



Hiking for Joy, Love, and Belonging

By Haifa Shawwa



When our friend Khaled sold his apartment, his old mother sobbed bitterly. "He will never come back... I know it... He will never come back..." she repeated. The tired mother knew that the apartment was the last anchor that would tie her big boy to his origins. At least it would have made emigration harder, maybe debatable. And she was right. Our friend bought a "new home" in what was once his diaspora. Home is also where we bond with details that we are comfortable with and love. Forget about the heart thing, home is where one's tent is!

It is at a certain point in our lives that we become more focused on our needs; not exactly the basic needs but those things that enhance our inner growth, bring us closer to our individual perspective, and most important, walk us towards our happiness. Hiking for a certain purpose was definitely a priority on my bucket list. And my purpose was to walk for the obvious reason of staying fit and healthy, but necessarily for the joy of "knowing." How could you ever enjoy a country without even knowing that it existed? How could you ever claim to know it without enjoying its diversified climates and loving every beautiful, enchanting spot it encompasses? If we do not love, we can never experience belonging. If we do not belong, we find abandonment more of a relief...not at all an agony!

That was when I started to search for local hiking groups, and I stress—"locality" of initiative and of agenda. The title "Hike and Explore Your Country" struck me as the perfect option. Well, I needed to walk, but on an exploratory basis. The urge to learn

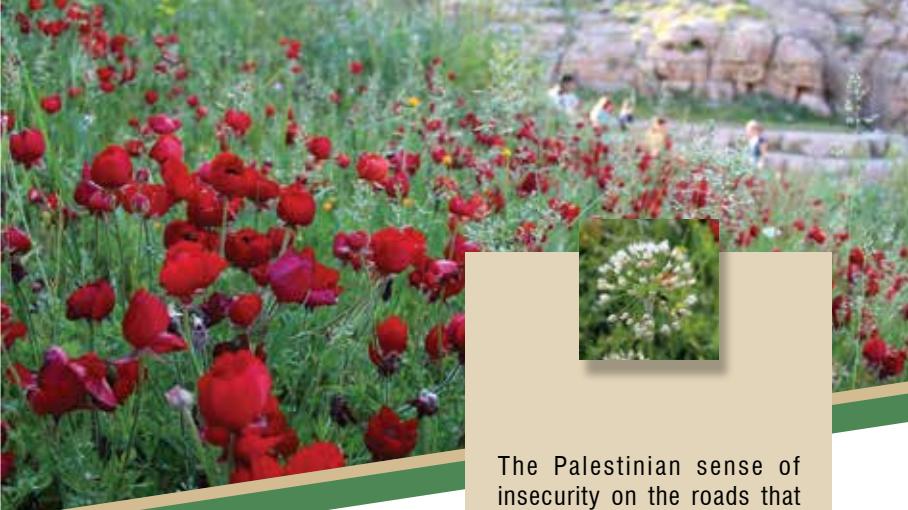


Photo by Ibtisam Sleiman.

more by being part of a diverse group sounded right. Learning about flora, fauna, and stories of places from the locals is a treasure in its own right. The group comprises intellectuals, writers, photographers, and public figures, but also farmers, shop owners, cooks, storytellers, housewives, babies, conservatives, and liberals, to list a few. Apparently everyone has a specific learning agenda. Mine is to track "aqua-touristic" locations or natural water resources, in "accessible" Palestine; well, in all of Palestine, when possible.

The group – or the tribe, as they like to be called – a not-for-profit Ramallah-based public initiative, encouraged everyone to step in. It is gender neutral, restricted by neither age, academic achievement, social standing, nor area. But suggesting that people from all other areas should get to Ramallah first and then make their way to their scheduled destination sounded neither convenient nor practical. So word spread that another group was to be formed. It was like a magical pot: applicants who expressed an interest in joining the group flooded the group page. Very quickly, the Nablus group was created and filled to optimum capacity. The Ramallah tribe had participants from almost all the towns

The Palestinian sense of insecurity on the roads that connect their towns has been a source of indirect benefit for Israel. As an annual ritual, tens of thousands of Palestinian school boys and girls are taken to closed (zoo-like) amusement parks instead of traveling freely around the country to walk, climb, swim, dance, and enjoy open spaces. According to the ministry of education, the destinations of Palestinian school trips must be to safe sites in spaces classified as Area A. Much to the relief of the Israelis, settlers in particular, a whole population is imprisoned in grey, green-less, and heavily polluted cities and towns, deprived even of the right to know that such breathtaking nearby treasures exist.

of the northern West Bank: Nablus, Tulkarem, Jenin, and Qalqilya, just to mention a few. Local guides would join on a voluntary basis or for minimal fees that everyone shared to secure. All this triggered the creation of an ongoing Ted-X-style interaction – in the cultural, historical, and traditional sense, never to stop and ever to surprise, enrich, and inspire.

What really struck me as fascinating during my first hike was the communal

attitude in the group. Youngsters offered to help carry our backpacks, snacks would typically be shared, even water. Millennials hopped from place to place carrying their music playlists along, nothing like the huge battery-operated cassette players we used to carry on outings. Young fathers joined in as they carried their children on shoulder seats, women – well, the not-so-sporty women like myself – enjoyed the ever-present assistance of the youth of both sexes offering their arms to assist them in climbing up to hard-to-reach places. Teatime, with its accompanying community protocol during the much-awaited breaks, was everyone's treat. That primitive fire-brewed tea proved to be the men's chore for a change! A fire was started with ample dry twigs and a lighter; the typical carbon-covered teapot and your heart's choice of Palestinian herbs brought from home

or freshly plucked from around the area completed the ritual. It was the only time to rest; tribe rules tolerate neither lingering nor wasting time. If you chose to linger, then it was your responsibility to find your lost tribe. Afterwards, an environmentally friendly farewell allowed everyone to clean up the area to keep it as presentable as it should be for other hikers.

Listening to expressions of fascination and wonder from young people is the real reward. They would say things such as: "I never knew we had this in Palestine," or "There are so many towns and villages beyond the main roads that connect the major cities." Questions were also raised: "Is this Area C or Area A?" Such hikes triggered curiosity, inquiry, research, doubt... A humble start but a healthy start. Yes, those are the kids born during the first Intifada and after. Their picnicking

culture was limited to balconies if safety allowed. For these youngsters, their image of the Palestinian State lacked those villages, plains, hills, and meadows that they never knew existed. These abandoned areas benefited the Israelis and the settlers, in particular, who spent decades enjoying what the Palestinians never knew they owned. So for decades, they stayed confined to their crowded, grey, green-less towns. As a result, a whole generation lost its feel for the soil, for open skies, and for spaces. The final objective of the hiking group, then, was really getting the younger generation out of their mental and physical caves and giving them the priceless chance of connecting to, bonding with, and belonging to their rich and beautiful localities.

The group plans a monthly agenda, attempting to cover tracks that vary in difficulty and topography: water tracks,

mountain-climbing, plateaus, even desert areas and visiting Bedouins and enjoying tent-made goat cheese, butter, and fire-baked breads.

Arriving at Al-Fawwar Spring in the great Qelt Valley (Jericho) and going down the road after the bus departed, we were received by an enormous bed of violets and yellow and red local wild flowers. We entered the neatly groomed premises of the spring and noticed that "up there," fluttering in the wind, were three Israeli flags.

Following the generous spring route for more than 12 kilometers, we were astonished by the abundance of running water, not really the water we expected to find in thirsty Palestine. Since the beginning of time, Al-Fawwar (meaning "over flowing") Spring would flow generously every 20 minutes with fresh bursts of water, keeping the shallow reservoir clean and clear. Not to anyone's surprise, of course, Al-Fawwar Spring, the enormous and generous reservoir\spring of Al-Qelt, Farah (female mouse) Spring, the breathtaking Qana Valley region, and a hundred more water-producing spots are all classified as Area C, which, according to the Oslo Accords, refers to those areas that are under the full control and authority of Israel, which alone can reap the benefits.

But then it's not always about learning and exploring or discovering. Nor is it about written or scheduled agendas. Sometimes unexpected things just happen. "Hike and Explore Your Country" claims to be the stage for a beautiful love story between Saja and Thaer. They were both hikers, lovers of nature. They joined in to walk, talk, and reconnect with their origins, but little did they know that by connecting with their past they were actually paving love steps for a beautiful future. Those of us who listen to the soft music of the elements are the most susceptible to its magic. After some time they both decided to commit themselves to an eternal bond. They got engaged and

Walking barefoot through those water tracks of the Al-Fawwar spring. Photo by Ibtisam Sleiman.





Climbing fearlessly, so many of them first-timers, yet feeling so at home. Photo by Ibtisam Sleiman.

received the blessings of the whole tribe. How much more positive energy could have accompanied them as they started their new life together?

Hike and Explore is a walking community. It works hard to spread the culture of “hiking to know and see” throughout the Palestinian community. There is nothing elite about it. It truly is a public initiative, and it does not matter at all who you are as long as you love to hike and respect the terms of the tribe and help preserve the habitat with all its precious components. Healthy bodies embrace healthy minds and spirits. It is an eternal reality that beautiful places become part of your

nostalgic memory and that familiarity with places evolves into emotions and then attachment. When we’re attached to a place, we claim partial ownership. It is the establishment of such national ownership that we all need, and something that we all should be part of.

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*The eternal beauty of Al-Fawwar spring. We could almost hear the stories of our forefathers.
Photo by Ibtisam Sleiman.*

