

# Develop Your Own Pilgrimage Tourism

Pilgrimage tourism may be one of the earliest and most important forms of tourism. Faith based tourism exists throughout the world, from India to Mexico, from Israel to Saudi Arabia. From Biblical times pilgrimages have not only been calls to spirituality but also major economic drivers that impact not only the soul but also the pocketbook. The Bible speaks of ascending to Jerusalem at least three times a year for each of the Biblical harvest festivals. Likewise the Islamic world is famous for the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.



## Cities, Temples and ... Lenin

For many millennia people have made pilgrimages to cities, shrines, rivers, mountains. Cities around the world have developed religious tourism not only at their main centers but also in places where miracles have been reported such as in Fatima in Portugal and Lourdes in France.

Furthermore, while pilgrimages are usually associated with religious events or locations, they may also come in the form of visits to places where political events have occurred, burial sites of political leaders, or famous monuments. For example, during the Communist period of Russian history there, millions of people made a pilgrimage to Lenin's tomb and in the USA millions visit the monuments that punctuate Washington, DC

Pilgrimage tourism in many ways parallels other forms of event tourism. While some form of spirituality, wish for divine healing or thankfulness inspires the trip, in many ways these pilgrimages also reflect many of the characteristics of other forms of tourism venues. A visitor to any of these religious sites will quickly note that in the modern world of pilgrimage tourism (and from what we can learn from ancient texts, also in the ancient world) the places produce secondary industries. Be these, the souvenir industry or the lodging industry, a series of dependent industries quickly develop

around the site.

### **Spiritual or Cognitive Travelers?**

Secondly, just as in some many other forms of tourism, the visitor (pilgrim) must be a believer in the narrative. Thirdly there is a difference between a pilgrimage, whose primary basis is faith-oriented, and a trip in which the person's primary purpose is other than the spiritual narrative. These people may be classified as pilgrimage based tourism but they are not spiritual pilgrims. Thus, entering into the world of religious pilgrimage sites is an exercise in spiritual emotion rather than cognition.



While all pilgrimages are faith-based travel, not all faith-based tourism is pilgrimages. Faith based travel may take place for life cycle events, for missionary work or humanitarian interest projects and for religious conventions and conclaves.

Although from a social psychology viewpoint pilgrimages are based on emotion, faith-based tourism is big business. To help you deal with this growing travel trend. Here are some essentials to help the busy travel and tourism professional.

### **Pilgrimages Are Often Big Business**

It is estimated that in the US alone some 25% of the traveling public is interested in some form of pilgrimage or faith-based tourism. When one adds to this the number of people who travel for faith-based conventions, and faith based activities such as weddings, bar mitzvahs or funerals, the number becomes extraordinarily large. World Religious Travel is one of the fastest growing segments in travel today. Religious travel is estimated at a value of US\$18 billion and 300 million travelers strong. Major faith based destinations such as Israel, Italy and Saudi Arabia have developed large industries that provide services for people on pilgrimage.

### **Group or Individual Tourism**

Pilgrimages may occur as a form of group or individual tourism. Especially among young people (who compose about one third of the faith-based visitors) there are a great number of people who seek spiritual aspects to their vacations. Think through what areas of your community offer a chance to increase self-awareness or spirituality.

### **Less Threatened by Economic Crisis**

Pilgrimage travel is often less prone to economic ups and downs in the market place. Because faith-based travelers are committed travelers they tend to save for these religious experiences and travel despite the state of the economy. Faith travelers tend to have different motives for travel than do travelers for other reasons. For example, the faith-based traveler often travels as part of a religious obligation or to fulfill a spiritual mission. Faith-based travel can provide a steady flow of income to a local tourism economy.

### **All Ages and All Nationalities**

The pilgrimage and faith based market has the advantage of appealing to people from around the world, of all ages and of all nationalities. Tourism and travel professionals should be aware that this market might well double by the year 2020. To add to this number many faith-based travelers prefer to travel in groups rather than as individuals.

### **Be Sensitive to Religious Needs**

Religiously aware professionals will do best with this market. From airlines to hotels, those travel and tourism professionals who are sensitive to religious needs are going to do better. Among the things to consider are types of food served, types of music played and when activities take place. As in other forms of tourism it is essential to know your market. For example, airlines that do not offer vegetarian meals may lose a portion of the faith-based market whose religion has specific food restrictions.



### **Develop Your Faith-Based Tourism**

A recent study reported by the Associate Press found that in the Judeo-Christian world Israel is the number one preference of faith-based travelers followed by Italy and then England; however, faith-based tourism does not have to be built around a classical pilgrimage site. There is no doubt that it helps to have a major religious center, such as Jerusalem, Mecca, or Rome most locales will never have such holy sites. Lack of a religious center does not mean however that a location cannot develop faith-based tourism. Florida has created its own Bible land, and multiple cities around the world have found ways to incorporate religious holidays into their tourism product.

### **Coordinate with Pilgrim's Needs**

Support industries must coordinate with the pilgrimage cycle and needs. All too often the spirituality that visitors seek is lost at the level of supporting industries. During faith based tourism periods it is essential that hotels and restaurants connect with the arts and cultural communities to develop an overall faith based product rather than a mishmash of unrelated offerings.

### **Resources for Religious Tourism**

Be aware of new and exciting resources for pilgrimage and faith-based travel. For examples the website Grouple.com has a whole section dedicated to religious travel. Major religious institutions also maintain travel centers for people of their faith. Another inspiration for pilgrimages may be called the anti-faith based traveler. For example, the fictional works of J. K. Rowling' Harry Potter, Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code, Shakespeare's plays - have all created pilgrimages.

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