

TRAVEL *bethlehem*

O Little Town of Bethlehem

*Experience the solemnity of Christmas
where Christ was born*

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A view of the facade of
St. Catherine's Church

"... O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM, HOW STILL WE SEE THEE LIE. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Having grown up in a traditional Filipino household, my idea of celebrating the holidays had always involved mixing together popular and religious traditions. This included putting up Christmas trees, writing letters to Santa Clause, participating in Simbang Gabi, watching my mother assemble her Nativity sets and preparing Noche Buena for the whole family. Because this holiday tradition was deeply ingrained in my system, I thought it was taboo to be celebrating Christmas elsewhere and without family.

That was until my godmother suggested taking a pilgrimage on Christmas Day to the place where Jesus was born. Of course, I could not contain my excitement to go to the exact place where Christmas really began 2000 years ago—Bethlehem!

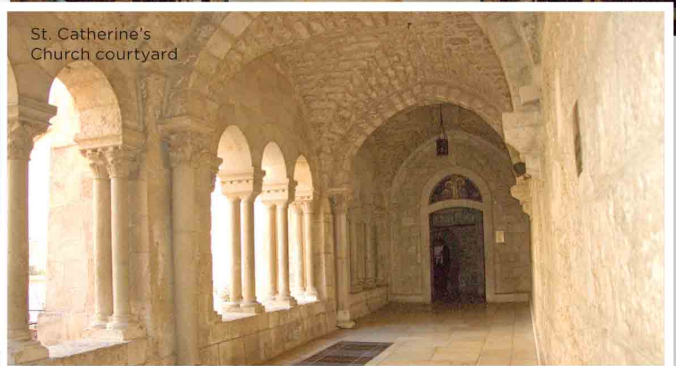
Being the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem competes with the Vatican City in the sheer number of pilgrims who come there during the holidays. Because it is the melting pot of all religious denominations, the locals observe Christmas Day differently from one other. Similar with commercial Christmas traditions, Roman Catholics and Protestants celebrate Christmas on December 25. Greek Orthodox Christians celebrate on January 6, while January 18 is the date for Armenian Christians.

The festive mood is best characterized by the traditional Christmas carols that the locals play, the Christmas lights strung around the streets, the Christmas market where plays are staged and the cross that is painted on the doors in each Christian home.

A view of the West Bank walls circling the city of Bethlehem



Midnight Mass is celebrated at St. Catherine's Church



St. Catherine's Church courtyard

Different interpretations of the Nativity scenes are also displayed in all households.

It was the day before Christmas when we made our way to Bethlehem. Bordered by the famous West Bank Wall with high electrical fences and guard towers circling the entire city, the entry into the Palestinian territory of Bethlehem entailed passing through check points and finding out that only Palestinian tour guides

were allowed to take tourists around (I found it really ironic that an on-going political strife between the Israelis and Palestinians would take place right in the heart of Jesus' birthplace). After border formalities, we finally checked into our hotel, which was packed with people from around the world.

We started our day by paying homage to St. Catherine's Church. Run

by the Franciscans, it is where the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem celebrates Midnight Mass. The modern basilica has three aisles. To the north and west is the active Franciscan monastery. Outside the west door of the church is a cloister where a modern statue of St. Jerome stands. Meanwhile, you can find a gigantic Belen replica in the church courtyard. It was a bit difficult to feel the solemnity of Christmas because so many pilgrims flooded the church trying to take photos as guides briefed their respective groups.

But on a lighter note, a very memorable moment for me was observing the Christmas parade and processions passing through Manger Square, the plaza located just outside the church. Lay organizations, school bands and religious groups all dressed up in their best holiday costumes marched through the streets playing all kinds of music. Being surrounded by such festive and joyous energy really filled me with Christmas spirit!

We then started making our way to the Church of the Nativity which was managed by Greek Orthodox Christians. We all had to create a human chain so nobody would get lost in the heavy throng but, luckily, we were able to avoid the crowd.

Designed like a typical Roman basilica, the structure of the church features golden mosaics covering the side walls. People enter the basilica through a very low door called the "Door of Humility." As we entered



A belen is set up in Shepherd's Field, where the Angel of the Lord visited a group of shepherds and informed them of Jesus' birth



School children participate in the Christmas parade



The parade at Manger's Square

Budget:

Airfare going to Bethlehem during the holidays is priced between P80,000 to P145,000 per person.

the church, a single thought was running through my head: "This is the moment we have all been waiting for! We are finally going to see the Nativity Grotto!"

The Grotto of the Nativity is located beneath the church and can be reached by two sets of stairways. These stairways lead to the cave where Mary gave birth to Jesus. The exact place of birth is located on the east side of the cave and is marked by a star. The star is made of silver and has 14 rays that

represent the 14 generations from Abraham to David, the 14 generations from David to the exile of Babylon and the 14 generations from the exile of Babylon to Jesus' birth. The Latin inscriptions that appear on the star reads: "Here of the Virgin Mary Jesus Christ was born - 1717".

I honestly did not know what to expect as we descended the narrow passageway leading to the grotto. But when I finally reached it, I simply fell on my knees as a feeling of renewed faith washed over me. Up to this day, I still find it difficult to put into words the surreal feeling that I felt that time.

We stayed there the whole day and waited for Christmas Eve, which was marked by another round of processions—complete with galloping horsemen and police mounted on Arabian horses leading the party. They were followed by a solitary horseman riding on a coal-black steed and carrying a cross. Behind him were the churchmen and government officials. The procession quietly entered the doors of the Church of the Nativity to put an ancient effigy of the Holy Child into the grotto.

Celebrating Christmas in Bethlehem will surely leave you with an unforgettable

spiritual and cultural journey that you may not be able to have in any other place. I believe that once in your lifetime, you should never miss the chance to pay homage to Jesus. But never forget also that it doesn't really matter where you are in the world during this most celebrated

holiday, as Christmas can be best celebrated in one's heart. I remember asking a dear friend once when his birthday was, and his reply was, "Every day is my birthday." And I believe that's what Christmas should be all about too—us celebrating it every day in our hearts! 🏠



The Nativity Grotto



Inside the Church of the Nativity



A modern day Santa livening up the festivities in Manger Square

Where to Stay:

Jacir Palace is the largest hotel in Bethlehem. It has three floors, with each spanning 800 square meters. It features an outdoor swimming pool, a health spa, two meeting rooms, 250 hotel rooms and 11 food and beverage outlets, including restaurants and bars.

Jacir Palace is located at Jerusalem-Hebron Road, PO Box 1167, Bethlehem, Palestinian National Authority; call +972-0-22766777; fax +972-0-22766770

A view of the Church of the Nativity courtyard

