

Israeli tour business rebounds from negative impacts of 9/11

Three generations of 'Morse' women remain committed to Hollywood business that put their family on the map

by Paul Scott Abbott
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Although operating a business escorting people to one of the most volatile regions in the world has never been easy - 9/11/01 is a date that left travel to Israel at a virtual standstill. The augmented unrest in the Middle East coupled with a crippled American economy could have been a recipe of irreparable measure for those such as the Greater Hollywood-based Margaret Morse Tours (MMT).

MMT is known nationwide for its niche in Bar/Bat Mitzvah tours to Israel as well as worldwide tours catering to an adult/senior clientele. Word-of-mouth referrals throughout predominantly Jewish circles of the country has resulted in them being widely recognized as one of the best at what they do.

Four years after having finally

overcome the tourism-depressing impact of 9/11, the three generations of women behind Margaret Morse Tours are looking forward to again having the trips they operate to Israel fully booked.

MMT was founded in 1980 by a vibrant 67-year-old grandmother. Margaret Morse, a lifelong musician and director of a choral group, had the opportunity to participate in a musical competition in Israel and single-handedly arranged all travel plans for 1,100 people. This was her first trip to Israel and she became inspired by the land, its people and its history. Immediately after returning home, she began a travel/tour business with members of her family and rapidly attained an impeccable reputation and loyal following.

Margaret Morse had a natural rapport with people and a talent to

promote a tour to Israel as the 'trip of a lifetime.'

Emerald Hills resident Marcy Roberts and her family recently returned from one of those trips.

"Thousands of years of history came alive in Israel with Margaret Morse Tours, especially seeing our twin sons read from the Torah on top of Masada," she said.

"Her [Margaret's] magnetic personality, hands-on involvement, well-placed contacts and passion won her eager participants and repeat customers," said granddaughter Robyn Morse, 35, the company comptroller and youngest among the generational trio.

"We've always had '9/11s' happening in Israel. Israel has never been fully at peace," said Robyn, quickly adding how, "travelling there has always been a priority to people of all religions. It's a spiritual milestone for everyone once they've arrived."

Travelers' peace of mind apparently has calmed enough - now that the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks are four years in the past - and economic times are robust enough that there is little hesitancy on the part of many to commit to a 2 1/2-week escorted tour to Israel -- 'the trip of a lifetime' -- that has a per-person price in the \$3,500 to \$4,000 range.

"This year is one of our best, with almost every tour scheduled at full capacity," said Robyn.

The tour business has booked 111 people for a trip leaving Sept. 13 and another 128 for one scheduled to depart Nov. 1

"People are comfortable that we're with them every step of the way," she said, adding that the tours typically do not take participants to settlement areas where Israelis are at conflict with Palestinians.

"Our business isn't just a business," Robyn said. "Our business is run from the heart. My



grandmother's goal was always to educate and inspire."

MMT clients are often overwhelmed with the Morse family's eye for detail and all the "extras" that are provided that are not mentioned on the itinerary.

"Margaret Morse Tours provided cherished momentos that bring back wonderful memories from that once-in-a-lifetime visit to Israel," said Emerald Hills resident Dr. Fred Sherman, whose family travelled with MMT in the summer of 2004.

Robyn's mother, Wendy Morse, 60, is president of the company and accompanies all tour groups, while grandmother and founder Margaret Morse, now 92, has settled into a less active role in recent years.

Robyn and Wendy first journeyed to Israel in the early 1980s, when Margaret Morse founded the firm.

"I never really envisioned that it would become a real business [at the time]," Wendy Morse said. "None of us envisioned it. We were a family of musicians."

Over the past 25 years, nearly 50,000 people have visited Israel on the firm's tours. Participants have included Jews, Christians and even some without religious affiliations. The company has received numerous awards, including from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism.

Not too long from now, the family business may be looking to actively add a fourth generation. Robyn and her husband PJ O'Keefe's two daughters, Morgan, 5, and Danielle, 2, already have their passports and are slated to take their first trip to Israel next summer.

For more information, call MMT at 954-458-2021 or visit www.margaretmorsetours.com

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Run by three generations of women, Margaret Morse Tours, which specializes in tours to Israel, is experiencing a resurgence since 9/11's crippling effects. (From left:) Robyn Morse, with daughter Morgan, then 1, grandmother Margaret "Bubby" Morse and mother Wendy are pictured here with an ARMDI emergency rescue vehicle donated by Margaret in honor of Morgan's birth.