

## TRIP REVIEW

## IRAQ

by Ihab Zaki (March 2013)

I never thought it would be possible to make it into Iraq as a tourist. But I've just returned and I am eager to share my experience with other like-minded individuals who are considering it.

Let me start at the beginning. In March of 2012 I attended the travel convention in Berlin, Germany. As I was perusing the exhibits, deciding what companies to approach, I came across a huge pavilion that resembled the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. It certainly got my attention and so I entered and began a conversation with an Iraqi tour operator who told me that he was here (with the blessings of his government) to promote tourism to the German market. He went on to say that his company currently hosts travelers (in small groups) from many countries from around the world. I returned home filled with ideas on how to make this work and frankly questions as to the feasibility of such a plan. I began researching the topic and found a UK-based travel company that was currently running several tours a year into Iraq. Digging deeper I found that his tours included several American tourists (which answered the question as to whether or not the US market would be interested) and finally I heard through the grapevine that one of my loyal clients had been one of those travelers. I contacted her to get her impressions and soon realized that with some adjustments (best available hotels rather than budget for instance) this would be something that my clientele would be interested in. After much back and forth discussion with the agent I met in Berlin, we plotted a very comprehensive tour that would begin in Basra in the very south, travel to Mosul in the very north and offer an extension to Kurdistan. Because this is a new destination for STS and one that is just emerging I decided it would be best if I accompanied the group. Okay...I really wanted to go



on this trip and that was just an excuse, but a valid one nonetheless! I was pleased that the tour filled within a few weeks after I began spreading the word with 15 intrepid explorers all loyal clients that had traveled with us many times before. The pressure was on!

Days before the adventure began I started having pre-tour concerns. I had questions as to whether I was a pioneer doing something rather unusual or was this desire of mine to put Iraq on the tourist map nothing more than a crazy pipedream. Friends and family were far from reassuring that I was doing the right thing as they all thought I had totally lost my mind. Their pessimistic comments kept echoing in my head through the series of flights that I had to take to get to my ultimate destination. Finally, by the last flight (Istanbul to Basra), I was determined to set aside these doubts and immersed myself in a book on the ancient history of Mesopotamia. Instead I dreamt of the mystical names of cities and empires that have long since disappeared along with the kings and gods that ruled them. Nineveh, Nimrud, Ur, Babylon, Sumer, are names of places that have been filling my head causing a deep rooted desire to follow in the footsteps of the ancients that once inhabited these places.



I finally admitted to myself that I was not heading there merely because it was my professional duty but also because of my pressing desire to discover the land and its history. I succumbed to my weakness of having a restless spirit and a wandering soul that yearns to immerse itself in exotic places for the thrill of discovery even above comfort. The feeling was so intense that I had to pinch myself to let the reality that I was truly going there sink in. I would not be going alone as I met up with the group in Istanbul for the last leg of the journey and I couldn't help but wonder if they too suffer from a burning desire to quench an insatiable thirst for knowledge.



I recalled a paragraph I once read in C.W. Ceram's book "Gods, Graves and Scholars" in 1949 that said the following: "Flat was the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers, but here and there mysterious mounds rose out of the plain. Dust swirled about these protuberances, piling the black earth into steep dunes.... The Bedouin who rested by these mounds, letting their camels graze... had no idea what they might contain.... Here evolved... archaeology's greatest triumphs.... the land of mounds showed no visible traces of past greatness. There were no temples and statues to fire the archaeological effort.... No pyramids and obelisks reared into the sky.... The blank faces of Bedouin and Kurd failed to reflect their ancestral greatness.... the investigators had little to go on but some poetical descriptions from the Bible. That and some clay shards, covered with cuneiform characters, which looked... as if 'birds had been walking over wet sand'.... the archaeological conquest in this arena was particularly memorable."





I shall probably, but by no means certainly come back in one piece to tell the tales of such a land... nice dinner and then I fainted for a short sleep dreaming of Mesopotamia while in my cramped airplane seat. Will the journey be wonderful, marvelous, frustrating, nerve-wracking, glorious, dangerous, magnificent or thrilling... who knows!



The trip started with a bit of a bump in Istanbul. I can only surmise that the agent at the gate for our flight was not accustomed to seeing American travelers heading to Basra. This was the first of a few ARGO moments (feeling the ominous hand of someone halting the plane at the last minute and demanding that we disembark and return to the terminal). But we were allowed to board the plane and took off sometime after midnight, anxious but hopeful. The landing was rather an eerie one as you could see a vast expanse of desert from every window and the city was engulfed by a dust storm, barely a couple of hours after dawn broke as we touched down in Basra. We were met with another obstacle, as the officers at the airport did not have the supplemental approval paper from the central authority in Baghdad that would grant us entry. After a few phone calls by our local representative, the approval arrived and we entered the country.

Most of us had been up and on the road for nearly 2 days, but you could feel the excitement and sense of adventure surrounding the group as we approached the bus that would whisk us away on our journey. It was a relief to see this giant German bus with ample seats, air conditioning and a toilet was going to be ours through the journey. The delay in the airport on arrival dictated that we make some alterations to our program (see the notice at the end of every itinerary that warns about this very thing happening...sometimes it actually does!) I was grateful for my fellow travelers' patience and acceptance as we departed for the town of Al Qurna, an hour from the airport.



The town is situated in the confluence of the two mighty rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates that gave this entire region the name Mesopotamia, which translates to Between the Rivers. On the Tigris side we visited a park, which exist to commemorate a tree. It represents the location of paradise and supposedly, it was planted by Adam! And if that's not enough for you...Abraham has visited the site as well. Welcome to Iraq...we are now headed to Basra for lunch. A busy place decorated with plastic and colored lights catering mainly to local middle class, not foreigners of course. Our first absolutely delicious Iraqi meal! A salty spicy soup, seven dishes of mezze (hors-d'oeuvres), hummus, cucumbers, tomatoes, olives and piles of hot flatbread straight out of the oven, then a dish of chicken legs and thighs with piles of rice and baked beans and peas to pour on it.

Going to Al Qurna and back to Basra was when we started getting acquainted with the populated Iraqi countryside, the chaos of auto jams, the vital pedestrian and petty-merchant life by and on the



roads' edges, the costumes of men and women, the crummy houses and occasional mosques, the endless election posters, the numerous flags, national ones, provincial ones, and religious ones, the dried mud-flats, green fields and date palms- and the endless check points. Stop the bus. Count us, glance or collect the passports, and off we go again... that is how bureaucracy will follow us every day I guess.

The recent war in Iraq has taken its toll on Basra. Gone is the Museum of Archaeology as well as the museum dedicated to the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war. Where all the artifacts have disappeared to is anyone's guess. There were also a couple of mosques, among them the ancient Masjid Ali, a Friday mosque dedicated to the first imam Ali's battle with Fatima. The mosque was destroyed by Saddam Hussein and in its place, there is now a new edifice constructed after the demolition of the ancient site. There is a road along a canal with 19th century merchant homes known as Shenashil Houses that are noteworthy for their unique architecture – they are now dilapidated beyond belief. Most of them are unoccupied and falling apart. One is housing Iraqi soldiers that guard the neighborhood. If circumstances were different, this would be a wonderful street to renovate for restaurants and upscale shops. But as things are, these houses are located in a city that has much more urgent problems to take care of than historical homes. Most likely, they are doomed.



The sandstorm had moved on and we had a reasonably clear sky in the afternoon. Immediately, the sun felt twice as strong and temperatures were high. And many of us were sluggish especially after so many days and flights to get here. But a ride in a boat on the **Shatt Al-Arab**, as the Tigris and Euphrates are known, to view the sunset, perked us up again. We saw a few ships Saddam sank that jut out of the river and are now being used by the locals as docks or for shelter. We passed by one of Saddam's palaces - reportedly he owned 40 palaces all over the country and would notify at least three each day that he would be coming and to have food prepared. If he showed up at all was questionable, but he hoped to distract his enemies and minimize the likelihood of an attack on his life. Chin Shih Huan Di, the Chinese emperor did something similar in his paranoia. He always traveled with two carriages and nobody knew in which one he was actually riding thus increasing his chances for survival by 50%. Saddam went way beyond that. This palace, as well as the subsequent one we would see was looted to the last removable object.



Afterwards, we finally settled at our hotel, a pleasing property with nice rooms and a great restaurant where we had a lovely buffet-style dinner. Other guests were mainly oil men coming to expand the again flourishing Southern Iraq Oil Field, so Basra was surely turning prosperous again. Outside the hotel, it was encouraging to see the riverfront lined with restaurants, teashops, hookah (water pipe) cafes and an amusement park with a giant Ferris wheel. Life does go on.



After a badly needed night's sleep, on a bed rather than in airplane seats or on airport benches we departed for Ur, site of one of the most important and best restored ziggurats in all of Iraq: The Ziggurat of Ur. A ziggurat is a temple tower that each Mesopotamian town would have erected to honor its city god. Our enthusiastic archaeologist, Professor Geoff Emberling, gave us a wonderful overview of the history of Mesopotamia along the way. The fantastic stories surrounding this region that have been retold describe a flood that occurred during Biblical times. Archaeologists have attempted to scientifically prove the accuracy of this record. Some things have been substantiated and the belief is that Ur was a major city-state in the 3rd millennium BC based on treasures that were discovered here. Many of the objects can now be found in the British Museum. What is left in situ is more than many of the other archaeological sites in Mesopotamia have on display. The entire city is huge and we were only able to visit a small portion, including a fenced-off area in which digging is still expected to continue – someday. The ziggurat has been restored and thankfully with many of the original bricks. Of the several levels it once had, only 1.5 levels remain. In trying to envision the size of the full structure one can only surmise that it must have been impressive if not intimidating. The site guards an iconic figure that speaks fluent English (and 4 other languages), took over the position from his father who inherited the guarding of the site from his father before him. Having spent his whole life at this site learning from his predecessors, he was able to give us a remarkable explanation along with some maps and pictures of all the major discoveries and artifacts unearthed in this place. Abu Amir is a delightful man and we all encouraged him to instill in his young son Amir (who is now just 8 years old) the love of Ur so he can carry the baton one day and maintain the legacy.



The day had yet one more glory for us! Five miles north of Ur was a much smaller, lower, older mound (Tell) called Tell Ubaid, considered to be one of the oldest sites in Mesopotamia, dating back to about 2800 B.C, and this is where archaeologist Leonard Wooley discovered bronze eagle reliefs and other artifacts, now in the British Museum. We stopped in the middle of the desert close to a slight mound in the terrain surrounded by a broken fence. There was nothing to indicate what this site was, no one guarding it, in fact, no sign of life at all. Yet, when we walked over, we discovered a huge cache of pottery shards and some of the cones that once made up ancient wall mosaics. These pieces were strewn everywhere just littering the ground. Many legends surround Eridu and much of the knowledge about it comes from written sources. In its heyday in the 3rd millennium BC it is believed to have had a port that connected it via lagoons to the rivers, unimaginable today. The track to the hill was muddy so the bus could not make it up but a crew of soldiers took our group in their 2 pickup trucks, adding a sense of excitement to our adventure. Our group was truly amazed at the fragments that surrounded us and kept picking up pottery pieces to test Geoff's expertise. He would go over the artistic styles and the periods with an enthusiasm that was contagious. All in all it was the perfect ending to a wonderful day.



We left Tell Ubaid quite pleased with our discovery and headed to the city of Nasseriya and the Hotel Al-Djanoob, our stopping place for the night. This funky little hotel had a great location on the Euphrates, and the rooms were fine, everything worked – plumbing, electricity – it offered free internet,



and had a nice restaurant. The furniture was so eclectic that someone in our group suggested that the owner must have acquired it at estate sales from various Saddam palaces.

Electric outages in Iraq are common daily events and so everyone has a generator that usually kicks in a few minutes after the break in service occurs. As we toured the country in our motor coach we couldn't help but notice the unsightly mess of electric wires hanging in every possible direction. Many are quite low and at times our driver would stop the bus so that our guide Bassem could pop the vent open and climb on the roof of the vehicle with a wooden stick to lift the wires and assist the driver to navigate through the jumble of lines!



The following day we departed for one of the most unique places in Iraq: the Marshes. Traditionally, this area has had the poorest and least educated people of Iraq mixed in with a large immigrant population. Since the marshes are difficult to navigate for visitors from the outside, they have been a favorite refuge for rebels and dissidents. Clashes between Saddam's regime and this region were frequent; cycles of rebellion were followed by retaliation. In the intervening years since the fall of Saddam, things have calmed down. I can't think of any region in the world quite like this. Channels measuring 10-12 feet in depth run through reeds that grow at least another foot or two above the water level. These reeds are harvested and used for the construction of unique traditional houses. People live on small mud islands either isolated or in miniscule village clusters. Water buffalo are raised in this area and roam freely as they graze right in the middle of shallower areas. An amazing array of birds lives in this area as well as an abundance of delicious indigenous fish that command top dollar in the markets in Baghdad.



Our group boarded 5 small boats for a thrilling ride through this dramatic scenery. Afterwards, we marveled at how the inhabitants were able to crisscross those hundreds of channels with ease and how the fishermen know them like the back of their hand. We were sure that if we tried to find our way around without a local guide we would be hopelessly lost. The landmarks are just too subtle. We equated it to our own knowledge of the roads in our home cities. It was interesting to see that men as well as women worked these boats, operating the long, wooden poles to maneuver them around manually. Each one is also equipped with a small motor.

We came upon a village where the houses and livestock pens were all in a jumble, as if the animals were part of the family. Dogs and geese woofed and waddled through the scene and the presence of a car indicated that there was at least one "road" passable enough to connect the village to the mainland. Road is probably too generous a term, more likely it was a muddy track wide enough to allow single-line traffic. There were no signs of electricity, so none of the creature comforts that we are so accustomed to such as lights, refrigeration, television and certainly no air conditioning or internet!

How people live like this is utterly unimaginable to a city person like me. But I have to admit that as an outsider looking in I tend to romanticize this way of life that is quickly disappearing. I am not sure the inhabitants appreciate it and for them modernization probably cannot come soon enough.

The government has built locks to block water access to the marshes. In response to rebellions vast regions have been drained to control the “unruly” population and incredible damage has been done to the environment. Much has been reclaimed, but we also passed areas where it was obvious that marshes once thrived and now nothing more than cracked dry land exists. Many of the reed houses have also been replaced by brick constructions. Still, from what remains today, we were able to glean an amazing look into a way of life that has been recorded on cylinder seals of ancient Mesopotamia!



The following day was yet another one dedicated to ancient places. We headed out to explore 2 of the least visited sites in Iraq: Girzu and Lagash. In their heyday both were enormous cities of grandeur and elegance with many elaborate waterways. Girzu flourished ca. 2200 BC after the fall of the Akkadian empire and was formed by a large expanse of tells (mounds) and according to Geoff, each and every one probably houses amazing relics beneath them. Serious excavations have never been undertaken in this area and as seasons passed without anyone guarding or maintaining the site, looting was a profitable occupation post the 2003 invasion period. After touring the ancient water reservoir we slowly made our way uphill towards the depression where some of the most renowned Sumerian statues have been discovered. To our amazement and surprise, we stumbled upon a part of a cuneiform tablet in very good condition so we all gathered and listened to Geoff reading it and identifying the period of the piece. It turned out we were surrounded by many broken tablets possibly the recorded history of a civilization that thrived more than 4 thousand years ago. What a thrill to find ourselves, in the midst of this amazing ruin. We had a glimpse of what it must be like for an archaeologist to make a fortuitous discovery. I am happy to report that our highly educated group, were able to appreciate the situation and all adhered to the “pick up a piece, study it, photograph it but then put it back where you found it” rule. I am sure that some of us, in our heart of hearts, were tempted to pocket some pieces to display in our living rooms back in the states. But we didn’t out of respect to our host country.



Our next stop was Lagash, the largest Sumerian city and another vast archaeological site made up of tells with an amazing quantity of charred pottery spread in every direction over many kilometers. To expand on the experience of “archaeologist for a day” Geoff suggested a mock dig or treasure hunt, where we would fan out in all directions and have 20 minutes to find that one object that would make our name in the archaeology world. At the end of the allotted time, Geoff went over each piece to assess its place in the historical record and its artistic value. I don’t mean to brag...well yes I do...one of my pieces, a green glazed shard decorated with a frieze that was once a top for an urn won first prize! We then scattered our pieces over the field before heading back to our hotel.



We packed our suitcases and departed for another of Iraq's famous Sumerian sites and the most thoroughly excavated: Uruk, one of the major centers of Mesopotamia. It was here, around 4000-3200 BC that cuneiform script was developed. Gilgamesh was supposedly one of the rulers of Uruk and fought here with Enkidu. Upon arrival we gathered at the guardhouse where we sat on the cushioned carpets to listen to the attendant's stories about the last time an excavation was undertaken here. We had brought along a picnic lunch that we consumed before wandering off to explore our surroundings. Envisioning the sand-covered hills and the crumbling mud walls transfixed into palaces, temples, residences, and even a port, was an exercise that stretched my mind beyond its capacity. What an experience! Sumer is a Holy Land of archaeology, and indeed the Cradle of Civilization and Uruk is its Holy of Holies. The heat of the day was stifling, around 92 degrees (in the first half of March). One can only imagine how uncomfortable it would be in June, July and August!



Another day, another amazing destination, and this time we headed to Al Kifl, a town that was once home to a large Jewish population until they immigrated to Israel in the 1950's. To this day, much of the land and housing is still owned by these absentee landlords. According to our guide, Al Kifl is a town that displays the occasional bouts of tension as the Sunnis, Shias, and Nationalists that now reside there are not on the best of terms. We however, were greeted with a warm, friendly welcome. The "must see" site in Al Kifl is a shrine dedicated to Ezekiel, a prophet mainly venerated in the Torah, but also mentioned twice in the Koran. The building, dating back to the 14th century, was once a synagogue, still recognizable through several features, and now functions as a mosque. The balcony for women is still in place, and traces of Hebrew writing and some of the synagogue's old frescoes still remain. Active excavations are being carried out behind the mosque to unearth the building's history. As the VIPs in town, we were invited for tea with the head imam of the shrine and to sign his guest book.



The oldest covered souq of Iraq is adjacent to the shrine and we were allowed to stroll around in it freely. That is, if you ignore the four armed soldiers who walked in front of and behind us and would not let us stray or linger. We caused quite a stir in the souq. The town is used to foreign visitors, but mostly pilgrims from Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh, not American tourists.

We left Al Kifl and headed to Kufa, the site of the 7th century palace Dar al Imara. Excavations were begun here in the early 20th century by foreign teams. The site is now in its third phase under the direction of an Iraqi team. Dozens of people were busy working at the site when we arrived. The dig is situated in close proximity to one of the main Islamic attractions of





Kufa: the house of Ali, the fourth caliph and first imam of the Shia. The site you visit however is a brick house that is only 9 years old! My sense of historical preservation was completely violated. A 9 year-old house does not impart a sense of a historically important place from the 7th century! But none of the Shia followers seemed to care. They walked around, touching the walls of the rooms of the sons of Ali, Hussein and Hassan. They gazed at the library of Ali, admired the fountain from which he drank and were overcome with emotion to the point of shedding a tear regardless of the authenticity of the place. I guess, an agnostic like me will always miss the point.

Only 7 kilometers from Kufa is the holy city of **Najaf**, arguably the site of the most important shrine in Iraq, though to some that moniker belongs to Kerbala. Historically, there is little that could top the tomb of Ali, the first imam. But many followers of the faith express a more emotional connection to the Kerbala shrines that are dedicated to the martyrdom of Hussein, Hassan, and Abbas. We were able to get a glimpse of this important Shia shrine, but we were not allowed into the shrine itself. We were however, hosted in the courtyard of the mosque, which was a delightful interlude. We entered the complex after removing our shoes and walked on the impeccably clean floor and carpets of the courtyard where we were able to observe the day-to-day routine of the enclave. People were resting, praying, reading, playing, chanting, or beating their chests. This experience was easily one of the most memorable moments of all of my time in Iraq.



As an Arabic speaker and someone who by birth could claim to be from the same geographical part of the world, it was assumed that I was a “believer”. I did not volunteer any information to the contrary when I was informed that I would be admitted into the shrine and that I could take pictures. Up to this point, none of the group had been granted the use of a camera and so I would be able to provide them with photos of what they would not be allowed to see. I could never have imagined the spectacle that awaited me. There is nothing unusual about the shrine itself. It is the repository for a sarcophagus that is draped with a green cloth and is surrounded by a square box lined with a silver (or was it gold?) metal grid that everyone is trying to touch. The walls were all covered with reflective glass that imparts a sense of enormity to the place. Women have access to only a small portion of the shrine, less than one quarter. As I got closer to the shrine, the sea of wailing people tightened around me. I wish I could have recorded the look of fierce determination on the faces of some of the women to get to the shrine and touch it. I will remember it as elbow-thrusting madness!



Back in the courtyard, we had a group picture taken in front of the gold covered dome and 2 minarets. As we were trying to position ourselves we constantly had to make way for the steady stream of men carrying coffins of relatives or dear friends. These men would dart through the open space into the shrine area make a quick circle around the courtyard



and exit towards the cemetery. With the remains of 8 million departed souls, this repository for the dead spreads out in all directions as far as the eye can see and is believed to be the largest cemetery in the world. A final resting spot in this holy ground is most coveted by Shiites because of its proximity to Ali the 1st imam. Fervent believers from as far away as Pakistan and India wish to be buried here.



We took some time to wander through the labyrinth of the nearby bazaar that caters mostly to the pilgrims visiting the site. There was not much for us to buy in terms of artifacts and artisanal products but just being able to mingle with the “true believers” who are buying Chinese products, prayer rugs, chadors, sweets and jewelry was a pleasant way to end our day. We then walked back to our nearby hotel to relax and freshen up before dinner.



The following day we set out for Nippur, a site that has not been accessible in well over a decade, making us the envy of many an archaeologist. Hard to believe that just 100 years ago, there was still so much water in the area – the reason for the existence of the town in the first place - and that at that time it was only accessible by boat. We walked through dried out riverbeds, with not a trace of water left.

Over 5000 years of uninterrupted occupation at Nippur, undisturbed by major catastrophes, has made this site unique in all of Iraq. There are material remains from 4500 BC to 800 AD. This was not a capital, but a center of learning and philosophy. There was a library that yielded tens of thousands of clay tablets, many of which have not been published! We literally walked over pristine ground leaving impressions in the crumbling earth. But of course, within a few weeks our footsteps will be covered. There are not many protective measures in place for the monuments and some of them were the setting for recent battles. We noticed numerous spent bullet shells strewn about.



At Nippur just as at Uruk, there were heaps and heaps of pottery shards littering the area. It felt as if the archaeologists had plenty to work with and in fact too much had been dug up and they did not know what to do with the “leftovers”. Both sites had railroad tracks and small iron wagons that had been left behind, indicators of major excavation efforts. For decades these sites have not seen any active archaeological work, not even a visiting archaeologist.





To some extent we felt as if we were treading on virgin territory...well...it's nice to imagine it that way.

Down by the guard house was a more modern building, Chicago House, for the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago has inherited Nippur. Truly scientific work was done for some seasons by Prof. McGuire Gibson of Chicago, but he has endured twenty three years of frustration since 1990, since when wars, politics and looter-bandits have made field work impossible. A guard told us that they had prevented all looting at Nippur, unlike the case at other archaeological sites. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The guards opened up Chicago House to us. Piles of railroad track sections and water tanks in the court, for safe-keeping. No furnishings and some crumbling. In one room there was the slightly damaged but wonderful mural, by some Chicago wiseacres, of the tell, with strange beasts and trees - and people and gods. Prof. Gibson is shown, perhaps eight inches tall, in a blue uniform with the horned headdress of a Sumerian deity, riding in a horseless chariot, distributing dollar bills. True Sumerian art! Whee!

Next it was on to Ukhaidir, a 9th century desert palace, or fortress, or was it a hideout? In any case, it should not be missed! It is a huge cubical construction with tower-like bastions of half-circles interspersed in the nearly 200 meter long walls that are visible for miles in the flat desert landscape. Heavily, but tastefully restored, it really gives you an idea about medieval palace architecture. A walk along the upper turrets affords views into all the inner courts and helps to sort out the maze you have to maneuver through when walking at ground level. The palace has two mosques, and both have mihrabs (niches) that according to guidebooks and historians are oriented neither toward Mecca nor Jerusalem. This is nearly unheard of as far as I can tell. A mihrab is not put in randomly or without thought. This is a curious puzzle. Nearby, there is a brand-new visitor's center just waiting for those busloads of tourists to arrive. The problem is that they are not coming as the site receives maybe a couple of hundred foreign visitors per year.



The Sunnis have Mecca and Medina, but the Shiites have Kerbala and Najaf. And in Kerbala they have two of the most important shrines less than 200 meters apart from one another and several smaller shrines around the town. The importance of these two shrines becomes clear when you start to count the number of Iranian pilgrims paying homage at any given time. They come by the busload not just during festival times but, all year round!



In Kerbala, the Husaynia Shrine is dedicated to one of the early imams, Hussein, and there is also the shrine of his brother Al Abbas. These shrines were attacked, flooded, destroyed, raided and bombed by Saddam because of their importance to the Shiia

religion. This was a great place for people watching, and to just soak up the lively atmosphere that surrounds it! The shrine was filled with pilgrims who often came in groups all the way from Iran. They gathered around their leaders, clearly identifiable as Iranian mullahs by their brown overcoats and their white, black, or green turbans, and read, chanted, or beat their chests in outwardly signs of mourning over the dead imam Hussein. I could have sat there for hours just watching the emotional displays. The sick are brought here, the old and the young. People often stay for days and come to the shrine to pray for hours. It is not all serious as they also have picnics, play games, and socialize.

Security is fierce. We passed multiple checkpoints to get into Kerbala including three just to get near the shrine. We then had to pass inspection with the “modesty police” to make sure that we were dressed appropriately especially the women who had to don the hijab. Luckily, our group was all suitably covered so we were given a guide to take us through the mosque except for the shrine – of course! Once again, as the only non-infidel in the group, I was allowed to enter the shrine and take pictures that I could share at a later time with my group. We were told that the staff members that work in the two shrines every day to maintain, guide, host and organize the pilgrims, number around 12,000. Aside from their decent salaries, they are fed 3 meals a day. Just one look around the place is enough to confirm that religious tourism is a profitable business and is surely a monumental source of economic wealth for the town.



The mosque is enormous and beautifully, though recently, decorated with amazing tile work. Afterwards we climbed up to visit the small museum that included what was left of the many gifts given by rulers and leaders from around the world to the shrine. It housed an excellent display of weaponry, shields, gilded Qurans, ornate vases, silver chandeliers and illuminated manuscripts written in beautiful calligraphy. It was here that we encountered a group of local media. They were astounded when they heard that American tourists were visiting the shrine and Iraq. They requested an interview and expressed their amazement that I had brought a group of Americans to the country. Once they got beyond that they mostly wanted to make sure that we were enjoying our stay, that we were being treated with respect and that we were well received by their fellow countrymen. They were appreciative of the fact that we were there to learn about their country and its people. They wished us well and hoped we would enjoy our time in Iraq.



Another bus journey, many check points (we developed an amazing tolerance by then to such delaying experiences, and the group never complained as long as the stop did not exceed 1 hour at a time). What is there to say about Babylon or at least the Babylon of today. Under Saddam, a rebuilding project was put in place that has practically resurrected the site from nothing but crumbling hills. The entire central palace of Babylon shines in 20th century fired bricks and yes, it is impressive to walk through these



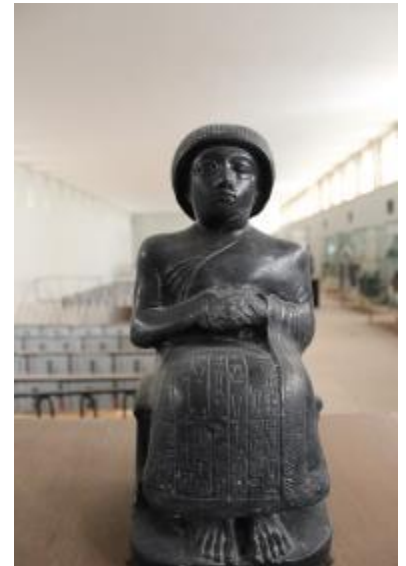


vast courtyards and to think that on the reconstructed platform of the throne room Alexander the Great died, surrounded by his mourning generals, but he certainly did not die on *this* platform. Just on the one that used to be here. Oh well...

The Babylon of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BC) is razed and sunk below the water table, so even archaeologists can't reach it. Where the hanging gardens and the foundation of the famous tower of Babel used to be, there is now a barbed wired fence barring visitors from entry. Instead, a military base built by the Americans sits on this plot of land that was the site of these ancient ruins, much to the chagrin of the world. Of course some countries, Germany for instance, are not in a position to complain. They would be wise not to protest too much when it comes to Babylon, as they were the ones who removed the



famed Ishtar Gate that is now on exhibit at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin along with the Zeus Altar from Pergamon. The archaeologist who led us around the site was very pleased with their more recent work and he pointed out excavations undertaken by German teams. But according to stories that have been passed down, the Germans also cracked the big lion of Babylon that still stands in situ when they attempted to remove it. This led to a debate amongst ourselves, as to whether or not we felt that Babylon should have been restored to resemble a facsimile of its ancient self or if the crumbling mud hills should have been left untouched (ideally combined with an informative 3D digital reconstruction and a good floor plan.) I must confess that when I was in Berlin attending that conference, I made it a point despite my very tight schedule to hop on a train and visit the museum to marvel at the original Ishtar Gate. Just seeing how majestic and beautiful it looked, touching an edifice that survived thousands of years and standing miniscule in front of it in all its grandeur, that was the impetus that ignited the spark that triggered my desire to stand in the spot where this stunning architectural gem came from.



Looking beyond Babylon and the gorgeous views over the Euphrates your eyes settle on the ruined towers of one of the **palaces of Saddam**. This one is open to the public and one is free to roam around. It has been looted to the last light bulb and covered with graffiti. The sheer size and cost of this palace and the fact that he most likely was never in residence, indicates the magnitude of his madness, not to mention the waste of government funds. It is understandable that his subjects felt a bitter resentment towards their leader and took out their vengeance by looting and vandalizing this once majestic place after the fall of Saddam, turning the palace into an eerie, desolate ruin. Saddam built this one over the ruins of Babylon to remind himself that he is the current lion of Babylon and the descendent of the greatest of civilizations. On the flip side, we could all see beyond the current sad state of the place and could envision how magnificent it would be as either a luxury hotel or a museum of some sort.

After a full day of discovery, we eagerly continued to Baghdad full of anticipation for what lay ahead of us. By the time we reached the city darkness had fallen putting a damper on our expectations but we proceeded to a wonderful Syrian restaurant for yet another satisfying meal before heading to the Hotel Uruk, my last night in country. It turned out to be a fantastic place, with large rooms nicely

furnished and clean bathrooms. We all settled in for a good night's sleep, as tomorrow would be a busy day.

The next morning we all woke up enthusiastic and thrilled to be finally heading to the National Museum of Archaeology, which we had heard so much about. Who doesn't remember the disheartening news of how it had been looted during the time of the US invasion. There is some satisfaction in the fact that many of the stolen pieces had been successfully retrieved but one still mourns for all the pieces of history that remain lost.

Upon leaving our hotel we were hit with one of the ugly realities of Baghdad: TRAFFIC! The city has been choked off by the blockage and barricading of almost all side streets for security reasons. The entire population of 4 million people must use a fixed set of major roads and avenues to travel about the city. It took us about an hour to get from the hotel to the museum (possibly not exceeding a distance of 10 miles). We didn't let this dampen our spirits, as the group seemed as excited as children going to the zoo! The museum staff met us after a delay of half an hour, the time it took to process our permits. We were informed that we would be allowed to use cameras inside the museum, welcomed news. We spent the next 2 hours going from one gallery to the next in chronological order. The local docent and Geoff took turns describing pieces and taking questions. At the time of our visit a BBC TV crew was filming a documentary on the museum. They requested interviews with several of our group and posted a clip on the BBC web site.



I left the group after the museum and grabbed a cab to the airport. The group departed in 2 mini vans for the old quarter of Baghdad (it would have been impossible to enter and exit with the bus). The departure procedure was quite a surreal experience as my cab dropped me in a parking lot full of buses. From here I took a seat on a bus after loading my bags in the baggage compartment. We then drove a few kilometers to another spot where we disembarked, picked up our bags and a K9 unit sniffed every bag. Next we boarded another bus that carried us a few more kilometers to the airport entrance. Once again, we along with our luggage were unloaded. Our passports were checked our bags received the K9 treatment one more time before we were allowed to enter the building where we had to put our bags through a series of 3 X-ray machines. Finally I arrived at the counter... frazzled but feeling safer...I think!!!

So now I am home...looking at my photos, writing about my experiences and reliving the adventure. I should tell you that we were provided with security for the first half of the trip, and then half way through it, we were advised that the authorities decided against it. At first we were slightly intimidated by this but in no time it was accepted as part of the routine. I remembered that our groups had similar experiences in Libya, Algeria and in certain areas of Egypt. Recently I received information that the Iraqi government would no longer provide security details for foreign visitors. I personally never felt threatened or uncomfortable with safety issues. If you have concerns or would like to talk to another member of our group, please contact the office and we will put you in touch with someone who would be willing to share their observations with you.

