



AP Photo Pier Paolo Cito

Israeli custom officials give a guided tour of holy sites yesterday. The custom officials are being taught the basics of Christianity to help them handle the millions of pilgrims who will visit the holy site in 2000.

# Israeli government prepares for pilgrims

By DINA KRAFT  
Associated Press Writer

JERUSALEM — Customs inspector Nadav Shattel, a religious Jew, had never set foot in a church before.

He looked around in wonder yesterday as he and his colleagues were led around the cavernous, incense-filled Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of Jesus' burial — all in the line of duty.

The Israeli inspectors, along with taxi drivers, airport workers and police officers, are being taught the basics of Christianity in a course the Tourism Ministry hopes will help them handle the millions of millennium pilgrims with greater care.

In a daylong seminar, historian Doron Bar gently guided 15 inspectors through the life of Jesus, the teachings of Paul the Apostle and the maze of different denominations.

"It all emerged from this small country," Bar said as he tapped a map of Israel. "And that's why all of these people are coming here."

Using a slide projector, he flashed images of different types

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head of the Anti-Defamation League in Israel

of crosses and showed a cross-section of pilgrims from around the world, commenting on their different religious customs.

One picture showed Brazilian pilgrims swaying and waving their hands in prayer outside the Old City walls. The Brazilians, Bar explained, tend to be among the most expressive in showing their faith.

Rabbi David Rosen, who has been trying to promote Jewish-Christian dialogue, welcomed the government's efforts to prepare the tourism industry for the expected influx of pilgrims.

But he said the opportunity to use the millennium to educate Israelis about Christianity and visitors about Judaism has largely been missed.

"I don't get the impression that enough energy has been given to preparing materials that can cause better understanding between Christians and Jews," said Rosen, who helped negotiate a 1994 recognition treaty between Israel and the Vatican and now heads the Anti-Defamation League in Israel.

The Tourism Ministry said it simply hoped to cut down on misunderstandings and make tourism workers more sensitive to the needs of pilgrims.

A course for police commanders will include a section on how to identify and deal with possibly volatile pilgrims who come to the Holy Land expecting an apocalypse ushering in the Second Coming of Jesus.

Israel fears it could become a target for Christian doomsday groups and has set up a special police unit to prevent cultists from passing through border controls.

Despite the last-minute preparations for the millennium rush, tourism officials recently acknowledged that the number of visitors may not greatly exceed the annual average. Some 3 million are expected in 2000, about half the forecasts made several years ago.

Even with expectations for the millennial rush scaled back, the customs inspectors were eager to learn about the Christian visitors.

Bar explained that for many pilgrims, a trip to the Holy Land is a highlight of their lives, and that they may be on a spiritual high when they enter Israel. He said inspectors should bear this in mind when checking the visitors at the border crossings.

At the end of the class, Bar took his charges to several churches in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's walled Old City.

In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, they observed the priests swinging incense and pilgrims lighting candles.

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