

The Holy Land

Witnessing layers
of history, culture
and belief in Israel

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREA PERRY

The limestone walls that surround the Old City of Jerusalem are a beautiful pale yellow. They are huge – averaging 12 metres tall – and pocked with bullet holes. Depending on where you want to go within, you can pass through the walls at any one of seven arched gates. There is an eighth gate on the eastern side, but it has been sealed since medieval times and awaits the coming of the Messiah.

This is the Holy City.

We pass a team of armed Israeli Defense Force soldiers and enter through the Damascus Gate. Moving inward, it is tight. Shops of all sorts press together, and hanging fabric blocks parts of the sky. The air is a dense blend of spice and incense.

The slender limestone streets match the perimeter walls and are smooth underfoot. My friend and I are in a rush, and it takes some effort to walk quickly without slipping on the worn stone or shouldering one of the many locals out shopping for their daily goods. I sidestep a small elderly woman and divert my eyes from a coloured arrangement of dried fruit before the seller has enough time to ask if I want to try. It feels silly to hurry along streets that have stood in place for thousands of years but it's my first day in the city, and we're late trying to get to high ground.

We reach the Tower of David – not really a tower but the ruins of an ancient citadel on the western edge of the Old City – and from the top of the citadel, we can see

.....
The Dome of the Rock – a rich golden dome on a base of blue mosaic tile – sits on the raised stone platform of Temple Mount.

Jerusalem from above. A long cloud shaped like an angel's wing sweeps over the city underneath the mid-morning sun.

The Tower of David doubles as a museum, and my friend has paid 15 shekels each for audio guides. We hold the guides close to our ears as a cold wind moves past.

The Old City is divided into quarters: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Armenian. I examine the rooftops spread out in front of me and think I can see where one section morphs into another. Crosses, minarets, and Israeli state flags stand up among coils of barbed wire, snaking electrical wire, satellite dishes and clothing drying on lines. A chained German shepherd on a nearby rooftop barks under a yellow and white Papal flag.

Outside the walls to the East, the deep green slope of the Mount of Olives commands attention. It is the site of several significant Christian events, including the ascension of Christ and the birth of Christianity's fundamental prayer, the "Our

Father." It is also the location of the oldest (3,000 years) and most important Jewish cemetery.

Even at this distance, I can see thousands of stone coffins spread out over the earth, and the voice in my ear explains that, in the Jewish faith, this is where the resurrection of the dead will begin.

Undoubtedly, though, looking out over the Old City, it is the brilliant gold of the Dome of the Rock that draws the most attention and sunlight.

The Dome of the Rock – a rich golden dome on a base of blue mosaic tile – sits on the raised stone platform of Temple Mount. It is set apart visually and in spiritual significance. The current building is an Islamic Shrine; however, its previous incarnations have seen it exist twice as a Jewish temple and once as a Roman temple venerating the god Jupiter. The many iterations of the structure are fascinating, but the guide informs me that it is the rock within the building that bears great worth.

In Jewish belief, the rock is the foundation stone: the first piece of creation around which God crafted the entire Earth. In the Islamic faith, it is the rock upon which the Prophet Muhammad placed his foot before ascending to heaven at the end of his life. And for Christians, it is the rock on which Abraham intended to sacrifice his son, Isaac, before God intervened to stay Abraham's hand, instead promising Himself (God) as a future sacrifice in the form of Christ.

In this divided city, each major religion falls on top of the other to rest on a single location. It is a stunning convergence of history and belief.

The reflected sunlight sparkles as I stare at the Dome of the Rock for some time, beholding the heart of Jerusalem.

The Dome of the Rock is the core around which my impression of Jerusalem and the rest of Israel forms. Over the next two weeks, as my friend and I travel through a number of cities, my

focus is on layers, divisions and meeting points. It is not at all difficult to spot them.

We wake early one morning to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an expansive stone structure in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem. The Church is believed to be built over the two holiest sites in Christianity: the location of Christ's crucifixion as well as the tomb in which he was buried and resurrected. Prior to the construction of the church, a temple to Venus stood on this site.

As we enter the church, we pass a group of Christian pilgrims bent and weeping over a stone slab meant to represent the place where Christ's body was lain after he was removed from the cross; and I feel a strange combination of energy. There is a severe heaviness, reinforced by a hazy layer of incense and an abundance of ornate decorations of wood and gold. Yet when I look to the ceiling in the main room, a large, round portal opens to the light morning sky and I can't help but think of Venus, Goddess of Love. The daylight from the portal fills the room, merging with the light of a row of candles burning before the stooped entrance to Christ's tomb.

We join a line of pilgrims and tourists and file into and out of the shrine constructed around the tomb. As we exit, although I feel the weight of collective density that fills the church, I smile at a large painting of Mary, Mother of Love, steadfast in sunlight.

We drive a rental van 30 minutes south of Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and at the Church of the Nativity, the story is similar. Previously the location of a temple dedicated to the Greek god Adonis, the church is believed by Christians to stand upon the site of Christ's birth. Having been raised Roman Catholic and being familiar with the story of Jesus, I am expecting something akin to a simple manger; but in the main hall of the church I'm surprised by lavish ornamentation. Dozens of gold and silver censers hang by chains from the ceiling, coloured glass bulbs refract various beams of light, and an enormous gold-leafed wall display



PROTECT YOUR INVESTMENT

WITH PAINT PROTECTION FILM

...THE BEST PROTECTION YOU'LL NEVER SEE

A VIRTUALLY INVISIBLE BARRIER AGAINST:

STONE CHIPS ROAD DEBRIS DAMAGE INSECT STAINS

KARRITE 519.743.6307 www.karrite.ca
1486 VICTORIA ST. N. KITCHENER

ARTEFACTS

salvage & design



Console Table
Half a mill wheel found in Hamilton c 1880
with a 150 year old pine barn floor top.



Custom Creations
Deliberately Different

30 years offering the best in architectural salvage and its creative re-use.
Each piece as unique as its owner.

519 664-3760

St Jacobs

artefacts.ca

Flashback

IN TIME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Marking the 140th anniversary of
The Waterloo Region Record's publication,
Flash from the Past: Kitchener-Waterloo
in 140 Photographs, showcases
the column's best.

Only **\$26.95***

THIS ONE-OF-A-KIND COLLECTION MAKES
AN EXCELLENT GIFT THIS HOLIDAY SEASON!

AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE
160 King Street East in downtown Kitchener
and online at www.therecordstore.ca

*Price includes taxes.

QUALITY COLLISION REPAIRS



CSN COLLISION CENTRE. **REGENCY**

CSN Regency Kitchener

150 Alpine Rd, Kitchener - (519) 744-8421

CSN Regency Waterloo

140 Lexington Ct, Waterloo - (519) 885-3800

LIKENEW.CA

venerates not only Jesus but also an array of saints and angels demonstrating various characteristics and functions.

I wonder how dissimilar it may be to what an honouring of Adonis – god of Beauty and Desire – may have looked like.

Behind and underneath the main display, we wait with a pack of other visitors to enter the birth chamber. It is not a manger, but a cave in which Mary is believed to have given birth to the Son of God.

The air is hot with light, incense and breath; and the line has not moved for some time. A low, steady chant drifts out from the cave, and we realize that a prayer service of some kind has stalled the flow of visitors.

When we do finally enter, I am once more taken aback by the décor. It's not the lavishness that surprises me this time, but the fact that the majority of images adorning the chamber are of suns. The small section of stone of the original cave that is still visible – worn smooth and black from the touches and kisses of millions of pilgrims – is also surrounded by an image of the sun.

The similarity of the words “sun” and “son” does not escape me, and I wonder at the enduring eras of human thought that have known the Sun to be God.

In addition to the layers of religion, Bethlehem is also a place of great political and cultural complexity. Located in the West Bank, Bethlehem forms part of the Occupied Territories. By international law, the territories belong to the Palestinian Authority; however, they have been forcefully occupied by Israel since 1967.

One of Christianity's holiest cities is an Arab land under Zionist (Jewish Nationalist) control.

As we depart toward the northern edge of the city, a concrete wall about eight metres high and rimmed with barbed wire faces us. It is the West Bank Barrier, built by Israel to prevent Palestinians from leaving the Occupied Territories.

I get out of the van to walk along the barrier. I pass underneath an active machine-gun nest and take in the mosaic of graffiti that covers the wall. An image of a Palestinian freedom fighter holding a grenade overlaps with a quickly sprayed, “No Peace Without Love.” A few feet above, a blue and red apology from an American reads, “Sorry my tax dollars paid for this.” The painted concrete is colourful, beautifully artistic, powerfully political and deeply saddening.

Back in the van, my friend holds up his Canadian diplomat passport and a young Israeli Defense Force (IDF) border guard waves us through the security checkpoint.

On later days, we drive to other West Bank cities, including Jericho – potentially the oldest city on the planet – and Ramallah, the current political capital of Palestine. Each time we successfully pass through an IDF checkpoint, we are acutely aware of the immense privilege it is to visit the Occupied Territories and to leave.

While my friend is at work in Jerusalem, I take a bus two hours north to the Mediterranean city of Haifa. I visit the Baha'i World Centre and tour its famous terraced gardens. I admire the central teachings of the Baha'i faith, which assert that all religions – although they have different characteristics and founding prophets – are ultimately united in purpose: to bring the world into spiritual union and peace.

I stand in an olive grove on the lower terrace of the gardens and examine the glinting Shrine of the Bab. The tour guide explains that the Bab, whose name means “gate” or “doorway,” is the forerunning prophet to the Baha'i faith. The shrine is closed to visitors for the afternoon, but I can feel the presence of the doorway. It is as if there is an intangible opening in the atmosphere – the sensation of a possible route out of separation and into unity.

Birds sound from the surrounding trees, and I bow slightly toward the shrine, whispering, “Thank You.”

There are moments of rest from the complex, layered reality of Israel. We drive south and hike through the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve, forgoing the high, dry path to walk in the cool spring water flowing along the wadi. We strip to swimsuits and dip our heads under the rush of a secluded waterfall. On the way back, we watch a herd of ibex slowly descending the far side of the ravine, and I have a renewed appreciation for the peaceful neutrality of nature.

Down the road from Ein Gedi, we step carefully across a shoreline of hardened salt and float weightlessly in the Dead Sea.

We drive further south to the border town of Eilat, and I sit under a full moon on the bank of the Red Sea. I am aware that this is yet another point of convergence: The territory of Jordan – which has a long history of violent conflict with Israel – is visible across the water, and the borders of Egypt and Saudi Arabia are only a short distance away. Yet I feel grace in the glow of the moon that casts itself equally and without prejudice onto all of the land below.

With three days left in the trip, word comes down that, in less than 48 hours, Donald Trump will announce that the United States formally recognizes Jerusalem as the state capital of Israel.

It is a move that is expected to cause significant unrest, since both Palestine and Israel consider Jerusalem to be their true capital; and the decades-long international peace endeavour within the region has focused on a two-state, shared-capital solution.

I'm back in Jerusalem and decide to visit the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount ahead of the announcement, anticipating that, if there is subsequent conflict, it could be centred on this contentious, shared location between Islam and Judaism.

In other words: I have to see it now, in case it's too dangerous tomorrow.

I enter a covered wooden walkway that rises from the ground level of the Old City to Temple Mount. It is the only entrance available for non-Muslim visitors, and I'm mixed with a group of European tourists. At security, a female IDF guard looks through my backpack and asks, “What religion are you?”

“Secular,” I say without thinking, and the guard smiles, stepping aside so I can pass through the metal detector.

From the height of the walkway, I pause to observe the Western Wall below. The wall – forming a portion of the western barrier around Temple Mount – is the closest that Orthodox Jews are able to get to the Dome of the Rock.

In the Jewish faith, in addition to containing the foundation stone of creation, the Dome of the Rock is believed to sit upon the “holy of holies” – essentially, the place where God dwelt – and is considered too sacred to be approached too closely. Beneath the walkway, worshippers press their foreheads to the wall and slip folded prayer notes into crevices between the stones.

On Temple Mount, I walk slowly around the Dome, taking in every angle. Although the three major monotheistic religions disagree about the reasons why this location is important, there is consensus: It is crucially significant. Being a non-Muslim, I can't go inside, but I hesitate near the entrance, as close as I can get without showing disrespect.

I may simply be tuning in to the collective belief, or it may be my own instinct sounding an alert, but as I stand in front of the shrine, I do feel there is truth in the claim that this precise point on Earth is uniquely essential. Whether by divine orchestration or human creation, higher prophecy or the human mind and its incredible capacity for self-fulfilling prophecy, it seems certain that something has happened and that something will happen here.

I turn away from the entrance, predicting that one day I will return. 

CERTIFIED COLLISION CENTRES



CSN COLLISION CENTRE. **GOLDEN TRIANGLE**

CSN Golden Triangle Guelph

215 Dawson Rd, Guelph - (519) 824-5550

CSN Golden Triangle Cambridge

435 Sheldon Dr, Cambridge - (519) 622-1055

LIKENEW.CA