

Holy Land Tours (Christian)



Holyland Tours: In the footsteps



For well over 2000 years, the peoples of three faiths have revered the near Middle East as a holy land. No area of the world has been more gifted with religious significance. Christian pilgrims have traveled to Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Greece and Italy to achieve a fuller understanding of their religious heritage. The first pilgrims traveled a difficult path on the dangerous roads of the old Roman Empire. Today's travelers will find their journey somewhat easier to achieve, but no less rewarding in the doing. It has often been said that travel is a journey of the soul as much as the body. Nowhere is this more true than in travel that expressly seeks out the core of a religious tradition.



More and more travelers are discovering the important role the geography and culture of the Middle East played in the development of their religions. This TRO Activity Index Guide focuses on the Christian tradition in the Mediterranean region. Other TRO Activity Index Guides look to the Jewish heritage or to other geographic areas of pilgrimage. This TRO Guide will acquaint you with the basics of planning, booking a preparing for a trip to the holy land: that area of the Mediterranean important to the history and heritage of Christianity. Many of the most important events in Christianity occurred long before it was the religion of the Roman Empire, but when it was instead a little known but growing sect.



Early in your trip research, determine what type of travel to the holy land you wish to undertake, and the destinations you wish to visit. If you want to delve back to the pre-Christian era, Egypt holds many of the early origins of the faith in its fantastic array of antiquities, as does Israel. The life of Jesus is the story of Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the Jordan valley. The life of the early church spans a much wider area, however, through Israel and Jordan to Lebanon, Turkey, Greece and Italy, the first regions of travel for the early apostles and Church.

You will also want to decide if you want to travel independently or with a group. Your travel consultant can arrange an independent fly/drive itinerary for you in almost any destination. An independent itinerary has many advantages in that your time is your own and you can pace the trip to suit your own preferences without the confines of schedules and timetables. A hosted or escorted tour is another option, providing guided tours of the destinations involved. Hosted and escorted tours can be arranged privately, so that you are not with other travelers, or as part of a larger group. In the hosted or escorted option, you have the advantage of a knowledgeable guide and the efficiency inherent in having someone familiar with the setting arranging your itinerary. Group tours tend to be less expensive in general than independent or private tours. Escorted group travel permits the traveler to experience a destination while letting others worry about logistical details of the itinerary.

Many of the sites you will visit will have a maze-like quality to them, and vast historical and religious significance. Your travels will be significantly enhanced by the presence of a knowledgeable multi-lingual guide. Regardless of the type of tour for which you opt, investigate the quality of the guides that will be available to you so that you can quickly and efficiently negotiate the ins and outs of the encounters you will have. In the end, it is a matter of personal preference and budget.

Should you decide to use a tour company, you should also discuss with your travel consultant the character of the tour companies available. Many tours to the holy land are run by secular tour operators providing excellent programs complete with well-trained guides. Other tour companies are "faith based" and often use ministers or lay-evangelists to guide and conduct the tour. Some tour companies offer a variety of options such as tours specially designed for Catholics or Protestants. The character and ambiance of these groups can be very different, so communicate early on your preferences with your travel consultant.



Station Nine, Via Dolorosa

Jerusalem remains the primary destination for most trips to the holy land. The city is a key religious site for Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the so-called "faiths of the Book". The Abrahamic religions all derive from a common, ancient and Semitic tradition arising from this region of the world. As a result there are few destinations anywhere that can match the convergence of historical, religious and cultural significance of Jerusalem.

Most tour operators will make sure that key sites in the city are a part of your experience. In the section known as the "Old City", you will find the souk, or city market. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is the traditional place of the Crucifixion and the Tomb, still stands, the cornerstone having been laid in 1149 by Crusaders. Visitors can walk the Via Dolorosa, the original Stations of the Cross. Others believe the Garden Tomb in East Jerusalem to be the place of the Tomb. The Wailing Wall in the Jewish Quarter and the Citadel (the Tower of David) are a part of nearly every itinerary. Inside the confines of the Church of All Nations is the Garden of Gethsemane. Mount Zion, the traditional location of the Last Supper is close to the nearby King David's Tomb. Outside of Jerusalem, however, Israel is a continuum of archeological and religious treasures. Many tours take in dozens of sites such as the Sea of Galilee, Qumran and Tiberias. Bethlehem is just five miles south of Jerusalem. Now in the hands of the Palestinian Authority, the town is not always open to inspection, but when it is, no pilgrim will want to miss the location of the birth of Jesus. Nazareth, the location where Jesus spent much of his early life, is also very common stopping point on most itineraries. Many tours take in Caesarea, where Peter began his ministries. Many Roman artifacts such as the old Ampitheatre and aqueduct remain intact. The Mount of the Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River provide opportunities for many tour operators to allow travelers to cruise on the Sea or to be baptized in the River.

The paths traveled by the early apostles also offer opportunities for travelers to immerse themselves in a religious pilgrimage. Travelers to Greece will find the ancient city of Corinth, where the early church received the canonical Letter to the Corinthians.

In Turkey, one can travel to the fortified monastery of St. John where tradition tells us the Book of Revelations was authored. Here are many magnificent churches visited by Saint Peter and Saint Paul as the Christian religion moved from being a Jewish sect to a religion of the Gentiles.

On Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean coast is the city of Antakya, in biblical times called "Antioch". In 1963, the Vatican designated the Church of St. Peter in Antioch as the world's first Cathedral. Not far away is Tarsus, the birthplace of the Apostle Paul. Here also is the city of Ephesus where grave of John is supposed to be at the



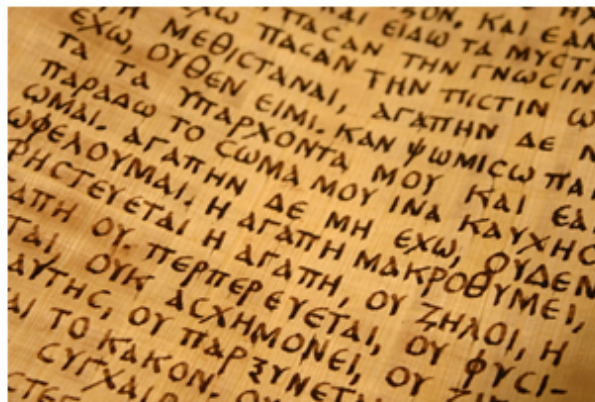
Turkey - House of the Virgin Mary

Basilica of St. John. It is in Ephesus, where Paul wrote the Epistles to the Ephesians and where St. John the Evangelist is traditionally thought to have brought the mother of Jesus. The Virgin Mary's house is located in Ephesus and is recognized by the Vatican as an important Christian shrine. It is also in Turkey that legend says Noah's Ark came to rest after the Great Flood on Mount Agri (Ararat). Finally, Rome and Vatican City remain a center for many Christian pilgrims, both Catholic and Protestant.

The high season for travel to the Mediterranean region generally runs between May and October. The earlier and later shoulder seasons see fewer crowds and generally cooler temperatures, as the summer months can be very hot. The winter months are the least expensive season in which to go and excellent values can be found during the winter, exclusive of the spike in pilgrimage travel that occurs in Israel during the traditional Christmas season. Some tour packages include air, while others are priced "land only". Your travel consultant can assist you with achieving the greatest possible value with regard to your transportation. Other considerations will be whether to elect to do a pre or post tour extension if you choose an escorted tour, giving you an opportunity to spend time on your own exploring your destinations. Some tour operators reserve the right to cancel particular tours, or you may decide to change your own plans. Be sure to determine the policies of the tour operator you choose and to purchase travel insurance to protect against unforeseen interruptions or circumstances. Again, your travel consultant is your best guide.

Spend some time reviewing the materials provided by your travel consultant and be comfortable with what is, and is not, included in the price of your tour. Consider the issues of departure taxes, visas, gratuities and meals. You may also want to upgrade your accommodations. If you are traveling by yourself, determine what the "single supplement" charge will be, or whether the tour operator can find a suitable roommate for you.

Tours to the holy land inevitably mean a great deal of walking. Many of the sites you will visit are either roughly paved or unpaved. It is a good idea to prepare yourself by being in as good a physical shape as possible prior to leaving on your trip. If you or any of your travel companions have any physical impairment, be sure to let your travel consultant know. Bring comfortable clothing, but pack as lightly as possible. Your tour operator will provide you with a list of recommended items to bring, but a good pair of walking shoes, already broken in, is a must! A hat, sunglasses and sunscreen are also very important must-haves as you will spend a great deal of your time out-of-doors.



Greek Manuscript of 1st Corinthians 13



Gethsemane

Make sure that your travel documentation is in order well in advance of your date of departure. Your travel consultant can assist you with the requirements of the countries that you intend to visit. You will typically need a passport valid for at least six months from your planned date of return home. In addition, some destinations will request to see a return airline ticket. Visas are required of some nationalities by some countries, so inquire with regard to your particular circumstances and planned itinerary. Travel documentation is a bit different for Israel than for some other destinations. In particular, some Arab countries will not allow you to enter if you have visited

Israel. Therefore, have the customs official in Israel stamp your entry permit rather than your passport.

Finally, safety is always an issue of concern when visiting the Middle East, especially Israel. In general, the situation has been much better over the recent past than in the years just prior to 2006, despite the recent conflict between militant factions in Lebanon and Israel. If the events in one region appear too unstable for you, shift your focus to one of the other biblically significant areas. While there are no guarantees of safety, hundreds of thousands of tourists visit the holy land each year without incident.

With the assistance of a good travel consultant and a bit of planning, your own, personal pilgrimage can be safe and spiritually most rewarding.



Egyptian - Israeli border