



A GROUP of visitors on a tour of Nazareth.

Nazareth: Jewish state, Christian heritage, Muslim majority

By HELGA TRIM

WHAT a difference a year makes. For Maoz Inon, owner of the Fauzi Azar Inn and winner of the Responsible Tourism Award 2011 for Best Accommodation for Local Communities, 2012 was the year that people came to see and stay in Nazareth. He says local businesses are thriving.

"In the last few weeks, three accommodation businesses opened within 150 metres of the Inn," he boasts, Maoz Inon's vision for developing Nazareth through tourism is now a budding reality.

Maoz Inon is a Jew from Tel Aviv. When I first interviewed him last year, he had just won his first major award and was just starting to win over his Arab neighbours. Today, Maoz and Suraida Shomar Nassar, the Palestinian manager of the Inn, have charted a course for peace and prosperity, at least in Nazareth. Fauzi Azar Inn's Free Old City Tour generated more than \$7,500 last year with the proceeds being donated to a local orphanage.

The authentic Arab mansion with its beautiful courtyard and 21st century amenities has been drawing in visitors from around the world.

"It was a record year for the Inn with 7,538 guests visiting us," the team at Fauzi Azar Inn said visitors last year.

Considering the 14-room inn accommodates a maximum of 50 guests, 7,000 plus guests in one year is quite a feat. To stay at the Inn is to get a taste of Nazarene life in the heart of Nazareth's Old City. The Inn was once the home of the Azar family and I'm told it maintains its homey atmosphere. A truly Arab breakfast is served daily. Free tours of Nazareth are offered. Those who enjoy hiking appreciate free maps of the Jesus Trail. "We printed 20,000 of our new Nazareth Tourism Maps, for the first time in color, and are giving tourism and business consultations to local



SURAIIDA NASSER and Maoz Inon, owner of the Fauzi Azar Inn in Nazareth, and winner of the Responsible Tourism Award 2011 for Best Accommodation for Local Communities.

entrepreneurs," Maoz said. The Inn also hosts cultural shows that highlight the music of the region and movie nights.

Nazareth did not have a good reputation in biblical times and two millennia after, I'm still trying to convince my friend in Tel Aviv that Nazareth has lots to offer the visitor.

I repeat what Philip said to Nathaniel when he doubted that Nazareth could produce anything good, "Come and see." (John 1:46) Maoz left Tel Aviv to visit Nazareth and today it's his home. His advice for those who still have doubts about Nazareth: "Nazareth is a beautiful city with Christian Heritage in a Jewish state but with a Muslim majority and that makes it unique world wide. The combination of Ottoman architecture and the sophisticated food scene plus award winning accommodation facilities make it a MUST visit for tourists and Israelis alike. For Israelis I'd recommend visiting the city for the first time with a tour: historical or culinary, which are becoming more and more popular. The Central location in

Galilee makes it also a great base to explore other sites such as the Sea of Galilee, Akko (also known as Acre this is a UNESCO World Heritage Site), Haifa (World Centre of the Bahai Faith with its tiered gardens), and more."

It's been quite a difficult year in the Middle East and the struggles continue into 2013. But in the midst of Arab Springs and conflicts in Gaza, visitors continue to flock to Israel. A priest in Jerusalem told me there were more visitors to the Holy sites in 2012 than at any other time. The Israel Ministry of Tourism confirms that tourism grew by four percent over the year before and expects that percentage to rise this year as well. I will be heading to Israel/Palestine with a group of friends to see and touch biblical history. More important, I want to contribute to a future of peace and prosperity. I'll start by staying in Nazareth.

Maoz Inon says: "We feel we are now very much obligated to spread the word of Responsible Tourism, and be ambassadors of it — and this is exactly what we are doing!"