

By Penlope Nankunda

Nothing spells Christmas like visiting the little town of Bethlehem we have been singing about all our lives.

Getting the chance to visit Israel was nothing short of a miracle; but visiting in December, the month when we celebrate Jesus' birth, was indeed divine appointment.

Apart from the Bible stories I have read, heard and acted out all my life, I discovered that I did not know or understand Jesus' birthplace properly.

For example, I only got to know that the Bethlehem we sing about is in Palestine and not Israel like I always believed.

It is, indeed, a little quiet town on a hillside. The mood in the town was more festive than we had experienced around the rest of the country. Because most of the country was celebrating the Jewish festival of Hannukah, it was strange for us to realise that the birth of Jesus seemed to be more evident in the Kampala we had left behind than in his country of origin. Luckily, Bethlehem was the saving grace. The streets were littered with Christmas decorations unlike the Hanukah lights we had seen elsewhere; and we could now relate the country to events 2000 years ago.

Our first stop, which is also going to be the focus of my reflection was 'The Shepherds' Field'. East of Bethlehem, we went through the mostly Christian village of Beit Sahour (or Beit Sahur), where it is believed the lush field is located. This is the place, according to the Gospel writer Luke, where a host of angels is believed to have appeared to some shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. You all remember that famous carol "While shepherds watched their flocks by night"? Yeah; the hillside, now gardens, where they grazed their sheep and told jokes moments before a host of angels appeared in the sky singing praises and announcing the birth of a savior, now sits. 'A big garden is there now, protected by a neat wall all around, and also there is a very splendid cave with an altar,' the earliest Christian pilgrims in 584, are believed to have commented on the field.

We visited the Roman Catholics (Franciscans) site at Khirbat Siyar al-Ghanim. Here there is a low natural cave or rock shelter in pleasant surroundings and with a fine view of the hills. The cave, with soot-

My Xmas in Bethlehem



The writer standing at the entrance to Bethlehem

blackened roof, has been partly enclosed to make a modern chapel.

Above is a modern church (1954) shaped like a tent and decorated with a bronze angel sits. Its walls are plastered with beautiful paintings depicting the happenings of the starry, joy-filled night. Before each painting stands an altar at which pilgrims kneel and say their prayers in reflection. The ceiling of the chapel is made of a beautiful glass-filled dome. Light penetrates the concrete and glass dome, illuminating the interior of the chapel, calling to mind the divine light that appeared to the shepherds that far off night.

Just outside the chapel, to the north, are ruins of a rectangular monastery founded on a site occupied by nomadic shepherds in the 1st century. An early phase is dated from the late 4th century to the early 5th century and a second phase (which used stones from the original apse of the Church of the Nativity) to the 6th century.

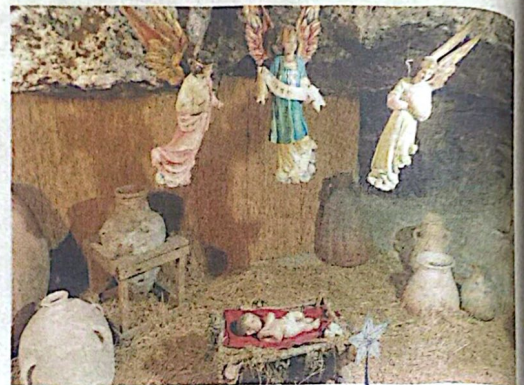
The monastery had winepresses, bakery,

cisterns and animal pens.

The beautiful and cool gardens looked inviting but the December cold would not let us spend a lot of time admiring them. Instead we sought shelter in the shepherds cave directly below the chapel. We were told that this cave, and many such others dotted around the town, were where the shepherds sought shelter from the December cold back in the day.

From here, we went on to visit the Church of Nativity. This church was built on the exact place where baby Jesus was born on Christmas day. The Church of Nativity was built over the manger of Jesus. The guide at the Church of Nativity showed us the old floor of the first church which was built in 300AD. He then took us to see the manger.

The manger is in a cave. When we went down into the manger, we saw a star on



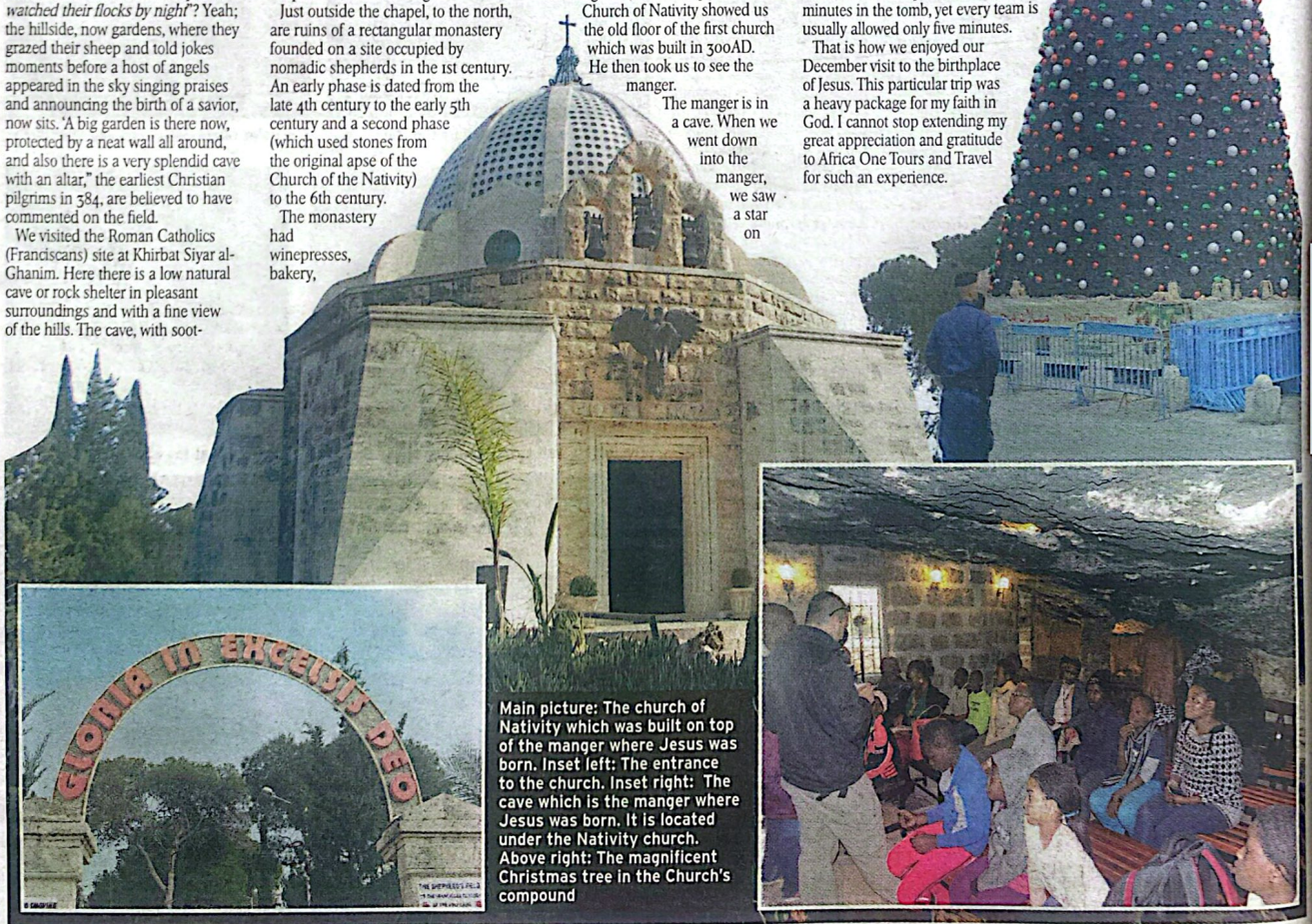
The manger is decorated with Jesus' pictures, those of his parents and others

the floor which had anointing oil in it. It represents the exact spot where Jesus was born. It was decorated with Jesus' pictures and others of Mary, Joseph and his descendants.

Adjacent to this, we were shown the spot where the animals were standing as Jesus was born. What a humbling experience. We sang songs of praise to God and held hands in prayer.

Outside the church is a huge Christmas tree. Our tour guide informed us that the church is usually full, but on the day we visited, there were no other teams. We were able to spend almost 45 minutes in the tomb, yet every team is usually allowed only five minutes.

That is how we enjoyed our December visit to the birthplace of Jesus. This particular trip was a heavy package for my faith in God. I cannot stop extending my great appreciation and gratitude to Africa One Tours and Travel for such an experience.



Main picture: The church of Nativity which was built on top of the manger where Jesus was born. Inset left: The entrance to the church. Inset right: The cave which is the manger where Jesus was born. It is located under the Nativity church. Above right: The magnificent Christmas tree in the Church's compound

