

While Russians Queue, U.S. State Department Says Putin 'Only Tourist in Crimea'

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Marie Harf

A wisecrack from U.S. State Department deputy spokeswoman saying President Vladimir Putin is the only tourist to have visited Crimea this year conflicts with reports of millions of Russian tourists traveling to the Black Sea resort.

Asked during a daily briefing what she thought about Putin's visit to Crimea earlier this week, Marie Harf replied: "From what I hear, he's the only tourist that's actually gone there this summer."

Harf said she had been waiting to use the line ever since the start of the meeting, according to a transcript of her comments on the State Department website.

She then added, on a more serious note, that Crimea's "tourism industry has completely plummeted since the Russian invasion."

"Their economy is faltering because of it, which is a huge burden, actually, on Russia, who has annexed it," Harf said.

Her comments overlook reports of about 2 million people traveling to Crimea this year, according to the coastal peninsula's Tourism and Resorts Ministry, cited by Rossiiskaya Gazeta daily. The ministry said it expected the figure to reach 3 million by the end of the year.

The report has not been independently confirmed.

Last year, tourist inflow into Crimea — known for its warm sea temperatures and cheap prices, but shunned by some for its notoriously subpar Soviet customer service — stood at 5.9 million, the ministry said in late December, Segodnya.ua reported.

Russians made up about a third of last year's vacationers in Crimea, the remainder being accounted for by Ukrainians — most of whom have stayed clear of the region after Russia annexed it in March following a hasty referendum held under Russian supervision.

Crimea is not connected by land to Russia and is only accessible by plane or ferry. Some 2,300 vehicles were queuing up for the ferry as of Friday, constituting a 30-hour wait for those wanting to make the crossing, RIA Novosti reported.

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