

Bedouin Desert Tourism



By Nasser Ka'abneh

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uring the late twentieth century, the idea of alternative tourism – whether social or environmental – crystalized, presenting an approach that differs from traditional tourism. Desert tourism began within the context of this trend, especially tourism that includes visits to Bedouin communities that live in the desert. Tourists who truly want to get to know the life of *al-badia* (the desert) and *al-reef* (the rural area) will never be able to fully appreciate this lifestyle by watching a documentary, reading a report, or even taking a bus tour. They have to live with the Bedouin families and tribes to experience their lifestyle. So we have improved our offering to allow guests to see the numerous facets

Qumran, an archaeological site in the West Bank located on a dry marl plateau about 1.5 km from the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea.



Wadi Qelt, a valley, riverine gulch, or stream in the West Bank, originating near Jerusalem and running into the Jordan River near Jericho, shortly before it flows into the Dead Sea.

of Bedouin life. Moreover, we have trained many specialized guides in this field. Still, there are many challenges and difficulties to overcome that hamper this beautiful mode of tourism.

Visitors can participate in an abundance of activities when they visit Bedouin tribes in the desert, enabling them to get to know the customs and traditions. Homestays are considered the most important component in providing an experience of the customs and traditions of this environment and way of life. Guests must allocate sufficient time to live with host families and share their food, drink, and lifestyle to learn how Bedouins manage to deal with the desert conditions and appreciate this way of life that is based on simple elements and ingredients. Here, the visitor can join household members and participate in the preparation of food and in doing other

chores.

Some other activities include touring the depths of the solitary desert to experience tranquility and peace away from the hustle and bustle of the city. These tours may be done by walking, driving off-road vehicles, or riding animals, such as camels. Tours can last one day or more, if possible, and include camping in the desert and watching the sun rise and set from the cliffs around the Dead Sea or from any other place in Palestine's beautiful desert. Another option is the unique activity of following shepherds as they graze their camels, goats, and sheep, either spending a whole day with them or just watching their coming and going.



Wadi Qelt.

Visitors can rely on a limited number of trained Bedouin guides during their stay. Bedouins are experts on their environment, and tourists need never worry about getting lost! These guides can lead any group safely to any destination, but few have expertise in group-guiding logistics and administration, nor do they possess knowledge of first aid or speak foreign languages. The guides who possess these skills, however, can safely and confidently lead tourists who wish to wander through the desert. They possess skills that no one else has because they are familiar with the

desert's dangers and safe places and know what people need in order to tolerate extreme conditions and bear hardships. For example, these persons can tell who or what was recently in a certain place because they are skilled at reading tracks and traces. Such a guide can give a weather report simply by looking at the sky – and thus determine how fast a group should move or whether it must change its path in case there is the possibility of torrential rainfall. The guide will know when visitors should rest for a while and where they should go to avoid the sun's heat and the risk of sunstroke.

The impediments and challenges implicit in desert tourism can be linked to resources or to the political situation. A lack of financial resources could prevent Bedouins working in this field from implementing the projects that they consider necessary. For example, it is impossible to find a person in the West Bank who would be capable of accompanying more than four people on camels, or someone who possesses more than one off-road vehicle to transport tourists to the heart of the desert. In such cases, Bedouins resort to participatory work to organize and manage their affairs.

Moreover, Palestinians are prevented from visiting some desert sites or even the desert in general because many of these areas have been declared Israeli military zones and thus off-limits to Palestinians or tourists. Soldiers or settlers may put up obstacles to prevent the owners of the land from accessing and using it. In addition, we find many Israeli projects that pretend to provide “Bedouin tourism” by imitating the lifestyle of Bedouins in order to entice visitors. They will have tents (*beit sha'ar*), camels and other livestock, and they will even dress as Bedouins. They will also have full access to the desert.



A panoramic view at Qumran.

Despite these obstacles, however, genuine desert tourism with Bedouins is a great gateway that allows visitors to acquaint themselves with the hospitality, culture, and lifestyle of the Palestinian Bedouins. Moreover, it provides a source of income that increases the resilience of Bedouins during these difficult times.

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Climbing the Mountains of Al-Badia



By Ala' Khalil

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hoever hovers over the tops of desert mountains will surely mock the tragedies and hardships of life and even ridicule life itself.” This saying has been stuck in my head since I was very young. Many times I've asked myself, “How can I hover over the mountains and minimize the burden I carry on my shoulder as a Palestinian?” I have been roaming the desert since infancy. I have sat for hours gazing at its magnificence that comforts yet at the same time overflows with challenge, uncertainty, and myths. Trying to discover who I am, I would imagine life in the past and in the present, on the tops of desert mountains, at the edges of cliffs, slopes, and dams, and in the foothills of lush groves.

I often asked myself how our forebears built their houses on these ragged mountains and fortified them for protection in case of war or invasion. Such imaginary scenes dazzled me and sparked in me a desire to discover the desert world. I would find myself roaming in an open-air museum at the heart of the Palestinian wilderness: I felt as if the colored rocks of the desert mountains were waving at me, as if the hands of my great grandfathers were motioning to me, calling me to discover them.



Climbing the Badia mountains.

Here began the story of my search for a way to reach the mountaintops and the edges of their slopes. I wanted to touch these rocks and restore the history of our civilization and the beauty that has been passed down to us in the wildness of Mar Saba, the cliffs over the Dead Sea, *Wadi al-Darajeh* (Valley of the Steps), and the hill Khashm al-Daraj.

In 2013, a friend told me about a training course for young people who wished to learn the skills of climbing and walking through the mountains to appreciate nature. I saw the desert before me, with the gradation of colors, its mountains and rocks smiling at me, and was awakened from my dream by the voice of my girlfriends asking, “Can

we do this as girls? Will society allow this?” My response was a resolute cry of “Let’s try!”

Fortunate to be able to join the training course, I experienced climbing mountains and slopes, walking between them, and felt as if I were a child again, crawling and wrestling, learning how to walk all over again. At that time, I inhaled freedom. The air was not like any ordinary air. When I looked down after a long climb up, seeing the expansive mountains, I was able to see Palestine free and liberated from all walls and barriers. I was sure that I was the daughter of those slopes, edges, and mountains with their pride, loftiness, and steadfastness. I learned patience, how to control myself, how to move my one hand

by order from the other hand, warning me not to look back. I learned that any stage I reach is a success, even if it is a small step. I learned a lesson about the importance of perseverance, of continuing to press forward, no matter how difficult the march is. And I learned to respect nature. The sport of walking and climbing the mountains of the desert polished my personality and gave me the incentive to renew my positive energy and rid myself from negativity.

Mountain climbing in the desert has a special flavor that differs from climbing in other places. It is an adventure that combines the loftiness of mountains with the magnificence and power of the desert as it is known by the Bedouins. The Bedouins have chosen the desert and the desert has chosen them, making them her children who can bear her heat, understand her wind and coolness, recognize her voices and messages, and reveal her secrets. The desert forces us to develop strength, patience, and wisdom. And in the end, she gives us the ability to walk on her sandy paths and climb the cliffs of her valleys, as we learn to ascend her rugged mountains and steep slopes with lightness and with the instinct of the deer and ibex.

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