



The Village of Bethany

After three days of sight-seeing and exchanging stories with friendly fellow travelers in Istanbul, I flew into Tel Aviv on Monday afternoon. Sister Martha had intended to pick me up at the airport, but due to an onslaught of unexpected guests at the monastery, we decided that I would take a *sherut* into Jerusalem and she would pick me up at Notre Dame near the Old City. Directly outside the arrivals hall I found two *sheruts* lined up for Jerusalem. The driver said, "Where?" Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to see the Holy Land and happy to be standing in the sunshine I said, "Jerusalem!" He gave me a mocking now-tell-me-something-I-don't-know shrug and repeated his question. Right. I deserved that – it's a big city, isn't it? My naive smile faded as I stammered to recall the name that until then I had associated with Paris rather than Jerusalem. "Oh, uh, Notre Dame." He waved me to the second *sherut*, where the driver stacked my suitcase in the back with the others and motioned for me to get in the van. I peeked in and found it full of men with black suits, curls and hats, men with *yarmulkes* and a blonde girl about my age. Now it was my turn to ask, "Where?" As I contemplated how I would squeeze toward the back to land next to the patriarchal figure sprawled out with his bags, robe, cane, etc. on two seats, a young man wearing a *yarmulke* maneuvered his way back there instead and I took his seat. We were on our way. I was impressed by what I'd seen so far – a sparkling airport, clean cars and good roads. While the people around me chatted in Hebrew and New York-accented English, I took in my new landscape – dry, rocky hills with clusters of stone buildings in monochromatic white, sand and khaki.

The *sherut* is basically a 13-passenger taxi van. Each passenger tells the driver where they're going and then he determines the most direct path and delivers you accordingly. After some very lonely cab rides in Delhi only a few days previously, I can safely say that I much prefer the group approach to the solitary ride with a dubious taxi driver. Passengers alighted in various hillside neighborhoods. We passed the Intel building. The patriarchal-looking Orthodox Jew with two cell phones got off near a group of high apartment buildings. Others were dropped at St. Thomas, Damascus Gate, and then I was dropped at Notre Dame. Sister Martha was there to meet me. "The Old City is there." She gestured to the left as we took off towards Bethany. It was dark by then, but she pointed out the Dome of the Rock and the Mount of Olives. "Gethse-

mane is on this side and we're on the other side--it used to be a five minute drive, now it takes thirty minutes." As soon as we crossed into Palestine, Hebrew signs gave way to Arabic. Then before I knew we were there Sister Martha opened the gate to the monastery/school compound, we drove through and I was suddenly sitting at the dinner table surrounded by Russian-speaking girls and nuns.

The Church of St. Mary Magdalene was built in the 19th century in Gethsemane by Tsar Alexander III in memory of his mother, Maria Fedorovna, whose patron saint was St. Mary Magdalene. Maria Fedorovna is still prayed for during the Great Entrance at every Divine Liturgy served in this church; this has been the tradition since its consecration in 1888. The Russian mission acquired the property in Bethany in 1909 and a guesthouse was built for pilgrims visiting the holy sites. In the early 1930s, two Anglican nuns made a visit to the Holy Land on their way to serve in India. They rented rooms in a house on the Gethsemane property and the nun looking after the church showed them around. Intrigued by Orthodoxy, they never left. Instead of going to India, they were catechized and accepted the Orthodox Faith. Once again they chose the monastic path and were tonsured as Sisters Mary and Martha. They were given a blessing to renovate the Bethany property, establish a sisterhood and start a medical clinic. In 1936 they started a convent at Gethsemane as well. In 1937 the sisters opened an elementary school for girls at Bethany. After World War II came to an end in Europe, the situation in Palestine heated up. The nuns, with the help and protection of the Red Cross, made the Bethany school into a hospital to accept the many wounded and it became a fortress of relative safety for local people during shellings. Through wars and the various difficulties that seem to be ever present in this part of the world – even now with the construction of the West Bank barrier, separating Bethany from Jerusalem--the school and ministry here persevere. This year, the school celebrates its 77th year of operation.

Today there are five sisters at Bethany. Sister Martha, the administrator of the school, is from Germany, but communicates freely in Russian and English. Sisters Olga, Larissa and Natalia are from various parts of Russia and speak Russian. The fifth sister, Fotina, is from Palestine and she speaks Arabic, English and Russian. My roommate, Anastasia, or Nastya, has been here for almost a year. Russian is her first language and she speaks English perfectly too.

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According to Sister Olga, the most important thing about me is that I can drive a car. Of course, I understand why she's excited—Sister Martha is the only resident driver and when she's gone, there's no one. Regarding driving, Sister Martha passed on the advice she received from another sister, "Keep cool and remember that people here went straight from driving camels to cars."

Yesterday, I drove Sister Olga to a shop to load up on fresh fruits and vegetables. Right before we left for the errand, a man working at the school asked if he could come along to go to the bank. He gave me directions, helped me navigate getting the van turned around in what ended up being an extremely awkward parking lot and gave me cues on when to use the horn and when not to use the horn. (I just came from India, remem-



The school day runs from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. with seven periods and a big 25-minute break at 10:25 a.m., when teachers share a breakfast of hummus, bread, salad, falafel and olives and the children play. School is in session five days a week: Monday-Thursday and Saturday. There are four English teachers for 1st-12th grade, who have each allowed me to sit in on their classes to help out or offer conversation practice. I hope to work with the English classes every day.

In 2000 Israel began constructing a barrier between itself and the Palestinian territory of the West Bank; they're not done yet. I'm new here, so I'm just beginning to unravel the complicated story of why the wall was built and what it means to people who live on either side of it. The stated purpose is to protect Israeli citizens from Palestinian terrorism and it's true that fewer attacks have been carried out since its construction. On the other hand, it turns Palestine into swiss cheese; at best, increasing commute times and at worst, imprisoning those without permits.

Clockwise from left, Orthodox School of Bethany, a tiny chapel in the garden of the monastery, and a section of the monastery building with the entrance gate pictured at lower left.

Previous page: The hillside viewed from the school playground.



ber, where the horn is used more frequently.) His name is William. He's from the village of Taybeh and now lives in Bethany. In the morning he works at the school and in the afternoon, he drives a taxi! It was a short trip, but I was glad to have such an experienced guide show up to give me pointers. About half a mile from the monastery, I spotted a sign for "Tomb of Lazarus" and less than a half mile after that, the wall.

In addition to the sisters, there are fifteen boarders here, Christian girls from broken homes. They all attend the school, but live here and participate in meal times, chores and liturgical life with the sisters. Most of them speak Arabic and Russian and study English at school. The oldest is sixteen and the youngest is five. I've just begun to get to know them—they are friendly and sweet and promise to teach me some Arabic.

One of the first things I noticed is that when people talk about the wall, they don't just say "the wall" or "it," they say "8-meter-high wall" almost every time. I wondered how unique this descriptor was to this wall and decided to Google it. Sure enough, all of the results from a search on "8 meter high wall" referred to the West Bank barrier. Before I came here, I knew the wall created difficulties for Palestinians, but now I'm learning specifically how it impacts everyday life. People lost their jobs, access to healthcare and international travel when the wall went up. I can move freely between the two sides, but many of the teachers and students can't even go to Israel for a field trip. In English conversation with the 9th graders, we were talking about whales and whether or not they have them in the Mediterranean. They said, "Yes, probably, but we cannot go and see them." I asked where the students were born. Almost all were born in Jerusalem—there aren't any hospitals in Bethany. They were born there and they can see it, but no longer visit.

As one friend said to me, when I described my plans to visit here, "You're going to get an education is what you're going to get." And that's exactly why I came...to learn, to visit the holy sites and to drink Arabic coffee. ✨