

## **Faith trumps fear for Israel tourists**

Rami Levi has a unique challenge each day when he comes to work. He's got to make millions of people want to visit a country that makes the news nearly every day as a terrorist target.

As Israel's tourism ambassador to North America and South America--a post he assumed just 10 days before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States--his is a job filled with obstacles.

But by appealing to the faithful, encouraging the Jews and Christians alike to visit the land they revere as the holiest in the world, he has managed to salvage about a quarter of Israel's tourism industry. And there are signs of further improvements in tourist interest.

"There's one thing that we have that no one else has: There's only one Holy Land," Levi said ahead of a visit by thousands of tourism professionals to Los Angeles for a trade show. "We can compete with 170 other nations because we have Jerusalem."

With an ambitious campaign targeting synagogues and churches across the United States, Israel has steadily won back the tourists its economy depends on, with local religious leaders playing a key role in the process.

One million tourists came to the Jewish state last year, though only around one in four was a Jew. Tourists pumped \$1.6 billion into the economy, which, while still down from the 1999 high of \$4 billion, encourages Levi. Visits from the Americas are up 52 percent this year, and during the recent Passover holidays, occupancy of the nation's 335 hotels hit 100 percent.

"The goal I set for my offices was simple: that the \$4 billion tourism industry, one of Israel's main growth engines, won't go bankrupt," Levi said. "We needed to make sure hotels wouldn't close their doors, airlines wouldn't stop flying, travel agents wouldn't leave the country."

Jack Hayford, the influential founding pastor of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, a Pentecostal congregation with more than 10,000 followers, has long supported travel to the nation. He has visited Israel 30 times, led thousands of people on tours through Christianity's holiest sites and become such a strong champion of the country that he's met with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on recent trips. In addition to contributing to mailings encouraging congregants to travel to the country, Hayford produced a 90-minute DVD instructing churches in how to plan group trips. The video, which covers everything from theological reasons for making the journey to security concerns, will be distributed to 100,000 churches across the country.

"There's unquestionably a distinct presence of the Holy Spirit of God in that land," Hayford said. "I've been in public ministry for 40 years, and I know the difference between having a good feeling and having an interaction with God. In Israel, there's a very real feeling of God's presence."

Levi also made inroads with Chabad Lubavitch, a Westwood-based, non-denominational Jewish social service network that puts on an annual televised fund-raiser. He appeared on the show last fall, imploring devout Jews to visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem and other culturally important sites. He worked with rabbis directly to distribute pledge cards to congregants, used to elicit promises to visit the country within a year.

Although all agree that the terrorist threat is very real--Hayford's last meeting with Sharon was cut short by an explosion near Jerusalem--none seem deterred by reports of suicide bombings.

But for all the precautions, Israel has had a difficult time shedding its tumultuous image. The State Department renewed its travel warning this week, cautioning Americans to avoid the nation if possible. Additionally, security fears have led at least 14 life insurance companies to deny coverage to people planning to visit the country, according to a lawsuit filed Wednesday in Los Angeles Superior Court.

"When you get right down to it, people visiting Israel are no more in danger than (in) New York or Los Angeles," said Bill Shernoff, a Los Angeles attorney who filed the suit. "It's silly to reject life insurance if you're just visiting, like our governor's doing just next week."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will attend the groundbreaking of a museum of tolerance and promote California business.