

How to Plan Your Ultimate Israel Pilgrimage

What if it were possible to travel back in time to ancient Jerusalem, where Jesus made His triumphal entry into the city? Or to take Holy Communion in the Garden Tomb where Christ was once buried? For many Christians, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is only a dream.

But it doesn't have to be! With the economy forcing some airline companies to lower prices, consumers like you and me are reaping the benefits.

In March I boarded a 747 jet to take my first trip to Israel. What I discovered there was a dream come true.

Day 1: Tel Aviv/ Jaffa

When you touch down in Israel, be prepared to meet people from around the world.

Tourists visiting the country represent a tapestry of many races, cultures and nationalities. Israel is a conduit through which travelers from Asia, Africa and Europe must pass.

Begin your pilgrimage in Tel Aviv. The city has beautiful beaches that line the Mediterranean Sea and is home to the U.S. Embassy.

I suggest you go to the city's port area, where you will find a host of restaurants, shops and worthwhile tourist sites.

One of the oldest cities in the world is Jaffa, and many Christian tourists are drawn to the ancient seaport by its rich biblical history and ancient archaeology. Peter lived in Jaffa more than 2,000 years ago, and when he left there he went to Caesarea, which should be next on your itinerary.

Day 2: Nazareth

Drive to Caesarea Harbor and tour various go to Megiddo, or “Armageddon,” site of the final battle mentioned in the book of Revelation.

A favorite tourist stop in Israel is Nazareth, where Jesus spent the early years of His life. While there, visit the Basilica of the Annunciation, where Mary received word from the angel Gabrielle that she would carry the Savior of the world.

Day 3: Galilee

Many tourists anticipate spending the day in Galilee, and I was no exception. Start your day with a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee in a replica of the 2,000-year-old “Jesus boat.”

Visit the tranquil Mount of Beatitudes and Capernaum, where you will discover a marble synagogue dating to the third or fourth century. Capernaum is called “the city of Jesus” because He lived in the fishing town during His Galilean ministry.

Then, tour some of the holy sites including Tabgha, where Jesus performed the miracle of the fishes and loaves, and Bethsaida—the birthplace of Peter, Andrew and Philip.

Your tour will no doubt include a stop in Kursi, where Jesus cast demons from a possessed man into a herd of swine, and Yardenit, where pilgrims are baptized in a pool on the Jordan River.

Day 4: The Dead Sea

Considered the lowest surface area on earth, the Dead Sea lies 419 meters below sea level. It contains a high concentration of salt, which makes it impossible for anything to live in the water. Don’t bother trying to take a swim; just get in and effortlessly float a while.

Next, go to Beit She'an, the ancient city where King Saul died in battle. As you approach the Qumran caves, you will no doubt be astonished by its overwhelming size and archaeological ruins.

To enjoy your visit to the caves, you'll need to wear a good pair of sneakers or hiking shoes. Here you will learn about the ancient Essene settlement, where a sect of Jewish zealots buried what are known today as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which include fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. The scrolls were discovered there between 1947 and 1956.

Board the bus and head for the ancient ruins of Masada, where you will see archaeological revelations of King Herod's mountaintop fortress.

Day 5: Jerusalem

Welcome to Jerusalem! The highlight of any trip to Israel is a tour of Jerusalem. I suggest you begin your day with a visit to Yad Vashem National Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust. Next, go to the Shrine of the Book, where the Dead Sea Scrolls are exhibited, and tour the newly opened model of ancient Jerusalem.

No trip to the Holy City would be complete without a getaway to Mahane Yehuda, Jerusalem's main open market. Drive to Ein Karem, the birthplace of John the Baptist, then go to Haas Promenade to get a picturesque view of Jerusalem and the Old City basin.

Day 6: Mount of Olives

Today you will begin your sightseeing adventure on the Mount of Olives. The mountain is aptly known for its olive trees, but it's the old Jewish cemetery that occupies much of land area.

Descend the mountain by foot along Palm Sunday Road and stop

at Dominus Flavit, the place where the Bible says Jesus wept for Jerusalem. After you tour the peaceful Garden of Gethsemane, visit the beautiful Church of All Nations.

Then enter the Old City through Zion Gate. Walk along the Via Dolorosa, the path Jesus traveled on His way to the cross.

As you make your way through the crowded streets of the Old City, go to the Holy Church of the Sepulchre and the museum of the history of Jerusalem at the Citadel.

Conclude your day with a visit to the Garden Tomb. According to my tour guide, the rock-hewn burial site is located in a garden that's considered by Protestants to be the site of the Crucifixion—a place called Golgotha.

Day 7: The Old City

Begin the final day of your pilgrimage with another trip to the Old City. Start with a visit to the Southern Wall excavations and the Davidson Centre. Then, make your way to the City of David to see archaeological finds built by King David.

Make your way over to the Western Wall and see the most “sacred site” in Jerusalem, and be sure to take lots of pictures. But if you arrive at the Wall on the Sabbath, you will not be permitted to take pictures or use videotape.

Then, wind your way through the Western Wall tunnels located deep beneath the surface. Visit the rebuilt Jewish quarters and Cardor Main Street from the Roman-Byzantine era.

One of my favorite sites in the Old City is Mount Zion. There you will visit the Upper Room, where the Bible says in Acts 2:4 that the Holy Spirit fell on 120 believers while they were praying, including Jesus' mother, Mary. This is also the site of the Last Supper.

Next—free time! Go to Nahalat Shiva in downtown Jerusalem,

where you can visit shops, eateries and more. Check out of your hotel—and leave for home with an experience of a lifetime.

Bless Israel

The Bible says anyone who blesses Israel will be blessed by God. That's one reason ministries based in Israel say it is important to invest in the future of the country with trips to the Holy land to bless its people.

While in Israel, break away from sightseeing to volunteer and serve. Vision for Israel, based in Jerusalem, and its feeding ministry, Joseph Storehouse, reach out to the poor, needy and orphans with food, shelter, clothing and the love of Jesus. My Olive Tree, founded by Curt Landry, offers a unique way to help build relationships between the evangelical community and the nation—through planting olive trees.

“The olive tree is significant. It symbolizes unity and reconciliation, and every time we plant an olive tree, we are bringing reconciliation to Israel,” says Landry.

A spokesperson for Israel Ministry of Tourism says Christian visitors to Israel contribute to the success of Israel and leave transformed.

“For nearly 2,000 years, Christian visitors from all over the world have come to the land of their spiritual heritage. It provides them with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the land of the Bible, to deepen their faith and to be spiritually transformed.”

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