

The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

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Museum Masterpieces

Gabe Levenson - Travel Writer

'See America first' goes the familiar travel slogan, and that should include the array of Jewish museums in the U.S. They can vastly enrich your travel experience.



Jewish museums are scattered across the country, but they do exist in every region - from coast to coast, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, in the Rockies, in the deserts and central plains.

At least half a dozen are in New York City, from the Jewish Heritage at the southern tip of Manhattan overlooking the Statue of Liberty, to the Judaica Museum in the northern Bronx overlooking the George Washington Bridge.

Jewish museums within easy reach are in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Newport and Providence, R.I., among other Eastern cities. Perhaps lesser known to New Yorkers are the museums in Chicago, Atlanta, Miami Beach and St. Petersburg, Fla., Scottsdale, Ariz., and even Utica, Miss.

Here are details on a few of them.

Winter haven. Travelers to Chicago this winter can find sanctuary from the frigid blasts of Lake Michigan, as well as infusions of Judaic knowledge, in the welcoming halls of the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies.

Serving a Jewish community of nearly 300,000, the Spertus is a busy hive of exhibits, public programming and research facilities. It also offers a library and advanced-degree courses, as well as a Judaica shop.

Though there is no kosher dining facility now, one is being included in the enlarged museum facility under construction next door. Meanwhile, you can eat kosher in Chicago's West Devon Street Jewish neighborhood at such recommended kosher eateries as the Taboun, for Mediterranean cuisine; the Jerusalem Kosher Restaurant, for vegetarian and Israeli foods, and Mi Tsu Yn, for Chinese dishes.

The Spertus logo is a flame accompanied by the biblical phrase yehi, or ?let there be lights.?

According to staff member Susan Baum, ?Logo and flame symbolize the Spertus commitment to learning through education and the arts, today and for the future.?

Next weekend marks the opening of a new major show at the Spertus,

Anne Frank: A History for Today. Running through April, the show will provide background to the Anne Frank diary: the rise of Germany's Nazi Party from 1929 to its downfall in 1945. The display is interspersed throughout with eyewitness reports by Holocaust survivors who recount their personal experiences."

These reports allow viewers to reflect on issues in today's world, with an emphasis on the importance of human rights, individual responsibility and "like the voice we know from the diary" wisdom and courage in the face of adversity," Baum said.

Dixie diaspora. The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience is tucked into the southwestern corner of the state of Mississippi in the small town of Utica "where Jews have never lived. Indeed, only 1,100 Jews live in the entire state, mostly in Jackson, the capital. However, Utica is the site of a 300-acre summer camp for Jewish boys and girls from all over the South.

The museum, housed in its own brick building on the campgrounds, features several exhibit galleries and a central sanctuary used for a variety of programs and services.

Since 1986, the museum has worked "to preserve, interpret and document the long and rich tradition of Jewish life in the South," staff member Neola Young told me. Featured are numerous objects from disbanded congregations across the region, like the 1968 ark from the now-demolished synagogue in Vicksburg, Miss., that serves as the sanctuary's centerpiece.

In 1997, the museum mounted its award-winning exhibit "From Alsace to America," a look at the immigration of Alsatian Jews to cities and small towns in the South. As part of its outreach program to 12 Southern states, the museum, now known as the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, has dispatched the Alsace show throughout the area it serves. A portion of this widely acclaimed exhibit remains on display at the Utica museum.

South Beach sensation. Snowbirds fleeing the rigors of a New York winter find sanctuary in Florida, particularly in the Miami Beach area. The many synagogues, kosher restaurants and cultural happenings keep visitors as comfortable "and certainly a lot warmer" than they would be on the Upper West Side.

Not least of the attractions in Miami Beach is the Jewish Museum of Florida in South Beach, which opened a decade ago in a former building that housed Miami Beach's first synagogue. On the National Register of Historic Places, the building underwent a two-year restoration of \$1.5 million and boasts the Art Deco features of the surrounding neighborhood, as well as its own copper dome, marble bima and 80 stained-glass windows.

The museum mounts and hosts its own exhibitions, as well as traveling exhibitions like "Mosaic," depicting the Jewish experience in Florida from 1763 to the present. It also sponsors cultural and educational programs, houses a Collections and Research Center reflecting some 250 years of Florida Jewish history, and communicates the values and issues of that history to Jewish and non-Jewish visitors alike.

Marcia Jo Zerivitz, founding executive director and chief curator, notes that Florida's Jewish community of 850,000 is the nation's third largest

after New York City and Los Angeles. South Florida, which includes Miami Beach, has the second largest concentration of Jews in the world ? 15 percent of the region's total Jewish population ? after Israel.

?The Jewish Museum of Florida is a place for Jews of all ages and stripes to discover and reaffirm their rich heritage,? Zerivitz says.

The third observance of the annual Florida Jewish History Month just closed, but ongoing through February is "The Joys of Tolerance ? Reflecting Florida Diversity Through the Twelve Tribes.? The integrated art exhibit, commissioned for the museum, is by Annette Pier, a renowned Mexico City multimedia artist.

Resources:

Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, Utica, Miss.; (601) 362-6357.

Spertus Institute, 618 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago; (312) 322-1747 or www.spertus.edu

Jewish Museum of Florida, 301 Washington Ave., Miami Beach; (305) 672-5044 or www.jewishmuseum.com.