

# A hallelujah visit to the Holy Land

In Jerusalem that first morning, we gazed upon a beautiful sunrise highlighting the walled Old City from our King David Hotel rooms. It was a perfect introduction to the Holy Land.

**Cradle of Faith Tour:** Pendletonians Joe and Susan DeMarsh and I joined this November tour organized by

Dick Ranian Travel Advisors in Portland, Oregon. Dick and his niece Ani were especially suited for organizing this tour to Israel because they are Armenian Christians who grew up in Jerusalem; and they still have family, whom we met, who live in the Old City. The Ranians arranged for a very experienced and knowledgeable Israeli guide, who had emigrated to Israel from Holland in 1980. And in Bethlehem in the Palestinian West Bank, a Palestinian guide surprised us with his good briefings on Christian history and theology. It is impossible to cover everything we saw of this spectacular, complicated, beautiful, spiritual, overwhelming country. Below are selected sites and commentary.



HARRIET ISOM  
Comment

**Arrival:** The first impression arriving in Israel is its impressive infrastructure. It begins with the 45-minute drive, following the historic Jaffa Road, from the very modern Tel Aviv airport up to the hills of Jerusalem on a curving superhighway lighted all the way. The impression augments as one tours Israel's bustling cities. Of Israeli city reputations, Tel Aviv is considered the play city; Jerusalem, the religious city; and Haifa, the work city.

**Jerusalem:** The city that blankets the hills exudes a soft, almost golden touch from the beige quarry stone of its buildings. This 3,000-year-old international city has been invaded and rebuilt continuously through the centuries, and you leave it with better realization of how much it is revered and claimed by Christians, Jews and Muslims. The magnificent view westward from the top of Mt. Olive, where we jostled with busloads of pilgrims and tourists for a good picture, is a primer in just how many historic and religious sites there are to visit. You need a map! We spent wonderful hours exploring with our guide the meandering alleys, bazaars and key sights of the walled Old City where the Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Armenian quarters reflect the differing cultures. Israel is not a melting pot. There are virtually no marriages between them. The cultures and religions remain distinct.

**Christians:** In 1910, Christians were 8 percent of the area's population but they number only 2 percent or about 160,000, in Israel today. Most are Arab Israelis who live in the north. They belong to the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church (60 percent) or to the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem. There are smatterings of Latin Catholics, Coptic, Armenians, Assyrians and more recent Christian immigrants from Lebanon and Russia. Interestingly, Christian Arabs are seeking deeper integration into Israel, including permission to join the military. They excel academically and are prospering in business, science and white collar professions. Relatively safe in general from harassment, they do encounter defacement of Christian monuments from both radical Muslims and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

**Christian Images:** In the Holy Land, be prepared for mostly the Christian trappings of Eastern and Greek Orthodox churches — and for sectarian rivalries. Christendom's most important church, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, has shared ownership among Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Armenians, Orthodox Syrians, Copts and Ethiopians. Since the different sects could never agree on who should have the keys of the church, the keys have been



A view of the Old City of Jerusalem and Temple Mount.

Photo by Susan DeMarsh



Olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Photo by Susan DeMarsh



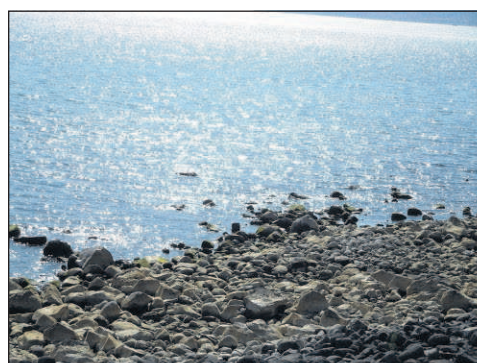
King David's Tomb marker.

Photo by Susan DeMarsh



Immovable ladder.

Photo by Susan DeMarsh



The Sea of Galilee.

Photo by Susan DeMarsh

kept by a local Muslim family since the days of Saladin; and its members to this very day still unlock the church doors each morning.

**City's Crown Jewel:** On the Temple Mount, the shining gold-plated Dome of the Rock is to be admired from vantages all over the city. However, we skipped the hours it takes to enter the Temple Mount plaza itself. The Dome is not open to the general public,

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and its administration (Muslim) and security (Israel) is an extremely touchy subject between the two sides.

**Our Favorite Place:** Particularly beautiful and spiritual for Christians in Jerusalem is the Garden of Gethsemane, with its ancient olive trees, one or two calculated to be 2,000 years old, and its colorful flowering bougainvillea, as well as the adjacent Franciscan Church of All Nations (1924).

**Bethlehem:** Shepherd's Field on the outskirts is the place where the Angel Gabriel is said to have informed the shepherds of Jesus' birth. As we entered the Chapel of Angels (1953), it resounded with the singing of familiar hymns by visiting American pilgrims. And there we learned the difference between caves and grottos. Whereas caves are manmade, grottos are natural rock caves common in the area; shepherds lived in grottos in the winter with their best sheep and lambs. A grotto was thus the most likely place where Jesus was born, with the charming image of the lambs helping to keep him warm in the manger.

In Bethlehem, we found the Church of the Nativity, the oldest continuously operating church since 326 CE, at the top of its steepest hill; but it was in disruptive renovation. Once inside the church with its low entrance door to encourage humility, you find the stairs down to the small Grotto of the Nativity, the traditional site of Jesus' manger, marked by a 14-point silver star.

**Galilee:** The Galilee (as Israelis refer to it) was the area where Jesus lived and preached. Traveling along the west side of the Sea of Galilee, we were amazed to find public beaches, camping grounds, hiking and cycling trails. Indeed modern Capernaum is a highly popular Israeli resort town. Further north, high up on a hill beside the lake, we found Christian history at The Mount of

Beatitudes with its Franciscan octagonal church (1937) and beautiful gardens featuring signs of each of the beatitudes. Across the lake are the Golan Heights; and with Damascus only some 60 miles on the other side, the Golan Heights, our guide emphasized, are absolutely key to Israel's security.

**Archeology:** So many interesting findings are coming from archaeological digs. In Jerusalem, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a 12th century building sitting on fourth century remains, archaeologists have removed marble cladding to reveal a limestone shelf or burial bed that was originally hewn from the wall of a cave. It is believed to be the chamber housing the cave where Jesus is said to have been entombed and resurrected. The slab has been covered with marble since at least 1555 to prevent pilgrims from breaking off pieces as relics. At Magdala on the Sea of Galilee, the remains of a synagogue where Jesus is said to have preached are being unearthed. And at the very attractive port of Caesarea, south of Haifa, recent excavations have uncovered Roman town remains, including a chariot racing hippodrome, plus Crusader fortifications built after Crusaders were ejected from Jerusalem. The dock where St. Paul left for Rome as a prisoner is being restored.

**Israel's Economy:** Today's 3 percent growth rate is spurred primarily by the high tech and research sector, producing products much in demand in the world. Many of us older tourists had a mental image of Israel with its kibbutz that pioneered drip irrigation in agriculture. That drip irrigation is still everywhere, including city street plantings, but kibbutz aren't as numerous as before. What we saw instead as we traveled up the Jordan Valley and south of Haifa were huge Israeli farms of hothouse crops, particularly date and banana trees. Reportedly, the masses of white plastic used for greenhouse cover are, however, produced at a kibbutz.

**Politics:** The English language Jerusalem Post and Hareetz provided good reading during our visit. Articles indicated that Prime Minister Netanyahu was riding high in political, economic and foreign relations. He is soon to travel abroad to visit Australia, Singapore and the two countries where Israel purchases most of its oil, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan (and undoubtedly the U.S. after the presidential inauguration!).

**U.S. Election:** We were there before the U.S. election results, and Prime Minister Netanyahu was quoted as saying correctly that no matter who ended up winning, he would be a welcome guest at the White House. Since then, Israel's right wing parties have loudly cheered Donald Trump's win because they believe he will abandon a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, not opposed Israeli settlement construction in contested land and will move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel's self-declared capital of Jerusalem. (All embassies are currently in Tel Aviv because, in international terms, who controls Jerusalem is still a contentious issue to be negotiated). U.S. presidents have traditionally sought to bring the two sides to an overall settlement, but so far unsuccessfully. President-elect Trump is already quoted as saying he believes he could bring peace to the region as "the ultimate deal."

**Recommended reading/watching:** To better understand Jerusalem's incredible history, read Karen Armstrong's "History of Jerusalem" and Adina Hoffman's "Till We Have Built Jerusalem." For the contemporary tourist scene, watch Rick Steves' just released TV program on the Holy Land.

Ambassador Harriet Isom grew up in Pendleton and has retired to the family ranch. She was a career diplomat serving in Asia and Africa from 1961 to 1996.

## Quick takes

### Snowstorm response

Two kids around the North Hill were going door to door and asking people if they could shovel their drive and walk ways. They wouldn't accept any form of payment, but were happy to receive some cups of hot cocoa. They were really sweet and happy to help.

Katherine Brizendine

Two Mormon missionaries are out shoveling snow here in Hermiston. Dressed in their Sunday best! They were kind enough to shovel in front of our mailboxes so I rewarded them with two containers of my homemade peanut clusters.

Kellye Connell Finch

I have seen a few occasions when people on the freeway between Pendleton and Hermiston had a hard time seeing in the snow and someone with 4wd would get in front of them to guide the way ... There are so many examples I have seen of people helping others in this beautiful white mess we have going.

Jennifer Bush

Got stuck last night and Umatilla police officer Darren stopped offer to help me out or give me a ride to my house ... and in the morning another Umatilla officer helped me get it out.

Oscar Fuentes

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week's takes. Tweet yours @Tim\_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

## How to keep independent bookstores alive

By CARRIE LA SEUR  
Writers on the Range

It's early October, and I'm at the High Plains Book Festival at the art museum in Billings, Montana, selling books as fast as I can handle the slippery credit-card reader. My own books are on the table with those of other regional authors and friends. Stacks of books pass to people I've known for years.

Everyone involved is smiling, giddy to see books selling like — well, like books — in downtown Billings. In the last six months, several hundred locals and more distant friends have bought \$100 shares, or made larger investments, to become co-owners of This House of Books, our new indie bookstore. Author-owners include Craig Johnson of Longmire fame, and Jamie Ford, author of the bestseller "The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet."

Back in 2011 and 2012, Billings lost its Borders, and then, more painfully, Thomas Books, the locally owned downtown bookstore we'd loved for 20 years. Many of us felt as if we'd somehow failed our bookstores, but both stores were profitable. What killed them was the corporate bookselling model, which demands ever-higher

profits, and the exhausting burden of running a sole-proprietor shop.

There are still a few niche and used bookstores in town that serve their purposes wonderfully. We have Barnes & Noble and Costco and Target, but to anyone who values a bookstore as an expression of a town's soul — full of books chosen by a bookseller we know — they are no substitute.

Writers and readers got together and moped into our beer about this sad development. We felt like a house without a cat or dog; how could we claim title to being the lively literary community we knew we were? And yet there were encouraging signs: Around this time, voters approved funding for a new downtown library, the book festival began taking off, and suddenly, we had enough local authors for a good-sized party. All we needed was a bookstore.

If you've never experienced the way a great bookstore can accelerate time, so that two hours have passed and you're sitting on the floor with books in your lap wondering what happened, you might find it hard to understand how we felt. But a lot of us need to get lost in rows of new books. We need to hear authors read and speak, and we

love to talk about ideas.

For a year or so, all we did was mutter and complain. No one was eager to throw down a life's savings and give up all semblance of a normal life to start a bookstore. In some places, this might have been the end of it, but you have to remember where we live. Billings made national headlines in the 1990s for its vigorous pushback against hate groups and white supremacists. This is not a community that walks away from existential challenges — the "Not In Our Town" movement started here.

At some point, former Billings Mayor Chuck Tooley, of the Not In Our Town era, wondered aloud if a cooperative would work. Someone Googled it. Co-ops are special beasts. There are cooperatives for farmers selling grain and co-ops that sell electricity to rural residents. There are also retail varieties, such as food co-ops. Montana has a robust cooperative movement with staff to support new co-ops, so we kept researching.

So why can't bookstores be co-ops? Actually they already exist, with the Harvard Co-op Bookstore being one of the best known. The key is common ownership. When we made

a decision to form what we called the Billings Bookstore Cooperative, we gambled that Billings would be willing to spend money, not just on books, but on owning a little piece of a bookstore, in exchange for discounts and dividends.

Oh, the magic of being right, as townspeople stepped up. So began the slow-motion movement that led to This House of Books opening its doors in October 2016. Volunteers wrote a business plan, formed the cooperative, began selling shares and hired a general manager.

We had good advice from booksellers around Montana, and member-owners volunteered hundreds of hours building out the 3,000-square-foot space. In a critical step toward sustainability, staffers are now paid for their work.

This is a happy story, not just for Billings, but also for brick-and-mortar bookstores in general. In the wake of the Amazon and e-book revolutions, people have begun seeking a more personal experience, a trend that is reshaping the marketplace. The secret sauce is a bookstore that answers only to its community. It refreshes the human spirit in a fundamental way. This House of Books is that kind of gift, from the people to the people.