

LEADING THE WAY IN TOURISM IN ISRAEL

What happens when innovation and creativity meet infrastructure and volume? It's a match made in heaven for Israel travel and it's called **Israel Way!** ■ Ella Lavon

In 2011, the tourism market in Israel was shaken when the Egged Tour Group, a subsidiary of the Egged Bus Cooperative and one of the most established tourism companies in Israel, purchased Oranim Educational Initiatives Ltd. Formerly owned privately by the charismatic entrepreneur Shlomo "Momo" Lifshitz (who has left the company), Oranim was a powerhouse for innovation and creativity in Israel travel, developing unique products and services such as eCamp, Destination Israel, Exclusive Travel Design and more.

Innovative and dynamic

Egged Tours was known world-wide for its day tours to Israel's leading sites such as Jerusalem and Masada that depart daily and service thousands of tourists annually. However, apart from the daily tours, the company also focused on the Israeli market, providing educational tourism services to two-thirds of the Israeli school system, event planning and incentive tourism to hundreds of Israeli organizations, and organized tours and vacation packages for Israelis traveling outside of Israel.

Looking to become a significant player in the incoming tourism market, the company recruited Dani Mor, the former CEO of Israel Experience Ltd., to run the new subsidiary together with Avraham Infeld, a senior Jewish Education professional who served as the Director General of organizations such as Melitz, Taglit-Birthright Israel and Hillel International. The new company, Israel Way, is an independent subsidiary company of Egged Tours.

Egged Tours owns its own bus fleet and partners with the Israeli Youth Hostel Association. "We own our own infrastructure, and that is a huge advantage both with regards to pricing and availability, and our volume gives us a real advantage when nego-

tiating with other suppliers. We can offer our clients better prices than any of our competitors," affirms Mor. "When you combine that capability with a highly-experienced staff and the innovative and dynamic spirit of Israel Way, you have a real winner." Israel Way plans trips for schools, youth movements, communities and more, crafting each tour to meet the client's needs. In addition, the company offers a variety of unique services and programs detailed below.

"Like" Israel in eCamp

In the age of Facebook and Twitter, how do you make Israel relevant and get American teens to "Like" the Jewish State? Israel Way's eCamp (www.ecamp4u.com) has approached this challenge by thinking out of the box and creating an international Jewish hi-tech summer camp in Israel focused on technology and new media arts. Opening its fifth summer in 2012, eCamp offers programs for kids and teens ages 7-18 and boasts alumni from over 30 countries, including hundreds of Americans who are hardcore "fans" of the program and of Israel (and NOT just on Facebook). "eCamp is a Jewish educational program that nurtures high-tech leaders of the future while reinforcing the campers' bond with their Jewish identity and with Israel," says Dotan Tamir, eCamp Director. "Part of the way we get our teens to connect to the state of Israel is by focusing on the unique technological capabilities that Israel possesses. Our main goal is to demonstrate to the campers that here in Israel they can realize their future and turn their dreams into reality." The participants at eCamp get to create, invent and design their own technological projects. Campers choose between 29 hands-on technological workshops in subjects ranging from computer game development, robotics, digital music, 3D modeling, video filming, digital comics and programming.

Yet eCamp is not just a tech camp. Adopting the successful model of Jewish overnight camps in North America, the camp includes social programs, outdoor activities at the swimming pool and the sports facilities, and fun, pluralistic Jewish experiences. The spoken language at camp is English so kids and teens from North America feel at home away from home.

"We want to open eCamp to as many campers as possible," says Tamir. "After a successful pilot last summer we are now running eCamp Max, a special program for kids with Aspergers syndrome, PDD and high functioning autism. eCamp MAX really helps the campers

A participant on an Israel Way program picks radishes on a kibbutz



shine as individuals as they unleash their creativity in the workshops and experience new relationships with their peers. We are looking for funding that will help more parents with these special-needs kids give them a meaningful Israeli summer camp experience.”

Israel YOUR Way

One of Israel Way’s first steps was to enter the Taglit-Birthright Israel market. In 2011 the company ran a pilot program called “Israel YOUR Way” (www.israelyourway.net), bringing two buses to Israel. In the summer of 2012, Israel Way aims to offer 8-10 trips, including special interest groups focusing on career development and on the city of Tel Aviv.

“Birthright is the Israel inspiration for many young Americans,” said Gadi Ben Dov, Director of Israel YOUR Way, “it paves the way for all future connections. Since we strive to connect American Jews to Israel, it was important for us to be a significant force in Birthright. But we don’t want to be just another organizer. We want to bring our participants new content and a new perspective.” Ben Dov, former director of Israel programs for the Reform Movement (URJ) has worked with Birthright trips for years, coordinating Birthright programs run by the URJ.

Destination Israel – a program for everyone

Whether it’s volunteering on a kibbutz, interning in Tel Aviv, teaching English in a disadvantaged Israeli neighborhood, getting an MA from a branch of NYU-Poly or soaking up the sun in Eilat while learning about the hotel industry, Israel Way’s ‘Destination Israel’ project (www.destinationisrael.com) offers meaningful and enjoyable experiences in Israel for everyone. Destination Israel’s programs range from one week to a year, serving participants of all ages.

Affiliated with Masa, participants in the longer programs are eligible for financial aid, so many of the volunteer programs in central locations such as Ashdod, Ramla and Ness Ziona are absolutely free. Hundreds of young adults traveled to Israel through Israel Way in 2011, making the company the fastest-growing and one of the biggest Masa organizers.

The W2I challenge

Women enjoy a challenge. What better way to shake up your life than off-road driving in all terrain vehicles with Jewish women from all over the world – in Israel! Women to Israel (www.w2ichallenge.com) is a new and exciting program scheduled to run in March 2012.

Open to women ages 24 and up, the program includes adventures such as jeep treks, rappelling and torchlight hikes, as well as art workshops in nature, meditation sessions and an activity with women in traditional costumes. Modeled after the successful Israeli “Queen of the Desert” project, W2I offers Jewish women a completely unique perspective on Israel and their Jewish identity.




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ETD - Travel Architecture

“Building the perfect trip can be as complex as building the perfect home for the discerning consumer,” says David Magen. “That’s why I see myself as a travel architect rather than a tour organizer. I know that my clients demand the best, and if one beam isn’t perfect, the entire building won’t be able to stand. That is why I created ETD – Exclusive Travel Design (www.etdisrael.com) in 2010 – to make dreams come true in Israel.”

ETD offers a wide range of theme tours such as wine, architecture, culinary experiences and arts. The company also arranges tailor-made tours and events for individuals and small groups as well as large organizations such as Jewish Federations. Concentrating on an upscale market, ETD strives for excellence, and works only with local service providers who have a proven track record of the highest quality service.

Magen brings a wealth of experience to his position. He was a senior staff member of the UJC/JFNA’s Israel office for over 20 years, directing the missions department that brought hundreds of visitors to Israel annually. ■

 For more information about Israel Way, go to www.israelway.com.