

## Transit agencies rolling out new attractions

## US bus systems lure riders with plush seats, Wi-Fi

travel

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WASHINGTON, Aug 25, (AP): Think of the typical city bus, and you're likely to picture old vehicles with hard seats and noisy brakes that belch diesel fumes as they jerk from stop to stop.

Transit agencies want you to take another look. They're rolling out more attractive and comfortable buses, convenient express routes and even on-board Wi-Fi.

High gas prices and a tight economy have made all kinds of transit, including buses, more popular. In the first three months of 2008, 2.6 billion trips were taken on public transportation in the US, a 3 percent increase over the first quarter of 2007, according to the American Public Transportation Association. Bus ridership increased 2 percent to nearly 1.5 billion trips.

Buses may lack the hipness of subways or light rail, but they are the best hope for accommodating large numbers of new riders quickly and affordably. To harness the increased demand for mass transit, officials are turning to new ways of delivering and marketing their bus service.

Ted Mann, an Arlington, Va., resident, has been a regular bus rider since totaling his car a year ago and has noticed the improvements.

Mann, 66, said the Washington area's extensive transit service has meant he hasn't felt compelled to buy a new car. Still, he can testify to the image problem that buses face. "The other night I was with a group of people, and the fastest thing to do was to get on the bus. Some of these people had never been on a bus as if this was some awful low-class way," he said.

Nationally, bus riders tend to be poorer than rail passengers. According to a 2007 national study by public transportation association, 21 percent of trips by rail are made by people with household incomes less than \$25,000, compared with 43 percent of bus trips. On the other side of the spectrum, 30 percent of rail trips are made by people with incomes of \$75,000 or higher, while only 12 percent of bus trips are.

Metro, the Washington region's transit agency, hopes a makeover will help buses'

public relations problem. This month the agency is introducing new buses with a modern red and silver color scheme, cushioned seats and sound-deadening floors for a quieter ride.

"People who wouldn't normally take the bus — they can see this beautiful piece of art here and want to take public transportation," said Milo Victoria, Metro's assistant general manager for bus operations.

Elsewhere, transit agencies from Chattanooga, Tenn., to Cincinnati to Oakland, Calif., have introduced Wi-Fi on buses, particularly those on longer commuter routes. Metro plans to make Wi-Fi available at elaborate new bus shelters in Arlington, which will also feature heated seats and electronic signs with bus arrival and departure information.

And transit systems are looking for inexpensive ways to make bus trips faster. Cincinnati's Metro received permission this month to make permanent an arrangement that allows buses to travel in the left shoulder of Interstate 71 when traffic is heavy.

Other systems use technology that keeps traffic lights green when a bus approaches.

Transit systems are also adopting more fuel-efficient alternatives to regular diesel buses, helping insulate them from rising fuel costs while also providing another selling point for potential passengers who care about the environment. In Philadelphia, for example, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority has ordered 400 new diesel-electric hybrids, with the first 100 to be introduced by the end of the year.

In the Washington region, the emphasis on improving bus service marks a shift. Metro's rail system, a federal project of the 1960s and 1970s, has long been the local favorite. Home buyers often pay a premium for proximity to a Metro station while bus routes don't have the same cachet.

Metro General Manager John Catoe, who arrived at the agency last year with a mandate to improve bus service, said nicer vehicles and more convenient service will go a long way to changing the mode's image.

"We painted the picture of the bus," he

said. "We as an industry need to repaint the picture and make it attractive."

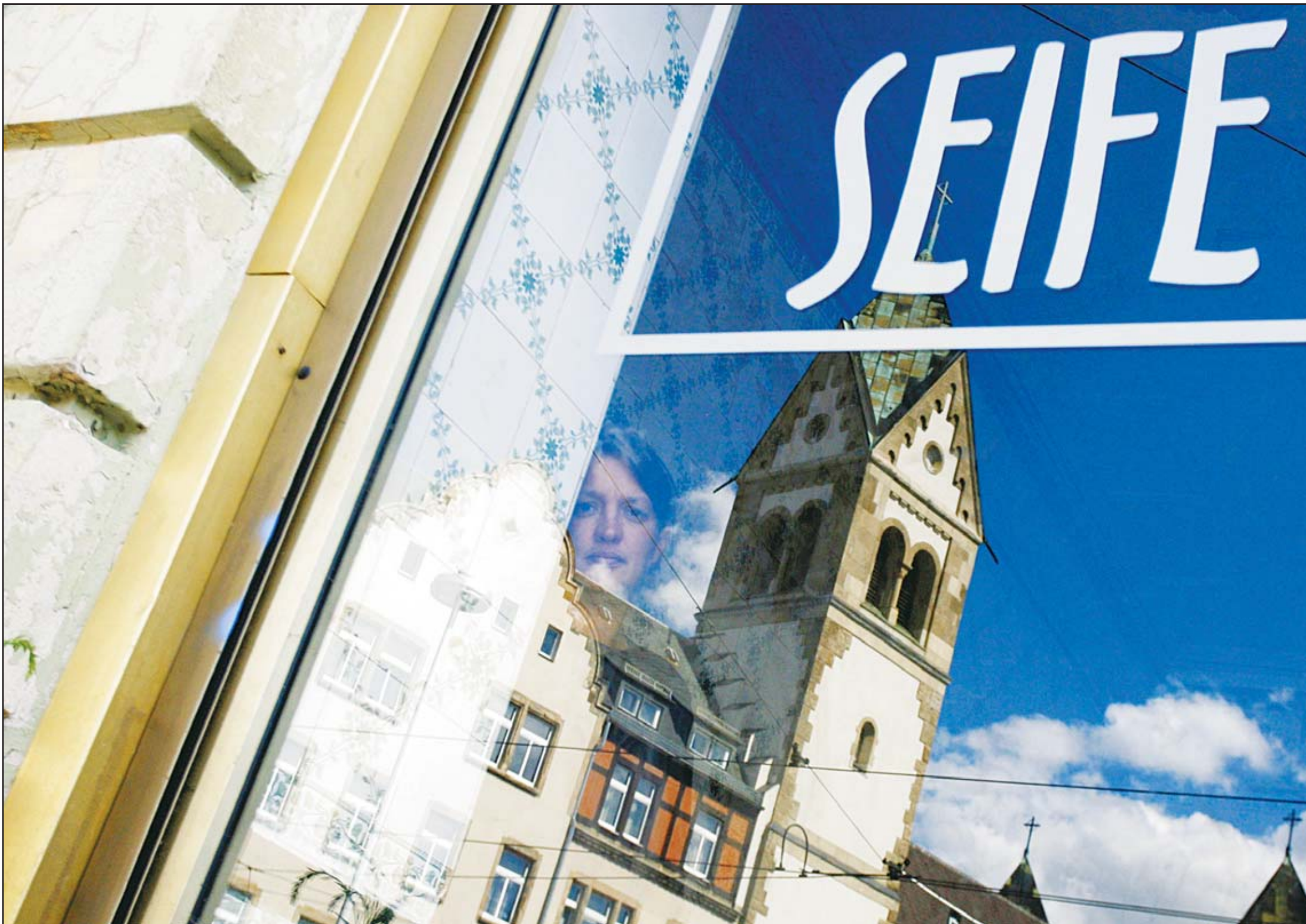
Expanding and improving Washington's bus service is critical to shift some of the pressure off the rail system, which is packed during rush hour and has little room to add longer or more frequent trains. Catoe has proposed an extensive network of express buses that would use shoulders or bus-only lanes to help meet the region's immediate transportation needs.

Such an initiative would require millions of dollars in new equipment. Washington's new 60-foot articulated buses cost nearly \$800,000 apiece a total of \$17.4 million for 22 buses.

But that's nothing close to the cost of expanding the rail network. For example, a project to extend Metrorail 11.6 miles in northern Virginia carries a \$2.6 billion price tag, and it won't be done until 2013 at the earliest.

"Right now we have the issues," Catoe said, "and we don't have a lot of time to be building things."

## Lifestyle



Ilka Weingart poses for a portrait in her soap shop in a guardian building in Leipzig, Aug 13. When Ilka Weingart first entered the abandoned East German building where she wanted to open her shop, she stared at gaping holes in the floor and decades-old layers of grime. After two years of scrubbing, hammering and cleaning, Weingart now proudly leans against a wall of shiny Art Nouveau tiles she discovered underneath the dirt and presents her funky, new shop — for which she does not pay penny in rent. (RTRS)

## Group of artists turn historic buildings into arts hub

## Legal squatters brush up Leipzig's old relics

By Kerstin Gehmlich

When Ilka Weingart first entered the abandoned east German butcher's store where she wanted to open a soap shop, she gaped at holes in the floor, decades-old layers of grime, and rust-coloured stains.

After two years' scrubbing, hammering and cleaning, Weingart now proudly leans against a wall of floral Art Nouveau tiles she discovered beneath the dirt and presents her shiny new shop — for which she does not pay a penny in rent.

She is one of a colourful group of artists, yoga teachers and young entrepreneurs who are renovating derelict buildings in Leipzig, one of many cities in East Germany that suffered depopulation after unification in 1990.

Fixing floors, windows and roofs and making sure no squatters move in, they live rent-free as part of a scheme that its initiators hope will not only save historic buildings but also turn the city into a cool arts hub.

"I wouldn't have been able to afford a normal shop," says the 37-year-old, one of 120 people acting as 'guardians' to homes abandoned when many of Leipzig's inhabitants left for West Germany or moved out to the modern suburbs.

## Unattractive

With their coal-fired ovens and shared toilets, Leipzig's listed turn-of-the-century buildings, which once housed the wealthy bourgeoisie, suddenly became unattractive.

In the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, some 100,000 people left the city where Richard Wagner was born and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe went to university. Its population is now growing again, recently edging over half a million.

"An estimated 40,000 flats still stand empty. That's about 14 to 15 percent of all of Leipzig's apartments," said Juliana Pantzer from Haushalten, the association running the scheme.

To many landlords, it did not seem worth renovating their buildings as the prospect of well-paying tenants was so far off. Crumbling facades still line many streets.

"We are trying to stabilise the situation and rescue ... the buildings," Pantzer said, adding 12 formerly abandoned homes had already become galleries, shops or studios since the initiative was launched four years ago.

Owners benefited because squatters were deterred, and the buildings were being renovated and maintained for free, she said. After a five-year period as guardians, "tenants" will have to negotiate regular rental contracts with the landlords.

Weingart's yellow brick building in one of Leipzig's poorest areas near the Baumwollspinnerei, a former factory that once housed one of Europe's largest cotton-spinning mills, stood empty for 15 years before the owner decided to make it available to the public.

## Brushes

The paint is still peeling off the ceiling above the staircase. Thieves stole the wooden banisters years ago.

Weingart and her neighbours have put in new windows, floors and doors and set up a large paint-splattered table and a barbecue on the dry grass in the garden.

A few flights upstairs, 27-year-old artist Nils Franke sits on a worn-out sofa opposite a giant self-portrait. Paint brushes, tubs and newspapers litter the floor.

"It's a bit chaotic," said Franke, his beard

twisted into two dreadlocks. "But I like it. You can do your own thing."

Franke and his two artist friends say they put about 800 euros (\$1,170) each into the renovation of their work space. Now, they only pay a few dozen euros in fees per month to the Haushalten group, on top of electricity and water bills.

"It's cost efficient," said Raymond Grotegut, who like Franke, studies at

Leipzig's prestigious Academy of Visual Arts.

Pinning a canvas onto a frame, Grotegut said the project had helped change the neighbourhood.

"It's hip," the 33-year-old said. "The entire area has become more lively. There are new markets, new art shows. And lots of small boutiques and galleries have suddenly emerged."

The Baumwollspinnerei opposite has

become a new tourist attraction after young artists from the New Leipzig School, such as painter Neo Rauch, set up there.

"The first step is always for artists to arrive. Then firms follow and finally, people fill up the remaining flats," said Grotegut. "We're at the first step at the moment."

Even though Leipzig's population has slowly started to grow, unemployment in the city still stands at some 17 percent — well above the national average of around 8 percent.

## Concept

Haushalten now hopes to extend the concept, and the eastern cities of Halle and Chemnitz are already working on similar schemes.

Standing in a freshly renovated workshop a few blocks away from Weingart's building, guardian Anja Kessler said she hoped her candle-making shop would turn into a community meeting point.

"The kids in this neighbourhood don't have much offered to them," the 31-year-old said as she scraped off Communist-era wallpaper. "That's where I come in. I can teach them how to make candles."

Once the works are finished, Kessler's building will also feature a yoga studio and a vegan restaurant.

"This is like a giant playground!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling behind purple glasses as she wiped her hands on her wide, orange trousers.

New shops could help bring clients to the old cafe next door, said her 23-year-old neighbour Max Mueller.

But looking at the colourful group carrying tools into the building, he added: "I just hope they won't be too loud." (RTRS)



Artist Nils Franke sits on a terrace in front of a guardian building in Leipzig, Aug 13. Like many East German cities, Leipzig suffered depopulation after the country's unification in 1990, with many inhabitants leaving for West Germany or moving to modern suburban homes. Now a colourful mix of artists, yoga teachers and young entrepreneurs, some 120 people are acting as 'guardians' to formerly abandoned homes, reinstalling electricity in the derelict buildings, fixing floors, windows and roofs and making sure no squatters move in. (RTRS)

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✓ **DOHA, Qatar:** Qatar Airways today announced its Doha — New York route will operate non-stop with a daily flight, effective from the beginning of the winter 2008 schedules on Oct 26.

For full release please click on the link below:  
<http://www.qatarairways.com/> (RTRS)

✓ **CAIRO:** The number of people visiting Egypt increased more than 25 percent in the financial year 2007/8, compared with the previous year, Tourism Minister Zoheir Garrana told Reuters in an interview.

The number of nights tourists spend in Egypt and the amount of tourist revenue reaching the country increased 32 percent in the year, which ended in June, he added.

Egypt has not yet seen any slowdown in tourism because of slower growth in the European or US economies but it does anticipate some effect, he said. (RTRS)

✓ **RIYADH:** Sama Airlines, the newest low-fares airline in Saudi Arabia, announced a commercial agreement has been signed between Sama and Safi Airways, to provide more choices for travel to the customers of both airlines. Safi Airways provide daily flights between Dubai and Kabul, enabling onward travel on Sama's Saudi domestic and international network via Sharjah. This agreement follows the signing of a similar agreement with Bahrain Air, facilitating for Sama's guests more choices to Manama, Kabul, Mashad, and Kochi.

Mr Andrew Cowen, Chief Executive Officer of Sama said: "Sama is continuing its work to expand access to international destinations not directly served by Sama such as Manama, Kuchi, Kabul, and Mashad to its guests. The cooperation with Safi Airways and Bahrain Air is allowing Sama to direct sell to those destinations with these partner airlines. This latest agreement supports Sama's continuing efforts to meet growing demand for travel market in the Middle East, as part of our objective of becoming the preferred low-cost carrier for travelers in the region." (RTRS)

✓ **GUATEMALA CITY:** The pilot of a small plane carrying humanitarian workers called in engine trouble about 45 minutes before crashing in a field in eastern Guatemala, killing 10 people, including five Americans.

The Cessna Caravan crashed about 60 miles (100 kms) east of Guatemala City on Sunday and the burned wreckage of the plane was scattered along the edge of a barren field lined with palm trees, an aviation official and a survivor said.

The pilot tried to make an emergency landing. Civil Aviation director Jose Carlos said. Eight passengers were killed, along with the Guatemalan pilot and co-pilot, he said.

Carlos said five of the passengers killed were Americans, but the nationalities of the other three had not been determined. Four other Americans on board were injured and were being airlifted to a hospital in the capital.

Sarah Jensen, a 19-year-old who survived the crash with minor cuts and bruises, said she and her family were headed to a village in the area of El Estor to build homes for CHOICE Humanitarian, a group based in West Jordan, Utah.

Her brother and father were killed in the crash, and her mother had serious burns and contusions. The family is from Amery, Wisconsin, Jensen told The Associated Press in a brief interview at the hospital.

It was unclear if the other Americans were also with CHOICE Humanitarian. The group did not return calls Sunday afternoon.

Aero Ruta Maya, the airline operating the plane, said only 12 people were on the plane, including the pilots, a discrepancy that could not immediately be resolved.

Joanne de Bickford, who said she was the daughter of the airline's owner and was helping manage the crisis, confirmed there were Americans on board. She said the airline did not know how many people died.

The army provided a list of passengers, but the names appeared to be garbled. The US Embassy did not immediately return calls seeking comment. (AP)

✓ **BEIJING:** China still aims to launch "the most luxurious train in the world" from Beijing to Tibet despite riots that broke out in the Himalayan region this spring, railway officials said Thursday.

"The plan hasn't been cancelled," said an official at the Railway Ministry who declined to be named.

State-run Xinhua news agency reported in early March, just days before deadly riots broke out in Tibet, that the train would go into service on Sept 1.

But an official at the Qinghai Tibet Railway Company, who also asked to remain anonymous, told AFP Thursday there was no timetable yet for the train's maiden voyage.

Xinhua said earlier a ticket of the 96-seat train, decorated "according to the standards of a five-star hotel", would cost about 40,000 yuan (\$5,800), or 20 times the ordinary fare for a train ride to Tibet.

The company reportedly teamed up with a foreign partner to invest a total of \$150 million in the train.

Government figures showed the number of tourists visiting Tibet in the first half of 2008 fell by around 70 percent from the same period last year, following the violent unrest there in March.

Exiled Tibetan leaders say 203 people died in the riots and the subsequent government clampdown, but China has accused "rioters" of being responsible for 21 deaths.

Beijing barred all tourists from going to Tibet until the end of April and foreign visitors were only allowed back in at the end of June. (AFP)