

TRAVEL

SAN JUAN STAR - SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 2008

David Landis, left, and Maoz Inon climb the cliffs at the historical site of Aseel along the Jesus Trail in the Galilee region of northern Israel. The two entrepreneurs have built the trail following in the footsteps of Jesus' travels with the hope of attracting thousands of pilgrims from around the world each year.

TRAIL THROUGH ISRAEL'S NORTH FOLLOWS IN FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS

By LAURIE COPANS
Associated Press Writer

A MOUNT OF BEATITUDES, Israel
dirt path begins across the road from a bus-congested holy site on Israel's Sea of Galilee, winding up a hill covered with wild oat and thistle.

Thousands of pilgrims each year visit the stone church at Tabgha and other sanctuaries marking Jesus' miracles. But few venture beyond the crowds to the landscape Jesus walked in the Galilee. Those who do find silence and solace on the rocky hills and in the shade of the olive trees that cover the plains.

Now a private Israeli project has set down a 40-mile hiking path through the region where Jesus ministered. The Jesus Trail hopes to bring thousands of tourists to follow in his footsteps to hear the songbirds, smell the wild dill and reflect along the way.

Since the trail is not yet marked, travelers can hire a tour guide, download GPS coordinates from Jesustrail.com or pick up trail maps at tourist sites. The path is meant to be hiked in four days. Pilgrims can sleep near the start of the trail in Nazareth, the town Jesus lived in as a boy, and travel each day to the start of a section. Or they can stay at the occasional guest house offered by kibbutzim and Arab communities or carry tents with them.

The path is an alternative to bus tours that stop only at the known holy sites.

"I think the trail more than anything brings out the human nature of Jesus when the Bible talks about him becoming flesh and living among the people," said David Landis, an American who has helped lay out the trail. "I meet the people and I travel the land and I see the flowers and the wildlife, the real things ... that really come alive for me in the story."

My hike in April with Landis and the Israeli brain behind the endeavor, entrepreneur Maoz Inon, began before sunup in Nazareth at the Fauzi Azar Inn, a hostel in a 200-year-old Arab mansion that Inon manages in Nazareth's Old City.

I awoke to the sound of the call to prayer from several mosques combined with the lively screeching of swifts as they darted over the brightening sky. Bells soon began to ring at the Church of the Annunciation, calling believers to Sunday worship at the sanctuary where tradition says God told Mary she would give birth to his son.

We alternated between foot and Inon's car since we had to fit the entire trip into one day.

Starting by car, our first stop was the Arab village of Kana, about nine miles into the trail. At the 19th-century Wedding Church commemorating Jesus' miracle here of changing water into wine at a wedding, we met a swarm of tourists from Georgia, Alabama and Ohio.

Standing in the church's cobblestone yard, group leader David Hughes, a pastor, pointed out that the

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