

## ISRAEL

We are in Israel at the invitation of the Jerusalem Marathon organisers. We haven't ventured to this part of the world before and exploring the middle east is something we've been keen on for quite a while. What we found in Israel is a welcoming people who are keen to share their culture and their history. Israel is one of the most intriguing places we have visited and one I am keen to return to.

### MONDAY – DAY 1

We have a couple of hours layover in Rome before our connection to Tel Aviv. The weather on arrival in Tel Aviv is pleasant and the smog oppressive.

Our transfer is only 30mins to Jerusalem where we check into the **Crowne Plaza**. The hotel is a bit tired and we have limited/no space to put our clothes so we put them all over the room.

It's been a long journey from Australia and we are pretty much done for the day. We wander around the hotel, look in the shops and generally try to stay awake. We have access to the club lounge on floor 21 so have a very early snack before retiring.

### TUESDAY – DAY 2

We awaken to a dirty fog so thick we can't even see the road below our room on the 16th floor. Today we have a day trip to Nazareth. On the drive up the day starts to clear.

**Nazareth** has a population of 90,000, is the largest Arab city in Israel and very much a Palestinian city. There is a walking path from Nazareth, called the **Jesus Walk** – you walk the path and stay with locals along the way. The walk starts at Nazareth and ends at Kfar-Nahum, which is down on the Sea of Galilee.

We walk around the city. Our first stop is the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, where the Angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce she was with child. The church is exquisite and clearly very meaningful to the many people who are worshipping inside.





We walk through the old city and sample Israeli pizza at **Old City Pizza**. One pizza is oregano and sesame and the other with cheese. We visit a spice shop which smells of everything exotic. I select a small ceramic dish as a souvenir of Nazareth.





Back on the bus and we're off to **Tiberias** and the **Sea of Galilee**. The trip takes about 45min.



Once there we meet with Mayor and organisers of the Tiberias Marathon.

We visit another Greek Orthodox Church in the company of Moshe - a native NY'en from the Bronx who has lived in Tiberias since 1981. He has a wealth of knowledge which he shares freely with us.

We walk down to the edge of the Sea of Galilee and we dip our hands in, just so we can say we have.



### WEDNESDAY – DAY 3

Today we are going to Shilo and the Old Town this afternoon.

In **Shilo** we go 4wd'ing and have a re-enactment of Benjamin carrying the word of defeat back to Shilo, which was the capital of Israel in biblical times. We wander through the complex and go the tabernacle. It is deeply moving and there is a real sense of faith.





We enjoy a fabulous lunch of fresh salads and vegies.

Back to Jerusalem where we have a tour of **the Old City**. Our guide is highly informative. We visit the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**, inside which is the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus.



We visit the **Wailing (Western) Wall** and there are many there praying. The women and men are separated - we go to the right, them to the left. When you exit you do so by walking backwards ie you don't turn around and walk forwards.



It's getting dark by the time we leave - been a long day!



We have dinner at **Jacko's** restaurant - the meal and company is great.

#### **THURSDAY – DAY 4**

Today is a tour to **Bethlehem** which I'm very much looking forward to. It's an interesting trip as we take a bus to the border of the city, which is surrounded by an extremely high, cement wall. The bus crosses through the checkpoint, into Palestine, and then we all disembark and get onto a smaller, local bus for the tour around Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is a city of 45,000. We have a guide and there is a lot to see in the city – the Temple of Mohammed, Catholic cemetery which is the burial place of Oscar Schindler, Church of St Catherine, Shepherd's Field and a Church built by Antonio Bellucci, which is under the custody of the Franciscans.

We venture into the Church of the Nativity, which stands on the place where Jesus was born. It is a magnificent church and contains mosaics from the 4th century



We were taken to a souvenirs shop and I again purchase a small bowl as a reminder of my visit to Bethlehem. A lot of the souvenirs have the same pattern on them with a different name but I don't mind at all. I use my souvenir items constantly at home and they are a wonderful reminder of our travels. The cost is only a bit outrageous!

Just down the road is the best Shawerma in Bethlehem so we stop for lunch. I have chicken and salad and it's great. Costs 30sh (about \$8.50) so nothing cheap about that either.

It was a fantastic tour and I'm really pleased I dipped my toe into the Palestinian side of things. Bethlehem is a wonderful city, full of charm and history.





#### FRIDAY – DAY 5

We run the 5km and I find out the hard way how different running on the treadmill is to running on the road! I've been avoiding the road of late to extend my running career.... the end is nigh! The race is very congested and many runners are cutting kilometres off the course. The medal is lovely and well worth the effort.



We wait for the winner of the marathon to come in - 2:17.

Back at the hotel, we take a taxi to the **Old City** as we only got a glimpse the other day. We wander through the Christian area and follow the **Via Dolorosa**, where the stations of the cross are indicated along the way 1-8, with the remainder being in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Where the Christian area meets the Moslem quarter there are many heavily armed police. No one seems to take any notice of them and lively markets are going on all around them.



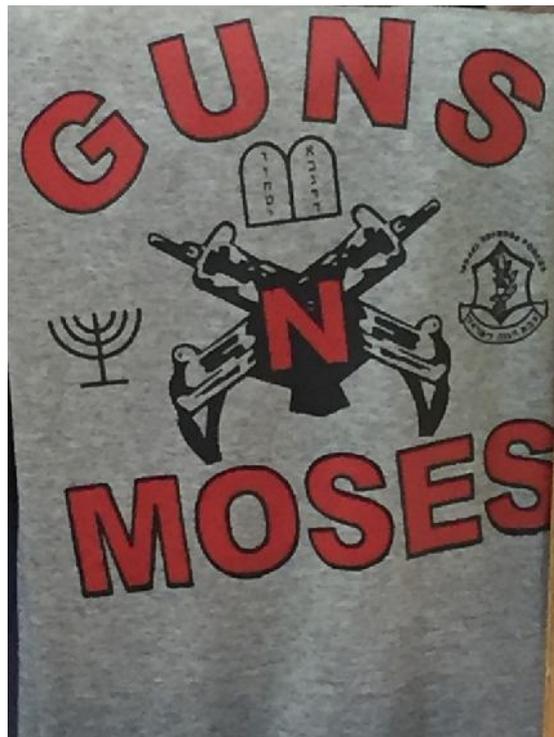
We cross into the Moslem area and continue our walk down the Via D. We visit the prison of Jesus and the **Church of the Flagellation**. It is a deeply moving journey and one we enjoy.

Crossing into the Jewish quarter we pass through a scanner as the **Western Wall** is just beyond the crossing.





We walk around the Old City – it is a bustling area with markets, shops, restaurants and cafes. The Old city is divided into four different areas – the Moslem Quarter, the Christian Quarter, the Armenian Quarter and the Jewish Quarter. A wall surrounds the Old City, with various gates for entry. Each quarter is distinctly different with it's own culture, buildings and people. Extraordinary.



This evening we are treated to dinner at our host's home in Nazit. Dinner is laid out in the front yard of his house and we are warmly welcomed by his family. A friend has done the catering and it is the best food I have had since we arrived. There is an eggplant dish and also a slow cooked beef which is superb with baked sweet potato.

We drive into **Tel Aviv** and are shown some places of interest, including where Rabin was murdered. We walk through the flea market area, which is alive with bars. It is an interesting walk - we continue on down through the market area and overlooking the beachfront.

## SATURDAY – DAY 6

Off to Masada and the Dead Sea. It's a bit of a drive!

We shop in **Arad** and pick up today's host. Arad is a desert city, has 24,000 population and is 600m above sea level. The Dead Sea is 400m below. We are now in a very dry, desert climate.

There is a 'Run to the Sunrise' held here which starts at 2am and runs towards Masada. The area has many Bedouins, still living as in ancient times in the desert in tents and villages. In winter they live between the gaps in the mountains, out of the wind.

We visit the desert resort in **Masada** - incredible. There is an extraordinary view of the desert everywhere you look. We have tea and meet the mayor.



Off to the Masada fortress in the Judean Desert and overlooking the Dead Sea. What a view! It is a World Heritage site and a symbol of the ancient Kingdom of Israel.

Quite the walk and quite the view once we got there.



We go to the **Dead Sea** which is 400m below sea level. It is a very strange floating around on the Sea.... not **in** the sea as it is virtually impossible to submerge yourself. Two warnings – don't swallow the water and don't get it in your eyes. We give it a small taste and it is horrendously salty. We only have about 20min in the water but we make the most of it. So much fun! The water temp is around 28-30 degrees - it's really pleasant and you could float around all day. It's much warmer down here than in Jerusalem - about 25.



Back at the hotel we go down to the hotel restaurant. We have a lovely dinner of fish and vegies with a glass of very ordinary local Chardonnay.

The end of a long week.

### **SUNDAY – DAY 7**

We enjoy a lazy brekkie before packing in preparation for our departure to Tel Aviv.

We have a pickup at 11 am and are off to our next home - the **Market House Hotel** in the Jaffa area of **Tel Aviv**.

Our room is immediately available and we settle in. The hotel has a fabulous feel to it. Big leather lounges, books, coffee anytime (& wine too it seems), wonderfully friendly staff. We are located right in the flea market so off to explore. It is quite busy and there are many eclectic stalls. We found a soap shop which is divine and I buy 5 soaps (plus get the 6th free) for 100 shekels.



We have a booking tonight at **Onza**, the #1 ranked restaurant in Tel Aviv and return to the hotel to put our feet up for a while. We find a sunny spot on a big lounge and settle in with our books. We have a small wine at happy hour before going up to shower and change.

The restaurant is only a few hundred metres from the hotel and is a lively spot. Our waitress is very friendly and helpful and we order with her assistance. A large freshly baked loaf of bread; cauliflower salad, tomato dip/sauce, eggplant dip and a main of prawns. We order a local Syrah to wash it down.



It's a fabulous meal in a buzzy restaurant and we top it off with dessert - I have a coconut & fruit offer and Dave has tiramisu. Mine is just too rich and I struggle.

They make a big deal of giving you a free shot, which you down with the waitress but the prices well and truly cover anything 'free.'

At 9pm the owner tells us we must leave as they want the table. A bit rich given our 7:30 booking and 440 shekels bill (about \$150). Our waitress became distant when we asked for more water and decided service was over. She then comes to reinforce the fact that we must leave. We do.

## MONDAY – DAY 8

We have a lazy Brekkie before spending the day relaxing downstairs. Around 4pm we go for a walk - the soap shop has a lovely Powder scent and I want to see if I can get some body lotion. The shop is only around the corner - they have the lotion but only in a glass half litre bottle. It has a too heavy to lug around so I leave it.

We go for a run along the boardwalk on the beachfront and see a bit more of the city. Then it's back, shower and settle in downstairs. We decide we'll settle for a few snacks at the hotel and an early night.



## TUESDAY – DAY 9

We enjoy our final morning before leaving at 8am for the airport. Our taxi driver lived in Melbourne for 20yrs and is back here as his mother is elderly; he plans to return to Melbourne to join his family in a few years.

We are through customs and at our gate in less than an hour after we leave the hotel. Flying Alitalia to Rome. Next stop Puglia!

