

Travel & Pilgrimages

A land where tradition colors historical fact

By Judith Sudilovsky
Catholic News Service

BETHANY, West Bank — Rabah Elyan stands outside the Church of Lazarus offering cold drinks to the few tourists milling around the church.

He has already had a late start because of the time change: Israel started daylight saving time the previous night, while the Palestinian towns stayed on winter time. When Elyan arrived at his stand, the tour buses were already there.

In addition to hawking drinks at his small stand just outside the church where Jesus is said to have raised Lazarus from the dead, Elyan offers tourists the chance to see what he calls "the oldest house in Bethany." It is the location of the well where Jesus drew water and which, coincidentally, is on land belonging to Elyan's family.

"This is the only (underground) well in Bethany. This is where Jesus took his water from, these are the steps leading down," Elyan said.

He said he welcomes groups and tourists inside the house and the covered courtyard with the well so they can hold prayer meetings or have their picture taken with period costumes to really feel what it was like in the time of Jesus. He does not charge anything for the service, he said, but donations are appreciated.

The authenticity of the well is anybody's guess, said archeologist and tour guide Harley Stark. But that is true about many of the churches and tombs pilgrims visit during their pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

"Looking for historical accuracy with religious sites is very hard. I can't say, and I don't think anyone else can say, this is the place where Mary and Martha lived," said Stark, sitting in the courtyard of the church, supposedly built on the site of the home of Mary and Martha. A few yards away and down a long flight of steps is the cave where tradition holds that Lazarus was buried.

"But I can say that somewhere in this area is where they lived and where Lazarus was raised from the dead," Stark added.

The present day Church of Lazarus was built on top of Crusader ruins, he said.

During the Byzantine period it was important for Christian churches to find places connected to a specific event in Jesus' life so that pilgrims could feel as if they were following in his footsteps, said Stark. In addition, pilgrims were a good source of income for the upkeep of the shrines. There was no admission charged to enter the churches, but the monks and priests sold little trinkets and holy oil as souvenirs, much like they do today, Stark said.

Byzantine-era shrines are



CNS/Reuters
Sister Palmira and another tourist touch the 14-point star said to mark the traditional spot of Christ's birth inside Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity. The Catholic nun was on her first visit to the Holy Land.

more likely to have been built nearer to the site where an actual event took place, since they were built only about 500 years after the death of Jesus, said Stark, while those built by the Crusaders were built more than a thousand years after his death and have less of a chance of being historically accurate.

Each Christian church was eager to stake out its own claim in the Holy Land, and so they all established their own churches and shrines on the sites where they said a holy event occurred.

For example, a few yards away from the Church of Lazarus stands a Greek Orthodox church memorializing the same event.

The hills surrounding

Jerusalem are dotted with little monasteries and churches of various denominations, some commemorating specific events and others just built to establish the presence of a specific religious denomination.

Up the hill from Bethany and across the Kidron Valley from the walls of Jerusalem is the Franciscan Church in the village of Beth Page. A black wrought-iron fence surrounds a rock which Jesus is said to have stood on before mounting the donkey he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

A few yards away on another slope is another church on the site where the Greek Orthodox say the event took place.

Down in the valley, at the Church of Gethsemane where Jesus is said to have sweated blood and where the Romans arrested him, a group of tourists file silently into the church.

"As a Catholic I have been taught that this is where the whole story took place, and I want to see those places," said 70-year-old Esther de Mose of Colombia. "I know that some of the sites might not be in the exact places where the events really occurred, but that is not important. What is important is the agony of our Lord, his crucifixion and resurrection, especially now."

Pilgrims come regularly to the Ecce Homo Sisters of Zion Convent, which since medieval times has been regarded as the starting point of the Via Dolorosa, or Street of Sorrows, where Jesus began his walk with the cross.

However, noted Stark, the arch inside the convent — where medieval tradition holds that Jesus stood with his crown of thorns and purple robe — was actually built 100 years later by Roman Emperor Hadrian. That is clearly stated on the explanation in front of the arch.

On any given day during Lent, the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem are filled with Christian tour groups stopping at each of the 14 stations of the Via Dolorosa. But, Stark noted, the tradition of the Via Dolorosa began only about 500 years ago.

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SARDIS - is one of the most picturesque areas of any of the Seven Churches. Visit the temple, the Byzantine Church, the Roman-era synagogue and the gymnasium. After lunch continue to Philadelphia, which with Smyrna, were the only two churches among the Seven, that did not receive St. John the Baptist's disapproval.

EPHESUS - Ephesus is one of the world's finest archaeological sights. The Arcadian Way, the splendid facade of the Library of Celsus, the Amphitheater where St. Paul preached to the Ephesians that "gods made by human hands are not gods at all."

Visit the church of the Virgin Mary where the Third Ecumenical Council was held. One tradition maintains that St. John brought the Virgin Mary to Ephesus and she spent the rest of her life in the house on the hilltop. The home is now visited by thousands of Catholics each year.

Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II both celebrated Mass here.

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KONYA - St. Paul and St. Barnabas both preached in Konya, in the synagogue that no longer exists. Today the city is known for its Seljuk mosques and monuments, and the monastery of the great mystic Mevlana.

CAPPADOCIA - Visit Kaymakli - an underground city carved in the soft volcanic rock by early Christians. Citadel of Uchisar, the Goreme Valley - an open air museum with its cave-churches hewn out of rock. Visit the monastic valley of Zelve - the Valley of Fairy Chimneys and the caves of the ancient village of Avanos.

ANKARA - Depart for Ankara, the capital of modern Turkey. Visit the world-famous Museum of Anatolian Civilizations filled with the priceless collection of the pre-historic era. Then drive to the Mausoleum of Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic.

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