

Middle East Trip 2010

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In March 2010 I traveled to the Netherlands, Egypt, and Israel for a week and a half. This trip report serves to help others who might want to incorporate similar elements into their own trips, to entertain others, and to help me remember my trip.

19 March - Heading to the Netherlands

For the first part of this trip I visited the Netherlands to see some family friends. I had promised to visit them again and this was the best opportunity. Every day for the preceding week I had been getting up 30 minutes - 1 hour earlier than the day before to help get me ready for the time change. I got up at 02:30 on this day. It also helped me to get in a full day's work before my early afternoon flight. I connected through Chicago from Minneapolis to Amsterdam. It was amusing to note that more and more you see people clustering around the few power outlets in airports.

20 March - Visiting the Netherlands

I landed at ~08:00 and breezed through customs. I tried paying with my credit card to get a train ticket but all the machines there expected cards with chips on them, something that hasn't shown up a lot in the US yet. I paid cash and was on the train towards Hengelo, changing through Amersfoort, in a few minutes. Passing through Amsterdam I noticed that the ING building there looks like a giant ship. I was able to call the Redderhofs with my US cellphone no problem. There was a light rain and when I arrived in Hengelo Jan noted my visiting always makes it rain.

I returned to Jan & Netty's home in Borne and after their daughter Heleen arrived at noon we had lunch and then went to visit the nearby town of Ootmarsum. The town had several nice buildings and several art galleries. Heleen is an art student and was unimpressed with their low quality though. I got to see where Netty was born. There was a good amount of history in the town from the German occupation.

Back at their home we exchanged gifts. I gave Heleen a guide book and map for their visit to the western US later in the year. Amongst other things I received an orange Holland hat from them. Heleen's husband Derk returned from winning a soccer game 5-1 and we had dinner. After that I went to their house which they had just started to remodel when I visited in 2008 and now looked very nice. We went to a nearby Irish pub later in the evening to visit some of their friends. One of the friends mentioned that next time I'm in Berlin I needed to see the Dutch embassy there which apparently has many neat architectural features including secret passages.

21 March - Last Day in the Netherlands

I had set my alarm for 06:30 but immediately went back to sleep till 08:30. Heleen wasn't feeling well so Derk and I headed over to Jan & Netty's. It had stopped raining. During lunch I participated in an egg cracking tradition. Each person holds their hard boiled egg and hits it against their competitor's. If your egg is the one to crack, you

loose. The winner gets a new competitor. I won but I think it helped that I went last. On the news there were plenty of stories about the US health care bill.

After lunch we went to a park on the grounds belonging to a duke and had a short walk before heading to the Hengelo train station. From the station you can sort of see a city block that had been rebuilt after WWII. No one liked the design. It had a tower with a clock that had stopped working. They didn't have the money to fix the clock so they just covered it over. I took the 15:06 train to Schiphol after promising to try to visit again some day.

At Schiphol I got through security for my flight to Munich without any problems. Derk & Heleen had mentioned that when they flew to the US now they had to go through full body scanners. My biggest worry about my trip to Egypt was that the Egyptian currency that I had received was in 100 Pound (LE) notes. Train tickets there only cost 1LE and taxi drivers of course never have change, so I was expecting a lot of problems. I tried getting some of my 100LE notes broken at the currency exchange office there but they also only had 100LE notes themselves. While waiting for my flight I read "The Importance of Being Earnest" which I had downloaded to my iPhone.

During my flight to Munich the German beside me spilled some beer on my only pair of pants, but that cleaned up without too much hassle. My flight to Cairo was first thing in the morning so when I arrived in Munich late in the evening I tried entering the international terminal but they wouldn't allow it. I exited through customs and found a bench in the airport to try to get some sleep on. In hindsight I could have saved time and money by taking a train from Hengelo to Munich.

22 March - First Day in Cairo

I didn't get any sleep to speak of so in the early morning hours I wandered over to the airport hotel. They wanted 195 Euro for a room so I just sat in their lobby reading. I finished "Earnest" and started "The Canterville Ghost". The one physical book that I brought with me was "Ender's Shadow" which is a parallel novel to "Ender's Game", probably the 2nd most important military novel out there. I returned to the airport after a while, figured out a way to build a better pillow from my equipment, and was able to get in ~30 minutes of sleep. I had breakfast at McDonald's. I got stopped and searched going through security back in airport. I was tired and had forgotten some coins in my pocket and had left some water in my Platypus water bladder.

In the airport terminal I was able to take a good nap. Before my flight I tried breaking the 100LE notes but ran into the same problem. In a central area of the terminal were some small rooms set aside for smokers. I got a lot more sleep on the flight to Cairo.

In Cairo airport I had to buy an entry visa and used one of the 100LE's to do so, which got me some change. I also converted 2 \$20s I had which also helped.

Outside the airport I ended up taking a taxi to Ramses train station. The driving conditions were worse than Lima and here no one even bothered to paint lane markers

as no one would have paid any attention to them. The suggested taxi rate was 40LE but I had listened to advice that said that you should negotiate the fare after you start the ride. Stupid advice. I ended up paying 80LE and so started the day angry. Ramses in the central train station in Cairo for trains leaving the city. I visited the Abela / Sleeper Trains office inside the station to buy my ticket to Luxor for the following night. At first they said that there weren't any cabins for me, but then they found me a cabin with another person, which is what I wanted. The price was \$60 in actual American dollars each way.

I left the station and started walking west towards the Nile. I had brought a little \$1 compass and that proved its worth one hundred times over. The neighborhood I walked through was pretty beat up and I was very conscious of being the only white person there, but it was a good introduction to Cairo and working with Cairo traffic. I eventually got to the Nile and walked a little south before crossing a bridge over to the western bank. That side was so much nicer than the eastern. I kept my GPS out to track my position for later geotagging of my photos. In one spot I set it down beside my backpack to take some photos, got distracted by something, and then walked off.

I loved that GPS. It had gotten me through Peru and I had spent a lot of time manually programming in all the places I wanted to visit in Egypt and Israel. It was five minutes before I realized that I didn't have it any more and when I returned to the spot it was of course gone. Your first day in a new place is always awful and my attitude continued to go down hill.

Using the paper printouts from Google Maps that I had brought I took a southern bridge back over the Nile to the eastern bank and made my way past the Egyptian Museum. I had neglected to put distance scales on my paper maps and so got lost several times on my way to the Australian Hostel. Each time though a very friendly and helpful resident always noticed the lost look on my face and pointed me in the right direction. I got to the right street but still couldn't find it. Fortunately on my iPhone I had the email from the reservation service and was able to get the street number and eventually found it. Going up a rickety elevator I got to the office. The staff were friendly. They had given my single person room to another person but gave me a discount on a 4 person room that only one other person in it. I had dinner at McDonalds and noticed that people butt in line like they drive here. Back in the hostel I was able to shower and email home.

23 March - Cairo Museums

I got up at 06:30 and checked out of the hostel. They let me leave my backpack in a locked room. I had breakfast at McDonalds and walked over to the Egyptian museum. While waiting to go in a local who wanted to go to business school in the US practiced his English with me. He mentioned that he thought the museum wouldn't open till 09:00 so to fill time I crossed back over to the western bank and walked north trying to find their 1973 memorial, keeping an eye out for my GPS the whole time. Egyptians view the 1973 Yom Kippur war with Israel as a great victory; everyone else admits that they

got the canal back but otherwise thinks Israel kicked their ass. I didn't find either so I returned to the museum.

The museum let people onto the grounds at 08:30 but didn't open till 09:00. Like most sites in Egypt the museum had a metal detector but unlike most sites it was actually on and security actually paid attention to the buzzer. Unless you pay a large fee they don't allow cameras inside the museum. I got a few photos outside with my iPhone but none from inside. I spent about 1:45 in the museum and it was decent. Maybe I should have hired a guide but I later heard that they were 80LE an hour and the few writeups in the museum weren't too bad. King Tut's stuff was nice. My favorite part was that they had some chariots and I was able to see how they worked the axles. The axles are fixed in place and the wheels slide over them. One piece of art was a large black cat with a pharaoh standing on its back. My cat Aeryn says that this shows that the power really did rest with the cats and the humans were just ornamentation.

I returned to the hostel, had lunch at McDonalds, and got my camera. A staff worker gave me some advice on how to get to the Citadel and said that the taxi price should be 10 - 15 LE. I waited in front of the hostel and eventually got into a taxi. While in the taxi I was angry that I was only able to bargain the price down to 30LE. At the Citadel after I paid him he asked for a 5LE tip and I just walked off.

The Citadel is in eastern Cairo and is a large fort up on a hill built by Saladin. Inside it are two large mosques, the Egyptian police museum, and the Egyptian military museum. You can't wear shoes in the mosques so I tied my shoelaces together and carried my boots over my neck. The police museum was underwhelming. I generally liked the military museum and spent the majority of my ~2:30 at the Citadel there. The museum is like the Vatican museums where you walk along a twisting set of hallways. Unfortunately most of the special topics were in rooms off the hallways and were almost always closed. It was a good overview of Egyptian history. There was plenty of 1973 propaganda. I showed probably too much interest in their field artillery pieces and am pretty sure that I picked up a plainclothes tail. Outside the Citadel one taxi driver walked away when I wouldn't meet the price he wanted but someone else agreed to the 30LE I eventually bargained to. It was still too high but I felt pretty good about getting it down from their initial 50LE offer.

Back in the hostel I rested my feet and talked to a Missouri couple who had been on vacation for a month and had been all over Israel and Egypt. They mentioned that hostels in Jerusalem had package Masada trips and they and everyone else raved about Petra which is near Israel. I talked to the Floridian girl who I had shared my room with. She was between jobs, had been on vacation for ten months, and had been all over Asia before eventually making it to Egypt. Her favorite place had been India with all its variety. The hostel staff served tea and coffee for everyone. The Australian Hostel was the best hostel I've ever been too. The staff were great and the layout facilitated the easy meeting and talking to of other travelers.

I had dinner at McDonalds and got 200LE more out of an ATM. McDonalds was always great for breaking the 100LE notes into manageable sizes. I did get confused once because they have paper notes for sub-1LE values as well as coins. Back at the hostel I signed up for their package Pyramids tour and then followed walking directions from them to get to Ramses station, keeping an eye out for my GPS from all the sidewalk vendors. At the station I paid 0.25LE to use the bathroom and then sat down to read while I waited for my train. I hated being the only white person around and having to sit in the same place for 2 hours but I found a place where I could keep my eyes on all of the lines of approach. I used my earplugs to keep the noise down and they were another thing I was very happy to have brought.

The train arrived and I boarded. It stayed there for another thirty minutes before leaving on time. There were some American travelers on my car who tried to find someone to send to buy beer for them. After a while my roommate arrived. His name was Navid and he was an American-Pakistani from San Francisco. He was a democrat Muslim who had never met anyone in the military and he was in the middle of a long Middle East vacation so we talked for a long time. We were served dinner in our cabin and turned in. The ride was semi-bumpy so I didn't get as much sleep as I'd have liked.

24 March - Luxor

I was served breakfast in the cabin and got off the train in Luxor. Navid continued on the train towards parts southward. I had heard horror stories about the touts in Luxor but had a good map printed out and knew what I wanted to do, so coming out of the train station I quickly breached the line of taxi drivers and headed west towards Luxor temple. I completely ignored a horse carriage driver and he cursed at me after giving up on me. After taking a few photos of the temple I headed south around the temple to try to find a way to cross the Nile.

This was a great concern for me. I knew that I needed to take a boat to cross the river and then either take a taxi and walk to the Valley of the Kings (VotK), and then visit a few other sites on that western bank of the river. I had a lot of doubt as to how I'd do it and to how much I'd have to pay and had been putting a lot of prayer into it. An Egyptian approached me and I immediately suspected that he was another tout set to rip me off, but he offered to get me across the river and then drive me to the VotK for 40LE. This was maybe a little high of a price but it was pretty good so I accepted the offer. We took a little power boat across the river and I gave him a 50LE note, which included 5LE for each of us to the driver. On the far bank we met his brother and his taxi which we took off in. Along the way he offered for another 50LE to have his brother drop me off and pick me up whenever and wherever I wanted for three more sites. I thought about it for a while and eventually accepted. It turned out to be an amazing deal that I never had to haggle for.

Therein lies the central problem in vacationing in Egypt. Egypt has some great honest hardworking good people, but you'll never give yourself a chance to meet them because you'll be so irritated at the touts that'll you shun everyone who wants to talk to you. Meeting this guy and his brother were a clear miracle in my eyes.

They dropped me off outside the VotK at 07:00 and his brother would meet me there at 09:00. I paid the entrance fee and had been warned in advance not to pay for the “train” ride. It’s a tractor with a few cars behind it which ride you up the hill to the actual site, which is only a 3 minute walk and would be right in view from the visitor center if it weren’t for a kink in the road. I laughed when I saw how short the distance was. At the VotK you are given a ticket and allowed to go down into three different tombs of your choice. At each one a hole is punched in your ticket. There are many different tombs to choose from but not all of them are always open, and the popular ones like Tut’s cost extra but usually aren’t any better. The tombs are from three different dynasties and it’s recommended to see one from each dynasty. The most recommended is KV34 which is at the far end and up a little further into the hills.

On my way there I went down a wrong branch on the path. An Egyptian offered to show me the way and I said yes, so we went off the path up the side of the hill past the signs saying not to do this, but hey, he worked there right? We got high up the hill with some decent views. Cameras aren’t allowed there so I have no shots from it. We kept going and he showed me some alabaster that “he had painted himself” so I started to get suspicious and demanded that we go straight to the tomb. He started hemming and hawing here so I paid him 1LE to get rid of him, which he was angry at, and found another goat trail to get back onto the official part of the site.

I visited KV34, KV10, and one other one. At the last one the guard did a poor job of punching a hole, so it didn’t look like he had done it at all. I used his mistake to get me into a 4th tomb. The painting of hieroglyphics inside all of them were definitely impressive. Some sites will tell you to bring a flashlight, and I did, but I never needed it. I left the site and went back to the meeting point for the taxi. While in the visitor center I had followed my standard practice of chugging water and refilling my water bladder from a sink and tossing in an iodine tablet to purify it. I was a bit early but he showed up 10 minutes early himself and was impressed to see that I was on time. A rare other taxi had gone by the meeting point so I was already starting to see the benefit of arranging pickup.

We drove to Hatshepsut’s tomb and he agreed to meet me an hour later. Her tomb is the most impressive on the outside of all the west bank sites. I couldn’t go inside the tomb itself because they were restoring parts of it, so I spent time finding shade and looking at the hieroglyphics. It was pretty warm with no cloud cover so by this time I had my Oakleys on and was wearing the orange Holland hat that the Redderhof’s had given me. Leaving the site you get channeled into a tight passageway of vendor stalls. Many of the vendors came out and formed a cordon to intercept tourists coming through. I let some women go right in front of me to hit the cordon and then maneuvered through one of the holes they made in it to escape. It made me think of a little of the “red rover” children’s game.

The taxi driver was one minute late and we continued from there to buy a ticket for Habu Temple. It was a temple of Ramses III and fairly impressive. I couldn’t help but

think that it'd inspired at least one World of Warcraft map. As with the other sites I'd seen that they, there were several Egyptian school groups there. The driver picked me on time and we returned to the Nile. I paid him his 50LE and boarded a ferry for 1LE. After it filled up ten minutes later it crossed over to the eastern bank. I had lunch in a chilly McDonalds and rested my feet a little, which were starting to get pretty sore. One song on the radio in the restaurant was the uncensored version of James Bunt's "You're Beautiful". After lunch I hobbled north and eventually got to the Temple of Karnak.

At Karnak I took about thirty minutes to rest my feet and popped some Ibuprofen (vitamin I). I had done two weeks of prep hiking for this trip but it's almost impossible to prep for being on your feet all day when you work in an office. The Temple of Karnak was much bigger and more impressive than Habu Temple. A police officer inside showed me several sites to take nice photos from and took some photos of me, so I gave him 1LE. At one point at the site someone there asked another tourist where he was from and he replied Iraq. He wasn't on any of our wanted posters but I spent some time after thinking about what I'd do if I did meet someone who I needed to capture or put down. I spent a good two hours at the temple. On the way out I kept my hat low over my eyes and trudged wearily out, which helped keep the touts away from me.

I walked back south along the river towards the Luxor Museum. It was already late and they had weird hours and a high price, so I hung out across the street and rested my feet. The place where I was had concrete squares with benches on the sides and in the middle an awning for shade, with rose vines fed up through them to flower on the roof. From here you could see several of the docked cruise liners which ran up and down the Nile.

After an hour or so I walked south along the river photographing the feluccas (sail boats) and avoiding the touts trying to sell me felucca rides. After dinner at McDonalds I returned to get more sunset photos of the feluccas. After sunset I returned to photograph Luxor Temple. At the temple I could see what I'd learned from the other temples that there's a clear progress of open courtyards at the start lined with pillars and statues which leads more tightly packed areas with more pillars, which leads to the actual inner temple which had actual walls.

I returned to the train station and sat on the platform reading and waiting for the train. On the train I did have a roommate, Alexander (?), but he didn't really speak English and spent the whole time in another cabin with friends / family.

25 March - Giza Pyramids

I had reserved a trip on the Australian Hostel's 200LE Giza trip but fortunately not paid yet. I decided to just do the trip myself, not do some of the side stuff, and so save myself some money and foot ache. Once we got close to Cairo I used my phone to call them and cancel.

I got off at Giza station and got myself walking southwest along Al Haram street towards the pyramids. My feet were feeling OK but I decided to take a taxi after about a mile or

two. There wasn't room to haggle on the street but in the taxi the driver wouldn't come down to my price so I told him to let me get out, which got him down to a price only 2X what it should have been. After some distance a "friend" of his got in and tried to talk me into hiring a private car for the "long" distances at Giza. I ignored him so he eventually got out. The driver let me out by some touts outside the gate. They led me down a road but it wasn't going in quite the right way and they were trying to sell me a camel ride, so I walked back to the drop off point and walked a short distance up the road to the visitor center.

I got there right at 08:00 which is when it opens. I tried buying extra tickets to the Menkaure pyramid and solar barque museum sub-sites but the ticket vendor said that they weren't sold there. I entered the site and went up to the main pyramid. They weren't selling tickets there to enter it, so I returned to the ticket booth and was able to buy a ticket there from a different guy for the middle pyramid.

Back by the big pyramid a security worker took a look at my ticket and showed me the different things I could go to. Walking east towards some of the small pyramids for the queens another guy came up to me. He said he was a government worker and he took my ticket and he said that he'd take me to the different things. I didn't want to head that direction for a few minutes so I said no thanks. He had my ticket though and wouldn't give it back. After yelling at him and walking over to the police he eventually gave the ticket back. Touts were all over the place selling stuff like camel rides but I hadn't seen this one coming. There were plenty of touts there who wanted to give you a free gift for visiting and almost forced you to take it. I always declined or just put it down on the ground. I learned later that the free gift leads to actual sales attempts. I had several touts tell me that I looked like an Egyptian. I thought this was weird but surmised it possible from the dark tan I was getting, but again learned later that this is just standard banter.

I went into one of the small queen pyramids down a steep ramp. At the bottom was a small room but nothing good looking like at VotK. Behind the big pyramid I visited the solar barque museum which houses a ship that had been buried near one of the pyramids and was meticulously restored. It was nice to see but maybe not worth the price of admission to that small museum. At the middle pyramid I had to turn my camera over to a guard and was worried about it, but I got it back just fine upon exiting. Going into that pyramid was worthwhile. There was nothing super special inside and the side passages were blocked off, but it was an interesting route and nice to do once.

I walked to 3rd pyramid, Menkaure's. It was closed and that helps explain why I couldn't buy a ticket to it. A police officer called to me so I walked towards him. Once it was clear that he just wanted to show me where to take a nice photo which wouldn't look any different from where I had already done so, I just walked off. Touts in uniform. South of that pyramid and north of the Sphinx is a nice set of ruins that no one goes to and so there are no touts there. I spent a nice time walking around in them before walking past the Sphinx and exiting through the south exit.

Outside Giza I was able to use the “let me out” taxi technique again to keep the price low. I had talked him down to 15LE and he really wanted 20LE. Back at the Giza metro station I found that I didn’t have the change to give him 15LE so I ended up giving him a 20LE. Oh well. Cairo’s metro system is one of only two in Africa and actually pretty good. The middle two cars of every train are reserved for women. I took it north for 1LE back east over the river to Sadat station and walked to the hostel after having lunch at a KFC. I hung out at the hostel for the rest of the day and got cleaned up. My feet weren’t doing too badly. To make up for not giving me the single room they gave me a bed to take a nap on. Best hostel ever.

At dinner at McDonalds I paid 52.50LE for a 22.50LE McArabia meal and confused the heck out of the worker. I love doing that. I walked to the local metro station and took the train north to Hadayeq El-Zaitoun station to be nearer the airport. After getting onto a main road I took a taxi the rest of the way to the airport. I let the driver talk me into over paying him and got angry again. There were no good signs about which terminal to use, so I got dropped off at terminal 2. That wasn’t right. I tried calling the US to have a friend look up the flight, but my phone wouldn’t make international calls. Eventually I figured out that it was terminal 1 so I took a shuttle bus there.

I was flying Royal Jordanian through Amman to Tel Aviv. In the terminal there was no Royal Jordanian ticket desk to get my boarding pass from and the Information desk eventually figured out that I should go to the other side of security to get my pass. A worker at the security gate pulled me to the front of the line and asked for 1LE, but I was out of change so he eventually gave up. I was still at the front of the line though so I put my bag on the wide x-ray machine belt where the other passengers were just jamming their stuff. The guard at the metal detector wouldn’t let me through because I didn’t have a boarding pass, but by my keeping bugging him he let me through after a minute. I found the Royal Jordanian counter and got my tickets. The guy said to keep the Tel Aviv ticket separate. Whenever workers asked me if I was going to Tel Aviv I just said Amman. They pronounce it “eh-men” by the way. I didn’t have to pay an exit visa. At the gate there was a separate x-ray machine and metal detector. That’s good as the first check really was a joke. No wonder you can’t fly directly from Cairo to Tel Aviv.

The flight itself was pretty nice and I got some sleep. In Amman I exchanged the 100LE note I had remaining for 11 Jordanian dinars which was just enough for the 10 dinar entry visa. I walked over to the departure side of the terminal and slept for a few hours.

26 March - Tel Aviv

In the morning I went through a much more professional security process, bought some breakfast with my credit card, and departed for Tel Aviv. The flight was only 24 minutes long. They mentioned that we flew at 8,000 feet altitude and we came into Tel Aviv from the direction of the sea. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.

There was no entry visa to pay for in Tel Aviv but I did get pulled aside to be questioned because of where I had just come from. They asked where I would be staying and I was able to show them the reservation email on my iPhone which made them happy.

Today was a Friday and the whole country would be shutting down in the afternoon for the sabbath so my options for transportation and museums were limited. At the info desk they weren't able to contact the Palmach museum that I wanted to visit so I decided to visit the Israel Defense Forces museum instead. I took a train from the airport to Haganna station for 14NIS.

At the station I took a taxi to the museum. I made the dumb mistake of thinking that now that I was in a "western" nation everyone would be friendly and no one would try to rip me off. I ended up getting charged 80NIS for the taxi ride which was obscene. I had been expecting a meter in the taxi and so didn't bother to haggle before I got into it. The museum was closed. I had been so concerned about whether I could go to the Palmach museum that I forgot to double check my notes about the IDF museum. I walked 15 minutes back to the train station, avoided the taxi guys to avoid the embarrassment I was feeling for being ripped off, and took the train north to University station.

The whole time I was in Israel there were always plenty of young soldiers walking around doing their own traveling, many with their M-4, M-16, or TAR-21 rifle. While they only had one magazine each, anyone on duty always had a full set of impressive web gear. This was a marked contrast with Egypt.

At University station I walked five minutes to get to the Palmach museum. In the early days of Israel each small community was known as a "kibbutz". They still have some of them around. The self defense force for each kibbutz was the "haganna". During WWII the British formed a special defense force known as the "palmach" from haganna members with the intent of using them to prevent German attacks on the area. After Rommel was defeated at El Alamein the British shut the palmach down. The members went underground and lived in special self sustaining communities, spending half their time doing military training. After WWII the palmach was one of the primary forces fighting against the British Mandate.

On the museum's website it says that you need to register ahead of time to visit. I had tried but their email wasn't working. I showed up hoping for the best and was able to get in on one of the tours. The tour was in Hebrew but they had special listening devices to give prerecorded versions of what was being said in English. The "tour" was great. The group went from room to room and each room was dressed up to look like a scene from one part of the palmach's history. On one of the walls would be displayed a video of actors portraying what happened there. You followed a small group of palmach members from the days of WWII, through fighting the British, smuggling Jews out of Europe, waiting for independence, and the 1948 War of Independence. It was a very emotional experience and very well done. If I could sum up the Israeli national mindset that I encountered it would be the phrase that I kept hearing the whole trip, "we're still here." National survival is a very real issue for them.

After the museum I rushed back to the train station through a nice light sprinkle and took the train back to Haganna station. It was late afternoon and I needed to catch the last

train to Jerusalem before everything shut down. I had bought a 14:30 ticket. I had thought that the last train was at 14:00, but I was sure that the ticket lady with her poor English knew best. I jumped on what I thought was the right train from Haganna and after napping woke up in HaRishonim where the train shut down. I have no idea what happened. The few people left in the station gave me advice on how to get back to Tel Aviv. At the adjoining bus stop I jumped on a “sharoot” yellow minibus back to Tel Aviv’s Central Bus Station (CBS).

Inside the CBS there were still some of the large Egged (national bus company) busses leaving but none of the ticket desks were open. I walked over to the train station and it was shutting down too. Not happy. On my map of Tel Aviv I had marked the location that I had thought of staying at, the Florentine Hostel. I walked over to its general location on the map and just couldn’t find it. Trying to ask one local about it I started my conversation with, “Youth Hostel?,” and he thought I was saying, “Are you hostile?,” which took a moment to correct. After wandering for some time I found the Beit Immanuel hostel and checked in. They gave me a very nice room which had its own kitchen. I went out looking for dinner and almost everything was completely shut down by now. At a small convenience store I bought some orange flavored bread and brought that back. Back in the hostel a worship service was starting. It turned out that the hostel was associated with the Beit Immanuel church across the street and usually hosted mission groups coming through. I found out that the price for the one night was 210NIS which was a lot.

I ended the day having paid way too much to a taxi driver, was in the wrong city, and was paying a ton for a room. Once again my first day in a new place had gone poorly.

27 March - Jerusalem

National busses and trains were scheduled to start again in the late afternoon so I needed to find ways to keep myself busy. I was sort of planning to walk down to the touristy Old Jaffa port district and maybe see if the local zoo was open. I checked out and was mentioning my problem to the British girl working at the counter, and she explained that the sharoot buses were still running. They’re run by Arabs who don’t care if it’s the sabbath. She showed me on my map where to catch them by the CBS. I immediately changed my plans and walked back to the CBS. The CBS itself was locked shut so I had to find an alley to urinate in, but then I caught one of the minibuses just as it was leaving.

It only cost around 30NIS and I was dropped off sort of near the New Gate of the old city in Jerusalem. I found my way to the Jaffa Gate, bought some cinnamon rolls, and visited the visitor center there. It was a one minute walk to the Jaffa Gate Hostel where I checked in and was sort of back on schedule. I told the staff that I wanted to go on the Masada trip that they were advertising and they said they’d try contacting the people running it for me.

From there I crossed the street to the Tower of David. It’s a fortress inside the wall that now serves as a museum and I learned a lot about the history of Jerusalem. I stayed

there for a little over an hour till we all got kicked out at closing time which is 14:00 on Saturdays. One of the things that I learned is that after the 70 AD tearing down of the 2nd temple the Romans put a temple of Jupiter on the temple mount. The museum had many models of how the city looked throughout the last 3,000 years.

After that I waited for the free afternoon tour which was supposed to start at 14:30 at the Jaffa Gate, but I had been given wrong information and it wasn't running. I walked through the southern part of the old city to the Western Wall. There I got yelled at for accidentally walking into the women's portion and then got yelled at for walking into the men's portion without putting on one of the free white skull caps that I hadn't noticed. At the wall under the arch they have places where you can look down under where the road's been built up to where ground level used to be, which helps to show how high the wall really is.

From there I walked north into the Muslim quarter to try to find the Pool of Bethesda. In this area I could start to see that the Arabs really are second class citizens. I eventually found it inside a church compound but didn't pay to go in. From there I walked along the route that has the 15 stations of the cross to the church of the Holy Sepulchre. I'm still not sure what's so special about either of those but the Wikipedia entry for the later about the fighting over the site by the different denominations is sad / funny. At the church they were doing some Saturday evening Greek Orthodox religious event.

I returned to Jaffa Gate, bought some nice pizza with green olives, and returned to the hostel. I told the staff that I'd rather just do the Masada trip by myself. I sat in the TV room eating my pizza and talked to some retired Australians doing the typical Australian multi-month vacation. One of them was a 70-year old retired school teacher who enjoyed Civil War re-enactment and was looking forward to the upcoming Gettysburg anniversary. The other one told a tale of how he'd forgotten his backpack near an American embassy somewhere, the bomb squad had taken it, and how he'd gotten the bag back from them.

28 March - Masada

I got up at 06:00, bought some warm cinnamon rolls, and walked about thirty minutes to the Jerusalem CBS. I paid 44NIS for a ticket to Masada. At the station they had a store selling backpacks and other backpacking equipment, and weapon mod kits. Awesome.

It was a 1:44 ride to Masada. You can pay extra at the site to take a cable car up to the top but I did the 45 minute (suggested) climb in thirty minutes. Masada is a flat top hill by the Dead Sea south east of Jerusalem. Herod the Great turned it into a fortress and palace for himself and the Jews used it during the rebellion. After Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD the Romans besieged Masada in 72/73 AD. The cliffs are rather hard to scale so they spent months building an earthen ramp up to it which they rolled a siege tower up. When it was clear that the Romans would break in the next day the ~1000 Jews there killed themselves as an act of defiance. They burned all their possessions to keep the Romans from getting any booty, but left the food alone to show that they hadn't been starved out.

Being in an arid area water was a major issue. Masada is covered in *giant* cisterns. They had a set of partial dams which redirected water from flash floods in nearby dry rivers into the cisterns. I say partial dams because apparently some settlers in the last century tried living nearby and built complete dams across the riverbeds. The flash floods destroyed the dams leaving no water for them. The early Jews had apparently left gaps in their dams to keep the pressure against them from getting too high. Herod's system worked so well that he had a swimming pool built.

On Masada I paid 20NIS to rent a listening device and walked around from point to point. Herod's main palace had a huge set of supply rooms in which they found amphorae from Rome. He also had a full three-stage Roman bath. I walked down the Roman ramp and walked along one of the water channels to see some of the cisterns. This was worth doing but on top there is a cistern that you can actually walk down into. I spent about 3:15 on top and took 22 minutes to walk down at the end. I caught the first bus back to Jerusalem at 14:30 and the driver was listening to American hip hop from a Jordanian radio station.

Back in Jerusalem I bought more pizza for dinner and got cleaned up. I had rinsed some of my clothes in the sink to remove some of the stink but they still smelled. Next time I'll have to consider bringing a separate small bag in which to put soapy water to make my own washing machine. At this stage in a trip I'm always segregating out my least smelly clothes to wear on the flight home.

29 March - Hezekiah and Home

I got up at 06:00 but no food vendors were out yet so I returned to the hostel. I left later and bought some horrible tasting rolls so I only ate one of them. I walked south east towards the City of David which is outside the old city walls. The City of David is an archaeological park and where it is believed that David's palace and the homes of the nobility were. I bought a ticket, some yogurt, and did a little walking around before sitting down to wait for my tour to start. I got a chance to talk to one of the workers there who was complaining about other workers being tardy. He had grown up on a kibbutz and was used to getting up early and working hard even before breakfast. Then he talked about the military draft situation. In the old days those who didn't want to serve their country would claim insanity, but now kids will try to get medical deferrals before switching to insanity.

Our tour guide took us to a short 3D movie about the site before we went down a tunnel to the main feature which is the Zihon spring. The spring was essential to the city but in a sort of outlying position on the hillside which made defense challenging. To improve this, King Hezekiah built a tunnel redirecting the flow of the spring back along the hill inside the city to the Siloam pool. You could see how in the original tunnel leading from the hilltop down to the spring bronze age axes had been used to make very rough swinging cuts in the stone while in the lower Hezekiah tunnel iron age tools had made very smooth cuts.

We got to walk through the tunnel. The guide had forgotten his water shoes and I hadn't brought any so we did it barefoot while the other people on the tour used water shoes or flip flops. We had all brought flashlights. The very start and end of the tunnel were painful because I had to walk barefoot over metal grating but the tunnel itself was fairly smooth with calve height water flowing through it. The unlit tunnel is slightly wider than an adult's shoulders and took ~45 minutes to walk through. Workers on it started at the ends and worked towards each other. The tunnel was designed with broad S-curves instead of being straight so that the two sides would have a higher chance of running into each other.

After the City of David I returned to the hostel, got my backpack, and took a quick shower before walked to the CBS. I took an Egged bus to Ben Guiron airport and probably got off too soon as I found myself outside the main road entrance. A guard stopped me to talk and explained that it was 5 km to the terminal which I was fine with now that my feet had gotten fully calloused. I only got stopped by one of guard during my walk along the road. When I was about 1 km from the terminal a guy driving there stopped to give me a lift. I got randomly stopped and searched by a guard in front of terminal and then went inside. I bought a sandwich for dinner, with flatbread only, and read for a few hours. Passover was starting so there weren't too many people there. I finished reading "Ender's Shadow".

Around 20:00 I got into line to get my boarding pass. My carry on bag had to go through an x-ray machine and get tagged, and then I got into the next line to have the contents inspected. Either because the sniffer machine didn't like something or because of the other countries I'd been in, I got pulled aside and taken to another private search. This was fine with me as I had plenty of time and was getting a chance to see something new. They took all my things including my wallet into a room that I couldn't see. As I was putting all my stuff back together I got talking to one of the guards who had noticed my military ID and told him some of my Iraq experiences. He was a Merkava (tank) crew member and we talked about IEDs vs the losses their tanks had taken in Lebanon from ATGMs. I told him how impressed we were with their recent Gaza offensive.

Because of the thorough search I'd just been through they took me around the next set of metal detectors and the exit passport check was standard. On the twelve hour flight to Newark I mostly slept but also watched some Futurama and the second Borne movie. In Newark it took me a while to find the train to the proper terminal because some genius had given it the name "AirTrain" which looks just like "AirTran" which is an airline company.

Preparation

To physically prepare for this trip I spent the preceding two weeks walking 2-4 miles each day with 10 - 30 lbs in my backpack. This was better than nothing but by day three of the actual trip I was going lame and it wasn't until day 5 or so that my feet got fairly tough. I'm not sure what the solution is, as being employed and having many activities in my life precludes much further training.

I spent about 75 hours planning and rehearsing for this trip. This included general locale selection, sub-site selection, transportation and lodging booking, activity review and numerous cycles of refinement. I once again found that getting all my equipment out a few weeks ahead of time and then doing a detailed step by step map rehearsal revealed many issues and increased my confidence.

Expenses Not Including Lost Equipment & Wear and Tear

Major Transportation: \$1962

Taxis, Buses, Metro: \$209

Food: \$99

Lodging: \$103

Sites: \$124

Misc: \$90 ("tips", cat sitter, etc)

Total: \$2587

After Action Review

Good

- small compass
- Storing site locations on GPS, iPhone, printed out for redundancy
- iPhone allowed phone calls and using WiFi to email + surf, music player, many books thus saving space and weight
- One pair of pants. Not bringing a spare saved space and weight. Zip-off backpacking pants provide options for warm weather and have plenty of pockets for equipment.
- 18-55mm lens. I had considered bringing my 35/1.8 lens but many shots were made at full wide angle and I still had to do several panoramas.
- Water bladder + iodine. Lightweight, collapsable, saved tons of money over buying water.
- Ear plugs. So helpful.
- CampSuds soap. Useful for bathing with, shaving with, potentially useful for laundry.
- Long sleeve wicking layer. All I ever needed for insulation plus since I rarely wore it, it didn't smell at the end of the trip.
- Marmot PreCip. Nice softshell with large pockets to hold equipment.
- 3 pairs of socks. Seems to be the right balance.
- Backpack. I bought an REI Traverse 30 specifically for this trip. It's a daypack with a hip belt to save my back, its colors don't draw attention, and at 1,831 cubic inches provided the size I needed without being too big.
- McDonalds. I don't care for it more than anyone else, but it has a known level of quality and they can break large notes for you. In the third world McDonalds is more expensive than other restaurants which is one down side.

Bad

- lost GPS, should have had it dummy corded
- Smelly clothes. My clothing choices are based on what won't smell too bad after several days of wear. I need to devise a simple laundry solution.

- Money. I brought ~80% more foreign currency than I thought I'd need from my calculations and I still ended up visiting the ATM numerous times in Egypt and Israel.
- Fancy sunglasses. I love my prescription Oakleys but they stand out and cost several hundred dollars, making them risky to bring.
- Camera. I strongly prefer my DSLR to a point and shoot, but 95% of my shots were during the day of static scenes, so perhaps a light small P&S would have been better. Still, street cred for having a DSLR is worth something.
- Distance scales. When I print out a screen shot from Google Maps I need to include distance indicators.

Things I brought but didn't use

- Extra camera batteries for my Nikon D40
- Silk mummy liner for sleeping in
- Eye mask
- Neck gaiter
- Padlock (but has been useful on other trips)

Things I wish I'd brought

- brimmed hat