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WAS JERUSALEM BUILT HERE?

Non-believer ZACK CAHILL *makes a pilgrimage to the holy land*

No place on this earth – with the possible exception of a Michael Bolton concert – makes you question the nature of your existence like Jerusalem. It challenges your morals, your beliefs. Like a theological night-club bouncer, it grabs you by the collar and demands to know why you're there.

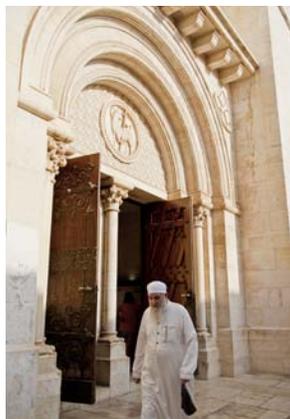
I know why I'm here. It seems that despite a lifelong atheism, the older I get, the more fascinated I become with ritual and the more I long for some kind of faith. It's mostly because I have an almost pathological fear of death. The 20-year-old me would be aghast. An insufferable dinner party agitator, citing Hitchens and Dawkins at anyone who dared mention something as innocuous as horoscopes, he would shudder to think that 14 years hence, he'd be on a pilgrimage in the City of David to the site of Christ's crucifixion (or at least allegedly – more on that later).

In a day already crammed with history, we figure to squeeze in a little more on the way. Frankly, most visitors would spend days, sometimes months, even years, feeling their way through Jerusalem, but today, we are on a whistle-stop tour, with our hosts, Pomegranate Travel trying to give us a taster for the city in just one day. We start at the Knesset, just to put the very



existence of Israel and its complicated politics into context, and already it feels like information overload.

Downhill, at the impressive Israel Museum, I'm a guinea pig on a new tour that's all about the Israeli male body image, put together by one of the museum's gay, senior guides. Pomegranate Travel had done a wonderful job in creating a tour of Jerusalem suited to my tastes, but while an interesting concept, even the guide professes that the theme is a difficult thing to shoehorn into a widely diverse collection. I am impressed at what he's trying to tell me, but frankly I'm much more interested in getting to the Dome of the Book; a bizarre, onion-shaped building, nightclub-lit and air conditioned – home to the Dead Sea Scrolls. I scan the ancient pages, pulled from a cave after a thousand years; the Hebrew still perfectly legible to any Israeli school child. It makes me think of the very book that dominated my 18 years of Catholic school in Dublin: its protagonist staring grimly down at us from his wooden cross above the blackboard; the Hail Marys we recited in Irish every time a teacher entered or left the class.



“Anyone who says they understand Jerusalem, really doesn't at all.”

I recently told a London friend some of my Catholic school stories. I presented them as amusing anecdotes. When I finished, I realised her mouth was hanging wide open as if I had described some mad alternate reality.

I've been reminding myself of that, every time I see a member of the Orthodox sect, heavy black coat and hat in forty-degree heat, or the man I saw on the plane over, with the strange box strapped to his head, its leather straps coiled round his arm, rocking and praying. To me, all religions look strange from the outside. Although my Pomegranate

guide for the day, Jeremy – a British Jewish transplant – begs to differ. To him, even after a decade of living in Israel, it looks strange too. As we walk quickly through the bustling, heaving Mahane Yehuda Market to see it in a quick half-hour, supping craft beer, halva and a bowl full of hot hummus in the process (another excursion that could easily take a half day), he rattles off an abridged history of the Jewish faith.

“Up until about 250 years ago, everyone agreed who the Jews were – a displaced people who originated in Israel. Then after the enlight-

enment, there was a push towards reform.”

As tends to be the case when you try to reform any kind of religion, whether you're hammering theses to a Church door or suggesting maybe gay marriage is okay, there were a few holdouts. Those who resisted the reformation became known collectively as Orthodox Jews. That's the hat, coat and curly hair brigade we see as we arrive at the old city, that we didn't see so many of in Tel Aviv. But, as Jeremy points out, they're not one, homogeneous mass. There are thirteen different kinds, each with their different convictions, all existing on a sliding scale of conservatism. Jeremy can pick them out by the shape of their hats, the colour of their jackets; like an expert gardener pointing out exotic shrubs when all I can see is grass.

We enter the great gates of King David's ancient city and huddle in the shade, as a UN convention of visitors pour ahead – Swedish, Chinese, American, German, among others. Jeremy tells us a number of conflicting stories about the architect who built the city 1538. First he says the architect was so honoured to have built the city that he asked to be buried here, beneath our feet. Then he says that he was buried here as punishment. He presents each story, each version, as fact. The point being if someone tells you something definite about this place, they don't know what they're talking about.

“And anyone who claims that they understand Jerusalem, doesn't understand Jerusalem at all,” he adds.

Over a scale model of the city we map out the path we



where Adam was created. It is the primary visual touchstone for anyone trying to picture Jerusalem – the lines of people in kippahs, bowing in jerky movements, laying their hands lovingly on the ancient edifice, posting letters in the cracks. You're not supposed to write a wish, it turns out. You're supposed to be thankful for something. So I write a little heart-felt screed about my friends and pack the letter into an already heaving crevasse.

will take, first through the Jewish, then the Muslim quarter. The other two are Christian and Armenian. The quarters are incredibly well defined. You can be bobbing and weaving past the wide brimmed hats and shops selling menorahs, ducking under the parasols of Chinese tourists, then slip through a side street and suddenly you're transported to an Arab souk as if you've stepped through magical portal. Heaving stalls selling dates, pistachios and endless gaudy tat line the narrow streets, and the inevitable calls of "Hello, English?!" ring in your ears.

I'd been chastised for the shortness of my shorts on a recent trip to Angkor Wat and here again we receive a number of scornful glances and tuts from the conservative populace. A man mutters something under his breath and our guide barks back a reprimand in his fluent phlegmy Hebrew – a language I have singularly failed to develop any kind of an ear for, its spitty syllables turning to candy floss in my mouth.

The Western Wall is only sacred because it's the closest point you can get to another sacred place, Mount Moriah,

I'm trying here. Trying to shrug off the 20-year-old cynic in me. The philosopher Alain De Botton's attitude to religion goes a little something like, "of course there's no God. But that's just the start of the conversation, not the end. Just because an idea isn't true doesn't mean it isn't useful."

Religion is as inescapable as oxygen here. It's in the thin boxes of scrolls that adorn every doorway. It's in the hotel lifts that stop at every floor on Shabat so you don't have to use technology. It's woven into the fabric, the ethnicity, the history of every person. It's among the reverent kids praying at the wall and the cute, young soldiers, M16s laid casually across their laps. To not engage with it is to walk the Louvre blindfolded.



The Dome of the Rock is the third most holy site in all of Islam after Mecca and Medina. We have to climb up onto a rooftop above the city's bustling streets to see it; its golden dome set against the olivetree-lined hills. Jeremy tells me that due to a couple of lines in the Bible, many believe this is the very hill that Jesus will appear atop, if and when the second coming rolls around. The hills are dotted with churches of every stripe, vying for a spot close to the action, like campers at the Apple store on the eve of the release of a new iPhone.

But the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was always going to hold the most fascination for me. It's inevitable that you learn a lot about the difference between Catholics and Protestants in Catholic school. Their priests can get married, ours can't (again, I have to stress, I don't believe in any of this stuff), they eschew the gaudiness, the pomp and the ceremony. Meanwhile we believe that the communion wafer turns into the literal flesh of Christ when it enters our mouths. Obviously, it's them that's the idiots.

But most relevant to this place is that the Protestants believe Jesus was crucified at Golgotha. Catholics believe he was crucified right here, the church I'm about to enter, behind the gaggle of sunburnt Germans and the crowd of Italian grandmothers.

It's an ecumenical oddity, this place. Its ownership is hotly contested, which you can understand, I guess. The Catholics, Jews and Armenian Christians all lay claim to it. A couple of hundred years ago, they got together and divided it up. The compromise



HANNAH BLUSTIN
TOUR OPERATOR



"More than anywhere, Jerusalem holds the key to understanding a world of competing religions; as well as the rival siblings of monotheism, born of ancient times, yet alive, well and impactful today. History and politics aside, I love Jerusalem for its constitutionally theatrical qualities: costumed people, all too human narratives, exotic souks, pungent smells of incense, spices and coffee, and soulful calls to prayer. I love the contrast between ancient Jerusalem and hedonistic, uber-modern Tel Aviv."

Hannah is the Founder of Pomegranate Travel, who hosted our journey to Jerusalem. Inspired by the pervading spirit of Israeli innovation and entrepreneurialism, she set up the company with the aim to share this little known, endlessly fascinating country where sensual indulgence and intellectual stimulation come magically wrapped together.
www.pomegranate-travel.com



was called the 'Status Quo', which they took very literally and have never agreed on anything since. Jeremy pulls out a reproduction of a 19th-century oil painting depicting the church, and points to the second floor window where a

few lines of paint depict a tiny ladder leaning against a window. I follow Jeremy's finger up to the same window before me now. And behold, the ladder is still there.

He tells me more, but it's just noise at this point. I don't need the Stations of the Cross explained to me for the millionth time, I know the story. I just want to get in there.

We're not rational, us humans. We think we are, but we're actually far from it. We're mostly a collection of competing agencies, phobias, suppressed memories and impulses we don't even understand. So why even try? That's what I tell myself to justify the weird mix of reverence and nervousness that washes over



"We're not rational, us humans. We think we are, but we're actually far from it."

me. It may be no more than an emotional tattoo stamped on me by the Irish education system, but I still feel it.

I walk past a group of people prostrating themselves over a slab of stone where Jesus was supposedly stripped. They're crying, wailing, praying, rubbing their phones on it too, as if to absorb some holiness via Bluetooth.

It's a cavernous place with a vaulted ceiling. It smells of age and burning candles and sun cream. I climb creaking stairs and join a long line made

up of tour groups. This is the queue to meet Jesus. I take my place at the back of the line. My companions nip past and point out nonchalantly that you can actually see what everyone is lining-up for from where they stand, implying there's no need to queue. This is bizarre to me. I'm at the place where Jesus was crucified so, I'm going to queue. I'm going to do this by the book.

After a few steps, I feel someone tapping at my elbow. It's one of the Italian grandmothers. I saw her a few

minutes ago when she skipped through the door. She has an imploring look on her face and she's... no, she can't be... she's pretending to be disabled. She's stooping and holding her arm at an odd angle and gesturing back and forth to the arm and to the place in front of me. She's trying to cut in line. To see Jesus.

No dice, lady. I try to shut her out, studiously looking at a stained glass window or a cross or something other than her. She tugs hard at my t-shirt. This is insane. I'm not getting into a fight with an old lady at the site of Christ's death. It's bad luck.

Thankfully, a priest comes along and intervenes. I don't speak Italian, but I can tell by his tone he's having none of her act. With a 'what-you-gonna-do' shrug and some florid Italian cursing (to a priest!) she suddenly heals as if by some divine miracle and heads to the back of the line.

A few short moments later, I find myself knelt beneath an altar with a golden Christ before me and a bunch of agitated Christians snapping at my heels. I realise I don't know what to do, so out of sheer dumb reflex, I bless myself and go back outside to the sun to join my friends. They've been waiting a while. "Are you born again?" one says, jokingly.

I'm not born again. I'm not a believer. I reckon that we are still headed for oblivion. But I'll say this for Jesus: in an age where movies made just a few short years ago can now feel bizarrely offensive and problematic to our moral sensibilities; when reading a great author means pinching your nose against anachronistic racism and homophobia; Jesus remains beyond reproach.



Whatever else that book may say or may be interpreted, the man himself said, "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. Love thy neighbour. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

I'm not a believer. I never will be. But like I said, just because an idea isn't true, doesn't mean it isn't useful. ©

Zack travelled to Jerusalem on a day-trip from Tel Aviv with Pomegranate Travel, a leading, full-service, specialist Israel Tour Company based in Tel Aviv and London. They develop creative, tailor-made tours and provide a deep-dive and insider view.
www.pomegranate-travel.com

ASK
A
LOCAL



OREN MYERS
MUSEUM GUIDE

"Jerusalem is a place of radical otherness. Countless communities converge across the city. While the common areas, such as the city center, are quite tolerant and open, the more segregated neighborhoods tend to be pretty conservative. Jerusalem is considered to be the stronghold of the alternative culture of Israel, standing in opposition to the Tel Aviv mainstream. There's a fascinating scene in the city led mostly by young people, many of whom move to the city for their studies and pass on when they graduate. This fluidity, which poses difficulties on the establishment of strong young communities, results in an always changing and reviving cultural scene."

Oren is Senior Guide at the Israel Museum and leading the development of a new tour examining sexuality and gender. Also a photographer and arts teacher at a local high-school, he lives in Jerusalem with his partner of over 6 years.