



THE HOLY LAND

a visitor's impressions

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Tel Aviv via Walthamstow

The port wing of our EL AL 777 was a blade of gold as we strode the eastern shore of the Adriatic, while a balloon of a full moon popped through the distant haze. The last honey gold ray of sunlight faded against the deepening sky.

Reassured that our in flight meal was kosher, by a note from Rabbi Moshe Nahshoni, no less, we head for a land with place names that have been adopted the world over, from the New World to the slate grey hills of Wales.

The eastern coast of the Med showed as bright stars of light as we neared Ben Gurion airport. Israel was approaching, and approaching New Year 5775.

The Holy Land 2014

Surrounded by the upwards spiral of economic and architectural development, the hill above the ancient port of Joppa provides a commanding view of a 21st century world city.

Tel Aviv to Tiberias

Jaffa, as in orange, or Joppa, as in the ancient port, has an 18th century Italianate church where it said the Apostle Peter resurrected the young Dorcas: a reredos painting illustrates the account. The vista from the acropolis is a carpet of modern development, 21st century Tel Aviv, home to 3 million and testament to progress which began in 1917, the year the British General Alanby secured the land of Palestine from the Turks.



The modern technology of the times is evident just a little further north on the coast at Caesarea. During the reign of Hadrian, and with bewildering precision, water was channelled by aqueduct from Mount Carmel, 11 miles north. Communal lavatories also survive, amongst extensive remains of an amphitheatre and hippodrome, all re-discovered under the sand dunes in the 1940's, together with Herod's Temple, now being washed by the sea. The place became a substantial crusader fort in the 12th century.

An excavator was lifting some of the surviving columns which lie like an assortment of lego - blocks which have lost their companions and thereby their purpose. As they were held upended for a few brief moments, they seemed to emulate much later columns: beyond stood three complete and one part constructed chimney of an oil fired power station. Other aged columns were the knotted fraying trunks of tamarisk trees, sparrows busily extracting seeds or insects from the cracks under the shade of the parched green canopy.

Mount Carmel protrudes like a sore thumb into the Med, a familiar punctuation mark on all Bible Lands maps. Tumbling from its northern slopes is Haifa, which has grown from a tiny port since the British dredged a deep harbour there for military purposes in 1917. From the third terrace, beyond the burnished dome of the Bahai centre and the white slab of a grain silo, we watched a container ship being tugged cautiously past the slender pointer of a breakwater. Beyond that, the sweeping bay and the port of Akko, and where misty sea merged with hazy sky, white cliffs where the sea truncated the ridge dividing Israel from Lebanon.

Christianity was born in troubled times, and has endured troubles ever since. The crusader castle at Akko testifies to this, started in 1099 by the Knights Hospitaller. Rebuilt by the Turks who eventually infilled most of it with earth, it was used as a prison and headquarters during the British mandate, by then much of it buried and awaiting the recent Israeli excavation and conservation. Now, animated visuals of marching crusaders are projected onto the walls of the vaulted chambers, and subterranean tunnels allow visitors to follow strategic underground routes out.

Leaving Akko and descending into the rift towards Galilee, our bus engine roared as it checked our descent. The road swirled us into Tiberias, another ladder of

The Roman aqueduct at Caesarea, which brought water from the slopes of Mount Carmel.



a town where from the 12th floor of the Prima we saw the evening sun turn the Golan Heights to gold, then fade, as shadow trickled over the buff Tiberias apartments, all castellated with drum kettles of solar water tanks.

A small fishing boat waits in the morning sunshine in the natural harbour just north of the ancient city of Caesarea.



Tiberias and Galilee

Insignificant places, yet their names are known worldwide. Tiberias would not figure in the consciousness of many but for its presence in the Bible. But a place doesn't even need an original name: an event, miracle or even a sermon will put a patch of otherwise unconsidered ground onto the world stage. Such is the Mount of the Beatitudes, the place where it is generally agreed that the so named teaching of Jesus was given. And looking at the parched landscape from the colonnade of the church, it's not hard to understand why His words would have such an appeal to those who were poor, unable to find sufficient work to pay for their modest needs and living in a land occupied by a foreign power.

From an air conditioned coach into a cool shaded church via a soothing fountain and clean flushing toilets, we are unavoidably separated from the real feelings of the crowds hearing Jesus as they stood in the glaring heat. They too would see the hazy view of the lake and mountains which probably looks little changed today. To be near in place does not diminish the distance in time. And whilst from a distance only the size of Tiberias and that of its buildings may have seem to have grown, the reality from the inside is transformed.

It's too easy to visualise Bible places as occupying a kind of time warp, forever as they were 2,000 years ago. This evening we walked to the BIG fashion outlet, a modern mall with wide air conditioned aisles and glittering shops. Here was cool in the modern sense, where poor, being a concept far

"Abraham" demonstrating traditional fishing techniques from his Jesus Boat "Promised Land" on Lake Galilee.

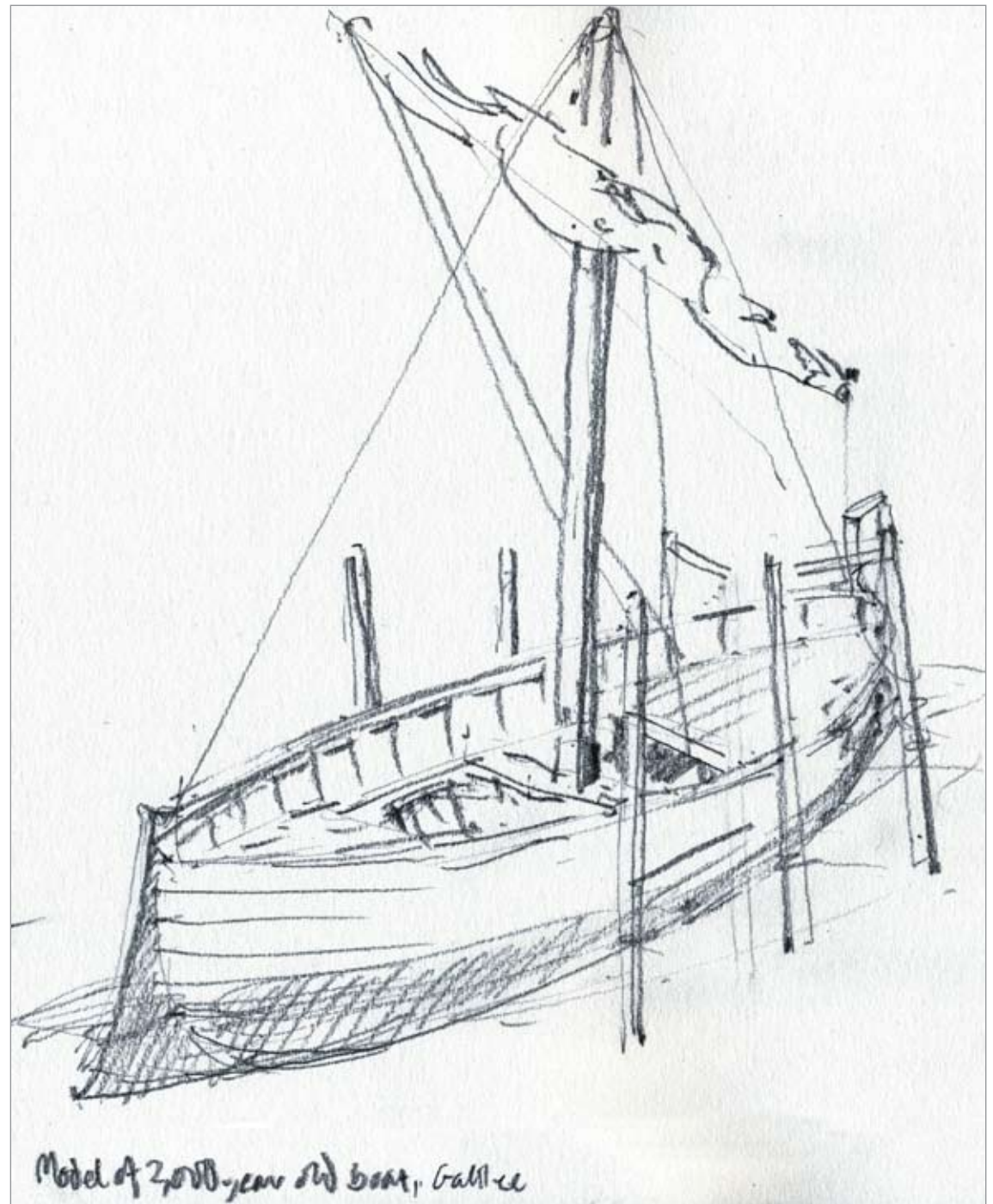
from the retailers agenda, would seem to transcend any concept of poor in spirit. The evidence of our eyes, and the hidden story of today's people may of course differ - we can only look, and be glad, that here is a place where it seems good for people to live, at least in the material sense.

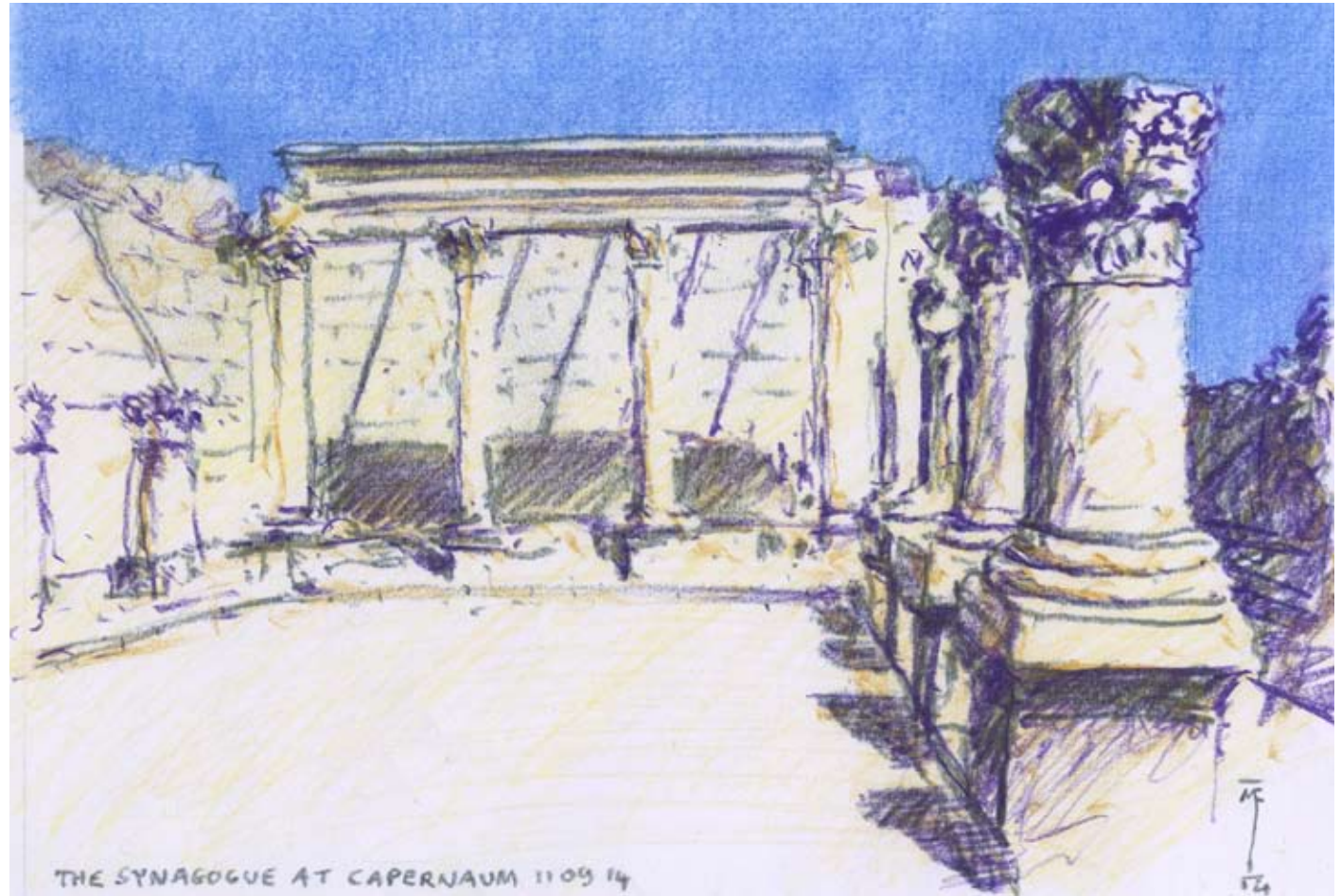
Detachment from times past is heightened rather than bridged by a fragile piece of evidence close to the lakeside. Here the Jesus Boats Dot Com ply back and forth, soft Hebrew music, fishing demonstrations and souvenirs taking us simultaneously into and away from ancient reality. But nothing takes us further from the past than the fragments of a 2000 year old boat, painstakingly rescued from the mud and preserved much like a holy relic. Whose boat was this, begs the giant wall inscription - Jesus' disciples, soldiers from the battle of Migdal or other fishermen? Time and the absence of any provenance has robbed us of the answer. Yes, it was the kind of boat that Peter could have owned, yes, Jesus could have sailed in such a boat, yes, it might even have been this very one. Ultimately we project our own hopes, our own beliefs, and maybe our own scepticism, onto the wrinkled timbers, blackened with silt and age.

Another church: here the loaves and fishes miraculously multiplied. Here, for once, the hungry really were blessed. And the account is preserved in the tesserae on the floor, and the memory preserved through the generations who pilgrim there. Another place: Arbel, crags within whose caves the Jewish people resisted the siege of the Romans in AD 70. Not even to be smoked out, those destined for captivity flung themselves to their deaths from the cliff-top.

And were it not for the developers, the synagogue at Capernaum might still have been there. But the old place is no more, and the builders saw to it that the walls that echoed to Jesus's voice would not echo to ours. Not that they would have had any heritage considerations, that redevelopment happened 18 centuries ago. Still, the classical columns are a fine sight, and the stone benches around the inside walls are arranged in much the same

Scale model reconstruction of the 2,000 year old fishing boat.

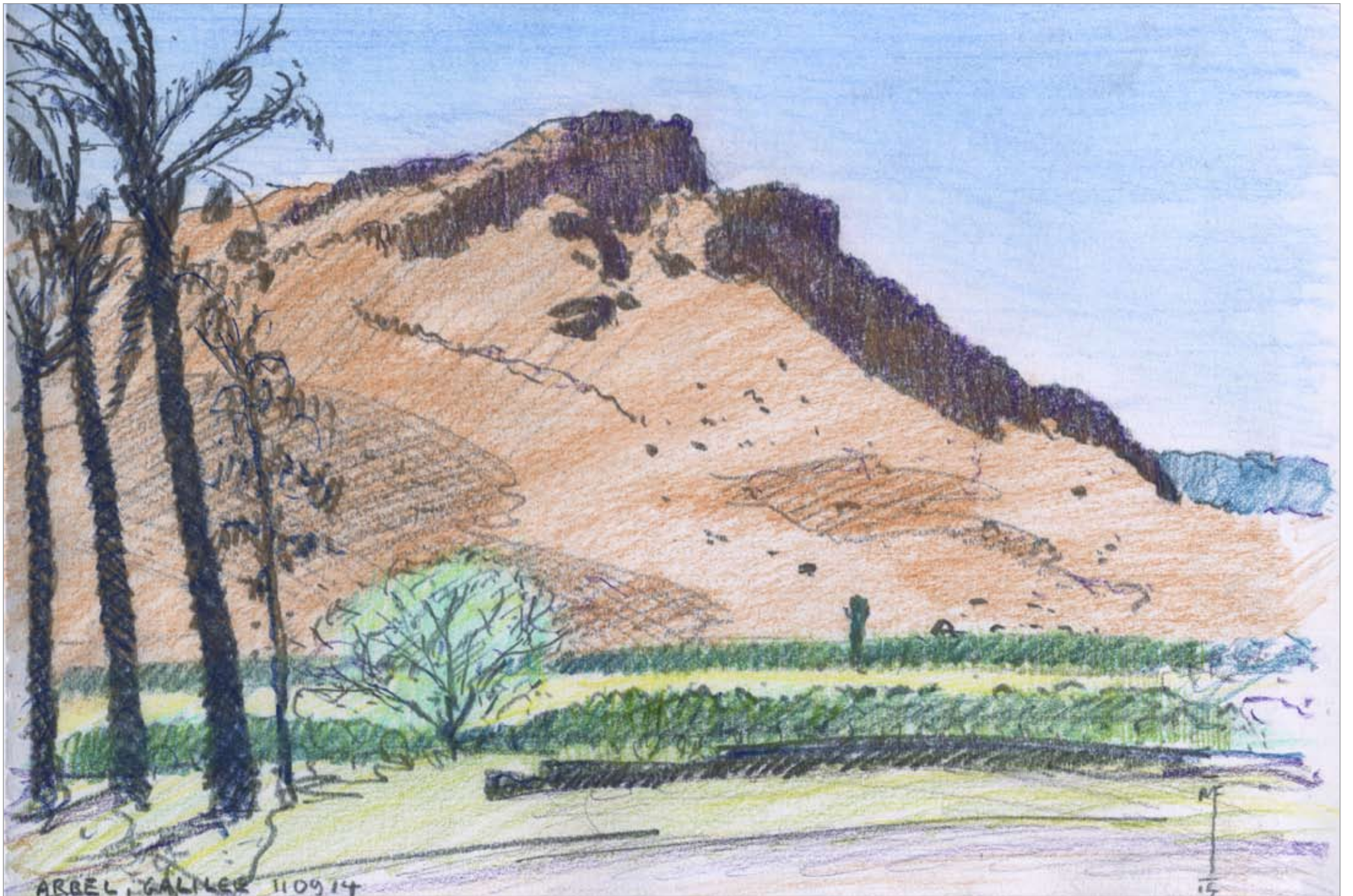




Left and above: in the old synagogue, Capernaum. Right: Mount Arbel

way. And today's visitors, drawn by desire, curiosity and even chance, echo the desire, curiosity or chance that drew people to see and listen when Jesus was in town.

Danger hangs stealthy silent in the Golan Heights. A danger real enough, as our guide, on observing a procession of UN vehicles heading that way deemed it prudent to keep us clear of the area. We stopped not far short of the ridge, at Banias Springs, once Caesarea Philippi, clear waters forming one of the sources of the Jordan. 2000 years ago it was a Greek Roman city where radical religious beliefs would be seriously challenged. Yet we learn that Jesus seriously challenged his disciples here, and that the Apostle Peter made his declaration that Jesus was the "Son of the Living God". The ruins tell part of the story, the location another, and oblivious to all this, and even seemingly oblivious to us, a rock rabbit nosed nonchalantly beneath the trees.





Everyday life near the modern rebuild of Mary's Well, Nazareth.

Prevailing Reality

When the then Pope was due to take Mass in Nazareth in the year 2000, the Moslem community feared losing part of a Mosque. The plan was to make everything perfect for the papal visit, the Moslems thought their piece of land was going to be taken over so they amassed in their thousands one night to protest.

The mosque, or to be exact the framework of a mosque, still stands on what was disputed property. Religion in conflict - a familiar scenario. Yet beneath the foundations of the Church of the Annunciation and the Church of St. Joseph are reminders of life in days gone by. Stone foundations, the shorn off walls of simple dwellings, and a reminder that for the 400 or so people who lived in Nazareth around 0 AD, life was simple survival, stripped bare of the trappings that overbalance our perceptions today.



Worshippers preparing to receive communion in the Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth.

That people can come and worship here so easily is perhaps a miracle in itself. But the towns of Cana and Nazareth would, without their historical connections, just be the places they appear, working towns, dusty and full of traffic.

Stripping back 2000 or so years is part reality in the Nazareth Village, built on a farm which is now a living museum. Like a stage back scene, the modern town crescents the hillside whilst a donkey eyes us at close quarters, as if acknowledging that we have paid to see him. He's tethered to an olive tree, where girls dressed in authentic costume are on hand to let us witness a few moments of harvesting. Paddocked goats and sheep are watched by men whose role also appears to be just part of the scene, and little more. The tough reality of former times is there to an extent, in someone hand tilling the soil. Up the hilly arid fields is a rebuild of part of the old village, as authentic as research can tell, complete with carpenter, olive press, spinner and weaver and herb grinder. And a synagogue, reconstructed reality, transplanted by a short distance and 2 millennia from the instance of Jesus declaring himself to be the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. There are the scrolls, just as they might have been there for him to pick up and read. There too are the stone jars into





Re-imagined reality: pilgrims and volunteers re-enact the life of ancient times tending sheep and goats, spinning and weaving, grinding herbs and opening the synagogue.



which the scriptures were carefully stored.

We left the hills of Nazareth and descended into the vale of Jezreel, a flat patchwork of banana, olive and mango trees.

The tough reality of life was related to us by Daniel on his Kibbutz Shaar Hagolan. Born there to Polish parents who had settled in 1935, he has seen the place grow from a small communal farm. Now it houses around 100 people, and runs a factory making plastic water pipes which employs a further 150. Years ago the pioneers attempted to make a fishing lake. The lake no longer survives but in excavating it they discovered important neolithic remains, including evidence of a village. The tough reality of conflict has affected them, the place suffering badly in the 1990's, everyone including the youngest children knowing their way through underground tunnels to the bunkers. The Kibbutz movement helped to regenerate the country before the state of Israel was formed. Nowadays it is less significant and run on more commercial lines, but it demonstrates commitment and pioneering spirit.

We journeyed to Beit She'an, recently discovered evidence of the glory of the Roman Empire, then via West Bank route, the trickle of today's Jordan to the east, and beyond it the pie crust edge of the Jordanian mountains. Sparsely populated, and with little traffic, we sped past isolated farming hamlets until Jericho shimmered in the distance. A sharp right turn and a grinding ascent revealed the skyline of the Jerusalem suburbs, turquoise shadow in the late afternoon light. Exiting the tunnel at the summit, the city burst into view, a billowing sea of white block buildings, the burnished Dome of the Rock sewn in like a gold button.

"Daniel" relates the reality of a troubled kibbutz life.



The Roman social scene: portal of the great amphitheatre at Beit She'an, and the communal lavatories with their constantly flushed water channels.



By The Dead Sea

Today is the Sabbath. The day of the week “when God rested”. So if you are a devout Jew, you have to rest. Which stops you doing things. What sort of things? Quite a few things.

We didn't know, for instance, that you are not allowed to press a knob. The sort of knob that calls a lift. Now a lift, surely, is there to save you work. But pressing the knob causes it to work, so, no, you can't do that. So the lift has a nice relaxing day off too? Oh no it doesn't. To save you the trouble, it has to be set running before sunset, when the Sabbath day starts. Up and down it goes, working harder than ever and using much more power than on the other days. How do you tell it what floor you want? You can't - you can't press the knobs. So, the lift obediently goes up, down, up, down, pausing to open its doors on every floor in both directions, whilst you step aboard for the most tedious journey you can imagine. Without having to exert yourself by pressing any knobs.

We may smile, or inwardly despair at such rigorous religious rules, but today we saw historical evidence of far greater extremes. Around 150 BC, the Essines established a remote community at Qumran by the Dead Sea, on what was then a peninsular but now separated from the water by a wide band of gently stepped silt. Here, with no suitable water supply, they made it their faithful duty to purify themselves by bathing three times a day. To satisfy this need a complex engineered system was installed to catch every last drop of rain water that ran off the hills of Jerusalem. The Essines are best known for their manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls. Not that they perhaps intended to be known for them, they hid them in caves - hid them so well that they lay undiscovered for some 1,900 years.

Further south, a zealot sect took over one of Herod's 3 palaces, this one his stronghold at Masada, to which he had been obliged to flee on 3 occasions. The infrastructure, installed on a mount quite separate from any other, which kept the king in isolated and impregnable splendour proved to be perfect for the 900 or so renegades who refused to surrender to the Romans after the fall of Jerusalem in the year AD 70.

The Roman army laid siege, and found themselves committed to it for 3 years before the fortress was taken. But such was their determination not to fall into

A dry shard of stone, picked up at random from the ground at Qumran, bore an uncanny resemblance to the profile of one of the ancient Essines.



The Calidarium, where hot air circulated beneath a raised floor to heat the room above.

Roman hands, the occupants had slaughtered each other the night before they would have been captured. The Roman siege ramp is still there, despite centuries of erosion and earthquakes. But the climb to the top was not hard work for us. No need for siege ramps any more, or even a sweltering toil up the snake path. A cable car now swoops visitors up, 80 at a time, to bake in the searing heat of the fortified plateau. Yes, a cable car operating on the Sabbath, by staff who have no problem pressing the knobs to make it go.

Later we joined the flocks of tourists who come to rest on the curiously buoyant mineral rich water of the Dead Sea, first working hard to smear ourselves with mud extracted from the murky sea bed. We are 1,200 feet below “real” sea level, it is 36 degrees according to the display screen as we scull like bobbing corks, the blazing sun hurting our eyes and the Jordan mountains shimmering gold in the distance to the east.

Left: one of the gateways into the fortified palace complex on the top of Masada. Opposite: the mountain of Masada, viewed from a Roman encampment. From here and seven others the army laid siege to the fortress for three years.





Jerusalem, Jerusalem

East Meets West. We first said that in Athens, then in Istanbul. We say it again in Jerusalem. But it's more than that here, for culture, politics and religion all meet at a global crossroads. So too meets hope and fear, peace and conflict, division and unity. Somehow it all works. Or has been made to work. Together the three consecutive holy days, adjoining but distinct, are the heartbeats of multiple faiths.

The hope of resurrection, in the mass of Jewish graves forming an endless crescent on the Mount of Olives; the compromises of Christianity: Greek, Coptic, Catholic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Syrian, their Turkish imposed Status Quo slicing the towering domed cake of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; the divisions of the old city: Moslem and Jew knowing that sharing is surviving; the devotion to the past: preserving orthodox faith and historical links at the Wailing Wall.

Left: Container port for the deceased: tombs of the faithful souls awaiting in the hope of resurrection on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Right: Ancient olive trees in Gethsemane, the garden whose name translates as Oil Press. Below: Tourists and visitors mingle with devout Jews at the Western (wailing) wall, foundation of the ancient Temple of Solomon. Handwritten prayers are pressed like mortar between the stones (right).





And everywhere people, tourists, pilgrims, shopkeepers, as if impelled by a giant teaspoon that keeps their liquid flow on the move. Nowhere is anyone still for long: the boys darting through the canopied narrow streets on bicycles, the shopkeepers in those same dark passageways imploring you for business. Loosely linked and shuffling - bemused tour groups, i-phones and cameras waving in a kind of supplication at every and any curious sight. The measured gait of pilgrims, each step trodden with a conviction of purpose.



Far left: Fifth Station of the Cross: an oratory dedicated to Simon of Cyrene, who was compelled to bear the cross of Jesus, marks a turning point on this pilgrims route.

Above left: Getting the teeshirt at Station Seven of the Cross.

Above: Looking up from a narrow street to a view that is probably much as it was two thousand years ago.

Above right: Glimpsing one of the domes which forms the multi-faith Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Right: In an old shop sign, a reminder that Jews and Arabs can trace a common ancestry, a reminder too of the currency by which Jesus was betrayed.





Left: inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, pilgrims crowd and queue to pay homage to the tomb now housed under an immense dome, incense smoke rising into shafts of sunlight, whilst a procession leaves the church (above).

Right upper: rooftop vista. Right lower: in the quiet of early evening, three visitors step thoughtfully along the Via Dolorosa, disregarding the distractions of the souvenir shops.

Far right: part of the ancient main thoroughfare from Byzantine times, this street is depicted on the mosaic map at Madaba, Jordan.





Left: believed to be the site of the tomb of King David, and with separate entrances for men and women, the draped stone casket can just be glimpsed through the doorway. Manuscripts are housed in the cabinet on the left.

Right: outside the city walls: the surrounding hills are a piecrust of suburban development. A modern church tower pierces the sky, and amongst the hotels and apartment blocks stands an ancient cube of a house in its own walled garden.



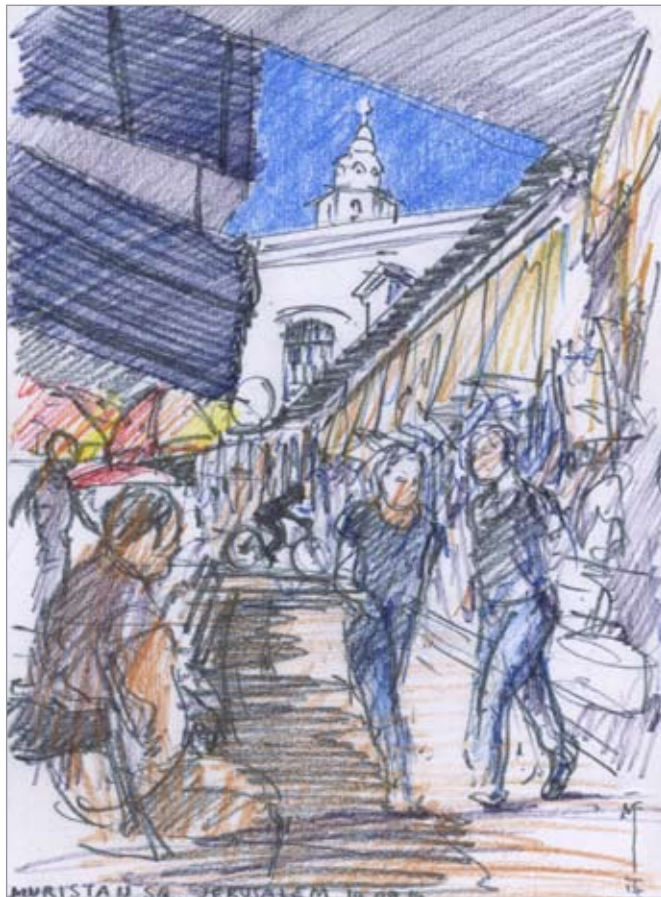


This is the real Jerusalem. It seems real enough, if only because so many things are said to have happened here. And just to have survived makes it remarkable. But what is most real is that to many, it just happens to be where they live, the place they call home.

Left: Damascus Gate, Saturday evening market.

Right: Sunday evening market in the Moslem quarter of Jerusalem, and a stallholder suddenly becomes aware of the camera.

Below: Muristan, close to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a minaret rises into the triangle of sky above the shops.





Divisions

'Where are you from?' enquires the friendly security guard as we head for the Temple Mount. 'England.'
'Passports please...'

The third most holy place in the Islamic world is the golden domed mosque known worldwide as The Dome of the Rock. Its presence and survival is maybe a metaphor for differing faiths who share at least some common ground. Regardless of faith or belief, it is a holy place, held dear to many, including Jews, who sadly are excluded from visiting. Before the mosque stood, this was the site of three Jewish temples, the last one destroyed in AD 70.

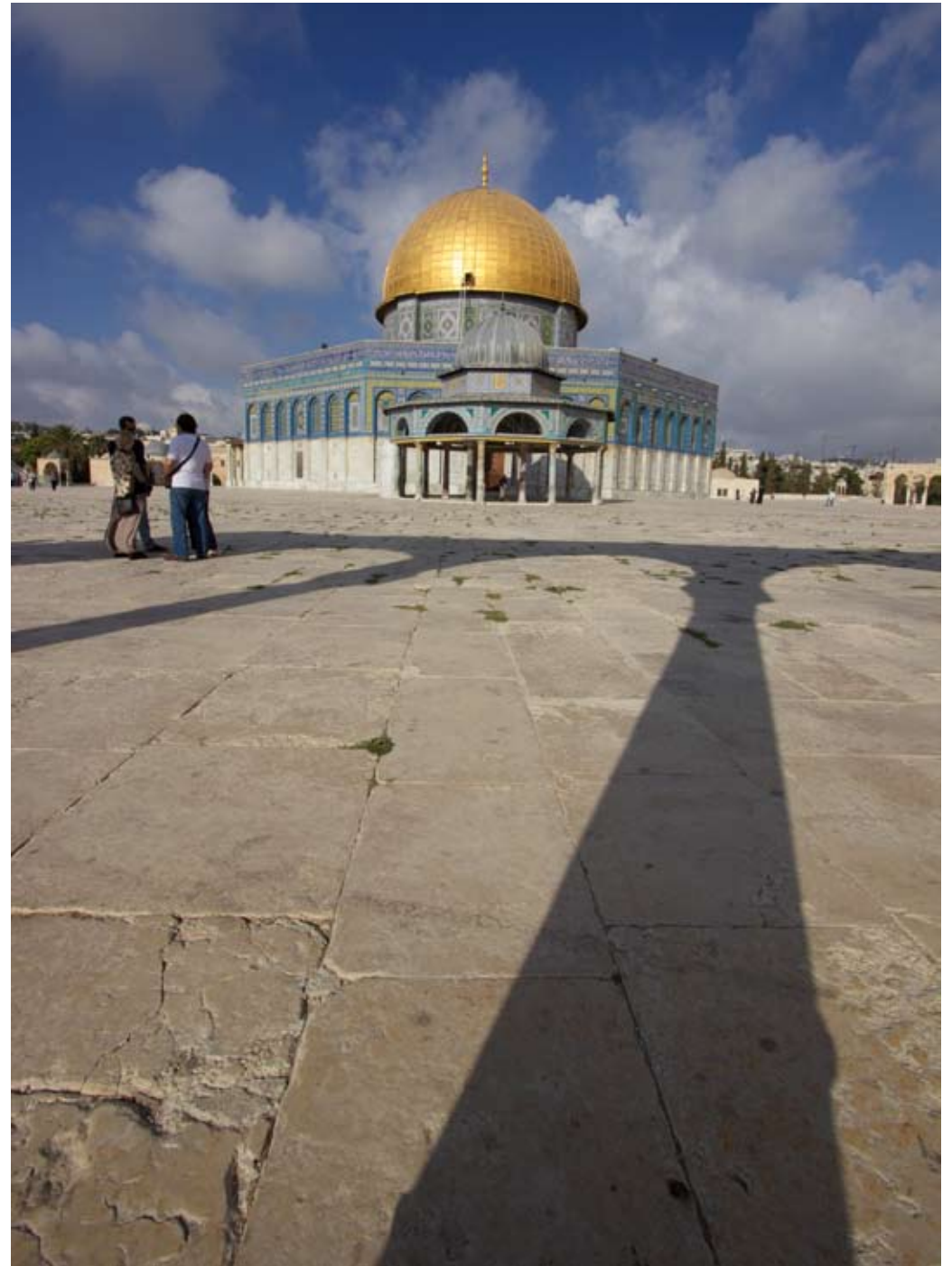
From a distance the mosque has a purity of simplicity which belies its size. Yet it has a majestic aura, standing serene and almost unapproachable in a great open space. Seen from within the square it ceases to be just another part of Jerusalem, but stands solo, as if no other structure may dare compete, or even exist. Moving closer, the tiled decoration is nothing short of amazing.

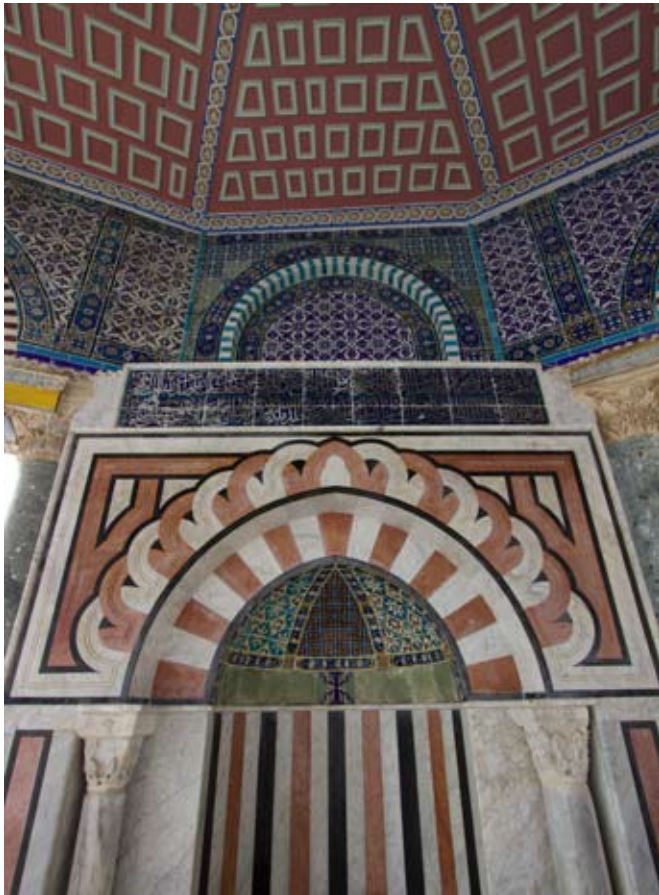
Inside - and here we encounter division - only Moslems may enter.

Left: within the temple precincts and above the Western Wall, the dome of the iconic mosque is glimpsed through a colonnade.

Right: woven into the fabric of the city when viewed from afar, the dome commands its own space with supreme architectural confidence at close quarters.







Above: though we were unable to enter the main mosque building, some impression of the interior could be gained from the decoration on the inside of the Dome of the Chain, which has been said to represent the very centre of the world.

Far left and left: shadowplay on the extensive courts of Temple Mount.

Right: morning shadows, approach to the Dome of the Rock.





One of the holiest places in the Christian world is a few miles but another country away. Bethlehem: scene of conflict and division between Israel and Palestine, a razor wire fringed wall of graffiti'd concrete pillars. Israelis may not enter, their government fearing for their safety. The sentiment of the carol "how still we see thee lie" could hardly be further from the reality.

Here the people are not prosperous, they rely on 80% of their income from tourism. Maybe more visitors would help to pay for them to finish some of their buildings. It was just after we had passed through the checkpoint and seen the stretch of security wall alongside the road into town that we began to notice them. Modest sized apartment blocks, blank hollow eyed with unfilled window openings, rising from the dusty rubble of abandoned sites. Part started, part finished, part occupied: houses, shops, garages, in concrete and golden precision cut limestone, anchored with their occupied neighbours on the steep crumbling slopes of the town.

Left: everyday life and traffic queues continue in Bethlehem as if a parallel world.

Right: peace and goodwill versus conflict and division, the West Bank barrier graffiti portrait of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine activist Leila Khaled.





We file through the purposely low door into the Church of the Nativity, low so that all have to stoop in reverence to the Christ child. And inside, it is all scaffolding. A complete forest, like a supportive cobweb, through which descend elaborate high gothic German made chandeliers. Even the pillars are mummified in wooden laths, their classical capitals shedding cloth cloaks, as if caught in suspense whilst disrobing. All this, explains Mr. Ahbood, our Christian Palestinian guide, is to stop us getting wet in here when it rains. We are ushered quickly through the grotto, a crypt where we stoop again, this time to touch the star inlaid in the floor - a star surrounded by a crescent moon of flickering lanterns. The bright guiding star that brought the wise men to this very spot, is burnished bright through the reverent touching of the tens of thousands who make their pilgrimage here.

Left: a souvenir shop brightens the corner of a forbidding multi-storey car park. Having arrived in air conditioned comfort, pilgrims then have an assisted approach to their destination.

Right: a visitor dressed appropriately in a blue robe acquires her own memory of Bethlehem, whilst beyond, visitors prepare to stoop to enter the church.

Far right above: shadowed by scaffolding, this Madonna and Child watch benignly at the constant stream of visitors descending the steps to the shrine.

Far right below: crucifix and icon above the entrance to the nativity grotto.







Left: kneeling to see, touch and even kiss the Bethlehem Star.

This page: once followed by the Wise Men, the guiding star now draws people from the world over.



About two miles from the town a casket of a domed Greek church stands over a cave. This is Shepherds' Fields, a place associated with Jacob, Boaz and the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. And there are still flocks here. One: outlines of sheep in a balustrade leaping up a staircase, and another: sheep carved from stone, forming a fountain, water cascading, dribbling or not flowing at all from their mouths.

On our coach we return to the town as Mr. Ahbood recites the prayer Our Father in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. It is a soulful, singing recitation, cutting through the centuries, as a half built house, a shabby occupied one, an abandoned building plot, a hard surfaced sports field and an impressively oily car workshop flick past our coach windows.

Jerusalem is a divided city, and until 1967 was quite literally in two countries: Israel and Jordan. It is divided in time: its historic fortunes and misfortunes told through a light spectacular at the Tower of David. It's not a tower as such, but a fortress, nor was it built by King David, but by one of the Herods. But such inaccuracies matter little against the 4,000 year history of the city, from the Canaanite times of over 3000 years before Christ to the present day. Raised, razed, raised, the swords of conquerors dividing its existence into 13 distinct eras.

Left: one of the working fountain sheep at Shepherds' Fields.

Right: within the citadel walls, tourists gather for the sound and light show which wordlessly transports them through the story of Jerusalem from the time of King David to the present.





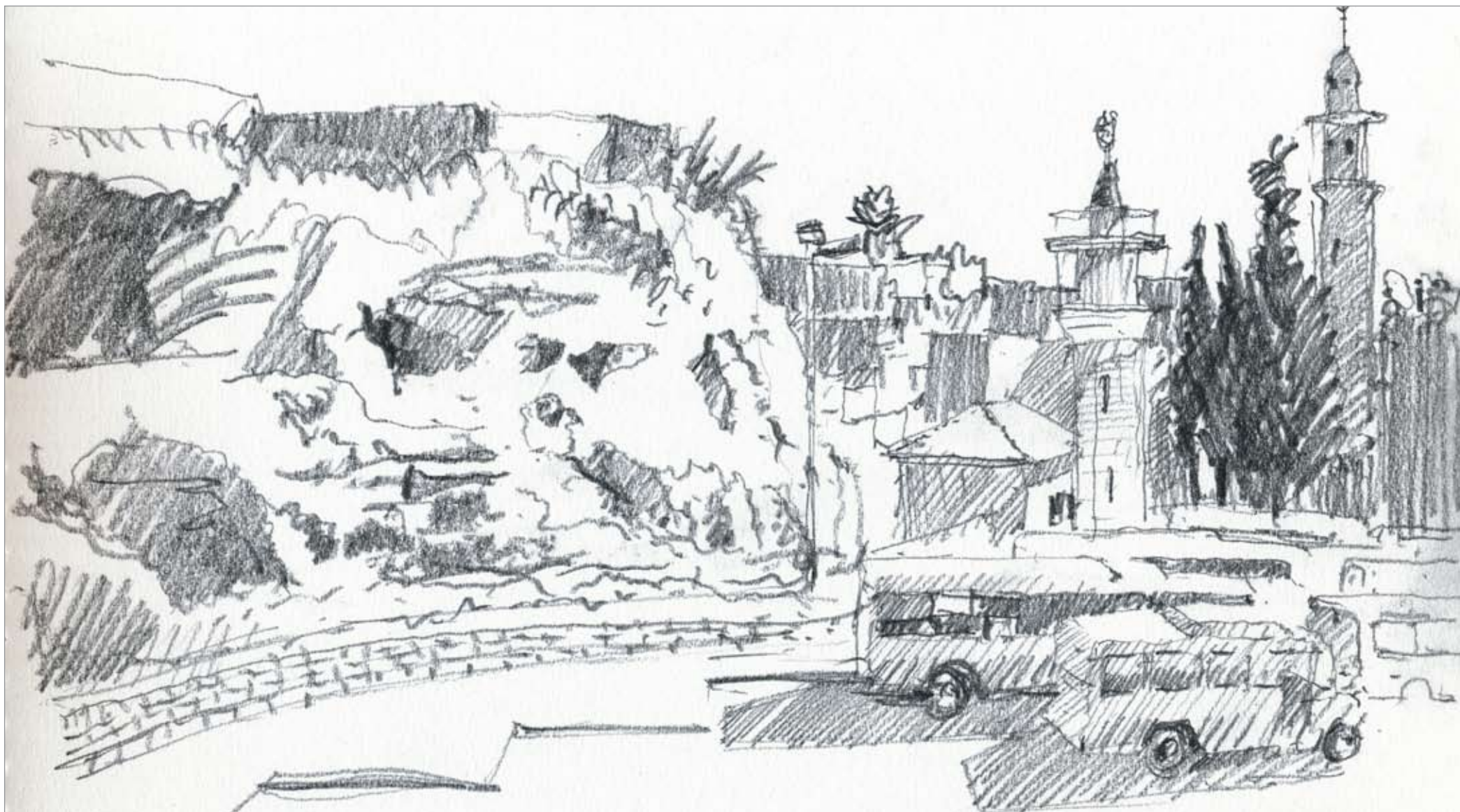
Who Rolled The Stone?

Samuel, who was our guide for nearly all our trip, made the remark that it is not necessarily the place that is important but what it stands for. And just by being a place of pilgrimage, the memory of an event can be preserved.

Our distance in space can be closed, but our distance in time cannot. It even feels strange being able to think that we might be in the very place where a particular event occurred. We had already been to the tomb of Jesus, on Sunday. It lay beneath a great cathedral, music and incense soaring and mingling with monumental architecture. Greeks, Coptic, Catholics, Armenians, Ethiopians, each with their own division, or space, under an ornate canopy of decoration. We have now been to the tomb of Jesus on Tuesday. Beside a great open air space, music and sermons soaring and mingling with the canopy of shady trees. Where there might be ornament was simplicity, where there might be incense was a refreshing breeze. And the pilgrims came, stood for

their photos then stooped in quiet wonder as they entered the cave, stepping over the channel in the ground along which a mighty millstone could roll. Outside, from the simple wooden pulpit an American preacher said to his attentive congregation: here is the place where for centuries, thousands upon thousands of people have come to see just what those disciples came to see: nothing. An empty tomb to which the apostles ran in bewildered haste.

From the edge of the garden we

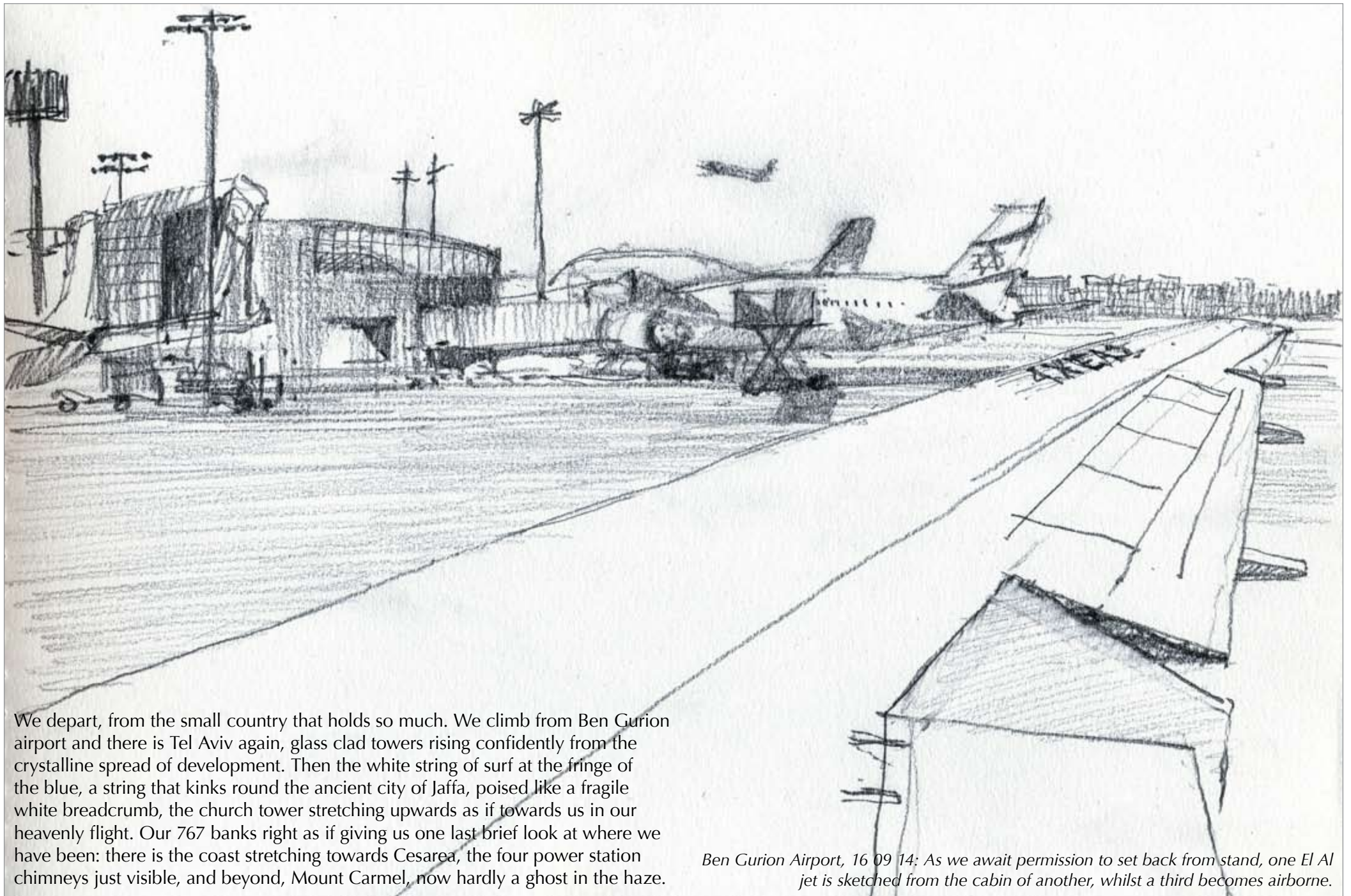


Left, main picture: along this groove a giant stone could roll, sealing the chamber where the visitor, posing for his photo, is standing.

Left, insert: The Garden Tomb: not the only cave claiming to be the resting place of Jesus' body, but in contrast to many pilgrimage sites, still relatively unspoilt and in the open air.

Above: Skull Hill, Jerusalem: view from close to the Garden Tomb, a "skull" peering from the rock formation.

look across to a bus station and to two minarets piercing the skyline. And there, just perceptible in the crumbling cliff, is the "place of the skull" as recorded in the Bible story of Christ's passion. Here the everyday, the down to earth necessity of life, the evidence of differing faiths and a visible touchstone of the Christian world come together.



We depart, from the small country that holds so much. We climb from Ben Gurion airport and there is Tel Aviv again, glass clad towers rising confidently from the crystalline spread of development. Then the white string of surf at the fringe of the blue, a string that kinks round the ancient city of Jaffa, poised like a fragile white breadcrumb, the church tower stretching upwards as if towards us in our heavenly flight. Our 767 banks right as if giving us one last brief look at where we have been: there is the coast stretching towards Cesarea, the four power station chimneys just visible, and beyond, Mount Carmel, now hardly a ghost in the haze.

Ben Gurion Airport, 16 09 14: As we await permission to set back from stand, one El Al jet is sketched from the cabin of another, whilst a third becomes airborne.

No excuse!

Notice in the doorway of the Catholic church in Bethlehem: If you come as visitors, we pray you will leave as pilgrims. If you come as pilgrims, we pray you will leave as better pilgrims.

The soap works?

One of the agreeable things about most hotel rooms is the kettle and coffee. Except, when our room is made up, there is no guarantee that the coffee sachets will be replenished. In Tiberias, we had to go to reception to request the supplies we might have expected to be there on our return. Minutes later a generous delivery of sachets was brought to our door. But when the maid was gone we discovered still no whitener. I returned to reception and rectification was promised. I then found that the two lifts were fully occupied, another coach party having just arrived with luggage. So I walked up the six floors.

We were just heading out of our room for dinner when there was a delivery. A huge delivery. Whitener this time, with lots more coffee.

It was the same in Jerusalem. But there we could help ourselves from the ready supply the dining room at breakfast. However, the soap - those little bars in fiddly cellophane wrappers and cardboard - no matter how little the tablet had been used, it was faithfully renewed every day. But after 3 days we returned to find that the penny had finally dropped and our part used soap was still there. By the handbasin, carefully returned to its box. The box we had put in the bin.

Day of rest?

The lift might not have much of a day of rest on the Sabbath but the knives do. In the dining room we were unable to cut off portions or slices of bread and cheesecake, but had to improvise with the tongs. Not ideal for layers of well baked flaky pastry. Realising we could get our desert knives from our tables, we then realised why the proper implements were not provided. It was the Sabbath. So we had to work extra hard to cut our helpings. Anyway we now had our breakfast. But where was the coffee? No coffee machine working, but there were some jugs of coffee in the control of wandering waiters, who true to type, seem genetically

programmed not to notice the anxious and apologetic waves of a diner who requires their services. Eventually they came, with jugs too small to be of use in a large dining room. Well, they certainly had to work hard going to constantly refill them.

Samuel, our guide, related how he found it relaxing to wash his car. So much so that it made a nice relaxing activity for the Sabbath. To his tut-tutting Hassidic neighbour he would say 'what's your problem? I'm the one going to hell, not you!' The neighbour doesn't speak to him any more.

The porcine factor?

We were not surprised to find no pork on any menu. So it was a big surprise to find we were driving past a pig farm. Yes, a very well established pig farm, with restaurant, farm shop - selling their now very popular - not pork - "white steak". And in a country where it is against the law to raise pigs on Israeli soil. Ah, yes, but the pigs are not raised on the land. It took a clever lawyer to come up with a simple solution: raise the pigs pens on a wooden slatted floor a few inches off the ground...

Quiet?

'It's very quiet this time' commented Barbara, our tour manager. 'Quiet, with all these throngs of visitors pushing through the narrow streets of Jerusalem?' 'Yes, very quiet, we haven't had to queue for long anywhere. Sometimes you can't get along the Via Dolorosa at all - it's totally solid.'

But then it's only a few weeks since intense fireworks and illegal tunnel discoveries on the border with Gaza were hitting the news headlines worldwide. And we recalled how we might be prevented from making this trip had the situation deteriorated. We did hear some thuds of explosives one evening in Jerusalem - and they turned out to be no more sinister than party fireworks popping.

With thanks to Travelsphere, their guides, hotels and drivers, all of whom looked after us extremely well.

