

Oct 2012 – Israel Journey: North and South

After exploring Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, we decided to travel five days in the north through Galilee, Nazareth, Caesarea and Acre before our week on the Red Sea beach at the extreme south of Israel (Eilat).

Deciding where to go was not easy as there are so many interesting sites in a country with such a LOOOOONG history: Egyptian, Roman, Arab, Christian, Jewish. But between our paper guides (Lonely Planet and Eyewitness Travel) and the recommendations of friends, we finally established a route.

Two of the best preserved Egyptian/Roman coastal towns are Caesarea and Acre (Akko). We understand better now the succession of 3,500 years of invaders include Egyptians, Romans, the (unsuccessful) French (Napoleon) / Muslim / Turkish (Ottoman Empire) and British...



Acre really illustrates how a city is built on another: this imposing structure dating from the Roman times (also used as an underground city by the Crusaders) has been filled with earth and served as the foundation for a new fortress built over it by the Ottomans... Hence its excellent condition. It 'just' took removing a little dirt to find the beautiful structures/halls

pictured above.

In Acre, we tasted the best hummus in Israel (according to a young Israeli trail hiker we met). Regine found very good but I (Tim) did not understand why people made such a fuss over and queue to eat



mashed chickpea with a salad and pita bread ...

Here I am at the end of the day relaxing in a Turkish bath (excellent visit showing how the men (and women in a separate area) used this place to relax and socialize). Would be fun to try it for real one day.



The apostle Paul spent time in Caesarea before being sent to Rome for trial (as a Roman citizen he demanded judgment by the Emperor and was executed on his order only).

It was very impressive to see the actual size of a Roman amphitheater (holds 8,000+ spectators) and coliseum. But by then we started having our share got of ancient stones in sunny blazing dry heat ... Caesarea was the primary Roman Judea port, now a state park which had an impressive interactive museum with holograms of people appearing in front of us and we could ask questions to these key historic figures of the last 3000+ years – we understood why it was fashionable to level defeated fortified cities (to ensure past conquerors/invaders would not have a recoverable foothold). We also ‘talked’ with the mother Roman Emperor Justinian I (brought Christianity to the Roman Empire) who around year 300 set off to the holy land to find where Jesus lived and died. She is also the one who asserts she found Jesus’s cross (she found 3 and the real one healed a sick person!!).



In Nazareth (an Israeli Arab town), and Galilee and we visited where Jesus grew up, first preached and performed a number of miracles, and where Mary lived (see photos above – beautiful cathedral build on these rocks supposed to be Mary’s home) and where Joseph worked. Each historic biblical site has a church and often you can see (touch/kiss?) old rocks which some claim to be THE spot (dwelling/workshop/area etc) where someone lived or some event happened. This place may also have changed in the last centuries... but it does not matter whether it is the right place or not – if enough people associate a story with

a place, it just makes it special. We have patiently learned that tradition is often as important as truth and facts in these matters.

We visited 'Nazareth village', very well done re-creation of the first century village life (a bit like 'the mission' in Tallahassee) in the very area where Jesus grew up they actually plough the soil, grow wheat, olives and grapes, make wine, harvest and press

olives, make cloth as in the

first century. The site used has been cultivated for 2000 years (they found no trace of building there) and there was found the only wine press in area dating from the first century! What is a wine press? Just rock carved as a basin (where people used to treat on the grapes bare foot) with a channel into a deeper hole in the rock below to collect the juice. Jesus grew up in



Nazareth and would have participated in the wine making as did everyone in the village, on this very spot! Pretty neat we thought. This village also housed an ancient synagogue (the tour guide explained where Jesus would likely have been invited to preach when he was young) and we saw typical houses – a little courtyard half covered with a roof where daily



activities would take place and a room without windows for bedroom and another small room for food storage. We found this the best site to visit to get a feel for the 'context' of Jesus' life.

We also visited a museum showing a first century fishing boat found deep in the mud of the Sea of Galilee (Israel's largest fresh water lake). Impressive story of restoration – took 10y of chemistry magic to turn this soft water logged wood into real wood again.

Was this boat the one Jesus stood on to preach?

On our day around the sea of Galilee, we arrived at Mt Beatitudes just 10 minutes after they closed for a 2h lunch break – must be managed by French folks! We could not believe we would have to wait almost 2 hours to get into the church/site... Bad luck or good luck? We drove to the back of the church compound, found a lovely tranquil shady high spot over-looking the Sea of Galilee (shade was crucial as we were still in the part of



our trip where it was VERY hot), had our picnic lunch (we always had food with us), then a little siesta in the car. Then we took the time to read and reflect on what I (Tim) believe is one of the most beautiful and important passages in the bible "the Sermon on the Mount" - a pretty challenging message for us, in the rich west, having all we can dream of in life!.. Being on the real spot where Jesus gave this sermon was truly moving, but did not really help in our understanding I must say.... We decided afterwards that this quiet time reading was probably better than another church visit! This was one of the finest moments of our travels that will linger in our mind for a long time.

**Want to meet people in any country you travel to and experience family life there or welcome travelers from afar at your home?
Join Servas as a traveler or host!**

Where did we stay in Galilee? This is ANOTHER very interesting story and one that made our travel VERY special and dear to our hearts. We stayed with 2 families we had never met before. At a Xmas party last year we heard about SERVAS and joined (servas.org) this wonderful 60 year old organization dedicated to world peace. SERVAS operates in 126 nations (truly global) with 15,500+ members worldwide offering members free access to other member's homes for a minimum of two nights (may be longer if host offers) with NO reciprocity or exchange of money expected. The host offers a bed and typically a couple of evening meals will be shared with the host family as well. The mission of the organization is to foster peace by allowing people around the world to know each other by sharing a couple of nights lodging, meals and good conversation.

When you initially receive the list of "hosts" in a country you will be visiting, it is just like

contacting friends by alerting them: Hey I am in the area, are you available? Great opportunity to meet people and understand better their country. So we found two Servas "host" families in Galilee (this was the only region we had the opportunity to try use our Servas list - elsewhere we had accommodation pre-booked from US or we were in our friend's Tel Aviv apartment). So we had the pleasure of sharing intimacy with two wonderful Israeli families. It was a very touching experience. Conversations helped us understand some aspects of Israeli life and the delicate balance between Jews and Arabs - and their daily challenges in the countryside well away from the greater Tel Aviv reality - often considered the "other" Israel....hip, young, urban, sectarian and on the move, more like NY/Miami than Israel.



The first Galilee couple were Alon and Inbal (and 4 kids). Their oldest daughter left home the week we arrived to begin her 2 years of compulsory (for all but Arab and Orthodox Jews) military service (3 years for men). Alon is a 'sheriff'. Constant vigilance against theft from

Bedouin's (nomadic Arab tribesmen) is needed in spite of bright security lights shining and patrols all night long around the village. His challenge is to be the peace maker and not escalate the anger when theft (cars, cattle, electronics. etc) occurs. He has for instance organized meeting between the head of the Bedouins and the villagers to see how they can live together in peace and reduce youth violence.... He has served in this role for 10 years. Inbal's dad was killed in combat during the 1967 war (Israeli's count time much as we do unfortunately...by war era. For us it is WWII, Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq/ Afghanistan, for Israeli people they have 6 or so wars since the end of WWII where each generation participated in the military and their generation's conflict and often times someone dear was injured or lost their life). Inbal's peace work focuses on what Jewish and Arab people have in common – their love of the land and its plants. She is compiling a book of native plants and their spiritual message to us – part of her healing to bring understanding to both sides of the things they have in common.

The last major conflict between Israeli and Palestinian Arabs (Second Intifada) was in 2000 during which Israeli arab youths threw large stones at Jewish cars at the nearby intersection... A big rock in the windshield at 80km hour is death. The Jewish people on their hill top community were immobilized there for a week until the police stopped the revolt. The Arab town of Nazareth lost out: Jewish people stopped shopping there.



Speaking of the Israeli-Arabs, here is a photo taken on a large square of Nazareth next to the huge Cathedral of the Annunciation where the Virgin Mary was told by angel Gabriel she was pregnant with Jesus (you can see the dome in the background – as well as hear speakers from the mosque calling the faithful to prayer five times a day). This sign is an extract from the Koran telling all "heathens" (we the Christian and Jewish etc?): "Whoever has a religion other than Islam will never be accepted in heaven and in the hereafter will go to hell"!!?? This sign made us smile with its poor spelling and being placed in the path of all Christian tourists. This sign shows that the Israeli Arabs have the freedom to practice their own religion in Israel and display whatever they want... However will these same Arabs elsewhere be tolerant of others choice of religion too? That is a key issue for the Jews in Israel: our Jewish family near Nazareth had not seen this sign as they avoid the nearby Arab towns even though it is in Israel, they were upset when we showed it to them... It was not funny to them but a potential threat of violence. They fear young Arabs who may take this message of "damning" literally and instigate acts of violence...



While we ate dinner a young members of the Sheriff's "community watch" (24 hour patrols with M-16s slung loosely from their shoulder's) dropped by to check in with the him. The sheriff is ALWAYS on call.....The headline in the Jerusalem post this morning shouted that "80 Rockets and Mortar shells fired from Gaza Strip Landed in Israel....3 near dead including 2 foreign workers...retaliation likely ... worst shelling in a decades ...?" This made us understand better the response of a SERVAS family near Jerusalem: one

lady told us that she could not host us: her grand kids were coming to stay because they live near the Gaza strip which is unsafe since the bombing started again. This is the reality of being in a country at war. Now every new house built must also contain a bomb shelter which adds an enormous cost (around \$20 000)... Similar we suppose to requiring us to build hurricane ready houses...but for natural disasters, not preventable human tragedy.

All Jewish Israelis (except Israeli-Arab and Orthodox Jews – see photo) are required to do military service (males 3 years females 2 years) and be ready to take up arms to defend the country at any moment during an extended "reserve" service (reminded me of my (Tim) 4 year reserve service back in the 1970s after active duty). The two villages where we were greeted by a family are called "Moshars" – kind of village farmland cooperative community established at the time of Israeli independence – 1948. It is a pretty village with lovely homes and Israeli-planted tall trees built on a hill top (great visibility!!?)... When we asked if it was true that the Jews had planted all the trees in Israel, the answer: "of course No! Some olives trees can be 400 years old".



Here is a photo with our second SERVAS hosts: Arie and Mira are at the back with Two of their four children (Ethiopian babies adopted). Their oldest child just finished his required military service that week and was transitioning ...it's a way of life in Israel for all. Their Canadian-Israeli friends Frank and Elaine came to dinner too. Here we experienced our first Sabah diner. The tradition for the more religious Israelis is that men put a kippah (small cap) on their head and our host provided one

for me (Tim) and Frank. Arie began the meal by reading a short Hebrew prayer, then he circulated a glass of wine we all sipped from and gave each of us a piece of bread... which concluded the ritual. We found touching to see the reality and simplicity of this sharing wine and bread as in Jesus' last meal! Simpler than the catholic mass ritual.



Cana is an Israeli Arab city (as is Nazareth) close to where we stayed. When we invited our Jewish hosts to take a ride with us to Cana, they instantly replied: oh no, we're not going to Cana! So we drove there on our own wondering whether it was safe but to us it was just another city. A touching moment was when we renewed our wedding vows in the Greek Orthodox Church St George in Cana, where Jesus preformed his first miracle of Jesus changed the water (good) wine. Tim bought a bottle of wine for our hosts with a Nazareth vineyard wine label ... Apparently it was not intended to be opened but only a memento!!! The wine was horrible...

Elaine teaches English to classes of mixed young Jewish and Arab students. A conversation ensued about education – is it true that Arab schools receive less funding than Jewish ones? Nobody knew for sure. Mira's experience is that Arabs can enter university with grades much lower than Jewish students. Indeed, Israel has an affirmative action program for Arabs (much like that for minorities in the US) to encourage a higher level of education among young Arabs – hoping that better education will help relationships. Perhaps so, perhaps not. Peaceful coexist is not always obvious or linear and people round the tables feared the impact of the Muslim priests (?) on young people.

From this Sabbath meal together, came a wonderful following day: Elaine and Frank proposed to guide us to the nearby site that had very well preserve roman city. The site of Zippori is still being excavated and Elaine had participated in many of those efforts. We walked down huge water reserves and through underground tunnels distributing the water to various parts of the city. Elaine also had souvenirs of playing when she was a kid. She enjoyed going back and was amazed at the excavation progress – she pointed out with excitement the roman paved road with the groove marks from the chart wheels, another paving stones engraved with a Jewish menorah or a kids games from over 2000 years ago. She made the day so much fun! We ate a cactus





fruit, sucked on dried up carob beans, chewed anise seeds, and picked and ate little sweet white pomegranates. What a treat this visit was. This is what is amazing with Servas: You meet people and spend such quality time with them!

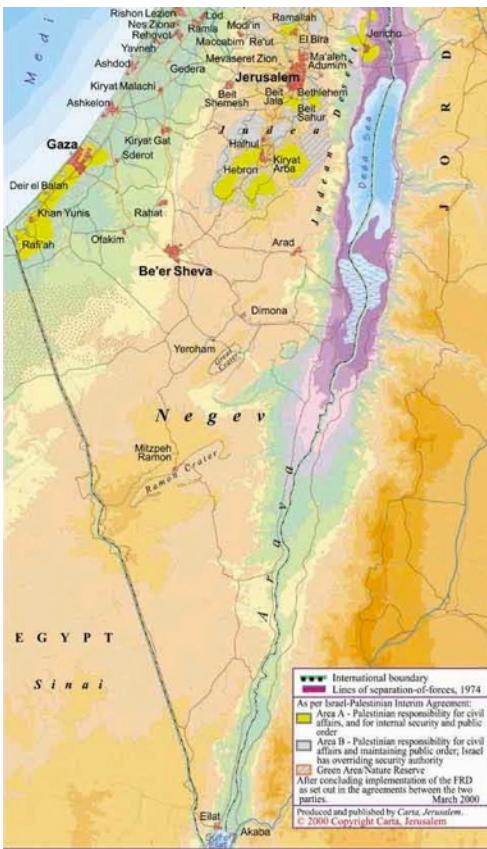


In the evening, after a walk on the hills side with stunning view of the surrounding landscape, Tim played music with Mira, our host and I enjoyed looking at Arie woodworking tools and projects! It was soon time to go to bed as everyone was getting up early to start the week the following day.

Arie gets up at 5am every day and works for a high tech medical equipment company and travels a lot. Is office is 1.5 h drive from home, near Tel Aviv. With gas price as high as in Europe (\$2+/liter = \$8/gallon), this is a huge cost in time and money – but it seems that everyone travels long distance to go to work. Mira also travels over an hour drive each way (north) providing counseling for WWII Holocaust victims. It was so interesting getting to know them and their kids.



Our 70 mile drive back to Tel Aviv in morning rush hour traffic took 3 ½ hours. We had a tight schedule – drive to Tel-Aviv, return the car, make our way across town and catch the 11am bus to Eilat. The GPS (an IPAD rented from the car rental company) was our great



We also passed many industrial farm 'greenhouses' in the midst of the desert...this kept amazing us. We knew that all the fruit and veggies we would find in Eilat were going to be locally produced! In fact all we eat in Israel is locally produced – even bananas! we saw them under their nets in Galilee. Very remarkable how Israel grows all of its food!

Eilat – holiday town – think 1/100 Las Vegas and ½ Panama City FL on the Red Sea. It seems 70% of tourists were Russian. Several years ago Israel and Russia struck a deal that allowed Russians to come to Israel as freely as Greece or Turkey and the Russians are voting with their rubles—all tourist signs are in Hebrew/English AND Russian. In recent years Russia has sent over 1 million new immigrants to Israel as well. As one of our friends said...like most historic and current Israeli immigrants... "They arrive with NO financial resources, but significant education and ambition...." Our impression is that Israel is a mini United Nations with many languages – one predominant religion, and is one of the world leaders in entrepreneurial zeal... individuals with education and cutting edge creative energies making deals all over the world for their VERY productive nation.

guide all week long. Starting at 6am gave us enough time to make it to our bus – then we were happy to let someone else drive us to the most southern tip of Israel – 200+ miles at \$35 round trip...

Public transport is cheap and very comfortable. We watched the road pass beneath us with continued amazement at the vast and torrid Negev desert (the western part of which was receiving rocket fire at the time!!). Two 15 minute stops in the desert with the surprise to see a McDonalds at the bus stop in the middle of the desert at the bus stop – the worst of American culture export knows no boundaries???

See the connection between the (Sea of Galilee) the Dead Sea and the Red Sea ? Imagine the project to build a pipeline to collect water from the Red sea and fill up the Dead Sea, generate hydro-power, fresh water and ensure the survival of the Dead Sea (which has dropped 14 feet in the past decade+) – this would make its shore more useable (would avoid the land collapse it is now experiencing)..



Eilat – is only 3 miles from Jordan and Egypt (east and west respectively), the only two Arab nations that recognize Israel as a “legitimate” nation – achieved under Carter and Clinton Presidencies respectively. All the other Muslim/Arab neighbor states are at virtual (undeclared) war with Israel and do not allow entry if a person's passport (other than a diplomatic passport) shows any travel to Israel.

Eilat temperature: mid 90 to 100+ during our stay in late October and 110+ in summer!! Attraction: exploring the coral reefs of the Red Sea, travel to PETRA in Jordan (one of the 7 wonders of the world...COOL)..... camel, jeep, horse back and hiking trips in the desert (we had had enough of the desert by then)



We enjoyed our elegant (5 Star) Eilat Club hotel with its supermarket, 4 swimming pools (surprisingly cold water) ... and lots and lots of families with kids....They were plays/ lectures/games – all useless for us as all was in Hebrew!

Our first day was to investigate how to get to Petra in Jordan – our friends has told us that was was a must. (more on the trip to Petra later). Then the rest of the week was enjoying water, coral and fish... We found a wonderful nature reserve with coral reefs within easy swim from the beach where we could rent a mask and snorkel and spend a day in the shade.



This combined with a visit to the underwater observatory with the boat ride 'submarine' gave us very relaxing days we settled into a real holiday pace. Part of the observatory, includes a salt water aquarium as well which uses water



from the Red Sea. The observatory also grows coral with great success since they already have sea water with perfect settings. The observatory underwater tower is so beautiful – it looks a magical garden with fish that are free to come and go They might think that it is we who are in captivity... some coral have a tiny number next to them – those are from a project with the local school – each kids grows a coral for a year in an aquarium and then it is ‘planted’ (?) around the observatory and kids

can come and see how it does! Great to spread awareness of the fragile sea to the young generations.

The trip to Petra in Jordan was a long tiring day: You can see on the map that was not exactly a easy site to visit (2h bus side Jordan each way, after waiting long queues to cross the border. Incidentally Jordan is ruled by King Abdullah II – his father King Hussein signed a peace treaty with Israel during his reign.

After in depth research, we decided that the easiest way to visit was to take a tour. SO we drove in a mini bus through the desert, this time in Jordan.



On the way, the guide talked to us about the Bedouin's way of life – It was nice to finally have all our questions answered about these people that we see everywhere in the desert. I remember our surprise the first time we saw these basic accommodation on the way to the Dead sea, past Jerusalem.... They herd livestock (camels, sheep, goats) and live in tents (one per family) made from the wool of these animals...though many are now settling into villages. It is not obvious to see what the animals have to eat around here! Their life is, difficult, simple ... and harsh. Keep moving to where food is for the herd. Needless to say that their way of life is disappearing rapidly, now only 70,000 Bedouins remain in Jordan and this generation may be the last.. the picture shows a one family tent – and the contrast below with the bedouins living in "built" houses in a small village...



We finally around noon we arrived at Petra – one of the 7 wonders of the world! We all voted to see the site first and leave ‘lunch’ for later on in the afternoon.



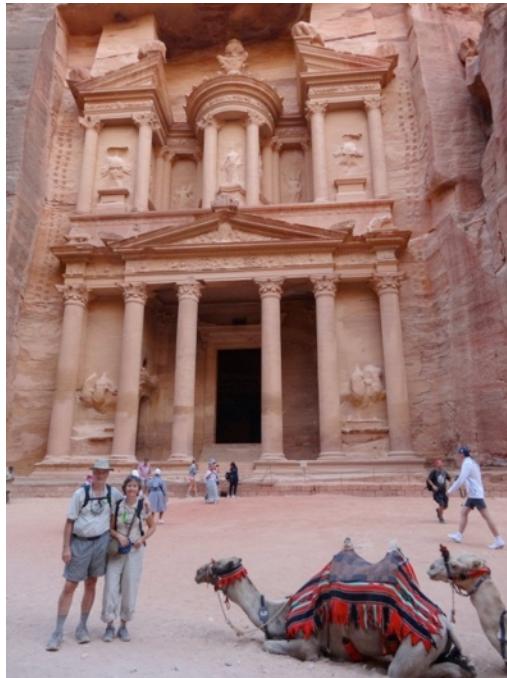
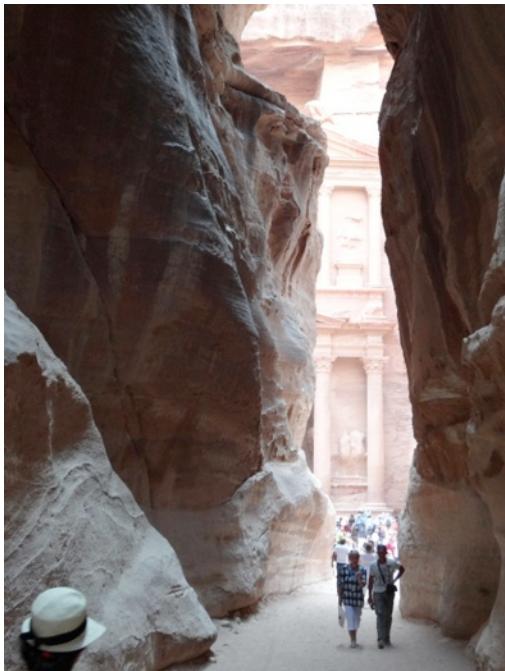
Petra is a city carved into the mountain rock dating from around 2500 years ago was built by an ancient civilization thriving at the crossroads of the trading route between east and west. Here are some views of the entrance to the site – the graves with beautiful facades. 70% of Petra is still under the sand!

The ruins were inhabited by Bedouins and their animals in recent years before it became a significant tourist attraction. When the site was ranked one of the 7 'wonders' of the world, Jordan built a village to bribe the Bedouins to leave the site. A house with water, electricity and television is a pretty attractive proposition compared with a cave with a wonderful facade... Now Bedouins are on the site of Petra as traders selling horse, donkey or camel rides or gifts and tourist trinkets. Some were actually born and raised in these ancient caves.

Here are some tourists... We still cannot help being surprised with the women clothing.



In Eilat I watched on a french TV channel a program on Qatar (small kingdom near Saudi Arabia) – a woman stated that wearing this robe is freedom: you can be in your pajamas underneath! And I would add: no risk of sunburns and free sauna in the summer...



The first view of the best preserved facade in Petra after a long way through a narrow path between huge rocks – Town very well hidden town in these mountains....



A Bedouin at work.

We only spent 3.5h on the site – this is the down side of being on an organized tour – we spent almost longer in gift stores than the site itself...

We finished the day with a nice buffet meal, the 2h ride back, the long lines at the border and to get transportation back to the hotel. A long 14h day... we were ready to chill with low key activities and enjoy beach and coral reef the last few days!

For 6 weeks we really enjoyed all the sweets and delights of Jewish and arab food ... now time for a more frugal diet!



We understand what it means to eat kosher – Tim wanted some butter for his bread at lunch one day and was told that there was no butter because it was not kosher as meat was on the menu. He then asked for cheese to go on his spaghetti and same answer – not available as not kosher. Kosher means not mixing dairy and meat.

An Israeli breakfast include pan cakes, bread, sweet things, salads (above), cooked vegetables, cheese, eggs, fish but no meat. When I asked why dairy and meat are not mixed, an Israeli friend told me that “ It is an insult to the animal to be cooked in its own milk ...”

The temperature finally turned nice the last 2 weeks of our stay – we arrived 4 weeks too early! During our stay it rained twice and those were very special moments – in Tel Aviv, we had a huge storm turning the street into a river (first storm after months of sunny days) and the first evening in Eilat, just after we settled into our apartment. We thought: well this is what storms look like here – high winds, lightning, lots of rain then we heard how an exceptional event it was! This single storm brought more rain than the whole of the previous year. The city was washed from the desert dust for us!

We had 5 days in Tel Aviv before heading back to US. We spent a in Jerusalem with the friends who invited us to Israel, Michal and Benzi. We went to the holocaust museum and the Israel Museum (being with our friends made these places 1000 times more interesting!). We went again on our own by bus (great service: \$8 return ticket – nothing can beat public transport in Israel) and walked on the ramparts (great to peak into people back yards and roof tops) and jointed a walking tour to Mount of Olive. I was delighted to see a couple of vegetables gardens in the old city!



Mount of Olive has a huge jewish cemetery – jewish people want to be buried wrapped in a cloth (unlike catholics who allow cremation now) and graves are huge family assets as families want to be buried together. I was so sad looking at the desecrated cemetery: the guide explained to us that soldiers from Jordan took the tombstones to build toilets during the 1967 six day war.



In between all the church visits, we also saw some 1500 years old olive trees (Olive trees do not die but keep growing – see the one here) from the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed on the last night before being arrested. The olives are harvested every year and the oil sent to the pope (just like jewish people used to send the best olive oil (first press) to the temple).

In Tel Aviv, one more museum (art), one last swim, last wonderful pomegranate for breakfast, a meal with a friend then time to pack our bags and go home – we were lucky to miss the travel disruption due to hurricane Sandy on the East coast. Seamless

trip: 24h travel to reach a warm, green, quiet Tallahassee! How beautiful everything looks after all this time in desert landscapes. How nice to meet friends again.

After six weeks in Israel, we had enough of being tourists. Now I love having my hands in the dirt and planting my fall garden . Traveling has given me more ideas of things to make and food to eat. Tim is back to music. I loved getting back to my computer that is 20 times faster than the travel laptop... We have stopped waking up at night and wondering where we are! Life is good!

