Travel In the Holy Land

By Dylan Penny

 This summer, I applied to be a part of the Youth Ambassadors Student Exchange. Many hours of fundraising and presentation-work were put into the trip. In the end, I believe that the squeeze was definitely worth the juice, and that everyone had a lot of fun.

 The purpose of the YASE program, headed by the American-Israel Friendship League, is to promote understanding and knowledge between young Americans and Israelis from all over both nations. Before we went to Israel, we spent three days in Washington D.C. and New York. We were given a unique opportunity to make friends from different backgrounds with different views and beliefs, and we enjoyed every minute of it.

 As we prepared to leave for JFK, the American delegations said their goodbyes to the Israelis as none of us would see them for a week. Their flight had been delayed and so they spent two extra days in New York before heading back to their homes. The American delegations, however, spent their time in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv after a particularly interesting plane ride with Orthodox Jews rising in the middle of the flight to pray.

 We arrived in Ben Gurion International in Tel Aviv at around 11:50 P.M. We took a bus to a guesthouse in Jerusalem in a neighborhood that was predominantly inhabited by Orthodox Jews. We got to the guesthouse at about 1:00 P.M., ate a sandwich for dinner and went to sleep.

 The next morning, we ate a light, authentic Israeli breakfast at the hotel and met Essie. She was the guide that would accompany us on all of our tours in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. After that, we were allowed to relax and buy snacks from a local café until about 1:30 in the afternoon. We then proceeded to tour the city by bus.

 Jerusalem is much more than the Old City. It is a huge, sprawling Metropolis that rivals D.C. The buildings are also very attractive; most having a Middle Eastern aesthetics. Even so, many are made of concrete in the unlikely case of a rocket attack. Most people live in apartments which consist of four or less flats stacked on one another. Each family typically occupies a flat, and while it is not quite as spacious as your average American’s house, it is plenty of room for four or less people.

 After seeing most of the city, we got to do a bit of shopping in one of the City’s local Bazaars. It is a very active environment with some people haggling over goods, others yelling about their prices and others still just hanging out. If you know what you’re doing, it is very easy to negotiate prices down, however; it is also very easy as a tourist to get coaxed into buying stuff for twice its actual worth. Haggling is a game as old as trade itself, and the key to it all is knowing how much you are willing to pay.

 Shabbat commences every Friday afternoon in Israel. By Five o’clock, almost everything in the city shuts down. So as we ended our trip to the Bazaar, we noticed that the crowds at shops were thinning out and all of the stalls began shutting down. We continued through the streets of Jerusalem until about six. We then took a bus to a large hill overlooking the city; specifically the Temple Mount. I will tell you right now that I cannot begin to describe how amazing it is to look over Jerusalem as the Muslim Call to Prayer sounds in the distance. We then went to the Western Wall for a brief glimpse and headed back to dinner.

 The very next day, we all took a bus out to the Dead Sea. Now, very close to this large body of water is a Mount Massada: a 400 foot-tall plateau where King Herod built one of his grand fortresses more than 2,000 years ago. Later at approximately 70 A.D., a group roughly 600 Jewish warriors used the mountain’s defenses to hold off the Roman invaders. The siege continued for months until the Romans finally broke through, and rather than be killed and their families enslaved, the Jews killed their loved ones and then themselves leaving this world as the masters of their own fate. During our tour, we noticed how this stronghold, being more than ancient by anyone’s standards, was miraculously well preserved by ingenious building techniques and the dry, desert environment; some of the original frescoes and ceramics from Herod’s time were still present.

 We then went to the Ein Gedi Springs Oasis and observed the Ibex and Hyrax which call the place home. The Dead Sea which is the lowest point on Earth and the saltiest body of water in the world was our next stop. We all took the chance to float in the water and then cover our bodies with Dead Sea mud which has natural properties that are beneficial to your skin. We then bathed in a warm pool which is powered by geothermal energy. It was a relaxing experience, and it gave us time to recuperate before the chaperones loaded us back onto the bus which dropped us off at the hotel.

 The next morning our guide took us on a tour of the Districts of the Old City. We started on foot at a section of wall erected by the Ottoman Turks more than 500 years ago. We then continued on to The Ruin which is a restored Synagogue that was destroyed during the Six Day’s War. The site is apparently one of the more important areas to the Jewish faith due to its proximity to the Western Wall. After a light snack we continued on through security at the Western Wall and enjoyed a sunny afternoon in a very spiritual place; some of us even placed prayers in the cracks of the wall.

 We then continued on to the Arab Quarter and saw the stations of the Via Delarosa where Jesus supposedly carried the cross. The path goes through many varying churches such as an Ethiopian church, a Coptic church and an Armenian church. The walk ended at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Jesus was supposedly hung on the cross, then buried, then rose from the dead. Everyone in the church was clambering to get a view of these rocky outcrops that held such religious implications.

The building itself had high, arching, impressive ceilings, many frescoes of biblical events pertaining to the Messiah and a variety of gold and brass decorations. The smell of incense was heavy in the air and aromatically pleasing. We then went back to the Arab Quarter and shopped at an antiques store where I managed to buy a nice Chess Set for about $50 after talking him down from $80. We went back to the guesthouse for dinner and had some quality time with the other delegations.

 The next day we were on our way to Tel Aviv. We stopped at the Yad Vashim or Israeli Holocaust Memorial which gave all of us some time to reflect. The Israelis and the Jewish people have progressed so far from a very dark period. We then went to the Knesset building where Israeli parliament is housed and got some perspective on how things are run there. We then went to the Israeli Kennedy Memorial which had its own eternal flame and the emblem of each state around it in a circle. We loaded back on the bus and continued the rest of our relatively short journey to the Ruth Daniel guesthouse in Jaffa which is ten minute’s walk from Tel Aviv. We ate a nice dinner and then explored Jaffa a little bit. We got some Gelato, walked up and down the beach and went back to the hotel.

The next morning, we gave Jaffa another look, and it was beautiful in the daytime. The sandstone buildings show the age of the city. It was the principal port of Palestine in its day; before Tel Aviv was even conceived, back during the first Crusades. Jaffa changed hands several times from the Jews to the Muslims, to Christians, to the Muslims again until the conception of a Jewish nation after the British Mandate. The city today is a hub for artisans and houses great restaurants and authentic cuisine. Graffiti is actually encouraged here, and much of the artwork is astounding. Rudimentary scribbles by vandals are hard to come by because they are replaced by true portraits of art.

We continued on to see where Napoleon marched through the city and supposedly cursed his army by allowing them to raid some of the city’s holy sites. We stopped at two Pillars supposedly placed by Pharaoh Ramses I during his conquests long ago. I especially enjoyed Jaffa because it was almost like San Francisco but with the climate of Miami and the historical relevance that only Israel has to offer. It is hard to walk through the city without stumbling upon ancient history of some sort.

We then continued on to Tel Aviv which is very similar to Miami as well with palm trees and scenic beaches, but you’ll never see the pristine waters of the Mediterranean in North America. We walked along to see the Ben Hagim square: named after Israel’s former Prime Minister who was gunned down by a radical for his efforts to provide peace with the Palestinians. We then continued on to see many of the city’s other historical sites including where the Peace Tower which sat on the site where the first Israeli national school had been built before it was struck by a Palestinian missile. We also saw the dance academy in Tel Aviv which had quite an impressive campus. Apparently many of Israel’s most talented dancers came out of this school and some went on to hold international acclaim. After a thorough tour of the city, we went back to our hotels and recuperated for the journey ahead.

The next morning after a nice breakfast, we loaded our bags onto the bus and were driven to our host cities. The Oklahoma delegation was dropped of first at Haifa, then the New York delegation at Hakfar Iroq. We said our goodbyes cheerfully, thinking we would see them in a week. After that, we continued on to Modi’in; excited and ready to see the friends we’d made from the Modi’in delegation.

We arrived at the city at around 2 o’clock in the afternoon. Modi’in itself is relatively small, being only 16 years old and calling a little more than 83,000 people home. Our hosts greeted us at the city’s community center where lunch and drinks were served. We then went to our host families’ houses. I was staying with Liav Botton and his family.

I was met at the door by his mother: Khamda. She seemed nice and was always kindly concerned with making sure I was comfortable in their household. Liav’s father, Samwell, was a very humorous and sociable man who at the time was conducting business with one of his clients. Noonou was from Portu, Portugal and seemed like an interesting man with much pride for his country and his customs. Liav had two siblings; his younger brother Amit was fascinated by me and loved American culture. His older Sister Mattel was in the IDF and sang on the military’s radio station. She was going to D.C. in a few months to sing in front of the Washington monument and the IDF’s Chief of Staff which was exciting.

 During the trip, I was given the chance to participate in Amit’s Bar Mitzvah on the Sabbath. It was great to be able to watch him recite the Torah in the synagogue and be recognized by the community as a man. We then went back to the house to meet Liav’s extended family members that were present for the festivities afterwards. We ate a smorgasbord of great food. Liav’s family was originally from Spain and Turkey before they migrated to the newly formed State of Israel, so the food varied from roasted chicken, to sweet rice, to some of the best salmon I’ve ever had and a lot of pickled beets.

While I was in Modi’in, we went to a lot of parties, visited the local schools and talked with the students about America and life in Virginia Beach. We had a lot of fun bowling, and we even took fifteen minute train ride back to Tel Aviv to do a bit of shopping. Unfortunately during that night, a rocket almost struck the city and we were forced to leave and head back on the train. The next day, we received news that we weren’t to leave Modi’in, and we would have to leave by tomorrow night. Nobody enjoyed the situation, but we made the best of it.

We went to Modi’in’s city hall the next day and got a chance to talk to the mayor and get our picture taken with him. We received some small gifts courtesy of the city and were given the standard “Thank you for coming…” speech. I stood up on behalf of our delegation and thanked both the mayor, the school superintendent for allowing us into their schools and the other members of the community who made this all possible. We had a good time and then went back to our host families to say our goodbyes.

I don’t think that I had ever expected to feel so downtrodden about leaving people who had been almost complete strangers to me five days ago. We had shared some fun times and gotten a chance to know each other. I don’t think I’ll ever forget Liav and his family. We then threw my bags in the car and drove the painfully short distance to the community center. We had a small dancing party which gave us some time to say goodbye.

The bus finally arrived at the center. We loaded on the bus; both Americans and Israelis. By the time we arrived at the airport, most of the girls were on the edge of tears. We got through security and customs and then said our final goodbyes to our dear friends. I’ll admit that I got a bit teary-eyed as well. I would miss all of them, but I would especially miss Liav who had become like my brother during this great journey.

I think it was Shani that put my mind at ease when she said that, “This isn’t goodbye; it’s more like see you later.” I didn’t know if that was true or not, but it made me feel that I would come back, or that they would come visit us in the U.S. With that notion in mind, we trudged on through the airport and flew home. When we arrived on the other side, some of us were still grieving, but we were glad to be back in our homeland.