



# Nature, Culture, Adventure

## Hiking in Palestine



By Suhail Hijazi

Hiking activities have become increasingly popular as a form of alternative tourism in Palestine, encouraging authentic travel through a personal interaction with Palestine's local environment, nature, and people. This growing trend is practiced more so in the West Bank because the Israeli occupation prohibits access to Gaza and prevents most Palestinians from reaching all areas of historical Palestine.

Organizations such as Siraj, Rozana, and Mahmiyat, to name only a few, have begun to run programs that diversify the personality of hiking by combining elements of nature, history,



A trail in Wadi al-Muqleq.



A view from the fifth-century Monastery of Mar Saba.

archaeology, and religion with the trails, as does the Abraham Path. In parallel, individual groups and initiatives have also invited local and international hikers to join them in their expeditions to hike already-famous routes and to discover new routes. Some of these groups are organized by members and charge no fees, others target foreign visitors and international workers who want to discover more aspects of Palestine. Walking Palestine and Hike Palestine, for example, offer weekly programs that invite people to participate in nature walks and outdoor activities from sunrise to sunset and sunset to sunrise, while learning about Palestinian culture and history.

Palestine's diverse demography and heterogeneous topography and climate range from green mountains to valleys to deserts and are at the heart of its beauty. It is perfectly suited for hikes that fit a variety of capacities and interests; some are easier, shorter, family-friendly walks, while others are harder, longer, physically demanding walks for hikers, athletes, and those looking for a challenge. Despite my countless favorite walks,

especially the ones that end with a dip in cold natural water springs, such as Wadi al-Limon in Aboud, northwest of Ramallah, I would like to share with you a selection of three hikes in Palestine that are undeniably great.

The first one starts from the fifth-century Monastery of Mar Saba to Ein Fashkha natural reserve and mineral-water pools. This desolate desert walk southeast of Jerusalem takes you along the mountains overlooking spectacular views of the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley, and passes through the ruins of Hyrcania Fortress (Khirbet Mird). The hike requires much perseverance and physical strength since its difficult, steep, and uneven terrain takes you through caves, across small bridges, and around towers, ancient water reservoirs and cisterns, tomb chambers, and Byzantine mosaics, following ancient pilgrimage routes.

The second hike is in Battir Village, a UNESCO heritage site and hilly landscape located southwest of Jerusalem. This green walk ventures through forests, grapevines, and olive groves, archaeological sites and abandoned villages, rock-cut tombs, ruins of a Canaanite tower, springs, and an ancient Roman pool. Most notably, the walk uncovers a traditional

Outdoor activities and hiking tours in Palestine include swimming, climbing, camping, star gazing, and tasting traditional foods, such as *zarb* (vegetables and meat or chicken cooked over a fire underground), *musakhan* (chicken with caramelized onions served on special stone-baked bread soaked in chicken broth and olive oil), *makloubeh* (literally: upside down, a combination of fried vegetables cooked in one pot with chicken and rice and turned over onto a tray), freshly produced local dairy foods, and tea or coffee prepared on firewood.

water distribution system through the agricultural terraces and natural water-irrigation channels that support its famous gardening production. Its fertile land and agricultural abundance have caused Battir to become known as the “Basket of Vegetables,” with a valley that leads out to the Mediterranean Sea. The center is an aesthetically charming old town called the Seven Widows Quarter, named after the story of seven widows who lived there, once upon a time.

And lastly is a walk in Wadi al-Muqleq, a valley that starts from the western hills of Jerusalem stretching to the Dead Sea. Its name, *muqleq*, means

“worry,” referring to the worry of all those who walk through its wilderness amid the threat of frequent erosions as well as heavy flooding that take place during the winter; floods that wipe away not only mud and debris, but once, an entire highway! From Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, the valley stream with its natural diversity starts at 800 meters above sea level and descends to 400 meters below sea level as it passes through the Tomb of Moses. This adventurous hike runs through white-chalk mountains, and while parts of it are flat, other parts are steep, almost vertically shaped cliffs that are climbed using rungs that have

Wadi al-Muqleq.



The village of Battir near Bethlehem.

been drilled into the mountainsides and show you very little of what's underneath you.

Hiking has inspired collaboration with Palestinian businesses, communities, and cooperatives, which has modestly enriched the Palestinian economy. For example, rural families have established guesthouse initiatives at various points on hiking trails. Such guesthouses are tailored to hikers and include Al-Mirdawi Guesthouse in Arrabeh, southwest of Jenin, and the guesthouse in Auja, north of Jericho, which also serves as an Eco Center. Similarly, Bedouins have established camping areas such as Tal al-Amar camping site east of Bethlehem, and Arab al-Rashaydeh, southeast of Bethlehem. In addition, local people have opened restaurants, such as Hosh al-Yasmeen in Beit Jala, close to Al-Makhrour Trail, and Al-Khirbeh in Battir, which serve traditional food and refreshing drinks.

Under other circumstances, the whole of Palestine would be suitable for hiking, but there are too many Israeli settlements, military training zones, and barriers that restrict movement and prevent people from walking freely and seeing everything that is

worth seeing, even in the West Bank, and particularly in Area C. These oppressive actions have changed our landscape and caused our water sources to run dry, limiting our ability to see all the beauty that was once there. Despite this, the Palestinian Authority has managed to place some landmarks on the trails and to grant licenses to hiking guides, thereby advocating for hiking and making it an attractive feature of alternative tourism. These measures have not only increased the opportunities for hiking, they have also boosted hikers' knowledge of Palestinian politics and taught them about its society, heritage, and economy, all on foot.

*Article photos courtesy of Riziq Ghyada.*

*Suhail Hijazi has a strong appreciation and passion for the planet's natural topographies. He has dedicated a lot of time since his youth to discovering Palestine and introducing it to others. He is an expert on Palestinian trails and, in 2011, founded Hike Palestine, a company that offers a variety of outdoor activities for travelers and corporations that are interested in learning about another face of Palestine.*