

The ancient city of Nazareth is a unique moment on the pilgrim path today. Nazareth is unique because it is one of the few places where we will visit a truly mixed city. The mix is Muslim and Christian. Of the city's 80,000 people 55% are Muslim and 45% are Christian. Nazareth is unique in that we will not see any clear signs of separation.

Throughout the West Bank and Israel, we will find the "Security Wall" separating Palestinians from Israelis. In Bethlehem, the wall dominates the landscape and gives a clear sense of separation. As you venture out of Jerusalem, the plethora of settlements fill the hills with a sense of "growth." But the growth is very controversial and the land where the growth is happening is greatly disputed. The settlements are not mixing with Palestinian neighborhoods, they are creating separate communities.

Hence, Nazareth is unique in that it has two very different communities who share an Arab identity. Nazareth is not the only place where Christians live in Israel, but it is largest, and thus, Christians achieve a level of presence. This is the only place where you will visit Christian neighborhoods, while we will visit many places where there are Arab Muslim neighborhoods.



Nazareth is also unique as it hosts a thriving basilica. The Church of the Annunciation hosts a fascinating collection of modern mosaics featuring the Virgin Mary. In Nazareth we will find a modern church rising above the shrine of the 1st century excavation. As if this is not enough,

there is evidence that around this excavation is, perhaps, the oldest remaining church. On top of this pre-Byzantine church is a crusader church as well.

Surrounding the basilica is a bustling city. The shops, the cafes, the office buildings all evidence a vitality that is very uncommon in Arab cities within Israel/Palestine. In Bethlehem we will visit a site, The Church of the Nativity, which has similar antiquity as well as devotional importance, but you will notice a very different atmosphere.

A pilgrim to the Holy Land today is a welcomed guest. Everywhere we go, there will be gracious hosts— and this is not just to take the tourist dollars. Pilgrims are welcomed because we are venturing out to find faith, to find healing, to find a blessing, to find understanding. This is a gift to all who meet you. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions all value the pilgrim.

On our walking and touring and seeking, though, we need to be mindful that those who welcome us are struggling. There is great tension over water, security, and, mostly, land. There is no time where someone living in Israel/Palestine today is not confronted with the issues of occupation and the violence that so often comes with it.

For many of us this is a first visit to Israel/Palestine. Please be mindful of the tensions in which people live. But more than being mindful, be hopeful. For Israel to survive as a nation it must find a solution greater than Apartheid; for Palestinians to thrive as a people, walls must come down. How this is to happen has been a vexing, painful question for more than seventy years now. As we walk through the Holy Land, pray that such a day of peace can be given to us all.