

# Christians in Profile – Garo Garabedian

1. *Can you tell our readers about your family background and how they got started in the travel business in Jerusalem and how it has expanded.?*

Our founder George Garabedian was born in the Armenian Compound in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1910. At a very early age he showed a great interest in the fascinating world of tourism. He began his career in 1925 with Cox & Kings, the renowned British shipping agents and travel tycoons. In 1931, George established his own travel office catering to the needs of Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. He soon mastered the travel business and became an expert in this field. However, the 1948 war cost George everything; he lost his business and his home.

After the war, he started from scratch and founded George Garabedian & Co. thus becoming one of the founders of the modern travel industry in Jordan. As a good earner of foreign currency to the newly born kingdom, George became a close friend of the late King Hussein and a personal advisor to His Majesty on matters relating to tourism. For the services rendered to the Catholic Philippine flow of pilgrims to the Holy Land in 1959, he was named the Honorary Consul of the Philippines. He also received the keys to the cities of Detroit, Houston and Charlotte, among other rewards. George handled all the local arrangements for the classic film production of *Lawrence of Arabia*. George passed away in 1988 and his footsteps have been followed by his son, Garo, the current president of George's International Tours in San Diego and George Garabedian Travel Agency, the Christmas Hotel and GGC Transport Company in Jerusalem. Garo has studied tourism extensively in Europe and earned a degree from the world-renowned Ecole Hoteliere de Lausanne in Switzerland. For the past forty years he has continued the work started by his late father and has positioned George's International Tours as a leader in promoting Christian pilgrimages.

2. *What are some of the difficulties that your travel agency has faced over the years in bringing people to the Holy Land?*

For many years it has been very difficult to operate our Travel Agency in Jerusalem due to the lack of Christian tour guides who were not licensed. For this reason, many of our young boys and girls with university degrees migrated to North America and Australia. Yet, we take pride in the fact that we can guarantee local Christian guides in each country you visit. In the Holy Land it was no easy feat as less than 5%

of the licensed guides in the country are Christians. Christian guides are able to familiarize you not only with the history of the various sites pilgrims will be visiting, but with their spiritual significance as well. We are also very grateful to the Franciscan Order in Jerusalem for providing us priest guides to lead our groups in the Holy Land.

3. *There appears to be a tendency among Americans who want to visit the Holy Land on pilgrimage to be afraid because of some imagined or real danger coming over there. Can you comment on that?*

We have always been victims of wars and terrorist incidents that have occurred in the Holy Land. Some have concerns about security in the Holy Land, Jordan and Egypt. I always try to assure that the situation is more stable than one might otherwise believe. Personally, I feel safer on the streets of Jerusalem than I do in many parts of Los Angeles. Many tourists are unaware of the geography of the region. Young adults in the US fail to understand the world and their place in it, according to a survey-based report on geographic literacy. Take Iraq, for example, many pilgrims and tourists cancelled their tours to the Holy Land when the war began in 2003, yet 68 percent of Americans aged 18 to 24 failed to correctly locate Iraq on a map.

4. *You have been one of the most used Christian travel agencies within the Roman Catholic circle including the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, The Sovereign Military Order of Jerusalem and the Knights of Malta, as well as many parishes from the U.S. To what do you attribute that to?*

Ever since we established our Travel Company, we have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars on promotional material and have traveled on countless occasions to North America and Europe introducing our Travel Agency to many parishes, religious orders and universities. We are also grateful to several Franciscan priests who have introduced and recommended our agency to many Catholic parishes and important religious orders in the United States. *By providing exceptional service, I have the honor of organizing all the travel arrangements for the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, the Knights of Malta, the Sovereign Military Order of Jerusalem, the Knights of Lazarus and many Catholic parishes from the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia.*

5. *The George Garabedian Company also maintains an office in San Diego, California, called George's International for travelers wish-*



*ing to visit the Holy Land as well as other countries. Do you handle other pilgrimage tours to other Catholic sites like Lourdes, Fatima and Rome? Are you finding that private travel is increasing as opposed to group tours?*

I have studied and worked in Europe for more than nine years and have traveled extensively to many European countries wishing that one day I will start promoting groups and pilgrimages to visit the Marian Shrines, Italy, Eastern Europe, Ireland and the footsteps of St. Paul. In 1990, I decided to start my Travel Company in the United States under the name of George's International to introduce Europe to many priests and university professors with whom I had built excellent relationships when I was managing George Garabedian Travel Agency in Jerusalem. I traveled more than eight times for educational purposes before promoting my first pilgrimage to Italy in 1991. Today, many Catholic priests, university professors and travel agents in the United States call George's International Tours to arrange their tours and pilgrimages for groups and families.

6. *How can people contact your company in the United States?*

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