



## UK Cash Helps Boost Iraq Tourism

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(BBC) -- Pack your sunglasses, swimsuit and don't forget your flak jacket - the new holiday hotspot could be Iraq if the British government has its way.

The Department for International Development has pledged £25,000 to help promote tourism to the ravaged country.

Sightseeing tours would include the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, dating back to 3,000 BC, and marshlands thought to be the location of the Garden of Eden.

But the Foreign Office warns against "all but essential" travel to Iraq.

Iraq was never a popular holiday destination under Saddam Hussein, but it did draw people to sites of ancient civilisations such as Babylon and Ur, the Shia Muslim holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala, and even Basra - regarded by some as the Venice of the East with its lush gardens and lagoons.

The capital, Baghdad, is packed with ancient bazaars, restaurants, museums, palaces, mosques and shrines.

International Development Secretary Hilary Benn, who gave details of the aid in a Commons answer, said it was part of a "wider plan of development assistance".

But since US-led forces ousted Saddam in April 2003, most tourists have been pilgrims from neighbouring Iran.

A UK tourist company, Hinterland Travel, embarked on the first post-war tour of Iraq last September.

But most people have been deterred by television pictures of foreigners held hostage and the carnage caused by suicide bombings.

However, these images have not deterred British travel operator Don Lucey, who is planning a tour of Iraq in October.

Mr Lucey, a former soldier and policeman who worked for the Ministry of Defence in Iraq as a civilian in 2003, is even taking his 16-year-old daughter along on the trip.

He told BBC News Online: "Iraq is a nice place with nice people, despite all the terrorist activities."

He said his group would be staying in a four-star hotel and would visit some of the historical sites, "but not Basra, it's the pits. I don't know why the government is advocating Basra as a tourist spot."

He added: "Iraq has a lot to offer, a lot of history. It's not all war and people killing each other. Obviously terrorists scare a lot of people, but people like myself want to prove that they are not in control."

### Insurance

Mr Lucey, whose company Bann Tours is based in Swindon, Wiltshire, said tourism in Iraq had to start somewhere and he is determined to be a catalyst.

The 10-day trip costs £1,200 per person. Insurance increases the price by another £500.

But Mr Lucey does not think the £25,000 in government aid is a good idea.

"They would be better spending money on the war zones we already have in the UK, rather than Iraq," he said.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman said the department discouraged "all but essential travel" to Iraq.

She added: "I personally would not consider going to Iraq on holiday as essential, but other people might. I imagine only the most hardy

traveller would want to go there."

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