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MAZEL TOV

Israel is sixty four today

Steve Gillick

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14 MAY 2012: The word 'mazel' has, like many words, undergone several transformations. It started off meaning 'destiny', and therefore, in combination with 'tov', meaning 'good', it was a wish that your path of life be happy and prosperous (perhaps an earlier version of the Vulcan blessing to "live long and prosper").



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Today, the expression Mazel Tov is taken to mean “good luck” or ‘congratulations” and it is mostly heard on joyous occasions including birthdays. On May 14th, Israel celebrates Yom Ha’atzmaut (Yome Ha-Atz-ma-oot), the day it declared its independence 64 years ago, and congratulations are in order.

From my perspective, my five trips to Israel not only opened my eyes to an amazing country but in the true spirit of adventure and education, to the wonders of the Middle East in general. And interspersed amongst my trips to Israel proper, were 3 trips to the Sinai (one when it was Israeli territory and 2 when it was Egyptian) 2 trips to Egypt, covering Cairo, Luxor and Abu Simbel; a visit to Jordan to see Amman and Petra, an adventure that took us all around Morocco, and an exploration of Tunisia from Sidi bou Said, to Douz and the Sahara. And I will admit that Lebanon, Syria and Libya are on the list for future travels.

It’s hard to explain the draw of the Middle East,

outside of the people, the culture, the food, the lifestyle, the history and the languages spoken! It probably started off for me, by watching the movie Exodus 20-30 times when I was younger and then when in Jerusalem, hanging out by the Damascus Gate each morning while I ate my breakfast from a street vendor, consisting of a 'Bagele' (a type of bagel that resembles a pretzel) sprinkled with 'zartar' (a mixture of dry spices), and taking in the rhythm of the people, the sounds, smells of spices and the mystique of being outside-of-my-normal routine.

Certainly the attraction and fascination with Israel was quite profound. On my first trip in 1976, four of us took off the entire summer to go to Israel, with no itinerary, other than an invitation to base our stay at a friend's relative's Kibbutz. On the 2nd or 3rd day of our stay, we entered the dining room to find bottles of wine set out, which was unusual for a weekday meal.

Everyone was in a celebratory mood and the reason soon made international headlines. The Zahal ♦ the Israeli army ♦ had just completed a successful covert mission by flying to Entebbe Airport in Uganda and rescuing passengers from an Air France flight that had been hijacked over Europe and then taken hostage. The only Israeli casualty of the operation was the commander, Jonathan Netanyahu, the brother of the current Prime Minister of Israel. But the James Bond-like revelation of the Entebbe raid stirred our imagination and admiration for Israel, and the following six weeks were more or less themed on amazing achievements and perseverance.

And we did just about everything we could for six weeks, and went everywhere that Egged buses and

even some hitch-hiking, allowed.

From the UN base helping to ensure security by the Syrian border at Qiryat Shimona (and manned by Canadian soldiers, by the way) to the Bedouin market in the south in Be'er Sheva. From the underground Crusader city in Akko, to the mosaics and Coptic monastery in Jericho; and from Tsfat, Tiberias and Haifa in the north, to Masada, the Dead Sea and Eilat.

A few days in Amsterdam and London concluded this adventure but it left indelible marks on my travel endorphins.

I returned in 1984 with a friend and we re-visited many areas from the previous trip, but also met someone from the Nature Preservation Society while on a seven day trek in the Sinai Mountains, escorted by a consortium of two Egyptians, one Bedouin and one Israeli Guide, as well as several camels.

With new insight into the natural wonders of the country, we visited the cooling waters at Baniyas (dating back to the Roman God, Pan, after which the site is named), to inner-tubing on the Jordan River; from helping to escort evening tourist walks on the walls surrounding Jerusalem, to watching vultures riding the thermals to circle Kalat Nimrod, the crusader castle fortress in the Upper Galilee.

And of course no trip to Israel would be complete without sampling the unbelievably fresh salads, fruits, spicy falafel sandwiches (the variety in Haifa was staggering), and more delicious foods from restaurants, street vendors and even hotel dining rooms.

I returned in 1985 and this time rented a car to travel the country with an Israeli friend. Without disparaging the name of the actual car rental company, let's just say that we nicknamed it "Gonif Car Rental". Gonif is a Yiddish term that means "dishonest" and was fitting, as the car broke down several times and seemed to attract bad fortune.

In one memorable instance, the car was hemmed in by another car in a parking area with no driver in site. After a few locals asked why we were looking for the other driver, they got together, literally picked up the offending car and moved it so we could drive off. But the trip itself was wonderful again as, hard to believe in such a small country, we saw new wonders both natural and ancient, almost every day.

In 1987 I decided to take my Mom to Israel and again we rented a car and drove all over the country, but this time from a photographic angle, as Mom was an accomplished photographer.

So early mornings and sunsets became a priority as well as timing historical attractions to coincide with the best light of the day. This was also the trip on which we wandered through Hezekiah's Tunnel, an eighth century (BCE) structure that was constructed to carry water to the City of David in case the city was under siege. While modern photos of the tunnel show it to be bone dry, in 1987 the water was about chest deep, so I have to pay homage to Mom's adventurous spirit.

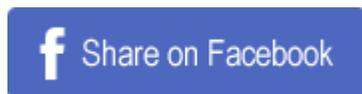
My fifth trip, and alas, my last to date, was in 1990, after a visit to Turkey. This time it was trekking in Wadi Jilaboon, wandering around Druze Villages, discovering the artist Anna Ticho, and spending time in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem. A

quick language lesson was also in the cards. Every time my friend answered the telephone, she said “Alan”. Finally after many of these calls I asked who this Alan character was and why did he keep calling her. My friend laughed and said “it’s not ‘Alan’. It’s ‘A-ha-lan’, which is Arabic for ‘hello’, which turned out to be the cool way for Israelis to greet their friends.

Israel has gone through many changes since my last visit and I am not sure I would even recognize the places once familiar to me, with new modern buildings, shopping malls, hotels, and the never ending cycle of new historical/biblical discoveries.

But you know, it’s the flavour of the country that gets to you. It’s a combination of what you see, how you relate to it, what you taste and what you personally get out of a visit that imprints on your memory and your enthusiasm. And whether observant or not in one’s own religious beliefs, whether political or not, whether you are a niche market traveller or not (and good grief, Israel has so many niche markets to offer), it remains a destination that has a very powerful attraction and appeal for travellers of all generations.

Happy Birthday Israel, and Mazel Tov from a traveller who is long overdue for another visit.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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