



Everywhere

Two Nights in Aqaba - Part 2

By Mel Pearlman

The next morning, having arrived in Israel the evening before, my son and I began our trip to Jordan. Our route to Aqaba would take us south through downtown Tel Aviv on freeways that made me feel we were in Los Angeles during morning rush hour traffic.

We then continued south to pick up Highway 40 that would take us into Beer Sheva where we stopped for lunch. From Beer Sheva we headed east on Highway 25, past Dimona, the site of Israel's nuclear facility. At the Arava Crossing we turned south onto Highway 90 to Eilat. Highway 90 runs along the border with Jordan, through an area of the Negev known as the Arava.

As evening approached and the sun was descending in the West, our anxiety about crossing the border into Jordan began to rise. I had previously arranged with an Israeli tour company to arrange our tour to the ruins of Petra and for two nights in Aqaba. We were to meet a tour company representative at the border crossing to assist us on the Israeli side of the border, and were told we would have an escort pick us up on the Jordanian side to take us to our hotel in Aqaba.

We arrived at the border crossing around 5:30 p.m. It was dusk. We parked the car in the parking lot, grabbed our overnight bags and had to walk several hundred yards to the Israeli border processing facility. As we approached the facility, there was no one from the tour company there to greet us. We called the tour office, but it was already closed. About a half-hour later our Israeli contact arrived, but told us he had to pick up his wife from work; and would we mind riding with him to do so. Since it was a rhetorical question we had "Ein Brayra" (no choice) and we acquiesced. This after all was Israel!

Finally, we returned to the border crossing and our Israeli exit was without incident. The Israeli Border officers were very friendly. My son who had made Aliyah, was required to leave Israel with his Israeli passport in order to return to Israel. He was advised however, to enter and exit Jordan with his American passport in order to leave Jordan without any potential "incidents." This suggestion did not alleviate our mounting anxiety.

We then were directed into a "no man's land" of about 150 yards where Jordan's border patrol would process us into Jordan.

Watching the Israeli flags grow smaller as we looked back and the Jordanian flags looming ever larger before us, we realized we were no longer under Israeli protection; we began to question the wisdom of our decision to spend the two nights in Aqaba rather than in Eilat.

The Jordanian border patrol greeted us with stone faces and an all business attitude. We presented our U.S. passports and they inspected our overnight bags. They did not speak English or Hebrew. After the inspection my son was told to pass and I was to remain in the room.

In my overnight bag they found a pair of binoculars which apparently raised suspicions about the purpose of my visit. I was escorted to a different room, separated from my son and my passport. For a moment, I wasn't sure which separation created greater stress.

I sat there alone for about 10 minutes, which felt like hours. Finally, a higher-ranking English speaking officer entered the room and extensively questioned me about my intentions and my binoculars. Where did I get these binoculars? How powerful were they, etc.? I finally convinced him I was just a tourist with reservations at a hotel in Aqaba; and was taking a guided tour of Petra the next day with a Jordanian tour company.

After ordering me not to remove the binoculars from my bag during my entire stay in Jordan. I was reunited with my passport and my son; and we were allowed to pass into Jordan to meet our Jordanian tour representative who would escort us to our hotel. Unfortunately, he was nowhere in sight and we had no way to communicate with him.

(To be continued ...)

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.