

Let us worship in our own land



Angela Burton looks at how pilgrims visiting the Holy Land have a level of freedom denied to many Palestinians who live there.

As the temperature hit 40°C, traffic on the road through Bethlehem ground to a halt. Mini-buses, coaches and the local eight-seater taxis sat nose to tail, snaking their way out of town on the half-built road.

Through the mix of heat, exhaust fumes and dust, pilgrims threaded their way from coach to church. Tour guides led the way, ushering their groups through the tiny entrance of the Church of the Nativity. Latter-day Bethlehem, far from being the sleepy idyll of a million Christmas cards, was a cauldron of rush-hour activity.

The Church of the Nativity itself – a beautiful, sparse building with

an intricate and decorative altar – provided a peaceful contrast. After coming through the four-feet-high entrance – all that remains open of the huge gateway, bricked up to prevent Crusaders from riding into the church – the noise receded, leaving only the respectful murmur of pilgrims voices.

Under the banner 'Bethlehem 2000', the Palestinian National Authority is gearing up for an influx of tourists next year. It is believed as many as five million extra tourists could flock to the Holy Land over the millennium, and most plan to make pilgrimages to the historic sites. But the opportunity and freedom they will have to travel from, for example, Bethlehem to Nazareth, are luxuries denied to most Palestinians.

Recent moves may have provided 'safe passage' for Palestinians travelling from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank; but permission for Palestinian Christians wishing to visit Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, or Muslims wanting to worship at the Al Aqsa Mosque (Islam's third holiest site) depends on whether they have a Jerusalem identity card, or a permit from the Israeli authorities. Worship is rarely seen as a valid reason for issuing a permit, with refusals made on the grounds of a threat to security.

Below:

An Australian tour group visit site of historic interest, accompanied by a guide from the Alternative Information Centre.



Above: Pilgrims visit the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa.



As millennium fever grows, so too has the debate about the redesigned checkpoint on the road to Bethlehem. It is planned to have two entrances – one for tourists and one for Palestinians wishing to enter Jerusalem without an identity card – but construction on it was suspended in October because of accusations that it would be a violation of human rights.

According to a statement by, among others, the Israeli human rights organisation Badil and the Palestinian Human Rights Information Centre, "the installation of this type of segregated checkpoint violates the most basic rights of Palestinians, including the right of freedom of movement ... The new checkpoint is another sign that Israel

is determined to advance the system of apartheid."

The situation stands in stark contrast to the freedom that pilgrims from abroad have to move between Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Jericho and Nazareth. For this reason, many, including the Christian Aid-funded Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), feel the role of alternative tourism is an important one, not only in raising the profile of Palestinian Christians, but also for forging links between pilgrims and all people of the Holy Land to pave the way for a lasting peace.

Palestinian Christians account for just two per cent of the population of Israel and the Palestinian territories – down from eight per cent in 1948. According to the

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MECC, one of the problems is that, of the 55,000 Palestinian Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories, 35,000 do not have the Israeli-issued permits or identity cards to enable access to Jerusalem.

"We need to meet visiting groups to get their input and to boost the prospects for an open and democratic society in Palestine," says Bernard Sabella of MECC. "The idea of alternative tourism is a good one; people want to meet the living stones – the people – but many don't realise there is a Christian presence here. We want to be accessible to Christians, Jews and Muslims, to meet with them, to talk and to worship."

The joint Israeli/Palestinian-run Alternative Information Centre (AIC),

a Christian Aid partner, has teamed up with the Alternative Tourism Group in Bethlehem to develop a strategy for alternative tourism. They want to use the millennium to help tourists bear witness to the realities of day-to-day life for Palestinians.

As a consequence, visitors to the Holy Land can not only walk the Via Dolorosa, visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity, they can also take an alternative tour – a programme tailored to their needs which provides the opportunity to meet ordinary Palestinians and Israelis away from the tourist sites.

The MECC's Jerusalem Liaison Office is expanding the Ecumenical Travel Service next year to facilitate this and boost understanding of the Christian presence in the Holy Land. Fareed Jaber is the Administrative Director of AIC, a Bethlehem resident who has no free access to Jerusalem. "The Palestinian tourist industry is doing its best," he said. "In Bethlehem there are four new hotels under construction, and we are starting to promote local



BY WIREIMAGE



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handicrafts. But with around 95 per cent of pilgrimages in Israeli hands, we are just picking up the crumbs from the table.

"This Christmas will see a peak, but that can't last. With alternative tourism, where people have stayed with families, they will be able to go home and say how it has affected them. By personalising these tours we'll achieve a lot – our overall objective is justice and peace for this troubled region."

Not far from Fareed's office is the Christian Aid-funded YMCA Rehabilitation Centre in Beit Sahour, a small town on the edge of Bethlehem. Thousands of tourists pass through Bethlehem each year on their way to Beit Sahour. It is the site of Shepherds' Fields, where the news of Jesus' birth was heard.

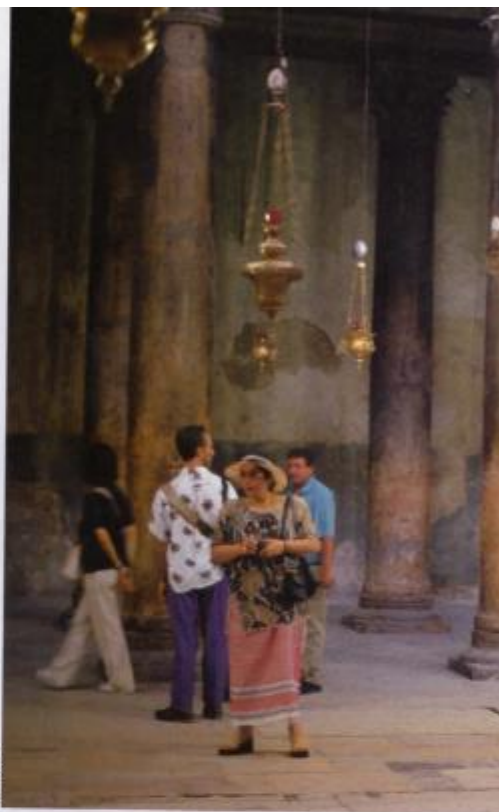
A stone's throw from the low, dark caves where the shepherds sheltered their flocks, the YMCA is helping young people with mental and physical disabilities to learn new skills. The centre has 30 clients who are assessed to find out what their expectations are, and what help can be given to them.

On the sloping hillside that leads from the Centre to the caves, Nader Abu Amsha, Director of YMCA Beit Sahour, described the obstacles created by the Israeli policy of closing-off the West Bank from Jerusalem on the grounds of security, denying residents the rights pilgrims freely enjoy.

"We had an agreement with the Al Maqased Hospital in Jerusalem, and we would send our clients there for treatment," said Nader. "But since the closures, we had to stop dealing with the hospital. You even need a permit to get an artificial limb."

The restrictions affect the social lives of clients too. "When the Rehabilitation Centre wants to take clients for a trip to the sea, everyone needs a permit. Now we just hire a bus with Jerusalem number plates and go illegally," he added.

Nader, who grew up in Bethlehem, used to visit Jerusalem each week as a child with his father. "He would take me by bus to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and we'd walk through the streets and buy sweets. I'd be spoiled. When I compare this with how it is now, it's like another country."



CHRISTIAN AID

Above:

The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem. Up to five million extra tourists are expected in the Holy Land during the millennium.

"I live beside the border between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and I see people from all over the world passing freely through. It's hard when you've spent your life playing and living here, and suddenly you find yourself without rights."

"As a person who believes in spiritual life, as a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew, you need to be free to worship whenever you want. If you need to get a permit to do this, it makes it meaningless. I'm looking forward to Bethlehem 2000, because when tourists come here they will see the other side."

A 45-minute drive away in Jericho, the YMCA's Vocational Training Centre is helping young people overcome the restrictions they face in moving around the West Bank by providing training in car maintenance, computing, electronics, metalwork and carpentry. As the increase in tourism gathers pace, the YMCA is planning extra workshops in catering and building maintenance to supply the anticipated demand for staff for three new hotels in Jericho.

The course is residential

Top left: Fareed Jaber of the AIC
Bottom left: Eitan Feiner of B'Tselem.



feature



because, for many of the young men living in the villages around Jericho, roadblocks and checkpoints close their villages off after 5pm, making it impossible for them to get home.

YMCA Jericho's Director, Randa Hilal, faces problems with staff as "Half of our staff are from Ramallah and half are from Bethlehem, so when either one or the other is closed-off for security reasons, half the staff can't get in," she says.

Randa herself is subject to the permit system. "If I have to go to Jerusalem without a permit, I try to go on the back roads. Sometimes I leave my car before the blockade and climb over fences to get in - I might not have a permit, but I feel I have the right to go and pray."

Ghada Zidan lives in Beit Jala, the pretty sister-town of Beit Sabour. A board member of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees - a Christian Aid-supported organisation in the West Bank - she faces restrictions whenever she attempts to leave home for work in Jerusalem. "Only if you need one for work will you get a permit," she said, unfolding her pass, valid for

three months only. "You can't get a permit for a silly purpose like sightseeing. My mother hasn't been to Jerusalem for ages, and many children have never been."

Ghada explained the complex rules which govern her daily journey. "It has the dates and times I can travel, as well as the route I am authorised to take; I can't use it to visit relatives, and if I get caught in the Church of the Redeemer, I'm risking a military court."

But for Ghada and her family, the complexities of the peace process are playing out closer to home than Jerusalem; the narrow road which runs at the back of her house divides her house from her family's land, and the road is in Greater Jerusalem - a place Ghada is only allowed to visit for work. To take an evening walk there with her father and children is to break the law - yet her Dutch husband can go there with impunity.

"I don't feel bad that tourists can come, but I feel that my rights are being violated. Tourists do have a responsibility, though; they should question how we are living, and see

"A lot of Palestinians feel they are living in a big prison - it may not have walls, but it's closed."

Top right: YMCA in Jericho provides vocational training for young people. Ghada Zidan with her ID card which permits her to travel to Jerusalem for work, but not worship.

what a big injustice is being done. A lot of Palestinians feel they are living in a big prison - it may not have walls, but it's closed."

Eitan Felner, Director of the Christian Aid-supported Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, was emphatic: "We want to use the millennium to inform tourists and religious leaders about this hidden history."

"One of our goals is to provide information so people can see that Israel is creating a situation which has implications not only for Palestinians in Jerusalem, but for Christianity and Islam. Anyone who comes to Jerusalem, especially pilgrims, should be concerned with these policies and should use the millennium to express their concerns."

If you would like to find out more about alternative tourism, send for Christian Aid's new leaflet, *Planning a pilgrimage to the Holy Land? Take the alternative route, which can be ordered from Supporter Relations, Christian Aid, PO Box 100, London SE1 7RT; or call 0171 523 2229.*