

Israel Comes to Florida

At the Holy Land Experience, Orlando's newest theme park, visitors discover the history of the Scriptures, re-creations of biblical sites and inspirational entertainment.

What if it were possible to travel back in time to ancient Jerusalem, where Jesus roamed the dusty roads spreading the message of salvation? Or to peer inside the Garden Tomb, where the Savior was buried before His resurrection three days later?

For many Christians, it would be a dream come true to take a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and watch the Bible unfold before their eyes. But thanks to a biblical theme park located in Orlando, Florida, tourists can be transported back 2,000 years to the historic city without ever leaving the United States.

The Holy Land Experience, a reproduction of Jerusalem that sits on 14 acres, is the only attraction of its kind. The huge replica was built by Zion's Hope, a nondenominational ministry created to "fervently, yet graciously" proclaim Christ to the Jewish people. Marvin Rosenthal, a Messianic Jew and founder of the organization, says the park is the first-ever "living biblical museum."

Once inside the City Gates, parkgoers can mingle with first-century soldiers or stroll through the Jerusalem Street Market to browse in quaint stores such as the Old Scroll Shop, where souvenirs and books are sold. The Smile of a Child Adventure is a play area and one-stop shop for youngsters touring the park.

Visitors can then tour the Dead Sea Qumran Caves, a replica of

the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, or scurry to the Theater of Life to catch a 55-minute airing of One Night With the King, starring famed Hollywood film actor Omar Sharif.

“I traveled all the way from Germany to take in some of the sites here at the park,” visitor Sasha Bergman says. “It has helped me become a better student of the Bible.”

When the Holy Land Experience opened its doors in February 2001, it faced a wave of controversy. Jewish leaders protested the park’s existence, accusing organizers of using the huge replica of ancient Jerusalem as a façade to convert Jewish visitors to Christianity.

Rosenthal drew more criticism when local media learned that he refused to hire charismatic Christians. “We are not charismatics,” he told the Orlando Sentinel in 2001. “We love them. We appreciate them. But we would not offer them a job.”

The park also faced a legal challenge when the Orange County Property Appraiser challenged its tax-exempt status, claiming the Holy Land Experience operated as a business rather than as a ministry. However, in July 2005 a Florida circuit judge ruled in favor of the park, preventing Zion’s Hope from having to pay a property-tax bill in excess of \$1 million.

At that time more than 1 million tourists had visited the theme park, but it still struggled regularly with low ticket sales and flagging attendance. The slump often left organizers scrambling to make payroll, putting employees’ jobs at risk.

Last June all that changed when the Trinity Broadcasting

Network (TBN) purchased the theme park from Zion's Hope for \$37 million, paying off investors and securing employees' jobs. In the first month after TBN took over, park owners say they saw a 30 percent rise in attendance, noting that in November and December attendance rose 47 percent.

Today, there are no protestors standing outside with bullhorns shouting, "Stop the destruction of the Jewish people!" And Christians who embrace charismatic teaching not only work at the park; they own it. Tourists file into the parking lot sometimes an hour before the attraction opens, eager to start their journey through Jerusalem.

Back to the Future

Visitors to the Holy Land Experience have traveled from as far away as Switzerland, London and Africa. Some learn about the theme park while watching TBN; others hear about it while visiting Florida.

Inside, it's easy to be drawn in by the lifelike sights, sounds and exhibits at the park. Visitors can stroll through a scaled-down version of the Via Dolorosa, the street Jesus walked on His way to Calvary, or reflect on the resurrection of Christ at the reproduction of the Garden Tomb.

At the six-story Temple Complex, performers re-enact popular Bible stories, such as the account of the centurion whose servant was healed and the crucifixion of Jesus. Maggie Williams, who vacations regularly in Florida with her husband, Rob, says the Holy Land Experience has given her a greater appreciation for the life of Christ. "It seems so real: the trial of Jesus, His crucifixion and the place of His

resurrection," she says.

The park is also home to The Scriptorium: Center for Biblical Antiquities, where some of the world's rarest Bibles and oldest religious artifacts are housed. The Van Kampen Collection consists of scrolls, manuscripts and scribal tablets that date back to the seventh century B.C. Inside, visitors get a 55-minute history lesson on some of the earliest printings of the Bible, such as the Esther scroll, which dates back to the 17th or 18th century.

Every seven minutes in the Scriptorium, doors open and guests are guided through an automated tour replete with the history of how the Bible was written, translated and spread around the world. A narrator informs listeners that John Wycliffe's gospel printings, dating back to the 1300s, were the first translations of the Bible from Latin to English.

He explains that texts were created to make the Scriptures accessible throughout England and adds that Johannes Gutenberg's printing press made the Bible so widely available that British leaders could no longer deny commoners the right to read the Scriptures. The tour culminates with a dramatic presentation of both Old and New Testament characters such as Isaiah, Ezra, Joshua, Moses, and the apostles Paul and Peter.

TBN co-founder Jan Crouch told viewers watching the network's flagship Praise the Lord broadcast that changes are under way at the park, including the creation of a venue for teenagers. She says the additions would make the park a place the entire family could enjoy. The Holy Land Experience is only miles away from Orlando's major tourist attractions, including Walt Disney World and Universal Studios Florida.

Orlando resident Mildred Eason started attending the Holy Land Experience regularly last winter when a TBN employee invited her to participate in an intercessory prayer group formed by Jan Crouch. "I go every Tuesday and Thursday and walk around the park and pray for the presence of the Lord, the workers and the owners," Eason says.

Although she enjoys the shows and musicals, she says she is especially intrigued by the Jerusalem Model A.D. 66. The replica measures 45 by 25 feet and is believed to be the world's largest indoor model of Jerusalem. "It has given me a better understanding of the actual city and its culture," Eason says.

Laura Johnson is from Ohio and says her favorite exhibit is the Wilderness Tabernacle, where visitors view a 30-minute presentation that explains the rituals and sacrifices practiced among the Hebrews when they traveled in the wilderness after the great exodus from Egypt. Replicas of the Ark of the Covenant and other artifacts are housed in the tabernacle.

"It was a little difficult for me to imagine what the tabernacle looked like before I visited the Wilderness Tabernacle," Johnson says. "But now I know why its existence is so important."

The New Jerusalem

TBN General Counsel John Casoria says the network didn't set out to buy the Christian theme park. In 2006 TBN purchased Orlando-based WTGL-TV Channel 52 for \$50 million, giving the California-based network use of its full-power TV station,

which reaches more than 4 million homes across central Florida. But because the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) required that TBN also have a studio, which its deal with WTGL didn't include, the media ministry began looking for land in Orlando, Casoria says.

The network owners "thought it would be a good idea" to build a studio next to the Christian theme park, Casoria says. "We knew the Holy Land [Experience] existed, and we thought what a nice synergy to have TBN across the street." He said negotiations for the extra land led to the purchase of the entire park.

Although many of the exhibits and sights at the Holy Land Experience will remain the same, TBN hopes future changes to the park will draw more tourists from around the world. Orlando city planner Jim Burnett says TBN's proposal to build a 100,000 square-foot TV studio across the street from the park was approved in February, opening the door for the network to start construction.

Casoria says the television studio will be one of TBN's main operations, serving as a backdrop for many of the network's upcoming film projects. The state-of-the-art facility promises to be "elaborate architecturally" and outfitted with 24-carat gold glass curtains and jewel stones.

Other details of the expansion project include a 30-foot high, double-sided marquee in plain view of thousands of motorists who travel along Orlando's main thoroughfare, Interstate 4.

TBN is awaiting final approval on a proposal it submitted to the City of Orlando that would give the network the go-ahead

to build a 146 square-foot bridge that will stretch from the entrance of the park to the other side of the street, where the TV studio and extra parking spaces will be located.

With these and other changes, TBN officials expect to see a significant increase in attendance in the months to come. "We are expecting attendance to increase by 50 percent," Casoria says.

Valerie G. Lowe is associate editor of Charisma magazine.

Travel tips

For many tourists visiting the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida, the biblical theme park is the next best thing to traveling 7,000 miles to see the actual city of Jerusalem. To make the most of the visit, parkgoers should consider the following tips:

»**Arrive early.** To take advantage of all the park has to offer, visitors are encouraged to arrive before the crowds. The Holy Land Experience is open from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday thru Saturday. Keep in mind that rush hour traffic on Interstate 4 will be bumper-to-bumper.

»**Make preparations.** The huge reproduction of the ancient city offers numerous attractions, live shows and historical presentations all designed to give tourists a glimpse into the life of Jesus from His birth to His resurrection. Guests can map out their day using a copy of the daily schedule provided at the turnstiles at the entrance to the park.

»**Dress comfortably.** Wearing the wrong shoes and clothing can make a trip to Florida uncomfortable. Appropriate attire,

footwear and sun gear will make your experience more pleasant. And don't forget your umbrella: Thunderstorms are typical during summer afternoons.

»**Beware of the heat**. Although Orlando is known for its beautiful weather, temperatures often soar into the 90s during the summer months—and the humidity is intense. Guests should wear sun screen and drink plenty of water.