Jerusalem



In the Old City



Sunrise in Jerusalem, the Old City in silhouette