

For These Palestinian Kids, a First-ever Day at the Beach Means the Whole World

Sometimes it involves defying the Israeli authorities, but taking children from the West Bank village of Beit Ummar for a day of fun in the waves of the Mediterranean has its own rewards

[Patty Nieberg](#) and [Shachar Peled](#) Aug 08, 2019 6:21 PM



A Palestinian toddler plays on the beach in Tel Aviv for the first time. Patty Nieberg

Odai lies on the Mediterranean shore and waits for the waves to tug at his feet. The [Palestinian](#) toddler shrieks with excitement, feeling the sea for the first time.

His uncle Nabil, 48, is on the sand nearby, as are other members of their group: Palestinian children and adults from the [West Bank](#) who came to a beach in Tel Aviv this week thanks to the efforts of Robby Berman, 53, an American who made aliyah 30 years ago.



Robby Berman, the organizer of the beach trips, speaks on the phone. Patty Nieberg

For most of them (their names have been changed in this article), this is their first time on a beach. “They had never seen anything like it before,” says Nabil. He is here with some of his children. Although he goes into Israel often, he says the experience was full of surprises for his kids — especially since their village doesn’t have any parks or streams.

The group came from Beit Ummar, located between Bethlehem and Hebron and situated within Area B, meaning it is officially under Palestinian civil control and Israeli security control. Getting everyone to Tel Aviv’s Bograshov Beach posed some unique challenges.

For trips like this, Palestinians from the West Bank must be in possession of a valid permit to enter Israel. It is not uncommon for applicants to be rejected for “security reasons,” and some permit holders are denied entry at the checkpoint. While Palestinian men over 55 and women over 50 don’t require a permit, and neither do children under 16 traveling with a permit-carrying parent, anyone else who enters Israel without one is breaking the law. Not all the adults in the group have permits, making this trip risky for both volunteers and participants.

Despite nerve-racking moments on the journey to reach Tel Aviv, everyone is quick to embrace the unfamiliar setting. Adults rub globs of sunscreen onto their faces, while

children grab any inflatable toy they can find and spend hours in the sea, begging to stay after sunset.

In the media, Beit Ummar is known for the constant friction between its residents and Israeli soldiers. "[Beit Ummar](#) is known as a village where the children [throw rocks at Israeli cars](#) on their way to Hebron," says Berman, who is from Jerusalem. "I can guarantee you that none of the kids I have driven to the beach, with a kippa on my head, will ever, ever throw a rock at an Israeli car. That's my little contribution to fomenting peace."

Another volunteer from Jerusalem, Gila Rockman, agrees. This her first time participating in the excursion and she says that something as simple as going to the beach offers important exposure to people on both sides: "The longer this conflict goes on, the more the younger generation on either side doesn't know each other — except for in a soldier situation at a checkpoint."

This year's group, made up of toddlers and children, teenagers and adults, wore T-shirts promoting Berman's nonprofit organization, the Halachic Organ Donor society. But the adults without paperwork avoided wearing them in order to not draw attention to themselves.

The group also included newlyweds Tarek, 24, and Soraya, 22, who made the trip a romantic getaway. They were married two weeks ago, but Tarek "doesn't have any money for a honeymoon — so this is it," Berman explains.

Spending their honeymoon on the beach in Israel made Tarek and his wife happy. And being there with Berman, Tarek says, made him unafraid.

Between criticism and support

Berman began his annual beach trips four years ago, after meeting some children from Beit Ummar in Jerusalem one Friday. They were selling spearmint to raise money for their family; their mother died in childbirth a few years earlier.

"I thought, 'Why should I give these kids charity?' — basically enabling them to become *miskenim*," Berman says, using the Hebrew term for "downtrodden." Instead he gave them 20 shekels (\$5.75) to sit with him in a coffee shop for 20 minutes and converse only in Arabic, which he was studying at the time.

During one conversation, one of the kids told him they had never been to the beach. "Turns out it was a big thing I didn't know about," he says. "A lot of Arabs in the West Bank have never been to the beach."



Palestinian children from the group play on the beach in Tel Aviv as the sun sets over the Mediterranean. Patty Nieberg

Being able to provide an opportunity that Israelis take for granted was one of the reasons Rockman volunteered. “My kids sometimes even kvetch about it when we say we’re going to the beach,” she says. “And these [Palestinian] kids are sitting in the car jumping up and down.”

When Berman first started the outings, there were just six kids in his car. Last year, the number grew to 20 in several cars and this year it was about 30. In addition to the volunteers, they were accompanied by seven adults from Beit Ummar.

The volunteers risk being questioned at the checkpoint. Some even have cover stories ready as they wait for the call from the car ahead of them, telling them that they got through. But usually, with their Israeli license plates, they drive through no questions asked.

Sometimes — like last year — there aren’t enough volunteers so they have to leave people behind. “You had to see the look on their faces,” Berman recalls.

In order to find his volunteer drivers, Berman posts in Facebook groups, eliciting a mixed response. Last year, for example, when he wrote on the nearly 265,000-member-strong Secret Tel Aviv group, there were over 2,000 comments split between criticism and support of his efforts. The moderators eventually closed the post’s comments.

“I post an innocent post, ‘Please come and help,’ and then the comments [become] political,” Berman says. “Can’t people see the humanity of a person wanting to bring children to the beach, who have never been and can’t get there on their own accord? That’s not enough for you to stop and think?”

This year, some of the Palestinian kids dropped out of the trip because “they were getting afraid [after] reading a lot of the nasty, hateful comments by these Israelis [in the Secret Tel Aviv group],” he says. But the reaction at the beach was pleasant all around. Onlookers smiled as Odai jumped over waves in his oversized T-shirt.

As the day came to a close, the group stayed to watch the sun set over the sea for the first time in their lives.

Nabil says the most memorable part of the trip for his children was the people who drove them to Tel Aviv and the way they treated them. The family has invited the volunteers to visit their home and the children are excited to host everyone, including the Israelis.

“It’s an experience that they’ll always remember: the smell, the taste, the water, the feel of the sand,” says Rockman. “And if the first time can be something positive with Israelis, I think it’s even more special.”