

Explore Palestine!



Souq al-Qattarin in the Old City of Jerusalem.

For a real treat, walk up the few steps of the covered staircase to the Austrian Hospice or climb to the roofs of Souq al-Qattarin (Market of the Cotton Merchants) to ponder the magnificent Dome of the Rock. Very soon, you will start observing the layers of Jerusalem's history that go back thousands of years and expand all over the Old City today. Ancient and newer civilizations cross your path as you tour the city. There is so much to explore!

A lesser-known yet equally bustling city is Nablus. The ancient old city's souq, the traditional soap factories that

use olive oil as their main ingredient, the shops that serve delicious *knafeh* (a traditional sweet pastry with white cheese soaked in syrup), the beautiful architecture of the *hammam* (Turkish bath), the old-fashioned *tahini* (sesame paste) factory, the manufacturing process of making traditional tiles from cement and an array of dyes in a small workshop, and the hectic old city leave you baffled and wanting more. This city gives you a deeper insight into the diversity of Arab-Palestinians and the specialties that vary from city to city. Do not leave without trying the *knafeh*!

Located between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, the city of Nablus is a commercial and a cultural center in Palestine.



By Hani Khashram
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Palestine has something to offer for everyone. If you're a tourist, you won't regret spending your vacation in Palestine, visiting ancient sites, enjoying local cuisine and cafes, and witnessing or participating in cultural events. If you're a pilgrim, Palestine is a wellspring of faith. And if you're adventurous, you can hike the desert guided by moonlight, learn Arabic, and eat delicious, healthy food.

The first thing you notice when you come to Palestine is the people's hospitality and how happy locals are to help you find your way as you navigate around town or between sites and localities. Palestinians are happy to give you a sense of how they live and readily invite you to share their way of life. They have you try everything from food to traditional clothing, and you may even be welcomed to their home for a cup of strong, steaming coffee and a friendly conversation.

As you are quickly enabled to immerse yourself in the local atmosphere, you are simultaneously thrown into the heart of Palestinian culture and everyday movement – so it's time to explore. A city you will surely not miss is Jerusalem, where, inevitably, you will find yourself strolling through the narrow alleys and passages. Daytime is the best time to experience what the Old City has to offer.



The remains of the ancient Roman forum in Sebastia.

We continue to Sebastya, located approximately 12 kilometers northwest of Nablus. This small town was the capital city of the Northern Kingdom during Iron Age II and continued to be an important administrative center of the region during the ensuing centuries. Local Christian and Islamic traditions locate the tomb of John the Baptist in Sebastya. Churches and a mosque dedicated to John the Baptist, Prophet Yahia, perpetuate his religious veneration to this day. The town is surrounded by a distinct terraced landscape dotted with olive, almond, apricot, and fig trees. Sebastya has,

over the ages, hosted cultures that flourished from the Iron Age to the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods and to the present time. These civilizations have left behind various archaeological remains you can visit.

Next up, we have Deir Ghassaneh. Exploring the history of Ramallah's nearby villages on a spring or summer day is a unique experience. Located 25 kilometers northwest of Ramallah, Deir Ghassaneh is one of the 24 feudal villages (throne villages) that flourished as important administrative centers

Deir Ghassaneh (the giraffe sculpture is temporary and the result of recycling project by local school children). Photo courtesy of Bassam Al-Mohor.



during Palestine's Ottoman era. A hiking trail on the surrounding hills passes through 3000-year-old olive trees and allows you to explore the unspoiled beauty of the surrounding countryside. Built on a ridge in the hills north of Ramallah, Deir Ghassaneh commands spectacular views across the coastal plain and the Mediterranean Sea. The trail ends in the archaeologically and historically significant village center. On arrival,

Battir is one of the last farming villages in Palestine that continues to use a unique irrigation system that is over 2000 years old, built during Roman times.



Battir, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located west of Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of Roubina Bassour Ghattas.

visitors are welcomed by women who exhibit their traditional handicrafts and homemade Palestinian food products that are created and prepared by the members of Deir Ghassaneh's thriving women's association. If you like to enrich your visit with cultural, historical, and educational components, we encourage you to interact with people and to listen to their stories and adventures. Having rested in Deir Ghassaneh's central square that is guarded by a fortified tower, you can walk through narrow

alleyways into the fine residential compound. Its alternating bands of colored stone and pointed archways are typical of seventeenth-century Ottoman architecture.

Heading further south, we enter the areas that surround Bethlehem and the small village of Battir, located 6 kilometers west of Bethlehem and 7 kilometers south of Jerusalem. Its unforgettable terraced landscape features olive groves and vineyards whose uniqueness is honored by

being listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as “Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir.” The site and its surrounding agricultural terraces, including its irrigation system, represent an outstanding example of human settlement near water sources and land adaptation for agricultural purposes. In Battir, you can beautifully observe how to grow vegetables and herbs on fertile land and learn planting tips from local women who work daily in the fields. You certainly don’t want to forget to visit Jericho, the oldest continually

mosaics that include the Tree of Life, is a must-see. The neighboring Dead Sea invites you to a mud bath and a float on silky-feeling water surrounded by desert hills – good ways to spend your day, too!

Let’s turn to something closer to the heart: the stomach. Have you ever tried deliciously stuffed zucchini or smoother-than-smooth hummus? You might want to learn how to make some of these mouth-watering dishes yourself. Cooking classes are on the rise in Palestine, so learning to make sweet semolina cake or *maqloubeh* (a layered dish of rice and vegetables



Mount of Temptation Monastery in Jericho.

inhabited city in the world. Its Tell es-Sultan boasts important archaeological finds, including Natufian structures that date back to earlier than 9000 BCE. You can also take a bike ride through the city, especially in the cooler early-evening hours. The newly renovated site of Hisham’s Palace, an Ummayyad-period summer castle with intricate

cooked with chicken and turned upside down when done) is within your reach. In Bethlehem, you can join Noor Women’s Empowerment Group for cooking classes that are held at and organized by women from Aida Camp. In Nablus, Bait al-Karama offers one, two, or four-day cooking courses that focus on traditional and Nabulsi dishes. With cooking sessions and



Some of the aqueducts in Wadi Qelt date back to Roman times. Courtesy of Shitabe Yamada.

guided visits to the local souq, shops, and factories, this course is great for true foodies.

In Jerusalem, head down to the market on Bab el-Wad Alley (the street that leads down into the Old City from Damascus Gate and then veers to the left, past the Austrian Hospice) to taste fresh carrot juice; the pomegranate juice is an absolute delight as well, and mixing them is another excellent option. Or have a taste of halva (*halawa* is an Arabic word for sweetness), a thickened sesame paste that comes in regular and chocolate flavors and can be topped with pistachios and sunflower seeds. Its crumbly texture and light sweetness will leave you craving for more. But we move on and leave some room for what’s to come as we head to the Christian Quarter to try the most delicious hummus, served in a bowl and covered with olive oil, chickpeas, and tahini. The sheer fluff of this dish will make you grab the bread and delve in for a bite! The restaurant has been around for around 50 years. Not something to miss out on!

“**Jericho is the most popular destination among Palestinian tourists.**”

Palestine is marked by hills, valleys, and plains that offer beautiful vistas and plenty of opportunities to move as you digest all the food you just ate. One famous trail leads through the deserted desert landscape east of Jerusalem: hike through the oasis of Wadi Qelt is a truly astounding experience! Wadi Qelt is a canyon created by a riverbed that runs from west of Jerusalem to the Jordan River north of the Dead Sea, fed by three successive main springs: Ein Fara on the outset, Ein Fawwar in the middle, and Ein Qelt towards the lower end.

The wadi's unique ecosystem has plentiful water, particularly in spring, offers opportunities to rest in the shade as you hike the valley's depth, and allows for breathtaking views as you navigate above the ravine's deep cliffs amidst the whistling of groundhogs. You may spot eagles and ibex or a distant shepherd doing his best to feed his flock among the sparse vegetation that grows on these desert hills. Caves in the valley's rocks offer shelter, some of which have previously been inhabited by hermits who used to find solace in this beautiful valley. Trees and bushes are permanently green, forming an oasis in the valley and along the ancient aqueduct. The wadi's main landmark is Deir al-Qelt, the Monastery of St George, part of which is carved out of the rock and impressively clings to the canyon walls. You might be able to catch a donkey ride back up to the main road with one of the local Bedouins who these days carve a meager existence from selling refreshments and handmade jewelry rather than meandering with their flocks because their grazing grounds have been severely restricted and reserved instead for Israeli settlers who have taken up raising sheep in the area.

During the summer, you are well advised to rise early to explore Wadi Qelt. The main hiking season is in winter and spring because summer temperatures can be too hot for extended hikes at midday. But the area nevertheless offers some great options for avid hikers.

Palestine is a world on its own that cannot be fully journeyed in a day, nor can it be explored hastily. The country's multifaceted culture and rich heritage offer an ocean of activities and allow for a sheer endless journey of experiences. The renowned

Palestinian hospitality, scrumptious food, diverse natural beauty, dynamic culture, abundance of religious sites, and rich language with many dialects all keep you on the lookout for more and dare you to go that extra mile to leave no stone unturned.

Hani Khashram, 28 years old, graduated from the Lycee Francais in Jerusalem before taking an interest in tourism and the related service industry. Led by his passion for human relations and interpersonal connections to become a certified guide of the Holy Land, he is currently co-owner of Aeolus Tours, an incoming destination management company, and guides visitors around Israel and Palestine using narratives and storytelling.

Nisreen Shahin is the founder and general manager of Makers–Tech4Good, a non-profit organization located in Ramallah that aims to create and disseminates affordable solutions to neglected challenges of people with disabilities. She is also the co-founder of Palterhal for Adventure & Exploration, working to promote Palestine as an exceptional destination for both local and foreign tourists.

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