

Religion Today
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Ramadan in East Jerusalem
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The month-long Muslim festival of Ramadan will begin this year on June 17. Last summer, I arrived in East Jerusalem, the Muslim section of the city, on the day after Ramadan's start. Things were quite different from a previous visit, when it had not been Ramadan. Here are my traveler's tales:

Ramadan is the holiest festival in the Islamic calendar. Every day, for the entire month, Muslims fast during the daylight hours. In June and July, that means from about 4 a.m. to 8 p.m. At sundown, Muslims gather with family and friends to enjoy a good meal and to renew their ties of family and friendship.

That's what the textbooks tell you. In reality, Muslims do much more: gathering after dark in the central areas of the city under strings of multicolored lights, buying toys for young children, eating special sweets and drinking fresh juice, and praying at the mosque. There is a keen sense of relaxed celebration in the air, almost like an evening at a state fair.

But life alters in other ways as well. I first noticed a change when the mosque down the street gave the signal for the end of the day's fast. At 10 before 8 p.m., a cannon went off. It fired a shell straight up into the air, which then exploded, giving off a flash and an extremely loud bang.

I noted the second change the next morning at 4 a.m. when the cannon was fired again to signal the start of the fast.

At lunch time, I was surprised to notice that my favorite place for a "shwarma pita" (the Arab version of a Greek gyros sandwich) was not only closed but shuttered. This is a local joint, not aimed at the tourists, but serving a working Arab clientele. Since no one was eating during the day, it of course, made no sense to open. "Duh!" I said to myself. (And then I thought of all the revenue this business was losing for an entire month.)

Not quite getting it, I decided to head for my favorite sweet shop, Jafar's, in the Old City. At least I could sit down and have a piece of baklava, a slice of kenafi and a cup of Arab coffee.

It was not to be. The shop was open, but I was surprised to see all the chairs on the tables as if they were closed. Jafar's son told me I could buy the baklava and kenafi to take out, but I could not eat it there.

The next day, I realized that Jafar's was the only sweet shop selling the big pans of kenafi (a candy/pie/cookie with a base of soft, white cheese topped with honey, ground nuts and spices). Instead, most food shops were making pancakes right next to the street. Each cook was surrounded by adults looking interested and entranced children watching, staring enchantedly at the young man turning the pancakes.

I kept looking at these scenes as I walked by, thinking, "It just looks like a pancake. What gives?" Well, walking among the crowds after dark, I found out these were a traditional Ramadan treat stuffed with nuts and cheese. Quite tasty, especially made with honey.

But, even traditional pancakes must change. When I came out the Damascus Gate from the Old City that night, I found that each of the main approaches to the gate was occupied by a young man making fresh crepes (not pancakes) for the youngsters arrayed in front of him. The crepes were smeared with Nutella (a hazelnut spread, which many people here like more than chocolate), rolled up and then eaten. I had last seen this treat at an Israeli rock-and-roll concert. Not quite traditional, but close enough to fit in while providing a cool vibe.

There also is a "Friday night after the high school football game" atmosphere. In other words, young men with cars cruise the main streets revving their engines, squealing their tires, cranking up the volume on their stereos and generally making lots of noise.

Of course, since there is strict segregation of unmarried men and women here, the young, male drivers are assuredly not doing this to attract the attention of the opposite sex. (Did I write that with a straight face??)

As I finish this article, it approaches midnight, and I hope the car noise outside the window will settle down soon. Then, I can descend from my sugar high (too much honey) and fall asleep. After all, I have to be rested for the 4 a.m. cannon.