

Imagine the morning sun warming your skin as you step into Barouk Reserve. Close your eyes and let the scene unfold—the hum of voices around you, the earthy scent of cedar trees, the feel of wild thyme brushing against your fingertips. This is where a group of visually impaired hikers, accompanied by EQUAL and the Lebanese Mountain Trail Association (LMTA), gathered to embark on a journey that went far beyond the physical path.

As the bus filled with lively conversation and laughter, it became clear that this wasn't just any hike. The visually impaired participants were filled with excitement, some mingled with a hint of nervousness.

Arriving at the Monkey Farm, the group settled in for a refreshing lavender-infused beverage and figs with sesame paste, their aromas wafting through the air and sparking energy and anticipation. With new friends by their side, they were ready to experience nature in a way they'd never imagined.

At the trailhead, the LMTA guides introduced a special setup: a directional bar designed to support each visually impaired hiker between two sighted guides. With the guides holding each end and the hiker securely fastened to the bar in the center, the hikers could experience the trail independently, moving with confidence. This simple system offered a remarkable freedom, allowing everyone to focus not on limitations but on the journey ahead.

With each step, the LMTA guides narrated the landscape around them, describing the colors of wildflowers, the sun filtering through trees branches. They shared the thrill of the natural world through words, bringing the scene to life and inviting the hikers into an immersive experience. But they didn't stop there—they invited each hiker to get close to the earth, teaching them to identify thyme, sage, and wild oregano by touch and smell. As fingers brushed the soil and scents filled the air, even those who were initially hesitant found themselves deeply engaged, drawn into a connection with the land that transcended sight.

Pausing along the trail, the group encountered donkeys and sheep, each animal a chance for tactile discovery. For many, it was a first—a unique sensory experience that filled the hike with warmth and joy. As hands brushed against woolly coats and gentle muzzles, the bonds between hikers and guides deepened, woven through shared laughter and the simple pleasure of connection.

By the time they reached the farm for lunch, there was a feeling of celebration in the air. Plates of traditional Lebanese food were passed around, and everyone dug in, sharing not just a meal but stories, dreams, and contact information. The visually impaired hikers left with a new sense of empowerment, having realized that the directional bars allowed them to navigate independently, to touch and smell their surroundings in ways that

brought nature alive. The sighted guides, in turn, gained a new perspective, realizing that their companions' courage and resilience made visual impairment simply one facet of a deeply capable and independent person.

The experience was a testament to teamwork and the magic of inclusion. A special thank you goes to the LMTA team, whose skill, patience, and attentiveness turned the hike into a safe and inspiring experience. Thanks also to the generous owner of the Monkey Farm for hosting us in such a welcoming way, and to the Farmville staff who treated us to a delicious, soul-warming meal that brought us all together.

As you imagine this journey, the feel of soil beneath your hands, the scent of wild herbs, and the sound of laughter in the air, consider this: in a world quick to make assumptions about ability, what can each of us do to help break down barriers? How can we share the courage and determination of the visually impaired, ensuring their independence and resilience are understood and celebrated?

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