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BBYO expands travel programs

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Traveling through BBYO no longer necessarily implies a trip to Israel. Over the last several years, the organization has expanded its travel program, Passport to the World, which now includes experiences in Europe, China and Central America.

Lane Schlessel, director of BBYO's Passport to the World, said that these changes have occurred "to give kids the option to see other Jewish places."

Students are provided the opportunity to see Jewish communities in the areas that they visit and are given the option of flying to Israel for three weeks after touring other countries.

Schlessel said BBYO offers a number of three-week Israel programs throughout the summer to accommodate teens that have various commitments while school is out, such as jobs, family vacations and preparing for college.

Andrew Cohen, 17, was one of 27 Phoenix-area teens to take part in one of BBYO's travel programs this summer. He left on June 22, spending a week touring Budapest, Vienna, Bratislava and Prague before a month-long journey to Israel that included the three-week BBYO program and an additional weeklong stay at a kibbutz. He returned home July 28.

"It's where everything started," said Cohen, explaining why he wanted to go to Israel. "It's where history is. The land has been fought over for centuries. The Temple is there. It's the Jewish homeland."

Cohen said that of all the cultural differences, the difference between Middle Eastern and American food is what shocked him the most.

He also said his most memorable experience was visiting the Western Wall, which he did both on a Tuesday and during Shabbat. He described the men's side of the Kotel during the Sabbath as a sea of black, because of all the Orthodox, sprinkled with the random colors of less observant Jews.

"We went to an overlook and you could see everything, and I was awestruck," he said.

For more information on BBYO or BBYO's traveling programs, contact Steven Baker at 480-634-4900, ext. 1127, or sbaker@bbyo.org.