

Franklin dentist shares experiences traveling to Jerusalem

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Franklin dentist Donald Zelazny, 53, spent the fall volunteering at a Jerusalem dental clinic.

Zelazny, who runs [Z Dental](#) on Franklin Road, said, “So many people of any faith have a desire to see Israel, and as a Christian, I have heard of many places there through Bible studies in school or at church. I love to travel so it was high on my bucket list.”

He shared his perspective on the visit to a fascinating part of the world.

Eighteen months: That’s how long I waited between signing up to work at the Trudi Birger Dental Clinic in Jerusalem until actually going.

I watched the events of this past violent summer in Israel on TV and it had me wondering whether I should go. On Oct. 30, 2014, I finally left Detroit for Israel, arriving on Oct. 31.

The clinic: Established in 1980 and named after its founder, a Holocaust survivor, it is run by the Dental Volunteers for Israel. They treat needy children of any faith from Jerusalem.

The clinic is staffed by a fantastic group of bilingual assistants from Jerusalem who assist volunteer dentists from Israel and more than 20 countries around the world.

Three dentists are there per week and the clinic is open 50 weeks per year. The clinic is a popular volunteer choice for dentists for several reasons.

The clinic, through the Israeli government, provides use of an apartment free of charge for the volunteer dentists. Israel is not an inexpensive country, so the carrot of a free apartment should lure some dentists to volunteer there.

Unlike some volunteer experiences I have had in other free clinics both in the U.S. and in Latin America, this one did not seem quite as desperate.

In some clinics, there is such terrible breakdown in patients’ mouths that a volunteer barely feels like a dent was made in the problem.

While there were plenty of patients with large cavities and more than enough work for me, the degree of breakdown was not as severe in many cases.

Also education is not part of the protocol in some clinics. In this clinic the patient has an examination and a hygiene appointment before the dentist ever does any treatment.

If their oral hygiene is not adequate, they are returned to the hygienist for further training (or motivation).

At the clinic I have been to twice in Honduras, I saw some of the same patients the second time I was there and their oral condition had worsened. One eight-year-old boy we encountered there this past year did not even know what a toothbrush was.

Education really needs to be a part of the plan in any health care delivery setting, no matter how remote.

The Jerusalem clinic was definitely up-to-date, with digital X-rays and all of the equipment and supplies I use at my Franklin office.

American Friends of Dental Volunteers for Israel collects monetary donations for the clinic and many of the volunteering foreign dentists give to the clinic as well.

Each patient I saw had a treatment plan which had been developed by the Israeli dental clinic director who does all the patients' exams upon their intake to the clinic.

My assistant would basically tell me what service I was going to provide.

If I had any concerns about the treatment recommendations or wanted to change the plan, I had to review this with the Israeli dentist running the clinic on that particular day.

I consulted with them several times regarding proposed treatment and, due to the excellent education these dentists receive, was always on the same page as them.

Jerusalem the city

So what was it like to be in Jerusalem and Israel during this turbulent time?

Israel rightly has had a great deal of coverage in the international media, especially after the very violent summer in the Gaza Strip area — an area fought over for thousands of years.

The area called the Temple Mount in the “Old City” of Jerusalem is the most contentious piece of real estate on the planet.

The city is vitally important to the three largest monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Each have some of their holiest and most important sites in this city.

This is a city of over a million people so just about everyone is just able to go about their business as in any other large city.

There are some areas where tensions are more likely to boil over — areas in Arab East Jerusalem and on the Mount of Olives area near the Temple Mount.

Fortunately tourists are not the target of violence in Israel. Tourists bring much-needed dollars to Israelis and Arabs (whether Christian or Muslim).

There are so many different areas in Israel and Palestine. Some are Israeli areas run by the Israelis, some are Palestinian areas actually run by Palestinians. Some are Palestinian areas still run by Israel.

Figuring out who lived where and who was in control of which area was very confusing. Fortunately, I hired an excellent guide who gave me a tour of the Old City in Jerusalem and with whom I spent eight days with touring the rest of the country from sea to shining (Dead) sea.

I called him the “Mayor of Israel” as he seemed to be friends with just about everyone we met.

I floated in the Dead Sea, walked in the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and attempted (and failed) to walk on the Sea of Galilee.

I went through the Judean Desert, Negev Desert and walked in the Jordan River. I shared Shabbat dinner and slept in the home of one of my guide’s friends in Eilat. I slept in a real deal “man cave” in the Negev Desert, drove within about 12 miles of the Gaza Strip.

I stood at the borders of Egypt, Lebanon and Syria and looked down in a United Nations camp in Syria that was briefly held earlier this year by ISIS.

I never felt in any danger even though there were killings in three different places while I was there.

One of the days I was in Jerusalem a man drove his van into a crowded rail station that was one stop from mine — and about a half-mile from my apartment — killing two before he was shot. Random acts like this are more troubling as they are indiscriminate.

The man was hailed as a hero by Hamas.

The Israeli people are extremely resilient. I went down to this stop that night and got out and looked around. The police had already erected a concrete barrier to prevent further attacks via vehicle, but you would hardly know that people were killed there less than 12 hours before.

Life goes on.

I also spent time in several Palestinian areas, Bethlehem and Jericho, and truly enjoyed these areas and the Palestinian people there as well. Services from Manger Square will mean much more to me this holiday season. Like the Israelis, these people just want to be able to live their lives in peace.

My guide was able to give me great insight into the present situation in Israel and Palestine and helped me develop a love for this fantastic, diverse, complex area of the world and it’s people, food and culture.

I cannot wait to go back.

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