

**TO DO!96
CONTEST SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE TOURISM**

Award Winner

***INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM
Programme for Alternative Tourism***

represented by Dr. Mitri Raheb
Director of the Centre and Pastor at the
Lutheran Christmas Church,
Bethlehem, Palestine

Rationale for the award

by

Klaus Betz

1. INTRODUCTION

The research in relation to the entry for the contest of the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM was carried out from November 11th to 17th, 1996. On behalf of the Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V. (Study Group for Tourism and Development) the concept and objectives of the Centre as described in the contest documents were scrutinised there and then without any difficulty whatsoever.

Prior to this, however, care had to be taken through appropriate measures that the pending research in Bethlehem could be done confidentially. Palestine still is (in the sense of West Bank and Gaza Strip) a country occupied by the supreme power of Israel.

2. BACKGROUND

Contrary to the general understanding there is no peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians but there are only - according to the status - a number of „Declarations of Principles“ which spell out the procedures on both sides until a final peace agreement will be signed. One such example is the „Hebron Treaty“. For this reason the occupied West Jordan is still divided into three zones and scattered with numerous „checkpoints“.

Since the Oslo I and Oslo II Agreements, those areas described as Zone A are completely under autonomous Palestinian control (about 4 per cent, compare map). All other regions of the so-called „Holy Land“ come under Zone B (under Palestinian civil administration but under Israeli military administration, about one forth of the area), or else as Zone C (completely under Israeli sovereignty).

This state of affairs does not at all affect a visitor holding a EU passport for instance. Her or his mobility is normally not restricted in any way. For Palestinians, however, this kind of mobility does not exist. Only in Zone A do they have absolute mobility (in certain areas of Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus or Hebron), but these are areas, which are not interlinked. If one speaks of „cordonning off West Bank“ this does not simply mean, that a Palestinian cannot go to Israel or East Jerusalem (which was prohibited after the Oslo Accord anyway, and as a consequence of which there are now about 160 000 jobless Palestinians). „Cordonning off“ means in some cases that Palestinians may not be allowed to travel from one Zone A to another Zone A because, after leaving the respective city boundary, they always have to pass through an Israeli controlled Zone B or Zone C where they can be denied the continuation of their journey without being given the reason for this refusal.

On the other hand Israel has built through-roads within West Bank - for instance from Jerusalem to the Jewish settlements near Hebron - which can only be used by vehicles with yellow (Israeli) number plates and which are inaccessible for cars with blue (Palestinian) number plates.

It is imperative to know about this situation and these conditions in order to be able to understand the situation of tourism in the Holy Land. Since the signing of the Oslo Agreement tourism is de jure within the competence of the Palestinian Autonomy Administration, de facto, however, it is a business, dominated by the Israeli tourism industry.

In the case of a „Holy Land Tour“ it is still common practise to travel to the West Bank in or with a group under the auspices of an Israeli agency which arranges the tour to the respective sights with Israeli busses and Israeli guides (among some 5000 guides there are allegedly only 39 Palestinians).

By contrast, Palestinian enterprises are so far not allowed to meet travel or pilgrim groups say in Jerusalem (with new and modern touring buses from the Netherlands) in order to show them Bethlehem and its surroundings under their auspices. (Groups or individuals can of course decide to take a taxi in order to close - from the perspective of Jerusalem - the geographically narrow, but politically big gap between the Israeli and the Palestinian „tourist track“).

The situation of tourism resulting from this state of affairs:

Each year about 2 million tourists come to Israel - of which roughly one million also go to Bethlehem. Around three-quarters of the Bethlehem visitors are Christians (Pilgrims, Biblical Travellers). Of course most of these tourists want to see the Church of Nativity in the centre of Bethlehem. In memory of the „birth place“ of Christ, people throng in the crypt and are moved and carried away when services or the Eucharist are celebrated. At the same time an incessant stream of tourist buses is flooding the Manger Square while people are hurriedly buying some cheap souvenirs or arranging some photos with Palestinian policemen.

Normally, the total time spent in Bethlehem does not exceed one to one and a half hours. A stroll through the Old Town does not take place, the contact with the population, often living near the poverty line, is avoided, the political situation in the West Bank is left out of account. Therefore, tourism of this kind, goes past the people living there. And this in a region where the majority of the people are Christian Palestinians. In Bethlehem (Arabic: Beit Lahem) 41 per cent of the roughly 40 000 inhabitants profess their faith in Christianity, in the smaller neighbouring communities such as Beit Jala 70 per cent and in Beit Sahour 83 per cent of the population are professing Christians.

3. INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM

3.1 Appraisal

The INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is an institution fostering dialogue, reconciliation and understanding. Situated at the heart of Bethlehem, right under the roof of the „Christmas Church“ it wants to contribute to „the development of a Palestinian civil society“.

In this transitional phase from occupation to the formation of a sovereign state, the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is keen on getting involved when the course is set towards tourism, economic, social, cultural and socio-cultural development. Through its own actions and concept it wants to provide some orientation and become (and be) a model. Seen from this perspective the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM with its 10 full-time and part-time staff has taken up a Herculean task since it was founded in 1992 and since it opened its guesthouse in 1995 - pursuing its aim against all the odds.

Because it is a guesthouse, a place for encounter, a centre for conferences, communication, cultural learning and experience, for peace and women's work, because it does networking and understands itself also as an organisation which, through tourism, sees a possibility of international exchange, of promoting personal encounter - because of all this, the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is an „Island“ rising above all the turbulence (and on which one can take refuge), just as it is a platform, from which new ground can be broken and new (bridges) and relations be built (see criteria catalogue).

3.2 Objectives and concept

Since the opening of the "Abu Gubran" Guesthouse in 1995 (12 rooms for a maximum of 26 guests) the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is finally in a position to receive individual travellers as well as small groups. The INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM wants to make sure that an autonomous tourism industry will begin to develop, a sector which will benefit the Palestinians. In practical terms this means that the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM has to be engaged on several „fronts“ at the same time. On the one hand it wants to convince the Autonomy authorities that it might be a disastrous decision to build as many high-rise tourist hotels as possible by the 2000th anniversary Celebration in Bethlehem (which would change the image of the Old Town and could possibly turn Bethlehem into a „Christian tourist Disneyland“), on the other hand it wants to make great efforts to get away from the dependence on the Israeli tourism industry. And thirdly, the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM feels obliged to pass on visitors of the centre also to other small hotels and guesthouses (both in Bethlehem and in other places of West Bank) or to families with a guest room (bed and breakfast).

3.3 Appraisal of the project

- **Contest criterion:**
„Involvement of the different interests and requirements of the local people through participation“

Since the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is a kind of „hub“, it complies with this criterion through a number of direct and indirect initiatives and actions (all the more so as one has to recognise the fact that the „needs of the local population“ are presently oriented towards very basic needs: income, food, drinking water, regular and undisturbed schooling for the children). These actions include passing on guests to other hotels and hosts, to local guides/Palestinian taxi drivers/car rentals and bus companies, or - see the following criteria - the possibility for Palestinian handicrafts artists to get in touch with visitors through the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM. It is also considered important (employment effect) that all re-construction and renovation work is carried out by Palestinian architects and workers and that local material is used. Meanwhile the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM, through these activities, has gained something like a status of a „consulting“, and for many local people it has become an important advisor.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Strengthening of awareness among the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development in their daily economic, social and cultural life“

One of the basic problems is that the majority of the Palestinians hardly notice the beauty of their landscape and culture because they are lacking the opportunity for comparison. Therefore, everything new and modern is regarded as beautiful, while things which the visitors find exotic and fascinating are considered by the population to be old and boring. This attitude may in future be the cause for conflict (all the more so because the kind of tourism practised up to now has neither generated income nor jobs for the majority of the population). In order to overcome this conflict and to sensitise the population for their own cultural heritage, the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM plans to initiate a number of measures (see below, criteria catalogue). But this can only be realised, - just like cogs intermeshing -, once it is possible to put tourism

business on the Palestinian „track“, and this in turn would require „pioneering organisations“ which are able to implement such an approach - and one such organisation is the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Participation of a broad local population strata regarding the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism“

In order to fulfil this criterion the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM has so far pursued mainly two directions. For one, parts of its premises are put at the disposal for a kind of sales exhibition, and secondly it organises visitors programmes. Among the crafts offered one can for instance find hand-made models for Christmas cribs from olive wood, cut by a local wood-cutter (instead of the machine-cut standard trash), high-quality glasses and vases from the glass-blowing works in Hebron, ceramic plates and bowls from a workshop in Beit Sahour and finally ornate embroidery of women specialised in this craft from a near-by (Islamic) Bedouin village. This was initiated because (so far) hardly anybody has a chance of meeting the producers at their place of work. And for this reason the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM has also developed some visiting programmes to remedy this situation. Groups and individuals are now in a position to go on sightseeing tours with (Palestinian) buses and taxis around Bethlehem (Herodion, Solomon's Pool) or to book excursions to Ramallah, Hebron or Jericho. And last but not least, training programmes are initiated with the aim of preparing Palestinians for jobs in tourism, and to offer adequate training possibilities.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism for the local people by improvement of working conditions in relation to payment, social security, working hours, education and training“

In view of the fact that the (Palestinian run) tourism in West Jordan finds itself in a rather prenatal stage, accompanied by an unemployment rate of between 40 and 50 per cent, this criterion is not applicable (Bert Brecht: „Food comes first and only then morality“). It is therefore much more important to find jobs for young Palestinians who got their training abroad and who are willing to return. Here too, the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is actively involved. With its re-integration programme it tries to fulfil this task. This is done through its contacts within Palestine, but also by organising in-service training and studies for skilled workers (in guesthouses in Switzerland, with municipal administrations/tourist information office in Cologne, or else tourism studies at the Free University in Berlin).

- **Contest criterion:**
„Reinforcement of the local culture as well as the cultural identity of those living in tourism destination areas“

The INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM puts emphasis on a „strategy of conservation instead of new buildings“ by focusing on an authentic and socially compatible renovation of the Old Town of Bethlehem. It hired skilled personnel who returned to Palestine (such as the trained architect and monument conservationist, Khoulood Daibes, who got her training in Germany and wrote her dissertation on „Conservation strategies for Palestine with Bethlehem as a case in point“), and these people encourage businessmen, house owners and the municipality to follow this

approach. „Identity“ must become visible when one strolls through the Old Town of Bethlehem. The INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is a paragon in this respect: it was carefully renovated in the original West Bank style (natural stone-blocks hewn by hand). Equipped with an interior created by Palestinian artists and craftsmen (lighting, glass, ceramics and paintings), with furniture from local production and of course with a Palestinian cuisine (partly from bio-dynamic cultivation). This concept was already replicated by a family hotel, still under construction (Bethlehem Inn, 36 rooms) which will open in spring 1997.

In addition the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM organises musical events, both for visitors and for Palestinians. The guests are thus experiencing Arab music and dance and at the same time they have the opportunity to meet with the local people.

- **Contest criterion:**

„Avoidance, minimization of social and cultural damage caused by tourism in destination areas“

Since tourism has so far mainly moved along the axis Jerusalem-Bethlehem-Jerusalem, as a „closed shop“ so to speak, this criterion is not applicable for the time being, also because the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM is not in a position to exert its influence in this situation. There are hardly any individual travellers who would venture into far away villages. Still, the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM has worked out an „Alternative Guide“ for Bethlehem and its surrounding areas which will probably appear this spring (in Arabic and English, and if a German publishing house can be found, also in German). The information is complemented by a „Palestinian Cook Book“ to better understand the local culture.

- **Contest criterion:**

„Application of new methods in qualifying partnership and cooperation between the external tourism industry and the local people“

One can hardly speak of cooperation with the „external tourism industry“ if this relates to the Israeli monopoly. The situation is quite different, however, with regard to foreign travel agencies or with regard to youth groups organised by church organisations or in the case of young people doing community service instead of military service or medical doctors. By organising programmes of encounter, the visitors shall have the opportunity not only to get to know the beauty of the country but, if they wish so, also to be confronted with the social misery. Therefore it is also envisaged to take the visitors to refugee camps, social institutions or hospitals. Or else, if the visitors agree to it, they have the possibility to accompany and work with a Palestinian family either in their vineyard or in their olive grove. The people of Palestine should have the opportunity to meet tourists, to communicate with them. The INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM might actually be the only place in Palestine where one can meet church and political representatives of the Jewish, Islamic and Christian faiths, where people have the chance to get a precise and subtle analysis of the situation by listening to more than just one party - in a country with three religions and two nations.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Creation of other favorable conditions for a socially responsible tourism development in destination areas“

Through the mere existence of the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM with its socially responsible concept - at this initial stage of tourism development - it will be very difficult for any other organisation or authority etc. to justify a less elaborate process. The functioning example does exist - and in order for it to be able to continue functioning, it needs further support and publicity.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Projects/measures entered for the contest must be in line with the principles of environmental compatibility“

The situation of the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM has to be seen from the perspective of the overall situation of the city. In this context mention must first be made of the water shortage. Since the water management is under Israeli control (alleged distribution ratio of drinking water reserves: 75 % for Israel and Jewish settlements, 25% for the Palestinian population), there is a shortage of water. One can therefore understand the opinion of the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM that huge and luxurious hotels (which are too lavish with water) should not be built. Otherwise the population would suffer from even more restrictions.

Furthermore, Bethlehem City has to struggle with the problem of waste disposal because the next available waste incineration plant is situated in Zone C (this could not be verified by the expert). And also because there are only two garbage trucks available for the entire waste disposal (donated by North-Rhine-Westphalia). Therefore garbage is „disposed of“ illegally and randomly.

To sum up:

<p>The expert responsible for the research proposes to award a prize to the INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF BETHLEHEM on the occasion of the ITB 1997 in recognition of the work done in a very difficult situation and in order to assist it in its further efforts.</p>
