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An Indian Traveller’s Storybook Night in Bethlehem

A writer, who grew up rehearsing nativity plays in her Indian school, is overwhelmed at witnessing Christmas at the sacred Church of Nativity in West Bank’s Bethlehem.



In Christmastime, devotees flock to Bethlehem, lining up outside sacred sites all through the night, sometimes up to dawn. Photo by: Pavel Skopets/Shutterstock

BY Kusumita Das POSTED ON January 30, 2022

I think the first time I even heard the word “Bethlehem” was in a Christmas carol which we would rehearse through the year at school in Durgapur, to perform the Nativity Scene at our annual Christmas programme. To my young mind, in songs about Bethlehem it seemed like this faraway storybook land that probably existed thousands of years ago, with hills and meadows and caves. So when I stepped inside the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem to attend the midnight mass in December 2021, the journey from that little school auditorium to ground zero seemed hard to comprehend. It was not something I had set out to do, and yet here I was, singing “Silent Night, Holy Night”, standing on the floor of Saint Catherine’s Chapel right above the ‘manger’ which is believed to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ.

Bethlehem is part of the West Bank territories and can be reached from Jerusalem by bus or car in less than thirty minutes. Its main attraction is the Church of Nativity that was built circa 330 A.D. by the first Christian Roman emperor Constantine and was mostly destroyed during the Samaritan rebellion in 529 A.D. However, parts of the original mosaic floor remain. It was rebuilt not long after, by Byzantine emperor Justinian. Historians believe that the rebuilt version, which stands on Bethlehem’s Manger Square, was larger and grander, and is mostly the structure as we see today. Three rival Christian sects, the Roman Catholic, Armenian Apostolic and Greek Orthodox share caretaking duties of the church, just like the way it is at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the site of Jesus’s crucifixion. The Grotto of the Nativity is revered as the exact spot where Mother Mary had laid baby Jesus after he was born. It’s an underground space which forms the crypt of the Church of Nativity, situated under its main altar. The exact spot where Jesus was born is marked by a 14-pointed silver star that bears a Latin inscription “*Hic De Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est*”, which means “Here Jesus Christ was born to Virgin Mary”. In the middle of the 14-pointed star is a circular hole, through which devotees can reach in to touch the stone that is believed to be the original stone where Mary had laid while giving birth to Christ.



Chapel of the Sheperd's Field. Photo by: waupee08/Shutterstock

Every year, after the midnight mass, the queues stretch till as long as dawn, with thousands of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter the holiest site for Christians. This time, the wait was hardly half-an-hour. The throngs of international pilgrims were missing due to travel restrictions; this time the attendees mostly comprised local Arab Christians, international students and expats living in the Holy Land, and even pilgrims from Gaza, who had managed to secure special permits for the occasion. It was a memorable moment for the Church as well as those Gazan devotees who could set foot in Bethlehem, a city that's been at the centre of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The mass is conducted largely in Latin, with bits of Arabic, French and even a little Hebrew thrown in, and stretches for almost three hours. This December it was presided by HB Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Patriarch of Jerusalem of the Latins and was attended by the Palestinian Prime Minister, Mohammad Shtayyeh, while the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas gave it a miss.

The mass, which is broadcast around the world, is the cornerstone of Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem. It's pretty much the culmination point of all the events through the day, that started off with the colourful Christmas parade, with marching bands and scout squads banging drums and waving flags, making their way to the festive Manger Square. Thousands of Palestinian scouts, playing in over 25 bands marched through the city playing their bagpipes, tubas, drums and trombones. It's an annual tradition, where they accompany the Patriarch of Jerusalem, as he makes his way to Bethlehem, to the Church of Nativity. It's the one event that stirs up festivities on the eve of Christmas. And given that 2020's Christmas was a very silent night, everything this time rang more festive and precious than usual. A giant Christmas tree topped with a red star towered over the Manger Square, standing just a few yards away from a mosque. The Biblical town is mostly inhabited by Muslims now, but the Holy Land is nothing if not a stage for various religious monuments, with a warring past, holding their own ground next to one another.

In the hours leading up to the midnight mass, the Manger Square was a sea of Santa hats. This was Bethlehem in all its reclaimed Christmas glory. Christmas carols in Arabic blared from loudspeakers as people lined up under the Christmas tree trying to take the perfect selfie, while those that felt peckish huddled around the sweet corn stalls. The shops bordering the square had laid out rows of nargeelas (local term for hookah) and the December air was heavy with the aroma

on a hunt for shawarma through the alleys of Bethlehem’s Old City that border the Manger Square on one side. We trudged around on the steep slopes of a luminous Star Street–believed to be the path Mary and Joseph had taken from Nazareth to the Church of Nativity. It was once the touristy core of this town, a bustling hub of souvenir stores, workshops, craftsmen, especially those working with the famous ‘Bethlehem olive wood’. But all the dazzling string lights dangling over our heads couldn’t minimize the dim reality of lost livelihoods on both sides of the road.

Manger Square was still bustling on Christmas morning, but we made our way to Shepherds’ Field, a short cab ride away, on the eastern slopes of Bethlehem. The tidings about the birth of Jesus are believed to have been announced by angels, to a few good shepherds tending to their flock of sheep in the caves here. The massive, enclosed area was partially excavated in the mid-19th century, and again a hundred years later, to reveal ruins of altars and mosaic inscriptions and even olive presses and grain storage units that confirmed that this was once a place dwelt by pastoral folk. On top of the caves now stands the Shepherds’ Field Chapel, a Roman Catholic monument; its most striking feature is its tent-like structure. And not too far away, is a red-domed Greek Orthodox church that commemorates the same Biblical event. No matter what relic of Christian history you encounter in the Holy Land, the rivalry among Christian sects in how they honour and preserve history and tradition, is a living, breathing reality.

The low hung caves have been turned into a tiny chapel that compels you to keep your head bowed down. I would almost always be assigned the role of a shepherd back at school in Nativity re-enactments and many arduous hours would go by making cardboard cut-outs of sheep, fattening them up by sticking cotton wool on them. For us shepherds, by the time of the actual scene, the fluffs of cotton would begin to shed, making our flock appear much leaner than we had intended them to be. It was a frustrating cycle. Now, on Christmas day, standing inside the cave where it all began, things appeared to have come a full circle for this reluctant



Inside the church (bottom), which stands over Manger Square, the exact spot where Jesus was born (top) is marked by a silver star. Photos by: Victor Lauer/Shutterstock, DyziO/Shuttertsock



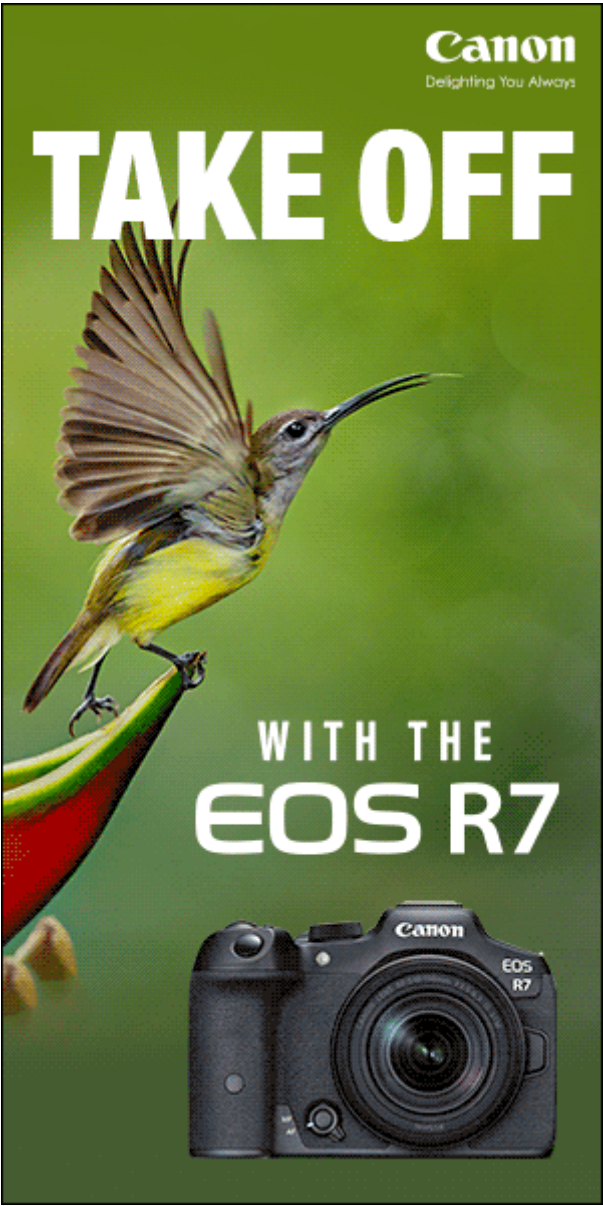
Streets of the Arab Quarters of Bethlehem come alive during Christmas. Photo by: VladimirMPetrov/Shutterstock

shepherd.

It was way past sundown by the time we left Shepherd's Field to return to Manger Square for one last cup of coffee and a goodbye stroll. There was no Bethlehem star to guide us, so we hailed a taxi.

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A D V E R T I S E M E N T



Kusumita Das is a freelance writer based in Mumbai. Her favourite word is serendipity and that's exactly what travel means to her. An overnight train journey to the mountains is how she defines a perfect holiday. That combined with lots of tea.

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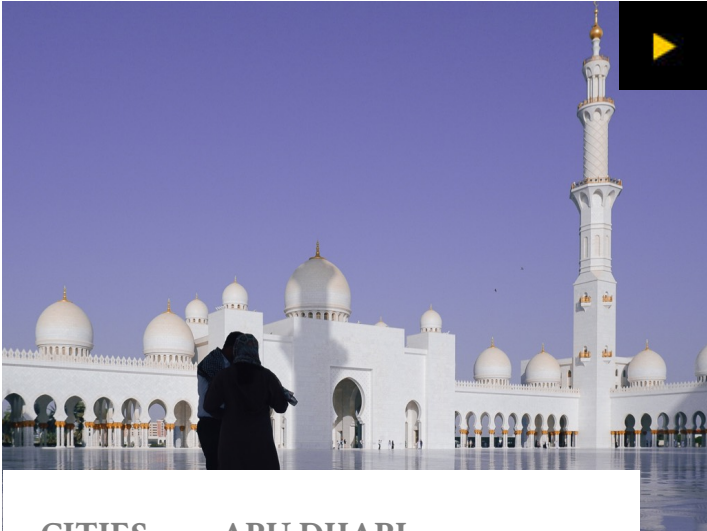
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