



WHERE TO GO?

Deir Hijleh Monastery A Day in the Life of a Hermit

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Spiritual fondness in the exclusion of a desert was what the Byzantine 4th-century hermits searched for and found in Palestine. Most of them settled in the wilderness of the areas east of Jerusalem and west of River Jordan. Around 400 AD, some 70 monasteries flourished here. However nowadays, just a few of them remained inhabited.

Deir Hijleh (Monastery of Hijleh), located 5.7 km southeast of Jericho, is an example of a monastic life in the wilderness. The church was founded in 455 AD by St. Gerasimus, a monk from Lycia in Asia Minor. It was initially constructed in a form of a laura, a cluster of caves where hermits lead

their solitary life and spent their time in prayer. Some of the caves are located one kilometre east of the current monastery. They are hewn in the soft rock of the steep cliffs of Wadi Nukheil (Valley of Palms), where tall palm trees dominate the landscape.

The modern-day Greek Orthodox monastery, characterized by a set of shiny golden domes, dates back to 1885. It is located 400 metres west of the previous church that was abandoned in the 18th century and currently lies in ruins. However, the foundation of the recent church bears inscriptions showing that it belonged to the early Christian edifice.

The interior of the church contains various icons depicting St. Gerasimus with a lion accompanying him. According to the tradition, the hermit met the lion near the Jordan River, roaring in pain caused by a thorn stuck in its paw. After St. Gerasimus removed the thorn, the lion became tame and from that time lived together with the monks.

Also inside the church is a rare icon depicting Mary nursing Jesus. The site where the Deir Hijleh is built is also said to be the spot where the Holy Family rested during their escape to Egypt.

Nowadays, Deir Hijleh welcomes visitors daily and has a small guesthouse. It is surrounded by a garden of palm trees where birds' songs are music to the ears. The premises of the monastery also contain a resting area and a small playground for children.

Other famous and still functioning wilderness monasteries are: Monastery of St. Saba (Deir Mar Saba), located east of Bethlehem; Monastery of St. George of Koziba in Wadi Quelt (Deir Quelt), and Monastery of Temptation (Deir Qurantal) in Jericho. For more information, contact VisitPalestine.ps at info@visitpalestine.ps.

