

Alternative Tours, Literally



By Luisa Morgantini

I have never used the term “alternative tourism” to describe the trips that I organize to Palestine and Israel. They are trips that focus on learning and solidarity. As the registration form says, these are trips “of the mind and of the heart,” to a place that oozes with history; a history that belongs to both shores of the Mediterranean Sea, to a place

that, up until 1947, was called Palestine, and where, despite their differences, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Samaritans, and other peoples had lived together, even if never in total freedom and always under foreign control. A place where, for more than 50 years now, what remains of historic Palestine – the West Bank and Gaza – continues to be under military occupation. However, ours are not “adventure” trips to places where conflicts and injustice abound; rather, our participants desire to gain an understanding of the situation and then take action in favor of truth and justice. I would therefore call them trips of social commitment, trips that certainly have nothing to do with traditional pilgrimages, where people seek to relive two-thousand-year-old stories.

I have been going to Palestine for years, since 1985 – going, coming home, and then wanting to go back again and again and again. More than thirty years have gone by since my first visit. Initially I would go alone, but then I started to think about how important it would be to organize trips and take representatives of civil society and of the political and institutional world to see this place of conflict

and gain a firsthand understanding of what is going on. A work camp was organized at Birzeit University in 1986. Then in 1987, a few months before the beginning of the first Intifada, a work camp was held in Taybeh in the Triangle: there were 65 of us; we restored a kindergarten, and during the weekends, we would visit the occupied territories. And again, in August 1988, 69 Italian women came together for a peace project, sponsored by AssoPace Palestina and Casa delle donne of Turin and Bologna, to build relationships with women in the places of conflict, for a bottom-up diplomacy. And since then, other trips for understanding and solidarity have been organized to raise awareness about the situation and take action for change.

Up until 1982, I – and almost everyone in Europe, I believe – thought that Palestinians were either refugees

them known as human beings, in their daily toil and labor, living life marked by checkpoints and arrests. Seeing with one’s own eyes means deconstructing the propaganda and the Israeli narrative that describes Israel as a country surrounded by enemies and in need of defending itself, which, in fact, could not be further from the actual reality. The settlers of Hebron, as well as many ministers of the Israeli government today, make it very clear when they say: “This land is ours by divine right; the Palestinian population must go and live in Arab countries or wherever else they choose.”

Our tours enable participants to meet Palestinians who resist with nonviolence the settlement policies and the building of the Wall. We meet women who are aware that they have to fight against not only the occupation

Photos from trips organized by Luisa Morgantini to learn about the situation in Palestine.



scattered across the world or the fedayeen of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. After the ousting of Palestinians from Lebanon and the Sabra and Shatila massacre, things changed; I wanted to know about the Palestinians who were living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, and meet those who had succeeded in remaining in the part of historical Palestine that had become Israel.

Going to Palestine and Israel meant bringing the truth to light, doing away with the stereotype of Palestinians as either “victims” or “terrorists,” making

but also the patriarchal system. We meet youth who, together with the older generations, struggle for freedom by means of protecting and energizing Palestinian culture, with theatre, cinema, music, and art being their weapons. We also meet people who struggle to defend their cultural identity and their architectural heritage that are constantly under attack in cities such as Nablus, Hebron, and Jerusalem, which is a diverse mosaic of cultures.

We travel through the beauty of the land and experience the scents and flavors of Palestinian traditional cuisine,



Luisa Morgantini lecturing on Palestine.

striving to keep it alive. We go into refugee camps to listen to the stories of those who were compelled to leave their villages, and we meet with the families of Palestinian prisoners. This is the Palestine that you encounter during these journeys of understanding and solidarity that are organized three times a year. A vibrant, creative, and cultured Palestine that is also full of contradictions, just like any other country in the world.

But we also meet the Israel that does not support apartheid or the settlers; the Israel of the women who every day are at the checkpoints to observe the behavior of the soldiers and report on the violations of human rights; the Israel of the young people who refuse to do their military service in the occupation army; of those who think that military occupation should end and who, together with the Palestinians, demonstrate against the Wall; of the intellectuals and journalists who reveal the militarism inherent in the State of Israel and the discriminatory policies not only against the Palestinians but also against immigrants and against the Jewish population of Arab or African origin; of the Palestinian and Israeli peace fighters, enemies in the past, who now together cry out against the

occupation; of the parents' circles and of the families of Palestinian and Israeli victims who recognize how skewed the situation is but acknowledge each other in their grief.

For a few days after returning home, the travelers live in silence, overpowered by the emotions of the shocking experience they witnessed. But it is the return home that is important; the "journey" takes hold of you, it penetrates into your soul, your heart, and your head, because what is experienced firsthand is how outrageously unfathomable is the injustice against a people who unfailingly entrust us with the same message: "Go back to your country and let the truth be known." And it is thanks to these journeys, during which people witness what is going on, that AssoPace Palestina was set up in Italy with the very purpose of taking action here, in our own country, because we know that responsibility for failing to find a solution lies with the international community, with the European Union, with our government that does not compel Israel to comply with international law. In following up on our commitment and our journeys, we invite Palestinian witnesses from the People's Committees for Nonviolent



Luisa Morgantini and her group visiting a Bedouin community.

Resistance, women, former prisoners, artists from the worlds of theatre, music, and cinema, and Israelis who are in favor of peace and justice to share their experience in order to enable those who cannot "go" there to meet the protagonists of a reality that needs to be changed so that these two peoples may finally coexist in mutual respect.

We, at AssoPace Palestina, harbor this hope and unfailingly continue to be actively human.

Article photos courtesy of the author.

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The monstrous Separation Wall at the entrance to Bethlehem.

