

A Code of Conduct for Tourism in the Holy Land

A Palestinian Initiative

Responsible and just forms of tourism offer communities opportunities to share their cultures, tell their stories, request solidarity and foster tolerance and greater understanding. This is the principle that has shaped this Code of Conduct which has been developed to inform pilgrims and tourists of the reality of Palestine and Palestinians and to seek their support in using tourism to transform contemporary injustices. At the same time, the Code aims to raise awareness amongst Palestinian tourism stakeholders of how tourism in Palestine can be transformed and enhanced to truly benefit both hosts and visitors.

■ The Context of Palestine

The establishment of just and responsible tourism for Palestine and Palestinians requires an understanding of political context and history, for it is these that set the constraints and barriers within which Palestinian tourism has to operate. The Code addresses these directly – and, by doing so, attempts to overcome them.

Palestine is a unique tourist destination – its long history, religious significance and natural beauty make it an amazing place to visit. Palestine's importance derives partly from the fact that it is home to the three monotheistic and Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Every year it attracts many pilgrims, people of faith and scholars who visit the holy places. Secular tourists come to explore the historical sites, Palestine's vibrant cities, rural life and nature reserves.

However, since the beginning of the 20th century Palestine has seen complicated changes in its political circumstances. These have included the creation of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 war. As a result of the latter, Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. These events have created catastrophic political, economic and social facts which have deeply affected the life of the Palestinian people, most of whom became refugees. In many ways Palestine itself was simply wiped off the map, historic Palestine coming to be known as Israel. In this context tourism became a political tool in the supremacy and domination of the Israeli establishment over land and people, and an instrument for preventing the Palestinians from enjoying the benefits and the fruits of the cultural and human interaction on which tourism thrives. Despite the fact that Israel signed the Oslo Agreements with the PLO in the 1990s and recognised the establishment of the Palestinian Authority to administer some of the Palestinian territories, namely the West Bank and Gaza Strip, many areas of life in those areas are still under Israeli control. For example, Israel controls all access

to Palestine (land and sea borders as well as access from the airport), most of the Palestinian water resources, and all movement of people and goods from, to and within Palestine. These facts have significant impacts on the development of tourism in the Palestinian territories and the dissemination of information to tourists. Jerusalem – the heart of tourism in the region – has been illegally annexed to Israel, filled with illegal settlements, besieged, surrounded by checkpoints, and encircled by the Apartheid Wall, all of which has resulted in the city's isolation from its social and geographical surroundings.

Despite all this, the touristic, historic, and holy places found in Israel and the Palestinian territories are united. They cannot be separated from each other. In this regard what we are asking tourists to do is to visit both Israel and Palestine rather than choose to visit just one or the other. This is the route towards more fairness and justice.

Tourism in Palestine provides visitors with a particularly rewarding and enriching experience. Not only may the tourist discover the beauty, spirituality and hospitality of the country but also come to encounter some of the political, economic, and social facts on the ground that shape the daily lives of Palestinians. This is as it should be for much can be gained – both by tourists and by their Palestinian hosts – from a proper relationship between the two. Too often the contact is very slight, consisting of rapid, coach driven, visits to the Nativity church in Bethlehem (with a souvenir shop on the way) – a style of tourism that derives from the fact that much of the itinerary is controlled by Israel and the processes of the Israeli tourism industry. Our Code, on the other hand, seeks to contribute to a more general effort to re-engage the tourist with Palestinian land and people in such a way that will benefit local communities, reduce over exploitation of a small number of iconic sites, and also reduce the pollution that results from coach driven mass tourism in the Palestinian towns and cities (especially Bethlehem).

Therefore, we urge you, the tourist, to consider visiting the Palestinian cities, towns and villages and to allow time for encounters with the population living in these places. We believe that in this way, tourism will realise its potential for both you and us. At the same time, we call

on the local community to interact positively and in a respectful way with pilgrims and tourists, and to renounce small-mindedness and exploitation of visitors. We should all remember that visits by tourists to the country are an opportunity for cultural, social and human exchange.

The Vision of the Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism

The Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism (PIRT) is a network of organisations, associations and public bodies committed to work for responsible tourism to the Holy Land and to act as advocates for this approach to tourism. We are committed to transforming the current tourism patterns in the Holy Land by encouraging pilgrims and tourists to include Palestinian cities, towns and villages in their itineraries in order to achieve a more equal distribution of tourism revenues to all people in this land. Based on our belief that both tourists and hosts can be enriched by human encounters through tourism, we invite travellers to meet the Palestinian people and explore their culture. We strive to create opportunities for local communities to become involved in tourism activities and to earn a fair income from the process. We believe that protecting and preserving the environment is of utmost importance, and thus we are searching for less harmful ways of providing tourism services. We call on all service providers to commit themselves to responsible business practices and to renounce exploitative behaviour. Our objective is to promote a just and responsible tourism in Palestine that benefits the Palestinian people, pilgrims, tourists and all other stakeholders in tourism in the country without harming local communities.

The Code of Conduct

A. Travellers to the Holy Land

Preparation

To prepare your trip to Palestine, we encourage you to consider including the following in your preparation:

1. Choose an inclusive and balanced itinerary that allows you to visit and stay in different places.
2. Educate yourself by reading guidebooks, travel accounts and articles about current news and events.
3. Establish contact with Palestinians to get up-to-date information about the current situation, safety, local history, culture and customs.
4. Approach travelling with a desire to learn rather than just observe. Leave prejudices behind.

Your trip

Adopting a considerate attitude towards the people you encounter, the environment, and host communities when travelling in Palestine helps to make sure that your trip is beneficial both for you as a tourist and for the hosts.

5. Your attitude:
 - Respect and learn about the local culture. Although taking pictures is in general welcome, be aware of people's sensitivity about being photographed: always ask first for their approval.
 - Observe local customs. Respect local dress codes and dress modestly.
 - Interact and spend time with local people. Be aware that your cultural values may differ from theirs. They may, for example, have different concepts of time, personal space, communication and society. They are not wrong or inferior, just different.
6. Your behaviour:
 - Be aware of short-sighted emotional reactions, such as giving money out of compassion. This can be offensive.
 - Make sure that you encounter and engage with the local communities who are struggling for the respect of their dignity.

- Support communities in a responsible way, without encouraging them to change their customs in order to adopt yours.
 - When visiting holy sites, allow members of the respective religious community to guide you.
7. Your use of natural resources:
 - Co-operate with locals in conserving precious natural resources. Commit yourself to a moderate use when possible.
 - Be open to experience local standards rather than expecting to find the same conditions as in your home town and/or country.
 8. Support the local economy:
 - Appreciate local expertise by paying adequately.
 - Buy local products.
 - Contribute to ensuring that tourism has a beneficial outcome for the local community.
 - Use local transportation, guides, accommodation, restaurants and markets to benefit the local economy. Consider giving tips where customary.
 9. Remember that the people you encounter have lived under military occupation for many years. Be sensitive when discussing related topics and listen to their points of view.
 10. Be inspired by the pilgrim’s journey: take your time to live and experience the daily life of the local people.

Returning home

When you return from Palestine do not hesitate to share your experiences with friends and relations. Your Palestinian hosts will be very happy to know that you keep them in your mind and that you tell their and your stories. In this way, you can strengthen the human side of tourism and enhance its benefits to communities and individuals.

11. Share your experience:
 - Think of creating links between your community and the community you visited.
 - Tell the stories of the people you met.
 - Discuss and debrief with other members of your group (if you travelled together with others).
 - Share with your family; inform your community; write articles.
12. Stick to the commitments you made during your trip:
 - Remember the promises you made to the local people you met and honour them.
 - Keep the people in your thoughts, pray for them and act when your actions are needed.
13. Allow yourself to be enriched by learning experiences:
 - Question your stereotypes/generalisations, both the ones you had before the trip and the ones emerging from your experience abroad.
 - Address prejudices and injustice where you meet them.
14. Take action:
 - Learn about the involvement and responsibilities of your home country in the Middle East. Expose and confront them when they have been unfair.
 - Address statements you do not agree with, such as inaccurate tourism brochures, stereotyped views of Palestine in conversation and inaccurate or biased media portrayals.
 - Confront statements you don’t agree with, e.g. in tourism brochures, etc.

B. The Palestinian Tourism Sector

Whilst Palestine has been a destination for travellers for many centuries, the development of a tourism industry that provides services to a large number of tourists is still rather recent. Indeed, the development has not yet been completed and new capacities are being added. Despite this, we believe that the time has come to work towards a more sustainable development of the sector. Therefore, as representatives of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and private companies, associations and civil society organisations, we call on all tourism stakeholders in Palestine to commit to the practices and policies introduced in this Code of Conduct.

Your behaviour towards tourists: treat them honestly and with respect

1. Respect the religious belief of visitors and the freedom of religious worship. Appreciate cultural diversity. Respect ways of dressing and food preferences of visitors.
2. Tour guides: Provide accurate and useful information to tourists that covers the religious, social and cultural dimensions of Palestine. Do not just tell stories that visitors want to hear and do not repeat stereotypes. Instead of doing this, challenge the visitors by presenting different interpretations. Be aware of your unique role as a tour guide: visitors will draw conclusions about Palestinians from your behaviour.
3. Local communities, tour guides and employees in the tourism sector: Help tourists when they are in need. Be hospitable. Interact with visitors on a human level, do not limit your interactions to economic/financial exchanges.
4. Authority: The tourist police and other official bodies should deal with tourists in a respectful way.
5. Authority and local communities: Undertake efforts to prevent negative and irresponsible behaviour like begging from tourists and exploiting them.

Your responsibility towards local communities. Bear in mind that local businesses have a responsibility towards the people they employ and the communities whose resources they use.

6. Pay fair wages.
7. Distribute the income fairly amongst product producers, providers, sellers and intermediaries.
8. Sell national and local products and handicrafts to tourists. Consider adopting fair trade standards.
9. Develop means of communication and opportunities for interaction between Palestinians and tourists.

Engage in human and cultural exchanges for these can increase the benefits from tourism to Palestinian communities.

10. Create opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism, such as home stay arrangements, etc.
11. Increase networking amongst churches and international organisations to explain the Palestinian narrative to complete the picture of people who are familiar with the more well-known Israeli narrative.

Improve the Palestinian tourism offer and its itineraries, making them more unique.

12. Develop the competence of the workforce in the tourism industry and their knowledge of Palestinian identity and history. Further, train tour guides in contemporary issues. Develop the awareness of people interacting with tourists (guides, taxi drivers, host families, etc.).
13. Integrate culture and heritage into tourist programmes. Improve the image of Palestine through organizing festivals, conferences, workshops and use these cultural events to encourage tourists to spend longer periods of time in Palestine.
14. Improve marketing of local handicrafts and national products.
15. Raise awareness that programmes of Palestinian travel agencies should include all different aspects of Palestine, i.e. religion, politics, economics, cultural heritage and leisure.

Our responsibility towards the environment

16. Introduce environment-friendly principles to the operation of hotels, guest houses and restaurants and inform your guests about your standards. Increase the environmental awareness among Palestinians and provide a tourism that respects the environment.

Responsible business practices in the tourism industry

17. Increase transparency in business practices and engage in ethical competition which does not harm the value of tourism.
18. Tourists have the right to fair prices and full enjoyment of their trips.

■ Establishing the Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct has been drafted following extensive consultations both locally within Palestine and internationally with those organisations and individuals committed to responsible tourism and justice. It is a living document which invites engagement, comment and feedback for further improvement in achieving its objectives. You can help us to improve it by sending your feedback to pirt@atg.ps.