



## Bahá'í World Centre

### One and a half million to visit Terraces this year

MORE THAN 54,000 people have taken pre-reserved guided tours of the cascading garden Terraces surrounding the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel since they opened in June, indicating that the site may soon become one of the top tourist attractions in Israel.

In addition, thousands more have visited the three sections of the gardens that are open to drop-in visitors. In all, more than 400,000 entries have been recorded since June 4, 2001, when the Terraces were officially opened to the public, and at this rate the number of entries per year will add up to more than 1.5 million.

“The remarkable thing about the high volume of visitors is that it is coming at a time when tourism in Israel has dropped by 30 per cent in the last six months. In contrast, in Haifa we’ve seen only an 8 per cent drop,” said Moshe Tsur, General Manager of the Haifa Tourist Board. “There is no doubt the Bahá'í gardens have had a big role in saving Haifa’s tourism industry.”

There are no fees for entry into the gardens or for the guided tours, but Mr Tsur estimates that other spending, such as on food, refreshments and transportation, has contributed millions of dollars to the local economy since the gardens opened.

The effect of this economic vitality is particularly visible in the evenings, after the gardens close and the dramatic night-time illumination of the Terraces and Shrine is turned on. Along Ben Gurion Avenue, which runs in a straight line from the base of the Terraces to the Haifa port, sidewalk cafes and restaurants are now bustling, even on midweek evenings, whereas just a few months ago the area was largely quiet after dark. The lighted Terraces rise above the avenue, which runs through the historic German Templer Colony. The whole neighbourhood, including rows of red-tiled homes built by German settlers in the late 19th century, has recently been restored by the city of Haifa.

The Haifa Tourist Board is located in one of the Templer homes and runs the booking system for the guided tours of the Terraces. Five telephone operators work full time to take calls on the tour reservation lines.

Two different guided tours are offered: the first goes down the top nine Terraces from the crest of the mountain to the Shrine midway down the slope, and the second tour goes from the Shrine down the lower nine Terraces to the Entrance Plaza on Ben Gurion Avenue. There are 19 Terraces altogether, extending one kilometre from the crest to the foot of Mount Carmel.

In groups of 40 to 50 at a time, tourists are led by Israeli guides who are recruited and trained by the Beit Hagefen Centre, an Arab-Jewish cultural centre that is well known in Haifa for its programs to promote coexistence among all the ethnic groups in the city. Many of the guides are university students and they represent a great diversity of backgrounds: Christians, Druze, Jews, Muslims, Russian immigrants, and others.

About 35 guides have been recruited and have gone through an intensive three-day training session to become guides on the Terraces. The training program, which will be repeated periodically as new guides are recruited, included sessions with the architect of the Terraces, Fariborz Sahba, and the caretaker of the Bahá'í Holy Places, Jamsheed Ardjomandi.

Gleaned from Bahá'í World News Service

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