

How I conquered Israel

By: Frida Aranbayeva

Imagine meeting someone from a whole different environment than you're used to, but yet find yourself completely comfortable around them in a foreign place surrounded by beautiful landscape and an aura that completely binds you spiritually; it almost leaves you feeling overpowering and unbearable having to say good-bye when it all comes to an end. Now, imagine having to say good-bye to thirty-five of such wonderful people that you've come attached to in the two weeks process of exploring such a deep-conflicted, yet spiritual country of Israel.

Coming back from Israel felt unreal, almost dreading to hit reality and pursue my everyday ritual of school and constant work felt like a hassle, when just a week ago I was hiking in the most unbelievable mystical place of Masada, catching the sunrise and being immersed in its complete beauty, just me and nature relaxed into one. Memories start to pile up as I literally went through hundreds of my pictures and one by one told my siblings and my family of all the fun I've had and the knowledge I've gained. The moment I've set foot on American soil, my parent's first question was "did you feel any fear?" It was at that moment where I realized I felt completely safe in Israel than I did walking through the streets of New York. It felt bizarre to have said that so easily without over thinking, but comforting to know that sometimes the media does more than often exaggerate the status of Israel's safety. With having five soldiers from the Intelligence army joining as participants and having our own medic within our vicinity, it was easily forgotten that there is an actual active war going on in the recent news in the Gaza strip.

One of my most vivid memories of the trip was walking underground within the Kotel tunnels along side the Western Wall. No trip to Israel is complete without a visit to

the Kotel or 'Western Wall'. It was mind blowing to be walking the holy corridors of pure man-made excavation. Excitement grew among us being aware of the fact that through such small exposure of the tunnels we were all in the midst of a revelation of historical evidence. Being in the presence of the Western Wall, having put my prayer among the millions of shuffled prayers in the tiny breaks of the wall, kept my spirits high and highly proud of my heritage, it's as if I wanted to yell out "I'm Jewish and I'm proud!" Another personal highlight of the birthright Israel trip was the hike up the Masada. It was entertaining when our tour leader Shachar Fertig, got creative and got all dressed up as King Herod and introduced us to a world of history 2,000 years ago as we wondered through this desert fortress exploring the ancient excavations including Herod's palace and stables, synagogue and it's water system. Being on top of Masada was remarkable; it was a feeling of relief almost as if everything was at peace and the scenery of the Dead Sea made it all worth it to finally reach the top and see the ramp the Romans built to capture Masada. To this day, when an Israeli soldier takes an oath, part of the oath is, "Masada shall not fall again."

I'm gratefully thankful to Diti Kikayon for recruiting me as the last saved participant seat in Israel Experts group. I was able to confide with her with any questions and anxiety I've had to get ready for the trip. As nervous as I was accepting that seat at the time, I'm more than relieved of the fact that I hadn't cancelled due to the danger I thought I would be exposed to. I was able to be in the company of variety of people and even created hopeful long-lasting friendships and connections from all over the states, such as from Minnesota, Chicago, Illinois to Texas, Houston. I feel truly blessed to have experienced Israel with my peers and gain insight to my Jewish roots through the eyes of

Israeli soldiers, and through our activities and discussion programs; all in which heightened my interest in understanding this troubled country and perhaps visit it once again.