

## **DESTINATION PALESTINE**

# **TOURISM'S DENIED POTENTIAL**

The enhancement of Palestine's status at the United Nations and its international recognition is a first step towards the independence of the State of Palestine, and towards achieving peace through the internationally endorsed formula of two states on the 1967 border. There can be no doubt that this will help all parties to break the current political deadlock and advance the peace process. With all eyes of the world focused on Palestine and Bethlehem during Christmas time, this is an excellent opportunity to shed more light on the many challenges and obstacles facing Palestine as a country and more specifically as a tourism destination.

Christmas is a national holiday for Palestinians, who celebrate at three different times according to the Catholic, Greek-Orthodox and Armenian calendars. For Christians, Bethlehem is the place where the singular moment of salvation history took place. For non-Christians, the message of Bethlehem is timeless and goes "beyond borders". Its message of peace and reconciliation is universal, touching the deepest hopes and dreams of all nations and peoples. For Palestinians, no hope for human dignity, independence or peace is possible until the occupation ends.

The impact of occupation on the daily lives of Palestinians is undeniable. The illegal Wall, which cuts deep into the occupied West Bank; the settlements, which house over half a million illegal settlers on Palestinian land; and the hundreds of checkpoints and "bypass roads" that connect the settlements, have crippled Palestinian mobility and freedom of movement within our own territory. The ongoing expropriation of our land and the drainage of our natural resources are shattering any remaining chance for a viable two state solution.

Despite its small size, Palestine has an abundance of historical, religious and cultural heritage sites. Every inch of this land has a story to tell, every hill the scene of a battle, and every stone a monument or a tomb. One cannot understand the geography of Palestine without knowing its history and one cannot understand its history without understanding its geography.

Throughout its turbulent history, the Palestinian tourism industry has been faced with many obstacles and hurdles that hindered its growth and development. Since the Israeli occupation of 1967, the Israeli tourism industry has flourished, in many cases through the exploitation of Palestinian sites, while the Palestinian sector has been faced with unfair competition and an oppressive military occupation. Nevertheless, between 1994 and 2000, an estimated USD 700 million was invested into the sector to develop infrastructure (hotels, restaurants etc.) and preserve heritage sites across Palestine. Following a near collapse of the industry during the second intifada (2000-2005), the sector gradually recovered, again demonstrating the resilience of the private sector through an influx of fresh investment.

Despite the proactive investment in tourism across Palestine, the sector remains strangled by the loss of land, lack of control over borders and restrictions on movement. These obstacles make long term planning impossible. More than simply marginalizing the Palestinian tourist industry, Israeli colonization policies, including the illegal Wall and settlement regime, have all but completely severed the Holy and historic cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem from one another.

## MAIN CHALLENGES FACING BETHLEHEM

Today, Bethlehem is one of Palestine's largest tourism destinations. Over a million tourists come to Bethlehem every year and, almost for the past 8 years, the sector has seen continued growth in terms of both visitor arrivals and overnight stays. Unfortunately, Palestine continues to face enormous challenges and obstacles as a result of the ongoing Israeli occupation. In Bethlehem, specifically, these challenges continue to have a direct impact on the tourism industry.

- **RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT:** Palestinian tour guides or transportation companies have not been able to enter Israel since 2000. From over 150 tourist guides licensed to work all over Palestine, only 42 have permits to guide in Israel, which are renewed periodically and without guarantee. Navigating and understanding the ever changing policies vis-a-vis Palestinian travel restrictions is not an easy task. The procedures tend to change depending on the political relations between the parties. Furthermore, all Palestinians have different travel restrictions depending on where they live, whether in Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Israel or the diaspora. These restrictions on movement severely hinder the development of a domestic tourism industry.
- **LIMITED CONTROL OVER TOURISM RESOURCES:** Another key obstacle to developing our tourism industry is our inability to carry out any development work in approximately 60% of the West Bank where many historical, religious and archeological treasures are located. These are areas which have been expropriated by Israel and are tightly controlled by the Israeli occupying forces. In many cases, touristic sites in these areas are being exploited by the Israel in order to benefit its own tourism industry. A primary example in the Bethlehem Area is Herodion which lies well within Palestine's boundaries but is under the full control of the Israeli National Park Authority which collects and benefits from entrance fees, and provides jobs for Israeli settlers.
- **SIZABLE LEAKAGES OF TOURISM REVENUES:** While Bethlehem continues to receive millions of visitors, the majority of these tourists only spend half a day there, leaving very little time spent among the host communities in Bethlehem. These visitors hurry in the footsteps of Jesus and often their only interaction with the "living stones" of the Holy Land is through a tour bus window. Once again, this phenomenon has much to do with Israeli tour operators, who control the industry and are able to tailor tours to benefit Israel and promote hotels in West Jerusalem or in illegal settlements which surround Bethlehem. Nevertheless, tourism planners in Palestine are continuously striving to develop new packages and products. A 2011 "Master Plan for Tourism development in Bethlehem" is currently being implemented. The plan proposes various interventions that would enhance the overall tourist experience in Bethlehem and help to encourage more geographically spread visits and increased time and spending within the area.
- **HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT AND "BRAIN DRAIN":** Bethlehem has always relied heavily on tourism and on its connection with East Jerusalem. Due to Israeli policies, the town and surrounding governorate has been gradually and systematically cut off from Jerusalem. This has had a direct impact on the economic livelihood of Bethlehem and today the governorate is faced with the second highest unemployment rate in Palestine (around 21% -second only to Gaza). "Brain drain" from Bethlehem is also evident with many of the youth seeking work in neighboring towns such as Ramallah or opting to emigrate abroad.

● **THE CHRISTIANS OF THE HOLY LAND AS A DISAPPEARING COMMUNITY:** Palestinian Christians are indigenous to the Holy Land, they are not immigrants, and they are the “first” Christian population on earth. Christians have always been an integral part of the Palestinian national and cultural identity and play a pivotal role in Palestinian society. The strain of living under occupation has caused thousands of Palestinian Christians to immigrate to Europe, the US and Latin America in search of a better life. The percentage of Christians in the Holy Land has dramatically decreased since the implementation of Israeli policies of ethnic cleansing and colonization. This trend is very alarming and unless it is seriously addressed, the Holy Land will become a museum of shrines, as opposed to a vibrant land with a thriving Christian community.

## **BETHLEHEM IS A WORLD HERITAGE DESTINATION**

The outstanding universal value of Bethlehem to humanity is unquestionable. The town has been a focus of Christian tradition and worship throughout the centuries. Together with Jerusalem, Bethlehem is the spiritual heart of the Christian world. Christmas, one of the most widely-celebrated religious festivals in the world, is based on the birth story of Jesus, which took place here more than 2000 years ago. Jesus’ role as Issa, the divinely inspired prophet in Islamic belief, is equally significant and underscores the sanctity of the place to many people of faith. Moreover, the wealth of cultural heritage is an important resource for the development of Palestine; it will help sustain both the Palestinian economy and identity, and it is viewed as an integral component of human heritage worldwide.

The Israeli occupation has been instrumental in preventing Palestine from registering sites on the World Heritage List. In 2002, following the Israeli invasion of the cities of Nablus, Bethlehem and Hebron, and the deliberate destruction of cultural sites, the World Heritage Committee adopted a resolution to support the protection of the exceptional universal value of Palestinian cultural and natural heritage. After nearly 10 years, in November 2011, Palestine joined UNESCO as a full Member State. In July 2012, the World Heritage Committee, during its 36th Session held in Saint Petersburg, inscribed the Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem, Palestine on UNESCO’s World Heritage in Danger List. Later in June 2014, Battir, also at the Bethlehem District, was including on UNESCO’s World Heritage in Danger List.

As a full member state in UNESCO, Palestine will fulfill its responsibility to protect cultural and natural heritage sites in its land. In fact, there are a number of other nominations being prepared for submission including Hebron and Jericho, all sites threatened by destruction, settlement construction and the illegal Wall. As an Observer State in the UN, Palestine will be a responsible actor on the international stage, using diplomatic and legal tools now available, in order to protect the whole of Palestine, and the little town which witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ.