

Emerging Yet Lesser Known Destinations for the 21st Century Religious Traveler



Although religious travel is considered one of the oldest forms of tourism, it surprisingly remains one of the least known forms of travel in many ways. For example, ask the average traveler to name as many religious travel sites around the world as possible, and usually at best they can only name a handful of most common or popular faith-based destinations (i.e. Israel, Mecca, the Vatican, etc.). However, things are changing. Religious tourism is on the rise throughout the world and more destinations than ever before are being “discovered” as places of pilgrimage.

Although many countries can be considered emerging destinations for 21st-century religious travelers, three specific countries appear poised for great futures in faith-based tourism: **Armenia, Cyprus, and Jordan**. Each of these destinations boast a rich religious history and culture, while also serving as home to many important pilgrimage sites – all of which appeal to different faiths. Furthermore, each of these countries and their respective tourist boards are currently making significant strides in reaching out to the religious travel market through various means and efforts. Let’s take a look at each of these “off-the-beaten-path” yet emerging destinations in religious tourism.



Armenia

Of all the emerging destinations in religious tourism, the one that just may possess the greatest potential is Armenia. For one, Armenia is situated in the highlands surrounding the Biblical mountains of Ararat, the very place where according to the Old Testament, Noah's Ark landed after the flood. Secondly, Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 A.D., which is believed to have originally been evangelized by two of Jesus' apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew (Note: It wasn't until around 314 A.D. that Constantine recognized Christianity in the Roman Empire). As such, Armenians are considered by many "the first Christians." The result? Armenia possesses a very rich and ancient Christian history with some 4,000 churches available to visiting religious travelers. And more than ever before, Armenia itself is beginning to reach out to the global religious travel market and sharing its message.

Cyprus

Cyprus definitely qualifies as an "off the beaten path," emerging religious travel destination. Why is that? It was in Cyprus where in 2006, in cooperation with the World Tourism Organization, the 1st International Conference on Religious Tourism (ICORET) was held. Since then, Cyprus has quickly evolved into an up-and-coming destination for religious travelers.....and for good reason. Like Armenia, Cyprus is home to a very rich religious history and culture. Christians are drawn to Cyprus to view its more than 90 Christian basilica ruins, explore the pilgrimage sites associated with St. Lazarus and St. Helen, and to

see the Pillar of St. Paul, where according to tradition the apostle was flogged in 45 A.D. Muslims are drawn on pilgrimage to Cyprus to visit Larnaca and the prominent shrine of Hala Sultan Tekke (also known as the Mosque of Umm Haram). Taken altogether, it is estimated that 100,000 people visit Cyprus for religious purposes each year...but that number is quickly growing.



Jordan

In the past five to ten years, virtually no other country has done more to attract religious pilgrims than the country of Jordan. And the results are in. Jordan is quickly rising from being a rather “obscure” pilgrimage destination to a budding leader in the global faith tourism arena. For this reason, religious tourism remains a primary focus of the Jordan Tourism Board – and rightfully so. Jordan appeals to multiple faiths including Christians, Muslims, and Jews for its prominent place and role in religious history. For example, it is here where pilgrims can visit Mt. Nebo, the very place where Moses is said to have viewed the Promised Land. In addition, it is here in Jordan where Abraham, a common patriarch of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, is believed to have traversed while on his journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan. Today, Jordan remains one of the few national tourist boards with fully-dedicated religious tourism brochures, promotional materials, and webpages, all of which assist pilgrims in planning their religious travel plans to Jordan.



And ... Lebanon

As mentioned earlier, many countries and destinations can qualify as “off-the-beaten-path” yet emerging destinations in religious tourism. For example, take the country of Lebanon, which recently debuted a film about Lebanon's many religious sites, as well as a guidebook entitled “The Paths of Faith,” featuring 20 roads leading to both Christian and Muslim holy sites. This focus and direction on religious tourism is coming from the country’s tourism board itself, where the Lebanon’s director general of tourism ministry (Nada Sardouk) summarized it best, when he stated the "human and economic importance of boosting religious tourism" and referenced the country’s “incredible wealth of religions.”

In the coming years, we can expect to see more countries and national tourist boards follow the same “strategies” as Armenia, Cyprus, Jordan, and Lebanon, whereby they tout and promote their rich religious heritage, culture, and sites to attract faith-based travelers. As this happens, many more of these “off-the-beaten-path” destinations for religious tourism just may emerge as the new leaders of the global faith-based travel industry.

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