

The Path of Hope & Unity

From ancient traditions to modern hospitality, there is so much more to Palestine than you might initially imagine – and one of the best ways to explore the changing story of this region is on a hike through the West Bank.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRACEY CROKE

Writer Rudyard Kipling said it in a nutshell: “The first condition of understanding a foreign country is to smell it”.

Right now, I’m being punched in the nose by the zing of cardamom from my Arabic coffee. It’s my third of the day, and it’s still morning. It’s a long-standing custom in Palestine to back up a “hello” by sharing a beverage. Strangers, friends and visitors from foreign lands (like me) are all greeted and treated with equal gusto. Even outdoors and on the go, Palestinians are always prepared for a brew.

Some carry their coffee in a flask, along with dinky cups to share. Others prefer to pack the ingredients and a kettle – as my guide Anwar does – to cater for his unknown number of daily liaisons. It is a ritual that comes from the heart, and it’s a conversation starter. It’s the first condition of really getting to know Palestine.

Under the shade of an almond tree, I ask Anwar what he would most like people to know about Palestine. “Come and see with your own eyes,” he urges, sweeping his hand across a stunning patchwork panorama all the way down to the Jordan Valley. “Hike through our beautiful wilderness and meet the Palestinian people.”

ANOTHER VIEW

Palestinians know better than anybody that their home is often viewed through the lenses of land seizures, occupation and conflict. But in the West Bank, Anwar and guides like him are showing curious visitors a wider picture, via a new cultural hiking route – The Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil, which translates to “Abraham’s Path”.

As someone who floats somewhere between atheist and agnostic, it is fair to say that a pilgrimage – even one to some of the world’s holiest sites – would not normally float my Noah’s Ark.

This page: The winding trail of The Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil passes through 53 cities and villages.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Stopping for a brew along the route; Cactus can grow through fences – a fitting metaphor for Palestinian life under occupation; Walking along the dusty, rocky track.

Palestine is recognised by 136 of the 193 UN member states.

However, I’m in the Holy Land for a different kind of enlightenment. I’m here for the culture. I’m here for a real education. And I am here for the unity, which is so meaningfully represented by Abraham himself.

Abraham is revered in the holy books of three world-shaping faiths: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. And these faiths – which are also known as the Abrahamic religions – are currently worshipped in varying degrees by half of humankind. Even non-believers like me know Abraham for his kindness to strangers – an act anyone can relate to without a doctrine in the equation.

Since the first civilisations traded goods on caravan routes, the people of Palestine have opened their homes to visitors, not knowing where they came from or how long they would stay. This trail is a chance for people to get to know Palestine through a common thread of Abrahamic tradition that bonds all of humanity – hospitality.



GOOD TO KNOW

The Masar Ibrahim has been named the world’s best new walking trail by *National Geographic*.

According to recent reports from the United Nations, Palestine has become one of the world’s fastest growing destinations in tourism. The OPT has experienced back-to-back years of outstanding growth, being the fastest growing tourism destination in 2017. In 2018 a record-breaking four million tourists visited the Holy Land.

Violence is generally localised to predictable areas and usually does not target tourists. Major crime rates are similar to most western European countries. Petty travel-related crime – theft or pick pocketing, for instance – is extremely rare and unknown along the trail. Visitors should exercise normal caution and use common sense in the larger towns and cities.

The *Masar* (path) winds 330km along rocky hillside tracks from the city of Jenin, set in the northern West Bank, to Abraham’s (Ibrahim’s) tomb in Hebron (Al-Khalil) in the south. It passes through 53 cities and villages, where families are keen to open their homes and hearts and show us a slice of Palestine rarely seen in the media.

I’m ambling along a 45km subsection over three days. It takes me from the northern city of Nablus to Taybeh – one of the few Christian towns still remaining in Palestine or Israel – though little-visited rural areas and half-forgotten ruins connected by wild mountains and *wadis* (valleys).

A migraine-inducing amount of geopolitical history and conflict has split Palestine into two distinct areas. Until 1948, Palestine typically referred to the geographic region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. However, much of this land is now considered present-day Israel.

Today, Palestine has shrunk to the West Bank (a territory that divides modern-day Israel and Jordan) and the Gaza Strip (land bordering modern-day Israel and Egypt). The vast majority of this land is under Israeli military control, which is why these areas are generally referred to as the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

The West Bank is small – about 5,600km² – yet incredibly diverse. In the north, sharp limestone mountains stalk wide, windswept plains that are hemmed by the lush riverbeds of the Jordan Valley. In the central region, lunar-like craters drop to the Dead Sea and ochre cliffs peter out into rolling desert as the landscape submits to the arid climate in the south.

There is something especially cheery about quintessential Arabic hospitality when you enter Palestine, possibly because people know it takes a fair bit of determination to get here. A savvy friend advised me that Israeli

border security might reject me if I mention my intention to visit a state that’s recognised by 136 out of the 193 United Nations member states – but not by Israel.

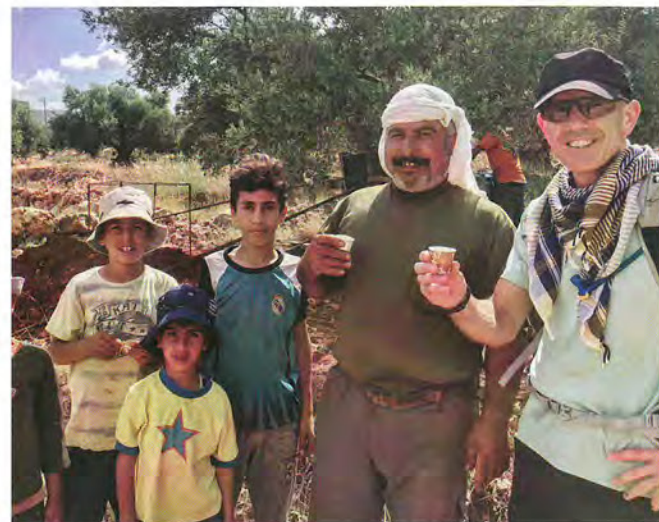
MAKING AN ENTRANCE

If you fly into Tel Aviv, it’s easy to avoid the P-word. However, I came from the Israeli-controlled border Palestine shares with Jordan, so my destination was as plain as the nose on my face. Bizarrely, even here, the unwritten ‘don’t mention Palestine’ rule still applies, and this avoidance results in an almost comical round of questioning.

“Where are you going?” the official asks. “Nablus,” I respond. “Where is Nablus?” she barks back, wearing her best mean face. “In the north,” I reply. “Where else are you going?” she snaps. “Bethlehem,” I reply. “Where is Bethlehem?” she retorts. “In the south...” And so on. Eventually, the war-of-words attrition ends with a sneering wave through.

Cosmopolitan Nablus is cupped with mountains, but the best view is in the midst of the Old Town, where layers of civilisations can be seen in one glance. I trust my senses to guide me through a confusing labyrinth of streets, navigating staggered crates of groceries butted up against handicraft workshops, old spice mills, and grand manors housing Turkish bathhouses.

Down an alleyway of stone archways, the hand-carved ceiling of a barber shop catches my eye. “I don’t know how old it is,” says the owner, Sultan, plucking his client’s eyebrows with a traditional cotton ‘threading’ technique dating back thousands of years. “It was my father’s, and my grandfather’s before that.”



My curiosity is promptly rewarded with a glass of icy sweet carob juice and a giggly FaceTime chat with Sultan's three children.

My partner Paul decides to join the queue for a shave. His turn in the chair is accompanied by oppression-inspired Palestinian humour. "Peace," Sultan says with a chuckle, making a V sign with his left hand and waving his barber tools in the right. The shave and the joke at Paul's expense are worth every shekel.

Just outside Nablus, we visit the biblical city of Shechem – one of an impressive 12,000 archaeological and cultural heritage sites in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, according to the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquity.

For believers, this is where God appeared to Abraham and declared, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). Fast forward a few thousand years – and from this promise came the belief that modern Jews inherited the right to re-establish their national homeland here.

This dream was fulfilled in 1948 – when what Israelis call the "War of Independence" and Palestinians call "Nakba" (meaning catastrophe) took place, and the modern state of Israel was established. In the process, more than 700,000 people – roughly half of Palestine's Arab population at that time – fled or were expelled by militia. Most became refugees in surrounding countries, while some were displaced within Palestine itself.

Today, Shechem battles with weeds and rubble to reveal a half-excavated rambling fortification wall and a temple with a sacrificial slab. To me, the most exceptional thing about this place of great significance is that

Clockwise from above: It is customary to follow a greeting by sharing a cup of coffee; Flying a kite in Shechem; Stopping for a pre-trek shave from Sultan the Barber in Nablus Old Town; Student Rand talks about her hopes, dreams and life under occupation.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

The best times to go are March to May and September to November. Palestine's climate is essentially Mediterranean, with hot summers, cold winters and a mild spring and autumn. Temperatures can reach 40°C in summer, but the nights are cool in the mountains and desert.

Founded in 2005, Siraj Center has an impeccable safety record and also offers cycling tours.

The meeting point is Jerusalem – about one hour's drive from Ben Gurion International Airport (Tel Aviv) or the land crossing from Jordan (Allenby Bridge).

UK-based Silk Road Adventures also offers treks through The West Bank. silkroad-adventures.com



we are sharing it with no-one except two young boys trying to fly a broken kite. They are from nearby Balata, one of 19 refugee camps that still exist in the shrunken Palestine 70 years on.

GETTING THROUGH

While Paul fixes the boys' kite, my eyes drift over to Anwar, who is sitting patiently on a bench in front of a wire fence mobbed by cacti plants. "I love cactus," says Anwar as I walk over. "It can grow through fences."

Studying it more closely, I notice Anwar is not referring to new shoots sprouting through the wire. Instead, the cactus has folded its mature stems into whatever shape is needed to grow through to the other side. Once there, its contorted flesh opens and spreads once again, scarred but free.

The analogy is not lost on us as we journey on, the trail managing to weave its magical way through deep wadis up to mountain vistas, avoiding the notorious Israeli roadblocks and checkpoints – of which there are more



than 600 – which restrict the free movement of all Palestinians and affect basically every aspect of their day-to-day lives. Depending on who you ask, the restrictions are either necessary for security, or a system of apartheid. Whichever you believe, the fact is that they are in violation of international law.

"Okay," chortles Anwar, rubbing his hands together. "You've arrived at a Palestinian checkpoint!" He selects a collection of twigs and dried grass to start a small fire for his blackened pot.

After our cup of coffee, we follow the Jordan Valley to the sound of the golden grass swaying in the evening breeze. Eventually, the trail rises to the hilltop village of Duma, Anwar's home town.

About halfway up, we find ourselves navigating around piles of hardcore road base, which stretch to the top of the unsealed road as if a giant caterpillar had turned to stone. "I see your village is getting a new road," I say excitedly to Anwar.

"Was," he corrects. "The Israeli military confiscated our machine. They said we didn't have a permit."

Anwar describes the Israeli process they need to go through to develop their village. It sounds like a cruel game riddled with tripwires that are camouflaged by a maze of unfathomable rules.

MEET THE LOCALS

To put these rules into context, we walk to the edge of the village with our host for the evening: psychologist Wael Dawabsha, who helps families and young teens with trauma using a narrative therapy programme.

Wael shows us a closed-down chicken farm and a bulldozed house that were deemed outside the village boundaries by the Israeli authorities. He points out distant lush, fertile fields leading to a fortified Israeli settlement – which never suffers the same waste, water and power restrictions that are experienced in Duma. Two military choppers hover overhead.

In the next village, Kafr Malik, we stay with Messada – who works at the Ministry of Youth and Sport. While Paul happily plays Connect 4 with her youngest daughter, I talk to elder sibling Rand about her life under occupation.

"Many people have the wrong idea about Palestine. They think we are terrorists," says the 23-year-old, who's a housing design student. "We are not against the Jewish religion – we are against Israeli action and the harm of Palestinians."

Rand is concerned about social issues such as equal access to water, food and medicine. She's entering the Hult Prize – an international award created to generate start-up ideas from young people to sustainably solve the world's most critical social challenges.

"Palestinians have first-hand experience and unique ideas because we face many problems, but we live our lives and stay hopeful," she says.

Some of the best beers I've ever tasted have come at the end of a long journey. Surprisingly, Palestine does

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RAND, DESIGN STUDENT

not disappoint. In the Christian town of Taybeh, Madees Khoury of Taybeh Brewing Company talks about running the family microbrewery, while taking us through a beer tasting.

"Israelis make doing business very difficult for Palestinians," she tells us. "Produce, water, power restrictions and transportation delays are time consuming and costly. A two-hour drive can take three days simply because we're Palestinian."



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CITY OF CULTURE

Galway, Ireland has been selected as the European City of Culture for 2020, with themes of language, landscape and migration. It will be the biggest cultural festival ever held in Ireland, running from 1 February, 2020 to 31 January, 2021 – based on the four fire seasons of the Celtic calendar: Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain. It is a massive undertaking with more than 1,900 events across Galway City, as well as surrounding villages, towns and islands off the Galway Coast.

Sometimes Madees doesn't make a profit – but this master brewer and TEDx talker wants to send beer to the international market anyway. "It's not just beer," she says. "It's the image of Palestine. It's our story."

As I sample various ales, my phone suddenly connects to the brewery wi-fi and starts buzzing with a week's worth of Facebook messages. One draws my attention:

Friend: "Hey, are you around? Fancy a beer?"

Me: "Sorry, can't. I'm away, in the West Bank."

Friend: "I imagine it might be difficult getting a beer there!"

Me: "I imagined that, too – but right now I can smell the punch of hops in this Palestinian brew."

Friend: "So what's it like there?"

Me: "In a nutshell, I'd describe it as a place no-one else can tell you about. You have to wake up here and smell the coffee. And nowhere else deserves your nostrils more."



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ISLAND HOPPING

With its proximity to Australia and the friendly nature of the Thai people, Thailand continues to be an alluring destination. While Phuket attracts many visitors for its beaches, shopping and cool resorts, Krabi also has plenty of fans. Stunning beaches are the order of the day, and it is so easy to arrange a tour that takes you to some of the most beautiful of all. From Ao Nang you can visit Poda, Kai, Mo and Tap, as well as Phi Phi and Phi Phi Don. At Railay Beach it is an easy walk around past a cave to watch

the rock climbers scamper up the cliff face. Tubkaak is another tranquil beach, and this area will see the opening of the brand-new Banyan Tree Krabi by the middle of 2020.

For a more textured experience, take a tour to Ko Klang – just 10 minutes from Krabi Town's Chaofa Pier. This island is a quiet Muslim enclave, where locals are fishermen, rice farmers or work in textiles. A visit here is like going back in time, as you explore in tuk tuks, go kayaking in mangroves, do a cooking class, fish, or learn to make traditional miniature Hua Tong boats. And the food here is exceptional, with excellent stilted restaurants like Kanabnam View Seafood Restaurant & Fish Farm. amazingthailand.com.au

Long tail boats in Krabi Town, Thailand.

