

Exploring Jerusalem

My tour in the old city of Jerusalem, my dream trip..

I have always wanted to experience this adventure and to learn more about this historical city by visiting sites in it and exploring the reality that is hidden in its streets and ancient neighborhoods and alleyways.

One bright sunny day , my friends and I decided to start our journey.. We started walking to the Via Dolorosa beside Abu Shukri Restaurant and Fifth Station of the Cross heading to the Arab Blind Association. We stopped in front of souvenirs shops. I can feel the uniqueness of this city from its walls and paving stones of the street. The shop sold Chicago Bulls T-shirts and postcards of Jerusalem, it sold skullcaps for religious Jews and glass worry beads for Christians and Moslems.

All at once three angry boys, fists swinging, began fighting right in front of us. It was two against one, and the boy fending off blows began walking backwards up stone steps. No one was hurt, and I don't even know if the fight was real. One girl in our group thought they were just showing off for us. The two boys, their chests proudly extended like roosters, looked at us and bowed like they were superheroes.

"What're your names?" they wanted to know. We girls just walked past them and disappeared into the Arab Blind Association.

A lady met us. Dressed in high heels and a bright dress, she had on a pearl necklace and golden earrings. She was pretty, too, and as she took us on the tour I could smell her perfume. It was like walking through a rose garden.

She told us the history of the association. I perked my ears to catch the story, while my eyes wandered around the high, arching walls and ceiling that looked like it was as old as the world itself. How many generations of people have lived here? I found myself asking. How many stories the building could tell if its old stones could speak.

We went from room to room until we arrived to the workshop. The blind people who have jobs there come from all over Jerusalem and even the West Bank. I could no longer smell the rose garden because we were now in a rain forest. That's what I smelled. Fresh wood. Piled up on metal worktables were blocks of cut wood. Hundreds of blocks, and they all had little holes drilled into them. A man sat in a corner. He smiled at us, brushed off sawdust from his blue overalls, and said with a big smile, "ahlan wa sahan." Welcome.

Our tour guide introduced him as Harb Shweiki. His job was to drill holes into wood. From the expression in his eyes, the way he looked at us, I knew he wasn't blind. How could he be? He sat in front of a big mean-looking machine with sharp drills that ate into wood. I didn't think a blind man would want such a job.

"Do you have any questions for Mr. Shweiki," asked our guide.

Hands flew up and the six of us girls wanted to know his age - he's 47 years-old - where he's from - Jerusalem - how long he'd worked there - "oh, I can't remember ... maybe a thousand years" - and why he's drilling holes into wood blocks. "Brooms," he answered. "We make brooms here. The holes are for the bristles."

Oh, I said to myself. That explains the strange boxes I saw filled with what looked like pine needles. Mr. Shweiki drills the holes for the blind people to fill with needles. All my life we'd had such brooms in our house and never once had I thought about where they come from, who makes them, what are they made of?

"Can we see people putting the needles in the blocks," I raised my hand and asked. The pretty lady in high heels took us into the next room. There we met Mr. Foad, a man with dark glasses and a cane next to a table covered with wood blocks and packets of the strings that looked like pine needles. He wore a white hat and had a beard bushy enough to be one of his brooms.

Mr. Foad smiled and said ahlan wa sahan. Our guide once again asked us if we had questions, and again we asked his age (54), where he lives (a village outside

Ramallah), and how long he'd work making there (one year). The man seemed strong and proud about his job, but I'm sure he's sad about being blind.

"Mr. Foad," I asked.

"Yes, my dear."

"I'd like to know where the pine needles come from?"

He reached into a wooden box and pulled out a batch. "These are not pine needles. Can you guess what they are?" He seemed happy to have a secret. All six of us girls offered our guesses. Mr. Foad roared with laughter.

"No, no, no ... ha, ha, ha. They come from the skin of a coconut!"

I pictured coconut trees on a beach on a distant island. A tiny bit of the island paradise I have in my hands each time I sweep the kitchen floor. I'll never do my chores around our house without thinking about Mr. Shweiki and Mr. Foad.

We said goodbye and thanked everybody for all the interesting information. I still wanted to know more but our tour through the old city continued. Little did I know that I would soon go from thinking about coconuts to thinking about dead bodies and evil tunnels under the holly Al-Aqsa mosque.

We walked up Tariq Al-Wad Street, and there was oil on the stones under our feet. We held one another so we wouldn't slip. We then turned into a small alley followed by a dark passageway, and finally we arrived to an old house behind an iron gate. The courtyard was crowded with people, with everyone talking at once. I heard words such as "settlers," "digging," "cave," "deep," and "dangerous." I was confused, and became even more so because of the thick cloud of flies swarming in the air, and a sickening smell of sewage. Where were we?

An old man with a wizard's white beard met us. He had on a black hat and was dressed in a traditional white robe, spotlessly clean, and with a long crooked finger he asked us to come closer. The man's brown eyes were bloodshot and he was holding a stick.

“No way!” one girl said. I too was shivering.

“You must come close if you want to see what THEY did.” The old man banged his stick on the ground.

I moved closer; other girls backed up. The old man saw that I was coming toward him – slowly – and he said once again, “Come here. His voice was almost like a scream, but somehow I knew he was a kind man, a good man.

I find myself standing next to him when he bent down, and with the help of one of his son with a tattoo he pulled away an old wooden tabletop without legs.

There was a hole. The smell nearly made me faint. The previous day, the old man said, the ground in his courtyard gave way like the earth itself was being swallowed. The 20-meter-deep cave, he said, was made by settlers trying to tunnel under the Al-Aqsa mosque. They were looking for their Jewish temple.

“Look down inside,” he commanded. Three of us girls were crazy enough to bend our heads over the hole. The flies and smell made my eyes water. But I looked hard into the deep cavern.

And I saw a body. A head of man buried up to his neck. I was so scared that I ran away from the hole and went to the back of the courtyard. The old man and his son moved the tabletop back in place. I whispered to the other two girls who had been with me if they saw the body. “What body?” They saw nothing.

I was sure that I wasn’t daydreaming. I still am.

By: Maya Jabr