

# Surrealism as a Way of Life: Driving Route 443 Through The West Bank

Driving on Highway 443, one of the few Israeli roads through the Occupied Territories, is an experience in the surrealism of everyday life in Israel.

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It was almost a normal weekend. A group of friends traveled to the north of Israel for a weekend of relaxation. True, we stayed at a “tsimer,” the Israeli form of a bed and breakfast located in the Golan Heights, a piece of land that may be given back to Syria in some future peace deal. But the place was pretty nice—jacuzzi tub, covered deck, nice Israeli breakfast, and a small bottle of local wine greeting us as we entered our room. As we prepared to return to Jerusalem, we had to decide which route to take.

If one looks at a map of Israel, the most direct way from the Golan Heights back to Jerusalem is on Highway 90, a road that runs through the Jordan Valley (a.k.a. the West Bank, a.k.a. Occupied Territories). “Guys, I take this road all the time, and it’s a road restricted to Jews and others with permission to travel on it. But I get if it makes you nervous,” said my friend, a foreign correspondent who went with us on our journey to the North. Why would one be nervous doing the simple task of driving from here to there, you might ask? Roads through the West Bank are political fraught and, on occasion, sites of violence—an occasional sniper shooting or rock throwing. Meanwhile, I had overheard him and another friend of ours conversing in Hebrew about the road earlier, about when the last sniper attack had occurred (not in a long time), and about the fact that traffic would be heavy on the other road back to Jerusalem, a much more circuitous route that goes around the West Bank adding at least an hour to the trip. After much consultation, we decided to avoid the West Bank and take the long route home.

As one travels south on the new main highway in Israel, Highway 6, one has two ways of getting back to Jerusalem. One road, Highway 1, runs from

Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, winding through the Judean Hills with large trucks and buses careening in and out of traffic. At the end of the weekend on Saturday (Israel's weekend officially ends on Saturday, not Sunday, night because of the Jewish Sabbath), traffic can get backed up for miles. Many Israelis take Route 443 instead, a four-lane, smooth highway that climbs gently along a ridge, avoiding the nauseating turns of Highway 1. The only problem is that it runs right through the West Bank.

Our friend who was driving insisted that 443 was an easy way to get to Jerusalem and would avoid any weekender traffic. On that score, he was correct. But driving on Highway 443, one of the few Israeli roads through the Occupied Territories that is used primarily by Israeli commuters and not by Jewish settlers in the Territories, is an experience in the surrealism of everyday life in Israel.

We began in Modi'in, at which point our correspondent friend said that we were passing the Green Line, the ceasefire line from the 1948-9 war that marked the de facto boundaries of the State of Israel. One would have no idea that we had just crossed the Green Line, the internationally recognized border of Israel, as there is no sign, no border, nor even any mention of this on the map we were using. A few kilometers further in, however, we passed one of the notorious check points. Since this road is used almost exclusively by Israelis, the checkpoint is not especially rigorous. We were traveling into the West Bank, so there were no soldiers checking drivers' papers. Going in the other direction—leaving the West Bank and entering Israel and therefore potentially more of a security risk—there was a small line up of cars waiting to be waved through or checked. We breezed along at 100 km/hr on the well maintained road.

And then things started turning from the real to the surreal. Occasionally we noticed highway exits that had concrete barricades preventing anyone from entering or exiting the highway. "They closed access to Palestinians several years ago to prevent people from using the road," our friend pointed out. It turns out that with the outbreak of the Second Intifada in late 2000 and a sniper death in December of that year, those exits were closed off to prevent local residents from using the road and slipping into Israel proper. In addition,

concrete walls were built along parts of the highway to prevent locals from getting near the road, shooting, sniping, or fire bomb throwing, all of which had occurred in the past. These details that should inspire fear in even the most hardened driver I learned later, to write this piece.

But driving on the road is less fear-inducing than surreal. There were highway exits blocked by concrete barriers, others that literally led nowhere. We drove mere meters from Palestinian villages and towns that dot the countryside in this part of the West Bank. They are clearly visible from the road, marked by particular Arab architecture and even more obviously by the green light that glows from the minarets in the towns. And yet, there are no street signs indicating the presence of these towns, no markers, arrows, roads, signs.

There is no street activity in the towns visible from the highway—like a Potemkin Village, a beautiful façade of reality invented by Catherine the Great to mask the dreary reality of eighteenth century Russia.

One drives for about 25-30 minutes on the highway passing village after village and roads leading nowhere. The primary usable exits from the highway are to Israeli settlements, most notably Giv'at Ze'ev, which is well labeled with signage in three languages, Hebrew, English and Arabic (just in case a local Palestinian had a sudden yearning to hang out with the Israeli settlers in Giv'at Ze'ev). As we approached Jerusalem, we noticed ever-higher concrete walls protecting the road and then the checkpoint. I asked my friend if we needed to show any form of documents. "We probably won't be stopped. Just look as American as possible." The soldiers don't have the time or ability to stop every car, so they only stop those that are deemed worthy of stopping, usually based on the way the driver and passengers look (a.k.a. driving while Arab). The two teenage soldiers bearing large guns didn't bat an eyelash as we cruised through and entered Jerusalem.

My friend drives Route 443 all the time, as do most Jerusalem residents. It is normal, and it is surreal at the same time. Making the real disappear before ones eyes, using concrete to shield that which we do not want to see is what makes living in Israel normal, at least for Jews. And as I unpacked my bag from my almost-normal weekend away in the North, I realized that anything

can become normal if one does it on a day to day basis, even rendering people invisible.