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Shalom
by
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Shalom! Greetings from all our friends in Israel and boy, it sure is good to be back on American soil. Judy and I returned last Tuesday after 10 days of flying, bussing, walking and contemplating in the land where our country's spiritual roots are located and I can honestly say I've never seen so many blocks of limestone lying about on top of the ground in my life. Excavating for archeological digs are everywhere in Israel. All the blocks don't necessarily represent long forgotten communities being uncovered, however. Limestone is the primary building material used over there... probably because the whole country seems to be made of the stuff and there are new buildings going up on every hillside. The building code in Jerusalem prescribes that all buildings should be covered with natural stone. Although this makes building costs somewhat more expensive, it gives the city a very distinct look in comparison with other cities, in the sense that absolutely every building... personal, business or government... is the same color. Only few buildings, mostly from the 1950s, were not built according to this code.

I won't be giving you the full story today since I haven't gotten all my thoughts together as yet... (Jet Lag and all that, you know)... so I'll just give you a perfunctory glimpse of what we did when. For those of you who have never been... be ye Christian, Jewish or otherwise... a trip to Israel should be a must do on your list of things to do. If you are a Christian then it is doubly important that you make the 11 hour flight and see what started this whole "Jewish/Christian/Muslim religion" thing throughout the whole world.

I had no idea as to what to expect when we got there, although I had visions in my head as to how certain things would look. Unfortunately, nothing was as I thought it would or should be. Is it ever? The country has come a long way since its officially recognized inception as a formal nation of its own. Starting with 650,000 residents in the late 40's Israel's population is now close to 6.3 Million, with 650,000 living in Jerusalem alone. Of the 6.3 Million approximately 1.5 Million are Arabs, something of which many people are not aware.

We were fortunate to stay in fairly modern hotels... a 3 Star Hotel in Tiberias and a 4 Star Hotel in Jerusalem. Very nice rooms and service, however, by the time the trip was over most everyone in the group were looking for the familiar Golden Arches of McDonalds to get a taste of America. It wasn't that the food was bad... it wasn't, however, it wasn't good either. There were a few in our group that would eat anything placed before them, but my taste buds refused to allow some of the Middle East delicacies to pass over my lips. The coffee was strong and bitter for the most part and the meat, of any origin of species, was bland and pretty much tasteless.

There were plenty of vegetable dishes with rice being the grain of choice on which to place them, but potatoes were prepared in a way that seemed to make them tasteless as well. There are some who say I'm a picky eater but I would prefer to think of myself as one with a discerning palate. It is my belief, as bourgeois as it may seem that food is there to enjoy and not just to sustain life. It must have taste and a personality that is pleasing to my taste buds. The majority of food I encountered in Israel did not meet those criteria. Most in our group of 30 agreed with me but none of us felt it was a reason to refrain from visiting the country.

As I stated I am intentionally keeping my remarks about the trip limited to generalities rather than specifics because there were so many good things we encountered I don't want to dilute the impact of them with words spoken too hastily.

The weather was perfect and the timing was right for the trip as well. The only rain we encountered was a quick storm that arose as we were crossing the Sea of Galilee on an open boat. It had a cover but the sides were open and the rain blew in, pushed by a 10-20 mph wind. It didn't dampen our spirits however and we were rewarded with one of our best meals on the trip... Peter's Fish fried whole (with head on) and served with a soup, salad and Pita bread. The restaurant was operated by members of a kibbutz located on the shores of Galilee and was packed. I guess good food is appreciated by most everyone.

The trip was planned well and the guide who led us each day had a degree in Archeology and one in History and had participated in several of the archeological digs throughout the country. He was passionate about Israel and the Christian heritage of the country. He literally made many of the sites come alive in a way that few people could.

For those of you who have been delaying a trip to Israel because of fear of violence my advice would be to not allow that to be a deterrent. With proper restrictions put upon oneself, the country of Israel is no more dangerous to the average tourist than it would be to go to many large American cities. In fact it might be safer since Israeli soldiers are everywhere and most businesses on the street usually have armed security personnel at their entrances. The Israelis and the Palestinians both want American dollars to come and come often. They need those dollars to come, therefore they will both treat you with a guarded respect knowing you are keeping their economies healthy.

I will tell you more in the coming weeks as I am able so stay tuned for more. See you next week.

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