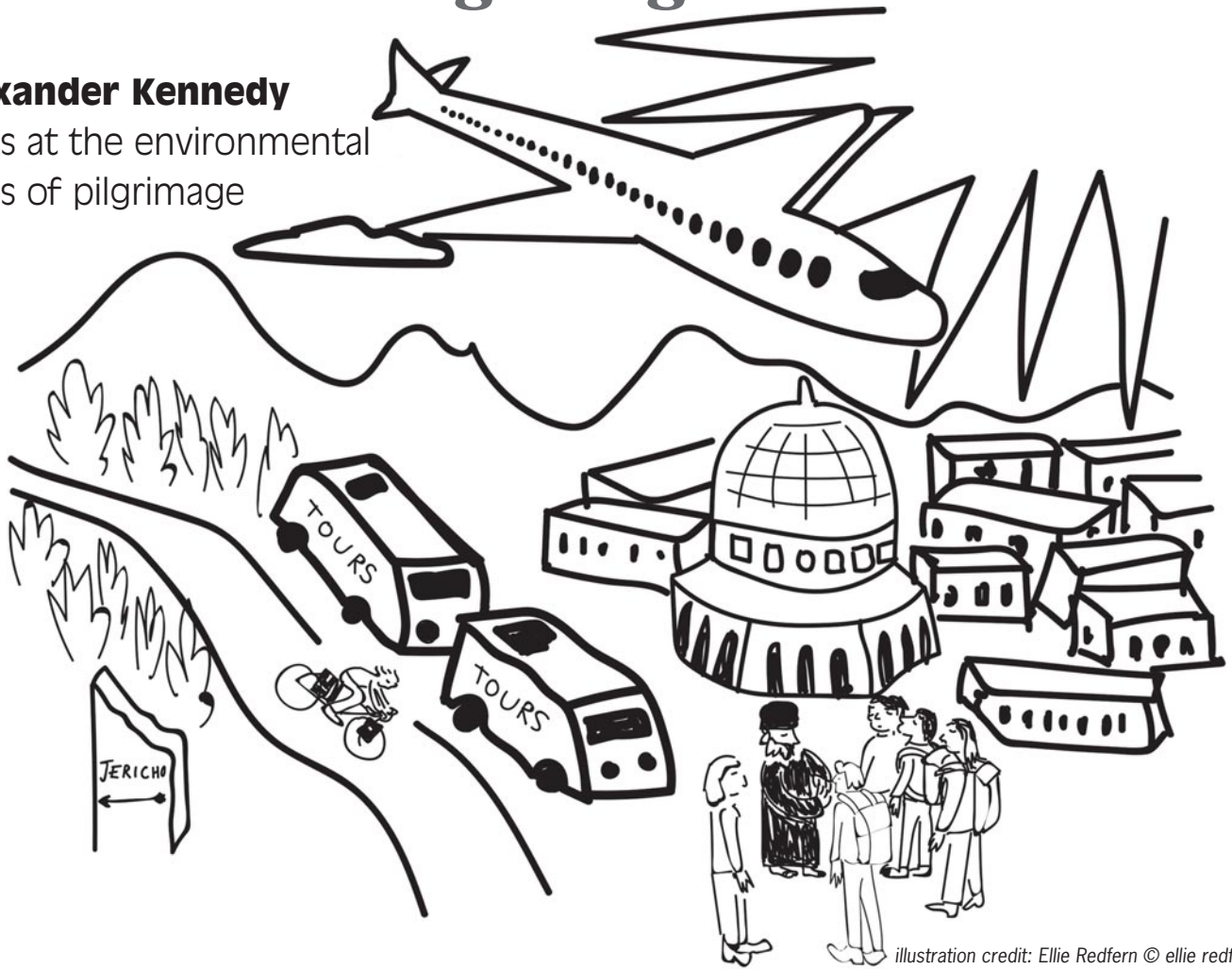


# The Price of Pilgrimage

**Alexander Kennedy**

looks at the environmental costs of pilgrimage



Recently a brochure advertising a pilgrimage to the Holy Land came my way and the planned trip looks attractive as it includes visits to Nazareth, the Jordan Valley, Jericho and Jerusalem. Travel will be by a very reputable airline and accommodation will be in guesthouses and convents. All airport and security charges are included, a complimentary visa is provided and full travel insurance is arranged by the operators so that the whole package is inclusive. There will be half-board accommodation for seven days with transfers being by an air-conditioned coach at a total cost of under £1,500 from Heathrow (LHR). All this for £1,500 seems a very modest price. However, the environmental costs are considerable.

These impacts are largely due to the three different modes of travel involved: travel from home to LHR, the return flight to Tel Aviv (TLV) and a coach tour to the historical sites which would amount to about 400km. The resulting greenhouse gas emissions can be calculated from the Climate Stewards website<sup>1</sup>. The calculated CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are shown in the Table together with three different surface methods of reaching LHR from Sheffield. These are fairly accurate estimates based on our knowledge of the chemistry and combustion of fossil fuels. Aircraft fuel consumption can vary with the model, the seating

layout and distance flown but the Airbus A320 series of airliners use between 2,000 and 3,000 kg/hour in flight.<sup>2</sup>

JOURNEY	MODE	DISTANCE (Km.)	CO <sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS (Kg.)
Sheffield-LHR	Diesel Train	260	14
Sheffield-LHR	Coach	320	12
Sheffield-LHR	Medium Car	320	80
LHR-TLV	EI AI	7,135	1,194
Tour of Israel	Coach	400	11

Some obvious conclusions may be drawn from these figures: first that surface travel is much less polluting than flying which uses a great deal of fossil fuel but the emissions of aircraft occur mainly at altitude. However airports attract a large volume of surface traffic and have huge car parks which, in turn, alter the environment by preventing rainwater from penetrating the natural surface. They also take up a great deal of land. It follows that all airports should have rail access and that vehicular access and car parking should be limited to essential vehicles as private cars produce more pollution than public transport.

It is no longer possible to make a pilgrimage to Israel by surface travel but, in 1984 Bettina Selby<sup>3</sup>, then middle-aged, cycled to Jerusalem via the Bernina Pass to Venice. There she joined a ship for Istanbul and from there she crossed into Asia. She then rode along the coast of Turkey visiting Pergamum, Ephesus and Tarsus. Entering Syria she stopped in Aleppo and Damascus before crossing into Jordan where she visited Krak de Chevalier and finally, after much official obstructionism, she crossed the Allenby Bridge to enter Israel. After visiting all of the New Testament sites and some Crusader castles, she finished her four month pilgrimage tour at Acre whence she left Israel by sea.

Today it should be possible to arrive in or depart from Israel via Haifa but it might be necessary to use a cruise ship which would have a somewhat sybaritic on-board lifestyle for a pilgrim and Selby's account suggests that she did not really enjoy her trip from Venice to Istanbul on a Russian cruise liner. In fuel consumption terms, ships are far superior to land or air traffic but they often give rise to a good deal of pollution by sulphur dioxide.

Finally it is important to ask whether a pilgrimage to Israel is either necessary or even desirable. First, these ancient sites have all been modified by centuries of development by different Christian sects and all are subject to the blight of

mass tourism. From 30,000 feet the pilgrim can learn nothing about the lands and peoples over which she is flying which nullifies much of the value of the journey. Seeing is not essential to believing as St. Thomas was told.<sup>4</sup>

Climate change is real and Pope Francis has described how it causes poverty and displacement among the poorest in our world.<sup>5</sup> While he does not suggest any simple solutions it is a fact that all of us contribute, in some way, to climate change so we need to be careful in our choice of actions. Travel has an impact on our carbon footprints so we need to choose the least polluting modes and, perhaps, we should revive the use of the wartime slogan "Is your journey really necessary?" ■



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#### References:

1. Climate Stewards [climatestewards.org/](http://climatestewards.org/)
2. Airliners.net
3. Selby, Bettina (1985) *Riding to Jerusalem*, Richard Drew, Glasgow.
4. St. John 20: 27-29
5. Pope Francis (2015 Encyclical) *Laudate si' o mi Signore*