

Speech by Mr Hubert Debbasch

On the occasion of the official opening of the Babel Tours company

Sunday 5 July 2009

Governor,

Ministers,

Consul General,

Mayor,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

My first visit to Iraqi Kurdistan took place barely one year ago. It was the beginning of summer and, like today, the temperatures tended to keep people indoors, when I decided to come to this country, that I am now beginning to understand. This country that I love more and more. This country where, if I may use the expression, I am beginning to take root: a few months ago I even obtained a resident's permit for Iraqi Kurdistan. I would even go so far as to say that I feel increasingly close to the inhabitants of the country.

Without falling into the trap of romanticism, I would say that my commitment to the land of Iraq is one of love and of passion. I came to see, based on a healthy curiosity and a desire to understand, and everything that I have seen, everything that I have understood – even though I am well aware that I still have almost everything to learn, beginning with the language of the country – everything that I have found here, gave me the desire to undertake, to build and to create.

My French company, Terre Entière, is a tour operator that enjoys a reputation for its cultural tours and pilgrimages. How could I wait any longer for Terre Entière to organise tours to this cradle of our cultures, this place where the faith of my fathers is so strong? I therefore knew somehow that I could never be disappointed when I came to Kurdistan and Iraq. I knew that my thirst for knowledge and human encounters would be slaked. But what I did not know, was that I would be embarking on a path leading to what we are celebrating today: the creation of a company, the creation of Babel Tours.

(...)

It goes without saying that each profession has its own rules, its own habits and its own secrets. It goes without saying that within a given profession, not everyone can offer the same level of skills. When I'm looking for a baker in Erbil or Ankawa, I don't go just anywhere, I know exactly where to find good bread! The same applies to the tourism profession. There are many tour operators, but not all the tours offered are of the same quality. We all work with the same raw materials, but the end product is never the same. Terre Entière is recognised for the quality of its work and I want to place this know-how at the service of Iraq and Kurdistan. The raw material that interests me in this country is of far greater value than mineral resources and, unlike oil for example, can never be depleted: I am talking of the history and culture of the land on which we stand today and which it is your privilege to inhabit. Many countries lacking in history are justifiably envious of you! With this past, we have everything we need to create a fine future together! With this past and the countless prestigious sites that bear witness to it, Babel Tours seems destined for happy days ahead, in the same way as the many travellers who will, I hope, come with us, with you, to discover the natural and historical sites of Iraq.

Babel Tours will be relying on the know-how of Terre Entière, a French company, but it is, and will of course remain an Iraqi company and its employees are all Iraqis. I am delighted to present Mr Rebwar Dawood who is the Chairman. When you talk to him, you will quickly understand that he is a Kurd and rightly proud to be one. Rebwar accompanied this famous Christmas in Iraq tour which made headlines around the world. In him, I rapidly saw someone on whom I could rely and the six months of work we have just accomplished together have proven that my confidence was well placed. He is assisted by Mr Ramiz Rahemo, who comes from Mosul. And I am honoured and proud that Mrs Narmen Ali, an archaeologist with a reputation both at home and abroad, has agreed to place her expertise at the service of Babel Tours. She helps us on a daily basis, not only to understand the known sites, but also to explore everything as yet unknown and still to be discovered in Iraq.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends, the first time I came here, I knew that the undertaking ahead would not be easy. I also quickly understood that if I wanted to help develop tourism in Iraq I would need patience, a lot of patience. But, as my colleagues and everyone else who knows me is aware, patience is something I don't have! It's my impatience and my enthusiasm that will help drive me through the hard times. It is your welcome, your goodwill and your cooperation that will enable us to make Babel Tours an enterprise totally dedicated to the development of Iraq and Kurdistan. I offer you all my greatest respect and all my thanks.

Hubert DEBBASCH  
CEO of Terre Entière  
CEO of Babel Tours