



A visit to the holiest sites of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity is just another day in Jerusalem's Old City

Sacred Ground

BY KEREN ENGELBERG

The massive wall stood before us as it had for centuries. In its old age, it had acquired roots. Patches of green brush sprouted from the cracks between its stone blocks. Where there was no green, another kind of flower had taken hold. As high as the hand could reach, papers of every sort had been folded and wedged tightly into gaps and nooks between the stones. Within their folds were the wishes and prayers of humanity. This was the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall, of Jerusalem, where Jewish pilgrims come to honor the last remaining wall of their Holy Temple. The custom is to pray here and leave one's written prayers.

My husband, David, my sisters Maya and Danna, and I had come to Jerusalem as part of a 10-day visit to Israel. On this day we were in Jerusalem's walled Old City. Fittingly known as such because it is the oldest portion of Israel's capital, the Old City is divided into four sections:

the Jewish Quarter, the Armenian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, and the Christian Quarter.

As an Israeli American and a Jew, I have always held deep ties to this country, which my family left when I was very young. We've come back often to visit family and friends, and I spent a year here as a college student. This was my first visit in five years, and I was surprised to find that Jerusalem still had the power to move me.

I walked with my sisters to the wall's southern prayer area, reserved for women. Some were hunched in deep prayer, oblivious to tourists snapping photos. Others were touching the wall and crying or placing notes of prayer into available crevices. Facing the wall, so ancient and steeped in the history of our community, I felt a wave of emotion come over me. I silenced my inner cynic and pulled out a blank piece of paper and a pen, scrawled my own prayer, folded it carefully, and placed it in a crack in the wall. We met David

Papers large and small containing the prayers of visitors are wedged into cracks in Jerusalem's Western Wall.

outside the men's prayer area and I asked him for his impression. "I didn't expect to get so emotional," he said, his eyes a little teary.

Jerusalem, historically, has this effect on people. So much so that there's a psychosis named for it: Jerusalem Syndrome. "Each year," my *Lonely Planet* tour book says, "tens of thousands of tourists descend on Jerusalem to walk in the footsteps of the prophets, and a handful come away from the journey thinking they are the prophets."

But even for the sound of mind, whether spiritual or agnostic, this place has a way of getting to people. With its stone floors worn from generations of trampling feet and its history older than Methuselah, this is the physical space where the stories learned in religious school took place. Whether you're Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, the words *Jerusalem* and *holy* are synonymous. Indeed, while its name literally means "City of Peace," it is Jerusalem's religious import that makes it so beloved and yet so rife with political discord. Tourists can feel fairly safe visiting, but one need only read news headlines to know that life here can be far from peaceful.

Rocks of Ages

Surrounded by high walls built by Sultan of the Ottoman Empire Suleiman in the 16th century, the

Old City once constituted the whole of Jerusalem. Citizens entered through its seven gates (an eighth was added later), which were locked at night for protection—an important consideration for a city that has withstood countless invasions. The four quarters were an invention of the 19th century, divided up according to the majority of people who inhabited—and still inhabit—each portion. It may be called the Old City, but the square-kilometer quadrangle still bustles with the foot and push-cart traffic of Arab salesmen, Jewish yeshiva boys,

and priests of various Christian denominations going about their daily business.

Bab as-Silsila Street is where the Arab souk meets the Jewish Quarter, and we followed it east, downhill, hoping to bargain for souvenirs on our way to the Dome of the Rock. Here, the narrow street is lined with stalls where purveyors sell water pipes, T-shirts, and colorful fabrics. Some vendors called out greetings as

we walked by their stalls; others sat and talked with one another, smoked water pipes, or caressed worry beads.

We stopped to look at some Armenian-style pottery and then at a stall filled with Uzbek *suzanis*. I was tempted to bring home one of the beautiful textiles, but even at a steal—I talked the store owner down from 600 shekels (about \$150) to 300 shekels (about \$75)—they were more than I could justify spending. Instead, I thanked the seller and continued on, happy to have had an authentic haggling experience on this visit.

Farther down Bab as-Silsila Street and into the labyrinthine Muslim Quarter (the largest of the quarters), we reached the entrance to the courtyard of the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque only to learn that they were closed to visitors. It's not an unusual occurrence for this site, whose hours change based on religious and political considerations, but still I was disappointed. Believed by Muslims to be the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven, the dome is one of Islam's holiest edifices. Having visited it years earlier, I'd been eager for David and my sisters to see the dome's rounded golden roof and intricate tile work up close.



The golden Dome of the Rock rises above the courtyard of the Western Wall (below). The holy site anchors the Muslim Quarter, where visitors can purchase items from Armenian-style pottery to grain (above left and right).





Merry Christmas

We had just enough time to get to the Christian Quarter before sunset. From the narrow Al Wad Road, we turned on to Via Dolorosa, or Way of the Sorrows, the path Jesus is believed to have followed as he carried his cross to his crucifixion. And suddenly we realized: It was Christmas!

In this Jewish state, Christmas isn't a national holiday. Business goes on as usual, so it's easy to overlook the day unless you find yourself in a Christian neighborhood. Along Via Dolorosa, colorful Christmas lights strung from building to building were our first reminder. Two young men dressed as Santa Claus were our second. Had we needed a third, the masses of pilgrims at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would have done the job.

It is believed that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre sits upon the site of Christ's crucifixion and tomb. It is one of Christianity's holiest sites, and we'd have thought twice about visiting on Easter, when throngs of pilgrims come here. (Easter tradition is to follow Via Dolorosa, stopping at the 14 stations of the cross—as Christ did—the final five of which are in the church itself.) For Christmas, however, most pilgrims visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the city where Jesus was born.

We entered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre through an immense door. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, we saw men and women kneeling before a marble slab with lamps hanging over it. This Stone of the Anointing is believed to be the site where Jesus' body was prepared for

burial. Some visitors cried as they kissed the stone. Some prayed. One woman caressed it with what appeared to be a pink knitted baby's blanket.

The emotion was as palpable here as it was at the Wailing Wall. So much so that we felt awkward witnessing it and moved on through the church. The yawning structure seemed to go on forever in all directions. We walked through the stations where Jesus was stripped of his garments, where he was nailed to the cross, where his cross was planted, where his body was given to Mary, and where he was entombed. The church's mosaics, gilded chapels, and towering ceilings with innumerable strung lanterns dazzled us. David was transfixed by the hundreds of tiny crosses etched in the stone walls by so many pilgrims over so many centuries.

Exiting those stone walls, we were back outside in the courtyard where night had now fallen. It was time to leave this ancient place to its current inhabitants. We walked through the narrow alleyways to the main road, noticing that lights now illuminated the windows of the old apartments above us. I imagined families gathering in homes throughout this miniature city, offering prayers as they sat down to their evening meal. I wondered how many of their prayers had been the same as mine that morning: a simple wish for peace and the health and well-being of loved ones. **W**

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In the Christian Quarter, two men dressed in matching Santa outfits offer a reminder that it is Christmas.