

Camping in Palestine

A Reality Check



By Marwan Tarazi

Camping truly is a breath of fresh air when it comes to recreational activities. This low-cost, community-building experience is a respite from our fast-paced, technology-driven lives, offering a charming return to simplicity that is both soothing and invigorating. The canvas of the outdoors creates a playground for young and old alike, uniting families and friends under a star-lit sky and around a flickering campfire. The serene backdrop of nature, coupled with the absence of modern distractions, allows for deep conversations and shared moments of laughter, all while creating lasting memories. Unplugging from the daily grind and plugging into the rhythms of the natural world, camping instills a newfound appreciation for the environment. It's more than just an activity; it's an antidote to the digital age, a passport to adventure, and a heartfelt celebration of human connection.

In the shadow of oppression and an unjust reality, camping and the outdoors become more than just a leisurely escape for Palestinians: they transform into a lifeline, offering a brief respite from the unyielding grip of a stifling existence. For those of us who endure daily violations of our rights, every aspect of our lives under Israel is a relentless chokehold that crushes dreams and aspirations with impunity. The weight of gross injustice hangs heavily on our shoulders, a burden carried daily with no end in sight.

In the wilderness, however, barriers disappear, and the shackles of humiliation and abuse fade away. Here, one can feel free from the relentless presence of checkpoints, surveillance, and the omnipresent eyes of those who seek to oppress. As we camp and roam under open skies, we reclaim a sense of autonomy, an unshackled spirit that defies the boundaries imposed upon us.

...Or do we?

Well, first of all, let's acknowledge that we live in a beautiful country with amazing natural diversity, all within an hour's reach or so: hills adorned with olive trees, rock gardens, beautiful landscapes, the unique Dead Sea basin, deserts, Mediterranean beaches, Lake Tiberias, water springs, the Jordan Valley, the beautiful Galilee – providing conditions for outdoor activities year-round.

But the beauty of Palestine's natural treasures is marred by human greed, lunacy, fanatical ideologies, and corrupt politics that relentlessly erode this once holy land ecologically, culturally, and socially. Amidst stunning landscapes, the harsh reminder of this brutal reality dampens the enjoyment of nature and, at times, poses life-threatening risks.

Approximately 9 million Palestinians live in Palestine today: 3 million in

Campers enjoying the serene backdrop of nature.





Photo by Firas Jarrar.

the West Bank, 2 million in Gaza, and 2 million in the rest of historical Palestine (Palestinians who remained in Palestine in 1948 and were given Israeli citizenship). Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are forcefully denied access to their ancestral lands.

For the 3 million Palestinians who live in the West Bank, nature's abundant beauty is undeniably present in their immediate surroundings. But for this indigenous population, a grievous reality lurks beneath this picturesque landscape. Over half a million foreign settlers, claiming divine right, forcefully occupy and exploit the land's resources. They massacre nature, construct alien colonies, impose separation walls, and restrict access to what little land Palestinians have left from the land in which they lived less than a century ago. Israel is systematically stealing it with

impunity. These methodical actions – augmented by those of lunatic settler hooligans who are set on the loose under the Israeli army's protection – perpetuate a reign of terror, abuse, and colonization, diminishing the appeal, scope, and accessibility of the natural paradise that once flourished harmoniously.

For the 2 million Palestinians trapped in Gaza's open-air prison, life is suffocating under a barrage of Israeli atrocities. Basic necessities such as suitable drinking water are scarce, and contaminated aquifers and sewage discharge into the sea endanger health and well-being. Venturing near the separation wall, whether to tend to fields or seek respite in nature, risks indiscriminate firing by Israeli army snipers. Even the sea, a symbol of freedom, is restricted, turning Gaza's beach into the sole escape from confinement. Camping and outdoor activities

become forbidden luxuries, casualties of an oppressive system that further stifles and oppresses an already vulnerable population, leaving them with little sanctuary from their constrained existence.

The remaining two million Palestinians outside the West Bank and Gaza indeed have access to some of Palestine's natural beauty, with nature reserves, hiking trails, and camping areas in picturesque locations. However, this privilege is overshadowed by a different form of oppression, perpetuated by Israel's systematic erasure of Palestinian culture and heritage. Witnessing measures such as the theft of their ancestral land, the renaming of Palestinian cities and sites with foreign or distorted Hebrew names, and the attempts to erase the Arabic language leave them feeling like strangers in their own homeland. The rewriting of history from the colonizer's perspective further reinforces the injustice, erasing Palestinian narratives and experiences. The weight of this oppressive reality lingers, reminding them of the colonial abuse, mistreatment, and injustice that has plagued their people for over 75 years – as the world turns a blind eye to their plight. This deep-rooted injustice, omnipresent amidst the breathtaking scenery, leaves little room for a genuine enjoyment of nature as the ghosts of colonial abuse haunt every corner of Palestine.

Then, there is the undeniable reality of the ongoing profound ecological devastation of nature that one cannot overlook or ignore. Take the Dead Sea, for example. It is being destroyed relentlessly and without any remorse due to the Israeli government's diversion



Slowly cooking a meal over a fire is a soothing and rewarding experience.



Food remains a national sport in Palestine! Photo courtesy of Hani Elfar.

of water from the Jordan River to make the “desert bloom,” causing the sea to shrink and forming irreversible building-size sinkholes. Stagnant waters have made the Jordan River and Dead Sea more vulnerable to pollution. Industrial waste, agricultural runoff, and the dumping of untreated sewage all contribute to the loss of the biodiversity of this unique ecosystem. Watching this amazing legend die in front of your eyes is more than heartbreaking.

The Hula Wetlands once were a critical stop on bird migration routes and a sanctuary for diverse wildlife. Again, in efforts to “make the desert bloom,” Israel drained the Hula wetlands, which caused an ecological disaster and led to the destruction of its unique local ecosystem and the loss of many bird and fish species. In addition, decaying peat from the drained Hula basin released excessive

nutrients into Lake Tiberias, triggering harmful algae blooms and extending the damage further.

Ecological damage is continuing without pause. The Apartheid Separation Wall, an imposing structure that is hundreds of kilometers long and a horrific eye sore, cuts through serene landscape, disrupts the natural beauty and harmony of the environment, and obstructs the natural pathways of wildlife. As prohibitions are placed on Palestinians that prevent them from constructing wastewater treatment facilities, sewage is in many cases directly disposed into wadis and valleys, polluting and destroying these beautiful natural environments. Israeli settlements are exempted from these building prohibitions but nevertheless dispose their wastewater on the surrounding Palestinian land, some of which is used for agriculture.

An ban is imposed also on building proper solid waste management facilities in the so-called Area C of the West Bank, which has resulted in the unsystematic burning of garbage and other harmful disposal practices, causing further harm to the already limited natural areas. The illegal disposal of e-waste by Israeli companies in Palestinian regions, along with the dumping of toxic waste, are devastating practices that systematically destroy nature and make it less accessible to all.

When nature enthusiasts wander through the stunning landscapes of Palestine, a living museum of unparalleled historical and cultural richness, the sight of desecrated and deteriorating archaeological sites is yet another heart-wrenching experience. The evidence of looting and pillaging can be witnessed in practically every archeological site, especially in the West Bank. This devastation, happening right under the watchful eye and protection of Israel, as the Palestinian Authority has no leverage in these areas, leaves a bitter taste. Moreover, it’s a painful irony to find that artifacts plundered from these sites are traded predominantly by Israeli dealers. This silent endorsement of theft serves a darker purpose: to erase inconvenient truths that challenge Israel’s religious narrative that seemingly justifies plunder, oppression, and racial domination. The further this archaeological heritage fades into oblivion, the easier it becomes to uphold a narrative that is rooted more in mythology and fabricated history than in historical and scientific facts.

Despite these daunting challenges, nature remains our oasis, a realm of tranquility amidst the devastation. Seventy-five years of colonialism,

injustice, and oppression have honed our spirit of resilience, enabling us to find positivity even in difficult circumstances. Immersion in nature isn’t just a respite it’s a revelation. Without experiencing it firsthand, we remain detached from the true extent of the human-inflicted damage and the magnitude of loss it entails. Our engagement with the natural world is crucial in fostering an activist spirit: a commitment to protecting what we have left. Let’s rejoice in the half-full glass of nature’s beauty but also remain conscious, critical, and proactively engaged in preservation efforts. Our collective actions can make a significant difference in shielding our natural heritage for generations to come.

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