

Re: OT: US BLEW IT IN IRAQ– Wall Street Journal Reporter Finds

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Fred Bloggs <nospam@nospam.com> wrote in message news:<41693A8A.2060009@nospam.com>...

> *From Baghdad*

> *A Wall Street Journal Reporter's E-Mail to Friends*

>

> *by Farnaz Fassih*

I thought you said the WSJ should stick to business news?

Here is an actual article by Fassih:

By FARNAZ FASSIHI

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

September 27, 2004; Page A17

BAGHDAD, Iraq -- Amid the protracted hostilities here, air travel remains mostly off-limits to the public as mortars and rockets continue to pummel the airport. Ground travel, too, is a dicey proposition for civilians and soldiers alike, with roadside explosives being just one among many deadly dangers.

And yet, Iraqis are braving these obstacles and more for respites from the chaos and uncertainty of daily life: A burgeoning tourist industry is taking root, spurred by the very violence that is making travel so perilous and fed by the newfound freedom to leave at will.

Bright yellow banners hanging at street corners throughout Baghdad flap in the wind, offering Iraqis a chance to explore Syria, visit Egypt for a swim in the Red Sea, tour the Shiite Muslim shrines of Iran or savor the relative calm of their own nation's Kurdish north via weekend getaways. More attractive than what any of these destinations boast is simply the chance to leave their troubles behind.

For the first time in more than two decades, the travel business is booming here. Nearly one hundred new travel agencies have opened in the past year, competing to offer package deals to a rapidly

increasing number of tourists.

"The nicest thing about traveling is psychological relief," says Haidar Yasser, the 30-year-old owner of Al-Hani travel agency. "Tourists say they want to go to a place that is safe, beautiful and quiet and forget about this mess for a few days."

Syria ranks as the No. 1 destination — a 10-day package including transportation, hotel and guided tours costs about \$250. The Kurdish north, with its cool weather, green mountains, rivers and waterfalls, is a second favorite spot.

On a recent early morning at the crack of dawn, several dozen Iraqi families gathered at a street corner waiting for the tour bus from Al-Hani agency to arrive. Most passengers were heading to Syria, but a dozen planned to fly on to Egypt.

The hurdles for travelers are considerable. The only commercial flight available to the public is a chartered Royal Jordanian flight that costs \$600 for a one-way trip to Amman, Jordan. Besides bombs, road travel carries the risk of highway robbery, kidnapping and the crossfire of raging battles. A few weeks ago, one of the agency's buses en route to Irbil was shot up, injuring a driver and his assistant and forcing the tour to return to Baghdad.

But the pack of tourists seems undaunted. To take the passengers' minds off the risks, a young tour leader on the Al-Hani bus doubles as a showman for the duration of the drive. He sings popular Arabic songs, dances, tells jokes and engages the crowd in games such as bingo.

In about eight hours, the bus will reach Damascus, and "it will be all over. We can relax and do every thing we can't do in Iraq, like have fun and not worry," says Sara Bazaaz, a giddy 17-year-old who is leaving Iraq for the first time in her life. Her parents have traveled to Europe, Asia and the Middle East but haven't left the country since 1980. "Iraq was safe before, but like a prison," says Shameel Bazaaz, a 52-year-old mechanical engineer.

Aside from the desire to flee the mayhem, Iraqis have wanderlust. For the first time in nearly 25 years, they are allowed to leave the country without needing authorization. Saddam Hussein's regime banned traveling abroad unless one had special government permission — and it cost the equivalent of about \$200, which most Iraqis couldn't afford.

After the Persian Gulf War ended in 1991, the northern parts of Iraq were protected by the United Nations and the U.S., permitting the Kurdish-populated area to enjoy autonomous rule. Because of its contrasting nature and weather from the rest of the country, the north always had been a popular tourist destination, but this new invisible

border put an end to free travel between the Arabs and Kurds.

As a result, the business of travel agencies slowly diminished over the years. Many of the 220 registered agencies went out of business or were forced to issue only domestic airline tickets and cater to a government quota of six Iranian pilgrim groups a year. Internet and e-mail access wasn't widespread, and travel agents scarcely had contact with their outside counterparts.

Mr. Yasser, who has been in the business since 1989, says the difference between now and before the war is "like night and day" for the travel industry. Shortly after the invasion in April 2003, he drove up to Kurdistan and screened its tourist potential. He secured deals and discounts with several hotels in Irbil, Suliamanieh and Dohuk, and started one of the first tour groups to the north. By the end of last summer, clients began to inquire about traveling abroad; Mr. Yasser bought a computer, connected it to the Internet, opened an e-mail account and discovered he could make deals with tour agencies in neighboring countries.

"They are astonished to hear we are operating a tourism business in Iraq," he says of his counterparts. "They all feel bad for what is happening here and go out of their way to give us discounts and help us in every way."