

Managing group tours for pilgrimage purposes

By Ronen Paldi

Traveling for religious purposes is an \$18-billion-a-year industry and still growing.

Selling and organizing religious travel is an important business segment for agents looking to expand into lucrative markets.

One of the most important, but trickiest, segments of religious travel is pilgrimage travel. These travelers go beyond visiting religious sites. Pilgrimages are deeper and more meaningful and handling groups traveling for a pilgrimage requires special knowledge and understanding on behalf of the travel agent and tour agency.

The word for pilgrimage in Hebrew literally translates to "one who is sent by foot." Those who went on pilgrimages were not looking for a vacation. They had to travel long distances by walking.

For those early travelers, it was a spiritual journey that would often transform their entire lives. That still holds true today.

Diving into the world of religious travel, and pilgrimages in particular, is not as easy, for most, as selling other forms of travel. Travel agents and tour planners should not start cold-calling churches and pastors to book those first trips. The best way to find customers is to get a referral from a friend, or perhaps to talk to any priests or pastors that you already know and mention that you are interested in planning and organizing religious trips.

A pilgrimage is an emotional journey. It is something felt very deeply in the hearts and minds of those taking the trip. That means that dealing with groups interested in taking a pilgrimage is different than dealing with a group looking to visit religious sites for purposes of a vacation. With a pilgrimage the emotions run



A pilgrimage group visits Caesarea in Israel.

higher, and the traveler is likely more emotionally invested than your average vacationer.

In general, pilgrimages come from church groups. For a church, any kind of travel is a major expense because it is not part of their annual operating overhead, and planning any kind of travel with members of the congregation is a major physical and financial endeavor. Travel agents and tour planners should keep this in mind, and make sure their pricing is aligned with the church's budget and be prepared to negotiate if need be.

Pilgrims are looking to make a personal connection with people and places they have heard about in church or read about in the Bible. This goes beyond just knowing a little bit about biblical history or visiting a site with religious significance and then moving on to the souvenir shop.

With that in mind, make sure your tour operator provides guides who are knowledgeable and capable of delivering that extra measure of service that pilgrims take to heart so deeply.

How can a travel agent hope to compete in this potentially lucrative world of pilgrimage travel?

It's important to remember that the hard-sell approach preferred by

many travel agents will likely turn off anyone looking to make a pilgrimage.

The key for success in this endeavor is choosing the right tour operator.

When looking for a tour operator to help you manage pilgrimages it is important to keep these things in mind:

- Use a tour operator that supports travel agents by not dealing directly with churches.
 - Choose a tour operator that has extensive experience with the destination that the group wants to visit.
 - Choose a tour operator that understands the meaning of pilgrimage.
 - Be sure to use a tour operator that can customize the pilgrimage for each church group since not every group will want to see the same things every time.
 - Choose a company that is financially solid so that you know a quality trip will be guaranteed.
 - Choose a company that will provide all of the documents necessary for the travelers to have a smooth trip, uninterrupted by red tape and hassles.
- If the pilgrimage is done correctly and properly it can provide an experience so unique that it will bring customers back again and again. It can also provide a whole new and unique branch of your travel offerings.



Ronen Paldi is the founder of Portland, Ore.-based Ya'lla Tours USA, which specializes in offering unique and life-changing tours for religious travelers to some of the world's most important sacred destinations in Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan and Greece.