TRAVEL

Faith-Filled Travel

Specialty tour companies spotlight history of key religious sites

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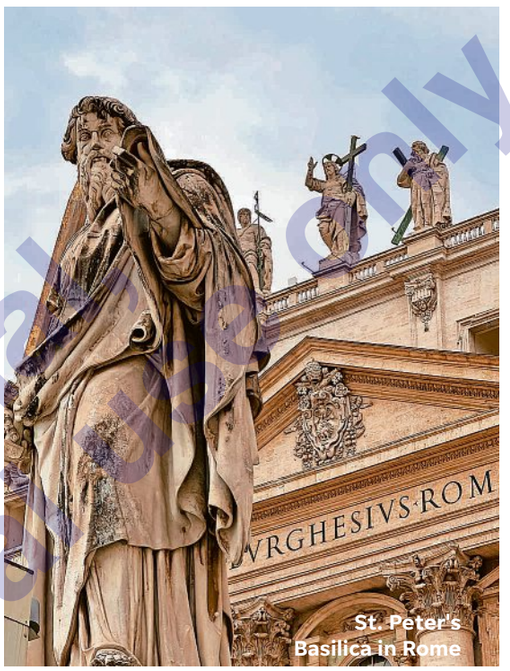
TRAVEL

Jerusalem

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES TOURS



St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

MELANIE BORN

By Robin Roenker

It's one thing to read about a place in the Bible. It's another thing entirely to experience it firsthand.

The areas where Jesus taught and traveled and the cities highlighted in the Apostle Paul's journeys together set the foundation for modern Christianity. For many Christians, visiting some or all of these sites at least once is a bucket-list wish.

"When you are standing at the site of the ancient marketplace in Ephesus (an ancient city in Turkey), where Paul was doing ministry, all of a sudden it becomes more than words on a page," says the Rev. J. Todd Bardin, a pastor in DeLand, Fla. In 2024, Bardin led members of his Trinity United Methodist Church congregation on a Journeys of Paul Mediterranean cruise with Educational Opportunities Tours (EO Tours). "It's now something we (have seen) and remember."

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MORE THAN SIGHTSEEING

By touring with a company that specializes in religious travel, visitors come away with far more than just social-media-worthy snapshots of famous biblical places. Faith-based tour companies take pride in working with knowledgeable guides and speakers who take visitors on a deep dive into the history and religious context of each site.

"We're trying to provide education and discipleship," says Mark Yeh, director of sales and marketing development for EO Tours, which offers both cruises and land-based itineraries in the Holy Land.

He adds, "We provide guest speakers — often clergy members or academic professors — on the majority of our cruises to provide added context for the sites we're seeing."

Nasser Noorani, president and CEO of Friendship Tours, handpicks guides in the Holy Land who are fluent in English and deeply trained on both the Old Testament and the New Testament. He says he feels their expertise grounds and enriches the company's religious-based tours, which are open and customizable to groups of 20 or more.

The Best of the Holy Land, one of Friendship Tours' most popular faith itineraries, offers a 10-day journey starting in Tel Aviv that includes stops at iconic biblical locations such as the Sea of Galilee, the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

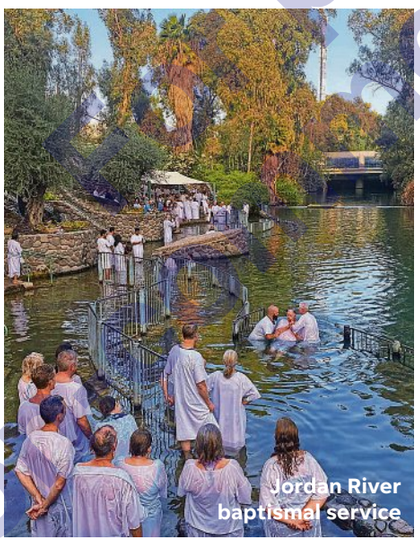
"From having an opportunity to be baptized in the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized, to doing the Via Dolorosa (Stations of the Cross) in Jerusalem and visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Garden Tomb (two sites with purported ties to the site of Jesus's burial and resurrection), the entire journey is a very emotional experience," Noorani says.

Those who have made the journey say seeing these places in person only serves to grow their faith.

"If you go to the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John as disciples, you see that it's not a large beach. When you're standing there, you're within 150 yards of where Jesus said 'Come follow me,'" says Ryan Hayden of Manhattan, Kan., who has taken both ground-based tours of the Holy Land and a Journeys of Paul cruise with EO Tours. "You can hear the waves lapping the sand and rocks right where it happened."

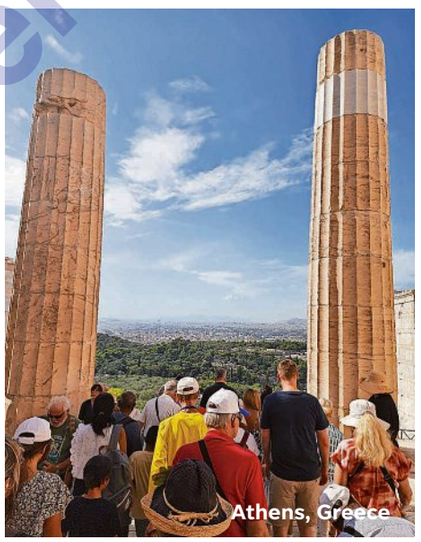
Saint Hieronymus statue at the Church of the Nativity of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, Palestine

ANDY BERG/GETTY IMAGES



Jordan River baptismal service

NIR SHAANANI/FRIENDSHIP TOURS



Athens, Greece

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES TOURS

EUROPEAN OPTIONS

Beyond popular Holy Land itineraries, operators such as the Globus company brands, which includes both Globus and Cosmos tours, offer faith-driven European trips. Options are open to solo travelers and couples as well as larger groups and include a 12-day journey across Spain to visit famous pilgrimage sites and shrines of Mary via Cosmos's Fátima, Lourdes, & Shrines of Spain tour or a nine-day trip to Italy that includes an exploration of the major basilicas of Rome via Cosmos's Spiritual Highlights of Italy tour.

Because 2025 has been declared a Jubilee Year for Catholics — a special time of pilgrimage and reflection held every 25 years — itineraries to Rome this year are in especially high demand.

"In a typical travel year, Italy has about 13 million inbound visitors. This year, they expect it to be somewhere between 30 million to 35 million," says Steve Born, chief marketing officer for the Globus family of brands. "If you imagine all the attention that will be focused on Rome and its religious sites, then you can quickly see the critical value of having a knowledgeable tour operator effortlessly navigate you through all of that to give you access to those in-demand locations."

Protestant pilgrimage options include EO Tours' Wesley Heritage Tour, a nine-day tour of England focused on sites linked to Methodist founder John Wesley, or EO Tours' Reformation in Germany: In the Footsteps of Martin Luther, which leads visitors across key sites linked to the Reformation.

No matter the setting, faith-based travel tends to elevate a trip beyond simple tourism.

"What's interesting about our approach to the tours is it's a combination of faith and fun," Born says. "It's the best of both worlds, because you're seeing these sites with guides who are experts in their field alongside a group of like-minded travelers who are able to share the experience collectively."

"Guided Christian travel gives you the dirt on your shoes, the stones to touch, the texture of reality that you can only picture in your head otherwise," says Hayden, who is considering a return to Jerusalem in 2026.

Bardin agrees.

"These trips walk the fine line of tourism and pilgrimage," he says. "It's about focusing as much on the journey as the destination — and what we bring back with us."

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