

# Has the Pilgrimage Been Hijacked?

By Richard LeSueur



The travel industry has discovered a new word, “pilgrimage.” What was commonly marketed in previous years as a “Tour to the Holy Land” is today promoted as a “*Pilgrimage* to the Holy Land.” Has anything changed? Not really. The itineraries read the same: the frenetic pace, glossy hotels, air conditioned coaches, sumptuous meals, ample shopping opportunities, and the blur of sites. One might ask then, what do these tours have to do with the ancient practice of pilgrimage? Is this simply a marketing scheme to add sticker value and appeal to religious clients? Has the pilgrimage been hijacked for consumerist ends? Is there a difference between tourism and pilgrimage?

For more than twenty-five years I have been facilitating programs of Christian pilgrimage primarily in the Middle East. Pilgrimage is not tourism. Pilgrimage may involve elements of tourism common to all travel, but it is an ancient, soulful way of approaching a land, its peoples, and its story. Pilgrimage is different from tourism in its intention, design, collective rituals, and the principles that underlie the day-to-day experience.

The photo on the next page is Sinai, the landscape of Genesis, scribed by a thin, grey pencil-line of asphalt. The road was paved in more recent years to make it possible for air-conditioned buses to whisk tourists to the foot of Mount Sinai in a day. Arriving by noon, one can have a quick bite of lunch, visit some of St. Catherine’s ancient treasures, ride a camel, and be back at the coastal hotels for dinner. This is cultural tourism, and it is the most common form of tourism today. One skims the surface of an immense landscape.



Sinai. Photo courtesy of Richard LeSueur.

A site is seen, a photograph taken, and then one carries on.

Alternatively, travelers can arrive to the Sinai through the relatively new airport at Taba where, within half an hour, one can luxuriate at one of the hotels along the beaches of what is called the “Egyptian Riviera.” The “sun holiday” offered by the Sinai comes with pristine beaches, discothèques, massage beds, and an experience where the cares of home can fade away.

The more adventurous fly to Sharm el-Sheikh, at the southernmost tip of the Sinai Peninsula, where they can learn to scuba dive amongst hammerhead sharks and manta rays in what are described as some of the most magnificent coral reefs of the world. Adventure tourism in the Sinai also offers spectacular granite rock faces for the thrill of first ascents.

There is, however, another way. From the coastal village of Nuweiba, one can travel on the new road into the Sinai for about a half an hour to a place that looks like no particular place, and wait at the roadside. Soon, from across the wilderness, the local people of the desert, the Bedouin, arrive in jeeps. Food and supplies are tied to the vehicle roofs. You get in, and head into the wilderness on what for the Bedouin are “the other ways

The tourism industry has been marketing tours to the Holy Land for decades. Today these tours are increasingly being called pilgrimages. Has anything changed? Not really. But the name of an ancient, soulful practice has been hijacked for little more than marketing purposes. In what ways is pilgrimage different from religious tourism and why is it important today?



through.” As the sun draws near the horizon, your jeep moves toward one of the rock formations, draws into the shadows, and stops. As the engines fall still, an immense silence wraps around you like a warm blanket.

You receive practical instructions as your baggage is unloaded. You choose your sleeping bag and mat, and then you walk out across the sand to find a place to prepare your bed for the night. As you look around at your dispersing companions, you know that some of them have never slept in a sleeping bag, let alone in the open without a tent.

As your Bedouin hosts light a fire of acacia wood and start preparations for dinner, the group gathers further along where a niche of rock forms a semi-circle of etched shapes. You are invited to build a cairn from rocks strewn in the sand, an altar. An ancient question is posed from the Psalms, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” A cup of wine and a piece of dry bread are laid out, candles are lit, and you listen to sacred texts about the same wilderness you are now in. You offer prayers and share a sacred meal.

Already the desert is working on everyone in your group. You feel safe, but not protected from the wilds. You have chosen to be at the edge of your comfort, at the edge of your familiarity, at the edge of your experience, at the edge of God. This is the realm of pilgrimage.

In the work of designing and hosting programs of pilgrimage, I seek to generate more than site visits or novel adventure, but moments that create the possibility of sacred encounter, stirring insight and personal transformation. I believe that immersion in the fullness of the specific geography being visited, even if it means risk and hardship, is a necessary precondition to the transformational potential of pilgrimage.

For example, most Christian tours today, even those called pilgrimages to the Holy Land, no longer take their groups into Bethlehem. The city sacred to Christians as the birthplace of the Prince of Peace is avoided. Groups are taken instead to a nearby hill in Jerusalem where one can see Bethlehem in the distance. Political commentary is often offered to “explain” the detour: the dangers of



*The Separation Wall around Bethlehem. Photo by Andrea Merli.*

Bethlehem, the necessity of the wall, and rhetoric aimed to both bolster agreement for Israel’s oppressive measures and reinforce prejudice and fear of Palestinians. Upon arrival at the hilltop the group may be invited to gather outside the bus, sing a Christmas carol, take a photograph, offer a prayer, and then carry on. To this, the pilgrimage must say no. Pilgrimage demands that one go in, that one enter fully into all that a landscape reveals. The Christian pilgrim has to face the Separation Wall, deal with its sorrows, enter Bethlehem, stand amongst Christian brothers and sisters, join them in their churches, and pray there—because that is where God meets us, and where we meet the truth of ourselves and of our time.

In contrast to the worry-free travel packages marketed by the tourism industry, hardship, challenge, risk, and strain are not accidental to a pilgrimage experience. Indeed, the greatest risk of a pilgrimage may not be in the physical challenge, but in the risk of being changed. A pilgrimage ensures that the traveler meets the “living stones” of the present community, hears their stories, learns, and enters deeply into the truth of the setting. If the aim of a Christian tourist in visiting the “Holy Land” is to enhance his or her

Christian faith and re-encounter the living Christ, then it can never be by only looking for what was true in the past, but must include seeing what is also true today.

A renaissance of pilgrimage is underway. The pilgrimage routes of Europe are overflowing. Part of the challenge in the recovery of this ancient practice, for Christians, is that we are trying to fit a twelfth-century concept into a contemporary reality. The tourist industry will continue to hijack an ancient concept to popularize what is still only a form of religious tourism. The worthy task will be to reaffirm the wisdom of an ancient practice whereby one is immersed in the truth of the world, can engage with its timeless, soulful story, and is spiritually awakened and motivated into new global citizenship.

*The Rev. Dr. Richard LeSueur is a former lecturer with St. George’s College in Jerusalem. He has been facilitating programs of pilgrimage in the Middle East for more than twenty-five years and serves as adjunct faculty with Trinity College, University of Toronto, Canada.*

<sup>1</sup> The Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Psalm 78:19