

# Cultural Tourism and World Heritage Conservation

Courtesy of UNESCO National Office for Palestine, Ramallah

Over the last decades, cultural tourism has become one of the largest and fastest-growing global tourism markets, where visitors' essential motivation is oriented towards discovering and experiencing the tangible attractions, intangible components, and cultural products of a given destination. As such, cultural assets and creative expressions are increasingly utilized to promote tourism destinations and

hence heighten their competitiveness and attractiveness. At the same time, they provide opportunities for development through job creation, improvement of communities' livelihood, renewal of places, and appreciation of living cultures, value systems, beliefs, and traditions.

Given that visiting cultural sites and discovering local expressions and traditions rank high on travelers' lists,<sup>i</sup> cultural tourism can contribute to the conservation and promotion of natural and cultural heritage, also fostering mutual understanding and a sense of pride among host communities. To ensure that tourism is used effectively for cultural preservation and sustainable development, UNESCO's World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme<sup>ii</sup> has been set to create an international framework for sustainable tourism management at World Heritage Sites, based on heritage values. Through this program, UNESCO endeavors to create networks of key stakeholders to coordinate the destination management and marketing associated with the different heritage routes to promote high-quality and unique experiences based on UNESCO's recognized heritage sites, yet stressing the added value of tourism in these places.

Indeed, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and tourism have been closely intertwined since the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972.<sup>iii</sup> This year, 2022, marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this important international treaty, where the theme "The Next 50: World Heritage as a source of resilience, humanity and innovation"<sup>iv</sup> affirms UNESCO's resolution to go well beyond celebrating past achievements through dedicating this milestone to an



interdisciplinary reflection on the next 50 years of World Heritage.

For "The Next 50," UNESCO has selected five priority areas to drive its collective attention and present focus when it comes to World Heritage: (1) COVID-19 recovery, (2) climate change and heritage conservation, (3) balanced representation of the inscribed sites, (4) sustainable tourism, and (5) digital transformation. Clearly, these five areas represent major challenges yet lesser-explored opportunities that can influence the preservation and promotion of World Heritage in the years to come, through advocating and attracting innovative crowdsourcing ideas from around the world.

The past, current, and projected growth of international and domestic travel represents both challenges and opportunities for World Heritage Sites and the respective populations

in and around them, given that these sites are among the most popular and heavily promoted visitor and tourist attractions in many countries. This requires proper management of resources to ensure that tourism is perceived as an enabler for economic sustainability to the local community.

Combining tourism and cultural heritage is at the heart of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Together, these sectors can influence and foster positive, dynamic, and responsive strategies and plans to work towards well-conserved and properly promoted World Heritage Sites, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, UNESCO worked with sister UN agencies to assess the pandemic's impact on World Heritage properties and highlight the role of culture in their recovery. These assessments

*Bethlehem Reborn* Exhibition in Miró Hall at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, October 2022. The exhibition was dedicated to 50 years of the World Heritage Convention.





The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. ©UNESCO.

and analyses were presented in key policy papers such as “UNWTO Inclusive Recovery Guide – Sociocultural Impacts of Covid-19, Issue 2: Cultural Tourism” and the “UN Secretary-General Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Transforming Tourism.” The latter showed that the impact of COVID-19 on tourism “has placed further pressure on heritage conservation in the cultural sector, as well as on the cultural and social fabric of communities, particularly indigenous people and ethnic groups.”

During the COVID-19 crisis, 90 percent of countries fully or partially closed World Heritage Sites, and around 85,000 museums were also temporarily closed.<sup>v</sup> Despite the unfortunate consequences of the disruption, this global pause in travel has created an opportunity to move away from unsustainable practices of the past towards more resilient models that contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In

response, UNESCO and the Advisory Bodies to the World Heritage Committee initiated a dedicated task force that called for promoting more strategic approaches for tourism recovery that could potentially stimulate economic, social, and environmental benefits to touristic destinations, while also integrating innovation and digitalization, and embracing local values at the same time.

Palestine, like the rest of the world, was strongly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2020 press release published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) on the occasion of World Tourism Day, celebrated annually on September 27, the projected losses in tourism revenues were estimated at approximately US\$1.15 billion during the first ten months of the pandemic.<sup>vi</sup> PCBS indicated that this is largely due to “the closure of borders and tourist facilities, in addition to a sharp decline in inbound and domestic

tourism,” which also impacted more than 10,000 employees who work in activities related to the tourism sector and who stopped working during that period.<sup>vii</sup>

The Bethlehem and Jerusalem governorates usually receive the largest number of tourists and pilgrims, not only due to their significant religious value but also because both governorates have sites inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List, such as Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem



Battir Sign. ©UNESCO.

(2012).<sup>viii</sup> Given that almost 81 percent of the total number of hotels are located in the mentioned governorates,<sup>ix</sup> these governorates were the most affected by the pandemic nationwide.

Nonetheless, and despite these challenging facts, the pandemic has proved to be a double-edged sword

when it comes to cultural tourism in World Heritage Sites in Palestine. This was particularly evident in another World Heritage Site, Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir (2014).<sup>x</sup> Battir is renowned for its complex irrigation system that is distributed along a series of drystone wall agricultural terraces that are believed to have been cultivated since antiquity. Over time, and due to socioeconomic changes in Palestinian society, agricultural practices in Palestine have witnessed a general decline, as people have depended more on other sectors as a source of living. This had also been the case in Battir, where its inscription on UNESCO’s World Heritage List caused tourism to flourish and become an important anchor for economic sustainability and development – while agricultural practices and land cultivation received much less attention. With the outbreak of the pandemic, however, the inhabitants of Battir turned the COVID-19 confinements and restrictions into an unprecedented opportunity to conserve their natural resources and utilize their neglected agricultural plots in the World Heritage terraces. Investing in land recovery ensures the proper maintenance of terraces and, according to the World Heritage Committee, is the optimal recommended practice to allow the site to be conserved and managed properly.<sup>xi</sup>

This shift towards the caretaking of agricultural terraces in Battir was easy to plot, given that the natural characteristics of the site are different than those in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, or at the World Heritage site of Hebron/Al-Khail Old Town (inscribed in 2017).<sup>xii</sup>

As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, the mentioned shift is a living witness to the fact that cultural tourism and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage play important roles in promoting sustainability within local communities. These activities can contribute to inclusive economic growth and at the same time enhance local identity, protecting traditional practices, fostering innovation, enabling the sharing of knowledge and experiences, ensuring proper communication about deeply-rooted cultural heritage assets, and providing benefits and empowerment for all.

In this spirit, in close coordination and cooperation with its partners, UNESCO is committed to continue investing efforts towards the enhancement and revitalization of cultural heritage in Palestine, especially at sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, but also beyond. In

this vein, UNESCO has recently concluded a nine-year project entitled “Local Development through the Rehabilitation and Revitalization of the Historic Built Environment in Palestine,” with generous funding from Sweden. The project targeted 75 abandoned historic cultural heritage sites in rural and urban historic centers all over Palestine and in partnership with four specialized cultural heritage organizations. The project eventually managed to create and establish health care and educational facilities, women’s associations, community and youth centers, kindergartens, libraries, and community institutions, among others, in addition to infrastructure works and the revitalization of public spaces.

This long-standing cooperation has focused on the rehabilitation and revitalization of the historic environment. It aims to transform once-deserted sites into vibrant, thriving structures that serve the local communities, creating spaces

for public use while at the same time promoting cultural tourism. Furthermore, throughout the years of implementation, UNESCO engaged in capacity building, conducted training sessions, held awareness-raising activities, and supported the development of policies as well as rehabilitation and revitalization works designed to meet the needs of the local community.

As a result, the project has enhanced the public’s appreciation of cultural heritage, including among the younger generation. It has furthermore proven that the contemporary needs of local communities can be met if the community properly invests in its deeply rooted heritage, especially in a place with a rich history and despite numerous challenges. The project’s positive impact was particularly evident when UNESCO witnessed that the slightest intervention in one site triggered other similar projects in the same

neighborhood or area. It has hence set examples for the long-term protection of Palestinian cultural heritage.

Other successes were made on the tourism front, as the project contributed to the rehabilitation of numerous buildings that now host centers that either serve as touristic destinations themselves or function as premises for institutions that promote cultural tourism. For example, the Old Hebron Museum was established in the building that formerly was home to the Palestine Hotel in the old town of Hebron and is now one of its main touristic attractions. Dar Khalaf, also in Hebron, is currently used by the tourism department of Hebron Municipality and serves as a tourism promotion and information center. Dar Qumsieh in Beit Sahour was renovated to host the organization that promotes and maintains the Palestine Heritage Trail. And Dar Al Sabagh, located along the Pilgrimage

Route in the old town of Bethlehem, has provided services to the Palestinian community in diaspora. UNESCO’s project also contributed to enhancing the infrastructure in the Bir O’neh area, a touristic attraction in Beit Jala, and established a starting point for the walking trail in Al-Ubeidiya. It has enhanced the infrastructure in the old town centers of Hebron and Bethlehem, thereby improving the overall environment and enriching the experience that these two World Heritage Sites have to offer.

Realizing that World Heritage sites, and the tangible cultural heritage at large, represent a potential source for the sustainable and economic growth and development of local communities, UNESCO designs and implements projects and activities that respond to the numerous challenges that emerge at these sites. UNESCO’s interventions are implemented in a manner that contributes to the proper



Old Hebron Museum. ©UNESCO, Mohammad Silwadi.



Hebron Old City. ©UNESCO.

of World Heritage Sites that are recognized for their significance to humanity. The aforementioned numbers and examples only testify to the strong linkages that World Heritage Sites have in influencing tourism in Palestine and beyond. UNESCO believes that protecting the entrenched values of cultural heritage is a shared responsibility. Therefore, the proper cooperation between the concerned public authorities and other stakeholders, including the private sector, tourism operators, and site managers, is crucial in order to achieve short- and long-term sustainable outcomes that protect the resources on which this sector will thrive in the future.

conservation and management of these sites, taking into account their prospects for attracting cultural tourism while at the same time sustaining their outstanding universal values.

With recent indicators<sup>xiii</sup> that clearly show how tourism is regaining its momentum in Palestine, this is a call for all of us to advocate for sustainable cultural tourism while focusing on the added value

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<sup>i</sup> World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), *Tourism at World Heritage Sites: Challenges and Opportunities*, available at <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416608>.

<sup>ii</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention, *Sustainable Tourism*, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tourism/>.

<sup>iii</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention, *The World Heritage Convention*, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/>.

<sup>iv</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention, *The Next 50*, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/next50/>.

<sup>v</sup> United Nations Executive Summary, Policy Brief: "COVID-19 and Transforming Tourism," available at <https://www.sg-pb.org/pb/2020/09/27/sg-pb-2020-09-27-01>.

<sup>vi</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), joint press release with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA) on the occasion of World Tourism Day, September 27, 2020, available at <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3817>.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention, Birthplace of Jesus: Nativity Church and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1433>.

<sup>ix</sup> PCBS, joint press release with MoTA, 2020.

<sup>x</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention, Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines—Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1492/>.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention, Hebron/AI-Khalil Old Town, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1565/>.

<sup>xiii</sup> PCBS, joint press release with MoTA at the occasion of World Tourism Day, September 27, 2022, available at <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?tabID=512&lang=en&ItemID=4320&mid=3171&wversion=Staging>.