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## Reflections from Abroad

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## **Reflections from Abroad**

*By Lauren Johnson*

### **Jerusalem - Friday, 02/12/2010**

Today was by far our most exhausting day, not only because it involved constant walking, but because we also took in some of the most profound sites the area has to offer. We got to go back to Jerusalem, to the City of David, to walk through the old Canaanite water tunnels that lie adjacent to the similar ones constructed by Hezekiah. We then went into old Jerusalem and out of the modern world, really like taking a step back in time—on the street were vendors selling breads and scarves, children trying to lure passersby into their parents' shops or into purchasing postcards and jewelry; fruits and vegetables of unknown types and origins in abundance; crosses and crucifixes, stars of David and prayer shawls, flutes and bracelets. It reminded me very much of San Lorenzo market here in Florence—but older, a bit dirtier, more mysterious, and more foreign. We walked the famous Via Dolorosa, which follows the steps of Christ from condemnation to flagellation, to crucifixion and burial. We saw the supposed hole where the cross was planted, the tomb, and the stone where Jesus was anointed and cleansed after his death inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The afternoon, however, brought us to our communion/devotional in the Garden tomb and also to a contradiction—because the Garden tomb, like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, also claims to be the spot of the crucifixion and burial of Christ. Continuing our journey through the rest of Old Jerusalem, we walked first through the Muslim quarter, then the Christian, and finally the Jewish one. You knew instantly when you entered the Jewish section because, as our Palestinian tour guide George put it, “it was covered, well lit, and there are trash cans.” Upon exiting the Market Cardo, or “heart,” we were

finally at one of the most revered places in the world—the Western Wall, sectioned off into separate sections for men and women and crowded with the devout in prayer; this spot contained the last remnants of the original wall built around the temple at Jerusalem; behind it loomed the beautiful Dome of the Rock, of which it must be said is probably the most beautiful architectural structure in Old Jerusalem.

### **Florence**

Florence, Italy is absolutely the most enchanting place in the world. It's everything you expect it to be and absolutely nothing you could have anticipated. A contradiction in itself, a living piece of the Renaissance trapped in the modern age, a city full of medieval streets and cobblestones, priceless art and fish-bowl cars—and, of course, the best coffee (complemented perfectly by a creamy piece of tiramisu) the West has to offer. But it's not only the obvious that Italy will delight you with—the cuisine, the charming architecture, the unfamiliarity of a world set apart; these can grow old, tedious, normal, just like eating pasta twice a day every day can start to grow old, tedious, normal. No, Italy is more than its surface—to get to know and embrace Florence, one has to dig, to search, to truly find the hidden gems beneath it. Probably the best experience I had here in Italy was riding on the back of my Italian friend's *motorino* one night (after we indulged in a typical Florentine dinner, Bistecca Fiorentina), where he gave me a “tour of Florence,” as the locals knew it; I got to see things and learn more about the culture in a way that would have been impossible without the search for it. For that's what the year abroad here as truly taught me—the search, the journey, is what is important. One day, I was looking for a church nearby, a tiny little medieval one containing frescoes by Botticelli and Ghirlandaio; I

wasn't able to find the church the first time I went looking for it, but I did stumble upon the best hot chocolate shop in Florence; or I can talk about the time that I went into an antiquated leather purse shop and spoke solely in Italian to the little old woman who makes the purses there; or I could mention the time that our entire villa got dressed up in purples and reds and jerseys and Forza Viola scarves, parading through the streets to the bewilderment of the Florentines as we made our way to the stadium to cheer on the soccer team. I try to paint a picture of my year here, to explain to others how all of these wonderful experiences have indefinably changed me as a person, yet the task in itself is impossible. As cliché as it sounds, it's true—study abroad 2009-2010 in Florence, Italy was the best year of my life and I couldn't have chosen a better place to spend it.