

What is a homestay?

Homestays are an accommodation option in which guests stay in the home of a local family, eating meals with them and participating in daily life of the host community.

Why do homestays exist?

Homestays serve a variety of functions along the Abraham Path and form a core component of the Path vision.

First, homestays fill a very important **practical need**. While a few cities and towns along the Path do have hotels and other formal accommodations, smaller towns and villages have no accommodations infrastructure and do not have enough demand to warrant a formal hotel. The Path becomes much more accessible when hikers are able to eat and sleep in host families, especially in areas where camping is not feasible. Nothing feels better after a long day of walking than arriving to a cozy home, having a hot shower, eating nourishing home-cooked food and sleeping on a bed or mat indoors.

Other than meeting hikers' practical needs, homestays provide a valuable **window into local culture**. Travelers meet local people, participate in local culture, eat local foods, and generally experience authentic everyday life. Don't be surprised if you are swept up into your host family's life as an honorary member. You may visit neighbors, attend a wedding, try your hand at baking bread over a fire, milk a goat, and learn phrases in the local language.

Homestays do not only benefit hikers, but also **provide income in rural areas** where other methods of income generation do not exist. This income benefits the host families individually as well as the larger community and contributes to better health and hygiene, increased educational opportunities, and helps to keep families together where men may otherwise have to leave the village in order to find work.

This income generation is also **empowering to women**, who are able to utilize their traditional hospitality skills of food preparation, cleaning and making guests feel extremely welcome. This work is acceptable even in more conservative areas where women do not traditionally work outside of the home.

Another advantage of homestays is that the Path develops **strong local partners and stakeholders who can communicate the vision and purpose of the Path** within their communities, directly contributing to the long-term success of the project. Homestays also give local families the opportunity to meet and know a variety of people from around the world, helping to open up their worldview and create relationships of goodwill across national, religious and political lines. Local communities also have the opportunity to work with other local communities to facilitate hiker services, such as luggage transfer, thereby strengthening bonds between diverse communities.

What to expect in your homestay experience:

Staying in a homestay is different than staying in a traditional accommodation, so it is important to **prepare yourself for a unique experience**. Being immersed in a difference culture can be exhilarating and educational, but also may push guests a bit beyond their comfort zones.

Expect to **be treated like family** and to be cared for very intentionally. You will likely be offered a constant stream of drinks, snacks, and meals with great concern that you are taken care of. Teacups are refilled as soon as they are set down empty, plates may be refilled until you are completely stuffed! This care is humbling and beautiful, but can sometimes feels invasive for people who are accustomed to a lot of personal space and privacy.

While some of the host families speak English quite well, or have at least one family member who can translate, there may be times when **family members may not speak English**. This can sometimes feel awkward, especially for more introverted guests. Don't be afraid to just sit in silence and enjoy being together. Some guests bring some family photos or other item for "show and tell" as a conversation piece. Learning just a few words or phrases in the host's language goes a long way with showing your appreciation and respect for local culture. You may be surprised at how well you can communicate with hand gestures and charades.

Host families vary in their income, and **some houses will be more simple and basic**. In Palestine and Jordan, guests usually have their own bedroom, while in Turkey, all guests normally sleep on mats in the living room of the house (the family sleeps in another room). In Bedouin tents, sleeping is generally dormitory-style on mats in one large tent. Bathrooms in Palestine and Jordan typically have western-style toilets, while in Turkey most families have squat-style toilets in outhouses. All hosting facilities have warm showers available, though be considerate of water shortages by trying to take a short shower.

In more conservative communities, **gender roles and expectations are very clearly defined** and men and women may be separated for much of the time. Take your cue from your host as to whether you can shake hands with members of the opposite gender (if they reach for your hand, accept, if not, simply speak a greeting with your right hand over your heart). Be careful not to be overly friendly with locals of the opposite gender, and refrain from hugging, putting your arm around, or in any way touching people of the opposite gender. Public displays of affection should also be avoided.

Both men and women should **dress appropriately**, wearing long pants/trousers (and in Turkey, women should wear long skirts). Women should also avoid sleeveless tops and anything low-cut. Women do not need to cover their heads except when visiting a mosque.

Families will make an effort to accommodate **dietary restrictions**, so please make them known as early as possible. The most common foods you may encounter at host families are rice, chicken, roasted vegetables, lentils, fresh salads, bread, soup, yogurt, olives and fresh fruit. Coffee, tea, bottled water and juices are commonly offered to drink; Alcohol is rarely available (with the possible exception of Palestinian Christian communities).

Children are universally loved and doted on in communities along the Path, and many children will express interest and curiosity in visitors. Feel free to play with children and you may even make their day by kicking a football or playing cards with them. However, please **do not give money, candy, pens or other gifts to children** as this can lead to chronic begging and expectations of handouts. If you wish to contribute, contact Abraham's Path for location specific projects at info@abrahampath.org

Be careful with topics that may be sensitive or painful for local people, such as money/finances, politics and religion. Other possible sensitive topics include sexuality (arranged marriages, polygamy, cohabitation, homosexuality, etc.) and gender roles and expectations. The majority of homestay hosts are Muslim, and it is very important that guests avoid any proselytization, handing out of tracts/Bibles, etc. Also, be careful to follow through on any promises you make to the family, for example if you offer to send photos or postcards or return to visit in the future.

In spite of some of the small challenges of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication, **expect host families to be a lot of fun!** Great food, warmth and laughter characterize many homestay experiences, which are a highlight for many travelers on Abraham's Path.

Other Accommodation Options:

Many larger towns and cities along Abraham's Path offer **hotels, hostels and guest houses**, and if you prefer this option it may be possible to taxi on and off the trail each day to the nearest hotel. **Camping** is an option in certain areas, although environmental and political restrictions limit camping possibilities on some stages of the Path.