

organising an

ETHICAL PILGRIMAGE

to the Holy Land

useful history and tips



an ecumenical Christian guide



Why?

There are contrasting views on this deeply loved and disputed region. It is right that Christians discover and celebrate ancient and modern Israel. But Palestine is often neglected. Fewer than 2% of Christian Pilgrimages to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory end up choosing Palestinian hotels, tour guides, or coach companies.

The illegal occupation by Israel of the West Bank and Gaza adversely affects the people of Palestine. Restrictions devastate the economy. The WCC recently reminded us that “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”. We want Christians to show solidarity with Palestinians when organising their pilgrimages. Israeli businesses must be supported, but Palestinian businesses should be included as one way of demonstrating solidarity with those under the occupation.



Thinking about it...

For a thousand years pilgrims to The Holy Land were hosted by local Christians, often in monasteries. Today however the pilgrimage that you may be organising will see your group arriving in Tel Aviv by plane and then use a coach to move from airport to hotel, to places of interest. Some tours hardly ever arrange meet-ups with local Christians. They visit historical churches and holy places merely as components of the tour itinerary rather than as places to witness how the work of justice - so central to the ministry of Jesus - continues today.

Short history

When the State of Israel came into being in 1948, it did not establish itself in an empty land. Thousands of Palestinian families and communities - some tracing their connection to the land back a thousand years or more - were displaced to make way for the influx of mainly Jewish newcomers. To be sure, many Jewish families were fleeing the worst expression of human oppression in modern history, the Jewish Holocaust. Other Jewish groups like the Mizrahi or the Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula arrived in Israel after being expelled from ancient homelands in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. There were and remain powerful reasons for the establishment and continued existence of Israel.



History cont...

Nevertheless, the way the State was created and operates today perpetuate enormous suffering for both Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis are terrified by the threat of rocket attacks. Mothers fear for the lives of their children. People living in Gaza and the West Bank find themselves under various levels of Israeli military control. This is not sustainable, not Shalom.

Fewer than 2% of tours will highlight the reality of life for Palestinian Christians and Muslims under Israeli occupation. Many tours breeze past Israeli military checkpoints into Bethlehem without realising that they have entered an occupied territory. They may not know that locals find it incredibly difficult to cross through that same military checkpoint, even for things like specialised medical treatment. Christians in Palestine now number less than 2% of the population, declining as young people leave to find better life opportunities. Some evidence suggests a small increase in the number of Christians living in Israel, but in Palestine itself we are losing our connection to one of history's oldest Christian communities.

What Should I do?

We think organising tours to the Holy Land with **justice** in mind is important. Every Christian tour should actively seek out Israeli and Palestinian Christians to hear their stories. Tours should be geared up to support local Palestinian tour companies, hotels, and businesses. Tours should visit projects that assist farmers, small business owners, workers, refugee camps, and projects that work to improve the lives of ordinary people. They should find out from local Palestinians and Israeli Christians how they can maintain personal and practical links once the tour is over. In these and other ways, Christians can be part of the healing that needs to take place in this deeply special but fragmented part of the world.



Tips and things to consider

Before you embark on your pilgrimage, you may want to start your planning with some of these considerations

Tour company

- Are you intentionally choosing a tour company that is owned and run by Palestinians?
- Will you be using a Palestinian-owned and run coach company?

Hotels and Food

- Are you planning for at least part of your stay to be in Palestinian-owned hotels?
- Will a substantial number of your restaurant bookings be in Palestinian restaurants?

Day tours and speakers

- Will you be hearing from Israeli and Palestinian Christian speakers on life under occupation, and with organisations working for peace?
- Will you visit Yad Vashem for an understanding of recent Jewish history?
- Are at least some of your tour guides and speakers Palestinian?
- Have you included a visit to a refugee camp inside The West Bank?
- Will you connect with Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations?
- Have you arranged to hear Jewish perspectives on contemporary Israel?
- Do your Bible studies connect the justice issues faced by biblical characters and locals today e.g. the shepherds at Beit Sahour?



Further questions to shape your pilgrimage

- Will you arrange for tour members to visit and purchase goods at Palestinian shops, and purchase jointly-produced Israeli/Palestinian goods e.g. from Sindyanna in Galilee?
- Will you visit Palestinian farms like Tent of Nations or Sarras Farm that are threatened with invasion from settlers or confiscation from Israeli authorities?
- Have you arranged for a local Palestinian guide to take you through Hebron to explain how Israeli settlers make life so very difficult in this historic town?
- Will you be visiting a Bedouin village?
- Will you hear from Jewish settlers?
- Will you wake up at 4.00am and join with Palestinian workers crossing checkpoints?

May God bless you as you organise your ethical tour to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory

You may wish to explore...



Council for Christians and Jews

For a deepened appreciation of how many British Jewish communities view the situation in Israel and Palestine, please visit the website or ask a speaker to attend a pre-journey Zoom event

<https://ccj.org.uk>



Sabeel-Kairos

Through its "Come and See" project, Sabeel-Kairos has sent out a call to international churches and pilgrimage organisers that is based on the concept of Justice Tourism. This has places human dignity at the core of any tourism project that seeks to promote the search of God's truth through local encounters on a path that leads to mutuality, solidarity, and the real discovery of human community. Sabeel may be contacted to meet on Zoom

<https://www.sabeel-kairos.org.uk/a-kairos-perspective-of-tourism-and-pilgrimage-come-and-see/>

Exploring further...



The Alternative Tourism Group

The ATG works to modify mass tourism in “the Holy Land” to establish a more human-oriented tourism. They put tourists in direct contact with the Palestinian people and organisations to help pilgrims develop a better understanding of Arab-Palestinian culture and history. This is important as it challenges the many negative stereotypes of Palestine and its people. They encourage meetings with the Palestinian people and to develop a deeper understanding of everyday life under the Israeli Occupation. They also offer tourists the unique encounters with Palestinians through volunteer (olive harvesting, planting trees, etc.)

<http://atg.ps/about-us>

EAPPI

The mission of the **Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel** is to witness life under occupation, to engage with local Palestinians and Israelis pursuing a just peace, and to work to change the international community's involvement with the conflict, urging them to act against injustice in the region. Again, think about asking an EAPPI representative to speak to your group on Zoom before you go

<https://www.eappi.org/en/>





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Walking

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Pilgrimage

Search online

Methodist Liaison Office in Jerusalem - World Methodist Council Middle East

The Church of Scotland - mission in Jerusalem

The United Reformed Church - Mission Team IOPT

VIDEO *(one of many)*

<https://www.fodip.org.uk/walkingthetightrope>