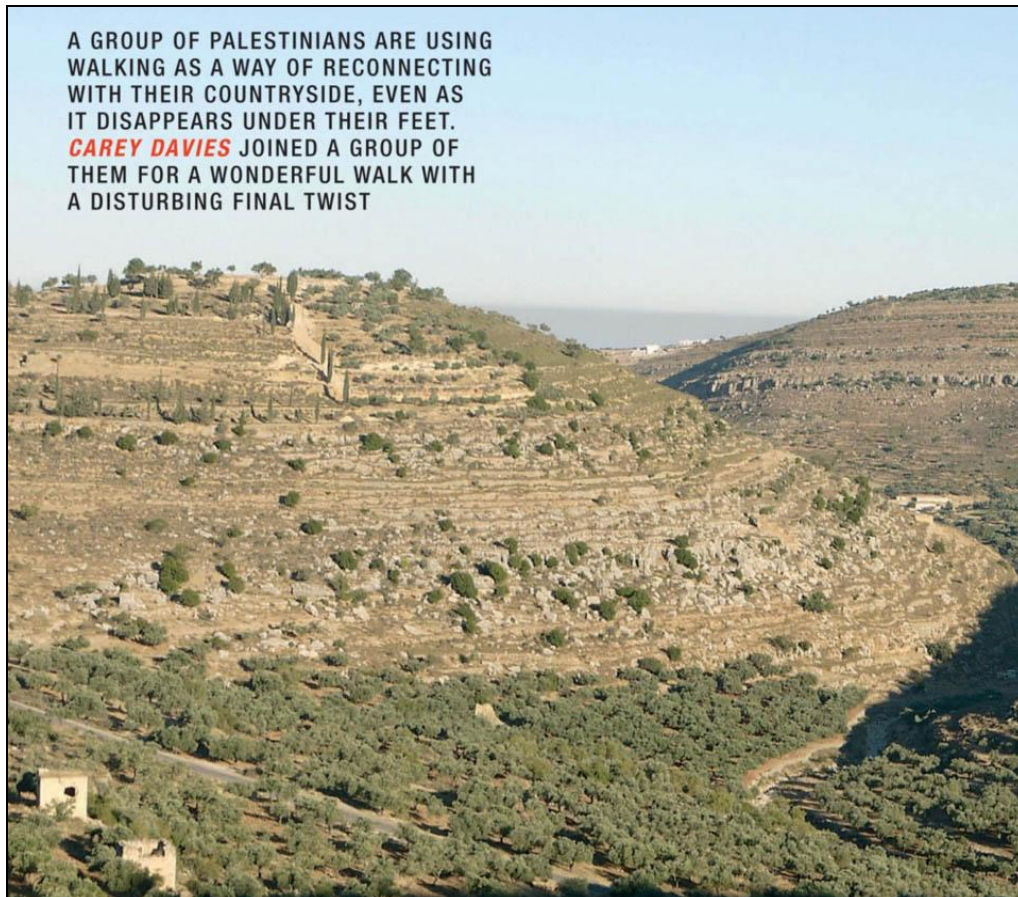


RAMBLING IN PALESTINE

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PALESTINE



“WE DON’T TEND TO USE MAPS,” SAYS SAMIA AS SHE PICKS HER WAY DOWN a scrubby, olive-terraced hillside. “Maps are misleading in an occupied land.” I’m with a group of about a dozen people, cutting a heedless path through olive groves, ducking under fruit trees and over churned-up, sandy earth. The environment is a quintessentially Mediterranean one: undulating limestone hills, blue sky above, parched ground underfoot. But there are uncommon features in the landscape which situate us somewhere very specific.

A few hundred feet below us, cutting jarringly through the base of a gentle-sloped valley, is a wide, silent road. Above us, the hill is crowned by something which is part suburban development, part fortress: rows of white houses clustered together with all the packed monotony of a British Costa del Sol resort complex, behind a large electrified fence intermittently dotted with watchtowers. It’s unmistakably an Israeli settlement, and it serves as a reminder that this is the occupied country Samia describes – the West Bank of Palestine.



The people I'm with are members of a club that, by Palestinian standards, is something of an oddity. It's a walking group. Its name, Shat-ha, means 'picnic' in Arabic, and it is the only such group in Palestine which meets regularly. Its members gather every Saturday morning for walks in the Palestinian countryside – a land which, it comes as little surprise to find out, presents challenges to the would-be Rambler.

"Anything can change according to the actions of the occupiers," Samia continues. "On one day a few years ago we used a map. It led us through land that had been claimed by an Israeli settlement. Some settlers confronted us. The Israeli army came and the settlers pretended they couldn't speak English, even though we knew they were from Brooklyn. It was a horrible day. Since then we haven't used maps."

I FIRST HEARD OF SHAT-HA when I interviewed the British comedian Mark Thomas shortly after he completed his own walk through Palestine, an eventful sojourn along the famous militarised barrier Israeli has constructed alongside – and often a long way inside – the West Bank. News of the existence of a Palestinian hiking group surprised me. Years of media coverage of outrage and intifadas had formed in my head an image of a land exclusively made up of checkpoints, settlements and sprawling Hebron-like towns of close-quarters animosity. But there is another, often overlooked side to Palestine: a beautiful countryside, and one in which Palestinians themselves take tremendous pride.



This aspect of Palestine has received more attention in recent years, helped by the Palestinian author Raja Shehadeh, whose 2007 book *Palestinian Walks* recounts how he has seen much of the countryside of his youth and early adult life disappear under the concrete of Israeli settlement. But he also describes a country brimming with cultural and rural texture, history, flora and fauna, memory and significance. While much of this has been destroyed, some of it still remains. He writes: “Many will... read this book against the background of the grim images on their television screens. They might experience a dissonant moment as they read about the beautiful countryside in which the six walks in this book take place: could the land of perpetual strife and bloodshed have such peaceful, precious hills?”



I am an avid and frequent walker at home in Britain, and a great believer in the freedom of ordinary people to access the countryside – what is sometimes dubbed “the right to roam”. But Palestine is, of course, a very different place to Derbyshire. A glance at a map of the West Bank over the last 50 years shows the land available to Palestinians shrinking constantly, as a blotchy pattern of Israeli settlements, plantations, settler only roads, military zones and barriers grows. What does the “right to roam” signify in a place where crossings through checkpoints are a fact of life, where the simplest of journeys can take hours, and where freedom of movement is routinely denied? I was intrigued to try and find out.



So in the weak light of the 5am gloom I found myself standing in Al-Manara square, the five-way intersection that serves as the focal point of public life in Ramallah, scanning the empty early morning streets for the improbable-seeming appearance of a rambling group. Eventually, two people appeared at the corner of the square, rucksacks on their backs and walking boots on their feet. Moments later they were joined by a couple more, and before long there was a small crowd. Before I had a chance to introduce myself a minibus appeared, slightly too small for the group. I squeezed in next to a man called Omar and a woman called Mariana, who was perched in an unstable fashion on Omar’s lap.

WHAT DOES THE “RIGHT TO ROAM” SIGNIFY IN A PLACE WHERE CROSSINGS THROUGH CHECKPOINTS ARE A FACT OF LIFE, WHERE THE SIMPLEST OF JOURNEYS CAN TAKE HOURS, AND WHERE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT IS ROUTINELY DENIED?

The group travels all over the West Bank for their walks, preferring places with as much distance as possible from Israeli settlements. But this time they had opted to go local. A 10-minute drive through the gradually awakening streets of Ramallah brought us to the eastern outskirts of the town. I finally got the chance to introduce myself, and was welcomed warmly by the temporarily conjoined Mariana –

Omar hybrid. "I would shake your hand, but she is sitting on it," said Omar. The bus stopped on the hard shoulder of a dual carriageway, a nondescript sort of place in the shadow of recent-looking housing blocks. With Samia leading purposefully, we piled out and began picking our way through scrappy infrastructure of the city's periphery, crossing drainage ditches, piled banks of earth and other bits of urban marginalia. But our route soon took us into the head of a wide valley, sloping down from the road and away from the city's outer limits as grapefruit-red morning light began to hit the tops of the white tower blocks behind us.



We came to a terraced hillside, and began weaving a path through shrub and trees. The change in the landscape was swift, from the city's shabby fringes to gentler agricultural surroundings. But the terraces, while clearly productive at one time, were now patchy and unkempt, the sparse olive trees joined by a host of resurgent overgrowth, the contouring walls crumbling. As the first rays of the sun finally hit us we came to a qasr, one of the many stone buildings dotting the Palestinian countryside that would have once been used by agricultural workers for shelter and rest. We stopped to absorb the sun for a moment and let everyone catch up. Threaded with creepers and roof long since collapsed, the qasr resembled a dilapidated piece of medieval castle, though it is probably much more recent. Samia told me that neglect is a symptom of the depopulation of the Palestinian countryside; economic necessity compels young Palestinians to live in the cities to pursue what work is available, leaving swathes of the countryside abandoned. Elsewhere, Palestinian livelihoods are attacked in more direct ways. Settlers are known to cut down and burn olive trees belonging to Palestinians, wiping out sources of income and destroying trees which may have belonged to families for generations. Even the seemingly benign auspices of conservation have made life harder for rural Palestinians. Wild boars, while native to Palestine, have been helped by Israeli policy in recent years to increase in number, to the point where they are causing devastation to crop populations. Palestinians are forbidden from harming the boars, and the Israeli military catch and prosecute people who attempt to limit their population.

The decaying rustic environs in the immediate vicinity made a strange contrast with other visible landmarks. Topping the hill on the other side of the valley, not more than a mile or so as the crow flies, was an Israeli settlement in the latter stages of construction. It was a jarring imposition on the landscape. Tiered rows of identical four-storey buildings cut sharply across the hillside, sheltering behind buttressenforced walls forming concentric rings, like vast concrete palisades, with a huge skirt of earth scraped out of the hillside to support the construction above. Glassless windows gaped emptily, and every building – there were at least 60 visible in one part alone – was a copy of the next. In its regimented uniformity it had the character of a single, unified structure. These are the sorts of structures which are transforming Palestine beyond recognition.



AS WE WALKED, the personalities of the group's members started to emerge. Samia is that staple of every good rambling group: the stern leader. "Last week we met at 6," she said, "but there were just too many people who turned up. So this time we made it 5 – to weed out the less committed." Jawad is the group's spaniel, and had a habit of continually diverting from the walk to scramble over any protruding piece of the landscape he could find, scaling the front of the qasr as if it were a rock climb and then leaping heroically between a pair of limestone boulders. Omar, the owner of a pottery business in Ramallah, is the group's joker, with a mischievous line in gallows humour. As Jawad athletically scaled another piece of rock, he noted drily: "Jawad is our guerrilla." Later we came to a line of barbed wire strewn across a field, and picked our way cautiously across it. "If you hear a click, stay very still," Omar said to me, grinning, "so we can all run away." I walked with Omar for a while, and he pointed to a wide, empty road cutting through the base of the valley below the vast settlement, and told me it was a recently-built settler-only road, off-limits to Palestinians. A huge spider's web of these roads is slicing up the West Bank, growing alongside the settlements. "It is very difficult to travel anywhere in Palestine," he said. "If you go by road, there are checkpoints, barriers, soldiers. But when you walk, it's different. You are freer when you walk, there are fewer obstacles. You go where your feet carry you." Then he said something I have heard variations of many times before, but never in such a context: "When I walk, I feel like I'm flying." The same motivation is shared in some way by all the walkers I got the chance to talk to. All speak of the daily frustration and demoralisation of living under occupation, and it is clear the club's walks give them the simple delight common to walking everywhere, of stepping outside life's everyday troubles. But while this sidestep may be temporary, it takes on a heightened significance for the Shat-ha walkers.



Decades of settlement and occupation have frayed the bond Palestinians have with their land; the aim of Palestine's would-be conquerors is to snap it altogether. Walking out of the towns and cities gives the Shat-ha ramblers the chance to reconnect, literally, with the countryside being stolen under their feet. It is more than just a Sunday ramble. In this landscape of constant flux, the tangibility of walking is both a comfort and a form of testimony. It gives them an ability to maintain perspective as the walls of occupation close in.





A WARM BREEZE GENTLY STIRRED THE BRANCHES ABOVE. IT WAS VERY EASY TO FORGET THAT THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST BITTERLY AND BRUTALLY CONTESTED LANDSCAPES OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Walking in the West Bank, however, inevitably confronts the rambler with the evidence of the occupation they are trying to escape from. At one point we came to the edge of a wide-topped hill, and saw that nearly every hilltop in the vicinity was crowned with a settlement. I asked Omar how it feels to look at a landscape he has known since childhood covered like this. He gave a familiar sigh: “Obviously I feel very sad,” he says. “All these settlements you can see are recent. This one here was only built five years ago. The settlers are taking everything. Ten years ago it was the uprising of the intifada; now we are seeing the uprising of the settlers.”

Another rambler, Mariana, gave a succinct answer when I asked the same question: “I just ignore them,” she said, simply, and walked on.

OUR ROUTE TOOK US CLIMBING down a dry waterfall through a narrow canyon of polished limestone. We dodged around a path to avoid a crowd of intransigent goats, and weaved through a fruit orchard, picking nearly-ripe apricots off the branches as we went.

Eventually, it was time to stop for brunch. The group sheltered from the stifling intensity of the sun under the shady canopy of a spreading pine tree. Out came yoghurt, bread, rice-stuffed vine leaves and hummus enriched with za’atar, the distinctive blend of oregano, thyme, savory and spices ubiquitous in Palestine. We talked and laughed between mouthfuls of food. Mariana propped a small kettle on a fire, then dropped peppermint leaves into the boiling water. The resulting infusion was passed around in plastic cups. It felt idyllic. A warm breeze gently stirred the branches above. It was very easy to forget that this is one of the most bitterly and brutally contested landscapes of the contemporary world.

As we packed up to continue, Samia issued a jocular directive: “No more talking about politics. We’re supposed to be having fun!”

We began descending into a small valley. Sitting in its base was a rectangular pool of green-blue water, surrounded by trees and cropland. At first I guessed it was some sort of agricultural cistern, but as we picked our way down towards it, it looked as if it may have been designed for swimming too. Around the rim of the pool was a low stone wall at perfect sitting height. Crumbled structures sat above it, ideal shelter spots. Trees lined one side, providing shelter, and a sub-surface wall in the centre of the pool meant you could stand in the middle of it, submerged to waist height.



Jawad was the first to jump in, closely followed by Omar. I joined them. Plunging into the cool water was wonderful after that baking heat, the sun streaking in shimmering rays through the opalescent water. Tucked into the folds of this valley, hidden from the world, we seemed to have found a private sanctuary where the ugly realities of settlements and soldiers couldn't possibly intrude.

We hadn't. I was standing on the raised platform in the centre of the pool when the settlers appeared. From a path by the side of the pool appeared several Israeli men, women and children, including a young man with a submachine gun slung across his back.

The atmosphere immediately darkened, and in an instant, the illusion of peaceful serenity was shattered. A tense quiet fell as both groups of people evaluated the other, calculating how to proceed. The Shat-ha members had become silent, and no-one was swimming.

With what smacked of exaggerated confidence, a young settler walked up to the pool and dived in, completing an ostentatious front crawl from one side to the other. The settlers began spreading themselves out on the other side of the pool, setting up portable stoves and laying out picnic blankets in the ruins. One seemed to be making a show of measuring one piece of building remnant with a tape measure. A few started asking questions of the Palestinians. One of them must have been "where are you from", as the reply came: "Ramallah."

After these first few exchanges, things seemed to become more heated. Exchanges flew back and forth which were obviously hostile. Eventually the Palestinians decided to leave. As we walked away, Samia's temper frayed. "It's ridiculous," she shouted. "This pool could have been here for a thousand years. But now they have found it" – she gestured towards the settlers – "they will claim it as theirs. The next time we come back there will be a fence around it and we won't be able to use it."

Samia was furious as we walked up the hill to the awaiting bus. Others were more subdued, but the experience had obviously made its mark. Omar put it simply: "That has ruined my day."

We arrived late for the bus. On the way home, nobody communicated much, and we parted with little said. It had been a wonderful day with a soured ending. The Shat-ha ramblers' aim to escape a harsh reality for a few hours had, on this occasion, backfired. The symbolic stand-off around the pool had provided an unwelcome reminder of the changes wrought upon their country by Israel's settlement project – changes they were trying to forget, if only for a few hours.

Despite this, my walk with Shat-ha had still shown me a side of Palestine a million miles away from the 'media image'. A raft of new guidebooks, trails and tour companies hope to promote Palestine's potential as a walking destination to foreign visitors; I would strongly recommend a visit. It may not be a carefree week's strolling in the Lake District but it will provide an experience like no other. Palestinians are rightfully proud of their countryside, but arguably the real wonder is its people. At other times during my stay in Palestine I walked alone in the West Bank, and was greeted effusively and with astounding generosity by the people I encountered. In one village near Sebastia in the northern West Bank I was welcomed into a home where the whole family gathered, plying me with food, tea and conversation until I reluctantly left after several hours in their company.

"Palestine is disfigured but still beautiful," the family's mother had said. "I would never want to live in England," she added, wrinkling her nose in disdain. "Too much rain."

PATHS THROUGH PALESTINE

There are several long-distance walking trails in Palestine. **The Nativity Trail**, created around the time of the millennium, is a 10-day, 160km walk representing the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Although there are now obstacles to walking the full route due to the West Bank Separation Barrier constructed by the Israelis, sections of the trail are still walkable and **the Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies** (walkpalestine.com) organises trips along it.

A more recent development is the **Abraham Path**, a walking trail across the Middle East which passes through sites associated with Abraham and his family. Still a work in progress, there are already 400km of trail in place in Turkey, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. Although the aim eventually is for the whole path to be accessible to independent travellers, the organisers recommend that some sections are best walked as part of an organized group and that women do not walk alone. The eventual goal is for the path to cover some 1500km by 2016. In the mean time, it is possible to walk the West Bank section and **the Siraj Center** organises four-day trips.

National Geographic Traveller magazine recently named the **Abraham Path** as the **best new long-distance route in the world**, and it was also recommended as one of the world's best trails in the recent backpacking special edition of **The Great Outdoors**.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape by Raja Shehadeh is published by Profile Books.

The guidebook **Walking Palestine: 25 Journeys into the West Bank** by Stefan Szepesi (with a foreword by Raja Shehadeh) is published by Interlink Publishing Group.

Comedian Mark Thomas's book **Extreme Rambling: Walking Israel's Separation Barrier**. For Fun. is published by Ebury Books.

The Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation that seeks to create links between Palestinian people and others around the world through educational tourism. It organises led walks in Palestine, including multi-day trips on the Abraham Path and Nativity Trail: www.walkpalestine.com

Carey's 2011 interview with Mark Thomas is available at: tgomagazine.co.uk

Tony Howard and Di Taylor, who were involved in the launch of the Nativity Trail, have information on walking in the region at their website: nomadstravel.co.uk/countries/palestine/palestine-diary/