



Life in Palestine

COUNT OF VOLUNTEERING IN THE CONFLICT ZONE



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A new approach to life

HELLO everyone, and welcome to my first column of 2016.

Now, if you have never read my column, let me take a moment to introduce myself. I'm Priya; marketer by day and *Eastern Eye* columnist and blogger by night. I bring to the paper's readers thoughts and opinions on all things dating and relationships. People often ask me where I get my material from – well, I go on a few dates here and there as do my single friends, so my understanding and experience of the modern world of dating is pretty good.

However, my first column this year isn't going to be solely about dating – it will be in the future – but today it is about moving upwards in 2016. I have decided not to make any New Year's resolutions, but to do things that make my heart happy.

I'm going to spend more time with the people I love and not care as much about those who don't make as much of an effort with me. Friends are the glue that hold our lives together, from love, life and work to providing affection and support when you need it the most, and I really value that.

I'm also going to fill my life with experiences and pleasures: things I've wanted to try such as hiking and hopefully visiting Croatia, like I have always wanted to.

I'm going to stand up for myself more, learn to say no and not give in to pressure as much.

I wanted to tell the single girls who read my column that in a world where there is so much pressure to be 'with someone', you are not alone, and you never will be. As time goes by, women are getting stronger and breaking barriers like never before. Women like me will always be there for you to provide support and encouragement – we basically have got your back, girl!

Also, as much as you want to meet someone, this isn't the be-all and end-all of your life – you must always focus on things that you want to achieve and which you love doing before anything else. Meeting someone along the way will be a bonus and if they support you in your endeavours, then you have hit the jackpot. Love, of course, is always full of compromises and sacrifices and you always have to support each other, but if a man doesn't understand what you want in life then he can bugger off!

Ultimately in 2016, follow your heart – travel, laugh, love, but above all, live. Do what makes you happy and what you want to do. I'm going to leave you with a quote by Steve Jobs, "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition."



Just when I thought I would be waved on, the lady at the security booth had one final question. "Did you like Israel?" she asked.

My answer that "yes, I liked Israel," was deemed insufficient by her.

"But did you love Israel?" Piercing eyes.

"Yes, I did."

"Say you love Israel," she demanded.

It took me a moment to realise she was being deadly serious. "I love Israel," I said, although it is hard to be enthusiastic under such circumstances.

One thing is for sure, I loved Palestine and can't wait to go back.

Obviously, the political situation is a nightmare for those living there. However, underneath it all is a beautiful nation of warmth, humour and a personality too often overshadowed by politics. Palestine has suffered greatly in the recent past. Realistic ambitions of peace require a compassionate international audience. Right now, Palestinian freedom and basic resources are being systematically denied to them by Israelis.

The people I met in Palestine were kind-hearted, warm and generous despite having very little. Coming back to the UK and my home comforts made me realise just how fortunate I am to be born in a place of peace and freedom. Many children born in Palestine may never experience either, but I hope with all my heart that this will not be the case for much longer.

The recent attacks in Paris have shown us that, even in the middle of barbaric acts and a minority wave of anti-Muslim sentiment, people remain compassionate and loving towards their fellow man. That may be the only defence Palestine has left right now. Their only hope.

Don't believe me? See for yourself at www.projecthope.ps/nablus



the shell of the house was a sobering reminder of the human cost of the ongoing conflict. The smell of death lingered in the air, so strong that even now the memory of it remains vivid. The word 'revenge' had been spray-painted on the wall, in Hebrew.

Saying goodbye to my friends from Project Hope was very difficult. They had been so kind and generous that I had thoroughly enjoyed my time in Palestine, in spite of some of the deplorable things I witnessed. Even now I miss the relentless enthusiasm of my students, the three-shekel falafels and the sound of the call to prayer five times a day. Most of all, I miss the warmth of the Palestinian people.

On my way out of Palestine, I was questioned by Israeli soldiers about my trip. Why had I been in Palestine? Where did I go? What had I been doing? I was aware that any disagreeable answers could result in a ban from re-entering Israel.



West Bank, the mayor had resigned. This was typical of the instability in the area, and a disappointing barrier to my ambition, but I remained intent on pursuing the idea in the future.

As part of the volunteering scheme, I taught children in the largest UN refugee camp in the West Bank, Balata. There are 23,000 Palestinian refugees there, all of whom yearn for a home of their own. Many of the children I taught were suffering from low confidence and trauma. They grow up in an environment where toys, fun and laughter are rare but the sound of gunshots is much more commonplace.

Week five

My most difficult experience in Palestine was in Duma, a small village close to Nablus. A few days before I arrived, a family of three had died in a night time arson attack, including an 18-month-old boy. Seeing the family's possessions inside