

Israel, Palestinians join in tourism push: Cooperation in marketing

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Israel and the Palestinian Authority plan to jointly market their region as a pilgrimage destination, Israel's Ministry of Tourism has announced.

In a sign that relations between Israel and the Palestinians are improving, the two sides have agreed to place the symbols of both ministries on advertisements promoting tourism to the Holy Land. The campaign, which will initially cost \$500,000, will target Greece, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

The announcement was made just before the new year after Israeli Tourism Ministry Director General Eli Cohen and his Palestinian counterpart, Bajis Ismail, agreed on the plan during a meeting in early December. In addition, Israeli Tourism Minister Gideon Ezra met with Palestinian Tourism and Antiquities Minister Mitri Abu Aita near Bethlehem to discuss this and other joint ventures.

Both Israelis and Palestinians have suffered from the virtual collapse in their intertwined tourism industries that resulted from the violent Palestinian uprising that began more than four years ago.

Despite a significant increase in the number of tourists to Israel in 2004, only 13,000 pilgrims, including 4,700 Israeli-Arab Christians, visited Bethlehem during Christmas. Thousands of Christian and Muslim Palestinians have emigrated from the region in recent years, and many more say they will do so if the economy does not improve significantly. Israeli tourism officials predict that approximately 1.7 million visitors will arrive in 2005. -*Religion News Service*