



Alternative Tourism in Palestine



By Tony Khashram

A recent trip to Florence has convinced me of the transformational potential of travel and tourism. There, crowds of travelers line up for a chance to visit the city's attractions. Shopkeepers are excited to meet the newest arrivals and are constantly preoccupied with expanding their businesses to accommodate new guests. Tour guides, universities, and religious and historical communities all work cohesively to generate experiences for the excited visitors. The city is buzzing with activities. "Imagine this," I thought to myself, "Imagine this in Palestine. How transformed she would be."

Remains of Roman Sebastiya.



The travel industry in Palestine holds the promise of being uniquely advantageous. The country's abundance of historical sites, exquisite landscape, and rich culture make it an obvious choice for a wide range of travelers. Thus, the sector represents an indispensable source of income for the country's growing economy, particularly in cities such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Jericho that have few other income-generating industries.

to access histories, landscapes, and communities that otherwise might be forgotten; travel becomes an opportunity not only to learn and enjoy (yes!) but also to contribute.

An obvious starting point for such an excursion is the famous Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil, the biblical "Path of Abraham" – the trail that runs from southeast Turkey to the deserts of the Jordan Valley. This remarkable journey offers a firsthand exploration of some of the



The stunning Wadi Qelt. Photo by Shirabe Yamada.

However, Palestine's tourism sector is not without its barriers. The majority of travel to the Holy Land offers no incentive or opportunity to explore the diversity that Palestine and Palestinians have to offer, and it is frequently stifled by unappealing stories in the media of unrest or political strife. Alternative tourism, however, which focuses on the mutually beneficial exchange between visitor and local, is one avenue through which tourism in Palestine can be fostered. Alternative tourism is a redefinition of travel that focuses on intercultural and educational experiences. In this way, travel becomes an opportunity

most historical and ancient lands. The tour is completed on foot, and its trails take travelers from Nablus to the beautiful springs of Al-Auja, along the Jordan Valley to the Dead Sea region, and to the biblical cities of Jericho, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem.

Another remarkable experience starts in the small city of Nablus, whose historic old town lies at the heart of a city that still reflects the ever-changing face of Middle Eastern politics. This trip offers visits to the remains of Roman Sebastiya and the fascinating old souk of Nablus as well as a landscape of olive groves and wheat towards Jabal

Alternative tourism offers travelers an opportunity to experience Palestine's natural and historical beauty, as well as its exceptional hospitality, while learning about traditional customs and supporting the local economy.

Awrma and the village of Aqraba. Here, there are opportunities to have lunch with the local community before following the path via Ain Samia to Al-Auja, considered to be one of the most beautiful areas in the region. A night spent in a simple Bedouin camp completes the excursion.

In Jericho, one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the world, we find the breathtaking Wadi Qelt and its stunning sixth-century cliff-hanging Orthodox monastery. From Jericho, a drive to Bethlehem allows the traveler to visit the Church of the Nativity before continuing to Jerusalem, undoubtedly one of the world's most fascinating cities that boasts some of the holiest sites in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Other adventures, such as homestays, allow travelers to experience authentic Palestinian culture and family traditions while staying with a carefully vetted local host family. Travelers enjoy direct contact with the culture they wish to understand, and they experience local customs and social behavior. They have the opportunity to attend celebrations and events, such as weddings. They contribute to and become part of significant moments as an integral member of the family. They also have the opportunity to learn some Arabic through close contact with family members.

Other Palestinian cultural programs offer travelers specialized educational opportunities. For example, Our Palestinian Culture Program enables travelers to understand Palestinian culture and tradition and how it relates to that of nearby Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. This program, lasting from one week to three months, focuses on the major aspects of the country's traditions: religion, customs, language, art, literature, music, and costumes. Activities include learning some Arabic, participating in open discussions, visiting attractions and sites in Hebron, learning about Palestinian cuisine, etc.

These excursions are but a brief overview of what alternative tourism in Palestine can offer. These life-altering adventures provide the traveler with access to a Palestine that is yet unknown to most. But perhaps most importantly, they aim to create respectful and mutually beneficial interactions between visitors and locals that not only generate a profit but also showcase what Palestine truly is.

Article photos courtesy of HLITOA.



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The magnificent Umayyad Hisham's Palace in Jericho.

