

Walking the Path in Palestine

Detailed information for travellers



Welcome!

The *Masar Ibrahim al Khalil* (Abraham's Path) offers travellers a rare opportunity to go beyond the headlines and the stereotypes, to get away from the conventional holy land tour itineraries, and to explore for themselves the remarkable landscape, people, and culture of Palestine.

The country is struggling to emerge from a painful history of occupation and conflict, and no honest or serious description of travel in Palestine can avoid these realities. But there is so much more to this land than gets reported in the news: breathtaking rural scenery, ancient historical sites, and a friendly, hospitable, and spirited people. Crossing areas of the country largely unknown to the outside world, the Masar ('Path') provides a rare chance for travellers to be welcomed into ordinary Palestinian homes, to share a meal and listen to the stories of these families, and to learn something about the daily lives, concerns, and hopes of the people here.

To say that Palestine is an untroubled country would be less than the truth; but this is an extraordinary land, and to walk the Masar Ibrahim al Khalil in Palestine is to treat yourself to a rewarding, even life-enhancing, experience.

The Basics

Palestine is a nation-state comprising a population of four million people in two territories within what was once known as the Holy Land on the eastern side of the Mediterranean. The Masar crosses the larger of the two territories, the West Bank. This is an area of over 5500 sq km of land that lies due west of the River Jordan, above the Negev Desert. Its main cities are Jenin and Nablus in the North (where the Masar now begins), Ramallah, Jericho and East Jerusalem (Al Quds) in the centre, and Bethlehem and Hebron (Al Khalil) in the South.

The Path

Suitable for fit, active adults and older children, the Masar walking trail covers a total of 110 km of open countryside and pasture land passing through a number of rural villages that provide the chance of rest, hospitality and overnight stays in Palestinian homes.

The main trail starts on the edge of the ancient town of Nablus and ends in the village of Taybeh – a four day hike. A continuation of this trail is now in development, and will lead walkers south to Bir Zeit, through Jerusalem, and on towards Bethlehem and Hebron / Al Khalil. A spur of the path takes the walker from the natural springs of Ein Samia down to the Jordan Valley near Jericho. Eventually, this branch will rejoin the main route at Bethlehem (see map, below). Major Abrahamic sites visited by the trail include the Bronze Age ruins of Tel Balata in Nablus, the city of Jerusalem / Al Quds itself, and the historic town of Al Khalil or Hebron, the site of Ibrahim's tomb. ***See map, below.***



It is not yet possible for walkers to follow the trail without a local guide, due to the absence of way marking and the terrain itself, which ranges from good dirt roads to

rough shepherd tracks to hill scramble. The best seasons are spring and autumn - to experience the beauty of the hillside scenery, local flora and fauna while enjoying dry, sunny weather at reasonable temperatures. Prepare to engage with the people you meet along the way. You will learn something of their way of life, their values, their passions and their burning desire to retain their dignity, freedom and identity.



Proposed Itineraries

Travellers can select from two itineraries, each starting from Jerusalem and based on four days walking in Palestine. The first itinerary covers the basic four-day hike, with minibus transfers to and from the trail; the second provides an additional three nights in Jerusalem and Bethlehem for further exploration of the country and its history. The team in Palestine also invite inquiries from individuals or groups who would like to create their own itinerary, or to organize a longer hike including sections of the trail which are still in development.

Itinerary One: 4-days walking in Palestine, staying in family homes.

Day one: Nablus and Awarta

Meet at the Jerusalem Hotel (located on the Nablus Road near the Damascus Gate into the Old City of Jerusalem) for early morning transfer to Nablus. Tour the characterful old city on foot, visiting the olive oil soap factory. Walk to Tel Balata, site of the Bronze Age city of Shechem, where Abraham arrived in the Land of Canaan, then on to explore the Greek Orthodox church, which houses Jacob's well. In the afternoon we leave the city, walking through open countryside to the village of Awarta for evening dinner and an overnight home-stay.

Day Two: Awarta to Duma

Leave Awarta in the morning for a full day's walk (approx 17 km) to Duma, visiting Jabal Awurma and the villages of Aqrab, Majdal, and Bani Fadil along the way. In the evening, having rested and enjoyed a meal with our host family, we will be invited to join a fire-side gathering out on the open hillside for a flavour of the villagers' music and dance traditions (and perhaps to smoke the *nargileh* or *hookah* water pipe).

Day Three: Duma to Kufr Malek

Walk from Duma to Kufr Malek (14 km), passing through the village of Mghayyar and the natural springs and archaeological site of Ain Samia. Local food and evening conversation with the welcoming families of Kufr Malek, and perhaps a chance to meet with the leaders of the local women's committee.

Day Four: Kufr Malek to Taybeh

Walk from Kufr Malek along the edge of the high plateau (spectacular views down into the Great Rift Valley to the East) to the historic village of Taybeh, a Christian Arab village and home of Palestine's only brewery, to finish your walk with an ice-cold beer! Visit St George's Church and tour the brewery. Late afternoon transfer back to Jerusalem or Bethlehem.

Based on a minimum group of 4 people, the cost of this tour is US \$620 per person, which covers transfer by minibus between Jerusalem and the trail, all accommodation and meals while on the walk, plus the services of the guide.



Itinerary Two: 4 days hiking in Palestine, staying at local homes, plus two nights in Jerusalem and one in Bethlehem.

Days One: Arrival

Arrive in Jerusalem for an overnight stay at a guesthouse near the old city.

Day Two: Exploring the Old City of Jerusalem

We explore the old city of Jerusalem on foot, including St. Anna Church, pool of Bethesda, Flagellation Chapel, Al'Aqsa mosque (if possible) and a walk along the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Afternoon free to wander and explore independently. Dinner and overnight stay in Jerusalem.

NB: the following four days follow the itinerary outlined above...

Day Three: Nablus and Awarta

Early morning transfer to Nablus. Tour the characterful old city on foot, visiting the olive oil soap factory. Walk to Tel Balata, site of the Bronze Age city of Shechem, where Abraham arrived in the Land of Canaan, then on to explore the Greek Orthodox church, which houses Jacob's well. In the afternoon we leave the city, walking through open countryside to the village of Awarta for evening dinner and an overnight home-stay.

Day Four: Awarta to Duma

Leave Awarta in the morning for a full day's walk (approx 17 km) to Duma, visiting Jabal Awurma and the villages of Aqrab, Majdal, and Bani Fadil along the way. In the evening, having rested and enjoyed a meal with our host family, we will be invited to

join a fire-side gathering out on the open hillside for a flavour of the villagers' music and dance traditions (and perhaps to smoke the *nargileh* or *hookah* water pipe).

Day Five: Duma to Kufr Malek

Walk from Duma to Kufr Malek (14 km), passing through the village of Mghayyar and the natural springs and archaeological site of Ain Samia. Local food and evening conversation with the welcoming families of Kufr Malek, and perhaps a chance to meet with the leaders of the local women's committee.

Day Six: Kufr Malek to Taybeh

Walk from Kufr Malek along the edge of the high plateau (spectacular views down into the Great Rift Valley to the East) to the historic village of Taybeh, a Christian Arab village and home of Palestine's only brewery, to finish your walk with an ice-cold beer! Visit St George's Church and tour the brewery. Late afternoon transfer back to Bethlehem.

Day Seven: Bethlehem and Hebron / Al Khalil

In the morning we walk through old Bethlehem to the Church of the Nativity, then drive on to Hebron. Visit the old city of Hebron, including the Ibrahim Mosque where Ibrahim / Abraham is said to be buried with his wife Sarah. Transfer to Jerusalem (and then bus or taxi to Tel Aviv airport) for departure.

NB: This itinerary is based on 7 overnight stays in Palestine. It can be adjusted slightly to accommodate different arrival and departure times. The tour begins and ends in Jerusalem and does not include airport transfers. A very efficient shuttle service operates between the airport (in Tel Aviv) and the Jerusalem Hotel (in Jerusalem) – full details will be provided upon booking.

Based on a minimum group of 4 people, the cost of this tour is US\$880 per person, which covers transfer by minibus between Jerusalem and the trail, all accommodation and meals while on the trail, two nights B&B in Jerusalem and one night B&B in Bethlehem.

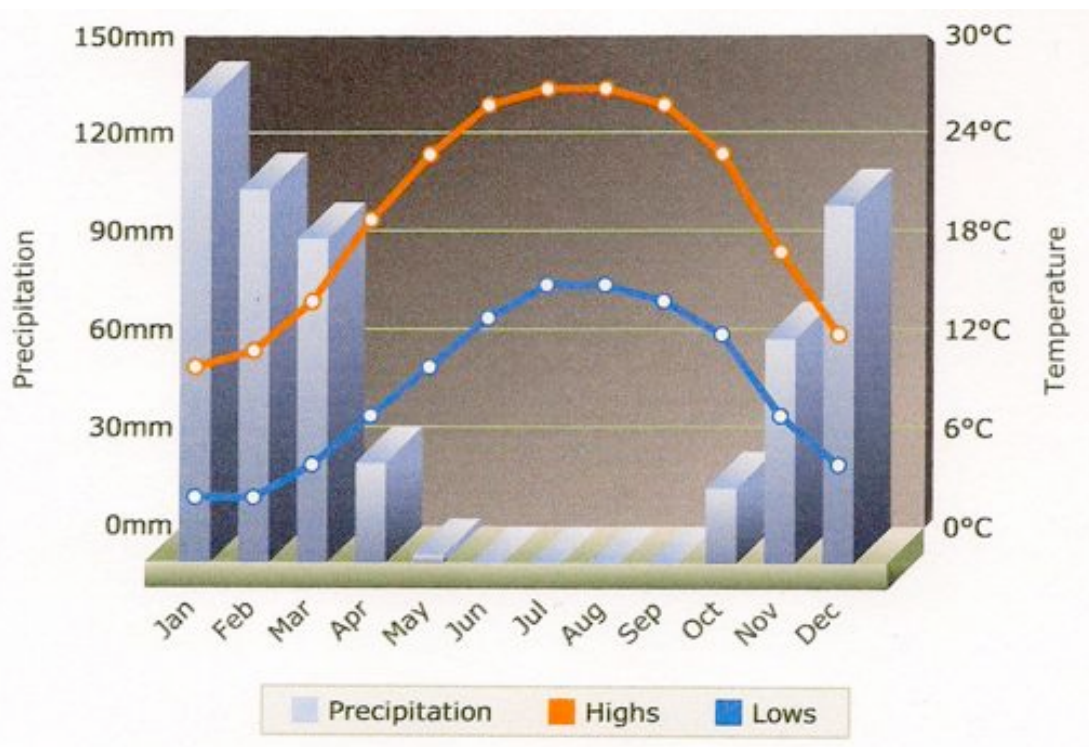
Additional excursions/extending your stay

There is a wealth of places to visit in Palestine and our local tour operators (See 'contacts' below) can also offer flexible itineraries, and help you to build a few days walking into a longer trip to the region. They will be happy to provide advice and further information about other excursions, private transport hire, guides, hotels and other accommodation.

Practical information

Climate and weather

Palestine's climate is essentially Mediterranean, with hot summers, cold winters and a balmy spring and autumn. Temperatures can reach 40 degrees centigrade midday in midsummer, but the nights are cool in the mountains and desert. Rainfall in the summer is non-existent (June – Sept), but winter brings snow on the mountains.



The best times of the year for walking are March to May and September to November. Early spring brings plentiful wildflowers; in late autumn, families are out harvesting the olive trees, and you may well be invited to sit and drink tea with them. If you do visit in the summer, the weather will be very hot but you will start walking earlier and take plenty of rest stops.

The Terrain

The walk is moderate to challenging. Distances are not too long - never more than 12 miles per day with a maximum total ascent per day of 400 metres, but the terrain is often rocky underfoot, with lots of stepping up and down, and there are some significant uphill and downhill sections. Light scrambling is required at one point. The path is a combination of old shepherds' tracks across rock and thorn scrub, good dirt roads, and occasional asphalt.

Accommodation

In Jerusalem and Bethlehem you will be staying in hotels or simple guesthouses with private rooms and ensuite facilities. While on the trail, you will be staying in family homes in Palestinian villages, meeting the kids, grandparents and extended families, and sharing their fresh, home-cooked food.

The Palestinian homes you will stay in all have electricity and running water. However, Palestine is among the most water-poor countries in the world so you should use water with great care. You will be able to have a quick shower or wash after each walk. There will always be plenty of bottled drinking water.

Men and women usually sleep separately, on mattresses on the floor of the family's main living space. Don't expect a private bedroom, although some families may be able to provide one for older married couples. If this is important to you, please make this known at the time of enquiry, so that you can get appropriate advice. Sheets are not generally used here; if you would like one, bring a cotton sleeping-bag liner.

Eating and drinking

You will be eating traditional Middle Eastern food. In the villages, this means home cooking, freshly prepared and local. Meals (breakfast too) usually consist of flat bread, cheese, yoghurt, humus, olives and salads. Dinner will include a typical Palestinian cooked dish, often including rice with chicken or meat. The walks include one or two very simple picnics of bread, cheese, and salad.



Palestine is primarily a Muslim country, so alcohol is hard to find and will not be offered during the walk. Be prepared for endless tiny glasses of sweet black tea, often served with mint, and for grainy, delicious Turkish-style coffee after meals.

In Jerusalem and in Bethlehem you can find wine and beer in many restaurants and bars. The trail also passes through Taybeh, home to Palestine's first brewery. Here you can sample a high-quality, organic lager beer brewed in accordance with the German purity laws of 1516! If you pass through in October, you might find the Taybeh version of Bavaria's legendary Oktoberfest in full swing – two days of Palestinian celebration, music, culture, and beer. See here for info on the beer - <http://www.taybehbeer.com> - and here for more info on the Oktoberfest - <http://www.taybehmunicipality.org>

Getting there

The tours start from Jerusalem. Travelling to Jerusalem is straightforward for European and US travellers. Several airlines offer cut-price flights from the UK to Tel-Aviv (Ben Gurion International Airport), about one hour's bus ride away. If you are coming from a tour to other parts of the Middle East, you will need to check on specific border crossings and routes. Our tour operators can provide advice on the journey and on where to meet.

What to wear

For the walk you will need strong boots, walking socks, and a hat or headscarf that covers your head and neck. Because the trail goes through rural areas, both women and men are advised dress conservatively to show respect to these communities. We advise women to wear long pants, and either wear long-sleeved blouses or carry a scarf in their bag for covering shoulders and arms as needed. It's also best to avoid low-cut shirts, tank tops, or sheer clothing. Men can wear short-sleeved shirts, but are also advised to wear long pants. If you are walking in the summer, wearing light fabrics like linen and cotton can help keep you comfortable. In the winter, it can get cold and sweaters and rain gear are recommended. Women are not required to cover their heads except in mosques and other holy places.

See the packing list below for a definitive idea of what to wear and bring

Looking after your health

There are no special health issues concerned with walking in Palestine. The greatest risks are from heat stroke/exhaustion, sunburn, dehydration and traveller's diarrhoea. Walkers should take the usual health precautions, carry water at all times,

ensure that they drink only bottled water, protect themselves from the sun and carry a small personal first aid kit (*see 'packing list' below*). The UK's NHS Travel Health website offers detailed and reliable information about vaccinations and other travel related health issues (*see 'further information' below*).

Safety and security

The Palestinians are a friendly and hospitable people with legendary respect for guests and visitors to their land. The path in Palestine has been established just over a year and since then several hundred people from many countries, including the USA and UK, have walked all or part of the route without safety or security incidents of any kind. You will be walking in rural areas, and will be accompanied at all times by a professional Palestinian guide who knows, and is held in great respect and affection by, the communities along the route. Without exception, travellers on the Masar have been welcomed with warmth and kindness by the people of Palestine.

Despite the marked increase in security in the West Bank in recent years, it is clearly not possible for the Abraham Path Initiative or its partners to guarantee the personal safety of every traveller to Palestine. There is still an element of political tension and instability, and you will not fail to notice the Israeli military checkpoints and roadblocks, especially close to the settlements. **Travellers are advised to visit the website of their home government for detailed and up-to-date information about the security situation** in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (*see below for relevant web links*).

Petty travel-related crime – theft or pick pocketing - is extremely rare in Palestine, and unknown along the trail. Travellers should exercise normal caution and use common sense in the larger towns and cities.

Insurance

Travel insurance is your responsibility and you are strongly advised to take out adequate travel insurance before you travel, including emergency health care and repatriation cover.

Shopping

Street markets abound in all the major towns selling everything from fruit and vegetables to sweets, toys and small jewellery. Every village offers a roadside shop for drinks, food and snacks. Good quality souvenirs and clothes are best sought in Jerusalem's Old City where the covered markets offer hours of great browsing, but prices can be high.

Notes for walkers

Join an existing walk or group...

A number of small, guided group walks are scheduled for the autumn of 2010 and the spring of 2011. Contact our local tour operators (*see 'further information' below*).

Make your own itinerary...

Please contact our local tour operator if you wish to arrange a special tour or guided walk that suits the requirements of yourself, your family or friends. In general, the price will depend on the per-person cost (which obviously increases with a smaller group size), motor transport (expensive) and the number and distance of the excursions you require.

Walking with Children...

Although the Palestinian culture is itself very 'child-friendly', we do not recommend bringing children under the age of 12 due to the nature of the terrain, which can be challenging, and the limited facilities in the villages. Older children who are more adventurous and willing to eat local food might enjoy the journey. The path in Palestine has proved to be a memorable and even transformational event for some of the young teenagers who have walked the trail.

Equipment

No special walking equipment is needed, other than strong footwear and head covering. Hiking poles, while not essential, are very useful on this terrain, and we recommend that you bring them.

Carrying your gear

Baggage transfer between villages can be arranged, so you do not need to carry all your gear while you are hiking. Bring a small day-pack to carry with you on the walks, and one other small suitcase. If you're on a long trip and carrying a huge suitcase, it is probably best to leave this in Jerusalem before you begin the walk. If you want to backpack straight through carrying all your gear, that's fine – though we recommend that you keep the weight of the pack to not more than 10% - 15% of your body weight, plus your water bottle and water.

Contacts and further information

To make a booking, or for further information about the Path...

Michael Awad at **Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies** in Palestine

Tel: 972 2 274 8590

Email: michel@sirajcenter.org

Email: info@sirajcenter.org

Web: <http://www.sirajcenter.org/>

About travelling in Palestine...

The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism provides detailed information about the country:

<http://www.travelpalestine.ps/site/index.php>

Our local partners offer a range of alternative tourism programs in Palestine. More information at <http://www.sirajcenter.org/>

Safety and Security...

For UK nationals, the Foreign Office provides up-to-date travel information here:

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/middle-east-north-africa/israel-occupied>

For US citizens, the US Department of State offers up-to-date travel information

here: <http://www.state.gov/travel/>

Travel Health...

The following websites provide credible and up-to-date information about travel health issues...

UK's National Health Service

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/travelhealth/Pages/Travelhealthhome.aspx>

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia

<http://www.cdc.gov/>

Information about Heat Stroke / Exhaustion...

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Heat-exhaustion-and-heatstroke/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Information about Travellers Diarrhoea...

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/travellersdiarrhoea/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Recommended Packing List

- Boots or strong shoes, and walking socks
- Flip flops or other lightweight footwear for evenings
- Long sleeved shirts and full length trousers (for protecting limbs against scratches, sunburn etc)
- Hat or head covering
- Hiking poles (not essential, but very useful on this terrain)
- Water bottle
- Sunscreen – strong factor
- Light fleece or sweater, even in summer, for the evenings
- Light rain jacket (not needed in June, July, or August)
- Cotton sleeping-bag liner, if required
- Light pyjamas or suitable nightwear
- Small flashlight or head-torch
- Small first-aid kit (plasters, antiseptic wipes, oral rehydration salts, Compede or other blister treatment)
- Sanitary items and other basic pharmaceutical goods as required (not always available in villages)
- Camera

