

Journey to the Holy Land—In Florida

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 due to a failing economy, times are tough and people are saving their money until times get better. But I took a journey to the Holy Land Experience in Florida and had a wonderful time without leaving the U.S.

It's not the real thing, but vacationers can get a glimpse of Jerusalem this summer in preparation for a trip to Israel one day.

The Holy Land Experience is a reproduction of Jerusalem. 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.

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.

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.

The Jerusalem Model A.D. 66 is intriguing to say the least. The replica measures 45 by 25 feet and is believed to be the world's largest indoor model of Jerusalem.

There's nothing on the planet that can replace Jerusalem, Israel, but the Holy Land Experience is a good place to get familiar with what awaits pilgrims destined for the real thing.