

## A WINDOW ON THE WEST BANK

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There was a period, a window, in the mid-1990s when fieldwork on the West Bank was reasonably safe. The window opened about 1993, by which time the Intifada of the preceding five years had run its course, and it closed in October 2000, when the second, or *Al Aqsa*, Intifada began. “Reasonably safe” is subjective. After the first Intifada, Israelis rarely if ever considered the West Bank safe. They pointed to many continuing acts of violence, and they said that Arabs were temperamentally volatile—friendly one moment, explosive the next. Many Palestinians, too, thought it was crazy for a foreigner to walk around some West Bank places—the Hebron souk most of all. Yet I wandered through that souk many times, and almost nothing bad happened. While the window was open, in fact, I spent three summers on the West Bank and three or four shorter periods at other times of the year—and almost nothing bad ever happened.

Almost? A few boys outside the spectacular but isolated Mar Saba monastery pick up some grapefruit-sized rocks and threaten to break my head if I don’t give them money. A friendly Palestinian trucker flags me down and warns me that if I drive farther along this road I’ll run into flying rocks. (This is on the approach to Si’ir, a proud town that generates its own electricity rather than accept the dependency implied by a hookup to the Israeli grid.) Palestinian security thugs accost me in Hebron, where they are briefly suspicious that I am seeking to buy property on behalf of Jews. Other Palestinian security men detain me for a while in Jerusalem’s Haram al Sharif, where my scrutiny of certain Herodian flagstones they have always ignored suggests that I am investigating something that might, somehow, threaten their control of the place.

But what are incidents like these, alongside the thousands of West Bank miles that I drove? People stared for a moment at a yellow-plated (Israeli) car lost in the maze of dead-end streets in the core of Nablus, but they were mostly bemused, especially when I returned a minute later, sheepishly backtracking. Other people—even in Si’ir, where I eventually became a frequent visitor—checked me over twice, then forgot about me. I helped them, by driving with my windows down and my elbow resting conspicuously on the windowsill. Danger, I wanted them to think, was the last thing I had in mind. Besides, I wanted to distinguish myself from settlers, who often drive in vehicles whose windows are not only closed but whose glass has been replaced by heavy, rock-deflecting plexiglass.

Nobody ever threw a rock at me. Beginner’s luck? Maybe, but if that’s what it is, I had an awful lot of it. Car-rental agents at Tel Aviv’s Ben-Gurion Airport would be

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