

# Why are the walls that strife-torn cities so

REPORT BY MARCELLO DI CINTIO

**T**OURISTS LOVE WALLS, and I am unsure why. I understand the attraction to the defunct historical walls. Hadrian's. China's. The last slabs of Berlin's. These relics stand as open-air museums that recall the greatness, the hubris or the shame of geopolitics past. I wonder, though, what draws travellers to contemporary barriers – the walls that still divide, detain and exclude. Nothing should be more anathema to those of us who profess an affection for motion, after all, than structures purpose-built to halt and obstruct. And yet, as I visited many of the world's fortified edges to investigate what it means to live in the shadows of walls, I was surprised to find that the tourists had beaten me there.

The biggest attraction in Cyprus's divided capital – called Nicosia on the south side of the line, Lefkoşa on the north – is the divide itself. This wall went up after the Turkish army landed in 1974, either an invasion or a rescue mission depending on what side of the wall your sympathies lie. The wall split the city neatly in two, severed the north-south streets with sandbags and barricades, and created a UN-monitored buffer zone between the two warring halves. Tourists to Nicosia used to climb onto a raised viewing platform at the barricaded end of Ledra Street to gaze north over this feral Dead Zone. Greek soldiers, old enough for cigarettes but too young to shave, stood by to enforce the rules against photography.

Ledra Street reopened in 2008. Taking photos along the 'border' is still officially prohibited, and the soldiers remain, but anyone with proper identification

can walk across the line into the north. Now passing through the wall is the attraction. When I visited in 2009, festive fabric curtains hung on either side of the crossing to prevent me from seeing the Dead Zone's necropolis of abandoned streets. Silhouettes of children holding balloons and of women carrying shopping

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bags were printed on the fabric to draw my eyes down from the bullet-scarred walls. Once through the pastel corridor, a blue line painted on the ground leads tourists to the sights in Old Lefkoşa, but after an hour of buying crafts at the Büyük Han and visiting the Selimiye Mosque, most visitors feel they have lingered long enough. The real kick for these day-trippers is treading over disputed ground, walking below bullet holes, and telling their friends back home that a boy with a rifle waved their camera away.

I admit I experienced the same sort of excitement. Traversing the disputed space felt like a delicious rebellion. I was the

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child who sees a door marked 'Keep Out' and rushes up to touch the knob. The thrill was artificial, of course. Passing through the wall dividing the city is both legal and encouraged. But this hardly matters. It is the whiff of subversion,

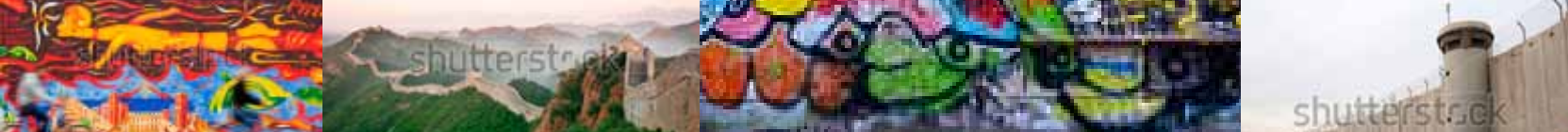
however safe and meaningless, that draws travellers across the line.

Soon after building began in 2002, Israel's 'separation barrier' around the West Bank joined the sacred Western Wall and the medieval stone ramparts around Jerusalem's Old City in the trinity of walls tourists to the region feel

compelled to visit. More than eight metres high in some sections, and slathered with all manner of graffiti and spray-painted

slogans, the wall strikes an audacious and photogenic pose. Opportunistic taxi drivers in Bethlehem earn extra fares touring visitors past the ironic murals painted by the famed street artist Banksy. I ate lunch at a Bethlehem wall-side restaurant whose proprietors had spray-painted the menu onto the vertical concrete. As in Nicosia, passing through the wall is a must-do, involving an obstacle course of bag-scanners, steel turnstiles and checkpoints where bored soldiers peer at passports through bulletproof glass. I brought my Catholic mother to Bethlehem in 2007. She will remember navigating the wall long after she forgets placing her hand on the spot where Jesus might have been born.

For some travellers, just seeing the wall is not enough. The third edition of Footprint's *Israel Handbook* includes 'protesting the wall' as a tourist activity in the same league as riding camels in the Negev and smearing oneself with Dead Sea mud. In the book's Ramallah chapter – wedged between hotel listings and a recommendation to visit a Palestinian brewery – the authors give advice for 'those wishing to show support against the separation wall'. The section describes where to find shared taxis to the weekly



# divide war zones and perversely compelling?

demonstrations, and counsels visitors to 'expect tear-gas, at least, to be used to disperse the crowds'. (The 'at least' is accurate; the three protests I witnessed were symphonies of sound grenades and rubber bullets.) The book also warns against mentioning such activities to Israeli authorities: 'bear in mind that you could get into trouble and all sorts of visa problems could ensue'. Evidently, body-cavity searches make lousy souvenirs.

The wall is no attraction for the Palestinians, of course. 'First the Israelis built a wall,' artist Basel Abbas told me

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in Ramallah. 'Next they will build a roof.' Abbas was kidding, but the morbid joke reveals the fact that, for those forced to live in its shadow, the wall stands for something more sinister than a sight to see. The 'apartheid wall', as it is often called, is another marker on a continuum of catastrophe, a hated structure that divides farmers from their fields, separates students from their schools, and confiscates vast tracts of Palestinian land.

Many in the West Bank feel grateful for the attention the Wall has brought to their struggle. The barrier provides a potent symbol to rally around – a surface to spray with paint and pound with fists. But Abbas – who grew up in Nicosia alongside another wall – fears the barrier over-simplifies a complex conflict. Despite their good intentions, visitors who focus on the wall only get a whiff of what it means to live under occupation. 'The wall is not central to the Palestinian experience,' Abbas insisted. 'The wall is not the point. It is not all about the wall.'

**N**OWHERE, THOUGH, do the walls command as much tourist attention as they do in Belfast. The absurdly named Peace Lines absolutely mutilate the city, carve it up into Protestant and Catholic enclaves, and provide an ample canvas for the graffiti of hate. But the tourists love them.

Visitors photograph the walls from the windows of double-decker tour buses, or hire the famed Black Taxis for guided excursions. When they reach the wall on Cupar Way, the city's longest, drivers hand out felt-tipped pens so their charges can

add their names and messages to the thousands already scrawled over the concrete. 'When the guns stop you can hear the birds of freedom,'

wrote Maeve from Australia. Adam from Houston implored, 'May God help us all.'

Reading the scribbles, I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Belfast was one of the last stops on my wall itinerary, and by that time I'd grown too cynical to harbour much patience for condescending clichés about peace and brotherhood. They were thin gestures of foreign vanity penned by the momentarily engaged. Besides, all the feel-good messages did not keep my eyes from glancing up at the top of the wall and imagining a brick sailing over it.

Those who work to inspire reconciliation find it hard to stomach the idea that the walls are tourist attractions. Breandán Ó Cléirigh, an activist committed to bringing down Belfast's barricades, told me that the walls impose a sense of territorial constraint on youth who fear

straying outside their familiar fortified zone. The barricades may block the occasional hurled bottle, but they also prevent people in both communities from ever seeing each other beyond the ossified binaries of Us and Them. They make actual peace impossible. The walls are to be ashamed of, not showcased. 'The sooner we draw down the walls the better,' Ó Cléirigh told me. 'Ending this ghoulish tourism is just another reason we need to imagine a city without barriers.'

The problem with these barricade holidays is that we visitors pass through the walls too lightly. Each stands on the frontier of conflict and pain, but when the struggles are not our own, our passage through the walls has no meaning. Instead, we take our crossings for granted. In our urge for no-cost infiltrations and holiday snaps, we forget those who cannot pass. We focus on the walls themselves, not on those whom the walls exclude and expel. Our holiday smiles cheapen their pain.

However, if we look intently at both the walls and the walled-out, and if we allow empathy to slow our steps across the lines, there is a value to this kind of tourism. Everyone should visit the barricades in Belfast, Cyprus and Palestine in order to understand the psychic trauma of physical

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division. We should pause in the cool, dark shadows of the walls and question our human need to build them. Only then can we embrace our other, greater impulse – the compulsion to tear the walls down. **T** *'Walls: Travels Along the Barricades' by Marcello Di Cintio is published by Union Books at £14.99*

