

by Kaylee Dall (November 2018)

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.



I started in Erbil, first with a stop at the small museum that had ancient pottery found in Kurdistan. While we were there, some schoolboys at the museum were extremely interested in us and took pictures with and of us. It was fun to see the two groups interacting.

We continued to the 7000-year-old citadel, the oldest inhabited city on earth, as there is still one family inside. It started a long time ago and each new group built on top of the past. The history was just layered inside, and they still haven't reached the bottom layer. They are slowly renovating it but recently had to pause because of the government's lost funding. We spent a lot of time there, which there was a lot to see. We saw the bathhouse, the only one for the whole city, which was surprising because it could probably only hold 50 people. Then we saw one of the mansions still left, there used to be 30 and now there is a few that remained standing. The mansion was restored to its formal glory with big windows and a beautiful courtyard space. We continued to the textiles museum, which stored the culture and history of the Kurd tribes through their weavings. The most exciting part was that nothing dated back past 1990 as older weaving was not kept and saved. After we walked out of the main gate to see the top view of the Bazar. It was great to see the hustle and bustle from above and to view the beautiful fountains they put between the Bazar buildings.



I never thought I could eat so much until I reached Kurdistan. The lunch was a massive amount of food with chicken, lamb, and beef with a lot of rice and veggies. It was all piled up on a platter that was fit for kings, and the color of all the food together made the presentation ten times better. After lunch, we stopped at the mosque to view from outside. We couldn't go inside because of a funeral that took place. The outside was marveled with the blue Arabic tiles you usually see on mosques, but standing next to it and looking up as it towered over you was unbelievable and it felt so powerful looming over you with the two minarets spearing the sky. We continued to where the old mosque was located before it fell apart. The only part still standing is half of the minaret. You could only see a little detail left, these tiny blue tiles on one side.

I have never seen such an energetic and crazy shopping spot before and that after I've been to countless black Fridays at 4 am. The Bazar was filled with people, and everyone is yelling for you to come this way or that. People are arguing about prices, and traffic around the Bazar has no order. If I didn't follow our guide, I would have gotten lost. It twisted and turned, and there were so many different sectors, that you could get anything you wanted there. We kept walking through the Bazar until we reached the money exchange did I think it was a regular place to buy goods. These guys had stacks on stacks of money just sitting on these counters, and they had money counters sifting through there piles. You could hear them arguing about currency exchange (or I assume that what they were yelling about) and the counting machines. If I didn't know better, I would have thought it was the cartel. They were so open with the money and even asked me to take pictures of them. We continued walking through the different parts of the Bazar until the group met up and headed to dinner, which was at a local restaurant buffet style.



The next day to Duhok, we had a full day drive. We started the trip to Dayro d-Mor Matay Monastery in the mountains. We had to cross into the disputed area of Iraq to get there, so we were in the part where Iraq controls, but Kurdistan still has a presence. The monastery is tucked away at the top of a mountain, which means we drove switchbacks all the way to the top. On the drive up, we drove past a herd of sheep walking up as well. The monastery up close was breathtaking as everything had clean, sharp edges, but the coloring of the building fit right into the mountain, almost like camouflage. We were looking out the front of the monastery where miles of mountains and fields can be seen.



We drove back down the mountain and continued to Gaugamela, site of the famous battle between King Darius III and Alexander the Great. It is currently farmland, so it was hard to view the fight in your mind's eye. The kids in the village followed us up the hill and were as intrigued as we were.

They seemed to be fascinated with us learning about something that was down the street from their houses.

Jirwan, the oldest aqueduct, and bridge ruin in the world built in the time of Sennacherib (690 BC), which was our next stop. The site was once part of a vast complex that was built to water the gardens of Nineveh. Huge stones transported by hand from quarries hundreds of miles away. I was told that engineers worldwide have studied this bridge and still use this design in current bridges. The blocks were massive and probably weighed more than me. The bridge was between small rolling hills and was so wide and long it was unbelievable.

After our lunch stop at a truck stop, which is nothing like our truck stops and was a fantastic restaurant, we continued to the temple for the Yezidis people, a group that was slaughtered by ISIS, descendants of the Zoroastrians – one of the most mysterious people in the world to experience their pilgrimage. Once we got there, we had to leave our shoes on the bus. We walked in, and there was a baptism going on, and they were singing and yelling and clapping. They welcomed us to join in and experience the joy the family had as they brought their



son into their traditions. All the Yezidis people were happy to have us there and fascinated that they wanted to take pictures with us. The experience in the temple was one of the best I've had traveling. The energy inside was happy and loving, and I felt so welcomed. Maybe it was because they kissed everything as it was like their sign of the cross, thankfully no one tried to kiss me. Inside the temple, there were cloths tied around these poles, and they believe that once you untie a knot, that person's wish comes true, and once you tie your knot, you make a wish. After experiencing all the smiles and warm laughter, I was satisfied for the night and was ready for bed.

The next day we continued our journey to Rawanduz, our first stop was Amadiya. On the way to Amadiya sits one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, surrounded by a wall and sits up on a hill. We couldn't go up to it as land mines surrounded it and now mostly destroyed by the Kurdish people. The wall surrounding the palace now is painted with a mural of the Kurdish people's victory over him. After stopping to see the palace, we continued to Amadiya with a quick stop at the madrassa connected to the Egyptian school in Cairo. The ruins of the madrassa sat beautifully in the mountains and the trees. There are a few rooms left standing, and you can look out the windows into the mountains.



The town of Amadiya is located on a high promontory above a breathtaking landscape and fed by a geothermal spring originating far below the mountain. It was once an almost impenetrable fortress. The small roads circled the houses that hung off the cliffs with a view of the mountains. We

saw the city gate (Bab Zebar) on one edge of the city with a spectacular view of the mountains. The gate was built in 500-600AD, and you can still see old carvings on the wall.

The group made a quick stop for lunch along the river on our way to the mullah Mustapha memorial (father of modern Kurdistan). They are currently working on the buildings surrounding the grave that will house a library, cafeteria, and museum. Once it's done, the site will be beautiful; the grave itself is off to the side and has two stones on either side with little rocks down the middle, which is unusual for a Muslim grave.



We continued to Shanidar Cave in the mountains where pre-historic remains were discovered. The grave is home to history's most famous Neanderthal - "Nancy." They also found a tunnel system that they will exuviate soon that goes deep into the mountain. The site where they found a fence surrounds the barred Human remains as they are still digging. We continued to the resort, which is located at the top of a mountain. The resort was beautiful, and the rooms were so spacious with fireplaces and little kitchens. The restaurant there was fantastic and had all the different kinds of food to try.



My stay in Kurdistan was short, but my experiences were not. I will forever remember my time with the Yezidis people and the drives through the mountain. I'll remember the Bazar and the men yelling with stacks of money in front of them. I'll remember this trip fondly as a great cultural experience.



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