

West Bank

الضفة الغربية

הגדה המערבית



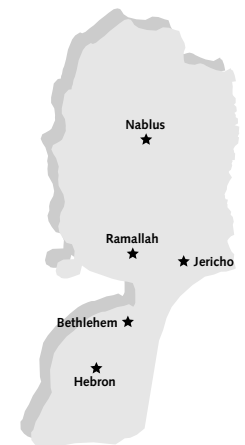
The major portion of the proposed Palestinian state, the West Bank has been Israeli-occupied since control was wrested from Jordan in the 1967 war. But the limestone cities and hamlets among the hills of this rustic 5800-sq-km area are distinctly Palestinian and can offer a traveller memories that linger like a mellow, sweet scent on a pillow.

You might have heard of Jerusalem syndrome: the sudden sensation, while visiting the Holy Land, that you are the Messiah. Palestine syndrome is a more down-to-earth affliction, not unlike falling in love. The hospitality and dignity of the people, the ancient stone-terraced olive groves, the spearmint tea and silty coffee, along with a happy dash of sunstroke, can make business travellers, pilgrims and peaceworkers bond with the place forever. Syndrome aside, as a foreign passport-holder you might gain kinky satisfaction from waving a little book that wields power over the guns, walls and barbed wire that deny 2.3 million West Bank Palestinians free passage.

The West Bank is developed for tourism, but because of regional turmoil it's all dressed up with no place to go. A bit of sojourner's opportunism is welcome as outlets offer below-market prices. Room rates here reflect hard times, so if you go when there's peace on earth, expect to pay more, but see if haggling for less is an option. Opening hours are also flexible, so if you like something, check if they'll open just for you.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wondering while wandering the storied stone passages from **Bethlehem's** (p291) Old City to Manger Sq and the Church of the Nativity
- Interacting with internationals over coffee or cocktails in one of **Ramallah's** (p299) in-the-know gathering spots
- Dangling aloft in a cable car above **Jericho's** (p305) sandy remains of the oldest civilisation on earth
- Witnessing – either religiously or politically – the revered and contentious resting place in **Hebron** (p307) of the monotheist patriarchs
- Piquing the senses with a Turkish bath in **Nablus** (p309)



WARNING

Check news reports, ask authorities for the official line on travel to the West Bank, contact agencies in the region (for a list see *Get Inside*, p296), and find out what church groups are doing. Christian pilgrims worldwide have intimate connections with the Holy Land. Hotels were booked solid in Bethlehem as soon as the second Palestinian uprising against Israeli authorities eased up. In 2000 the second or Al-Aqsa intifada (Arabic for 'shrugging off') decimated tourism. But in 2006, tour buses rolled in even as bombs fell on Lebanon and Israel. That same year, a policy came into effect denying entry to Palestinians with citizenship in other countries. Curfews, closures, roadblocks and military engagement can occur as soon as tensions arise. Since movement in the streets during curfews could result in injury or death, business hours are null and void at these times.

Take your cues from the Israeli army, as well as from experienced Palestinians. Carry your passport; be respectful of soldiers at checkpoints – they're armed and are often teenagers who would rather be somewhere else. The combination of martial law and media attention makes a person with a foreign passport safer in the West Bank than in many other parts of the world. But avoid demonstrations and skirmishes. Where there are guns or bulldozers, it is better to look like a tourist than a Palestinian, journalist or activist.

History

The West Bank as a unique geographical designation is a side effect of the 1948 creation of Israel in 78% of historic Palestine. Deriving the name from its position west of the Jordan River, the West Bank is known in biblical terms as 'Judea and Samaria'. Contemporary use of these expressions can incite tension, as it suggests a belief in the prophecy that Jews will establish Israel on the whole of historic Palestine and possibly beyond. References to the 'Green Line' skirt this issue (see *Walls Not Tumbling*, p302), while some use 'the Occupied Palestinian Territories' (including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) to avoid any religious leaning, or just 'the Territories', which is less politically charged; for this book Lonely Planet's standard is 'Palestinian Territories'.

West Bank culture is stamped with 400 years of Ottoman Turkish rule, but even shorter occupations can leave a mark, such as the post-WWI British Mandate (English is still taught in schools). More profoundly, the tri-point tug-of-war between the Palestinians, the European Zionists and the British resulted in the conflict we know today. After forming duplicitous alliances and frustrating the aspirations of both the natives and the settlers, Britain pulled out, leaving a show of force to determine the outcome.

Symbols of Palestinian independence such as owning or flying the flag are no longer against Israeli law. But the post-Oslo Accord semiautonomy exercised by Palestinian municipalities was reversed during

the second intifada (Arabic for 'shrugging off'), when Israeli troops and tanks pushed deep into Palestinian population centres (see p38). By 2005, however, even with death and destruction ongoing, West Bank towns began to function again. In 2006, despite the loss of Western aid and the disappearance of Hamas lawmakers when that group won the majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament, West Bankers stretched their resources, and schools and offices opened.

Evidence of Palestinian politics and resistance in the West Bank is everywhere, with tattered campaign posters fading on walls and spirited Arabic graffiti in every direction. Teachers, police officers, garbage collectors and other government employees work without pay for months on end, holding out for political resolution. While most Palestinians are not aligned with Hamas, the efficient social services provided by that Islamic party were desperately needed, and its longstanding quest to end corruption in government appealed to the masses. Israel fostered Hamas, in its infancy, to foil the secular nationalist intentions of Yasser Arafat and the PLO. Hamas' resistance to conform was unexpected.

Regardless of who heads the Oslo Accord-established Palestinian Authority (PA), total, everyday control of the areas surrounding the towns highlighted in this chapter, along with the Jewish settlements among them, remains firmly with Israel. In addition to borders, Israel controls the airspace and almost all water resources.

UNSETTLING FACTS

From a clear vantage point, look in any direction and see repetitive angular forms – often on a hill top – amidst villages that appear to have developed gradually and in a somewhat heterogeneous fashion over time. The Jewish colonies set up in the Palestinian Territories are most often referred to as 'settlements'. Yet even this word can raise the ire of some, especially in cases like Gilo, carved out of the Bethlehem-Beit Jala area, but often called a 'neighbourhood of West Jerusalem'. CNN reporters are required to use this language.

Israelis are divided on the issue of expansion outside their country, as many recognise that the generation of Palestinians born in the West Bank with Israel as a reality have no personal recollection of pre-1948 Palestine but are chafing under the policies of military occupation and land confiscation today. Hundreds of young Israelis are willing to risk jail time for refusing, on ethical grounds, to do their mandatory military service in the Palestinian Territories. In 1988 even Yasser Arafat publicly accepted Israel, expecting to establish a nation on the 22% of Palestine remaining. But in contravention of international law prohibiting a nation's transfer of civilian population into land it occupies, Israel continues to establish new settlements and expand existing ones. Bypass roads giving Jews from around the world exclusive access to each other and into Israel not only take up and disrupt Palestinian land, but also cut the West Bank into restrictive enclaves. While tourists are welcome to use these roads, Palestinians must be granted rare permission.

The UN Security Council condemns settlement building as illegal and as an obstacle to peace. Yet in 1998 Ariel Sharon, then foreign minister, told settlers to 'grab the hill tops' in the West Bank, before a final solution could be sealed ceding control to the Palestinians. The early Zionist mission to 'create facts on the ground' is still in effect, while even natural expansion of Palestinian areas is forbidden. In the decade following the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, which included a pledge to freeze land claims and settlement building, the settler population more than doubled as construction continued.

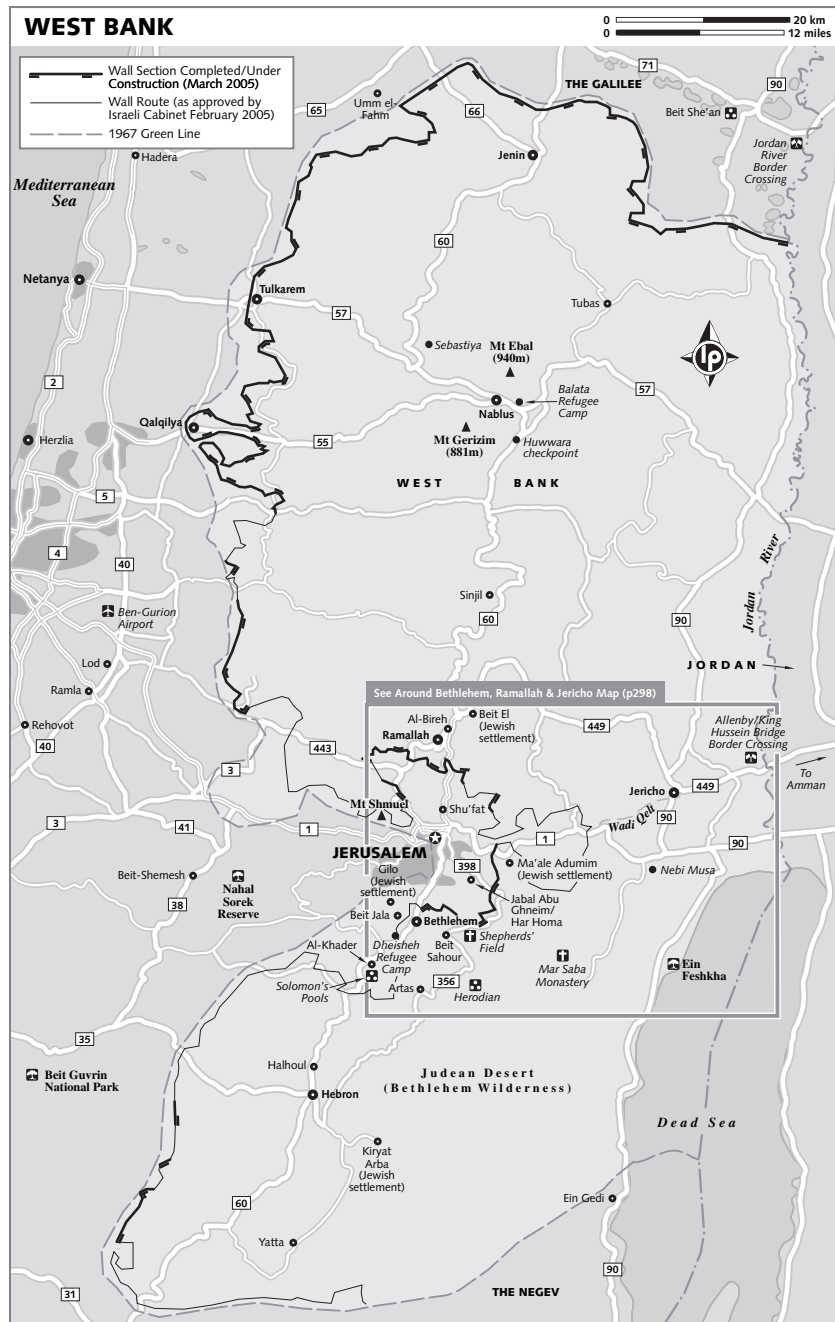
As Israel evacuated 8700 settlers from the Palestinian Territories (mainly Gaza) in 2005, it made plans to accommodate 30,000 more in the West Bank. There are 430,000 settlers in the West Bank including the 180,000 in East Jerusalem (annexed by Israel in 1980 but recognised by no other country as legal). Israel reports that there are 138 settlements in the West Bank.

Many settlements begin as outposts deemed illegal by Israel but then win support and grow from a collection of trailers into a permanent housing development guarded by Israeli forces. Founded in 1976, the largest West Bank settlement is Ma'ale Adumim, a modern city taking up 50 sq km and housing more than 30,000 Jews. Now called a 'suburb of Jerusalem', Israel plans to annex the town, which sits upon the desolate brown hills between Jerusalem and Jericho, drawing from limited West Bank water sources to create a lush and liveable California-like atmosphere. Centuries-old olive trees uprooted by the tens of thousands from Palestinian farms sometimes end up replanted around settlements.

Equally contentious is the brand-new condo-tower complex on Jabal Abu Ghneim. The settlement Har Homa takes centre stage in the populated valley between Bethlehem and Jerusalem near Beit Sahour. The previously forested hill was the last portal linking the West Bank to the presumed future capital of Palestine in East Jerusalem.

Jewish settlers run the gamut from Russians seeking subsidised housing and excellent free secular schools to Uzi-toting zealots from New York and France fulfilling holy prophecy in anticipation of the Messiah – the latter being rarer by far, but wielding much power in government and creating enough of a flap in Hebron for there to be a volunteer corps from Europe and Turkey dedicated to keeping a record of misconduct by all parties there. Settlers have arsenals and carry weapons, and settlements are defended by armed soldiers at great cost to Israel and its funders, some of whom are Christian Zionists. According to them the Second Coming of Christ will occur when Jews establish Israel according to biblical prophecy; see p307 for more on the Hebron situation.

Find out more from these Israeli sources (English option available on websites): www.peacenow.org.il; www.btselem.org; the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics.



The question of a final solution is perpetually suspended: relinquishing control of the Palestinians and their land is as unfathomable to Israeli leaders as incorporating the West Bank into Israel proper and giving all inhabitants citizenship in the Jewish state.

Orientation & Information

This Week in Palestine (☎ 295 1262; www.thisweekinpalestine.com) is a must. Pick up this glossy totable at hotels and agencies for happenings in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank.

When a Palestinian tells you there will be a 'party' at a bar or restaurant, it means DJ-and-dancing. Make a reservation. Like the cool, sweet smoke of the water pipe? Ask for it by one of its many names: *argeeleh*, *nargileh*, *sheesha*, *hookah* or *hubbly-bubbly*.

The day of rest in the West Bank is Friday, due to a predominantly Muslim population, but in cities with a strong Christian presence and business community, such as Bethlehem and Ramallah, Sunday can be soft on commerce, too. So it's cocktails on Thursday with a Saturday chaser. Souqs (outdoor markets) and commercial districts are most crowded on Saturdays, a vestige of the Israel-dependent (Saturdays-off) West Bank workforce, no longer permitted to cross the Green Line for employment. During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, special deserts scent the air, and storekeepers change opening hours to accommodate daytime fasting and family food fests at sundown (*iftar*).

Tours

You can visit the West Bank on a tour; see p410 for details. As well, see Get Inside (p296) for a list of insider organisations, and House Demolitions (p306) for tours with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD).

Getting There & Around

If the Palestinians know anything, it's how to get around their land. That is, unless you meet one who doesn't. They feel compelled to help you either way. If a person doesn't seem sure, get a second opinion. Some make assumptions about what seems obvious. Travel is restricted, so their points of reference are limited. If the person you first approach doesn't speak English, you will probably be directed to someone who does.

Palestinians identify localities by the nickname of an intersection or neighbourhood. Street names mean less to them – or more, if you're counting the number of names one street can have. The following city sections provide the names of prominent areas. Don't be shy. Asking directions is not only a way to connect briefly with locals, it is also a potential opportunity to get someone to accompany you. It would be highly unusual for a Palestinian offering to show you around to expect payment.

Unless you're driving, your means of transportation will be private (special) taxis, the more economical service (pronounced *ser-vees*) taxis, or 'Ford transit' (white vans called 'Ford'). A tap on the shoulder in one of these means pass the money forward. Nowadays, you'll be taken to a checkpoint where you might have to pass the soldiers on foot, then catch another service taxi on the other side into town.

If driving, you'll have most freedom of movement with yellow licence plates. Your passport should do the rest. Sometimes there's no waiting at the checkpoint. Sometimes. Ask around for the latest. Most Jerusalem-based rental-car agencies forbid you to take their cars into the Palestinian Territories. **Green Peace** (☎ 02-582 2179; www.greenpeace.co.il; Shu'fat, East Jerusalem) is an exception. You may also rent a car in the West Bank, but find out in advance if the cars have yellow plates.

Yellow plates in the West Bank could be an irritant, as you could look like a free-wheeling Israeli who gets to travel through towns and between settlements and Jerusalem on bypass roads. Palestinian cars that are not allowed to cross borders bear white plates (not to be confused with white plates marked 'CD' – *corps diplomatiques*). To avert the rare occurrence of a stone lobbed at your car, avoid appearing to be a religious Jew or Jewish settler. Place a *keffiyeh* (a scarf like that worn by Arafat) on the dash. (A red one is also welcome, indicating a leftward leaning.) Remove it when stopped at a checkpoint as it could become an inadvertent conversation piece for bored Israeli soldiers.

If you don't firm up directions, it's easy to get lost and run into a Jewish settlement. Security around these developments is vigilant, so avoid arousing suspicions.

Roads are fine outside congested commercial centres. Park nearby and walk. Road maps are as current as circumstances will allow. Purchase the most up-to-date road maps with satellite coordinates for GPS users at **GSE** (Map p290; ☎ 274 4728; www.palmap.org; 8 Jamal Abdel Nasser St, Cinema; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) in Bethlehem, or at the **Educational Bookshop** (Map p110; ☎ 02-628 3704; 22 Salah ad-Din St; ☎ 8am-8pm) in East Jerusalem.

BETHLEHEM

بيت لحم

☎ 02 / pop 61,000

Built along ancient footpaths, the little town where Mary and Joseph went for the census and returned with a son is one of the most continuously inhabited places in

the world, with residents as far back as the Palaeolithic era. On record the town developed in the 14th century BC as a city-state named after the goddess Beit Lahmu, then donned the Old Testament name Ephrata. Three centuries after the birth of Jesus, the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion with the establishment of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In 638 the city was conquered by Muslims, but a treaty was signed guaranteeing Christians property rights and religious freedom. Bethlehem enjoyed exalted status both domestically and in Europe during the Crusader periods of 1099–1187 and 1228–1244. The city continued to prosper through ups and downs under Mamluk

and Turkish rule. In the 19th century the British took an interest in the area while an Eastern European-led Zionist movement began to take hold in Palestine. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, Bethlehem bucked under the British Mandate, whose policies included revoking the citizenship of Bethlehemites abroad while granting citizenship to Jews after two years of residency. Today it's a distinctly Christian town with Muslim and Christian Palestinian Arab residents.

Looking east towards Jordan, the graceful Bethlehem wilderness becomes an arid landscape of dusky sand-blanketed hills. Also called the Judean Desert, this retreat for the eyes has a secret backdrop: beyond the blue haze is a stupendous mountain range in Jordan that only emerges to the view seasonally.

Orientation

Think of Bethlehem as a tripartite pleasure, with the Christian Arab villages of Beit Saour and Beit Jala at her sides. Each has a splendid old city, but the two smaller sisters offer the ancient charm without the commercial clutter. The area's population also includes three refugee camps.

Unless you come from the west through Beit Jala past a defunct Israeli roadblock, your visit to Bethlehem from Jerusalem starts at the new checkpoint resembling the entrance to a maximum-security prison. Show your passport to get in.

The area around the still-armed former Israeli checkpoint just to the west near Rachel's Tomb is called Al-Qubba.

In Bethlehem, Manger St (aka Ring Rd or New Rd) is the modern commercial motorway curving around towards Manger Sq (Bab id-Deir) and the Church of the Nativity. Stay alert for the best view of the Old City, looking upward. Fridays are quiet with only a few shops opening after prayers. Many Christian-owned enterprises close on Sunday also. Public services are closed Friday, open Sunday.

Corny but clever: trace the shape of a crucifix when walking through Bethlehem and you'll see a lot. Imagine Pope Paul VI St as vertical with Manger Sq at the top (east) and the taxi stand at Bab iz-Qaq at the bottom (west). Areas Al-Madbasseh and Al-Cinema are in between. The souq is to the

right (south), and charming old Star St is to the left (north). The etched-stone turns of Star St host an annual Christmas festival market.

Information

Manger Sq, the city's centerpiece, is also the hub of services – both religious and logistical. It has a post office, ATM and **Open Bethlehem** (☎ 277 7993; www.openbethlehem.org; Manger Sq) – see p296 for its services.

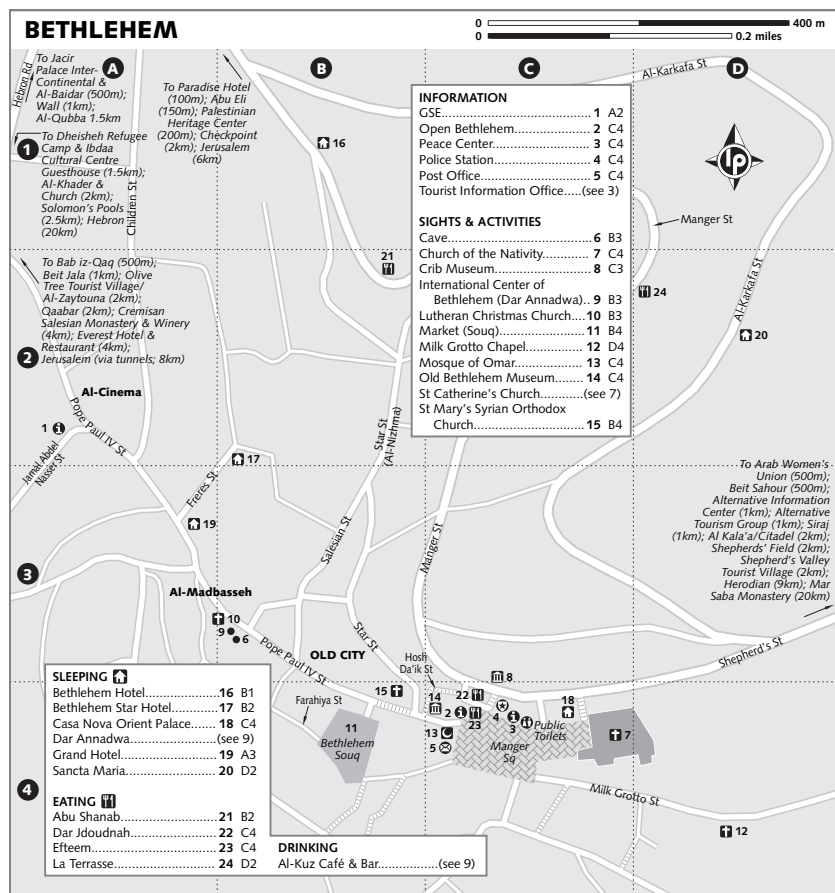
The newest building on Manger Sq is the **Peace Center** (☎ 276 6677; www.peacecenter.org; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat & 9am-4pm Sun, 9am-2am Christmas Eve). On the former site of an Israeli police station, the Peace Center was built by the Swedish government. Find free tourist maps, a bookshop-gift store, galleries, an auditorium and public toilets here. It also handles inquiries about cultural activities on the square such as the Olive Harvest Festival in October–November. It was here that the Israeli army set up headquarters during the siege of the Church of the Nativity in 2002. The facility was looted and vandalised. One hundred tanks ground through the city and filled the square.

Also at the Peace Centre is a **tourist information centre** (☎ 9am-3.30pm).

Sights

MANGER SQUARE & THE OLD CITY

The energy on Manger Sq and in the Old City on Christmas Eve is positively electric. But the narrow limestone streets and exotic storefronts are a year-round draw. Even if you're not a churchgoer, on a Sunday morning sneak a peek at an array of Christian denominations celebrating in the place where so much started. Most in attendance are Palestinians, but respectful visitors are welcome to attend or stop in for a few moments of contemplation. Set out at 9am at the **Lutheran Christmas Church**, on Pope Paul VI St. Then head towards Manger Sq to **St Mary's Syrian Orthodox Church** where services are held in a dialect of Aramaic. Descend the stairs to Manger Sq and enter the Church of the Nativity to find a Greek Orthodox service in session. Tiptoe around to the left and through a passage where the Roman Catholic Mass is in progress at **St Catherine's Church**. Don't stand with your hands in your pockets, chew gum, or sit with one foot resting on the other knee.



Or do. Nothing is likely to happen. But it isn't polite.

The nativity-scene spectacle at the **Crib Museum** (☎ 276 0876; ☞ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat; closed Sun) is a short walk off Manger Sq.

CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

Even without conjuring anything resembling the manger scene, the **Church of the Nativity** is an imposing marker for the birthplace of Jesus. Also called the Basilica of the Nativity, it's the oldest continuously operating church. It was commissioned in 326 by Constantine, with his mother Helena Augusta as head contractor and the bishop of Jerusalem in charge, forever ending the use of the site for the pagan worship of Adonis. Renovations throughout

the centuries included a new floor, beneath which lies the 4th-century mosaic floor discovered in 1934. After bowing through the Ottoman-era **Door of Humility** (most likely built so short to prevent soldiers on horses from entering), proceed to the cavernous nave and see a wooden trapdoor revealing a section of the mosaic. Emperor Justinian had the church rebuilt in the 6th century after it was burnt down in the Samaritan revolt. The mammoth columns of red-and-white limestone come from Bethlehem quarries. In the 12th century the wall around the church was constructed by Greeks and Franks, a cooperative venture between the Byzantine (Orthodox) and Latin (Catholic) – so-called 'oriental' and 'occidental' – Christians who

had been experiencing a schism. Continue to the **Grotto of the Nativity**. The 14-pointed silver star marking the spot believed to be where Jesus was born was a gift from the French in 1717. The **Chapel of the Manger** or 'the Crib' to one side of the grotto represents the scene of the nativity.

Conflict and controversy have rocked this cradle for ages. The Persians spared it when they sacked Palestine in 614, ostensibly because they saw a depiction of the magi in their own native costume. The star was stolen in 1847 and later replaced. Administrative domination of the church changed hands repeatedly between the Orthodox and Catholics with the Muslims drawn in to arbitrate, given their authority in the region and respect for Jesus as a prophet in Islam. To this day, management of the church is divvied up metre-for-metre between the Orthodox, Catholic and Armenian clerics.

Age-old squabbles are not the only action the basilica has seen. In 2002 Israel invaded Bethlehem, sending a resistance force of 200 Palestinians, 50 with weapons, to burst into the church for refuge. A highly televised siege ensued, lasting 39 days. An Israeli flare started a fire in the church, but the damage was contained.

ST CATHERINE'S CHURCH

Midnight Mass at the newer, pink-toned **St Catherine's Church** is broadcast around the world on Christmas Eve. Accessed through the Church of the Nativity or from its front, you should first wander through the Crusader-era Franciscan cloister with a statue of St Jerome. Yasser Arafat and an entourage of notables, including his Christian wife, attended midnight Mass each year until the second intifada broke out.

MILK GROTTA CHAPEL

A lesser-known house of worship, a short walk off Manger Sq, is the **Milk Grotto Chapel** (Milk Grotto St; admission free; ☞ 8-11am & 2-6pm). The white rock inside this stony chapel is said to bring milk to a mother's bosom and enhance fertility in women swallowing a morsel of the chalky substance. Legend has it that Mary and Joseph stopped here with the baby Jesus for a feeding, and some milk dripped onto the red rock-turning it white.

MOSQUE OF OMAR

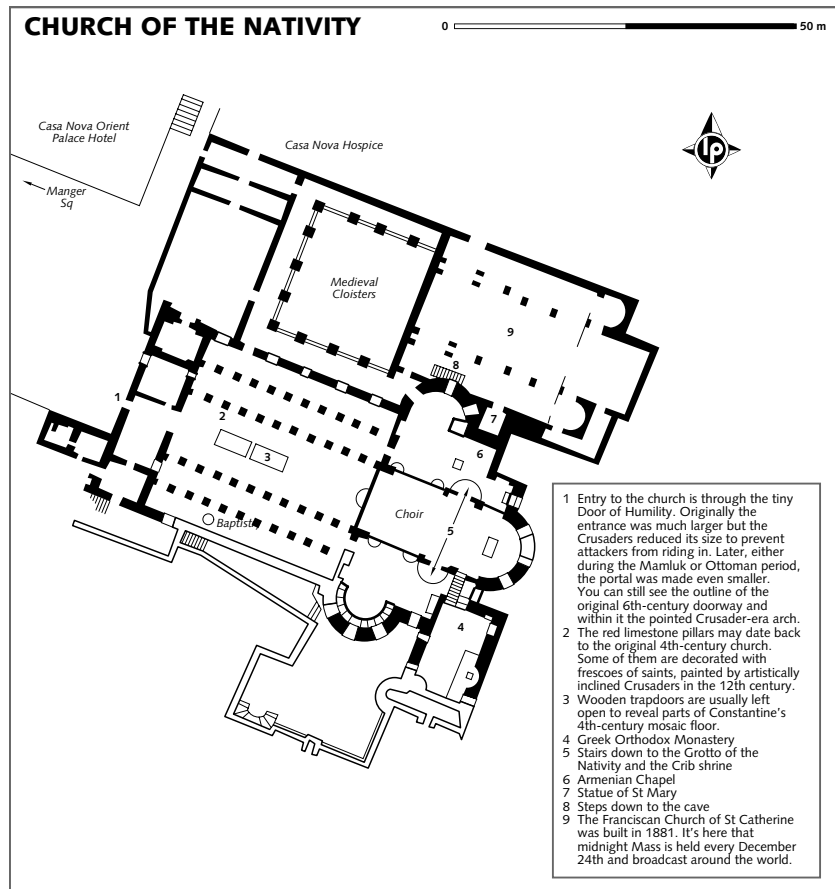
On Manger Sq, opposite the church, is the **Mosque of Omar**, named after the 2nd caliph, Omar Ibn al-Khattab. It was built in 1860 on land granted by the Greek Orthodox Church in honour of the Prophet Muhammad's father-in-law, who in 637 took Jerusalem from the flagging Byzantines and then prayed in the Church of the Nativity. Having declared the region sacred in compliance with the Quran, al-Khattab realised his followers would want to enshrine that spot as a Muslim holy site. In order to keep the Christian site intact, he instituted the Pact of Omar preventing Muslim prayer assemblies at the church. Only individuals were allowed to pray there.

RACHEL'S TOMB

In a desolate corridor near the entrance to town is **Rachel's Tomb** (Jerusalem-Hebron Rd, Al-Qubba; ☞ 7.30am-4pm Sun-Thu, 7.30am-1.30pm Fri). Another Bethlehem sojourner in labour, Rachel is said to have died here in childbirth, on the way south to Hebron. Her husband Jacob 'set a pillar upon her grave' (Genesis 35:20). Revered by followers of all three Abrahamic religions (Jews and Muslims in particular), the place has been enshrined and guarded for centuries, from the Byzantine and Islamic eras to the Crusaders, Ottomans and Israelis. Located near the former checkpoint to Bethlehem from Jerusalem, the tomb complex was flanked by businesses that now stand defunct due to the construction of the 8m-high wall (see p302) effectively annexing the once-autonomous Palestinian area to Jerusalem. Yarmulkes are provided to be worn by all visitors. The mosque, long inaccessible to Palestinians, may also now be off limits to visitors. As of this writing only students of the yeshiva and guided tour groups may enter. Access Rachel's Tomb from Jerusalem through a military-controlled portion of Jerusalem-Hebron Rd.

PALESTINIAN HERITAGE CENTER & OLD BETHLEHEM MUSEUM

A steadfast sign of life nearby is the **Palestinian Heritage Center** (☎ 274 2642; www.palestinianheritagecenter.com; Manger St, Al-Qubba; ☞ 10am-7pm). Have your picture taken in Palestinian folk-dress at this exotic micromuseum with lifelike Bedouin dioramas. Learn from the effusive owner Maha how Palestinian hand-stitched



embroidery (for sale) identifies wearers according to village of origin. On that note, the **Old Bethlehem Museum** (☎ 274 2589; www.arabwomenunion.org; Star St, Old City; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, closed Thu afternoon) will transport you through time to a typical Palestinian home of the 19th century. See native costumes and purchase embroidery produced by the Arab Women's Union.

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM & THE CAVE

A good place in the Old City area to gather your thoughts and plan itineraries is the **International Center of Bethlehem** (Dar Annadwa; ☎ 277 0047; www.annadwa.org; Pope Paul VI St, Al-Madbasseh). Check the calendar for concerts, plays, films, English-language documentaries and lectures at the sprawling facility, which includes a restaurant, coffee bar (see Al-Kuz Café and Bar, p297) and guesthouse. Relax on multiple stone verandas or inside where there's free wi-fi. Natives know the centre as Dar Annadwa, and it also houses the **Cave** (Al-Kahf; thecave@annadwa.org; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat, closed Sun), which has extended hours for exhibits. Watch artisans at work through large windows, then go into the gallery-gift shop and bookstore. Don't miss how it gets its name – an ancient cave-dwelling on the lower level.

Sleeping

Most hotel rooms in Bethlehem are nondescript or downright drab unless you're in the Jacir Palace Inter-Continental or Dar Annadwa. Bethlehem caters to a pilgrim crowd. Groups fill the city even off-season. Expect to pay 30% to 50% more at Christmas time. Check the calendar for both Latin (Catholic) and Orthodox Christmas and Easter dates.

BUDGET

Ibdaa Cultural Centre Guesthouse (☎ 277 6444; www.dheishah-ibdaa.net; Dheishah Refugee Camp; dm US\$15) The new multipurpose facility on Jerusalem-Hebron Rd is a happening place, treating travellers to free internet, cheap eats, simple lodging and the Dheishah experience (p297).

Arab Women's Union (☎ 277 5507; arwomenunion@yahoo.com; Beit Sahour; r US\$20) The women who run this guesthouse recycle paper, run community programs and produce olive-wood artefacts.

Everest Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 274 2604; everest@p-ol.com; Beit Jala; s/d US\$30/40) If cooling off is key, the name tells you this lodging is at the summit. A patio in the pines says you've left the lower climes and flora of Bethlehem. The restaurant is known for pigeon.

Bethlehem Hotel (☎ 277 0702; bhotel@p-ol.com; s/d US\$28/45) Rooms are cheery but plain-Jane, yet this Manger St standard, 1km from the Nativity Church, is likely to have water even when the city is dry. Its bar is up one flight from the lobby.

Grand Hotel (☎ 274 1602; bandak@p-ol.com; s/d US\$40/55) Known for its Mexican restaurant serving fresh fish, this basic dwelling is in the thick of it on the way to the Old City.

Bethlehem Star Hotel (☎ 274 3249; htstar@hall.net; s/d US\$35/55) For a plainer-than-plain resting post, it certainly draws a steady flow of journalists. The view overlooking Bethlehem from the breakfast room is captivating (and potentially informative – most military incursions are visible from this high vantage point).

Olive Tree Tourist Village/Al-Zaytouna (☎ 274 2016; Beit Jala; s/d US\$45/55) A complex of children's indoor and outdoor play areas, water toys, a pool and a disco (see Drinking & Entertainment; p297), in addition to the guesthouse, makes this ideal for families when circumstances allow it to function fully. It's best to ensure you make inquiries beforehand.

Paradise Hotel (☎ 274 4542; paradise@p-ol.com; s/d 150/250NIS; ☎) Renovated since Israeli shelling brought about its demise in 2001, the prominent Manger St hotel's lobby gleams, while rooms are spartan. Computer facilities and internet access (per hour US\$2) are available in the common area.

MIDRANGE

Casa Nova Orient Palace (☎ 274 3980; casanova.palace.com; s/d US\$45/60) The closest you'll get to sleeping in the manger. The lobby, just off Manger Sq next to the Church of the Nativity, is as much a gathering place for transient tourists and devout dignitaries as it is for hotel guests.

Sancta Maria (☎ 276 7374; smaria@p-ol.com; Al-Karkafa St; s/d/tr 150/260/300NIS) The lobby and terrace of this new construction gives the impression that the rooms have more character than they deliver. It's a five-minute drive to the Church of the Nativity.

CONVERSATION STARTERS: RELIGION AND POLITICS – YES

- Mention the last name of someone you've met. A Palestinian will run a mental search of that name and the town the family comes from.
- Ask how a dish is made, what spices are used and whose mother makes it best.
- Find out if shwarma is more often turkey or more often beef.
- Ask when the olive harvest is, and how *do* you pickle olives?
- Probe for details on what it's like when a curfew or closure is imposed.
- Respectfully learn if a person has been in Israeli prisons or 'administrative detention'.
- Express an interest in seeing a woman's embroidered handiwork and what it means.
- Inquire about a person's lineage and where family members were born.
- Translate Palestinians' names into English. Flower-child communes have nothing on them.
- Wonder aloud about relations between Christians and Muslims.
- Ask why people sometimes put flower bouquets all over their cars.
- Ask adult refugees if their homes still exist and if they can enter Israel to see them.
- Ask what happened to St Barbara's Church and is it really the first in the Holy Land?
- Discern what is a sign of the culture vs what is peculiar to a religion.

Note that though Palestinians are open to deep and wandering conversations, it would embarrass (and possibly inhibit) them to suggest that men holding hands, kissing cheeks, walking with arms laced or sitting in a snuggly way appear homosexual. It's highly unlikely that they are. There is a winking awareness of certain individuals (such as one popular salon owner in the West Bank) being gay. But the culture doesn't take gently to public displays, and some flatly deny homosexuality exists.

Dar Annadwa (☎ 277 0047; www.annadwa.org; 109 Pope Paul VI St, Old City; s/d US\$50/70) Each of the 13 tasteful rooms is named after a Palestinian village. Students from the International Center's art school provide décor in this chic Lutheran-sponsored boutique guesthouse with all the amenities.

TOP END

Jacir Palace Inter-Continental (☎ 276 6777; jacir@interconti.com; s/d/ste, with breakfast US\$80/90/120; ☎) Opulent Middle Eastern luxury near Al-Qubba beckons you to this restored mansion. The stone colonnade and world-class ambience make the courtyard restaurant-bar worth a visit. Shortly after the initial restoration, Israeli soldiers seized it, but repairs have been made. The breakfast is a hummus-to-ham buffet.

Eating

BUDGET

Efteem (☎ 277 0157; Manger Sq; felafels 4NIS) Two shops on the down-ramp off the square serve felafel, but the second one down is so

cherished, restaurateurs from Haifa come in to buy the mix.

Qaabar (☎ 274 1419; Beit Jala) Get to the sweet old city of Beit Jala and ask for barbecue. Everyone knows Qaabar for the charcoal-grilled chicken and its fabulous aioli – a habit-forming garlic mayonnaise (eggless). Use your fingers.

MIDRANGE

Dar Jdoudnah (☎ 274 3212; Manger Sq; mains 25-45NIS) Down the ramp from Manger Sq and to the left, find a wide-open bar in this old stone textile factory and olive oil press. Have a meal or cappuccino with a slice of creamy *layaly lubnan* (a crustless pudding made from milk, semolina and cream with a touch of rose water). Keys on the wall symbolise the Palestinian return home, in keeping with the name of this place: our grandparents' house.

Al-Kala'a/Citadel (☎ 277 5725; Old City, Beit Sahour; mains 25-50NIS) This ancient gem of a schoolhouse is host to Westerners and natives with an appetite for both Palestinian and surprisingly good Chinese cooking.

GET INSIDE

This book provides you with the information to go it alone, but the best way to enjoy the West Bank in its fullness is to hook up with the English-speaking core of Palestinians and internationals who can arrange your travel to the sights so you have more time for independent discovery. Your experience can be as structured (or not) as you like. If your desire is strictly spiritual, your religious organisation at home may already have experience travelling to this region and may be able to help you. But there's so much more than the relics to be experienced in the present-day vitality of the region. Stay in a private home for a total immersion experience. Inquire about day trips, workshops, cooking classes, volunteer assignments and Arabic lessons. Arrange travel from abroad with the assistance of the agencies listed here or look them up when you arrive and introduce yourself.

Your best first stop is **Open Bethlehem** (☎ 02-277 7993; www.openbethlehem.org; Manger Sq). Neither a travel agency nor a tourist centre, these Palestinian internationals can guide you to the experience you're hoping to have or make suggestions for options you hadn't thought of. You will establish contacts in the region with the movers and shakers of the Palestinian civil society development scene.

Check out these options for your best fit on the spiritual-to-secular spectrum:

Alternative Tourism Group (ATG; ☎ 02 277 2151; www.patg.org) Best-connected secular organisation in Palestine offering the full gamut of information.

American Friends Service Committee with Palestine Fair Trade Association (☎ in the USA 312-427 2533; www.palestinefairtrade.org; israelpalestine@afsc.org) International social justice organisation planning tours, including one, with homestays, participating in the Palestinian olive harvest.

International Palestinian Youth League (IPYL; ☎ 02-222 9131; www.ipyl.org) Hebron-based geopolitical study trips, homestays, volunteer opportunities.

International Solidarity Movement (ISM; www.palsolidarity.org) A good way to get deported or maimed; its nonviolent resistance actions are so effective it's the target of global smear campaigns.

Middle East Fellowship/Holy Land Trust (☎ in the USA 626-797 7904; www.middleeastfellowship.org) Religious or secular tours and extended stays, including the Palestine Summer Encounter (a two-month volunteer program with Arabic classes).

Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange (PACE; ☎ 02-240 7611; www.pace.ps) Exchange programs and educational tours.

Sabeel (☎ 02-523 7136; www.sabeel.org) Globally respected ecumenical Christian organisation with an internationally educated staff.

Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies (☎ 02-274 8590; www.sirajcenter.org) Rooted in Palestinian Christianity, with broad ecumenical and secular reach.

A good start for independent research is the **Alternative Information Center** (AIC; ☎ 02-277 5444; www.alternativenews.org), a joint Palestinian-Israeli think-tank based in Beit Sahour and Jerusalem.

Fabulous out on the patio or inside with an olive-wood scale model of old Jerusalem.

Shepherd's Valley Tourist Village (☎ 277 3875; Beit Sahour; mains 25-50NIS) A habitual stop after Shepherds' Field, the attraction is the environment as much as the local food. It's a huge Bedouin tent. Occasional folkloric dance.

La Terrasse (☎ 275 3678; mains 25-58NIS; ☎ closed Tue) Beauty and politics merge in the panoramic view from La Terrasse of Bethlehem and the Jewish settlement of Har Homa. Find a stepped-up Mediterranean-Mexican menu, comfy-chic ambience, a variety of wines and an international clientele. Alfredo comes with mushrooms, unless you

decline. The creamy, crunchy almond soup is divine.

Abu Shanab (☎ 275 0043; Manger St; mains 30-60NIS; ☎ closed Mon) Succulent lamb chops and traditionally butchered shish kebab are said to turn vegetarians around, but there's plenty of meatless mezze. The *kofta* (mincemeat and spices grilled on a skewer) is not overly seasoned (nothing to hide!). Moustachioed brothers (hence the name) give special attention to out-of-towners.

Abu Eli (☎ 274 1897; Al-Qubba; mains 30-60NIS) Stuffed pigeon, anyone? One of the star establishments for Middle Eastern salads and grilled meat, Abu Eli now relies on deals

with tour operators due to being shunted off by the wall.

Al-Baidar (☎ 276 6777; Jacir Palace Inter-Continental, Hebron Rd; mains US\$9-14) Covered cloisters in this exquisitely restored mansion are worth a stop, even for the special lemonade or a glass of beer. No baklava here. Apple pie, yes.

Drinking & Entertainment

Al-Kuz Café and Bar (☎ 277 0047; International Center of Bethlehem, 109 Pope Paul VI St, Al-Madbassah) This charmingly kitschy Bedouin-inspired coffee bar extends out to a rambling patio garden. Free wi-fi.

Olive Tree Tourist Village/Al-Zaytouna (☎ 274 2016; Beit Jala; admission varies) Dance parties are 9pm till late Thursday and Saturday nights at the disco-in-the-round. Reservations are advised. Befriend locals and go someplace for a pre-dawn breakfast while the rest of the town sleeps.

Getting There & Away

Special (private) taxis/service (shared) taxis (50/5NIS) originate from Al-Musrara across from Jerusalem's Old City (Damascus Gate/Bab al-Amoud). The southward 10km drive stops at the checkpoint. You might have to cross on foot and continue 3km in another vehicle (special taxi 10NIS to 15NIS). Buses also run to Bethlehem or Beit Jala from Jerusalem. Returning, the Bethlehem bus waits at the checkpoint headed for Jerusalem (5NIS).

AROUND BETHLEHEM**Dheisheh Refugee Camp & Ibdaa Cultural Centre** דהישה
דחישה

You might be surprised by the vitality and progress emanating from the **Dheisheh Refugee Camp** (UNRWA; ☎ 02-274 2445; Jerusalem-Hebron Rd). Having started out as a tent site, this 1-sq-km camp was established in 1949 on Bethlehem's municipal land leased to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for 99 years. The residents come from 30 villages and from West Jerusalem. Their hometowns were repopulated with Jewish immigrants, or demolished. There's one part-time doctor for the 11,000 residents. The decades have seen restrictive barricades, barbed wire and some of the longest periods of curfew ever imposed by the Israelis – 84 consecutive days during the Gulf War. The result of never leaving the buildings, aside from acute distress, was a baby boom. A

huge number of residents have been in Israeli prisons as occupation resisters. The **Ibdaa Cultural Centre** (www.dheisheh-ibdaa.net) at the camp, named for the idea of 'making something out of nothing', is headquarters for the world-renowned youth dance troupe and the women's basketball team. It also supports a media centre, trade school, kindergarten, oral history project, women's leadership initiative, internet lab (free to visitors), restaurant and Ibdaa Cultural Centre Guesthouse. Volunteers are welcome.

To get to Dheisheh catch a service taxi at Bab iz-Qaq (3NIS) in Bethlehem.

Shepherds' Field

While the Beit Sahour **Shepherds' Field** isn't the only Bethlehem surrounding ascribed to the 'multitude of the heavenly host' (Luke 2:13) and the origin of 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo' (Glory to God in the Highest), it is the most frequented. The chapel grounds are placid and picturesque; you might find a bride in white having her photos done while brown-clad monks relax under a tree.

To reach Shepherds' Field take a private taxi from Bethlehem (15NIS) or catch the Beit Sahour bus (1.5NIS) near Manger Sq outside Dar Jdoudnah.

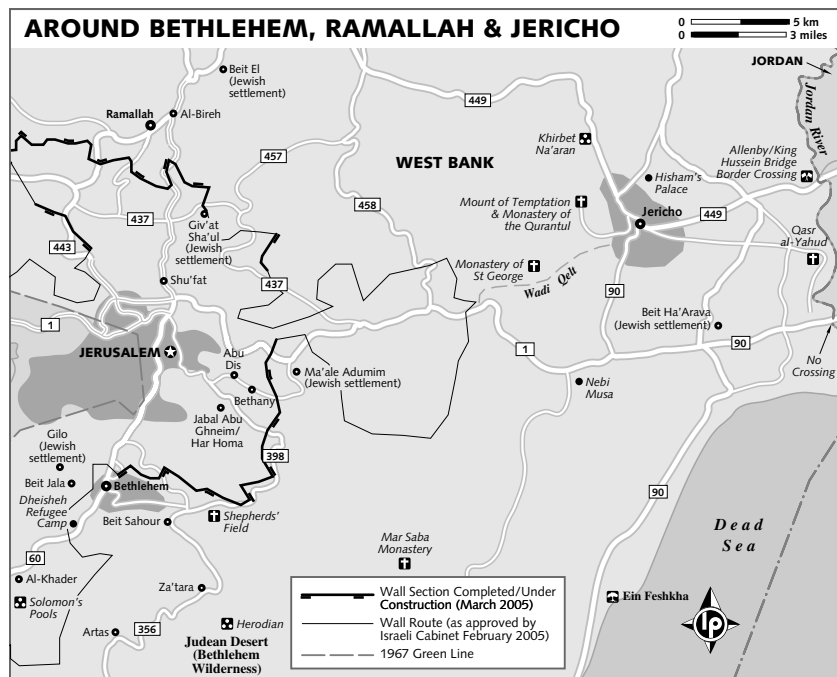
Herodianהרודיון
הרודיון

Juxtapose the angels heralding the birth of Jesus with **Herodian** (☎ 02-776 2251; admission 23NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm Sun-Thu, 8am-4pm Fri), one of King Herod's stellar architectural feats. Scanning the Judean Desert, your eye is caught by a flat-topped hill rising above all others, 9km south of Beit Sahour. It was a palace. Jews controlled the site during the two revolts (AD 66-132) and now.

A private taxi costs 100NIS to 120NIS (return). The driver will wait an hour. Some walk the 12km through Wadi Artas, from the Muslim village of Artas which hosts the annual Lettuce Festival (p390) and a gracious agrarian convent.

Al-Khader Churchכנסיית אלח'דר
كنيسة الخضير

Al-Khader Church (☎ 02-274 3233; Al-Khader, Jerusalem-Hebron Rd; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-7pm) will conjure stories of St George who slew the dragon. He is also known as the 'patron saint of Palestine' or 'St George the Green' with a feast day on 5 May. Venerated by Christians



and Muslims, St George is called upon by travellers and the sick. A man or woman from the Muslim family entrusted with the keys to the small Greek Orthodox church will perform a chaining ritual at your request, ceremonially chaining and unchaining any visitor desiring to release bad energy, cleanse the soul, cast off illness or prepare for a long journey. Knock on the rectory door for attention if no-one is in the church. You can take a private taxi from Bethlehem (15NIS) to Al-Khader.

Solomon's Pools

ברכות שלמה ברכ שלیمان
The more prominent site in Al-Khader area would be **Solomon's Pools**. During Roman times a system of springs filled three mammoth rectangular reservoirs supplying water via aqueducts to Jerusalem and Herodian. King Solomon enjoyed respite beside their serene shimmer where he is said to have written the sensuous *Song of Solomon*. The springs were used into the 20th century for irrigating crops in the surrounding fertile valley. Successive armies have set up camp

here. An Ottoman fortress is still evident. Spectacular even when empty, the pools were drained after several drownings; with the opening of a new conference centre and tourist village adjacent to the pools, plans at the time of writing were to refill them.

To reach Solomon's Pools from Bethlehem take Dheisheh bus No 1 (2NIS) from Manger Sq or private taxi (15NIS).

Mar Saba Monastery

מנזר מרסבא דיר מרסביא

A must-see on any architectural journey is the **Mar Saba Monastery** (☎ 8am-4pm Sun-Thu; admission 20NIS), 20km east of Bethlehem (beyond Beit Sahour). This phenomenal cliff-clinging hermitage is best seen from the opposite slope, but men can exercise their privilege by going inside, where a dozen monks reside. There is a Women's Tower at the entrance, for waiting. A taxi driver will take you (100NIS to 120NIS return), and wait an hour.

Cremisan Salesian Monastery & Winery

If homage to the spirits is in your plan, the **Cremisan Salesian Monastery & Winery** (☎ 02-274

4826; Beit Jala) is worth a visit. Wine connoisseurs: go for the view. This silent hill top refuge sends half a million litres of affordable wine downhill every year. If you're spooked by narrow cliffside roads, leave the driving to a pro. Call to reserve a tasting. To reach Cremisan take a private taxi from Bethlehem (15NIS).

RAMALLAH & AL-BIREH

رام الله البيرة
רמאללה אל-בירה

☎ 02 / pop 65,000

The 'bride of Palestine' is a lofty 900m above sea level, so it's understandable that Gulfies and Jordanians used to cool off here in the days long before the dicey Qalandia checkpoint. A mere 15km north of Jerusalem, the city is free from dense politics and religious fervour. Ramallah was settled by Christians in the 1500s. Al-Bireh's history is traced to the Canaanites. But many of today's Ramallahns are refugees from 1948 who developed lives and livelihoods in exile.

Ironically, the most child-friendly city in the Palestinian Territories is also the place for cocktails and culture. The hub of governmental ministries, diplomatic missions, broadcast outlets, NGOs, commerce and art since the Oslo Accords, Ramallah accommodates work and family side by side, with a play area around every corner. Could it be that the mayor is a woman? She isn't the first.

For the record, the political and diplomatic scene Ramallah is known for is largely rooted in Al-Bireh. Palestinian government ministries, cultural organisations and women's groups have their offices in Al-Bireh. An historic caravan crossing between Ramallah and Nablus, Al-Bireh maintains its place as a commercial hub with banks, communications facilities and businesses, many of which have connections with families who emigrated to the USA.

Orientation

The general area around Al-Manara (Lighthouse Sq) is 'City Centre'. Banks are plentiful here. Other areas of note include Al-Se'a (Clock Sq), which is another circular intersection easily mistaken for Al-Manara but lies a short walk to the southwest, Al-Sharafeh, Al-Masyoun, Al-Balu'a, the Old City and Al-Muntazah (Ramallah Park or Garden).

Sights & Activities

Experience the honk and hustle of the City Centre by walking down Rukab St (Main St) from Al-Manara.

Among this area's few sites of archaeological interest are the hill top **Tel al-Nasbeh** (the biblical city of Mizbeh) and the **Crusader Church** in Al-Bireh. The church is said to have been built where Mary and Joseph lost their pre-teen son, before finding him in Jerusalem philosophising with the grown-ups at the temple.

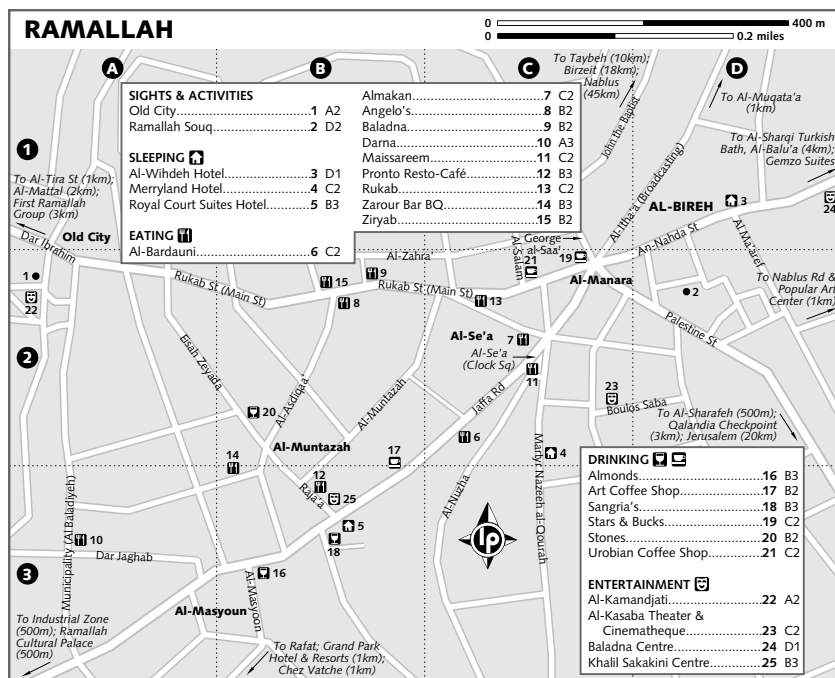
Yasser Arafat spent his sunset years in the bulldozed presidential compound, **Al-Muqata'a**, after the Israelis invaded Ramallah. His enormous **cube tomb** (☎ 298 6465; Al-Itha'a St) is there but, in fact, he died of unknown causes in a hospital in Paris. An illuminated photo near the roof marks the spot where in 2002 he huddled in the rubble. Buildings have been restored with the exception of some holes from tank shelling. Al-Muqata'a is 1km from Al-Manara on the road to Birzeit and Nablus.

Ramallah's **Old City** is a blink-of-an-eye example of Ottoman architecture. It includes the small **Al-Kamandjati** (☎ 297 3101; www.alkamandjati.com in French; Old City) conservatory, with the strains of violin and flute wafting over an ancient arch with an edgy, modern copper entryway. It offers intimate concerts and recitals.

Play or just watch at the **First Ramallah Group** (Sareyyet Ramallah; ☎ 295 2706; www.sirreyeh.org; Al-Tira St, Old City). The home of the scouts has a pool and gym open to visitors for a fee. Busy basketball courts glow late into the summer night. The walled, well-lit family park seats hundreds. Worth a look for its sense of community and the gracious old fieldhouse. Take Nahdha St (Main St/Rukab St) from Al-Manara beyond the Old City where Main St becomes Dar Ibrahim and then Al-Tira.

Wander through **Ramallah Souq** (Souq al-Bireh or Al-Hisbeh) on Nablus Rd, 100m off Al-Manara. Technically in Al-Bireh, Ramallah's big bazaar and produce market has an indoor section as well. During Ramadan it's brilliantly festive and pungent with the season's confections.

Preen for your evening at **Al-Sharqi Turkish Bath** (☎ 240 8281; 1st fl, An-Najma Bldg, Al-Balu'a; bath with exfoliation &/or massage 30-100NIS). The full-service *hammam* (bathhouse) offers baths



with exfoliation and massage on Tuesday and Sunday (from 9am to 9pm) for women; and Monday, Wednesday and Saturday (from 10am to midnight) for men.

Sleeping

Overall, Ramallah has the classiest accommodation in the West Bank. Bids are not uncommon. Satellite TV, internet access and parking are practically *de rigueur*.

BUDGET

Al-Wihdeh Hotel (☎ 298 0412; Al-Nahda St, Al-Manara; s/d 80/100NIS) Bed but no breakfast. Al-Wihdeh offers basic affordable digs in the centre of town.

Merryland Hotel (☎ 298 7176; Al-Ma'ahed St, Al-Se'a/Clock Sq; s/d/t 80/120/150NIS) Not one of Ramallah's fresh luxury lodgings, but comfy and convenient.

MIDRANGE

Royal Court Suites Hotel (☎ 296 4040; fax 296 4047; Al-Muntazah; s US\$59, d US\$69-120) Units have furnished kitchenettes, some with separate bedrooms. Ask for a room with a balcony.

Seafood and panoramic views in the penthouse dining/breakfast room.

TOP END

Grand Park Hotel & Resorts (☎ 298 6194; grandpark.com; Rafat Rd, Al-Masyoun; s/d US\$75/95; 🏠) Largest and swankiest hotel in town has gardens, patio dining, a lounge, a dramatic swimming pool and kids' playground. There's also free wi-fi. The sole elevator is shared with hotel staff.

City Inn Palace (☎ 240 8080; fax 240 8091; Al-Sharafah; s/d US\$70/100) For a subtly elegant lodging in Al-Bireh where you might run into your favourite foreign journalist (despite the absence of liquor in the restaurant), your best bet is this fresh full-service facility. Stock the room's fridge with your own brew and blanc.

Best Eastern (☎ 295 8450; fax 295 8452; Al-Bireh; s/d US\$90/110; 🏠) Aside from the pool, it isn't remarkable, except that it's alcohol free in a town that otherwise rocks. Rooms have minibars for storing whatever you bring.

Gemzo Suites (☎ 240 9727; www.gemzosuites.net; 1-2/3-bedroom apt US\$150/200/240) These furnished apartments in highly secured,

Mediterranean-style apartment towers in Al-Balu'a have full laundry service, residential-rate telephones, well-equipped kitchens, dining and sitting rooms and a play yard.

Eating BUDGET

Take a break and try one of Ramallah's ice-cream shops for a texture sensation that will tell you what 'gum Arabic' is all about. Rukab and Baladna are the most famous.

Maissareem (Al-Se'a/Clock Sq; felfels 3-4NIS) It may not be the locals' favourite felfel shop, but this flashy streetside stand lights up the square in the wee hours.

Ziryab (☎ 295 9093; Salah Bldg, Main St; mains 20-60NIS) Pause for a coffee or something stronger at this artsy spot. It's upstairs of ice-cream shop Baladna, and you can access free wi-fi.

Angelo's (☎ 295 6408; Main St; mains 26-58NIS) Pizza and cheesy casseroles come bubbling out of the olive-wood oven. Busiest from 2pm to 4pm.

MIDRANGE

Pronto Resto-Café (☎ 298 7312; Al-Muntazah; mains 35-60NIS) A hip little coffeehouse and trattoria is the spot for musicians, filmmakers, professionals and peacemakers. Carbonara is full of smoky bacon and garlic. Pose on the patio with a large glass of wine (10NIS to 20NIS) and watch families at play in the park.

Al-Bardauni (☎ 295 1410; Al-Muntazah; mains 30-70NIS) 'The deal' for four includes an enormous array of salads (mezze), grilled meats and dessert for 200NIS. Aside from the Lebanese-inspired menu, the signature of this place is its covered patio seating.

Zarour Bar BQ (☎ 295 6767; Old City; mains 40-70NIS) The grilled meats and salads at this local standby give the total experience of a Palestinian meal, down to dessert and a hot drink.

TOP END

Almakan (☎ 295 7676; Al-Se'a/Clock Sq; 50-85NIS) A step up in dining and ambience, tradition meets innovation for a few shekels more.

Darna (☎ 295 0590; www.darna.ps; Al-Sahel St, east of Old City; mains 50-95NIS) Ramallah's most glamorous eatery sets out to 'refine and re-define' Palestinian cuisine – and delivers. The reconstructed stone house has graceful arches and sexy lighting. Find a water well near the bread oven, and there are family

heirlooms honouring the name of this eatery, which means 'our house'. Also offers nargileh (water pipe) and free wi-fi. There's a playground for the kids.

Drinking

Most places serve food, but these are known drinkeries for natives and imports.

Sangria's (☎ 295 6808; Jaffa St, Al-Muntazah) Make a reservation for Ramallah's favourite summer bar if it's Thursday or Saturday night. The Mexican and international menu is ambitious, but you're there for the drinks and glamour-garden ambience.

Chez Vatche (☎ 296 5966; Al-Masyoun) Posture 'round the pool. Chilly night? Go next door to Adios in the Grand Park.

Adios (☎ 298 6194; Grand Park Hotel, Rafat Rd, Al-Masyoun) Adios is a cave-like bar offering a cozy cocktail most nights but at a moment's notice it can erupt into party mode, becoming an intimate, high-decibel dance club.

Almonds (☎ 295 7028; Ramallah Hotel, Al-Masyoun; mains 30-50NIS) Shoot pool and drink. No glitz, but Anglophones and a loyal following.

Al-Mattal (☎ 298 6529; cnr Al-Tira & Es-Saraya Sts, Old City) Jury's still out on whether this café-cinema is a brothel, but it's known for running with a dangerous crowd. By Palestinian standards this means having your butt grabbed on the dance floor or being offered marijuana.

Stones (☎ 296 6038; Al-Muntazah; mains 30-65NIS) This glassy multitiered box with stunning skylight has wood-oven-baked focaccia and serves coffee drinks and cocktails. Near the municipality/city hall.

COFFEEHOUSES

Art Coffee Shop (Al-Se'a/Clock Sq) Card- and board-game players are welcome; on the road between Clock Sq and Al-Masyoun.

Urobian Coffee Shop (☎ 295 7031; Rukab St, Al-Manara) Bring your sweet tooth and decide between fresh juice and pastry. This women-friendly hang-out is open on Friday. No nargileh.

Stars & Bucks (☎ 297 5674; Al-Manara) No sign of the bitter-bean green here, though the logo is strikingly familiar.

Entertainment

The entertainment listing *This Week in Palestine* will help you navigate cultural offerings:

Al-Kasaba Theater & Cinematheque (☎ 296 5292; www.alkasaba.org; Al-Manara) A magnet for

WALLS NOT TUMBLING

Good fences make good neighbours. Unless you build them in your neighbour's yard, say the UN and International Court of Justice. But Israel disagrees. Israel is building a wall roughly along the 1967 Green Line, the de facto border between Israel and a future independent state of Palestine, looping and scooping around Jewish settlements while also separating Palestinians from their communities, businesses, schools and crops. To the Palestinians, it looks like a land-and-water grab. They call it the 'Apartheid Wall' and see it as part of a continued ethnic-cleansing campaign. But Israel's stated intention is for its 'Security Barrier' to be removed pending a peaceful resolution of the ongoing conflict.

Israel says the barrier is necessary to ensure the safety of Israeli citizens (www.securityfence.mod.gov.il). It is hoped that this wall will be more effective than the one in Gaza. The only two suicide bombers emerging from Gaza up to the second intifada period entered Israel after that wall's construction in 1994, which roughly coincides with the first Palestinian suicide bombing ever.

So far it is possible for some Palestinians going to work, school or hospital to find ways to penetrate the shorter or unfinished portions of the barrier. Israel knows this. But since most suicide bombers pass through checkpoints and not open border areas, people climbing over with books or squeezing through with shopping bags are not the issue. Nevertheless, Israel reports a measurable reduction in violence against Israelis since the wall began, a relief to Israeli citizens concerned for their safety.

The majority of the structure consists of fences with trenches and barbed wire or razor wire. Some consists of concrete slabs up to 8m high (the Berlin Wall was 4m high). The wall is punctuated by cameras, sensors and armed sniper towers.

Some projected outcomes upon completion:

- Length – 680km (twice the length of the Green Line; thrice the length of the Berlin Wall)
- Cost – US\$2–3 million per kilometre (US\$1.5 to US\$2 billion total)
- Location – 80% within Palestinian territory
- De facto annexation – 46% of West Bank (with the wall itself taking 9.5%)
- West Bank settlers west of wall – 355,783; approx 85% (see p287)
- Palestinians between wall and Green Line – 242,000
- Palestinians separated from their land – 280,000; 12% of Palestinian population
- Area of historic Palestine for 2.3 million Palestinians to live in – 12%
- Palestinian homes demolished or slated for razing – 604 (see p306)
- Palestinian civilian deaths related to wall construction – 553 as of 2005

Land questions aside, the Palestinian economy ground to a halt with the second intifada in 2000. The wall effectively stifles the resumption of business regardless of political climate. Osama's Pizza is just one example. Osama Mushahwar learned the art of New York-style pizza while studying in the USA. His East Jerusalem pizzeria drew long queues for 15 years until the wall went up on the Jerusalem–Ramallah Rd, locking him between two checkpoints. Sales went down 95%, so he was forced to close. Hundreds of checkpoints, roadblocks and restrictions of movement seal off economic channels. East Jerusalem, along with Bethlehem and Ramallah, account for 30% to 40% of the Palestinian economy. Without this economic engine, a future state is not viable.

Proponents of the wall predict peace as a result. But the path to peace is long. In the village of Bil'in, where 60% of the farmland is to be confiscated, weekly nonviolent demonstrations have been staged by Palestinians and internationals (peace and social justice activists). Israeli armed forces have responded with blue dye from water cannons, tear gas, rubber-coated bullets resulting in injuries and one international being beaten in the head with the butt of a gun.

Spans of graffiti may lighten the spirit of the wall with hopeful humour (see p59), but the pledge to resist endures: www.stophthewall.org.

artists, musicians and film and theatre buffs; take Jerusalem St off Al-Manara, take a right on Hospital St and head along for two blocks.

Khalil Sakakini Centre (☎ 298 7374; www.sakakini.org; Al-Muntazah) Hosts art exhibitions by the locally and internationally renowned.

Popular Art Center (☎ 240 3891; www.popularartcenter.org; Nablus Rd, Al-Bireh) The point of origin for the music-rich Palestine International Festival of Music & Dance held in June, this houses the Palestinian Dance School and offers film screenings.

Ramallah Cultural Palace (☎ 298 4704; www.ramallahculturalpalace.org; Industrial Zone) Up a hill in the Industrial Zone is this formidable state-of-the-art performance venue with a lively calendar of events.

AM Qattan Foundation (☎ 296 0544; www.qattanfoundation.org; Al-Jihad St, Al-Masyoun) Readings and competitions in poetry, short story, novel- and script-writing, journalism, and plastic art.

Baladna Centre (☎ 295 8434; Al-Nahda St) Children's shows, concerts, films and activities entertaining to speakers of any language.

Getting There & Around

From Al-Musarra in Jerusalem take a service taxi or bus (4NIS) to the Qalandia checkpoint. From there take another shared taxi to Al-Manara (3NIS per person) – you're there when you see the lions.

Everything within the Ramallah area is 10 minutes or less by private taxi and should cost 10NIS to 20NIS. Bargain with the driver before getting in.

AROUND RAMALLAH

When a small Christian village is known more for its beer than for its Bible stories, one might think the past is forgotten. But the townsfolk in Taybeh hold fast to their heritage, raising a glass to the place they believe Jesus stayed with his disciples in his final hours (John 11:54).

The **Taybeh Beer** (☎ 02-289 8868; www.taybehbeer.net) microbrewery isn't so micro anymore; it has opened in Germany and the UK. Arrange for a brewhouse tour. This microbrewery is 15km from Ramallah, either via Birzeit or through Calandia (from the checkpoint). Either way costs 10NIS by service taxi.

Beer and books go hand in hand. **Birzeit University** (☎ 02-298 2153; www.birzeit.edu), named

for its host village, is a nexus of activity when curfews, closures and roadblocks don't prevent students from getting to school. Enrolment stands at 6300, with slightly more women than men. An international music festival and frequent public events make it a destination for all. Classes in Arabic are available for visitors staying on. Birzeit University is about 4km from Ramallah and a service taxi from Al-Manara costs 3NIS.

JERICHO

اريجا יריחו

☎ 02 / pop 20,000

The oldest continuously inhabited city on earth is also the lowest, at 260m (1200ft) below sea level. Half the fun of Jericho is the drive from Jerusalem, where the stubby green and chalky white topography gives way to smooth caramel mounds and brown velvet moonscapes. Keep an eye out for camels and Bedouin tent dwellers (who've been selling their tents and living in open metal boxes).

The West Bank's largest and, in ways, most contentious Jewish settlement, Ma'ale Adumim, sprawls atop the hills outside of Jerusalem. A glance at its magnitude and permanence makes it obvious why a final two-state solution with this as Palestine is so complex – especially with Israel's plans to annex the colony. In so doing, Israel will radically re-draw the boundaries of Jerusalem to include this confiscated Palestinian land, stretching its de facto Jerusalem jurisdiction deep into the West Bank. Some say the plan is to extend 'Greater Jerusalem' to the Jordan River. Furthermore, the Jordan Valley along the Jordan River amounts to 28.5% of the West Bank, which Israel has no intention of relinquishing given its proximity to a national border (Jordan).

Jericho is a place to warm up and slow down. The population ebbs in hot summer months and flows when rest of the West Bank shivers with rain and occasional snow. Tourists come in summer, nevertheless, to ascend the Mount of Temptation and continue on to float in the salty waters of the Dead Sea. Palestinians allowed to travel gather here or pass through on their way across the river to Jordan. The pace is conspicuously relaxed, and security is so tight since the second intifada that heads of state come here to confer. After a four-year lull, 40,000 tourists visited Jericho in 2005. As

Hezbollah rockets fell in northern Israel in 2006, Palestinian-Israelis took cover in Jericho. But the Austrian-owned casino that was a magnet for Israelis before the intifada was closed at the time of writing.

Jericho has changed hands repeatedly but is known by the biblically astute as the first city the Israelites captured after wandering 40 years in the desert. Addled by horn blasts, the walls came down with a shout (Joshua 6). After Joshua followed his divine command, the city fell to the Babylonians, then the Romans destroyed it, the Byzantines rebuilt, earthquake struck, the Crusaders took hold, then Saladin settled in. Christians celebrate Jericho as the place where John the Baptist received his own

baptism in the Jordan River and where the temptation of Jesus took place on the mountain. Ordinarily, this gathering place to remember Jesus' baptism is open to visitors only during the Greek Orthodox Epiphany and the third Thursday in October for Roman Catholics. Contact the **Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies** (☎ 02-274 8590; www.sirajcenter.org) to find out if these exceptions are being honoured. While disparate claims are made as to the specific location of the baptism, the one most agreed upon is Qasr al-Yahud, which is located in a minefield.

In March of 2006 the Israeli army rammed and pumelled the Palestinian Authority prison and security headquarters in Jericho with bulldozers, tank artillery and helicopter

guns. The US and UK prison monitors were told of the plan and left the premises for a constellation of reasons. After the nine-hour siege, two guards were dead and the six wanted Palestinian prisoners were captured, including one accused of the 2001 assassination of the Israeli tourism minister, Rehavam Zeevi, who boisterously espoused the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

Sights & Activities

MOUNT OF TEMPTATION & MONASTERY OF THE QURANTUL

If your heart can handle the height more than the hike, take a swiny Swiss-made cable car near the ancient city ruins, Tel es-Sultan, up to the place where Jesus resisted. The **Mount of Temptation & Monastery of the Qurantul** (☎ 232 1590; www.jericho-cablecar.com; cable-car round trip US\$12; ☎ 8am-5pm) mark the cave where the devil is said to have tested Jesus, saying that after a 40-day fast, the Son of God should make a loaf of bread out of a stone (Matthew 4:1-11). The 12th-century Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Qurantul (Monastery of the Forty) clings to a cliff-side overlooking orange and banana trees in the river valley, the Dead Sea to the south, and the Jordan Mountains to the east. There's plenty of stair-climbing at the summit if you want to see the monastery for an extra charge. The cave-church inside is only open in the morning.

TEL ES-SULTAN

'Old city' means something different here. Visit **Tel es-Sultan** (☎ 232 1590; admission 10NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm) on foot or look down from the cable car and see what remains of the world's original civilisation. It looks like sand dunes and stairways because it dates back 7000 years, when planting crops and keeping livestock were innovations. They are the oldest known stairways in the world, and the layers of civilisation beneath go back another two millennia. The round tower indicates that it was fortified and defended. Legend has it that the tower withstood seven earthquakes. Biblical references to Lot and his wife also refer to earthquakes in this region. The abandoned mud dwellings you see around Jericho are not related. They were constructed in 1948 when refugees poured into the area from what is Israel today. Mud is a good building material for hot climates.

HISHAM'S PALACE & KHIRBET NA'ARAN

For archaeology lovers, **Hisham's Palace** (Khirbet al-Mafjar; ☎ 232 1590; admission 10NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm), 5km north of Jericho, is impressive. The sprawling winter hunting retreat of Caliph Hisham Ibn Abd al-Malik must have been magnificent in the 8th century with its baths, mosaic floors and pillars. The guestroom mosaic bears the somewhat-known image of a lion biting a deer and a tree of red oranges. The aesthetic mix also includes the hint of a burgeoning Islamic architectural identity.

A Byzantine synagogue near the remaining arch of an aqueduct serving Hisham's Palace, Khirbet Na'aran has a 6th-century mosaic floor demonstrating similar decorative trends.

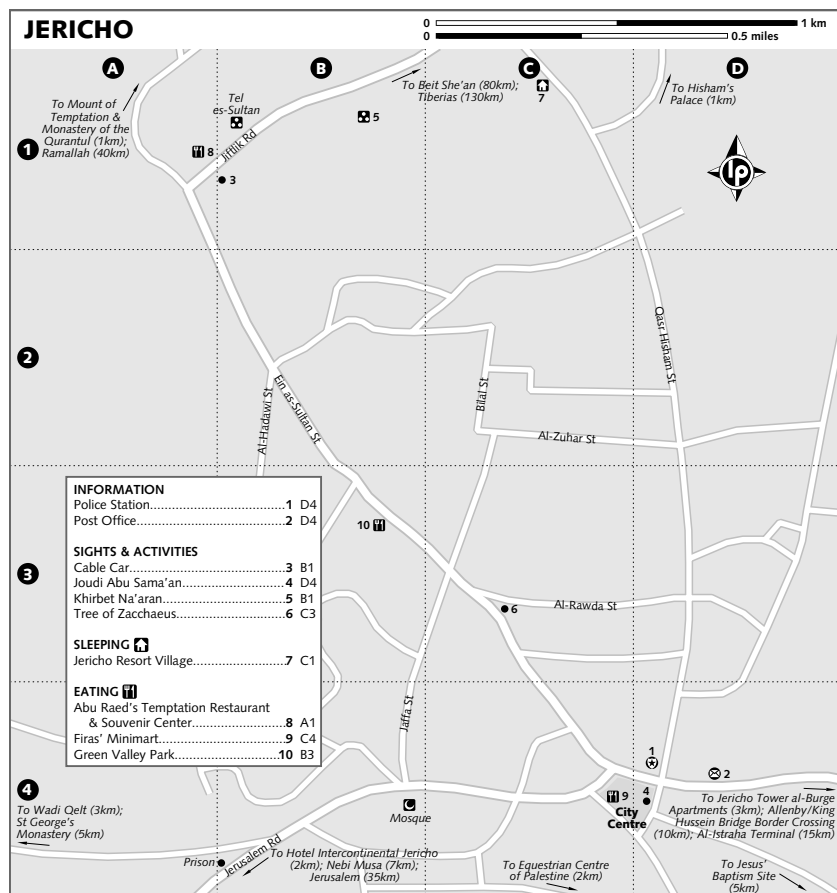
WADI QELT & NEBI MUSA

Why drive to Hisham's Palace when you can take a 15km hike (or camel ride) through the Wadi Qelt? The steep canyon between Jerusalem and Jericho is a naturalist's treat. Find a waterfall and aqueduct along the way. Cave dwellings here gave way to monasteries, with the spectacular 5th-century **St George's Monastery** blending into a rock face. The monastery is closed to visitors on Sunday. Don't drink water from the springs, and beware of extreme heat in summer and flash floods in winter. Signs to the settlement of Mitzpe Yericho will put you on the path, or contact a Bedouin guide (☎ 052 265 0988) and consider a jeep or camel.

Another side road on the way to Jericho from Jerusalem will take you south to Nebi Musa (nearing the northern edge of the Dead Sea), the tomb of Moses, as revered by Muslims. A mosque was built on the site in 1269 and expanded two centuries later.

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A circle of dilapidated storefronts at the city centre, with colourful bouquets of household products spilling into the streets, is Jericho's version of a shopping mall. Here you'll find a taxi stand or be able to rent a bike on the east side of the centre from **Joudi Abu Sama'an** (☎ 232 4070; per day 10NIS; ☎ 7am-10pm). But if four legs are better than two wheels, the **Equestrian Centre of Palestine** (☎ 232 5007; per hr 40NIS) is on Al-Qadisiya St.



You might pass the **Tree of Zachaeus** near the city centre. This sycamore, said to be more than 2000 years old, got its name from the story of the rich-but-short publican who climbed the tree to greet Jesus then invited the prophet to his home.

Sleeping

Jericho Tower al-Burge Apartments (☎ 232 4896; Amman St/Al-Istraha; apt 250-350NIS) Two- and three-bedroom semi-furnished no-frills apartments have washing machines, kitchenettes without cookware, and air-con by request. It's next to the Alami farming project on Amman St, out from the city centre off Hettefer St near the Allenby Bridge parking and transfer post. It's helpful to know a little Arabic.

Jericho Resort Village (☎ 232 1255; fax 232 2189; s/d 250/300NIS; ☎ ☎) This breezy bamboo-bedecked vacation getaway has bungalows with kitchenettes as well as standard rooms with tile floors and terraces. Jacuzzi, kids' pool, tennis, poolside bar. Near Hisham's Palace.

Hotel Intercontinental Jericho (☎ 231 1200; www.interconti.com; s/d US\$80/90; ☎ ☎) With a rack rate of US\$220 per night, tour operators are eager to pull past the security gate and discharge busloads into the lap of luxury for a fraction of that cost. Click your heels for a sound sensation beneath the small dome in the splendid Australian-designed foyer. Enjoy tennis, basketball, indoor squash, a

gym, restaurant and bar. Scattered swimming pools (admission per adult/child, including towels and locker US\$20/10) and terraced grounds are open to the public. It's near the checkpoint letting you into Jericho.

Eating

One cannot live by bread alone, so Jericho has plenty to satisfy. The resort hotels in Jericho have fine eating outlets, and you can lunch at the top of the Mount of Temptation.

Abu Raed's Temptation Restaurant and Souvenir Center (☎ 232 2614; Tel as-Sultan; mains US\$7-15) Part of a retail extravaganza, including a snack shop and souvenir outlets, to suit every taste from the dada to the divine. The mostly Middle Eastern lunch buffet offers quality and variety.

Green Valley Park (☎ 232 2349; Ein es-Sultan St; mains 30-60NIS) One of a jubilant strip of shaded dining patios on this street, for eating in the local style. Specialises in grilled meats and mezze.

Firas' minimart (☎ 232 6202; ☎ 24hr) On the west side of the city centre.

Getting There & Away

You can take a taxi to Abu Dis from Al-Musrara in Jerusalem or Bab iz-Qaq in Bethlehem (service taxi 7NIS). Take a service taxi to Jericho for 10NIS. Drivers take Rte 1 towards Ma'ale Adumim and follow the signs to Jericho, taking the highway to the left.

Taxis also go from the checkpoints in Ramallah and Nablus.

HEBRON

الخليل חברון

☎ 02 / pop 166,000

If Chinese exporters think Al-Khalil (Hebron) is a country, it could be as much for the international commercial trade as the high-decibel political clamour emanating from it. Yet despite decades of tension between native Palestinian Arabs and immigrant Zionists, Hebron has flourished as a business leader among Palestinian communities. It is generally the densest population centre since many fleeing the violence of 1948 ended up staying here after losing their properties to the new Jewish state.

On a former trade route to the Arabian Peninsula, Hebron is still celebrated for blown glass, hand-painted pottery, grapes, dairy products and camel meat. It's a discount shopper's bliss. Nevertheless, the 'Village of the Four' is a primary place of pilgrimage. Surrounding the collective tomb of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives, Hebron is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Recent History

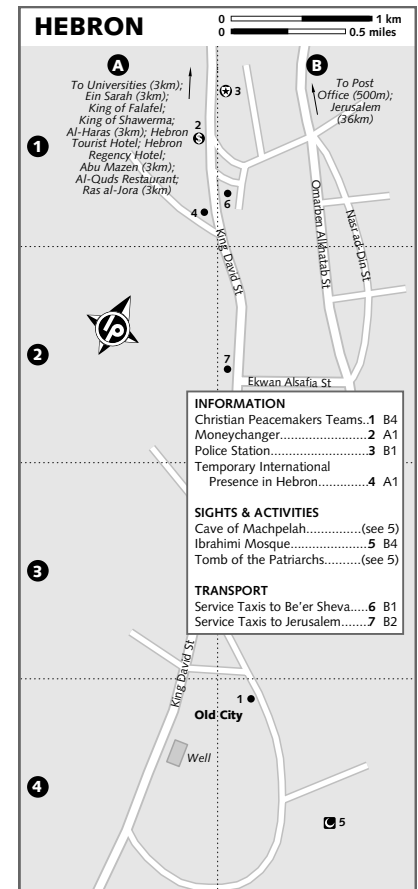
The 19th-century pronouncement by European socialist Jews of their intent to create a Jewish state in Palestine fomented little discord, as the rate of Jewish immigration was slow. But with anti-Semitism on the rise in Europe, the Zionist project caught on. So by the time the Ottomans fell to the Brits in WWI, the mood was ripening for a showdown. Arab nationalists revolted in 1929 when the status of holy sites and other property was imperiled. Jews in Hebron were targeted and killed, so most were evacuated.

The prominent feature of today's Hebron is the striking presence of Israeli military guards and ultraorthodox Jews in the West Bank's most conservative Muslim city and also its most peopled. Rabbi Moshe Levinger and his US-born wife began colonising the centre of town after Israel seized the West Bank in 1967. Though these moves were against Israeli law, they ultimately garnered endorsement, even after the settlement of Kiryat Arba was established nearby to draw the settlers out. As a result, the city is quartered up into zones. Each armed settler in the Old City is protected by as many as four

armed soldiers stationed on rooftops and street corners, emboldening the 600 Jews there to parade in the streets chanting anti-Arab ditties and wielding guns. Clashes break out between settlers and soldiers regularly.

As proof of the unusual radicalism of these settlers, there is a memorial tribute to Brooklyn-born physician Baruch Goldstein who, on the Jewish holiday of Purim during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in 1994, sprayed Palestinians with bullets while they prayed in the mosque. Palestinians, who the religious settlers consider foreigners in the Promised Land, wait for the final solution and occasionally strike back with violence.

There are at least 17 Jewish settlements in the vicinity of Hebron, housing more than



HOUSE DEMOLITIONS *Michael Kohn*

During the intifada years it was well known that after a suicide bomber completed his mission, the Israeli army would identify the bomber's home, clear out the residents and have it flattened with a bulldozer. What is less well known is that these house demolitions were happening before suicide bombings began in the '90s, and continue unabated today.

This stems from Israel's policy of refusing to give building permits to Palestinians. As they need homes to live in, Palestinians build without permits, and it's only a matter of time before these illegal domiciles are identified and demolished. Homes are also destroyed when an area is declared a security zone or nature preserve.

According to the **Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions** (ICAH; www.icahd.org), punitive demolitions only account for 5% of the 12,000 demolitions that have occurred since 1967. The other 95%, ICAHD says, were razed during military incursions or because they lacked the necessary permits.

Since 1997 ICAHD has been protesting house demolitions and has worked to improve the lives of those whose homes have been levelled. In some cases ICAHD has rebuilt homes two or three times as an act of protest, realising that the military could come back and destroy them. ICAHD provides tours from its base in Jerusalem. A day trip includes a visit to the Separation Wall, the Ma'ale Adumim Jewish settlement in the West Bank, and a home that was destroyed. Contact ICAHD though the activist centre **Daila** (Map pp114-15; ☎ 02-624 5560; www.dailazoo.net; 4 Shlomzion HaMalka, Jerusalem; ☎ 4pm-midnight Mon-Fri).

12,000 Jews. For foreign-observer operations based here, see below.

Orientation & Information

The northern entrance to Hebron, which is 6km from the Ibrahim Mosque and Old City, is called Ras al-Jora or Jerusalem Sq. Another 700m puts you at the intersection Al-Haras. Jerusalem Rd (Shari'a al-Quds) becomes Ein Sarah St at Al-Haras and goes through the Ein Sarah area to the city centre (Bab iz-Zawieh), to the Old City souq and further to the Ibrahim Mosque. Get information on happenings in Hebron from **IPYL** (☎ 02-222 9131; www.ipyl.org).

A curious aspect of Ein Sarah St is the multitude of internet cafés. But if you prefer a scholarly vibe, Hebron University, Palestine Polytechnic University and Al-Quds Open University all have computer labs (with internet) for use at a cost of 4NIS per hour.

The following are foreign-observer operations with offices in Hebron:

Christian Peacemakers Teams (CPT; www.cpt.org)

Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH; ☎ 222 4445; www.tiph.org)

Sights & Activities

At Ras al-Jora, blown-glass and ceramic factories are open for viewing and shopping. The blue glass is alluring. **Al-Natseh** (☎ 222 8502; www.hebronglass.com; ☎ 8am-9pm; closed noon-2pm Fri) and **Al-Salam** glass factory (☎ 222 9127) draw crowds, as does the smaller **Tamimi Ceramics** (☎ 222 0358), all with similar opening hours.

Continue on to the **Tomb of the Patriarchs** and **Cave of Machpelah**, where the **Ibrahim Mosque** (☎ 222 8213; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm Sun-Thu) sits; be mindful of the separate spaces for Jews and Muslims and the strict security since the Goldstein massacre. As it is a house of worship, when entering the mosque, you will be asked to remove your shoes, and women will be handed a head covering. Like decorated tents, the mostly Mamluk-made cenotaphs commemorate the patriarchs and their wives, but it is the cave below that is said to have been bought by Abraham as the actual final resting place for his brood in the posthumous company of Adam and Eve. For Jews and Muslims, the site is second in importance only to Jerusalem's most spiritual spot.

The Herod-commissioned enclosure was altered by the Byzantines in the 6th century, adding a church. A synagogue was built beside it. When the Arabs conquered the area in the following century, the church was converted to a mosque, but the synagogue remained intact. After the Crusaders had their era, the Mamluks built another mosque.

The **Old City's** Mamluk-styled Ottoman architecture includes a **souq**, but merchants have moved to an outdoor area due to violent events. Still, the open-air market is a sensual odyssey from agriculture to art.

Sleeping

Hebron Tourist Hotel (☎ 222 6760; Ein Sarah; s/d US\$35/45) An airy lobby gives way to adequate rooms mixing shabby with new.

Hebron Regency Hotel (☎ 225 7390; www.hebron-regency.com; Ras al-Jora; s/d/ste US\$70/90/150) It could be the on-premise Turkish bath (bath and massage US\$30) and exercise room that make the dark marble lobby a little dank. At least lithographs in the overpriced rooms offer an authentic sense of place, as do the village views from higher floors.

Eating

Though camel meat is available, you won't find it on most menus, as even Khalilis find it exotic. But Hebron is the place for hard-to-get homestyle meals. It's the liquor that's unattainable here. Drinking only happens in private.

King of Falafel (☎ 222 8726; Al-Haras; felafels 2NIS) Stuff hummus and a rainbow of salads into your sandwich and order fries on the side.

King of Shawerma (☎ 222 8831; Al-Haras; meals 10NIS) More slick but less storied than its neighbouring sandwich sovereign, this is for the nonvegetarian.

Abu Mazen (☎ 222 6168; Nimra St; mains 25-35NIS) Understandably crowded from noon to 2pm, Abu Mazen offers outstanding value. For the price you get salads with refills, warm bread, a choice of a delicious hot dish, a bottle of water, and bitter unsweetened Arabic coffee with dessert. *Mensef* (lamb on rice served beside a salted broth of lamb stock and dissolved dried yogurt) is usually a big-event family meal, so this could be your only chance to try it. The lamb melts in your mouth, and the yogurt-soaked yellow rice is a profusion of authentic flavours. *Kidreh* (a baked casserole of meat, nuts and

rice) and stuffed chicken are special, too. Find it near the Regency Hotel and Al-Quds Open University. Its chief competitor is Al-Quds Restaurant at Ras al-Jora.

Getting There & Away

At any time roads can be blocked and iron gates can roll shut. But the circumnavigation possible at the time of writing made it no problem for service taxi drivers at Al-Musrara in Jerusalem to go the 36km to Hebron in less than an hour (15NIS). From Al-Nashash in Bethlehem it's 24km (6NIS). Arrive and return via Bab ez-Zawieh. Get current information if driving, and don't rely on road signs.

NABLUS

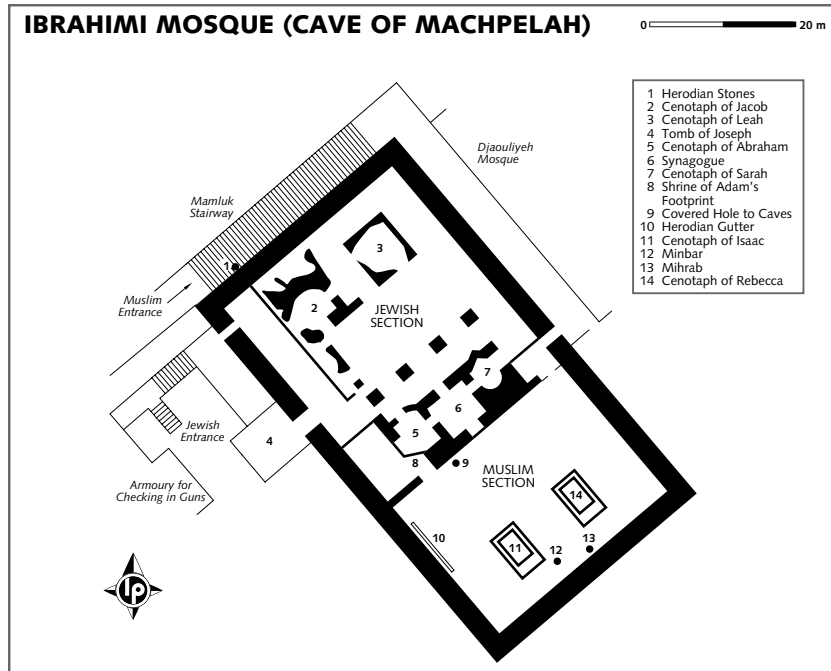
نابلس

☎ 09 / pop 134,000

The West Bank's northern population hub is also one that has seen some of the roughest action, given the stringent resistance to Israeli occupation that simmers here. With much damage and destruction wrought since 2000, keep a careful eye on the climate for tourists. But an opportunity to go should be relished.

Situated in and around a lush spring valley between Mt Gerizim (Jarzim in Arabic) and rocky Mt Ebal, Nablus became a significant exporter of olive oil, cotton, soap and carob. Best known contemporarily for its olive-oil soap factories, olive wood carving and warm chewy goat-cheese pastry (*kunafeh*), Nablus is layered with millennia of plunder and glory. After the tribes of Israel split 12 ways, Shechem was declared by one faction as the capital of all ancient Israel and held on through inter-tribal conflict and external threat for nearly two centuries. Today's Tel Balata (a tel is an ancient mound created by centuries of urban rebuilding) memorialises that event.

After the Assyrian conquest, forced population shifts increased the rate of intermarriage of Gentiles with the remaining Israelites of Samaria (a departure from Orthodox Jewish practice). John Hyrcanus, a Jewish leader from the south, destroyed the city of Shechem and the rival temple on Mt Gerizim. Later, the Romans obliterated what remained of Shechem and set up the 'new city' Neapolis (Nablus) in AD 70. Buildings are still in use that date back six centuries and earlier. Repair to these has been



slow after air and land invasion. Curfews forbid all movement outside of buildings. The longest of these was from July to mid-October 2002, during which time the curfew was lifted for only 79 hours of provision-shopping and movement in the streets.

The northern West Bank is still referred to by some Old Testament purists as Samaria, from which term 'Samaritan' is derived. Among the most fascinating elements of the Nablus area is the Samaritan community and their relationship to Mt Gerizim since the 2nd millennium BC. With fewer than 700 people today, including some in Tel Aviv and Jaffa, they pose no challenge to greater Jewry. But in earlier times, their racial impurity made them outcast, among Jews who did not intermarry with Gentiles. The worst insult Jesus could sling was to compare a Samaritan favourably to the Jewish elites of the day.

Sights & Activities

While Samaritan secular habits are indistinguishable from those of any other Palestinian, their religious rites are tied to a belief that **Mt Gerizim** is not only the first piece of land ever created, but is also the land out of which Adam was made, the only place spared in the great flood, and the place Abraham went to sacrifice his son (opposing the common belief that this took place in Jerusalem). A strictly followed Moses-sanctioned ritual sacrifice commemorates this event each year when Samaritans gather on the mountain for 40 days in prayer. One seat's is reserved in the Palestinian parliament for a Samaritan. Learn more at the **Samaritan Museum** (☎ /fax 237 0249; admission 4NIS; 🕒 8am-2pm Sun-Fri) on Mt Gerizim.

An-Nasir Mosque is one of 30 mosques and provides one of the 30 minarets that point skyward from Nablus; it's also a landmark at the corner of An-Nasir and Jamaa al-Kebir Sts.

In the Old City of Nablus, **Al-Qasaba** is an Ottoman-era labyrinth of framing shops and pastry stands, spice sacks and vegetable mounds, in a snapshot of the past. Look for examples of earlier architecture from the Mamluk, Crusader and Byzantine eras as you imagine life here as far back as 4000 years. Don't miss **Touqan Castle**, a privately owned Turkish mansion. Visit a soap factory like **Al-Bader** (Al-Nasser St) or recharge your

senses with a bath at the oldest functioning Turkish hammam in Palestine. Built in 1624, **Al-Shifa** (☎ 238 1176; 🕒 men 8am-midnight Mon & Wed-Sat, 3pm-midnight Tue & Sun, women 8am-5pm Tue & Sun) offers massage, a bath with camel's-hair brushes, and occasionally music.

At the entrance to Balata, the largest UNRWA refugee camp (housing 20,000) in the West Bank, you'll find **Jacob's Well** (admission free; 🕒 8am-noon & 2pm-5pm), the spot where Christians believe a Samaritan woman offered Jesus a drink of water, and he then revealed to her that he was the Messiah (John 4:13-14). A Byzantine church destroyed in the Samaritan revolt of 529 was replaced by a Crusader church, which is undergoing restorations, overseen by a priest.

Sleeping

Al-Yasmeen Hotel (☎ 233 3555; yasmeen@palnet.com; s/d US\$40/50) A favourite lodging of aid workers and politicians, this puts you in the middle of it all.

Al-Qasr Hotel (☎ 238 5444; alqasr@netvision.net.il; s/d US\$60/75) A full-service sleep is worth a commute. It's 3km out of town.

Eating & Drinking

In addition to confectionaries selling Turkish delight, halweh and syrupy pastry, Nablus is full of cafés for sipping and puffing, but the clientele is usually masculine. While a woman might be served in one of these, she could draw stares.

Women and men together enjoy **Al-Madafa** (☎ 238 4492; Rafidia St; 🕒 9am-midnight). **Selim Effendi Restaurant** (☎ 237 1332; Raharbat St, Martyrs' Sq) serves full traditional meals.

No alcohol is served in these establishments, but the eatery at Al-Yasmeen Hotel has a bar. Try the *kunafeh* (dessert's answer to pizza) at Al-Aqsa, next to the An-Nasir Mosque. The warm, elastic cheese and syrup-soaked wheat shreds make *kunafeh* a cultural pastime and special-occasion treat.

Getting There & Away

Under normal circumstances, take a service taxi/bus from Ramallah's bus station near Al-Manara for 13/8NIS. There are seven checkpoints around Nablus, so normal is relative. The main one on the road from Ramallah is the Huwwara checkpoint, which can be closed for security reasons at any time. Find out first.

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