

Cambridge Judge Business School Israel Trek 2017

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In the first week of January, 37 MBA students gathered in Israel for the CJBS Israel Trek. The primary aim of the trek was to learn about the startup ecosystem of the nation and the factors that have helped propel it to become one of the most successful startup nations in the world. In addition, the trip included activities to learn about the cultural and political landscape of the country. The opportunity to visit local companies and meet with both Israelis and Palestinians provided us with a unique insight into the lifestyle and business communities of the country.

We began our trip in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. We were met by our tour leaders and Karmel, our dedicated tour guide. Having worked throughout the world for Israeli organisations and currently working with a Palestinian partner to promote integration within the country, Karmel had an insightful perspective of the country. During our time in Jerusalem we visited Siftec, a startup accelerator, where we heard about the range of startups growing out of Israel and the difficulties they face in scaling. We heard from the CEO of Fresh Fund, which is capitalising on the demographics and high quality of education in the country to generate successful startups.

Later in the day we had the amazing opportunity to meet with Nir Barkat, the mayor of Jerusalem, along with MBA students from Wharton and Georgetown. Nir spoke about the small national market and the importance of firms in focusing on international markets from inception. Moreover, he spoke about the benefit of military service in creating an entrepreneurial spirit in the country. We then had the opportunity to walk through the old city of Jerusalem and see the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Western Wall, two impressive and religiously significant sites in the centre of the city.

After spending the night with a Bedouin community in Kfar Nokdim, we woke early to reach Masada. Whilst watching the sunrise over Jordan and the Dead Sea, we learnt more about the history of the country. On route to Tel Aviv we visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum, where our guide took us on an intimate walk through the very personal stories of the Holocaust. It was clear that the events of the Holocaust had left a fighting spirit within the Jewish community in Israel.

On arriving in Tel Aviv, our first stop was a startup co working space called Rise Tel Aviv, where four Israeli business leaders of multinational companies shared their views on Israel as a startup nation. The CEO of ironSource told us about how they had managed to successfully scale and are now competing on a global scale with the likes of Clickco. He spoke of the challenge in bringing international talent into the country and how the government is implementing policies to overcome this. It was very interesting to hear about the increase in incubators and accelerators within the country, for example The Junction, and the benefit they provide to startups.

We had time during the last couple of days to reflect on the experiences of the previous days. We discussed our preconceptions and new insights into the country. Personally, it was amazing to see how a country in conflict had generated a world class start up ecosystem and the policies which had been put in place to do so. The country and its people have such a positive and lively energy. I am optimistic that it is only a matter of time before Israel sees its billion dollar, 'unicorn' firm emerge.