



## Vacations With a Purpose

**WHILE** people today are busier than ever, nearly everyone agrees that it's important to take time to wind down, relax, and recharge their batteries. By doing so they return more focused, inspired, and productive.

For millions of families, that time of recharging has come during their annual vacation. These days, more options than ever exist for families to get away from it all. Overseas trips, amusement parks, missions, camps, conventions, retreats, cruises, and more are available to take you and yours away. And more and more are targeting Christians to come aboard.

It's a billion dollar business as Christian travel is up 10 percent over the last three years, according to the National Tour Association.

Vacationing with a purpose  
can enrich family relationships.

No matter what the destination—if you even have one at all—few would argue that the most important aspect of the family vacation is just that: family.

Here are some vacation options that may allow you and your family to come back relaxed, recuperated, and refreshed.

### Seeing the World

More than 600,000 Americans travel overseas each year to enjoy religious and faith-based vacations and that number is increasing as travel organizers are starting to cater to Christians.

Russ Goodman of Seattle-based *Ultimate Journeys* specializes in designing Christian destination tours such as "Jesus and Galilee," "Holy Land—Journey of a Lifetime," and "Lands of Jesus and Moses."

"Having done this for a number of years, I can say that you do not come back unchanged," Goodman said. "People are intrigued by the Bible. They are taught it their whole lives and they become excited to go and see these places for themselves. Families bond, they learn, and they benefit a great deal."

Offering 70 itineraries to such places as Israel, Turkey, Greece, Ireland, and Scotland, travelers can choose cruises, ground tours, or a combination of the two.

And speaking of cruises, these vacation mainstays are being reinvented and reconfigured for Christian sea-goers. Fully stocked bars and casino-style slot machines from regular cruises are put in mothballs to give way to Christian musicians and speakers preaching God's Word.

Outfits such as All Christian Cruises and Christian Cruises.net offer destinations to such visually appealing places as the Caribbean and Alaska.

### Religious Travel Trends Increasing

When a travel company that has been around for nearly 80 years formalizes faith-based travel itineraries, it's safe to say they are monitoring trends and keeping an eye on what's hot.

Kevin Wright, Religious Travel Manager of Globus, the world's leading escorted travel company, said the numbers told them to invest in faith-based travel.

Globus recently started offering religious tours all over the world. From the journeys of the apostle Paul, to the seven churches of Revelation in Turkey, to Martin Luther tours throughout Germany, Globus's business has increased three straight years as faith-based travel is on the upswing.

Indeed, Wright said that Globus doubled its business in 2005 from 2004 and as of early 2006 had already eclipsed 2005's mark.

Wright attributes the rise in religious travel to three factors. First, people in general are simply traveling more. Second, baby boomers are coming back to their faith. Finally, people are hungering for a personal, intimate faith.

He said people want to go to the site in Athens, Greece where the apostle Paul delivered a speech in Acts 17.

"It enriches family relationships," Wright said. "Kids learn more. It's the beauty of travel—everyone benefits physically, socially, spiritually, and intellectually."

Wright said it's one thing to sit in a family room watching television documentaries, but it's another thing entirely to see the sights in person.

"Everyone comes back recharged," Wright said, "ready to return to work or school."

While the Bible land of Israel is most desirable for

Christian sightseers, the political unrest in the region has curtailed tourism recently. Wright said Globus will begin offering trips to Israel again in 2007 but in the meantime, American families can settle for the next best thing.

### Israel Comes to Orlando

In 2001, in the tourism capital of America, Mickey Mouse received competition from an unlikely amusement park figure. Not a cartoon character or superhero, but a Jewish carpenter who walked a land thousands of miles away 2,000 years ago.

The Holy Land Experience is an Orlando, Florida park where visitors are taken back in time to see what Jesus saw.

Dr. Dan Hayden, president and executive director of the park, said the goal was to bring Bible times to life.

“The Bible is not just words in a paragraph or paragraphs on a page,” Hayden said. “[It’s about] living people in a real environment in real circumstances.”

It’s one thing to sit in a family room watching television documentaries, but it’s another thing entirely to see the sights in person.

Some of the attractions in the park are:

- The Scriptorium which houses the largest private collection of biblical texts and artifacts in the United States.
- The Qumran Dead Sea Caves which are a replica of the caves in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947.
- The world’s largest indoor model of ancient Jerusalem.
- A full-scale model depicting the tomb in which Jesus was buried.
- Live shows where actors and musicians depict the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and other biblical events.

It is precisely these real circumstances that the park tries to display to tourists who are coming from around the country by the busload.

“It’s a learning experience,” Hayden says. “They learn by immersion—from all the sights and sounds. It’s entertainment and education.”

“There is a real hunger in our society because there is such turmoil and uncertainty. People are looking for a stable basis—a strong faith. They’re looking for something more,” he said.

### Planning for Vacations

Amy Eckert, a travel-writer in Western Michigan, recognized that religious-themed travel was on the increase

when she wrote three Christian travel guides.

“I thought it was a niche that was underserved,” Eckert said. “I see travel as a spiritual pilgrimage, and in my writing I wanted to include sites Christian families could see.”

Eckert, who has traveled all over the world, always took a yearly vacation with her family. She offered these tips parents can use in planning family trips:

- Let every family member choose a site or activity during the vacation so no one feels left out and so family members can discover what the others find entertaining.
- Ask each family member to make a list of his or her favorite sites, then take each person’s top two sites and work them into the itinerary.
- Take time to relax. Eckert warned against trying to cram too much into a vacation, which can leave travelers feeling more fatigued than when they left. A vacation is a time to get away from it all and relax, Eckert said—not become even more exhausted, or worse, angry at each other over an unpleasant time. Eckert suggests that when family members get fatigued, don’t hesitate to cut out a planned event to let everyone rest.
- Sunday worship should be included. While traveling, it may afford a family an opportunity to worship in a new place—a historic church, for instance. She also said that seeing new things could offer families time to focus on the natural beauty of the world. Her family would always go to a zoo on their vacations to “see the beautiful creativity God used in making animals.” They ended each zoo trip with a discussion about Noah’s Ark and a brief devotional.

### A Personal Retreat

Bob Stacy, minister of Spring Hill Church of Christ in Middletown, Ohio, takes a yearly retreat in which he combines relaxation with planning.

Every year Stacy travels by himself to French Lick, Indiana where he plans his upcoming year. Topics, sermons, schedules, and more are considered as Stacy slows down to think things through. By slowing down, he figures he’s able to speed right back up.

“It’s alone time,” Stacy said. “I feel good when I come back. There are no interruptions. I think, I relax—it’s a good time.”

And while Stacy values his down time, he is also willing to work hard as wife Nell and he have planned a mission trip to Venezuela in 2007.

“Missions are the richest experiences,” he said. “It’s being on the ground floor of the work of the church. You deal with first generation Christians who are often the most enthusiastic because it’s all brand new to them.”

Stacy said missions can provide families with a rewarding experience and recommended a mission trip as a possible family vacation.

“It brings you back refreshed,” he said. “You have a new appreciation for the Lord—a new outlook, really.” ■