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TRAVEL INSIDER

More agencies are serving the flock: religious travelers

With faith-based trips gaining new attention, participants are finding varied activities and upscale lodging.

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IT'S not your reverend father's church retreat.

The four-night "Cruise With a Cause" next month aboard Royal Caribbean's Sovereign of the Seas will offer a "Hip Hop 'Til You Drop Show," music by a dozen Christian rock and pop acts, a rock-climbing wall and spa treatments — but no drinking or gambling.

On Grand Bahama Island, passengers will disembark to attend a crusade and take the Gospel to more than 20 schools.

The topper? The whole trip, organized by PraiseFest Ministries Inc., a nonprofit ministry in Northport, Ala., will be filmed by JCTV, a Christian youth channel owned by the giant Trinity Broadcasting Network, as a 12-part reality TV series.

Religious, or faith-based, travel is going big time. Although most trips are still organized ad-hoc by churches and other religious groups, large tour operators and agencies are entering this niche market.

For the spiritual traveler, that shift is bringing more varied activities, departure dates and fancier lodging. You no longer have to depend on your local church, synagogue or other organization to set up a trip; you can join a scheduled one.

Globus, which has U.S. offices in Littleton, Colo., and is one of the world's largest tour operators, made a splash in the industry last year when it opened a religious-tours division.

Although a few companies, such as Educational Opportunities Tours in Lakeland, Fla., and 206 Tours in Smithtown, N.Y., have long specialized in spiritual trips, and many others will organize them on demand, Globus may be the biggest mass-market tour operator to offer a specialty in faith-based travel.

Such travel has a long tradition, said Kevin J. Wright, who has written several books on the subject and manages the religious program at Globus. During the Middle Ages, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church assigned penitents to go on pilgrimages for reparation of sins.

Today, Wright said, many Catholics remain avid travelers, visiting not only the Holy Land but also shrines throughout Europe and Latin America.

"They don't do it for penitential reasons," he said. "They want to stay in a nice place."

Apparently, so do people of other faiths.

Although he declined to say how many bookings the company had, Wright said Globus expected to triple sales this year in its religious division, which uses first-class or better accommodations.

The cost of the division's most popular itinerary, the "Footsteps of Apostle Paul" 10-day cruise-tour to Greece and Turkey, starts at $1,579 per person, based on double occupancy; airfare is extra.

About 55% of his customers are Catholic, about 2% Jewish and the balance Protestant, said Wright, who is Catholic. About one of 10, he figures, may be motivated not by faith but by an interest in biblical history or other subjects.

Starting with eight tours in spring 2005, the program expanded to 20 this year in 20 nations. Within two months, Wright said, the division distributed 50,000 tour brochures and had to print 100,000 more.

Whether faith-based travel is growing faster than other types, as some in the industry believe, is difficult to document.

Based on Department of Commerce surveys of U.S. residents going overseas, the number of travelers citing religion as the main purpose for their trips grew 16.9% from 2002 to 2004, matching the percentage growth in total overseas travel. When you add in people who listed religion as only one of the reasons, the growth was 22.5%.

Either way you figure it, fewer than 3% of Americans typically go abroad for religious reasons, and fewer traveled for this purpose in 2004 than in 2000.

The Travel Industry Assn. of America didn't have recent figures for such trips within the U.S. In its 2003 survey, more than a fourth of Americans reported attending religious services while traveling.

Whatever the statistics, faith-based travel does seem to be attracting new attention.

The number of U.S. churches, synagogues and other religious organizations offering group travel has grown 22% in five years, based on a database of 384,600 such groups compiled by American Church Lists, a division of InfoUSA in Omaha.

And more than a third of the National Tour Assn.'s 600 members offer religious trips, a figure that increased 9% between 2003 and 2005, said Hank Phillips, president of the industry trade group.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which discouraged many Americans from traveling, faith-based travel "jumped out" at companies looking for a new niche to sell to, said Honnie Korngold, an evangelical Christian who owns Christian Travel Finder, a travel agency and tour packager based in Seal Beach.

Korngold's company, which is marketing the May 29-June 2 "Cruise With a Cause," is just 2 years old but already has a staff of six, she said, and expects to send 10,000 people on trips in the next 18 months.

Another trip it books is "Girl's Get-a-Way Cruise," which sails Nov. 9-13, departing from Jacksonville, Fla., to Freeport and Nassau, Bahamas. The organizer, a 3-year-old company called Premier Christian Cruises in High Point, N.C., has chartered Carnival's ship Celebration.

The cruise, Premier's website says, "will offer Christian music playing nonstop over the PA system, Christian TV channels, wholesome movies, clean-cut comedy, uplifting speakers," concerts and even scrap-booking for teens. Rates begin at $599 per person, double occupancy; airfare and port taxes are extra.

Trips such as this one are essentially church retreats in new venues, said Jeff Gayduk, publisher of Leisure Group Travel in Willowbrook, Ill., an information publication for group travel.

Churches, depending on the type, may call them community or fellowship events, and, if

sponsored by them, Gayduk said, some may use them as fund-raisers, keeping part of the proceeds.

So besides a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or other sacred sites, a faith-based trip may be what Gayduk calls "a social-building travel program." Or it may be a missionary or charitable trip. Or it may combine two goals, as in "Cruise With a Cause."

Before you go on such a trip, make sure you know what type it is. And don't take everything on faith.

As with any travel, check out the organizing company, asking questions such as, "How long have you been in business?" and "What professional associations do you belong to?"

For travel agents, belonging to the American Society of Travel Agents is a good sign.

For tour operators, look for the National Tour Assn. or the United States Tour Operators Assn. And checking with the Better Business Bureau is a good idea too.