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On the Positive Side

The cats of Jerusalem add to its beauty

By Dr. Judy Long For the Sun-News

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They told us cats would be everywhere in Jerusalem. It sounded sort of like a warning, as though an animal lover like me would be overtaken by a tsunami of despair and pulled out to sea. I live in a city where "feral cats" are considered vermin, people who help them are outlaws, and the rate of euthanasia at the "shelter" is stunningly high. I took the warning: Are visitors to Israel expected to bag their limit of cats before returning home? I tried not to let my imagination run away with me.

I knew there were other options. I had seen the many cats of Rome, buoyed up by the fond attention of Romans who regularly feed them. I had visited with the many-toed cats of Key West. These cats are neither "pets" nor "strays," but something in between. They seem to be a collective asset of their cities, held in common rather than being "owned" by a particular individual. The cats expect nothing but good from the tourists (Hemingway fans or not). The feeling is mutual.

Well, there were cats. There are cats in the Golan, there are cats in the Galilee. And there are cats in Jerusalem. Most of them seemed to be the lean, long-bodied, small-headed cats we in the U.S. associate with the exotic shorthairs like Abyssinians and Siamese. They are everywhere in the market, and many of them are friendly to strangers. In a cool cave where we caught our breaths after climbing the Tower of David in the Old City of Jerusalem, a pretty cat climbed into the lap of a fellow traveler and nested in her hat.

I initiated surveillance on the building across from our hotel in a green, leafy neighborhood in Jerusalem. Early in the morning, children carrying books leave for school. A woman comes out onto the balcony and prays.

Soon a parade of cats, like a flow of commuters, climbs the slope opposite, staying on the sidewalk. A slim gray cat hurries up the sidewalk and disappears. Shortly afterward, a tri-color follows the same route up the hill, taking a different exit. Somehow the gate across the street has been left ajar. A little white dog peers out, but decides not to pursue. A black-and-white male cat pauses to spray the utility box before making his turn.

A Jerusalemite informs me that there is no official policy of ridding the streets of cats (dogs appear only on leashes, especially in Tel Aviv). The streets are not littered with cat corpses, nor is the abundant flora dying from showers of cat urine. There is a trap/neuter/release program in Jerusalem, its graduates identified by their ear-notches. I wasn't able to learn much about the origin or history of the program, but I didn't see any kittens or any obviously pregnant cats.

From my point of view, the cats of Jerusalem were part of the visual beauty of this ancient city. I left wondering, "How do they do it?"

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