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Russian Companies Launch Tours to War-Torn Syria

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Russian tour operators have begun selling organized tours into war-ravaged Syria despite government warnings for citizens to avoid the country, the Kommersant business daily reported Tuesday.

Syria has been wracked by eight years of conflict after anti-government protests in 2011 devolved into civil war. Russia launched a military campaign in 2015 to support its ally Damascus against both Syrian rebels and Islamic State militants.

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At least two Russian operators are selling organized tours to seven Syrian cities that start from the Lebanese capital of Beirut, Kommersant reported. One of the operators said it has sent 50 Russian tourists to Syria so far this year, while another only remarked that demand was low.

Eight-day tours with stops in Damascus, Aleppo, Palmyra and other cities cost between $1,600 and $1,950. Russians can obtain visas at the border for a $35 fee.

"There are three or four Syrian companies that receive special permits from the relevant authorities" to allow Russians into Syria, Middle East expert Grigory Leontiyev was quoted as saying.

"Solo tourists are turned away while trying to enter the country," Leontiyev added.

A Russian Foreign Ministry travel advisory urges citizens to avoid visiting Syria due to the threat of terrorist attacks. In a statement Tuesday, the Federal Tourism Agency advised Russians to refrain from traveling to Syria until conditions in the country normalize and recommended that Russian tour companies suspend their tours there.

The tour operators said that Russian travelers are avoiding the northwestern province of Idlib, Syria's last rebel stronghold.

Leontiyev estimates Syria's tourism potential at tens of thousands of people, with most of the interest coming from avid tourists and bloggers. Ordinary tourists are expected to consider traveling to the conflict-torn country in two to three years, Kommersant cited him as saying.

Three times more Russian nationals, 334 people, have visited Syria so far in 2019 than in 2018, FSB border agents were cited as saying.

Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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