

## Where God walked with man

CHEAH UI-HOON visits Israel to trace the footsteps of Jesus and saints of yore, and hear biblical stories told onsite

I COULDN'T resist pocketing a few stones, rolling them around my palm to feel for the roundest ones, as I imagined how a young shepherd boy called David would have picked similarly smooth stones for his fight with the giant Goliath.



**Historical significance:** The famed Temple Mount on which Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are situated

'Pick as many pebbles as you want,' declared the tour guide; even as I had surreptitiously slipped a couple into my pocket when I thought no one was looking. And as all the members of the tour group helped themselves to the stones in the dry riverbed, our guide pipped: 'They come and fill up the riverbed with truckloads of new stones every month!'

But of course. This is the Valley of Elah in Israel, where the infamous David vs Goliath battle took place 3,000 years ago. And our travel group of 40-odd from a Singapore church was just a drop in the wave of the two to three million international visitors to Israel each year - surely a big number specifically to tour the biblical sites. The riverbed would have been picked clean by now if it wasn't replenished regularly.

That didn't quite diminish our enthusiasm, however, even as we laughed (sheepishly) at ourselves. This was after all, Israel, land of the Bible - where it seems that every rock has a story behind it. When faith-filled travellers visit, it's not so much to check out the political situation or even modern-day Israel, but to walk the same paths as Jesus and the saints of old, to see where their stories took place; stories of faith which, as a Christian songwriter once penned, make a boy grow bold and a man walk straight.

As valleys go, the Valley of Elah isn't as picturesque or even as majestic as those you'd find in mountainous countries like Switzerland or New Zealand. It's pretty nondescript, really, especially when it's been turned into farm land - the orderly rows of bell peppers and chilli giving no hint of its tempestuous past as a former Old Testament battleground of the Israelites and Philistines.

Indeed, what makes a trip to Israel special is to hear biblical stories told onsite, on the very ground where they took place, and seeing for ourselves the lay of the land. Then there are the details mentioned in the Bible that you thought were insignificant but are in fact, pretty meaningful, and cast a new light on stories you thought you knew so well.

## Biblical sites

Over the course of our 10-day tour (conducted by Sar El Tours, which specialises in evangelical Christian tours), we visited places like the sprawling Beth Shemesh ('house of the sun' - mentioned nearly two dozen times in the scriptures and which saw a significant event involving the Ark of the Covenant); and the rugged Engedi (where David hid from King Saul; King Solomon (David's son) also made references to the fertile mountain range's flora and fauna to depict the beauty of his lover in the Song of Songs).

Then there's the picturesque Gideon Springs (where Gideon tested his men, reducing his army from 10,000 to 300 by the way they drank water from the springs); and Qumran caves near the Dead Sea (which, at 150 feet below sea level, is the lowest point of the earth), where a goatherd, 59 years ago, stumbled upon the largest and oldest body of manuscripts relating to the Bible and to the time of Jesus of Nazareth.

The highlight of any visit to Israel is of course Jerusalem, imbued as it is with so much significance tied to various periods of its history: Canaanite, Israelite, Greek, Roman, Arab, Crusader, and Ottoman. The first sighting of the holy city of Jews, Muslims and Christians, as you're driving up the hilly expressway is a spine-tingling moment, after which you scramble madly for your camera to try to get the best shot from your moving bus.

We took about two days to explore Jerusalem's surrounding areas and its zigzagging streets within its ancient city walls - which was barely enough time to absorb all the information about it. One popular route is of course the Via Dolorosa, or the Way of the Cross which it's believed Jesus took on his way to his crucifixion - major parts cutting through the colourful, bustling bazaar in the Arab quarter.

Incidentally, the Tower of David Museum near the Jaffa Gate - one of the many excellent museums in Israel - housed in a citadel built by King Herod the Great (73-4 BC), who wasn't called the greatest builder in Jewish history for nothing as he also built the Temple Mount on which the Byzantine-styled Dome of the Rock now stands - gives an illuminating period-by-period development of Jerusalem city.

From a Christian's point of view, one of the more meaningful walking tours is to trace Jesus's journey from the Mount of Olives, along the East side of Jerusalem, to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus came to pray after the Last Supper with his disciples. You pass by several churches built along the mountain slope - such as the storybook-like Russian Orthodox Church with its gleaming onion-shaped roofs and the Franciscan-run Dominus Flevit chapel which is shaped like a teardrop to commemorate Jesus weeping over Jerusalem.

From Jerusalem, we journeyed on to Tiberias, a popular tourist destination for more than 2,000 years and important centre of Jewish history. It's also a town next to the 51km shoreline of the Sea of Galilee (actually, a lake) where Jesus walked on water and also calmed the seas in a storm, as told in the gospels.

There, the tour took a New Testament thrust (think Hellenistic and Roman periods) as we took a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee (like Jesus and his disciples did), and also explored the various sites of Jesus's ministry - the Mount of Beatitudes, Tabgha, Capernaum - as the areas surrounding the lake were where 90 per cent of the recorded miracles of Jesus were performed.

The landscape here, in the Northern part of Israel, is rather dramatic, especially as this is where the country's highest peak, the 9,200 feet-high Mount Hermon, is located.

### **Mountain views**

As we visited in cool December, the only times we experienced bitterly cold and windy situations were when we drove up to mountain ranges to get to commanding, vantage views of the land - Mount Arbel (some 1,300 feet above the narrow wadi below known as the Valley of Doves which Jesus and his followers would have passed through to go to Jerusalem, a 90km walk away), Mount Carmel (where you can spot the Mediterranean sea and site of prophet Elijah's fire-from-heaven confrontation with opposing prophets), and Golan Heights, the Northern security belt of Israel.

At places like Zippori or Sepphoris (where it's believed Jesus and his father, Joseph, could have helped build), one could admire the Hellenistic and Roman remains, including beautiful mosaic work, such as the 'Mona Lisa of Galilee' on what was formerly the dining room floor of a two-storey house of an important Gentile.

Naturally, most people would ask how safe it is to travel to Israel. As far as the tour group circuit goes, the set-up seems fine and secure; anyway, what's a visit to Israel without exercising faith? Food was Middle Eastern in style, and since it was the Hanukkah period, we also got to indulge in rich, creamy doughnuts. Not quite the Krispy Kreme variety, but the fact that they're deep-fried in oil is to commemorate a miracle of burning oil lamps in Jewish history.

Historical sites, fortunately, have a rustic and just-excavated feel to them instead of being swanky tourist destinations. Even Israeli soldiers, whom we encountered from time to time, became part of the many Kodak moments - with the well-armed guys seemingly used to having their pictures taken by, and with, giggly girls.

The one place we visited that was being developed as a sophisticated lifestyle/leisure destination (and when we wished we had more shopping time) was at Caesarea Maritima which evolved from an early 20th century settlement project by the Rothschild family. Having packed all that we could in the 10 days there, the feeling when we left is that we've just scraped the surface of Israel - described as the 'apple of God's eye' in the Bible, and the place where, as some of us believe, God walked with man for a while.



**Old Testament battleground:** The Valley of Elah, where David picked stones for his fight with the giant Goliath. The Mona Lisa of Galilee (next) was found in the two-storey house of an important Gentile

