

# Iraq



...Iraqi Kurdistan with  
Erbil, Mar Matai, Lalish,  
Dahuk, Rawandouz and  
more...

September 2013



## Now is the time to visit Kurdistan Practically no tourists yet ...

... It was with some expectations of the unexpected and mixed feeling that we arrived to Erbil (or Arbil or Hawler different names for the same city). Having read up a little bit on this autonomous region of Iraq - yet to open up to tourism, I tried to keep my expectations to a minimum. There is a small chapter in the Lonely Planet Guide book, which describes what cities and places of interests there are, but not a whole lot is actually written about this region/country.

We agreed on 5 days and 4 nights, not really knowing how much one would need. In the review mirror I would have set-aside 6-7 days instead. Depending on who much one wants to see and do and how tight a schedule you're prepared to arrange for. Even though the distances are not that great, it does take longer than you think to get from A to B, as the roads in many parts are quite poor and you'll be wanting to stop to take in the local villages and sites.

**Day 1** → Arrival to Erbil / sightseeing and overnight Erbil

**Day 2** → Erbil to Dukhan via Lalish, Mar Matai and refugee camp in Domiz

**Day 3** → Dukan to Rawandouz via Saddams summer-villa, Al-Amedieh, local villages, Hamilton road and Gali Ali Beg

**Day 4** → Rawandouz to Sulymania via Saqwalan, Koya and refugee camp at Bazrama.

**Day 5** → Suly – Erbil via local villages, Kirkuk to Erbil





## Erbil – the capitol of Kurdistan!

A modern city in the making – construction sites everywhere!

As most “first-comers” to Iraq and the Kurdish regional capitol – I was of course very surprised at what I saw. Even though I had read up a bit and been forewarned, that the city has exploded in recent years. There are construction sites everywhere, and Erbil is turning into a quite modern city today. It is said to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

We stayed at **Ardil Hotel & Motel** opposite of Abu Afif (+964-770-422 9816) and also near Shorsh Bridge. This was suggested by **our local guide Mr. Havel** (He can be found with contact details in the LP guide book as well). The hotel was ca: 40 USD / head including breakfast. However, we did not get any bed linen or towels. So try the Kotri Salam instead (listed in the LP guidebook)

With limited time in Kurdistan, we decided early on to minimize our time spent in Erbil. The Citadel, Grand Mosque and the Bazar areas are what are primarily to see. We spent most time near the Citadel and the Bazar regions. The place was filled with people and since the elections are coming up, a lot of campaigning, singing and dancing took place in the centre primarily.

Instead of eating Swarma or Shish kebab in the Bazar area we were persuaded to go to another area to find a restaurant. We took a taxi and ended up at **Abu Shabab Restaurant**. This was said to be one of the better they could offer. A typical Arabic choice with water arrangements and coloured lights around the dining area, which was outside. Lots of Arabic families come here apparently. The food was nothing special at all. Don't be persuaded to try this place..





This Christian enclave dates back to 4<sup>th</sup> century!

On our second day we set out early after having filled up the car with water and bread. We stopped on the way to get a flavour of the local villages and markets. Well worthwhile to get good pictures and really see the local scenes. We passed oil fields, which is the main source of revenue of course.

We arrived at Al-Kosh (Mar Mattai) Monestary close to Mosul and south of Dahuk. This splendid Monestary dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Using many of the natural caves nearby St Matthew eventually started to construct and build the Monestary. The bishop (see pictures) was very talkative and spoke good English. He also invited us into the church and to take place in the ceremony of christening a baby (see pictures).

The Bishop has 5 monks and 8 visiting students to help out to run the place, and with visiting pilgrims and Kurds the place seemed very much alive. It is beautifully situated on the hill overlooking the plain and dessert. The offer rooms with cooking facilities if you want to spend time here. Once can stay a day or a week also if one wants to. As we had other stops to make, we spend a couple of hours at this most interesting place.





## The Yazidi minority....

Yazidis makes a pilgrimage once in a life time here

The place is well hidden in a green valley. This is the most sacred place on earth for all practitioners of the Yazidi faith. The tradition bids every Yazidi to visit this place one in a lifetime wherever they live on earth. **This is where their deity Malak Taus first landed.**

Some people also believe that Noah's Ark came to rest here. Visitors must walk barefoot once inside the sacred temples. The holiest of the places is the Sanctuary. **The interior of the temple contains several tombs, the most important one being the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Mustafa.**

The pillars, tombs and walls are wrapped in colourful silks; **The visitors tie and untie knots to make a wish.** Inside the tombs there are also walls lined with urns, which are filled every morning with oil. This done by one family by tradition who also lives here.

**The whole area was completely packed with pilgrims** and people who wanted to visit and see the place. People were sitting and eating in groups, women were chanting and singing traditional folk songs. It is easy to get claustrophobic here – but a great place for colourful photographs.



## Damiz refugee camp close to Syrian border.

The figure is reaching 200,000 refugees from Syria who are presently staying in camps in Iraq...



..Although the number of Syrian refugees is much fewer in Iraq compared to Turkey, Lebanon or Iran, the figure is quickly approaching **200,000 refugees**. **More than 50,000 Syrians entered the Kurdistan region of Iraq only since August 15<sup>th</sup> until 31<sup>st</sup> of August.**

**UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) is one of the main organizations in place to coordinate and facilitate at the camps.** When we tried to enter the largest of all camps in Iraq – Domiz – with over 100,000 refugees, we were not let in. They have increased control and security not wanting unnecessary and uncontrolled visitors such as journalists etc.

We still managed to make a detour around the premises to get in on the backside to get a glimpse of how people live and get by in these camps. Being invited inside into the tents, you begin to understand what the daily life for these people look like. What made most impression on me was all the children and how cheerful they still seemed to be midst all of this difficulties. There are tremendous shortages still here for food, medical supplies and more importantly also treatment. We did not yet know that we would get another chance to see another camp later in the week...

We stayed at the **Amanuel Motel in Dahuk (quite OK)** for ca: 40 USD/person. You can find beer/booze in Dahuk...





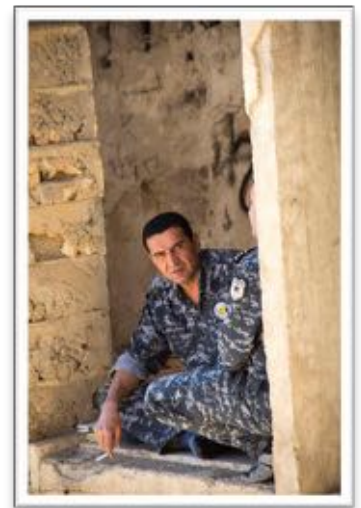
## Saddam Hussein's' summer palace...!

With a manmade lake nearby this was once a beautiful palace...



The road from Dahuk via Al-Amediya and some local villages is not the best. On the other hand you get to pass through some fantastic landscape and get to stop and see some local villages.

We also stopped at one of Saddam Hussein's' summer houses. It is today guarded by army. The place was completely stripped of anything valuable. We were eventually let in and made good use of our brought along cartons of cigarettes. Once these were handed out all around we could freely walk around and take pictures of the former palace. We could not however take pictures of the soldiers – so what you see here doesn't exist of course.



I managed to take some tiles from Saddams' private bathroom (not sure what to do with it however). Very interesting to have seen.

## Scenes from along the road....





## The famous Hamilton road in the mountains!

After the stopover at Saddam's summer palace **we continued to Amadiyah**. It is described as the village in the clouds, as it is built on a high plateau ca: 1200 m above sea level. This is a must to stop-by and see with its picturesque small alleys and bazar. Again, you will most certainly not see any other tourists, but you're likely to run into a Swedish speaking Kurd from Eskilstuna or Gothenburg, and they will let you know of course. Stop for some tea and a chat at one of the small cafes along the streets.

### **The Amediya minaret and mosque is also well worth a visit.**

We eventually came on to **the famous Hamilton road**, which was built at the turn of last century. There is both a "lower" as well as an "upper" road – and you need to see both. There are some absolutely amazing sights and sceneries from the upper road. You will also stop by the **Gali Ali Beg Waterfall**. This is a tourist magnet for Iraqis who come here on mass. The waterfall is not so much to see in it self as the people and how they come and enjoy the food, wade in the water and just mingle. The local restaurant houses 4-5 Falcons (see pictures).

The night was spent at **Pank Resort up on the hilltop**, where we rented a villa from the Kurdish-Swedish Mr. Hassem, who lives in Eskilstuna and who has made a fortune as the distributor for Nestlé in Sweden. He hosted us and told us about a book which is shortly coming out in this honour – "The Rice King"....





## “Koya” and its genuine Bazars!

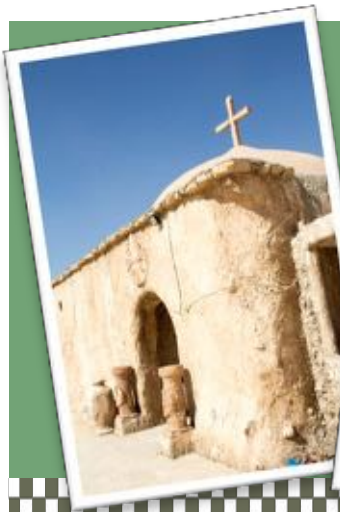
Not even mentioned in the guidebooks – but please stop by!



Koya is another charming place, not to be missed. **There is an old Citadel here, an old church (Picnic) and also the old Bazars.**

The old market and the winding old alleys are truly amazing. Here you really get the feeling that nothing has changed for centuries. What is especially attractive about this Bazar is that **you can find many “hidden” passages into old buildings.** Some of them are in ruins of course, but many have kept the facades in remarkable condition. This is a place to “loose your self” and wander freely to see where the alleys take you.

Don't forget to stop and have “a coke and a smile” or some tea and watch the old men sitting and playing Domino as there was nothing more important going on the world...







## Bazrama yet another refugee camp...!

With circa 5000 Syrian people on the run from a civil war...

I get something in my throat every time I look at the pictures I took at this camp – Bazrama and Damiz. It is so obvious that it could have been either you or I under different circumstances. These are people who went about their lives, when everything changed with the Civil war in their home country.

They have been fortunate at least to have a place to stay, not having to worry about when the next attack with bombs will hit their neighbourhood.

They are given rice 3 times per day with some bread and water in the morning. They get a small portion of meat once per week. There are not enough medical supplies. Many of the children are malnourished, and there are not enough medically trained personnel on site. Nor do they know how long they will be staying before going home...



Beautiful and proud people from a neighbouring country....





## Sulymaniyah is more westernized than Erbil!

We are nearing the end of this amazing trip! We arrive into Sulymaniyah in the evening just before sunset. We called ahead to check out on the hotel alternatives and opted for Hotel Taji Pash in the centre near the Mosque. Perfect location and also very good prices ca: 30 USD / person and night including breakfast.

The bazar area is quite big and quite a buzzing place with people and activities. You will find just about anything here.

Our main focus and purpose with visiting “Suly” was the Red Security Prison (Amna Suraka), which are today the regions “Genocide museum”. Once part of the Ba’ath Party (Saddam), the prison acted as a facility for torture and death. The site is well done and pretty much kept as it was when taken over by the Kurdish resistance group in the beginning of 1991. Bullet holes still remain in the walls and the main building is untouched. You also get a real feeling of what the prison cell section must have looked like once.

Make sure to visit this place in the morning as it closes at noon. They have also prepared a section of rooms and corridors for “remembrance” where there are lights in the ceiling ca: 4500 representing all the villages effected and pieces of cut mirrors on the wall representing each and every person killed ca: 192,000.

Outside in the yard there are tanks and other military vehicles.

