

The Pilgrimage of a Lifetime

Every year thousands of Christians go to the Holy Land to connect with God and the history of His people. We asked these travelers to share their experiences with you.

Every visitor to Israel has at least one special moment from his or her trip that stands out. Whether it's walking on the same paths on which Jesus walked, sitting in a restaurant talking with local Israelis or planting a tree to help the desert rebloom—a visit to Israel is memorable. I asked believers from around the world to share their unique memories. From Wales to China to the United States, they responded with stories they've treasured in their hearts—in some cases for decades. Here are their special moments.

I went to Israel in 2005 on a tour for Christians sponsored by *Archaeological Diggings*. We were at a *tel* (archaeological site) in Mareshah that is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 11:8 and 14:9-13.

We spent our days digging in a bell-shaped underground cave. We carefully removed rubble, put it into buckets, and passed everything to the entrance of the cave where we systematically sieved through it looking for anything valuable.

Some of our finds included pottery shards, bones, beads, and pieces of plates and urns. The most exciting discoveries were an intact decorated oil lamp from Crete, estimated to be about 2,300 years old; and several *ostraca*, or fragments of pottery with ancient writing on them.

Each night we stayed at a *kibbutz* where we enjoyed good, simple food and pleasant accommodations. I treasure the experience and memories of our dig in Israel.

–Norelle Hawkins, Australia

I first read the novel *Exodus* when I was 19, and a desire to visit Israel grew inside me. Thirty-three years later—in 2005—I took my long-awaited trip to Israel. Earlier this year, I returned for a second wonderful visit.

Each trip was very personal and unique in its own way. The common thread—and my most special memory—was simply being among the Jewish people, talking with them, sharing a meal, on unexpected occasions praying together and simply getting to know them. On both trips I experienced the honor of sharing a Shabbat dinner with open and warm-hearted Jewish families.

I visited many biblical sites, and they were deeply moving, but my most cherished memories are just being among the Israelis. Each moment represented an encounter with life in Israel that has left me longing to return yet again, to know the people and the land even more intimately.

–Rebecca Randolph, USA

I first visited Israel in September 2005 and have been back many times since. One special memory I have is of the day I was swarmed by about 20 Arab children. I had made friends with some of them, and word must have gotten around that I was a friendly American. All of them were hugging me and greeting me by name, sharing candy with me and chattering in Arabic.

Every day the same little girls would all come out of their homes to greet me, and I would always feel the love of Christ for them. They were very special to me, and I know they are very special to God.

Going to Israel was never about the sites for me; it was always about the people, Jews and Arabs. I will always remember how Jesus “let the little children come to Him” through me, and how He also used those children in my life to show me His heart.

–Susanna Welch, USA

I went to Israel 30 years ago, and the place I remember most vividly was the Garden of Gethsemane. I cried very much there as I thought about the Lord's prayer and His suffering. Nobody was with Him at His moment of sorrow and crisis, not even His good friends.

Sometimes when I am alone with my own pain and sorrow, I thank Jesus that He understands my pain. When we pass through the deep, dark valley, He is there with us.

I always remember my time in the garden. I love to sing the song "In the Garden" because it reminds me of that special moment there.

–Krisna Jittiwuttikarn, Thailand

My wife and I went to a prayer conference in Israel in 1988. After sessions with intercessory leaders from around the globe, we decided to see the sights. At a huge scale model of the Old City, we noticed a man who was stocking the tourist sites with Cadbury chocolate candy.

When he learned we were Americans, he immediately offered to take us to his home for lunch. We eagerly accepted.

He drove us to his beautiful home in the hills overlooking the city and served us a delicious lunch. After eating, we asked him about the difficulties of living in what was at the time a very violent city. He said that though he and his young family had thought many times of leaving Israel for a more peaceful life elsewhere, they had decided against it.

Because our host, though a Jew, did not seem to be particularly religious his reason surprised me. He said: "No matter what happens, this is God's land. You can feel His presence everywhere. There is no place like this on earth."

–James Kohlmann, USA

I visited Israel earlier this year. One of the moments I remember from my trip was one in which a Palestinian man shared his testimony about how he became a believer in Jesus. He told us that he asked the Lord to change his heart so he would be able to love the Israelis. He also said he gathered his Palestinian brothers to pray for peace between the two nations.

I used to look forward to the day when Palestine would be erased from the earth. Now I see a different picture: Ishmael and his little brother, Isaac, are tightly embraced when they both come to know the Lord of their father, Abraham. Now I see a peaceful and joyful picture rather than one nation's victory over the other.

—Wang Li, China

I made my first trip to Israel in May 2008 for TheCall. What I remember most was an event that occurred in the Old City of Jerusalem as I walked to the Western Wall. A Jewish woman stopped me and asked if I would take a few books and place them at the wall. The books were in Hebrew, and I had no idea what they were, so I refused, but she insisted it was a favor—not a scam.

Reluctantly I agreed, but when I saw an orthodox Jew I showed him the books and asked if it was all right for me to take them to the wall. He replied that it was very appropriate because the rabbis used these books to pray at the wall. He seemed so happy that an American would carry these books that he took my hands and prayed a blessing over me.

After I finished praying at the Wall, a rabbi came up to me and laid his hand on mine. He pulled me into an underground area along the old wall, leading me past other praying rabbis to a wooden alcove. There he recited a blessing over me. I don't know if he saw me carrying the books, but his blessing me was a special honor and a memory I'll always treasure.

–Jonathan Randolph, USA

I visited Israel last fall with a group of believers from Zimbabwe. One of the things I remember most took place at Beit She'an, a national park in northern Israel that has some of the country's best archeological sites. We traveled with a gentleman who had spastic cerebral palsy and had difficulty with coordination.

He was not to be prevented by his disability from seeing the sites, however, and he demonstrated such determination that we all ended up taking turns carrying him on our backs. It was quite a testimony to the strength of the human spirit and brotherly love.

–Matthew Wazara, M.D., Zimbabwe

I visited Israel in 2006. The most special moment I experienced came when I was touring the Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem, the vast complex that honors the 6 million Jews murdered during the Holocaust. The memorial was completely dark except for the light from a few photos of children that were projected on the walls.

As I made my way down a ramp holding on to the walls, I saw in the distance a tiny flickering flame—then another and another and another. The ramp opened into an octagonal room in which it seemed as if thousands of candles burned all around me. I soon realized there was only one candle, its flame reflected by countless mirrors.

As I gazed at it, a voice slowly read the names of the 1.5 million children killed during the Holocaust. I didn't hear them all because it takes months to read the entire list, but I will always remember the emotions I experienced while visiting this memorial and thinking about the Jewish children who lost their lives.

–Diana Scimone, USA

I lived in Israel from 2005-2008. One special memory I have was going to Kiryat Luza, the Samaritan village where Jesus met the woman at the well. One night a year the Samaritans here sacrifice a sheep to atone for their sins.

The night I visited, hundreds of people were waiting for the priests to carry out the sacrifice. Suddenly, the high priest started singing, and the other Samaritans joined in with chanting. The little sheep had no idea what was about to happen to them and they were happily *baa-ing* away. I thought of Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed and He was afflicted. ... He was led as a lamb to the slaughter" (NKJV).

As I photographed the event, I realized that in one of my pictures the railings of the sheep enclosure blocked the view of the sheep. I started to delete the photo when I took a closer look. The railings in the picture formed a perfect cross right over the sheep waiting to be slaughtered. I've kept that photo because it's a perfect symbol of the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross for us and a sign that our sins are truly forgiven.

—Anna Farrell, Wales

I went to Israel in 1999, and the tour group I was traveling with visited many settlements. Some were well-established, with permanent housing, medical facilities and schools. Others consisted of only four or five trailers housing the few families living in the settlement. As we talked with the settlers, each one passionately expressed reasons for settling in a new area of Israel, even though the conditions were less than desirable and sometimes dangerous.

I'll never forget one of those settlements. It consisted of just one family, isolated on the top of a dry and dusty hill with little water. A husband and wife and their 2-year-old daughter lived by themselves in a trailer, with the closest neighbor miles away. They had a small grove of olive trees,

which they guarded 24 hours a day. Despite the personal danger to their lives and property, they believed they were called to settle the land. We met many Israelis who had the same spirit as this courageous family.

–Deborah Yero, USA

Believers have been coming to the Holy Land for more than 2,000 years—and every one of them has taken home a special memory that captured his heart. It's as if the God of Israel custom-designs a trip to His land for each of us.

If you've never visited Israel, He has a special memory reserved just for you. Don't wait a moment longer to go. Your memory is waiting for *you*.

Diana Scimone is a journalist and the author of the Adventures With PawPaw children's book series. She is president of PawPaw's Pals, Inc., which works to stop child trafficking worldwide ().