



Reporting from Ramallah

One of the blessings of travel is making new friends. Sometimes you find those new friends initially through a Google search. Several months before I got on a plane, I googled “Taybeh beer” to learn more about Palestine’s one and only family-owned microbrewery located in a historic Christian village northeast of Ramallah. In addition to the company website, I found the blog of an American girl named Genevieve living in the West Bank. She and her husband visited Taybeh for a day hike, sampled the microbrew at a local cafe and thankfully for me, she wrote about it on her blog.

In addition to chronicling her adventures in the West Bank, Genevieve writes about packing light and reaching your creative potential. She has also written two e-books about how to live a full life with less. Reading her blog, I found several points of connection in her personal stories; her warmth and sense of humor shone through every post. To top it all off, Genevieve previously worked as a fairy princess and knows how to make balloon animals. I knew we could be friends.

When I checked Genevieve’s location on the map, I realized I was due to be in her neck of the woods in February. So I emailed her about meeting and she was up for it. Once I got settled in Bethany, she suggested we meet at a well-known ice cream place called Rukab’s in Ramallah on a Sunday afternoon.

I took a *service* (sherut) from El-Azariyeh to Ramallah after church last Sunday. Everything was going fine until the driver started yelling into his phone. I tried to ignore this and enjoy the scenery, which is when I noticed we were turning off the main road. In fact, it looked like we were driving down into a quarry. Oh, that’s because we *were* driving into a quarry. Was it because our driver was distracted with solving a family feud or scolding his daughter for leaving a dirty spoon on the counter last night? Whatever the reason, soon enough we were up and out again, on the main road into Ramallah. Meanwhile I couldn’t decide if the driver was more angry with the person calling on the red phone or the one calling on the grey phone. He just kept going back and forth yelling at both of them. I was relieved when he let me off

in the middle of a vegetable market and sweetly said, “I no speak English” in response to my question about Rukab’s. The proprietor of a nearby pharmacy gave me directions instead and I was soon enjoying a stroll down Ramallah’s busy streets.

I arrived early and decided to get some coffee, so Genevieve and I ended up meeting at Stars & Bucks. The name and logo are a nod to the Seattle-based coffee giant, while the menu is completely different. Genevieve and I had a good chat about Palestine and what she’s learned from living here. Her husband works with a humanitarian aid organization, so he is often stationed in conflict zones; prior to Palestine he worked in Chechnya. They’ve been married two years and the West Bank is their first assignment together. Although they may live in the States from time to time, when in transition, they know that his work will continue to take them to challenging places.

Genevieve kindly showed me around the central area of Ramallah, which in contrast to El-Azariyeh feels like a buzzing metropolis. It was a treat to be out and about with another American girl, compare notes on Palestine and even make a few commercial transactions, a.k.a. shop. I asked Genevieve if we could hunt for yarn, since I have a project in mind. I figured if there was yarn to be had in the West Bank, Ramallah would have it.

Here are some of my favorite Ramallah discoveries:

☒ Stars & Bucks was perfect for a peaceful 3rd-storey hot chocolate break from the hubbub of downtown.

☒ Genevieve’s favorite falafel place—It was the first time I had someone throw a lemon slice—complete with the rind—into my sandwich and I loved it. Refreshing, crunchy and delicious!

☒ Fresh squeezed juices—I tried a mixture of pomegranate, carrot and orange with ginger while Genevieve enjoyed avocado and sugar cane. I felt healthier just standing in the shop breathing in the smell of pulverized fruit.

☒ A great art and school supply store where I chose some stickers for my 1st and 2nd grade students.

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✂ Handmade Leather Shoes—On our way to find the yarn store we stopped by a shop that Genevieve knows well called Rahala. The sole of each shoe is stamped with “Made in Palestine” and the company logo. They are feminine, colorful and come in a wide variety of styles. I was really impressed with the quality. If I manage to jettison an old pair of shoes from my luggage, I think I’ll be allowed to choose a replacement at Rahala.

✂ Yarn! Even though they didn’t have a big selection, it was exciting to find it tucked in with buttons and ribbon in an embroidery shop. While we were there several local women came in to choose embroidery floss for their projects. This reminded me that I have yet to see any shops showcasing the well-known Palestinian embroidery. I hope to learn more about this tradition soon.

✂ La Vie Cafe — I’m voting this place into the next Lonely Planet Guide. Although by the time I got to the cafe, I wasn’t hungry anymore, it gave me a little thrill to see the words “Guinness Chocolate Cake,” “Caramel Macchiato Cheesecake” and “Gluten Free” written on little cards next to the gorgeous homemade desserts behind the glass. The team behind the cafe is Morgan and Saleh, a Californian expat and her Palestinian husband. The vegetables for salads and quiche are grown in a rooftop garden. Several different kinds of fruit and nut producing trees grow on the property. There are also chickens in the backyard and honeybees on the roof. You can tell that the owners take pride in their work, enjoy growing and making food and love the employees like family.

Maybe it seems silly to travel so far to admire things that remind you of home. I can explain it this way: finding cheesecake in a classy cafe in the West Bank makes you realize how special cheesecake, a thoughtfully chosen color palette and a pleasant dining atmosphere are. Plus, I think

the efforts the Palestinian people put into their fresh juices, falafel sandwiches and handmade shoes is what makes them so special.

At the end of our Ramallah walk, Genevieve introduced me to her husband. They were even gracious enough to invite me to leave my painted handprint on their wall of welcome in the entry to their apartment. It was such an honor to meet them and see how they’re rocking the adventure of married life in the West Bank.



Above: The golden yellow services offer convenient transport between cities. The drivers just wait until they have a full van and go. Previous page: Al-Manara Square. You can see the green and white of Stars & Bucks on the 3rd floor of the building behind the square.

Genevieve’s writing inspired me from half way across the world. If I hadn’t left home, I wouldn’t have been able to meet Genevieve and see “where the magic happens” in her home office. I feel so blessed to have made a face-to-face connection with the girl who makes packing, simplifying your life and living in a conflict zone all look fun, easy and rewarding. Thank you, Genevieve!

On the way home, I thought about all the newscasts that I’d heard when I was younger, journalists signing off with their name followed by a somber “Ramallah.” This was the Ramallah that had been bombed so severely only a decade ago. I looked for signs of that turbulent time, but instead I saw guitar shops and furniture stores. Beyond this I saw long stretches of the 8-meter-high wall.

This time, on the way out of town, I expected our smooth path to be interrupted by a rocky drive through the stone quarry. When we left the main road and the dust started flying, I knew I was on the right path. ✂



Genevieve and me in front of La Vie Cafe’s rooftop garden in Ramallah. Genevieve blogs at www.packinglust.com. Please check out her priceless story about “How to Offend the Neighbors.”