

by Ihab Zaki

Being a young traveler, I've had few Middle East experiences having only been to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain if you count those. Being in Kurdistan was an experience I didn't think I would ever have. The culture and landscape were nothing I was expecting, considering I was technically in Iraq. The people were unbelievably kind and interested in our presence there. The city for being so weak still had a life to them and these beautiful resorts and 5-star hotels. To say the least, Kurdistan shocked me in all the best ways.



Following my 10 day tour in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, I returned to Michigan with so many memories and vivid images of the wonderful things I had seen and the delightful and hospitable Kurdish people that I encountered on my journey! I immediately attempted to sit down and write my review, but felt torn as there were so many things I wanted to share and my brain just couldn't keep up...but here I am...finally putting my thoughts, experiences and feelings down on paper!

Realizing how a visit to Iraq proper still seems to be so unattainable at this time, I looked at a tour of Kurdistan as being the closest I will get for a while. Kurdistan, the autonomous northern region of Iraq predominantly inhabited by the Kurds, is amazingly different from the areas populated by the Arabs. For one thing it is safer as it is free from the daily violence that plagues the rest of the country. It is also experiencing a construction and investment boom, modernizing at a very fast pace and most importantly the terrain is a stark opposite of the desert that characterizes middle and southern Iraq. Kurdistan is a delight for mountain lovers. Rightly labeled "The Other Iraq", it is a democratic model for Iraq's future.

Upon my arrival in Turkey I encountered a slight delay due to an airline schedule change and was forced to overnight in Istanbul. I joke of course, because this city never bores me and I do not perceive spending a night in it as a "forced" activity. The next morning I caught a flight to Suleimaniyah along the eastern border of the country rather than to the capital Erbil as originally planned. Soon after arriving I bought a SIM card for \$5 for my cell phone in order to have a Kurdish number to make contact with my guide and



group in Erbil. Next I negotiated with a taxi driver for a \$100 fee to take me to Erbil right away to hook up with my 5 intrepid travelers who had reached Kurdistan a couple of days prior to my arrival. The 3-hour trip traveling at speeds of 100 miles an hour woke me from my jet lag and kept me at the edge of my seat. Thankfully the roads are quite good and the Hyundai was very comfortable. I finally settled down to take in my surroundings as we sped passed and the oil fields with their landmark flaming rigs dotting the horizon are what sticks in my mind. My heart was pounding as I realized “I am finally in Kurdistan” after having prepared for so long for this trip and imagining how it would feel and what it would look like. People frequently raise their eyebrows in disbelief when I tell them about some of the more “unusual” destinations that I take travelers to but this time it was different... they were in UTTER shock when I said Northern Iraq! I hence decided not to defend myself this time, but to wait until I returned when I would be able to talk about the experience from an educated position.

On the way to Erbil, we saw across the green line the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, notorious for sporadic sectarian clashes and repeated suicide attacks. Though I could see them just a few miles away there was a secure protective line, a well-guarded border that has succeeded for years to keep the Kurdish part safe. After arriving at the beautiful ex-“Sheraton” hotel in Erbil, I met with my fellow travelers and experienced the usual jolt of joy when I re-unite with some of my favorite companions that have been on so many trips with me in the past! We headed out for a relaxing dinner where we caught up on stories and afterwards I was able to settle in for a good night’s sleep.

The next day we left heading northwest towards the beautiful mountains to the city of Dohuk. We gained elevation as we traveled through stunning scenery along the winding mountain roads. Our first stop was at a 4th century Syriac monastery that gave us a glimpse at the wonderful coexistence of faiths in Kurdistan! A delightful monk that spoke fluent English toured with us and explained the monastic life, and showed us the old section of the complex with the domed part of the ancient church and the tombs of the bishops and monks. Unlike Iraq proper, various Christian denominations as well as Sunnis, a few Shiites and a sect called Yazidis coexist without the aggression that prevails just south of here.

After lunch we headed to the site of the famous battle of Gaugamela between King Darius and Alexander the Great in 331 BC. There on a mound overlooking the vast valley, Colonel Harry Schute, one of the owners of The Other Iraq Tours gave us a very informative presentation with charts and maps that made us feel we were re-enacting the battle. We could almost sense the ground tremble as it did those many years ago under the feet of the Greek infantry and the Persian archers! As in so many other places around the world, little children came out from the nearby village to greet us. A clever young boy of about 9 years old asked our guide (whose name is Balin) “ Every few



weeks I see you come here with different foreigners and you climb on this hill and keep talking... about what exactly? What's there to see anyhow? Who are these people?" It was a very astute remark and we all laughed at his wit while Balin tried to explain to him what he does and who we are.

Afterwards, we headed to an amazing small town called Lalish, the center and holy city for the Yazidi sect. They claim to be the oldest religion in the world, and it is a bizarre mixture of other faiths. Originally related to Hinduism, they are technically Moslems but they also baptize their children and they still have ties with Zoroastrianism. It is an amalgam of many creeds cloaked in Sufism. They have their own Holy book called "Black Book" and their faith is shrouded with mystery (like the Druze in Syria and Lebanon) as they do not reveal much of its tenets to outsiders of the faith. After a visit to their temple, we arrived at our modern elegant hotel in Dohuk, where we would be staying for 2 nights. It is a very pleasant city that is known for its colored houses: stark purple, blue, red, orange and yellow are strangely mixed and matched. Some of us who had the energy climbed up around sunset to a Zoroastrian cave which was once a fire temple and houses many symbols of ancient gods.

Next day we traveled to a small nearby town where we visited an amazing ancient Jewish synagogue that lies amidst a contemporary small village. The place, which is totally deserted, gave us a wonderful eerie sense of solitude. In it is the alleged tomb of the prophet Nahum. Sadly, we felt that without outside help, this edifice will disappear in a few years or be destroyed to make way for some modern housing. Another lovely drive snaking around the mountains took us to our second monastery in Kurdistan, but this time a Chaldean one. We explored the dark labyrinth of the three ancient altars and tombs and enjoyed unparalleled vistas of the valley below as a backdrop.



After lunch we drove to Zakho, the border town with Turkey where we saw the famous old Roman Bridge over the Habur River. We encountered some locals who as so often happens, wanted to chat and get acquainted. After this brief interlude we returned to Dohuk for dinner. I badly needed some laundry service given that lately I have taken to traveling with a carry-on bag and no checked luggage. I have to admit...it has its advantages: no more backaches from dragging large suitcases and over packing, no worrying about lost luggage, moving through customs much quicker as I am not waiting for my bags to appear, being able to board an earlier flight as I am carrying my bags and they have not been checked onto my original one. I arrived back to the hotel that night to find my shirts washed, ironed and waiting for me on the bed, thus reinforcing my decision to pack light. Decided to head upstairs for a drink at the bar before joining my companions for a fabulous meal at the Lebanese restaurant in the hotel.

We departed Dohuk the following morning, refreshed, relaxed and with clean clothes. We visited a few smaller sites such as a remnant of an aqueduct with reliefs and cuneiform text dating to the time of the Assyrian King Sanhareeb (704-681 BC). We had an impromptu stop at Sulav waterfall where some locals were dancing to loud Kurdish and Arabic music so we joined in, much to their surprise and a delightful time filled with laughter was had by all. Although the terrain of Kurdistan at this time of the year (October) is arid and semi-barren, we were repeatedly reminded by Balin that spring is more

beautiful as it turns green and lush in the months of April and May and the many waterfalls created by the melting snow complete the idyllic scene. I believe it must be a stunning place judging from the multitude of rapid rivers we drove along and the many small waterfalls that were still in evidence. But in my personal opinion, I think October is also a wonderful time to visit as the arid beauty of the rugged mountains gives it a special feeling that reflects the typical Kurdish landscape. It is this somewhat harsher climate that helped shape the culture and the heritage of the inhabitants.

We then drove to a very peaceful and extremely beautiful part of the country called Rawanduz. We stopped along the way at Shanidar, a huge, impressive cave where some of the world's first pre-historic remains were found. You reach the mouth of the cave by climbing 150 steps and your reward is the knowledge that you are standing in a spot that has been inhabited in one form or another since the time of Neanderthal man. We arrived at our resort (PANK) located on the edge of a majestic canyon surrounded by shimmering mountains. We were told that from one of the peaks there were views of Saddam's palaces and a 1970's astronomical observatory that was unfortunately damaged by the many wars this country has had since that time. We passed breathtaking landscapes with scattered Kurdish villages and we learned about their sad history and the systematic destruction by Saddam who flattened over 4000 Kurdish villages during his reign. We enjoyed a day of leisure at the resort and around it where we drove through the mountains and down to the bottom of the canyon and in the afternoon some of us stayed at the resort while others went on a tour to the nearby villages. After departing this heavenly area, we headed to the second largest city in Kurdistan and the most modern, Suleimaniya,



situated about 40 miles from the Iranian border. There we visited the so called "Red House of Torture" where Saddam killed thousands of Kurds. The buildings have been left the way they were after the battle between Saddam's troops and the Kurdish rebels in 1991. It also houses a beautiful and well-displayed ethnographic museum of Kurdish folk art, weapons, textiles, jewelry and carpets. Then we enjoyed an afternoon strolling through the old bazaar...and when I say old I mean 18th century, as Suleimanuiyah did not exist until 1784. Still, it was an enjoyable experience as some of us hunted for old silver jewelry and I headed to the carpet shop.

The following day, we drove to Halbja, the site of Saddam's worst attack and gassing of the Kurdish population on March 16th, 1988. We visited the memorial that housed some of the most horrific images of the attack and the graveyards that almost speak to you when you stroll through them. Very moving experience similar to such sad places around the world as Dachau, Auschwitz and the Killing Fields of Cambodia. On our way back we made a fascinating stop at the archaeological museum of the city; quite small and humble but displaying a reasonable collection of artifacts dating from 7000 BC to



Islamic and Ottoman times.

The next morning we headed back to Erbil, stopping at the old town of Koisinjak currently known as Koya. We toured the Jewish bazaar that is very quaint with winding alleyways and small shops, but no Jews living here any longer. Once inside, we stopped to visit the 18th century caravanserai and were told that a man who upholsters chairs had turned the place into his home and workshop. He was not to be found anywhere and Balin insisted we must see the place, so we entered to find this run down but lovely caravanserai. We had an enjoyable couple of hours walking through rooms, climbing up and down from floor to floor and finding so many old relics such as entire pottery jars, amphorae stacked in dark rooms and ancient carpets, torn and shabby looking but still interesting to see in the context of our surroundings. From here we headed to Erbil for my last night in country while the rest of the group would be spending a couple of days to explore the city.

I did not want to leave Kurdistan without visiting the two most important sites in Erbil, the Citadel and the Textile Museum. Our guide Balin offered to give me an abbreviated tour so I would not be disappointed. I must admit I was not expecting to be so impressed with the Citadel, BUT it is a masterpiece and certainly deserving of its addition to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list. The Citadel claims to be the oldest inhabited city in the world dating back to Sumerian times when it was called Urbellum or Arbella. It is believed that the prophet Abraham passed through it on his journey through Mesopotamia. The layers inside have piled up so high, that if you were to dig down just 200 feet, there would be an endless amount of objects to discover. The place was Sumerian then Babylonian then Greek then Persian, then Arab then Ottoman then modern, each adding a layer over the next! Inside the walls we stopped to see the marvelous collection at the Textile Museum, a privately owned enterprise. It is a little oasis inside a medieval house created by a Kurd who lived in Sweden and returned to Erbil to achieve his dream of collecting and preserving Kurdish textiles, hand woven nomadic rugs and carpets. Actually Mr. Lolan is considered an iconic figure in the preservation of woven art and he was kind enough to give us a lecture on the subject. Later he joined us for lunch where people bombarded him with questions about his work, life inside the citadel walls and the myths and stories shrouding it.



After lunch, my group was off to visit another cave, Bestoon, famous for its impressive stalactites and stalagmites. To my sadness, I had to bid them farewell and head to the airport to begin my journey home. The region was experiencing a sand storm that had started that morning but did not deter us from departing for Istanbul where I connected to my flight for Detroit arriving safe and sound the following day. I was ready to see my wife and two little girls and anxious to tell them about my thrilling adventure in northern Iraq, and how beautiful Kurdistan is!

In trying to sum up my experience in Kurdistan, I would have to begin by saying that it is an eclectic region which offered us a multitude of experiences and chance encounters: from the great walled city of Erbil to nearly deserted but still-functioning monasteries to gushing rivers like the Greater Zab and Lesser Zab, both feeding into the Tigris. The country is blessed with natural features such as mountains, canyons, caves and waterfalls that provided a magnificent backdrop to our travels. We marveled at the ancient desolate ruins of synagogues, churches, mosques and caravanserais in a region that has witnessed much and survived the worst. Most importantly it was the enriching exchanges with the Kurdish people who shared their culture, past history of suffering, promising future and their pride in their resilience to persevere in these trying times that made the most lasting impression. I hope this review and the few photos I have included will spark an interest to visit this region that would like to put the recent past behind them and go forward in peace. The best way to experience it is to pack and go. Let us know when you are ready and we will help you with the arrangements. The year 2010 looks promising, as at least two airlines, Turkish and Lufthansa, will begin offering direct service from Istanbul and Munich (respectively) to Erbil along with the airlines that currently offer flights from Beirut, Dubai, Athens, Amman and Vienna. As an American it is somewhat comforting to travel here knowing that the Kurds are very grateful to us for all our support and protection since the establishment of the No-Fly-Zone in 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 which liberated them.



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