

Alex Reid Israel-Jordan Journal, April 2018.

This Journal documents Helen and my participation in a guided tour of Israel (with a bit of Jordan thrown in for good measure), led by our former pastor, Natanael Costea. The tour party consisted of 27 people overall, all from Perth, from our church as well as several others. This Journal has been created from all the Facebook posts (pictures and commentary) that I made during the course of our trip. They have been edited a little, and augmented in a couple of cases, and with a **General Reflections** section at the end.

Contents:

[Jordan](#)

[Petra](#)

[Galilee](#)

[Haifa](#)

[Nazareth](#)

[Tel Aviv](#)

[Jaffa](#)

[Bethlehem](#)

[Jerusalem](#)

[Dead Sea](#)

[Masada](#)

[Jerusalem - more](#)

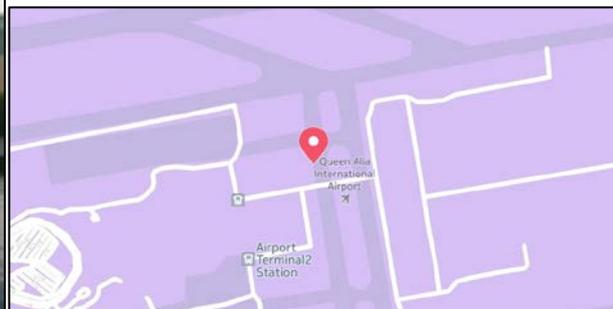
[Bethlehem - more](#)

[Jerusalem - Mt Scopus](#)

[Dubai & Home](#)

[General Reflections](#)

Monday, 9-Apr, 16:00: Something of a strain having to get up at 3am in order to catch our flight at 6am! But we did make it. Now arrived in Amman, Jordan (Queen Alia International Airport), from Perth, via Dubai (5 hours' time difference). Here's a photo of the airport, taken while waiting for our visas.



Monday, 9-Apr, 17:00: The Tour Party waiting for our collective visas, Amman, Jordan.



Monday, 9-Apr, 18:30: Drove to our hotel in Amman, the Geneva Hotel.

Tuesday, 10-Apr, 10:30: Started our tour of Jordan/Israel with a visit to a Greek Orthodox church in Madaba (near Amman), containing mosaics from 560AD, showing a map of the Holy Land. Interestingly, a monastery called Lot's Monastery was recently found by using this map as a guide.



Tuesday, 10-Apr, 11:30: Next we travelled to Mt Nebo, on which is built another Greek Orthodox church, again with amazing mosaics, this time dating from 650AD. This mosaic (right) had been covered by the one now on the wall, so was preserved fully intact.



Tuesday, 10-Apr, 11:30: Mt Nebo is of course the high point overlooking the Jordan Valley from which Moses was shown the Promised Land (into which he was denied entry). Visibility not the best today (in fact it was raining most of the time); we can't begrudge the locals the rain - Jordan is the 5th driest nation on Earth. [the rain cleared just before we left, so we *did* get to see much of the Promised Land].



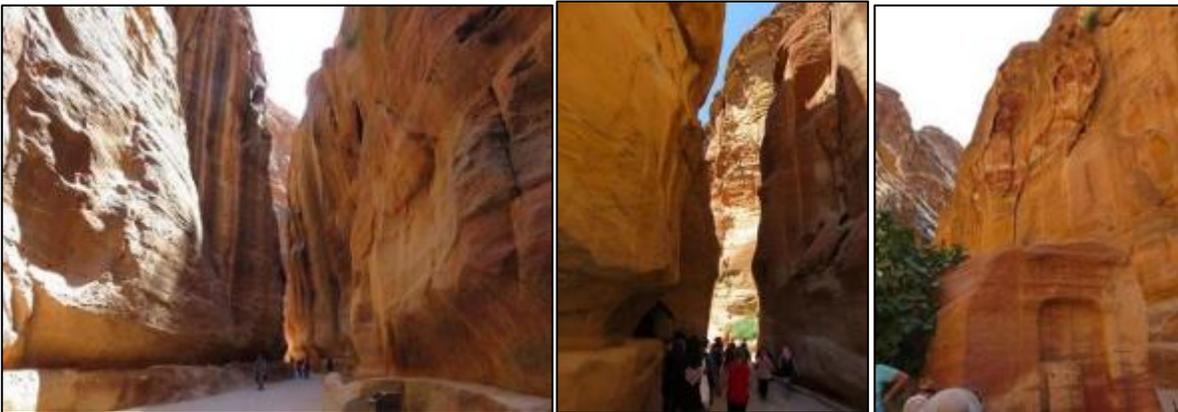
Tuesday, 10-Apr, 12:30: Next stop was at a mosaic workshop. This area is apparently renowned for its mosaics, for two millennia! Then (13:30) we stopped at the Mt Nebo Panorama Restaurant for a buffet lunch (costing \$US13 pp).

Tuesday, 10-Apr, 16:00: On the way to Petra, we stopped at the Mid Way Castle for a comfort stop. Ended up buying an Arabic head-dress, or keffiyeh. Keeps the ears warm!



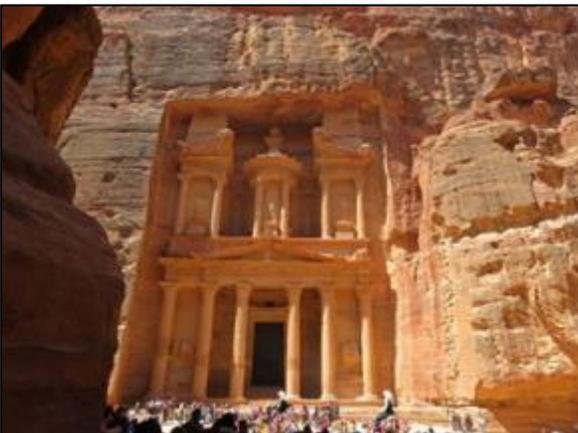
Tuesday, 10-Apr, 18:15: checked into the Amra Palace Hotel in the modern town of Petra, for 2 nights.

Wednesday, 11-Apr, Petra, 10:00: OK, we've finally reached Petra and have embarked on a 4km walk through the Siq (gorge) to get to the ancient city. You can see from these how narrow (yet navigable) is the Siq, and why Petra is called the "Rose Red City".





Wednesday, 11-Apr, 11:30, Petra: Finally, the Reveal!!! Petra's Treasury building, in all its glory!



Wednesday, 11-Apr, 12:00, Petra: Of course, Petra is more than just the Treasury building! Out the other side from the narrow defile through which you walk to reach the Treasury building, is the ancient city proper, with an amphitheatre, tombs hewn from the rock face, the Royal Tombs, etc. Then we had lunch at a restaurant partially hewn into the rock face.



Wednesday, 11-Apr, 14:30: we had donkey rides from the ancient city up into the new town, where the former cave dwellers have been relocated, including the New Zealand woman who married a Bedouin (wrote the book “Married to a Bedouin”). There the coach collected us and took us back to the hotel.

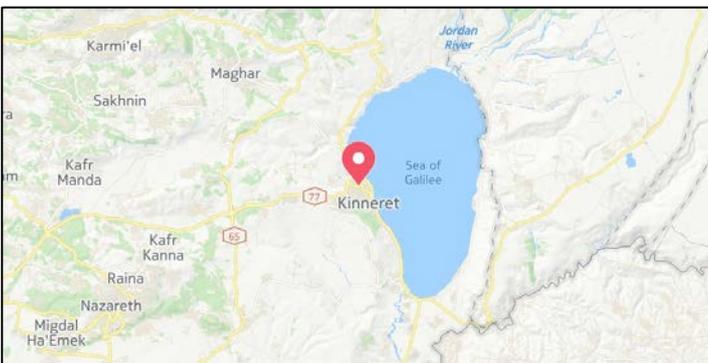
Thursday, 12-Apr, 10:30: After leaving Petra (at 6:30am!) and travelling North parallel to the Dead Sea (but not in view of it) we reach the border. Just crossing the Allenby Bridge over the Jordan River from Jordan to Israel. It's slow, but we've eventually got there!



Thursday, 12-Apr, 18:00, Galilee: Just had a lovely cruise on Lake Galilee, following a tiring day crossing the border at Allenby Bridge.



Thursday, 12-Apr, 19:00: Checked into Royal Plaza Hotel, Tiberias (change of plan from original hotel in Nazareth), for 3 nights.



Friday, 13-Apr, 08:40: Today we visited various sites around Galilee featured in the ministry of Jesus, starting with the Sermon on the Mount; this is taken to be the most likely site, rolling down to the Lake, with a church built on the supposed exact spot. A lovely day to think about all those Blessings!



Friday, 13-Apr, 09:45: we also visited the site of Peter's house in Capernaum, where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. The remains of the house have been cleverly retained with the church above cantilevered over it.



Friday, 13-Apr, 10:00: next we visited the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum.



Friday, 13-Apr, 11:00: a more modern site - the Olea Essence factory (in the Golan Heights area), where the huge range of products made from olives were explained (including the discovery of the benefit to the skin of rubbing in the residue after 3 pressings of the olives, which previously had been discarded, contaminating the soil).



Friday, 13-Apr, 12:30: we visited the site where it is thought the miracle of the loaves & fishes took place; quite a nice church has been built there, with this lovely cloister leading into it.



Friday, 13-Apr, 13:00: next was a visit to the shore of Lake Galilee near the place where Jesus (and Peter, briefly) walked on water. This is the church built on that spot, though the water level has receded somewhat now (it used to lap the base of the church).



Friday, 13-Apr, 13:30: we had lunch at St Peter's Restaurant, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, dining on St Peter's fish (though not actually caught in the Sea of Galilee).



Friday, 13-Apr, 15:00: we also drove past the place where Jesus had cast out a legion of demons from a Gadarene man; in the process we circumnavigated the whole Lake. We ended up (15:20) at the site of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, near where the Jordan emerges from the Sea of Galilee [though, as with most of these sites, there is an alternative site down near where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea].



Saturday, 14-Apr, 09:40: this day we drove from Tiberias to Haifa, where we saw some great views over the city, and of the Bahai temple and gardens. We also met up with Ronit Bender, formerly a member of our church in Perth (Churchlands) but now "retired" to Haifa (she's a native of Haifa); she explained some of the work she does among druggies & prostitutes - basically just trying to love and serve them as Jesus would.



Saturday, 14-Apr, 10:45: after dropping Ronit off near her home, we drove on along the ridge of Mount Carmel to the highest point. A great view from here! But I doubt that was much noticed by Elijah when he did battle with the prophets of Baal, gaining a resounding victory and persuading the people that they should return to the Lord.



Saturday, 14-Apr, 12:00, stop 3: leaving Mt Carmel, we drove to Nazareth, the village in which Jesus grew up (now a bustling city). On the edge of town is a place called Mount Precipice, over which the citizens tried to throw Jesus, angered by his claim to be the Son of God. A great view from there, especially of Mount Tabor.



Saturday, 14-Apr, 12:40, stop 4: Returning the centre of town, we visited a reconstruction of Nazareth Village as it would have been at the time of Christ. This included a carpenter (of course!), a stonemason, a weaver, a vineyard and winepress, an olive grove and press, and even a synagogue. They were blessed with a vacant piece of land in the centre of town, which even rejoiced in some genuine ruins. Altogether a very well presented experience.





Saturday, 14-Apr, 15:30, stop 5: I forgot to mention that we had lunch in part of Nazareth Village set up as an Inn, with appropriate (ie 1st century) food served. From there we went to the Church of the Annunciation (built over the spot where the angel announced to Mary that she would give birth to Jesus), and another built over the place where they believe Joseph's house had been located. And from there we went to Cana, where various pots and water (wine?) jars from that period have been unearthed; we tasted some "Cana wine", but I strongly suspect it was made in the conventional fashion! Thus ended Day 6.





Sunday, 15-Apr, 09:10, stop 1: on leaving Tiberias (checking out of our hotel), heading for Bethlehem, we first stopped off at Caesarea. Here is the aqueduct that the Romans built to get water to the Palace of the Governor (eg Pontius Pilate). [“what did the Romans ever do for us?”]

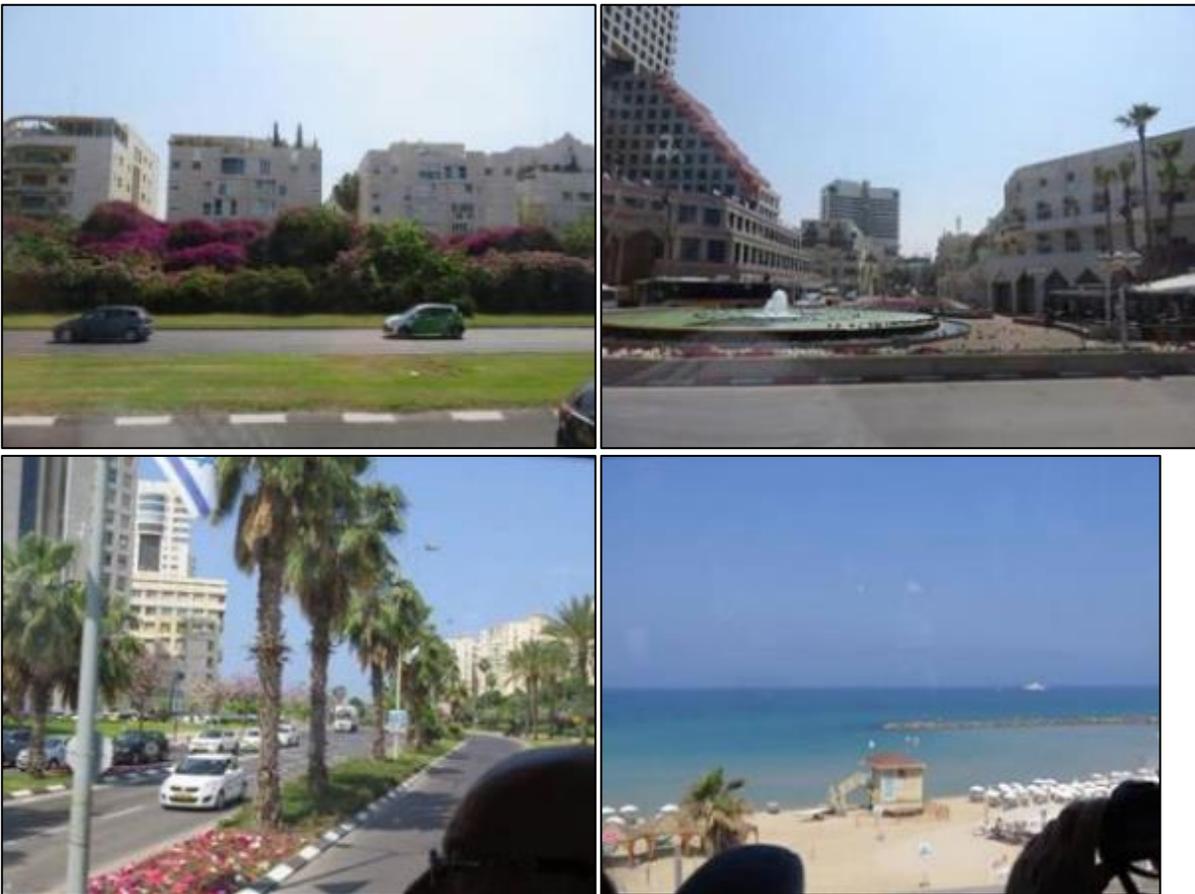


Sunday, 15-Apr, 10:00: It is overwhelmingly clear that Israel has been almost fully reforested; everywhere we went was green and vegetated (of course, it is Spring there now), but similar land in Jordan was still rather bare. Here are some examples as we drove along.





Sunday, 15-Apr, 10:45: we drove on through Tel Aviv...



Sunday, 15-Apr, 11:00, stop 2: Our objective was Jaffa, aka Yafo, now co-extensive with Tel Aviv. Also known in Biblical times as Joppa, Jaffa is most known (in the Bible) as the place where Jonah (fleeing from the assignment God had given him) set sail for Tarshish, subsequently swallowed by a large fish. Jaffa is quite ancient and has lots of lovely lanes. It is also known as the place where Peter healed (resurrected) Dorcas; also where the Roman centurion Cornelius sought Peter out, who as a result realised that the Gospel was not just for Jews (great news for us Gentiles!). It also seems to have an association with astrology, judging by the Wishing Bridge and various sculptures.



Sunday, 15-Apr, 12:45, stop 3: From Jaffa, we went to Bethlehem (where our hotel for the next 4 nights was located), had lunch there at the Grotto Restaurant, then visited Shepherds' Field, complete with "church located over the spot"!





Sunday, 15-Apr, 15:30, stop 4: Most shops in Bethlehem seem to be tourist-oriented, eg King David Souvenirs, John the Baptist Souvenirs; we chose to patronise a Christian-run souvenir shop near the centre of Bethlehem. Bethlehem is, of course, mostly populated by Palestinians (Christian population has declined from 85% to now only 25%).



Sunday, 15-Apr, 16:30, stop 5: Finally, we reached Manger Square where the Church of the Nativity is located over the presumed spot where the manger had been - it has Armenian, Catholic and Orthodox sections (at one time, with a line down the middle to ensure adherents of one didn't accidentally step foot into another section). Appropriately, you have to stoop to enter the church; we didn't actually need the length of the queue to deter us from entering the grotto presumed to be the exact spot. A lovely cloister adjacent, along with a chapel that Helen identified with!





Sunday, 15-Apr, 17:40: checked into Hotel Ararat, Bethlehem, West Bank, for 4 nights, after a full day visiting Caesarea, Tel Aviv, Jaffa (Yafo), Jerusalem (drive past), Bethlehem (Shepherd's Field, Manger Square, Church of the Nativity). View from our hotel window...

Monday, 16-Apr, 09:45: View over Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.



Monday, 16-Apr, 10:50, Jerusalem: Mount of Olives.



Monday, 16-Apr, 11:20, Jerusalem: Garden of Gethsemane and the walls of Jerusalem seen from there. Note the former "Golden Gate" leading directly into Solomon's Colonnade in the outer part of the Temple; this was blocked up by the Turks apparently to prevent the victorious return of the Messiah, reputed to take place through that gate. It actually leads almost directly to the Gate Beautiful into the temple, famous for the first miracle that Peter & John invoked, when they prayed for a lame man begging at the gate.



Monday, 16-Apr, 12:15, Jerusalem: We also walked through the Jewish Quarter and visited The Temple Institute's exhibit, which demonstrates the significance of the Temple to Jews and the purpose of the various Temple implements. Then on to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, a significant prayer place for Jews - see the prayer papers jammed into wall crevices.





Monday, 16-Apr, 15:15, Jerusalem: Via Dolorosa - the path that Jesus took with his cross to the place of crucifixion (now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). We expended 133 calories following that same path...



Monday, 16-Apr, 15:20, Jerusalem: the Pool at Bethesda where Jesus healed the crippled man who couldn't get up to be first to bathe in the Pool when the waters were disturbed (when people generally got healed). The water here arises naturally from accumulation in the surrounding hills. I gathered a little of the water in a bottle...





Monday, 16-Apr, 16:50, Jerusalem: the Garden Tomb, generally thought nowadays to have a greater claim to be the actual tomb used by Jesus (only for 3 days!), than the site over which the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been built. Regardless, I found it a serene, peaceful and beautiful quiet location - leaving the bustle of the city behind...



Monday, 16-Apr, 18:50, Jerusalem: The Jaffa Gate, formerly known as David's Gate. And so we leave the Eternal City for today (back on Wednesday). And I realise I've left out 2 days (Saturday and Sunday, when we saw and did lots!). Don't worry, I'll catch up eventually! [in this Journal, now inserted in correct chronological sequence].



Tuesday, 17-Apr, 09:00: Today we visited the Dead Sea and various sights nearby. The road to Jericho (on which the tale of the Good Samaritan is set) drops below sea level at the depicted spot. The Dead Sea is some 433m below sea level, and dropping a further 1m/year at present.



Tuesday, 17-Apr, 10:00: So we drive along beside the Dead Sea... Dire warnings appear from time to time, like one alerting the unwary traveller to the threat of drowning (in the centre photo; note the absence of water beyond the sign), and another that may be more related to the jurisdiction controlling the area beyond the sign than to natural dangers. Actually, the drowning sign may be there because there have been "sink holes" along the edges of the Sea.



Tuesday, 17-Apr, 10:15: Our objective is Masada, made famous by the 960 Jewish rebels who held out against the might of Rome for months in 73AD. When the Romans built a huge ramp up to the

mesa, and succeeded in breaching the walls, the rebels chose death rather than slavery and killed each other in a suicide pact (2 women and 5 children survived, by hiding in a cistern). I hadn't known that a magnificent palace had been built there by Herod some 70 years earlier (as a winter palace and refuge from enemies), which the rebels lived in during the siege. We didn't need to lay siege to get there, nor take the "Snake Path" to the top, but used the convenient cable car (pity the Romans didn't know about that!). On returning to the base, we had a buffet lunch.



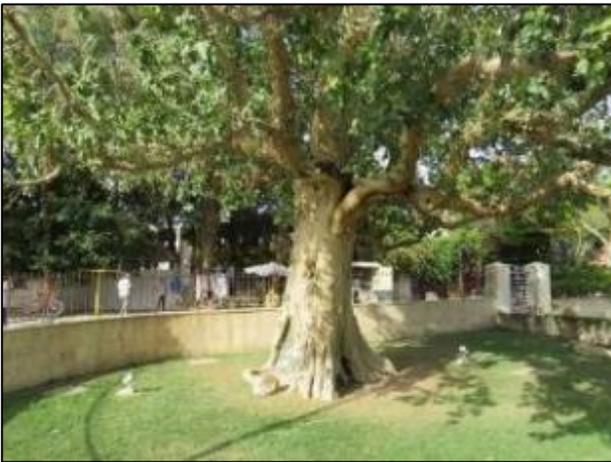
Tuesday, 17-Apr, 14:20: A visit to Masada (really quite hot by now, being 430m below sea level) was followed by a "swim" in the Dead Sea at Ein Bokek. Quite a pleasant and unusual experience! Note the "bronzed Aussie" about to enter the water (Natanael, our great tour leader).



Tuesday, 17-Apr, 15:50: A mountain goat (correction: ibex) stopped to check us out when we made a photo stop along the Dead Sea road.



Tuesday, 17-Apr, 16:45: Our final destination before returning to our hotel in Bethlehem was Jericho. Here we sought out the sycamore-fig tree that Zacchaeus climbed in order to get a better look at Jesus, passing by. He got more than he bargained for! There are (of course!) at least 2 other trees that could be the actual one, but this one does date to more than 2000 years old, and has not had a church built over it! (The Catholic and Greek Orthodox trees are also quite ancient).



Wednesday, 18-Apr, 08:30: So, last day in Israel/Jerusalem: started off by visiting the Yad Vashem, the Museum of the Holocaust. Very moving, especially the archives where they are trying to document all who perished. How is it that we humans can be so desensitised to the inhumanity of it all? We need museums like this to remind us that it **can** happen, even in "advanced, civilised" societies...



Wednesday, 18-Apr, 11:50: Next, it was Mount Zion, just outside the city walls, where we visited the Tomb of King David and the Upper Room (where Jesus and his disciples held the Last Supper); the present room was a Crusader reworking of a Byzantium chapel created within the room thought to be the one, later a mosque, and maybe also a synagogue. A bit crowded today...



Wednesday, 18-Apr, 13:15: Then we travelled to the Mahane Yehuda Market along Jaffa Road to buy lunch (and ingredients for our "lunch on the run" tomorrow). All senses assailed here!!



Wednesday, 18-Apr, 13:45: Ate lunch at Hasandak (Godfather) Restaurant outside Mahane Yehudi Market, Jerusalem...

Wednesday, 18-Apr, 15:20: We travelled by tram down the length of Jaffa Road, rather than window-shop all along that road. Found the tram ticket system very easy to operate!



Wednesday, 18-Apr, 16:30: Our final objective was to meet the coach at the Jaffa Gate (aka David's Gate - see David's tower in the background).

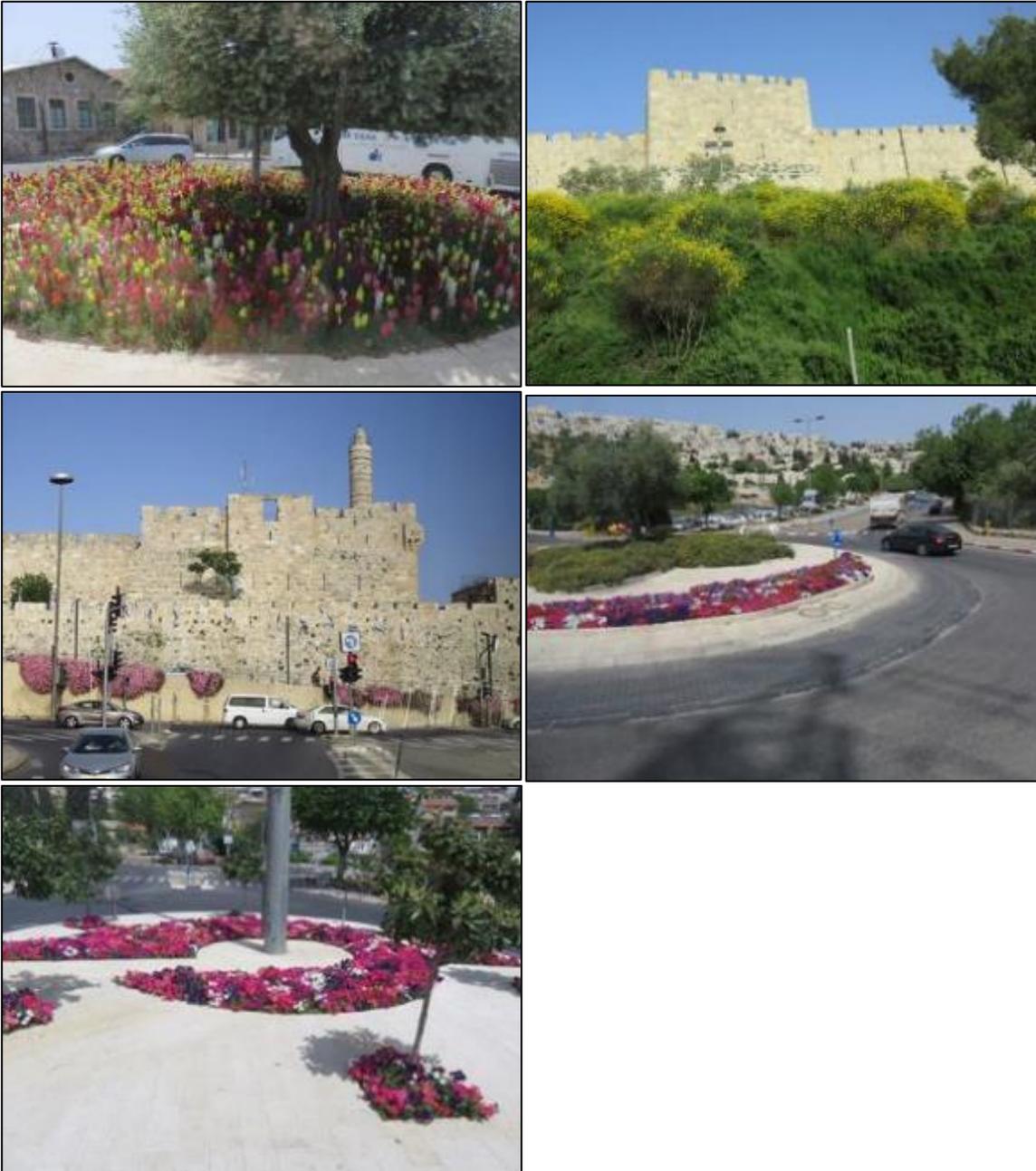


Wednesday, 18-Apr, 17:00 at Jaffa Gate. Drinking more coffee, while we wait for the coach...

Wednesday, 18-Apr: We had previously visited the Damascus Gate, perhaps the finest gate still standing. This version, of course, dates only from the Ottoman period. But it was outside this gate (probably) that the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was stoned to death.



Wednesday, 18-Apr, 17:10: We've driven around Jerusalem quite a bit now, partly moving from one place to another, but also moving back & forth between our hotel in Bethlehem and Jerusalem (about 15km apart, though traffic snarls means it takes quite a while for the journey). But I've admired the amount of floral arrangements we've seen. Very presentable!



Thursday, 19-Apr, 10:00: just about to check out of our hotel, to return (via Amman) to Perth; but had a little bit of free time, so I walked to Manger Square, Bethlehem. Here is the Church of the Nativity, crowded as always, but a brief respite while I was there. Only ~1km away, but uphill all the way (450m if I read my tracker correctly! - no, only 120m, but still a climb!). Spoke with a Palestinian man who asked where I was from: Australia always gets a good reception!



Thursday, 19-Apr, 10:20, stop 1: just to update my post about our last day, when I walked to Manger Square, Bethlehem: here are 2 panoramas (looking N then S). I also have a 3D VR panorama should you ever want to see it and you or I have a heads-up VR display handy (I have 2, including the remarkably good Google Cardboard one).



Thursday, 19-Apr, 12:50, stop 2: After leaving the hotel, on our way back to Amman, we stopped off a couple of times. The first time was at the British WW1 War Cemetery on Mount Scopus (of course, includes Commonwealth troops). As with all these war cemeteries, beautifully kept. Here's the view from there.



Thursday, 19-Apr, 13:15, stop 3: of course, you can't get to Mount Scopus and not see the view over Jerusalem again (very similar to that from Mt of Olives, but a bit higher).



Thursday, 19-Apr, 14:15: at Allenby Bridge Amman, Jordan. Trying to be patient at the border crossing... Took about 1.5 hours, as they wouldn't process us till our Jordanian coach arrived, scheduled for 4pm; very quick once the coach arrived. We've got as far now as the Jordanian side of the border, undergoing passport control there. That only took 10 mins!!! Then stopped at the Geneva Hotel where we had use of the lobby till it was time to go to the airport.

Friday, 20-Apr, 02:05: Finally at the airport, Amman, Jordan, traveling to Perth, Western Australia from Queen Alia International Airport, via Dubai. Arriving in Dubai we were able to use the Emirates lounge to freshen up before the next leg of the journey. Here's the view over the city flying out of Dubai. Normally **very** hazy, this time (early in the morning) you can actually see some things (including the Burj Khalifa)!



Saturday, 21-Apr, 00:10: Great to be home, but a wonderful trip, full on, lots of super memories and experiences to process and ponder upon.

General Reflections:

What a fascinating (and disturbing) part of the world, steeped in history, immense geographical/geological interest, and deep political, economic and religious significance. There are so many interleaving layers to this “Promised Land”. We didn’t get to explore all of these facets in depth, but the tour gave us a wonderful overview of the land, its people and its significance.

For a Christian, the visits to places where significant events occurred in the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) had the most profound impact, bringing many Bible stories tangibly to life. I read them now with a fresh perspective. Most of the places of significance now have churches built over them; I guess that does reinforce the special significance of that particular place, but many were first built well after the actual events, so whether they are at the real locations or not is quite open to debate. That doesn’t really matter much to me; if they are not the **actual** spots, then the actual spots are nearby or in similar locations, so one gets the overall impression of the site and location (eg where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount). But I have to say I was really put off (as were most members of our Group) by the seeming adulation of the “exact spots” by crowds of pilgrims, like the huge queues (an hour or two long) to get into the Nativity crypt; I had previously visited the crypt (in 1997) when there were few people about, but even then the crush to get close enough to kiss the rock on which the manger had supposedly sat, quite turned me off. Sailing on the Sea of Galilee was especially beautiful in this regard - it **was** the Sea of Galilee (not a sailing boat, though) and wonderfully peaceful out on the water, quietly gliding by, giving space to ponder...

The geography of the land is fascinating, especially given the Great Rift Valley (which continues on into Africa) comprising the Jordan River and the Dead and Galilee seas, with the deepest place on Earth at 433m below sea level. I bought a lovely 3D relief map of Israel better to understand its geography (& geology). On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, some great strata were revealed in cuttings (see photo). I’ve already mentioned the reforestation that has taken place in Israel, even on the hillsides (see photo) - our guide pointed out that “every one of those trees has been planted” (but he wasn’t able to inform me as to how decisions were made about what species to choose, or how they were deployed, or in what diversity). On my previous trips (1997-1999) to Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, I was struck forcibly by the barrenness of all the terrain (I think caused by plundering timber by the Ottomans), which is in huge contrast to what has been accomplished in Israel.



While we saw no unrest at all (for which I’m hugely grateful), we were very much aware of the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians (and other groups). The Great March of Return had started a little while before we visited Israel, in which many people in Gaza marched to the dividing fence with Israel; the Israelis (on the other side of the border) had killed quite a few of the marchers; things were quiet while we were there (though we were well away from Gaza), but confrontations (and killings) resumed after we left. They were protesting about the blockade that

Israel has imposed on Gaza (controlling their food, water and power supplies), and not allowing anyone to leave (or enter, I think). As always with these things, it is a complex situation, and all too easy to blame one side or the other. You can understand why Israel wants to stop the constant rocket firing into Israel from Gaza, but as with most Israeli actions their response has been draconian. On the other hand again, I understand that ISIS at one time reached the Syrian border with Israel and attempted an incursion, but were repulsed so severely that they didn't try it again.

The wall that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem is a stark sign of the divisions between the Israelis and Palestinians. We travelled through it daily while we were in Bethlehem; mostly, it was relatively straightforward and quick to pass through the checkpoint; but once we were delayed by about an hour: it seemed to be one of those occasions I've encountered before when the Israelis just stop everything for a while. I don't know if this is *intended* to irritate the Palestinians, but it certainly does that! And not just irritate, but sometimes severely disrupt their lives. A few examples of this were plastered to the wall on the Bethlehem side. Banksy has also made the wall famous by painting murals on it (I'm not sure if the dove with a flak-jacket was his, but it's certainly in his style). See photos below. Stark and brutal it may be, but I do note that the incidence of terrorist attacks has fallen right off. Note, by the way, that the wall is not all about keeping Palestinians out of Israel: there are also laws and stark warnings preventing Israelis from entering Palestinian areas (see the red notice). Note that Israel is now divided into 3 Areas, A, B, C: C is totally under Israeli control; A is under Palestinian control, except for security matters; B is Palestinian but mostly under Israeli control. There are checkpoints as you travel between the Areas, and travel is limited between Areas for various categories of people.





Apart from the stark Jew-Arab divisions and conflicts, there are other divisions in this land, eg between Palestinian Christians and Jews; one of our guides was a Palestinian Christian: I asked him if there was much persecution of Christians, and he replied “no persecution, but there is discrimination” (which actually is a form of persecution). Another Christian we met said that orthodox Jews persecute Christians, especially Jews that have converted to Christianity, to the point that they have to be careful about what they do and say, lest they be attacked. Israel is, of course, officially a secular state, tolerant of all ethnic and religious differences, but that doesn’t always translate into genuine tolerance. A Palestinian Christian I know who was at one time a member of the Knesset was hounded by Israeli forces because he visited relatives in a neighbouring country, to the point of him having to leave Israel for fear of his life. So, a very complex situation altogether.

The highlights to me of the trip were the boat ride of the Sea of Galilee, the visit to the Nazareth Village, and the visit to the Garden Tomb along with communion there. These were significant quiet oases amid the bustle of the other visits. Added to that was the visit to Petra, especially walking through the Siq till the Treasury building came fully into view.

So, many memories, and some that will have ongoing impact (eg as I read especially the New Testament stories). Much food for thought, as well...