



BETHLEHEM REBOUNDS FROM PANDEMIC, LIFTING CHRISTMAS SPIRITS - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on December 25, 2022 by MAYA ALLERUZZO, JALAL BWAITEL and HANNAH

SCHOENBAUM | Associated Press



Photo: Women pose for a photo as they visit the Church of the Nativity, traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem

The biblical town of Bethlehem marked a merry Christmas on Saturday, with thousands of visitors descending upon the traditional birthplace of Jesus as it rebounds from the coronavirus pandemic.

Tourism is the economic lifeblood of this town in the occupied West Bank, and for the past two years, the pandemic kept international visitors away.

This year, visitors are back, hotels are full and shopkeepers have reported a brisk business in the runup to the holiday. Although the numbers have not reached pre-pandemic levels, the return of tourists has palpably raised spirits in Bethlehem.

"We are celebrating Christmas this year in a very much different way than last year," Palestinian Tourism Minister Rula Maayah said. "We're celebrating Christmas with pilgrims coming from all over the world."

Throughout the day, hundreds of people strolled through Manger Square for Christmas Eve celebrations. Marching bands pounding on drums and playing bagpipes paraded through the area, and foreign tourists meandered about and snapped selfies with the town's large Christmas tree behind them.

Cool gray weather, along with an occasional rain shower, did little to dampen spirits, though many people headed indoors to shops and restaurants to warm up. By nightfall, the crowds had thinned.

Daisy Lucas, a 38-year-old Filipina who works in Israel, said it was a dream come true to mark the holiday in such an important place.

"As a Christian walking in the places in the Bible, it's so overwhelming," she said. "This is the birthplace of Jesus Christ. As a Christian, that's one achievement that's on my bucket list."

Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Roman Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land, arrived from Jerusalem through a checkpoint in Israel's West Bank separation barrier.

"We are living in very difficult challenges," he said, noting the war in Ukraine and a recent wave of Israeli-Palestinian violence. "But the message of Christmas is a message of peace."



"It's possible to change things," he added. "We will be very clear in what we have to do and what we have to say in order to preserve the importance of unity and reconciliation among all."

Pizzaballa walked through Manger Square, waving to well-wishers before heading to the Church of the Nativity, built on the spot where Christians believe Jesus was born. Later, he was to celebrate Midnight Mass.

Hundreds of millions of Christians were ushering in the holiday, wrapping up a tumultuous year characterized by conflict and violence in many parts of the world.

In war-ravaged Ukraine, the glitzy lights normally spread over over Kyiv's Sophia Square were missing due to restrictions and power cuts. Instead, a modest tree decorated with blue and yellow lights barely broke the gloom of the square. Mayor Vitali Klitschko has called it the "Tree of Invincibility."

In the United States, a winter storm battered much of the country, bringing blinding blizzards, freezing rain and bone-chilling temperatures that caused many holiday events to be canceled and created mayhem for travelers.

But off the central coast of Florida, where temperatures dropped as low as 27 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 2.7 Celsius), more than a hundred surfers dressed in Santa costumes braved the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean in the morning for an annual Christmas Eve Surfing Santas festival.

NORAD, the U.S. military agency known for its playful tradition of tracking Santa Claus as he delivers presents on Christmas Eve, said it didn't expect COVID-19 or the storms hitting North America to affect Saint Nick's global travels.

"I think Santa will be right at home with the Arctic weather that's hitting into the lower 48," said Lt. Gen. David Nahom, a NORAD official based in Anchorage, Alaska.

In Mexico, tens of thousands of migrants who fled violence and poverty in their home countries are almost certain to spend Christmas in crowded shelters or on the streets of towns along the U.S. border, where organized crime routinely targets them.

Present-day reality was visible at Manger Square as banners showing photos of Palestinian prisoner Nasser Abu Hamid were prominently displayed. The veteran prisoner died of cancer last week in an Israeli prison clinic after spending some 20 years behind bars for his conviction in the deaths of seven Israelis.

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Schoenbaum reported from Raleigh, North Carolina.