

15 Days in PALESTINE



Life in a Refugee Camp

Basil Loupis-November 2009

For Zain

Day 1 Saturday Sept. 26

Baptism.

I head for the Immigration counter. After months of planning, doubts and some procrastination, I am finally in Tel Aviv, heading for the Palestinian West Bank.

The Air France flight from Paris has delivered my son in law, Jean-Luc and me, on time at 4 pm.

They tell me that the Israeli immigration is tough and any mention of where I am heading for, may result in instant deportation. I approach the woman at the immigration counter, with the biggest smile I can muster. I am ready to take the initiative. "Do you prefer we speak English or French?"

She screws her nose " Don't speak French, just good English"

"This is great; I do not speak French either" Smiles all around "Tourist or business?"

"Doesn't every one visit Israel, at least once before they die?" More smiles!

My passport is stamped with a 3 month visa!

We pass thought customs unchecked.

I call Yasser (Karama's director), to inform him of our arrival and within 30 minutes Mahmoud, our taxi driver is here, for the 80 minute drive to Bethlehem and the Deheishe refugee camp.

Mahmoud is one of the few Palestinian drivers licensed to drive in both Israel and the West Bank. He speaks good English.

We learn:

- Israelis can drive everywhere
- Palestinians can only drive in the West Bank
- Palestinians are not allowed to use freeways
- There are Israeli check points everywhere.

You can see endless Israeli settlements under construction in the West Bank. We pass through a couple of Israeli checkpoints. The first of many more in the next couple of weeks. We learn the routine."Passports please!" Why are you here? Where are you going? Why?" All very cool and unfriendly. Checking and rechecking the passport photo, to make certain it matches your face.

Arriving at Deheishe, is an experience in squalor. Dilapidated, is the kindest I can describe the home I will share with 3 other men for the next 2 weeks.

We are greeted by Karama's director Yasser and Michael, a 27 year old American. Michael has volunteered for at least 3 months, he is in charge of all volunteers and day to day activities at the Centre.

Later we are joined by Luay, Yasser's younger brother and Quentin an 18 year old French volunteer from Normandy.

I crash around midnight and surprisingly, sleep rather well



**Karama (Arabic for dignity) was established in 2002 as a non-governmental organization, situated in the Deheishe refugee camp, Bethlehem, in the West Bank. The organization works independently and is not affiliated with any political party or movement. Since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 the inhabitants of the camp have been surrounded by an environment of cruelty, devastation and poverty. For more information on Karama refer to www.karama.org
For more information on refugee camps, refer to my end notes.*

Day 2 Sun Sept.27

We lie to our children!

It is loud, it is penetrating my ears, it is 5am, it is the call to prayer from the local Mosque. It lasts about 5 minutes and I drift back to sleep. Then in what seems to be 5-10 minutes later, it starts all over again.. Must have been very tired, for I stay in bed till after 6.30 am.

Early this morning, we take the 10 minute taxi ride to AIDA, the sister camp to Deheishe. .

It blatantly and painfully hits you right away. Yesterday's distant grey line, is now challenging your face. The Aida camp is surrounded by THE WALL. This obscene, oppressive symbol of repression, this grim reminder of incarceration is there, surrounding us in all its 8 meter high, ugly might.



We are greeted by Kareem, the Center's Youth Director. He is young, about 27, very well educated and not surprisingly, highly articulate. He points to a large key sculptured above the camp's entrance. The key, we learn us symbolizes the plight of every Palestinian refugee. It reminds Palestinians:

- **That WE have a home**
- **That we have kept the Key because we WANT to go home**
- **That our right is irrevocable and is NOT for sale**

We are sipping coffee in Kareem' office, when a young man drops by. We talk to Hassan and explain the purpose of our visit.

"Come and I will show you my fathers furniture company"

We walk back to the entrance of the camp and he points to a large empty building, just inside the Wall.

"My father spent many years establishing this furniture business, it was his dream. We employed about 50 people The factory was just behind this building. Then the Israelis built this wall between us and our factory It broke my father's heart He lost his dream, his business and 50 people lost their jobs" Hassan has turned his back to us while he talks. He wants to hide his tears.

Kareem is also emotional

"I was 22 when they built this wall. It is not just a wall in the ground, it is a wall round my heart my emotions, my head. No matter where I am or where I go it is embedded in me! I was recently invited to travel to Europe for a series of talks. On one particular day we crossed the borders of 3 countries. What? No searches? No checks? No questions? No guns aimed at you? Was it real, was I dreaming, is this freedom?"

Later we take a short walk around the camp. Many of the houses look peculiar The fronts are of different construction to the rest of the house. Is this the local fashion we ask? No, we hear. When the Israelis invaded the camp in 2003, they claimed that they were searching for insurgents. They did not bother to enter through the door. They just smashed the whole front wall!

We meet and talk to people at random as we walk through the camp. It seems that everyone has a story to tell. A house demolished, a loved one shot, a child maimed.

But you also sense hope, a feeling of inspirational resilience and most of all dignity. One cannot help but notice that both young and old walk straight, heads high.

We climb to the roof of a 3 storey building. We can see over the wall now. An olive grove straight ahead, about a hundred meters to our right a huge Israeli settlement. The olive grove is abandoned. It used to belong to a Palestinian farmer. His home was on this side of the wall, the farm on the other. He would have to travel at least 15km and pass 3 checkpoints to attend his olive trees.

Some families have decided to stay with their tiny farms. It means that their homes have become their prison. They are in no man's land. They cannot visit friends or relatives in the West Bank, nor can they move freely, within the Israeli side. They live on 3 monthly renewable permits, with unbelievable restrictions of movement.

We look down on the playground of an empty school. The class room walls are riddled with bullet holes. It used to be a girls school. Then Israeli settlers on the other side of the wall started shooting at the



school. They claimed that they had seen "insurgents" in the playground! Now parents refuse to send their girls to this school and the building is abandoned.

On the way down we are greeted by a young attractive woman, who invites us to her apartment for coffee. Her home is tiny, The "lounge" the size of an average Australian bathroom, a small bedroom and a kitchenette. You can see effort and pride in the furniture, rugs and wall decorations. The woman lives there with her husband and 5 year old daughter. She talks in Arabic as she is serving coffee. Kareem translates:

*"The worst thing about being a parent in Palestine is that **every day we lie to our children.** We tell them that there is always hope and a brighter future! But in our hearts we know that the world has abandoned us!"*

Day 3 Monday Sept 28

What's your name?

This morning we take the 15 minute drive to Bethlehem and the Nativity church. What can I say?

Good for little tunes for Sunday school kids? The endless rows of souvenir and relic shops? The old church full of chanting monks, wearing peculiar habits & funny hats? The selling of candles and "holy water" at every nook and cranny? Then of course the donation boxes at every second step! Sorry folks, but I just could not wait to get out!

To me, the most memorable impression of Bethlehem was lunch, at this excellent falafel restaurant!



We head back to Deheishe and the Karama Centre. The place is buzzing with about 60 local youth, plus the volunteers from all over the world. Kids practice English they have learned at school, or play chess, or use the centre's computers to rehash homework. Popular is the practice of "dapka", the local dance.

I meet some of the volunteers:

There is Sonia, Esther, and Anna from Germany, Paula an American of Colombian extraction, Celia from Norway and Quentin from France. It is a sort of semi organized chaos, but it works! The main activities run after school, between 1 & 6 pm.

The local kids are friendly and appear to be carefree. They are curious and happy to introduce themselves. "What's your name? Where do you come from?" seems to be the most common greeting. The same applies when kids and teenagers approach us in the streets of Deheishe. Most of the adults are also respectful and offer a greeting. Day or night, one feels safe walking the narrow streets and alleyways.



Back at the "Bachelors' Apartment" we are joined by Luay. He is 29 years old and educated in Sweden.

In the days that followed, we increasingly admire his vision, intelligence and clear precise thinking.

Jean-Luc and I are charged with impatient enthusiasm. We want to discuss the future, budgets, fund-raising and improved PR. For tonight, sleep is not an issue

Day 4- Tuesday, Sept. 29

There is nothing wrong with her!

At the Centre, observing learning participating, filled with surprise, amazement and joy, just to be here and experience first hand, the resilience of these young Palestinian people! The determined teenagers, the enthusiasm of our young volunteers.

It is also a day of grief and the inescapable feeling of frustration and anger!

Yasser shows me some photographs of Zain, a beautiful bright eyed 10 year old girl and copies of several letters.

The photos show that Zain has a very badly deformed left arm.

A group of visiting Germans, which included some doctors, met the young girl and were so moved by her plight, that they offered to fly her to Germany for an MRI scan, confident that laser surgery would alleviate her condition. But this requires Israeli permits so she could travel out of the jail, that is now Palestine. The Israelis refused these permits.



"First, bring her to us, to a hospital in Jerusalem. We have the facilities here to help" With German pressure, arrangements were made for the necessary permits to travel to Jerusalem. On the specified day the girl accompanied by her mother arrived at the Israeli checkpoint, to cross over to Jerusalem.

Guess what? The mother was not allowed to cross! Only the little girl, who naturally refused to go without her mum. Finally they returned to the camp and the girl was taken to the Israeli hospital accompanied by a foreign female volunteer from Karama.

The girl was examined by a junior doctor and surprise, surprise? There is nothing wrong with her he wrote. No need for an MRI scan. She will eventually outgrow her problem!

The hospital also advised the German doctors that the girl's parents were happy with the Israeli prognosis and no longer wished her to go to Germany! (I have seen copies of the letters, what you read is only a brief summary!)

How bloody, blatantly, inhumane and cruel can you be? Is this Terrorism, or what?



As usual this story, as for many others, is the subject of much discussion among the volunteers. There are many stories of pregnant women and new born babies, dying at check points, while waiting for a permit to cross to Jerusalem, for emergency hospital treatment. Some of the girls are tearful. "If this girl was my daughter, or sister, would I not, take arms and seek revenge, in whatever desperate way I could?" A girl from Europe adds "Take the most loyal dog, the most placid cat. Starve it, kick it, abuse it! It will eventually bite you!"

Day 5-Wednesday, Sept.30

The house of no toilet door

I have breakfast of 6 falafel, some Arabic bread and hommus. The 6 falafel cost 1 shekel (25 cents). This is our staple diet here. Falafel for breakfast and lunch, very occasionally some chicken kebab. Fortunately I love falafel, but I suppose after 2 weeks of falafel, I will enjoy a breakfast of eggs and bacon!

Forgot to mention that at the bachelor flat we share, the bathroom/toilet has no door. It adjoins the living/dining room! Get it? My bed must be a reject, from the homeless of Hyde Park. There is no hot water either, but I suppose one could get used to cold showers! I dare a cold shower every couple of days.

There are also restrictions in electricity and water, which the Israelis, reluctantly supply, (and of course charge), under pressure from the UN. Both services are likely to be cut off at whim, especially water. For continuity of supply the locals have large water tanks on the roof. When the merciful Israelis allow water to flow, the locals fill their tanks, ready for the next Israeli drought.

I have seen the monthly electricity account, for our bachelor home. It was just under 2000 shekels, about \$600.00 Australian dollars. Considering that there is no hot water, and we use bottled gas to boil water for tea or coffee, one could reasonably conclude, that this is another example of Israeli "generosity".

A rather quiet day at the "office". We farewell some volunteers and welcome some others. Sonia, Anna, Paula and Celia, depart. The new arrivals are Betsy and Matthew from Seattle and a young married couple from Toronto, John & Fowsia

I start working on a permanent English syllabus for tutorials, plus research some fund raising ideas.

Day 6- Thursday October 1

Mistaken for a terrorist?

It is early, I lie in bed powering up for a cold shower. I resolve to accept the ridiculous side of the status quo and look at the funny side of life here.

Mid morning we drive to Hebron and head for the old sector and its famous souk.(Markets)

We strike pandemonium. Whistles and sirens, traffic stopped, Israeli soldiers everywhere! We soon find out why! Two Israeli "immigrants" want to go shopping, or take a stroll, or whatever. They are "protected" by 6 Israeli soldiers, while other soldiers, stop traffic, close roads and force people indoors.

Funny! Yes?

Hebron is Palestine's largest city. Population 600,000 Palestinians and 500 ultra orthodox Jewish "immigrants". They are "protected" by about 3000 Israeli troops. They have confiscated many Palestinian homes in the old part of the city and to add additional accommodation they use modified sea containers, perched on the roof tops. The Israeli army is also "camped" on the roof tops.

Most of the Israeli camps are scattered among Palestinian homes. These Palestinians, cannot leave their own premises. The Israelis keep a constant lookout and as soon as a home is unoccupied, even for a few moments, it is confiscated.

The Israelis do not give land or building titles to any Palestinian.,so in theory all Palestinian homes are illegal!

About 3/4 of the old souk is abandoned. The Jews control the roof tops, so they throw rocks, rubbish and excrement at the shops and shoppers below. Stories of acid pouring are also common. Some tourists, "mistaken" for Arabs, have been injured with rocks and acid. The shop keepers tried fitting steel mesh in the alleyways above the shops, but this did not stop excrement and acid seeping through. More that 800 businesses and shops were forced to close and are now abandoned.

There are two international agencies based in Hebron, in theory to observe and report on any human violations. Their reporting is apparently fair, but obviously no one bothers to read the reports!



We head for the Tomb of the Patriarchs and the Ibrahimi Mosque, where, according to tradition, Abraham and his clan are buried. We pass 3 Israeli checkpoints, with metal detectors, all within a distance of less than 30 meters. Well armed Israeli soldiers search us and ask who we are and why we are visiting. The Mosque is divided in two sections, Jewish and Moslem. We are told there is also a small area for Christian worship. During Jewish worship, or Jewish religious events, the army takes over the whole area, no one else is allowed near the Mosque.

In 1994 a Brooklyn born physician, Baruch Goldstein, entered the Mosque, during the month of Ramadan and sprayed worshipers with bullets. I believe 29 were killed and 150 injured. Baruch, a well educated man,

claimed that God had urged him to kill. Jehovah, Allah, God! One Deity, but what a bitterly divided trinity! Was all this killing an act of terrorism? Don't be funny! Israelis, Americans, we of the West, never, ever commit acts of terrorism! We kill, in the name of freedom, democracy, justice and God. Today our happy shooter, is worshipped by the Jews, with many memorials and shrines erected in his honour!

On the way back, we climb to the rooftop of one of the few un-confiscated Palestinian homes. A few meters below we see a rooftop mounted Israeli military camp. Two soldiers, a man and a woman are less than 30 meters away. They casually lower their guns from their shoulders as they observe us.

Filled with understanding and goodwill, I am about to wave hello and take a picture, when Luay pulls me roughly away." Don't you dare, do you want us all killed? They will claim you raised your arm to throw a rock or a grenade, shoot us all and burn the building."

Pretending to be looking elsewhere, I peek back at the soldiers. The guns are unmistakably aimed in our direction!

Surely, there must be a funny side to this all?

Day 7-Friday, October 2

A dog!

There is movement at the Centre. We are to be visited by a group of Danish "cultural" tourists. The word is clean and tidy everything and make it sparkle!

Volunteers and locals get to work. Walls are scrubbed, floors swept and washed. The small garden and playground cleaned and tidied.

I am amazed at the Palestinian teenagers. They throw everything to their work, they are systematic and enthusiastic. Girls laugh and tease the boys and the boys reply in kind.

Teenagers acting like all teenagers around the world.

Taliban style discrimination based on sex, is not to be seen in Palestine. Education is of equal importance for both boys and girls.

Jean-Luc has observed that the Palestinian university in Ramallah, has a majority of female students. I have often heard Palestinian men joke about their womenfolk. "They are the real bosses, God help you if you incur their wrath!" Not like our sweet and placid women in Australia?

I am only a few days in Karama and already the future leaders are obvious. There is Mohammed, Ghassan, Osama & Ishmael, from the boys. Banans, Aziza and Ishma, from the girls. All with good English from school, all respected and followed by the other kids.

Managed to have a private chat to most of them. They are all keen to finish high school and go to a university. "The pen must be our major weapon against Israel", they consent!

Nevertheless, none trusts the current Palestinian leadership and sadly no one can point to a future leader.

A group of about 25 Danes arrive after lunch and seem to be genuinely interested in all our activities. As expected they have many questions for both volunteers and Yasser, our Director.

Much time is spent on "Why don't people leave the refugee camps?"

Yasser starts his reply, with another question "To go, where?"

Palestine is the poorest "nation", in the area, with over 45% unemployment. At least the camp offers some meagre accommodation, with limited assistance and protection by the UN.

Outside the camp, there is nothing that would guarantee accommodation or economic survival.

The highlight of the afternoon, is an impromptu performance of the "dapka". Younger and older boys and girls go through their dance routines with fervour and enthusiasm.



The Danes give them a standing ovation and demand three “encores”

Later in the evening we are joined by Jean-Luc and his associate Phillipe. In the last few days, they have been touring, visiting Jerusalem, Ramallah, Jerico and the Dead sea. They have many incredible stories to tell. Apparently at one of the checkpoints, they were denied entry into Jerusalem, because of passport “irregularities”. They had to travel a circle of 20km to the next checkpoint. This time they were allowed to cross. They were also forbidden entry to the Dead Sea, because their guide (Luay) is a Palestinian. Jean -Luc described how the tall, cool Frenchman Phillipe, lost it and had a screaming exchange with the Israelis, an unwelcome lesson on discrimination, freedom and democracy!

By the way, Luay has a degree from a Swedish university and has spent many years in Sweden. He is a naturalized Swede, with a Swedish passport, but in Palestine he refuses to use his foreign passport, preferring to use his Palestinian identity card and accept all the humiliations, imposed by the Israelis.

I recall someone asking Luay, who he would rather be, if not a Palestinian. Without the slightest hesitation, he replied, “A Dog!” He went on to remind us, that in most civilised countries, the law offers more rights & protection to dogs and other animals, than he would ever receive as a Palestinian, in his own occupied country

Day 8- Saturday, October 3

Al Ishcandarani!

I am beginning to assimilate in the refugee camp.

A few meters from our “house”, is a tiny falafel shop, run by a husband and wife team and occasionally their sons. The parents speak a smattering of English and with my few Arabic words, we seem to communicate reasonably well. I have shown them pictures of my children and grandchildren. Leila's name seems to have stuck! Every visit elicits a wide warm smile and the greeting “Salaam Abu Leila” They seem to put a few extras in my falafel roll. Extra salad, tahini, hommus, pickles! They also insist that my falafel is fried fresh, instead of serving pre-cooked falafel from the rack. I am certain that they charge me local's prices. A falafel roll plus a can of drink, for 3 shekels (about 85 cents),

Next door, is a tiny dilapidated grocery store, which I frequent as often as a need arises. It is run by an old man, who's face lights up as soon as I enter. “Salaam, Salaam alecum” We communicate without language, just by connecting in the universal language of goodwill. We get to know each other's name and family details. He often has visitors, other old men, who drop in for a chat and to pass away time, while waiting for the next customer to spend a few shekel. The old man insists on proudly introducing me to his friends.

“Basili al Ishcandarani” (Basil the Alexandrian).

A short distance further down, an old toothless woman squats by the side of the road and sells grapes from a basket. I often buy her grapes and she always rewards me with her exquisite toothless grin.

Yasser, often questions the volunteers about purchases they made in the camp. He gets very angry with any hint of overcharging. He does not hesitate to march into the offender's premises and lecture them on the need to respect the volunteers and all foreign visitors..

Repeat offenders are permanently banned and blacklisted.



Mid afternoon Jean-Luc calls me from Tel Aviv airport. The news are not too good! The Israeli Customs, have emptied his bags, checked the photos in his camera, even the spare memory card, read all his notes and took him to a small room for a 70 minute interrogation. It appears that airport CTV cameras have recorded him being “too friendly” with Mahmood the taxi driver! I begin to dread my departure in a

week's time and resolve to email out my photos, notes and any possible "incriminating" evidence of my local activities.

Tonight all eight volunteers, plus Yasser, pack ourselves in a "share" taxi and head off to Bethlehem. It is our weekly social get together.

Yasser has selected one of the better Arabic restaurants, a huge establishment, seating at least 250 diners. It even has its own bakery to keep up with the demand for fresh Arabic bread!

What can I say? The food is local, delicious, endless and irresistible. We drink the local freshly squeezed lemonade, sip wonderful aromatic tea and eat to gluttony.

It cost 60 shekel each, about \$18.00

Day 9- Sunday, October 4

Bushisms!

The new crew is beginning to function.

Betsy and Fowsia have drawn a couple of dozen pictures. A man, a woman, a boy, a girl, a baby, etc. Part of the new English syllabus!

Matthew has bought some mysterious supplies from the local shops and is conducting "science" experiments. He has placed some of his ingredients in an empty drink bottle, which he cupped with a balloon. Somehow the balloon begins to slowly inflate! His audience is enthralled!

John is teaching chess moves to half a dozen captivated teenagers.



Young, idealistic, excitable Quentin, is "lecturing" on French democracy! I can imagine him wearing a beret, waving a broomstick and storming the Bastille!

Mohammed is demonstrating his latest dance moves, for the "dapka"

We normally finish "work", around 6.30 p.m. and head for our lodgings. The girls to their host families, the boys to their bachelor abode. Yasser's family provides a simple, local evening meal for us. I suspect that Quentin devours at least half of it!

Early nights are unheard of. Deep into the night we discuss and argue today's happenings, tomorrows developments, but mostly politics and the Palestinian dilemma.

Tonight the two American boys reminisce about George W. Bush and his numerous "bushisms". The irreverence and jokes about the man who used to be their president, is incredible, especially as one of them has served for seven years, as an American soldier abroad.

Day 10- Monday, October 5

A concert under The Wall

More visitors! A group representing various charities from Germany. They tell us they have money to help, including un-allocated funds from UNICEF.

As usual Yasser is called to explain the need for Non Government Organizations such as Karama and Michael speaks about the work of the volunteers. It has fallen on me to make a plea for donations!

But nothing is simple in Palestine! Applications for donations must come through the approved channels. That means, through the Palestinian Authority, and often the Israeli banking system. The Fatah government might then redirect donations to their allies, or before releasing any funds, insist on major political favours. Israeli banks will often deny cash transfers, usually on the pretext that the money would aid terrorism. I am beginning to believe that "Catch 22" was invented specifically, for the Palestinians!

We discuss ways of by-passing the donation bottleneck. Surely there must be a way?

(In the following days we manage to set up a "paypal" type facility for donations to be paid directly to Karama's bank account! They have given us an initial limit of only 500 euro per transaction, but it is a good start.)

Later in the afternoon, I am asked to represent Karama, at a Brazilian folk music concert, at the Aida refugee camp. It is part of a "cultural" exchange between Brazil and Palestine, complete with speeches by representatives of both countries. It is held in a makeshift stage right under The Wall and an Israeli observation tower. The symbolism is obvious and inescapable!

As we leave, Ghassan, my 16 year old guide and interpreter, jumps on a high fence right under the observation tower and asks me to take a photograph. My camera records this cocktail of youth, testosterone, defiance and bravado!



Day 11- Tuesday, October 6

Hamas or Fatah?

I accompany Yasser and some of our volunteers on a shopping trip to Bethlehem. A few of the volunteers have travelled light, with only the clothes needed for their trip to Palestine, They insist that this is sensible, as clothing is cheaper here, plus they are helping the local economy!

We visit the local markets, (the Bethlehem souk), where clothing can be bought for a song.

I window shop as the others try and buy clothes. A shopkeeper approaches me with an ear to ear grin. "Are you a Hamas or a Fatah supporter?" He has taken me by surprise! I look around for hints, but all the posters are in Arabic, the signs and slogans meaningless. Is he joking, or am I gambling for a thick lip? I opt to play the odds. "Hamas!" The smile widens, my hand is shaken, I am offered tea and local cookies. Phew!!!

I rejoin the others at a basement "fashion boutique". John is trying on a pair of jeans. Esther picks up a rather fetching black and red shirt and places it on my chest. "Hmm, it really suits you, you should buy it!" I look at the label and it says "silk". So I buy it, for the very special, for me and only me, at the never to be repeated price of only \$8.50. For today only and only for today, I feel too lazy to haggle!

After lunch (the usual falafel, tahini, hommus, etc.), we return to Karama for the afternoon's activities.

Later in the evening, Luay drops in at the house of no toilet door and we start putting together a program for our pet project. Cultural travel! Another very, very late night! Tomorrow, I will need a very, very, very cold shower, to wake me up!

Day 12- Wednesday, October 7

A surprise Invitation

Back at the Karama Centre, with many of last night's notes to decipher and to start uploading my notes and pictures. But guess what? The local internet is down!

Four hours later, we get a connection, but it is painfully slow. At this rate it would take days to upload all my work. Damn, Damn!!

About lunchtime, 16 year old Ishmael, one of our local regular teenagers, requests that we talk in private! He looks unusually nervous and shy. "I was wondering, if you would like to come to my house for lunch, after Mosque, on Friday?" I shake his hand and tell him that it would be a great honour. And for me, it is indeed!

Day 13- Thursday, October 8

Intrigue at the ruins

My last opportunity to be a tourist. Luay is suggesting a visit to the Herodion. Six of the volunteers pack into a minibus taxi and we head for the 2000 year old ruins.

It is located within the so called Palestinian territory, but it is occupied and run by the Israelis. More tourist dollars for them, more checkpoints for us. The entrance is guarded by one Israeli tank, two troop carriers and a few armed Israeli soldiers. Surprisingly they wave us through. We park the taxi, pay the entrance fees and get a brochure. I quote from the first couple of paragraphs .

“Herodion , one of Herod the Great's most ambitious building projects, served the Judean King (37-4 BCE) as summer palace, fortress, monument, burial ground and district capital. Of all the sites built by the “builder king” Herodion is the only one that bears his name.

The immense Herodion complex, 15 km south of Jerusalem and about 5 km south-east of Bethlehem, near the ancient roads to the Dead Sea, was built between 23 and 20 BCE.....on an artificial cone shaped mountain”

From the top of the mountain the view all around is uninterrupted. You can see Bethlehem near by and Jerusalem in the far distance. Israeli settlements, are scattered all around. Mostly on land confiscated from Palestinians. The strategy is simple and obvious to all. Join all the settlements together and they will form a horseshoe with Bethlehem in the middle. Sooner rather than later, Bethlehem will be in Israeli hands and they will control all tourism to the holy land. No tourist will need to leave Israel, the tourist dollar, will stay in their coffers!

Once again, Quentin is animated. With his broken English and loud voice, he is expressing his disgust for the potential invasion of another part of Palestine. I notice an Israeli “tourist” loitering around us and try to silence Quentin. He continues, oblivious to my hints. The Israeli, is definitely glued to our group. I physically drag Quentin away and we continue our tour. The Israeli stays a few steps behind us. We climb some steps and a thin young Jew with an orthodox cap, almost knocks me over. No need, there was plenty of space for him to pass by. The first guy has now disappeared, but the thin man is following us. Matthew, the ex American soldier, looks at me and winks. He too has noticed that we are being followed. We let the group continue, but Matthew and I casually move in opposite directions. There are now three “minders”, one for the group and one each for Matthew and me. What on earth for? If they thought we were a “security risk”, they would have stopped us. A bit of intimidating, perhaps?

As in all historical sites there are plenty of signs with directions to the various points of interest, The signs are in Hebrew, English and Arabic. Matthew can read Arabic. Common to all signs, the directions in Arabic simply translate: **“Stop, Forbidden”**

Day 14- Friday, October 9

Please don't tell the parents!

I am lucky! The internet is working today! I achieve a fair bit of uploading and clear some outstanding work with Michael and Yasser. I also spend much time cursing my bloody crazy computer, which has an English/Arabic keyboard and keeps changing from English to Arabic, at its whim and without the courtesy of telling me first!

At 12.30, Ishmael is at the door and we set off for his home. This is a new area for me, up the hill, at the back of the camp. As we climb the hill, I notice the difference. The streets are cleaner, the houses get bigger, there are fences, little gardens and even one or two old cars in carports. I name this area “Deiheishe Heights”, for surely it is the more “prestigious” part of the camp.

My host's home is large by camp standards, the floors are tiled and walls tastefully decorated with rugs and needle work. We sit on a comfortable lounge, in a large room, with nice rugs and coffee tables. Tea and soft drink is offered and served by Ishmael and his teenage brothers, Mohammed and Ibrahim. Lunch is on the patio and consists of a mountain of pasta cooked with tomato and local herbs. There are only three of us. Ishmael, his brother Ibrahim and myself. Ibrahim empties his plate, Ishmael finishes half and I manage to squeeze about a quarter. As the Middle Eastern tradition requires, I am constantly encouraged to clean my plate. Eat, Eat, the brothers repeat.

Later, Ahmad the boys' father drops by. He does not speak English, but Ishmael translates and we manage a friendly 20 minute conversation. I learn that he has a tiling business and judging by his comfortable home, he must be doing rather well. We have coffee together, served by one of his daughters. He has five children, all teenagers. Three sons and two daughters. Praise Allah he adds, they are all doing well at school and all want to go to a university.

Before leaving, I get another pleasant surprise. Mohammed walks in holding a large box with several rolls of paper. He looks coy and turns to his brothers for support. "Show him" they smile. One by one he rolls out his sketches and paintings. He started painting at 12, after seeing some Italian art on the Internet. He has no formal training, other than studying and copying the work of the European masters. He shows me portraits, landscapes and even some modern abstract work. By the way, he is quick to explain, that the lady on the right was copied from a drawing on the web! (But please do not tell the parents that you have seen it!)



I am touched, he is very good, a natural artist with great potential. Wish I had the money or connections to send him to France or Italy. He would not disappoint! I photograph some of his art and he asks if he can borrow my camera. He photographs his brothers and me, then his mother's wall hangings at different angles and perspectives. This 17 year old boy, has the quirky eye of an artist.

Tonight, Yasser and the crew organise a farewell dinner for me. We march to the only local "restaurant", a couple of bench tables in a tiny room, above one of the falafel takeaways. There are no menus, cutlery, or tablecloths. Yasser shouts the orders from the top of the stairs. Falafel and condiments of course. In my honour, he also orders some bbq chicken. The ultimate gastronomic luxury in Deiheshe!

Back at the house of no toilet door, I opt for an early night. Must be fresh for tomorrow, my last day in Palestine. I have work to finish, then face the dreaded security at the airport.

About an hour into a deep sleep, my bedroom door is flung open. I glimpse the dark shadow, and hear Yasser's voice. "Wake up, we have not finished discussing my plans for a high school at the camp!" Two hours later, I realize that my plans for a long night's sleep will need to be revised!

Day 15- Saturday October 10

Amen!

For as many flights as I can remember, the moment the aircraft's fat tyres lift from the tarmac, has been special for me. I inevitably get this feeling of renewal and expectation!.

My Palestinian experience has strengthened and empowered me. It was all too short indeed, but it was full and rewarding.

Below us Tel Aviv is rapidly shrinking, buildings have become "lego" bricks and the roads fine pencil lines. I am leaving the surreal world of the last few days and heading back to my own world, the life I own. I feel free and yet filled with sadness! There is a lot more I could do, I have a need to come back!

Out of the window, I see this faint ever diminishing outline of a sad wretched land. The land claimed by three different peoples who answer to the same God! Who, in the name of this same God and in order to please this same God, they have for centuries fought each other, tortured, maimed and slaughtered each other, Afterwards they offer praise and thank, this same God, for they believe that He will reward their violence with eternal life and a place in heaven! .

This is the legacy of the children of Abraham, the peoples of the Book!

Surprisingly, I had a trouble free exit at the airport. I made sure that I thanked Mahmood without being seen.. May be buying the "Jerusalem Post" and pretending to be absorbed in it, helped! May be acting a bit "dotty", also helped! There was no baggage searches, no interrogations. No worst than departing from Sydney airport!

The five hour flight to Paris, gives me time to reflect.

I arrived with no idea of what to expect. May be to look under the hood of a potential "terrorist", or to experience the zealotry of religious fundamentalism, most likely to make some sense of the confused and conflicting, news headlines.

I leave with the memory of the bright eyed youth, of proud parents and the certainty that humanity, irrespective of race or creed, is united with common goals and aspirations. I also leave with guilt, for my own ignorance and apathy. For it is the silence of apathy that allows the world to ignore the cruelty that I have witnessed.

I am not totally pessimistic either. World public opinion is rapidly changing in favour of the Palestinians. For who knows? Maybe one day soon, the world will unite and put a stop to this injustice.

In Sha Allah!

In the meantime the Palestinians will survive. On their unconquerable spirit, inexhaustible resilience and sheer determination!

Amen!



Notes on my Trip

I originally planned to be in Palestine for at least 6 months, possibly a year. However feedback from the area was not good. Volunteers to Palestine have been known to be refused entry, have their entry visas restricted, or banned from re-entry. It was a gamble I was not prepared to take. To stay in Palestine for 6 months or more, meant that I would have to relinquish the lease for my home, find storage for my furniture and car and resettle all over again on my return. There was no guarantee that the Israelis would allow me to stay longer than a few weeks. So I opted for this short "exploratory" trip. I hope to go back, when circumstances would allow me to stay for a longer period.

Deheishe and Aida refugee Camps

After the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, the UN estimates that 750,000 Palestinians, were expelled from the coastal regions and plains of Palestine (now Israel). As a temporary humanitarian solution, the UN established a number of tent camps to house the refugees. The refugees were advised to keep the keys to their homes, business or farms, as negotiations, with Israel, were taking place to allow a safe return home. That was in 1949. The Palestinians are still waiting, despite countless UN resolutions demanding a return to their homes. The US has vetoed all such resolutions. I believe that Australia has followed the US line.

There are now, a total of 59 Palestinian refugee camps:

19 in the West Bank, 8 in Gaza, 10 in Jordan, 10 in Syria and 12 in Lebanon

Deheishe and Aida camps, were established on leased land, as temporary refuges, for people expelled from 45 villages, west of Jerusalem and Hebron. Each camp has an area of just over one square kilometer. The estimated population of Deheishe camp is over 12,000 and Aida 7,000. This is more than 3 times as many people, than originally planned There is only one part time doctor. There are continuous shortages of water, electricity, schools and medical facilities. Access to emergency or specialist hospitals in Jerusalem, is generally denied, or much delayed, due to an unbelievable amount of paperwork..

Amenities

- *Parks, playgrounds, libraries, market places do not exist.*
- *Public buildings are old and cannot be extended due to overcrowded land usage.*
- *Water- and electricity supply is insufficient. There are not enough sewage water pipes; leaking sewage tanks present a great hygienic hazard.*
- *Trash piles up in the streets because waste disposal is minimal..*
- *Little air circulation and a high level of air pollution, are the main cause for health problems, such as pneumonia within the camp.*
- *Electric cables are most often not safe and lie unsecured along and above the streets.*
- *Underground water pipes throughout the camp are very old, often leaking. Garden hoses are used for most of the water reticulation.*
- *The schools are poorly equipped, painfully noisy and too small. Classrooms are overcrowded (more than 50 pupils per class), making efficient teaching impossible. Classroom furniture, is old and dangerous*

The Wall and other Obstacles

It is estimated that by the time it is completed, the Israeli separation Wall, will be 650 Km long. About four times longer than the Berlin Wall. It is built about 80%, within the Palestinian territory and it is estimated that it has a negative effect on at least 42% of the Palestinian population

A recent UN report states that Israel has 592 obstacles such as checkpoints, trenches and barriers across

the occupied West Bank

In all, there are 69 permanently staffed checkpoints, 23 partial checkpoints and 500 un-staffed obstacles in the West Bank, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank say any viable economic growth (for Palestine), will depend on Israel lifting more of the curbs which have stymied private sector investment in the Palestinian territory for almost a decade.

Settlements

I cannot imagine any rich western nation being able to afford, or finance, the continuous construction of the settlements, as they occur in Israel. So how can a small country like Israel, afford this huge cost?

I have been told that they are financed through wealthy Jews in the US, Europe and Australia and by large multinational soft drink and food corporations, in return for exclusive distribution rights. I cannot confirm whether this is true or not, but it makes some sense.

Irrespective of the source of money, the building of these settlements, is obviously a huge boost to the Israeli economy and employment. No wonder they choose to ignore Obama's attempts to stop them. In my humble opinion, peace, will be economically very expensive for Israel. They will resist, with any excuse at every opportunity. The only time Israel will accept peace, is when the West, stops the flow of money. The spin about natural expansion, terrorism, or religious rights, is in my opinion, just bunkum.

Aggression, Resistance & Terrorism

In establishing their state in 1948, the Israelis used all the methods described today as terrorism, including suicide and car bombings, especially against the British and the UN. These former "terrorists" are now national heroes in Israel.

So what is terrorism? The US army manuals use this definition "*.....the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature.....through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear.*"

My short visit to Palestine has raised more doubts than solutions. The consensus of foreign visitors (to Palestine) that I spoke to, is that the Palestinians do live in a state of terror and are the victims of prejudice, violence and cruelty. We of the West, could be seen to be equally guilty of this terror and injustice, for our ignorance and silence is taken as tacit approval for the horror to go on. It helps feed the flames of extreme fundamentalism and thus perpetuate the cycle of violence.

I have also wrestled with the concept of resistance. Depending on who's side you are, it can mean aggression or terrorism. It can also mean that you use whatever means at your disposal, to repel a much more powerful aggressor and restore your right to exist as a free human being.

The debate will go on! Unfortunately, one mainly hears the spin!

Impartiality

I have travelled to Palestine, because it has been in the news constantly for the last 60 years or more. I have watched atrocities from both sides of the conflict and heard views from politicians, activists and academics. There is no doubt in my mind that the Israeli side is extremely well equipped to win, both the armed and PR war.

In recording my 15 days in Palestine, I have only written about what I have personally experienced and observed.

Thought that my Australian passport would allow me freedom of movement, but I have experienced intimidation and delays, at most of the numerous checkpoints I had to cross.

I see THE WALL, all around me everyday, the observation towers and the armed soldiers.

I see the domineering Israeli settlements everywhere I turn. Ever expanding ever growing. Arrogant, challenging, unstoppable!

I have seen several street blocks of empty shops in Hebron and the damage caused to both life and property, by a handful of ultra orthodox Jews.

I have seen the pictures of the young maimed girl and read the official letters of denial from an Israeli Hospital.

I have recorded only conversations that I could personally confirm and cross check.

I have seen and often experienced the most blatant disregard of elementary human rights I could have ever imagined!

I have often denied myself the luxury of believing what I have seen or heard, because it is beyond my comprehension, as a free human being!

I have often felt that I was in jail, because it is a jail

As for the Israeli point of view, you can read the newspapers, watch the news and listen to the politicians.

All comments are welcome:
Contact me at bloupis@gmail.com

*With many thanks to my good friend Christine, for her great wine, her time and help in editing the diary,
for correcting (most of) my dreadful spelling mistakes
and for helping me overcome, my lifelong, addiction, to "commas"*