



TENS OF THOUSANDS ARE EXPECTED TO VISIT ISRAEL DURING THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD

The Tourism Ministry to provide free shuttle transport between Jerusalem and Bethlehem for Christmas Mass celebrations and to support Christmas festivities in Nazareth * Tourism Minister to host pre-Christmas reception on 21/12/15 for Church leaders in Jerusalem

Tourism Minister Yariv Levin: "I welcome the thousands of visitors who are expected to arrive in Israel for the Christmas holiday. We are doing our utmost to offer assistance to each and every one and welcome them. The ministry invests significantly throughout the year in the conservation and upgrading of Christian sites in order to ensure that every Christian can visit the sites that are sacred for him. We invite you to visit these sites and enjoy a powerful religious and spiritual experience."

Jerusalem, December 17, 2015 - The Tourism Ministry is working to welcome the tens of thousands of visitors expected to arrive in Israel for the Christmas period. From 15:00 on Christmas Eve through to 03:00 on Christmas Day, the Ministry of Tourism will offer **free shuttle transportation**, helping pilgrims travelling between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Buses will leave every 30 minutes on the hour and half hour from the bus stop near the Carta Parking lot (opposite Jaffa Gate and near to the Mamilla Boulevard). The bus will also stop near the entrance to the Mar Elias Monastery, and at the Rosmarin junction, before continuing via Rachel's Crossing to Bethlehem - and then back again. Representatives from the Ministry of Tourism will welcome tourists and pilgrims at Rachel's Crossing with sweets in the spirit of the holiday. The ministry will also provide a firework display during the Christmas parade in Nazareth.

EVENTS AND FESTIVITIES IN JERUSALEM AND NAZARETH

21 December 2015

Tourism Minister Yariv Levin will host the traditional pre-Christmas reception for leaders of the Christian communities and churches in Israel at the Shimshon Center, Beit Shmuel in Jerusalem at 11:00. Also participating in the reception alongside ambassadors and Christian leaders will be the Director-General of the Tourism Ministry Amir Halevi, and representatives of the Church, government and private bodies involved in promoting Christian tourism to the Holy Land. Among the Church leaders attending the reception: His Beatitude Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilus III, His Eminence Vatican Ambassador Giuseppe Lazzarotto and the Custos of the Holy Land His Paternity Pierbattista Pizzaballa. The minister will send season's greetings for Christmas to the Christian communities and invite the faithful around the world to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

24 December 2015

On Christmas Eve, 24.12.15, the traditional parade of thousands of local youth, together with the leaders of the Christian communities, will pass through **Nazareth** from 15:00. The parade ends at the plaza in front of the Basilica with a firework display, sponsored by the Tourism Ministry, to announce the opening of the festive Christmas celebrations (17:30). Christmas Mass will be celebrated in the Basilica of the Annunciation at 19:00.

In recent years, the Tourism Ministry has invested close to NIS 100 million in developing and maintaining the infrastructure of Christian sites, in order to enrich the pilgrim's spiritual experience. These sites include, among others, the baptism site at Qasr el Yahud near the Dead Sea, Mount Zion and Ein Karem in Jerusalem and the Gospel Trail in the Galilee. Other projects include, among others, the boardwalk from Tiberias to Capernaum, Korazim and Mount Precipice.

The Papal visit to Israel in May 2014 brought thousands of tourists and pilgrims to Israel and, following the visit, hundreds of thousands more tourists who traveled to the Holy Land as a result. The Tourism Ministry invested about NIS2.5 million around the visit in marketing to leverage the visit of the Pope.

The ministry runs dedicated websites and facebook pages for the Catholic and Evangelical communities.

- www.holyland-pilgrimage.org (the Tourism Ministry's dedicated site for Catholic pilgrims, available in English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, Polish and Portuguese).
- <http://www.goisrael.com/Evng> (the Tourism Ministry's dedicated site for Evangelical Christians)

Christian tourism:

54% of the 2.9 million tourist entries (those staying at least one night) in 2014 were Christians. Of these, 39% were Catholic, 27% Protestants, 27% Orthodox. Among the **Protestants**, 74% were Evangelicals (who comprise 20% of all Christian tourists and 8% of all tourists) while 26% were from the mainstream and the Afro-American church. Among the **Orthodox**, 85% belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, and 15% to the Greek Orthodox and others.

21% of all visitors to Israel defined the purpose of their visit as pilgrimage. The vast majority of all Christian visitors visit Jerusalem, with about a third visiting Tel Aviv-Jaffa. The most visited sites by Christians (by descending order) Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Jewish Quarter, Capernaum, Old Jaffa, Tower of David, Qumran, Yad Vashem, Beit Shean and Qasr el Yahud.

High resolution images related to religious tourism sites and Christmas can be downloaded, free of charge, from [the picture gallery](http://www.flickr.com/photos/israelphotogallery/albums) on the ministry website or from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/israelphotogallery/albums>

Information about Christmas services: Christian Information Center
<http://www.cicts.org/default.asp?id=353>. **Please note that the Tourism Ministry is not responsible for any information on this website.**



Lydia Weitzman, Foreign Press Adviser to the Ministry of Tourism
Tel: 052 3584395 Email: israeltourismministry@gmail.com
www.goisrael.com www.holyland-pilgrimage.org