



Preserving and Promoting Palestine in 2014

A complex yet rich year for tourism and archaeology in our beautiful country!

By Rula Ma'ayah



The year started off with tremendous energy as a result of the achievements of 2013, the best year yet for Palestine tourism. The number of visits and overnight stays reached a historical high, and the sector, led by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, was thriving as new projects helped to build momentum. Right from the start of 2014, the ministry focused on various tracks to strengthen Palestinian national heritage and to enhance service quality and standards in tourism.

One of the highlights of the year was the addition of Battir to the World Heritage List after a long battle to document and defend the site in the face of the Israeli Segregation Wall, and to ensure the preservation of its various natural and archaeological riches. This listing now enables the ministry and the non-governmental sector to develop tourism and preservation in the area, and to offer attractive services, such as the Ecomuseum in Battir or the hiking and walking trails from the *Makhrou* in Beit-Jala to the heart of Battir's Roman terraces and abundant water springs.

The other grand event of the year was the visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to Bethlehem and his stop at the northern entrance of the city, in front of the Segregation Wall, for a moment of prayer for peace and an end to occupation. The papal visit attracted thousands of pilgrims to Bethlehem and gave us the opportunity to showcase the tourism sector's various areas of expertise, from hotels and restaurants to the efficient organisational team at the Tourism Police and at the state level.

The ministry continues to lead preservation projects and the rehabilitation of sites in order to host international visitors



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and introduce them to the riches of Palestine. In cooperation with the French government, we have rehabilitated small yet beautiful Bethlehem home to house Al-Badd Museum, which hosts a variety of exhibits, from the olive press to the archaeological remains found on-site, culminating with a beautiful terrace that overlooks the landscapes of Bethlehem and the desert.

The ministry works closely with private-sector associations, and this cooperation has borne fruit in 2014 through the on-going process of classification of Palestinian hotels and through events such as the Arab Tour Guide Union's visit to Solomon's Pools to enhance visibility and knowledge of the initiatives of the private sector.

Despite the Israeli aggression on Gaza and Israel's restrictions on the

The year 2013 was known as the best year for Palestinian tourism, with 4,424,855 visits between January and the end of October, and 885,487 overnight stays. Despite all the geopolitical challenges that Palestine faced during the same period in 2014, there were 4,602,280 visits and 1,008,534 overnight stays.

normal flow of tourism, the ministry perseveres in its mission to strengthen and develop Palestinian capabilities and resilience. After the attacks on Gaza, the ministry took the lead in the sectoral recovery and development plan for Gaza alongside international partners such as UNESCO. In addition, the ministry conducted a survey in the West Bank to assess the losses that resulted from this period. On the other hand, the

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ministry has successfully managed to organise, for the first time, a refresher course for Palestinian guides within 1948 Palestine, thus giving many guides the opportunity to visit and learn about the Palestinian story in Nazareth, Haifa, Bisan, Saffouria, and Marj bin 'Amer.

In 2014, the archaeology team at the ministry unveiled two major tourism attractions: the historic site at Tell Balata in Nablus, which has opened its doors to receive visitors, and the museum

near Hisham's Palace. The cosy state-of-the-art museum displays some of the findings at the magnificent palace and leads the visitor on a historical journey through the great Umayyad architecture of Palestine.

Moreover, to highlight the northern part of the West Bank, the ministry has named Tulkarem the Tourism City for 2014/2015, and events have started to animate the city. At the same time, two information centres, in Sebastiya and Jenin, have been inaugurated to

facilitate tourist visits. Through the network of information centres, the ministry assists visitors to Palestine and works to ensure that their visit is an enjoyable experience and journey of discovery.

In order to support all these initiatives, the team at the ministry works hard to provide support and assistance to the various levels of the tourism sector. During the year we signed cooperation agreements with Jordan and France to enter into a knowledge-and-experience exchange programme.

As well as laying the groundwork for increased cooperation with the various donors and private-sector associations, the ministry has started to develop an initiative to create synergy among all local development plans from the private sector, the associations, local government, and donors so as to design hub master plans that would lead all private- and public-sector efforts in creating strong infrastructure and branding for the major hubs in Palestine.

The ministry is committed to strengthening the educational capacities

of the tourism and hospitality industry. For this reason a country-wide survey of the educational institutes was implemented and discussions were held with the various actors within this field in order to create a new vision for educational requirements. The ministry staff held meetings and workshops with Palestinian educational institutes and donors to assist and direct the new developments in tourism and hospitality education in order to meet the expectations of quality and the requirements of the ever-evolving tourism market.

Visibility is the major worldwide challenge for Palestine as a tourism destination. Ministry teams work to encourage participation in major tourism fairs. In 2014, the ministry and the private sector entered new markets, such as those in Japan, Mexico, and Romania, in order to create wider exposure. In addition, the ministry published and distributed new promotional materials, namely, those related to specific sites and the new Palestine brochure, which provides visitors with an overview of sites and activities across the country.

Al-Badd. ©Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities.





Al-Badd. ©Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities.

Engaging media is also a primary concern, and in 2014, some of our most challenging work included trying to change US public opinion through a joint project with Rick Steves, the widely watched American travel producer, whom we assisted in preparing a half-hour movie on travel in Palestine that was aired in November on approximately 300 local US TV stations.

The year 2014 was challenging, and 2015 will be even more so as we strive to improve the quality of our hospitality

to international and local tourists as well as preserve and maintain Palestinian cultural heritage and historical sites.

Her Excellency Rula Ma'ayah, Minister of Tourism and Antiquities, graduated from Birzeit University in 1994, and obtained a higher diploma in public administration from the Milan Catholic University in 2006. In 1995 she became a director at the Ministry of Youth and Sports. She was general director at the Ministry of Justice before being appointed Minister of Tourism and Antiquities in May 2012.