What are the opportunities for religious tourism from Europe?

Religious tourism is a growing market. Europeans are increasingly drifting from traditional religions towards a more spiritual way of practising their faith. In addition, an increasing number of people who do not consider themselves religious are interested in spirituality. This means that the market for religious tourism from Europe is very promising. Religiously aware professionals who are able to create an interesting tourism programme have the best chances in this market.

1. Product description

Religious tourism is a type of tourism exclusively or strongly motivated by religious reasons. This is one of the oldest forms of tourism. It can also be referred to as faith tourism or spiritual tourism.

People go on religious holidays to confirm, deepen or reflect upon their faith. They would like to:

- connect personally to a holy place
- better understand and appreciate a religion
- feel free from worry
- find peace and meaning in life

Some examples of religious tourism activities:

- religious tourist attractions
- pilgrimages
- monastery visits and guest stays
- retreats and faith-based camps
- religious conventions and rallies
- leisure (fellowship) vacations

Important aspects of a religious holiday generally include:

- an interesting programme
• accommodation that strengthens the experience
• encounters with other religious tourists (fellowship)
• meeting local people

Health and safety measures
Health and safety are important to European tourists. They often inquire about the safety of their destination. Safe driving in particular can be a concern: tourists will want to know the qualifications of their drivers and how/when the equipment is tested. Unclean rooms and a lack of (or faulty) smoke detectors are an annoyance at the destination. This might result in bad reviews after the holiday.

Tips:
• Pay attention to general safety measures. For example, tour operators should check vehicles and equipment regularly and hire experienced guides who know the area well. Accommodation establishments should have safety measures in place, such as smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, emergency exits, first-aid kits and 24-hour medical assistance.
• Show the outcomes of safety checks and licences to your clients.

Political stability
Safety is important to European tourists, especially because some developing countries are politically unstable. Most commercial tour operators don’t offer holidays to countries that their Ministry of Foreign Affairs has declared unsafe. This has previously led to a drop in tourism arrivals in countries such as Mali, Egypt and Kenya. This is also true for religious destinations in developing countries. Many famous religious tourism destinations, in Turkey and Syria for example, are coping with major safety issues.

Tips:
• Keep (potential) customers updated on changes in the safety situation in your area. You can do so through your website and your staff, for example. Be open and honest in your communication: explain which areas are safe or where safety might be an issue. Your customers have plenty of information sources too.
• Share safety experiences from customers on your website. Let them write about how safe they felt, because tourists value the experience of other travellers.
• If your region is ‘unsafe’, commercial tour operators will most probably not go there. In this case, focus on volunteer organisations and individual travellers. Check your country’s current safety status at the website of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in your target countries (Ireland and the United Kingdom).

Traveller profile
Religious tourists are committed travellers. They tend to save up for these religious experiences. As a result, the religious tourism segment is less sensitive to economic ups and downs than the overall tourism market.
Religious tourists prefer travelling in groups rather than as individuals. In contrast, people who want to do a pilgrimage prefer travelling on their own.

Religious tourists can be divided into three age groups:

**Young people (18 to 29)**

This group makes up around a third of religious tourists. They tend to be a budget and most likely spend the night in simple accommodation. Faith-based hospices or youth hostels are popular among this group, and fellowship (meeting other young religious travellers) is important to them. Many join travel groups initiated by their church or other religious centre. They are greatly interested in religious culture.

Young religious tourists with a Christian background are most likely to travel in groups and tend to come from a traditional and conservative background. Young religious tourists who do not belong to a church or religious centre may also seek a more spiritual kind of religious holiday. They are generally very open-minded and more likely to book individual holidays.

**Tips:**

- Offer separate dormitories for men and women. Many young religious tourists who are not married do not wish to share a dormitory with people from the opposite sex.
- Provide a local concierge to assist with on-site activities. This is especially appreciated when there are many young people in a group.
- Include singing activities and physical activities in your programme.

**Midlifers (30 to 55)**

This is the smallest segment. To them, the journey itself is a reason to travel. They seek an interesting spiritual programme and want flexibility and good information about the places they visit. They like visiting religious ceremonies. In addition, they enjoy meeting locals and other travellers who are on a similar journey. Out of all age groups, people in this group are the most likely to go on a pilgrimage.

A significant part of the religious tourists between 30 and 55 years of age are experiencing some sort of midlife crisis. To them, a religious holiday is meant to be a spiritual recharge. Spirituality tends to be more important to them than traditional religion.

**Tips:**

- Emphasise the spirituality of your tourism product.
- Promote your products as an experience, rather than just visiting a certain religious site or event.
- Invest in good guides that have extensive knowledge about the places you visit.

**Older tourists (55+)**

Older tourists make up approximately half of all religious tourists. There are slightly more women than men in this group. They prefer high-end accommodation and book their travel arrangements
via a tour operator. Compared to the other two groups, older tourists spend the most money on religious travel. They are very much interested in religious culture and tend to belong to traditional and conservative social groups.

Many of these people are “dream come true” religious tourists who visit the most popular religious tourism destinations like Israel or Mecca. They usually travel with one or two people they know, preferably in an organised group tour.

This group can be very interesting for you. They tend to opt for a full tour package, and are keen to find a specialised provider of tailor-made services to make their dream come true – and they are willing to pay a premium for that.

**Tips:**
- Be sensitive to religious needs. Think about what food to serve, the kind of music to play and the timing of activities.
- Having good guides with extensive knowledge about the places they visit and the religions they concern is very important.
- Develop itineraries with various activities surrounding the religious theme.
- Also offer specialised and tailor-made tours.
- Comfort is important to this group, so make sure to provide high-quality accommodation and good meals. See our study about senior travel from Europe for more information on this segment.

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for religious tourism?

*Religious tourism is one of the fastest-growing travel segments.* The UNWTO estimates that tourists take 600 million national and international religious trips per year. It also estimates that 300 million tourists visit the world’s major religious sites each year. This is about a fourth of all international tourist arrivals.

For statistics on European source markets, see our study on European demand for tourism in developing countries.

**Popular religious tourism destinations**

The most famous and most visited religious tourism destinations are those mentioned in major religious books, such as Jerusalem (Bible) and Mecca (Quran). Other religious destinations may not be as old, but are extremely famous and popular nevertheless, such as Lourdes, Fatima and Santiago de Compostela.

Popular religious tourism destinations in developing countries include sites in:
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Egypt
- Iran
- Jordan
- Nepal
- Peru
- Turkey
3. Which trends offer opportunities on the European market for religious tourism?

Search for spirituality

European tourists are increasingly looking for spiritual meaning. Religious tourism can be a way for them to find it. In (especially Western) Europe, spirituality is less about attending formal ceremonies and more about experiencing a general sense of spirituality in daily life. People are looking for meaningfulness, worthwhile events, spiritual and mindful relaxation and ways of slowing down. Spiritual tourism activities vary from pilgrimages and religious tourism attractions to meditation and yoga retreats.

Tips:

- Offer a variety of spiritual tourism activities to appeal to different groups of tourists.
- Provide an experience free of dogmas and moral lessons. Instead, teach and let people experience spirituality.
- For more information, see our study on inner wellness tourism, which focuses on spiritual, mental and emotional wellness.

Fellowship tours

Fellowship tours are tours where people with the same interests and goals embark on a religious journey. Participating with like-minded people, also for recreation, makes the experience more joyful and meaningful. This in itself strengthens the faith and the purpose of the trip. The most popular forms of fellowship tours are cruises and youth events from religious centres. Although this is not a very fast growing segment, the trend is expected to remain very relevant.

Tips:

- Offer tourists the opportunity to meet like-minded people. Examples include common time for devotions, lectures by theologians and communal eating.
- Add an element of fun to your package. This is almost as important as the more serious part of the religious tourism agenda.
Search for authentic experiences

The increasing search for authentic experiences is very well known in the world tourism sector. This trend is expected to continue influencing tourism for years to come. An increasingly popular way for tourists to have authentic experiences is by connecting to spiritual and cultural traditions. This also means that tourists want to know more about the background of the place they are visiting. They are keen to be involved in the religious or spiritual life.

Tips:

- Include interaction with locals in your product/service offering.
- Give your religious tourists the opportunity to learn. You can do this by hiring good guides, giving lectures, offering counselling etc.
- Some religious tourism destinations are turning into booming businesses. However, make sure this does not affect the traditional role of religious tourism. It should be about promoting spiritual healing and devotion.

Participation

There is a shift from passive cultural tourism to a more active, immaterial and spiritual type. European religious tourists like to interact with local people. For example, by joining locals in religious celebrations or eating at local people’s homes. This trend is expected to continue to grow significantly in the coming years.

European religious tourists like to combine strictly religious experiences with cultural or volunteering activities. Volunteering contributes to the desire to lead a meaningful life and put something good back into society. However, this ‘volun-tourism’ also poses risks, for example to local children and wildlife.

Tips:

- Provide options to combine different religious experiences with other activities. For example, include the possibility for your customers to do volunteer work.
- Be flexible in your offering, with tailor-made products and services. Give your customers the option to build their own package.
- Be careful when offering volun-tourism experiences and make sure they actually benefit your local community, environment and/or wildlife. If you are in Africa, consider Fair Trade Tourism certification. Since 2016, this certification standard has included additional criteria for tourism products with volunteer offerings.

Increasing use of online research

European religious tourists increasingly research and plan their trip online. To gather information and share experiences they use:

- peer review sites, like TripAdvisor and Zoover
- travel forums, like Lonely Planet’s Thorn Tree forum
- social media, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube
Online research is a trend that has increased exponentially over the past years. Although growth has peaked, the use of the Internet to research tourism will continue to increase. It is predicted to remain the most important research channel for years to come.

Make sure to show European religious tourists the experience you can offer them. Visual media like photos and videos are useful tools for this. Sharing travel pictures on social media is very popular.

Tips:
- Maintain a strong Internet presence and online marketing strategy, including social media.
- Use photos and videos to bring your story alive. For more information, watch this webinar series on visual communication in adventure travel by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) and Libris.
- Use current customers as ambassadors for your company and area. Encourage them to share their experiences and visuals on social media, to write blogs and to review your company.
- For more information, see our 10 tips for online success with your tourism company.

For more information, see our study on European tourism market trends.

4. What requirements should your religious tourism product comply with to be allowed on the European market?

For general tourism requirements, see our study on what requirements your services should comply with to attract European tourists.

In addition, there are some voluntary standards for the more adventurous kinds of religious tourism.

Voluntary adventure tourism safety standards
For more adventurous religious experiences, three ISO standards support safe adventure practices: 21101, 21102 and 21103. Additionally, some countries have their own voluntary standards. For instance, BS 8848 in the United Kingdom.

Tips:
- Study the ISO standards on adventure tourism. Use them to enhance your safety performance.
- Check for possible voluntary standards in your target markets.

5. What competition do you face on the European market for religious tourism products?

Religious tourism does not have to be organised around a pilgrimage site. Lack of a religious centre doesn’t mean that a destination cannot develop faith-based tourism. Several cities around the world have found ways to incorporate religious holidays into their tourism product. For instance, Florida has created its own Bible Land. Ultimately, the journey and the destination village or town generate
the power to attract visitors, not simply the site itself.

Tip:
- Learn about the religious tourism sector of competing destinations. Use this as an inspiration to improve your product and marketing. Rwanda is a very good example. Their tourism office launched a religious route to the village of Kibeho, where apparitions of the Virgin Mary were first reported in 1981.

Connect your local secondary industries with your faith-based tourism
Stakeholders in the industry report that, all too often, the spirituality that visitors seek is lost at the level of supporting industries. During faith-based tourism periods, hotels and restaurants should connect with the arts and cultural communities to develop an overall faith-based product, rather than a mix of unrelated offerings.

Tips:
- Even smaller tourism destinations should dedicate some time to developing local faith-based tourism.
- Take the time to meet with your local religious leaders. Ask them if they attract visitors for family events, religious retreats or faith-based study. Often these people have a great deal of marketing knowledge and expertise to share, but feel disconnected from the tourism community. Include them in the development of a joint business plan.

Religious or spiritual culture as UNESCO World Heritage
Around 20% of the sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List have a religious or spiritual connection. The World Heritage status can give tourist destinations a competitive advantage. They can build their image as a religious tourism destination around it.

Religious sites in developing countries on the UNESCO World Heritage List include:
- Bolivia - Jesuit Missions of the Chiquitos
- Botswana - Tsodilo
- Cambodia - Angkor
- Colombia - San Agustin Archaeological Park
- Ethiopia - rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela
- Kenya - sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests
- Myanmar - Pyu Ancient Cities

Tips:
- If your nearby religious site has UNESCO World Heritage status, relate this to your product.
- Clearly promote your local UNESCO status. Emphasise that this religious culture is unique to your destination.
6. Through what channels can you get religious tourism products on the European market?

Selecting smaller specialised tour operators

Smaller European tour operators that specialise in religious tourism or your destination offer the best opportunities. You can identify them via trade associations, events and databases.

Some examples:

- **Adventure Travel Trade Association** (ATTA) - global trade organisation for the adventure travel industry. Organises the Adventure Travel World Summit. [Search for members.]
- **ITB** - annual tourist trade event, March, Berlin.
- **The Complete Pilgrim** - offers an extensive overview of religious tourism destinations filtered on faith, country and type of destination.
- **World Travel Market** - annual tourist trade event, November, London.

Bookings via religious organisations

Other main organisers for religious tourism are churches, mosques, temples and mission organisations. Many tourists book travel products through these organisations and book their flights individually. They hear about travel offers during church services or from other people in their religious community.

Generating direct sales

European tourists increasingly book their holidays directly with service providers at the destination. To increase your chances of direct sales, you can promote your product on religious tourism websites/portals. For example, the [Religious Travel Planning Guide](#).

For an overview of the trade structure for tourism, see our study on [the channels and segments of the European tourism market](#).

7. What are the end market prices for religious tourism products?

Travellers have many destinations and types of holiday to choose from. This makes tourism a relatively price-sensitive and competitive industry. The price of a long-haul trip is determined by three factors:

1. The exchange rate between the currency of the country of origin and that of the destination country.
2. The costs of transport to and from the destination country.
3. The price of goods and services the tourist consumes in the destination country.

European tour operators are not open about the purchasing prices of their tourism products. According to industry experts, their margins vary between 10% and 25%. Prices of holiday packages vary widely as they depend on a lot of factors, such as:

- availability
- destination
- modes of transport
- travel period
- number of travellers
- length of stay
- type of accommodation
- activities included
Tips:

- Check which countries have cheap direct flights to your destination, for instance at Skyscanner. This gives you a competitive advantage in those countries.
- You can compare prices for religious tourism products online, for example at Globus Faith.
- Tourism Council WA has some useful online tools for pricing tours and accommodation. These help you determine the break-even point and ideal retail price of your tourism product.

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