

6 TRAVELOGUE - HOLY LAND

Exaltacion Cruz is a very popular guide, especially for those who are on a religious pilgrimage. She knows history from A to Z and the Bible from Z to A. Friday, the first day in Jerusalem was a whirlwind of activity: a visit to the Chapel of the Ascension; the Pater Noster Church; the Dominus Flavit Church where Jesus wept for Jerusalem; Basilica of the Agony; the Cenaculum site of the Last Supper; David's Tomb; and Dormition Abbey; and finally Caiphas House where we had our private mass. And in most places, Exie would first give a historical sketch, then the religious implications, and invariably a little proselytizing. I must have been one of the more irreverent in the group, and when she started rattling off biblical names like Ester or Elijah, and



something that sounded like Jael, I had to whisper to the other guys that I thought she was referring to the father of Superman.

Picture on left is at St Ann's Church at the Bethsheda site, where Jesus made the lame man walk after the poor guy had waited 30 years beside the pool whose waters became miraculous when the Angel of the Lord visited and started the water rippling.

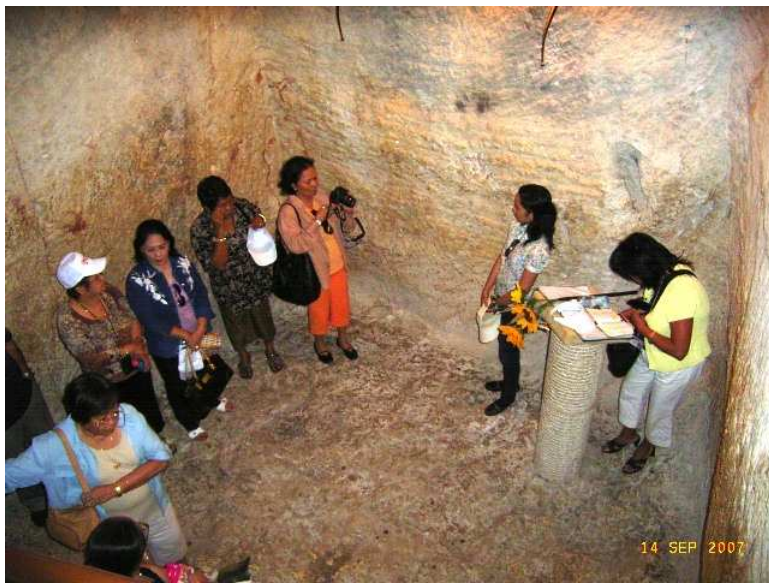
Exie always brought a "staff" of sunflowers which she hoisted up for us to see so we could follow her. This proved to be very useful with the hundreds of tourists milling around everywhere. And surprise of surprises, we had met her before at a family event in NY. Her brother was married to a close second cousin of Lisa. Small world, we would all sigh. Even two of the guys in the group had ties to Tanjay, and Lisa spent much time tracing common friends and relatives.

We spent three nights at the Jerusalem Olive Tree Hotel, and it was in the dining room where we met other Filipino tour groups: from Manila, from Cebu, and other Asians such as Indonesian, etc. I was frustrated in that the rooms had no internet connections, and the only access to the internet were two computers in the lobby. But since Friday was some Jewish holiday and Saturday was Sabbath, these also were closed. As a matter of fact, we found the elevators very frustrating: they would stop at every floor. We heard that it is because on Sabbath, one should not work, even to push the elevator button, hence they were programmed to stop at every floor. I recall that in LA, the Jews always lived near their temple, so they didn't have to drive there on Sabbath.

But Jerusalem is a multi-faith city, especially the Old Walled-in Jerusalem, with the three major monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - claiming primacy over that real estate. And even among the Jews, there were cleavages. Exie mentioned about the Hasidic Jews, the ultraconservative group who wear black garb, black hats and have curly rolls as sideburns. They are also very visible in NY. In Israel, they are subsidized: they do not work (presumably they just study the Torah), are not drafted to the army, do not pay taxes, etc. And they multiply like rabbits. Exie says most of the secular Jews don't like them. I can commiserate because when we were at the Wailing Wall, these guys badgered us for a \$20 donation. And when we were at Jericho passing the closed Holiday Inn Casino (it was thriving until the Intifada started 8 years ago), Exie said her driver-friends indicated the Hasidics were quite visible there, too, as bettors.

To me, the highlights of the tour were: a) renewing our marriage vows at Cana, b) floating in the Dead Sea, c) getting re-baptized at the River Jordan, d) tracing the Passion, or Via Doloroso all the way up to Golgotha, and e) boating on the Sea of Galilee (too bad I didn't have occasion to try to walk on the water).

Saturday and Sunday were more visits to the following: St Annes Church at Bethseda; Doloroso Street and the Stations of the Cross ending at the Holy Sepulchre Church, site of Jesus' burial and resurrection; Bethlehem and the Shepherd's Field where the shepherds were called to witness the birth; Basilica of the Grotto, birthplace of Jesus; Church of the Visitation where Mary was visited by her cousin the mother of John the Baptist; Church of St John the Baptist; Mount of Olives and the Jewish cemetery; the Garden of Gethsemane with its ancient olive trees; the Wailing Wall; Yardenit on the River Jordan; Jericho and the 2000 year old Sycamore tree.



On left is the dungeon under the church that was built over the ruins of the house of Caiphas, where Jesus most probably had been kept. Below is a plaque explaining the layout.



Picture below is me floating in the Dead Sea. The salinity at this north end of the sea, near the River Jordan, is 33%, while in the south, it is 66%. One is discouraged from actually swimming as the water might get in your eyes (as it did to Lisa) so one brings bottles of fresh water for flushing. I made a quick calculation and figured that if I were at the south end of the sea, and furthermore if I could have somehow balanced myself upright, then Archimedes' principle would have allowed me to "walk on the water", at least up to my thighs. And Jesus wouldn't have had to say "Oh, ye men of little feet". But that of



course is in reference to the Sea of Galilee, which we also visited. We only stayed a few minutes in the water. It felt oily with such high salinity. The showers stalls and towels-for-rent were most welcome.

..... to be continued....