

The Holy Land from a Different Perspective



The Holy Land acts as a focal point for the pilgrimages of the Abrahamic religions Judaism Christianity and Islam and the Baha'i Faith. From the earliest days of Christianity pilgrims were those who made a long journey to the Holy Land to venerate pray and meditate at the places associated with the life of Christ.

While the main purpose of religious oriented travel is a spiritual experience travelers are now looking for a blend of religious and non religious activities. They want to go on a pilgrimage and have a vacation. Enrich their lives while enjoying themselves visiting the Holy Land.

Local tour operators developed special programmes to introduce pilgrims to historical, architectural, cultural and archeological significance of places on their itineraries and other lesser known sites. Many places in the region remain undiscovered for the common visitors yet they are definitely worth seeing.

St. Nicolas Orthodox Church in Beit Jala

Beit Jala is a town 10 kilometers from Bethlehem. Thousands of people come to the Beit Jala St. Nicholas Festival, honoring the town's patron saint. Street parades, fun fairs, performances, and religious processions are all part of the celebration in this predominantly Christian town. Roman Catholics and Lutherans participate with the Greek Orthodox majority in the city-wide celebration.



In AD 305 monks from Anatolia in Asia Minor, came and established a monastery with several caves and houses. When St. Nicholas made his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, tradition holds he lived in one of these caves from 312–315.

The cave currently houses an icon of St. Nicolas and an eternal flame that remains lit in honor of him. An ancient monastery was built on the site as early as 200 AD, and was destroyed and rebuilt many times. The church shows off much of the work of Beit Jala's famous stone masons, including a magnificent Iconostas, considered a masterpiece of stone iconography.

St. Nicholas' Day is part of a three-day celebration beginning with St. Barbara on December 17, then St. Saba on the 18th, and culminating in St. Nicholas Day on the 19th. The day begins at 7:30 am with St. Nicholas Liturgy, lasting until noon. Then a procession goes to the cave beneath St Nicholas Church where the saint stayed when in Beit Jala. Later in the afternoon everyone goes to the Orthodox Club social hall for a concert given by local church choirs.

Al Khader

St. George, known as "Al Khader" or "the Green One," is also the name of the village in which his church is located 5 kilometers west of Bethlehem. The site of al-Khader was first inhabited by the Canaanites in 1953; five arrowheads of javelins dating from the 11th century BC were discovered in al-Khader with Canaanite inscriptions. The translations were "dart of 'Abd Labi't".

Al-Khader is named after Saint George. According to local tradition, Saint George was imprisoned in al-Khader where the current Monastery of St. George stands. The chains holding him were relics that were said to hold healing power.

Christians from Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala and Muslims from al-Khader flock to the monastery to celebrate the Feast of Saint George in early May. The feast occurs annually on 5 May, and although it is originally a local Christian holiday, both Palestinian Christians and Muslims participate. On the morning of 6 May, Greek Orthodox Christians from the area march in a procession to the monastery.



The 12th-century Crusader Church of the Resurrection in Abu Ghosh

Abu-Gosh is an Arab village with small Christian groups, located a few kilometers from Jerusalem on what is today, and what was historically, the main road to Jerusalem from the central and coastal regions. During the Crusader Period the village was ascribed as the place where Jesus showed himself after his resurrection to two disciples who were walking together along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

The Monastery was built by the Knights Hospitallers in 1142 atop three Roman cisterns. The walls of the crypt are the walls of the Roman cistern – and there are steps down into the water bubbling from a spring.

The monastery is one of the most beautiful buildings preserved from the Crusader Period, and can still

be visited. It is located in the heart of a well-tended garden with ancient trees. Impressive frescoes are painted on the inner walls, and a fountain flows from the crypt at the base of the monastery.



Kursi: Jesus Healing a Madman in Gadarenes/Gergesa

The Gospels tell how Jesus heals a madman, after sailing across the Sea of Galilee and landing in the Country of Gadarenes (Gader, south east corner of the lake). He drives out the demons into a herd of swine, which "ran violently down a steep place into the sea and were choked in the sea".

Kursi is located 500 m east from the shores of the Sea of Galilee, on the foothills of the Golan Heights. Talmud text lists towns with pagan worships, and includes Kursi as a gentile town at the times of Jesus. This makes sense, as the pigs were raised on a non-Jewish farm since their meat is forbidden for Jews.

The remains of the largest Byzantine monastery in Israel came to light accidentally. Excavations restored the ruins of a 5-6th Century church and monastery.

“My pilgrimage to the lands of the Bible would not be complete without a visit to Bethlehem, the City of David and the birthplace of Jesus Christ.” Excerpt from His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI’s Welcoming Ceremony in Bethlehem Wednesday, 13 May 2009.

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