

# Morcos Nassar Palace, Bethlehem

A Unique Guesthouse Run by  
People with Intellectual  
Disabilities



By Issam Juha  
and Saeda Manoli

Culture is the way of life passed on through generations in a society. As Palestine has been host to many societies and cultures in the course of its history, it offers a particularly rich diversity of cultural heritage. This heritage boosts the cultural standing of Palestinian identity and offers development opportunities for economic growth. Cultural heritage tourism has great potential for contributing to this, offering great values and fortunes. Many cities in Palestine have significant (world) heritage sites that make them important tourist destinations.

Bethlehem is one of the most prominent Palestinian cities and has invested in its heritage through the implementation of many restoration and rehabilitation projects. The Bethlehem 2000 Project, implemented between 1997 and 2000, is one example of the exceptional initiatives that were carried out to protect heritage sites and create a more attractive destination for tourists. Its initiatives included updating the city's infrastructure and emphasizing the significance of important cultural sites. The Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP) is continuing this mission through its work on the rehabilitation of traditional buildings and sites. The center has restored several buildings in Bethlehem and adapted them for reuse by turning them into handcraft centers, visitor centers, and guesthouses. All these projects have helped increase

Bethlehem's appeal among both the local community and international visitors who can now better enjoy the built-up cultural heritage of Bethlehem. One of the significant renovation projects recently completed by CCHP is the palace of Morcos Nassar.

Located in Bethlehem's Anatreh Quarter and offering views of Shahin Valley and Hindaza Mountain, the palace has three levels and a total space of 540 square meters. It was

built between 1899 and 1910, designed by the talented and famous first architect in Palestine, Morcos Nassar, who served as a Jerusalem City engineer at the beginning of the twentieth century and designed and built several significant mansions in Bethlehem and Jerusalem during this period. For 50 years, the palace served as a residential building for Nassar's family. The building adapts the vernacular architecture building typology, the Liwan House, which

Stairs lead to the main entrance of Ma'an Iil-Hayat Boutique Hotel.





Young people with disabilities are taking care of tidying a bedroom inside Ma'an lil-Hayat Boutique Hotel.

Young people with disabilities are setting the table for guests in the dining room at Ma'an lil-Hayat Boutique Hotel.

consists of large halls on every floor, displaying valuable objects. The large hall, *liwan*, is connected to the main entrances and to the staircase, providing a linear circulation among the adjacent rooms. The architecture concept is based on the simple repetition of rooms along both sides of the *liwan*.

Nassar Palace is considered to be one of the first buildings in Bethlehem that witnessed a development in construction techniques. It was built in two phases. Phase one included building the basement and ground floor, using local white hard (*eheesheh*) stone. The first floor was built in phase two, using local red (*layyeb*) stone. Its distinctive exterior and interior design features prominent decorated balconies and artistic stone elements. The interior walls and ceilings were

enriched with colorful oil paintings that indicate the family's wealth and power, showing landscapes, hunting activities, fruits, angels, and animals. The palace openings are longitudinal, topped by arches and surrounded by simple stone frames. The inner ceiling of the basement floor has a traditional cross vault form, and the tiles are made of old, traditional stone. The ceiling of the ground and first floors is made of flat concrete slabs, and the tiles show traditional stone carpets.

In 2012, the building was purchased by the organization Ma'an lil-Hayat (Together for Life)/ L'Arche Bethlehem. Ma'an lil-Hayat aims to bring together people with and without intellectual disabilities through structured creative activities and celebration. It works towards a stronger integration of people with an intellectual disability in society. CCHP in cooperation

with Riwaq restored the building so that it can be used for activities. In parallel, CCHP rehabilitated the stairway leading to the site, adopting it for the use of small vehicles and providing the beneficiaries of the organization with comfortable access to the site. A new elevator was installed to ensure access to all floors of the building for the beneficiaries, utilizing a reversible construction design with a steel frame and glass facades. Thus, the building is well adapted to be used by people with special needs while maintaining its aesthetic and heritage value. In 2021, Ma'an lil-Hayat commissioned



Eastern elevation of the Marcos Nassar building, showing the steel and glass external elevator.

CCHP to readapt the historic Marcos Nassar Palace as a boutique hotel.

CCHP has a proven record of accomplishment in renovating heritage

The large hall, *liwan*, inside Ma'an lil-Hayat Boutique Hotel, connecting the rooms and the main stairs.





The interior ceilings enriched with colorful oil paintings.

buildings and repurposing them for innovative new uses. They benefit the cultural heritage experience in the Bethlehem area and appeal to local residents and tourists alike. Previous projects include the renovation of Dar Al-Sabbagh for the adoptive reuse by the Diaspora Research and Study Centre, the renovation of the Hosh Abu Jarour Icon School, and the restoration of Hosh Al-Syrian Guesthouse, now a high-end guesthouse in the old city of Bethlehem. In 2017, CCHP completed the rehabilitation of the Dar Sababa and Ishaq building that now serves fair trade artisans. In the same year, the restoration and adaptive reuse project for Dar Awwad in Beit Sahour was completed, transforming it into a visitor information center.

The rehabilitation of Morcos Nassar Palace that took place between 2021 and 2022 was considered a challenge for CCHP in terms of finding a balance between preserving the original characteristics and authenticity of the building and adapting it for the current use. The project is remarkable for its contribution to cultural heritage tourism in Bethlehem because it not only preserved a building known for its significant historical and architectural value but also was renovated in a way that it now offers a unique experience for visitors who wish to stay in the historic town of Bethlehem. Moreover, the choice to stay at the Ma'an lil-Hayat Boutique Hotel reflects the guests' interest in contributing to Palestinian social responsibility and demonstrates a

beautiful example of responsible tourism that contributes to the integration of a group that is marginalized in society. As members of the staff of the boutique hotel, people with intellectual disabilities not only help run the hotel, receive international guests, and generate their own income, they are also actively taking care of an historic building.

Tourists and visitors staying in the hotel enjoy a unique experience not only in the building's historic atmosphere but also through the opportunity to interact with the local Palestinian community, in particular, a part of the community that would perhaps otherwise remain entirely invisible.

The hotel opened in the summer of 2022, and the appreciation for this unique guesthouse is reflected in the ratings that guests have given their stay on booking.com, awarding the hotel with a score of 9.5 out of 10 and choosing the description "exceptional." Guests praise the beauty and comfort of the hotel, its Palestinian breakfast, and the friendly hospitality of the staff.

Heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and often brings with it a multitude of political and ethical issues as well as logistical problems relating to over-visitation and congestion. Moreover, minorities and local populations are frequently excluded from profiting from large-scale heritage tourism. The restoration and repurposing of the Morcos Nassar Palace in Bethlehem is an important

example that shows that it is possible to create a high-end visitor's experience for tourists through cultural heritage that truly benefits the local community.

All photos were taken by the CCHP team.

*Issam Juha is the director of the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation and a former deputy mayor of Bethlehem. An architect with a master's degree in world heritage studies, Issam has been responsible for several rehabilitation projects that aim to revitalize Bethlehem's Star Street, among them Dar Al Sabagh.*

*Saeda Manoli, an architect at the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation, has 20 years of experience in the fields of design and supervision. Saeda has been responsible for several rehabilitation projects that aim to revitalize Bethlehem.*

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