Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem

Introduction

For many Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, the most important and meaningful thing they will do while in the city is walk the Via Dolorosa, the route that Jesus took between his condemnation by Pilate and his crucifixion and burial. The Via Dolorosa pilgrimage is followed by Christians of many denominations, but especially Catholics and Orthodox.

History

The Via Dolorosa pilgrimage been followed since early Christianity, beginning as soon as it became safe to do so after Constantine legalized the religion (mid-4th century). Originally, Byzantine pilgrims followed a similar path to the one taken today, but did not stop along the way. Over the centuries, the route has changed several times.

By the 8th century, the route had changed: beginning at the Garden of Gethsemane, pilgrims headed south to Mount Zion then doubled back around the Temple Mount to the Holy Sepulchre. The Middle Ages saw two rival routes, based on a split in the Latin Church: those with churches to the west went westward and those with churches in the east went eastward.

From the 14th to 16th centuries, pilgrims followed the Franciscan route, which began at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and included eight stations. Around this time, the tradition of 14 Stations of the Cross was developing in Europe. To avoid disappointing European pilgrims, the difference was made up with the addition of six more stations.
Today, the main route of the Via Dolorosa is that of the early Byzantine pilgrims, with 14 stations along the way. However, alternative routes are followed by those who have different opinions on the locations of various events. Anglicans believe Jesus would have been led north towards the Garden Tomb, while Dominican Catholics start from Herod's Palace near Jaffa Gate.

For most pilgrims, however, the exact location of each event along the Via Dolorosa is of little importance; the pilgrimage has great meaning due to its proximity to the original events and the reflection upon them along the way.

**What's to See?**

The route of the Via Dolorosa begins near the Lions' Gate in the Muslim Quarter and ends at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Christian Quarter, covering 500 meters and incorporating 14 Stations of the Cross. Unfortunately, the Via Dolorosa can prove a difficult place for prayer and contemplation, as it travels through busy streets lined with snack bars and tourist shops.

Each of the 14 Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa is marked with a plaque, but these small signs can be difficult to spot. Probably the best way to be sure of recognizing all the stations is to join the Friday procession (see "Festivals & Events" below) or a guided walk (ask at the Christian Information Centre). Preparation in advance is helpful, too, and perhaps the following description of the Via Dolorosa can help.

**Station 1** is Jesus' condemnation by Pontius Pilate (Mt 27:11-24; Mk 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-19:16). This event is held to have occurred at the site of Madrasa al-Omariya, 300m west of...
the Lion's Gate. The madrasa is still used as a school and can be entered with the permission of the caretaker at specific times (Mon-Thu, Sat 2:30-6; Fri 2:30-4pm). As mentioned above, an alternative location for this event is Herod's Palace at Jaffa Gate.

**Station 2** is where Jesus took up his cross. This is located next to the Franciscan Monastery of the Flagellation, across the road from the First Station.

The Chapel of Judgment/Condemnation, on the left, marks the site where Jesus was sentenced to death; the Chapel of the Flagellation, on the right, is where he was beaten by Roman soldiers (Mt 27:27-30; Mk 15:16-19; John 19:1-3).

From here, the Via Dolorosa turns south on Tariq Bab al-Ghawanima and passes the northwestern gate of the Temple Mount, Bab al-Ghawanima. Up ahead on the north side of the Via Dolorosa is the Convent of the Sisters of Zion, which contains large pieces of the Lithostrotos (Pavement of Justice).

The Lithostrotos stone slab has grooves carved in it, which are variously interpreted as channels for rainwater or traction for horses. What is clear, though, is that the squares and triangles on the slabs were made by game-playing Roman soldiers. The floor has been dated to the time of Hadrian (AD 117-138) and therefore postdates Jesus, but it is still fascinating and serves to bring to life the Gospel account of soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothes.

Just west of the entrance to the Lithostrotos is the Ecce Homo Arch, where Pilate identified Jesus to the crowd saying "Ecco homo" ("Behold the man" - John 19:5). The arch is part of a gate dating from Emperor Hadrian's time and was given its present name in the 16th century.
Marked by a relief sculpture above the door of a small Polish chapel at the junction with al-Wad Road, Station 3 is where Jesus fell for the first time under the weight of his cross. Station 4 is where Mary watched her son go by with the cross, and is commemorated at the Armenian Church of Our Lady of the Spasm. (Neither of these events is recorded in the Bible.) Be sure to go inside the church to see the remarkable 5th-century floor mosaic, which includes an outline of a pair of sandals, said to be Mary's footprints.

At Station 5, Simon of Cyrene was forced by Roman soldiers to help Jesus carry this cross (Mt 27:32; Mk 15:21; Lk 23:26). This is located on the corner where the Via Dolorosa turns west off al-Wad Road and begins to narrow as it goes uphill.

At the top of a steep hill is Station 6, where, according to a tradition dating from the 14th century, St. Veronica wiped Jesus' face with her handkerchief, leaving an image of his face imprinted on the cloth. The relic, known as the Sudarium or Veronica, is kept at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Veronica's name may derive from the Latin vera icon, "true image."

Station 6 is commemorated by the Church of the Holy Face, served by the “Little Sisters,” a Greek Catholic monastery of St. Cosmos and was refurbished by Barluzzi in 1953. Inside are refurbished Crusader arches.

At Station 7, Jesus fell for a second time. This is marked by a Franciscan chapel at the Via Dolorosa’s junction with Souq Khan al-Zeit.

Station 8 is across the market street and up the steps of Aqabat al-Khanqah, opposite the Station VIII Souvenir Bazaar. A cross and the Greek inscription "NIKA" on the wall of the Greek
Orthodox Monastery of St. Charalambos mark the place where Jesus consoled the lamenting women of Jerusalem (Lk 23:27-31).

A rather confusing route across Souq Khan al-Zeit, south down Khan al-Zeit, and up 28 stone steps leads to Station 9 at the Coptic Patriarchate next to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Here, a Roman pillar marks the site of Jesus' third fall.

**Stations 10-14** are all inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. To get to the entrance from Station 9, head south down Souq Khan al-Zeit to the end, turn right into Souq al-Dabbagha and go straight on to the doorway at the end of the street. Briefly, the last five stations are as follows:

10. Jesus is stripped - top of the stairs to the right outside the entrance

11. Jesus is nailed to the cross - upstairs just inside the entrance, at the Latin Calvary

12. Jesus dies on the cross - Rock of Golgotha in the Greek Orthodox Calvary

13. Jesus is taken down from the cross and His body is prepared for burial.

14. Jesus is laid in the tomb - in theedicule on the main floor, inside the tiny Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre
Festivals and Events

A weekly procession along the Via Dolorosa is led by Franciscans at 3pm on Fridays, which is approximately the time and day of the original events. The procession begins at the Pilgrims' Reception Centre, about 300m inside the Lions' Gate in the Muslim Quarter. Joining this is perhaps the best way to experience the full devotional atmosphere of the pilgrimage.

The most popular time to follow the Via Dolorosa is during Holy Week, when thousands of pilgrims, led by Franciscans, follow the route to the crucifixion.