

FIELD REPORT – Israel & Palestinian Territories

A Centurion instructor assisted media clients in Jerusalem, Gaza, Nablus and Jenin from August 8-16, 2002. Here is his field report.

ACCOMMODATION:

The American Colony Hotel, Nablus Road, Jerusalem (021 627 9777) is journalists' meeting point. I stayed in nearby Addar Hotel, 53 Nablus Road, Jerusalem (\$70 per night) which is in a safe area and is used by journalists. Some 40 minutes from Tel Aviv and about 60 km from airport. Al Qasr Hotel, Nablus, West Bank (\$70 per night) has a good commanding view over Nablus from its roof. Very friendly staff. Very good food. Mobile communications are very good. Al Diera Hotel, Gaza (\$75 per night) is on the sea front. Journalists stay in this hotel frequently, book rooms in advance. Friendly staff. Very good food. Mobile communications are not too good, but if you move around the hotel you can get a better signal.

CURRENCY:

Preferred currencies are Israeli shekels and US dollars (7 shekels = £1).

DANGERS:

Suicide bombers, shooting in air at funerals, buses, bus stops, IDF checkpoints, driving at night. Do not use buses or stand at bus stops. Do not take Israeli yellow-plated cars into West Bank. Pickpockets (children) in refugee camps.

Route 60 from Jerusalem to Nablus and Jenin is mostly dual carriageway at first, then single. Road conditions good. There are a couple of Israeli Defence Force checkpoints and a few settlements on the hills. Nablus, largest of the West Bank towns (pop. 120,000), is about one hour from Jerusalem. It was under 100% curfew. Quite a few people break this curfew at risk of reprisals from the IDF. The town was quite deserted with pot holes and blocked off roads. IDF soldiers regularly patrol the town in Armoured Personnel Carriers and Murgerva tanks. At night there was regular shooting.

From Nablus to Jenin there was an IDF checkpoint on the road about 2-3 km from the town limits. There were many APCs and tanks there. Also at this point is an Israeli settlement. The IDF was digging up the road near Jenin so we had to take a major dirt track which made the drive about 1 hour 30 minutes. It could have been done in about 30-40 minutes but with these routes it's always worth adding a bit of "fudge factor".

FOOD & WATER:

Water in Jerusalem hotels is OK to drink. In Gaza and West Bank drink bottled water. Bottled water can be bought everywhere. Make sure seal on bottle top is not broken.

HEALTH & HYGIENE:

Yellow Fever, Dyptheria and Tetanus, Hepatitis, Hepatitis B, Polio, Rabies, Typhoid inoculations. Take syringes and needles with a note from your doctor giving the reason for carrying them. In case of emergencies dial 911 or contact the local branch of the Magen David Adom (Red Star of David). The Jerusalem Post carries a list of late-opening chemists. Doctors/hospitals expect immediate cash payment for health services. Hygiene facilities in hotels are very good.

LOCAL CUSTOMS:

Shops close at 1400 Friday afternoon (start of the Jewish Sabbath) and all day Saturday.

SAFETY & SECURITY:

I was kitted with a helmet, high velocity personal protective equipment, first aid bum bag and trauma pack. When wearing body armour, it's best not to have anything sharp (pens, etc.) in shirt pockets or jewellery around the neck. These could become embedded in the body should an incident occur.

Erez is the main crossing from Israel to Gaza. It's one hour's drive from Jerusalem. You have to park your car there and take all equipment with you. Passports are stamped, equipment put through x-ray machine. There is now a porter with a trolley who will carry your gear from passport office and through the last Israeli checkpoint (50 shekels). Either walk or take taxi 200 metres to Palestinian checkpoint, which will want to see your passport. Pick up either fixer or driver.

IDF checkpoints are often in two parts. These are usually manned by two soldiers who you can see, often a third one has you in his sights in an observation tower/post with camouflage netting over it. Drive slowly up to "Red Hand" stop signpost and wait to be waved forward. Keep watching the soldier because often there will only be a slight movement of his hand to wave you forward. Have Press ID ready, make sure your hands are visible.

Sunglasses are good things to wear (99% of Palestinians don't wear them). Be polite to the IDF soldier. He will give you no reason as to why he won't let you through. A phone call to the Government Press Office, Foreign Press Department in Jerusalem (972 2 5007 500) usually gets you through but you will have to wait (tell them your location). Once you're through the first part of the checkpoint, drive slowly towards the second part, keep driving (even if there are soldiers there) unless you are told to stop.

At night, dip your headlights/use sidelights, have interior light on so soldiers can see you. Driver must not use his mobile phone (\$150 fine).

Be aware that if you are refused permission to go through a checkpoint and decide to use dirt tracks to get to location, depending on the location of the checkpoint (high ground) the IDF can see your vehicle for many miles.

TRAVEL:

Took 1 hour 20 minutes to get through Customs at Ben Gurion airport, Tel Aviv. Driving conditions in areas visited ranged from very good to difficult.

VISA:

No visa required but you will need an Israeli Immigration Form which must be filled in in duplicate. You can get it at the airport check-in. Do not lose the second copy which must stay with your passport until you leave.