

Religious **TRAVEL** PLANNING GUIDE

2019 EDITION

Retreats *in* England

Rock of Ages
*Ancient cave churches
of Turkey's Cappadocia region*

Cruising with a Mission
*Shore excursions give travelers
a chance to make a difference*

Christian Music Festivals
*Annual events at home and abroad
strike a chord with church groups*

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AT CENTERS IN ALL
CORNERS OF THE
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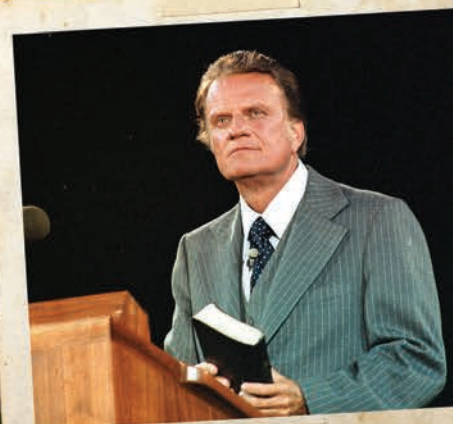
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Religious TRAVEL

PLANNING GUIDE

VOL. 9 • 2019 EDITION

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Photo courtesy of Lee Abbey, Lynton, England

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Randy Mink

Expanding Horizons With Overseas Travel

One of the biggest events on the 2020 world travel calendar is happening in Germany, and many church groups are making plans to be part of it.

I'm talking about a spectacle that occurs only once a decade—the Oberammergau Passion Play. The story of Christ's last days on earth, to be re-enacted 103 times between May and October next year, will enthrall the faithful from around the world, both Protestants and Catholics. The epic drama has been performed every 10 years, with a just few exceptions, since 1634.

Religious Travel Planning Guide has put together a whitepaper on the Passion Play, a project I was proud to have a small role in. It not only explains the logistics of traveling to the Bavarian town of Oberammergau and booking seats for the play but gives some ready-to-go European itineraries designed by major tour operators that have secured tickets for the play. And you'll get a real feel for the event from someone who has been there—travel writer Don Heimbürger, an expert on the German-speaking world who contributed to many sections of the whitepaper. For details on the guide, see page 22 and learn how you can download a free copy.

If you've never been to Oberammergau, it's the perfect Alpine town, a fairy-tale hamlet surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Happily, it is within easy driving distance of other popular German tourist destinations. Your group's Oberammergau visit in 2020 can be combined with not only places in Germany but with other countries in Central Europe, like Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, even Italy.

The Cappadocia region of Turkey, also featured in these pages, draws travelers looking to tap into the roots of early

Christianity. A treasure chest of religious heritage is found in the cave churches sprinkled throughout this part of central Turkey, a land of bizarre rock formations where Christians sought refuge during Roman rule and continued to build communities centuries after. As my son and I toured the area—scrambling up rocky paths, burrowing through tunnels and admiring remnants of frescos in dimly lit church interiors—we not only communed with the past but got real tastes of Turkish hospitality wherever we went. In the town of Urgup, one family we met in a park invited us into their nearby home, where they served us thick Turkish coffee in little cups and then showed us their cellar, garden and rooftop strung with clotheslines.

For other ideas on foreign travel with your church group, check out “Religious Retreats in England” (p. 18). Or consider combining a cruise with volunteer opportunities incorporated into shore excursions in the Caribbean and Central America (“Cruising with a Mission,” p. 10).

Focusing on places closer to home, author Lori Erickson suggests invigorating and mind-expanding camp experiences from West Virginia to Washington State in “Faith, Fellowship and S'mores” (p. 13).

We hope this ninth annual edition of *Religious Travel Planning Guide*, along with our online resources, will inspire you to create meaningful travel programs for your community of faith.

Happy Traveling,

Randy Mink
Managing Editor

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Rock *of* Ages



Vibrant scenes, dominated by deep blues, decorate the extensively restored Dark Church in the caves at Goreme Open-Air Museum.

Turkish Ministry of Culture & Tourism

The **Cappadocia** region of central **Turkey** abounds with **cave churches** from the **early days of Christianity**

By **Randy Mink**

The lunar landscapes of Cappadocia, a series of barren valleys studded with bizarre geological formations, are like giant sculpture gardens. Add ancient underground cities and rock-hewn churches to this otherworldly natural setting, and you have one of the most visited destinations in Turkey. The scenic and archaeological wonders are simply magical.

A vast steppe, Cappadocia lies between mountain ranges to the south and north. Volcanic eruptions occurred there millions of years ago, and the ash was compressed to form a porous rock called tuff. Steady erosion over centuries produced conical pillars that became known as fairy chimneys, as winds whistling through the rocks were said to have sounded like fairy voices.

The softness of the volcanic stone enabled the early Christians (and inhabitants before them) to carve out hiding places. Christians used the dwellings and churches to escape persecution during the first centuries of Roman rule. The communities continued to thrive during the more peaceful Byzantine era, then under the Arabs (who allowed Christians to practice their faith) and into the late Middle Ages. Because of the region's isolation, Cappadocia proved to be the perfect hideout for hermits and monks. The region lies in the heart of Anatolia, the Asian part of Turkey comprising 95 percent of its land area.

Cappadocia's religious treasures, some with well-preserved frescoes, were mostly forgotten until a French explorer rediscovered them in the early 18th century. It's estimated there are some 500 rock churches and chapels scattered about Cappadocia, most of them unknown to tourists.

Everywhere they look, travelers see honeycombs of rock-cut holes, doors and windows etched into cliffs—remnants of past civilizations. Yet some of these hollowed-out spaces are still inhabited, and many globetrotters don't consider a Cappadocia trip complete without staying in one of the new cave hotels or dining in a cave restaurant, which have become attractions in themselves.

The town of Goreme, with its rock-carved homes and picturesque fairy chimneys, makes a good base for exploring Cappadocia. It has tour companies, shops, restaurants, hotels and the region's most visited archaeological site—**Goreme Open-Air Museum**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At this roughly circular monastic complex fashioned from tuff, a paved path leads to some 30 Orthodox Christian churches and chapels, plus carved-out spaces that were homes, rectories, monasteries and religious schools.

Among points of interest are three 11th century columned churches—Elmalı Kilise (Apple Church), Karanlık Kilise (Dark Church) and Carikli Kilise (Sandals Church). They are noted for their Byzantine-style cross plan with central dome and restored paintings of Christ Pantocrator (depicting Jesus holding a book in one hand and giving a blessing with the other) above images of archangels and seraphim. Sandals Church is named for the indentations in the floor, which some believe to be casts from Jesus' own footprints. On the Dark Church's walls and domed ceiling, the deep blues of the vibrant frescoes are derived from the mineral azurite. Their brilliance has been retained, thanks to the fact that the

church lets in little light (thus its name); the Crucifixion scene is particularly intense. The Dark Church's extra admission fee (imposed to limit the number of visitors) is worth it.

Across from the main museum area, the same ticket grants entrance to Tokali Kilise (Buckle Church), Goreme's oldest house of worship. Dating from the early 10th century, it impresses with high ceilings and rich blue colors in painstakingly-painted frescoes portraying the life of Christ.

Many points of historical and religious interest are located just a few miles from Goreme. For example, there's **Zelve Open-Air Museum**, a fairy-chimney community of cave dwellings that was a center of Christian monastic life between the 9th and 13th centuries. The tourist-friendly village of Uchisar boasts one of Cappadocia's most prominent natural landmarks, a

huge, tunnel-riddled outcrop called **Uchisar Castle**. Those who tackle its steep steps are rewarded with fine vistas of the rock valleys. Both Uchisar and nearby Urgup offer a variety of trendy hotels and restaurants. The town of Avanos is famous for its potteries, which use the clay from the banks of the Kizilirmak (Red River).

Another magnet for faith tourism groups is the peaceful **Ihlara Valley**, a verdant river canyon dotted with about 100 rock churches (and some 5,000 houses) in the cliffs above. Compared to the stark landscapes in most of Cappadocia, this pretty, nine-mile stretch along the Melendiz River, an hour or so southwest of Goreme, offers shade trees, other leafy vegetation and the soothing sound of rushing water, plus relief from the tourist throngs at Goreme and other sites in the well-traveled Nevsehir-Avanos-Urgup triangle. It begins at Ihlara village and ends at Selime Monastery and Selime village. An entrance in the canyon's mid-section, with a stairway of nearly 400 steps leading to the path below, provides access to several fresco-



Visitors to the Ihlara Valley find remnants of frescoes in cave churches carved into cliffs rising above the Melendiz River.

Randy Mink

decorated churches within easy walking distance of each other. Reachable by wooden steps, these nooks are in various states of ruin. Unlike scenes depicted in other Cappadocian churches, the ones here are reminiscent of the early churches of Syria and Coptic churches of Egypt.

The multi-story **Selime Cathedral**, just outside the valley's northern entrance, is the largest rock church in Cappadocia. Built between the 8th and 9th centuries, it's where the region's first non-secret mass was said. Two lines of columns divide the cathedral into three naves; dozens of rooms are connected by passages and tunnels. Fresco remnants, dating back to the late 10th century, depict scenes such as the Ascension, Christmas, Adoration of the Magi, Flight to Egypt, Pursuit of Elizabeth, Baptism and Dormition of the Virgin. Just east of the cathedral is the Mother Mary Church, one of the most beautiful rock-carved churches in the area.

Of the 40 underground settlements that have been uncovered in Cappadocia, the most extensive is **Derinkuyu**, which at one time was thought to have housed thousands of people. One group of Christians fleeing Roman persecution arrived in the area from Jerusalem via Antioch (Antakya) and Caesarea (Kayseri) in the second century. Tunnel tours through the labyrinth—definitely not for the

claustrophobic—take visitors eight floors down, about 180 feet below the earth. A cruciform church, baptismal pool, wine and oil presses, stables and scores of private living quarters can be seen. The second floor has a seminary, a barrel-vaulted room with small cells believed to have been used for study. Kitchen walls and ceilings bear the signs of soot absorbed by the soft volcanic rock. Smoke was dispersed in the air ducts and ventilation shafts, leaving possible attackers none the wiser. Each floor had an entrance that could be sealed with a circular door in the form of a doughnut-shaped millstone.

To see Cappadocia from above, consider a hot-air balloon adventure. Many operators offer these early-morning flights over the canyons, cliffs, fairy chimneys, orchards and villages. The memorable experience isn't cheap—expect to pay about \$200 a person—but don't necessarily go with the lowest price. It's wise to check out the company's safety record and pilots' experience. Other outdoor options include ATV safaris and horseback riding treks.

Just being in this tucked-away region in Asia Minor is an adventure in itself. Blessed with stunning works created both by Mother Nature and the hands of man, Cappadocia is a fascinating destination for religious groups looking to explore the early days of their faith. ✚

Cappadocia *Fast Facts*

Getting there: Turkish Airlines flights connecting Istanbul with Nevsehir get travelers to the heart of Cappadocia in just an hour-and-a-half. Hotels in Nevsehir, Goreme, Urgup and other towns can arrange shuttle transportation from and to the airport. Turkish Airlines offers nonstop service between Istanbul and nine U.S. cities—New York, Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Miami, Houston, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The marketing department of the airline's Chicago office (marketingchi@thy.com) can refer church group organizers to travel agencies and tour operators that offer faith-based tours, including one-week fam trips for priests, pastors and other church leaders. Some trips combine Israel (served by Turkish Airlines) and Turkey. (turkishairlines.com)

Cappadocia Museum Pass: Visitors touring Cappadocia can save money over buying individual admissions by investing in this handy pass. Good for 72 hours, it grants admission to major historical attractions, including Goreme Open-Air Museum, Ihlara Valley, and Derinkuyu and Kaymakli underground cities. The pass costs 110 Turkish lira (about \$21) and can be purchased at the first stop.

Safety tips: Reaching the cave churches often requires negotiating rocky paths and climbing steps or even ladders. Though some tourists do this in sandals, better footwear choices would be gym shoes or hiking boots. Also, there are drop-offs with no railings for protection, so it's advisable to pay attention to your surroundings, especially when you're framing a picture. At Goreme, some of the churches can be entered and exited at ground level.

Weather: Summers in Cappadocia are bone dry and hot, with temperatures well into the 90s. Winters are cold and snowy. The best weather is April/May and September/October.

Where to Stay: The stylish cave hotels of Cappadocia offer amenities that Fred and Wilma Flintstone could never have imagined. Rooms of the multi-level, cliff-clinging Sota Cappadocia hotel in Urgup have been lived in for centuries, but guests enjoy 21st century comforts typical of upscale boutique hotels anywhere. Bedrooms and baths have under-floor heating. A lavish, multi-course breakfast is served in the lounge, and the adjacent rooftop terrace has four sun beds. (sotacappadocia.com)

Other Christian Sights in Turkey: Former churches of note in Istanbul include the Hagia Sophia, a Byzantine wonder that was once the largest church in Christendom, and Church of the Holy Savior in Chora, with its dazzling Byzantine frescoes and mosaics. The Apostle Paul tread the streets of Ephesus, a remarkably well-preserved Roman archeological site not far from the Aegean coast; the nearby House of the Virgin Mary, where the Virgin Mary is said to have spent her last days, draws throngs of pilgrims. Many itineraries follow in the footsteps of St. Paul, who carried the message of Christ throughout Anatolia; sites visited include locations of the Seven Churches of Revelation. In the town of Demre in Antalya province, the Church of St. Nicholas is a place of pilgrimage named for the 4th century saint who started the legend of Santa Claus.

By the Book: Insight Guides' lavishly illustrated *Turkey* (455 pp., \$24.99, insightguides.com) provides background material on Turkish history and culture as well as practical tips on visiting Cappadocia and other parts of the country. Packed with nitty-gritty details is *Rough Guides' Turkey* (724 pp., \$27.99, roughguides.com).

Information: Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, hometurkey.com/en.

Hot-air balloon flights offer a tantalizing overview of Cappadocia's lunar landscapes.

Turkish Ministry of Culture & Tourism

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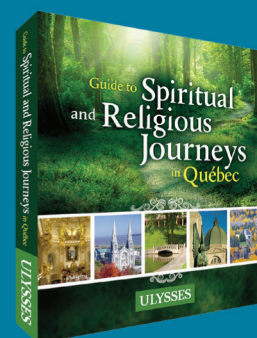
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Cruising with a Mission

Travelers can make time to help those in need



Give Kids the World Village, Kissimmee, Florida

Give Kids the World Village



Carnival's Give Back with Purpose

Carnival Cruise Line



Carnival cruise passengers help with reforestation in the Dominican Republic.

Carnival Cruise Line



Youth Rebuilding New Orleans

Youth Rebuilding New Orleans/Dwayne "Prince" Holmes, Jr.

By Nancy Schretter

Faith-based organizations planning retreats, mission trips, youth travel and fellowship events are increasingly including cruises in their travel plans. Cruise vacations appeal to all ages, from teens and families to couples and seniors. In addition, attractive group rates and a wide range of accommodation options can make cruises budget-friendly as well. These trips offer not only opportunities for fellowship, service-related projects and spiritual renewal but also for having fun and sharing memorable experiences together.

Cruise itineraries from easy-to-reach U.S. homeports visit a number of destinations with significant needs in the Eastern and Western Caribbean, Mexico and Central America. On these sailings, groups can use their days at sea for leadership programs, small-group discussions, speakers and other events. Days in ports of call can focus on a mix of giving-back experiences and opportunities for bonding and fun.

Purpose-Driven Shore Excursions Make an Impact

While Fathom and Princess Cruises periodically offered Travel Deep voluntourism-related Caribbean group cruises, faith-based organizations can easily develop their own service-related programs on major cruise lines throughout the year. If a key focus is giving back to others, look for cruise itineraries that include ports with purpose-related shore excursions. These can include visits to local schools, children's homes, churches and other non-profits. Carnival Cruise Line, Holland America Line, Costa Cruises, Princess Cruises, Shore-Trips/Hope Floats and others can provide these kinds of shore excursions and meaningful activities in numerous ports of call.

Carnival Cruise Line offers immersive Give Back with Purpose shore excursions that enable guests to make a difference in local communities. Launched in 2016, these Carnival excursions are available in several ports of call in the Caribbean and Mexico. They include Amber Cove/Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic; Belize City, Belize; Cozumel, Mexico; Montego Bay, Jamaica; Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; and San Juan, Puerto Rico. These guided excursions generally operate with a six-guest minimum, but there is no maximum number of participants.

Give Back with Purpose excursions visit organizations assisting those who need it most. "Guests want to empower themselves to change the world, and these tours provide a way for them to make their actions count," said Erika Tache, Carnival's director of product development – tour operations, who spearheaded the program. Carnival uses its local tour-operator partners to help select quality non-profit organizations that are in greatest need of support. A portion of the shore excursion fees goes to non-profits involved in the tours and are quickly put to good use. In Montego Bay, for example, funds have gone towards building a new school classroom, while in Cozumel, the monies have been used to purchase kitchen appliances and build a playground at Ciudad de Angeles children's home.

Carnival's Give Back with Purpose tours provide an easy, stress-free way for religious groups to incorporate charitable activities into their cruises. Many Carnival excursions visit non-profit organiza-



Groups can arrange to work on projects pre- or post-cruise with HandsOn New Orleans. Right: Volunteers help unload grocery donations at a children's home in Roatan, Honduras.



tions working with abandoned children and those in need, including children's homes, orphanages, basic schools and churches. Some of these include Liberty Children's Home in Belize and Ciudad de Angeles and San José del Mar Church in Cozumel. There, guests meet with directors and administrators, staff members, teachers, priests, and sometimes children and young adults living at the homes to learn more about the organizations, their work and the challenges they face. These encounters are memorable experiences that can make lasting connections and touch the heart. Transportation and an authentic meal at a community restaurant are provided as well.

While Give Back with Purpose excursions do not include service work, there are other ways for faith-based groups to give back as part of these experiences. Many of the children's homes and non-profits provide "wish lists" on their websites, so groups can often bring donations of children's items, over-the-counter medicines and school supplies with them on their visits. While cruise guests generally can transport properly declared in-kind donations off their cruise ships in many ports of call, restrictive customs rules may require alternative approaches in destinations such as Mexico. In Cozumel, for example, it's easy to take a taxi to the nearby Mega store to purchase much needed supplies for the Ciudad de Angeles children's home. Purchases like these help the local economy, and groceries are often greatly appreciated at children's homes in other locations as well.

Holland America Line features a number of Cruise with Purpose shore excursions. On calls at the Dominican Republic port of Amber Cove, groups can volunteer at a women's recycling micro-business and a women's chocolate cooperative to help boost production and increase sales. Similar shore excursions are available on Costa Cruises and Princess Cruises sailings. In Corinto, Nicaragua, Holland America guests can visit with schoolchildren at the Betania Foundation, a property that hosts 400 kids and teens.

Other organizations also provide opportunities to give back on cruises. ShoreTrips, a large independent tour operator, has partnered with non-profit Hope Floats to offer volunteer opportunities in a variety of Caribbean ports of call. Its GIVE excursions can be included on any cruise and are available in Antigua; Barbados; Belize City; Cozumel; Nassau, Bahamas; Castries, St. Lucia; St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands; and Tortola, British Virgin Islands. Some excursions focus on animal care and recycling activities, while others include service work such as volunteering at a senior center or children's home.

ShoreTrips' GIVE opportunities are developed by Bill and Cathleen Huckaby, founders of Hope Floats. Volunteer hours, rather than funds, provide the donation on these tours, and opportunities

to provide in-kind donations vary. Shore excursions can be purchased directly through ShoreTrips or Hope Floats. While transportation is generally not included in the cost of ShoreTrips GIVE excursions, taxi instructions are provided with each tour.

Faith-based travel planners interested in setting up their own independent shore excursions can check out the resources and direct contacts provided by Together for Good, an organization that promotes giving back as part of the travel experience. Together for Good's website provides information on over 100 service-related opportunities in the Caribbean, Central America, the Bahamas, Mexico and the United States. This resource is best suited for those who have the time to arrange their group's service opportunities in ports of call.

Together for Good's website directory lists options in popular international cruise ports and U.S. homeports. Some of these include bringing supplies and volunteering at a children's home or school in Roatan, Honduras; opportunities to assist schools and community organizations in Jamaica and Mexico; and working with non-profits in New Orleans. Insights on arranging transportation and detailed tips for those planning service-oriented cruises are provided as well.

Additional Opportunities to Give Back

Shore excursions aren't the only ways to help others on a faith-based cruise. Carnival Cruise Line's Care to Play program has raised over \$16 million for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital through a variety of charitable fundraising events including the popular Groove for St. Jude dance party held onboard all Carnival ships. Guests can also take part in Holland America Line's On Deck for a Cause, which includes a sea-day 5K walk around the ship to raise funds for six international cancer organizations.

Opportunities for meaningful pre- or post-cruise service work are available as well. Groups sailing out of Port Canaveral, Florida may wish to spend time volunteering at Give Kids the World Village, a non-profit resort in Kissimmee. This storybook-like vacation village caters to children facing a life-threatening illness and their families. Volunteers fill more than 1,800 weekly shifts, assisting with activities including children's entertainment programs, guest dining services or even running an amusement park ride.

Church groups cruising from New Orleans have several options, too. Volunteers can help rebuild distressed and foreclosed homes with Youth Rebuilding New Orleans or work on a variety of projects through HandsOn New Orleans. These pre- and post-cruise service activities offer additional opportunities for fellowship, fun, spiritual renewal and making a difference together. That's what meaningful faith-based cruises are all about. ✚



Faith, Fellowship and S'mores

Camp experiences for adults mix spiritual growth with outdoor adventure

By Lori Erickson

If you grew up in a religious family, there's a good chance that some of your best childhood memories date back to your time at a summer church camp. Sure, that first night away from home was hard, but after that the combination of friends, the great outdoors and the chance to deepen your faith likely created some of your most formative spiritual experiences. If you were lucky, you got the chance to return year after year.

As a planner of church trips, you can help people re-live some of those childhood memories. They'll never be 13 again (and honestly, hardly any of us would want to be). But they can still experience the wonder of watching a full moon rise above a mountain lake, the camaraderie of singing around a crackling campfire and the fun of goofy sports activities with friends. Best of all, their time at a camp can re-orient their religious compass, setting them back on a path to God. Sometimes the best thing we can do in our ministries is take people away from a church building and into God's creation.

Especially in this era when it's increasingly difficult to disconnect from the many forms of media and the constant demands of modern life, a stay at a Christian camp can be as life-changing as it was when you were young. Here are eight camps that offer a blend of outdoor recreation, fellowship and faith formation for adult groups:

Alpine Ministries (www.alpineministries.com) in Mt. Hope, West Virginia, is located on the campus of Appalachian Bible College. Groups come here in part to enjoy the New and Gauley rivers, which offer some of the best whitewater rafting in the



Silver Birch Ranch

country. Alpine Ministries is the only Christian rafting company in the area. After you experience the thrill of the rapids, you can keep the adrenaline flowing by heading underground to explore the twists and turns of a wild cave with headlamps and helmet, or by rappelling down a 120-foot cliff face into the New River Gorge, which is part of the National Park Service. Other outdoor offerings include a high-ropes course, climbing tower, adventure swing and zip line, all set amid the beautiful West Virginia mountains. A variety of indoor meeting spaces offers plenty of options once you're ready to come inside again. Up to 300 guests can stay in tents, a lodge or in dorm accommodations.

The non-denominational **Black Diamond Camps** (www.blackdiamond.org) offer groups the chance to pray, recharge and re-commit themselves to Christ in two locations in the state of Washington. Its main campus is in Auburn, 45 minutes from Seattle. Lodging ranges from dorm-style lodges and A-frame cabins to hotel-style rooms. Activities include mountain biking, zip lining, a 3-D climbing wall, black light mini golf and a super swing. For a more remote, back-to-nature experience, groups can book a stay at its Rainier facility, which is located just nine miles from Mt. Rainier National Park in the Cascade Mountains. Hiking and mountain biking in this stunning landscape provide nourishment for both soul and body (an added bonus: with no cell phone service and limited Wi-Fi, it's easier to disconnect from day-to-day worries and concerns). Between the two camps, Black Diamond can accommodate up to 800 guests.

Near Asheville, North Carolina, the non-denominational **Camp Cedar Cliff** (www.campcedarcliff.org) sits on 350 acres in the Blue Ridge Mountains next to the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove. Bordered by the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, the camp offers a wide range of outdoor activities, from whitewater rafting, swimming and horseback riding to hiking. Guests can also challenge themselves on a climbing wall, zoom through the forest on zip lines and bond with fellow group members on a high ropes course. Camp Cedar Cliff, which can accommodate up to 250 guests, offers lodging in cabins.

Halfway between Omaha and Lincoln near the Platte River in Nebraska, the **Carol Joy Holling Conference and Retreat Center** (www.cjhcenter.org) is operated by Nebraska Lutheran Outdoor Ministries. Hiking trails wind through 350 acres of prairie, woodlands and wetlands, past sandstone outcroppings and a spring-fed lake. Along with faith formation, outdoor education is an important

part of the center's mission. Guests can take night hikes, do an owl prowl, stargaze, bird watch and learn about pond ecosystems. Team-building options include low and high ropes courses and activities such as a levitation platform, power perch and trust games. A variety of meeting spaces and lodging types accommodates diverse groups. In the summer, the center can host 675 guests, with a winter capacity of 365 and space in the fall and spring for 475.

In the rural countryside of east central Ohio, the non-denominational **Faith Ranch** (www.faithranch.org) focuses much of its programming around horseback riding. Groups come for day outings or for one- or two-night stays, with every visit including at least one trail ride. In addition to riding lessons and instruction in grooming, saddling and other horse-related tasks, Faith Ranch offers activities that include swimming, fishing, archery and shooting and a ropes/challenge course. In the evening, groups can enjoy an old-fashioned barn dance. The ranch accommodates up to 124 overnight guests in tents, bunk and ranch houses, and cabins.

Two hours east of Dallas in Big Sandy, Texas, **The Pines Catholic Camp** (www.thepines.org) has been offering fellowship, fun and faith formation for more than 20 Catholic dioceses since 1988. During the summer it caters to youth, but adult groups are welcome the rest of the year. Swimming, sand volleyball, a climbing wall, giant water slide, archery and zip lines offer plenty of ways to relax in between programming. The adventuresome will enjoy trying the slippery sport of log rolling on Lake Lou Ann. The Pines can host up to 200 guests in bunk-style cabins.

The **Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp** (www.rmcc.org) is located in Pikes National Forest on the west side of Pikes Peak Massif in Colorado. In the winter, groups can do outdoor activities such as ice skating and snow sledding/tubing, or head indoors for some cozy scrapbooking or quilting. In the warm months, visitors enjoy fishing, hiking and a ropes/challenge course. Many guests include a visit to Pikes Peak in their stay. One of the tallest mountains in the Front Range, it's just eight miles away from the camp. The facility can accommodate up to 225 guests in tent sites, cabins, dorms, a lodge and hotel-style rooms.

Wisconsin's scenic Northwoods is home to the non-denominational **Silver Birch Ranch** (www.silverbirchranh.org). Founded in 1968, it sits on 100 acres in the Nicolet National Forest near the town of White Lake northwest of Green Bay. Specialized programs range from couples weekends and men's retreats to winter family camps. Activities include swimming on Sawyer Lake, an indoor rock wall, zip line, hunting, trap shooting, horseback riding, paintball and whitewater rafting on the nearby Wolf River. In the winter, guests can enjoy groomed ski trails, ice skating, broom ball and snow tubing. Winter and fall capacity is 300; in the spring the camp can accommodate 265. Lodging options include tent and RV sites, cabins and a lodge. ✚



Lori Erickson is the author of *Holy Rover: Journeys in Search of Mystery, Miracles, and God* (Fortress Press).



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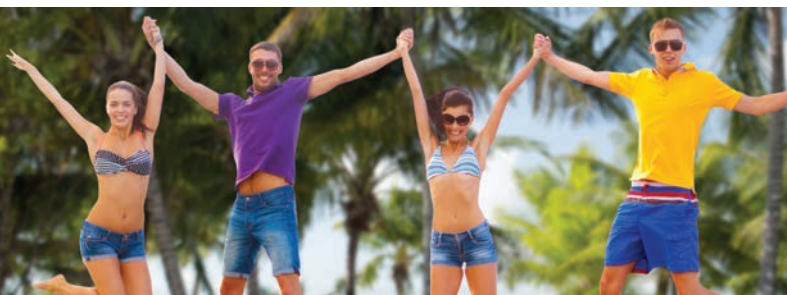


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Five Things to Know When Selecting Hotel Accommodations for Your Youth Group

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By Harry H. Peck

You are in charge of your youth group's tour.

Yikes!

That's a common reaction from adults who become youth group leaders and accept responsibility for planning a tour. Most critical is securing hotel lodgings that are well-located, safe, secure and affordable.

HOTEL TYPES: This is key, as there are many different hotel types. Some lower-end types may have exterior corridors rather than interior hallways that require passing through a main entrance door and past the front desk. When a room occupant opens the door onto an exterior corridor, he or she is going outside, and this is not desirable from a safety/security standpoint. Ask about this when negotiating by email or phone. The hotel website may not mention it.

Also, while many hotel types offer a free breakfast, a full-service hotel probably does not.

ROOM TYPES: Mostly you'll want rooms with two double beds. Don't take for granted that you get these. Some hotels offer many rooms with one king-size bed only and may be remarkably casual about putting such a room into your room block.

Windows and balconies. You don't want your youngsters on a balcony! They invite horseplay and are a tremendous liability. If your hotel has balconies, get another hotel. Ask the hotel about this during the negotiation process and get that information in writing.

AFFORDABILITY: An incredibly important item. The rate impacts lots of things, including how many can travel.

You'll become unpopular fast (with the parents of tour-takers) if you pick a hotel with a rate in the stratosphere. Conversely, don't choose the least expensive hotel either. There's usually a good reason why a hotel has a low rate, and you don't want to associate with any of those reasons.

LOCATION: It's nice to have a hotel right next to the main

attraction—what convenience! But you pay for convenience, so be flexible. If traveling by motorcoach or van, five or 10 miles from the attraction is minimal, and you can probably knock \$20-30 (or more!) off your rate. On the other hand, don't overdo this—stories abound of groups booking the other side of town, getting lost and missing the opening curtain, first pitch, etc.

YES, YOU NEED A CONTRACT: It protects both parties from misunderstandings. Last November, a pro football game in Mexico City was moved to Los Angeles with one week's notice. Imagine the impact on Los Angeles hotels.

In such cases, a small group with no contract might suddenly not have a reservation when management pushes their personnel

to “lose” your reservation if they can sell it for three times your rate.

The contract should specify the bed types (discussed above), that your room block will stay close together and that the hotel will help you find an outside security firm to patrol the floor where your room block is scheduled.

READ your contract to avoid surprises. In producing hotel contracts with word-processing software, some boilerplate language not applicable to your group sneaks in. SIGN and return the contract by the deadline.


These things can keep your tour together, allow everyone to enjoy the experience and let you, the tour planner sleep at night. ✚



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Religious Retreats in England

Experience true serenity and reflection at these centers of spirituality in all corners of the country

By Courtney Lind

In a world of increasing demands, where we are spread thin making time for work, family, friends and faith, it is critical to devote time for self-care and provide ourselves with a chance to truly be present in our faith. Religious retreats offer the perfect opportunity to escape the daily grind, connect with nature and God, and simply be at peace with mind, body and soul. The UK offers a plethora of options for faith-based retreats – whether it's a weekend escape or a full week of unplugging from the stresses of daily life.

Retreats in several regions, including greater London, allow travelers a chance to reflect in new surroundings while seeking peace and tranquility. Check out the following locations to see what might be a good fit for your group.

South West

Lee Abbey

Lynton

Perched on a hill high above the blue waters of the Bristol Channel, Lee Abbey is the ideal place to disconnect and create a closer connection to God. There is no cellular signal at the abbey, so groups are treated to a tranquil space that offers a chance to explore faith at a deeper level and for individuals to engage in quiet reflection that is sure to heal the soul. The surrounding natural beauty provides dramatic juxtaposition – peaceful streams and powerful waves, lush farmland and rugged forests. It's the perfect place to unwind and appreciate what is all around. The abbey lets groups take part in specialized programs, or simply create their own unique experience at a site where relationships are celebrated and God is all around. (<https://leeabbey.org.uk>)



North West

Cloverley Hall Christian Conference Centre

Whitchurch

Groups return to Cloverley Hall year after year, and it's easy to see why. This gorgeous center, in operation as a religious retreat for 50 years, is the perfect blend of peace and community. Comfortable guest rooms of varying sizes can accommodate up to 140 residents, and there are plenty of spaces throughout the center for group or individual study and reflection. Whether it's a Bible study in the 150-seat conference center or quiet meditation on the outdoor green, Cloverley Hall is ready to meet the desires of its visitors. Outdoor activities include petanque, volleyball, tennis and barbecues. (<https://cloverleyhall.org>)

East

Quiet Waters

Bungay

Visitors from far and wide have been coming to Quiet Waters for nearly half a century, and it continues to be a place of spiritual renewal and rest. Set on two acres around a charming farmhouse, it offers plenty of opportunities for groups to create their own devotional journeys. The charming rooms offer accommodation for up to 16. Spend time in prayer in the chapel, engage in Bible study by the home's wood fireplace and enjoy the presence of friends over delicious meals in the dining rooms. (<https://www.quietwaters.org.uk>)



Located on the North Devon coast of southwest England, the Gothic-style main house of Lee Abbey retreat and conference center dates from 1850.

Yorkshire and the Humber

Westwood Christian Centre

Huddersfield

Rolling hills dotted with quaint cottages, green as far as the eye can see, and sweeping cloudscapes are the first things visitors will see when they arrive at Westwood Christian Centre. Thus begins a visit primed for serenity, at a center run by two families who have created an ideal blend of community, creativity, spirituality and sustainability. All faiths are welcomed and celebrated at Westwood, and visitors have the opportunity to share with and learn from one another as they enhance their personal connection with God. There is also an opportunity to explore a more creative side through singing and dancing. (<https://westwood-centre.org.uk>)

Greater London

The Kairos Centre

Roehampton

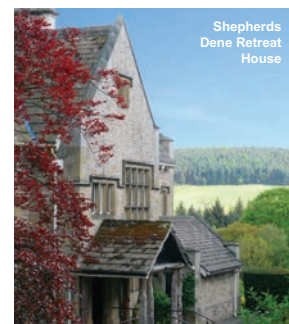
You don't always have to leave the city to find peace. The Kairos Centre, just southwest of London, is a perfect example of tranquility existing among the hustle and bustle of city life. Set among acres of gorgeous gardens and overlooking famous Richmond Park, the Kairos Centre provides guests a secluded space to pray and refresh both mind and body. For those looking for guided programs, the center offers a variety of organized retreats and quiet days, but is also available for those who wish to travel alone or as part of a group and engage in spiritual reflection. Comfortable accommodations are in the form of a three-bedroom bungalow, which includes amenities such as a full kitchen and sitting room. Seven rooms of the center are set aside for retreat and conference purposes, and a quaint chapel is also on-site. (<http://www.thekairoscentre.co.uk>)

North East

Shepherds Dene Retreat House

Corbridge

When the original owners of Shepherds Dene passed the family home on to the Diocese of Newcastle in 1945, it was their wish that "those who come to Shepherds Dene for knowledge will find it and those who come for rest will go away refreshed." With a staff dedicated to providing customized service and an exceptional guest experience, visitors are sure to find what they are looking for. A walk through the 20-acre site's beautiful gardens or a quiet evening of prayer in one of the cozy rooms of the main house after a locally-sourced meal is the perfect recipe for rejuvenation. The center has a variety of breakout rooms to choose from for group study, and many visitors enjoy spending time outdoors and taking in the fresh country air or hiking down to the tranquil stream. (<http://shepherdsdene.co.uk>)





Top Christian Music Festivals

Christian music festivals offer a great way for those in the faith community to solidify bonds, make new friends and expand their cultural horizons. They provide an ideal destination for those wishing to travel in groups, such as church youth clubs. Besides music, these events offer opportunities to commune with the natural world, attend inspirational workshops and seminars, and participate in outdoor activities. Following are just a few of the top Christian music festivals and what each experience has to offer.

Annual events at home and abroad strike a chord with church groups

Creation Northeast Festival *United States*

One of the longest-running, faith-oriented music events in the country, Creation Northeast Festival spans three days in late June in Mount Union, Pennsylvania. This festival features seven stages and a large offering of family-friendly activities such as a skate park and dance parties. Other highlights include a candle-lighting moment at the main stage designed to provide attendees with a communal experience that brings them closer to God, a designated children's stage, fireworks, outdoor sports such as volleyball, and break-out sessions and seminars occurring in the woods. Music ranges from rock, pop and contemporary to classic worship.

Creation Northwest Festival *United States*

Creation Northeast proved to be so popular that event organizers decided that those on the West Coast shouldn't be left out of the fun. An annual event since 1998, Creation Northwest has enjoyed several different locations in Washington State and will be hosted in Kennewick going forward. This festival mirrors its East Coast counterpart in many ways, with big-name acts and notable speakers interspersed with popular local talent.

Spirit West Coast *United States*

Founded by five local families in 1995, Spirit West Coast happens every year for four days in the middle of June in the idyllic California community of Monterey. This event is extremely popular with youth groups, and the organization offers camping for those who prefer not to stay in nearby hotels. In typical California style, the festival is considered a free-form adventure by those who attend, and all major religious music genres are represented. A sister festival takes place at the Del Mar Fairgrounds in San Diego.

Oslo International Church Music Festival *Norway*

Held annually two weeks before Easter since 2001 and lasting for 10 days, the Oslo International Church Music Festival showcases world-class church music in a variety of genres. Acting as the central institution of the development of modern church music, the festival provides an inclusive forum for individual church musicians as well as groups such as choirs, ensembles and orchestras regardless of affiliation. The festival counts the safeguarding of historical traditions among its guiding principles. Attendees often find themselves transported back in time as they listen to Gregorian chants in a medieval church.

The concert halls consist of some of Oslo's most beautiful churches, including the renowned Oslo Cathedral, which was built in 1694, and Gamie Aker Church, which was erected in 1080 by King Olav Kyrre and is the oldest building in Oslo. Music seminars are available for those wishing to learn from some of the country's most important church musicians.

KEY2LIFE Festival *Austria*

Held annually in late August in Vienna, KEY2LIFE Festival features creative Christian rock from a variety of European countries, with two stages and up to 16 bands. Attendees enjoy

four days of inspiration mixed with fun and relaxation. Camping is available for those who'd prefer a more natural experience than staying in one of Vienna's historic hotels, and activities include creative zones, a tea tent, and the opportunity to mix and philosophize with monks. Visitors can also show their own Christian rock skills on an open stage for 10 minutes.

Maata Näkyvissä Festival *Finland*

Sponsored by the Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland and held every year during a long weekend in the second half of November in Turku, the Maata Näkyvissä Festival began as a memorial event for 17-year-old student Timo Vainio and grew from there. Originally organized and promoted by students, this festival remains true to its roots with a wide appeal to young people. Accommodations are available in local schools for those traveling from out of the area, although Turku also offers a variety of hotels and hostels to choose from. Maata Näkyvissä Festival is the largest Christian music event in Europe's Nordic region. Domestic and international bands play in venues that include the Turku Faire Centre and the HK Arena.

CreationFest *England*

Situated in picturesque Cornwall at the Royal Cornwall Events Centre and taking place during the first week of August, Creation Fest is a family-friendly Christian festival offering completely free attendance. A wide variety of Christian genres is represented by both UK and international performers, including rock, folk, rap, pop, and traditional choir and worship music, on six separate stages. Comfortable camping facilities feature hot showers, clean restrooms, and friendly, knowledgeable staff for over 2,000 campers. A full program of Bible teaching is also a part of the CreationFest picture. The Events Centre features a massive skate park and offers demos by top skaters as well as open sessions along with a number of outdoor programs.

Alive Music Festival *United States*

Taking place each year for four days during the latter half of July in Mineral City, Ohio, Alive Music Festival has been going strong on the faith-based music scene for 30 years. A member of the Christian Festival Association, Alive Music Festival is organized and promoted by Bill and Kathy Graening, who describe their mission as an opportunity on their part to offer a deeper walk with Jesus through music and teaching. Alive's talent lineup always includes international stars of the Christian music scene, in addition to lesser-known regional acts that are nonetheless top-quality. Also on tap are inspirational talks, workshops and seminars, plus comedy and kids' shows. Vendors such as Chick-Fil-A and Pizza Hut cater to a wide variety of personal dietary needs and preferences.

Nearby Atwood Lake Park offers camping and outdoor activities, including boating, swimming, fishing, and hiking. Many festival attendees set up camp here, although hotels, cabins and other lodging choices are also available. Camping options range from basic tent camping to large RV spots suitable for luxurious glamping. ✚

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Crowne Plaza Chicago SW-Burr Ridge

Located in southwest suburban Burr Ridge, Crowne Plaza Chicago SW is a completely refurbished hotel that offers elegant lodging and an abundance of nearby activities

Re-opened in summer of 2017, Crowne Plaza features 123 upscale rooms that provide premium bedding with soft pillows and custom linens, Wi-Fi, in-room coffee and dining, refrigerator, USB ports, spacious work areas and in some suites, soothing Jacuzzi tubs. Each room has 12 outlets, enabling electronic devices to stay fully charged.

Crowne Plaza resides a short distance from a multitude of Burr Ridge shops and restaurants. Upscale clothing stores like **Chico's, J.Jill, Soma** and **Loft** will entice, while restaurants like **Capri Ristorante, Dao Sushi, Thai and Hibachi Restaurant, Eddie Merlot's** and **Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurant** will satiate hunger pangs. Guests who don't want to stray from the premises can enjoy distinctive American fare inside the hotel at **Sip & Savor** restaurant, which is open for breakfast and dinner.

Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace presents Broadway shows, while nearby **Brookfield Zoo** is a family favorite and contains 450 species of animals across 216 acres. Relaxation awaits at **Kohler Waters Spa** in Burr Ridge, which features a 25-foot whirlpool with a cascading waterfall, steam room and sauna and three distinctive shower experiences. Guests looking to play golf can visit **Cog Hill Golf and Country Club** in nearby Lemont, where they can compete on a course that has been dubbed one of the 100 best in the country. Crowne Plaza also

resides near numerous parks, like **Harvester Park**, which encompasses 37 acres, including 17 acres of wetlands containing trails, fishing docks, a pond and observation points.

Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve in nearby Darien features 2,492 acres of prairies, savannas and woodlands that contain 740 native plant species and more than 300 species of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles.

Situated less than 15 miles from **O'Hare Airport** and 10 miles from **Midway Airport**, Crowne Plaza is easily accessible (located directly off Interstate 55, 30 minutes from downtown **Chicago**). Crowne Plaza supplies free parking, including complimentary bus parking and provides free shuttle service within a three-mile radius.

Crowne Plaza features 6,500 square feet of gathering space across three rooms, including a 4,000-square-foot ballroom. Guests can stay active in the hotel's fitness center and relax in the indoor pool.

Crowne Plaza Chicago SW-Burr Ridge Quick Facts

Rooms: 123, including 58 kings, 53 double doubles, 9 special-needs rooms and 3 suites.

Banquet space: 4 rooms totaling 6,500 square feet of space. The Grand Ballroom is 4,000 square feet while other rooms include the Aria Ballroom, Boardroom and Hospitality Suite.

Amenities: Gym featuring treadmill, elliptical machines, free weights and a stationary bicycle; indoor swimming pool; 24-hour business center with fax and printing services; restaurant serving American fare and lounge; free Wi-Fi; in-room coffee and dining and a 24-hour snack shop.

Group perks: Groups receive a special rates for both guestrooms and breakfast.

Contact info: Crowne Plaza Burr Ridge, 300 South Frontage Road, Burr Ridge, Illinois. Michelle D'Andrea, Director of Sales and Marketing. 630-601-7548, mdandrea@cpchicagosw.com, www.cpchicagosw.com

Nearby: Crowne Plaza is less than a five-minute drive from the Burr Ridge Village Center, which offers the best shopping in the village. This complex contains 195,000 square feet of stores and restaurants. The hotel is also a short drive from Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace, Brookfield Zoo, Cog Hill Golf and Country Club in Lemont, Camp Bullfrog Lake in Willow Springs and Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve in Darien.

Location: The hotel is located less than 15 miles from O'Hare Airport and 10 miles from Midway Airport in Burr Ridge, Illinois, and resides directly off Interstate 55, 30 minutes from downtown Chicago.

CROWNE PLAZA CHICAGO SW-BURR RIDGE

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