

Journey of a Lifetime

Like no other experience on Earth, a pilgrimage to Israel will connect you to God, the roots of your faith and a very special people.

Day 1: Welcome to Israel

It's late afternoon as my flight lands at Ben Gurion International Airport, just southeast of Tel Aviv, Israel. The plane is filled with Jews and Christians arriving for the Jewish holy days, and every one of them breaks into applause as we arrive.

Many people think I'm crazy to come to Israel. War, terrorism, suicide bombings—yet God has given me a peace about the trip. I know the safest place to be is in His will.

My guide, Yael Shilo, meets me outside the baggage area, and we head for her van to drive to Jerusalem.

I talk with Yael about what I want to see on this trip. My goal is not just to walk where Jesus walked but also to walk where He walks. I don't want to just see the sites. I want to see what God is doing here today.

I want to meet Israelis, talk with them and let them know there are many Christians who love and support them. I want to understand how the daily news is playing out biblical prophecy and learn more about the Jewish roots of my Christian faith.

As we near Jerusalem, the sun is setting over the Judean Mountains, the moon is rising, and Israel is already taking my breath away. "That's the Aijalon Valley," Yael points, "where Joshua prayed for the sun and moon to stand still."

Welcome to Israel, where every stone has a 5,000-year history.

Day 2: Jerusalem

Thanks to jet lag, I'm up bright and early for my introduction to the glories of Israeli breakfasts. The restaurant in my hotel, the Dan Panorama, is a lavish spread of Israeli-grown fruits and vegetables—an amazing fulfillment of Scripture promises such as the one in Isaiah 51:3 that says He will make Israel's deserts like a garden again.

Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement—the holiest day on the Jewish calendar—begins this evening at sunset, and everyone is hurrying to prepare for the fast. As soon as the sun sets, the entire country will come to a total halt. Even secular and nonreligious Jews observe the day.

Today is also the International Day of Prayer for the Peace of Jerusalem, and millions of Christians around the world are praying. I take a taxi to Jaffa Gate, one of the entrances to the Old City, where 500 Christians and Jews are gathered at the Tower of David Museum for a ceremony broadcast live on God TV.

By late afternoon, the streets of Jerusalem are void of cars but filled with people walking to synagogue. Many are religious Jews from around the world. They're easy to spot—men in long black coats and women all in white.

I follow the crowd to the Great Synagogue, and as dusk falls, Yom Kippur begins. This is an orthodox synagogue, and it's standing-room-only in the balcony (women sit separated from men). The prayers and singing are all in Hebrew, of course, but some of the verses read every year all over the world on this night are the beautiful promises from Isaiah chapters 57 and 58.

Day 3: Jerusalem

On this holiest day of the Jewish year it's forbidden to do any work, even turning on a light. My hotel has Shabbat elevators, alarm clocks and air conditioners, which automatically go on and off, without anyone pressing a button.

No cars means no taxis or buses, so unless I want to sit in my hotel all day, I prepare for a lot of walking.

I meet some Christian friends at Jaffa Gate, and we walk through the Old City. It's divided into quarters—Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Armenian. In the Jewish quarter, I'm scolded for taking a picture of an adorable little boy on his way to synagogue with his father. "Not today," the father sternly tells me.

More walking, and I'm rewarded with my first view of the Kotel, or Wailing Wall, and the Temple Mount, which shares the site with the Al Aksa Mosque. This is the most contested piece of real estate on the planet.

I also get my first view of Israeli security as we pass through an X-ray machine before we can enter the area—the first of many purse searches I'll encounter here. It's just a fact of life in Israel.

We pray at the wall for the peace of this land, and then I meet up with another friend who is here studying Arabic. She takes me on a dizzying tour through the Muslim quarter, a typical Middle Eastern market that is as bustling as the Jewish quarter is deserted.

In the late afternoon, I start the trek to the home of a friend, Dvora Ganani, who has invited me to dinner with her family to break the Yom Kippur fast. About halfway there, I realize, I'm walking in Jerusalem, with no idea where I'm going, and I'm not the least bit afraid. I would never do this in the U.S. but feel safe here.

I arrive at Dvora's five minutes before dusk, and we race to the local synagogue, where children are watching the sky for the three stars that signify the end of Yom Kippur. The shofar blows, everyone starts dancing, and tears fill my eyes.

Dvora is director-general of an international organization

that promotes cooperation between Jews and Christians—and provides aid to Jews in Israel and around the world.

“Don’t be a tourist,” Dvora cautions me. “Meet the Israelis. ... Just start talking. They’ll talk if you ask them a question. Living here is like being in a pressure cooker. Ask them what it’s like.”

Then this Jewish woman tells me something surprising: “Israelis need to meet Christians. They need to know the support and love you have for them. Most of them don’t know this.”

Day 4: Tel Aviv and Haifa

Yael picks me up and we head north. I settle back for a long drive, but 45 minutes later, we’re in Tel Aviv. I have to adapt to distances in Israel, which is not much bigger than New Jersey.

“In Jerusalem, they pray; in Tel Aviv, they play,” Yael says. This is Israel’s commercial, cultural and financial center—a relatively new city founded by early Zionist pioneers before there was a modern Israel. The city is an open museum filled with homes and offices in the Bauhaus International style of architecture.

We’re soon back in ancient times as we drive to charming Jaffa, one of the world’s oldest ports. Jonah set sail from here, and the apostle Peter met Cornelius and prayed for Tabitha to be raised from the dead.

Nearby is Caesarea, the vast city that Herod built—complete with stadiums, theaters and a giant port. The Caesarea harbor experience is a multimedia presentation on the history of this well-preserved site.

After lunch by the Mediterranean, we continue north, stopping at Megiddo. The excavations of this ancient fortified city

that overlooks the Jezreel Valley are fascinating, but even more overpowering to me is what will happen someday in the future. The biblical name for Megiddo is Armageddon, and it's here that the events of Zechariah 12:11 and Revelation 16:16 will play out at the end of time.

We end the day in Haifa on the slopes of Mount Carmel, where the prophet Elijah battled the false prophets of Baal. Just a few weeks before our arrival, Haifa was bombed regularly during the 2006 war with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

My room in the Holiday Inn is perched atop Mount Carmel overlooking the spectacular harbor. I imagine rockets being launched from the Lebanese border, just a few miles away, as 1.3 million Israelis stayed in bunkers or tent cities, or moved in with families farther south.

The city is bouncing back, and tonight Yael and I dine on tabbouleh, eggplant and hummus at Aldiyar Restaurant in Haifa's trendy downtown. The owner tells us stories of dodging Katushka rockets. Everyone, it seems, has a war story to tell—some with happy endings, others not.

Yael sadly shares that her best friend's son, who served in the military, was killed during the war. As soon as young men and women graduate from high school, they must serve in the army—men for three years, women for two. The streets are filled with these young soldiers carrying rifles and protecting their homeland.

This, it seems, is the tension that Israelis live with day after day. As a Christian, I believe I have a biblical mandate to stand with Israel, to pray for it according to Psalm 122:6 and to “comfort” God's people according to Isaiah 40:1. One of the best ways, I'm told, is simply coming here.

Day 5: Nazareth and Galilee

Our hotel shows signs of the final holiday of this special

season—Sukkot, or the Feast of Booths. It's what Christians celebrate as the Feast of Tabernacles, and it's the most joyful of all the feasts. Everyone is building little booths, or sukkots, all over the country, on sidewalks, in front yards and on balconies, as Jews prepare to eat and sleep in them for eight days to remind them of the temporary shelters that the ancient Israelites lived in while wandering in the desert.

Even our hotel has a sukkot. We don't have much time to check it out, however, because Yael has a full day planned. We drive east to Nazareth, where Jesus lived as a child. Nazareth is now part of the Palestinian-controlled area.

We visit the Basilica of the Annunciation, Mary's Well and Nazareth Village, a full-scale re-creation of what Nazareth looked like when Jesus walked these paths as a boy. We're the only visitors at most sites; it's just a few weeks after the war, and many groups canceled their tours.

As Yael and I head farther east, we drive past miles of lush forest, every tree planted by hand in the last few decades. It's very popular among visiting Christians to show support for Israel by planting a tree, and I want to do my part.

Yael takes me to L'Avi Forest. I choose a stick with roots, which she assures me is an oak tree, and plant it on a rocky hillside. "You can return in 20 years and visit your tree," she says.

Before I came to Israel, I read Leon Uris' book Exodus, and everywhere I look, including the forest, I think about the 20th century history of this land. Brave pioneers came from many countries to reclaim land that had been reduced to desert, swamp and wasteland.

We stop for lunch at an outdoor restaurant owned by Druze, an ancient group that split from Islam in the 11th century. Under a huge shade tree, we feast on stuffed grape leaves made by an old woman and her granddaughter. Our next stop is the Mount of

Beatitudes, overlooking the beautiful Sea of Galilee. Many Christians find it almost annoying that there is a church on every historic site, rather than leaving the land in its natural form—and I confess to being one of them. It's hard to "walk where Jesus walked" when a modern building occupies the site.

We follow the Galilee south to the delightful town of Tiberias. It has almost a beach-town feel on this fall evening; the weather is beautiful, children are out of school for the holiday, and there's even a small boardwalk and some amusement rides.

We visit the Galilee Experience, a multimedia presentation about the history of Galilee and Jesus' time here, then stop at the wonderful Decks Restaurant along the banks of the Galilee. We dine outdoors on St. Peter's Fish, probably caught a mile from where we sit.

Later that night, I stand on the balcony of my room at the Holiday Inn Tiberias, under the stars and full moon, and look across the Sea of Galilee to the Golan Heights. It is beautiful here, and God's peace rests everywhere.

Day 6: Dead Sea

Visiting Israel is not for the faint of heart—not because of security but because of the walking. Today promises to be both exhilarating and exhausting. Yael and I start early with a visit to Yardenite, a modern baptismal site on the Jordan River near where John baptized Jesus (no one knows the exact spot, of course).

The site is actually maintained by a kibbutz, one of the many cooperative settlements that dot the land. Early pioneers who came here in the late 19th and early 20th centuries lived in kibbutzim for protection and to work together to reclaim the land. After the state of Israel was founded in 1948, the number of kibbutzim grew rapidly, and many of Israel's "baby

boomers" grew up on a kibbutz.

Yael asks if I'd like to visit the kibbutz shop, which is known for its dates. Our five-minute stop turns into 60 minutes as we talk with the owner, sample dozens of fresh dates (who knew there were so many varieties?), and talk with one of the many Americans we meet who've made aliyah to Israel.

Aliyah means ascent, or going up, and Yael explains that the first law the new parliament passed in 1948 was the Law of Return.

"Every Jew in the world can immigrate to Israel," she says. "Even if only their grandmother was Jewish, they're considered Jews and have the right to return." And since the 1950s, millions have come—from the U.S., Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, South America, Ethiopia and just recently, India.

We finally leave the kibbutz and follow the Jordan River south as it empties into the Dead Sea. The lowest place on Earth looks a lot like the moon, only saltier. Locals and tourists are painting themselves with the therapeutic mud and then washing it off in the sea.

We stop at Masada, Herod's mountaintop fortress overlooking the spectacular Judean Desert. It is breathtakingly beautiful on top—and intensely hot and bone-dry. Yael hands me a 2-liter water bottle and insists I finish it by the time we come back down.

Masada was the last stronghold of Jewish freedom fighters who battled the Romans in A.D. 73 and committed mass suicide rather than surrendering. Today's soldiers make the climb as part of their army training and receive a gun and a Bible—and proclaim a vow of loyalty that "never again" will this happen.

Nearby is Yiftach, the home for teenage boys where Dvora's

daughter, Carmel, works. A few phone calls (yes, cell phones work even by the Dead Sea), and we stop for a quick visit. We talk with Carmel, a social worker, and with the home's director about the special needs of these teenage sons of ultraconservative Jews—which are not unlike the problems some PKs (pastors' kids) face in the U.S.

About an hour away are the Qumran caves, where in 1947 shepherd boys found jars filled with scrolls hidden for nearly 2,000 years. Remarkably preserved because of the arid climate, the scrolls include the books of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, and today are on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

And Jerusalem is where we head next. Yael drops me off at the beautiful Grand Court Hotel, within walking distance of Damascus Gate (everything in Jerusalem is measured by how close it is to the Old City, and which of the gates it is near). That evening, I have dinner at Olive and Fish Restaurant with Yehuda Shen from the Ministry of Tourism, who tells me he extends a warm welcome to American Christians to come to Israel.

Day 7: Jerusalem

Sukkot begins at sunset, and every balcony, sidewalk, house and restaurant in Jerusalem sports a sukkot filled with colorful fruit and vegetables (this is the harvest festival, after all).

Yael takes me to Mahane Yehuda, Jerusalem's bustling fruit, vegetable, fish and poultry market. It's even busier today as families shop for the eight-day feast—poppy-seed cakes, creamy cheeses, Halvah candy (“the best in the world!”) and the ever-present pomegranates.

In a tiny section of the market, young and elderly Jewish men in long black coats and furry hats select the “four species” that are part of Sukkot, according to Leviticus 23:40—three

types of branches and an etrog, a fruit that looks like a lemon, only larger. The men examine each one, looking for those without spot or blemish.

After an all-too-brief visit to the amazing Israel Museum to see the Dead Sea Scrolls, Yael takes me to Yad Vashem. This is Israel's heartrending national memorial to the martyrs and heroes of the Holocaust, or the Shoah as it is called in Hebrew.

A stillness rests over the enormous complex that bears grim testimony to the horrific events of the 20th century. Yad Vashem means "memorial name" and is based on Isaiah 58:5. One of the centerpieces is the hall of names filled with books listing millions of names of those murdered in the Holocaust.

It is overpowering, and I'm particularly moved by the indoor-outdoor memorial to the 1.5 million Jewish children who were killed. In a completely blackened room, the flame from a single candle is multiplied by thousands of mirrors, so that the ceiling, walls and floor are filled with tiny flickering flames. A voice slowly reads the names of individual children who were murdered—on and on 24/7.

Outside, a small forest commemorates righteous gentiles who risked their own lives to help Jews. Suddenly, standing there looking at yellowed posters in German whose meaning is all too clear, I understand why, when I tell Jews in the U.S. that there are many Christians who love Israel and the Jews, they don't believe it. Holocausts, crusades, pogroms—why should they believe?

I have no words to say to Yael when we leave and only hope she knows that my heart is for her people and their nation.

Day 8: Feast of Tabernacles

For Christians, Sukkot has a deep prophetic significance. That's why thousands of believers all over the world come to

Israel each autumn to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

Sukkot represents the final harvest described in Isaiah 11:11-12 and Revelation 14:15. Instead of an agricultural harvest, however, the final harvest will be a harvest of people from every nation who will come to worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

That's why the hotels—mine included—are filled with Christians from all over the world who have come up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Thankfully, they were not deterred by terrorism, wars and rumors of wars.

Tonight I join 4,000 believers from more than 100 countries for the annual Feast of Tabernacles opening of the weeklong celebration sponsored by the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. It begins on the shores of the Dead Sea in the Judean Desert.

A stage, lights and thousands of chairs are set up on the sand. Across the Dead Sea, a full moon slips past the mountains of Jordan, and then hangs postcard-like right over the stage, ready for the dancing and celebration to begin.

Day 9: Jerusalem

Sunday is a workday in Israel, and I head for the offices of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ). There, I meet Shlomite, a beautiful 29-year-old sabra (native Israeli), whose soldier husband was killed by one of 4,500 rockets fired by Hezbollah during last summer's war.

Shlomite tells me about the tragedy, describing how 1.3 million Israelis slept in bomb shelters or underground rooms during the war. IFCJ, which is supported by many Christians in the U.S., was the first on the scene in northern Israel with food and supplies just 24 hours after the war began.

That afternoon I meet up with Yechiel Eckstein, an orthodox

Jewish rabbi and president of IFCJ. We drive south to Kiryat Malachi, where hundreds of newly arrived Ethiopian Jews are struggling to assimilate into Israeli society. We visit with some of them—a group of adorable kids who are running, jumping, doing cartwheels and showing off the grassy park that IFCJ built where a garbage dump once stood.

The rabbi tells me that millions of dollars for these and many other IFCJ projects come from American evangelical Christians. “They are Israel’s best friends,” he says.

Day 10: Negev

Yael and I head south for a day in the Negev Desert. This spectacular place is part of the area where the Israelites wandered for 40 years. We visit the kibbutz where David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, lived and worked, and a Bedouin encampment, where we enjoy a quick camel ride and homemade pita bread and yogurt.

Our final stop is Avdat, the remains of an ancient station on the spice trail that once stretched from Petra to Gaza. Here, caravans of 1,000 camels carried spices from India and East Asia across miles of desert on their way to Europe.

Yael and I sample some of those flavors for dinner at Joy Restaurant—an entire eggplant, fire-roasted whole, then thinly sliced with the cap still intact, and placed upon a creamy sauce of local spices. Israeli food has been a delightful surprise, and this meal is no different.

Day 11: Jerusalem

Inside the old city, we follow the Via Dolorosa. Many of the stops are faintly marked plaques on the side of crumbling buildings or hidden inside buildings such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Then we take a quick tour of the Upper Room. Like many sites

in Israel, this is not the original room, but one that was actually constructed by the crusaders 1,400 years after the Last Supper and Pentecost took place.

Yael is having a heated discussion with some locals. I assume it's a political argument, but she tells me they're debating who serves the best falafel in Jerusalem.

We head to the old city to try her favorite place for this quintessential Israeli dish of fried chickpeas. I'm no falafel expert, but her choice has my vote.

The Mount of Olives offers us a panoramic view of the old city, along with the beautiful garden of Gethsemane and garden tomb (two sites that are thankfully left in their natural state). Our guide at the garden tomb tells us, "Millions of people come here from all over the world to see absolutely nothing." He's right; the tomb is completely empty.

Later that night before driving to the airport, Yael and I go to the Dolphin Yam for a celebration dinner, and she gives me a gift. It is a CD of the original recording of the song "Jerusalem of Gold," one of the anthems of modern Israel. I know I will play it many times when I return home as a reminder of this wonderful land and people.

As my plane takes off, Israel fades from my sight—but not from my heart. I'm already planning my return visit.

Every spring, Jews all over the world say these words at Passover: "L'shana ha'ba-ah b'Yerushalayim," or "Next year in Jerusalem."

If you, too, have said you will travel to Israel "next year" or "one day," why not this year?

It's your time. Israel is waiting for you. Welcome home.

Diana Scimone is a journalist and president of PawPaw's Pals Inc., a nonprofit organization that helps children in crisis situations around the world ().

For additional information that will help you plan a memorable trip to Israel, log on to

How to Stay Safe in Israel

One of the best things we can do to support Israel is to go there. Yes, there are security issues to consider, just as there are security issues to consider at home. (While I was in Israel, for example, a group of Amish schoolgirls back home in the U.S. was murdered in their classroom.)

If you're waiting for the "perfect" time to go to Israel, you may have a long wait. Don't let fear make the decision for you. On this most contested piece of real estate in the world, there will always be wars and rumors of wars. You have to hear from God yourself about when you are to visit Israel and then trust Him to keep you safe.

Whether you fly to Israel on El Al, the national airline, or on Delta or other carriers, you'll notice an extra layer of security, including extra checkpoints. You may be asked specific questions about the nature of your trip, why you're going and who you're going with.

The security check is particularly lengthy when you leave Israel. Make sure you allow plenty of time coming and going.

Tips for Making Your Journey Memorable

The vast majority of Christians who visit Israel for the first time come on organized group tours. It's a practical way to see all the sites without having to arrange everything yourself. You can also arrange private tours with guides who

will customize an itinerary just for you, going where you want to go, skipping what you don't want to see and traveling at your own pace.

Either way, make sure your guide is a local, and preferably Jewish, guide. You want to come and meet the locals and find out what life is like from someone who lives there 24/7. Some people think Jewish tour guides can't do justice to "Christian" sites, but my guide was extremely well versed in Christian history and doctrine—and most Jewish guides are.

However you visit, make sure you see more of Israel than you can by just getting on and off a tour bus. You'll have plenty of opportunities at every stop.

Israelis are very friendly and open, so just start talking and asking questions and you'll soon be in the middle of a lively conversation. And if you want to skip one evening's organized activities so that you can mingle with the locals, you can definitely do so.

Why We Should Support Israel's People

This is what God says in His Word:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you'" (Ps. 122:6, NKJV).

"'Comfort, yes, comfort My people!' says your God" (Is. 40:1).

"'I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Gen. 12:3).

"For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings" (Rom. 15:27, NIV).

"For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as

brightness, and her salvation as a lamp that burns. I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they shall never hold their peace day or night. You who make mention of the Lord, do not keep silent, and give Him no rest till He establishes and till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (Is 62:1,6-7, NKJV).

Handy Hebrew for Beginners

A few phrases to get you started:

Shalom – Hello, goodbye, all-purpose greeting.

Ken – Yes.

Lo – No.

Bevakasha – Please.

Toda – Thank you.

Al lo davar – You're welcome.

Slikha – Excuse me.

Ani mitsta-er – I'm sorry.

Ata medaber anglit? – Do you speak English?

Ma shelomkha? – How are you?

Lila tov – Good night.

Hach semeach – Happy Holidays!

What to Pack for Your Journey

1. Comfortable walking shoes: Everything you've heard about the amount of walking you'll do—and how rocky and hilly the terrain is—is true. Break in your shoes well ahead of your trip.

2. Women should not wear sleeveless tops in conservative and Orthodox areas, nor in many of the churches you'll visit. Keep a light shawl with you.

3. Even though Israel is a small country, temperatures can vary significantly. Jerusalem, which is on a higher elevation, can be cool at night. Tel Aviv, on the Mediterranean, can be hot and humid. The Negev Desert (Dead Sea scrolls, Masada) is hot and dry.

4. A sun umbrella was my best friend () and was easier than juggling a hat and jacket. A regular umbrella will work, but a sun umbrella is designed to keep out heat as well as rays.

5. Bring mix-and-match clothes so you can pack as small a suitcase as possible. If you're on a tour, you'll be getting on and off buses your entire trip, and you don't want to lug anything you don't have to. Save room for souvenirs, of course.