

On a wing and a prayer

By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

COLORADO SPRINGS — From Focus on the Family's expansive campus in the shadow of Colorado's Front Range, the 14,100-foot summit of Pikes Peak seems close enough to touch.



An alternative to Disney: The WordSpring Discovery Center in Orlando lets visitors explore the history of the Bible.

Wycliffe Bible Translators

But the nearly 250,000 tourists who visit the religious group's headquarters each year aren't drawn here for unfettered views of the mountain that inspired the poem *America the Beautiful*.

Most come to Colorado Springs at the invitation of Focus on the Family leader James Dobson, whose weekly radio broadcasts from the city that has been dubbed the "Vatican of evangelical Christianity" reach an estimated 1.5 million listeners a day. At what ranks as one of the tourist town's most popular attractions, born-again explorers can peer into Dobson's studio, whoosh down a three-story

corkscrew slide to commune with characters from Disney's Christian-themed film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and browse a 9,000-square-foot bookstore and gift shop stocked with Scripture Mints and "Be a Revolution" T-shirts.

Focus on the Family's visitors are among a burgeoning flock of evangelical Christians whose definition of an "all-inclusive" vacation incorporates an emphasis on faith.

They represent about 70 million Americans — an estimated 25% of the population, according to a recent Gallup Poll. And they're being courted by travel companies and destinations eager to tap the same lucrative market that has helped catapult *Narnia* to the top of the box office, make religious music titles outsell jazz and classical combined, and turn evangelical preacher Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* into one of the best-selling books in U.S. history.

From Israel study tours and short-term volunteer missions in Central America to Colorado River rafting trips that describe the Grand Canyon from a creationist perspective, faith-based travel by many denominations is booming.

"Before Sept. 11, when we thought of the term 'religious travel,' it was often a pilgrimage to validate faith, the central focus of the trip," says Jeff Gayduk of Premier Tourism Marketing, a Willowbrook, Ill., publisher aimed at group travel. "Now, more churches are developing travel programs as a social outlet, a way to tie members closer together."

A popular and growing market

According to the U.S. Office of Travel & Tourism Industries, overseas religious and pilgrimage travel attracts more than 600,000 American participants a year. Premier Tourism Marketing says that of some 450,000 churches in the USA, about 50,000 now have some kind of travel program. That's up an estimated 20% in the past five years.

Such travelers represent a broad spectrum of spiritual beliefs, from Catholicism — which fueled a spike in visits to Rome and other Catholic sites following Pope John Paul II's death last summer — to Buddhism. Prompted in part by increased Western interest in Tibetan religious culture, the number of Himalayan pilgrimages offered by New York-based Sacred Journeys has quadrupled over the past few years, says organizer Tina Patterson.

A SAMPLER OF FAITH-BASED TRIPS

● **Globus:** Offers 20 tours to 20 countries, from a seven-day "California Missions" trip between San Francisco and Los Angeles (from \$1,249 a person, double, without airfare) to a 10-day "Footsteps of Apostle Paul" trip to Greece and Turkey (from \$1,449 a person, double, without airfare). 866-755-8581 or globusjourneys.com/faith

● **Christian Travel Finder:** Sells cruises, tours and retreats with a Christian focus, including a "Girl's Get-A-Way Cruise" from Jacksonville to the Bahamas Nov. 9-13 on Carnival's Celebration, featuring Christian music, "wholesome movies, clean-cut comedy and uplifting speakers." From \$599 a person, double, excluding taxes and port fees. 888-518-7571 or christiantravelfinder.com

● **Reformation Tours:** Specializes in "Europe from a Christian perspective," including an escorted tour July 1-14 that traces Protestant history in Switzerland, France and Germany (\$2,199 a person, double, without airfare). 800-303-5534 or reformationtours.com

But the growing political and economic clout of Protestant evangelical Christians is capturing the travel industry's attention in a big way. And while most faith-based journeys are still arranged by small, affinity-based outfits, mainstream operators are seeing the light, as well. According to a survey conducted last year, more than a third of the National Tour Association's 630 tour operator members now sell religious trips, up nearly 10% since 2003.

"Twenty years ago, Christian radio stations barely existed. Wal-Mart didn't offer religious books, and now they represent about a third of their sales," says Kevin Wright of Littleton, Colo.-based Globus tours. "Every travel agent is looking for a new niche, and (faith-based travel) is one of them."

The major group tour operator launched a religious tour division in 2005 and doubled its number of offerings this year, including a 10-day "Wesley England & Methodist Heritage" trip starting at \$2,350 a person from New York.

Citing a U.S. State Department warning against "unnecessary travel" to the West Bank, Globus doesn't yet offer an Israel option (it plans to do so next year). But regional instability hasn't stopped evangelical Christians from visiting in increasing numbers: According to the Israeli tourism ministry, Americans accounted for 460,000 of the more than 1.9 million tourists visiting Israel in 2005, a 21% boost over the previous year. Evangelical and other Christian visitors worldwide rose by 62% the first half of 2005, while the number of Jewish travelers was up 5%.

This month's PBS television miniseries *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land Through the Five Books of Moses*, based on the best-selling book by Bruce Feiler, includes a tie-in to a biblically themed itinerary arranged by Israel-based Holy Land Tours.

Meanwhile, a consortium of American evangelical groups is still negotiating with Israel to build a Christian theme park and visitor center on the shores of the Sea of Galilee — despite supporter Pat Robertson's recent remarks implying that Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's Jan. 4 stroke was retribution for returning land to Palestinians.

"It will focus on the real places where Jesus walked," an Israeli tourism spokesman told the *Christian Science Monitor* earlier this month. "It's a place where pilgrims can touch the experience — they can touch the Bible."

Pilgrimages to the Holy Land and short-term volunteer missions to natural-disaster zones and poverty-stricken areas remain mainstays of faith-based travel. Samaritan's Purse, a North Carolina-based Christian relief agency, sent nearly 4,000 volunteers — many of them vacationers — to the Gulf Coast last year in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

But that doesn't rule out a week of sun and sand.

"We're not something that's going to compete with Disney or Universal Studios, but for people with a spiritual bent, this adds a deeper component to their experience," adds Michael Currier of Orlando-based Wycliffe Bible Translators USA. The non-profit mission group's WordSpring Discovery Center opened in 2002 and draws about 18,000 visitors a year, nearly half of them

vacationing families, to exhibits that include costumed figures reciting the biblical verse John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life") in their native languages.

Jeff Templeton of North Carolina-based Templeton Tours has been selling Christian-themed cruises, primarily to Southern Baptist church groups who ban alcohol and turn shipboard casinos into religious bookstores, for three decades. Business is up 40% over the past five years, he says, and the traditional cruise experience "is driving more people to us because so much of their programming involves drinking, gambling and Las Vegas-style shows. It's hard to overcome that atmosphere."

Faithful get to choose

To be sure, emphasizing a Christian travel connection isn't a guaranteed ticket to financial success. Televangelist Jim Bakker's Heritage USA resort and theme park in Fort Mill, S.C., one of the country's most popular vacation destinations in the mid-1980s, faltered after its founder was imprisoned for tax fraud. Attendance at Orlando's biblically themed Holy Land Experience, meanwhile, has declined since its 2001 launch, and the park's owners are aiming more of their marketing efforts at local churches.

But to Honnie Korngold and 120 travel agents who gathered in Denver last month for what was billed as the first national conference on religious travel, the market for trips made on a wing and a prayer is as upbeat as a rousing sermon.

"If Christians are given the opportunity to choose a cruise or other vacation that's family-friendly and enriches their faith," says Korngold, who founded the Southern California-based travel agency Christian Travel Group two years ago, "they'll definitely choose that alternative."

Janice Sneller is among them. A veteran of three secular cruises, the 50-year-old homemaker from International Falls, Minn., signed up with her husband, Earl, and 2,000 other believers for a four-day Christian music charter on Carnival's Fascination last September.

The chance to hear such popular groups as Audio Adrenaline and Casting Crowns in concert was a bigger draw than the stops in Key West and Cozumel, says Sneller, a Covenant Church member whose shipmates included Catholics, Baptists, Methodists and Lutherans, among other denominations.

But the main attraction was more intangible: "Even though we didn't know anybody else on the cruise, we had something in common," she says. "We all had the same desire to get together, praise and worship."

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