

Faithful Trips

Few vacations are as exciting and enlightening as those spent where religious traditions are rooted.

BY LAURA DAILY



Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris





Kenneth and Rosemary Trowbridge of Morganfield, Ky., have traveled to many places steeped in religious tradition and history, including Fatima, Portugal; Lourdes, France; Israel; and Italy. The couple has seen Fatima's faithful carry a statue of Mary in a candlelit procession. They've explored the hilltop village of St. Francis' Assisi. They've walked the streets of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

"I've celebrated Mass in Lourdes," Kenneth Trowbridge recalls. "I've strolled the Pope's garden. You read about places in the Bible, but to see and touch them, and to say, 'I've been there,' is truly special."

The Trowbridges aren't going it alone. Faith-based travel has grown from a niche market to a full-blown, multibillion-dollar industry. Annually, nearly 1 million Americans travel overseas on a faith-based trip, according to the World Religious Travel Association.

At one time, the majority of such journeys were simple, personal pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome and other places widely associated with religious history. Now, well-orchestrated group tours can take you throughout the world, combining exploration of culture, history and spirituality with leisure activities, such as shopping in local markets or people-watching at corner cafés.

Who Goes Where?

Globus, one of the world's largest tour operators, offers religious vacations escorted by experts in the history and culture of the visited areas. "Journey Through the Holy Land" visits the Valley of Elah (site of David's victory over Goliath) and Cana, where Jesus changed water to wine. "Grand Catholic Italy" moves from Rome and the Vatican

through Assisi, Florence and Venice. "Lourdes & Shrines of France" visits such sacred sites as Notre Dame Cathedral and St. Bernadette's birthplace.

IsramWorld offers an eight-day "Holy Land Pilgrimage" with an optional trip to Eilat on the Red Sea. A 13-day tour of Israel and Jordan includes a visit to the mountain fortress of Masada and a chance to swim in the Dead Sea.



You can sail to the Holy Land, too. Some cruise itineraries include overnight stays or extended port time in Israel, Egypt or Turkey. For 2011, Royal Caribbean is offering 11 Holy Land cruises on its Vision of the Seas and Splendour of the Seas vessels.

The new Celebrity Solstice also carries passengers on Holy Land sailings, some of which provide opportunities to tour Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Crystal Cruises' "Ruins & Relics" itinerary includes a bird's-eye view of Masada from a helicopter, a visit to Jerusalem's Western Wall, and a three-night excursion to Petra in Jordan. Experts in world affairs, such as former White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater, host workshops aboard the ship.

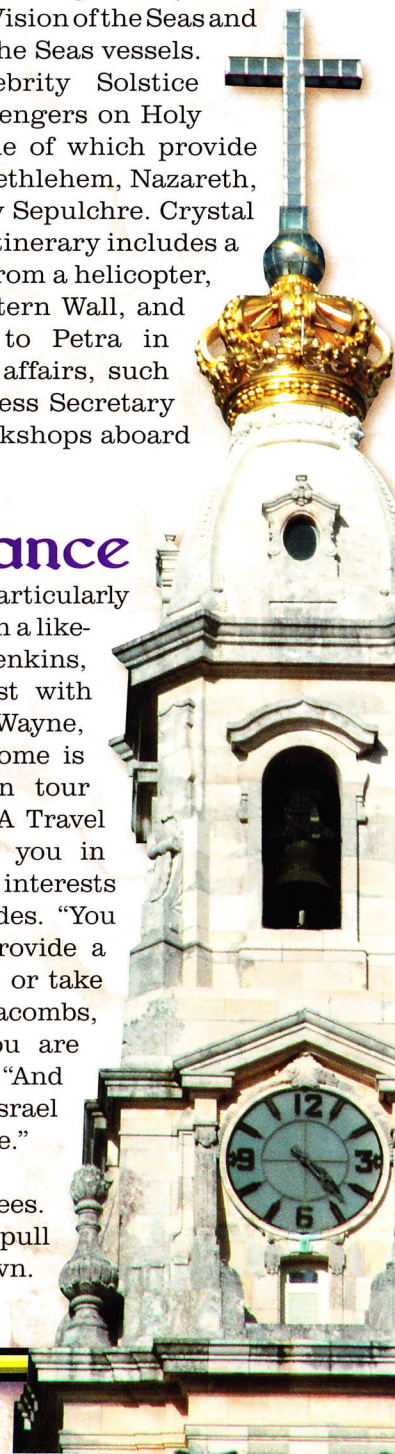
Seek Guidance

Faith-based travel is particularly rewarding when shared with a like-minded group, says Linda Jenkins, a religious travel specialist with Travel Leaders in Ft. Wayne, Ind. "A Catholic tour of Rome is different from a Christian tour of Rome," she points out. A Travel Leaders expert can place you in tours that suit your specific interests and are led by expert guides. "You want someone who can provide a private tour of the Vatican, or take you into the Christian catacombs, and really know what you are seeing," Jenkins says. "And there's no way to really see Israel without a professional guide."

Kenneth Trowbridge agrees. He's seen guides seem to pull off miracles of their own.



The Dead Sea



During a visit to the Vatican for a Wednesday Mass, he recalls, "Everyone was maneuvering to get to the front of Vatican Square to catch a glimpse of the Pope. But our guide kept telling us to stay at the back near a small path. We thought he was crazy until the Pope rode by. I found myself within six feet of His Holiness — not once, but twice!"

Phil Overton, president of Travel Leaders in Dallas, cautions those seeking religious travel to be wary of scam artists offering bogus or subpar vacation packages. "There are a lot of charlatans out there who look legitimate when they aren't," he says. "Using a travel agent can ensure that you get your money's worth. We research tour operators in advance. I will not book travel with one of them unless I know the company or someone I trust vouches for it."



Travel Leaders experts offer valuable advice based on personal experiences throughout the world. Here, agents visit Masada in Israel, a site where Jews resisted Roman rule during the first century.

"That's why using local travel agents is so important," says Jenkins. "Not only will they advocate for you, but they'll find the perfect tour to meet your beliefs and needs."

Laura Daily is a Colorado-based writer specializing in travel, health, food and consumer issues.

Personal Journeys

A Postcards writer shares memories from favorite faith-based trips.

By Ginger Taggart

Visión Quests

Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Six visionaries living in this small village have described appearances by the Virgin Mary and conveyed messages from her to the world. Since 1981, when the apparitions were first reported, millions of people — of many faiths and nationalities — have visited Medjugorje, often bringing home stories of healings and supernatural events.

In 2008, I had the privilege of staying with one of the Medjugorje visionaries. Speaking with my host, joining hundreds of other pilgrims, and witnessing an unexplainable "weeping statue" were profound experiences, providing perhaps the greatest sense of peace I've ever known.

Lourdes, France

Here, in 1858, a 14-year-old girl named Bernadette reported 18 apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Today, Lourdes is known as a site of miraculous healings. The local population of 15,000 is dwarfed by the nearly 5 million outsiders who visit annually.

I attended an open-air Mass in the historic grotto where Bernadette experienced her visions. I also bathed in waters reputed to have healing properties, and I joined a candlelit processional that occurs nightly. I was highly impressed by stunning mosaics debuting at the Basilica of the Rosary to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the town's famous apparition sightings.

St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

