

Tantur Ecumenical Institute

Newsletter

Walking on the Wild Side

by
Andrea Krogmann

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Hiking and Exploring Palestine..... A real treat!



Nidal our intrepid guide shows groups the secrets of the land and the beauty of Palestine that the media often ignores

"From Nazareth to Bethlehem on foot! Not for three million dollars!" The reaction by the small Swiss group is universally similar.....feelings of astonishment, disbelief, amused laughter at this "crazy" suggestion. Walking the "Nativity Trail" across the West Bank is one of those exotic bonuses in life in that it gives people the opportunity to see the Holy Land, with new eyes.....off the beaten track, so to speak.

"Suddenly you realize that you are in a war zone." was the spontaneous reaction of the Swiss group on the guided tour as they viewed some of the scenes where the second Intifada took place in Nablus. The contrasts that bring the trail in the footsteps of Jesus and Nablus a hotspot of tension could hardly be greater. Nearly pristine nature and seemingly remote river valleys with idyllic pastoral scenes where the biblical imagery is vivid contrast with checkpoints, military bases and Israeli settlements amid Palestinian villages which bring you back down to earth and the realisation that the conflict has determined and almost defined the difficult lives of the people in the country. So, the walk is a 160 kilometers trek usually completed in eight to ten days that takes you alongside the "Nativity Trail" deep into the Holy Land, and to the place of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem. Originally launched in 2000, as a project in Bethlehem under the name "Alternative Tourism Group" it struggled in his early years due to the consequences of the second intifada. In 2008, the route was revived, and still has an air of mystery about it: Never more than 30 groups have explored this cradle of Christianity on foot, so it is ripe for the picking. Zaher Ghattas, a Christian from Nazareth, accompanied the group through his hometown and on to the Sea of Galilee. Nidal Sawalmeh a Palestinian with expert knowledge of the landscape of the West Bank also joined us as our guide. We crossed the checkpoint north of Jenin, as a group alone most West Bank Palestinians cannot enter Israel so we had to leave our trusted guide being for a while until we were reunited with him on Palestinian soil. After a rainy winter, the landscape in the northern West Bank is unusually green and flowery, with a rustic flavor more associated with Tuscany than the Middle East. Expertly Nidal gives us a rundown of the beautiful flora and fauna, which abounds together with archaeological excavations that dot the country side "You see the big wheel down there"? This should be a theme park, then came the second Intifada. Today there is a recycling company. A night with Christian families in Zebabde, coupled with an overnight stay in the refugee camp of Fara'a added to the adventure. We camped with the Bedouins in Ain Auja drinking copious amounts of sweet tea. Contact with the local population is a major part of alternative tourism concept of the "birth trail" and a great opportunity to meet the living stones of the Holy Land. South of Nablus, the demanding path leads down into the breathtaking Jordan Valley and on to Jericho, reportedly the oldest city in the world. The trail continues through a training area of the Israeli army, and in order to avoid complications, the group took two taxis to transport beyond the military base, before walking through the Judean desert towards the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba. Women have to stay outside, it states: According to legend, a violent earthquake will shake the region, should ever a female named after the monastery of St. Saba in the 5th Century entered. By the end of the trip our Swiss friend's attitudes had changed for the better!

Impressive wall graffiti adorns the serpentine walls between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Even the famous graffiti artist "Banksy" has left his mark



A wall of another kind in this land of contradictions. The Wailing Wall is one of Judaism's most important sites.



And atop one of Judaism's most holiest sites the paradox continues.... sits the Dome of the Rock one of Islam's most holy sites.



Welcome to Isralistine
by
Prof. Ben Nicholson

Generally it's expected that upon visiting a country you return from it a little more informed, but with Israel and Palestine you may be more informed, but in a way that is impossible to reconcile. For the past two weeks I have zipped in and out of Jordan, nipped across parts of Palestine, hiked in northern Israel, stayed near Bethlehem's wall and downtown Jerusalem, and seen just about every major site up close. In short I've 'done' Israel, but it's definitely gotten the better of me.

For the past ten years I've immersed myself in all things relating to the 'Abrahamics', the conjunction of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and have been eagerly awaiting a visit to 'Isralistine' for years since writing a satire on the region, post 9/11. In addition to the reading and writing, with students we've built models of the Old City, delved into the politics of the Wall, looked at every sort of map of the region and exhaustively studied the architect Frederick Kiesler who built the Shrine of the Book. A friend sent me the link to the Mondoweiss War of Ideas in the Middle East website that balances pro-Israel journalism with stories from the Palestinian point of view.

Probably it's best to start from a 'Boots on the Ground' perspective as it reveals the myriad of paradoxes that make up this part of the world. Of all the places I've visited these past four months, the cobbled streets of Israel veritably ring out with the sound of military boots, albeit rubber. I was on my very best behavior from the moment of setting foot on Israel's soil, especially in passport control. I later discovered that I scored a 'three' out of a possible 'six' on my interview: they considered me pretty low risk. Had I got a 'six' it would have been the Prostate Cancer Checkup routine in the back room. Incidentally, your score is marked on the purple sticker they attach to the cover of your passport. It tickles the famous Jewish funny bone to see what score you get: the higher your score, the better the joke on you! Some think that the country is paranoid, and well they maybe, but the relentlessness of the paranoia spills over the very people who are coming to give the place their best shot: visitors from afar. Israel has difficulty with differentiating between terrorists and tourists, perhaps it's a pronunciation thing, but it certainly does not feel like it. The "Where are you from? How are you going? What are you doing here?" routine is ubiquitous, so much so that it would stand in for a good alternative for the national anthem. I must have been asked that a dozen times. My favorite run-in was when walking on part of the Israel National Trail: one day I did a brutal 29 kilometer, four-liters-of-water-a-day scramble over scorching-hot bolder-strewn stream beds, at the outside limit of what I could do. Along comes a bouncy pack of boy-scout looking men, wearing khaki pants and lime green tee - shirts and we stop and exchange the usual pleasantries that hikers do, the Where, How & Why triad of questions. After I had given them my best short-form account of my world journey I returned the question: "And where are you from?" and got a curt "Israeli Intelligence." I back handedly slapped the leader's upper arm remarking "And I thought I was being nice to you!" I know I wouldn't last long here without a spell in the pokey. However, visiting the Old City of Jerusalem is a pretty wonderful thing to do, but it does need time to figure out. There's a very good walk that can be made on the top of the stone wall along the northern half of the city, and it's slightly ironic that I 'like' this wall and do not 'like' the other Wall, the serpentine wall which divides 2 countries, for in the end they are both walls around cities. Witnessing Old Jerusalem from this vantage point, peering into backyards and over roof tops, lets you see the everyday goings on of the city rather than just the touristy bits. Walking inside the city is a little like being in Venice as a lot of time is spent in very narrow alleys, some of which are covered over to make cool arcades. What's unusual is that just a few yards from an arcade selling tourist knick-knacks you can be in an alley of tiny butcher shops, each specializing in one or another animal or even parts of an animal, a tripe shop for example. This also means that there are cheap and delicious restaurants catering to the marketeers serving simple and clean food for a song, right in the middle of the city. Israel/Palestine Isralistine is a land of contradictions that will often leave you reeling and at other times enchanted.

Roasting in Ras Karkar.....but it was worth it!

by
Keith Begg

In 2011 I joined a hiking group called “Hiking Palestine” consisting of a large number of intrepid travelers mainly from overseas who live and reside in Israel/Palestine and work principally in the NGO field. The hikes are really quite amazing in that the initial modus operandi of this group was to discover through hiking, many of the untouched and beautiful landscapes of Palestine, but with a twist! None of the treks or paths are mentioned in any of the guide books. So it is a real voyage of discovery. In fact all 25 hikes are now excellently documented in a book titled *Walking Palestine* written by an adventurous and charismatic member of the hiking group, Stefan Szepesi. Having been on several of the hikes myself, I feel a new and holistic appreciation for the beauty of the Palestinian landscape and the wonderful people we have met along the way. From serene olive tree laden valleys, to the remains of Ottoman Empire railway architecture to the hospitality of the people living in villages perilously perched on mountain tops, the land is alive and rich with architectural evidence of waves of invaders but also unfortunately the evident scars of the most recent occupation.

So it was in the middle of June I agreed to go on a hike to Ras Karkar several kilometers to the west of the principal city of Palestine, Ramallah. Because of the weather and temperatures forecasted at reaching 40 degrees Celsius it was agreed that the hike would consist of 2 hours of walking. Feeling confident I decided to experience Jerusalem’s eclectic nightlife the night before so with 4 hours sleep under my belt not feeling the May West put my hiking boots on and off I went.

Ras Karkar is located on a sharp, rocky, steeply sloping mountain and like the icing on a cake, is topped by a beautiful 18th century castle built by the Samhan Family who had ruled the village for many centuries. So was our starting point on top of that hill looking over a stunning panorama of lush valleys, olive groves, with the Mediterranean Sea glittering like diamonds far off in the distance. We descended the village to discover to the unfolding countryside spreading out before our eyes. We were constantly greeted by the little children of the village, who came out of their houses to see this merry band of foreigners discovering their landscape, their beautiful, smiling almond coloured eyes glistening in the sun. It was probably the first hike I have ever been on where not only did we get lost but managed the feat at least 5 times. The sun was beating down but at least the excesses of the previous evening were slowly evaporating from every pore of my body and around every corner was something new to discover. We wound through a beautiful pine forest to get to a Sultan’s pool where legend has it, that the waters contain healing powers. A little bit dubious to this claim but in high spirits as the hike now looking like 4 hours in duration with temperatures bubbling to over 40 degrees, so the chance to cool off was the carrot on the stick. We passed an abandoned mosque literally standing in the middle of nowhere, but more surprising a group of Israeli settlers appeared out of the thicket of bushes surrounding the mosque. They seemed wary but initially friendly and were only too keen to show us this famed Sultan’s pool, or so we naively thought. However one of our more astute hikers a Professor no less in Semitic languages felt the opposite and how right she was. A soldier appeared wanting to know if we were Jewish, what we were doing here and if we had any contact with the local Arab population. Photographs were also taken of the group as well as our map which was not acting as a trustworthy ally on this occasion. Hiking was obviously an alien concept to them and as I have found out many times in my travels throughout this magnificent land, the word terrorist is routinely confused with tourist. After about 15 minutes of negotiating with the armed soldier and “not so friendly” settlers we arrived at this famed Sultan’s pool ready to strip off, dive in and cool off. Unfortunately the pool was nothing short of a cesspool but we did manage to find a well and cool our faces, albeit grateful but a little bit disappointed. Liters of water were drunk, camaraderie filled the air and I was delighted at being able to maintain my farmers tan. All’s well that ends well.....

Well here is me starting out full of the joys of life oblivious to the 40 degrees celcius heat that would lie before me ☺



The friendly locals that came out to “move” us on our way ☺



Sultan’s Pool or Cess Pool – Judge for yourself!



In the past, those who walked the Holy Land were often called 'pilgrims'. This year I was part of a hiking group that walked 'the Abraham path', which ends in Hebron. The hikers were a mix of NGO workers, bankers, public health officers, local guides and a priest (myself). Just as in past centuries, this group of hikers reflected ethnic variety. The difference is that those hikers today did not consider themselves pilgrims like Abraham who entrusted himself totally into God's providence as he hiked. Some of them walk because it is a form of exercise. Others are looking for a 'holiday' experience. But, they may be justified for not calling themselves 'religious'; for once they arrive at the shrine they discover that religion there is a department of government where those who hold authority do not seem capable of coping with Abraham's naked trust in God. Nonetheless, they walked there; not because they liked each other. There was a landscape that bound them together. Our life is a journey, and what matters at the end is not the security of this or that 'religion', but something else for which we hunger, but cannot manage. Like those who hike, the unity of the Church in this land ought to be based on how to connect people at the level of their hunger for a new world and a new Holy Land, not by making us all the same, but by providing the landscape where all can stretch out and receive the bread of life, which this land could not and cannot cope with.

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A Reflection for August by the Rev. Dr. Yazid Said

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Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies
PO Box 11381,
91113 Jerusalem,
Israel



Ph: int +972 2 676 09 11 Fax: int +972 2 676 09 14
e-mail: tantur@netvision.net.il Website: www.tantur.org

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