

The Tour

(A Trip to the Holy Land)

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Day 1: Departure & Arrival

At last they were on their way, seated in the giant 747 like a platoon of soldiers on a parade ground each with their personal copy of the in-flight magazine and the safety instruction sheet, which seasoned travelers didn't bother to look at with their 'I know it all; I've travelled so much' expression. There was the small complimentary pillow which most passengers couldn't decide what to do with, so sat on it. If you were lucky you found a pair of headphones, sealed in a plastic bag, in the seat pocket in front of you. Alternatively, the already opened bag yielded a set with parts missing. And finally there was the complimentary sick bag for those 'unseasoned' passengers or those with a weak stomach.

Geoff fumbled in the backpack at his feet and pulled out his spectacles and sci-fi novel whilst Sheila, his wife, was waving the headphone jack about trying to find out where to plug it in. Having found the socket and plugged in the headphones she fumbled about with the controls trying to find out what was on. Geoff laid the book on his lap and pulled out the in-flight magazine to read about the exotic holidays they always seemed to advertise - more interesting than the one they were on of course. Having skipped over the pages in Hebrew (they were bound for Israel) he finally reached the maps showing the flight routes covered by the airline - El Al. Meanwhile Sheila had picked out the on-board shopping catalogue to check out alcohol, perfume and cigarette prices.

"I knew it" she said. "The perfume is cheaper on the airplane. I shouldn't have bought it at Heathrow."

Geoff stuffed the in-flight magazine back into the pocket in front of him and laid his head back thinking of phrases in Hebrew (Shalom) and Arabic (Ahlan wa Sahlan). The PA system interrupted his thoughts as the Captain announced their clearance to taxi out to the runway. The usual apologies for the delay: air traffic control as usual. It was always someone else's fault - local air traffic control, striking French staff or congestion over Frankfurt. The TV screens mounted in the cabin burst into life ready for the safety instruction movie. This one was novel: the

Pink Panther clambering around the cabin with those long legs, fitting himself into the inflatable jacket and sticking the oxygen mask over his snout. The movie on the screens disappeared; the plane finally reached its takeoff position and, with the roar of its engines, started accelerating down the runway.

Funny how Jumbo Jets always seem to be going too slow to get off the ground and seem to spend far too long taxiing down the run-way. Just as you think the plane is about to crash into the fence at the end it lifts off and climbs steeply leaving behind the vast conurbation of London boroughs - that unhealthy mass of buildings and people. The Captain's voice came over the PA system again announcing in Hebrew, followed by English, their flight plan, cruise altitude and permission to smoke for those in the designated seating area. As they broke through the clouds to a clear blue sky and brilliant sunshine the clinking, bumping sound of the drinks trolleys could be heard charging its way down the cabin aisles with help from cabin staff. Woe betide any passenger who gets in their way for prematurely wanting to visit the toilet. The sound of fold-away trays being lowered worked its way down the cabin as 'drinks from the bar' were served along with a 'drink with the meal'. These stewardesses seemed quite friendly, not like those who show annoyance if you don't speak loud enough by sticking their ear towards you saying 'Pardon?' in a rather abrupt manner. Some passengers also seem to lack manners, especially business men who don't think they need them. 'Drink from the bar, Sir?' 'Yes.' 'What would you like?' 'Gin and tonic'. "Wine with your meal sir?" "Yes." 'Red or white?' 'Red.' I suppose their argument is that by paying for club class or first class exonerates them from having to say 'Please' or 'Thank you'.

The sound of foil coated bags being opened was followed by the ravenous consumption of the obligatory salted peanuts. Some people daintily ate one at a time whilst others upended the open bag over a gaping mouth to munch them all in ten seconds flat. Having allowed enough time to sip half the drink the invasion of the plastic bag brigade started, to scoop up the empty plastic beakers so that the in-flight meals could be loaded onto the trolleys. Okay, to be honest it isn't that bad on long flights. Not like the short journeys lasting 45 minutes where the rapid serving of drinks and meals was never followed by complimentary indigestion tablets.

Having carefully arranged the meal on every available square centimetre of space on the fold-away tray and whilst trying to spread the bread roll with the rock-hard butter, along come those Florence Nightingales again with coffee and tea. 'Okay, if I put the wine there, the mineral water here and .. oops, there goes the spoon - fallen under the seat in front. Can I reach it? Oh sod it, I'll use the fork'.

Finally the 'ordeal of the meal' is over and up jump the toilet brigade squeezing past the trollies as the cabin staff collect up half eaten meals as the inflight movie begins. Away go the stowaway-trays and passengers settle down to watch, read, sleep or chat amongst themselves.

Geoff and Sheila bury themselves in their books for the remainder of the four-hour flight ahead.

The routine preparing for holidays and the run-up to the actual departure was now fairly standard for Geoff and Sheila. Weeks, sometimes months, before the departure date Geoff would visit the local libraries for the holiday guide book to swat up on the local sights, best places to visit, routes to be taken and best places to eat. Not that they ever found the recommended eating places. It was usually more a question of - 'Where shall we eat tonight?' 'Don't mind.' 'How about here?' 'Could do. What about this one?' 'Yes. I don't mind.' 'This one's expensive. The one we passed just now was cheaper.' 'Let's go back to that one then.' 'Okay.'

It was always useful of course to learn a few phrases of the local lingo even though most people throughout the world always seem to know more English than you could ever learn of their language. In this instance life was complicated due to the use of Hebrew and Arabic. Well, most Israelis probably speak English so let's learn a bit of Arabic. They say that locals always appreciate tourists trying to make some effort to speak their language which, in many cases, seems to be true. So, Geoff learnt a few useless Arabic phrases - 'Ahlan wa Sahlan - Hello', 'Ana min Ingiltra - I am from England', which would be obvious

anyway, and 'Maa Salaama - Cheerio'. Well, that was a good conversation.

Having filled the guide book with bookmarks and checked off other travel items - passports, currency, travellers cheques, film - now was the time to bring the cases down from the loft a week before departure. Sheila's trunk and Geoff's ruck sack were laid open on the bed. 'Oh very funny', she says. 'I suppose you are taking one pair of trousers and those old shorts you have had for ten years.' Geoff replaces the hold-all with a small suitcase. 'That's still not big enough. We'll have to take one of the medium sized ones.' Nearer the departure day Geoff tries to carefully pack the travelling kettle, iron, coffee, walking shoes, suntan lotion, etc into the small case. As usual it proves to be too small so, up into the loft again for one of the medium sized cases and repack. It is now departure day minus one. The 'trunk' - large suitcase actually - is overflowing with a wardrobe of clothes. Shorts, in case it is hot, trousers, in case it is not and clothes for the evening - some of us like to dress up, others of us wear the same things every day! The equipment list seems to get longer each year.

Departure day minus one also sees the dogs dropped off for their exciting holiday: the kennels. Harvey barks all the way. Tossing chewing sticks to the animal imprisoned in the hatch back boot keeps him quiet for about half a minute. Having devoured six sticks, shortly after leaving the house, the rest of the journey is spent with the dog competing against the radio for the decibel record. Ben, the other dog, cuddles up on Sheila's lap trying to ignore its neurotic companion. Finally, they arrive at the kennels and the dogs trot off happily with the kennel maid without even bothering to look round to say cheerio to their master and mistress. So much for loyalty!

The evening before departure the cases are finally ready ... except for the hair drier, shower gel, medicines and clothes that weren't packed in case they get creased.

Departure minus one hour. Is everything packed? Yes, except for the hair drier and tablets.

Departure minus fifteen minutes. The case tops are forced down - guaranteeing creases in all those carefully ironed clothes and the locks are closed. Ah, you have forgotten the blouse on the bed and the curling tongs. Undo the locks, unzip the cases, cram the carefully ironed blouse in, poke in the curling tongs and do the case up again.

Departure time. Where is that daughter who's taking us to the airport? Late again.

Departure plus five minutes. Still no sign of daughter's taxi service.

Departure plus ten minutes. Panic begins to set in. What if the roads are busy. You can guarantee two lanes of the motorway will be closed off. Still, it should take one and a half hours to get to the airport. Daughter bumps her car onto the drive. At last! Geoff opens the boot to load the cases. It is full up with football kit, police cones, a rusty roof rack a moldy car manual, a plastic bottle of water on its side and a clothes airer that was given to her weeks before. There is no room for the cases. They stand staring at the mess

The cases packed into the boot, the former contents dumped outside the front door of the house and they were soon steaming up the motorway to London Heathrow Airport.

Into the crowded airport booking hall and through passport control with all their baggage and on to the special check in gate for the Israeli El Al flight. After a few minutes of airline personnel trying to make up their minds whether to open the gate they finally guide the passengers in and direct them to a security official who proceeds to ask a number of questions. 'Where are you going? Why are you visiting Israel? How long are you staying? Where are you staying? I am sorry but we have to ask you all these questions for the safety of our passengers. Do you know anyone in Israel? Have you been there before? When did you decide to visit our country? How long ago did you book your ticket? When did you receive your ticket? I am sorry but we have to ask you all these questions for the safety of our passengers. Do you own all the bag contents? Do you own the cases? Who packed the cases? And so it went on until finally ... Have a nice trip. Not 'We have decided not to prosecute' as they half expected. And so, when the time came, they

settled themselves into the boarding lounge for the long wait to boarding time. As usual some passengers conception of 'hand' luggage consists of massive holdalls that would completely fill an overhead locker. An airline staff member comes striding around the lounge swooping on these errant folk. 'You are not taking that on the plane. It is too heavy. Remove what you need to. I will be back in five minutes to collect the bag to deposit in the hold.' A crowd of devout Jews are bobbing in prayer at the departure door. Praying for a safe journey. Praying for no bombs on board. Praying that the roving baggage spotter does not notice their own six-foot piece of hand luggage.

On board at last with a complimentary Hebrew newspaper and all the rest of the paraphernalia that goes with air travel.

Sometimes, time drags but when the flight is over it is often quickly forgotten in the excitement of arriving at one's destination. The heat of late evening hits them as they disembark down the steps. 'I thought you said it is supposed to be cool in the evenings.' "Well it is supposed to be at this time of the year.' 'Tell me. I've heard it all before.' They fight to get into one of the airport buses to be conveyed to the airport building. They reach up for the hand straps but don't really need them. The crush of the passengers stops anyone from falling over as the bus lurches forward for the 15 second journey to the airport building. The bus disgorges its contents like vomit and the mad scramble to the airport arrival hall begins. Now, at most airports humans tend naturally to form some manner of orderly queues to each immigration desk. Not here. They join the sea of bodies that ebbs and flows as people jostle about ramming ankles with push chairs and oversized hand luggage. They are beckoned forward by the immigration official who scrutinizes their passports carefully, the stony face finally cracking into a smile 'Enjoy your stay.'

Why is it that our baggage is always last to come off the plane? In fact, is it here at all. Ah, one of the tour company officials has already taken it off. They are directed to a corner of the immigration hall to join other tour passengers. An elderly man is grumbling about the time they have to wait but refrains from lodging an official complaint when

offered. Off they go again through customs to the awaiting coach. Some passengers have a good sense of tidiness by depositing their baggage trolley in a suitable collection area. One passenger doesn't, as he or she removes their baggage and allows the trolley to go careering across the car park to smash into a van parked near by.

At last they arrive at the hotel - the Grand Beach. It is one o'clock in the morning. The dour faced hotel receptionist thrusts an envelope into the hand of each guest. The envelope contains the room key, sticky labels for luggage a welcoming letter and instructions to be up and ready for departure at 0745 the next morning. They reach the adequate rooms, flop on the bed and wait for the luggage which finally arrives (don't forget they expect tips here). Oh dear; no loose change; no tip. Sort out clothing for the following day (cases have to be outside the room by 0700) and at long last to bed and to sleep.

Day 2: Jerusalem

Rise and shine it's 0615! Just time for a shower and stuff all the creased clothes back into the case before descending to the restaurant for breakfast. The shower head is one those typically found in some hotels. It has a mind of its own and refuses to remain in the correct position to give one a hot refreshing shower. Instead, it persists in dropping down to clean the wall behind instead. Geoff finally manages to jam it against the ceiling so that it sort-of cascades in the correct position.

They join the milling throng around the breakfast bar to spoon out cereals, yoghurt or fresh fruit. Grab a roll and rock hard butter with a choice of cheese or preserve - except the one you really want. Then there is the automatic toaster that is always set too low so that the 'toast' comes out like dry bread. Put it through again and you get a piece of charcoal. For those nationalities that really like it there are tomatoes, cucumber, olives, beet-root and all salad accompaniments. Coffee is not self service here but the waiter seems to approach every table but

ours. When they finally attract his attention, he slouches over and stops. No coffee cups. They shrug as he ambles back to collect two cups and saucers. Just time to throw the coffee down and dash back to the room to clean the teeth, go to the toilet (don't want to have to go on the coach) and arrive exhausted in front of the coach. They clamber on board. 'You all need to identify your luggage.' someone calls out. Off the coach again to point out the black case and the red case and back on again to relish the air-conditioned luxury. It is already getting hot, unusual for this time of year of course. Still, they aren't sorry to leave the Grand Beach. The four-star hotel seemed to have run out of the usual bathroom supplies except two dry looking bars of soap. Even the minibar had been removed, unless the previous guest walked off with it. The only things worth having were two brochures on Tel Aviv which advertised hostesses on credit for tourists and businessmen. Pictures illustrate several groups of bulging breasted beauties willing to escort the lonely traveller on sensuous site seeing city sojourns. Obviously a very friendly and thoughtful place to visit.

The tour begins. The guide, a short slightly plump serious faced lady introduces herself as Brenda (typical Israeli name) and the driver Lutvi (that's more like it) who is Palestinian. Brenda outlines the following day's events in English and German - she obviously knows that her group does not include French or Italians, who would be upset at her choice of languages. The itinerary for today: down the coast to Ashkelon, across the Negev desert via Be'er Sheva to Massada. On to the Dead Sea for the customary float and finishing up in Jerusalem for the night.

The coach battles through the early morning Tel Aviv rush hour traffic and finally escapes to the smooth highway heading south along the old Via Maris, the famous trade route between Syria and Egypt. They whisk past Ashdod and skirt Ashkelon, two old philistine cities - it would have been nice to have seen some of the old ruins. Brenda gives a running commentary on their history and the changes and development that Israel has brought. They turn off onto the desert road and pull into a tourist restaurant for refreshments and a comfort break, should anyone need to relieve themselves. The usual queues for the ladies toilets and at the self-service counter for the overpriced refreshments. In this country anyone selling water is sitting on a

goldmine. Brenda continually emphasizes the need to drink lots of water due to the dry heat. Armed with their bottles of water at nearly a pound sterling each, Geoff and Sheila wander outside so that Geoff can take his first photograph - a red flowering bush. Back onto the coach for the dash to Be'er Sheva. This was once a desert outpost captured by the Egyptians in the six-day war. The tour took them through the new part of the city with its university and housing complexes. The classical tour at this stage smacks of Israeli propaganda. Still, be patient. Now we start the 1,000 metres to the Dead Sea which lies 400 metres below sea level.

The desert is not of rolling sand dunes like we see in films but very mountainous and rugged. The sound of camera shutters can be heard clicking around the coach as passengers take pictures of Bedouin settlements through the windows. Soon the first glimpses of the Dead Sea can be seen as the road winds down between the mountains. The lower part of the Dead Sea has been divided into a series of evaporation basins for recovering the salts. The salinity of the Dead Sea is about 40% due to the high rate of evaporation. They reach the edge of the sea and follow the shore line to one of the major attractions of the tour - Masada. Masada was first used as a fortress in 103-76 BC but is more famously known as the place where Jewish Zealots held out in revolt against Roman rule. Brenda again emphasizes the need to drink and purchase plenty of water. The coach spills out its contents that join the throngs of tourists gathered about the refreshment kiosk grasping their bottles of water and joining the queues for the cable car or rejoining their air-conditioned coach. The cable cars are crammed to bursting with hot sweaty bodies and lurch their way to the summit of the mountain. Well, not quite the summit. There are two flights of steps to climb via an old water cistern which acts as a bottleneck for the waves of tour groups. Even though the cistern is just an empty rock cavern everyone has to make the customary visit squeezing past those trying to get out of the narrow access point. Equipped with their free 'tour company' hats Brenda's troupe begin the tour listening to her description of piles of rocks as the bathhouse or the synagogue. I suppose that with enough imagination any clump of rocks could be described as a former palace or some magnificent building. The keen photographic types linger behind the group snapping pictures of the

rocks to bore friends and relatives back home. 'This is King Herod's palace.' 'Oh yeah.'

Brenda finally reaches her destination that has been equipped with some shaded seating - the lower terrace of King Herod's Northern palace. From here can be seen part of the ramp built by the Romans when they finally assaulted the fortress successfully. On with the tour, Brenda decides to head back to the cable car. Geoff and Iwen take off to grab better shots of the Roman ramp. 'I think Brenda is finding it too hot' comments Iwen. Iwen is a retired Welsh business man a little hard of hearing. His wife, Mair, is a small dainty lady also Welsh. Geoff has to read passages from his guide book because Iwen doesn't seem to like listening to Brenda. Iwen thinks Brenda belong to Mossad, the Israeli secret service. Back down in the squashy cable car, buy more water and on to the next stop - a health spar for the customary black mud treatment and obligatory float in the briny water.

On arrival at the health spar they dive into the changing rooms and then out down to the mud bath. The stench of sulphur, or more like the bad egg smell of hydrogen sulphide, is strong as people wallow in the health-giving sulphur baths. It's amazing what you can sell to tourists that is purportedly health giving. Maybe it is true, but one often wonders how much is psychological. A short distance from the spar building people are gathered around two square tubs filled with black mud smearing themselves or one another with the mineral laden earth. Geoff sits in a deck chair eyeing an attractive looking woman smeared from head to toe with the mud. Attractive in the sense that her physique and eyes give the impression of an attractive woman. Sheila and Jenny rejoin Geoff and Johnny looking like a couple of Sambos from Enid Blyton. They move about chatting waiting for the mud to dry. The attractive woman, accompanied by a male companion, has decided to wash off the mud. When back to her caucasian form she and the male join two other males. They appear to be group of young people on holiday together.

Johnny and Jenny on the other hand are a retired elderly couple of expats living in Zimbabwe in a modest home complete with swimming pool and man servant.

The mud slowly dries in the sun cracking around the limb joints. After the usual photograph the ladies wash the mud off under the sulphur showers and all move off to catch the beach train down to the special bathing area. A special 'safe' bathing area is cordoned off and full of bodies floating in the brine. There is a warning that the rocks are slippery, due to the briny water, and a special ramp is supplied for bathers. So, one lady decides to enter the water via the rocks and slips on them. Each couple take turns to snap photographs of their salty loved ones before showering off and returning to the lido building on foot or via the beach train. People scramble to get on the train and somehow Sheila and Geoff get separated. Geoff is sitting next to a young bronzed Germanic beauty, probably young enough to be his daughter. This upsets his wife who storms off after disembarking from the train.

After getting dressed and grabbing a bite to eat in the restaurant they all board the coach for the final leg of the journey to Jerusalem and a good night's rest.

They arrive at the Sonora Hotel with strict instructions to be ready for dinner at 7pm and departure prompt at 8am the following morning. Sheila throws a tantrum because it seems that the electrical adapter kit includes adapters for every country except Israel. The issue is resolved later when they find out that the sloping Israeli flat pinned sockets do in fact accept the European two pin adapter. Relief! Now all those creased clothes can be carefully ironed ready for re-creasing on the next leg of the journey in two days time.

They spend a pleasant dinner with the expats from Zimbabwe who explain how they have left their servant in charge of the home whilst they are away. Clever, these Africans. They can actually be trained to wash up! How about that! The complimentary house wine is eagerly accepted - and admittedly good too.

The meal over, they wander past the main dining room which is filled with a huge crowd celebrating what could be a wedding and, following a cup of expensive coffee in the bar retire to their room. Bed at last and a good night's sleep.

Day 3: The Old City

Breakfast is in the large dining room and, as they make their way to a table, they are intercepted by a head waiter. 'Who are you with?' 'CETO.' 'Over here please.'

They are joined by Iwen and Mair and enjoy a good breakfast with Iwen supplying various anecdotes and a mound of toast for everyone. No-one has time to eat any as it is nearly 8 o'clock with just enough time to dash up to the hotel room to clean the teeth and dash back down again to board the coach for the first day's tour of Jerusalem.

The first stop is a visit to the Gardens of Gethsemane with olive trees reputedly dating back to the time of Jesus. This is followed by a view from the Mount of Olives and then on to the City of Jerusalem. Into the city via the Dung Gate, they stand about while Brenda provides more historical information and then move off for the customary wail at the Western Wall. Men are segregated from the women and have the western part of the wall because it is more shaded. The IDF patrol the rooftops around the wall, probably a result of the recent Intifada incidents.

The next stop is the Muslim quarter and a visit to the Dome of the Rock followed by a walk along the via Dolorosa - purportedly the route Jesus took to his crucifixion following his sentencing. They hurry past Arab market stalls as Brenda urges them to keep up and not get lost. She is anxious to cram in as much as possible. Geoff manages to escape her beady eyes long enough to buy a couple of souvenir books on Israel and Jerusalem. As usual with such gifts the prices are always inflated in the hotel lobbies so the bookshop or market stall are the best bet.

A view of the old city wall is followed by lunch at a restaurant packed with tourists. They join the long winding queue and miraculously find somewhere to sit to munch a cake and sip a coke.

They finish the day with a visit to King David's tomb and the Room of the Last Supper - well it may not be; actually it probably wasn't here at all. But then again nearly everything about the biblical significance of all these holy places seems to be disputed.

On the way back Brenda invites everyone to an Israeli folk evening for a modest fee to be collected at the hotel. They enjoy a pleasant meal with the expats and one of the anesthetist couples and then shoot off to join the coach for the concert.

The evening begins with a walk through a restored part of the new city followed by a driving tour around the old city walls. Finally, they arrive at the YMCA for an exciting concert of Israeli folk songs and dances to end the day. The many nationalities present are revealed as the guest female vocalist quizzes the audience on their countries of origin. The usual tape cassettes are on sale during the interval and, because of the venue, only soft drinks are sold, which is no great hardship. With the early starts for most tour groups a large consumption of alcohol is the last thing they want.

So, to bed once again after a hectic day and exciting evening.

Day 4: The New City

Breakfast is enjoined with Iwen and Mair again plus a table full of the Dutch members of the tour group. They begin the day with visit to a model of the second temple. The intensity of the heat drives Brenda to seek shade under one of the few trees to deliver her lecture on the history of the second temple which in reality is more like a massive city on its own. Once again Geoff wanders off trying to get the best photographic shots which, as it happens, do not turn out very good due to the sun reflecting off the light sandstone of which the model is built. Having allowed the allotted time for photographs Brenda hustles

everyone back onto the coach for the next stop - the Holocaust Museum, Art Gallery and the Knesset - the Israeli parliament.

The holocaust museum is another of those moving experiences of the suffering of the Jews during the Nazi era. It is one of many that can be seen in various countries where Jewish communities have gathered evidence of the sufferings of their people. This one, of course, is much more extensive with many heart-rending photographs and narratives. In the final section an enormous effort is being expended to gather the names of all those who perished during those years. One member of the tour group, an ex-German Jewess now a British citizen, is visibly moved whilst taken refreshments in the cafeteria. She has discovered the names of her family who she lost track of when she fled the Nazi terror.

Geoff and Sheila find time to talk to Brenda who, like many Jews, also has an interesting tale to tell regarding her own family's travels. She, it transpires, was born in South Africa where her father fled without being able to speak a word of English (or Afrikaans come to that). Apparently, he tried to teach himself the language by borrowing 'Shakespeare' from the library. When on the verge of suicide, a kindly librarian pointed him to an author who used a more appropriate form of the English language.

The final tour for the morning is a visit to the Israeli parliament - well, the outside of it; security prohibits any visits inside the building. While Brenda explains the meaning of a giant model of a seven stem candelabra (the menorah) the coach drivers argues with the security police as he maneuvers the coach around trying not to park in front of the gates to the parliament grounds which have to be visibly clear.

And so on to lunch once again.

A visit to Rachel's Tomb is a must for Christians and Jews. As with all Jewish places of worship, men and women are segregated so that women visit one side of the tomb and men the other. Certainly, on the men's side the crush of tourists caused the worshippers to exhibit a sense of intrusion - and who can blame them! Meanwhile, on the other side women wept their hearts out.

And on to the birthplace of Jesus - Bethlehem. The coach stops off at a Palestinian gift shop for the gullible tourists to part with their shekels, pounds or dollars. Geoff notices a music shop as the coach slows down - just the place to buy some Arabic music. The tourists are hassled by street traders trying to sell fabulous jewelry as they crowd into the shop. Geoff slips out to cross over the street, dodging mad Palestinian drivers, to reach the sanctuary of the music shop. A young, well built young lady smiles as he enters. The small shop has one wall covered with cabinets of tape cassettes and the other displaying a small selection of western pop and classical compact discs. His request for traditional Arabic music is rewarded by a selection of popular Arab vocalists, all of whom come from Egypt. Finally, they focus on a tape of belly dance music - also Egyptian. In fact, the whole collection of tapes seems to originate in Egypt. The tape is four shekels and the shop proprietor does not have change for a 20 shekel note. Geoff whizzes back to the gift shop to get some change, mistakenly clutching a wad of notes as he dashes past the street jewelers. With a supply of smaller notes, coins do not seem to be available, he dodges past a mass of outstretched arms to return to the music shop and collect the cassette. Feeling pleased with himself, his elation is dampened when a young Palestinian thrusts some of the fabulous jewelry at him demanding 20 shekels for a necklace and bracelet. Geoff politely declines but the insistent Arab drops the jewelry over Geoff's arm and backs off refusing to accept it back. 'You have 20 shekels.' He says. Geoff tries to hang the jewelry over a wrought iron shop shutter but the Arab pushes him away. After a few more tense moments Geoff finally manages to return the jewelry and escapes into the shop to join the rest of the tour group on their way out.

Back onto the coach and back off again following a short journey to the Church of the Nativity. They park in a small town square watched over in one corner by a fenced-in Israeli police post. They amble over to the church, to which access is gained via a small doorway, through which all have to stoop, to enter. Apparently, the original door had been bricked up to stop horsemen riding through. Crowds of tourists mill around inside and, in one corner, a long line of people queue up to descend to a small crypt where it is purported that Jesus was born. Geoff declines to join the queue. As with most holy places, churches

have been built and rebuilt on the original site. Iwen takes Geoff aside after ascending from the crypt. 'Eh boyo, why don't you nip in through the exit. The manger is just down there. Look you can just see it. Anyway, there isn't much to see, isn't it?'

They finally exit the church and make their way back to the coach and the hassle of Palestinian youths trying to sell postcards. He follows the group onto the coach and Brenda tries to get him off but he is persistent in a jovial way invoking smiles and giggles from the coach party. Brenda speaks with Lutvi who also admonishes the Palestinian. Finally, he gets off talking loudly and waving his wad of postcards about. Then they are on the road again to their last destination - the Israeli Museum.

They do not have time to visit many areas of the museum, so most of the group wander off to see the famous Dead Sea Scrolls - dog eared pieces of parchment many of which are statements of ownership of Jews of that era. They finish the visit by viewing some strange pieces of modern sculpture - chunks of rock and metal that supposed to represent human beings or other objects of interest. Each to their own.

Back to the Jerusalem Hotel for the last time. At dinner Geoff and Sheila join the group of German 'youths'. 'May we join you?' Geoff asks. They indicate their pleasure. 'Are you all German?' He asks. The woman replies. 'We are a family. This is my husband Klaus and these are our sons Robert and Phillipe.' Following some animated conversation and a joke about all blonde haired British youths being called 'Klaus' (the real Klaus saw the funny side) the German family excused themselves, so Geoff and Sheila wander outside for a walk and returned to the hotel just in time to avoid a violent thunderstorm which, it was hoped, would result in a cooler day following. It didn't.

Day 5: Galilee

Following another chatty breakfast with Iwen and Mair they rejoin the coach party for the next leg of the journey. They descend once again

towards the Dead Sea entering the autonomous city of Jericho. Haven't we all longed to see the famous walls of Jericho that Joshua brought down with his famous trumpets. Well, he was obviously very successful because all that remained was the base of a single tower in a vast excavated area with remnants of what could have been bits of wall. Another lecture from Brenda under a sweltering sun with the customary visit to the toilet - the Gents containing a single hand basin with the tap turned on full ... but no water. Then on to the Palestinian gift shop and cafe.

Armed with their bottles of water the group clamber back onto the coach for the long drive to Tiberius and Galilee. Sheila and Geoff have lunch by the air conditioner. Although their filled bread rolls were in danger of being blown away it was preferable to sitting in the omnipresent heat. Iwen and Mair couldn't hack it though and were joined by Iwen's shadow. Oh, I forgot to mention that Iwen had a shadow in the form of Tony, an Englishman from up north, and his wife Fay. But more about him later!

After lunch, people disperse to visit the town or go for a bathe in the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret to the Israelis). Most of the bathers were swimming around a boat launching ramp ignoring the sign which said 'No Swimming' and the commands of an Israeli official ordering them to come out. They all ignored him so he gave up and went away. Bloody tourists. Never do as they're told. Always ignoring official signs when they want to by pleading innocence – 'Oh, I didn't see the sign. Obviously not in a very good position.'

Geoff responds to a request to video the two Scots, Sam and Jean, and manages to catch the two distant 'roly-polys' on film.

Ice creams and the coach took the weary group - it's amazing how weary one can get doing nothing but sitting around and eating - to their first Kibbutz hotel. Following a noisy check-in, the rooms were allocated and arrangements made for luggage delivery. Geoff and Sheila are allocated a room in a block adjoining the reception area so Geoff decides to take his own luggage down and battles with dozens of German tourists scrambling through the door to the block with their suitcases. Geoff abandons any thought of trying to use the elevator

with the risk of being crushed to death or suffocated, so heaves the bulging cases down the stairs and along to the room. It is 6.15 and time to do something I suppose - like watch a video about Kibbutz life and all before dinner at 7pm sharp.

The room is pleasant enough with a TV - clamped to the table with padlocked steel bars. Obviously guests, tourists again no doubt, have been in the habit of walking off with the TVs under their arms as a souvenir of their stay.

They ascend to the dining room and join Geoff and Rose. The latter kindly offer to share a bottle of wine - the real reason being that Geoff has no money, having failed to cash a travelers-cheque at reception - they had run out of money! The meal is served by a dour faced, middle-aged automaton who plonks the plates down ignoring the polite 'thanks'. Geoff tries to catch the dour dame's eyes to solicit a smile and towards the end of the meal finally wins as the 'waitress' cracks her face. The general impression is that kibbutz workers resent having to wait on tourists - but then again that seems typical for nearly all Israeli hotel staff. Maybe they just hate tourists.

The day concludes with drinks from the bar, paid for by Geoff, and the most welcome bed.

Day 6: Haifa

Up again bright and early and breakfast with different people - Sam and Jean. Once on the bus, Brenda promises a stop to replenish cash supplies and off they go up into the hills of Golan and a view of the Syrian cities of Quneitra (old and new) and a UN outpost. On the way they stop for a view of Nimrod castle and a Druze village - caught on film as barely distinguishable attractions due to their ability to merge with their surroundings. Geoff decides to fight with the coach steps and loses with a cut head and leg. Click, click, click and whirr, whirr go the cameras before they re-embark and head for Qitze and the

wonderful Bank. Exhilarated by the feel of cash, Geoff buys ice creams which have to be eaten fast before they melt in the sun. Sheila is talking too much and doesn't see the danger signs. Her ice cream collapses in a heap on the ground.

By popular demand Brenda has arranged a boat trip on the Sea of Galilee so back on the coach to the sea. They call in to see the church at Copernicum and St Peters before reaching the embarkation point for the boat trip. The craft is built in the style of a traditional fishing boat of the period with the crew dressed in the traditional garments. At the end of the trip the traditional bowl is available for tips. They return to the pier to pass by young Arab or Jewish boys leaping off a 15ft wooden pier pile into the sea.

Back onto the coach and on to Nazareth to see the Church of the Annunciation; but first lunch. Unfortunately, today is the sit-down restaurant meal with set menu. Geoff and Sheila think about the apple pastries they had bought to eat after the rolls they were hoping to buy for lunch. They are joined at the table by others, including a German couple who seem to keep themselves to themselves. The expensive salad is followed by Israeli style sweet coffee, which they can't drink, and a glad return to the coach and onward to their last major stop - Nazareth.

As they enter the city a group of attractive young girls giggle and wave at the coach from a balcony. The party disembarks from the coach and wanders past trader stalls and the odd begging Arab up to the entrance to the church. Geoff and Robert are banned from entering because they are only wearing shorts. After the tour group has disappeared, they enquire about the exit and wander up the street to find it. Chatting about different races temperaments they oggle an attractive woman in a short skirt which reminds Geoff of the group of girls at the city entrance and an important item of information in the guide book - that the most beautiful Jewish girls come from Nazareth.

Eventually, the tour group emerge from the church and Sheila is angry because Geoff was not there to take photographs of the beautiful stained glass. Judit overhears Sheila's admonition and in a low voice to oneside says 'They weren't that good.' They walk back down to the

main street to await Lutvi and the coach. They pick up a lost elderly Hungarian female tourist and deposit her at a coach collection point hoping she finds her group.

As they start the last leg of the journey to the next Kibbutz hotel Brenda compliments the group on their punctuality and behaviour in not wandering off and getting lost like some folks are apt to do. As token of her and Lutvi's thanks she passes round a bag of traditional Arab sweets - sugared almonds. It also happens that the tour group had also organized collections for Brenda and Lutvi and towards the end of their journey a presentation of hats stuffed with shekel notes is made to the two.

Meanwhile, Sheila's stomach has been aching somewhat and she is in desperate need of the loo. Stress levels rise as the coach moves through Haifa as the stomach vies against traffic lights that always seem to be on the red. As they move into the country towards their destination Sheila prepares herself for a mad dash to the loo as soon as they reach the Kibbutz hotel.

This time the rooms are some distance from hotel reception so they leave their cases for a porter to bring down. That evening they had a meal with Geoff and Rose.

[Ed. Unfortunately, when later reviewing this diary I found that I had only made brief notes regarding the remainder of the holiday. Hence, my reconstruction is a 'best effort' at trying to scrape up those memories.]

Day 7: Return to Tel Aviv

The morning starts with problems having a shower because [my] notes mention 'The Battle of the Four Taps', which probably means trying to identify which taps control the bath, which ones control the shower and

which ones control the temperature. However, the day continues with another early breakfast (for two) and departure for Acre and Haifa in the baking hot day before stopping for lunch at a crowded café.

Whilst in Acre they visit a workshop of engravers where they purchase a souvenir plate. The original was presented to President Jimmy Carter for his contribution to the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. The plate links the City of Jerusalem with the dove of peace and is inscribed in English and Hebrew with the words:

*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

Well, that didn't work did it!

They continued on to Caesarea and Jaffa and ended up back at The Grand Beach Hotel with its dour faced staff. They remained in Tel-Aviv for the night prior to their departure for the last leg of the holiday: three days in Eilat on the Red Sea coast. They finish the day with the usual evening meal and spend some time in the bar with Revetel, who was more interested in having her arm stroked and hand holding.

Day 8: Eilat day 1

Breakfast this morning was endowed with a superefficient waitress, which meant that coffee was supplied promptly and used dishes were whisked away at lightning speed. However, on arrival at the airport there were reports of a grey horizon with the possibility of a storm and apparently the pilot requested a diversion. They passed through airport security without any mishaps and boarded a Fokker airplane for the flight to Eilat. On arrival they are met by Miss Lucy, who takes them to the hotel. [Ed. From my last notes it seems that we were treated to pizzas and a cabaret, but no photographs allowed.]

Day 9: Eilat day 2

In many mass-tourist hotels there are always some who devour as much food as they can at breakfast. Well, here was no exception; not only did they see a man stuffing face but also those who collect mounds of rolls on their plates, leaving to waste those they no longer have room for in their bloated stomachs. After breakfast Geoff and Sheila managed to procure some cash, went for a short walk and called in to some local shops. On the television there was some sort of TV Channel Contest which was apparently the longest running on record – not that they watched it.

Settling themselves in the poolside chairs they soon had problems with ‘The Battle of the Sunshade’ but then settled down to ogle at both the wrinkly bodies of elderly sunbathers and the slim, tanned bodies of the younger generation. Geoff thought to himself ‘my body was like that once’ (yeah, right!). Then there was the incident with the fly, or some pesky insect that kept dive bombing them to sample their drinks; but on the other hand, it could have stowed away in one of their meals!

As the hotel food was so atrocious Geoff and Sheila decided to go to an Indian restaurant one evening. It had an all-Israeli staff and a juke box playing Israeli pop songs; hence we questioned its authenticity. Half way through the meal a vagrant with dreadlocks wandered in towing several dogs behind him and made his way over to the juke box to check out the selection of songs available by leaning over the unit.

At some point they did hear about a shooting in Jerusalem and a panic situation at home (whatever that was!)

Day 10: Eilat day 3

The final day in Eilat starts with the usual breakfast session ogling and watching people with mounds of toast on their plates. After all, eat as much as you can; it is free. The remainder of the time is spent by the pool with 'hot' sea breezes and observing someone with unusually long toes and a woman who looked like Medusa.

Day 11: Homeward bound

Not much to report on the departure other than that to fly back to Tel Aviv for the international flight home.

In summary, I don't recall us doing much in Eilat, not being great swimmers or scuba divers, because of the baking heat. I think we spent most of the time reading by the swimming pool. It was probably here that I started writing up this diary but obviously never got to complete it, until now – 25 years later.

So ended Sheila's 'dream holiday to the Holy land'. Verdict? The dream wasn't a nightmare; in fact it was informative and humorous at times. We didn't find the Israeli's particularly friendly and the Palestinians don't do themselves any favours by their persistence in trying to sell you what you don't want; but hey, they are desperate for work and to earn enough to live. In this respect the Israeli's are not very supportive and by their actions engender frustration and anger amongst the Palestinians.

We did meet some interesting people of various nationalities in our coach party so, as a fitting end to this report, I have listed them below.

The Coach Party

England

Geoff & Sheila	2
Tony & Faye	4
The two sisters	6
The old couple	8
The newly weds	10
The expats from Zimbabwe (Met in Swansea later)	12
The lady with the stick (Ex German) Jewess	13

Wales

Iwen & Mair	15
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Guernsey

Geoff & Rose	17
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Scotland

Sam & Jean	19
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The Anaethetists

Him & Her (tall)	21
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Singapore & Japan

Tan Hung-Sin and Kayo Suzuki-Tan	25
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Germany

Klaus, Judit, Robert & Philippe	29
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Holland

The Dutch couple

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END