

Natural Reserves to Be

Courtesy of VisitPalestine.ps

Around 26,000 hectares (3.94 percent) of the West Bank can be classified as forested areas. There are approximately 93 major forests – natural, manmade, and mixed. The natural forests are habitats of great diversity of flora and fauna and include some endemic tree species such as *Pistacia palaestina*, *Quercus calliprinos* (Palestine oak), and *Ceratonia siliqua* (carob tree).

The forests are also breeding spots for rare and endangered bird species such as the Short-toed Eagle and Long-billed Pipit, but the main avian attraction are the Passerines, which use these sites as rest areas during migration.

Currently, there are three forests that are soon to be recognized destinations on the eco-tourism map of Palestine. The places are characterized by their natural and cultural values, and promoted as perfect spots for wildlife observation, bird watching, or flower watching during various walks following special marked trails. Staying on the trails is crucial in order not to disturb the natural habitat. Visitors are obliged to follow a central code of ethics, which includes preserving a quiet atmosphere and refraining from picking plants or littering.

Wadi al-Quff (mahmiyat.ps).



Umm al-Tut, Jenin

Umm al-Tut, Jenin is a protected area of approximately 505 acres, located southwest of Jenin and east of Um al-Tut Village (GPS coordinates: 32° 25' 53.16" N and 35° 20' 36.15" E). The place offers a great natural escape from everyday life in a crowded city.

One of the nearby sites of interest is Khirbat Bal'ameh, which dates back to the Bronze Age (3000 BC) and is identified as Biblical Ibleam. The most impressive feature of the remains is a water tunnel carved out of the rock that connected the settlement at the top of the hill with the spring of Bir el-Sinjib at the foot of the hill, giving inhabitants safe access to water even during times of siege.

Al-Hashmi (Baytillu), Ramallah

The protected area of Al-Hashmi (75 acres), which is partly natural and partly man-planted forest, lies near Baytillu Village, west of Ramallah (GPS coordinates: 31° 59' 28.63" N and 35° 05' 50.22" E). The area is characterized by its abundant fresh springs and pine trees.

Al-Hashmi is located in the vicinity of Wadi Natuf, the valley that gave its name to the pre-historic culture of the Natufians – people who lived in the eastern Mediterranean some 12,000 years ago, and who may have been among the first humans to cultivate plants, domesticate animals, and build permanent settlements.

Various walking trails pass through Al-Hashimi: Baytillu - Deir Ammar - Jammala; Wadi Zarqa to Wadi Jinta; Nabi Ghaith and Nabi Anir (Sufi trails); Wadi Tawahin; and Al-Assirah.

Wadi al-Quff, Hebron

Wadi al-Quff Natural Reserve (approximately 990 acres) is home to such bird species as the Syrian Woodpecker and Black-capped chickadee. It is located between Tarkumiya and Bayt Kahil villages (GPS coordinates: 31° 33' N and 35° 07' E) and is regarded as one of the largest wooded regions in the West Bank.

The forest enjoyed a special popularity in the 1920s, when more trees were planted around the reserve and a road was constructed, which passed through the forest to connect the cities of Hebron and Jaffa.

Inside the valley and near Bayt Kahil Village, within the archaeological area of Khirbet Safa, can be found a prominent manmade cave or tunnel, 15 meters high and more than 200 meters long (though no one has yet reached the end), believed to date to 4000 BC. The

place is called Alsafa (Bat) Cave, since it is currently inhabited by bats. The oral narrative states, however, that it used to serve as a place of a refuge from "the divine wind."

For inhabitants of the surrounding villages, Wadi al-Quff has cultural significance as well since there used to be a custom for newlyweds to bless their weddings in the valley. People would celebrate the wedding by taking a green branch from the forest and giving it to the bride.

The above-specified areas are a subject of "Promoting the Nature Conservation and Ecotourism in Palestine" project - a joint initiative of the Palestine Wildlife Society and Hanns Seidel Foundation Palestine, endorsed by the Palestinian government and funded by the European Union. The website launch (www.mahmiyat.ps), with more information about the destinations, is scheduled for May 24, 2016. Contact info@visitpalestine.ps to get more ideas about how to spend your time in Palestine.

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Adonis palaestina (VisitPalestine.ps).

Learning about flora and fauna Beityllu Park (mahmiyat.ps).

