



Bethlehem... Off the Beaten Track

By Sami Khoury



Bethlehem is undoubtedly one of the best-known places in the world as every year hundreds of thousands of tourists and pilgrims come to visit the Church of the Nativity that was built above the grotto where Jesus was born. The Church and the area around Manger Square are at the center of what Bethlehem has to offer: souvenir shops, restaurants, cultural centers, and hotels line these streets. Bethlehem shines especially during Christmas season with locals and foreigners flocking to town to join in the celebrations. Every year, Bethlehem and the neighboring Beit Jala and Beit Sahour organize various festivities and cultural events - from the lighting of the Christmas tree

Photo courtesy of CCHP.



Photo by Alessio Romenzi.

to numerous processions leading up to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day - in which visitors and locals come together in the spirit of Peace. With that said, and regrettably so, the vast majority of tourists and pilgrims to Bethlehem do not venture too far off the beaten track, and consequently they do not get to experience the many layers and rich experiences Bethlehem has to offer.

A **walking tour through Bethlehem's Old Quarters** offers beautiful views of stone streets - sometimes topped by rocky arches - and of houses with beautifully ornamented entrances, windows, and smaller openings. These treasures can also be seen while strolling along Star Street, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that leads from King David's Wells and through the prominent part of the historic town center - passing under the Arch of Zarrara, also known as Damascus Gate - merges at Al Manara Square with St. Paul VI Street, and ends at Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity. As the path is believed to be the route which Joseph and Mary took to approach the grotto of the Nativity, this same journey is repeated every year during the Christmas festivities. On 24 December, 6 January, and 18 January, patriarchs of various Christian denominations, preceded by scout

troupes and officials, follow Star Street to the Church of the Nativity to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. A new tourist information center will be opening on Star Street in an effort to help visitors navigate their way in and around the area.

Bethlehem also offers a broad choice of cultural centers and museums across the entire governorate. Worth visiting is the **Al Bad Museum for Olive Oil Production**, also known as the Badd Giacaman Museum, located in the heart of the Old City of Bethlehem in a traditional building that dates back to the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. The Museum houses a collection of ethnographic and archaeological artifacts depicting the process of olive oil production.

Another interesting site is the **Bethlehem Folklore Museum** that was established in 1979 by the Arab Women's Union and is one of the most original museums in Palestine. It houses a collection of traditional Palestinian household items, photographs, furniture, and works of art that show and illustrate life in Bethlehem from 1900 to 1932.

The **International Nativity Museum** is located in the complex of the Salesian Convent on a road running parallel to Star Street. It exhibits a very broad collection of over two hundred cribs with scenes of the Nativity that were imported to Bethlehem from various



Solomon's Pools, Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of VisitPalestine.com.

parts of the world. The diversity of the expositions shows the variety of customs, liturgy, and rituals practiced in different countries.

Another must-do is a visit to **Solomon's Pools**, located three kilometers south of Bethlehem. The three rectangular pools are cisterns that can hold up to 116,000 cubic meters of water. Partly excavated from rock and partly built, these huge reservoirs used to collect water from springs and rain that was then pumped it into Bethlehem, even as far as Jerusalem, using the sheer force of gravity. Adjacent to the Pools lie the remains of an ancient Ottoman fort that was recently renovated and converted into an ethnographic museum, named

Murad's Castle Museum after the fortress. The **Bethlehem Convention Palace** is located nearby the area and frequently hosts cultural and musical events. Also at a short distance from Solomon's Pools lies the **village of Artas (Urtas)** with a breathtaking scenery and historical allusiveness. The beautiful **Hortus Conclusus Convent**, built in 1894 by the Italian order of the Sisters of Mary, stands overlooking the valley. Artas is famous also for its annual festival, a community-based event organized by the Artas Folklore Center.

For the outdoor enthusiasts, the area around Bethlehem showcases some of Palestine's best natural

Mar Saba, Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of VisitPalestine.com.



wonders. A perfect example is the **Mar Saba Monastery**, located just fifteen kilometers from Bethlehem. Clinging to the cliff of Kidron Valley, this spectacular cloister evokes a thrilling shock when it first comes into view - in the midst of a desert landscape; and few of the Byzantine desert monasteries can match the serenity and beauty of this place. It was named after Saint Saba (439-532) who settled in a cave opposite the actual site of the monastery to live for five years in complete seclusion. Although Mar Saba is reputed for its hospitality to strangers, women have never been allowed to

declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. With a community-based approach to developing tourism, Battir is quickly gaining its rightful place among favorite destinations in Palestine, as it offers enriching experiences while hiking in one of Palestine's hidden treasures.

The neighboring town of Beit Jala, famous for its beautiful skyline of church steeples and narrow roads, should be another stop for visitors to the area. It is home to the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas that was named after the patron of Beit Jala and built over the grotto believed to be the place where St. Nicholas spent part of his



Battir village, Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of VisitPalestine.com.

enter. Hence, they can enjoy a glimpse of the chapel and building from a nearby two-story tower known as the Women's Tower. There are memorable hiking opportunities in the area surrounding Mar Saba.

In the proximity of Bethlehem as well lies the small village of **Battir** with its unforgettable landscape featuring olive groves and vineyards. Battir offers a couple of half-day walking trails that lead visitors across the ancient terraces and water systems that have been

life as a hermit in order to worship in proximity to the place of Jesus' birth.

Another key destination in the area is the town of Beit Sahour, located two kilometers southeast of Bethlehem and famous for the Shepherds' Fields that are associated with the place where the angel Gabriel appeared to the shepherds and told them that Jesus was born. Roman Catholics venerate the Shepherds' Fields located in Beit Sahour in an area known as **Siyar al-Ghanam**, meaning sheep's croft,

marked by three underground caves and the archeological ruins of an olive press, stables, and a Byzantine monastery that was probably destroyed in 614 by the Persians. In 1950, a modern Church, designed by the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi, was built on the site in a shape that aims to resemble a shepherd's tent.

The Greek Orthodox Site at Shepherds' Fields, also known as **Kanifat al-Ruwat**, is also located in Beit Sahour. The ruins at the site feature a grotto that has been used as a church since the fourth century. Above it can be found remains of a Byzantine chapel which was destroyed in 614. The chapel and a monastery had been rebuilt in the seventh century and survived until the tenth century; in 1989, a new, large church was built on the site. The fourth century lower church has been restored, and the remains of the upper church and of the monastery have been preserved. There is also an archaeological site that is known as the **Tower of Edar** which is said to have been built by Jacob after the death of his wife Rachel. (Genesis 35:21)

Cultural life in Bethlehem is vibrant with **local festivals** that take place throughout the year. Whether it is the famous Artas Lettuce Festival, the Faqus Festival in Beit Sahour, olive harvest festivals, or Christmas celebrations – on all these occasions, visitors to Bethlehem can enjoy cultural (evening) celebrations with the various local communities that host these events.

Finally, Bethlehem's **gastronomy** offers dining options that are diverse and cater to almost any craving with many restaurants and cafes throughout town. Whether you are seeking traditional Palestinian cuisine or want to opt for Italian, French, or Chinese food, you will be able to still your hunger - or to delight your senses and experience a bit of culinary luxury.

The Bethlehem area is also quite famous for offering visitors home-

stays, arrangements that allow foreigners to live with a Palestinian family and to experience first-hand the true essence of Palestinian hospitality. Various tour operators organize this service on both a short-term and a long-term basis. Hundreds of foreign volunteers also come and visit in order to work and volunteer in various non-profit organizations. Overall, the tourism infrastructure in Bethlehem is fully developed and able to cater to the needs of any visitor. New hotels and restaurants continue to open across the governorate. Several sites have been or are being restored, most prominent of which is the roof of the Church of the Nativity, while everyone is waiting with a great anticipation for the uncovering of other restored parts inside the old Basilica. The beautiful wall mosaics and frescoes that had darkened with time soon will be visible again in new glory.

This Christmas, Bethlehem will once again host thousands of visitors and pilgrims who are coming from across the world to our humble town in order to celebrate Christmas. While the calendar of events and activities is still under preparation, be sure to check out local listings to find out what is happening during your stay. Be sure to stop by the Visit Palestine Center's tourism information point and get the latest calendar of events or free tourist maps, or join one of the day-tours offered in the Bethlehem area.

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