

Holy Land Tour 2008

Our last trip to Israel was in June of 2008, on Israel's 60th anniversary. We left SFO on June 10 with a stopover in Atlanta, four hours later. After two hours in Atlanta, we boarded our flight to Tel Aviv. We flew up the east coast passing by Washington D.C., New York and Boston and then out over the ocean skirting the coast after passing by Nova Scotia the Prince Edward Island, Greenland, Iceland and the south over Ireland, Britain, skirting by Paris, Switzerland tip of Italy, over the Adriatic Sea Greece, over the Mediterranean and on into Tel Aviv. After an hour up in the air, we had dinner with a salad, a choice of either Roasted Breast of Chicken or Cheese Manicotti. Later in the flight we had a mid-flight snack of muffins, yogurts, granola bars and bananas. Then before arrival, we had an afternoon refreshment, fresh fruit, tabbouleu salad, hot tomato and pesto pizza and astur cookie. The first part of the flight was in the darkness so some of our group caught up on their sleep.

We arrived in Tel Aviv, sailed through customs and met our guide who got us on our bus. His name was Andre and the bus driver is A-ve. Andre is a Christian that comprises about 1% of the population in Israel. He was born in the old city, became a guide at 10 years of age, yes 10 showing people the various ways to different places. While he has an accent, it is one that we could understand, maybe missing only a word every 30 or so. Before arriving at The Metropolitan Hotel, the driver took us along the beach where we would go and stick our toes into the Mediterranean Sea. We had dinner with plenty to eat and then off to bed.

Our Wake up call on Thursday came at 6:45 A.M. We got ready, had a buffet breakfast and then walked a block and a half to get to the beach on the Mediterranean Sea. The bus pulled out at 8:30 and we were on the way Caesarea. We learned some Hebrew words and numbers on our way and had a quick overview of the land. At Caesarea, our first stop was at the ancient amphitheater where two members of our group went to the stage and led us in a song with words that we could hear real clearly. We walked past the Hippodrome and through the Crusader Fort. Lastly, we went over to the Roman Aqueduct and took more pictures and most us ran to the water of the Mediterranean again.

Our next stop was at Megiddo where 27 civilizations are built on top of each other. We had lunch here and most of us ate or shared a falafel that was really good. We overlooked the valley where Napoleon said could incorporate every major army of the world. We walked down and up 195 stairs into a water storage area and everyone on the trip took the walk.

We left to go to the Nazareth Village (<http://www.nazarethvillage.com/>) where we were able to get a glimpse of what Nazareth was like during the times of Jesus. We saw shepherds, a wine press, an oil press, olive trees, a replica of a synagogue as well as a house that probably was like the house that Jesus lived in as he was growing up. They had a gift shop and this was the first time many of the group had an opportunity to pick up some gifts and souvenirs.

On the way to Tiberius, we stopped at Cana and went to the traditional church where Jesus did his first miracle. That night, we stayed at the Holiday Inn located on the Sea of Galilee. For dinner, we had more than we ever wanted. Some had some salmon and beef, others had chicken, a salad bar, soup, bread with humus. Of course, the desert bar had all kinds of real rich cakes and puddings. No would could say that they walked away hungry.

After dinner, a good share of the students went into the pool at the hotel. Everyone seemed to do well today except for being a bit tired. We saw a lot the first day and a lot of pictures were taken. Wake up call the next day was at 6:30 A.M.

Friday was another interesting and busy day. After our wake up call, we hit the morning buffet for another big assortment of food. Most of us had pancakes with chocolate poured over them! Then we left at 8:00 and went to the shores of Galilee where we were on our own boat for a ride across the lake. Shortly after we left shore, they played the National Anthem and raised the flag. Of course, this was an exciting moment for all of us. While on the boat, we watched as one of the men tried to catch some fish with his net, had a short Bible study, did some singing and participated in one of the Jewish folk dances. It was also a time to get some pictures taken and buy some souvenirs. After docking, we visited the Jesus Boat that was discovered in 1985. We also saw a short movie of how the boat was discovered and preserved.

Our next trek was up the Golan Heights and on to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus stood before his disciples on a pagan spot where there were pagan temples and declared that he was going to build his church, bringing people to Christ. From here, we took about an hour hike going through the lush green areas at the headwaters of the Jordan, ending at a beautiful water fall. The hike gave us our exercise and gave us an idea of the land north of the Jordan. We stopped for Falafels again at a Lebanese Restaurant near some cool, fresh water.

After lunch, we came down off the Heights and stopped at the place that Jesus brought the Sermon on the Mount. Then we drove a couple of miles and visited the church of the loaves and fishes. A beautiful mosaic is on the floor of this church dating back hundreds of years. Our last visit was to Capernaum where we saw the home of Peter's mother-in-law and the place where the early church met. We saw a house right next door to it where people built on to their houses just like what we read about in John 14 where Christ promised to build a place for us in the future with the addition of many rooms. Our visit of the city stopped with a look at the synagogue that has a foundation dating back to the time of Jesus. It was getting warm here and temperatures seemed to be around a hundred degrees.

We got back to the hotel a little after five with dinner at 6:30. We had some with colds today but everyone seemed to be holding up both in health and spirits. On the Sabbath, the elevators stopped working like on ordinary days and there was no toast at all on the Sabbath! Our first stop was at the Jordan River for a baptismal service. Ten of our group wanted to be baptized, mostly for a rededication of life. One young man from our church had come to know the Lord six months earlier and this was his statement of his trust in Christ. After videos were taken and songs sung, pastor Miller stepped out of the river only to be met by a woman from Holland who was on a tour but their group wouldn't let anyone get baptized so she asked him if he would baptize her. Upon finding out her name and her relationship with Jesus, he baptized this 65 year old woman with our group standing there along with her bus load of friends. It was exciting to make this woman happy.

Our next stop was at Qumran where we saw a short video and walked through the area and out to the cave where the first scrolls were found. We drove down to En Gedi and hiked up to the falls and at the second falls, we walked out into the pool and stood under the falls cascading down on my head. From here we headed to our hotel at the Dead Sea and our regular dip into the Dead Sea. That evening, some had a special suite on the top with a huge balcony overlooking the Dead Sea. It was certainly one of our nicer places.

On Sunday Morning, we rose early again, had breakfast and headed out to Masada, the old fortress of Herod. Being Sunday, we sang on the bus and had prayer before the day began with a challenge about Father's Day. When we got off the bus, Marci Penner said to Diane Ketcham, "Your father is today with Our Father in heaven." This was a great encouragement to Diane who lost her father while being on the trip. The students were in unusually good form today and coming more out their shell. We were no longer on the tram for our three minute ride to the top when one of the young men shouted, "Where's the bathroom?" And the whole group responded, "There is no bathroom!" Then the group yelled out together, "Aughhhhhhhh." Even an 80 year old man responded by enthusiastically saying, "I love young people like that. They have such life." We filled up our water junks with nice cold water and went to an area where in 66 A.D. Jews rebelled against Rome. But in 73 A.D. the Romans marched against the Jews on the ramp they had made to conquer the fortress. But the Zealots cast lots to choose ten men to kill the remainder and then chose one man among themselves who would kill the survivors. That last Jew killed himself. Then, when the Romans arrived, they only found two surviving women and a few children. Here, as Josephus said, "And so met (the Romans) with the multitude of the slain, but could taken no pleasure in the fact, though it were done to their enemies."

Our Christian guide sat us now in the shade along the way and told us how the Jews chose freedom in order not to be slaves—and then asked ourselves, "What about us?" He asked us if we were willing to die to our habits and our temptations in order to be free from being slaves to them. What a great illustration of what we need to do in our lives when we come to Christ as Paul wrote in Romans six.

After looking at the storehouses, talking about how they got their water up here, seeing the synagogue, looking at the pigeon holes that were made here for some of their offerings, viewing the Roman ramp and the Byzantine church, we came back down the tram for our ride down.

Our next stop was the Judean Desert and we came to what is called the Genesis Land, situated in the heart of the Judean desert, on the way to the Dead Sea, in the land where the Patriarchs lived. A magical place, it enables visitors to experience life as it was in biblical times. Visitors to Genesis Land are greeted by Eliezer, Abraham's manservant, and by a train of camels which lead us down to Abraham's tent, where one can experience their legendary hospitality. Here, the stories of the Bible come to life in the very landscape in which they took place. (<http://www.genesisland.co.il/>). We had a typical meal for what Abraham would do for his guests. We ate until we were stuffed ending with dried apricots, raisins and dates. Then, we went over the church to the historical site where Jesus was born, the Church of the Nativity that was built in the 4th century. After that, we did some shopping to pick up some souvenirs and gifts. We went back to Jerusalem to our hotel, the Hyatt Regency where we had another full buffet of food. We ate so much today that everyone was personally stuffed.

One of our students had some stomach problems but was doing better by the end of the day. Good for old Pepto-Bismol. And one of the kids with a cold seemed to be getting over it. The spirits seemed high again and for the most part, everyone was healthy, though maybe a bit tired. So, while were still having computer hook up challenges, we still wished all of our Father's a Happy Father's Day and a word of thanks for those who helped make this event take place in the lives of their children.

On Monday, we headed out first to see the Shrine of the Book and as we entered it, we saw the model city of Jerusalem that had recently been moved and enhanced. Because of the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel, the Israel Museum presented two major sections of the Great Isaiah Scroll—the most complete biblical Dead Sea Scroll document ever found and one of the world's greatest archaeological treasures—in a special installation in the Shrine of the Book. For the first time in over

forty years, the public had the rare opportunity to view the two longest sections of the Scroll, featuring Isaiah's celebrated message of peace: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares..." (Isaiah 2:4).

From here we visited Yad Vashem, the official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. This name is Isaiah 56:5 that reads, "And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (Yad Vashem) that shall not be cut off." The museum was established in 1953 and was rebuilt about a year and half before we came. Today it contains more than 2300 authentic artifacts and would take hours to really be able to view the place.

In the afternoon we walked down the Mt. of Olives and eventually made our way to the high priest's residence just south of the Jaffa Gate. Here we went into what is known as The Church of St. Peter, now called St. Peter in Gallicantu (cock crow). It was built in the slopes of Mount Zion in 1931. Here we sat down and read the story of Peter denying Christ and just as we read about the rooster crowing, a rooster went off outside the church! According to tradition, this was the place of the palace of high priest Caiaphas, where Jesus was brought to jail after his arrest. These caves under the church are dated to the 2nd temple period where Jesus was believed to be held in custody, as well as Peter and John after his resurrection as seen in Acts 5. The lower room is a place where visitors stand and pray. Here we sang, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Also, we read Psalm 88 at this point. On the north side of the church is an ancient staircase, one can walk down towards the valley of Kidron. It is perhaps the passage from the upper city to the lower city during the first temple period and being the original steps that Jesus walked upon.

The next morning we entered the Lion's Gate and stopped to see the Crusader Church of St. Anne and the ancient Pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed a blind man. From here we went to the various stations of the cross, visiting the wailing wall and then The Coenaculum, known as the upper room and finishing the day at Gordon's Calvary by having communion together and providing everyone with a communion cup made out of olive wood.

As we left our hotel for our final day of sightseeing, the driver took us to the great view of the city from the southern end of Jerusalem. Then we drove down to the new city wall that had just been erected within the last couple of years to deter terrorist attacks against the people of Jerusalem. Our next stop was at En Kerena Village, the home of John the Baptist along with Mary and Elizabeth. Then we stopped off at The Hadassah University Medical Centre had a tour of the famous Marc Chagall's windows representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

We then made our way back to the old city by entering through the Joppa Gate where we bought the group some bread and then we visited the Tower of David Museum on the History of Jerusalem. The museum is set in the restored Citadel and gives one Jerusalem's long and eventful history through the Canaanite period, the first temple period, the return to Zion and the second temple period, the late Roman and Byzantine periods and much, much more right up to the nineteenth century. Then we left the museum and went up to the top of the wall on the western side, an area we had never walked, and went along this part of the wall down to the old city of David.

As our last day was coming to an end for sightseeing, we came to the City of David that is the ancient heart of biblical Jerusalem. This is the place where the kingdom of Israel first arose upon the stage of history. Our main activity here was where Hezekiah cut the remarkable Siloam tunnel out of the rock. This was for most of us the first time to go down the spiral staircase and into Warren's shaft that leads to the Gihon Springs where we walked through the water. The tunnel is 1750 feet long with water at

this time of the year coming up half way up our calves. It was sure nice for those of us who had water socks, otherwise, it would have just killed our feet to walk on the rock below. It was certainly no place for being claustrophobic. And not only was the tunnel narrow, but it was mostly difficult for anyone over 5' 9" and even then many of us hit our heads before finally figuring out that one has to walk with one hand reaching out to get the sense of the height and the other hand using a flashlight to see what was ahead. As one walks, bringing up the rear, one could hear our students yelling, laughing and screaming. It sounded like they were at one of the scariest rides at Disneyland. It was a great experience for this approximately 40 minute trek.

As we came out at the other end, we came upon the spot that has traditionally been called The Pool of Siloam. But, according to an article in the September/October 2005 issue of *Biblical Archeology Review*, some workers were repairing a sewage line with heavy equipment last summer when they uncovered what appeared to be two steps. As workers continued to dig, they discovered more steps, which grew wider as they went along. Archeologists believe at this time that the pool was at least 225 feet wide at one point, and steps were on at least three sides of the pool. The corners are greater than 90 degrees, indicating the pool was a trapezoid rather than a square. Archeologists know the pool was used until the end of the revolt, when it was abandoned as mud slid in from the hillside and was no longer cleaned out of the pool. Workers found the pool, located in the lowest spot of Jerusalem, under nearly 10 feet of mud in some places. This particular Pool of Siloam, used in Jesus' day, is different from one that tourists normally visit today which was built during the Byzantine era and assumed to be at the original site. The traditional pool that everyone currently goes to visit is much smaller, and this newly excavated pool is at least five times as large.

We went back to our hotel, showered, ate and headed off to the airport. At 12:30 A.M., we flew out of Tel Aviv and landed at JFK at 6:00 in the morning. From here we flew back to San Francisco. What a trip! It was loads of fun and a great experience. Many on the tour said that they needed to do this again in the near future. The next trip is scheduled for June of 2110.