

Israel trip stirs empathy for Palestinians

WHEN I saw the U.S. customs official at Newark International Airport, I broke into a smile. I was away from Israel at last. I was away from the checkpoints, away from the settlements and away from the soldiers. I no longer had to have a fanciful story of the tourist sights I visited when I was actually touring the misery of the West Bank.

On my first day in Israel, the taxi that drove me from Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv sped along fine highways and, suddenly, on both sides, were walls — walls of concrete or barbed wire, walls to keep the Palestinians away from Israelis and from other Palestinians, walls built to steal land and olive trees.

I went through my first checkpoint, uneventfully. A rifle-toting soldier looked at my passport and my driver's *hawiah*, the vital document that explains in what areas he or she is permitted access. No problem. The driver had a Jerusalem *hawiah*, so he could drive throughout the West Bank.

We were waved on. In all the 20 to 30 times I went through checkpoints, no soldier ever said "Thank you" or any other polite expression to an Arab driver.

Of course, for a Palestinian, that's the least of his problems.

I heard many terrible stories of what happened at checkpoints. One man told me how, when driving from one Palestinian area to another, he was delayed at a checkpoint and was late for an important meeting. He blew the car horn, just as he had seen Jewish settlers do on many occasions. It was a bad mistake. Soldiers took him and the driver, opened the car hood and made them bend their heads over the engine while the car horn was blared for 15 minutes.

Another man told of coming to a checkpoint with his wife and being told that it was closed. He said he backed away for some time and then the bullets flew. His wife was killed and he was badly injured. It happened in early 2000. Eventually, he got an apology, but there was neither an arrest nor a shekel in compensation.



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I stayed in a mostly Christian West Bank town near Bethlehem. From that town, I went several times to Ramallah, the de facto capital of Palestine. It is where Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has his compound. Since West Bankers are forbidden to travel through Jerusalem, the roads we had to take included a stretch of around 10 hairpin turns at impossibly steep angles.

One day, I went farther north in the West Bank and toured the city of Jenin to see its hospital. In the pediatric ward, I saw two tiny babies sharing one of the six incubators. This practice is against medical standards because of risk of infection, but hospital officials said they had no choice.

The other rooms in the wing were crowded and had very little in the way of medical equipment. The hospital no longer had a working ambulance. It had three, but two were destroyed by the Israeli military and one had been involved in a crash.

None of the wards or medical rooms had air conditioning, this in a region where it's 80 degrees or above for months. Jenin's hospital is the only one for a governate of 350,000 people.

In a June 2007 report, Save the Children said 10 percent of Palestinians under age 5 were chronically malnourished and that 10,000 die each year, mostly of preventable diseases and poor care of newborns.

Another day, I went to a Jerusalem suburb called Anata to see an Israeli group that rebuilds some of the thousands of Palestinian homes that have been bulldozed by authorities.

Anata is all Arab Palestinian and its residents pay full Israeli taxes, yet there are almost no services. The streets are poorly paved. A dirty trickle of liquid came down the lane near the house that was being rebuilt. I was told it was sewage. The garbage in Anata is never picked up. It accumulates everywhere until it's burned in the open air.

I was worried about leaving Israel. I was nervous that it would be found out that I had lived in the West Bank and I would be interrogated. I was anxious that my hours of video would be confiscated or that my interviewees would be harassed.

Other "internationals" who do human rights work undergo minute searches or are banned from re-entry into Israel. It turned out I had no problem.

As a Jew in my late 50s, my story about sightseeing and religious travel — all true, but very incomplete — satisfied my questioner and I passed from the security stop into a mall of glitzy duty-free shops and fountains.

Twelve hours later, I was at Newark airport, glad for my freedom and angry over the sufferings of the Palestinians.

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