

FROM HOLLYWOOD TO THE HOLY LAND

Israel is rapidly becoming a preferred destination for travelers from all over the world, including an unprecedented number of show business stars.

Sharon Stone discovered Israel while following her instinct, shortly before her much discussed movie "Basic Instinct 2" hit theaters worldwide.

Fellow movie star Richard Gere visited Israel several times in an effort to promote peace in the region.

Madonna followed her belief in Kabbalah straight to the source, and after several visits to the Holy Land, is now looking for a suitable home in the trendy town of Rosh Pina.

The list of recognizable names and faces goes on and on: Sting was recently in Israel and already plans a return visit. Chris Noth, "Mr. Big" of "Sex and the City" fame, relaxed by the Dead Sea, dined in Tel Aviv and toured Jerusalem during a brief hiatus from his busy schedule.

Natalie Portman, not only visits Israel frequently, but also reconnected with her Israeli roots by spending a whole semester studying at the Hebrew University. Ewan McGregor recently vacationed in Israel with his family, and Jim Carrey surprised his Israeli fans when he crossed from Egypt into Israel.

Will Smith, aka the "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," and his wife Jada Pinkett, were in Jordan when they decided they could not pass over visiting Jerusalem. The family crossed the border to spend the Passover and Easter season in the Holy Land. They placed a wish note among the stones of the Wailing Wall, visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and even "schmoozed" with the outgoing minister of tourism, Avraham Hirschson, and other dignitaries.

It looks like this summer's temperatures will be matched only by the hot acts performing in Israel, including hip-hop super group Black Eyed Peas, reggae star Ziggy Marley, rapper 50 cent, Sting and others. Other celebrities have recently expressed interest in visiting Israel, including singer Lenny Kravitz, actor Mark Wahlberg and actress Gina Gershon.

Israel and especially Jerusalem is again a magnet for visitors from all over the world. Celebrities, like other regular tourists, want to experience the exhilaration and excitement of visiting these unique and most inspiring sights.

The number of visitors to Israel has been growing consistently since 2004. In 2005 close to 2 million foreign tourists visited Israel, and the first quarter of 2006 showed a dramatic increase of 24 percent over the same period last year, totaling 463,300 tourists for the quarter.

"Israel is returning to its natural status as a favorite destination for world travelers, not only for celebrities, whose contribution is highly valued. What we are experiencing now is just the tip of the iceberg. There is a tremendous upsurge in tourism to Israel and the celebrities reinforce its popularity," says Eli Cohen, the Director General of the Ministry of Tourism.

"This trend started a few years ago and the numbers of visitors to Israel have been growing steadily thanks to the change in atmosphere in the region as well as the expanding open skies policy, which enabled more carriers enter the Israeli market. "We are very optimistic and believe that 2006 will be a record year in tourism and we will reach 3 million visitors," adds Arie Sommer, Tourism Commissioner to North America.

This dramatic transition started under the leadership of the former Minister of Tourism Avraham Hirschson, and Director General Eli Cohen. This direction will certainly continue under the leadership of the new Minister of Tourism Mr. Itzhak Herzog.

Israel is definitely en route to its rightful place on the map of international travel and is speedily returning as a major destination for both religious leisure travelers.

Prepared by: Ministry of Tourism, New York (Ruth Mekel)