

Hikers follow Abraham's spiritual path throughout Holy Land

TAYBEH, West Bank - On one night of their 31-mile trek through the West Bank, a group of 25 hikers was welcomed into a village during a wedding celebration. The next night they stayed in the modest homes of Palestinian families.

The night they arrived in the Christian village of Taybeh, they stayed at Holy Redeemer Parish's guesthouse.

Each experience was another piece not only along the physical path following the footsteps of biblical Abraham's sojourn, but an attempt to recreate his spiritual journey as a traveler who put his safety and well-being into the hands of strangers.

"We have a specific purpose. This is a cultural trail. We are walking in the spirit of Abraham, in the faith of our hosts," said Tyler Norris, executive director of the Abraham Path Initiative. Students from Christian Brothers-run Bethlehem University and a dozen young Americans and Europeans joined Norris on the pilot hike of the initiative in the West Bank in early July.

"To be a traveler is to walk in faith, not knowing where food or water is coming from. Sure there are risks, but there are also risks if you go to certain neighborhoods in Washington, D.C.," he said.

Although the overnight stops and a support car with plenty of water and room for hikers who needed a rest had been prearranged by Abraham Path Initiative's local partner Siraj, a Palestinian nongovernmental organization affiliated with the Melkite Catholic Church, the travelers did not know the families they were staying with or the villages where they would stop for the night.

At first Kelsey Pince, a 22-year-old Christian university student from Seattle, was afraid of offending her hosts because of the significant cultural differences, she told Catholic News Service.

"I didn't know what to expect," she said. "But the family was very open and I felt so

taken care of. The next night I was calm even when there was a bit more chaos as to who was staying where and even though I stayed in a very, very small house.”

Reem Jafari, a Palestinian Muslim who grew up in Dehiyshe refugee camp in Bethlehem and is studying in Washington, said the hike was an opportunity to introduce Palestinian culture to others. But maybe more importantly, Jafari said, she felt physically validated when she was able to hike up the steep mountains and valleys.

“I had the support of all my peers. I see I can do things I was afraid to do before,” she said.

Although the Abraham Path honors and respects the traditions of all three Abrahamic faiths on its routes, Norris emphasized that it is not an interfaith encounter. The initiative is not trying to make a political statement, promote Middle East peace or push for economic development; it is simply reviving an ancient traveling tradition, he said.

Still, it is hard to avoid polemics and politics in this part of the world, and some of the participants said they came on the trip out of political conviction in support of the Palestinians. For example, a visit to the Taybeh Brewing Co. was seen by Maria Khoury, wife of one of the owners, as an opportunity to present a litany of Palestinians’ problems.

“We are walking a fine line between political sensitivities in every country,” acknowledged Norris.

Organizers of the Abraham Path Initiative, a Harvard Law School venture and now an independent nongovernmental organization, hope to eventually link hiking paths throughout the Middle East.

After three years of research and coordination with local nongovernmental organizations, the Abraham Path Initiative got under way in November. The first groups trekked through Turkey and Jordan.

No one knows the exact route taken by Abraham during his journeys, and today’s Abraham Path is based on what local partners believe to be the best walking paths.

Five stops are mentioned in the Old Testament, including Abraham's birthplace of Ur in Iraq; and his travels to Nablus, Beit El and Hebron in what is now the West Bank, and Beersheba in Israel. But according to Islamic tradition Abraham also traveled to Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Initiative organizers hope that eventually paths also will be mapped out in Iraq, Israel, Egypt and Lebanon.

Forging such a path in the Middle East is no easy task and political and cultural sensitivity abound, Norris said. Israel is unlikely to allow hikers from Arab countries to cross its borders, traveling in Iraq currently is out of the question, and in Syria hikers only will journey along the Syrian Cultural Walking Trail in order to avoid possible appearance of politically sensitive connections with Israel.