

Travel Agency Includes Jewish sites in European Vacation Packages

With the exception of a big dip in Spring 2010, international air travel has been on a slow but steady upswing since dropping along with the faltering economy following the stock market plunge in 2008, according to International Air Transport Association statistics.

Bram Majtlis, president of the Buckhead-based Austrian Airlines Vacation Center, can attest to that. After two sparse years in 2009 and 2010, bookings have increased this year for the travel agency that has specialized in European vacation packages departing from New York and Washington since 1999. Now, Majtlis announced recently, his Austrian Airlines Vacation Center's "City Steals" packages to Prague, Budapest or Vienna also originate in Atlanta.

A "City Steals" selling point is the individualized itinerary. Majtlis and his staff of seven agents tailor each trip according to the travelers' interests by pre-arranging local tours to targeted sites. Clients can choose from group bus tours or private guided tours by car. "Whatever works best for the client," said Majtlis, who puts a priority on customer service.

In what may seem a counterintuitive move in the Internet era, Majtlis' vacation center does not offer online bookings.

"We put out products online with all the information. When you want to make a trip, you contact us so we have direct contact with the traveler," Majtlis said.

With partner offices in cities where Austrian Airlines Vacation Center books tours, the company's customer service doesn't end with a booking. "Every [travel] voucher has an emergency number for a [local] office. If there are any problems [during travel], call the office and we'll take care of it," Majtlis said.

In addition to vacations, Majtlis also coordinates educational and cultural group tours. For example,

one of his longtime clients is the Atlanta International School, which takes students to the annual Model United Nations in The Hague, Netherlands (Holland). The trip is extended for one week to visit a European city.

"That's where Bram really shines," said Sandy Ferko, AIS's head of counseling who has chaperoned the student trip since 1996. "He lays it all out for us. There's always some kind of purpose to the trip [such as architecture]. Bram has good info on all the cities. He listens to what we want. He understands what I'm asking for."

As a member of the Atlanta Jewish community, Ferko likes that Majtlis adds a Jewish component to her students' itinerary. Majtlis is Jewish himself and is always eager to incorporate Jewish sites into travelers' itineraries.

In fact, Majtlis, a native of the Netherlands, feels an obligation to inform others about Jewish history.

"One of my duties is to tell the story," said Majtlis, a metro Atlanta resident since 1991. "They always try to root us out [but] we always come back. One of the examples of that is my hometown."

Majtlis was born in 1951 in Middelburg, a city in southern Holland with a synagogue dating to 1706. Prior to World War II, 300 Jewish families lived there. Of Majtlis' nearly 80 family members, only a handful survived the Holocaust. His mother, an uncle and grandparents were hidden by a non-Jewish family in a small fishing village on the North Sea, not far from Middelburg. After the war, Majtlis' grandfather showed his family's gratitude by donating church bells.

After the war, Majtlis explained, his grandparents' house was the Jewish center. "When I was a child, I was the only Jewish kid in school in a city formerly thriving with Jews," he said. His bar mitzvah was held at the synagogue in Rotterdam, some 80 miles from Middelburg.

About 12 years ago, the Middelburg synagogue was re-opened, with assistance from the Dutch government. Many Torahs and ritual objects from the original synagogue found their way back from all over the world, said Majtlis. He said there are now about 200 members.

Majtlis' mother worked tirelessly to gain recognition for the son of the family who gave refuge to her own family during the war. "He was like an angel to them," Majtlis said.

About 10 years ago, the son, at age 90, was honored by Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial as a Righteous Gentile. The man's nephew wrote a book about the two families' wartime relationship, *In Safe Harbor*, which is mandatory reading for all Dutch schoolchildren.

For information about Austrian Airlines Vacation Center, visit www.austrianair-vacations.com or call (800) 790-4682.



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