TONY WHEELER'S

# DARK LANDS


**LONELY PLANET PUBLICATIONS**
Melbourne • Oakland • London

Tony Wheeler's Dark Lands

Published by Lonely Planet Publications 2013

90 Maribyrnong Street, Footscray, Victoria, 3011, Australia
150 Linden Street, Oakland CA 94607, USA
201 Wood Ln, London, W12 7Tq, United Kingdom

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Cover Design by Roberto Devicq
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Printed by Hang Tai Printing Company, Hong Kong
Printed in China

1st Editon

978 1 74321 846 4

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# INTRODUCTION

My first thought, when George W. Bush announced his Axis of Evil, was 'I want to go there.' Well, who wouldn't? He'd inadvertently created an adventurer's travel wish list: Iran, Iraq and North Korea, three countries that were worse than bad; they were positively evil. The fact that Iran and Iraq were sworn enemies who'd fought each other for eight years didn't seem to matter.

So I trekked around Mr Bush's Axis of Evil and then, for good measure, added six other countries that for assorted reasons had been labelled 'bad' to create my 2007 book *Bad Lands*. Afghanistan, home of the Taliban and temporary residence of Osama bin Laden, was – pre-invasion at least – clearly rotten to the core. Burma? Well, imprisoning a heroic Nobel Peace Prize winner would earn any country a bad tag,

even before you ran the economy into the ground. Cuba was clearly a wicked place: for fifty years every American president had dedicated himself to getting rid of Fidel Castro and imposing some regime change. Gaddafi, thoroughly evil and with a Michael Jackson–like enthusiasm for theatrical outfits, still ruled Libya at the time so his desert dictatorship deserved a place on the list too. Saudi Arabia was a shoo-in: not only did they oppress women, condemn most of us as infidels and chop hands and heads off, but they also provided almost all of the 9/11 hijackers.

Finally I tossed in Albania, not because the poor Albanians had been very bad to anybody apart from themselves, but because it had been such a weird little locked-away place, with a man – Enver Hoxha – who ticked that important box for any ruthless and corrupt bad-land leader: having a big-time personality cult. None of the friendly Albanians I met during my travels were particularly worried about being lumped in with a bunch of genuinely bad nations; their response seemed to be, 'call us bad, call us anything, just notice we're here.'

My travels through the bad lands turned out to be interesting, educational and, perhaps surprisingly, enjoyable, so a follow-up seemed an obvious plan. I'd even concluded the first book with an extended list of other troubled places I could have tagged on; a number of them feature in this book. 'Bad', however, wasn't the word I wanted. Apart from a little shonky banking, Nauru wasn't really bad; it was more misguided, silly, credulous and exploited. 'Troubled States' is certainly accurate;

they were all in trouble of some sort or another. 'Failed States' is also a precise, or perilously close to precise, definition for some of them. 'Weird Lands' is pretty truthful too: in one way or another visiting each of these countries turned out to be a weird experience. Eventually 'Dark Lands' emerged, and felt right: each had some distinctly dark shadows in its story, which to a greater or lesser extent coloured the atmosphere of the country today.

Mr Bush managed to sneak through once more with a secondary theme. On 1 May 2003 he stood on the deck of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* and announced, 'Mission accomplished.' As in any good opera, the words were surtitled above him, across the ship's 'island'. The invasion of Iraq had succeeded and democracy and peace would inevitably follow (although those pesky weapons of mass destruction had yet to be ferreted out).

He might as well have said, 'Pandora's box opened.' We'd done it: we'd marched into Iraq, got all the way to Baghdad, pulled down some statues, got rid of that mosaic of Bush Senior at the entrance to the Al Rashid Hotel and had not only found Pandora's Box, hidden away in one of Saddam's palaces, but we'd levered the damn thing open.

Pandora, in Greek mythology, is the first woman, given a box by Zeus, father of the Gods, with strict instructions not to open it. (In fact it was a jar, but perhaps a box sounded better.) Naturally Pandora opens it and quickly discovers that her little gift contains all the evil in the world – and, once all that trouble has escaped, there is no way of stuffing it back in. Plenty of people had warned Bush, Blair and Howard not to

invade Iraq – not to open that Pandora's box – but they were ignored. By May 2003, when he stood on the aircraft carrier, Mr Bush hadn't yet conducted an inventory of what, exactly, had escaped and which impossible problems might need to be overcome before the mission could really be accomplished. Clearly, however, a box had been opened.

Just as Iraq turned out to be a Pandora's box, full of problems we'd rather not have to address, each of my new dark land destinations also triggered memories of myths and fairytales. The ancient Hydra found a new setting in the hills of Pakistan; Rumpelstiltskin and King Midas echoed through the mines of Papua New Guinea. The morals of each tale were clear as I moved from country to country, some better heeded than others. I'd set out to travel through dark lands, but they ended up being fairytale lands too, which I suppose makes sense when you consider how dark fairytales can be.

Well before the Iraq invasion I'd concluded that most of modern life's dangers and pitfalls could be neatly summed up in fairytales. One of my favourite contemporary examples, *The Princess Bride*, borrows a warning from recent history. 'You fool,' the Sicilian outlaw Vizzini announces to his rival. 'You fell victim to one of the classic blunders. The most famous of which is: Never get involved in a land war in Asia.'

We're regularly warned of the dangers of ignoring history's lessons, but why wait until we're old enough to study history? We tell our children fairytales to warn them about how life works, the risks that lie in wait for them. Perhaps we too should be listening a little more closely the next time someone brings out Cinderella or Heracles.

# ISRAEL & PALESTINE

The old Uncle Remus tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby sums up the Israel and Palestine entanglement. Two sides trying to extricate themselves from each other only to find they become further enmeshed as the struggle goes on. You can argue about which side is rabbit and which side baby, but there's no question that the entanglement is a sticky one, and the more the two sides fight the harder it becomes to separate them. Every settlement, every stretch of wall, ties the two countries more closely together.

'At last,' I think, as a boulder hurtles towards me.

Go to Sicily and you'd expect to have a bag snatched by a passing scooter rider. In Ireland you're likely to consume one too many Guinnesses and regret it in the morning. Try to use your French in Paris and you'd be disappointed if it wasn't corrected at least once. I'd already been arrested in the Congo, so getting stoned in Palestine was just another rite of passage.

Israel and Palestine, individually and collectively, were top contenders for a position on my dark lands list. Although it took a week for the first stone to come my way – smaller and less deliberate ones would follow on two occasions – an assortment of other clichés about travel in the region had already lined themselves up.

I flew from Australia via Abu Dhabi to Amman in Jordan, and an hour after my passport was stamped into the country I am stamped out again at the Allenby Crossing into ... well, where am I being stamped into? Is this Palestine? The West

Bank? The Occupied Territories? Or perhaps Judea and Samaria, if I'm willing to accept the most extreme right-wing Israelis, who believe the borders of Israel should extend all the way to the Euphrates River, currently in Iraq.

To my mind, I'm entering Palestine, but the immigration process is under Israeli jurisdiction, and almost immediately, it seems, they confirm all their worst image problems. First the bags are hauled out of the bus luggage compartment and tossed on the ground while we're kept on board. Young people lounge around in jeans toting big guns. Our first step towards entering wherever we are entering is to go through security, a process that always involves a hint of indignity. Here it's laid on with a shovel.

The shoddy queues and boxes the officials sit in shout the message clearly: 'You're a third-world people and we're giving you a third-world experience.' My progress halts at the desk where I'm quizzed on why I'm here, where I'm going, who I'm seeing. I've got an Israeli friend's name, phone number and address in Tel Aviv at the top of my list, but that doesn't do anything and I'm passed on to a second window and a second interview with a very young soldier. He soon tires of looking at a long list from my laptop of 'We'll go here, we'll stay there, we'll add this, we'll walk to here, we'll drive there'. Getting into wherever I'm getting into takes well over an hour. And indignity? I'll soon experience worse.

I spend the first couple of days in Bethlehem, close to that famous wall: the much talked about, much photographed division between Israel and Palestine. Prompted by the terrorist attacks during the Second Intifada, construction of the wall

commenced in 2002, and there's no question that there has been a dramatic drop in the number of attacks since that time. So is it the Separation Wall, the Security Wall, the Segregation Wall or even the Apartheid Wall? It depends on who you talk to, but whichever name you decide on, it's difficult to find a weirder example of the wall's idiosyncrasies than at Rachel's Tomb.

Bethlehem and biblical childbirth were connected well before the virgin outing. Rachel, wife of the Old Testament prophet Jacob, died giving birth en route to Hebron from the biblical Shechem, which might be Nablus today. (You can read about it in Genesis.) Jacob installed a pillar at her resting place, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, and, since she was revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims, the tomb became a pilgrimage site for all three religions. It survived right through the Byzantine and Islamic periods, and the Crusader interludes; the current building comes courtesy of the Ottomans. In 1841 Sir Moses Montefiore – English, Jewish and wealthy – financed the restoration of the Ottoman dome and the addition of a vestibule and a mihrab. This was intended to mollify the local Muslims, who were getting fed up with increasing numbers of Jewish pilgrims interrupting ceremonies.

A century and a half later, in 1995, an Israeli military camp was plonked down next to the tomb. Three years after that, it's said that the army destroyed the Montefiore dome and vestibule. Bad, but much worse was to come. In 2006 a finger of the wall was extended into Bethlehem to enclose the tomb and cut it off from the town. From above it looks like a tentacle of the spaghetti monster, or one of those weird US electoral boundaries drawn to ensure a candidate of a certain racial profile is elected.

For Palestinians it meant the tomb was now off limits. For the businesses that had sprung up around the tomb it meant bankruptcy.

I read a lot more on Rachel's Tomb and, of course, there is more than one side to the story. There were regular Palestinian attacks on the tomb prior to the Israeli military arrival. It's also unclear whether the dome and vestibule were destroyed or were simply enclosed within a larger building so the original structure is not visible. Read Jewish websites and you'd think it was never Muslim. Read Muslim ones and the Jews never played a role! It's not unlike the entire country, in that sense.

I start my visit to Rachel's Tomb from near the Bethlehem Intercontinental Hotel. The wall is very picturesquely painted on this stretch and I walk along its labyrinthine path until I get to the checkpoint gate into Israel. I get across quickly because there's no queue, only a handful of people walking through like me. On the Israeli side, I backtrack 100 metres towards Bethlehem, where another gateway blocks the road leading around the wall to the tomb. I'm not allowed to walk the final few hundred metres, so I hitch a ride instead.

After the tomb's annexation, ordinary foreign tourists were not allowed to visit, but things seem to have changed. Still, I'm the only non-Jewish tourist here today; I wander the tomb without a *kippah* (or *yarmulke*, in Yiddish) and after a while, a polite gentleman comes over and offers me one, with the suggestion that it will 'help you to fit in'. Guidebooks suggest that wearing the Jewish skullcap indicates you agree with the tomb being a strictly Jewish site. I say I prefer to remain an outsider. The tomb stands about 3 metres high, shrouded and

then covered again in clear plastic. It's surrounded by black-clad gentlemen, most of them bearded and many wearing wide-brimmed hats, most of them facing the tomb and reading. From the tomb I manage to hitch back and it's a quick march back into Palestine. No security or checks in that direction.

When I get back to the hotel I try to trace my convoluted route along the wall, through the wall and then back along the other side of the wall, on Google Earth. The view is remarkably fuzzy and I puzzle over whether I've got a poor connection or if it's something more sinister. It turns out I've run into the Kyl-Bingaman amendment, which stops Google Earth from buying US satellite imagery of Israel at a higher resolution than they could obtain outside of the US. This is Israel at work; it's said they've twisted the arms of other satellite owners like South Korea or Russia to ensure they also don't sell anything higher resolution. This may all change soon: Turkey's Göktürk satellite was launched by the Chinese at the end of 2012 and will also offer higher resolution imagery. The current state of Israeli–Turkish relations means that arm-twisting might not work so effectively with the Turks. It's a Catch 22 situation – once Google can get higher resolution imagery outside the US they won't need to: when that happens they'll be allowed to buy it within the US. In the meantime, don't try to study things too closely in Israel; you'll get a better view of the back streets of Pyongyang than of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, one of the few places in Palestine that sees a regular flow of international visitors – even if most of them are day-tripped out from Jerusalem and often don't realise they've

crossed over – is followed by a visit to Hebron, where you despair of things ever going well in the West Bank. Before I leave Bethlehem, I hit all the Christian sites, starting with the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, the starting point for all Bethlehem tourism. Is this the exact place where Jesus was born, where a church now stands? There's a fourteen-pointed star on the floor to show precisely where the birth took place, and the site of the manger (a trough or box used to hold feed for an animal) is just a few steps away. It's as good a guess as any, and the micro-drama that plays out here is a fair simulacrum of today's disputes over Israel, Palestine, the West Bank and Gaza. The Christian sects who argue endlessly over ownership of the church are mirrored in the rest of the country by the various Israeli factions, the Palestinian Hamas and Fatah groups and anyone else who'd like to throw their hat in the local property ring. The Armenians, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics all preside over their own bit of the church and get extremely annoyed if one of the others encroaches on their territory.

The next day, I walk from the square to the Milk Grotto, another Christian legend site, hollowed out of white rock. Legend has it that, while Mary nursed Jesus, a drop of her breastmilk fell to the ground, turning it white. Then I take a taxi via Shepherds' Field, where they watched their flocks by night, to Hebron. I grab a shawarma for lunch and walk to the old town, where the souq is sadly quiet. This is an overwhelmingly Palestinian city now, but a Jewish settlement right in the town centre has cast a dark cloud, making Hebron the most difficult urban centre on the West Bank. Settlements can be like poisonous weed: once they take root, everything

around them dies. In Hebron, about 500 Palestinian shops have been closed by the military 'for security purposes' and another thousand have gone out of business. I wander around the area and down one street in the souq which is overlooked by settlers. The Palestinians have had to stretch wire mesh across the street because of settlers throwing stones, bricks and other debris onto people walking below.

The 500 to 800 Jewish settlers in the heart of the old city require up to 4000 Israeli soldiers to look after them, and all sorts of international observers to make sure both settlers and soldiers behave themselves. I enter the Tomb of the Patriarchs and check the cenotaphs of Isaac, Rebecca and the biggie, Abraham, which is shared between the Jewish and Muslim parts of the building. In 1994, Baruch Goldstein, an Israeli doctor from the nearby Kiryat Arba settlement, opened fire on Muslims praying in the Ibrahimi Mosque section of the building, killing twenty-nine and wounding another 125 before he was killed.

I leave the mosque, walk around the building's wall, down the street, up the next street, across the courtyard and into the Jewish part of the building, where I look at Abraham's tomb from the other corner. You can peer around the corner of the tomb and see people in the other part of the building. A glass, presumably bulletproof, screen means they can't take pot shots at each other.

My religious outing for the day complete, I meet up with Walid Al-Halaweh of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee. We admire the view of the old city from the rooftop of their fine old building and then walk over to Shuhada Street. This is the controversial separation street that runs right through

the centre of the old town and for some distance is off limits to Palestinians and their vehicles. Walid explains that simply driving from one side of the street, once a major thoroughfare, to the other can mean a 12-kilometre circuit for a Palestinian. Hebron is divided into Palestinian-controlled H1, with about 120,000 people, and Israeli military–controlled H2, with about 30,000 Palestinians and 700 Israelis. Palestinians can only approach the settler properties in H2 with special permits. The Israeli army and some contractors are here today – doing something, moving something – and I quickly find I've been appointed the official photographer for Walid's committee. He remonstrates with a young Israeli soldier, but it's all quite polite. I'm left in their office for a spell, uploading the photographs, before we head over to the local Chamber of Commerce, where an agreement is being signed with a visiting Turkish trade delegation.

With a population around 250,000, Nablus is the biggest city on the West Bank after Hebron, and my next stop. The modern town centre is a mainly recent construction after the Israelis did a total destruction job on the area in 2002. The entrance to the souq still stands, though, and this is where most of the interest lies. Posters of 'resistance martyrs' are pasted on the walls, most of them brandishing big guns like kids playing military games. My guide shows me through the Ottoman souq, past the picturesque clocktower in Victory Square, the Ottoman-era town centre. Built in 1901, it has a twin in Jaffa. Clear away the parked cars and junk and you could imagine

café tables around the square – charming and pleasant with a distinctly Mediterranean flavour.

Advancing a block further up the hill, I would have been on the main Roman thoroughfare in an even earlier Nablus. The Nablus Museum was once in the building beneath a large girls school dating from the 1980s or 1990s. It too was destroyed by the Israelis and is yet to be reconstituted. Under the museum, which is not locked, is a stretch of that ancient Roman street, way below the current street level. The school building has been dropped straight on top, the modern concrete columns rammed directly into the ancient paving stones. At least they didn't pour concrete foundations.

Still further up the hill is the Roman amphitheatre, today totally surrounded and partially subsumed by modern buildings. The entry gate is locked and nearby shopkeepers have no idea who has the key. We head back downhill, from Roman Nablus into Ottoman Nablus, pausing in Qaryun Square, where, according to the plaques, Israeli bulldozers knocked down houses without warning, killing the families, including children, inside. We stop in what was once a soap factory, and today is a wonderfully cluttered mix of antiques, herbs and coffee. We sip tea in the office, surrounded by cheeping, chirping caged birds.

Back on the modern central square, we visit an olive oil soap factory, one of only four left of the dozens once in Nablus. To make olive oil soap here, you fill a large circular vat with olive oil, caustic soda and salt, heat it up and stir it occasionally. When it's ready, you tap it off into drums and carry them, physically, upstairs. There you pour the liquid out onto the floor to about 4 centimetres deep, you let it solidify, and cut it up into

neat little 6-centimetre squares, break them out, stack them in very artistic looking conical towers and leave them for a few weeks to harden. Then you wrap each block individually and stack them in 10-kilogram cartons. The amazing thing about this whole process is that, apart from the mechanical stirring of the original vat, it's all done manually. Even wrapping the individual blocks of soap is done, with dazzling speed and dexterity, by a guy sitting on the floor, completing each wrapper with a thumb-lick of paste from a jar.

After all this work, vicarious or not, some sweets are in order, specifically the best *kunafeh* in town – the best Nablus *kunafeh* anywhere, in fact. I try a dish of this popular sweet and then watch the men prepare it. They oil a metre-wide pan, then spread flour and water which have been ground down from noodle-like shredded wheat across the pan, and top it with a cheese made from blended sheep's and cow's milks. They heat the pan for a few minutes, place a tray on top and flip the whole thing over. After leaving it to cool, they then wash sugar-sweetened water across the top and leave it to cool again for a longer spell. The café dispenses dishes of *kunafeh* with such speed that another of those metre-wide pans has to be set out every quarter of an hour or so.

I've arranged to be driven from Nablus to a Bedouin encampment overlooking the Dead Sea before going back to Bethlehem. After a series of unfortunate and frustrating delays, we end up at the camp as the sun sinks rapidly towards the horizon. What we should be doing is driving to a lookout point perched directly above the Dead Sea, where we would have watched the sunset with the sea at our feet. Now there's so little

time we can only race up to a lookout where the sea is visible, but in the distance. We arrive just as the last slivers of sun drop below the horizon. I am more than slightly disappointed, although I keep my mouth shut. The sight of a distant caravan of camels moving picturesquely along a ridge helps to cool any annoyance.

On our way back to the Bedouin camp we pass a deserted police outpost building from the Jordan era. Walkers on the Abraham Path, a long-distance walking track under development, sleep here for a night on their way to Hebron, two more days' walk from here. We pause just long enough for a quick meal with the Bedouin, sitting around a large dish of rice and chicken, with adjacent bowls of soup and a stack of unleavened bread for dipping.

The small road we took towards the Dead Sea was a good asphalt stretch; it leads past two Israeli settlements. Further along, after the asphalt has ended, we encounter a car coming in the opposite direction.

'Oh, they're settlers,' my guide, George, announces in a surprised tone. 'And they're waving at us,' he continues as he waves back.

'Wouldn't they normally wave?' I ask, used to outback roads in Australia, where you'd think it very strange if the driver of an oncoming vehicle didn't wave hello.

'Oh, an economic settler might wave,' George replies. 'An ideological one certainly wouldn't.'

Israel's West Bank settlers can be divided neatly into two categories. The economic ones are there simply because it makes financial sense: the land is cheaper, the housing is

government-supported and if they're working back in Israel, there are modern roads, generally closed to the Palestinians, that slice across the territories to whisk them to and from their jobs. The ideological ones are there for much more controversial reasons; they're there to put an Israeli footprint on what is now Palestinian territory. The settlements that are unofficial or illegal – even by Israeli government standards – will all be ideological rather than economic ones. Of course, to many people all the settlements are illegal.

The settlements are a visible example of a penchant for building facts. Who owns this land? Well, clearly we do, look – there's our house on it. Or better yet, our entire village or town. It's not a new idea – Israeli settlers are far from the first to follow invasion with fact creation. Isn't England dotted with castles and churches built by those Normans who turned up from France in 1066? And much of the US is built on land grabbed from the Native Americans. Australians were particularly adept at land grabbing – the English settlers simply classified the whole country as *terra nullius* – uninhabited land – and then handed themselves ownership titles. In fact, Australia's landed gentry are often referred to as the squattocracy, as they simply turned up and squatted on the land.

As well as Palestinian towns, I want to see some Palestine countryside – after all, Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks* is probably the best book to have come out of the region in recent years, certainly the best book about walking in Israel or Palestine. I've always felt that walking is the best way to come

to grips with a place; you see the world at an appropriate pace: slowly. I've got three very different walks lined up, two of them in Israel, one in Palestine, and each just a short taste of what can be much longer excursions.

I meet my Palestinian walking guide, Nedal Sawalmeh, at the Al Fara'a refugee camp near Nablus where he lives, and we continue up the road to Zababdeh, where we will follow the Nativity Trail back to the camp. The trail was intended to follow a 150-kilometre route from Nazareth to Bethlehem, tracing the path Joseph and Mary might have followed on that epic trek two millennia ago. Since a Palestinian-organised walk can't very well start in Israel, the trail kicks off just inside the West Bank border. I'll be walking day two of the trail.

On the short drive to our starting point and for the first hours of the walk, Israeli Air Force F16s zoom back and forth overhead, often very low and very noisily. Like the settlements, they're a regular reminder of who is in charge around here. This loud display brings to mind the line – credited to an Israeli conservative – that despite a history of Arabs being the great warriors while Jews were the great debaters, this time around 'the Arabs have lost every battle, and the Jews have lost every argument'. In the sky above us the air force is playing the Goliath role, and are winning the battle, while down at ground level the Palestinians are the underdogs, the stone-tossing Davids winning the argument.

In Zababdeh we start with a visit to the town's monastery. In the town centre there's a mosque with a particularly tall minaret, but the population is seventy-five per cent Christian. The day's walk is almost all through rural, agricultural land,

very rarely through anything remotely undeveloped. This has been described as the bread basket of the West Bank and there's a great deal of farming going on – potatoes, cucumbers, cabbages, onions, wheat, lots of olive groves and, late in the walk, greenhouses growing herbs for the European market. We stop at a village house in Sir for tea, coffee, fruit and effusive welcomes from an old man, his son and grandson, and end up at Nedal's home in the Al Fara'a refugee camp. I would have thought it was just another tightly packed Palestinian settlement, but Nedal insists it's divided decisively from the adjoining Palestinian town, which discourages it from spreading any further or from merging with it.

'It's been more than sixty years since Israel took our land,' Nedal says, 'and in all that time there have only been two marriages between camp residents and someone from an adjoining village.'

It wasn't a long walk and, having arrived at the crowded settlement, we sit around, talk, look at walk-related stuff on his computer, eat a big, late lunch and never get out to look at the camp. When it gets dark I regret not having pushed to do so.

Unlike the walks I would do in Israel, this trail has absolutely no way-marking. Adding some would make the trail more feasible for independent walkers, and would also indicate that this was very much a real local tourist initiative. It might also discourage the Israelis from building across the trail. Nedal reckons way-marking might also encourage the locals to be tidier. The trailside rubbish is not appalling – I've seen far worse in other countries in the region – but Nedal tries to partially blame it on the Israelis.

'The Israelis have crushed young peoples' faith in the future,' he insists, 'so they don't care that they make a mess of their land.' It seems far-fetched.

Of course, our conversation gets around to that big Israel–Palestine stumbling block, the 'right of return'. Nedal explains that his kids, and the camp refugees in general, never say they are from Al Fara'a; they may *live* in Al Fara'a, but they're *from* Jaffa. Nedal was born in Al Fara'a, so his children are second generation, but he's been back to Jaffa, where his family home was. It's now a factory.

'Making weapons,' he insists.

When I offer an Israeli, and for that matter a general Western, perspective – that the Palestinian refugees remain stuck in camps and make no effort to move out into the general community, while an equal number of Jewish refugees from Cairo, Tripoli, Baghdad and Tehran have moved into the general communities; there are no longer refugee camps in Israel – he's almost angry.

'That's a problem between them and Iraq and those other countries. Our problem is here.'

Nedal is forty-three and doesn't appear to be doing much else apart from his occasional guiding work. He has twice taken groups of Palestinian kids from the camps to Spain, and when he was younger he worked on labouring jobs in Israel; for six years he worked at the UN-funded centre in the camp for disabled refugees. What the unemployed refugees do for cash is not explained; the issue is simply skated around. What he has had time for is propagating. He has eight children, two boys and six girls. Trying for a boy wasn't the motivation: his oldest child is a boy, but he can't seem to stop, I'm told that taking the

pill isn't good for his wife, but methods involving him 'weren't good' for him either. The latest arrival is just six months old. His wife is absent while I'm in the apartment.

I move on to Ramallah, the 'de facto administrative capital' of the Palestinian National Authority. The Palestinians, if they ever get their own country, would like Jerusalem to be the capital, but is that ever going to happen?

It's just outside the city that I am finally stoned. I stop for an excellent coffee at the amusingly named Stars & Bucks before I drop into the former Arafat PLO compound, its major renovation and rebuild nearing completion. Arafat's tomb, guarded by two soldiers, is open to the public so I stand beside it for a photograph. From there, the rest of the day goes somewhat awry. The plan is to go to the Qalandia checkpoint, the major gateway between East Jerusalem and Ramallah. It's 5 kilometres from the PLO compound and I walk a kilometre and a half before I grab a bus, heading in the right direction, but not on the main road. With a couple of kilometres to go, the minibus U-turns and heads back, so I jump out.

At this point I reach a stretch of the wall, but the road heads away from the checkpoint – the wall continues on the correct bearing. So I leave the road, chased by three angry dogs, and follow the wall across country. Or rather I follow the outer wire fence; the wall is well back behind two fences. I'm picking my way through scrub, scrambling over rocks, finding faint meandering tracks every so often. I come upon more dogs, in fact a great pack of them, and pick up a few rocks in case they're as unfriendly as the previous batch, but they just slope off.

By this time the wall has disappeared; it's just the wire fences. There's a Jewish settlement off in the distance, and the way to the checkpoint – from here at least – dives down into a valley (here it would be called a wadi) and up the other side into a populated area, the Qalandia refugee township. The two communities, in close proximity, remind me how to recognise a settlement. The houses are clustered together, often on hilltops or along ridges, and are encircled by wire fences (these are gated communities); they do not have water tanks on the roofs (settlers get guaranteed mains water and use on average 300 litres per person per day; Palestinians get no guarantees – hence their storage tanks – and get by on 50 litres); and the roofs are red (Palestinian roofs may be red, but not always). Finally, of course, there's no minaret in sight in a settlement. The stream flowing along the bottom of the wadi is a trickle, only a half metre or so wide. As I climb up the other side, some kids – big kids – wave at me and then start hurling rocks.

It's been a while since I've had rocks thrown at me, but when I approach the kids, hands up in surrender and waving my Australian passport, they're quickly apologetic. One of them, who speaks a little English, accompanies me through the township, becoming steadily more apologetic as we go. His English isn't good enough to explain what this was all about – was I mistaken for a stray Israeli from the settlement across the valley? It's a change from the evidence of Israeli settlers hurling bricks at Palestinians in Hebron, but it certainly wouldn't have been amusing if one of the rocks had found its target.

I photograph the wall at the checkpoint, which is covered in artwork, and then grab a minibus back to Ramallah.

Rock-throwing Palestinians are quickly balanced out by the other variety: I field a hearty 'welcome to Palestine' from the passengers in a passing car, who presumably think I've just arrived, and when I stop into a bakery for a cinnamon roll I'm waved out without paying. The baker simply says, 'Welcome.' It's the number one English word I encounter during my Palestine visit.

The next day I cross into Israel. Or the rest of this place; the other side of the wall, in any case.

From the bus station in Ramallah I ride to the border where you get out, go through security and get on another bus into Jerusalem. I was depressed by the Allenby crossing from Jordan, but this kicks up to a higher level. If the Israelis had set out to design an entry point which shouts 'you're shit and we're treating you like shit' they couldn't have come up with anything better. If I were an Australian cow I would find the metal-barred corridor up to the gate eerily familiar, remarkably like being processed through an Australian cattle yard. All I'm really doing is going through security; the Palestinians are having their paperwork checked as well; and there are only ten or twenty people in front of me, but it takes half an hour bus-to-bus. Even when I'm through and ready to go I'm stuck behind a metal rotating door, waiting for it to finally unlock.

I'm staying on the East Jerusalem side of the town's dividing line. I walk along the border road between East and West Jerusalem to visit the Museum on the Seam, an edgy, political art gallery, echoing its edgy, political location. Then I head back

to enter the old city through the Damascus Gate, which leads into the Christian and Muslim quarters; I'd already stopped for a pita and falafel but now that I'm faced with the old city's treats, I grab some tea and a baklava, and call it a serial meal. I have a spell in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and work my way back along the Via Dolorosa. The Fourth Station of the Cross T-shirt shop is gone, or at least its sign is; thankfully there's still a T-shirt shop.

I've timed my arrival for the start of the Friday afternoon Stations of the Cross walk with the Franciscans. There are lots of brown-clad monks, one lugging a speaker that announces what's happening, in Italian, with lots of '*Ave Maria*s' included, but sadly nobody is carting a cross, as I was promised. I leave them and head to the Western Wall, having been turned back en route to the Dome of the Rock because it's prayer time, or something. I'm walking in circles by this time, unsuccessfully searching for a rooftop viewpoint, but successfully pausing for another tea and baklava.

Emerging from the old city, I'm handed a cartoon brochure by an American woman: 'Love the Jewish People', it announces. I look it up on the web later and discover it's a fundamentalist Christian tract: 'the end is coming and it's because we don't follow the Bible and back the Jews'. I've barely shaken her off when I'm nearly pickpocketed. It's a 'buy postcards' approach – squeezed between bus and wall and then next thing I realise he has his hand in my pocket and is about to remove my wallet.

'Oh, what's happening,' the bastard announces, when I grab his hand – as if it's just sneaked into my pocket with a mind of its own.

I retire to the hotel's bar for a pint of Taybeh. The barman explains: 'We don't sell Israeli beers.'

I look for the fundamentalist's leaflet, but it's gone. Perhaps the pickpocket took it.

The next morning I join three Swedes on a 'Politics of Jerusalem' tour and for the entire three hours Abu Hassan is near apoplectic about the Israelis. And us, for letting the Israelis get away with it.

The tour begins with a drive through the huge Neve Ya'akov settlement. Unlike the West Bank settlements, you can just drive into this one; there's no checkpoint. West Bank settlements are isolated fortresses: only the settlers or those with permission can get in through the security gates. Across the valley from Neve Ya'akov, the Palestinian Hizma area is the polar opposite. Comprising a refugee camp and two villages, Hizma is a walled prison, keeping the Palestinians in. Abu reckons eighty per cent of the inhabitants have East Jerusalem residency, so they can enter East Jerusalem by the checkpoint. The other twenty per cent can only use the checkpoint at the other end of Hizma, exiting into the West Bank.

We drive out to the West Bank through the Qalandia checkpoint – straight through this time, instead of my half-hour process the day before.

'You were lucky, it might have taken you two or three hours,' suggests Abu.

When we head back towards East Jerusalem, we approach an Israelis-only entry point. We can do this because we're in an Israeli-registered car and Abu has East Jerusalem residency.

'But they can still stop us and hassle us,' he continues. 'It depends if they think I look like Ahmed or Shlomo. Usually I'm Shlomo, but today's a quiet day so they might decide I'm Ahmed and ask questions.'

He's Shlomo today, so we drive straight through.

Our next stop is the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, site of an ongoing land dispute, the flipside of the Palestinian 'right of return' demands. The right to return to homes and lands lost in 1948 is a key Palestinian demand, one it's clear they're not going to get, as long as Israel exists. Here it's Israelis demanding the return of homes and land lost in 1948 when this area became part of East Jerusalem and under Jordanian control. The Six Day War in 1967 brought it back under Israeli control and there's a complicated and unpleasant ongoing struggle over the properties. Our last stop is the nearby International Red Cross Headquarters, where a group of Palestinians threatened with deportation had sheltered for over a year. The final two were arrested and deported in early 2012.

I finish the day with a walk around the city walls, and decide on a taxi ride from Dung Gate back to Jaffa Gate. Taking a taxi in Israel always seems to involve some sort of argument and today is no exception.

'Fifty shekel,' says the first driver when I ask him to use the meter. 'It's Shabbat, the meter rate is higher, you'll save money paying fifty shekel.'

'Fine, I'll pay more and use the meter,' I answer.

The agreed-in-advance rate quickly drops to forty shekels, then thirty.

'Look, it's saving you money, why don't you believe me?'

Several drivers all insist, cross their honest little hearts, that it's going to cost more on the meter.

Of course, I don't believe them and finally, when I start walking, a driver reneges on his mates and takes me. The meter fare is just clicking up to twenty when we enter Jaffa Gate.

In the evening I walk from East (Arab) to West (Israeli) Jerusalem to eat in the city centre. After argumentative taxi drivers, stone-tossing teenagers, pushy border officials and inept pickpockets, I'm not surprised to be propositioned by an Israeli prostitute en route. I dine in Adom, 'Red' in Hebrew, a very stylish place where I start the evening with a blueberry and basil mojito and accompany my seafood risotto with an Israeli pinot noir. It's a decidedly non-kosher seafood risotto, since it features mussels, calamari and prawns, all on the forbidden list.

After my meal, the first taxi I ask to take me to the American Colony Hotel, just beyond my hotel, asks for fifty shekels. The next one uses his meter and it's twenty-one shekels; I give him thirty. Jerusalem's old-school hotel is a place with a quirky history and an interesting role in the country today. Like the Museum on the Seam, it sits on the seamline between East and West Jerusalem and claims to be a pocket of neutrality in an often polarised city. As a result, it attracts a steady stream of diplomats, politicians and journalists – well-heeled ones, we're in five-star land – who also want to maintain their neutrality. Name a notable visitor to Jerusalem – including Lawrence of Arabia – and they've probably stayed at the American Colony, but the occupants were colourful even before it became a hotel. The original owner lived here with

his small harem of four wives, and after his death a Swedish-American colony of utopian Christians moved in, hence the name. It was established as a hotel in 1902 by Peter Ustinov's grandfather and in 1987 the actor filmed an Agatha Christie movie here. John le Carré wrote one of his books here during his stay, and it's also a favourite of retired US presidents and British prime ministers.

In the basement bar I get talking with a Washington DC–based embassy builder, over here doing some sort of work. After my cocktail, a couple of glasses of wine and now a couple of beers, it's a mildly tipsy reel back to my hotel.

In the morning I enter the old city through Herod's Gate into the Muslim quarter, wander aimlessly and eventually find myself back at Herod's Gate. I make one final sortie towards the Dome of the Rock. It's been closed every time I approached it. Last night I was told it would be 'open at 7.30 am', but this morning it's 'closed all day'. Defeated, I walk back along the Via Dolorosa to St Anne's Church, the 'finest Crusader church in Jerusalem'.

A black American preacher is bringing the roof down with a fire-and-brimstone sermon, which incorporates a great deal of shouting. When I return to the church after wandering around the Pool of Bethesda excavations, his congregation – all white – now have their arms around each other's shoulders and are shouting and hollering together.

'Well, it's a bit different,' a French priest says, when I emerge looking somewhat bemused.

As I walk along the Old City wall, back towards the hotel, I encounter four small boys. Once they pass, they pick up stones and start hurling them at me. They're really only pebbles, but I'll count it as my second stoning this trip.

It's time to leave Jerusalem and head north. The first taxi I approach to go to the bus station won't use his meter. The second will, and the driver, Adan, suggests I take him all the way to Nazareth: 'You'll get there in an hour and a half, instead of four.'

My bus trip was going to involve one bus to Afula and then another from there to Nazareth, staying within Israel proper, but before I know it we've slotted Jericho into the mix and we're through the checkpoint and in the West Bank. Every time I think I've left the West Bank, I find myself back there.

We cruise down Highway 1 towards Jordan, pausing at the sea level marker as we drop down below it towards the Dead Sea. Jericho looks like quite an interesting little town; I regret not overnighting there. Hisham's Palace, the most important Islamic archaeological site in Palestine, is the town's big attraction. In fact, it's somewhat of a mystery; no one's even certain if it's really named after the Caliph Hisham. What is certain is that it has some magnificent mosaics, and I'm a sucker for mosaics. I've visited similar desert palaces in Syria and Jordan and Hisham's follows a standard pattern, incorporating a fortress-like palace, a bathhouse and an agricultural development. In this dry environment the irrigation systems were clearly important, but water was also a necessity for the bathhouse and it's here that you find the mosaics, particularly the wonderful Tree of Life. The truly amazing thing about this site, though, is that I am the only visitor; I have the whole place to myself. It's a sad indicator of how far Palestine is off the tourist trail.

We drive back to Tell es-Sultan, the site of what might be the oldest town in the world – perhaps 10,000 years old and with

a claim to the first stairway ever. Oldest city or not, Jericho is certainly the lowest city at 260 metres below sea level. A cable car climbs up over the tell to the Monastery of St George of Koziba, perched high up on a cliff-face above the town.

We depart Jericho and head north on a road that runs parallel to the Jordan River. Jordan itself is clearly visible off to the east the whole way. At Qaser al-Yahud, where John the Baptist is supposed to have baptised Jesus, we peer across at a collection of interesting-looking buildings over the river in Jordan. The river is a tiny affair, perhaps 10 metres wide, although swift-flowing; we can talk to the Jordanians on the other side.

As we approach the checkpoint to leave the West Bank and enter Israel, Adan instructs me to say I'm going to Tiberias, if I'm asked.

'Nazareth is an Arab town. We could get delayed if you say you're going there.'

I am asked, I do say Tiberias – 'for a day or two' – but we're still pulled off to have the car searched and my bags put through an X-ray machine. Total delay? Perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, but Adan, as calm and gentle as you could hope for, is incensed. He's pleased I'm seeing what happens, though. I relate yesterday's 'Ahmed or Shlomo' tale. It's the usual Arab or Israeli question: Adan is Palestinian, but also a Jerusalem resident. The car is the only completely Israeli thing about us.

In Nazareth Adan drops me at the huge Basilica of the Annunciation and I wander into the old city to find my hotel. It's

very quiet; the town is almost completely shut down on Sunday, and after a couple of pieces of communal cake from the friendly inn's communal kitchen I take a circuitous route back towards the Basilica. Just before I arrive, two kids yell something at me and yet another stone is hurled my way. Not very hard, and they run off immediately and keep running when I step in their direction. It's my third stoning of the trip and my second of the day.

The Basilica is the town's big attraction, built on the site of Mary's home, where the angel Gabriel appeared, announcing that she might be a good virgin, but she was still going to have a baby. The church is a curious structure, built on top of the ruins of a Byzantine church, which in turn was built on top of a Crusader Church, and on back through history. There's an international collection of artworks, mainly mosaics, of Mary and child all around the Basilica, inside and out.

By now it's getting cold and dark, so I head back to the inn, where I meet Suraida Nasser and her husband, and Maoz Inon. Suraida is the Arab Palestinian granddaughter of Fauzi Azar, after whom the inn is named. Maoz is the Israeli who turned the fine old house into what it is today. We meet up with two more Israelis, Dror Tishler and Nitzan Kimchi, for dinner. Nitzan has been to Korea and confirms that his name does indeed cause considerable amusement there (kimchi is the fermented cabbage dish for which Koreans have such a strange passion). Dror and Nitzan are two typically entrepreneurial Israelis, creators of Kata, a backpack business which specialises in bags for professional camera and video equipment. The creative office is in Jerusalem, where they're also partners with Maoz in a popular backpacker hostel.

We proceed to have a very talkative dinner. Suraida and her husband muse about visiting Jordan, an Arab country where Palestinians predominate and yet are still treated as second-class citizens. Like other Arab countries in the region, Jordan has a delicate balance between its different sects and tribes, and the Hashemite clan who rules the country regards Palestinians with some suspicion. Forget politics, though – the real argument in this region, no matter what your religion, is where to get the best hummus. Some disagreement follows on just where it is found, but the following day it's halva rather than hummus which provokes discussion.

The next morning Maoz, Dror, Nitzan and I drive to Kibbutz Lavi, from where we'll spend a day walking part of the Jesus Trail. Maoz has mapped out a 65-kilometre trail, starting in Nazareth and ending at the Sea of Galilee, a route Jesus might have followed two thousand years ago. We start our walk from a memorial to the parents and siblings of the kibbutz founders who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Many of the founders were among the 10,000 children evacuated from Germany to the UK in the Kindertransport following Kristallnacht in 1938. A large proportion of their parents and relatives, left behind in Germany, did not survive the war. Kibbutz Lavi was unique in that the children stayed with their parents; usually they lived in communal children's quarters. The kibbutz was established on the site of a village whose Arab population was chased out in 1948.

We soon pass an onion field and I joke that this must have been the spot where Jesus performed the miracle of the onions. It was only later that he got around to fish and loaves. The walk

heads up to the Horns of Hattin, an extinct volcano cone, which was the site of the battle that brought the Second Crusade to its disastrous conclusion – at least from the point of view of the Crusaders. We stop for an extended snack break, the guys are equipped with a Campingaz-style cooker, so we make tea – and then coffee – and feast on bread, biscuits, cheese, olives, dips, tangerines and halva, with some joking about the omission of pistachio halva from the wide variety of flavours on offer.

After filling up, we move on to the Nebi Shu'eib, the site of Jethro's tomb and a centre for the Druze. Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, was – so the Druze believe – the source of Moses' useful opinions. From there we descend further down the hill to the site of Hattin village. The Arab villagers here, 1300 of them, fled or were pushed out in 1948 and were never allowed to come back. The only surviving traces of the lost village are parts of the mosque, and we clamber through the makeshift steel bars – installed to keep minaret climbers out – and on up to the top of the small minaret. It's a sad little site. We clear the place up; local weekend picnickers have left quite a mess and Maoz is very protective of his walk. We then sit down to our own little picnic, a repeat of the one we enjoyed not that long ago, not that far away.

Maoz's phone rings hot and heavy with calls about the Gospel Trail. The Israeli Ministry of Tourism came up with a copycat competitor to Maoz's Jesus Trail – called the Gospel Trail – but soon discovered that he took the useful precaution of nabbing the web address for Gospel Trail and is not willing to give it up.

'It's not as good a trail as ours,' Maoz insists. 'It doesn't go to the Horns of Hattin, one of the most historical sites along the route, nor does it take you over the Hill of Arbel with its

wonderful views. And it definitely wouldn't take you to a site like this, the remains of a village where the Arab population was driven out in 1948. In fact, it tries to avoid Arab population centres altogether. Walkers tell us that it's the hospitality they receive in both Jewish and Arab communities that is one of the highlights of the walk,' he continues. 'No way am I going to give them that web address.'

With all the talking and eating, this is a somewhat relaxed stroll, and we're not exactly making great time. The decision is made to abandon the rest of the scheduled day's walk and do the first bit of the next, the Hill of Arbel. We've arranged to conclude the day at a guest house where Jesus Trail walkers often overnight, and the owner, Israel Shavit, is summoned by phone, picks us up and drives us to Arbel. We climb to the top of the hill for the great views over the Sea of Galilee and the distant, hazy Golan Heights. I plan to spend a few days walking the Israel National Trail, but I get a preview here, where the two trails briefly converge near the site of those famous incidents of water walking, storm calming and feeding large crowds from meagre resources.

From our hilltop lookout we descend to the ancient synagogue at Moshav Arbel, where Maoz sums up the day – Holocaust memorial, Crusader defeat, Druze memorial, abandoned mosque and now synagogue ruins, all in one walk. A few more steps and we're at our driver's guest house. For lunch! Given that we've already had two trailside 'lunches' and it's only late afternoon, what we really have is an extraordinarily early dinner: Hungarian goulash and a nice bottle of cab sav.

Dror and Nitzan return to Jerusalem, and Maoz takes me back to Nazareth, relating the intriguing story of the Fauzi Azar Inn en route. Like so many young Israelis, Maoz followed his military service with a backpacking world tour. He'd come back enthused about the benefits of backpacker tourism – it brought an international mix of young people into contact with local communities and injected money into those communities at the local level. Nazareth's beautiful but rundown town centre looked like the perfect place to set up shop – part backpacker hostel, part boutique guest house – but that meant finding a suitable building, which would certainly be Arab-owned, and convincing the owners to go into partnership with the enemy: a young Israeli.

He discovered the semi-abandoned Fauzi Azar building and convinced Suraida that restoring her grandfather's house to its former glory not only was possible, but also made good business sense. Convincing Suraida's mother was a more daunting task, but Maoz was a man on a mission.

There's been a lot of talk all day about the state of the nation, or nations – a lot of 'what's happening, where is this all going', with absolutely no conclusions. Demographics are repeatedly cited as the key element in the whole puzzle. If a two-state solution doesn't happen, then it becomes one state, and Palestinians will soon outnumber Jews in that greater Israel state. Then what happens? An Israel that isn't Jewish? Or an Israel with a disenfranchised majority, a non-democratic Israel? This is one reason for the apartheid comparisons: Israel could become like the old South Africa, democratic only by restricting the vote to a minority. Of course, demographics aren't so simple.

For a start, the Palestinian fertility rate is falling, even on the West Bank. In Israel itself it's not that different from the Jewish figure, and Christian Arabs in Israel probably have even fewer children than Jewish Israelis. The demographics were massively disrupted in the 1990s by the arrival of a million Russian Jews, but they tend to have even fewer children than other Jews, so it was a one-off change, not an ongoing factor.

So what about a Greater Palestine? Part of the West Bank could be merged into Jordan, which is already at least sixty per cent Palestinian. This would effectively be a step back towards the pre-1967 situation, when all of the West Bank was in Jordan, and that's the last thing the Jordanian kingdom wants. They're a Hashemite minority ruling a Palestinian majority, and certainly don't want the majority to be even more overwhelming.

Maoz educates me a little more about the Orthodox side of the Israel picture, starting with a handy identikit. The Orthodox Israelis, the men at least, can be recognised by their *kippah*; the ultra-Orthodox go for that fashionable, all-black look which would blend seamlessly into the street scene in Warsaw 120 years ago, sometimes accompanied by a strange hat and usually by a strange hairdo. It's best not to call them ultra-Orthodox – that's a minefield which can be tiptoed around with the term *Haredi*. Contrary to what I expected, they're not necessarily on the far right of Israel's political spectrum. Some of the far right do come from this segment, but many *Haredi* have no right-wing tendencies at all. They're even supposed to be anti-Zionist because they believe there shouldn't be an Israel until the messiah arrives. As a result, many of the *Haredim* don't support the state, and

they certainly won't join the army if they can avoid it. At the time of Israel's creation, its first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, foolishly placated the Orthodox end of the spectrum by allowing them to escape army service as long as they were studying. The result is that a great number of them spend their whole lives studying, even when they have no interest and no aptitude for it. The *Haredim* tend to have lots of kids, so from a small base their numbers have increased dramatically. It's just another piece of the demographic puzzle, one which is causing considerable argument in Israel today. Many secular Israelis are becoming extremely unhappy about the *Haredim*: they don't work, they won't serve in the army, they push for all sorts of religious restrictions on life for non-Orthodox Israelis, and the hard-working, military-serving, secular Israelis have to pay for them.

A few days later Ohad Sharav, an Israeli friend, offers another reason for the *Haredi* opposition to military service. 'It's more than just opposition to the Zionist mission,' he suggests. 'They're also afraid that their young men could go into the army ultra-Orthodox and come out secular, seduced by the attractions of the outside world. And by serving with women.'

While I'm in Israel, an incident underscores the increasing level of conflict between secular and Orthodox. A *Haredi* man boarded a bus running from Ashdod, the seaside town just south of Tel Aviv, to Jerusalem but then refused to sit down. Nor would he get off the bus; he just stood in the door so the driver could not continue. His problem? There was a woman who hadn't gone to sit in the back, which is where he felt she should be. Tanya Rosenblit stood her ground: there's no Israeli law that says women

have to sit at the back. The police turned up and asked her if she would move, she refused and eventually they hauled the guy off and the bus continued without him. The Israeli media drew comparisons to Rosa Parks, the black woman who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus back in 1955. More likely it's just another example of the *Haredi* mentality, that as long as they can push women to the back of the bus much more important matters can be ignored.

The next morning Suraida reiterates Maoz's tale of how Fauzi Azar's house came back to life and it brings tears to my eyes. Everybody told him it was a bad business decision, quite apart from the Arab-Israeli problems involved, yet the enthusiasm for what Suraida and Maoz had created, both from the local community and from their collection of international guests, was tangible. Later she gives me a coffee-table book on Palestinian painted ceilings – I hadn't noticed the beautiful one over the reception area and the adjacent rooms, created by a Lebanese painter around 1860. Before I depart for Tel Aviv, I walk around the old town with Maoz. He seems to know everybody and everybody seems to knows him: more than once someone takes my arm and informs me 'he's a good man'. It's a worthwhile reminder that, despite the negatives I've experienced, Arabs and Israelis can work together.

A sherut, an Israeli share taxi, hustles me to Tel Aviv where I'm staying in the classy Hotel Montefiore, named after that Victorian-era British philanthropist involved with Rachel's Tomb. My room features a wall of books. I've got time for a

stroll to the beach, which takes me past a notable collection of Bauhaus buildings, but I don't know enough about Bauhaus to appreciate them. Back at the hotel I meet Ohad, my walking companion for the next few days, his wife and assorted friends and family for dinner. I've known Ohad for years, although this is the first time I'll be walking with him. We finish early: it's a crack-of-dawn departure tomorrow.

In Palestine I spent a day on the Nativity Trail followed by a day on Maoz's Jesus Trail. Now I'm heading to the opposite end of the country, the Negev Desert, for four days on the big Israel walk, the Israel National Trail. Since it's not much over 400 kilometres, as the crow flies, from one end of Israel to the other, it's quite a feat to squeeze in a 1000-kilometre walking trail. It begins on the slopes of Mount Hermon, the highest point in Israel, whose peak, and ski runs are in the Golan Heights, captured from Syria in the Six Day War of 1967. For the first week, the trail follows fairly close to the border with Lebanon then it runs south to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, where I'd briefly joined it on my Jesus Trail stroll.

From there the INT turns west towards Haifa, then south, sticking to the shores of the Mediterranean for several days before turning abruptly east, just before Tel Aviv. Israel is very narrow at this point, so it doesn't take long before the trail approaches that contentious wall, touches on Jerusalem, turns away to the south-west and then skirts around the West Bank before diving into the Negev Desert. This is where Ohad and I will pick up the trail.

It's in the Negev that hiking the INT can get complicated. The population thins out, so there aren't so many places to eat, stock up on supplies or find a bed for the night. Even if you're camping, the sites become more desolate and ill-equipped and for long stretches you hit a big problem: there's no water. Trail walkers are advised to carry at least 5 litres of drinking water per day – you can forget about niceties like washing and showers. The secret of crossing the Negev is water caching – laying in supplies of water to find as the walk progresses. Serious trail walkers do caching trips, driving to points along the trail where they can bury supplies of water for later. Trail notes recommend that you also carry the phone numbers of strategically situated taxi drivers, who will ferry water out should you arrive at your water stash and find some nasty water thief has pinched it. Fortunately, the trail is also populated by 'trail angels', who offer free accommodation – and water in emergencies – to INT walkers. I won't have to cope with these trail tribulations: Ohad has worked everything out and each day we take a taxi to the start or end of the day's walk, shuttling his car along the trail as we go.

Day one starts with a 5 am departure from Tel Aviv, and we're soon at Arad, high above the Dead Sea. A taxi takes us to the start of the walk, avoiding a tiresome march out of the town, and before long we're making a 7-kilometre descent through the *Nahal* Kanfan – *nahal* is the Hebrew word for wadi – a dry and rocky valley that widens out at some places only to narrow down to just a metre or so across at others. Apart from one stagnant puddle in a narrow section, there's no water at all, but it's clear that water does gush down here, and at speed. Our only encounters are a single hiker just a kilometre into the walk,

a camel herder on a donkey halfway down the valley and, high above the trail, a shepherd with a bunch of sheep and goats. Oh, and two Hummers with soldiers at the very end.

The single problem with the day's walk is that we do it much too fast. We were told it takes seven or eight hours, but even with a couple of leisurely stops it takes just five. Luckily, Negev taxi drivers seem to be very informed about the trail, even recommending particular points with good mobile phone reception for when we need to call for a pickup. Today's driver whisks us back to Ohad's car in Arad and we drive down to the Dead Sea, passing a string of unusual accident memorials on the winding descent. Roadside memorials have become a worldwide phenomenon in recent years, though they're often short-term affairs in the West. Here, they've become 'wreck art': weird plinth-mounted sculptures of motorcycle bits and car parts.

We're doing the trail in style; our overnight stay in a Dead Sea spa resort even includes a massage – it never gets to my legs, which probably need it the most. Afterwards we float in the hotel's Dead Sea pool; the sea itself, only 100 metres away, is rather chilly at this time of year. The salt burns any cuts, scrapes or scratches, including ones you didn't even realise you had.

It takes a ridiculous amount of time to get going the next morning, but once we're underway it's just a terrific walk all day. Almost immediately we catch up with a group of walkers, but they soon divert off on another track. We climb up a long wadi and then up to the rim of Ha'Makhtesh Ha'Katan, or small crater. The view is of the 'wow' variety and it's certainly not small – it takes us five hours to walk across. Although it's a crater, it's been formed by erosion, not, as it looks, by a gigantic meteorite.

At our lunch stop, halfway across the crater, we bump into two young women. Darya and Yuval are thirty-two days down the trail from the northern starting point; another couple of weeks and they'll be dabbling their toes in the Red Sea at Eilat. Curiously, they started out on the same day, but not together. One day in, and Darya's walking partner decided that long-distance walking wasn't for her and quit. So Darya teamed up with Yuval and her partner, but then a week or two later and Yuval's original companion also cried 'enough'. Appropriately, they are both recently out of the army: walking the Israel National Trail is almost an Israeli rite of passage, part of an extended gap year. You finish your military service, hike the INT, and head off around the world – a bit of trekking in Nepal, some hanging on the beach in Goa – until finally you get around to university or a job.

Having crossed the crater heading due south, we now turn west, walk to the edge of the crater and start climbing. Ohad has not only sorted out the trail technicalities and problems, but he has also chosen some particularly dramatic sections. Darya later emails me that, for her, this was the most spectacular day on the whole Israel National Trail. Ohad and I may have concluded we were speedy walkers the previous day, but we're soon put in our place as we climb out of the crater. Darya and Yuval catch up just as we start the climb and then proceed to surge up the hill ahead of us, despite carrying packs with tents, sleeping bags and cooking equipment, while we only have daypacks.

As we climb out of the crater, Ohad phones ahead for our taxi pickup and we're soon installed in our utilitarian guest house and dining in what has to be the strangest 'Italian' restaurant

I've ever encountered. I'd always thought the Italian menu translated anywhere, but clearly not in the Negev. Ohad opts for Thai noodles, which turn out to be a much wiser choice than the curious interpretation of fettucine pesto I'm served. They were the only Italian words I recognised.

We have walking companions for day three: just as we're finishing breakfast, Moshe Gilad, a journalist with the newspaper *Haaretz*, arrives from Tel Aviv with Ohad's young son Toam. Moshe begins his questioning as we're driving to our starting point.

'So where's the weirdest country you've ever been to?'

I hate being asked what my favourite country is, but strangest is no problem at all. 'North Korea,' I reply. 'Far and away in first place in that category.' North Korea struck me as much more than just a place of Potemkin villages; it was a Potemkin country – the whole place was a fake.

'Okay, second place?' he continues.

'Saudi Arabia.' With its weird religious police and its odd mix of modern (all that oil money, all that bling consumption) and mediaeval (an archaic justice system of hand- and head-chopping, women being treated like chattels and developing-world workers like slaves), I had no problem nominating the oil-rich kingdom for number two position. Our curious Western relationship with the country reinforces their strange status. We beg them to buy yet another squadron of supersonic interceptors to go with their latest platoon of tanks, plead with them to keep the price of oil low, and praise them as reliable partners in the Middle East while turning a very blind eye to their extreme distaste for democracy, not to mention the fact that they

supplied nearly all the 9/11 terrorists and continue to promote dissent in the Islamic world.

'And I'll nominate Israel – or Israel and Palestine – for third place,' I add. Moshe is totally unfazed by the comment and quotes it in his subsequent newspaper article about our day's walk.

The day's wonderfully varied walk takes us in the direction of Ha'Makhtesh Ha'Gadol, the big crater, and starts with rolling hills and ridge lines and the remains of Meizad Zahir, a small Roman fortress from the second or third century AD.

From there we climb to an amazing lookout point, descend into a long wadi, passing a group of Israeli walkers on our way, and then run into a herd of ibex. We cross the wadi and climb the canyon wall, an ascent that Italian walkers in the Dolomites would describe as a *via ferrata*, an 'iron road', after the metal steps embedded into the rock and the stretches of chain strung like climbing ropes.

All day there have been glimpses of the Dimona nuclear station and a tethered 'spy' blimp seems to hover overhead.

'It's keeping an eye on us,' I joke, taking photos of the distant station. This is where everyone assumes Israel manufactures its nuclear weapons. The government is silent on their existence, but most people think they are real.

We conclude the walk at the rim of the big crater and drive to Kibbutz Mashabei Sade for the night. Moshe returns to Tel Aviv while Ohad, Toam and I head to the kibbutz canteen for dinner, where a big group of young Americans are enjoying the Jewish homeland experience.

Day four, our final day on the trail, starts in a crouching, cramped pedestrian tunnel under a railway line used to convey

phosphate from the Oron mining site. Emerging from the tunnel, we immediately start up Mount Karbolet, which means 'cockscomb' in Hebrew. The edge of Ha'Makhtesh Ha'Gadol is like a sawtooth and much of the time it really is an edge. To my right, there's a sheer drop down into the crater; to my left a steep slope falls away from my teetering progress on the narrow path along the rim. It's not easy walking; it's a continuous up and down, is often rocky and uneven and you feel like you're walking with your ankles bent over. Still, it only takes us three hours to reach *Nahal* Mador. This is an 'escape', a point at which you can abandon the crater rim if time is running short and you're not going to be able to complete the day's walk before nightfall. We're well ahead of schedule, despite the fact that Ohad had been warned not to attempt this section on a short winter's day.

From there it's up and down – mainly up – until we finally descend the *Nahal* Afran, a truly spectacular valley. There's a series of rockpools, empty now, but, unmistakably, water does run through them in large quantities; the *nahal* walls show tilted strata levels and there are jumbled fallen rocks as well as sections with metal foot- and handholds up and down sheer faces and across severe slopes. Then there are the slopes that are just tricky, steep and loose. Altogether, you can see why it's not a good idea to get stuck here after dark.

We emerge onto the plain outside the crater and then it's just a trudge to the night camp, where we're picked up. It's been a fascinating four days and a very different experience from the gentle, fertile country of the Jesus Trail. There are so many walking opportunities in this region. If miracles

happen, Palestine's Abraham's Path might one day extend all the way through Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Israel, as well as Palestine, to conclude at Abraham's tomb in Hebron. At the moment a major miracle would be required to link the northern end of the Israel National Trail to the southern end of the 400-kilometre-long Lebanon Mountain Trail. On the map the two trail ends are about 10 kilometres apart, but in reality they could be separated by half a world.

I've had lots of opportunities to have my thoughts and opinions pulled in different directions throughout my stay. Even before I arrived, Ohad said in an email, 'It's a bit odd to say, but I don't think I know a single West Bank settler.' It's a reminder that there's no single Israel. During my West Bank travels I regularly bumped into that contentious wall and felt the impact – all negative – it has on the Palestinian population. Yet Ohad reminds me why it was built when he speaks about how intolerable life was during the Second Intifada, when every bus trip could be your last.

'Anna Orgal was our first translator,' he says. 'She translated your India guide. We were still a tiny business and it was the first Lonely Planet book we did in Hebrew.' If anyone asks me which guidebook I'm most proud of I still immediately point to that book. I travelled around India with Maureen researching it in 1980; she was pregnant with our daughter Tashi who was born later that year. 'Anna was a beautiful and optimistic woman,' Ohad continues, 'who always believed in peace and dialogue with the Palestinians. In June 2003 she was working at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem and was on bus number 14a as it travelled along Jaffa Street in central Jerusalem late one

afternoon. A suicide bomber, dressed as an orthodox Jew, got on the bus and exploded. One hundred people were injured and seventeen killed. Anna was one of the deaths, she was fifty-four.'

No matter where you are in the world, demographics are becoming the great determiner. It's like the boiled frog syndrome. Wars, terrorist attacks, natural disasters – we recognise them instantly, but like the frog failing to see that the water will soon be too hot for survival, we fail to notice gradual changes undermining our existence. So the Italians fail to notice that not having kids will eventually mean there won't be enough young workers to pay the old folks' pensions. The Indians fail to notice that using modern technology to ensure they have sons instead of daughters will soon leave them with a hopelessly skewed gender mix. The impact of demographics is rather more dramatic in disaster-zone countries, where too many young people and too few jobs leads to violence and instability.

Israel and Palestine are facing a number of demographic changes, all of which one side or the other – or even both – is trying to ignore. I left Israel and Palestine saddened, disappointed and worried. One state, two states – there was no solution and nobody I spoke to could see one. On both sides, Palestinian and Israeli, the focus seemed to be on a pessimistic worst case: 'Things will have to get much worse' or 'There will have to be some sort of cataclysm'. Neither one state or two, but no state seemed to be the general conclusion.

Sadly, no state seems to be the perfect solution to many Israelis and Israel supporters. 'Faced with violence from the

Palestinians, Israel won't negotiate' is one common view, 'and without violence Israel has no need to negotiate.'

So the present situation could continue indefinitely, and with every day that passes, with every new settler moving into the West Bank, with every extension and reinforcement of that wall, the notion of a two state solution moves further into the realm of impossibility. While at the same time, with every additional Palestinian or *Haredi* baby the possibility of a one state conclusion grows ever more ridiculous.

The government decision to extend settlements and walls combined with the relentless progress of demographic change may make the impasse ever more rigid, but one other factor outweighs them both. As Herbert Stein ruled, 'If something cannot go on forever, it will stop.' Trends that can't continue won't. In South Africa, apartheid could not go on forever. In Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Communism could not go on forever. And in the Middle East, I seriously doubt that the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians has an infinite future.

## ISRAEL & PALESTINE

(**1.**) > THE SAWTOOTH EDGE OF MOUNT KARBOLET, 'COCKSCOMB' IN HEBREW.
(**2.**) > WE MET DARYA AND YUVAL WALKING ACROSS HA'MAKHTESH HA'KATAN, THE 'SMALL CRATER' ON THE ISRAEL NATIONAL TRAIL
(**3.**) > THE MONASTERY OF ST GEORGE OF KOZIBA, PERCHED ON A CLIFF FACE ABOVE JERICHO
(**4.**) > DAMASCUS GATE TO THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

(**5.**) > A SORROWFUL STATUE OF LIBERTY ON THE SEPARATION WALL IN BETHLEHEM
(**6.**) > YASSER ARAFAT ON THE WALL AT THE QALANDIA CROSSING BETWEEN RAMALLAH AND JERUSALEM
(**7.**) > YASSER ARAFAT'S TOMB IN RAMALLAH
(**8.**) > TONY WALKING THE NATIVITY TRAIL IN PALESTINE



9.

(**9.**) > A COFFEE IN STARS & BUCKS IN RAMALLAH
(**10.**) > THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM
(**11.**) > QUEUEING UP TO GO THROUGH ISRAELI SECURITY AT THE QALANDIA CROSSING
(**12.**) > LOOKING DOWN INTO THE OLD CITY FROM JERUSALEM'S DAMASCUS GATE


10.


11.


12.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped with my travel and research on this book, some of whose names I can't mention for assorted reasons.

In Colombia, Germán Escobar was a wonderful and always amusing host and guide in Bogotá and also on the Caribbean coast where we were joined by Patrick Fleming, a terrific companion and organiser for our travels from Santa Marta. For the walk to Ciudad Perdida you could not ask for a better or more expert fellow walker than archaeologist Dr Santiago Giraldo, Global Heritage Fund's director for the site. Vincent Michael, GHF's Executive Director, further enriched the archaeological expertise.

In Congo, Emmanuel Rufubya was my Goma fixer for visiting the gorillas and climbing the Nyiragongo volcano.

I'm coming back for a Congo River trip, Emmanuel. Thanks to Joe Wasilewski and Patrick Kongolo (my Kisangani lawyer!) for bar conversation and advice at Les Chalets in Kisangani and to Thomas Gilchrist of Human Rights Watch for a Goma briefing. Anneke Van Woudenberg's Human Rights Watch reports from DRC are always worth reading.

In Haiti, Jacqualine Labrom was enormously helpful on both my visits and her Haiti experience goes right back to Papa Doc's days. If you want to visit Haiti, her Voyages Lumiere should be your first stop.

I had lots of help in Israel and Palestine, particularly from Michel Awad at the Siraj Center in Palestine, who also organised Nedal Sawalmeh to be my guide on the Nativity Trail walk. Maoz Inon and Suraida Nasser of the Fauzi Azar Inn were wonderful hosts and guides in Nazareth. Dror Tishler and Nitzan Kimchi joined Maoz and me as fellow walkers on the Jesus Trail, at the conclusion of which Israel Shavit was another great host and helper. On the Israel National Trail, Ohad Sharav was not only a fellow walker (as was his son Toam), but also an all-round organiser, explainer, fixer, problem solver and guide.

In Nauru, a big thank you to the passing motorists and motorcyclists who didn't even need to see an outstretched thumb to pick up a roadside hitchhiker, to the friendly staff at the Menen Hotel and to Sean Oppenheimer at Capelle's for rental car assistance and advice.

In Pakistan Najam ul-Haq Khan was an amazingly calm, collected, organised and experienced driver and guide. Kudos also to Jamil Mir of Travel Waljis in Islamabad, who sorted

out all the travel problems that popped up. Whether it was landslides, protests or unexpected Chinese border closures, he always managed to organise or reorganise. In Gulmit, poor Raja Hussain Khan of the Marco Polo Inn not only saw his first customers in who knows how long disappear due to that border closure, but he also came with us up to Sust. After we'd left Pakistan, Abdul Wahab of Old Road Tours in Kashgar sorted that end of the trip and provided Yusuf, our expert young guide. And before I even got to Pakistan, when persuading Indian Railways to issue a Delhi–Amritsar railway ticket proved to be mission impossible, my Delhi friend Ashok Khanna came through!

In Papua New Guinea, Nick Unsworth's assistance spread far from his base in Buka. The police station in Arawa provided all sorts of help, particularly from Rob Arnold and the other visiting Kiwi cops, and from Chris Imba, the local officer who showed me round the Panguna mine site. Thank you to Dennis for speeding me across from the Solomon Islands to Bougainville in his boat, and to Paul Kamuai at the Buin police station for diplomatically handling my unofficial arrival in his country. I can't forget Albert, the BRA man with the big machete whose help ensured I didn't miss out on Admiral Yamamoto's World War II crash site. In Australia Ron O'Leary was a wonderful source of information and entertaining tales on Bougainville.

Zimbabwe was made extraordinarily interesting by Craig van Zyl, who was not only a terrific guide (I appreciated the big gun he toted when we were walking in lion land), but also a fine pilot.

Getting this book over the finish line required a great deal of expert editing help from Emma Schwarcz.

Finally, and as always, to Maureen. This time she came with me to Haiti and Pakistan and on earlier trips we've visited Israel, Palestine, Papua New Guinea and Zimbabwe together. And when she doesn't join me, she lets me go. What more could I ask for?

**OTHER APPEARANCES:**

Extracts from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti and Israel & Palestine chapters appeared as 'A Troubled World' in the Small World edition of *Griffith Review*. The Haiti extract also appeared in the Qantas inflight magazine *Australian Way*. Material from the Israel National Trail account in the Israel & Palestine chapter appeared in *The Independent* in London.

For books I used in researching *Dark Lands* look for the 'Dark Lands Reading List' at http://tonywheeler.com.au/