



Beyond the Temple Mount at the Western Wall and Al-Aqsa Mosque



“Close to Gaza and well within rocket range, the people at the factory take the threat of attack and regular sirens in their stride – normality here is different again.”

Normality?

Everyone grows eventually to accept the world around them as normal. For some this can be an aggressive environment which generates constant tension and an acceptance of barriers, customs, or even violence which surprises those living in calmer societies. Having spent my first 30 years in Belfast I recall when travelling abroad how I would be amazed at the way in which the world viewed our ‘normality’. What we viewed as ‘just the way things are’ very effectively limited visitors from overseas for many years – we were left to our own devices in a complex political-religious-social battle-zone. The media didn’t necessarily lie but they did us no favors by only highlighting the problems. We went about our lives, observed our boundaries and, despite the backdrop, many people enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence – as normal as we could make it.

Take a look at Jerusalem today. It is an

amazing focal point for history and has the feel of a living museum. Impossible to sum up in a few paragraphs, the Old City is divided into quarters where Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Armenians co-exist: but here the tension is palpable. Passing beyond the end of the Via Dolorosa, my Jewish host was actively challenged by local Muslim youths about proceeding any further towards the Al-Aqsa mosque: ‘Only for Muslims!’. Nothing physical but a clear demarcation, and none too welcoming. I decided not to abandon my colleague at the gateway, not even sure that they would let a non-practicing Christian pass through, and we diverted to the Western Wall where, as a Jew, he was very welcome. Another incredible focal point, the atmosphere commands reverence as worshippers go about their devotions but there is a constant alertness all around. I declined the offer of a yarmulke which meant I couldn’t approach the

wall proper but I've seen one or two religious sites in my travels and I was happy to observe from a distance. It was interesting to see that men and women pray separately (at what can only be described as disproportionately sized sections).

The gaudy commercial trading of the main thoroughfare leading to the Temple Mount gives way within a few streets either side to neighborhoods where children are playing in the streets: examples of living history and future defenders of the right of their faith to remain within the walls of the city. That defense will last longer than the walls that surround them and, just like the history of Northern Ireland, will always remain opaque to an outsider. I can't say that I was entirely comfortable but there were lighter moments and in a quest for souvenirs to decorate the walls of Orla's palace back home, I decided to try my hand at haggling with an Arab trader. I saw a plate that I liked but he saw me coming first. Despite thinking I had done well to have him drop his price from 450 shekels to 350 (about \$100), my colleague pointed out I had vastly overpaid and probably made the trader's entire day's takings. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, however, and what I regard as a rather nice hand-engraved ancient artifact now adorns our hallway next to a ceremonial dagger from Oman. I'll haggle harder next time.

And then there is Tel-Aviv. Modern, vibrant and easy to navigate, it is a growing, expensive resort on the Mediterranean that is a magnet for Jews immigrating to Israel from all over the world. The mix of accented Hebrew reveals European and Russian newcomers to the locals who appear only too happy to welcome those taking the 'high way'. The city feels young and safe – everywhere you go you see young men and women in military uniform carrying their automatic


weapons. I don't mean on patrol. I mean on the bus, in the mall, and on the train as if they were carrying a hockey stick or a musical instrument. Normal to a young Israeli is born from necessity and readiness which, as an outsider, takes a while to get used to.

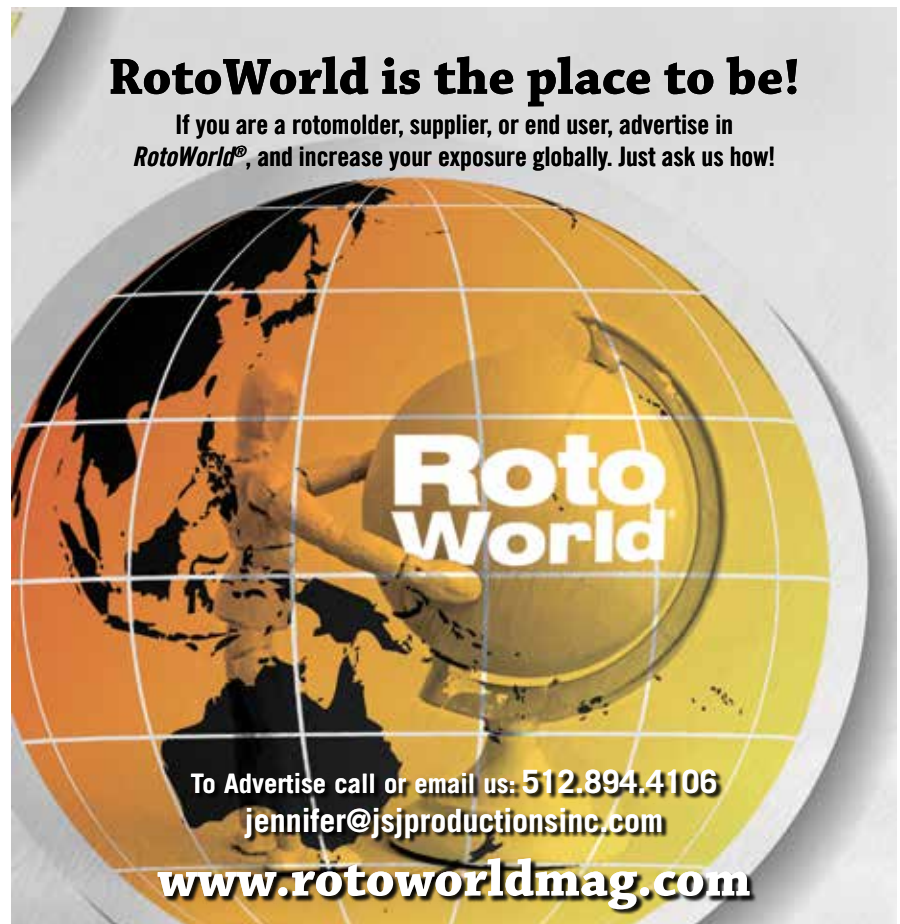
Small Country, Small Industry

Of course, I wasn't there just for sightseeing but to help with a new molding operation. Close to Gaza and well within rocket range, the people at the factory take the threat of attack and regular sirens in their stride – normality here is different again. They are resourceful, open to using good quality imported equipment and materials and certainly picked up the process

quickly. Within a couple of days they were confidently producing useful and attractive parts to meet their internal needs.

The industry here is small with only three or four molders, a couple of which form part of a kibbutz and which produce a typical range of standard rotomolding fare for local consumption. With a population of only around 7.9 million people and limited opportunity for trading with neighboring states, there is some potential for mid-level rotomolded parts but the development of these markets will remain to be seen.

I'll be back again sometime soon to help with new projects. Next time I'm bringing my secret weapon for haggling. She'll sort them out. 



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