



## 3750 steps to Mount Sinai

### Futurewise member Jacob Keet recalls his gap year journey through Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Egypt

**Istanbul is a magnificent city. Situated on the river Bosphorous, it is the only city to straddle two continents - Europe and Asia. As such, it marks the gateway to the East and is a good starting point for any adventure into the realms of the Orient. Before its fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, it formed the capital of the Byzantine Empire, a domain that in its heyday stretched from the lands of Southern Spain to the boundaries of ancient Persia.**

Leaving the sea air and somewhat European feel of Istanbul, I was then thrust into the Arab world of Syria. Arriving in Aleppo at 5 o'clock in the morning after a gruelling night flight, I was soon surrounded by a pack of small Syrians chanting 'taxi, taxi, taxi!' The cries continued even after

I had explained I was expecting a lift, and fortunately Haddhi, my Arabic teacher, arrived promptly to pick me up. Thus, to many sighs of disappointment from the taxi drivers, we sped off through the empty morning streets and into the heart of Aleppo.

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Derived from the Arabic word 'Haleb', meaning milk, folklore dictates that Aleppo got its name when Abraham stopped to milk his cows atop its hill. Whether or not this is true, the city certainly holds plenty of history and vies with Damascus for the status of the oldest, continuously inhabited settlement on

earth. The site itself is known to have been occupied since 5000BC. After a good many hours wandering through the ruins we stood to hear the loud azan, the call to prayer, emanate from Aleppo's mosques.

From Aleppo I travelled by train to the coast of the Mediterranean, Syrian hospitality backfiring somewhat when I sat down next to a boy insistent on buying me fizzy drinks and food; items not too high on my wish list after suffering the results of a bad kebab the night before. Needless to say, I did not spend the journey enjoying the view of the Syrian countryside from the white-washed windows of the toilet.

I made my way down the coast, visiting the ruins of three Crusader castles before heading back inland to Damascus to visit the Mausoleum of Saladin outside the Umayyad Mosque. The Ayyubid leader inflicted tremendous defeats on the Crusaders in the 12th century and is still revered by many Muslims today - an apt example of the power that the Crusades still hold in the modern Muslim world

A long coach ride with complimentary Arabic-pop blasting through the speakers took me across the border and into Jordan. Staying in Amman, I explored the region around the city - Al-Maghtas, the site on the River Jordan where Jesus was baptised, now enshrined by rushes on the river bank, and Mt. Nebo, where Moses once looked down upon the Promised Land which he was never to enter. The mountain commands a view which lays out the geography of the Holy Land better than any map.

Down from Amman, across wadis large enough to rival the Grand Canyon and past more Crusader castles, bastions of Medieval Christendom in the desert, I came to Petra, the Nabatean city carved in rock. The city is accessed by a long, winding siq, or canyon, which Medieval chroniclers spoke of as the gates to Hell.

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After a brief stint in the Jordanian desert, around the area where Lawrence of Arabia led the Arab revolt, I departed Jordan and crossed the Gulf of Aqaba by ferry to Egypt to complete my pilgrimage on the Holy Mountain. Resting in a Bedouin camp for the night, in a village near the foot of Mt. Sinai, I began my trek up the mountain the following day. At the mountain's base lays the fortress monastery of St. Katherine. From the monastery two paths lead up the mountain - the wide camel trail and the 3750 Steps of Repentance. I placed my foot firmly on the first step and begun my ascent. Only 3749 to go...

The large stone slabs which form the steps up to the summit were laid by a monk in the Middle Ages, intended as a form of penance. Climbing the path still helps one to envisage the mind of a medieval monk - particularly his obsession with sin which reached new heights at that time. Breathless and fatigued, I stopped for a quick sip of water on Elijah's Basin three-quarters of the way to the summit, before continuing on up the remainder of the steps to the mountain's peak.

The sun was fast setting, and I quickly found a rock on which to rest for the night, pulling a somewhat flea-ridden Bedouin blanket over myself and settling down to watch the orange sun descend beneath the mountains. The night, however, never grew dark, as one by one the stars took their places in the sky, the moon graciously illuminating the mountaintop and the stones of its holy buildings.

Drifting in and out of a state of semi-consciousness I awoke to some haunting chant, melodious but whispering through the cold mountain air. It was coming from the basin down below, and grew louder as other pilgrims climbed up to the summit. Whereas before I had been alone, soon enough the entire peak was flooded with people, all settling to watch the sun rise from beneath the earth. As if infused with the fervour of a new day, the pulsating orange ball leaped atop the horizon, once more casting its much-appreciated warmth on those who had gathered to see it.