

TRAVEL

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Backpackers beware

Despite a fledgling tourism boom, going off the beaten path in Kurdistan is a highly risky endeavor, as three Americans discovered last week

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AP, SULAIMANIYAH, IRAQ



Above: The Iran-Iraq border near Sulaimaniyah, 260km northeast of Baghdad, where three American hikers disappeared on July 31.

Right: Foreign and local tourists frolic in the river at Dokan Resort, near Sulaimaniyah.

PHOTOS: AP AND NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

In Iraq's Kurdish region where three American hikers fell into Iranian custody, the attractions for intrepid hikers and travelers are many. Visitors shop for crystal glasses and enjoy long walks in lush mountain resorts renowned for their pistachio groves.

Safety is a big selling point — tourism promoters boast not a single foreigner has been killed or kidnapped since 2003.

Still, in a region without a well-marked border, going off the beaten path in Kurdistan is very risky — as the three Americans discovered after they apparently wandered down the wrong side of a mountain last week and were taken into custody by Iranian border guards. Other than a frantic call to one of their friends, they haven't been heard from since.

The three — Shane Bauer, Sarah Shourd and Joshua Fattal — were under arrest in Iran on Tuesday for illegally entering the country, and an Iranian lawmaker said that authorities were deciding whether to accuse them of spying. The US State Department rejected the allegation, and relatives and Kurdish officials said they were merely hikers who got lost. The case is the latest source of friction with Washington at a time of political crisis in Iran.

Kurdish tourism officials are trying to keep the incident from drying up a budding business with the West.

"The detention of the three American citizens by the Iranian border forces will not affect our tourism activity because they came alone and not within a tourist group," said Kenaan Bahaudden, the director of the media office in the Kurdistan tourism ministry. "If they would have been with us, they would have been safer."

Kurdish police say the three went hiking without interpreters or bodyguards and were warned not to get too close to the border.

The tranquil mountains of the northern Iraq are one of the country's best-kept secrets, an oasis of relative security.

Kurdistan, about the size of Maryland and home to nearly 3.8 million people, is largely autonomous and has escaped much of Iraq's sectarian violence.

Although the region's three provinces are at odds with the central government over issues involving land and oil, Baghdad has encouraged tourism here to build trust between the majority Arabs and minority Kurds.

Iraqis are now vacationing in the Kurdish region in record numbers. More than 23,000 Iraqis headed north this summer, up from merely 3,700 last year, tourism officials say.

It is a relatively inexpensive getaway: A week in a modest hotel, with bus fare, costs about US\$160 per person, or one-third an average monthly salary.

In Saddam Hussein's days, most Iraqis were barred from traveling abroad — and Kurdistan was largely off-limits too. The Kurds separated from the rest of Iraq after rising up against Saddam in 1991, aided by a US-British no-fly zone that helped keep the dictator at bay.

After the US-led coalition ousted Saddam in 2003, Kurds eased border controls. That led to an initial surge of Arab tourism that year. But Kurds closed the gates again in February 2004 after suicide bombers killed 109 people at Kurdish party offices.

The Kurds have gradually eased restrictions though visitors are still carefully screened. Kurdish troops board buses carrying Iraqi Arabs at checkpoints, and compare names with lists sent ahead by the travel agents, travelers say.

Today the area is safe enough to entice a small but increasing number of Western tourists as well. Devoted travelers even share information on a blog called Backpacking Iraqi Kurdistan, which locates cheap hotels and rates a German-style bar in the regional capital, Irbil.

"It's worth wandering around the deserted streets," the blog says, "and you should not miss out on its Kurdish Textile Museum, a fantastic witness to Kurdish culture and tradition."

It is possible to fly into Kurdistan from several

cities in the Middle East and Europe. For example, direct flights from Munich to Sulaimaniyah, one of the Kurdish region's biggest cities, are available from Dokan Air, which calls itself a young but "dedicated" airline and serves the Dokan Resort area with its vistas of lakes and mountains.

Bahaudden, of the tourism ministry, said fewer than 100 Americans joined official tours here this year, most of them young people.

That is still more than in the rest of Iraq, which in March held its first officially sanctioned tour for Westerners since 2003. Four men and four women from Britain, the US and Canada took part.

The US State Department has a travel advisory out for all of Iraq and warns against nonessential trips.

"While the security environment has shown significant improvement over the past year, Iraq remains dangerous and unpredictable," it notes, adding that security in the Kurdish regions has improved but "violence persists and conditions could deteriorate quickly."

Kurdish immigration officials generally allow Americans to enter with a visa granted at the airports in major cities such as Irbil and Sulaimaniyah. The visas are good only in Kurdistan, and officials urge all visitors to register with the nearest US Embassy or consulate.

The three detained Americans came into the Kurdish area from Turkey on July 28, and the next day went to Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, spending a night there before moving on to Sulaimaniyah by bus. On July 30, they rented a cabin at Iraq-Iran border resort of Ahmed Awaa, according to a local security official.

From there on, accounts are sketchy.

Camping equipment and two backpacks apparently belonging to the Americans were found in the area and it seemed they were hiking above a waterfall when they accidentally crossed the border, a Kurdish security official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to release the information.

Shortly before their capture, the three contacted a fourth member of their group — Shon Meckfessel, a PhD student in linguistics — to say they had entered Iran by mistake and were surrounded by troops, the official said. Meckfessel stayed behind in Sulaimaniyah that day because he had a cold.

On the Net: backpackiraq.blogspot.com



To go, or not to go?

THE REGION

» The self-ruled Kurdish area of Iraq makes up the northern part of the country and has borders with Iran, Syria and Turkey. It occupies an area about the size of Maryland and is home to nearly 3.8 million people. Its capital is Irbil, locally known as Hawler. The Irbil citadel is the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the world, having been peopled since 6,000 BC.

TRAVEL WARNING

» The US State Department says Kurdistan is safer than much of Iraq, but "conditions could deteriorate quickly." Kurdish immigration officials allow Americans to enter with a visa granted at the airports. Officials urge all visitors to register with the nearest US Embassy or consulate.

POLITICAL TENSION

» The minority Kurds and the majority Arab Iraqis have long been locked in a dispute over oil resources and territory. Control of the city of Kirkuk is disputed and travel there is strongly discouraged.

SOURCE: AP