



Weaving Patterns of Resistance for Justice Through Tourism

*The Life and Work of
The Alternative Tourism Group*

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 ATGPalestine

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Published in Palestine by the Alternative Tourism Group-Study Center (ATG)
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Design and Layout: IDEAS

Preface

Preface

“The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.” Milan Kundera

The ATG and its programs were initiated during the First *Intifada* of 1987 as a tool of resistance against occupation, marginalization, and negation. The activities of the Palestinian people drew a great deal of attention, with people coming to the occupied territories wanting to understand what was going on and wanting to meet the Palestinians face to face. Confronted with the struggle between two narratives, the ATG intensified its efforts to meet the thirst of those who wanted to know more and give the “Palestinians” a face.

From the start of the occupation, tourism had been arranged by Israel to give travelers a one-sided view of the Palestinian people in line with Zionist ideologies. To cement the occupation, tourism was designed to erase the memory and history of Palestine – to negate Palestinians.

Visiting, meeting, and getting to know the “living stones” rather than just the stones of the holy sites, hearing their personal stories and often tragedies first hand, experiencing the aspirations of the Palestinian people and their longing for freedom and independence, and sharing the love for life, ingenuity, unique sense of humor, and their endless, tireless optimism to become free of occupation – all this became the cornerstone of ATG programs.

To meet the increasing demand for the initial ATG programs, the small, informal group evolved into an organization which then developed new itineraries for interested travelers. We chose to call ourselves the ‘Alternative Tourism Group’ because we stand for changing the existing trend of tourism and pilgrimage to The Holy Land into a more cultural and human-oriented activity. Justice was at the root

Preface

of our plans and actions. The ATG developed further and is now a research and study center that has compiled unique studies on aspects of alternative/justice tourism. To name a few: Sustainable just Tourism in Palestine; A Conflict between Two Narratives; and the Lost Revenue from Tourism to the Palestinian Economy. In 2006 the ATG won an International award "To Do" and in 2016 received a local award "The agent of the Year".

After long years of work, we are happy to present this book with accumulated experiences of ATG's work in the form of a narrative. We do not refer to this as a history book. We did not adopt a typical research methodology, nor did we reference actions on a chronological basis. We decided that we would situate ATG in the political context and express how ATG has joined the struggle for freedom and justice using a non-violent tool – alternative tourism. This book is also a thank you for all the friends who believed in us and helped establish the ATG.

We invite our friends to read this narrative of our journey as ATG. Our call is for people to visit Palestine and return as advocates for a just peace.

Dr. Majed Nassar
ATG Board President

Acknowledgements

ATG was invested by some visionary pioneers and dynamic policy makers and planners. In addition, there have been staffs whose value cannot be appraised in ordinary terms. This book is dedicated to their efforts as well as to those who visited us and those who served us as volunteers and interns.

ATG began as a dream among a band of friends whose work in the social sector united them during the First *Intifada* to create a new international consciousness. This was at the height of resistance and civil disobedience. It took creativity and innovation to translate tourism into a vehicle for peace and advocacy for justice. Except for the Late Mr. Jamal Salameh who passed away, the other founders are still among us and a few are even serving the ATG Board until today which has made ATG into a movement rather than a traditional tour operator. Our Founders cannot be mentioned as just a category, we must name them: Dr. Majed Nassar (currently our President) is one among those from the founding group whose energy still inspires and guides us. Dr. Elias Rishmawi still serves with distinction and dedication on our Board and generates new dynamics through his interventions, Mr. Rifat Kassis, Kairos Coordinator who helps our intent to transform ourselves into an entity that transforms tourism and transforms society through tourism, Mr Ghassan Andoni, also a leader who has enabled ATG to stay anchored to the rock, and the late Mr. Jamal Salameh (mentioned above) who we miss dearly for his advice and guidance.

Our current set of Board members has ensured that ATG remains viable, relevant, and vibrant at all times. As Executive Director, I am acutely conscious that in them I have a collective of people who's standing in society and commitment to justice in tourism and alternatives in tourism make ATG a respected movement in the tourism community, at civil society level, and in the eyes of the Government. They include: Dr. Majed Nassar (President), Dr. Elias Rishmawi, Dr. Elias Iseed, Mr. Hani Odeh, Rev. Ashraf Tannous, Rev. Imad Haddad, Mrs. Salwa Abu

Acknowledgements

Hashesh, Mrs. Naela Hanunah, and Ambassador Fouad Kokaly.

If I were to list our international partners, friends, supporters, and clients, who have never hesitated to show solidarity with us, and with the Palestinian situation, my list would be endless. International solidarity is what Palestine needs the most as we struggle against a powerful occupier. Our Board guarantees that we remain steadfast to its mission of serving Palestinian society and works to bring freedom and justice with tourism as the instrument.

Our staff members are a unique group – you could call them a friends circle, even family! Some have left us and initiated new things in Palestine with success and shared vision. We remain collaborators and friends. There is also the innumerable number of service providers and related stakeholders. They together have taken ATG to the heights to where we have reached. I must name our staff team in recognition: Mr. Ayman Abu Zulof, Mr. Jawad Musleh, Mr. Dafer Kassis, Mr. Amer Hanunah, Mr. Saher Abu Aita and our representative in Sweden Mrs. Inga-Lill Rubenson. We are proud of our team work.

Rami Kassis
Executive Director

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Crafting Encounters for Justice

This narrative of the origins and progress of the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG) from the early nineties to the present day captures significant periods in Palestinian history, to coincide with defining moments in the evolution, life and work of ATG. In many ways, it can be claimed that ATG was born during the birth pangs of the first *Intifada* and its aftermath.

Since the early 1990s, ATG has been crafting patterns of encounters for justice between visitors to Palestine and local communities. It has also initiated exposure between visitors and Israelis of different political persuasions. These encounters have had one singular attribute: each encounter was deliberately geared to be an opportunity to witness the realities faced by Palestinians ever since the formation of the State of Israel, and even more sharply, the state of affairs following the occupation of Palestine since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967.

When tallied in typical calendar years, ATG had its organizational birth in 1995. But it was operational, informally, ever since the start of the First *Intifada* in 1987. That was when the informal collective that had conceived the idea to connect travellers to the political reality of Palestine, and offer an alternative narrative to the Palestine-Israel conflict, agreed the need for an institution to systematize encounters, by creating innovative tourism products. ATG was, thus, born as the first alternative tourism initiative. That the idea had persuasive relevance is evident from the fact that several similar initiatives followed. Individuals and organizations have replicated the ATG concept and alternative tourism is now an integral part of resistance to the occupation.

Road Less Travelled

Justice tourists have always travelled into countries beset by conflict; they do not represent the traditional mass tourist who comes for sheer self-indulgent pleasure as their intent is driven by a sense of solidarity and need to understand the situation at first hand. They choose to do so for a variety of reasons -- not least, curiosity to understand the reality -- away from media definitions and often biased or unduly influenced reportage. The absence of adequate media sources offering objective reporting and analysis makes a 'Justice Tourist' something of a 'Citizen Reporter' who then tells the world what she/he sees on-the-ground and in encounters with the local people. There is one major difference between a normal tourist and a justice tourist. The latter always refers to her/his visit in such a way that she/he communicates the narrative of the oppressed -- the victim -- to the outside world. That person thus becomes an advocate for peace, a lobbyist for justice, who alone, in the Palestinian context, can be the real hope for a sustained peace.



Palestinians have been wrongly portrayed in the international media as tormenters of the Israelis. This portrayal has disregarded facts on-the-ground. The harsh truth is quite different.

The unjust partition agreement under which the State of Israel was created by an 11-member Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was drawn up at the first special session of the General Assembly in April 1947. The Assembly eventually voted, 33-13, in favour of partition (while submitting the final decision to the Security Council which never convened to vote on the issue) and since then Palestinians have been forced to live under an unjust colony that favoured Israel and – literally - pushed Palestinians aside to the margins. The UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) used the term “unbalanced” in describing the reason for Arab rejectionism of Resolution 181, which hardly fits the reality.

Israel’s ruthless 1947-49 so-called “War of Independence” resulted in at least 750,000 Palestinian men, women, and children being expelled from their homes by numerically superior Israeli forces. This humanitarian disaster is referred to as al *Nakba* (The Catastrophe) in Arabic. Since 1948, this deep injustice has continued, unrelentingly.

Some Social and Political Facts Must be Borne in Mind:

- Palestinian refugees are today the largest refugee community in the world.
- 1.5 million Palestinians are Israeli citizens, but are victims of systemic prejudice. They cannot live in the villages and homes from which they were violently expelled, and much of their property has been confiscated and handed to Jewish people in a unilateral measure of ongoing “judaization.”
- Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. Israel now controls even the remaining 22% of mandatory Palestine. It is stealing more and more land from this 22% of territory by constructing colonies, roads, industrial estates, quarries, military bases, closed military zones, firing ranges and nature reserves for Jewish Israelis on land confiscated

from its Palestinian owners. It has demolished tens of thousands of Palestinian homes since 1967 and controls Gaza's borders, ports, sea-line, air space, access, exports, imports and population registry. Gaza is nothing more than a large prison, where over 2 million people live under hugely shattering and inhuman conditions.

- Over 7,000 Palestinian men, women, and children are imprisoned in Israeli jails under physically insulting, humiliating conditions. Several hundred of these have not even been charged with a crime. According to statistics, every single Palestinian family has a family member either currently in prison, or imprisoned by Israel in the past.
- Palestinian human rights are routinely violated with impunity, which is a scar on human rights law, provisions of humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions and innumerable UN resolutions.

“The story of 1948... is the simple but horrific story of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine... Retrieving it from oblivion is incumbent upon us, not just as a greatly overdue act of historiographical reconstruction or professional duty; it is... the very first step we must take if we ever want reconciliation to have a chance, and peace to take root, in the torn lands of Palestine and Israel.”

- Ilan Pappé, Israeli historian, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine -



Road less travelled



The backdrop to

The Backdrop to the Intifada

Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands over the "Green Line" came in the wake of Israel's victory in the 1967 war, resulting in it acquiring political and economic control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Restrictions, curfews, collective punishment and expulsions became everyday occurrences. Palestinians were also required to pay taxes directly to the Israeli State, and as the Palestinian and Israeli economies became increasingly intertwined, many working class Palestinians found themselves working for Israeli-owned companies and factories. Many of these workers were employed in the growing Israeli colonies as well, helping to lay brick foundations and build homes for incoming Israeli settlers.

It was not long before Palestinian discontent about the quality of living conditions began to escalate. Palestinian youth knew just one version of life and that was life under Israeli occupation. They were equally frustrated by the fact that older generations had grown politically apathetic and were even beginning to accept the inevitability of the occupation. In specific terms, youth had to contend



The backdrop

with acute poverty, unemployment and lack of access to arable land. Israel's brutal policies had sanctioned the use of roadblocks, searches, arrests, deportations, and refusals of family reunification permits, all of which multiplied the feeling of bitterness and anger on-the-ground. The people in the Palestinian territories also saw the futility of the armed struggle waged under the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Amidst these conflicting viewpoints between the options of armed struggle and non-violence, it was the call for non-violent resistance that grew in appeal to Palestinians living in occupied territory.

So, it came as no surprise when the 1987 *Intifada* was sparked off by just a single confrontation. This followed an incident of a car crash at an IOF (Israel Occupation Forces) checkpoint at Erez Crossing in Gaza: a crash in which four Palestinians were killed by an Israeli



truck driver. When news of the killing reached the villages, Palestinian youth began assembling in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank. Israel acted swiftly to declare assemblies illegal. The IOF sought to break up the crowds by firing rubber bullets at the protesters. Palestinians were not to be subdued. They retaliated by throwing rocks at the Israeli soldiers. Riots soon broke out in Palestinian refugee camps and villages and the clashes grew wider. The international media finally opened its eyes and reported on the clashes, most of which saw scenes of Palestinian adolescents sling-shooting rocks and Molotov cocktails at Israeli tanks and armed soldiers. David, as Israel was previously perceived by the world, began at this point to be seen as Goliath.



Palestinian proponents of non-violence were energized, creating the United National Command (UNC) for the Escalation of the Uprising in the Occupied Territories to form an effective strategy for resistance. With the help of youth volunteers, the UNC distributed thousands of leaflets to Palestinian neighbourhoods, instructing residents how to resist Israeli domination. Forms of resistance included calling residents to: boycott Israeli-made products, resign from government or police positions, refrain from paying taxes to the Israeli government, stage merchants' strikes, and other forms of non-violent disobedience, with such acts of resistance helping to ignite and generate a sense of national identity.

Cultural assertion became another tool of protest, as a form of both national and cultural pride; Palestinian flags were raised during protest marches and traditional Palestinian theatre and poetry were performed in open-air spaces. This new pride with which Palestinian clothing was adorned added to the symbolism of resistance to Israeli occupation. Such actions resulted in massive losses to the Israeli economy: Israel suffered economic loss of approximately \$1 billion as a result of the Palestinian labour strike, boycotted goods and Palestinian refusal to pay taxes. Israel also had to increase the number of troops in the area from 12,000 to 80,000 and to increase its military expenditures by approximately \$600 million.

Local organizing went even further. The UNC helped to co-ordinate local Popular Committees which actively provided Palestinian communities with many social services to help end dependence on the Israeli occupiers. These committees helped provide residents with child-care, health-care, education and food. When the IOF began to crack down on the protests by brutally beating and shooting demonstrators, Popular Committees such as the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees set up hundreds of mobile health clinics to tend to the injured. In addition, committees such as the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees helped to support and plan non-violent direct actions such as protest marches and road closures. In May 1988, the UNC issued a Civil Disobedience Statement in which it instructed Palestinians to regard local committees as the government

of the people, rather than that of the Israeli military, with its "Civil Administration."

Popular protest soon assumed creative proportions. Watches were set to a different hour than that imposed by the Israelis, much to Israel's annoyance. IOF soldiers responded by shattering watches – clearly a sign of desperation at their inability to handle protests and the creative forms it was assuming. Civil disobedience had taken root and Israel was nonplussed. Israel tried to break the backbone of education by closing schools, and the people responded with improvised facilities for classes deemed illegal by Israel, in order to guarantee that students could pursue education. An important protest was the surrender of Israeli-issued ID cards by some and burning of their ID cards by others as a rejection of a forced identity by Israel. Many Palestinians would decline to show identification cards when confronted by Israeli soldiers at roadblocks and military checkpoints.

Palestinians also engaged in boycott of Israeli food products. One method was to collectivize land cultivation on which they cultivated fruits and vegetables. Israel's reaction was swift and ruthless. But, clearly, the move had Israel rattled; that was an important component of the protest and resistance to neutralize the so-called Israeli "Civil Administration." Palestinians were unrelenting. They, in the town of Beit Sahour, purchased 18 cows from an Israeli and set up their own dairy farm which Israel famously categorized as a "security threat." Despite orders to close the dairy farm, Palestinians merely shifted the location of the cows!

The Israeli government faced frustration and was constantly bewildered. For example, Palestinians resorted to distributing leaflets as a way of keeping people informed. Israel tried to control the distribution, but the source and distribution of the leaflets continued unimpeded.

Israel, in desperation, used mass arrests, rounding up thousands of leaders and protesters. Prisons were overflowing, yet people took

pride when family members were arrested by the IOF. Israel's tactic to empty the Palestinian community of leaders faltered because new leaders continually surfaced to replace those who had been arrested. In order to break Palestinian morale and prevent protesters from organizing, the IOF imposed a curfew on Palestinian refugee camps, villages and cities. The IOF also blockaded several Palestinian villages, restricting the flow of goods, food, medical services and electricity. In order to force Palestinian merchants to end their strike, Israeli officials ordered the IOF to smash open the locks of striking Palestinian stores. And when Palestinian locksmiths volunteered their services to the merchants and replaced the locks, the IOF broke them again, this time in the hopes of attracting looters. In response, the Palestinians set up neighbourhood watch committees to protect the shops from looters. These back-and-forth actions continued for a few more weeks until the IOF eventually gave up.

Media coverage worldwide showed horrific images exposing IOF cruelties. Images of the IOF dropping tear gas and mace from helicopters onto crowds of demonstrators, or of Israeli tractors bulldozing the homes of protesters, prompted abhorrence and criticism in many Western European nations were commonplace. Even Israeli peace groups mushroomed to speak out. Several youth refused army service, citing disagreement with the cause and methods of the IOF. Yet Israel remained adamant and pursued its path of repression.

As expected, the non-violent character of the struggle gave way to increased violence – much of it stemming from frustration at the failure to exact concessions from Israel and the failure of the international community to go beyond expressing anger and disapproval.

the Intilada



Intifada as Invitation to 'Come and See'

Despite the setbacks in the last stages of the First *Intifada*, it must be noted that until it began, the conflict was just another conflict in the eyes of the world, a footnote in the list of various conflicts around the world. The First *Intifada* shocked the world and forced a wake-up call on both sympathizers and opponents of the Palestinians alike. It offered the world another perspective on Israel's Occupation – an occupation previously hyped by Israel as "benign." It awoke numerous parts of the international community – civil society, churches and even governments. Palestine came alive as a country, as did people who had long been denied freedom and justice. Historians, political thinkers, human rights and justice activists all over the world began to see Israel as an oppressive state.

With sticks and stones, and no formal political backing, young Palestinians decided that enough was enough. Little was surfacing by way of solutions. The political class seemed far removed from the everyday happenings or realities in Palestinian society, and their chosen methods were going nowhere. Nor did the world seem to care enough. Every now and then, there was a UN conference, a UN General Assembly resolution, a striking demand from the UN Security Council. But actions emanating from all these amounted to nothing.

The *Intifada* changed everything. The world took notice, but not just that. People started arriving as solidarity groups or as individuals' intent on understanding the history and contemporary reality of the region, in order to understand the new struggle against Israel's occupation. A returning academic wrote: *"We came as visitors to know and understand the deeper implications and dimensions of the Intifada; we have returned as solidarity activists for a just and permanent colony for Palestinians."*

For solidarity activists, the conflict was no longer one in which the Arab was the aggressor and the Jew the victim. They recognized the solution imposed on the Arabs in 1948 as having been unfair. They saw that Israel was created in an unjust framework, which had

To 'Come and See'

served to assuage the conscience of Europeans whose assault on Jews in every part of the continent had been savage and massive. The Palestinians paid the price, by being compelled to surrender their land to a people in search of rehabilitation after the Holocaust. Israelis who came to Israel had the audacity to claim that they had reclaimed a land for themselves after being exiled for several thousands of years. They even claimed that the new Israel was a land without people. And that they, as a people without a land, had finally found their 'promised' homeland. The *Intifada* awakened the world to new facts as to the situation. It also aroused the conscience of thousands and their numbers have since multiplied manifold. It prompted the articulation of a new narrative on the Arab Israeli conflict. It saw, finally, the Palestinian condition through the lens of justice and human rights.



Before **ATG** - The Formative Phase

In the language of protest, ATG can claim that it seeks to mobilize people around the world to speak out truth worldwide. It is working to reinforce the truth through organized public opinion, by altering public perceptions and building a global mass of people to become advocates for justice and freedom for the Palestinians. It also seeks to expand the critical mass of informed people in a wider society to advance the Palestinian cause. ATG believes that an informed and vibrant civil society can bring pressure on political leaders to affect policy changes that will compel Israel to recognize the rights of the Palestinians.

ATG is inspired by the examples of global solidarity that supported local organizing against apartheid in South Africa. Many who have visited Palestine and seen for themselves the reality of what the Occupation is doing to people have developed solidarity groups, initiated or joined campaigns, written in favour of Palestinian claims in the media, and encouraged more individuals and groups to visit Palestine.

It is important to record the birth of ATG and the political circumstances in Beit Sahour, where it all started. The First *Intifada* was particularly strong, even militant in the Bethlehem area. Beit Sahour grew illustrious because it proved to be the epicentre of a strong resistance movement. These strong counter-moves against the Occupation attracted solidarity groups and travellers to Beit Sahour.

It was the traditional media sources which broke the news to the world; internet and social media were non-existent in those days, nor was the mass media in its prime. Television was, at best, a source of entertainment or for airing mainstream news. The people's protests, sometimes, however, seeped into the media's news coverage.

At about the same time, a group of civil society leaders drawn from

different social sectors met together, and agreed that they should respond to the visitors who were thronging Beit Sahour from overseas. Despite the daily disruption of normal life, this group was able to show their visitors the hard facts that triggered the *Intifada*. Visitors met with people in the health sector who were coping with health issues, notably in places where young people were injured and being treated. They also met with leaders of the tax-boycott movement, and those who mobilized the movement calling on people to abandon their ID cards. These encounters were an exercise in political education and orientation for the international community, as a new way of helping them to understand the conflict. It was a way in which Palestinians sought to challenge Israeli claims and the absence of political morals and ethics on the side of the occupation. The points of reference were the illegality of the occupation, the massive human rights' abuses, the expulsion of people from the territories, the closure of villages as a form of collective punishment, demolition of homes as a warning threat to abstain from resistance, the arbitrary takeover of land from Palestinians, the creation of colonies on Palestinian lands, as well as mass arrests and lengthy detentions.

With many leaders jailed, the small number of those who could offer this orientation had to be cautious and yet be prepared to mobilize. After several years of work carried out on a purely voluntary basis, the group decided to set up an organization so that the response could be more coherently systematized; it wanted to create an organisation with the capacity to mobilize worldwide attention and consciousness. The name given to the organization was: The Alternative Tourism Group (ATG). The name was innocuous enough. But not so the content of its work!

With a modest grant from ICCO-Netherlands, ATG was launched. ICCO supported ATG for a stipulated period of three years. At the time of the launch, the founders outlined a vision, mission, and strategy around which ATG would work. ATG had its intentions clearly set out.

Core to ATG's functions was the challenge to modify mass tourism in "The Holy Land" in order to establish a more human-oriented

the formative phase

tourism. This, in turn, implied that ATG would put foreign tourists in direct contact with Palestinians so as to help them gain a better understanding of Arab-Palestinian culture and history. ATG had concluded that that vision of direct encounter would enable it to break down negative stereotypes of Palestine and its people, as then predominating in the West.

ATG also had its eyes set on achieving a balance between the revenues of the Palestinian and Israeli tourism sectors by using Palestinian infrastructure (hotels, restaurants, transportation, guides and so on): this economic gain would also increase by augmenting the number of tourists visiting Palestine and lengthening their stay in Palestinian areas.

Another primary approach from ATG would be to facilitate knowledge sharing to tourists about Palestinian culture and the socio-political situation in Palestine. This would be achieved by encouraging instructive and authentic meetings with the Palestinian people. As mentioned previously, ATG was convinced that perception shifts about Palestinians would be best achieved when tourists would receive an objective understanding of everyday realities of the Israeli occupation. Tourists would, therefore, be afforded the opportunity to share unique experiences with Palestinians through volunteer work and non-governmental organizations (olive harvesting, tree planting, and so on.)

Clearly, ATG was not just about “preaching to the choir.” It risked meeting with visitors who had arrived in Palestine as mere sight-seers. By creating packages which were appropriate for the individuals or groups who wished to see even just one site or offer just one day to see the political reality, ATG was making a difference in arousing curiosity, enthusiasm and confidence to know more about the political context and suffering. It was this strategy that paid highest dividends, because it proved that a good encounter with reality coupled with a suitable analysis of facts which sounded reasonable and not overtly militant, could expand the circle of friends.

The numbers of groups from the USA and Europe grew in numbers. They came from churches and universities. In the meantime, in 1995, the Church of Sweden and the Methodist Church in the USA stepped in to support ATG's work by helping to increase their number of visitors to Palestine. In fact, they sent the first formal groups to ATG.

ATG grew in status and emerged as an attractive option especially for those who wanted a dose of political reality along with visits to traditional historical sites. ATG endeared itself to those groups by its willingness and capacity to create custom-made packages. Its tour guides were subtle but firm about their opinions. Within Palestine, ATG drew support from local groups and began building local alliances with the Alternative Information Center (AIC) – an important centre for critical sources of information and analysis. AIC had, and still has, a presence both in Israel and Palestine.

ICCO funding expired at the end of the first three years but its support had provided ATG with the seeds of institutional viability. An office had been established, a full time co-ordinator was appointed and a tour guide put in place. ATG was on its way. But it was not necessarily easy going. The demands on ATG were high, with groups from the USA and Europe growing. These problems pushed ATG to seek out new methods and contacts. At the international level, mainstream tourists were being targeted to undertake the ATG experience, rather than take the usual mainstream tourist route. Host families were introduced into the work, adding a new dimension to ATG's work – one which allowed it to create direct encounters between visitor and host community, while bringing economic benefits to host families.

By then, the Second *Intifada* had begun in Palestine. Unlike the First *Intifada*, the second was far more hard-hitting and even violent. The phenomenon of the 'suicide bomber' prompted the Israeli armed forces to react ruthlessly. It created a massive socio-economic-political crisis in Palestinian areas. ATG was hit financially and had to resort to financial cuts in expenses, including salaries. The management of ATG opted for new working methods to generate resources. After a two-year crisis, ATG re-grouped with two focal organizational goals

the formative phase

-- financial viability and advocacy work.

Even though ICCO's financial support had come to a complete halt, ATG was not discouraged. It chose to work on a self-reliant module and became independent of external support. Its new business-oriented model did not affect the quality of political tourism, nor did it impact organizational stability. Advocacy remained high on the agenda. ATG remained anchored to its core intent -- to change perceptions about Palestine and fiercely promote the Palestinian cause for justice. Making profits was not unimportant, but the core task was the mission of mobilization for political rethinking among its clientele.

ATG staff were re-educated for these new working methods, and the collective that became the ATG management and staff team proved successful. Creative approaches to ATG's work were adopted. For example, the Olive Picking Campaign, when launched in partnership with the JAI, became hugely popular, attracting visitors who found meaning in the work entailed by olive picking, chiefly because it meant they could stay with a Palestinian family, as well as work with Palestinian farmers all day long and be part of the harvesting of olive crops.



Philosophy of **ATG**

ATG seeks to offer roads that are less travelled. It seeks to make tourism what it was always intended to be – an encounter between people and cultures. In this way, it makes tourism in The Holy Land acquire the traits of a “pilgrimage” -- a journey in search of truth about the world of culture, economics, politics and society. The Holy Land, torn asunder as it is by divisions rooted in injustice, implies that a true traveller to Palestine Israel must make choices. ATG therefore has had to balance tourists' self-fulfilment with an equally strong measure of political consciousness.

Ben White, freelance journalist and writer, offers a useful view and analysis on travelling to Palestine. He says: *“Palestine should not have problems attracting tourists, with its rich blend of history, religious significance, local culture, as well as the varied and breath-taking scenery. But of course, the political context of the Israeli occupation means that the vast majority of tourists in the ‘Holy Land’ only see Palestinians through the window of a tour bus, as they dash in and out of Bethlehem for a couple of hours.”*

White describes how ATG pioneered the notion of ‘alternative tourism’ in Palestine: *“Alternative tourism in the West Bank has definitely seen marked improvements and developments since it really began to get off the ground in the 1990s. The pioneers were the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG), based in Beit Sahour near Bethlehem, who in the aftermath of the first Palestinian intifada realized the positive potential for an infrastructure in Palestine to receive visiting foreigners looking to understand the local reality.”*

White observes how the occupation has *“attracted a different kind of visitor, the ‘alternative tourist,’ who comes to the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), occupied by Israel along with the Gaza Strip since 1967, in order to better understand the conflict, and deliberately go ‘beyond’ the standard pilgrimage or mainstream tourist trip to Israel.”* White argues that this kind of tourist is much *“fewer in number, and typically already sensitized to some degree to the Palestinian situation.”*

He further regrets, *“Virtually no tourists, if any, go to the Gaza Strip, which has been under Israeli-imposed closure for several years.”*

Mainstream tourism and alternative tourism are in two different tourism zones altogether. Even though the space both use is the same, the difference lies in the narrative. The former relies on “sentimentalizing” The Holy Land, while the latter adds value to tourist packages with add-on – visits to spaces where the political ramifications of the Israeli Occupation are visible.



Ben White sees the need to somehow bring the mainstream-type tour together with the alternative tour because, as he observes, the two *“together could be crucial in increasing Palestinian tourism potential, a prospect that if done well, could bring important economic, social and political benefits.”*

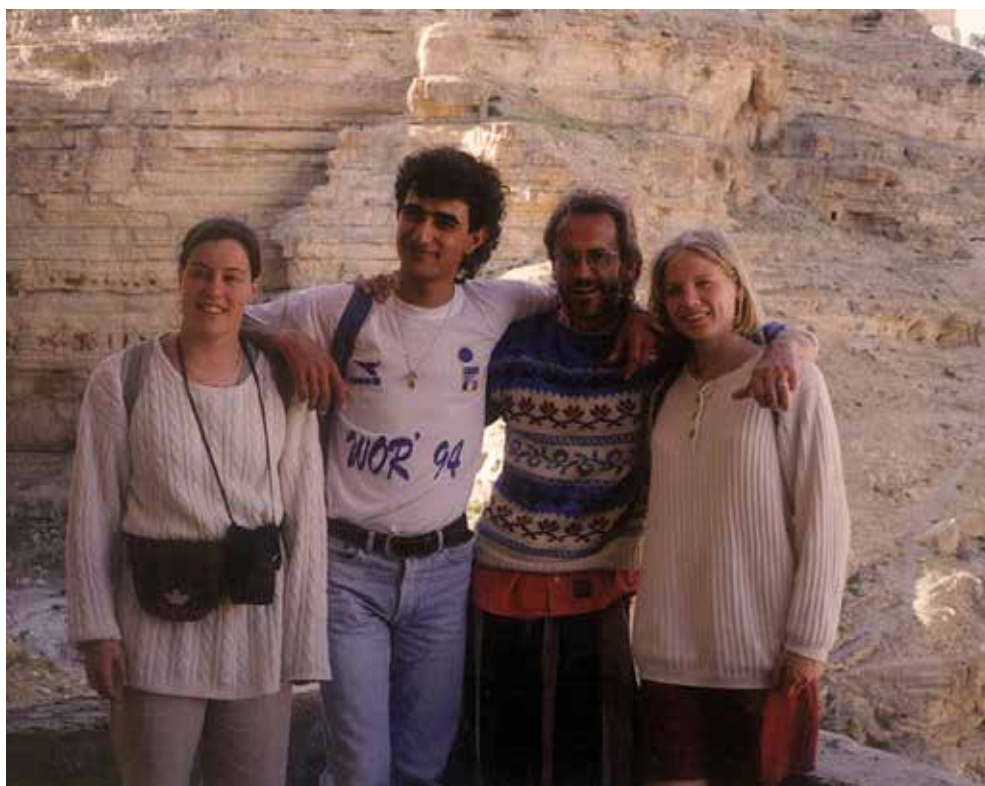
White also points to another important challenge-cum-prospect. He observes: *“One of the biggest problems is Palestine’s image. For any destination this is of crucial importance, and Palestine has suffered from the one-dimensional impressions given by the Western media (encouraged by Israeli propaganda) of the Occupied Territories, as an anarchic, dangerous nest of terrorists... The combination*

of a negative image, plus the physical barriers, means that most tourists stay within Israel's pre-1967 occupation boundaries or perhaps in a hotel in Jerusalem, and simply visit the Bethlehem area as one more item on a busy day's itinerary. Thus there is little money spent in the local hotels and restaurants, and the only chance that Palestinians have to benefit in any way from the visiting tourists is through selling expensive, heavily-commissioned gifts and souvenirs... This is all in stark contrast to an Israeli tourism industry supported by an active and resourceful government ministry, a sector with substantial funds to invest in advertising campaigns, and with well-developed contacts with crucial markets such as Western churches. Israel receives an estimated 95 percent or more of "Holy Land" tourism..."

In an article on "Tourism and Human Rights in Palestine," ATG Executive Director Rami Kassis writes: *"Israel has annexed the most significant archaeological sites and tourist monuments. The encroachments on Palestinian spaces and heritage under the name of tourism often seem harmless to the naive or undiscerning tourist. The fact, however, is that these policies of Israel impinge on the right to self-determination, freedom and independence. By the systematic control and confiscation of the tourist sites, and control of the tourism services and industry, Israel obstructs the Palestinians from the potentials and benefits of tourism resources – a clear dispossession of access to legitimate Gross National Income, per capita income."* It is important to note that Palestinian culture, civilization and history



represent a central dimension of national identity. Palestine has numerous historical, religious and cultural heritage sites and should always be comprehended within the framework of learning both its history and its geography together. By denying the Palestinian right to their own tourism spaces, Israel violates the essential right to allow for encounters between the Palestinian people and their guests. At a time when the situation in the occupied territories is rapidly deteriorating with mounting human rights violations, accompanied by even greater brutality, the world is under obligation to 'Come and See' Israel's total disregard for the rule of law and international humanitarian standards and practices.



ATG's *Inception and Evolution*

In a feasibility study carried out in 1994, ATG commissioned researchers to outline a vision-mission-strategy for ATG. The research team observed that The Holy Land was naturally imbued with all the necessary ingredients for the ideal tourist destination. The Holy Sites represent its most exceptional features; religious and historical heritage spaces confer on The Holy Land one of the major reasons why Christians, Jews and Muslims visit the region. But, aside from just the history, there are other aspects: The Holy Land abounds in fascinating natural gifts of culture and geography.

ATG's researchers also affirmed that tourism is pivotal to Palestine's economy. Even with ups and downs, its uniqueness remains and only suffers lapses in numbers in circumstances of dire conflict. It is income generating and creates benefits to the wider economy in GDP terms at the macro level. There are also enormous micro benefits at the community level, through direct employment of people in the sector. There are also important trade dimensions in handicrafts or items of tourist interest in home-based industry or other small-scale industry. Also to be factored in are the ways in which the tourism sector interacts with other sectors -- food, agriculture, dairy, goods and services. Overall, tourism employs close to 14% of the workforce from local populations, as well as a relatively large informal sector. In human resource terms, direct employment is in the region of 36,000 people including 53% in restaurants and sub-sectors, 22% in handicrafts and the souvenir industry, 13% in other allied services, with a balance of 12% in other sectors including tour guides, tour operators and staff at tourism sites (statistics from ICC, Palestine for 2010). According to FANACK Chronicle (a website providing analysis and fact-based information about the Middle East) 15% of the GDP of Palestine accrues from tourism. This figure does not account for the informal sector which comprises a high – and largely unaccounted for - number.

Perhaps one of the main benefits in tourism is that it brings in much

needed foreign exchange to cover Palestine's balance of payments for imports. Palestine's revenues from tourism would be far higher, but its real potential is harshly stifled by a ruthless tourism regime in Israel which has designed its own tourism policy in such a way that income leakages are created to a point where the bulk of the tourist dollar remains in Israeli hands. Even though the income trickling through is reasonable, Palestine deserves a far greater proportion of tourism income when weighed on the scale of justice. The bulk of historical and religious sites are located in Palestine but Israel has appropriated many of these spaces with a singularly selfish motivation – to sneak in profits from these spaces which, in the course of natural justice, would be in Palestinian hands.

For ATG, its niche has been to offer alternative tours. Alternative tourism offers visitors a variety of arrangements by which a range of hitherto unexplored elements is explored that are unconventional in comparison to regular tourism. Alternative tourism has added new depths to tourism through deepening visitors' understanding of The Holy Land and the lives of its indigenous peoples, who are increasingly referred to as "Living Stones": those who preserve the sacredness of the land just by living there. In that sense, ATG does not seek the impossible. It sticks to the basics of tourism -- to provide the visitor time to spend with the local communities, interacting with their cultures and traditions, obtaining a local and analytic narrative of the space and its historical, political, and socio-cultural dimensions.

To this day, ATG persists with its founding ideals to be a not-for-profit, non-religious, non-political, Palestinian grassroots organization that creates and markets alternative tours bringing multiple, tangible gain to host communities. Hence, ATG was defined by its founding members as an organization geared to socio-economic vitalization of the Palestinian economy on one hand, while benefiting tourists through distinctive tour programmes, on the other. ATG has created many job opportunities in the tourism sector for unemployed university graduates in the arts and social sciences; this was seen as an important contribution at a time when many young Palestinians found themselves educated but unemployed or under-employed.

ATG's *incent*

In tangible terms, the vision has included increasing lodging facilities at private Palestinian homes suitable to host visitors, benefiting both visitor and host, so visitors may socialize with people of a different culture and live The Holy Land experience, while seeing it through the eyes of a Palestinian. Moreover, it was conceived as a development strategy and a community-based tourism model where hosts have a supplementary source of income, and build up sincere and longstanding relationships with visitors, as well as being indirect promoters of ATG. It was never easy to locate ideal conditions, mainly due to the conservative nature of some segments of society. A stranger in the home was not always an easy proposition: but through prudence, increasingly careful selection criteria were applied, and people's motivation grew to contribute to and benefit from tourism.

ATG's success was also that its tourism products focused more on those Palestinian territories containing many religious and historic sites. In addition, tourists would be able to see and understand the current political crises. ATG also strongly subscribes to the notion that the essence of tourism is people-to-people encounters: so ATG organized conferences, dialogue meetings, interfaith initiatives and educational activities, in order to promote socio-cultural interaction between Palestinians and visitors.

Undoubtedly, the revitalization of Palestinian culture required Palestinians to develop new patterns of tourism away from the beaten track, both in terms of sites visited as well as narratives. Palestinian Christians had an additional role here, because of the multitude of Christian pilgrims who want to see the holy sites as part of the cradle of their faith: to see the churches from which Christianity took birth and spread around the world.

A distinguishing feature of ATG's strategy was to successfully train Palestinian tour guides. This was spurred by more than one reason. Firstly, Israel had, in 1967, snatched away the Palestinian right to obtain a tourist guide licence. It feared that a guide could easily become an instrument of pro-Palestinian propaganda. Yet now,

more and more local guides are available and ATG even carries out its own training. Palestinian guides are different because they hold within their hearts and mind a perspective of justice. They promote a cause – justice for Palestine, an end to the occupation. The guides do not merely cover a route. They take a path that not only involves significant sites but also includes themes, issues and questions, while connecting to other related topics and experiences.

ATG has created many innovations. These include visits to historical and religious sites with a new approach, bringing into focus Eastern traditions and philosophies. A typical novelty was the eco-tours, especially in Jericho where one could witness unspoiled wilderness; that tour also had an added value from a health perspective.

More creative encounters have been pioneered. Semi-nomadic tourism has taken travellers into Bedouin camps, for acquaintance with the distinct cultural expressions of those semi-nomadic people. For, after all, the picturesque pattern of Bedouin life is unmatched elsewhere. In the same vein, ATG has adopted desert excursions, unique to Palestine because of the silence of the Jerusalem wilderness, and also because Palestine is more rural than urban. Rural tourism has taken travellers into villages to understand the simple lifestyle of villagers.

ATG has also offered curious and discerning visitors encounters with Palestinian music and dance, guided tours of folkloric museums where local embroidery, glassware, brassware, Mother of Pearl and olive wood carvings may be seen and appreciated.

Many religious leaders and theologically inclined church-related groups appreciate the access to inter-religious encounters with Muslim, Christian, or Jewish clerics. It was also, for many, a unique experience to engage in political encounters with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. As an extension of this, ATG has organized encounters between visitors and social movements or social centres to learn how new theological centres are articulating notions of liberation, based on the particular cultural particularity of Palestine.

Justice Emerges as The Root of Alternative Tourism

ATG subscribes to the notion that alternative tours are crucial for introducing people to a vital consciousness of the Palestinian reality. ATG bases this assumption on an understanding that such tours offer information, learning and an emotional experience to amplify their perception of the conflict. In other words, ATG tours pose the real question of justice in the Palestinian-Israeli relationship. This becomes especially relevant and feasible when the alternative/justice tour allows Palestinians to present their own views and culture, and for visitors to draw their own conclusions.

ATG has been strategic in identifying the kind of groups which it wants to influence. These are mainly opinion makers in the international arena and include academic groups, church groups concerned with issues of social justice, diplomats, journalists and researchers, political organizations, and tourist or pilgrim groups willing to explore local issues. The wider Israeli public, for whom knowledge of Palestine, both 1948 Palestine and the Occupied Territories, is meagre and distorted by preconceptions, also constitute a sector that receives attention.

To what are alternative tours an alternative? To conventional tours that impart facts, anecdotes and "light" (or "lite") history about disconnected sites to passive listeners. Tourists come away with many facts that they soon forget because they are disjointed and do not fit into any overarching conceptual framework. Just as problematic, conventional tour guides impart hidden ideologies aimed at replacing the essential narratives or stories, or even, at worst, false narratives that seek to support rigid political positions.

While adopting the above ideas as the basis for a new paradigm in its work, ATG has also recognized that there was much from the past that it did not need to surrender, while affirming certain working principles. Acknowledging that several key elements differentiate ATG's approach from conventional tourism, ATG has conveyed its

doctrine around five essential principles:

ATG decided that it must be an advocacy-oriented social enterprise, dedicated to furthering a just and viable peace in the region through critical tourism and other forms of experiential learning. The plain agenda of an ATG tour seeks to uncover the sources of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while presenting diverse views of peoples of the area, in an “upfront” approach.

In this way, the alternative tour emerges as a coherent, critical experience. Histories, facts and anecdotes may give context and substance to sites, but are only useful when integrated into a problem-posing/learning experience. The guide is a learning facilitator – she or he structures experiences, introduces information and issues, answers contextual questions, and acts as an intermediary with local people.

In Palestine and Israel, there are strong competing claims and a long history of conflict. It may be appropriate to hear the different voices, view the places of conflict and critically examine the claims and grievances of all sides. But ATG insists on highlighting the proportions of injustice with which Palestinians contend under the occupation, under a rule that is harsh, cruel and discriminatory. In this sense, justice tours integrate the views of local people, often using them as guides or hosts. There is hardly a tour that does not address sensitive



of alternative tourism



issues – the occupation itself, “Judaization” of the landscape, home demolitions, the Separation Wall, colonies and so on. The intention is to move visitors to an awareness of political thinking that bends towards a peace built on the foundation of justice.

ATG pays attention to detail in planning a tour. Tour routes are based on themes, issues and topics. They are modular in nature; they may be separated or combined depending on a tourist group’s interests and schedule. ATG does not offer a premeditated package. Packages exist but any package can be re-done or re-packaged to suit the requirements of the group or individuals joining the tour.

ATG’s ultimate intention is dual. On the one hand, it creates solidarity groups able to advocate for justice in their own countries through public education, awareness-raising and lobbying of their governments on the Palestinian question. On the other hand, it enables and equips a visiting group to develop campaigns designed to awaken political consciousness among people and, through that process, engage in efforts such as boycott of Israeli products, disinvestment campaigns, olive tree planting, people-to-people exchanges of a specialized nature, or other relevant activism.

Niche Tourism Enterprises

Over its history, ATG has promoted some creative, offbeat enterprises to attract tourists to investigate the social and political side of Palestinian life; such enterprises are not merely non-conformist in approach but seek deeper meaning for travellers' interactions with Palestine or the occupation.

In Palestine, the olive tree was, and still remains, a constant target of the Israeli military. The destruction of olive trees has had intentional and destructive results on the lives of many Palestinian farmers, land owners and the population in general. ATG has translated this human rights issue and ecological concern into an opportunity for justice tourists to connect with olive farmers in more than mere words of solidarity. They offer visible disapproval of Israel's practices of brutal suppression by either planting olive trees, or by assisting the harvest. The action has more symbolism than tangible value. Firstly, it says to Israel: "We beg to differ!" Secondly, it signals to the Palestinians: "You are not alone." In over a decade of olive planting and harvesting, Palestinian farmers have created awareness among an ever-expanding international network of friends and partners about Palestinian rights to live with dignity and full human rights, and the Palestinian struggle.

Mainstream tourism has the tendency to introduce visitors to historical sites famous for one reason or another. But in that pattern of tourism, the visitor often misses the opportunity to listen to unwritten narratives of unheralded people off the beaten track, yet intimately connected to the tourist trail. When ATG joined the Bethlehem 2000 project in the year 1999 to help research the Nativity Trail Initiative as part of the offer for the new millennium, it added a unique dimension to the trail from Nazareth in the Galilee to the town of Bethlehem. History apart, the trail was charted to include new dimensions and alternative experiences; it was replete with exchanges with people and villages whose narrative would educate and enrich their trek through the terrain. A visitor can easily become

Niche Tourism

preoccupied, often in sentimentality, with the narrative of the young mother-to-be, Mary, travelling by donkey with her husband Joseph on a long, hard trek. ATG's preoccupation with adding value through additions and alternatives has meant that those who take the trek now meet a wide range of people, such as Franciscan priests on Mount Tabor, Muslim clerics at village mosques, Greek Orthodox monks in desert monasteries, hillside farmers and their families, small-town shopkeepers and craftspeople, Bedouin shepherds watering their flocks at ancient cisterns, and many more such interesting people. The Nativity Trail has thus transformed itself into a spiritual pilgrimage with a difference. It is now a journey of dialogue, openness and interaction with new people. Participants even come face-to-face with the flora and fauna of Palestine and discover the thrill of embracing a culture that has survived in Palestine for thousands of years.



Visits always include destinations of historical and political importance, with specially-trained guides, in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jaffa, Haifa, Nazareth, Hebron, Jericho, Nablus, and other cities and towns. An abstract history is one thing: in the context of the Israeli occupation, these very destinations are no longer sites that lend themselves to abstraction or neutral interpretation. Their

m enterprises

histories are increasingly defined by narratives stemming from the conflict. It is possible to have a neutral interpretation of a place visited, but that would not tell the complete story of the altered history or changing dynamics of the area or the lives of its people. In other words, each of these destinations has an emerging narration that is in the making at every juncture in history. For a tour to be truth telling and interpretative in scope, there simply must be the evolving storyline which, by design, must have political and cultural content beyond mere access to sites of historical and religious interest.



The city of Hebron is a typical illustration of such a dynamic; it epitomises an apartheid existence. Hebron is home to over 250,000 Palestinians and some 850 Jewish settlers. Deemed the second holiest city after Jerusalem for the Jews, it is one of the four holiest cities of Islam (after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem) and the Christian tradition. Its religio-historic importance makes Hebron's present status complex. Eight hundred and fifty Jewish settlers and 2,200 Israeli soldiers reside in parts of Hebron ("H-2"); the Palestinian population is gradually decreasing as a result of Israeli military rules, curfews and restrictions on movement, the forcible closure of Palestinian businesses and commercial outlets, especially under curfews lasting

Niche Tourism

years, and settler harassment. The Jewish 'settlers' are a separate component of the puzzle, governed by their own administration and with their own agenda, but essentially Israeli forces protect them.

If an average Israeli Government-registered guide were to take a group to Hebron, it would be in a bullet-proof bus or at least it would only enter from the Israeli colony of Kiryat Arba' to visit the area that settlers and the army control in the heart of the Old City of Hebron. This is part of the package for Israeli tourism -- demonizing the Palestinians. Hence the question arises: How do Palestinians convey the true storyline or a more accurate narrative? Typically, Palestinian exposure begins in what is euphemistically called 'Apartheid Street' (Shuhada Street), a name designated by Palestinians since they are forbidden to use the street, which used to be a thriving shopping walkway lane, and has been downgraded to a ghostly empty space, with shutters down on all shops (their locks welded closed by the IOF and their door-handles forcibly dismantled), an intimidating checkpoint at the end, guarded by heavily armed Israeli military forces. Any rare cars on that road will only ever be driven by Israeli settlers.

The regular tour ignores reality and follows a well-worn routine: -- see the sites, go shopping, collect souvenirs, take some photos for Facebook and Instagram (or the photo album at home). Justice demands otherwise. A tourist should encounter reality and, even more importantly, engage with locals to learn the facts. To "Come and See" is not a perfunctory, passive activity; it entails encounter, dialogue and analytical interpretation that must be told. The opportunity to see things from both sides must be offered. Only in this way may a visitor achieve informed judgment. While many Hebron settlers may refuse such interaction, invariably those who do interact with visitors (often with cruel and crude violence or foul language, while IOF soldiers posted there look on implacably), make the case against themselves most convincingly.

A Palestinian can show tourists modern stone buildings standing high above Hebron's old crumbling market place, inhabited now by

Jewish settlers, their walls literally touching those of the Old City. The main pathway of the suq (bazaar) is now covered with a roof of wire mesh that collects stones and plastic bottles like a giant sieve, items that the settlers have thrown down, including urine and bleach (the other side of that narrative being that Palestinians too were throwing items at the settlers). Palestinian people in some areas are not allowed to lock the doors of their houses so that Israeli soldiers may enter at will at any time. The houses are sometimes taken over by force because many Palestinians refuse to sell their properties for the millions of dollars offered by the settlers.



These are the encounters of alternative tourism -- a time of truth-telling by people and an opportunity to observe the clashing narratives. A discerning tourist, who encounters both the claims and counter claims, and sees the oppression, will absorb a very different narrative from that experienced on an Israeli-sponsored bus tour. The alternative narrative would go thus: *“I never once felt unsafe here and nor do the Palestinian people make you feel unwelcome. In fact, many treasure the opportunity to share their stories, knowing that you will share them too. But there’s no denying that you could feel the tension, and then we worked out why.”*

Niche Tourism

Alternative tours address issues of human interest but not as entertainment. They go deep into the challenges and prospects of human dignity. Why else would a visit to a refugee camp touch a raw nerve in the visitor's psyche? Such a visit often opens up a vital discourse -- the claim of the "right of return" -- a key demand of Palestinian selfhood.

Award winning journalist Grace Halsell, in an article "Life in a Palestinian Refugee Camp," poignantly says: *"Entering the refugee camp, I feel I am entering some medieval ghetto. I walk along a narrow alleyway, skirting an open sewage ditch. I pass tens of dozens of one-and two-room houses, each leaning on the other for support. I am in a ghetto without streets, sidewalks, gardens, patios, trees, flowers, plazas, or shops—among an uprooted, stateless, scattered people who, like the Jews before them, are in a tragic diaspora. I pass scores of small children, the third generation of Palestinians born in the ghetto that has almost as long a history as the state of Israel itself. Someone has said that for every Jew who was brought in to create a new state, a Palestinian Arab was uprooted and left homeless."*



The alternative tour also goes beyond a bland way of looking at interesting historical sites and hearing exciting anecdotes devoid of truth or analysis. If Palestinians confront the everyday reality of the “illegal colony enterprise,” is it not crucial for the tourist to understand its political, social, and economic ramifications? ATG facilitates travellers to see colonies for themselves. They usually return stunned, recognizing and perceptive that Israel’s colony policy is illegal under international law. Those colonies built on confiscated or stolen Palestinian land are one of the core justifications for the building of the Apartheid Wall. The forced displacement caused by the colonies severely limits Palestinian access to basic resources, including land and water, while perpetuating a system of segregation and legal and structural inequality between Palestinians and Israelis.

As known, this kind of tourism seeks truth, justice and restoration. It aligns with Palestinian attempts to reclaim what was stolen -- to the extent feasible, with so many facts-on-the-ground having had such dramatic impact since the beginning of the occupation.

An average Israeli tour bus often skips checkpoints: those tourists are privileged and must not even see the kind of harassment ordinary Palestinians must confront every day! The alternative visitors’ encounter at a check-point, however, is intended not merely to expose the cruelty of the Apartheid system: it clearly differentiates between the life of a privileged visitor under the aegis of an Israeli tour operator and the daily life of everyday people. ATG’s check-point encounters bring home to the visitor just what it means to exist in a military zone, consisting of a guard tower, a pedestrian waiting area, divided by barbed wire, blocks of concrete, rotating steel gates and the bureaucratic system of IDs – blue for the privileged, and green for those with limited freedoms.

Seeing the Separation Wall is something often omitted by the mainstream tour operator. To those who know, the wall is in ‘your face’. To those who don’t care and have come for pleasure or sentimental reasons, there is nothing to see. The Wall is mere physical infrastructure and may as well be necessary or justified. It requires a group to stop

enterprises

and reflect, based on seeing and hearing about the impacts of the wall. Questions will then emerge: How is the wall detrimental to the economy? How does it limit the natural flow of goods, including humanitarian aid? Restricted movement and access imposed by the Separation Wall and check-points impact the Palestinian economy by creating greater unemployment, crippled private sector activity, a rapid decline in GDP, decreased wages, and ever-increasing poverty. In addition, check-points restrict the Palestinian economy by limiting access to economies of scale in order to generate further growth, as well as limiting access to natural resources. Foreign investment is made extremely difficult by such restrictions.

Through the introduction of these out-of-the-ordinary options in a tourism package, ATG gives visitors a true "Come and See" experience. It is the character of the tour, and the quality of the tour guide, that make the difference.



Accessing Wider Constituencies

International travel fairs are invariable spaces where corporate tourism enterprises and governments market their products. But ATG, through effective lobbying, has found spaces within the broader Palestine stalls to present the "tour less taken" -- promoting an alternative way of travelling in Palestine. Displays at such fairs have evinced adequate interest to ensure interest in seeing The Holy Land within a different paradigm of tourism, without ignoring the region's political realities. People are frequently challenged when presented with alternatives. For this reason, ATG sees the need to interest media personalities or even corporate-related tour operators to make investigative visits to Palestine. Responses to such visits have been positive, initiating new understanding of the situation in Palestine-Israel and the negative and harsh circumstances thrown up by occupation practices or policies.

Alternative tourism is not a mass market, nor will it easily emerge as one. Nor does this alternative/'third sector' in tourism seek to attract a mass market; in fact there is risk in broadening to proportions that render its meaning and intent redundant. The alternative tourist is



Accessing wider constituencies

usually an astute judge of reality who is curious to go beyond the surface or the superficial: this is the focus and priority of alternative tourism. ATG invests its human and financial resources specifically towards achieving that goal.

ATG has also invested time and financial resources in its participation in important international events, such as the World Social Forums, World Council of Churches' assemblies, international tourism festivals or markets; it also accepts invitations to speaking tours abroad. The opening of ties with the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism was significant in this regard because it enabled ATG to become part of the global community of tourism networks which meet frequently to share ideas and concerns, while strategizing together.



Paradigm shift

Paradigm Shift

In its initial stages, ATG focused its energies almost exclusively on alternative tourism as a method of conveying the Palestinian reality. However, as ATG grew, it became clear that it must navigate further afield.

Palestinian culture is viewed as an important dimension of the life of the Palestinian people. Palestine is culturally rich. Its poets, writers, film-makers, actors and artists are highly political, primarily because the politics of oppression defines how Palestinians express themselves when dealing with the Israeli occupation. For example, Palestine has a long list of world-class poets.

Many Palestinians are also skilled in calligraphy and illustrate verses from the Koran in beautiful designs, for sale at art shows. In larger tourist destinations, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah, craftsmen sell woven rugs and tapestries, leather goods, pottery, and ceramic jars. Other traditional crafts are made from olive wood and ivory such as jewellery boxes, scenes of the Last Supper, crosses, camels, and mosques. Handmade glassware is also a craft whose techniques have traditionally been passed on from father to son, especially in Hebron, over the generations.

So, alternative tourism must not be confined to political narratives alone: it must, essentially, cover forms of culture and tradition that are regularly reaffirmed. This recognition prompts ATG to promote tourist encounters with culture, integrated into all its packages. Culinary tours



Paradigm shift

are set up for those who seek to understand culture via food. ATG's home stay programmes are also a direct encounter with tradition; this informal learning and sharing being an essential dimension of alternative tourism. A tourist's itinerary is incomplete by only adopting a hedonistic attitude to his or her visit. Until tourism becomes an encounter between cultures, neither the visitor nor the visited are deeply enriched.

To sum up: *Palestine has an outstanding cultural tourism potential, implying an experience of various cultural environments, including landscapes, the visual and performing arts, and unique local lifestyles, values, traditions and events as well as other ways of creative and inter-cultural exchange processes. (Kelly, 1998)*

“Cultural tourism aims to attract those tourists whose motives are learning about other cultures, their way of life, habits, customs, traditions, and ways of thinking. This form of tourism is more in line with modern global tourism market trends and is thus likely to see a further increase within the tourism sector.” (McKercher, 2002)



Renewing Tourism Through the Revision of Traditional Formats

Tourism is an evolving discipline. Its competitive nature demands that those who promote it, whether mainstream or alternative, must add new dimensions to enhance the experience. Consequently, new knowledge and avenues of tourism must be developed through study and research at ground level. New insights often require further verification through research. The ATG Study Centre is now emerging as an influential research platform that introduces researchers to crucial questions in the tourism arena.

The bottom line invariably has to do with the question of the occupation and the deliberate strangulation of Palestinian tourism and its manipulation by Israel. Judging from the several research studies carried out, it is clear that ATG's visibility and voice are recognised. Its research reassesses and refines ideas, while challenging simplistic deductions based on dominant mainstream media images. While challenging those stereotypes, ATG offers new ideas, concepts or theoretical formulations based on reliable data. While certain social theories about alternative tourism or critiques of tourism run the risk of being imprecise, each work of ATG on the study front typically seeks to initiate a dialogue of ideas, based on evidence promoted through the studies.

So, what might sound like a run-of-the-mill guidebook assumes a completely different perspective in ATG's inventory. The guidebook *Palestine and Palestinians* expresses a unique concept as a tourist guidebook, providing an in-depth, updated journey through the entire range of Palestinian culture: ancient and modern history, archaeology, religion, architecture and politics, including the daily reality of Israeli occupation. It is anything but a typical guidebook. Through it, ATG captures Palestinian memory in sites bearing witness to a history and identity originally created from contact with civilizations of the

Middle East, the Mediterranean, Europe and the Arab Peninsula. It has also exposed the contemporary tragedy and struggle of a people seeking recognition of their rights, detailing their ongoing search for an end to injustice, through a viable peace and statehood. By offering biographies of culturally significant personalities, poems or popular songs, ATG broadens the visitor's horizons. Palestine and Palestinians is above all geared to ATG's core function – to be an instrument of education and awareness-raising. ATG finds reward in its copious efforts to constantly update the book, and publish it in additional language versions. For example, the University of Turin has adopted the book as a reference/study book in its curriculum. The guidebook has so far been published in eight languages. It has also been converted into an "App," a pragmatic and handy tool for travellers who prefer to travel light! Its easy accessibility from the App Store for Apple devices or the Android Playstore makes it a handy information tool for the curious traveller.



Pilgrimages For Transformation

The Israeli West Bank barrier along the Green Line was framed by Israel as a supposed security barrier against terrorism. Palestinians see and experience it as an Apartheid Wall. The project was approved by Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, in November 2000; construction began in June 2002. Israel, which claimed the Wall was to control the entry of so-called terrorists, used it to cut into the West Bank through illegal acquisition of Palestinian land and natural resources. The unwritten agenda was to annex some 46% of the West Bank, isolating communities into Bantustans, ghettos and "military zones." The implications are severe when one considers that the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including almost 1.5 million refugees, is now locked into a mere 12% of mandated Palestine. Many Palestinians in the West Bank found themselves in the closed military zone of the Jordan Valley, or surrounded on three or four sides by the Wall or isolated between it and the Green Line. The loss of land or access to it and to markets, free movement and livelihoods -- and the threat of expulsion -- loomed large. The Wall was, effectively, an extension of the barrier Israel had built in the Gaza Strip in 1994 to cut off Palestinians there from the rest of the world. It has even at this incomplete stage literally ghettoized the Palestinian population and, while depriving them of land, markets and resources, has grabbed their dignity by forcing on them a humiliating, prison-type existence.

Prior to 2005, Palestine was already reeling from the impacts of the Second *Intifada*. Israel had gained a stranglehold in the Palestinian territories and was cementing the occupation in multiple ways. Incidents of settler violence ascended in numbers and in cruelty. Palestinians were not to be easily subdued. They initiated popular resistance to the Wall through demonstrations and other forms of direct action. Solidarity visitors joined these protests. But a main protest came in the form of graffiti artists writing protest slogans or drawing pictures underlining the Wall's abhorrent nature.

Pilgrimages for tra



It was at this time that the Ecumenical Coalition for Third World Tourism (popularly known as ECOT) sought a way to mobilize global solidarity through tourism around The Question of Palestine. Having established a close working relationship, ECOT and ATG joined together to examine how they could collectively develop a concrete global intervention to invigorate ATG's alternative tourism approach. In exploring the options, ATG studied the tourism market in Palestine. It was clear that the bulk of tourists to Palestine were so-called pilgrims from various church traditions. Although the study did not fully categorize them, it became clear that most pilgrims were making their visit to follow the paths that Jesus once took over 2000 years ago. Theirs was a journey of sentimentality – to experience emotionally those places where Jesus had once lived, walked, prayed, taught, been persecuted and died: where He was buried and was then resurrected. Each sacred space had to be visited and venerated. It was as if a mere visit to those spaces would somehow complete a crucial stage in the pilgrim's life. The entire pilgrimage, of course, had a missing link. Pilgrims, rarely, if ever, encountered the political context or reality. Similarities between Palestine in the time of Jesus and today were rarely explored.

Pilgrimage for Transformation (PIFT) was an idea designed to challenge traditional notions of pilgrimage. While formulating the ideas around PIFT, it emerged that a discourse on pilgrimage was not an issue

belonging to any single discipline, confined to alternative tourism alone. While planning an event to launch PIFT, it was obvious that full exploration of a critical definition of pilgrimage should be based on a multi-disciplinary discourse. ATG and ECOT therefore introduced an organization based in the Israeli-Occupied Golan Heights - Golan for Development - to explore the thesis that 'justice tourism' could contribute to justice and peace in the Occupied Territories through human encounter, and to consider how the global community could accompany Palestinians in challenging, transforming and countering mainstream tourism and the Israeli tourism monopoly, including its control -- financial, ideological, and theological -- over Christian pilgrimage.

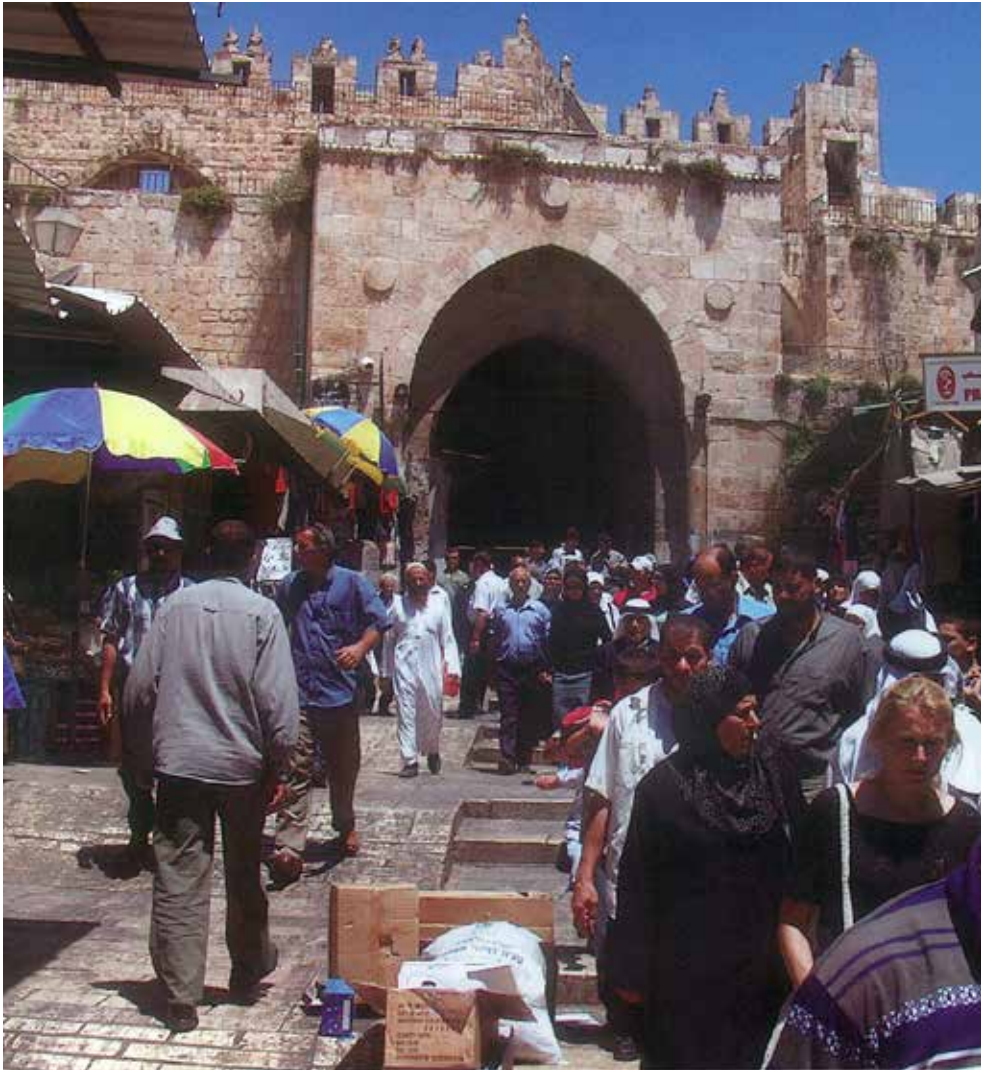
A group of theologians, human rights activists, academics, tourism activists and solidarity group members joined together for a historic event in Alexandria in Egypt to begin a process of preliminary research towards challenging, transforming and countering mainstream tourism and the Israeli tourism monopoly.

As stated, tourism tends to distort history, so has served as a vehicle of injustice. In the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, mainstream tourism is an economic, political and ideological prop for the oppression of the Palestinian people, whereas justice tourism is a viable alternative that promotes human encounter and breaks the silence, in order to lead to political awareness, personal transformation of both the visited and the visitor, while contributing to a just peace through advocacy and political action.

The organizers chose to impose an approach that a truly transformative pilgrimage would have to adopt within a totally different paradigm. Pilgrims would need to grasp the contemporary reality of Jesus' message in the context of what Palestine and Israel had become. Was the war, racism, occupation, and political corruption of the modern Holy Land to be swept under the carpet? Or, was a new political understanding and theological restatement required, so that pilgrimages could acquire their true meaning and attain an understanding of all these factors?

Pilgrimages for tra

Simultaneously, ATG also began a process of self-inquiry and organizational renewal; this had become imperative once the concept of Pilgrimages for Transformation raised questions in the Alexandria encounter of ethics, theology, ideology, and tourism theory. ATG was challenged to deepen the connection of pilgrimage, encounter and transformation based on understanding the connectedness between the spiritual and the political. Questions were raised as to how the international community may provide most effective support and solidarity in such a process? How can church, denominational,



ecumenical or interfaith groups join in actions for tourism as encounters for a just peace? How can spiritual solidarity be best expressed by those who have borne witness? ATG also clearly needed to restructure its organizational culture.

PIFT represented the defining moment that prompted ATG to shift from being mainly a tour operator to being a lobbying organization; consequently, it has developed as a rallying point for transforming tourism in The Holy Land, with a vision for peace with justice through human encounters that examine the root causes of the conflict and the resultant occupation.

The Code of Conduct for Travellers in The Holy Land is an important tool that adds meaning to pilgrims' visits, and those of probing, secular, solidarity activists and human rights defenders. The Code of Conduct was launched in an ATG co-ordinated project – The Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism (PIRT). The code itself emerged from the mandate of the Madaba meeting of the International Reference Group. In 2007, in Madaba, delegates to the meeting of the International Reference Group tackled pertinent questions for self-reflection, which were then transmitted through the Palestinian delegation for further exploration within Palestine. Questions included how ATG could foster that new understanding of the intrinsic link between the spiritual and the political. Madaba also considered how the international community of solidarity groups could respond to the attacks that would emerge to discredit and disrupt such local initiatives by powerful Israeli political-economic interests at governmental level, as well as within the Israeli tourism industry, who would be threatened by potential revenue decline as profits would increasingly go to Palestinian tourism sectors.

Following Madaba, representatives from all sectors in Palestine came together in an inclusive effort to develop a code of ethics for use by pilgrims and solidarity travellers as well as a code of ethics for the Palestinian tourism sector. All sectors in Palestinian tourism were included and encouraged to express their opinions. This included the Ministry of Tourism, guides, hotels, tour operators, souvenir

shops and civil society groups concerned about tourism issues and wider questions of the development of Palestinian culture or issues of economic development. For, after all, tourism is an important economic activity and ATG and many of its partners view tourism as a community-based and community-oriented economic activity.

The Code addresses issues of just and responsible tourism for Palestine and Palestinians, and provides mechanisms to overcome deficits in Palestinian tourism, while empowering host communities. It provides guidelines for a fair and beneficial tourism; the code has developed as an influential criterion for alternative tourism operators, while rapidly gaining local and international endorsement.

Following the adoption of the code, it was soon apparent that a phase of biblical reflection was paramount. This was needed urgently, as it was felt that the code could be a tool to answer the queries and uncertainties of Christian pilgrims, many of whom found themselves torn between the contradictory narrative for justice for Palestinians and Jewish claims to exclusive ownership of The Holy Land, derived from the Zionist claim to be the 'Chosen People.'

It was agreed that such an exploration should also be based on the political economy of tourism and its sociological/cultural impacts. A meeting in Switzerland convened in 2010 by ATG, Kairos Palestine, and the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum ("PIEF") explored how ATG could fill the void in theological reflection, to research pilgrimage theology. A search for the meaning of an authentic Christian pilgrimage in The Holy Land therefore followed, based on theological and Biblical perspectives and Biblical interpretations. This initiative focused on challenging Christians who visit The Holy Land (a significant audience of 1.7 million pilgrims or 60% of visitors to The Holy Land) to alter their encounters and narratives once in The Holy Land. ATG would work to connect the political with the spiritual, by acknowledging their incontrovertible relationship. The critical challenge was to construct pilgrimage patterns through which ATG could engage in building a new consciousness, to attract pilgrims with a new preference - one that favours justice in The Holy Land and thereby transform the

thinking of pilgrims whose bias in favour of the Jewish people still allows for the delegitimization of the Palestinian people.

In line with the 2009 Kairos Palestine document, ATG adopted the Kairos slogan "Come and See." Central to the Kairos document was the call to pilgrims to view The Holy Land as a place of intrinsic injustice inflicted upon the Palestinians since the formation of the State of Israel in 1948. In the wake of this call, ATG's follow-up asked that pilgrimage be a direct call to be peacemakers and torchbearers of justice. ATG had totally subscribed to the Kairos document idea, which, it referred to as nothing less than a journey of truth and transformation that will reveal the love of God to pilgrims through the eyes of the Palestinian people who, despite having suffered decades of occupation and dispossession, maintain their dignity, faith, and capacity for hope. This notion was best captured in an ATG encounter on "Come and See" where the Indian Dalit theologian, Dr. Deenbandhu Manchala, asserted: *"If you love God, you would love the people of God, the people that God created. Many of us Christians love the church – our buildings, monuments, traditions, relics, liturgies, and symbols. In the name of God, we love what we have created but fail to love what God has created – the human being and the rest of Creation."*

PIFT now advances an ideal of Palestinian hospitality which dates back to a long-standing tradition from the days of Jesus Christ, over 2000 years ago. ATG always knew that the strength of Palestinian-initiated pilgrimages was that *"For Palestinian Christians, the holy sites are not mere tourist destinations – they are often their own local churches - places that have meaning in their everyday worship. In other words, the communities that pilgrims will visit are the "Living Stones" who secure the sacred tradition in The Holy Land. They are the custodians and guardians of the places that marked the happenings in the life of Christ and the prophets. They are not mere museums or a space to pursue an egocentric faith which gives them a sense of self-fulfilment."* ("Come and See - A call from Palestinian Christians")

Pilgrimages for tra

The ensuing, transformative pilgrimage offers a comprehensive picture of the truth about The Holy Land, the evidence of which is seen in the witness of pilgrims to justice and in the actions they take to side with Palestinians as victims (or indeed, Israelis as victims of their own oppressive nature or policies and disappearing humanity, with neither empathy nor compassion in attitude towards, for example, civilians living in uninhabitable, inhumane conditions in Gaza).

The facts about the impediments to authentic pilgrimage are well documented by ATG. At the very launch of the PIFT process in 2005 in Alexandria, ATG protested that tourism in Palestine had been an Israeli monopoly since the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine. In Alexandria, it was concluded that Israeli tourism policy and practice isolated the Palestinian people from tourists, whether in a direct or unconscious attempt by Israel to project a negative image of Palestinians in general and, thus, justified the occupation and colonization of Palestine. Once more, ATG asserted its well-known dispute with Israel's tourism industry and government as to the inherent injustices that tourism was reinforcing. It pointed out how Israeli tourism is yet another colonialist and racist tool to maintain, expand and normalise the occupation.

In a further study, which coincided with a time of heightened repression by Israel, ATG countered the Israeli propaganda that a potential peace package was all set and had to be reversed only because Palestinians had spurned a "generous" peace package. The tyranny that Palestinians endured in those days rendered the Palestinians with one of the few remaining non-violent tools of resistance -- justice tourism. The conviction was that only such an approach could assist Palestinians to escape from the isolation to which they were being subjected. Accordingly, ATG went into an active marketing mode and discerned the need to address those churches and Christians who formed the bulk of pilgrims to The Holy Land. However, this new mind-set could not just be dropped on pilgrims when they arrived in Tel Aviv. Guidelines for Christians were developed and distributed at source, and further developed for pilgrims contemplating a pilgrimage to The Holy Land. In this

way, the project "Come and See -- A Journey for Peace with Justice" was launched, with guidelines that were as political in nature as they were theological in scope, developed by an international group of theologians, Palestinian Christian activists and professionals in the tourism industry. The guidelines represent one of ATG's niche additions to the discourse on pilgrimage because they now offer pilgrims a tool to aid in preparation for a pilgrimage, and act as a guide during stays in The Holy Land.

In connecting with the challenges and prospects of pilgrimage theology, ATG now promotes the notion of tourism as a vehicle for religious pilgrims to become advocates for peace with justice in Palestine with the goal of ending the occupation, based on theological reflections. This phase advances notions of how ATG may advance this new paradigm of tourism, to transform it into a quest for spirituality through encounters in which humankind seeks God's truth. A further document entitled "Listening to the Living Stones -- Towards Theological Explorations of Kairos Pilgrimages for Justice" has resulted in a wide range of concerned persons engaging in study and reflection on the theological imperatives of pilgrimage to The Holy Land. As the author, of the theology of pilgrimage, Rev. Raj Bharath Patta puts it, "Pilgrimage is a vocation and not a vacation. It is most of all an opportunity to understand the history and politics of The Holy Land as it is now played out in the global political arena. Christians, in particular, are obliged to understand the theological implications of their travel to The Holy Land and use it as one in which to truly understand the message of justice, co-existence and peace for all humankind."

The Way Forward

Looking Ahead – Challenges and Prospects

ATG can look back at the last 20+ years with satisfaction for having pioneered an idea, and taken it forward alone for several years until that idea caught on and spread to others who absorbed and took possession of the ideal of PIFT. Alternative tourism is now a movement in its own right, with more actors bringing to the table distinct features and/or complementary dimensions. More than that, ATG's work has influenced hundreds of individuals and organizations around the world who have, since their association with ATG, become integral to the struggle for justice in Palestine.

In 2006, ATG was recognized for its action-oriented work. It received an international award from a German consortium of concerned tourist groups. The award was recognized with the TODO Award signifying that it is given to an organization that "walks the talk." This recognition is significant for ATG, but is not a laurel on which ATG has rested. In 2016, ATG received yet another award of significance: "The Agent of the Year 2016." It was awarded to ATG by The Holy Land Incoming Tour Operator in Palestine with the co-operation of the Palestinian Ministry for Tourism and Antiquities, recognising ATG's outstanding performance and professionalism in the field of tourism. These two awards, one international in scope, the other a national recognition, illustrate the impact of ATG's work in offering alternatives in tourism and spreading the ideal of justice and peace through tourism.

ATG remains in constant search of new frontiers and potentials. It has consciously avoided the temptation to be satisfied with the status quo. It persists with advancing new thinking and possibilities under the rubric of "Alternative Tourism." But it also examines and analyses the root causes of the crisis of the occupation, especially as relating to tourism. It has clearly emerged as one of the fountains

for new ideas about tourism. ATG will also invest in future studies on issues – as it has on problems such as water, or destruction of cultural assets. ATG also stresses how tourism can play an important role for a peaceful solution to the conflict, through international solidarity. In the final analysis, it will be the fusion of the various forms of resistance – local, accompanied by international solidarity -- that will make the difference in the liberation of Palestine from the occupation.

To sum up: ATG has grown into a leading think-tank in the justice tourism arena in Palestine and around the world. It has been proactive in creating alliances and networks both within Palestine and internationally. It was instrumental as one of 12 partners around the world in creating the Tourism Advocacy Action Forum TAAF. members believe in their “shared recognition of the urgent need to rebuild an international network and forum for courageous dialogue on global tourism impacts.” It stands for “deeply transformative practices across the tourism sector - premised on mutual care.” Previously, ATG had become a strong extension of the work of the Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism (ECOT) in the Middle East, with special emphasis on Palestine.

Within Palestine, ATG continues to play a key role in creating the Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism (PIRT) – a coalition focused on analysing the tourism industry in the Occupied Territories by identifying the difficulties while tackling the threats that the occupation imposes on tourism. It has also been instrumental in developing the “Network for Experiential Tourism Organizations (NEPTO)” as a network that subscribes to the notion of tourism that supports local communities, protects the heritage, and respects the environment of Palestine.

Tourism is more than a mere industry for Palestine. It opens the space for contacts between Palestinians and international visitors. It allows for Palestinians to assert their identity, safeguard their culture and, above all, enlist advocates to go out and speak for their human rights and dignity.

The Way forward

Tourism must, in the end, transform the negative image of Palestine internationally and encourage local dignity and fortitude or *sumud* (steadfastness). From the perspective of ATG, tourism in Palestine is not a mere economic activity to generate profits for the industry and revenues for the government. Without question, it offers livelihoods for those in the tourist trade, but the whole purpose must be seen in a larger perspective, especially since what is in focus is The Holy Land. ATG perceives tourism as a plank for peace building. It offers itself as a platform to link the traveller, pilgrim, researcher, justice activist and peace maker to the host communities, and through them to the political reality of the occupation, the biblical sites in The Holy Land and a deeper understanding of faith.





The Way forward

