

Welcome to the Holy Land!

PRACTICAL NOTES FOR PILGRIMS

TRAVEL TO THE HOLY LAND

Flights

We travel by scheduled airlines with direct flights to the Holy Land – either to Tel Aviv in Israel or to Amman in Jordan; leaving from London Heathrow or London Gatwick depending on the group's preference and convenience.

A new scheduled service for the winter months has now been introduced by EasyJet from Gatwick to Aqaba in Jordan.

The flight time for all flights is 5 hours and in the Middle East the time is 2 hours ahead of GMT.

TRANSPORT IN THE HOLY LAND

We travel throughout in modern, de-luxe, air-conditioned coaches with WiFi; owned by Christian companies in Israel or Jordan.

LUGGAGE ALLOWANCE AND FLIGHTS

Checked hold luggage - British Airways, Royal Jordanian and El Al allow 23 kgs each person for hold luggage, plus a cabin bag and a handbag, laptop or camera bag. Since the Pandemic, the airlines no longer serve a full meal, only light snacks and drinks.

EasyJet allows up to 23kgs each person for hold luggage and one cabin bag. The cabin bag must be the regulation size and weigh maximum 8kg. Only one bag per person is allowed in the cabin, plus duty-free purchases (unless we choose and pay for Up Front seats, extra leg-room or Speedy Boarding).

Light food is available to buy on board, but you may prefer to buy from the several shops at the airport and bring your own. It must fit into your one cabin bag to carry on board.

We generally choose our seats and have Speedy Boarding, which enables us to board the aeroplane first, and helps us to sit together as a group.

Liquids, gels or creams of less than 100ml may be taken on board. Everything else must be packed in your hold luggage. Medications and toiletries under 100 ml that you need for the flight must be put into a transparent plastic bag and shown at the security check in.

HEALTH AND MEDICAL MATTERS

No vaccinations are considered essential for our part of the Middle East apart from ensuring that your tetanus protection is up to date. However, **Hepatitis A and Diphtheria are sometimes recommended for Jordan and Israel.** In June 2022 PCR Covid testing before the flight is no longer required. **Masks are not obligatory, but social distancing is normal.**

Most health problems occur from dehydration, causing headaches, and tiredness. **It is essential to drink 2 litres of fluid each day to prevent dehydration,** as the climate is dry and we are at a relatively high altitude most of the time. 2 bottles of water per person per day have been budgeted for and will be available each day on the coach. Extra water is required for the evenings and mornings. Tap water is mostly from underground springs containing minerals we are not used to and can cause tummy upsets. Common problems are mild travellers' diarrhoea from being in a different climate, with different food and water, and sometimes people experience mild fluid retention. However, most of us all of the time feel fine following a few sensible precautions:

- Don't drink tap water
- Don't eat food that has been left uncovered
- Don't buy from street vendors - including ice cream

Be sure to bring all your usual medications with you. Also bring adequate protection from the sun. We can normally deal immediately with most minor ailments and injuries and we are never far from a doctor and a hospital. We choose the cleanest toilets available when out and about, but in public places use anti-bacterial gel on your hands for extra safety and a handy pack of tissues with you as well.

Many streets and even church interiors have cobble stones and are uneven, so take care not to trip up, and wear well-soled shoes or sandals.

SPIRITUAL

We include a book of Scripture readings chosen for the pilgrimage. Wherever we visit, we hope there will be time and peace for personal reflection, and we will pray with the relevant Scriptures (*lectio divina*) to deepen our engagement with the land. We have a Pilgrims' Blessing on departure at the airport and a liturgy for the renewal of our Baptismal Promises in the River Jordan. We provide a copy of simple Morning and Evening Prayer and please bring your bible if you wish. Also please bring whatever you like and prefer to use in addition, and anything you'd like to share including music to enhance our worship together.

MONEY

In 2022 the British pound has fallen in value, making the dinar in Jordan equal £1.15. In Palestine and Israel, the currency is the New Israeli Shekel making 4.25 NIS to the £1. Bring only a small amount of currency from the UK, as it is better to bring sterling cash to exchange there, also US dollars or Euros. Bring a credit/debit card to get further money from an ATM as you need to. Or load up a pre-paid currency card. Many shops prefer payment by card following Covid.

We include as much as possible in the budget with half-board accommodation, and most lunches already paid for. You will not need to spend much on daily living, just your personal drinks, snacks, presents and souvenirs.

In addition, in Petra (Jordan), you might wish to take a horse and carriage into the Sik, or ride on a camel, mule or donkey. This will cost between 10-20 JDs per person.

ACCOMMODATION

We normally stay in Christian Pilgrim Houses, owned and run by a Religious Order or Christian family. These are 3/4 star or better. In Jordan or Israel, we may stay in Muslim or Jewish-owned Pilgrim Houses known to us and sympathetic to Christians on pilgrimage. Everywhere we stay will be

spotlessly clean and the standard of hospitality high. We always have en-suite accommodation and either shared or single occupancy rooms, as you have chosen.

Usually there will be a computer for guests with an internet connection and free Wi-Fi access in the reception areas and in most rooms.

MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

Clothes Bring a sun hat and sun glasses! and expect it to be sunny and bright during the day, all year round, with a day-time minimum of around 15° in mid-winter rising to 35° in the summer, spring and autumn. However, it can be cool in the evenings on the mountains once the sun goes down in Spring and Autumn, especially in Bethlehem and Madaba, as they are high hill towns and you will need a cardigan/sweater. The rainy season is between late October and February; the rain is tropical and it can also be chilly when it rains. Pack an umbrella for those months. The pilgrim houses are centrally heated and air-conditioned as well. Bring light summer clothes and your most comfortable walking gear. Dress code everywhere is casual but dignified and the holy places do not permit shorts above the knee or bare shoulders (have a scarf handy). In fact, shorts in the cities are not recommended at all. Bring swimming things for the swimming pools, also light footwear for the Dead Sea and for the Sea of Galilee (it can be stony/slippery underfoot).

The Israeli Army/Immigration is always concerned to ensure that visitors are not troublesome political peace activists, and for this reason *it is essential that at all times we make it clear that we are Christians on pilgrimage and keep our crosses and crucifixes prominent and there will be no problem at all.*

Laundry – Everywhere we stay there will be a laundry service to wash and iron our clothes as required, and normally return them the same day. The cost is low, but you can also wash through your laundry in your bathroom.

Tea – We often miss an early morning cup of tea - and none of the pilgrim houses has room service. Bring a travel kettle to make your own tea in your room – this is perfectly acceptable; just be discreet and keep everything

clean. Bring tea-bags and sachets of milk with you – or you can buy UHT milk. (the difficulty is keeping it cold unless you have a refrigerator)

Alcohol – alcohol is very expensive in Jordan and Israel, and you might like to bring duty-free drinks.

Gifts - You might like to bring a few little gifts for the children of the parishes or the orphanage in Bethlehem – e.g. notebooks, pens, bubbles, colouring books - or a pack of special biscuits for the Sisters. In Jordan, we bring things for the refugees and for the parish supported by our charity. Children's warm winter 2nd hand clothes are welcome. Also, easy 2nd hand educational toys for the disabled children, or the children in the hospital. Multi-vitamins for children and Vitamins D and B for the adults are great. We'll sort everything out together when we are there and you will decide, once you have met a few people, where you want things to go.

In Palestine, Israel and Jordan people are dignified and their poverty is well hidden and not immediately obvious. They never beg. Some street traders are "pushy" *selling Holy Land goods made in China*. Do not be fooled; we support the little shops who pay rent for their premises and give employment to others. There is no social service structure as we know it, and the Church and Charities provide the extra help people need.

Photography - Photography is very important, there are many treasures to photograph! All the usual film/photographic needs are readily available.

Voltage - The mains voltage is 220 and the sockets are usually two-pin, so you will need a European 3-pin adaptor – available at the airport if you haven't already got one.

Mobile telephones – please bring them, they are increasingly useful for keeping in touch. But the rates are high if calling/receiving from overseas. You need a Wi-Fi connection on your smartphone so that calls are free.

SECURITY

Whilst Jordan is normally quiet and free from tension, in view of the way the media reports happenings in Palestine and Israel, you might be concerned about safety.

No-one can possibly guarantee 100% safety anywhere in the world these days but our security lies in being sensible and listening to local advice. We do not go anywhere near Gaza in Israel nor the Syrian border. The West Bank is under military occupation, and travelling from Bethlehem to Jerusalem we go through check points as in other areas of Israel. Our drivers in Palestine/Israel are Arab Christians and if there were to be any sign of a demonstration in Jerusalem (for example) we would have advance notice. Everyone, Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli, is keen to look after pilgrims. During Covid the Israeli Government introduced a mandatory law that no foreign group of 5 persons or more would enter Israel unless guaranteed by one of their especially licensed travel agencies. We work with a Christian Agency in Jerusalem.

Arab hospitality is renowned; people are welcoming and wish to help and take care of visitors. The people of Bethlehem have been welcoming pilgrims since before Christ was born and hospitality is intrinsic to them. Women are treated with great respect and people are polite. Dress must be modest and dignified so as not to cause offence, and normally women always walk around in twos and threes – this is customary. Although this is a “greeting with a kiss on the cheek culture”, it is not correct in Muslim culture for a woman to touch a man or vice versa. Only for Christians.

Take care of your personal belongings, particularly cameras, mobile phones, wallets, etc. in the tourist areas, especially in Jerusalem. We generally advise to keep precious things in the safe in the pilgrim house, and to carry a photocopy of your passport and insurance documents and to have the minimum amount of cash on your person.

However, most people report that they feel safer in Bethlehem, Nazareth and Madaba than in British cities. There is harmony between Christian and Muslim in Bethlehem and Madaba and has been for centuries. The Christian schools and hospitals treat Christian and Muslim alike and Bethlehem University is a model of interfaith harmony and understanding. Only within living memory has the demography of the centre of Bethlehem and of Madaba changed from being predominantly Christian to predominantly Muslim – nevertheless the Christians still punch far above their weight and these are clearly Christian Arab towns.

In Jerusalem, if there is any tension, it is mainly religious. The Jewish quarter of the old city (around the Western Wall) is increasingly becoming a centre for Orthodox (as distinct from Reformed) Jewry. The Ultra-Orthodox Jews do not see us – we are unclean, and they are often critical of fellow Jews for their laxity. The Muslim Arabs are laid back and friendly – and as you walk from one quarter of the city of Old Jerusalem to another quarter, you can see how tensions might arise between Orthodox Jews and Arabs because they are so different. The Christian Arab quarters are generally quiet and welcoming at all times.

There is potentially a problem in East Jerusalem where Palestinian houses are being demolished to build Israeli parks or settlements, and there have been strong protests on the streets. We will be aware of anything in these areas of Jerusalem and not go near them.

In the North, in the Galilee, there is no tension.

Please familiarise yourself with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website www.fco.gov.uk and its advice to travellers in Jordan, Israel and the West Bank (Occupied Territories of Palestine). We must agree at all times to respect the cultural, political and religious diversity of the Holy Land and behave with the dignity and sensitivity befitting our position as guests in the country.

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