

DESTINATION: IRAQ

Traveling to Iraq is not for the faint of heart, but the rewards are substantial, particularly for those with an interest in Ancient Mesopotamia, Kurdish culture, and Islamic architecture – as well as an interest in being in a country where you will likely not see another western tourist.

My three-plus week trip to Kurdistan and Southern Iraq was arranged by Spiekermann Travel Services (Spiekermann), www.mideasttrvl.com, the only U.S.-based tour company of which I'm aware that currently operates tours in this area. The company runs Kurdistan and Southern Iraq trips separately, but it schedules the departures so that the two trips can be combined. A visa is required for Southern Iraq. Obtaining one is an arduous process, and can take months (a Letter of Introduction is required first). Several air carriers fly to Iraq. I chose Emirates Airlines to Erbil and out of Baghdad.

Kurdistan. U.S. dollars can be exchanged for Iraqi Dinars inside the Erbil international airport. For security reasons, arriving passengers usually cannot be met inside the terminal building, and instead must be met at an offsite "Meet and Greet" building (an unmarked free shuttle bus makes the circuit every five to ten minutes). That is where I was met by our excellent local Kurdish guide, Balim.

The Kurdistan portion of the trip was a bit thin on sites, but the experience was deeply enriched by our superb tour leader and Kurdistan expert, Douglas Layton, and by Balim, who told us hair-raising stories of his escape to London during Saddam Hussein's reign of terror. For me personally, the trip was also enhanced by being with our terrific group of "extreme travelers," almost all of whom were TCC members.

The principal site of interest in Kurdistan is probably the UNESCO-designated Citadel in Erbil. Among other things, this complex contains a lovely and comprehensive carpet museum. Below the Citadel is a large indoor-outdoor market (with some nice handicrafts), where we met several Peshmerga fighters in their distinctive gray or brown uniforms, complete with curved daggers in their cummerbunds. After Erbil, we drove in a small bus on a long circuit that took us, among other places, to the battlefield site where Alexander the Great defeated Darius III of Persia; the mammoth Shanidar Cave created by Neanderthals in the Paleolithic Era; Jerwan, where the ruins of the world's first aqueduct (built with Cuneiform-inscribed stones), remain; Lalish (a true highlight), to see the lovely Yazidi people worshipping at their unusual temple in the mountains; and a variety of museums dedicated to the tragic history of the Kurds, against whom unspeakable atrocities were committed by Saddam and many others. Sulaymaniyah, the large city southeast of Erbil, was interesting simply because it is so modern and "western" (we saw a number of women in western dress for the first and only time in Iraq). The Sulaymaniyah visit was to have included the second largest antiquities museum in Iraq, but sadly it was closed during our trip (we visited the small, unremarkable Erbil Civilization

Museum instead). Because of safety concerns (known in advance and therefore not on our itinerary), we were unable to visit Mosul, Kirkuk, or Nineveh).

On our last night in Kurdistan, we were treated to a wonderful dinner with special guest Jano Rose Biani, Iraq's most important filmmaker (his film "One Candle, Two Candles" was nominated for a Golden Globe). Mr. Biani welcomes inquiries at www.evinifilms.com or www.avfilminitiative.org.

Southern Iraq. From Erbil I flew on an Iraqi Airways jet to Basrah in Southern Iraq. From the moment I landed in Basrah, the contrast between Kurdistan and Southern Iraq could not have been more stark. At immigration, there were three lines, one labeled "Iraqi," one labeled "Diplomats," and the third labeled "Other." I was the only person in the "Other" line, and the immigration office looked at me as if I'd just landed from Mars. "What are you doing here?" he asked quizzically. "I'm here as a tourist," I replied, non-plussed. "A . . . tourist?? Do you have a . . . visa?" he said skeptically, and seemed taken somewhat aback when I answered in the affirmative. He asked me to wait, then wandered off for about 10 minutes, eventually returning with another immigration officer. Both double-checked the computer screen, scratched their heads, looked at me multiple times, and eventually shrugged, stamped my passport, and let me through.

If you were filming a war movie, you would plant your camera in Southern Iraq, much of which looks like a war zone. Basrah, in particular, is rubble to a large extent (after having been the "Venice of the Middle East" in the 1950s), and municipal services seemed close to non-existent (as Iraq continues to struggle to pay billions of dollars in war reparations). There were piles and piles of trash and plastic waste everywhere, to an extent I had seen nowhere else in the world (including the Dharavi slum in Mumbai). Also, for any visitor needing a toilet (other than in a hotel, restaurant or museum), the situation can only be described as dire; "bush breaks" would have been infinitely preferable. Finally, I have never seen more heavily armed military police anywhere (including Israel). That being said, the police were quite friendly, and often asked to take selfies with us.

Starting in Basrah, our group (as delightful, fearless, and travel-hardened as the Kurdistan group) followed a fairly straight northwesterly route for about 10 days that took us to the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and ended in Baghdad. Our tour leader/expert, Michel Behar (whom I'd met on an earlier trip to Turkmenistan), was beyond fantastic in every way, and we could not have accomplished what we did without him and the local tour company.

Our itinerary was comprehensive and well-conceived, enabling us to see the all of the major ancient sites and museums, as well as several astounding religious facilities. In addition, we were given meaningful opportunities to meet with local Iraqis in a variety of informal

settings. The younger Iraqis we encountered randomly on the streets, in shops, and at restaurants, although invariably extremely surprised to see us, could not have been friendlier or more accommodating, and if they knew English were always anxious to speak with us (once they overcame their shyness).

There are a surprising number of UNESCO World Heritage sites in Southern Iraq. Many are world-famous and all are very much worth seeing. First among equals is the neo-Sumerian Great Ziggurat at Ur (21st c B.C., restored 6th c B.C.) near Nasiriyah. Although the Great Ziggurat is made of mud-brick and far smaller than the famous pyramids of Egypt, it rises from a flat, deserted plain, and is quite impressive both in size and design. And visitors, unlike at the pyramids, can climb to the top (which our group did) for a spectacular view. We visited a huge and important royal burial site close to the ziggurat; many of its treasures are now housed in the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad.

Very impressive, too, is the ancient Sumerian complex at Uruk. Its unrestored Anu Ziggurat is huge. The vast area surrounding the ziggurat is covered with millions of pot shards and decorative ceramic elements dating back 4,000 years. I found it remarkable to simply be able to scoop up a random piece of a jar or oil lamp lying at my feet, and know that I was holding a bit of ancient history right in my hands. A German archeological mission was working at the site, giving us with an opportunity to speak with some of the crew about the work they had been doing there (principally conservation).

Ancient Babylon is less interesting than Ur and Uruk because the Germans carted off the magnificent Ishtar Gate, with its stunning glazed blue and gold tiles, to Berlin in the 1930s, and because so much of the site has been reconstructed. However, the huge site is nevertheless impressive because some of the 40-foot high brick walls are decorated, top to bottom, with delicate bas-reliefs of lions and dragons.

In addition to these archeological sites, we also visited the huge, photogenic mud-brick palace-fortress at Ukhaidir. Lastly, we visited Ctesiphon, capital of the Persian Empire in the Parthian and Sassanian periods. The ruins of this impressive mud-brick palace include what was, in antiquity, the largest man-made arch in the world-- and what is still the largest single-span vault of unreinforced brickwork in the world. It is possible to climb to the top (121 feet), although the structure looks like it could collapse at any moment.

While in Southern Iraq we visited two of Saddam Hussein's former palaces (of which there were 80-100 during his reign of terror). One of the palaces, in Basrah, has been turned into a well-curated antiquities museum, with a lovely collection of pottery, stone carvings, glass, and a bit of sculpture. Another palace is a five-minute drive up the hill from the Babylon ruins. Empty now, with its walls covered in graffiti, the palace's terrace affords a perfect view over the Babylon ruins and the surrounding lush countryside.

Southern Iraq boasts one of the great museums on the planet. The National Museum of Iraq, in Baghdad, is home to thousands of astounding artifacts in clay, stone, ivory, marble, and metal from Sumeria, Babylonia, Akkadia, Assyria, Persia, and more. Seeing these artifacts was unquestionably a highlight of our trip. Although the museum was looted during the U.S. invasion of Iraq and lost 15,000 items, it has now been well-restored (if oddly organized). Its most famous artifacts do not disappoint, including the jaw-dropping harp excavated from the burial tomb at Ur, and the Mask of Warka, dating to 3,000 B.C. The most popular collection is in a separate large wing containing monumental, and spectacular, bas-relief slabs and sculpture from the fearsome Assyrian Empire.

Our first opportunity in Southern Iraq to interact with local Iraqis occurred during a wonderful excursion into a picturesque wetland area near Nasiriyah known as The Marshes, a UNESCO-designated site. We rode in ancient wooden motorized canoes through marshy waterways (with water buffalo calmly swimming alongside us) to visit a group of Marsh Arabs, who herd the water buffalo and engage in subsistence farming. Later, we traveled not far from The Marshes, where we had the pleasure of meeting a most hospitable group of village elders (as well as several village boys) for tea in their large community meeting hall made of bundled straw. On our penultimate day in Southern Iraq, we met a number of young Iraqis during a delightful stop for tea and refreshments at the famous Asha Bandar Café (dating to 1926) in Baghdad. The teahouse was extremely crowded and wonderfully atmospheric, with old black-and-white photos on the walls, and a bread seller with his wares piled high on a tray which he balanced on his head.

The most remarkable sites we visited on the entire trip, at least in my personal view, were various Shiite shrines. The most astonishing of these was the bustling Sanctuary of Imam Ali in Najaf, containing the tomb of Shia Islam's second most important figure (and, by belief, the remains of Adam and Noah as well). The site is visited annually by more than 8 million Muslim pilgrims from all over the world, and is so gorgeous as to almost defy description. The shrine approximates the size of a football field, and inside, every inch of the 45-foot walls and arched ceilings is covered with tiny, delicate pieces of cut glass mirrors (some the color of emeralds, sapphires and rubies), which glint in every direction. The effect is utterly dazzling, almost like being in a snowstorm. Imam Ali's tomb is huge – and solid gold. Outside is a magnificent entrance covered entirely in gold leaf (including the two minarets). There is also a beautiful clock tower decorated in exquisite blue, green and white mosaic tile.

Equally stunning, if somewhat smaller, is the Great Mosque of Kufa. This complex has the same incredible cut-glass mirror interior rooms, as well as a lovely marble courtyard surrounded by a golden arcade. The complex is topped with a well-proportioned golden dome connected by a single string of green lights (green being the color of Islam) to a gorgeous blue-green-white mosaic clock tower. We saw this sublime site under a perfect crescent moon. On

our way to the mosque, a group of Shiite pilgrims (dressed in black, with matching yellow backpacks and yellow bandanas around their necks) marched by. They saw us and immediately came over to greet us and to find out where we were from. Upon learning we were Americans, they welcomed us excitedly – and identified themselves as belonging to Hezbollah.

We also visited the shrines of Imams Abbas and Hussayn (and the interesting on-site museum) in the holy city of Karbala. Women visiting all shrines must wear the chador. While most women wore an all-black version, there were quite a few wearing colorful, embroidered versions from their home countries. (Note: chadors are supplied free of charge at the shrines.) While we were sometimes pushed aside by women seeking proximity to the tombs of the imams, at other times we were approached with a friendly “Hello! Where are you from?”

General comments on travel in Iraq

I never felt unsafe on this trip, perhaps because the security throughout this region is so extraordinarily high: endless checkpoints along the roads; screenings at hotels and museum, and multiple screenings at the shrines and mosques. (At the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf, for example, there were at least four security screenings and pat-downs that had to be endured prior to entering the facility.) Security around and at the Baghdad international airport is extreme. There were seven major checkpoints on the approach to the international terminal entrance. At these checkpoints there were multiple pat-downs, screening machines for luggage, hand checks of luggage, and dogs sniffing for drugs and gunpowder. There were four more screenings inside the airport. The good news is that, having been subjected to Iraqi security, I can now laugh whenever someone tells me that “security is tight” at a particular airport.

The roads in Kurdistan are decent for the most part, but those in Southern Iraq are often terrible. Road signs are very few and far between, and even our bus drivers got lost several times. Also, there are no GPS capabilities. Don’t expect variety at meals. The food is decent, but lunch and dinner will be the same almost wherever you go: mostly lamb, chicken, onions, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, and rice in some combination or other (and occasionally some fish -- green vegetables are rare). The hotels in Iraq are generally decent but not up to U.S. standards (with the exception of the five-star Grand Millennium Hotel in Sulaymaniyah); hotel rooms are mostly modern and clean, and have hot running water – and western toilets. Electricity can be erratic. English was not spoken at the front desk in several of our hotels. In both Kurdistan and Southern Iraq, cash is king. Travelers can forget trying to use credit or debit cards. U.S. dollars are welcomed everywhere, and appreciated. Cash should be carried in small denominations (dollars and Iraqi dinars). Also, Iraq has no functioning postal service, so sending/receiving items while traveling is not a realistic option. Finally, with respect to shopping, Baghdad is best, including for antiques (on Waqif Street) and handicrafts.