



Mar Saba Monastery



By Wael Hamamra
Translated by Elias Khayyo

Mar Saba Monastery, also known as the Great Laura of Saint Sabas, is located 15 kilometers east of Bethlehem and 5 kilometers east of the town of Al-Ubeidiya. It was constructed in the area known as the Jerusalem Wilderness at the foot of a mountain and overlooks Wadi al-Nar (Kidron Valley). The wadi starts from the city of Jerusalem and meanders down to the Dead Sea. Below the monastery is a small water spring that can be accessed via a long flight of stairs. Mar Saba is considered to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited monasteries in the world and one of the destinations that are frequented by foreign and domestic tourists in Palestine. It is also one of the sites that the State of Palestine has placed on the world heritage tentative list as part of El-Bariyah: Wilderness with Monasteries. This area extends east of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron. We are hopeful that, in the future, the monastery's nomination file will be prepared and then adopted by UNESCO to make it a world heritage site.

The monastery was named after St. Sabas, who lived between 439 and 532 and who originated from Cappadocia in central Anatolia (currently in Turkey). In 478, before the monastery was erected, St. Sabas lived in a small cave opposite the present monastery. He was accompanied by a large group of other monks, who lived in some of the 70 other natural cave hermitages in the area. In 483, the great main monastery was established, and some of its features can still be seen today. This is why St. Sabas was called the leader of hermits in Palestine, despite the fact that the founder of monastic life in Palestine was St. Hilarion, in whose honor a monastery was built near Gaza in 329. Monasticism is a way of life that invites monks to dedicate their lives to asceticism, worship, and reclusion.



Mar Saba Monastery. Photo by Palestine Image Bank

The monastery was built in stages and witnessed various additions starting with the Byzantine era and followed by the Umayyad, Crusader, Ottoman, and current eras. The architecture of the enormous compound and its picturesque natural surroundings resemble a castle on a vast expanse, built with stones that were hewn to match the incline at the edge of the wadi. On the eastern facade of the monastery, several successive floors appear, which were constructed in a stepped fashion and topped with domes, gables, and flat roofs. The sides of the monastery rest on immense buttresses affixed to the rock, while inclining inwards to enhance the strength and sturdiness of the building and to minimize the effects of potential earthquakes or cracks. This feature attests to the expertise attained through the ages by the designers of the building. The windows of the monastery building are characteristically small, and platforms, verandas, and some courtyards and stairs were added to facilitate movement between the monastery's sections and levels.

The monastery consists of a cave hewn in natural rock, where St. Sabas dwelled for 50 years of his monastic life. His tomb was built in the monastery's main yard, with an octagonal building above it that is topped with a dome. During the Crusader era, St. Sabas's remains were moved to Venice in Italy, yet were returned in 1964 when Pope Paul VI visited the Holy Land. Underneath the yard is a cemetery for monks. A chapel carved in rock was dedicated to St. Nicholas, and it contains the skulls of a number of monks killed by the Persians when they invaded Palestine in 614–628. On the eastern side is the Church of the Virgin Mary, built during the reign of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. It was renovated during later periods, especially the Crusader era. Its round dome is considered the most beautiful ornamental feature of the monastery. Its walls are adorned with murals and paintings, some of which represent the life of Jesus Christ and St. Sabas. Varying shades of red, brown, blue, and yellow dominate its walls. The ornaments have been blackened by the use of candles and oil lamps.

One important feature of the monastery is the chapel of St. John of Damascus. He lived during the Umayyad period under the reign of Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan and that of his son Hisham. Coming from an affluent family – his grandfather was the head of the tax department at the Umayyad Khalifa Court and his father was a vizier in the court – John was friends with a number of Umayyad khalifas, yet he preferred monastic life and moved to live at Mar Saba Monastery. Many of his works were written during his time there. The monastery also includes a library, a kitchen, dining rooms, bedrooms, and storage rooms.

Mar Saba is surrounded by a high wall that was constructed and restored over the course of many eras. A square tower was built for protection in the northeastern corner of the monastery. It is about 18 meters high and known as the Justinian tower, yet its architectural style dates back to the Crusader era. Another tower was erected on the southwestern side of the monastery. Its location, only meters from the first tower, provides an overview of the monastery. This tower is named the women's tower or the girls' palace, and can host women who come to see the monastery because women are customarily prohibited from entering the monastery, in accordance with St. Sabas's behest. The monks have maintained their simple lifestyle, and the monastery lacks technological or modern features of daily life.

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The magnificent Mar Saba Monastery.
Photo by Fadi Dahabreh.