

# Alternative Experiences

## Desert Areas and the Jerusalem Wilderness



By Osama Staiti

**T**he desert's multiple interconnected elements constitute a variety of tourist destinations in many countries throughout the world, including Palestine. Nature reserves, the multiculturalism of local communities, and safari tourism invite visitors to roam mountains and valleys, offering the opportunity to enjoy a sunrise surrounded by nature or spend a night stargazing under dark, unpolluted desert skies. The most important characteristic of this type of tourism is its ability to connect tourists with locals, allowing them to communicate and making it easy for them to get to know each other. Sustainable desert tourism is the optimal utilization of the available desert tourist areas and forms a meeting point between the needs of tourists and those of the host country. Desert destinations available to individuals and groups in Palestine are ideally suited for ecological, therapeutic, sports, heritage, religious, adventure, and mountaineering tourism.

Sustainability and the preservation of resources are key elements in this type of tourism. If these principles are heeded, desert tourism greatly enhances tourism offerings and contributes to the desert area's prosperity, which is crucial in an environment that tends to be characterized by scarcity and a lack of development. Sustainable tourism, like sustainable development, requires that renewable natural resources be used in ways that do not lead to their destruction or degradation, ensuring

economic viability while safeguarding the benefit and well-being of future generations. Under such conditions, the desert can be a sustainable source of tourism as it holds an abundance of renewable resources and enormous potential. However, great care must be taken to ensure that the positive features of desert tourism are balanced against the potentially detrimental factors of using the desert ecosystem. If we maximize desert tourism's strengths and remove its weaknesses, it can enhance and take advantage of the local population's capabilities, support the social systems that aim to develop these areas, and benefit the economy – as the tourism sector is one of Palestine's most significant sources of income.

To best support and develop the sector, it is necessary to determine what distinguishes Palestinian desert tourism and indicate what types of tourist destinations constitute an important mix through which sustainable development can be achieved. This will help enhance prosperity for the local economy, environment, and society, especially if modern technology is employed.

Desert tourism offerings and sites that distinguish Palestine include historical, archaeological, and religious monuments and palaces, as the desert areas are full of beautiful sites that testify to the civilizations that have passed through these areas over the centuries and millennia and their ability to adapt to extreme environments. In addition, nature lovers will find attractive the natural areas that show off Palestine's rich biodiversity

**“ Palestine's desert areas offer a wide variety of historical and archeological monuments and attractions, religious sites, and natural areas. Desert tourism offerings attract and cater to adventurers, pilgrims, nature lovers, and persons who are interested in history, geology, or astronomy, as well as those who seek sociocultural encounters and wish to experience the lifestyle of the local desert dwellers. ”**

A sunrise above the magnificent Dead Sea near Jericho.



Rugged landscape in the vicinity of Al-Ubeidiya, a town east of Bethlehem.

with distinctive desert flora and fauna found in the Jerusalem Wilderness, Hebron Hills, and northern Negev regions of the central and southern West Bank, including desert plants, reptiles, and insects that have adapted to the dry and hot climate. Palestine also offers ideal locations for tourists interested in stargazing and areas with a warm climate, such as Jericho, which are ideal winter and springtime destinations and

Jerusalem hills to the desert area in and around the Jordan Valley. A vast, unique nature reserve located in the area in which Christianity originated more than 2,000 years ago, it holds treasures of cultural, historical, archaeological, and natural heritage significance, including a collection of Roman wells, Christian monasteries (such as the breathtaking Mar Saba),



Mar Saba Monastery, near the town of Al-Ubeidiya.

popular with tourists who live in cold regions. Finally, tourists interested in Earth's history will enjoy Palestine's interesting geological and topographic features that reveal layers of stones and minerals of different ages, types, and colors.

Also called the Wilderness of Palestine, the Jerusalem Wilderness is considered one of the most important areas in Palestine and extends from the forested

Muslim shrines and caravanserais (such as Nabi Mousa that is revered as the site of Moses's tomb and hosts a pilgrimage and large festival in spring), and other important archaeological sites (such as Tell Jericho and Hisham's Palace). More than half of its area, however, has been seized by the occupation forces that have taken control in an attempt to usurp

and Judaize Palestinian history and heritage.

The Jerusalem Wilderness covers a large area in central Palestine. It extends in the east to Palestine's eastern border with Jordan, which is delineated by the Jordan Valley and the

Early Christians lived in the wilderness of Jerusalem to escape persecution by Roman emperors. A number of Christian monks and hermits took refuge here, dwelling in caves. Eventually, some monasteries were established, such as the Monastery of



Maqam Nabi Musa, near Jericho.

Dead Sea. In the northeast, it reaches Al-Auja, a town north of the city of Jericho, whereas in the south, it extends to the areas southeast of Bethlehem and the village of Bani Na'im in the southern Hebron district.

It is a mostly rocky area where urban centers are surrounded by forest-covered mountains in the West, and the central mountains descend into flat land that is covered by dense vegetation and stretches of trees and shrubs. A number of valleys and canyons traverse the entire area, some of which are dry most of the year, while there are also natural springs that reappear every spring. In the desert areas farther east, a prevailing lack of rain causes erosion and reveals places of geological significance that feature rocks distinguished by their colors and textures.

Mar Saba; Saint Theodosius Monastery; Saint Gerasimus Monastery, also known as Deir Hijleh, in Jericho; Saint George Monastery in Wadi Qelt; and the monastery on the Mount of Temptation near Jericho.

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