

leap of FAITH

Religious tourism is no longer a niche segment.

With its lucrative potential and loyal customer base,

Kristina Rundquist assesses the market for agents



DEPENDING ON WHOM you ask, religious travel is either an emerging market or one of, if not the, oldest forms of tourism. This is one debate in which there are no losers. For Kevin Wright, president of the World Religious Travel Association (WRTA), faith-based travel has been around since the dawn of civilization and dates back to Egyptian times, when people would travel to cities to participate in festivals.

Put in a modern context, however, "it's still in its infancy in terms of potential," says John Stachnik, president and co-owner of Mayflower Tours and president of its faith-based travel division, Faithful Holidays.

Religious travel is a term with meanings as varied as people's faith. "There are three settings on the needle," says Stachnik. "They go all the way from strict pilgrimages on the right to religious travel in the middle and spiritual-based to left side of needle. Mostly, it's people who want to enjoy religious sites with like-minded people."

Included in the definition are mission trips and volunteer vacations. "Many people, especially in the faith-based world, want to make a real difference in people's lives," adds Mike Schields, director, group sales and emerging markets for

the Globus family of brands. "It's a very broad spectrum now that almost everyone can tap into."

Wright says: "If there are four words to sum up, it's faith, fun, fellowship and adventure. That's what differentiates this from bowling night. One of the great qualities of the marketplace for travel agents and tour operators is religious travelers don't travel in pairs like Noah's animals, they come in groups of up to 50."

Certainly, the Protestant religious market tends to be group-oriented while Mark Windsor, whose Faithful Travels agency specializes in pilgrimages and cultural trips with pilgrimage overtones, says most of his Catholic clients travel in groups too — especially to places such as the Holy Land, where FITs are possible but there are reasons to avoid independent-style trips.

Sophia Kulich specializes in Jewish travel at her agency, Sophia's Travel, but her client demographics are quite different, with about 70% being individuals and three-generation family groups. Kulich also arranges travel for larger numbers, such as synagogues and school groups who might be looking for more budget-friendly accommodations, but on average her clients "want five-star and comfort". ►

SAMPLES

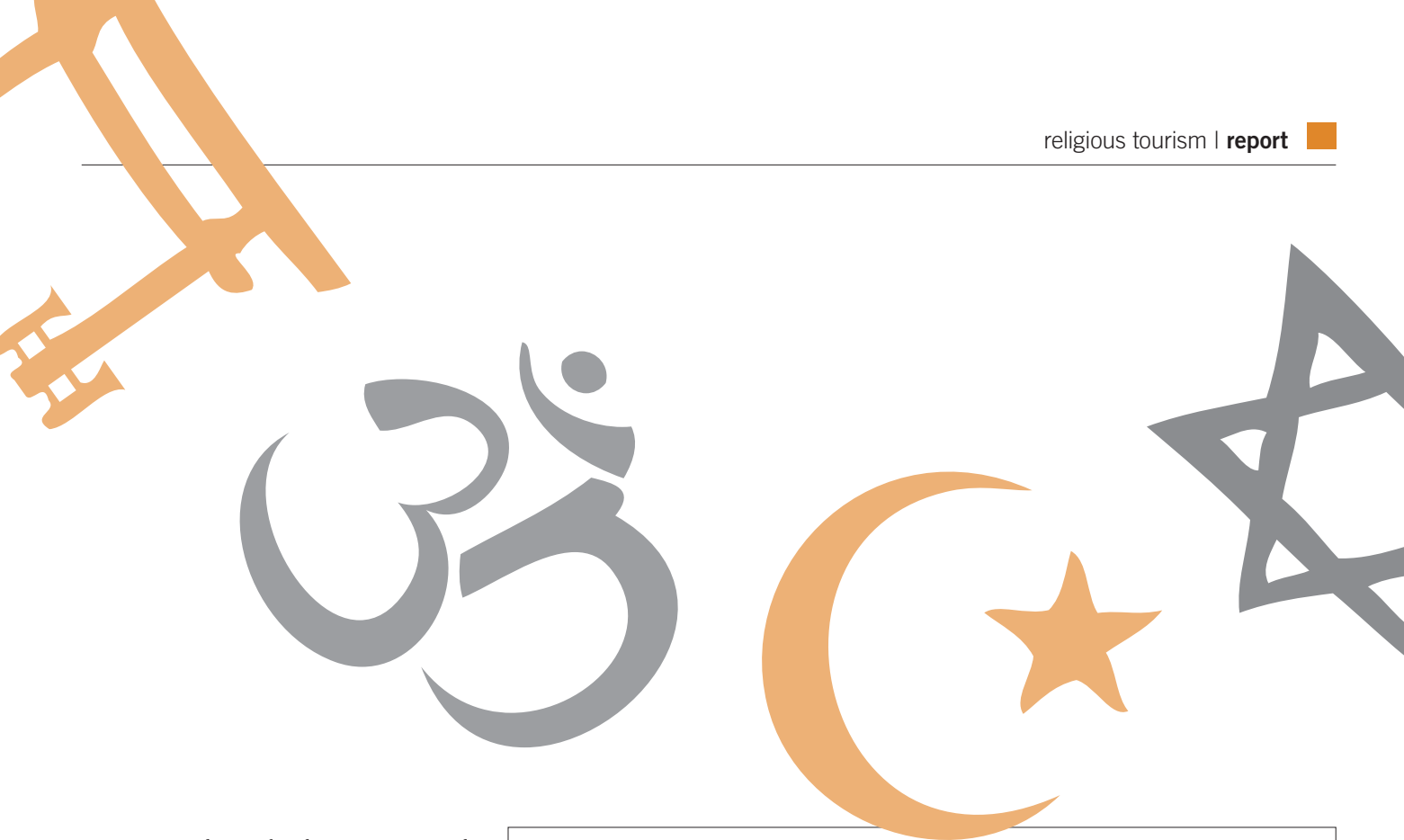
■ MAGISTER TOURS

Magister Tours, one of Turkey's leading inbound tour operators, offers the 11-day Christian faith tour, 'In the Footsteps of St. Paul'. Groups can explore the spiritual route of St. Paul across Turkey, visiting the historic sites that the founder of Christianity preached from, including Antioch (Antakya), Tarsus, Konya and Pisidian Antioch (Yalvac), together with visits to the House of Virgin Mary in Izmir, the Grotto of St. Peter in Antakya and the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Hierapolis and Pamukkale. The tour begins and ends in Istanbul and costs between \$990 and \$2,500, depending on class of hotel accommodation, period of travel and number of group participants.

T: +90 212 230 00 00. www.magister.com.tr

■ HONEST TOUR

Honest Travel & Pilgrimage, an inbound Turkey tour operator specializing in Christian FITs and group tours, offers the 8-day 'The Seven Churches of Asia Minor' tour giving an insight into the achievements and experiences of early Christian missionaries in Turkey. The tour starts in Istanbul before visiting the Seven Churches of The Revelation — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea — across the cities of Izmir, Pamukkale and Kusadasi. The tours includes all hotel accommodation, transfers and some meals. The price varies according to class of accommodation, period of travel and number of group participants. T: + 90 212 231 9747. www.honesttour.com



Luxury might not be the norm among the faithful, but Stachnik says the typical Faithful Holidays client still regards a religious trip as a vacation. “They want a nice meal at night; they want to have a glass of wine and dance. It’s not an ‘on your knees at all times’ thing.”

According to Wright, travel agents are “finally getting over the misconception that this [faith-based travel] is budget only. It’s not a budget market any more.” Adeline Castiglione, founder and owner of Adoration Tours, agrees. “Pilgrim travelers aren’t necessarily looking for luxury accommodation, but neither do they want to stay in hostels and eat bread and water along the way as in years gone by,” she says.

Most would agree that to categorize faith-based travel as a niche would be to do it an injustice. A niche, explains Schields, implies it’s new, which isn’t the case as pilgrims have been doing it for thousands of years. Yet it’s emerging and evolving as more players enter the market.

“For decades, most of the market was served by very small, independent tour operators,” says Schields. “Their singular focus, attention to detail and shared passion for the faith-based markets enabled them to connect with local churches and religious organizations. Financial pressures, the need for economies of scale in contracting, and global safety issues have enabled larger operators to enter the market. However, only a handful of major players have succeeded.”

Among them are Globus, which formally entered the religious market in 2004, and Mayflower Tours, which launched Faithful Holidays in 2008. ►

CASE STUDIES

SOPHIA KULICH SOPHIA’S TRAVEL

Lest there be doubters, faith-based travel can be a lucrative market. Just ask Sophia Kulich, owner of Sophia’s Travel (Palm Harbor, FL), an agency specializing in Jewish religious and heritage travel. “My business is growing, especially this year. I’d say our work has doubled. I’m hardly keeping up this summer,” she says.

But getting to this point hasn’t been a fast climb. “Jewish travel is a great niche, but it’s not easy to get there,” she says. “It takes years to develop and it’s not something you can do all on your own.” Although Kulich has been in the travel industry since 1993, it’s taken the past 10 years to get her niche where it is today.

Arranging travel for the Jewish faithful is often fraught with complications, she notes. “Many Jewish travelers don’t work on Saturday while there are also times when they can’t use elevators — they can walk, but the elderly often cannot walk far, so you need to be sure to place them on lower floors so they can take the stairs.

“They can’t use some electronic keys because it’s considered operating machinery, so we have to arrange for someone to open the door for them. There are many details you have to know. It helps if you understand the religion.”

MARK WINDSOR FAITHFUL TRAVELS

Mark Windsor, owner of Faithful Travels (Plano, TX), started his travel agency in 2003 and it became a faith-based agency late last year. With more than 25 years of industry experience under his belt, Windsor felt the move wasn’t so much a calling or a business opportunity, rather he “decided the best means of helping others deepen their faith was to use my experience to build personalized pilgrimages.”

Most of Windsor’s clients aren’t luxury travelers, he says. “Most are more interested in the spiritual elements of a trip. I’m more likely to get people interested in a monastic guesthouse than a five-star hotel.”

Faithful Travels focuses on true pilgrimages, as well as Catholic cultural trips with pilgrimage overtones, he explains. “Everyone’s interested in getting closer to God,” he says. “In some cases the way they choose to do this is by traveling to a specific place.”

He believes it’s a market anyone can enter, but is not certain why someone would do so “if they didn’t have something more than a business interest.” For those who wish to forge ahead, he advises: “Don’t get discouraged, and don’t expect instant results.”

The Globus Religious Travel Study found 4.5 million Americans have traveled on a faith-based or religious vacation

With an estimated 300 million religious travelers across the globe, it's no wonder tour operators and agents are jumping in. The Globus Religious Travel Study, conducted by Menlo Consulting Group, found 4.5 million Americans have traveled on a faith-based or religious vacation and predicted that by 2012 an additional 9.7 million will have done so. Further, the study found almost a third of all international travelers, about 15.7 million US adults, reported they are likely to take a faith-based trip in the future.

Some estimate the market is even larger. Stachnik says: "With the religious market, sometimes you have them on a faith-based program and next time they travel more generically. It's not that someone 'converts' to faith-based travel exclusively, so the size of the market is limited only by the number of people."

The size of the market and its potential are certainly draws for tour operators, he adds, but "the nice thing is we didn't have to reinvent the distribution channel". He says for travel agents looking to enter the market, the great news is it's highly definable. Every agent has a listing of every church and social group available to them in the phone book. Travel agents today don't realize it, but they probably already have clients in every church in their area.

Where are the faithful headed? Given most holy sites have been around for some time, the list of favorites comes as no surprise. Israel and the Holy Land top the roster for all denominations, with Italy running a close second. And all eyes are on Germany this year, celebrating its once-in-a-decade Passion Play in Oberammergau.

Among Jewish travelers, Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and the Baltic countries, are popular. For those on mission trips, South

America and Africa are favorites. Cruises for the religious minded have also jumped in popularity, while some safaris have even taken a faith-based approach.

For agents looking to break into this market, Schields warns they "will not succeed simply by putting an 'open for religious business' sign in the window." It's a very relationship-driven market and requires a lot of traditional customer contact and service. However, it's a very tight community and once established, referrals can grow quickly.

Despite many agents' trepidation, based mostly on fears they're not faithful enough themselves, Stachnik encourages them to give the market a second look. "Why bypass an opportunity to research and see if it bears hope and promise?" he says. "It's fiscally sound and you're dealing with salt-of-the-earth people. The best piece of advice I can give is don't let things pass you by." ■

TOP 5 SELLING TIPS

FROM MIKE SCHIELDS, DIRECTOR, GROUP SALES & EMERGING MARKETS FOR THE GLOBUS FAMILY OF BRANDS

- 1. MAKE THE CALL:** You might get the appointment over the phone, but not the business. You need to go there in person.
- 2. GET PAST THE GATEKEEPER:** This person protects the pastor, minister or deacon from too much admin work. This may take time, but it's a relationship worth cultivating.
- 3. FIND THE DECISION MAKER:** It's not always who you think. Sometimes it's a deacon or major layperson in the church. Ask questions and find out.
- 4. DO YOUR RESEARCH:** Every local church and religious organization has a mission and goal. Find out what it is and align your offerings with it.
- 5. BE PERSISTENT:** Churches have lots of people trying to sell to them. They can often be skeptical, so don't take it personally.

CONTACTS

■ FAITHFUL HOLIDAYS

www.faithfulholidays.com

■ GLOBUS

www.globusfaith.com

■ REGINA TOURS

www.1800catholic.com

■ WORLD RELIGIOUS TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

www.wrtareligioustravel.com