

## The West Bank on a shoestring: A day along the hottest new tourist trail

**A niche industry is developing in the West Bank, with Israeli companies organizing tours for independent travelers wishing to see what life is really like beyond the Green Line. Haaretz joins the day-trippers.**

By Judy Maltz | Jun.22, 2013 | 9:11 AM |



Restaurant in Bethlehem Photo by Anne Hoag

Our day begins with a stroll through the Aida refugee camp, a few kilometers north of Bethlehem, where we get our first close-up view of the separation fence and a short lecture from our Palestinian guide, Tamer, on the history of the occupation. From there we proceed to the Church of the Nativity, making a brief detour along the way so Tamer can point out the political graffiti murals painted around the town by British street artist Banksy.

After a break for lunch at a local restaurant, we head to Jericho, which claims to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, for a tour of its archaeological attractions along with some shopping. From there, it's on to Qasr el-Yahud, the site on the Jordan River where Jesus is believed to have been baptized. Back in our minibus, we drive through olive grove orchards to the village of Taibeh, for a tour of its well-known brewery, winding down with a visit to Yasser Arafat's tomb in Ramallah, a stroll through the bustling downtown, and drinks at a cafe popular among Palestinian high society.



**A Banksy wall mural in Bethlehem Photo by Anne Hoag**

The tour, aptly titled Best of the West Bank, is part of a new and budding Israeli niche industry: organized tours to the West Bank that include not only the mandatory Christian sites, but also some politics and culture thrown in for good measure.

Abraham Tours, a Jerusalem-based tour operator that caters to independent travelers and offers this particular tour once a week, is the latest to hop on the bandwagon, but it's certainly not alone: Green Olive Tours, based near Tel Aviv, already sensed a potential business opportunity a few years ago. Other providers have been operating out of East Jerusalem even longer, but prefer not to be called Israeli.

Building on both the relative calm over the Green Line and the growing number of independent travelers discovering Israel in recent years, these self-described "alternative" tours offer an array of itineraries designed for different interests, budgets and time constraints. They've also benefited from the fact that most Israeli car rental agencies don't provide insurance for foreign drivers in the West Bank, making it quite challenging for independent travelers to explore these parts on their own – if they haven't already been deterred by the elaborate checkpoint system in place along the Green Line.

Since these alternative tour operators don't pay commissions to hotels or other booking agencies, they typically charge less for trips to the West Bank than their mainstream equivalents, who tend to focus almost exclusively on Christian religious sites – another distinction that sets them apart.

Quite a few NGOs, both international and Israeli, also organize tours to the West Bank. These, though, tend to target social and political activists with very defined agendas, and aren't as suitable for travelers just seeking to learn about the conflict and also keen on visiting sights of religious and historical interest.

Not all the tours cover as much ground in a day as Best of the West Bank. Green Olive Tours, for example, runs a tour that devotes an entire day just to Nablus, which includes visits to the church of Jacob's Well's and the Balata refugee camp; meetings with representatives of local women's organizations; a stroll through the casbah (best known to Israelis as the site of some fierce battles during the second intifada); a tour of a local soap factory; a visit to a spice shop; and a stop at a local sweet shop reputed to make the best knafeh – a traditional Palestinian pastry – in the region. There's also a short trip at the end of the tour to Mount Gerizim, for a visit with Samaritans.

Abraham Tours has its own version of the single destination tour – this one to Hebron, but with a unique twist. It's a dual-narrative tour, so participants get to meet both Palestinians and Jewish settlers, while visiting the

biblical city. Initially launched on a weekly basis about a year ago, this particular tour has become so popular that, as of this summer, it's being offered twice a week.

For those interested in packing in a bit more, both operators offer tours that cover several destinations in a day. Travelers can opt for tours that focus on the central or northern West Bank, some of which also include visits to Jewish settlements in the vicinity as well. Alternatively, they can limit themselves to two major destinations in a day – Bethlehem and Ramallah, say, or Bethlehem and Hebron. And if time is not a factor, they can choose three-, four- or five-day tours of the West Bank, possibly even considering the seven-day Palestine Experience tour, or 10-day Palestine Immersion tours offered by Green Olive.



Vendors in Ramallah's bustling downtown Photo by Anne Hoag

“All these tours have been a response to growing interest and demand,” says Gal Mor, a partner and manager in Abraham Tours, which naturally feeds off the built-in clientele supplied by its sister company, the Jerusalem-based Abraham Hostel (recently voted one of the best large hostels in the world by the international booking site, Hostelworld.com). Mor and his partners, Maoz Inon and Yaron Burgin, have been behind several other recent initiatives to promote independent travel to Israel.

“The whole idea is not to change people’s conceptions, but to expose them to the complexity of the situation here,” he adds. Besides the Best of the West Bank and Hebron Dual Narrative tours, the company also runs a trip to Bethlehem three times a week, and recently launched a new weekly tour covering the northern West Bank.

These alternative West Bank tours target foreigners, if only because, as a rule, Israelis are prohibited from traveling in what is known as Area A – those sections of the West Bank under Palestinian Authority control (including Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin and Bethlehem). Indeed, big red signs posted at the entrances to Palestinian towns and villages in Area A warn Israeli citizens that entering is “dangerous to your lives.” Tour participants are required to bring their passports with them, just in case they are asked to present them at the various checkpoints separating Palestinian- and Israeli-ruled areas.

However, on several recent trips to the West Bank with both Abraham Tours and Green Olive Tours, never once were we stopped at a checkpoint or asked to present our passports. Indeed, the fact that moving around the territories has become easier in recent years has also been a boon to these tour providers.

### **‘Bulletproof’ settler bus**

Eliyahu, our American-born guide for the dual-narrative Hebron tour, meets our group in the lobby of the Abraham Hostel. From there we proceed to the Jerusalem Central Bus Station, where we board a “bulletproof” settler bus, as the tour brochure reassures us. It’s a small but rather eclectic group on our tour this time: a middle-aged couple from India; some young backpackers from Australia and various European countries; an elderly man from South Africa and another from Minnesota; a married student couple from Finland; even a young woman from the heart of rural America – Fargo, North Dakota.

Eliyahu, who grew up in Hawaii and today lives in Safed, tells us he became religious later in life (he sports a beard and long sidelocks) and is active in promoting Jewish-Muslim dialogue. It’s clear off the bat that he takes seriously his job of providing balance with his descriptions of the situation in one of the world’s most

contested cities. “Some refer to them as Jewish settlers,” he explains to his charges before getting on the bus. “Others call them the Jewish community of Hebron.”

“The Jews,” he adds, “don’t see this as occupation, but rather, as coming back to the homes they were forced to leave in the 1929 Hebron riots. Yes, there are Jewish terrorists among the settlers, but not all the settlers are terrorists.”

After we arrive in Hebron, we walk along Shuhada Street, where Eliyahu delivers us into the hands of our Palestinian guide, Mohammed. As Palestinians have since the second intifada been prohibited from walking along this particular stretch, Mohammed waves to us from afar.

For the next few hours, we experience home hospitality with Ahmed and his family, and hear about the injustices they’ve suffered at the hands of the settlers and the Israel Defense Forces. At one point, our South African tour participant interjects to ask whether they know that “God gave this land to the Jews.” He’s immediately called to order by the Minnesotan, who reminds him that “that was on condition that the Jews were good, but they weren’t and God has since evicted them from their land.”

After a stroll through the market (“Welcome to Palestine,” we’re greeted by vendors) and a stop-off for lunch at the home of another Palestinian family, we visit the Muslim side of the Tomb of the Patriarchs and hear about the massacre committed there almost 20 years ago by the American-born doctor Baruch Goldstein, who murdered 29 Muslim worshipers while they were at prayer). We then make our way back to the Jewish section of the city, where we’re returned to the hands of Eliyahu (who’s meanwhile made good use of the time, as he reports back to us, promoting a new initiative: A joint learning center in Hebron where religious Jews and Muslims can study their sacred texts together.)

We spend the second half of the tour visiting the Jewish section of the patriarchal tombs (there are separate entrances since the Goldstein massacre), and other sites of Jewish interest, among them the Beit Hadassah Museum of Jewish Life in Hebron ; the restored synagogue in the Avraham Avinu neighborhood, ending with a steep climb – you’ll need good walking shoes for this one – up to Tel Rumeida. There we meet Tzipi, a settler representative who tells us about her father, who was murdered in his bed by Palestinians nearly 30 years ago. A contingent of six young soldiers hovers around the premises of her home, which appears to double as a preschool.

### **More political**

Fred Schlomka, a Scottish-born Israeli peace activist and avid juggler, is the man behind Green Olive Tours, a company he founded six years ago, after spending much of his life working for nonprofit causes both in Israel and the United States. His West Bank tours definitely carry a more political message, and Schlomka makes no bones about whose side he’s on. “See those hilltop settlements over there,” he points out, as we take in the view from Mount Gerizim. “They’re clearly going to form one long line, preventing any further Palestinian construction.”

Schlomka maintains surprisingly good ties, though, with settler leaders, and recently launched a new tour called Meet the Settlers, which offers visits to three Jewish settlements in Gush Etzion. “I don’t try to demonize the settlers,” he says. “I try to humanize them. Some people who know me would laugh, but I’m seriously thinking of putting a sticker on my car that says ‘Settlers are people, too.’ It’s really the government that’s to blame for what’s going on here, not the settlers.”

We pick up three of the visitors for our Nablus tour in Beit Sahur, where Schlomka has arranged accommodation for them with a local family. There’s an elderly religious Christian couple from rural England, on their third trip to the region and trying to gain a better understanding of the conflict; and a Moroccan-born

Dutch woman who speaks fluent Arabic and has a great deal of fun communicating with the locals. A mother and daughter team, independent travelers from Germany, join us in downtown Jerusalem.

As we head out from Nablus after our off-the-beaten-track tour, Schlomka points out a village just on its outskirts, Huwwara, which he describes as the “ Hamas suicide bomber capital.” He has just lunched there, he reports to us, at a restaurant whose proprietor he’s convinced to become vegan.

I ask the British visitors whether they feel better informed about the conflict after our tiring, yet fascinating, day. “ I’d say that we have even more questions now than we did before,” answers the wife.