



SACRED SITES:  
VALUE BEYOND BELIEF

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### WHERE AND WHAT BECOME WHO AND WHY

As 2012 counts down to the end of the year, with every passing day the global travel community counts up to the 1 billion milestone. Expected to be reached in Q4/2012, this year international traveler arrivals will break the 1 billion mark– 1 billion people crossing borders, crossing frames of reference, and crossing belief systems to learn more about someone else, living somewhere else.

1 billion new discoveries.

While doing so, destinations will receive the multiplicity benefits of tourism – social, economic, and otherwise, x 1 billion.

Embedded within these benefits is the innate ability of the tourism sector to impart greater understanding and appreciation for not just where and how others live, but how they think. Visiting a destination has become a very different journey of discovery.

Once upon a time, to visit a new destination was to visit its icons, its major attractions, its signature places and spaces, its' Top 10 To-Dos. The outsider looking in was the norm. The souvenirs were enough.

But as time has passed, and society has evolved, the desire to scratch beneath the surface has increased. It is no longer about souvenirs, it is about stories. Moments, memories, meaning matters.

For this reason, within the greater destination itinerary, sacred sights and places of worship have gained in importance and value to destination experiences – in many cases, taking pride of place. Their role is clear - understanding the foundations of a culture (and seeing some of its finest artwork) has meant visiting the destination's centres of belief. To do so is to get so much closer to the spirit of the people of a destination, feeling one foot in. To not, is to remain outside.

Importantly, one need not be a spiritual tourist to feel the spirit of a place.

### PAUSE, PRAY, PROCEED

The outside-in image of Faith Tourism, also referred to as Religious or Spiritual Tourism has, for many travellers worldwide, for many decades, been simply, and often simplistically, understood. Spiritual / Faith Tourism, a modernised name for Religious Tourism, was travel focused on locations across the globe where people gathered to worship. They may be individuals, or they may be grouped. But their sense of purpose of travel was the same. While carrying different passports, these diverse groups of travellers were often starting on a common baseline - shared religion, shared appreciation, shared community. Faith Tourism was for the believers in this kind of historical and cultural holiday.

That used to be the common belief.

But more and more, in more places across the globe, sacred sights and places of worship are becoming important destinations for travelers within the total visitor experience. In addition to their often being the finest showing of a culture's architecture, temples, mosques, synagogues, churches - places of respect and ritual for religions around the world - have taken on a whole new meaning in the traveller's experience as travellers seek out understanding of their meaning to the people of the destination.

What once was quickly looked past, now is slowly looked into, looked up in, looked at as an essential part of a travel experience. It all connects back to how dramatically and swiftly the world has evolved in its basic connectedness.

### COMMON GROUND

Today's world, with its evaporation of distance, e-openness of information, and global impact of local events, has experienced a profound shift in fundamental, everyday belief systems. And an awakening of desire for wider understanding.

Crisis in the economy, challenges to political stability, cracks in social unity and acts of natural calamity in one part of the world have the ability to create concern in another half a world away. The words or actions of one individual have proven to inspire passionate response from millions.

This intense interconnectivity has unlocked curiosity of both breadth and depth of meaning. The WHERE and WHAT of the world around us now moves swiftly forward to the WHO and WHY – *why is this happening? What are they thinking?*

This curiosity has, as a result, unlocked new opportunities for destinations to create immersion experiences that bring travellers closer to the hearts and minds of the people of the destination.

To explore other belief systems, a pursuit that seeks to learn about our differences yet more often than not ultimately reveals that, in fact, we are more and more the same.

The value of the formal faith tourism industry is undeniable. Overall, 300 to 330 million faith tourists are estimated to travel per annum, according to the UNWTO. Of the world's most well-known and strongly pursued faith-based destinations, *the Hajj*, now undertaken by over three million devotees per year, remains well at the forefront of mass faith tourism participation. While open to only those of Islamic faith, other leading sacred sights are accessible to devotees of all faiths: *Yardenit*, the baptism site on the River Jordan; the *Wailing Wall* in Jerusalem; the banks of the *River Ganges*; and the *Golden Temple* in Amritsar, *Sheikh Zayed Grand Temple* in Bangkok, the *Grand Mosque* in Abu Dhabi, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, to name but a few.

Still, while a number of iconic places of worship exist across the globe, it is all places of worship that are taking on greater interest. Iconic status and surrounding souvenir shops are not required to attract the enquiring hearts and minds of today's world's travellers. The peaceful Buddhist temple down the road from the hotel in Sri Lanka, the tiny chapel within

the village in Sicily, the Sikh gurudwara in the centre of the city - millions of places of faith are finding millions of travellers quietly walking through their doors.

Thankfully, the tourism sector is aware of this growing desire of travelers to strengthen their awareness of the people within the destinations they visit. One such example: the Jumeirah Group, a proud supporter of the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding (SMCCU) in Dubai.

As explained by Gerald Lawless, the President and Group CEO of Jumeirah Group,:

*“Many of our guests are seeking enrichment experiences while enjoying their holidays in Dubai. The SMCCU has been providing a venue for people from different backgrounds to come together for a unique experience that introduces participants to the traditions, values, culture and the religion of the people of United Arab Emirates. When visiting the centre, visitors take a guided tour of the Jumeirah Mosque as it is open to the public and dedicated to receiving non-Muslim visitors. Jumeirah often works with the centre to organise such events as Iftar dinners during the Holy Month of Ramadan.”*

*At the core of the rationale of Jumeirah Group’s support of SMCCU is, as expressed by Lawless, “The centre is a unique opportunity to learn about the Emirati culture and Islam in a relaxed, informal atmosphere. The response has been great, our guests very much enjoy the overall ambience and opportunity to have this first-hand cultural experience. It promotes greater understanding and awareness.”*

In addition, the strong commitment to the SMCCU demonstrated by the Jumeirah Group acts as a strong reflection of the tourism industry’s commitment to bridging cultures by enhancing the guest experience through more meaningful exposure to local cultures.

### COUNTING BLESSINGS

The spirit of tourism is about developing global connectivity through understanding and appreciation. Participation in rituals has become a powerful show of respect, even if not a show of religious affiliation.

These moments - standing in the courtyard of a Buddhist temple breathing in the jasmine-scented smoke of followers burning incense while saying silent prayers, listening to choirs sing in heart-touching harmony, observing Friday prayers with its beauty of unity - have the power to add a richness to the traveller’s personal experience that goes beyond borders.

And, importantly, the moments can go beyond the holiday to establish a life-long understanding and appreciation of a people who, while maybe living half way across the world, are standing right beside us in their basic desire for health, harmony, a home, and a sense of happiness.

Whatever language we may speak, we all believe in counting our blessings.

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