

matt jones

An excerpt from *The Jesus Boat To Capernaum*, a 110,000 word travel book
by Matt Jones.

Old City, new friends

There's no single moment when we round a bend to see the city standing before us in all its splendour. Instead, we climb steadily out of the wilderness into unremarkable suburbs: the residential street the taxi drops me in could be near the centre of any vaguely European Mediterranean city. There's no landmark I can identify to get my bearings and it's only when I walk past the Central Bus Station that I know from my map I'm on the right road, heading in the right direction.

I continue past the Capital Studios, where a CNN reporter is doing a piece to camera, forgiving as I go the northern taxi driver for dropping me a full two km from the Jaffa Gate; forgiving, too, the local couple who claimed they didn't know where the western entrance to this most famous of cities was barely a hundred metres short of it.

And then I pass through the ancient walls, following in the footsteps of the victorious British General Allenby and T.E. Lawrence, 'Lawrence of Arabia', in December 1917. Finally, after two km and more than two decades of thinking, 'One day, I'll go there... one day', I'm standing in the walled city of old Jerusalem.

'Shopping? Interested in shopping?' 'Need a guide?' 'Looking for a hostel?' The tourist vultures circle and squawk from the moment I step into Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Square on the other side of the gate, but nearby, at 1 David Street, the first floor reception of the Petra Hostel is a haven of calm. I'm given Room 16, which overlooks the Citadel in the square, and follow the directions to the dormitory, up a wooden staircase and across a large communal landing area-cum-lounge that has a large picture window with stunning views of Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives on the other side of the city.

For a backpackers' hostel, the Petra has an illustrious past and retains a faded grandeur. Built in 1830 and formerly known as the Hotel Mediterranean, it claims to be the oldest hotel in Jerusalem. Famous former guests include Tsar Nicholas I, General Allenby, Mark Twain and Herman Melville who, according to a leaflet I picked up in reception, 'Conceived "Moby Dick" in one of the spacious rooms'.

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Inside Room 16, there are three bunks – six beds – half of which have crumpled blankets and assorted towels and clothes strewn over them. ‘I’m a very restless sleeper,’ says a portly, middle-aged Dutchman who follows me in. He had been cooking in a small kitchen off the landing. Evidently his is the curtained-off bottom bunk to the right of the window, as it’s to this that he returns with his pots.

It’s dim in the room. The white curtains billow in the light breeze coming off the square as I bag the bunk on top of Dutch on the assumption that it’s probably best for everyone if all the night time noise is concentrated in one corner.

As I sort myself out, the bedding stirs on the bottom of the bunk to the left of the window and a youthful face appears.

‘Where you in from?’ it asks.

‘Galilee. You?’

‘Tel Aviv.’

There’s a silence and then:

‘So how’s Galilee?’

The guy’s name is Kevin and he’s from Vancouver. I give him an overview of Galilee and the low down on the Scottish Hospice, which I’d been staying at on the lakeshore in Tiberias.

As my eyes become accustomed to the gloom in the room, I see another body stirring on the lower bunk farthest from the window. It belongs to a Japanese man, from Miyazaki Prefecture, who’s leaving for Tiberias tomorrow. In halting English he asks me about Galilee, too. In particular, he wants to know if the Scottish Hospice is a safe place to stay.

‘He’s a writer,’ says Kevin, nodding to Mr Miyazaki.

‘I write guidebooks,’ says Mr Miyazaki, apologetically.

Dutch re-enters the room and Mr Miyazaki points to him: ‘Ask him how long he’s been here,’ he says, brightening.

‘A year,’ says Dutch.

‘A year? And what do you do?’

‘I write for people who are going to change the world.’

Imagine, now, my expression changing. ‘Really?’ I ask.

Dutch sees my look of... what? Scepticism? Disbelief? Worry?

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‘You English don’t believe that Utopia is possible!’ he shouts. ‘Well it is!’ And at that, with a flapping of cloth and squeaking of bedsprings, he disappears into the bunk beneath me, kicking a metal object as he does so. With a sinking heart I imagine the object is a piss-pot under the bed and that Dutch has ‘Jerusalem Syndrome’, a mental condition I’ve read about in which sufferers believe they’ve come to the city on a mission from God. In most cases, they think they’re Bible characters. Who could Dutch be? Moses? Elijah? I hope he’s not Mary Magdalene.

After a short siesta I head downstairs to exchange money with a Steve Buscemi look-alike at a booth near the passageway entrance to the Petra and check my e-mails at an Internet café near the Jaffa Gate. Then, as the Citadel casts a long shadow over the Christian Information Centre on the eastern side of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Square, I walk back past the Petra and settle myself at a pavement table of the Moses Art Restaurant, which, surprisingly, advertises ‘Lebanese Food’ in bold italics from a sign on a rusty awning – you certainly wouldn’t find ‘Israeli Food’ promoted with the same enthusiasm is downtown Beirut. Between bites of a chicken shawarma sandwich and long gulps from a bottle of local Gold Star beer, I consult my guidebook for a suggestion or two as to how I might spend the rest of the afternoon.

According to my map of the Old City, the Petra and David Street are on the border of the Christian Quarter – which has within it the most venerated church in Christendom, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – and the Armenian Quarter, at the south end of which stands the Zion Gate. Beyond that (outside the city walls thanks to a botch-job by Suleiman the Magnificent’s Ottoman wall builders of the 16th Century) is Mount Zion, where the Biblical King David is said to be buried and where, a thousand years later, Jesus and the disciples are believed to have had their Last Supper.

The Jewish Quarter occupies a curiously small corner of the Old City between the Armenian Quarter and the Temple Mount, or Al-Haram Al Sharif as it’s known and administered in Arabic. North of Temple Mount, which in itself takes up a good fifth of the Old City, is the Muslim Quarter, which has the Via Dolorosa, the traditional route along which Christ carried the cross, running east to west through it, and which is separated from the Christian Quarter by Souq Khan Al-Zeit, running northwards from David Street to the Damascus Gate.

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If that description of old Jerusalem is dense and cluttered, it's because the walled city is just that. So picture, if you will, the old city as a SWOT analysis: where Strengths would be, in the top left, you have the Christian Quarter; the Armenian Quarter is where you'd list your Weaknesses underneath; Opportunities lie in the Muslim Quarter in the top right; and the Jewish Quarter, that would be Threats.

To the Church of the Holy Sepulchre then, built over the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of Christ: Golgotha, Calvary, the place where Jesus died and rose again, according to the Scriptures.

From David Street I walk up Christian Quarter Road – not a road in the conventional sense, but a wide passageway of covered souk stalls through which I jostle and bump – until I find on my right, an open-air corridor that zigzags into a small square in front of the main entrance on the church's south side.

I sit for a while on a step at the far end of the square to silence my thoughts and to make a conscious effort to identify myself with the numerous pilgrims who, hunched and darkly dressed against the austere backdrop of the church, look like figures in a Lowry painting – the background industry here being religion. I set my mind to observing my fellow pilgrims not as strangers to be isolated and analysed, but as extensions of myself: searching, finding, straying, losing, searching again; different parts of the one universal church in a city that, as my map makes clear, has an oversupply of stone churches and Christian denominations. It's with an open heart and open mind that I eventually rise, walk across the square, and follow my fellow pilgrims into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

First impressions on crossing the sill? It's dark; a bit medieval, in that it's poky, but poky on a grand scale; there's lots of stone, flickering candles and sooty shadows. It's more stern Patriarch than Mother Church: there's no welcome embrace of the senses at the door. It's not a place for New Age sensibilities. Definitely high church. Dare I say, it's funereal, gloomy and dismal, but with lots of sparkly, dangly bits, like the over-egged braiding on the uniform of some banana republic general. The architecture strives to impress in that way, too. It's got an air of authority, but a foreign somewhat dictatorial one, which the little old ladies with leathery Mediterranean features dressed entirely in black seem quite at home with. There are no sightseers here: everyone seems to have a purpose; there are innumerable enactments of apparently well-rehearsed religious rituals at points that are obviously ascribed some special significance.

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Dumbly, numbly, I weave through pillars into the Rotunda, a huge round hall where the eponymous Holy Sepulchre, the tomb of Christ, is preserved in a standalone shrine in the centre. To my astonishment there's an absolute mass of humanity concentrated here – I'd say between four and six hundred people of all races swirling in two directions on the four sides of the Sepulchre. The one goal of each person, it seems, is to get in front of the single low doorway to the tomb, and then to duck through it, in and out of a room the size of a walk-in closet. This task is complicated by the fact that they're mostly in groups and so must follow the direction of group leaders who a) Want to keep their people all together, and b) Want to keep them all happy. Intent on frustrating the group leaders on both counts are a bearded priest and two Israeli guards wearing 'Tourist Police' patches who, with a demonstrable lack of compassion, bark and snap at the heels of each flock, sending them nervous and bleating this way and that before penning them behind waist-high chains. Is this really the holiest place in Christendom?

Being alone and unencumbered by the requirements of group travel, I steal through the crowd to a bench near a high gate separating the Rotunda from what I take to be the Choir. Some elderly pilgrims, obviously traumatised by their experience this Sunday evening, sit down wearily alongside me, but it's not long before one of the Tourist Police spots us and tells us to move – just for the heck of it I suspect – to the bench on the other side of the gate. We've barely sat there a minute before his colleague notices us and shouts, 'Move! Move!' with the finesse of a prison guard. Standing now, I see the bearded priest actually pushing an elderly nun, who appears to be pleading with him.

I feel anger welling within me and say the Lord's Prayer to assert my faith in this appalling place. I've been to friendlier mosques. I've found a greater harmony in Zen temples. I've seen better crowd control at football matches. I swear, if you bathed the Rotunda in red light right now, it would be a vision of hell. Not one person that I can see in the vortex of souls before me has a smile on their face. Instead, their expressions reflect to differing degrees what an absolute ordeal this is for them.

With sections of the crowd held back behind chains, a party of young priests files into a cleared space in front of the Sepulchre and, singing something high church like a young Charlotte Church, form two lines on either side of the door for an incense-swinging priest to pass between. But while their voices are undeniably beautiful, lacking any pilgrim involvement this is more performance than worship, like a crowd scene in grand opera in which the leads sing while the rest of the cast members look on silently or rhubarb-rhubarb with those around them.

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When the priests leave, the chains are lowered and there's an undignified rush towards the Sepulchre door by the members of three rival groups swarming in from three directions; and further agonised expressions in the crush.

What I've seen here disgusts me. 'No site in the Holy Land is more yearned for by Christian pilgrims than the spot where Jesus died and was raised to a new life by the power of God,' writes Hubert Richards in his book *Pilgrim to the Holy Land*. 'No site is more likely initially to disappoint them,' he adds. So true. It's hard to believe that the activity around this memorial has anything to do with the gentle carpenter who preached love and compassion in the towns and villages of Galilee. It's about as far from the tranquillity of the Galilee hills and lakeshore as it's possible to get.

I wander around the dark recesses of the church trying to work out how the lay-out of the building corresponds to the geography of Golgotha, 'The Place of the Skull', the old quarry which in Christ's time was outside the city walls. It's a necessary exercise, because it reminds me that before it was transformed into the religious equivalent of Paddington Station this was indeed a quiet place, one that Christ knew in his last hours of human life, and where he suffered in ultimate solitude.

Richards' book is a help, with three diagrams of the site as it would have been around 30AD at the time of the crucifixion, in the 4th Century when the Roman Emperor Constantine's engineers removed the hill around the tomb to isolate and venerate it, and in the 12th Century, when the Crusaders built the structure we see today.

Calvary, where Jesus was nailed to the cross and died, is to the right of the entrance as I came in, above ground level on a higher floor. Yes, I'm beginning to get the measure of the place. I'm beginning to see how the Bible accounts could relate to a physical location that has been all but obliterated by nearly 2,000 years of construction, demolition, reconstruction and repair, from the time of the first church here in 66AD – just 36 years after the events it commemorated – to the 1980s, when a British company from Cambridge built the new Rotunda dome. It's time to go now, but I intend to return.

Outside in the souk, armed Israeli soldiers patrol in pairs on Christian Quarter Road, miniature tractors, made thin for the narrow streets, trundle by with the day's garbage, and a stallholder says to me, with an expression of genuine sincerity, 'You look tired. Want to sit down and have a drink?' But I continue on to David Street and then up the slope westward to the Petra. Within five minutes of leaving Calvary I sit myself down with a bottle of beer on the hostel roof.

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For fewer shekels a head than the rooms below, a community of 'Roof People' camps out here each night, and to the sound of Annie Lennox playing on one of their boom boxes, I watch as the shadows chase the last orange light of day up the dome of the Holy Sepulchre, across the jumble of flat rooftops of the downward sloping city, up the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount, and up through the groves and gardens of the Mount of Olives less than two km to the east. The Roof People have put up a sign at the top of the stairs, 'No politics, no religion and definitely no thinking.' I'll drink to that – well, for this evening at least.

Back in the dorm, I'm surprised to find the lights out and Kevin, Mr Miyazaki and Dutch already in their bunks. I undress and climb quietly up to mine, careful not to kick the metal potty on the floor. By 8.30pm, Room 16 is all tucked in.

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