

In the footsteps of the faithful

Journeys for religious reasons have grown from a niche into an industry

By Jean Torkelson, Rocky Mountain News

Friday, April 6, 2007

Scene from a pilgrimage:

The flight to Rome was an eight-hour slog. An audience with the pope loomed that morning. Now it was 5 a.m., and for the past few hours David and Jennifer Pipp's two toddlers had been tearing around the hotel room in the giddy throes of jet lag.

"We're exhausted," recalled David, "and the boys are running around and we're looking at each other and saying, 'Are we really going to try this?'"

Since Christianity began, pilgrims have endured sleepless treks, bleeding feet, empty bellies and, in modern times, transcontinental flights with their kids.

This is no vacation. Often it's no picnic either. The pilgrim embarks on a quest for spiritual healing and understanding: "It's a journey, a microcosm of real life - it demands everything you have," said the Rev. Greg Ames, a Northglenn priest who leads pilgrimages all over the world and calls himself "a pilgrimage freak."

For the Pippes, intrepid pilgrims since college days, it seemed natural to lug along David, then 3, and John, barely 12 months, on their 2001 trip to Rome, the heart of their Catholic faith.

"Family is everything to us," David Pipp said, "and little kids need the graces of a pilgrimage as much as adults do."

This Easter weekend, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims will flood St. Peter's Square, reflecting the growth in pilgrim travel. Since 2002, travel overseas for religious purposes has grown 30 percent, according to the U.S. Office of Travel and Tourism.

Whether done with family in tow, as a solitary quest, or even with a huge church group on a cruise ship, faith-based travel, as it's called, has become so big that it is no longer considered a niche but an industry, Kevin Wright said. He's the founder and executive director of the Denver-based Worldwide Religious Travel Association, a network for both the travel industry and the consumer.

At 34, he had visited nearly 30 countries as a pilgrim and is writing his fourth faith-based travel book.

"Travel and faith are both passions of mine - so I'm doing what I love," Wright said.

Treks have long history

For nearly two millennia, Christians have made spiritual treks. St. Helen did in the fourth century, when she is said to have found Christ's "true cross."

Today's pilgrims still reflect the questing spirit of St. Helen. They seek out the famous staircase that Jesus reputedly walked, and climb it on their knees, as did Denver friends Irene Maestas and Alta Salazar.

They travel to Jerusalem, as does the Rev. Kim Skattum, a Northglenn minister, who feels blessed every time he visits the Garden of Olives, an area the size of a backyard "which they say still has the roots of the olive trees where Jesus prayed."

Sometimes a pilgrimage isn't to a shrine but to a lonely place that invites reflection. On a spiritual trek deep into the Pamir mountains in Kyrgyzstan in central Asia, Ames struggled with pain, but drew meaning from his suffering.

"I had bloody blisters and couldn't turn around. I had to keep going," he said. "That challenged me to the deepest level of my being."

Yet Ames never tires of the power of a pilgrimage: "I tell people, 'Watch for miracles.' They happen all the time. Little ones and big ones."

Alta Salazar wasn't looking for a miracle, just a place to sit. It was a bitter, rainy day in Rome last June, and her hip hurt so much from a longstanding sciatica problem that she wanted to drop out of a classic pilgrim ritual - the climbing, on one's knees, up the 28 marble steps of La Scala Sancta (The Holy Stairs) to atone for sins. Legend has it the steep stairway, relocated from Jerusalem, is the one Jesus walked up to meet Pilate.

"I was already limping," Salazar said. "I told Irene, I can't stand anymore.' Then I sighed and looked up the stairs and said, 'Well, if Jesus did it, I will too.' "

Only later, "I realized the pain was gone," Salazar said. That was last June, "And it hasn't been back yet."

There are many kinds of healing, as Wright of the religious travel association found at the shrine in Chimayo, N.M., often called the Lourdes of America. Accounts of its miraculous dirt have drawn pilgrims for nearly 200 years.

In September 2005, Wright lost the first joint on three fingers of his left hand in a lawn mower accident. As a lifelong athlete, a public speaker and still in his early 30s, he said it is the single toughest challenge he has faced.

As he plunged his damaged hand into Chimayo's miraculous dirt, Wright prayed in a tumult of emotions, asking for healing, "spiritually, emotionally, and yes, physically, too, though I don't expect that - and I also asked, 'Why me?' And I gave thanks for it not being worse than it is."

Wright said he believes that God has answered him with continued emotional healing, a deeper gratitude for his happy life, and an even better understanding of his calling, to promote faith-based travel. As he writes about healing sites for people with disabilities, he realizes, "I'm one of them."

Trips mix joy, suffering

Anne Conway and her husband, Jorge de la Paz, met in 1999 in Madrid, Spain, where she was a university student and he was working in aviation. After moving to Denver, her hometown, they combined a passion for faith and travel in a business, Catholics for Pilgrimages.

The Catholic idea of "offering up" sufferings to God makes the pilgrimage experience richer and more

meaningful, the couple said. That can include putting up with annoying fellow pilgrims, eating peculiar food, enduring cramped bus rides.

"The spirit of pilgrimage is to understand that part of what you will experience is suffering - though, as a business, we don't purposely *try* to make you suffer," Anne Conway said with a smile.

While Catholics tend to emphasize pilgrimages as a disciplined spiritual quest, Protestants tend to call it "Christian travel" and emphasize the fellowship aspect. Cruise ships play a growing role these days in Christian travel, said Honnie Korngold, a former executive for the Protestant mission outreach Campus Crusade for Christ and founder of Christian Travel Finder, a California-based tourism company.

She said that churches often rent out a whole ship to avoid being at sea with alcohol, gambling and racy entertainment. Because trips are often family affairs, "Mom and dad like to know the staff aren't walking around the pool with trays of mai tais."

Both Protestants and Catholics agree that, on a pilgrimage, "blessings happen to people," Korngold said. Marriages are renewed, parents and kids give each other a second chance, "and families get away from everyday life and let God impact them."

Sometimes the greatest grace of a pilgrimage comes just from being there. Last June, Irene Maestas, 62, made her first overseas trip to visit the Vatican.

Immersed in the joy of being at the center of her faith, Maestas meandered down a little Rome side street, "and I was walking past all these sidewalk cafes and thinking, 'Oh my goodness, this looks like Rome.' Wait a minute - 'This *is* Rome!' "

Five unusual pilgrim places

- **St. Patrick's Purgatory, Lough-Derg, County Donegal, Ireland:** 1,200-year-old spiritual haven where pilgrims can make a rigorous three-day retreat, fasting on bread and water, in the same place St. Patrick reportedly did.
- **Nevers, France:** Visitors can gaze directly on the incorrupt body of St. Bernadette, who reported seeing the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858. Bernadette's body lies in a glass coffin in the chapel of St. Gildard.
- **The Eagle and the Child Pub, Oxford, England:** Tavern where acclaimed Christian authors C.S. Lewis (*The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*) and J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*) hung out in a writing group famously called the Inklings.
- **Mount Sinai, Egypt:** A popular place to be at sunrise. Hardy pilgrims hike to the top of the mount where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments.
- **Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan, Jordan:** Christians come from around the world to be baptized in the same river as Jesus was. *Information From World Religious Travel Association, Www.Religioustravelassociation.Com*

torkelsonj@rockymountainnews.com or 303-954-5055

© Rocky Mountain News