

From Dhahriya to Beit Mirsim A Hike on Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil

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The Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil is a long-distance, cultural hiking trail in Palestine. The route is 321 kilometers long and extends through the West Bank – from the village of Rummana northwest of Jenin to Beit Mirsim southwest of Hebron. The trail passes through 53 cities and villages where hikers, walkers, and travelers can experience the famous Palestinian hospitality.

The trail is divided into 21 day-long stages, with most ending in locations that offer travelers accommodations through local homestay arrangements, small guesthouses, Bedouin tents, or even a cave (in the area of the Jerusalem wilderness between Jericho and Bethlehem).

The final stage of the trail takes hikers on an interesting 19-kilometer hike between Dhahriya, located 23 kilometers southwest of Hebron, and Beit Mirsim, located 30 kilometers

southwest of Hebron. Dhahriya and Beit Mirsim can be reached from Hebron with public transportation, costing around 8 to 10 shekels per person.

According to local tradition, Dhahriya was founded in thirteenth century by the Mamluk ruler Al-Malik al-Dhahir Baibars, after whom the village was named. However, archaeological findings confirm that the site was inhabited before this time. Within the village stands a well-conserved fortress from the Hellenistic or early Roman period. Nevertheless, Dhahriya's historic core, with its narrow streets and small domed stone houses, is a well-preserved example of an architectural complex that dates to Ottoman times in Palestine. Before the houses were constructed, probably during the sixteenth or seventeenth century, the villagers used to live in caves that currently can be found beneath the old town.

In the late spring, the fields surrounding the trail that connects Dhahriya and Beit Mirsim become golden from the ripening ears of grain grown abundantly in the area. This is also the season when various kinds of grasshoppers and butterflies are plentiful and move from stone to stone or flower to flower.

Six kilometers down the trail one can see the ruins of a Byzantine church, located about 300 meters east of the village of Anab al-Kabir (22 kilometers southwest of Hebron). The compound served as a main religious center for the neighboring locations and includes parts of mosaic floors and the remains of a vine press and an impressive grain mill.

The *masar* also passes through populated areas and just next to the primary school of Anab al-Kabir. If you hike on a workday, it is very possible that students on their way home from school will join you for some part of the trek.

After Anab al-Kabir, the trail turns back to the north, leading to the suburb area of Dhahriya, where small shops can be found – a great place to refill supplies of cold water for the rest of the day. The trek also passes next to an amusement park and garden where hikers can take a break and rest in a shady spot.

The final part of the trail leads through the picturesque Wadi Nufakh, a valley that becomes a river during the rainy

season. The slopes of the valley are rich in various shrubs, including felty germander (*Teucrium polium*), in Arabic *jedeh* (الجمدة), which is widely used in popular medicine for treatment of stomach ailments. In the middle of the valley can be found a small olive grove, ideal for taking a rest in the shade of the trees.

The trek before reaching the village of Al-Burj, famous for housing the remains of a Crusader-period fortified castle and a church, passes just next to the Israeli separation barrier. The Wall is also later visible from Beit Mirsim, the final location on Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil. The village is rich in heritage and includes such historical sites as a Byzantine olive press and a shrine of the Prophet Handal (Maqam al-Nabi Handal). Close to the village lies Tell Beit Mirsim, an ancient archaeological site, dating approximately to the eighteenth century BC. The site is now located on the other side of the Wall and is inaccessible from the West Bank.

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More information about Masar Ibrahim Al-Khalil can be found at www.masaribrahim.ps.

Masar Ibrahim close to Al-Burj. Photo courtesy of visitpalestine.ps.



Dhahriya Old City. Photo courtesy of visitpalestine.ps.

