Exploring the landscape, ecology, and culture of the Jordan River Valley

A guide to eco tourism and environmental education at the Jordan Valley Eco Center at Auja
‘I lifted my eyes and beheld the wonderful valley created eons ago as it stretches far and long north to the Lebanon and south to the Red Sea and into Africa utterly oblivious of the man-made borders that come and go’

Raja Shehadeh
Welcome to the Jordan Valley Eco Center

The Jordan River Valley is among the most distinctive and beautiful landscapes anywhere on earth. It is also an environment under threat from political division and man-made ecological collapse.

At the Auja Eco Center, *Friends of the Earth Middle East* works to protect the landscape and support the people of the valley through environmental education and eco-tourism. We welcome you to join us in exploring the valley, meeting its people, and preserving its beauty for future generations.

In this booklet you’ll find information on the journeys, workshops, and activities that we run from our base at Auja. You’ll also find some stories about the geology, history, and human culture of this special place. If there is anything we can do to improve your stay with us, don’t hesitate to ask.

*Friends of the Earth Middle East*  
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**Journeys**

*Friends of the Earth Middle East* is developing a program of journeys to help you explore the landscape, politics, and culture of the Jordan River Valley.

Rather than relaying facts, these journeys are designed to give environmentalists, journalists, students, and travelers real insight into the valley’s history and environment.

We believe that only by seeing the Jordan River Valley as a whole can we hope to rehabilitate this landscape. For that reason, we try to look beyond the borders that have been drawn across the land and to see the older, deeper realities of the valley’s geology, ecology, and human culture.

We can also design special journeys to match your interests. If you’d like to create a special program for your group, just ask 😊
Hike the Valley

These guided walks take you far off the beaten track and into a landscape most visitors to Palestine never see.

The valley is home to animals including wolf and hyena, ibex and gazelle, and is one of the greatest migratory corridors for birds anywhere in the world. You’ll find abundant wild flowers in the springtime, as well as dozens of medicinal herbs and plants. In the desert canyons you can explore some of the oldest Christian monasteries on earth, or stumble across archaeological ruins from Roman times. Traveling on foot is also a great way to meet local people, including the Bedouin families who know these hills better than anyone else.

What to Bring and Wear

All walks are guided by our local staff, who are first-aid trained and who know the routes and the people of this area well.

- A hat or keffiyeh to cover your head. Do not try and walk without this – if you don’t have one, ask at the center
- Plenty of water - you should carry a minimum of 1 liter of water for every two hours walking, and more in the summer
- Strong boots or walking shoes - hiking sandals are OK if you are experienced in walking in them over this terrain
- Sunscreen
- Energy snacks – dried fruit and nuts are best for slow-release energy that’ll keep you going. You can buy them at the Auja store.
- Some of these walks include natural pools or waterfalls where you might be able to swim. Ask at the center about whether you need to bring towels and swim suits.
WADI AUJA
From Ein Sami to Ein Auja

9.77 km / 5 – 6 hours
Moderate / challenging. Some scrambling required. Rocky, uneven terrain.

THE WALK

The spring at Ein Samia, in the hills directly above Auja, is the most abundant in the West Bank. Today, its water is pumped over the ridge towards Ramallah, but for millions of years it was the source of a river that flowed east, flooding each winter and carving a deep gorge – the Wadi Auja - down into the Jordan Valley.

The trail begins as a dirt track through the fields, narrowing as it cuts across the thorn scrub and drops into the valley floor. From here the path follows the streambed, and requires some difficult scrambling down polished limestone chutes and across dry waterfalls. If this sounds like too much of a challenge, a slightly longer but easier trail avoids the steepest of these drops.
Eventually the gorge opens into the Jordan Valley, and ends at the Auja spring.

There are dozens of species of plants and trees in the Wadi Auja, and fabulous wildflowers in the springtime. Very few people come here, and the valley is a haven for birds and wildlife.

WADI JAHIR
From Ein Jahir to Ein Fassayal

5.0km / 3 – 4 hours
Moderate. Light scrambling. Rocky, uneven terrain.

THE WALK

The spring of Ein Jahir is unknown to almost everybody except the Bedouin who come here to water their flocks. From the spring the path winds down to the valley floor and follows the rocky stream bed to Ain Fassayal. Again, the trail involves some light scrambling down the eroded watercourse.
The hike is no more than five kilometers, but this must be one of the best walks in Palestine for observing birds and wildlife. There are gazelle and ibex here, as well as hyrax and desert foxes. The Long Legged Buzzard, the Snake Eagle, the Little Owl, and the Lesser Kestrel all nest in the cliffs above the valley. The whole valley feels quiet and remote.

WADI MALEH
From Al Burj to Khirbet al Maleh

4.5km / 2 – 3 hours
Moderate / Easy

THE WALK

The walk starts below Al Burj, a medieval stone tower built to control the valley during the time of the crusades. From the tower a track runs across farmed fields before descending into the valley, where it becomes a narrow, rocky path. After around four kilometers, the trail emerges at the depleted oasis and Ottoman ruins of Khirbet al Maleh. Below these ruins is a Palestinian village of some 200 people, many of whom are unable to access
their grazing and farming land due to the Israeli army’s expropriation of the valley for use as a military firing range.

Wadi Maleh is an exceptionally beautiful landscape, but also a place in which poverty has been sharply exacerbated by the occupation of Palestinian land and the depletion or theft of the water supply. For those who would like to explore these issues in more depth, this hike can be combined with a visit to the Palestinian villages of Bardala and Ein al Beida, close to the Green Line, where you can meet with local people and learn first-hand about the challenges they face.

CENTRAL WADI QELT
From Ein Fawwar to the Monastery of St. George

7.0km / 4 – 5 hours
Moderate / challenging. Some scrambling, and some short, steep climbs. Rocky uneven terrain. Some muddy sections in winter or early spring.

THE WADI QELT

Beginning near Jerusalem, the Wadi Qelt descends through the desert and deepens into a spectacular canyon before emerging in the Jordan River Valley near Jericho. The wadi forms a remote and secretive passage between these two ancient cities, and has been used by armies, monks, and smugglers for thousands of years. In the lower reaches of the valley, below the monastery of St. George, there are still hermits living in isolated caves in the side of the gorge. It is among the best known and most spectacular hikes in the West Bank, but remains a wild and challenging walk.

THE WALK

From the spring at Ein Fawwar, the trail follows the streambed through the reeds before climbing out of the valley across a spectacular rock bridge. Expect some scrambling around the rocks in the first hour of the walk. Descending again into the gorge, you arrive at the pools and waterfalls of Ein Qelt, which is a fabulous place to swim. From here the path follows the line
of an ancient aqueduct, dropping towards the monastery of Saint George, from where a steep climb will bring you back to the road.

Alternatively, you can continue for another couple of hours down into Jericho (see Lower Wadi Qelt, below, which is a continuation of this walk).

![Image of the monastery of St. George in the Wadi Qelt](image_url)

**LOWER WADI QELT**

From the Monastery of St. George to Jericho

4km / 1.5 - 2 hours

*Moderate / Easy. A winding, up-and-down desert path along the side of the canyon.*

*NB: this is a continuation of the previous walk*

**THE WALK**

From the monastery the trail contours along the northern side of the valley. After about an hour, you pass Wadi Qelt’s last inhabited hermitage – a cave built into the side of the cliffs that is home to an elderly Greek-speaking
monk from Macedonia, and to a tradition that goes back as far as the fourth century. Soon after the hermitage the canyon opens out in the Jordan River Valley, and the trail arrives at the ruins of King Herod’s winter palace on the edge of Jericho.

NIGHT HIKES

1-2 km / 1 - 2 hours
Easy

The Auja night hikes are a specialty of Mohanad Saaideh, our lead guide at Auja. If you trust Mohanad to find his way in the darkness (don’t worry – he hasn’t lost anyone yet) then you can follow him up to one of the springs, where you can watch and wait for the wild animals that only emerge at night, or take an easier stroll between the fields of the valley floor.

Either way, Mohanad is highly likely to light a fire and make tea, or else take you to visit some of his many friends in the valley for a late night chat and perhaps a smoke of the argileh (water pipe). If you’re lucky, he might even sing to you 😊
‘GOOD WATER NEIGHBOURS’ PATHS

Friends of the Earth has developed 18 ‘Good Water Neighbours’ paths in Israel, Jordan, and Palestine. These are mixed walking and driving tours that explore the issue of how water is shared across lines of division. The tours also showcase the natural and cultural heritage of each area.

Several of the walks listed here are part of the ‘Good Water Neighbours’ routes, including the hikes in Wadi Auja, Wadi Maleh, and Wadi Qelt. If you would like to combine your hike with a more in-depth exploration of water issues, just ask.

You’ll find more information on these itineraries in the brochures at the eco center.
Meet the People

The most memorable aspect of any journey is often not the scenery or the historic sites, but the people you meet along the way. This journey offers a chance to drink tea and talk with some of the families who live in and around Auja, and to learn from them about life in the valley.

MILK AND HONEY

Meeting the people and tasting the food of Auja

ITINERARY

We begin by visiting the Bedouin family of Naif Ghawameh, near Auja’s spring, where we share a breakfast of fresh shraq bread with yoghurt and cheese, thyme and oil. From here we drive into Auja village for tea at the home of the Njoum family - one of the last that still keeps bees and collects the special honey that they make from the Acacia trees. The Njoums also have a couple of cows, and you’ll be able to taste or buy cheese and milk as well as honey. We end with a visit Auja’s women’s cooperative, where you
can talk with the women, see the handicrafts they make, and find out about the work of the cooperative.

INSIGHT

Many of Auja’s families struggle everyday with problems that most of us only read about in reports or newspapers: ecological degradation, lack of water, and the spread of Israeli settlements through the valley. Alongside the warmth and good humor that you’re sure to find in Auja, this is a journey that will open your eyes to the individual human stories that often go unheard in the political debates and environmental campaigns.
Political Ecology

These journey offers an introduction to the places and people on the front line of the fight for water rights and environmental conservation in the Jordan Valley.

![Board showing the level of the Dead Sea in 1985](image)

THE VANISHING RIVER

An exploration of political conflict, social injustice, and environmental degradation in the Jordan River Valley

INSIGHT

By listening to local people we gain insight into some of the valley’s most acute problems: water scarcity, the pollution of the groundwater, the vanishing of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea, and the home demolitions that threaten Palestinian communities in the lower Jordan Valley.
On this journey we meet with Palestinian villagers, with Bedouin families struggling to survive the depletion of the springs, and with environmental activists working to rehabilitate the valley.

By joining the trip as an activist, a journalist, or simply as an interested traveler, you will learn about the destruction of this unique environment and equip yourself with the knowledge you need to advocate for change.

DAY ONE

We begin above the Wadi Maleh at the medieval stone tower of Al Burj, from where we can survey the valley and get a sense of the political divisions that underlie the destruction of the ecosystem. From here we make our way to Ein al Beida, the village that lies closest to the Jordan River and to the Green Line. Local people show us the spring, now depleted by the extraction of ground water, and share their stories of water confiscation and the loss of village land. From Ein al Beida we move on to Qardala, where we learn how the inhabitants are forced to buy the water that has been pumped from under their land by the Israeli settlements that surround them. Moving south, we stop for tea with families in Jiftlik and Fassayal, communities that have both suffered home demolitions and land seizures.

DAY TWO

For those who would like to extend this investigation, a second day’s journey brings us to the southern Jordan Valley, where the devastating environmental impact of the water conflict becomes apparent.

We visit the spring at Auja, now dry or depleted for much of the year, and talk with the Bedouin families who have suffered the consequences of this man-made disaster. From here we move on to the Baptism Site – one of the few points where it is possible to get down to the banks of the Jordan and to see the stagnant, polluted state of the river. A few kilometers to the south, we arrive at the shores of the Dead Sea. We stop at the ruins of the region’s oldest hotel, now stranded more than a kilometer from the water’s edge, and look at the sinkholes that have opened up around the shore as the sea recedes.
Back at the eco-center, *Friends of the Earth* can provide reports and background information for anyone who is interested to share this story or join the campaign for the rehabilitation of the valley.
Landscape and History

Caravan crossing the Roman bridge on the upper Jordan, early 20th C.

The Jordan River Valley is one of the richest cultural landscapes anywhere in the world.

Some of the first hominids to leave Africa walked across the plain and, in all probability, drank from the spring at Auja. More than a million years later, Jericho was among the first places on earth where humans learned how to farm, to settle, and to build an urban civilization. And over the past 3000 years, the valley has been the stage for some of the central stories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

This entire story – from the fossil remains of prehistoric seas to the archaeology of the world’s oldest town – is laid out before us in the Jordan River Valley.

Where conventional tourism is based on sightseeing, we are developing a program of themed journeys that offer insight into some of the important human developments that took place here, and that explore how human culture has evolved in response to the geology and environment of the
valley. The final section of this handbook – the story of the valley – provides historical background for these tours.

JERICHO’S SPRING & THE ORIGINS OF HISTORY
The Neolithic Revolution in the Jordan River Valley

Neolithic human skull from Jericho, plastered and inset with shells

INSIGHT

This journey explores the connection between the landscape of the valley and the origins of urban civilization in Jericho some 10,000 years ago. What was it that encouraged the valley’s early inhabitants to abandon nomadic life and to settle in the single place? When did foraging, hunting tribes become
agriculturalists? And how did farming lead to the development of an urban culture?

ITINERARY

We begin this investigation at the Auja spring, with an introduction to the pre-historic landscape of the valley. We then move on to the archaeological site of Tel es Sultan, to see the wall and tower of Neolithic Jericho, and to learn what makes this one of the most important archaeological discoveries anywhere in the world.

SACRED LANDSCAPE

The Jordan River Valley in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

INSIGHT

This journey explores the relationship between the landscape of the Jordan River Valley and the spiritual traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We look at the ways in which these faiths mapped religious stories onto the
landscape of the valley, and at how Christianity in particular created a
spiritual tradition centered on the idea of the desert.

ITINERARY

Beginning on the banks of the Jordan, we explore the origins of the idea that
this river is a place of healing and renewal, and see how the Jewish
mythology of purification was absorbed into the Christian tradition through
the story of John the Baptist.

We learn about the creation of a Christian ‘holy land’ in the valley during the
fourth and fifth centuries, and see how the birth of Christian pilgrimage was
connected with the new idea of the monasteries. Monasticism is a tradition
some 1,500 years old, but one which is still plainly visible in the monasteries
of St. George in the Wadi Qelt, St. Gerasimos near the Baptism site, and Saint
Sajas in the Kidron Valley.

From the desert monasteries we move south to look at the Islamic shrine of
Nebi Musa, close to the Dead Sea. Here we investigate how the creation of
an Islamic sacred geography in the valley was, on the one hand, an
expression of Islam’s connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and on the
other, a political response to the crusades of the 12th century. For those who
are interested, we can also incorporate the site of Qumran, just below the
caves where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, into this journey.
Other places to explore in the Jordan Valley

Beyond these themed journeys, the valley has dozens of fascinating historic sites and natural places that are well worth exploring. Here, you’ll find some background on the best of these sites. We’ll be happy to arrange tours to all of these places.

HISTORIC SITES AROUND JERICHO

TEL ES SULTAN

Tel es Sultan is the oldest part of Jericho, and one of the first cities anywhere in the world. It was excavated in the 1950s by Kathleen Kenyon, who discovered Neolithic houses encircled by a stone wall built some 10,000 years ago – a time when the rest of the human population was still following herds of animals across the landscape and still sleeping in caves or brushwood huts.

This is not a spectacular site, like Petra or the pyramids; but it represents the transition between the nomadic, hunting way of life and the beginnings of urban civilization. If you have even the slightest interest in archaeology or in the origins of our own culture, it should not be missed.

HISHAM’S PALACE

The Umayyads were a dynastic family who ruled the Islamic world for more than a century from their capital at Damascus. In the 730s, a man named Al Walid ibn Yazid, nephew of the Caliph Hisham, began building a private retreat in the desert just to the north of Jericho.

It was a lavish complex of courtyards, pools, mosques, and gardens, modeled on the Roman villas and bathhouses that could still been seen throughout the eastern Mediterranean at that time. But in 747, before it was even complete, the palace was destroyed by the worst earthquake to hit the valley in centuries. Just three years after that, the Umayyads were defeated and
overthrown by the Abbasid dynasty. The entire family was murdered, with the exception of a single grandson, also called Hisham, who escaped to Spain.

![The Tree of Life mosaic from Hisham’s Palace, Jericho.](image)

Hisham’s palace is among the outstanding examples of early Islamic architecture. It includes a mosaic panel known as the Tree of Life, which is widely regarded as one of the finest mosaics anywhere in the world. Until very recently it was thought that the palace was never rebuilt after the earthquake, but new excavations have shown that some of the complex was in use as late as the thirteenth century. The palace is still under excavation, and archaeologists hope that the mosaic – now under cover – can be placed on permanent display soon.

**QUMRAN**

The guides herding tourists around the archaeological site of Qumran, on the western shore of the Dead Sea, usually tell them that this was the home of an ascetic Jewish sect called the Essenes, who lived here at the time of Jesus and whose scribes produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.
It is true that the scrolls – the oldest surviving copies of the books of the Hebrew Bible – were hidden in caves above Qumran around the time of the Jewish revolt, in 66 – 70 CE, and that they were found here by a Bedouin goat herd almost two thousand years later, in the winter of 1946-7.

But the notion that they were produced in libraries at Qumran was largely the creation of a Dominican monk called Roland de Vaux, who excavated the site in the 1950s. His account of Qumran as a kind of proto-monastery caught the imagination of scholars and public alike, and over the past half century it has been elaborated in popular books and documentaries into a series of increasingly wild speculations, including the evidence-free theory that John the Baptist or even Jesus himself belonged to the sect or studied under the spiritual masters of Qumran.

Recent archaeology has challenged these stories, and has offered the much more prosaic suggestion that Qumran was a commercial estate, owned by a wealthy family and used for the production of perfume. Rival theories propose that this was a Judean military post guarding the road to Jerusalem, or perhaps a fortified trading center. Still others think that it was a tannery, or a factory for the production of pottery.

We may never know the real purpose of Qumran, or how it was connected to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Whatever the truth of the matter, people come from around the world to hear about a mysterious religious sect whose holy books were miraculously plucked from the darkness of two millennia and brought into the light. Even if we can no longer go along with this story, Qumran remains a fascinating place to visit.

THE MEDIEVAL SUGAR MILLS (TAWAHIN ES SUKKAR) IN JERICHO

The technique of making sugar from cane originated in the east, and passed into the Islamic world with the Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century. It requires both heat and water, and for that reason sugar may have been produced in the Jordan Valley as early as the Umayyad period.
The first recorded evidence of sugar production in the valley comes for the era of the Fatimid Caliphs in the 10th Century CE. By the time the crusaders arrived in 1099 CE it was a well-established industry, and the crusader nobility were astonished by what they called ‘sweet salt’. Europeans learned how to make sugar here, in the Jordan Valley, and from here the first sugar was exported back to France and England.

_Tawahin es Sukkar_ is the best-preserved medieval sugar mill in the valley. Excavations carried out in 2000 and 2004 revealed a major refinery powered by an aqueduct and including a sugar cane house, a mill, a kitchen and furnace, and many large earthenware pots for storing the sugar. It is a fascinating site, and one that very few visitors to Jericho ever bother to explore.

**SACRED SITES**

**THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC SHRINE OF NABI MUSA**

Long before a shrine was built here, the site of Nabi Musa was a way station on the pilgrimage route from Jerusalem to Mecca. Early Muslim pilgrims looked across the Jordan Valley and saw Mount Nebo, which in the Biblical tradition is the mountain where Moses died and was buried. The association between this place and the veneration of Moses (Musa) deepened until, inevitably perhaps, it morphed into the belief that this was the actual site of the prophet’s burial.

It is a tradition that was encouraged by Salaheddin al Ayyubi (Saladin), the great Kurdish military commander who defeated the crusader armies in the twelfth century and brought Jerusalem back under Muslim control. Salaheddin understood that the crusader conquest of the Holy Land was an extension of the Christian tradition of pilgrimage to holy sites. In response, he promoted shrines and festivals associated with Muslim saints and Sufi masters, and in the centuries that followed the crusades the landscape of Palestine was transformed into a distinctly Islamic sacred space.
The shrine of Nebi Musa was among the most important of these sites, and became the focus of an annual Muslim pilgrimage festival (*mawsim*) that survived well into the twentieth century. Thousands of people would set off from Jerusalem and gather here for days of feasting, horse racing, music and prayer. Until it was suppressed for political reasons by the Jordanian government in 1951, the *mawsim* of Nabi Musa was perhaps the most vibrant and colorful festival in Palestine.

The shrine of Nabi Musa includes not only a mosque, but also an enclosed caravanserai that could feed and accommodate thousands of pilgrims, together with their horses and camels. It is a fabulous example of medieval Islamic architecture, completed in 1269 CE during the reign of the Mamluk sultan Baybars. The medieval pilgrims who gathered here were astonished by the phenomenon of the burning stones – rocks that contain such high concentrations of bitumen that they are flammable.

**THE SYNAGOGUE OF SHAHWAN**

Just to the north of Jericho is a Byzantine synagogue that seems to have been used by a small Jewish community that lived here between the sixth and the eight centuries CE. It was discovered in 1936, during the British Mandate period, on land belonging to the Palestinian Shahwan family, and includes a mosaic depicting the Ark of the Covenant, a menorah, a shofar, and a Hebrew inscription reading ‘Peace upon Israel.’

Unsurprisingly, the synagogue has been a site of intense controversy. The Shahwan family kept the site open and protected the mosaic, even after the area came under Israeli military control in 1967. But in 1987, at the outbreak of the first *intifada*, the Israeli military confiscated the mosaic along with the family’s home and part of the farm around it. Since the Oslo Accords in 1993, the site has been under the control of the Palestinian Authority, which still deploys security forces to protect the synagogue.
THE BAPTISM SITE ON THE RIVER JORDAN

‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord’
John the Baptist as recorded in the gospel of John, 1:24

Before the time of Jesus, the Jordan River was already known as a place of miracles. It was here, in the Jewish tradition, that Joshua led the Israelites into the Holy Land, that Elijah ascended to heaven in his flaming chariot, and that Elisha healed Namaan the leper by bathing him in the river.

The idea of water as a symbol of spiritual renewal, and the stories of the Jordan’s miraculous powers, were almost certainly known to Jesus when he came here to be baptized in the river by the prophet John.

Where exactly this baptism took place we do not know. The site was not marked until some four or five hundred years later when, following the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Byzantine Christians began to map the stories of the New Testament onto the landscape of Palestine. It was then that the first churches were built on
the banks of the river, and that the first Christians began to immerse themselves in the river Jordan in re-enactment of the gospel story.

The tradition survived the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, and was still alive at the time of the crusades. But in the fourteenth century, as the flood of European Christian pilgrims dried up, the churches were abandoned and the site was lost.

In 1897 the discovery of a detailed mosaic map of the Holy Land in Madaba, Jordan, including a depiction of a church on the river, sparked a renewed interest in locating the baptism site. But it was not until 1997, after the peace treaty allowed for the de-mining of the riverbank, that an Italian archaeologist called Michele Piccirillo surveyed the area and found the ruins of churches dating back to the Byzantine era.

Since then, access to the river has been opened from both the Jordanian and the Israeli sides, and tens of thousands of Christians come here every year to be baptized in the Jordan. Few of them know that this is now among the most polluted rivers in the world.

THE MONASTERY OF SAINT GEORGE OF KOZIBA

The Monastery of St. George of Koziba is an early Christian monastery hidden in the Wadi Qelt, a remote canyon that runs down to Jericho. It was built around the caves of the first Christian hermits who retreated here in the fourth and fifth centuries, believing that this was the wilderness in which the prophet Elijah had been fed by ravens.

In around 480 CE these hermitages were transformed into a monastery by John of Thebes, and about a century after that it was expanded by the abbot from whom it takes its name – St. George of Koziba. In the early seventh century the monastery was destroyed and the monks slaughtered by the invading Persians. It was not inhabited again until the nineteenth century, when a Greek monk named Kalanikos settled here and began to reconstruct the ruins of the monastery. In the monastic church you can still see human skulls, said to be those of the monks murdered by the Persian armies.
THE MONASTERY OF SAINT SABAS

The monastery of Saint Sabas, or Mar Saba as he is known in Arabic, is an even more remote and spectacular Christian monastery, hanging from the cliffs of the Kidron Valley between Bethlehem and the Dead Sea. Unlike the monastery of Saint George, Mar Saba survived the attack of the Persian armies and has been continuously inhabited for almost one and a half thousand years. At no point during those fifteen centuries have women been allowed to set foot inside the monastery walls.

![The monastery of Mar Saba](image)

It was established by Saint Sabas, an Anatolian monk who came to Palestine in 439 CE and spent years living in isolation in the Kidron Valley before he began to attract followers. Within his lifetime, this scattered collection of anchorites developed into major monastery, complete with church, refectory, water reservoirs, a bakery, and a hospital.
In the early eight century the monastery was home to St. John of Damascus, a scholar who defended the tradition of using painted icons at a time when images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary were being destroyed as idolatrous across the eastern Mediterranean. Without this intervention, the history of Christian art (and of Western culture) may have been radically different.

The monastery is also linked to another, more recent controversy. In 1958 Morton Smith, a professor of ancient history at Colombia University, visited Mar Saba to research manuscripts in the library. He later claimed to have found and photographed a letter describing a ‘Secret Gospel of Mark’. Scholars continue to debate the authenticity of this letter and the existence of this otherwise unknown book.

THE MONASTERY OF SAINT GERASIMOS

In the middle of the fifth century CE an Anatolian monk named Gerasimos settled in the desert between Jericho and the river Jordan. The community that he led began as a laura – a Greek word that describes a scattered collection of anchorites, each living in an isolated cave, connected by a path. In time it developed into a formal monastery, but it never abandoned the early Christian ideal of the hermit, and many of the monks continued to live alone in caves cut into the side of the Wadi en Nukheil.

The original monastery seems to have survived until the crusader period and then been abandoned. In 1185 CE it was visited by a monk named John Phocas, who found a single hermit living among the ruins. He had been befriended, Phocas says, by two lions that lived in the undergrowth along the river Jordan.

This account may have its origins in another, older story about Saint Gerasimos and a lion. It was first written down in the sixth century CE by a Christian saint named John Moscos in a compendium of religious stories called ‘The Spiritual Meadow, and it made Gerasimos famous across the Byzantine Christian world.

Moscos tells us that Gerasimos found an injured lion in the valley, and removed a thorn from the animal’s foot. The lion followed the abbot back to
the monastery, where it lived peacefully with the monks and was given the
task of looking after the donkeys that carried water from the Jordan. When
one of the donkeys was stolen by a passing trader, the lion returned to the
monastery with its head hung low. The monks assumed that the lion had
eaten the donkey, and as a punishment the lion was forced to carry to the
heavy earthenware jars of water from the river. Months later, the lion saw
the thief with the stolen donkey, and roared so loudly that the trader fled.
The lion then led the donkey back to the monastery, its reputation restored.
You can see icons depicting this legend inside the monastic church.

The building you see today dates from 1885, and although it takes its name
from Saint Gerasimos, it is not built on the site of the original monastery. You
can find the ruins of that early foundation some 400m to the east, though
there is not much to see except mounds of mud and scattered mosaic
tesserae. The caves used by the early monks, though, can still be seen cut
into the cliff face of the Wadi en Nukheil, about a kilometer along the
security road.
MONASTERY OF THE TEMPTATION

There may have been monks living in caves on this site as early as the fourth century, but it was not until the crusader period that someone decided to locate the story of Christ’s retreat into the desert in this particular spot. Here, they said, Jesus spent forty days and forty nights after his baptism, resisting the temptations of Satan.

The crusaders built a small church here, but most of what you see today was created by the Greek Orthodox church in the late nineteenth century.

You are strongly advised to avoid the restaurant, which is purely for tourists. Much better to eat at the Auja center 😊

NATURAL SITES

THE DEAD SEA
Despite all the damage that has been done to this landscape, the Dead Sea remains a spectacularly beautiful place. The crystallized salt along the shore, the glittering blue of the lake against the red hills, and the warmth and density of the air – there is simply nowhere else like this on our planet.

Our Political Ecology tour explores the environmental catastrophe that is causing the Dead Sea to recede, and looks at the sinkholes that have opened up around the shore. It is still possible, however, to swim (or rather float) in the Dead Sea, and to enjoy this place for its beauty and for the reputed health-giving qualities of its mineral mud. Just let us know if you’d like to build this into your visit to Auja, and we’ll be happy to arrange it.

EIN FASHKHA NATURE RESERVE

Ein Fashkha is an Israeli-run nature reserve just below Qumran, near the shores of the Dead Sea. Before the depletion of the water table in the valley, sweet water springs fed this natural wetland and formed pools that were used for bathing as well as for watering animals.

Today, the springs are less abundant and the water more brackish, but the pools are still open and surrounded by reeds, tamarisk, and oleander. Parts of the reserve are closed to tourists because they support rare species of birds and animals, and Ein Fashkha remains one of the best places to watch for birds.
Eco Education

Environmental education lies at the heart of our mission at Auja. We work to give Palestinian children the knowledge they need to become wise custodians of this valley. We also offer lectures, workshops, and field trips for people from around the world who are interested to learn about this unique environment and to join us in campaigning for its rehabilitation.

If you are a schoolteacher, an organizational leader, or simply a traveler interested to learn more about the ecology of the valley, we welcome you to join any of these activities, or to talk to us about designing a special program for your school or group.

The learning groves at the Jordan Valley Eco Center
Kids and Schools
Inspiring children to care about the environment

THE LEARNING GARDEN

At Auja we’ve built a series of colorful, fun ‘learning groves’ in our garden, each dealing with a different aspect of the environment – the value of water, grey water technology, organic farming, solid waste, and recycling. Kids can see how grey water is filtered using natural materials, learn about composting, help recycle trash, and lend a hand in the garden. They can also learn about earthquakes and see the seismic activity monitoring station.

ECO FIELD TRIPS

We also lead field trips to the spring at Auja. By seeing the spring and (if it is flowing) paddling in the river, children get a feeling for the ecology of the valley and start to understand the importance of water in sustaining life here.
WORKSHOPS

‘Hands on’ activities are often the best way for children to learn. We run a series of fun workshops, including making and throwing ‘seed balls’ that help to support biodiversity in the valley, creating and building with mud bricks, and learning weaving and embroidery with women from Auja.

KEEP THE VALLEY BEAUTIFUL

We run regular ‘Keep the Valley Clean’ days in which we get kids to help with cleaning trash from the Auja spring or from the village, and educate them about littering and recycling.

*The Jordan Valley Eco Center playground*
Workshops

Hands-on learning of new and traditional skills for children and adults

Making mud bricks at the center

SEED BALLS

In the 1930s a Japanese ecologist called Masanobu Fukuoka developed ‘seed balls’: round pellets of seed, compost, clay, and water that are formed by hand, dried in the sun, and hurled into the landscape. Making and throwing seed balls is great fun (not just for kids!), and one of the best ways to create gardens of wild flowers and herbs, especially in hard-to-reach places.

MUD BRICKS

People have been building with mud brick around Auja for more than 10,000 years. Even today, millions of the people around the world live in homes made from mud. This workshop teaches the traditional Jordan Valley
technique of making and building with bricks made from mud, straw, and water. It is dirty and fun!

HANDICRAFTS

The ladies from the Auja Women’s Cooperative join us for a hands-on workshop in traditional handicrafts – Palestinian embroidery, jewelry making, and weaving baskets from banana leaves. This is a great way to meet and talk with women from Auja, to support the cooperative, and to learn a new craft.

PALESTINIAN FOOD

Learn how to make traditional Palestinian food with women from Auja. We use seasonal and local ingredients, many of them from our gardens, and focus on the kind of dishes that are made by families at home.
Courses and Lectures

Ecology, politics, and local knowledge

Environmental education is not just for kids. *Friends of the Earth* runs lectures and field trips that explore different aspects of the valley’s ecology, politics, and landscape. Check our website for upcoming events, or get in touch with us to enquire about any of the following activities. We’ll be happy to arrange a visit for your family or group.

**BIRD WATCHING**

The Jordan River Valley is home to an astonishing variety of birds, as well as being one of the world’s great migratory routes for birds flying between Africa and Asia. More than 470 separate species of bird have been recorded here, and over 500 million birds cross the migratory corridor each year. The best time to witness these migrations is between March 10\textsuperscript{th} and April 20\textsuperscript{th}.

Our bird watching courses include weeklong programs led by expert ornithologists, as well as shorter one-day trips focusing on raptors, wetland
species, or migratory birds. The Fashkah wetland nature reserve, near the Dead Sea, is a particularly good place to watch for rare species of eagle.

MEDICINAL PLANTS AND HERBS OF THE VALLEY

The people of Auja have preserved a knowledge of medicinal plants and herbal lore that has been handed down for thousands of years. Join us for a guided walk through the wild plants of the Jordan Valley.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY

This exploration of how the political situation affects the environment includes a one or two day journey through the valley (see the ‘Journeys’ program), as well as special lectures on the degradation and rehabilitation of the Jordan River Valley.

ALTERNATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

An introduction to grey-water recycling, solar cookers, composting, dry toilets, and traditional mud-brick construction. These talks can be pitched at any level, from a general introduction to a technical training course for specialists.

PALESTINIAN FOOD

Learn how to make traditional Palestinian food with women from Auja. We use seasonal and local ingredients, many of them from our gardens, and focus on the kind of dishes that are made by families at home.
The Guesthouse

We have eleven private guestrooms, all with *en suite* bathrooms and air conditioning.

We also have five dormitory rooms (eight beds each) that are suitable for families or student groups. Altogether, we can accommodate between 50 and 60 people.

- Free wifi internet throughout the center
- Gardens, roof terrace, and Bedouin tent areas for relaxing
- Home-cooked, local, seasonal food at our restaurant
- Small library of books and publications about the valley
- Fully-equipped conference and workshops rooms
- Outdoor amphitheatre for presentations and events
- Vegetable and herb gardens
- Mountain bikes for hire
Conferences and Retreats

We welcome businesses or NGOs to use the eco-center as a base for conferences, workshops, or retreats.

The peace of Auja makes this a perfect escape from the office and a great place to do some focused, creative work. We will also be happy to help you build short walks or excursions into your retreat.

We have a fully equipped meeting room that can accommodate up to 30 people, as well spaces on the roof terrace and in the gardens that are ideal for more informal gatherings.

The Auja restaurant can provide full meals, as well as tea and coffee breaks.
Restaurant

We are developing a rooftop restaurant that serves local, seasonal Palestinian food from the Jordan Valley and from Auja’s organic gardens.

These dishes are made by women from Auja village, and reflect the landscape and traditions of this place. In keeping with our environmental mission, this is one of the first restaurants in Palestine to use solar cookers.

This restaurant is open to everyone, not only to guests of the center.

NB: RESTAURANT OPENING WINTER 2012-13
The Story of the Valley

Seeing the Valley Whole
How was the landscape that we see today formed? What makes this a place of special ecological and historical value? And how does our work at Auja contribute towards the rehabilitation of the valley?

THE GREAT SLUMP
Looking east from Auja, you can see the hills of Jordan rising from the plain. They look stable enough, those mountains. But if you were to stand here for a million years or so, you might notice the villages on the Jordanian side drifting slowly towards the north.
That’s because they’re standing on the Arabian tectonic plate, a huge chunk of the earth’s crust that’s drifting away from Africa and crunching into Asia, while the mountains at your back are part of the African plate.

Beneath your feet, buried under miles of sediment, is the geological fault that separates the two. The geologists’ best guess is that the Arabian side of the valley has drifted north by around 100km over the past fifteen million years. It’s moving at around 6 or 7 millimeters a year, which is slower than your fingernails grow. But it’s that movement that has pulled the earth apart, allowing a broad strip of land to slump into the gap between Africa and Asia and forming a landscape unlike anywhere else on earth.

WATER, FERTILITY, AND THE ORIGINS OF HISTORY

Long before the evolution of modern humans, the land along the edges of the fault line was forced upward, raising a chain of mountains along either side of the valley. Drawn by these hills, the rain of two or three million winters washed alluvial soils into the plain, formed the Jordan River, and filtered into aquifers beneath the rock.

Tectonic movement broke and fissured the rock, and the water of the aquifers poured out onto the valley floor. The slow sinking of the land made it warm, and this warmth combined with the wetness and richness of the soil to create a corridor of fertility along the rift. Grasses and trees flourished, drawing herds of wild animals, including groups of early hominids, as well as vast flocks of migratory birds. In the fur and guts of these animals came seeds from the African savannah, which thrived in the heat of the valley and enriched an increasingly complex eco-system.

By some 20,000 years ago, the valley’s abundance of wild plants and animals, warmth and salt, perennial springs and alluvial mud had encouraged the first humans to settle here, generation after generation, and to build the world’s first villages. Eventually, these villagers began farming. With that step, they moved over the threshold that separates us from our nomadic, hunter-gatherer ancestors and marks the beginning of urban civilization and human history.
A LIVING MUSEUM

This entire story – from the fossil remains of prehistoric seas to the archaeology of the world’s earliest town – is laid out before us in the Jordan River Valley.

Here, perhaps more then anywhere else on earth, you can actually see how the slow forces of geology transformed the landscape and altered the climate; how the topography and climate created the eco-system; and how all of these elements shaped the course of human history. It is hard to imagine a more vivid illustration of a key ecological principal: interconnectedness.

And so there’s a certain sad irony to that fact that here, of all places, we’re faced with an ecological catastrophe – the destruction of the Jordan River, the drying of the springs, and the vanishing of the Dead Sea - caused by our failure to see that the Jordan Valley watershed is a single and complete eco-system.

Instead of recognizing the River Jordan and the Dead Sea as the center of a living system, we’ve taken them as borders. Instead of seeing the valley as a whole, we’ve divided it along lines that bear almost no relation to the geological or ecological contours of the land. Instead of protecting the flow of water that has sustained life here for millions of years, we’ve dammed and pumped and drained the very source of life from the valley.

And so the Jordan River Valley, which could be a living museum of natural history and human culture, has instead become a monument to human shortsightedness and alienation from the cycles of the natural world.

FRIENDS OF THE VALLEY, FRIENDS OF THE EARTH

At Auja, our environmental education and our eco-tourism programs share a common purpose: to teach people about the landscape, the environment, and the culture of this special place; to inspire them, through the story of the valley, to understand that human beings cannot thrive independently from the natural systems that sustain life on earth; and to encourage people from
all sides of the valley to work together for the rehabilitation of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.
Breaking Apart
The Geology of the Jordan Rift Valley and the Dead Sea

THE PREHISTORIC LAKE

Three million years ago, when the mountains behind Auja were not so high, the Mediterranean sea repeatedly flooded the trench that is now the Jordan Rift Valley. You can still find marine fossils in the limestone as you hike the hills around the eco center. Deeper down, below the silt that covers the valley floor, there are deposits of marine salt up to three kilometers thick.

The waters formed a narrow, crooked bay, connected to the Mediterranean through what is now the Jezreel Valley. By about two million years ago, as the mountains rose, this bay became an isolated inland sea that submerged the Rift Valley from Lake Tiberius to the southern reaches of the Wadi Araba.

As the earth cycled through its ages of ice and heat, rain and drought, the shoreline of this lake advanced and retreated. At times, the waters deepened and flooded the rift; at others, they vanished completely. The most recent of these pre-historic lakes, known to geologists as Lake Lisan, formed around 70,000 years ago. At its height, its surface was more than 100 meters above the level of today’s Dead Sea. But towards the end of the last ice age, as the climate grew warmer and drier, Lake Lisan began to evaporate faster than it was replenished.

By about 15,000 years ago the shoreline had retreated to roughly the level we see today, slowly concentrating the salt and killing the plants and animals that lived in the lake. The flat plain that runs along the valley floor is the lakebed, exposed by the retreating waters. And the Dead Sea is all that remains of Lake Lisan.
THE SEA OF SALT AND TAR

This unique geological history has left us with a landscape that is profoundly strange. On the shores of the Dead Sea, more than 400 meters below the level of the Mediterranean, the earth’s atmosphere is so thick that it filters ultraviolet light from the sun and becomes heavy with oxygen. The warmth and density of the air, the glittering blue against the red hills, the shoreline encrusted with salt – all this feels so unfamiliar that it seems, at times, like the surface of a different planet entirely.

The closer you look, the stranger things get. This is a sea in which the human body cannot sink; that disgorges huge globs of asphalt from beneath the waves; and that even, on rare occasions, changes color. That last happened in the winter of 1980, when rainwater pouring in from the River Jordan lifted the level of the lake, diluting the salt and allowing microscopic algae and bacteria to bloom in such abundance that the water was stained red.

You have to go back even further, to the 1930s, to find the last time that islands of bitumen seeped out from faults in the seabed and floated to the surface of the lake. They appeared so often in ancient times that the Dead Sea was known to the Roman geographer Strabo as the *Mare Asphaltum*. 
Even earlier, in 312 BCE, a Greek general called Hieronymus of Cardia witnessed the Nabataean Arabs (the builders of Petra) camped on the eastern shore of the sea, waiting for the bitumen to appear.

‘They make ready large bundles of reeds and cast them into the sea. On these not more than three men take their places, two of whom row with oars, but one carries a bow and repels any who sail against them from the other shore, or who venture to interfere with them. When they come near the floating bitumen they jump upon it with axes and, just as if it were soft stone, they cut pieces and load them onto the raft.’

Back on shore, the bitumen was sprinkled with sand, stuffed into leather bags, loaded onto camels and carried off “like the plunder of war.” Nabataean caravans took the bitumen south across the Sinai, towards Alexandria and the cities of the Nile. The ancient Egyptians used it for embalming the dead, as well as for caulking boats. In the Bronze Age, it was used as mortar in the walls of Jericho. And later, it became a key ingredient in a kind of proto-napalm called ‘Greek Fire’, the most terrifying weapon of the Byzantine navy.

Along with salt and bitumen, a whole range of unusual minerals has been concentrated in this basin by faults in the earth’s crust and the slow evaporation of Lake Lisan. Most of these minerals – magnesium and bromine, phosphate and potash - do not sound like the kind of thing that we come across in our everyday lives. But if you’ve ever applied a face pack or sprayed de-icer onto the windscreen of your car, then the chances are you’ve used some of the chemical compounds that accumulate in the mud of the Dead Sea.

EARTHQUAKES

The grinding and stretching of the earth’s crust along the African–Arabian fault has long triggered earthquakes around the Jordan Rift Valley. And because this fault runs through one of the most historically literate regions of the world, we have a record of seismic activity that stretches back as far as 1365 BCE.
Written in Assyrian and Hebrew, Greek and Arabic, some of these accounts remain extraordinarily vivid. The Byzantine monk Theophanes records the quake that struck this valley in the winter of 749. Shocks were felt from the Gulf of Aqaba to the banks of the Euphrates and from Gaza to Baghdad. Theophanes’s chronicle still carries the note of superstitious dread that these events would have caused in a pre-scientific age:

‘January 18th, 749. A violent earthquake occurred in Palestine, by the Jordan, and in all of Syria. Numberless multitudes perished, churches and monasteries collapsed, especially those in the desert of Jerusalem. Some cities were completely destroyed, other partially so, while some slid down entire, with their walls and houses, from the mountains to the plains. In Mesopotamia the ground was split along two miles, and out of the chasm was thrown up a different soil, very white and sandy, in the midst of which, they said, there came up an animal like a mule, quite spotless, that spoke in a human voice and announced the incursion of a certain nation from the desert against the Arabs.’

In what may be one of the earliest historical references to Auja, another Byzantine chronicler who lived through this earthquake, Michael the Syrian, wrote ‘a water source near Ariha [Jericho] was moved six miles.’ It also cracked the roof of the great mosque in Damascus, collapsed the Roman temple of Baalbek in Lebanon, destroyed Hisham’s palace in Jericho, and caused a tsunami in the Dead Sea.

THE VANISHING OF THE DEAD SEA

The Dead Sea has no outlet. Over the last 10,000 years or so, the inflow from the Jordan River has more or less matched the evaporation of water from the lake’s surface, and the shoreline has held steady. But over the last 50 years, with the Jordan reduced to a trickle, the Dead Sea has started to retreat. Some of the hotels built on the shore in the 50s and 60s are now stranded more than a kilometer from the water’s edge.
As the shoreline retreats, deposits of underground salt come into contact with fresh water from the aquifers around the edge of the Dead Sea. Pockets of salt dissolve in the flow of sweet water, causing the land above to collapse without warning. Huge sinkholes have opened around the perimeter of the Dead Sea. (The good news, according to Friends of the Earth’s co-director Gidon Bromberg, is that if you get swallowed up by one of these sinkholes, they’ll name it after you 😊.)

The vanishing of the Dead Sea is now a real possibility. Until recently, most scientists believed that as the surface of the lake gets smaller the rate of evaporation will decrease, causing the shoreline to stabilize around 100 meters lower than its present level. But in 2010, scientists drilled deep into the bed of the Dead Sea, pulling out a core of salt and sediment some 400 meters long and allowing them to read the history of the lake. At the 120,000 year mark, they found a flat layer of beach pebbles covering the salt. The lake, it seems, had vanished completely.

Without urgent and dramatic action to revive the river and replenish the Dead Sea, we may soon see a salt flat in the center of the Jordan Valley.
Through the Valley of Eden
The first human migrations out of Africa

TURKANA BOY AND THE FIRST HUMANS IN THE JORDAN VALLEY

In 1984, in the roots of a thorn tree on the shores of Lake Turkana in Kenya, a paleontologist called Kamoya Kimeu found the near complete skeleton of a boy who died around 1.5 million years ago. Turkana Boy, as he came to be known, probably belonged to a species called Homo Ergaster – an early form of human that evolved in Africa some two million years ago, and which is thought to be the direct ancestor of modern humans.

By the time of Turkana Boy, in the early Pleistocene era, the floor of the Wadi Araba and the Jordan Valley had slumped, while the highlands along the edge of the rift were being raised and tilted into the mountains we see today. These geological forces reconfigured the patterns of the watershed, draining the winter rains into the Rift Valley and creating freshwater lakes from the southern deserts of the Wadi Araba to the highlands of the Golan.
In the heat and humidity of the valley, trees and grasslands flourished, drawing great herds of animals from the African savannah. Embedded in the mud of the Jordan Valley are the fossilized remains of crocodile and hippopotamus, gazelle and warthog, rhinoceros and leopard.

Perhaps as long as 1.8 million years ago, small bands of early humans began to appear in this landscape. They were omnivorous scavengers, feeding on carcasses killed by other large predators, and its possible that they found their way here by following the animals out of east Africa. However they arrived, they were the first humans ever to leave the African continent.

UBEIDIYA

It’s highly likely that these people drank from the springs of Jericho and Auja, but the first hard evidence of their presence in the valley comes from a few kilometers further north. At the site of Ubeidiya, on the shores of a lake that vanished in prehistory, archaeologists have found fragments of cranial bone and teeth, more than a million years old, that almost certainly came from the same species as Turkana Boy.

Who were these people, and how different were they from us?

From the more complete skeletons found in Africa, paleontologists have been able to reconstruct *Homo Ergastus* in some detail. Turkana Boy, who died at around 10 years old, was already 1.6m in height, which suggests that the adults of the species may have been as tall as modern humans. Their bodies were hairless, and dark skinned, and muscled for running and hunting. Their had elongated faces and pronounced brow lines. They could probably talk in something recognizably like a human voice, though their range of vocalization and the complexity of their language was nothing like modern human speech, and their brains were far smaller than our own.

Along with fragments of their skulls, the men and women who camped on the muddy lakeshore at Ubeidiya left behind distinctive stone hand axes, shaped like a teardrop and flaked to an edge along both sides. The Ubeidiya axes are probably around 1.4 million years old, and appear to have been part of a standardized tool-making tradition that appeared in Africa at around
that time. They were used to hack meat from the bones of animals, to break the bones and extract the marrow, and to cut and scrape animal skins. It’s possible that the people who made these axes also knew how to control fire, and perhaps even to cook food.

*Bull’s horns from Ubeidiya, lower Paleolithic*

The early humans who walked through the valley eventually went deep into Europe and Asia. But they did not survive, and they are not our direct ancestors. Around 100,000 or 150,000 years ago, long after *Homo Ergastus* had vanished, a new species of human followed their footsteps out of Africa and found their way into the rift north of Jericho. By about 25,000 years ago, some of the people – anatomically modern humans – had abandoned nomadism entirely, and had settled to hunt and fish and forage in the fertility of the Jordan valley.
Jericho’s Spring

The Neolithic transition and the beginnings of urban culture

‘The agricultural revolution is not an event like the Trojan War, isolated in the distant past and without relevance to your lives today. The work begun by those Neolithic farmers in the Near East has been carried forward from one generation to the next without a single break, right into the present moment. It’s the foundation of your vast civilization today in exactly the same way that it was the foundation of the very first farming village.’

DANIEL QUINN. ISMAEL: AN ADVENTURE OF MIND AND SPIRIT

THE VILLAGE BY THE LAKE

Around 20,000 years ago, a fire started in a village on the shore of Lake Tiberius. Within minutes it had destroyed the brushwood huts and left six smoldering rings of charcoal where the village had been. If there were people living here at the time of the fire, they moved on; and within a few years, the rising water of the lake covered the site in a deep layer of silt.

In the autumn of 1989, after a drought that saw the water recede by some 10 meters, archaeologists found the remains of these houses in the exposed mud of the shore. Working quickly before the lake submerged the dig, they reconstructed a picture of life in one of the world’s first settled communities.

Towards the end of the last ice age, a band of nomadic hunter-gatherers arrived on the beach of the newly formed lake. Rather than moving on, they settled down to forage and fish and hunt, raising their children and burying their dead here at the water’s edge. They cooked on fire pits outside, knapped flint into sharp blades, and threw discarded shells and bones into a dumping ground.

One of the huts contained over 90,000 seeds, including many species of wild wheat and barley, as well as fruits which may have been dried in the sun and stored for the winter. There was also a heavy grinding stone set into the floor
and surrounded by grain, as though someone – perhaps the mother of the family - had been making flour not long before the fire started.

*Artist’s reconstruction of the houses at Ohalo II*

**THE NATUFIAN HOMELAND**

At the time of Ohalo II, as the village is known to archaeologists, other groups of people were starting to settle in the Jordan Valley, as well as in the hills to the west, along the Mediterranean coast, and even in the semi-desert steppe to the east.

There were forests of oak and pistachio trees on these slopes, dense grasslands and freshwater lakes in the valley. Gazelle and wild cattle grazed across the savannah. In the rivers and reed beds, men trapped ducks, gathered eggs, and caught catfish with their bare hands. The land was so abundant that there was simply no need to move on.

By about 13,000 years ago a distinct settled culture, known as *Natufian*, had emerged in the Jordan Rift Valley and the surrounding hills. Its people built homes with stone floors, sunk into the earth and roofed with wood and
brush. They cooked on hearths inside their houses, and stored food in baskets and animal skins. They made blades from flint and obsidian, hunted with bows and arrows, and carved bone into awls and barbed hooks.

They also crafted objects that seem to have had a ritual or totemic rather than a functional value. In the village of Nahal Oren, on the Mediterranean coast, someone carved a limestone figurine with an owl at one end and a dog’s head at the other. Human figures are rare in Natufian art, but in the Wadi Khareitoun near Bethlehem a Bedouin man found an 11,000 year old carving of a human couple making love. The Ain Sakhri lovers, as they came to be known, are now in the British Museum.

The Ain Sakhri lovers. Natufian, 9th millennium BCE.

Analysis of Natufian grindstones has found that they were used to powder red ochre as well as grain, which suggests that these people may have painted their skin. They certainly wore jewelry, and decorated the bodies of their dead. In Natufian cemeteries across the Levant, archaeologists have found necklaces and belts, earrings and bracelets made from bones and shell
and animal teeth. At the village of Ain Mallaha, just north of Lake Tiberius, a woman was buried with her hand on the body of a puppy.

The first settled families had no knowledge of farming, but they found stands of wild wheat and barley so dense and extensive that they began to harvest and store grain against the lean months of winter. They carried sickles of bone or wood, with flint blades set into the handle, and ground the seed to flour in stone mortars. In all probability, they made bread and baked it directly in the hot sand and ash of the fire.

The idea that the Natufians were the world’s first farmers remains controversial. But if they were not yet cultivating grain, they were certainly on the cusp of that breakthrough.

OVER THE THRESHOLD

Around 11,000 years ago the climate of the eastern Mediterranean began to change. For an interval of around 700 years, drought came often to the valley, testing the resilience of the families who lived here. Some of them moved on, reverting to the old ways and following the animals north. Others, searching for ways to wrest the calories they needed from the earth around them, began to scatter seeds of wild wheat and barley onto the fertile soil of the plain.

In retrospect, we can see that farming was the most significant advance ever made by humans – the first link in the chain of social and technological changes that brought our own civilization into being. But there was no sudden break with the past, and no single generation that stepped over the threshold that separates hunter-gatherers from settled agriculturalists. The first men and women to plant cereal still foraged for edible plants and roots, and still hunted gazelle and ibex as their ancestors had always done.

Slowly, though, over a period of several hundred years, they came to depend more on the food that they had grown and less on the food that they had killed or gathered in the wild. They learned which seeds would yield a harvest, and where best to plant them. At some stage they began to water the seedlings, helping their crops through the dry months of summer.
Without knowing it, these people were causing genetic modifications to the cereals they farmed. As they gathered wild barley or emmer wheat, they naturally looked for the plants with the fattest, heaviest grains. As they grasped and hacked at the stalks with flint sickles, the more brittle plants scattered the seed, leaving only the grains that were more firmly attached to the plants to be gathered up and sown again the following spring. The process of farming quickened the pace of evolution by selecting for those mutations – bigger, denser, stronger seeds – that were dominant in the seeds sown by Neolithic people.

As the techniques of farming improved and the modified seeds began to yield a more dependable harvest, and as the rains returned to the hills after centuries of drought, the villages of the Jordan River Valley were able to feed a growing population. Before long, they were able to store a surplus and, for the first time in human history, to feed people who were not farmers or hunters at all.

THE WALL OF JERICHO

Jericho was among the first places on earth where this transition took place.

It was not the only farming community in the world at that date. The earliest domestication of wild cereal probably took place to the north of here, in the Karacadag mountains of Turkey, or in the Euphrates valley around the Syrian site of Tell Abu Hureyra. And there were surely other early farming villages, still unknown to archaeologists, scattered across the Levant.

At the beginning of the Neolithic era people had already been living around Jericho’s spring for centuries. Slowly, this crude encampment of brushwood huts was transformed into one of the world’s first real villages.

And then, around 10,000 years ago, the Neolithic farmers of Jericho did something absolutely unprecedented: they raised a massive stone wall around the town.
Built from stones hauled from the banks of the Jordan River more than a mile away, this wall was 4 – 5 meters high and surrounded by a deep ditch. It included a tower almost 9m tall, with an internal staircase of 22 stone steps.

Within the wall, the people of Jericho lived in circular houses made from mud brick and plaster. Inside their homes there were fire pits for cooking, and stone querns for grinding flour. If they were making bread, they may also have been fermenting grain and drinking beer. There was no pottery, but they kept seeds and pulses in baskets and skins, or in silos made from mud and straw. They stored tools here, too; spears and nets for fishing in the river, flint-tipped arrows, and sickles for reaping the fields. From the loom weights we know there were weavers among them, though the textiles made in Neolithic Jericho have all perished.

Along with the tools of everyday life, some kept more precious objects in their homes: blades made from obsidian, a glassy volcanic rock from the Anatolian mountains, and cowrie shells from the Red Sea, and pieces of turquoise from the Sinai. They must have bartered for these things with the salt and bitumen that were so abundant in their own territory, along trade routes that followed the north-south contour of the Rift Valley.
It may have been to protect of this slow accumulation of wealth that the wall was built. Kathleen Kenyon, the British archaeologist who excavated here in the 1950s, certainly thought so. Later archaeologists have suggested that it was raised to protect Jericho’s mud brick homes against floods rather than against nomadic raiders, or even that the tower may have had a religious function.

Whatever its purpose, the scale and sophistication of this project displays a degree of confidence and collaboration had never been seen before. At this date, the world was still a wilderness populated mainly by tribes of hunting and foraging nomads. As they looked down on the walled city in the plain, they must have stared in wonder.

MUD, STRAW, AND CIVILIZATION

We may never know exactly why the wall was built, but we can be sure that it was made possible by the humble mud and straw granaries that stood in the homes of Neolithic Jericho.

Inside those granaries was the stored energy of Jericho’s men and women - energy that could be used to support specialized workers and to power the beginnings of urban civilization. In a pattern established here and repeated all over the world, the agricultural revolution was followed quickly by the growth of professional classes – artisans and merchants, engineers and priests – and by the emergence of ruling elites.

In Jericho’s obsidian blades and turquoise beads, we glimpse the beginnings of long distance trade and perhaps the birth of a merchant class. In the wall itself we see the beginnings of social hierarchy and organized government – someone must have designed this structure, and someone must have mobilized the hundreds of laborers who hauled and stacked the stone.

After around 7000 BCE, when Jericho was rebuilt after a period of abandonment, the pace of change quickens. The round huts of the earlier settlement give way to rectangular mud brick houses, some built around
courtyards and including as many as three rooms. These houses have stone foundations and pink terrazzo floors rendered in lime plaster, and may have been furnished with woven *kilim* rugs similar to those found across the region today.

![Image of mud and straw grain silos](image)

*These are mud and straw grain silos from a house in Jordan in the early 20th century. The Neolithic farmers of Jericho may have used something similar to store their harvest. Photo: Ammar Khammash.*

Under the floors were burials, including a cache of ten human skulls plastered and painted, with cowrie shells set into the eyes. They are the first examples of portraiture in human art, and hint at an elaborate religious cosmology that was probably regulated by a professional caste of priests or shamans.

In settlements throughout the fertile crescent, farmers were digging wells or cisterns to store the rain and cutting water channels into the earth. Irrigated fields probably indicate private property, which in turn implies that some system of arbitration, law, and government was developing.

The farmers’ need to measure and anticipate the pattern of the seasons led to the close observation of the stars and planets – a behavior which would
eventually lead to the development of astronomy and mathematics, and the making of the world’s first calendars. Seasonal harvests also forced improvements in the storage of food, and before long we see the beginnings of pottery in the Jordan Valley. By around 6000 BCE, the potter’s wheel was in use here.

THE CIVILIZED AND THE WILD

On the printed page, this looks like a cascade of technological innovation and social change. In reality, it was a steady and incremental series of developments that took place over many millennia, punctuated by periods of collapse or even regression.

But however slow it was, the pattern of progress is clear. By 3800 BCE we see villages in the Jordan River Valley whose household goods and rhythms of life would be familiar to today’s old people – villages like Tulaylat al Ghassul, across the plain from Auja, where men and women grew vines and olives almost 6000 years ago, tended vegetable gardens, stored wine and oil in earthenware jars, and shepherded goats across the hills.

By the Bronze Age, Jericho itself was developing into a prosperous walled city, trading with the other early Canaanite towns of the Levant – Tel Balata, Megiddo, Arad – as well as with the emerging urban centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Among these was Uruk, on the banks of the Euphrates in modern day Iraq, which by 2900 BCE was probably home to more than 50,000 people. This population included mathematicians and astronomers, accountants and scribes. There were monumental stone temples within the city walls, and wheeled chariots in the streets.

By that time, Jericho was a backwater compared to the civilizations of the Sumer or Egypt. But if the origins of the modern world can be traced back to any particular point, it is to the Jordan River Valley and a handful of sites across the Levant where Neolithic men and women first scattered seed into the mud.
And if we look for the earliest beginnings of civilization – for the very idea of urban space, set apart from the wilderness of the natural world – we find it here, in the wall that enclosed the town of Jericho.
Across the Jordan

The Jordan River Valley has long been a sacred landscape for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Why?

![The Madaba map showing Jericho, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea. Photo: Dale Gillard](image)

THE RIVER OF MIRACLES

In 1897 a mosaic was unearthed in the ruins of a Byzantine church in Madaba, Jordan. It turned out to be a map of Palestine and Egypt, made in the middle of the sixth century CE and depicting with startling accuracy and detail the sacred sites of the Christian Holy Land. Among them, just to the east of Jericho on the banks of the river, is an image of what may have been one of the first religious sanctuaries in the Jordan Valley: the standing stones of Gilgal.

The book of Joshua tells us that these stones were taken from the bed of the river Jordan, which had miraculously dried up to allow the twelve tribes of Israel to cross into the promised land after the exodus from Egypt:

‘And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal. And he spake unto the children of
Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in
time to come, saying What mean these stones? Then ye shall
let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan
on dry land.’
Joshua 4:20-23

The standing stones of Gilgal have never been found, and, if they existed at all, we are unlikely ever to know the truth of when and why they were placed on the banks of the river. Some scholars have suggested that the account in Joshua is an aetiological myth – a story told by the book’s authors to explain the existence of a much older, possibly Neolithic, stone circle that stood by the Jordan at the time that they were writing.

What we do know is that by the sixth century BCE, when the book of Joshua was probably written, the river Jordan was already understood by the Jewish people as a place of miracles, and as the boundary that marked their entry into a holy land.

THE GARDEN OF THE LORD

The valley was also seen as a kind of earthly glimpse of paradise. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all originated on the edge of the desert, and in all three traditions we find the image of paradise as a garden. The earliest description we have of the Jordan River Valley comes for the book of Genesis, and makes explicit this connection between the green of the valley and the desert dweller’s dream of heaven:

‘And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere...even as the garden of the Lord’

Genesis 13:10

In another book of the Hebrew bible, Kings, written at around the same time, we find the first reference to the river as a place of purification and healing. A military commander called Namaan seeks out Elisha, having heard that the prophet has the power to cure him of leprosy. Following instructions given by Elisha, Namaan immerses himself seven times in the Jordan and emerges from the river healed of disease and converted to the god of Israel.
This story was almost certainly known to John the Baptist - a charismatic Jewish preacher who, during the reign of King Herod, some eight centuries after the events described in the book of Kings, was ritually immersing people in the river Jordan as an act of spiritual cleansing and renewal. The story of Jesus’s baptism by John ensured that ritual washing would come to represent rebirth into the Christian faith, and that the river Jordan would become the symbol of crossing into the kingdom of heaven.

THE MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN HOLY LAND

Though early Christians seems to have practiced ritual baptism right from the start, the actual place of Christ’s baptism was forgotten for centuries. Unlike the Jews, who had always connected the presence of God with this particular stretch of land, the first Christians were not interested in sacred geography. For them, God had been revealed not in a place but through a person, and some of the church’s first theologians explicitly warned against the idea that God might be located in any particular spot. Eusebius, the earliest historian of the church, imagined Christ teaching men “not to look for God in a corner of the earth, nor in mountains, nor in temples made with hands.”

But even within the lifetime of Eusebius, a different current of Christian thought was emerging. By the early fourth century Christians were no longer a persecuted minority, forced to conceal their faith and to worship in furtive gatherings behinds closed doors. From 313 CE the Roman Emperor Constantine extended his protection to the faith and, some ten years after that, instigated a program of religious building that transformed the landscape of Palestine.

Led by the family of the Emperor, Christians abandoned their disdain for the idea of sacred geography and were swept along by a new enthusiasm to map the story of Jesus onto the landscape of Palestine. Within a single generation, they had identified the cave where Christ had been born, the olive groves where he had wept, and the hill where he had been crucified and buried. Magnificent new basilicas were built over all of the sites, and the first Christian pilgrims found that although the events of Christ’s life were now
centuries in the past, the widening gulf of time could be bridged by physical
closeness to the places where Jesus had walked, and prayed, and died.

Among these places, of course, was the river Jordan. It was from this time on
that the river became a place of pilgrimage, and the Jordan valley became
central to the emerging Christian idea of ‘the Holy Land’. Within two hundred
years of Constantine’s death, the valley was filled with churches built to
commemorate the life the Christ as well as the stories of the Old Testament.

The mosaic discovered in Madaba is a map of these stories and places, as
they were known to the Christians of the sixth century, and the churches
unearthed on the bank of the river Jordan in the 1990s belong to this
Byzantine imaginative reconstruction of the life of Jesus.

THE DESERT A CITY

The most astonishing aspect of the Christian holy land that was created here
between the fourth and the sixth centuries is that it has survived into our
own time - not just in the dust of Byzantine archaeology, but in the living
form of the monasteries that still stand in the desert canyons to the west of
the Dead Sea.

The first monks settled around the valley in the fourth century after Christ.
Like the early pilgrims, they were drawn to Palestine by Jerusalem, and by
the idea that Jesus himself had retreated into the wilderness here. But they
were also seeking out lonely places, far from the noise and corruption of the
world, where they could practice forms of extreme austerity and prayer that,
they believed, drew them closer to God.

Following the example of Saint Anthony of Egypt, who is traditionally
regarded as the first Christian monk, these men were hermits who lived
alone and in silence for decades at a time. Many survived on nothing but
insects, wild roots, and herbs, exposing themselves to the heat and cold of
the desert and depriving themselves of food, sex, and sleep. By the time of
Anthony’s death in 356 CE, so many people had followed him into the
wilderness that his biographer writes ‘the desert had become a city.’
It is no coincidence that the growth of the monastic movement coincides with the adoption of Christianity as the favored religion of the Roman Empire. Just a generation earlier, Christians had suffered and died for their beliefs in wave after wave of persecution. Suddenly, the church was flooded with new converts, many of whom knew little about the faith and were still steeped in pagan patterns of thought. How were the most committed Christians to mark themselves out from the crowd of pragmatists and promotion-seekers who had jumped onto the Christian bandwagon? How could they share in the suffering that had surely opened the gates of heaven to the early Christian martyrs? Monasticism offered an answer.

All of the early monasteries of the Jordan valley – Saint George, Saint Gerasimos, and Saint Sabas – began as scattered collections of hermits living in isolated caves and connected only by a narrow footpath. Towards the end
of the fifth century, the monks began to gather together into organized communities under the direction of a spiritual father or abbot. Gradually, the traditions of early monastic life were codified into written rules that determined the monks’ patterns of work, study and prayer. Gardens were planted and churches were built. This was the beginning of the monastic tradition that would eventually spread across Europe and become instrumental in the formation of Western Christian culture, not least because the monasteries were, for something like five hundred years, the only places that preserved the written classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome.

The finest example of an early Christian community in the region, and one of the best anywhere in the world, is the monastery of Mar Saba (Saint Sabas) in the Kidron Valley. It was founded in around 483 and has functioned as a monastery for more than fifteen centuries, surviving not only the earthquakes that left much of the late classical world in ruins but also the Persian invasions, the rise of Islam, the Crusades, the First World War, and the coming of modernity. While every other stratum of late antique society has perished or changed, the monasteries have persisted in their isolation and in their extreme conservatism, carrying the prayers, the music, the paintings, the books, the architecture, the language, and even the clothes of the Byzantine Christian world into the modern era.

AI ARD AL MUQADASA

It is almost certain that the prophet Mohammed met some of the early Christian monks who lived in the deserts of what is now Jordan and Syria in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. And although Islam rejected the concept of monasticism, it adopted the idea of Palestine as a sacred landscape right from the start.

The first Muslims understood Islam to be a return to the original faith of Abraham, a cleansing of the revelation that had been given by God to Jews and Christians but obscured by centuries of misunderstanding. This was why the first great work of Islamic architecture, the Dome of the Rock, was built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which Muslims believed had been visited by the Mohammed during a mysterious night journey on a winged horse, and
why the prophet instructed his followers to pray towards Jerusalem during the early years of Islam. The entire stretch of land, from the Mediterranean to the city of Damascus, was seen by the first Muslims as *al ard al muqadasa* – the holy land.

From at least the ninth century, Sufi mystics were drawn to Jerusalem from across the Islamic world. Influenced by the Christian monks who they met here, some of these men withdrew from the city into the solitude of the hills, acquired a reputation for sanctity, and began to attract disciples. Shrines were built over the graves of these local Sufi saints, drawing pilgrims in search of healing or fertility. The Jordan Valley was part of this network of shrines, not least because three companions of the prophet Mohammed had been buried along the river, including Sharhabil bin Hassneh, one of the scribes of the Quran.

It was not until the time of the crusades, though, that ruling elites began to promote the cult of the saints and the practice of pilgrimage as a way to consolidate Islamic rule over Palestine. Salaheddin al Ayyubi (Saladin), the Kurdish military leader who defeated the crusader armies in 1187 and brought Palestine back under Muslim rule, understood that the European invasions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had been inspired by devotion to the sacred sites of the Christian tradition. In response, Salaheddin and his successors encouraged the development of an Islamic sacred geography across Palestine.

Jerusalem and Hebron had always been the poles of Muslim pilgrimage in Palestine. But among the most important of the new holy places that developed during the Ayyubid period was the shrine of Nebi Musa in the Jordan Valley. The first pilgrims to visit this shrine looked across the valley towards Mount Nebo, the traditional burial place of Moses, who had always been recognized by Islam as a prophet. Inevitably, perhaps, the tradition of venerating Moses from this spot morphed into the belief that the prophet had actually been buried here.

By 1269, during the reign of the Mamluk Caliph Baybars, a major mosque and caravanserai had been built over the shrine, and an annual festival was held in honor of the prophet Musa. Under Ottoman rule, the *mawsim* (pilgrimage
festival) developed into a celebration that drew thousands of people from Jerusalem for five full days of prayer and feasting. Until it was stopped by the Jordanian government among the political turmoil that followed 1948, this was among the most colorful popular festivals in Palestine.