

ISRAEL

For Ya'lla Tours, region's turmoil is no obstacle to rebound

Ya'lla Tours USA, a Portland, Ore., operator specializing in customized FIT and group programs to Israel and the Mediterranean, has seen a rebound in travel to Israel following the turmoil in Egypt. In fact, demand just keeps growing, despite ongoing uncertainty in the wider region. Travel Weekly Senior Editor Gay Nagle Myers discussed the reasons behind Israel's strong client appeal with Ya'lla Tours President Ronen Paldi.

Travel Weekly: How did you handle your clients in Egypt when the turmoil began in January?

Ronen Paldi: We had a plan in place long before it was ever needed. We were able to instantly transfer our telecommunications to land lines; we had support staff working from alternative offices; and we were able to keep in touch with key staff to confirm all our clients were safe.

Safety and experience are our greatest assets. We took measures to ensure the well-being of our travelers.

TW: How is the Mideast situation affecting business now?

Paldi: We had a slowdown in Israel business and bookings in January due to Egypt and uncertainty on the part of travelers. By mid-February, we'd rebounded and haven't slowed down since.

Last year set records for Ya'lla Tours in U.S. travelers to Israel. People want to go. We're taking bookings for 2013 now. Even in 2009 when travel everywhere was down, Israel was up.

TW: What's your secret?

Paldi: We only deal with travel agents. We design and customize private tours for FITs and small groups; we do not cater to the mass market.

TW: Any problems in arranging travel within Israel?

Paldi: Hotel rooms: a shortage of hotel rooms and no parking areas for tour buses. It's easy enough to order a fleet of modern buses, but there's no place for them to park once the drivers drop off visitors at the sites. To block surrounding noise from large tour groups, we give each of our clients a personal headset so they can hear their guide.

TW: What's on tap in terms of new Ya'lla products to Israel?

Paldi: We're offering a Christian Pilgrimage Nov. 8 to 19. That's a time of year when demand is high and space is hard to get. So we set up this tour that agents can buy into with a guaranteed departure date.

We'll take customers from different travel agencies, capping the number at 25.

It's a real pilgrimage led by a spiritual leader with events like baptisms at the Jordan River and a private boat ride on the Sea of Galilee to visit the 2,000-year-old Genosar Boat, discovered in 1986.

TW: What's your advice to travel agents looking to sell Israel?

Paldi: Specialize in the destination and know what you are selling. We organized a Christian-oriented fam trip for 32 agents last year that visited all the holy sites in Israel for several days. After the tour, I led a 10-hour seminar in Tel Aviv instructing agents on how to sell Israel to church groups. Within two weeks after that fam, we saw bookings come in from several of the agents on the fam.

TW: What does Ya'lla mean, and how did you end up in Portland, Ore.?

Paldi: Ya'lla is Hebrew and Arabic slang for "Let's Go," and the name suits our company. I'm Israeli, but I came to Portland from Australia, where I'd been running a Ya'lla Tours office.

A friend recommended the area, said there was no one else in the Pacific Northwest selling tours to the Mideast. That was in 1993. A good decision.



'Safety and experience are our greatest assets.' — Ronen Paldi, Ya'lla Tours



Ya'lla Tours' bookings to Israel dropped in January but rebounded fully by February. Pictured, the city of Jaffa.



Ronen Paldi
President
Ya'lla Tours