

Russian Tour Operator to Offer Trips Around War-Torn Ukrainian Regions

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Members of the Ukrainian armed forces ride on an armoured personnel carrier (APC) near Debaltseve, eastern Ukraine, Feb. 12, 2015.

Russians wishing to take a closer look at the fighting in Ukraine may now have a chance to do so after a Moscow-based travel operator announced plans to offer guided tours of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions — bodyguards and armored carriers included, a news report said.

It was not immediately clear whether the fragile cease-fire that took effect Sunday would impact the company's plans.

According to Mikhail Bely, a co-owner of the Megapolis Kurort tour operator, a four-day tour of the war-torn regions will cost about \$2,000-\$3,000, the Izvestia newspaper reported Friday.

For this price, holidaymakers will be provided with an armored vehicle that could "comfortably" accommodate five to seven people, a local driver and guide, and bodyguards from an unspecified private security firm, the report said.

At least 10 of the travel agency's customers have expressed an interest in the package, Bely was quoted as saying. The tour operator previously specialized in health-oriented vacations in the Moscow region, but now intended to focus on package tours to the war zone.

Another co-owner of the travel agency, Anatoly Aronov, said that "many people were now interested in what is happening in the Donbass," Izvestia reported, noting that those wishing to travel on the tour would be doing so at their own risk.

Andrei Purgin, a separatist leader in Donetsk, said his supporters "would not interfere, but we don't have time to help, either — we have a war going on."

But Stanislav Vinokurov, Luhansk's self-proclaimed sports and tourism minister, was outraged, according to the Izvestia report.

"There is death and tears, there is grief, and I didn't expect such a proposal to appear at all, especially from our Moscow colleagues," he said, adding that the so-called Luhansk People's Republic planned to develop its own tourism industry eventually.

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