

Follow the Star

Courtesy of Bethlehem Destination Christmas

After [the Magi] had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.”
Matthew 2:9.

A little over 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, one of the most influential figures in human history was born. According to the well-known story of the Nativity, the magi saw and followed a star that led them to the place in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Today, people from all over the world still follow in their footsteps. But the numbers of visitors that are currently received over the Christmas holidays in Bethlehem are only a fraction of the potential that the town can attract and accommodate.

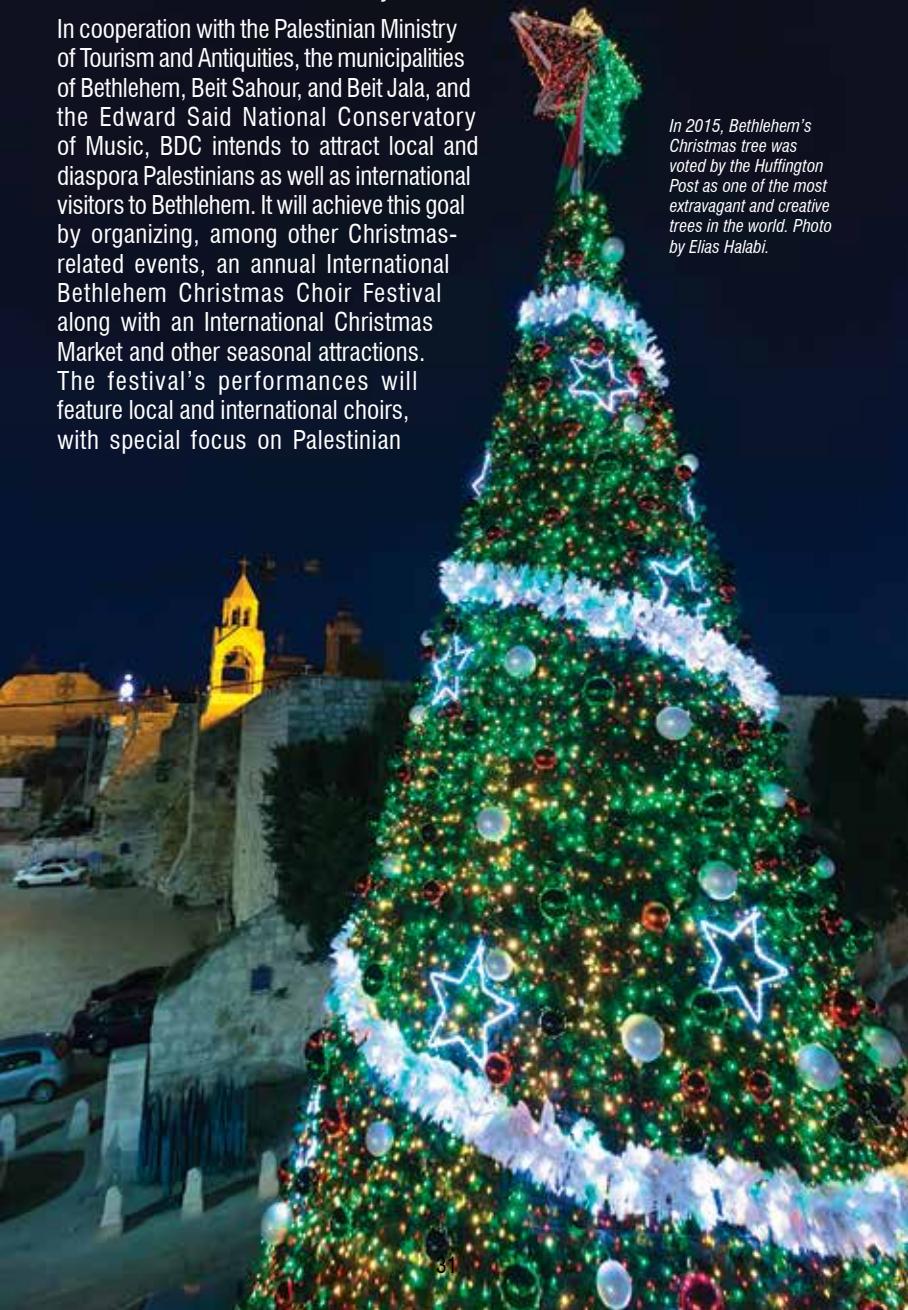
Bethlehem in itself is meaningful for devout Christians and many others, as Jesus is an important prophet for Muslims as well. To spend the Christmas season in Bethlehem is a most treasured experience on many levels and not only for pilgrims: Locals cherish the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ in their hometown, and Palestinians from all of historical Palestine gather to celebrate the many holidays of this special season; they are keen to let the world know that Christians live in Bethlehem and happy to promote the city as a unique tourist destination. Many foreign visitors and pilgrims regard their being able to spend Christmas in Bethlehem as the once-in-a-lifetime chance to be in this important place where it all began at the time that Christians all over the world celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. And indeed, the message of peace that emanates from the story of the nativity should be heard over the whole cacophony of negative messages that come from within the region and beyond.



It is our opinion that shared international cultural exchanges could promote greater awareness not only of this message of peace but also of the people still living in the land, the custodians of this shared heritage who long for nothing more than a just peace in the region. In this spirit, the Bethlehem Destination Christmas (BDC) initiative was formed in order to affirm Bethlehem's centrality to worldwide Christmas celebrations and to highlight the town's significance in the Christmas story. With its slogan Follow the Star, BDC intends to enhance Bethlehem's Christmas season and help generate tourism in the area over the period running from late November, with the beginning of Advent Season and the tree lighting ceremony, to late January, with Armenian Christmas celebrations on 19 and 20 January.

In cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the municipalities of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala, and the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, BDC intends to attract local and diaspora Palestinians as well as international visitors to Bethlehem. It will achieve this goal by organizing, among other Christmas-related events, an annual International Bethlehem Christmas Choir Festival along with an International Christmas Market and other seasonal attractions. The festival's performances will feature local and international choirs, with special focus on Palestinian

In 2015, Bethlehem's Christmas tree was voted by the Huffington Post as one of the most extravagant and creative trees in the world. Photo by Elias Halabi.



musicians from Palestine and the diaspora, and are expected to attract many visitors to Bethlehem and Palestine.

The BDC initiative was founded by a group of people, representing prominent Bethlehem institutions, who are keen to devote their shared enthusiasm and contribute their manifold ideas and experiences to the common goal of repositioning Bethlehem as an essential Christmas icon. By launching this initiative, they will bring attention to Palestine's cultural heritage and promote Bethlehem as the ultimate Christmas destination.

While the official launch of the BDC celebrations is scheduled for Christmas 2017, the board has planned a special pre-launching event to take place during the official Tree Lighting Ceremony on 3 December 2016. On that occasion, the renowned Oslo Philharmonic Choir will hold joint performances with local choirs.

During the Bethlehem Destination Christmas' first official celebration of Christmas in 2017, the promoters, in cooperation with the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), will host a major conference that is to be attended by the mayors and representatives of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour and international visitors. Naturally, the event will be hosted in the Bethlehem

area and shall facilitate the joint planning of future BDC celebrations. In particular, each twinned municipality will be offered the opportunity to annually sponsor a weekend (Thursday to Sunday) within the extended Christmas Season, when BDC events will feature a variety of Christmas markets and musical performances that shall be presented throughout the Bethlehem region. These events will not only generate international tourism but will also provide points of attraction for substantial numbers of Palestinians from historical Palestine and its diaspora. BDC will furthermore propose to synchronize the lighting of trees and ringing of church bells within the network of twinned towns and cities.

The initiative's innovative approach brings together the three cities of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala – known for being, respectively, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the home of the shepherds, and the home of St. Nicholas – with other world cities renowned for their special connection to Christmas traditions and events, among them:

- Amsterdam, Netherlands, home of the first and largest St. Nicholas Parade
- Greccio, Italy, home of the first Nativity Scene



BDC representatives hosted a press conference at ITB Berlin, the world's largest tourism fair. From left to right: Sebastian Plötzen, Bruno Walter, Dr. Khouloud Daibes, Rev. Dr. Miti Raheb, Ms. Radmila Labus, Eng. Mazen Karam, and Majed Ishaq. Photo courtesy of BDC.

- Strasbourg, France, home of the first Christmas Market
- Berlin, Germany, where Martin Luther began the tradition of the Christmas tree
- Rovaniemi in the Lapland region of Finland, home of the Santa Claus Village

In cooperation with these cities as a core group, the promoters of BDC shall organize the hosting of joint Christmas markets and develop bilateral and multilateral travel itineraries for the mutual exchange of visits. The celebrations shall furthermore capitalize on and aim to engage the more than one hundred towns and cities that are twinned with Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour, to the benefit of all parties involved. A yearly conference is envisaged to study various Christmas traditions and plan cooperation activities. This conference could be hosted, on a rotational basis,

by the core group cities and attended by representatives of twinned towns and cities, thereby creating an important occasion of exchange that will enhance tourism in the respective host cities and beyond.

The promotion of BDC will involve local and international bloggers, journalists, tourists, musicians, universities, and travel writers who can help achieve the initiative's goals of reviving Palestinian tourism within an extended Christmas season, thus encouraging tourists to prolong their stay in Bethlehem beyond current trends. Special attention will be given to ensure international media coverage. Besides generating job opportunities, the initiative will also contribute to the development of Palestine's cultural scene and will allow for important cultural exchange.

The BDC will support a range of marketing efforts and PR activities to promote Bethlehem and Palestine at international travel trade fairs in cooperation with the ministry of tourism and the private tourism sector. A successful press conference, attended by over forty journalists, was held at the ITB Berlin Tourism Fair in March 2016, where BDC screened a promotional film by the Palestinian MoTA that received a Second Star Award. Bethlehem Destination Christmas envisages participation in other major international travel trade fairs such as WTM London (Britain's largest travel fair), FITUR Madrid (Spain's largest travel fair), and CMT Stuttgart (Europe's largest consumer travel fair). In its

The ESNCM's Palestine Youth Orchestra in performance. Photo courtesy of ESNCM.



marketing activities, BDC will support Palestinian tour operators, enhancing their networking with international tour operators and other official bodies, and give assistance to incoming tour agents in their tour designs and marketing efforts. BDC's target is global and thus includes both international and national tourism markets that cover all of historical Palestine.

The Bethlehem Destination Christmas initiative requires awareness and support to be able to reach its goals. True internationalization of Christmas will hopefully lead to a greater intercultural awareness and shall induce a sense of pride and joy within the Palestinian community and its diaspora. This can have a very positive multiplier effect for our region. So let us all Follow the Star and head to Bethlehem to be part of the events that commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.



The short promotional film Travel Palestine: Rediscover Your Senses, produced by the Palestinian MOTA and presented by BDC won the Second Star Award at ITB Tourism Fair, Berlin, 2016. Photo courtesy of BDC.

The **Bethlehem Development Foundation** (BDF), founded by the late Said Khoury to regenerate Bethlehem, has since 2012 worked diligently to upgrade and promote the Christmas season by decorating Manger Square and its Christmas tree and supporting choirs and celebratory events.

Bethlehem University, founded in 1973, plays an important role in developing the tourism and hospitality sector. Emphasizing excellence in its tourism and hospitality programs and maintaining a strong connection and cooperation with all stakeholders in the industry, it fills the ever-growing market needs.

In 1992, **Diyar Consortium**, an NGO that focuses on art, culture, and tourism, organized the first conference on alternative/authentic tourism in Palestine and launched the Authentic Tourism Program that has changed the landscape of tourism by offering a holistic approach to visits to the Holy Land. Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, the educational arm of Diyar, created the "Diploma in Tour Guiding" program to train and qualify Palestinian guides, targeting especially women, with a new approach to guiding that combines the unique historical, religious, and cultural context of the Holy Land. Diyar continues to develop innovative ideas, conferences, and festivals.

The **Edward Said National Conservatory of Music** (ESNCM) is a music school that teaches and promotes music with the aim of making it accessible for all Palestinians, wherever they live, within the framework of strengthening the Palestinian cultural and national identity.

The **Holy Land Incoming Tour Operators Association** (HLITO), with over fifty active members, represents Palestinian incoming tour operators and is shaping the tourism industry in the Holy Land in general and Palestine in particular.