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Backpackers baffled by Bethlehem siege

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Makano and Takahashi take in the sights

Two tourists engrossed in their guidebooks and heading for the birthplace of Jesus Christ unwittingly wandered into the centre of a war zone on Tuesday.

The Japanese couple were amazed to find that Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity was at the centre of a 16-day old siege between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen.

Palestinian residents of Bethlehem looked on in disbelief as Yuji Makano and his girlfriend Mina Takahashi walked through the debris towards the church seemingly oblivious to the evidence of war.

They were rescued when journalists in flak jackets saw them and pointed out the bullet-holes across buildings, the Israeli tanks and rubble which littered the streets.

It was then that the couple decided to call off their trip to one of Christianity's holiest shrines.

They had been dropped off by a taxi at a checkpoint near Bethlehem and had made their way along streets torn up by armoured vehicles.

“
We have been on the road for the last six months and we did not watch television
 ”
Yuji Makano

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"We have been on the road for the last six months and we did not watch television or read the newspapers," Mr Makano told reporters.

Armoured vehicles

In the past, tourists have flocked to the 1,600-year-old church keen to see for themselves the exact spot where Jesus is believed to have been born.

But the area once bustling with tourists and street-sellers has been deserted for more than two weeks.

The stand-off at the church appears far from ending and led to the city's mayor announcing on Wednesday plans to ask Pope John Paul II to come and try to resolve the crisis.

About 200 people, including armed Palestinians, civilians and church staff have been barricaded inside the Church of the Nativity for more than two weeks.



The church has been the centre of a 16-day siege

They have described their situation as desperate, without food or medical supplies. Two corpses of people shot by Israeli snipers are also said to be decomposing inside the building.

Israel has been keeping up the psychological pressure on those holed up inside the church, bombarding it with ear-splitting, shrieking noises which aim to disorientate those inside.

The Israelis have also been flying flares and sending fireworks over the church, which has responded by ringing its bells.

Have you ever inadvertently found yourself in a combat zone or any other crisis situation while on holiday? Send us your stories using the form below.

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I was travelling with a friend in Afghanistan in 1997. We had reached Mazar-i-Sharif and were trying to get to Maymaneh when General Malik, based in Maymaneh, betrayed General Dostom and invited in the Taleban.

“
**We were on a new
and very active front
line**
”

**Robert Bain, New
Zealand**

We were stopped and arrested in Sheberghan, halfway between Mazar and Maymaneh. They wouldn't believe that we weren't journalists, and wouldn't tell us what was going on. It was only that night on BBC shortwave that we heard the news - we were on a new and very active front line.

The next day they put us on a bus, which was turned back halfway to Mazar because some soldiers were shooting at everything on the road. So they sent us back to Mazar by helicopter with some of the families of Dostom's henchmen. We were again put under house arrest, as journalists - no one believed we were tourists - and evacuated by the Red Cross to Peshawar a few days later. A few days after that, after Malik's men took Mazar and Dostom fled into Uzbekistan on foot, we heard that Malik's troops had turned on the Taleban in Mazar and massacred them. The "Guest House" we had been detained in was destroyed in the fighting.

Robert Bain, New Zealand

While cycling across China I found myself in a remote area in the West where the authorities and residents didn't seem aware of the fact that that China had opened its borders to the West. The local police had informed me that "foreigners were not allowed in China". My presence also drew huge crowds of curious onlookers. I showed them my passport and visa which they confiscated and brought me in for "questioning" in a concrete room - with my refusal to cooperate in their plan to deport me I was threatened with a gun. 14 gruelling hours later they put me on a bus to the border of Laos. I of course got off early and continued my ride.

Sharif Zawideh, China

On a trip to India in 1992, immediately after the infamous incident in Ayodhya, I ended up right in the middle of a riot between Hindus and Muslims. There were shots being fired, people wounded in

front of me, and pure terror wherever we ventured. In the end, to escape the violence, we had to disguise ourselves as Hindu travellers and eventually were smuggled out of the war zone at dawn even though we broke the curfew rules. A good tip for next time:

Read the local news of your destination before leaving home!

Z Naziri, UK

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There were shots being fired, people wounded in front of me, and pure terror wherever we ventured
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Z Naziri, UK

I was on New Road in Kathmandu the night before multiparty democracy was declared by the then King Birendra of Nepal. Tanks barrelled down the street and a general curfew was declared.

Gregory Oliveri, UK

I was once when I visited the Golden Temple in Amritsar a day before Operation Bluestar in 1984. There were fortifications everywhere and the fundamentalists were all over the place with heavy weaponry. All hell broke loose the next day.

Samsher Khan, Canada

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