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Blazing the Jesus Trail:

Marked Pilgrimage Route Brings Hikers to the Galilee

Nazareth, Israel, April 1, 2009— One year ago, the Jesus Trail, a Galilee pilgrimage hiking route, consisted of little more than a track of GPS points and an idea. Now, just one year later, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) is marking the trail with painted blazes, hundreds of diverse hikers have come to hike the trail, and locals are launching business initiatives in preparation for an increase in hikers.

Developed by local hostel owner and tourism developer Maoz Inon and outdoor adventure specialist David Landis, the trail offers an alternative for travelers and pilgrims to experience the steps of Jesus in a way that is authentic, adventurous and educational by trekking through the rugged and beautiful landscape of the Galilee the same way that Jesus did—by foot.

Painted blazes have already been added to 30 kilometers of the 65-kilometer trail, with plans to complete the blazing by the Pope's visit to Nazareth in May. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel is marking the trail using the Israeli blaze system and will include the trail on future official hiking maps of the region. "This is the first trail in Israel that has been blazed with foreign trekkers in mind, and our first historic long-distance trail," said Gili Greenbaum, Marking Coordinator for SPNI. "Marking the trail serves both to improve accessibility to hikers and also to limit environmental impact to one path," added Greenbaum.

As word spread about the trail in the past year, over 300 hikers have made their way to Nazareth to hike all or a portion of the trail. Many are taking advantage of free guiding on the first day of the trail provided by volunteers in Nazareth. An experienced pilgrimage hiker from South Africa came to experience the feel of the land and visit historical sites of the beaten track. One pastor from England came to pray from the high points of the trail. A group of four hiked the trail as part of a much larger trek from Germany to Israel. A conservative Mennonite family hiked the first day of the trail with their six children, including a 3-year-old. After running half the trail in one day, an American man reflected that his experience was, "quite surreal as [his] mind often drifted to the religious history [he] learned from the Bible."

Hikers experience the diversity of the Galilee and rich hospitality of local culture. A group of six American volunteers camping near a bedouin village had a surprise evening visit from a local man who brought them food and dry firewood. Many locals have been supportive of the project, including Abu Yusuf, a resident of the Arab village of Meshhed, who was eager to welcome hikers into his home.

Daniella Fields, an Israeli trailblazer for SPNI, met two little boys calling themselves, "the kings of Meshhed" as she painted blazes through their town. One of them helped her to carry her painting supplies. As she left town she thanked him for letting her "paint in [his] kingdom." As a Jewish Israeli, Fields commented, "There's so much I don't know about the different people in my own country."

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In addition to giving hikers the opportunity for a unique experience, the trail serves as an economic stimulus for local businesses. In Cana, several family-run bed and breakfasts have sprung up in response to the need for hiker accommodations. New restaurants opened in the old city of Nazareth to provide for the influx of pilgrims. The slower-paced travel of hiking ensures that pilgrims will patronize local businesses for food, accommodations and other necessities along way. With the marking of the trail already underway, hopes are high that the number of Jesus Trail hikers will continue to rise.

Jesus Trail hiker Richard Stetenga wrote, “The good thing about this trail is that it combines visiting some important religious sites with natural beauty. It gave me some time to reflect on things that happened there long ago, and their meaning now, for me.”

The Jesus Trail Web site—www.jesustrail.com— provides links to tour operators and features information on the religious and geographic sites, accommodations and food, and general resources on hiking the region.

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The Jesus Trail is a 65-kilometer hiking trail connecting sites from the life and ministry of Jesus. The entire Jesus Trail can be walked in 3-5 days, or any section can be walked as a day hike using public transportation. Travelers can camp out or stay in a variety of accommodations, ranging from simple dorms to five star hotels. The trail begins in Nazareth, the boyhood home of Jesus, and continues to the Sea of Galilee by way of Zippori, Cana, the Horns of Hattin and Arbel Cliffs. Around the Sea of Galilee the trail connects Tabgha, the church of the Primacy of St. Peter, Capernaum, and the Mount of Beatitudes. An optional return loop connects back to Nazareth via Tiberias, the Jordan River, Mount Tabor and Mount Precipice. More information is available at <http://jesustrail.com>.

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