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For Immediate Release

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Faith Travel Association Names First Impact and Inspire Award Winners ***Announcement Came at FTA's Conference February 1***

(ATLANTA, GA)— During its annual conference, held in Atlanta, Georgia this week, Faith Travel Association named the recipients of its Impact and Inspire Awards, which were created to honor travel professionals for their contributions to the faith-based travel market. The announcement came during the keynote session on Monday, February 2.

“FTA’s members are among the best in the industry, and we wanted a way to recognize them for the incredible work they are doing to advance the faith-based travel market,” explained Julie Hoover-Ernst, executive director of Faith Travel Association. “These awards give us an opportunity to recognize them for the innovative travel products they are developing which are not only appealing to a new kind of faith-based customer, they are building bridges and promoting peace by bringing people of different cultures together.”

Select International Tours and Cruises, a Christian travel management company founded in 1987 in Flemington, New Jersey, was the recipient of FTA’s Impact Award, which is presented to the travel agent, tour operator, DMO or Supplier with the most innovative faith based marketing concept, program or event in 2015, having showed demonstrable success in driving more faith-based travel to their destination, tour or attraction.

Edita Kronic, founder and president of Select International Tours & Cruises, was not able to be at the conference to accept the award in person but is thrilled for her team to have been honored in this way.

“It feels incredible to be recognized for the contribution Select International Tours has made in creating innovative, quality driven programs,” said Kronic. “We are proud to be members of FTA and are excited about the robust growth we have seen in the religious travel market, with lots of new ideas, programs and stakeholders. With the creation of the Impact Award, FTA has taken another step toward upgrading the value it offers to the entire industry.”

Select International Tours & Cruises was recognized for its *Nourish The Soul* Program, which enables participants to celebrate their faith together, meet with locals and learn about the customs and cultures of the destination and, in the words of the Psalms, “taste and see the goodness of the Lord.” This program not only lets Christians walk where Jesus walked, and pray where Jesus prayed, they get to explore Biblical cuisine by tasting the foods commonly eaten in Jesus’ time. The meals are prepared by Chefs for Peace, an organization comprised of chefs of different faiths who understand the power of food to bring people together, and participants even get an opportunity to help prepare these unique meals. Since introduced, demand for these faithful foodie tours has continued to climb and they are adding more tours all the time.

“Enhancing the pilgrimage experience through cooking with local chefs, visiting shrines and wineries, praying and sharing at the table has met with incredible success,” explained Kronic. “Our Nourish the Soul and Women and Wine product lines are an extension of the Faith and Food concept which we have now trademarked. With this concept we have created a completely new product line which is attractive to an entirely different and non-traditional pilgrimage customer.”

The Inspire Award is FTA’s most prestigious award, given to a person whose outstanding contributions over the course of their career have greatly advanced the faith-based travel market. The successful candidate’s innovative programs must have a lasting impact on not only the sector but on the lives of those who embark on these journeys of faith.

Aziz Abu Sarah, co-founder of MEJDI Tours, was honored with the Inspire Award for his efforts to redefine faith-based tourism. The company’s partnership with National Geographic to present the Holy Land in a way that is respectful to Israelis and Palestinians, as well as Jews, Muslims, and Christians is nothing short of groundbreaking. Through their partnership with National Geographic, the message of hope and peace has reached millions of people through the National Geographic catalogues, and has altered the perceptions travelers have of conflict and peace in the Holy Land. With his leadership, MEJDI Tours continues to expand its influential model of peace building through tourism by offering tours to Cuba, Ireland and Northern Ireland, Oman, the UAE, Turkey, Jordan, and more. By highlighting diverse cultural, religious, political, and ethnic narratives, MEJDI’s multiple perspectives approach to tourism enables travelers to gain a deeper understanding of destinations and their populations, forging lasting friendships with both individuals and local organizations.

Unfortunately, Aziz also could not be at the FTA conference to accept this award due to an invitation to discuss these very issues before an assembly of the Israeli government the same day.

"I'm truly honored to receive this award. We've created MEJDI Tours because we believe that travel is one of the most powerful forces globally for intercultural understanding and positive change. With 3 million tourists visiting the Holy Land each year, can you imagine what the impact would be if everybody traveled this way?" said Sarah. "I want to thank FTA for recognizing that travel can change the world."

The FTA conference was held in Atlanta February 1-2, 2016. The event brought together tour operators, travel agents, tour suppliers, DMOs and faith leaders from around the world to help them grow their faith-based travel programs. The numerous networking events and educational sessions were designed to help them plan and develop innovative and exciting faith-based travel programs for groups, from pilgrimages and leisure tours to mission trips and youth adventures.

Faith Travel Association is the premier association connecting faith-based travel professionals, destinations and organizations worldwide. For more information about Faith Travel Association, please visit faithtravelassociation.com.