

# VACATION IN IRAQ? UHM...



Iraq is a war torn country where sectarian violence and terrorist acts are quite common. One would say it is definitely not a place where to go for vacation. Nevertheless, not everybody thinks so. The country has lost many of its sights and many of its museums have been destroyed or looted. There are, however, still places worth seeing.

Kurds in the northern part of Iraq have their own Kurdistan Regional Government, also their own language, flag and national anthem. Approximately 5.5 million people live within this territory. This autonomous, federally recognized political, ethnic and economic region wants to become kind of Dubai and struggle to lure tourists.

Unlike the rest of Iraq, Kurdistan is a relatively safe region. Even here, however, a tourist will not avoid signs of war. There are numerous checkpoints as well as armed guards. Despite that, the region may succeed in gaining the attention of international tourists.

Iraq Kurdistan has a rich history. Tourists may for example visit the site of the famous Battle of Gaugamela where Alexander the Great of Macedonia defeated Darius III of Persia. Among other tourism attractions belongs an extensive aqueduct at Khanis. Famous is also the Shanidar Cave where skeletons of Neanderthals were excavated. The region also offers wonderful opportunities for hikers as it has beautiful mountains.

There are already several agencies that organize tours in this part of Iraq. A Paris-based agency Terre Entiere has begun organizing trips in here this year and there is also the California-based travel agency Distant Horizons that organizes 12-day cultural tours at around \$5,860 a person. It is possible to fly directly to Erbil, Kurdistan's capital city with Austrian Airlines from Vienna. In Erbil visitors may admire ancient buildings and visit local museums.

Though the region's tourism industry is somehow growing, of course it is still not a high-end destination. The country is very dangerous and the tourism infrastructure may naturally not meet all the expected standards.

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