

# Jerusalem Tourism Challenges and Opportunities

By Raed Saadeh



**T**he Palestinian consensus is that Jerusalem is a tourism destination of the first degree. It is perceived to be the city that possesses the strongest competencies as far as tourism is concerned. The current reality, however, is that its hotel capacity has decreased by half during the past twenty years, and many shops inside the Old City have closed their doors, forcing their owners to look for work at Israeli establishments. So what is happening to the city? What can be done to overturn this decline, and who can and/or should do it?

First of all, it is important to understand that Jerusalem has been deprived of its hinterland as a result of the Wall that the Israeli authorities have constructed around the city. This deprivation has detached Jerusalem from the rest of the Palestinian body and impacted its economic, cultural, social, and central importance, characteristics, and dynamics. A quick nostalgic glimpse at Jaffa might help explain this decentralization or de-urbanization that Jerusalem seems to be suffering from. The Israeli Wall not only prevents people from nearby cities and villages from accessing the city and hence annulling its ability to serve its natural clients, it has the double-edged-sword effect of draining the city of its residents as they seek to spend their time and attend to their interest with their counterparts in other Palestinian

cities, rendering Jerusalem a town that is suffocating. The influx of visitors into the city is mostly international and is subject to the seasonality of Christian pilgrimage, the main source of business in the city, and the Islamic market, which is limited and occasional.

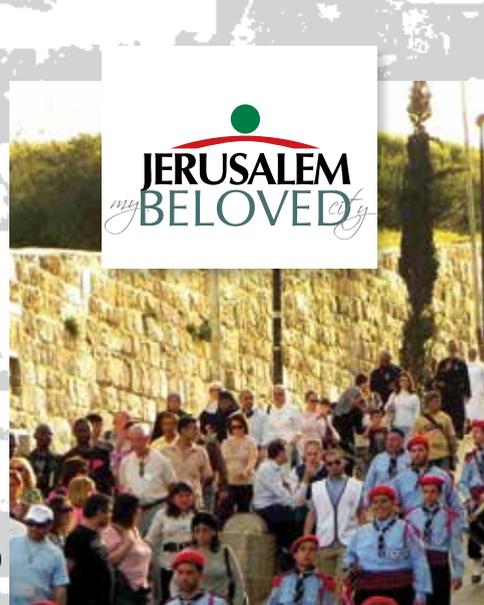
Secondly, due to the political setup dictated by the Oslo agreements, the Palestinian government has very limited intervention in the city. Its ability to act as a reference for the residents of the city, addressing their needs, aspirations, challenges and plans, is hampered by this fact. The Israeli authorities, on the other hand, have their own plans for Jerusalem, which for the most part don't take into account Palestinian economic, cultural,

and touristic well-being as indicated by the tragic decrease in the number of hotel establishments and room capacity. Civil society organizations, educational, cultural, and religious establishments have moved in to close the gap. Although this sincere and well-appreciated effort is pivotal for the city, it is fragmented and poorly coordinated.

Hence, the situation in Jerusalem is impacted by a number of imposed threats and mounting challenges such as the Israeli-imposed siege of the city, the absence of a governmental body to cater to its well being and aspirations, and the seasonality of its business. The situation is further compounded by the negative perceptions of travel to Palestine and the area, the lack of unique and differentiated programs, the frail competitive advantage, and the instability of the political situation.

Based on the above, the way to move forward in Jerusalem tourism has to take into consideration a plan that is based on three strategies: protection, competitive capacity, and promotion.

Protection reflects the need to preserve Palestinian culture, identity, and existence in the city. This requires programs that help



Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. Photo by Tarik Bakri.





Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

sustain the existing establishments, including those that focus on rehabilitation, furnishings, trainings, and institution and capacity building of both the individual business and the establishment or organization.

Competitive capacity can be enforced with new packages and offers for discerning visitors. Jerusalem needs a set of new products to challenge the overwhelming seasonality that overshadows its tourism. Competitiveness is about differentiation. It is about a uniquely identified Palestinian product in the city. It is about how the Jerusalem community is able to utilize its human, cultural, economic, and social resources and capacities. Once achieved, competitiveness is a key for sustainability.

So what are the main sustainability elements the city should aspire to realize? Understanding these elements and decoding them into practical and genuine initiatives is pivotal to achieve success. The first is the ability of its various sectors to work together, based on the notion that tourism doesn't belong to the tourism industry alone but to all sectors that are directly or indirectly linked to its value chain, such

as the commercial, the cultural, the religious, the educational, and the IT sectors. The second is the role of the community not only as a beneficiary of the tourism, economic, and cultural action but also as an active participant in the planning process for the tourism package and development.

The third element is the need to diversify the tourism offer. It will be difficult to create a viable, developing tourism industry in the city if it confines itself to one product and one market. Finally, in order to create a unique Palestinian tourism offer in Jerusalem, it is necessary to enhance the supporting sectors, including culture, women's and youth activity and production, and local handicrafts and artisan workmanship. Needless to say, the role of the various cultural festivals and exhibitions in attracting visitors is imperative, and it impacts both the domestic and the international. The domestic includes Jerusalemites, expatriates, and Palestinians from every location that has access to Jerusalem.

The third strategy is promotion and branding. The Jerusalem community, through its organizations and coordinated efforts, has the

ultimate responsibility of building its competencies, promoting its offer, and enhancing its well-being. There are two ways to accomplish this endeavor. The first is direct and requires that the community's tourism leadership find ways and resources to position Palestinian Jerusalem on the international and regional tourism maps. The second is networked and is based on the establishment of a set of relationships with local, regional, and international organizations that are involved in activities similar to the ones being created in Jerusalem. Cultural production, for example, can be networked with similar offers and activities in other countries



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

Palestinian civilization is a sophisticated, well-documented and enchanting reality that has its print on many of the surviving cultures and civilizations of today. There is no better place than Jerusalem to live and experience such a diverse cultural, architectural, demographic, and human mosaic.



that aim to promote culture. People who are seeking culture can find the Jerusalem offer intertwined in the respective circles. The various Jerusalem activities can find their place in pertinent platforms throughout the world, based on a scheme of networking, synergy coordination, and partnerships.

To further address Jerusalem tourism competency, consider the cultural and demographic mosaic of Palestine, which can best be explored in the

Old City of Jerusalem. This small area brings together a rich mixture of cultures, ways, and traditions. Jerusalem can best be understood through the eyes of this diversity. Gypsy, African, Moroccan, Afghani, Kurdish, Syrian, Egyptian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Greek, Assyrian, and Arab, as well as a multi ethnic Jewish community (just to name a few) all have a story of Jerusalem to tell and, when combined, provide a unique cultural identity that waits to be explored.

In addition, Jerusalem conceals an array of architectural-heritage medleys from Roman times through major empires such as the Byzantines, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Crusaders, the Ayyubids, the Mamluks, and the Ottomans. Women have built some of the best monuments and institutions in Jerusalem. Although Arab Islamic society was primarily patriarchal, some women had a clear role in many facets of life, particularly those who were close to the ruling authority, such as princesses, sultan's wives, or mothers or wives of rulers or influential people.



*Tourists visiting Jerusalem. Photo by Tarik Bakri.*

The Mamluk era, with its characteristic stability and calm, saw clear activity by women, represented by the establishment of public and private buildings and structures. The largest house or palace representing civil architecture in Jerusalem is attributed to a woman, al-Sitt Tunshuqal-Muzaffariyya. Also, the largest and greatest social charity organization from the Ottoman era, known as Al-Emara al-Amera is attributed to the wife of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman al-Qanuni (Suleiman I or Suleiman the Magnificent). She was famously known as Khassaki Sultan, and her building structure houses what is considered one of the greatest organizations, not only in Jerusalem, but also in Palestine and the Levant.

This uniqueness is what Jerusalem tourism needs. These elements can be integrated in the main current tourism offer, and they can be promoted individually in order to attract niche markets that might fancy the new potential to explore a city such as Jerusalem. Is the Jerusalem Palestinian community up to the challenge?

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