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## Promoting a Vision of Tourist Bliss in Baghdad's Dusty Rubble

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BAGHDAD — Humoud Yakobi gazes at the rubble-strewn parking lot, the maze of blast walls and the clusters of dusty palm trees on the island around him and sees hotels, restaurants and shopping malls, with throngs of people enjoying refreshments by the swimming pool or playing a round of golf.

"I always imagine it as some kind of heaven," he said.

Mr. Yakobi, the chairman of [Iraq's](#) Board of Tourism, is charged with attracting foreign visitors to his beleaguered country. Jazirat A'aras, an island in the Tigris that is just across from the fortified Green Zone and the new American Embassy, is central to his plans. He is seeking investors who might want to spend \$2.5 billion to \$4.5 billion to build on the island, which was a honeymoon resort before it was bombed and looted in 2003 and then taken over by the Americans for use as a construction yard for the new embassy.

As Mr. Yakobi and his colleagues envision it, the development would include "a six-star hotel," spas, a yacht club, an amusement park, a shopping center and luxury villas, built in the architectural style of the Ottoman Empire-era buildings in Old Baghdad. The complex would also have an 18-hole golf course, the "Tigris Woods Golf and Country Club," as it is called in preliminary sketches prepared by the Tourism Board.

Some might argue that Mr. Yakobi's vision is premature, if not absurd. Despite a drop in violence in Baghdad in recent months, Mr. Yakobi still cannot leave his office on Haifa Street without a convoy of armored cars and bodyguards. During an hourlong interview at his office recently, the lights blinked off, then on again, as the building's generator kicked in, an event repeated many times a day throughout Iraq. It was not so long ago that American forces sometimes had to escort the workers at the Tourism Board home, shielding them from the firefights in the street.

Mr. Yakobi, however, is by his own description an optimist, and he says he has some reason to believe that Iraq, known for its holy sites and antiquities, will once again be a tourist mecca.

"Tourism depends on political stability more than security," he said, adding that he believed the security situation would continue to improve. "Tourists want entertainment, rest, relaxation. If they find that in any place, they will come."

Capt. Thomas J. Karnowski, an enthusiastic Navy officer with the Civil Engineer Corps in the Green Zone, has been providing technical support to the Tourism Board on the island project.

"I look at the risk and say he who gets here first with the best idea gets the best opportunity," Captain Karnowski said recently as he led visitors on a tour of a jetty with a view of one of [Saddam Hussein's](#) eight

presidential homes across the Tigris.

Mr. Yakobi, 47, seems in some ways an unlikely candidate for the task he has been given. In his black suit and maroon checked tie, he looks far more like a bureaucrat than a visionary. Asked what he wakes up worrying about at night, he said, "I never wake up."

The tourism board, he said, will hold a weeklong conference in Baghdad in November to promote the island — which is a little more than a mile long by less than a mile wide — and other projects. Those include a hotel expected to open soon in the ancient city of Babylon in Babel Province, where cholera cases have recently been reported. He also has plans for a hotel, a sports complex and a medical center in the holy city of Najaf, and resorts in Anbar Province and the marshlands in the south.

The island development has no investors so far, though Mr. Yakobi believes the project might be two-thirds completed within five years. He said representatives from the tourism industry around the world had been invited to the conference, though it was unclear how many would attend.

"They will bring the message to all other countries that Iraq is secure," he said. "I am depending on them."

Hassan al-Fayadh, head of the tourism board's media relations department, was more skeptical.

"Western visitors are very sensitive to bombings and things like that," he said. "You can't achieve the tourism industry without security."

In fact, the State Department strongly warns Americans against travel to Iraq. "Despite recent security improvements, Iraq remains dangerous, volatile and unpredictable," its Web site says, noting that bombings, kidnappings and mortar fire are common and that "such attacks can occur at any time."

Still, even in Iraq's precarious state, tourism has not entirely vanished. Pilgrims from Iran, Pakistan, India and even Canada travel to the country's major religious shrines. Mr. Yakobi said their numbers had increased in the past year as large bombings and ground battles between militias and Iraqi and American forces had diminished.

He said about 1,500 Iranians arrived every day for religious tours that include three days in Najaf to visit the shrine of Imam Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, and four days in Karbala, the site of the gold-domed shrine of Imam Hussein, Imam Ali's son. Both shrines are revered by Shiite Muslims. The tours are supervised by the tourism board, a self-financed agency of the Iraqi government, and the visitors are provided with security, Mr. Yakobi said.

The autonomous Kurdish region in the north, where rapid development is taking place and violence is far lower, also attracts travelers, though most go there for business. Between meetings, they visit Erbil's citadel and the Kurdish Textile Museum, dine at restaurants in Sulaimaniya and sometimes venture into the mountainous countryside.

Distant Horizons, a travel company based in Long Beach, Calif., has begun offering excursions to the Kurdish region.

“We operated our first trip in June of this year (which went out full with 18 travelers and a wait list) and will be offering several departures in 2009,” Janet Moore, a spokeswoman for the company, said in an e-mail message.

She said that although the Kurdish government was more prepared for such trips than she expected, “the concept of tourism is a very new one.”

Before the American invasion in 2003, Westerners wandering the capital with cameras were not an uncommon sight. A Bradt travel guide to Iraq published in 2002 noted that “Iraqis tend to be very friendly, hospitable people, but most will not discuss politics or controversial topics.”

It suggests, among other expeditions, a day trip from Baghdad to see the shrine at Samarra, which was bombed in 2006, setting off a wave of sectarian violence that brought Iraq to the brink of civil war; a visit to the Christian churches in Mosul, now emptied of most of their worshipers; and a stroll down the streets of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, currently at the center of a struggle among Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens and other groups.

But if Mr. Yakobi has his way, the old days of tourism will soon return, and at least one intrepid traveler is ready for them.

Charles MacDonald, an adviser to a member of the provincial Parliament in Ontario, met Iraq's ambassador to Canada at a luncheon and decided to spend his vacation in Kurdistan. When he arrived, he said, Kurdish officials were astonished that he had come as a lone tourist, but they showed him the sights and arranged meetings with government leaders.

Mr. MacDonald, however, wanted to see more. So he hired a private security firm and set up a two-day trip to the Green Zone in Baghdad.

“This is modern history, and I wished to experience it first-hand,” he said.

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