



EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM IN PALESTINIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES:

“ABRAHAM’S PATH”

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Introduction: The economy of the Palestinian territories, hampered by years of conflict, occupation, and insecurity remains dependent on foreign aid with the public sector remaining the largest employer. In the short term it is imperative that donors continue to provide support to the Palestinian Authority (PA) budget, and that the PA presses ahead with the reform agenda which has slowed in recent months. Such actions will serve to sustain the important gains made in developing institutional capability, build confidence and ease the current crisis situation.

However, it is critical that serious efforts are made to look at medium term measures that can reverse current negative trends and put the Palestinian economy on a path to sustainable growth. This must be through efforts to promote private sector led economic growth in the Palestinian territories. This will necessarily depend upon increasing private investment to enable the PA to expand the tax base, create jobs and significantly reduce its dependence on donor aid.² In 2012, youth unemployment (Ages 15-29) reached 32% in the Palestinian territories.³ Although women’s participation in the economy is a priority of the PA and women have benefited from the PA’s long-term investment in health and education, women’s

participation in the labor force (16%) is lower than the MENA average of 26%.



Tourism in Palestine: The Palestinian tourism industry has the necessary infrastructure, facilities and attractions to become a viable and independent destination. However, the industry is not developed fully across the value chain resulting in leakages of tourism revenue. More than 2 million foreign tourist visited Palestine in 2010 and that number continued to increase in 2011 and 2012. Total overnight stays in Palestinian hotels increased by 40% in 2010 reaching a record high 1,400,000 (including both foreign and domestic overnight stays and staying in East Jerusalem overnights). Overnight stays by foreign visitors to the West Bank increased by 51%, however, about 76% of overnight stays were in the Bethlehem area and not geographically spread throughout the West Bank.

Rural areas did not benefit from the recent growth, and were excluded from the mainstream tourism routes. Both public and

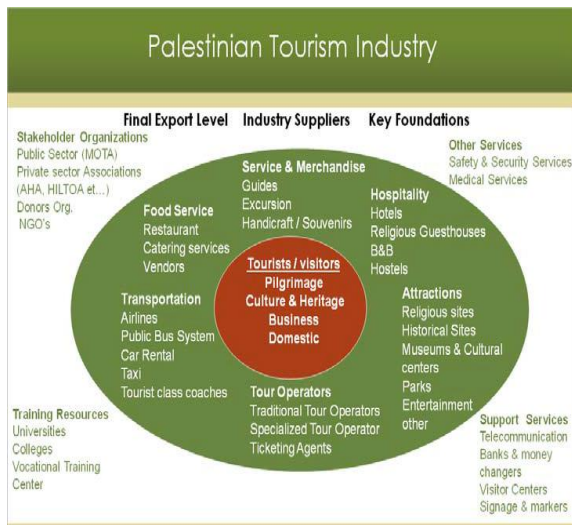
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² World Bank report to AHLC meeting, Sept. 2012

³ PCBS labor survey, Q2-2012

private sectors are investing millions of dollars in developing, restoring and upgrading the industry. Between 2000 and 2009 the private sector re-invested close to USD 300 million into the sector. Hotels, recreational parks and resorts, restaurants, cultural centers, and new transportation fleets were all among the key investments over the past 5 years.⁴

Despite the fact that the number of visitors to Palestine is on the rise, Palestine's share of regional tourism arrivals and revenues remains small. On the export side, Palestine offers a mixture of tangible (places / sites) and intangible (experiences). These components revolve around religious, cultural and historical sites coupled with other intangible elements such as Palestinian hospitality and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, Palestine has been unable to fully recognize and/or develop potential export products. Every natural, historical or cultural site is the basis for a tourism attraction for the right market segment.



Alternative Business Solutions, Palestine - May 2009

On the supply side, the economic value is created by various stakeholders at primary and secondary levels; the primary level consists of elements where the visitor makes direct expenditures as part of the overall visit such as accommodation, restaurants, retail stores, entertainment and events, while the secondary level is composed of the intermediaries

between the tourist and the destination such as airline carriers, travel agents and tour operators. In most cases, international travel agents are the primary channel for arrangements to the target country. The Tertiary level includes the suppliers that directly support these establishments such as agriculture and construction industries - as well as a wide range of business and technology service providers. For Palestine to successfully compete and get its share of regional tourism arrivals, it needs to diversify its tourism offering and promote its richness in cultural, historical and natural resources.⁵

Palestinian Tourism Strategy: In 2010, the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA) released a national strategy that carried the vision of "promoting the national image of Palestine as a safe, hospitable, independent destination, rich in religious, cultural, historical and natural resources". The objectives of the master plan are to increase the number of visitors, diversify the type of visitors, increase the time and money spent in the host communities, and increase the geographical spread throughout the West Bank. The latter element is of key importance to grow tourism as a sector which lifts the Palestinian economy beyond the traditional hub of the Bethlehem area (which presently attracts the vast majority of visitors) and also offers opportunities to rural areas where socio-economic development is lagging. While religious pilgrimage will remain at the core of Palestine's tourism offer, the industry has identified other segments as potential opportunities, including cultural heritage tourism, eco-tourism, experiential tourism, domestic tourism and foreign independent travelers.⁶

Experiential Tourism around the World: Experiential tourism is a combination of adventure and community oriented tourism. Adventure tourism is an activity seeking the challenges and rewards of adventure in natural surroundings. It is frequently carried out independently but also in organized groups.

⁴ Master Plan for Developing Tourism in Bethlehem, MOTA 2011

⁵ Palestinian Tourism Industry Review, CARANA/ USAID 2009
⁶ National Tourism Strategy of Palestine, MOTA 2010

The people concerned are generally medium to high income, seeking respite from the pressures and routine of urban lives. They pay high prices for holidays that may involve risk and will certainly involve some physical hardship. Unlike mass tourism, the benefits pass directly through all levels of society. Adventure tourism is undoubtedly big business: independent British travelers – many of them ‘back packers’ and adventure tourists – took 18,000,000 holidays abroad in 2003.⁷ According to the benchmark Adventure Tourism Market Report, published by The George Washington University in partnership with the Adventure Travel Trade Association and Xola Consulting, adventure travelers spent more than US\$89 billion on worldwide adventure tourism in 2009, excluding airfare and gear/clothing, on which they spent an additional US\$53 billion.⁸

Walking trails are of huge importance within the adventure and community tourism segments. Significant economic contributions come from ramblers and backpackers such as those walking Scotland’s ‘West Highland Way’ – a 96 mile (154 km) trail which supports the equivalent of 168 full time jobs and brings in US\$5.4 million (£3.5 m) to the rural communities through which it passes. One thousand guidebooks to the Hadrian’s Wall Trail were sold within three months of its opening, during which time, over 3,500 people walked the route.⁹ The best known long distance walking trail in the world –the Camino de Santiago in France and Spain- attracts over 170,000 people a year who walk a minimum of 62 miles (100 km) on the trail.

Experiential Tourism: Promoting Women and Youth Employment: Given the variety of jobs tourism creates across skills levels – from facilities maintenance to curators, architects, and city managers – and the sector’s ability to promote economic development in rural communities, the sector is well placed to employ youth and women. However, in many

MENA countries, there are acute shortages of labor trained in tourism-related customer service, with language skills, and sufficient professionalism. Moreover, socio-cultural factors may make it difficult for women to work in the sector. In much of MENA there is a cultural preference for women to stay at home, and in some communities there is a cultural wariness around working in tourism. In the area of experiential tourism, however, projects can innovate around the concept of women’s employment within accepted boundaries set by their societies. In rural areas, women are the main hosts who manage and prepare lodging and food while staying in and around the house. This type of employment can empower women and generate income, while affirming the region’s traditional value of hospitality. Strategic investments are needed in tourism-related vocational training (e.g. guiding), work-readiness programs, and language training for women and youth to take advantage of these employment opportunities. Skills upgrading is particularly important in rural areas, where literacy and formal education are low.¹⁰



Abraham's Path (Masar Ibrahim al Khalil): Abraham's Path is a route of walking and cultural tourism following the footsteps and memory of Abraham/Ibrahim across the Middle East.¹¹ The complete Path presently consists of a 270 miles (430 km) route but it may

⁷ New Opportunities for Mountaineering, Adventure and Desert Sports, Tony Howard and Di Taylor, March 2006

⁸ Adventure travel trade association (www.adventuretravelnews.com), August 2010

⁹ New Opportunities for Mountaineering, Adventure and Desert Sports, Tony Howard and Di Taylor, March 2006

¹⁰ A Strategy To Promote Recovery, Economic Diversification and Job Creation, MENA Quick Note # 78, The World Bank, January 2013

¹¹ The Initiative is a socio-economic and cultural project connecting East and West and not affiliated with or endorsing any religion or religious message. Along the route, the Initiative and its local partners highlight Abrahamic culture and memory in the widest sense of the term and in particular emphasising the ethos and values of hospitality and kindness to strangers which are present across the Middle East.

eventually cross 3,100 miles (5000 km) and ten countries in the Middle East. With local partners and an international NGO, Abraham's Path Initiative (API), is uncovering the footsteps of Abraham as a walking route for local and international visitors. The route presently starts at the birth place of Abraham in Urfa (also called Sanliurfa) and ends at his burial site in Hebron, Palestine. Since 2008, some 3,250 travelers have walked the Path, the majority of them passing through 21 rural communities and villages in Jordan and Palestine. Walkers contribute to the local economy by staying in villages with families in so-called homestays, buying homemade meals, and walking with local guides through attractive natural and archeological spots between rural communities.

Nearly 114 miles (182 km) of trail has been identified in Palestine, with hospitality, local guiding, and homestay houses in communities along its way. The Palestinian segment of the Path passes 13 communities and villages in areas A, B and C in the Palestinian West Bank; starting from Nablus in the North of the West Bank, and ending in Hebron in the south. In Israel, a 30-mile (48 km) segment of the Path from Arad to Be'er Sheva has been scouted and includes sites linked to Abraham such as Tel Sheva, Tel Arad, various Bedouin villages, the Falahin village of Derjat and Abraham's Well in



Abraham's Path in the West Bank, Palestine

the city of Be'er Sheva. People from different backgrounds - Jews and Arabs - have worked together to make the path come to life in this area.

Abraham's Path in the West Bank represents an innovative approach to tackling rural development, employment and women's empowerment in communities normally excluded from tourism and disconnected from one another. The initiative deliberately targets under-privileged small rural communities with little infrastructure, with the objectives of supporting job creation and reduced poverty for unemployed Palestinians (especially women and youth), empowering women in rural communities, supporting integration of conflict-affected populations and build social cohesion (across areas A, B, and C), and developing the tourism infrastructure to diversify and increase number of visitors, increase their spending in rural communities, and expand their geographical spread throughout the West Bank.

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