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Spirit and Adventure

By Sally S. Stich

For Mary-Rose Fisher, 51, an avid scrapbooker from Austin, Texas, the original appeal of the three-day Girl's Get-A-Way cruise, promoted as a tour for Christians who want to be "the women God wanted them to be," was the chance to create a spiritual memory book. "The scrapbooking session was described as commemorating the important events of your spiritual life, with all necessary art supplies provided," says the IBM software architect and devoted Protestant. But as it turned out, Fisher never once set foot in that workshop. She ended up by the pool with her daughter Christy, 27, where both enjoyed meeting other women--Episcopalians, Catholics, Methodists --whose similar values made for easy friendships.

Mother and daughter also enjoyed Bible study in the mornings, and Christian comedians (clean jokes only) and singers at night. In fact, Fisher had such a great time last November that she has already persuaded many of her girlfriends from church to sign up for a similar cruise this November. "My friends keep asking for our itinerary," she says, "but I tell them it's just so much fun being together--sunning in the afternoon and listening to Christian entertainment at night--that it doesn't matter what ports we stop at."

Religion and travel are hardly new partners, but Fisher is part of a growing group of tourists seeking to enrich their spiritual lives while enjoying a big dose of good old, secular fun, whether in the Holy Land, on a Christian cruise or touring the missions of California--wine-tasting reception included. "Religious tourism accounts for one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourism market," says Kevin Wright, religious-travel manager at Globus, an international tour company that offers 20 faith-based itineraries, up from eight in 2004. "We're talking about a \$1 billion industry."

Why the explosion of religious-oriented travel? Three factors, says Wright, who is the author of three travel guides for the faithful. The first, he says, is simple demographics: "In the last census, there were 8 million more people identified as Christians than a decade ago." Second, is the broader boom in international travel. According to Wright, 45% more Americans are traveling overseas today than 10 years ago. Third, says Wright, "people of faith increasingly want a personal experience of their faith."

And that may be why yesteryear's dry lectures in a dusty church don't quite cut it with this generation of travelers. "Boomers don't want to be told about faith, they want to experience it for themselves," says Cindi Brodhecker of MTS Travel in Ephrata, Pa., which focuses on the religious and nonprofit market. "They want to explore where their ancestors might have worshipped. Or better understand their religious background." And, like Fisher, they often want to take the family, making it a multigenerational experience. "Today faith-based travel is no longer targeted to a niche market--church groups who want

to go on a mission or pilgrimage," says Brodhecker. "It's for the mainstream customer who wants an exciting vacation that also makes the Bible come alive."

That's what drew Ann and Ron Richards to MTS's Footsteps of Paul tour of Greece, Turkey and Rome. The couple, who belong to the Congregational United Church of Christ in St. Charles, Ill., were particularly moved by a ceremony in which they were baptized in the same River Lydia in northern Greece where Paul is believed to have baptized Lydia, a merchant who, after hearing Paul's Gospel, became the first woman to embrace Christianity. Seeing where John the Evangelist is believed to have written the Book of Revelation also enriched their understanding of Scripture. But not all of their journey was religious. "We also took a five-day Mediterranean cruise to Mykonos, Ephesus, Crete and Santorini," says Ron, 65, "and all of that was pretty much standard tourist stuff."

Although pilgrimages to the Holy Land and to the shrines of Europe top the charts in popularity, almost any type of trip can be cast as faith-based travel, even white-water rafting. One of the most popular trips organized by the Windfall Outdoor Center in Maine is a run down the state's Kennebec River through rugged wilderness. The outing includes lunch and devotionals around a campfire. "What better place to talk about the beauty of God's creation," says Bob Chaffee, 50, who has taken his family on the rafting trip numerous times in the past 15 years, as part of a weeklong outdoor adventure arranged by Windfall.

For those who want to combine the luxury of a cruise with the spirit of a mission, there's the Cruise with a Cause, offered by Christian Travel Finder. Joan Tidwell, 53, took her daughter Lindsay, 18, on the voyage as a high school graduation gift. Mother and daughter, who are Baptists, boarded Royal Caribbean's Sovereign of the Seas for a five-day voyage and enjoyed cruise-ship amenities, concerts by such contemporary Christian artists as Todd Agnew and New Song at night, a day of missionary work in Freeport, Bahamas, and a day of snorkeling, sunbathing and swimming on CocoCay. "There were about 2,000 of us, some with church groups, some traveling alone, some there for the mission, some there for a cruise with no alcohol or gambling and good family entertainment," says Tidwell. For her, the highlight was going into the Freeport public schools to meet kids and talk to them about having a personal relationship with God.

As for Lindsay, mission work may have also bought her 15 minutes of fame: a reality TV show was being filmed during the cruise. The 12-episode program, Cruise with a Cause, hosted by JCTV's Brandon Crouch and Reba Toney, is a behind-the-scenes look at the mission effort as well as chats with guest artists and passengers. "It was totally cool watching the show being filmed," Lindsay says. "Of course we're all hoping to see ourselves" on television. But forget the typical cat fights, foul language and sexual tension of MTV's reality shows. This program will be good, clean fun--just like the cruise it captures.



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