Everywhere

Two nights in Aqaba - Part I

By Mel Pearlman

A few years back when my son was working toward his MBA at Tel Aviv University, he and I decided to do a father/son trip around Israel over a break in his studies. It was about this time of the year when the temperature was mild and Israel was relatively past its major winter storms.

Having survived the flight, I was met by my son carrying a hand made cardboard sign with my English name emblazoned in Hebrew letters. I speak, read and write a little Hebrew, but for me the hardest Hebrew words to read are those that phonetically spell out English words and proper names.

It was great to be back in Israel after a 16 year hiatus and 10 hours on an EL AL airplane. Much to my chagrin, EL AL was still packing its passengers into tight seats as had been the case on previous flights dating back many years. Their interior designers must have gotten their training at Norwegian sardine canneries.

Although I had been coming to Israel since 1963, my most previous trip to the Jewish State had been in December 2001, a few months after 9/11. At that time Israel was isolated from the world. Its only global air connection was EL AL. Because of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, when four commercial airliners were simultaneously hijacked and used as destructive missiles and the persistent terrorist threat, all other major international airlines had immediately suspended flights to Israel and had yet to resume flights to and from the Jewish State.

I had arrived in Israel on that December afternoon after a midnight EL AL flight from Newark Airport. Both Orlando International and Newark airports were heavily guarded by armed National Guard troops and bomb sniffing dogs. Despite any danger, I felt compelled to go to Israel to attend a conference of the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurors in Jerusalem which had been scheduled well before the Islamic terrorist attack and just as importantly, to demonstrate with my attendance that Israel was not alone, and that terrorism will never defeat the Jewish people.

It was a somber time in Israel. So few flights were arriving in Israel during that post 9/11 period, that the shuttle driver taking us to our Jerusalem hotel asked us to wait for another EL AL flight arriving from Europe in the next hour. He explained that he needed to fill his van with fares as that would be his only revenue for the day. Joined by a number of other arriving attendees for the conference, we quickly agreed to his request. Many taxi and shuttle drivers had been laid off and the few lucky ones still working were pooling their services on staggered days. The suspension of air service to Israel by every major world airline created a feeling of depression and isolation that was palpable in the air.

However, this current trip to be with my son was definitely not depressing. When I arrived at Ben Gurion Airport, the terminal was joyfully bustling with activity and filled with passengers arriving from around the world. Hundreds of family members, local tour guides and greeters were there to welcome them. In the 16 years since my last visit, Israel had expanded the terminal and other airport facilities into a world class airport.

I still had to wait for arranging transportation to my final destination, but this time it was because 10 people were in line ahead of me at the Enterprise car rental kiosk.

As we drove out of the airport I was amazed at the newly built highways and infrastructure and the fantastic skyline as we approached Tel Aviv. I could not believe the expansion of residences and skyscrapers as we fought the traffic to Ramat Aviv where my son shared a very modern apartment with two Israeli roommates.

“I felt I was visiting the Jewish State for the very first time and I could not wait to begin our father/son trip the next morning to Eilat and the anticipated anxiety of crossing the land border into Jordan for our first night’s stay in Aqaba.”

If you wish to comment or respond you can reach me at melpearlman322@gmail.com. Please do so in a rational, thoughtful, respectful and civil manner.

Mel Pearlman holds B.S. & M.S. degrees in physics as well as a J.D. degree and initially came to Florida in 1966 to work on the Gemini and Apollo space programs. He has practiced law in Central Florida since 1972. He has served as president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Orlando; was a charter board member, first vice president and pro-bono legal counsel of the Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center of Central Florida, as well as holding many other community leadership positions.