

A SPOTLIGHT ON THE INDEPENDENT: ROCKY ROAD TRAVEL



*Berlin-based Rocky Road Travel provides a gateway to some of the world's least-visited and misunderstood countries. Specialising in trips that are often described as 'dangerous' and 'inaccessible', they aim to open the curtain and shed light by working with local guides and businesses on the ground. We caught up with founder, **Shane Horan**, to chat about what inspired him to go it alone and his experiences as a tour leader.*



Tell us about Rocky Road Travel.

I founded Rocky Road Travel in January 2019. Previously I had worked as a tour leader in Australia, China and southeast Asia before moving back to Europe, eventually settling in Berlin. I've always had a fascination with the world and, having studied International Relations at university with a focus on so-called 'rogue states' (Iran and North Korea, in particular), I became eager to travel to these stigmatised destinations and experience them with my own eyes. Rocky Road Travel was created with the purpose of encouraging travellers to go beyond the usual rhetoric and to show others the true identity of often misunderstood destinations that I came to know and love.

What has been your most memorable trip with Rocky Road so far?

My most memorable trip came in 2019 on our Somaliland Independence Day tour. Our group was invited to join the military parade through Hargeisa, the capital of this self-declared independent state. So here we were, eight foreigners holding flags and marching with the Somaliland military through the streets waving at our adoring crowds – which included the president himself! We even got a cheeky wave back. It was a wonderful way to kick off any tour, never mind one in an unrecognised country.



Joining the parade on Somaliland Independence Day

Speaking of unrecognised countries – I must give an honourable mention to our trip to Iraqi Kurdistan during the last independence referendum. A period of political upheaval is a fascinating time to visit a country, but perhaps not the best time to organise a tour...

Towards the end of the trip, we were driving from Sulaymaniyah to Erbil when our local guide whispered to me: 'The Iraqi army has just taken the border town of Pirde, 30 miles south of here,

and may advance northwards tonight. What do you want to do?' Luckily, his wife was actually the daughter of the Erbil police chief, so we had first-hand information on the security situation in the region.

'Tell me everything you know right now,' I discreetly uttered back, so as not to alarm the group. He had been informed that the city was close to an evacuation order and that we should hit the road fast. The Iraqi army was re-grouping

at the southern checkpoint and preparing to advance towards Erbil in the middle of the night.

Upon hearing that, there was really only one option in my mind. We had to drive 2 hours northwest to Duhok to be closer to the Turkish border.

As the hours progressed, the likelihood of an advance on Erbil began to diminish, but however small the risk was, it was not one worth taking. We arrived safely in Duhok that night where we spent the next day visiting the sacred Yazidi temple at Lalish and stopped by the largest Yazidi IDA (Internally Displaced People) camp in Iraq – the Shariah camp – where we met some of the temporary residents. The following day we continued across the border safely and into Turkey.

This was my fourth visit to the Kurdish region, and it never disappoints.

Which destination would you suggest for someone's first trip off the beaten track?

I think Iraqi Kurdistan is a wonderful beginner's destination for your first visit to the Middle East. It has all the allure of an off-the-beaten-path destination – you're in Iraq, after all – but the region has its own borders and army, creating a bubble of added security. It's a well-developed, welcoming, fascinating and naturally stunning

part of the world. A world away from what we perceive Iraq to be.

Must-visit sites include the already mentioned Yazidi temple at Lalish, the memorial to the Kurds murdered by Saddam's chemical attacks in Halabja, and Saddam's abandoned mountain palace. But wherever you go, the overall welcoming atmosphere of the Kurds will ensure you have a fantastic trip – plus, the food is fantastic!

Which destination do you think most thoroughly confounds the stereotypes about it?

There are a few contenders for this prize! Given my background studying rogue states, I'll have to go with Iran. It's very easy to lump a government and its people into the same bracket – especially given the imagery and headlines generated by the media when it comes to this country.

But the reality of Iran is so far from what is covered by the press. Iranians are among the



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Lalish is one of my favourite sites in Iraqi Kurdistan



Victory Day, North Korea

friendliest and most welcoming people in the world. They want nothing more than to open their country to the world, build friendly relationships and show off the beauty of their land to as many visitors as possible.

How have things changed for you in the wake of the pandemic?

The pandemic has led us to restructure our product and think more sustainably. Our focus has shifted to offer sustainable, smaller-group trips to five core destinations. We now have a goal of making all our tours climate-neutral by mid 2022, and are working with [Ecologi](#) and [Eden Reforestation Projects](#)

to achieve this. A portion of every booking goes towards these foundations, who in turn are funding carbon-reduction projects around the world. On top of this, for every booking we also plant 25 trees to offset part of the footprint of the tour.

We are now also much busier than ever before. Since January this year, we have been flooded with requests from people all over the world asking us 'Where can I go?' or 'What's open?'. Luckily some of our core destinations – the likes of Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Socotra and South Sudan –

have remained open and accessible throughout the pandemic. The surge in bookings definitely illustrates the pent-up demand for travel that the global lockdowns have caused.

What are the advantages of booking through an indie operator like Rocky Road rather than one of the bigger names? And – be honest! – are there any disadvantages?

Hmmm, let me see! With smaller indie operators like ourselves, you get instant and personal responses to enquires – you'll even get my mobile number so you can WhatsApp me any questions! There's also a more intimate element, as tours focus more on local experiences than a ticklist of sites. On the ground, we work with only local and small businesses in an effort to give directly back to the community – tour groups stay in family-run hotels, eat in local restaurants and overland/use public transport as much as possible to reduce the carbon footprint.

And on a more practical note, customers also get the standard deposit and insolvency insurance with us – meaning that your money is always safe and you can book with confidence. So yeah, I'd say there are no disadvantages!

The Travel Club members can enjoy an exclusive 10% discount off any tour with Rocky Road Travel: just email info@rockyroadtravel.com and quote the code **TRAVELCLUB10**. See page XXX for more.