



MATT ROURKE/Associated Press

The six-sided sanctuary represents the cupped hands of God.

WRIGHT SYNAGOGUE OPENS FOR TOURS

Philadelphia area site his only Jewish house of worship

By KATHY MATHESON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ELKINS PARK, Pa. — Did you hear the one about the rabbi and the architect?

Few people have. Which is why the members of Beth Shalom — who worship in the only synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright — are stepping forward to tell the story of how their landmark spiritual home was built.

Described as a symbolic Mt. Sinai made of concrete, steel and glass, the iconic building near Philadelphia somehow never received the attention of more famous Wright designs. But new public visiting hours might change that.

"It should be better known," said Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the New Yorker magazine. "The space itself is just magnificent. It's exhilarating. Everything just soars."

The synagogue marks its 50th anniversary this year by establishing a visitors center that will be open three days a week. Previously, appointments were required to see Beth Shalom, although walk-ins sometimes got impromptu tours if a guide happened to be in the building.

FROM THE OUTSIDE, the pyramid-like roof rises more than 100 feet above the sanctuary. The "shingles" are really panels of corrugated wireglass and fiberglass that filter natural light into the building during the day; at night, the illuminated structure is an ethereal, almost otherworldly sight for motorists driving by.

If you go

Beth Shalom Synagogue: 8231 Old York Road, Elkins Park, Pa., just outside Philadelphia.

Visitors center: Open 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Wed. and Thu. and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Sun., or by appointment. Groups of 10 or more by appointment only. Tours are free to Preservation Foundation members. For nonmembers, \$10; \$8 students, seniors. Under 10 free.

Details: www.bethsholompreservation.org, 215-887-1342, ext. 106.

The six-sided sanctuary represents the cupped hands of God. A multicolored Plexiglas chandelier — Wright called it a "light basket" — is suspended above the nearly 1,100 seats, most of them original. Wright also designed the eternal light over the ark, where the Torah scrolls are kept.

"The synagogue lives and breathes; it moves with quiet grace and charm; its lights and shadows continually change with the coming of the sun and the passing of a cloud," wrote Mortimer J. Cohen, the rabbi who commissioned the building. "Under the moon it is a silver tower. Sun-touched, it is a golden beacon of brilliant light."

COHEN SOUGHT out Wright in 1953, and the unique synagogue design emerged from a combination of Cohen's sketches and a long-shelved Wright design for a "steel cathedral." But construction and financial problems — mostly stemming from the unorthodox design — plagued the project. It was finally finished in 1959, just a few months after Wright's death at age 91. Cohen died in 1972.

The Conservative congregation never sought to promote the building, perhaps because it is an active house of worship and not a museum, said past president Herbert Sachs. But a few years ago, as the synagogue sought National Historic Landmark status, Sachs began to grasp the growing need for regular upkeep and realized the congregation might one day need public help.

THE SYNAGOGUE began work on the visitors center around the time it earned landmark designation in 2007. The center is a converted multipurpose room that was part of Wright's original design.

The exhibits feature excerpts of years-long correspondence between the rabbi and the architect, timelines, sketches, oral histories of current synagogue members and a documentary. A gift shop offers souvenirs.

Preservation director Emily Cooperman expects tourism to increase with the new public hours; in recent years, about 5,000 tourists visited annually, most on bus tours, she said.

"That congregation is the custodian of one of the great treasures of American architecture," Goldberger said, "and it's great that they want to share it with more people."

'Pure Michigan' could be purely a memory

"Pure Michigan," we hardly knew ye.

The ax fell on the state's popular national tourism campaign Oct. 30. That's when Travel Michigan's \$30-million annual budget was allowed to lapse back to a measly \$5.4 million for 2010.

Now, its entire winter national ad campaign is scrapped.

And unless new sources of funding can be found by January, "Pure Michigan" will fade away.

THE TOP, THEN DROPPED

Like many sad things in our state, the story of "Pure Michigan" is cruelly ironic.

The wildly popular campaign with its wistful music, heart-tugging images and narration by actor Tim Allen recently



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was named one of the top travel advertising campaigns of all time — right up there with "Virginia Is for Lovers" and "What Happens Here Stays Here" in Las Vegas.

Invented in 2007, "Pure Michigan" is credited with keeping Michigan tourism afloat in hard times.

Tourists took 93.9 million trips in Michigan last year, spending \$16.3 billion. That's down from 2007 — but without "Pure Michigan" boosting our collective morale and tourism, it likely would have been worse.

LETTER CAMPAIGN FAILED

In September, I wrote a column asking readers to press legislators to save "Pure Michigan." Many of you responded. But it wasn't enough.

The pleas of the state's third largest industry were shoved to the side, consid-

ered not quite dire enough, a comparative luxury item.

This month, tourism officials are pushing an alternative plan to raise \$40 million in annual revenue through the redirection of current tourism sales and use taxes.

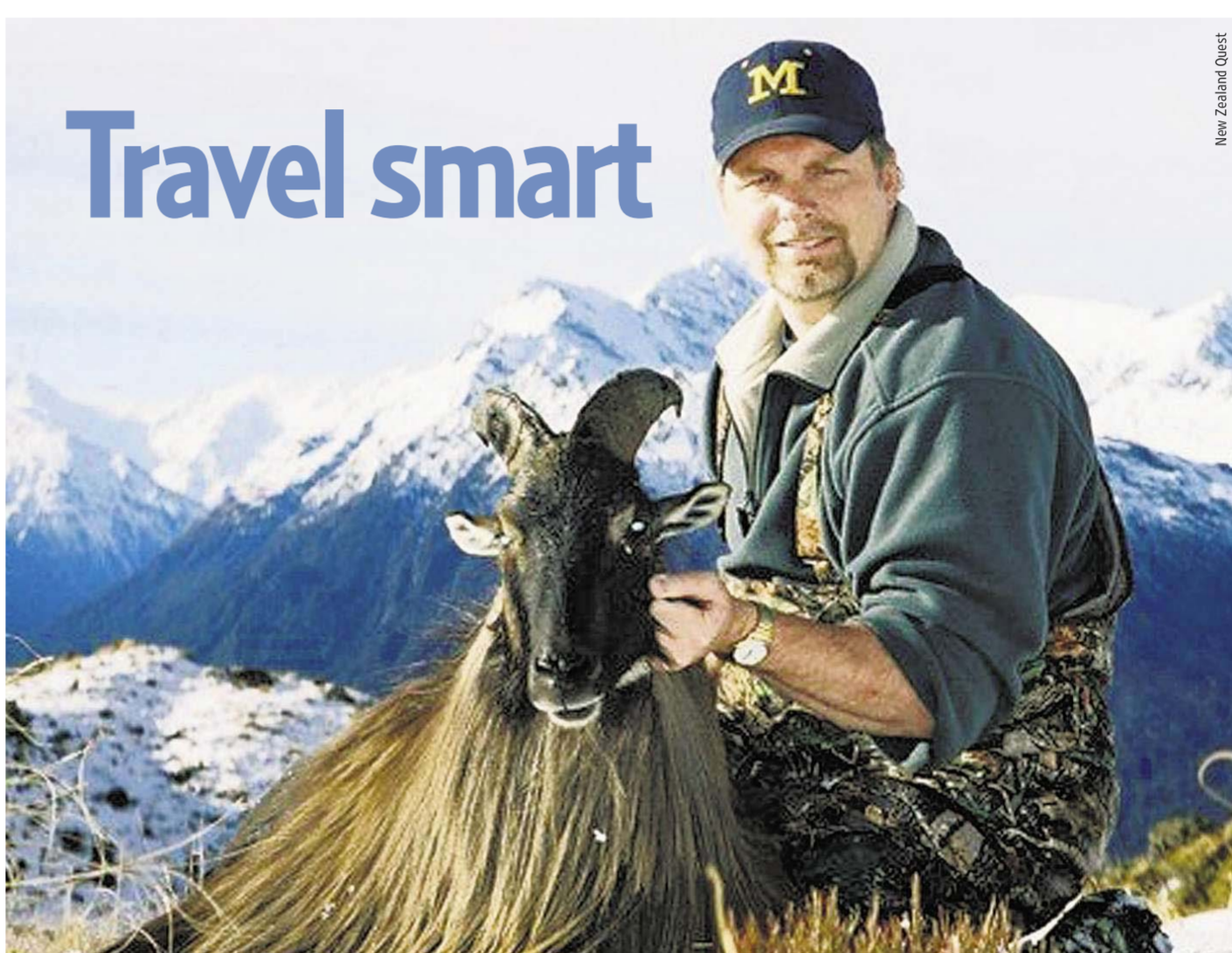
So please, write to your dysfunctional legislator once again. Make the point that "Pure Michigan" and our tourism industry can't be allowed to die. They have to do something.

Meanwhile, you can view a winter "Pure Michigan" video spot at www.michigan.org.

Cue the music. Cue Tim Allen. Cue the images of skiers and frozen ponds and all that pretty winter stuff.

Too bad nobody in America will see it on TV.

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The Michigan native, who was raised in Fairbanks, Alaska, runs two tour companies, Alaskan Quest (www.alaskanquest.com) and New Zealand Quest (www.nzquest.com).

In Alaska, "I love to take people out and show them experiences — wilderness float trips, where you float hundreds of miles from any town. You hear the wolves howl. You fish and hike," he says. "Chasing the northern lights in winter, visiting native villages where they still have polar bears stretched out over their garages. ... My customers want to do exactly what their dreams are."

And in New Zealand? "It's like taking Alaska and Hawaii and putting them together," he says. "Rain forests with glaciers in them. Volcanoes. Personal, private beaches. We catch lobsters as big as cats. There's world-class hunting — red stag, the tahr from Asia. It's quite magical."

The cost for a four-day trip from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay is about \$1,300. Hunting wild red stag in New Zealand? About \$7,000. Custom trips are individually priced and limited only by your dreams. Call Kaiser at 269-683-7692.

Kaiser's most interesting customer was a woman whose husband died before they could take their dream trip to Alaska.

"She took her husband's wedding ring, came to Alaska, and we climbed up in the middle of winter from the Brooks Range, and it was 50 below," he says. "When I looked up, there was a rainbow coming down from the ice crystals. And she had tears in her eyes. And she threw the ring."

— ELLEN CREAGER

Cool travel Web site

www.mdscski.org

What: Connects you to 26 ski clubs in southeastern Michigan, Ohio and Canada and the ski trips they sponsor.

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