

A walk down the wadi

This week the first local youth group ventured out for a winter walk on the Abraham Path. Here Daniel Adamson, the Initiative's Director of Path Development, gives a first hand account of the adventure



On Saturday morning a group of tourism students from Yarmouk University spent a day walking the Abraham Path in the Ajloun region of Jordan – the first of many thousands of young people who will, we hope, walk this way over the coming years. Together with their teacher, Dr. Khalid Magablih, the five young women and seven young men, all first year undergraduates at Yarmouk's department of tourism, came to learn about the Abraham Path, to meet some of the locals who live along the route, and to enjoy a day's winter walking in the northern highlands.

Having hauled themselves out of bed at first light on a Saturday morning the students were immediately faced with a half-hour presentation which their tutor, ever on the lookout for an educational opportunity, insisted that they follow in English, pausing to translate into Arabic only when he felt a word or a concept might not be clear to them. After the early start and the unanticipated lecture, the students filed outside into the freezing December rain. If some were regretting their decision to join this excursion, they kept it to themselves and struck out bravely for the first part of the walk.



Mahmoud Twaissi, the Abraham Path's National Field Coordinator in Jordan, speaking to the group before the walk



Setting out into the Wadi Rasun

And it was the walking that really did it. In the early winter light, with the last autumn color still clinging to the trees and their professor in his red *keffiyeh* and hiking boots, the self-conscious formality of the morning vanished into the easy chat and laughter of the hike. Quickly, the students lost their shyness and began to try out a few lines of English on me and on Margaret, a friend from Arizona who came along for the day. The rain stopped. Some of the girls picked the season's last blackberries from the wayside and ate them as we walked. The boys strode out ahead, full of laughter and attitude, preening and playing with their fancy cell phones. Two of the guys raced each into the village of Orjan, sprinting up a gradient that slowed the rest of us to a crawl and reminding some of us (who like to think that we're still young and fit) of just what it means to be 19. I couldn't help but smile as I watched them - the girls with their Italian-style quilted coats and colored training shoes, the guys all hair gel and elaborately pre-stressed jeans – filing past the tethered donkey, the old olive groves and the rain-drenched goats into the rural poverty of this village.



And yet for all their campus style, these young Jordanians still know and understand the traditions of their country. In the next village, Baoun, we were formally received in the home of the Imam, and the students were the model of courtesy. Sheikh Mohammed's son served the unsweetened black coffee, offered in tiny porcelain cups, which is the first ritual of hospitality in any Arab home, while the students listened to the Imam's account of how one of the 15th century's greatest scholars and mystic poets, a woman by the name of Aisha al Baouniya, rose from the obscurity of this village to achieve fame in the great centers of Islamic learning, Cairo and Damascus. At the request of their tutor, some of the group told Sheikh Mohammed what they'd learnt about the Abraham Path. And then, joined by Mr. Jamal, another village elder and leading local supporter of the

project, we were led downstairs to a table that was laden with roast chicken, platters of rice and salads, and deep bowls of fresh goat's yoghurt.



Left: Sheikh Mohammed presents lunch to the group. Right: Tamer tells Sheikh Mohammed about the Abraham Path.

Both local and western partners of the Abraham Path Initiative have been aware that walking in the landscape for pleasure is a culturally specific phenomenon – an attitude of mind and an activity which is taken for granted in much of Europe and the United States as part of our cultural inheritance, but which is quite alien to most of the world. This has been a worry to some, especially to those of us who live in the Middle East and who don't want the Abraham Path to develop into a hiking trail used only by foreign tourists. It was for this reason that, for me, the highlight of the walk came close to the end of the day.

By the time lunch was over and we stepped outside, the sun was already descending towards the Palestinian hills in the west. The drive home was long, and the girls had to be back in their homes before dark. Dr. Magablih told the students that we'd have to be getting back to the bus and, though my Arabic is still weak, I understood enough to follow the response from the group of girls: "Oh Sir! Can't we walk a little longer? We've still got ages! Please, can we just walk as far as Mar Elyas?"

And so the first youth group to walk on the Abraham Path – many of whom had never been out hiking in their lives - had to be cajoled back towards the bus and placated with promises of walks still to come.

Endnote: From the very beginning the stated aims of Abraham Path Initiative included the hope that the Path would serve as a forum for the energy, the idealism, and the creativity of young people - and especially for the young people of the Middle East. As it develops, this Path will provide a space in which a love nature can be cultivated, leadership can be fostered, economic initiative rewarded, voluntary service encouraged, landscapes preserved and cultural sites restored. At the end of the first Abraham Path youth walk, the Abraham Path Initiative extends its gratitude to Dr. Khalid Magablih and Miss. Rafa Haddad at Yarmouk University's department of tourism, and in particular to the twelve young people who have represented their peers with such integrity, courtesy, and good humor.



Local partners of the Abraham Path welcome a university-based partner to their village. Left to Right: Mr. Jamal, Sheikh Mohammed, and Dr. Khalid Magablih