



## Jewish Heritage Travel

# Jewish Heritage Tours



***"I have reflected many times upon our rigid search. It has shown me that everything is illuminated in the light of the past. It is always along the side of us, on the inside, looking out."*** - From the movie *"Everything is Illuminated"*

Experiencing the beauty and culture of an unfamiliar area of the world is always a remarkable experience. For those who are purposely exploring a culture through the window of their faith, it can be even more remarkable. Embarking on a Jewish heritage tour is one way for Jews, and others interested in Jewish tradition, to see how the tradition has lived, survived and thrived in destinations throughout the world.

By taking a trip that focuses on Jewish heritage, a traveler can visit the places, past and present, that are important to Jews as a people and to the traveler as a person of faith. The Diaspora has a center, but no boundary. Israel, Russia and Poland are important destinations, but many other countries throughout the world that are filled with the rich history of the Jewish people: China, Budapest, Italy, France, the United States, Africa, South America - just about every corner of the world has something of interest for those exploring their Jewish heritage and history.



A Jewish heritage tour involves much more than simply visiting the synagogues or Jewish museums of an area. Educated, informative tour guides will lead travelers to important places rich with Jewish customs, history and culture that a casual traveler may never find without professional, guided assistance.

Travelers on a Jewish heritage tour need not worry about their entire trip being one long history lesson without any fun along the way. Many tours include other aspects of the region, like fine restaurants, first-class hotels, shopping and local recreation. A good tour will balance the traveler's thirst for knowledge and desire for an enjoyable vacation.



It is important for many Jews to continue to observe their religious customs, even while on vacation. Many tours are able to fully service their needs, offering Kosher meals and access to synagogues for worship. They can also accommodate those who want to avoid Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) travel and every type of traveler: families, couples, singles, honeymooners, students, and even non-Jews who are interested in learning about the history and culture of the people can all find a tour that fits their interests.

### **Popular Jewish Heritage Tour Destinations**

While the Jewish people have lived in and contributed to many cultures throughout history, there are certain regions where they have had a concentrated influence, and their stories in these regions are inherent to understanding the heritage of the Jewish people. These destinations are some of the best places to start or include in a tour.

#### **Israel**

The Jewish race can trace their roots back to Israel, the land of Abraham, father of Israel. A heritage tour of Israel will take travelers through Jerusalem, Masada, Galilee, Tel Aviv, Haifa, and the Golan Heights; the whole of Israel is abounding with Jewish heritage and culture. A coordinated heritage tour through the Holy Land helps travelers pinpoint the essential places to visit. Tours will also often include stays at a Kibbutz, a voluntary Israeli commune, where travelers experience first-hand one of the modern aspects of Jewish life in Israel.

#### **Russia, Germany, Poland and the Holocaust**

Before the Holocaust, the Jewish culture in Russia, Central and Western Europe thrived. The Holocaust destroyed not only families, but also attempted to destroy the evidence of Jewish life in the country. In the years since, what was lost of Jewish life has been reconstructed where possible and memorialized where it cannot be reconstructed. Travelers to Europe can visit Berlin, Warsaw, Krakow, Auschwitz, and many of the other cities where the atrocities of the Holocaust attempted to annihilate the Jewish heritage. Many of these sites are now shrines, and monuments of repentance and memorial now dot the landscape.



#### **Budapest**

Many people may not realize that Budapest has the third largest population of Jews in Europe. The Jewish culture in Budapest is not just historical; it is a modern, living, breathing way of life for nearly 100,000 Jews. The history of the Jewish people in Budapest dates back to Roman times, and travelers have much to discover in this beautiful city, including Jewish people's contributions to its economy, politics and culture. A Jewish Museum has a wealth of information on the Jews of Hungary, and a stirring Holocaust Memorial stands in honor of the victims of the Holocaust.

#### **New York City**

In the United States, New York City is a city rich with Jewish heritage. In addition to touring the boroughs where the Jewish families live and work, travelers can tour the Museum of Jewish Heritage, a building designed in the shape of the Star of David.

## **China**

China? Yes, China. The country has a long and interesting Jewish heritage, and travelers have much to learn from a tour of the region. For over 800 years the Jews and the Chinese co-existed peacefully in Kaifeng. Over the centuries, however, the Jews were assimilated into the Chinese culture and in 1866, the synagogue in Kaifeng was eventually destroyed. There was a new influx of Jews to Shanghai during WWII as 30,000 took refuge, but then after the war, many left for Israel. Much evidence of the Jewish culture in China still exists, however, and can be experienced on a tour through the country.

## **Italy**

Italy has one of the oldest Jewish populations in Europe; the history of the Jews in Italy goes back over 2000 years. They have left their mark on Italy's architecture, history, art, philosophy and cuisine, and a heritage tour of Italy will take travelers to synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, the Jewish Museum and the old ghettos dating back to the 16th century.

## **Academic Study**



While many people choose to incorporate their heritage tour into a traditional vacation as one important part of a varied itinerary, some people choose to concentrate solely on studying their Jewish heritage on their trip and take what is often called an Academic Study Jewish Heritage Tour.

An academic study tour will be much more concentrated and educational than the common Jewish Heritage Tour. Emphasis will be on education and discovery, and leisure time is minimal. For those who wish to gain as much as they can from their tour in a short period of time, an academic study tour may be the way to go.

## **Choosing a Heritage Tour and Guide**

If the idea of a Jewish Heritage Tour peaks your interest, but you are not sure where to visit, ask yourself some questions and discuss these issues with your travel consultant to find a trip that best fits your expectations.

Are you interested in the history of your personal ancestors? If so, you should consider visiting those places from where your family originated. For example, if you know that your relatives emigrated from Russia, you may consider doing a heritage tour in Russia.

Is there a particular area of the world you have always wanted to see, regardless of the Jewish heritage found there? Why not visit a long desired destination while discovering the history of the Jews who lived there in the past and the culture of the Jews who live there in the present. Examples might be a trip to the Great Wall of China coupled with historical spots, or a luxury vacation in the Mediterranean with a short heritage tour in Italy.

Are you someone who feels very disconnected to your religious roots? Consider a visit to Israel, where the history of Judaism is the deepest. Or perhaps you are interested in learning more about this faith, even though it is not your own? Immersing yourself in the culture is a great way to do this, so visiting one of the main locations of Jewish culture may be a good choice.

Once you've chosen your tour destination, you need to pick a specific tour.

Your travel consultant will assist with choosing an appropriate Heritage Tour. Many agencies and tour guides specialize in these tours, and booking your tour with a specialist is the best way to ensure that you will get an authentic, educational, comprehensive tour of this kind.

If you know which area of the world you would like to tour, your travel consultant can compare the prices and the itineraries of the tours to see which best accommodates both your budget and interests. Some agencies offer customized tours with personal tour guides. A travel consultant will also know a tour organization's reputation and legitimacy, which is paramount in selecting an operator.

### **Independent Travel**

While going through an established tour organizer is probably the best way to go on a Jewish Heritage Tour, there is always the option of having your travel consultant assist you with planning and booking an independent tour. There are many books available that will guide you through a particular region, pointing you to the areas of interest for those on a heritage quest.

Some advantages to planning your own tour include the ability to completely customize your tour, change your plans on a moment's notice, and take advantage of the opportunity to spend as much (or as little) time at any one place as you wish. A Jewish Heritage Tour can be very emotionally taxing. Some people may wish to leave a particularly disturbing stop on the tour (such as those locations associated with The Holocaust) quickly while others may be fascinated and wish to spend more time there to really absorb their emotions. Creating your own tour gives you that freedom.

A word of caution for the do-it-yourselfers: There are many regions of the world where a traveler is much safer traveling with a tour group than without. An established tour will not only take you to the best points of interest, it will keep you away from unsafe locations for foreigners. If you are making your own plans, make your safety a priority and know where it is safe to go and where it is best to stay away - researching current travel advisory and safety considerations is another part of the planning where your experienced travel consultant will be invaluable.

### **Making the Most of Your Tour**

How do you make the most of such a remarkable experience? First of all, document it. Take pictures and video. One tip for making sure you keep track of what you photograph is to take pictures of signs with descriptions on them before you take any photos in the area. Even if it is just the name of a building, you will be able to identify the places in your pictures much more easily this way. When taking video, tell the story of the place as you are filming.

Keep a journal. If you are filming video, your narration will be one type of journal. However, thoughts and emotions can build up during the day, and spending the time to write them down in the evenings once you've retired to your room will help you get the most out of each day's experiences - and remember them more easily. Yes, you will be tired, but reflections on what you learned and how it affected you are best written when fresh. These records will be invaluable for you as memories, and may also help to contribute to your family's narrative.

When in Rome (or Israel or Poland or China) do as the Romans do. Experience the culture by taking part in their local activities. Try the foods of the area - it's easy to imagine that common Jewish foods in China will be very different from the cuisine in New York City. Wear the traditional dress when appropriate. Immerse yourself in the experience.

A Jewish Heritage Tour will be unlike any vacation you've ever taken. You will visit places that will break your heart, and you will meet people who will make your heart soar. You will learn history, connect with your roots, and have a deeper understanding of your faith, all within the few days of your journey. You will be changed.