



# The UNWTO Comes to Palestine

**By the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities**

**P**alestine will be hosting the International Conference on Religious Tourism in Bethlehem on the 15th and 16th of June, 2015. This year's conference is titled Fostering Sustainable Socioeconomic Development in Host Communities, and the conference will be jointly organized by the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and the Palestine Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

Travel and tourism for religious purposes have been closely interconnected since ancient times. The world's first travelers were pilgrims visiting the holy places associated with their various religions. Up until today visiting the sacred places of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions remains one of the main motivations for travelers from around the world.

In Palestine, the rich spiritual cultural heritage and the vibrant tourism industry provide an ideal environment for tourism professionals, members of religious communities, the private sector, academics, and development organizations to exchange views, perspectives, and experiences on how to develop and promote religious tourism. A special focus of this conference will be how to use tourism to foster inclusive socioeconomic development focusing on partnerships and initiatives that encourage the engagement and empowerment of local communities.

The conference will bring together world-renowned speakers from Latin America, Europe, Asia, the United States, the Arab world, and Palestine. Some of the panels will discuss issues



such as global trends shaping religious tourism and how to develop competitive products and tourism experiences. Speakers will discuss challenges and opportunities for the development and promotion of religious tourism routes, and will tackle the particularities of developing tourism products while preserving the spiritual dimension of a pilgrimage.

During the session on innovative approaches to tourism management at religious sites, representatives from tourism authorities around the world will discuss how to balance heritage preservation and tourism development, and highlight new ideas and best practices to enhance the customer experience while caring for the tangible and intangible religious heritage of host countries.

The final session will be on promoting the participation of host communities and enhancing the socioeconomic benefits of religious tourism on a local level. It will challenge speakers and participants to explore the future of religious tourism in this period where tourism is seen as an efficient development strategy.

This conference is a historic opportunity for Palestine to showcase the best of its religious heritage, living traditions, handicrafts, and natural landscape. The



Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in partnership with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will organize four thematic trips to help conference participants to discover Palestine's religious sites, traditions, handicrafts, and its diverse geography.

The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and JICA will also organize the "Palestine Exhibition," which will host all the Palestinian tourism-related associations (the Arab Hotel Association, Holy Land Incoming Tour Operators Association, Palestinian Society for Tourism and Travel Agents, the Network for Experiential Palestinian Tourism Organization, the Oriental Souvenir Shops Union, and the Handicrafts Union), and their members, as well as offering live handicrafts demonstrations.

*For more information, visit the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities website [www.travelpalestine.ps](http://www.travelpalestine.ps), and the UNWTO website [www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org).*