

My Israel Adventure

By Mira Coffey

Ever since I was little I've always wanted to travel, so when the idea of going to Israel became an option I knew this was my chance. I remember the excitement I felt after reading the itinerary: scenic hikes, community service and shopping were all included in the trip. I knew it was going to be a life changing experience but there was no way I could have predicted how memorable it was going to be. Having never traveled so far from home, I didn't know what to expect and I still didn't after I arrived. Everything presented me with something new.

After what felt like an eternity we arrived in Israel. Despite being incredibly jet lagged, we crammed our luggage on a bus while our Israeli guide, Ran, told us about what we were seeing. Although I'll admit I was barely listening, I was overwhelmed with the happiness of arriving in Israel, as well as being incredibly over tired. The next day was filled to the brim with activities. We explored the Old City of Jerusalem, where I had my first Israeli falafel. We wandered through the Hezekiah's water tunnel in waist high water for what felt like hours. We even visited the Kotel (the Western Wall). I was exhausted, but I had a relaxing night out shopping on Ben Yehuda Street to look forward to. After an hour of walking it felt nice to get out of the heat but something felt off. Ran turned on the intercom and told us that we were going to shop, however, it wasn't going to be on Ben Yehuda Street. This was our first experience with schedule changes. At this point I barely even noticed, our counselors didn't tell us why things were changed and we didn't ask. Someone mentioned rockets being fired but I just pushed that to the back of my mind.

Some of my fondest memories in Israel were the beautiful hikes we went on. My favorite hike was a water hike down the Nahal Jilaboun Canyon. It was incredibly hot and rocky but at the end of the hike we were rewarded with a beautiful waterfall to swim in. Before the hike, Ran warned us not to wander away from the trail. The area was an old battle ground and it was possible we could wander onto a stray mine. At first we didn't believe him, he once told us that in the desert there was a spider that runs and screams when it sees you. Once we arrived at the trail we saw he was right. Scattered around the trail were abandoned houses. They were tattered, grey, covered in graffiti and lined with bullet holes. After the hike we traveled to the top of Mt. Ben-Tal, from where we were we could see Israel's neighbors. We were called together and Ran explained to us that we were looking at the Syrian border. As he talked we suddenly heard a boom of thunder, but there wasn't a cloud in sight. Ran explained that the "thunder" was in fact the sound of a bomb coming from Syria. It's hard to explain this experience. Growing up in America I never had to worry or even imagine hearing something like that. It opened my eyes to the different experiences a person can have around the world.

About a week and a half passed and we had traveled all around Israel, moving from hotel to kibbutz each night. We had a scenic, but incredibly hot bike ride around Gan Hashlosha National Park. Visited Tzfat and did a lot of shopping. We also met Kabbalistic artist, Avraham Lowenthal, whose art is coincidentally hanging in the lounge of our synagogue. We even got to experience Israel's beautiful clear blue water by exploring the ocean caves at Rosh Hanikra. For that week and a half we more or less stuck to the schedule. Some activities were postponed but we barely even noticed. One night after our evening activity, Ran called all of us together. He told us about what was happening in Gaza and that rockets targeting Israel were becoming more and more frequent. To keep us safe, our schedule was going to be changing drastically. He made it very clear he wasn't going to let us go anywhere dangerous. Since it would be best to keep us all together, our homestay weekend was canceled and we were going to spend Shabbat in the middle of the Negev desert in the city Arad. What he said next I remember very clearly. He told us that he got a phone call that day asking him to join the army until things settled down. He told us that because of his position with our group he was going to stay with us. However, our second Israeli guide, Guy, got the same call and for him serving in the army was mandatory. We were going to drop him off at the base on our way to Arad. Ran then told us to call our parents to give them an update. That night I listened to my friends on the phone with their parents *convincing* them that they were going to come home safely. The next day we got up early to pack our bags. Guy was swarmed by everyone trying to get a picture with him. Before we dropped him off at the base, we stopped at a Coexist community center and talked to Palestinian teens. I talked to a girl my age named Laina. She loved to sing and talk about her family. She had parents and six other siblings. She was shocked when I told her that I only had one brother. Eventually we had to leave and head to the base. Once we arrived we weren't allowed to go into the base so we said goodbye to Guy at the gate. As strange as it sounds, as the day went on I got more and more comfortable with the idea of Guy being drafted. I talked to Guy before he left and he made it clear that nothing was going to happen to him, because he was stationed in the North. It wasn't the first time he had been drafted, but the third time. I realized that although for me the thought of being drafted was unheard of it wasn't in Israel. It was the Israeli way of life and we just had to adjust.

The long dry trek to Arad had begun. Despite the circumstances, our spirits were high. We played music, talked and laughed. I was fascinated by the Negev, I never thought that I'd think sand was beautiful. I studied the view outside my window, hoping that I'd catch sight of a camel. Suddenly Ran's voice came on over the intercom. He told us to turn off our music and to only talk in a whisper until we arrived in Arad. The relaxed atmosphere quickly turned tense. We arrived in Arad and were led into a small gritty looking hotel. Everyone was on edge. After we ate dinner Ran led us to the hotel's shelter, and told us what to do if we ever heard a siren. He explained to us how in America we have fire drills; Israel has siren drills. Despite my nerves from the stressful couple of days,

Arad became one of my favorite places. We went on a beautiful water hike, had a drum circle and Guy was even able to visit on Shabbat. So although at first glance there's nothing special in Arad, it'll always have a special place in my heart.

After we left Arad, our trip more or less followed the itinerary again. We avoided Jerusalem and Tel Aviv but we still were able to do memorable things. Like rolling down giant sand dunes in the Negev, or spending a night in the Bedouin tents experiencing their hospitality and waking up the next day and riding camels. Looking back I am more than happy with my experience in Israel. Although there were many inconveniences throughout the trip I wouldn't have wanted it to go any differently. My experience was real and that's all I ask for when I travel-- to see each country's different way of life. I feel as though I am more aware of the world and its unique struggles. I hope to return to Israel one day and experience the magic all over again.