

# Tourism in Iraq:

## A time for optimism

> Karen Dabrowska

“The cradle of ancient civilization” owns sites that do not belong to Iraq alone but to the whole world, Bahaa Mayah, a ministerial adviser at the State Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, emphasised.



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Once the violence subsides Iraq can start cashing in on its ruins and ancient, archaeological sites. There are 10,000 sites scattered all around modern Babylon. They need protection from looters but saving the cradle of civilisation from an early grave has not been a priority for either the Iraqi government or the coalition forces.

There are also the mountains of Kurdistan, the 'alps of the Middle East' a traditional place of refuge from the heat of the plains. Animals and birds are once again returning to the re-flooded marshlands where the Marsh Arabs are eager to welcome visitors

to their traditional houses of reeds and promote eco-tourism.

“Despite the current security situation we can attract a few tourists by diversifying into religious tourism, different from seasonal tourism in Saudi Arabia which depends on the Hajj and Umrah. We seek year-round tourism that operates internally and externally”, Mayah said.

There could be 200 million Shiites wanting to visit Iraq on pilgrimage. In addition to the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala, the country has numerous Shia shrines. The Imam Ali International Airport, currently under



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construction on the eastern side of Najaf, will make a positive contribution to the growing numbers of visitors.

“Religious tourism can be a priority. It will also improve security in the country, while containing the perpetrators of violence,” Mayah believes. Regardless of security challenges, the tourism advisor is convinced the country can generate opportunities and dedicate land to investment. However he said, “We lack services, hotels and restaurants, all ravaged by war today. Once peace is achieved, we can develop tourism through archaeological, religious and cultural diversification. Religious tourism will not only cater to Shiites and Sunnis since Iraq has a variety of holy sites Islamic, Christian and Judaic”.

His enthusiasm for the rapid promotion of Iraq's fledgling tourist industry is shared by veteran tour operator Geoff Hann who led ▶

the first, and only, foreign tourist group to visit the country after the change in 2003.

“Tourism in its many forms can be ready quickly if not immediately, once security is established. The clearing of the harbors around Basra is an invitation for cruise ships to stop and let their clients shop in the bazaars and make excursions to Ur, for example. Pilgrim traffic from the Gulf and Iran will grow immensely once shipping is made safer. Ancient Iraq, both north and south, offers endless opportunities for ancient and classical tours. Yes, there has been extensive looting, and yes much has been destroyed, some sadly for ever, but the major sites of Iraq are still extant. Much will need to be done of course, but all is not lost. The archaeological world is waiting for the opportunity to apply modern techniques to the established places and look for the lost sites of antiquity. The great Museum of Baghdad, once totally secure and aided by the world’s art community, will become a focus for all lovers of ancient history.

“We have so much to look forward to. This is not only Iraq’s heritage, but the heritage of mankind and it will be preserved. The mountains of Kurdistan Iraq beckon the adventurous. Side by side with these developments is the opportunity to rebuild the hotels and restaurants, and small farmers will also develop their own accommodation markets. Tourism employs large numbers throughout the world, and for a few years a boom in building, allied industries and of course labour will take place.

“I personally believe that we should all have courage, hold our collective nerves, look for the good news and continue to strive for progress. The future is bright for Iraq – the people are brave, courageous and willing to work hard if they can see a future that is more than mere survival. They have a wonderful heritage that we all share”, Hann concluded.

He co-authored a book *Iraq: Then And Now* - a guide to the country and its people, with freelance journalist Karen Dabrowska. Although not a travel guide in the strict sense of the word the book, published on May 1st, has a travel appendix which focuses on Iraqi Kurdistan. A section on the A-Z of archaeological sites provides detailed

descriptions of Agargouf, Babylon, Ashur, Borsippa, Ctesiphon, Erbil, Eridu, Khorsabad, Hatra, Kish, Larsa, Lagash, Nimrud, Nineveh, Nippur, Al'Ukhaidir, Tell Harmal, Ur and Uruk. Rather than cursing the darkness, we hope this

book will be a candle that sheds light on the Iraq of today and looks forward to a future of development and positive interaction between the people of Iraq and their brothers and sisters in the West. ■



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