

Israeli Violence Causes Drop in Tourism

The country's bustling tourist trade has fallen to a record low since fighting broke out in September

The view is spectacular as you stroll the shores of the Sea of Galilee. A crisp, blue sky seems to melt into the panoramic glassy waters next to where Jesus walked, taught and prayed.

There is a peace here that surpasses all understanding. But the quiet is almost noisy with a dark despair that has arisen from tourist locations across Israel.

At Peter's Primacy, where tradition says Jesus told Peter He would build His church "upon this rock," there are no crowds. Normally, there would have been busloads on this warm November day.

At the museum of The Galilee Boat—a 2,000-year-old wooden boat that dates to Jesus' day—the numbers are dismal, according to marketing manager Marina Banai. By October 1999, some 7,785 tourists had visited the museum. Just 13 months later, only 3,555 had visited, Banai said.

"It takes special conditions to preserve this boat—and that costs us \$10,000 a month," she said. "The gift shop here already had to lay off four people, and it's stuck with a stock of \$100,000."

At nearby Capernaum on Galilee's north shore, visitors are sparse. Capernaum's ruins are among the favorite stops for the 2 million tourists who travel to Israel annually.

On the Mediterranean Sea north of Tel Aviv, the parking lots at the Roman ruins at Caesarea are nearly empty.

Where has everyone gone?

Israeli tourism officials' prediction that 2000 would be the biggest year for tourism ever was correct. More visitors came to the country during the first nine months of 2000 than in any 12-month period in 53 years.

But since last September when violence broke out after

Palestinians rioted over Israeli right-wing politician Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the tourists stopped coming. Americans stopped coming after they watched the violence right before their eyes on CNN. They obeyed the U.S. State Department's advisory issued in October that warned them not to go to Israel or the Middle East lest they face terrorist attacks.

"We stand to lose \$1 billion in tourism revenues this year," said Tsion Ben-David, director of North American operations for Israel's Ministry of Tourism. "In 1999, we had about 2.6 million tourists visit Israel, and they brought in some \$3.7 billion. We estimated that we would have between 3.1 million and 4 million tourists this year and earn more than \$4 billion. But for the last quarter, we expected 800,000 tourists—and we've only had 180,000."

The vast majority of the violent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers has occurred in limited areas—in the West Bank, which is made up of a series of Palestinian settlements that stretch from north of Jerusalem south to Bethlehem; and in Gaza, a small strip of land on the Mediterranean Sea south of Tel Aviv. In most other areas of Israel—a small nation not much larger than the state of New Jersey—there is peace.

Israeli tourism officials are furious about CNN's coverage of the violence, which is deceptive because it makes viewers believe that all of Israel is indulged in violence, when very small areas are the centers of the trouble, Ben-David said.

Also hampering tourism is an ongoing partial strike by Israeli Interior Ministry employees, who are refusing to carry out

public services to press for higher wages. The Interior Ministry is responsible for approving visas for would-be visitors from several countries, especially those of Third World nations, the Jerusalem Post reported in December.

The strike forced the AD 2000 Movement to cancel Celebrate Messiah 2000—a major event the group had planned for four years. Some 600 delegates to the event, slated for Jerusalem last December, were unable to obtain visas to enter

Israel, and organizers were forced to cancel the event.

One Israeli tourism official told Charisma that the Interior Ministry strike would not pose significant harm to tourism in the short-term because “95 percent of tourists to Israel come from countries for which a visa is not required.”

Israel’s Ministry of Tourism and a group of U.S. mayors who recently visited Israel asked the U.S. State Department to rescind its travel advisory, but U.S. embassy officials in Tel Aviv say that most likely won’t happen until tensions die down. And it’s unlikely that Israeli complaints to CNN to reduce its coverage of the violence will have any impact at the Atlanta-based network.

Jewish tour guide Jeff Abel noted that terrorists don’t target tourists or tour buses. “Remember: this war is also a propaganda war—and [targeting tourists] would be bad for the cause,” Abel said.

Nationwide, Arabs and Jews alike are losing wages and jobs as the downward spiral continues. In the Mediterranean port city of Haifa, local tourism manager Moshe Tzur moaned when a major American movie studio built movie sets in Haifa, only to pull out when violence started in September.

Several hotels were shut down temporarily in Nazareth, where occupancy rates soared until the violence began, said Tareq Shihada, director of the Nazareth Tourist Board.

Some American Christians are maintaining plans to travel to Israel in 2001. Fred Price, pastor of Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles, has scheduled a tour for May. Passover 2001, sponsored by Watchman International, is slated for March 28-April 8 in Jerusalem. The Millennial Council is sponsoring "The Feast of Pentecost" in Jerusalem in May.

Tommy Barnett, pastor of Phoenix (Ariz.) First Assembly of God, traveled to Israel in November. "We jogged the streets of Jerusalem at 2 a.m. and felt completely safe," Barnett said. "I highly encourage my fellow leaders to plan trips to Israel now. "