

Israel Prepares for Christmas Tourist Rush

Israel is getting ready to welcome 90,000 tourists this Christmas. The nation is promoting access to holy sites and working to ensure the safety of all visitors.

One third of the 2.4 million Christian tourists expected to visit Israel by year's end are pilgrims visiting holy sites in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Nazareth, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Via Dolorosa and the Mount of Olives are located in Israel. Bethlehem is in the West Bank.

Israeli security and civil administration leaders met with the head of the Franciscan Monastery, the Ambassador to the Vatican, as well as the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Latin Patriarchs to facilitate freedom of worship and movement during the holiday season.

What's more, Israel is expediting transport and crossing arrangements so that pilgrims and visitors can participate in traditional Christmas ceremonies. For example, Major General Eitan Dangot, the Coordinator of the Government Activities in the Territories, is working with the Israel Police and the Israel Defense Forces to make sure the Bethlehem area crossings would be constantly open for tourists to freely enter the city during the holidays.

Christians constitute about 2 percent of Israel's overall population, but their number is steadily growing. By the end of 2009, 151,700 Christians lived in Israel, a 0.6 percent increase from the previous year.

Have you been to Israel during the Christmas season? I would love to hear about your experience.