Erbil is one of the world’s most ancient cities and has been continuously inhabited by human beings from around 5000 years BC. Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks all occupied the city before the Arabs and Ottoman Turks arrived. The Erbil citadel – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – along with Erbil’s Minaret are two distinct landmarks by which this historical city is recognised.

The modern-day city is home to 1.6 million mainly Kurdish people although there are also Assyrian, Turkoman, Arab and Armenian populations. It is the capital of the self-governing province of Iraqi Kurdistan which has since 2005 existed as a peaceful oasis hardly touched by the ebb and flow of war and conflict further to the south and west.

There are many resorts in Erbil province. During the summer people come – especially those from the strife-torn middle and southern parts of Iraq – to visit these places. A calendar of varied activities takes place throughout the year including sporting and cultural festivals, commercial exhibitions, international book fairs, etc.

The Erbil marathon is organised by non-governmental organisations brought under a single umbrella by Iraqi Kurdistan NGO’s Network “IKNN”. The Erbil Marathon is an expression of civil society’s activism against war and violence, and it is the message from the Kurdish people to the world that they love peace and justice. Despite the desperate economic crisis and instability in the wider region the 2015 edition of the Marathon was organised successfully. It is an event which brings together people from different ethnicities, nations, cultures, religions, beliefs and ages. Run under the title “Peace for all: yes for peace and peaceful coexistence”, Erbil Marathon aims to promote love, peace and non-violence in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

Runners and peace lovers from all over the world participate yearly in this event. The first edition was held in October 2011 and followed by the second Erbil International Marathon for Peace and Development in October 2012 with participants from 49 countries. Numbers have increased dramatically from 1500 in 2011 to around 7000 in 2015. This outstanding success has established Erbil as the centre of coexistence, brotherhood and fraternity in a region surrounded by hatred, ethnic and sectarian rejection and bloodshed. It was for

Unforgettable moments of running and cultural discovery in Iraqi Kurdistan
such reasons that Erbil was accepted as a member of Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS) immediately following the inaugural event.

Sixty Metre Street is one of the most famous and attractive streets in Erbil. It girdles the city and derives its name from its breadth which allows more space for runners during the marathon. There are many trees lining the sides of the road which offer shade and create a more attractive and spring-like character.

"The Erbil Marathon is a wonderful event and I am very happy to have been part of it. It is a great lesson in self-sufficiency and preparation," said Olga O’Hara from Russia, adding: "Running around 60 Meter Road four times is not as easy as it sounds, but the thrill of finishing in Sami Abdulrahman Park (created on the site of one of Saddam Hussein's former military bases) makes it all worth the effort. Happy Running!" October is a lovely month with mild weather — no more than 22 degrees C compared to annual summer highs of twice that number. It was chosen as the best time of the year to hold the marathon. For Stefan Samuelsson, a participant from Sweden, the mild conditions and the cheerfulness of the people watching and encouraging the runners made the marathon "the most intense and beautiful ever."

Kurdistan is more accessible than other neighbouring countries in the region. Visas, if needed, are easy to get at the Erbil International Airport (built in 2015). There are direct flights to many regional and European capitals (Dubai, Amman, Beirut, Istanbul, Vienna and Berlin). Accommodation is cheap and comfortable. In addition to this, Erbili people are known for being friendly and open to other cultures.

Kealan Delaney, from Ireland, put it this way: "Thank you to everybody in Kurdistan, Iraq for a wonderful time. I really enjoyed my stay in Erbil. The people are so friendly and welcoming and I hope to be back soon. Congratulations to all who organised, competed in and just watched the Marathon. It was such a great experience and something I will treasure as a memory for the rest of my life. My first marathon — in Erbil. Thank you Erbil!".

All marathoners, runners and peace lovers are invited to choose the Erbil marathon as their next adventure and add some unforgettable moments of running and cultural discovery to their memories.