

The 41 Places to Go in 2011



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From the beaches of Mexico to the wilds of Kurdistan, the places on this year's list take you to the end of the world and back.

34. Iraqi Kurdistan

Safety, history and a warm welcome in a stable corner of Iraq.

As United States forces withdraw from Iraq, a handful of intrepid travel companies are offering trips to the semiautonomous Kurdish region in the north, which has enjoyed relative safety and stability in recent years.

Geographic Expeditions is conducting a 21-day tour to Kurdistan and Eastern Turkey, about half of it spent exploring Kurdistan along the Hamilton Road, which connects strategic gorges, and the other half devoted to the Anatolia region of Turkey. Distant Horizons has been taking small groups of Americans to Kurdistan twice a year since 2008, has a trip this spring, *The Changing Face of Iraqi Kurdistan*, which will explore Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah. And last April, after a 20-year break, Lufthansa resumed service from Frankfurt to Erbil, the Kurdish capital and fourth-largest city in Iraq.

While the State Department continues to warn American tourists to avoid Iraq entirely, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office says the Kurdistan region is an exception. "The risk of terrorism in the Kurdistan Regional Government-controlled provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah is markedly and statistically lower than in other parts of Iraq," states its Web site.

Visitors can tour significant cultural landmarks like Erbil's citadel, which dates to the Assyrian empire, and the site of the Battle of Gaugamela, which ended in the defeat of the Persian king Darius III by Alexander the Great and led to the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. The biggest lure is the opportunity for authentic cultural encounters. "Authenticity is something that can be lost so quickly as development occurs," said Janet Moore, of Distant Horizons.

— MICHELLE HIGGINS