

Tourism in Palestine as a Counter-Discourse



By Rami K. Isaac

Tourism is an important instrument in (re)shaping and rearticulating the imaginative geographies related to Palestine. The Palestinian reality and daily life under occupation have been widely erased from the Israeli-controlled tourism sector in Palestine. However, many visitors who are drawn to the region, either due to their religious and ethnic affiliations or due to their political ideologies, also feel connected to the conflict and wish to better understand it. As a response to this market demand, several nongovernmental organizations and peace and social organizations have emerged in Palestine. Visitors who participate in the events offered by these organizations thus support their efforts to showcase their work and increase their support and backing.

In recent decades, several scholars have shown interest in the role of tourism in efforts to affect and shape visitors' perceptions to achieve political ends. Van den Boer states, "[T]he Zionist settler colonial project has rendered Palestinians invisible, not just by forcing them behind walls but also by co-opting their food, crafts, and folklore or representing them as the eternal 'other.'"ⁱ Israeli tourism providers aim to normalize these images, reordering

and reshaping them and visitors' assessments of people, places, and their relationship to the world.ⁱⁱ Tourism thus serves as an appendage to the physical struggle that takes place daily with land confiscation, house demolition, the uprooting of Palestinian Bedouin communities, and more.

Some theorists of settler-colonial relations define the ongoing slow and silent annexation of the West Bank as a land-centered project that aims to establish an autonomous state in the "settled" area and eliminate the native indigenous population.

ⁱⁱⁱ Land indeed plays a crucial part in Israel's endeavor to establish control through colonial settlement, as power is expressed through the ongoing settler colonial presence in Palestine,^{iv} and "settler colonialism has destroyed in order to replace and has renamed in order to erase."^v

Despite all these challenges and defying Israeli negative discourses about Palestinians and Palestine, the Palestinian tourism industry has flourished. Palestine has witnessed increasing numbers of visitors regardless of the numerous obstacles they face through measures such as checkpoints, closures, and Israel's excessive border control. Moreover, new forms of tourism are gaining traction: Justice tourism refers to forms of tourism that allow visitors to witness the reality of Israeli oppression.^{vi} This type of tourism has the potential to contribute to the formation of a counter-discourse to the prevailing Israeli discourse and hence constitutes a kind of alternative tourism. Thus, tourists who come to Palestine can participate in a variety of activities that oppose the Israeli-dominated discourse.

Tourism in Palestine allows

As a visitor or tourist, you are not only a witness of the current status but may also become a participant in the realization of a new, hopeful, and bright future.^{vii}

Mar Saba monastery in the mountains east of Bethlehem.



visitors to experience the region's rich cultural legacy, history, and natural beauty while engaging with the counter-narrative that promotes peace, understanding, and coexistence. Visitors can obtain a better understanding of Palestinian culture and history by interacting with local people, artists, musicians, and businesses. They can participate in cultural festivals, see art exhibitions, or visit community centers and encourage cross-cultural discourse that challenges preconceptions and thus brings a sense of hope. Visitors may also choose to participate in alternative excursions organized by local tourism agencies and guides, which can offer a distinct viewpoint on the region. These tours frequently cover topics related to the area's history, socioeconomic issues, Israeli occupation injustices, and grassroots initiatives. They may investigate lesser-known places that showcase Palestinian daily life and shed light on their aspirations, problems, and resilience. Visitors can also participate in peacebuilding projects. Many Palestinian organizations actively advocate Israeli-Palestinian peace,

dialogue, and reconciliation. Attending seminars, lectures, or discussion panels allows visitors to participate in these projects. These events promote discussions and understanding with the goal of bridging gaps and fostering peaceful coexistence. Groups that operate with such aims are Kairos Palestine, Olive Tree Tours, and Alternative Tourism Group.

Visitors actively contribute to the local economy. Moreover, visitors who participate in justice and other alternative tours demonstrate that such initiatives are capable of reordering reality; they prove that the oppressed can utilize tourism to circulate and solidify their narrative and calls for justice. Thereby, this form of tourism becomes a source of hope.

Choosing locally owned hotels, restaurants, and stores benefits the Palestinian economy and local communities, counters the dependency narrative, and promotes self-sufficiency. Shopping at traditional markets and buying locally manufactured crafts and items can help preserve Palestinian heritage and workmanship. Israel has

systematically rewritten Palestinian history in order to validate Jewish claims to the land while ignoring Palestinian counter-claims. Fortunately, Palestinian voices are being increasingly able to reach perceptive individuals. Palestine has beautiful natural settings that can be appreciated through ecotourism projects. As visitors explore hiking paths, wildlife reserves, and protected areas, they can contribute to conservation efforts and highlight the region's environmental resources. Adventure and nature tourism emphasizes the necessity of environmental preservation and the promotion of sustainable practices.

Several organizations in Palestine furthermore provide volunteer opportunities for those who want to make a difference. These activities might range from educational assistance for children and youth to community development initiatives. Volunteering gives visitors firsthand

knowledge of the issues that local communities are confronted with. As they return to their home country, they may choose to raise awareness and even protest, which might make an impact and contribute to the improvement of conditions. One of the most effective ways to challenge misconceptions and foster understanding is through genuine people-to-people interactions. Conversations, shared meals, and participation in local events can promote empathy and create friendships across borders and boundaries. Approaching the Palestinian counter-narrative with an open mind and a willingness to listen and learn is critical. Visitors can obtain a larger view of Palestine, contribute to a change for the better, and foster understanding, empathy, and peace by participating in such events and activities.



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The stairs leading from the souq to the plaza in front of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City.

ⁱ Dorien van der Boer, "Toward Decolonization in Tourism: Engaged Tourism and the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 65, 2016, available at <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/198344>.

ⁱⁱ Keith Hollinshead, "The 'Worldmaking' Prodigy of Tourism: The Reach and Power of Tourism in the Dynamics of Change and Transformation," *Tourism Analysis* 14 (1), 2016, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233490957_The_Worldmaking_Prodigy_of_Tourism_The_Reach_and_Power_of_Tourism_in_the_Dynamics_of_Change_and_Transformation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, available at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230299191>.

^{iv} Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samour, "Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine," *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2, 2012, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648823>.

^v Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," chapter in Stephen Morton and Stephen Bygrave, eds, *Foucault in an Age of Terror: Essays on Biopolitics and the Defence of Society* (pp. 152–182). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

^{vi} Rami Khalil Isaac and Darlene Hodge, "An Exploratory Study: Justice Tourism in Controversial Areas—The Case of Palestine," *Tourism Planning & Development* 8(1), 2011, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21568316.2011.554048>.

^{vii} Rami Khalil Isaac, "Tourism, Hope and Peace: A Counter-Discourse in Palestine," chapter in Tej Vir Singh, Richard Butler, and David Fennell, eds, *Tourism as a Pathway to Hope and Happiness*, Channel View Publications, 2022, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363832390_Isaac_RK_2022_Tourism_Hope_and_Peace_A_Counter-Discourse_in_Palestine_In_Tej_Vir_Singh_Richard_Butler_David_A_Fennell_eds_Tourism_as_a_pathway_to_hope_and_happiness.