

Braving Political Tensions

A GLIMPSE OF HEBRON AND RAMALLAH

Text and photos by Dr Juliana Poh

I am generally a traveller with a low-risk appetite. I don't put myself in potentially dangerous situations, not even marginally. Curiosity killed the cat in January 2020 though, when I entered the Palestinian territory deliberately on a political tour organised by a left-wing company.

My main objective in visiting Hebron and Ramallah was to see Yasser Arafat's tomb and the Separation Wall. This seemed achievable and relatively safe at the time I planned the day trip. It was easy enough to not overthink the fact that there was only one tour company with the itinerary I wanted. The ten of us in the minibus that day seemed like a special interest group. We drove for an hour from Tel Aviv to the eastern part of Jerusalem, also known to the Palestinians as the capital of the State of Palestine. Just like the time I visited Bethlehem, the only indication that I was near the border between the two states was the presence of Israeli soldiers and the red sign that stated that Israelis were forbidden from entering Area A.

En route to Ramallah

Our Palestinian guide hopped on and launched his explanation and viewpoints

about the political situation in his homeland today. The tour company had earlier emailed us to read up on this prior to the trip, so that we could have meaningful discussions with the guide. We were each given a full-colour map with the title "The Wall in Jerusalem – Isolation, Ghettoization, Expulsion". *Gulp.*

As we drove through Area A in the West Bank to Ramallah, the administrative capital of the State of Palestine, the landscape was littered with Israeli settlements (illegal by international law) and long stretches of the Separation Wall, some parts standing, some under construction. The guide even pointed out Banksy's artwork on one stretch that we passed. I had originally thought that the settlements were temporary housing. Instead, these were actually well constructed block housing communities, mainly Jewish, with full facilities including highways, schools, malls and synagogues.

When we stopped at a traffic light at the entrance of one of the small settlements, the guide brought our attention to two snipers in separate guard towers right next to the junction – guns positioned and their gaze focused on the traffic... then on us, with our

phone cameras. My heart seemed to miss a few beats at that moment as we dropped our phones and avoided the piercing gaze of the soldiers who had been alerted instantaneously. Our guide warned us to be careful.

Inside Ramallah

Yasser Arafat's Tomb is one of the top sights in Ramallah, being in the same compound as the headquarters of the West Bank administration. It was built with Jerusalem stone and houses a museum with a gift shop, where you can pay with Jordanian dinars, alluding to the political history of the state. The museum holds the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Yasser Arafat, as well as his copy of the Quran, pistol, hattah, etc. As we took pictures, the guide translated the Arabic inscriptions on the tomb for us, stating that the final resting place for Arafat shall be in Jerusalem.

We took a quick walk around the city centre of Ramallah and wandered through the huge market, which was still buzzing before noon. There were all sorts of wares on sale – fresh vegetables and fruits, nuts, jewellery and breads, pretty much like any marketplace in the Middle East. Ice cream was cheap and good too!

Heading to Hebron

Next stop: Hebron, the largest city in the West Bank. It was a crazy drive getting there – going through several checkpoints, the shared Israeli-Palestinian highway and on some routes restricted to Palestinians. I got my areas ABC mixed up. At one checkpoint, the guide had to get off and cross on foot, as required by Israeli law. We waited about 600 m away from the checkpoint and were relieved to see him coming back to us after about half an hour. The drive allowed us to appreciate the length of the Separation Wall and the ongoing issue of settlers. The mood in the minibus was sombre and contemplative as our guide spoke about the discriminatory treatment which they have to endure daily.

Hebron is the cradle of the Jewish civilization, Israel's first capital in the Iron Age under King David. Since 2017, the old city of Hebron has been recognised as one of three UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Palestine. The Cave of Machpelah is the communal burial place of the founding fathers and mothers of the Jewish religion (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives) and is therefore regarded as the second holiest place in Judaism after Temple Mount. The religious site is under heavy Israeli protection because of oft-violent tensions. Jews have access to 20 percent of the space and Muslims use the remainder; it is known as the Ibrahim Mosque to Muslims. The division occurred after a massacre in 1994; bullet holes in the pillars of Isaac Hall are stark reminders of the event. It was sad to hear news that since our visit, the mosque was desecrated yet another time by Israeli soldiers in February.



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We spent some time wandering on our own in the abandoned marketplace two streets from the tomb complex, which had borders marked by Israeli soldiers. The paths between the rows of locked-up shops were deserted and dusty, and out of bounds to Palestinians. It was not difficult to imagine that this was a hub of activity for the Palestinians just a few years ago. The Israeli settlers had literally established their places right above the Palestinian dwellings, displaying their flags from the balconies.

Underlying tensions

We ended our tour walking through the Old Hebron Market. What remains now is a smattering of stalls selling local foodstuffs such as dates and sweets, and handmade items like olive oil soap, loofahs, hattahs, prayer dresses, scarves and tote bags. Looking above the shops, one could not miss seeing the extensive netting that caught litter from the Israeli settlers above the Palestinian shops. We were even approached by the locals

to support the Palestinian liberation movement by donations or purchase of CDs and books documenting the unfortunate events that had befallen the local community.

I left with much food for thought after this eye-opening experience, but my understanding of the complex situation is only marginally improved. Perhaps one day, I shall return for a right-wing view of this intriguing part of the world. ◀

Legend

1. Guard tower along the separation wall
2. Abraham's tomb – bullet-proof glass on left separating the mosque and synagogue
3. Streets of Ramallah
4. Strawberry cart
5. Yasser Arafat's tomb
6. My Palestinian tour guide

Dr Poh is looking forward to collecting passport stamps and experiencing different cultures once again, but is now content with reading, treadmill runs and Netflix.



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