



PALESTINE A LIVING STORY CHRISTMAS EDITION

Celebrate *Christmas* WITH US

It's Time
To Travel
Palestine



A Message from the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities

The spirit of Christmas fills the air, and as Bethlehem prepares to celebrate this blessed season, I extend my warmest wishes—on behalf of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of the State of Palestine—to our friends, partners, and all who cherish the timeless magic of this sacred time.

Christmas in Bethlehem is a celebration of hope, faith, and renewal. It is a moment to reflect on the enduring spirit of our city, where the birthplace of Christ continues to inspire millions around the world with messages of love, peace, and compassion.

In this season of giving, I invite the global community to embrace Bethlehem once again as a beacon of hope and unity. Visitors from every corner of the world are welcomed to experience the warmth of our hospitality, the beauty of our sacred sites, and the joy of celebrating together in the true spirit of Christmas.

Your visit not only enriches your own spirit but also supports our efforts to preserve our heritage, promote sustainable tourism, and build bridges of peace and friendship.

The Ministry remains dedicated to offering a safe, meaningful, and memorable experience for all visitors, ensuring that this Christmas season in Bethlehem is filled with joy, reflection, and hope for a brighter future. May this Christmas bring peace to your hearts and to our world. Let us come together in celebration and in the shared hope for a peaceful and harmonious tomorrow.

Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year from Bethlehem
Arise, shine, for your light has come; and from the Land of the Nativity
the light rises anew.

Hani Al Hayek,
Minister of Tourism and Antiquities.





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Bethlehem:

The Birthplace of Christmas and the Message of Peace.

Christmas is one of the most important celebrations in the Christian calendar, commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. Beyond its religious significance, it has become a cultural occasion that brings families, friends, and communities together in a spirit of joy, love, and peace.

It is a time to reflect on compassion and generosity, sharing blessings with others. Traditions vary worldwide, but many are widely recognized: decorating Christmas trees with lights and ornaments, hanging wreaths and stockings, exchanging gifts, attending church services, singing carols, and enjoying festive meals. Children especially delight in stories about Santa Claus and the joy of Christmas morning gifts.

The date of Christmas differs among Christian denominations—most celebrate on December 25th, while some Orthodox churches observe it on January 7th. Regardless of the day, the holiday sends a universal message of hope, unity, and peace that continues to inspire people everywhere.



Santa Claus: From Palestine to Legend

Santa Claus—the rosy-cheeked man in the red suit with his snowy beard—is instantly recognizable around the globe. For most, he's the face of Christmas cheer, the bringer of gifts and laughter. Yet behind this jolly figure lies a story that stretches back over seventeen centuries to a real person: Saint Nicholas, the bishop of Myra.

Nicholas was known for his quiet generosity, often slipping gifts to the poor under the cover of night, especially children. One of his most famous acts—leaving coins for a struggling family—eventually gave rise to the cherished tradition of hanging stockings by the fireplace.

What many do not know is Nicholas's deep connection to Palestine. In Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, he is honored as a protector, with local stories recounting how he safeguarded the community during turbulent times.

Over the centuries, his story spread across Europe, transforming into "Sinterklaas" in the Netherlands and eventually evolving into the Santa Claus we know today, complete with reindeer, a sleigh, and a magical North Pole workshop. Despite these adaptations, the essence of Nicholas endures—a timeless reminder of the spirit of giving and compassion that transcends cultures and generations.



The Milk Grotto: A Sacred Haven of Faith and Hope

Just a short walk from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Milk Grotto stands as one of the Holy Land's most tender and revered sites. According to Christian religion, it is here that the Virgin Mary nursed the infant Jesus while the Holy Family hid from King Herod's soldiers. Legend says that a few drops of Mary's milk fell onto the rock, turning it a soft, milky white a sign of divine purity and protection.

The grotto, carved from smooth white stone, has drawn pilgrims from around the world for centuries, including both Christians and Muslims. In 1872, the Franciscan Order built a small chapel over the site to preserve its sanctity, later expanded in 2007 to welcome the growing number of visitors.

Beyond its religious importance, the Milk Grotto is cherished for its spiritual and healing power, particularly among women seeking blessings for fertility and motherhood. Many take home a small amount of the white powder from the grotto's stone believed to carry the blessing of Mary's milk.

A place of peace, faith, and maternal grace, the Milk Grotto continues to inspire hope for generations.





Where Lights Shine and Hope Grows: The Christmas Tree Story

The Christmas tree has long been a cherished symbol of the holiday season, representing life, hope, and renewal amid the winter chill. Its roots stretch back to ancient traditions, when people adorned evergreen trees to ward off evil spirits and celebrate the arrival of winter.

In Christian tradition, the tree signifies eternal life through Jesus Christ. The star or angel atop the tree reflects the Star of Bethlehem or the angels announcing Christ's birth. During the dark winter months, the twinkling lights symbolize the light, warmth, and hope that the holiday brings.

Today, the Christmas tree serves as a joyful centerpiece, uniting families and communities in celebration, reflection, and the sharing of goodwill. Its evergreen branches remind us that even in the coldest seasons, life and hope endure.



A Flame of Faith: St. Nicholas in Beit Jala

The town of Beit Jala holds deep devotion to its patron saint, St. Nicholas, whose legacy continues to shine through the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas.

Tradition holds that during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 4th century AD, St. Nicholas lived in a cave beneath the present-day church, which remains a sacred site for pilgrims.

The church, built in 1925 during the British Mandate, houses a revered icon of St. Nicholas and a perpetual flame burning in his honor. Locals believe the saint miraculously protected Beit Jala from destruction, especially during World War I, strengthening faith across generations.

Every year on December 19th, Beit Jala celebrates the Feast of St. Nicholas with parades, concerts, performances, and a Christmas market. Scout groups march through the streets, traditional dabke dancers perform, and families gather to honor their beloved saint. Visitors from across Palestine and beyond join the festivities, experiencing both the town's rich heritage and vibrant community spirit.

Today, the church stands as a symbol of hope, unity, and devotion, reflecting the enduring spirit of a community whose faith continues to burn brightly—just like the eternal flame of their beloved saint. It is a place where history, tradition, and faith converge, keeping alive the story of a saint whose legacy transcends centuries.





Grandma's Secret: Holiday Flavors of Palestine.

In Palestine, the holiday season transforms homes into bustling family kitchens, where memories are kneaded and joy is baked into every dish. Preparing ma'amoul, gingerbread, and Eid biscuits is a deeply cherished tradition that connects generations. Ma'amoul is more than a sweet treat—it is a religious symbol, intricately crafted, and its preparation strengthens family bonds. Colorful gingerbread are baked and decorated to hang on the Christmas tree, filling the air with the laughter and excitement of children.

The celebrations extend far beyond sweets. Holiday meals bring together multiple generations around tables laden with traditional Palestinian dishes such as grape leaves, stuffed vegetables, and maqluba. Each meal is not merely food; it embodies unity, generosity, and cultural heritage, nourishing both body and spirit.

The joy of the season is further enriched by the exchange of gifts, which delights children and teaches the timeless values of giving and sharing. From the aroma of fresh pastries to the laughter echoing through family homes, these moments create lasting memories that are treasured for a lifetime. In Palestine, holiday traditions are more than rituals—they are an enduring celebration of family, community, and the warmth of togetherness.



Mar Saba Monastery: The Desert Fortress of Faith

Hidden in the rugged Kidron Valley east of Bethlehem, Mar Saba Monastery is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited monasteries. Founded between 478 and 484 AD by Saint Saba and his disciples, it became a cornerstone of early monastic life in the Judean Desert.

Through invasions, earthquakes, and centuries of change, Mar Saba has stood as a symbol of faith and resilience. Its blue domes, stone walls, and watchtower reflect both spiritual devotion and defensive strength. Monks live simply, without electricity, using olive oil lamps and spring water. While women may not enter, a nearby convent welcomes them.

The relics of Saint Saba, once taken to Venice by Crusaders, were returned in 1965 and now rest within the monastery.

A timeless refuge of silence and prayer, Mar Saba continues to shine under the desert sun – preserving one of Palestine's most profound monastic traditions.

Christmas Magic in Bethlehem: Light, Faith, and Joy

Christmas Tree Lighting

In Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the holiday season comes alive with dazzling celebrations and cherished traditions. The season kicks off with the lighting of the Christmas tree in Manger Square, in front of the Church of the Nativity. A majestic tree, often over ten meters tall, sparkles with lights and ornaments as locals and tourists gather to enjoy hymns, music, and fireworks. This festive event marks the official start of the holiday season, symbolizing hope, unity, and joy throughout the city.

Christmas Market

The Christmas Market winds through Bethlehem's old streets and alleys, where small wooden stalls adorned with lights showcase Palestinian embroidery, handmade crafts, nativity figurines, traditional foods, and seasonal sweets. Carols, children's performances, and cultural activities fill the air, creating a lively hub where locals and visitors celebrate the true spirit of Christmas.





Christmas Parade and Scouts

The Christmas Parade brings further cheer, with scout groups marching in traditional uniforms, colorful floats, Santa Claus, music bands, and traditional dabke dancers filling the streets. Families line the roads waving flags and balloons, creating a festive atmosphere of shared celebration.

Christmas Mass

On December 24th, and January 6th the Christmas Mass at the Church of the Nativity draws believers from across Palestine and around the world. Led by patriarchs and priests, the prayers and hymns are broadcast globally, showcasing Bethlehem as a beacon of peace, faith, and unity.

Santa's House – Bethlehem

Located in Manger Square beside the Church of the Nativity, Santa's House is one of Bethlehem's most loved Christmas attractions. Each December, families and visitors from around the world come to meet Santa, take photos, and enjoy festive lights, music, and decorations handmade by local artisans.

More than just a children's stop, Santa's House shines as a symbol of joy, peace, and unity – capturing the true spirit of Christmas in the heart of Bethlehem.



A Profound Pilgrimage: Faith Renewed in the Holy Land

By Father Jomy John, Diocese of Faridabad, India

My first visit to the Holy Land was the realization of a lifelong dream and a journey of profound spiritual significance. As a priest, standing at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was an emotional highlight, marking the very site of Christ's miraculous birth. It's an experience that anchors your faith in history.

What truly impressed me was the enduring and dedicated spirit of the people. Even with the acknowledged complexities and difficulties of the region, the sacred sites are meticulously managed with remarkable care and deep reverence for all who visit. This commitment to maintaining the holy places is a testament to the community's faith.

Beyond the churches, the local culture was equally welcoming. I enjoyed browsing a Catholic shopping center where I found beautiful religious articles. Picking up rosaries, crosses, and anointing oils felt like carrying a tangible blessing back to my diocese. This is also a wonderful way to support the local Christian community.

I can wholeheartedly say that this pilgrimage has been an amazing experience, offering powerful spiritual renewal. The hospitality—from the excellent hotels to the helpful people—was exceptional. I urge all Christians to undertake this journey. Don't let anything stop you from coming to visit these sacred lands and witnessing the living faith here.

**Come and be blessed;
I wish you all a very happy Holy
Land Pilgrimage!**

Father Jomy John,
Diocese of Faridabad, India



*Arise, shine, for your light has come;
and from the Land of the Nativity,
the light rises anew.*

قومي استنيري، لأن نورك قد جاء ومن أرض الميلاد،
ينهض النور من جديد.