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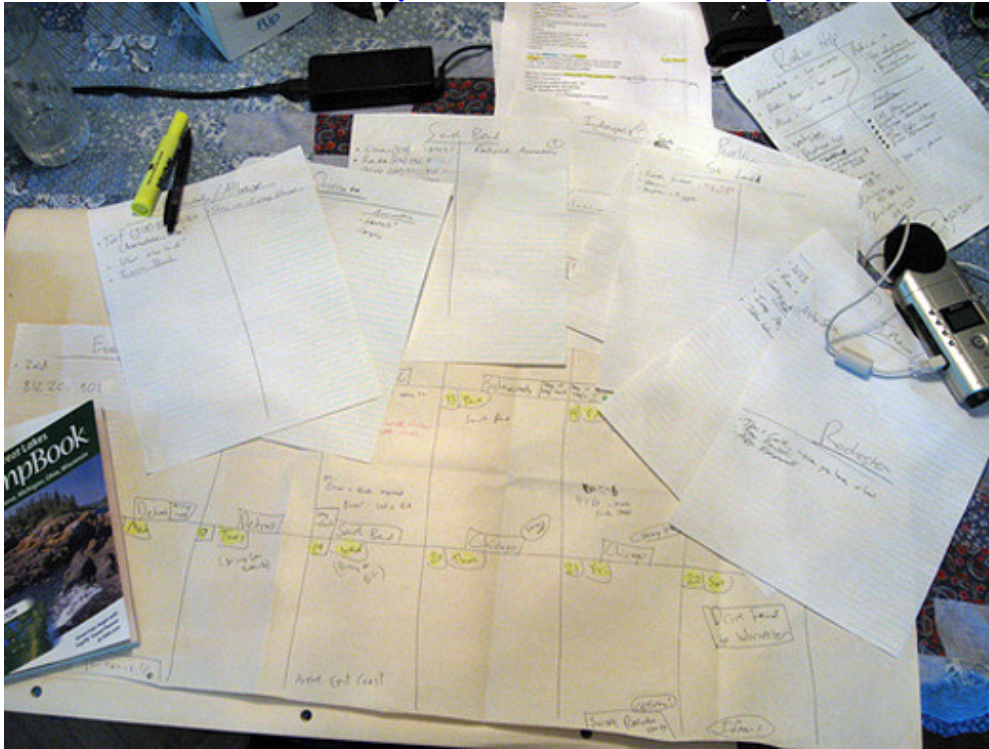
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<http://www.iraqistories.com/roadtrip/>

Richard Cozzens and Matthew McNaught, former volunteers with The Iraqi Student Project, putting down the road trip's schedule on paper

Road trip, Iraqi style

by [J.H. Freeman](#)

Aug 05, 2009

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[The Iraqi Road Trip Web Site](#)[Road Trip Map and Itinerary](#)[Follow Iraqi Road Trip on Twitter!](#)[Chicago Public Radio story about The Iraqi Student Project](#)

WASHINGTON - Jack Kerouac's "On The Road" enshrined the road trip in the American psyche, and even though the days of hitchhiking across the states are long gone, the tire-spinning sojourn is one of the nation's few cultural rites of passage.

"We were all delighted," he wrote in that immortal travelogue, "we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one noble function of the time, move."

It's a sign of our worldly times that more than 50 years after the book's publication, two Iraqi refugees from

Baghdad are picking up where Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise left off.

Declining to give surnames for fear of identifying family back home, Fouad, 20, and Ahmed, 17, arrived Tuesday via Amman in preparation for their American adventure.

The two are beneficiaries of the Iraqi Student Project, a non-profit with the goal of persuading American colleges and universities to provide tuition waivers for Iraqi refugees seeking undergraduate degrees.

“This whole road trip is to get more people interested in those Iraqi students who can’t go to college,” Fouad explained Wednesday in a telephone interview from Brooklyn.

The 20-year-old, who fled Baghdad for Damascus in 2005 with his family, starts his freshman year this fall at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., where he’ll study Engineering.

Along the way, Ahmed hopes to tell people about the relatively new project.

“It’s very important for me to let people know more about this wonderful program,” he said.

Stoked about steeping himself in the biological sciences, Ahmed will attend Goucher College in Maryland.

“Studying in the U.S. is like a golden chance that nobody can get. This project is providing this opportunity to most of us who fled the country and have no degree, no studying at all, no education.”

Nineteen more Iraqis are slated to enroll in U.S. schools this fall under the program.

The Iraqi Student Project was founded in 2007 by a married couple from Illinois named Gabe Huck and Theresa Kubasak.

Wanting to learn Arabic, Huck and Kubasak moved to Damascus in 2005 after retiring from careers in publishing and teaching. Stirred by the plight of Iraqi refugees in Syria like Fouad and Ahmed, whose access to higher education was sorely limited, they decided to do something about it.

At 1.1 million, Syria has more Iraqi refugees than any other Middle Eastern country, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency.

But Fouad and Ahmed won’t be completely alone—after all, they don’t even have driver’s licenses. Two Iraqi Student Group volunteers who taught them in Damascus will also hit the highways.

Richard Cozzens, 24, from Philadelphia, and 26-year-old Matthew McNaught, a British citizen from Winchester, England, will serve as guides and equally enthusiastic explorers.

Coincidentally, the international quartet begins its journey in New York, just as Kerouac’s alter-ego Sal Paradise did in “On The Road”. They will eventually end up in Washington on Aug. 22.

“It’s going to be an amazing chance for them to see the variety that is the United States,” said Cozzens in a telephone interview Tuesday evening from Kennedy Airport in New York, awaiting the Iraqis’ arrival.

A Harvard University graduate and proficient Arabic speaker, Cozzens came home from Damascus at the beginning of the summer and has been teaching at the Arabic Summer Academy in Boston.

“They are definitely going to see the vast diversity of the country. Not just skin color but the different kinds of people here,” Cozzens said.

One of their stops is South Bend, Ind., home of the Iraqi Student Project’s U.S. director Jane Pitz, who will

play host for an evening.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Pitz said from her home in Northern Indiana.

“They’ll see the Appalachians and the huge cities. They will see boring Indiana and Ohio. They’re gonna’ head down to Missouri. Cross-country road trip, that’s such a college thing!”

Another impetus for the road trip is to encounter a patchwork of people affected by the war in Iraq. Among these are some of the 14 Iraqis who were chosen for the project’s inaugural academic year in 2008.

Ambitions aren’t limited to countrymen. The Iraqis hope to connect with American war veterans. The U.S. soldier’s experience in a war that led to their displacement fascinates them.

Ahmed will try to “get to know his thoughts, what is he thinking, after serving his country. How was his life there? What did he think about Iraqis?”

Fouad is intrigued to talk to an American who was once on the other side of the war.

“He has the reasons to have war and I have the reasons to be against war,” Fouad said.

“I think it will be to get more ideas, what other people think about war, about what is going on in Iraq.”

Above all, the duo feels thrilled to traverse the unknown landscape of an enormous country, a place whose people and policies have had such an impact on their unlikely fates.

“Of course it’s to see America, getting to know the places, the famous places,” Ahmed said.

Famous places like Niagara Falls, whose gushing summit they both said topped the list of favored tourist destinations.

Departure is set for Thursday morning. First stop? Where else? The City of Brotherly Love.

Maybe Kerouac wrote it best: "What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? — it's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies."

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