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Tourism Takes Off in Kurdistan

BY TRACEY SHELTON

ERBIL: When it comes to dream destinations, Iraq is unlikely to rate too high on the list for the average western family holiday, but with a significant jump last year in the number of foreign visitors to the semiautonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, organized tour groups have begun to see a potential marketing value in "the other Iraq".



For some years, the relative stability in Iraq's North, in comparison to the troubled South of the country, has attracted businessmen and investors eager to break new ground and cash in on the expanding economy of the region.

Now, with foreign tourist numbers leaping to 132,541 last year, a 146% increase within two years according to figures released by the Ministry of Tourism, International tour companies are already making plans to exploit the appeal the mountainous beauty and local hospitality holds to Western travelers.

"I think tourism in Kurdistan is really in its infancy but see great potential for things here," said Shannon Skerritt, co-founder of Kurdistan Adventures, a tour company solely working within Iraqi Kurdistan that opened its doors in Sulaimani earlier this year.

Skerritt said tourists from the west are drawn to areas that "haven't been spoiled yet by mass tourism".

"I really get the sense that they are coming to see first hand for themselves what Kurdistan is about in contrast to what we all know and see constantly [through news media] about Iraq. I guess they want to be some of the first to see this," he added.

In 2007, the majority of foreign tourists to Iraqi Kurdistan came from within the region, Iranians making up a significant proportion, according to a Euromonitor International report released last June.

Since then tourists from Europe, Australia, and America have slowly been on the increase, according to the report, but until now this group has mostly comprised of young adventurous backpackers. With package tours now on offer western tourism is beginning to diversify.

73-year-old Patricia Boyer, a sports and health teacher from the USA, took a 10-day guided tour with Kurdistan Adventures last month.

"[Kurdistan] represents the past, which is what appeals to me," she said adding the highlight for her was both the scenery and the locals. "I greatly admire the strong identity & pride of the Iraqi Kurdish people."

Boyer says having a guided tour is what made her visit possible.

"The infrastructure isn't developed for tourism on your own. You would need to take expensive taxis and deal with the language in order to learn about the country," she said.

Euromonitor International estimates tourism numbers in Kurdistan will continue to grow by around 22 percent annually over the next three years. Referring to numerous development plans, tourism related trade fairs and the renovation of Kurdistan's two main airports, the report said the region is "clearly emerging as a safe haven and an attractive destination for foreign investment, and for growth in tourism."

In addition to the nine carriers already offering flights to the region, German carrier Lufthansa recently commenced flights to Erbil, and Emirates based Etihad Airways announced plans for regular flights beginning next month.

New hotel and shopping mall construction sites are also beginning to spring up in Erbil with the first international hotel chain set to

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enter the market with the 5-star Rotana Hotel due to open it's doors in September.

Thomes Touma, general manager of Rotana Erbil, currently under construction, believes there is already a huge demand for quality hotel services in the city and with tourism gradually opening up in the area there is a great potential for future growth.

"This is a very old civilization with many places of cultural interest," he said. "However, tourism is very much related to security. There is a small amount of people coming for leisure but this is still a small number. With increased security, better facilities, improved hotels, this will definitely open up in the future."

Touma is confident that the opening of Kurdistan's first international standard 5-star facility will pave the way for Erbil's business and tourism expansion, setting higher service standards in the region and sparking new investment interests in the area.

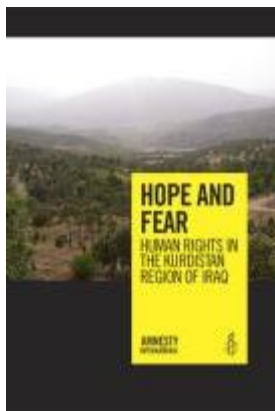
Samir Abdulla, Minister of Municipality and Tourism for Kurdistan, said as tourism expands it is economically benefiting the region both directly through tourism revenue and by increasing investment opportunities and business interests.

"The expansion of tourism sends a message to the world that Kurdistan Region is different and unlike the rest of Iraq," he told Rudaw via email. "It Defines Kurdish identity and culture to Western countries and visitors."

The minister further commented that an increase in tourism would allow Kurdish citizens to meet western people and learn to embrace foreign cultures.

Likewise, Skerritt feels their philosophy of getting tourists out there amongst the people rather than "sitting on a bus waiting of photo ops" will prove to be a winning combination for Kurdistan Adventures in the coming years.

"The security situation here is very good, it's very authentic and friendly, the prices are reasonable and hey - you can get a beer as well! I believe the KRG are starting to see this vision for themselves, but it's only the beginning."



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