

Religious tourism as big business

By Jill Kamil

The religious tourist is a fixture of both ancient and modern cultures -- a constant through the ages -- from the Exodus to the present day, when religious tourism has become a mainstay of secular tourism. As Egypt carries on opening up and restoring sites associated with the biblical flight into Egypt, it occurs to me that we are disposed to market this product in much the same way as we market Pharaonic monuments; that is, as religious buildings rather than as a religious experience.

This is to be expected in a country abounding in Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic antiquities that are ends in themselves for the curious traveller. As far back as Roman times, visitors came to see Egypt's wondrous monuments. What troubles me is that today, religious tourism -- a relatively new product in Egypt -- is promoted with a distinct emphasis on the historic, artistic and architectural aspects of traditionally religious sites, inevitably obscuring the true significance of the religious experience sought after. If religious tourism is to have any spiritual meaning, it should combine a reverence for the past with participation in the present.

Consider the fabled city of Saint Mena (Abu Mina) on the northern edge of the Western Desert. This was one of the great centres of pilgrimage from the fifth to seventh centuries. Thousands of people came from all over the Christian world seeking the site's reputed healing powers. Pilgrims took home sacred water in tiny pottery ampoules (shaped like two-handed jars and stamped with the figure of the saint between two camels) or oil from the lamp that burned before the tomb of the saint.

Saint Mena was a soldier-saint who died a martyr's death in western Asia. His cult gained popularity when, according to the legend, his body was placed on a camel and borne inland



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to be buried. At a certain spot the camel refused to move further, a sign taken as divine revelation that he should be buried there. Wind-blown sand eventually covered the tomb and no trace was left. Some centuries later, a shepherd observed that a sick lamb that crossed the spot immediately became well. When the remains of the saint were discovered, a church was built over his grave.

The reputation of the place spread far and wide. Pilgrims came in scores and the stories of wondrous cures that they carried home attracted more pilgrims. Soon the original church was too small to accommodate the number of visitors and the Roman Emperor Arcadius (395-408) built another church, to which the saint's relics were transferred. Subsequent emperors erected other buildings and eventually the Great Basilica was built, to which thousands of pilgrims flocked from as far afield as England, France, Germany, Spain and Turkey.

Cures were attributed to the therapeutic effects of the water, which came from springs in limestone rocks (they have since dried up) and baths were built flanking the church. When Constantine the Great's only daughter, who suffered from leprosy, was reputedly healed, the fame of the site spread throughout the Roman world. A great city grew there, flourished, and eventually disappeared. The famed city written up by classical writers was thought to be legendary until, in 1961, the German Archaeological Institute excavated the area, under the direction of Peter Grossman, and discovered one of the largest and most ancient pilgrimage sites in the world.



Crowds of pilgrims make their way to Abu Mena on weekends as well as for religious celebrations *photo: Michael Stock*

The ruins cover a one-kilometre-square area, where the main colonnaded pilgrimage route of the early Christians has been identified. It had shops and workshops to the left and right, leading to the Church of the Martyr, built during the Justinian era (528-565). The ruins suggest that pilgrims gathered in a great square surrounded by hostels. There, monks could take care of the sick who came to the shrine to be healed. There are also ruins of two large bath houses and wells.

It is not clear how many priests and monks were attached to the sacred area, perhaps several hundred. Most archaeologists agree that there must have been thousands of shop-keepers and workmen in the vicinity. In the labyrinthine ruins surrounding this area, cells and refectories have been identified. Excavations continue, one of the aims being to identify the plan of the town after the Arab conquest.

The lesson to be learned from the ancient religious centre of Abu Mena is that religious "tourism" only becomes a reality when believers participate with an intensity of conviction that can be experienced and shared -- that is to say, when the aim of the trip is not merely touristic interest, but a mission of faith. This applies to religious tourists of all faiths. It is often said in the cathedrals of Europe that the power of God can be felt in the prayer-soaked walls. Only when a visitor to Egypt can look beyond historical and architectural detail and begin to share the liturgies of the faithful, can religious tourism take on meaning.

What is vital for the religious tourist is the spirit of a sanctified ritual. And this matters more than whether a saint was buried at a certain place; whether or not Jesus performed a miracle at Gabal El-Tair (Mount of Birds, south of Beni Suef), where he reputedly stopped a falling stone with the palm of his hand; or whether Deir El-Maharraq or Assiut was the southernmost place reached during the flight into Egypt. There is majesty in the measureless power of faith -- and faith often begets faith. Until Egypt's promoters of religious tourism recognise this simple truth, they will continue to fall short of the full significance of the very thing they are trying to promote.

Let us return to the shrine of Abu Mina. A new monastery has been built there, its lofty surrounding wall and twin towers situated no more than 500 metres from the ancient site. The monastery was one of the great projects of Pope Kirollis VI, who laid the foundation stone on 27 November 1959 on land granted to the Coptic patriarchate. Progress, though slow, has been significant. The cathedral in honour of the saint is shaped like a cross and dominates the enclosure. The saint's relics are preserved in a small church named after Saint Samuel. The finest materials have been used in its construction -- marble from Italy and black and rose granite from Aswan. The nucleus of a museum has been laid and it is hoped that objects that have been taken to museums around the world (notably the Louvre) will be recovered and exhibited there.

The monastery of Saint Mena, like those of Wadi El-Natrun and others, is today a popular

place of pilgrimage. It boasts a guest house, where young men can stay and participate in the spiritual life and work of the community, and a visitors' resthouse, which welcomes guests and offers free meals and hot tea. The people who make their way there share a religious experience. The point of their visit is not to view, but to participate; to live the past in the present.

Steps continue to be taken to open up sites associated with the course followed by the Holy Family in Egypt. Some are now ready to receive visitors, while others will be completed by the middle of this year. The project is sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism and financed by the non-governmental society Reviving National Heritage. The point I have tried to stress is that the act we call religious tourism is more than just sightseeing and picture-taking. I venture to suggest that the number of tourists who visit these sites would be dramatically increased were there a spiritual experience that they all shared.

Take, for example, the Church of the Holy Virgin on the bank of the Nile in Maadi. It is among the dozen or so Christian sites listed in the "flight" and there is, indeed, a stairway extending from the courtyard down to the river where Mary, Joseph and Jesus reputedly descended, managing to hire a boat to take them to the security of Upper Egypt. The church, with its distinctive three cupolas, is one of the oldest in Egypt. It has been restored and now the ancient crumbling stairway -- presumably the focus of one's visit -- is duly protected. But a church is more than just a place associated with a biblical tradition. What makes it come alive is participation; to mingle amidst those engaged in worship: the act of bowing, crossing oneself, touching an icon, or as on the occasion when I chanced to be at the church during a mass baptism, see white-clad babies with golden crowns blessed by the bishop in full ecclesiastical regalia. To be a witness to the faith, simplicity and unity of religion; this is what religious tourism should be about -- and this is what I find to be lacking in the fanfare surrounding the sights in Egypt attributed to the Holy Family's flight.

Let us continue to promote sites for their historical, artistic and architectural interest, to be sure; but let us also recognise the need to raise interest in places that have a strong tradition of healing, like Abu Mena -- only one of dozens like it in Egypt. We can bolster annual festivals and give tourists an option to join hordes of pilgrims who make their way to holy places. It matters not if it is in a newly-restored church or a dark and dingy chapel of great antiquity. The meaning in religious tourism lies, as I have argued, in reverence for a past that is tangible here in the present.



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