

Palestine

Tourism under siege

By Ian Stalker



There's plenty of room at the inn for those visiting Bethlehem these days. The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict has scared most tourists away from Palestinian-governed areas but that hasn't stopped the Ministry of Tourism and Heritage of the Palestinian National Authority from sending

delegations to European travel shows, hoping to convince them to visit the city of Jesus' birth and other destinations, if not immediately, at least when regional violence subsides.

Yusef Daher, executive-director of the Arab Hotel Association, which represents hotels in Palestinian territory, concedes that tourists aren't likely to start arriving in large numbers in Bethlehem or other Palestinian destinations as long as fighting continues.

"I know we have a difficult message to deliver," he said during January's FITUR show in Madrid, where a Palestine booth featured around 12 hoteliers and ground operators, people whose presence was made in part possible because of funding provided by the Spanish agency Cooperacion Espanola, which assists developing countries.

Six of 18 Bethlehem hotels – which traditionally relied heavily on Christian pilgrims -- were closed in January because of a lack of business and some that were open had "zero occupancy," Daher reported. "It's very bad."

FITUR – which also had Israeli participation – coincided with a bloody Israeli raid in the Gaza Strip and a deadly suicide bombing in Jerusalem. But people were stopping by the Palestine booth to pick up travel brochures and indeed a Palestinian reception was well-attended, even as one Palestinian delegate – Christiane Nasser - told guests "You must wonder why Palestine is here today...given the situation back home."

Palestine participated in other European travel shows, including November's World Travel Market in London, which Daher said was "very successful" for the 30-member delegation. Palestinian tourism officials promote Bethlehem – home of the landmark Church of the Nativity –

Jerusalem and Jericho. Jericho is close to the cave where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

Palestinian-ruled parts of the West Bank saw over a million visitors in 2000, but the beginning of fighting quickly scared tourists away, with only 100,000 visiting in 2001. This Christmas Bethlehem saw 15,000 visitors, fewer than 10 per cent of them staying over night.

Daher said no tourist has been killed during the intifadah and neither side in the conflict attacks them.

Those travelling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem must pass through an Israeli army checkpoint, an easy procedure for tourists, but often-difficult for Palestinians.

Palestinians want tourists because of the revenue they bring to areas that have seen their economies devastated. The Israeli army shows more restraint when foreigners are nearby and is less likely to open fire on Palestinians.

Daher is confident tourism will quickly increase if the violence ends. That is why Palestinians will continue attending European travel shows as long as funding is available, eager to convince Christians interested in their religion's roots that they must see Jesus' birthplace.

"The Holy Land without Bethlehem is not a pilgrimage. Our message is we're getting prepared and we'll see you soon in Palestine." ■