

# Iraq as a tourist destination

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Iraq is the cradle of ancient civilisation, has nature's gifts and phenomena like oases, blue lakes and rivers, valleys and mountains and marshes, and desert. It is rich in cultural heritage and historic monuments and there is evidence of leisure tourism origins with traces during the Babylonian Empire, and a museum of historical antiquities was first opened to the public in Babylon in the 6th century.



Sadiq Fadil, the chairman of the Babel Chamber of Trade, stated that Iraq has great potential as a tourist destination, as Babylon is one of the ancient wonders of the world and Iraq has the best potential through its historical landmarks. Apart from that, it has many different types of attractions and tourists continue to visit the country despite the security situation problems.

## Attractions in Iraq

Attractions can be classified as natural or artificial (man made). Natural attractions are non-specific features and permanent, which include forests, landscapes and climate; artificial attractions are the products of history and culture such as museums and art galleries. These also include artificially created entertainment complexes to initiate motivation to increase the number of visitors, especially during the shoulder of high season, and to satisfy tourists' interest in bygone times, such as theme parks, old industrial buildings and many others.

Iraq is an ancient land of historical, cultural and religious sites with 100,000 sites of cultural-historical importance and it possesses a vibrant culture with numerous natural attractions. Only about 10,000 sites have been excavated and the rest remain untouched.





**A Babylonian  
Procession  
Greets the New  
Year Time of  
Nebuchadrezzar**

Iraq is the home of many religions, each having its own temples and antiquities, shrines in Shiite Islam, along with sites linked with Biblical Judaism and Christianity. Below is a list of some of the most important sites in Iraq:

### **Cultural attraction sites**

Cultural tourism is the oldest and fastest growing type of tourism; it covers a very wide range of attractions in the tourism sector. It is recognised as a type of special interest form of tourism,

where the culture shapes the basis of either attracting tourists or motivating individuals to travel; it covers heritage and archaeological sites.

### **1. Historical and archaeological sites**

- The city of Ur, a familiar name from the Old Testament, is the birth place of the Prophet Abraham. The royal cemetery dates back to about 2500 BC and houses some of the most beautiful Sumerian artefacts to

survive from ancient Mesopotamia. Calah), lies in the north of Iraq. It is famous for its royal palaces' ornaments with their stone relief,

•Nineveh, the capital City of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in north Iraq during the eighth and seventh centuries, is famous for its palaces, and a collection of more than 30,000 clay tablets including the myth of Gilgamish and the story of the flood.

•Nimrud (883-859BCE), a great Assyrian capital city (Biblical

which is now displayed at the British Museum. It was occupied from western Iran to the Mediterranean Sea and noted for its vast winged bulls and lions.

• Babylon, Alexander the Great's capital (BBC 2003), it is famous for its hanging gardens, the tower of Babylon, the lion, the





Ishtar gate and the code of law. are famous archaeological sites in Iraq. Babylon is one of the ancient wonders of the world, and the city is now nominated by UNESCO as a world heritage site.

•Ctesiphon (Al Madain), an ancient city near Baghdad, in the ruins of the city stands a 99ft single span brick arch, the largest in the world, built in the 3rd century BC.

•Eridu, Lagash, Uruk (Warka), Nippur, Larsa, and Khorsabad:

•Hatra, the famous ancient city in north Iraq, has been included in the world heritage list since 1985.

•Hawler (Erbil) Citadel, in the north of Iraq; it is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited sites, about 8000 years old.

•Nuffar, south of Baghdad the city, was famous in the third millennium before Christ, the first parliament known to mankind

was founded in this city and it around the cities.

was also a pilgrimage place for people, as it was considered the most holy city on earth by the Sumerians, Babylonians and Acadians.

•Folklore dances and songs vary depending on the region; handcraft shops, traditional architecture (Shanashil) building.

## 2. Heritage sites

Some of the famous heritage sites that are of international importance are the following:

• Art galleries and monuments: Many art galleries and monuments are scattered

•Abbasid palaces and mosques spread around Iraqi cities.

•Museums; Baghdad museum was one of the best museums in the world (BBC 2003); it contains 100,000 artefacts dating from 7000BC to 1,000AD recording

## Shat Al-Arab Basra





The arab marshland

the achievements of Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian and Islamic civilisations.

- Restaurants, which serve traditional food and have traditional decoration and a traditional style of building like the famous Kah Mirjan.

- Shrines of Prophets and mosques: places like Najaf and Karbala, Kadumia and Samarra, which attract millions of international and domestic pilgrims every year (Farhan 2008; The Independent 2008). The golden dome of Al- Askari Shrine, one of the holiest buildings in Islam, is situated in

Samarra (Haynes 2008). The Shrine of Prophets from different religions such as Zul Kifl in Hillah; Jonh, Sheth in Mosul; Azeer in Amara.

### **Natural attractions in Iraq**

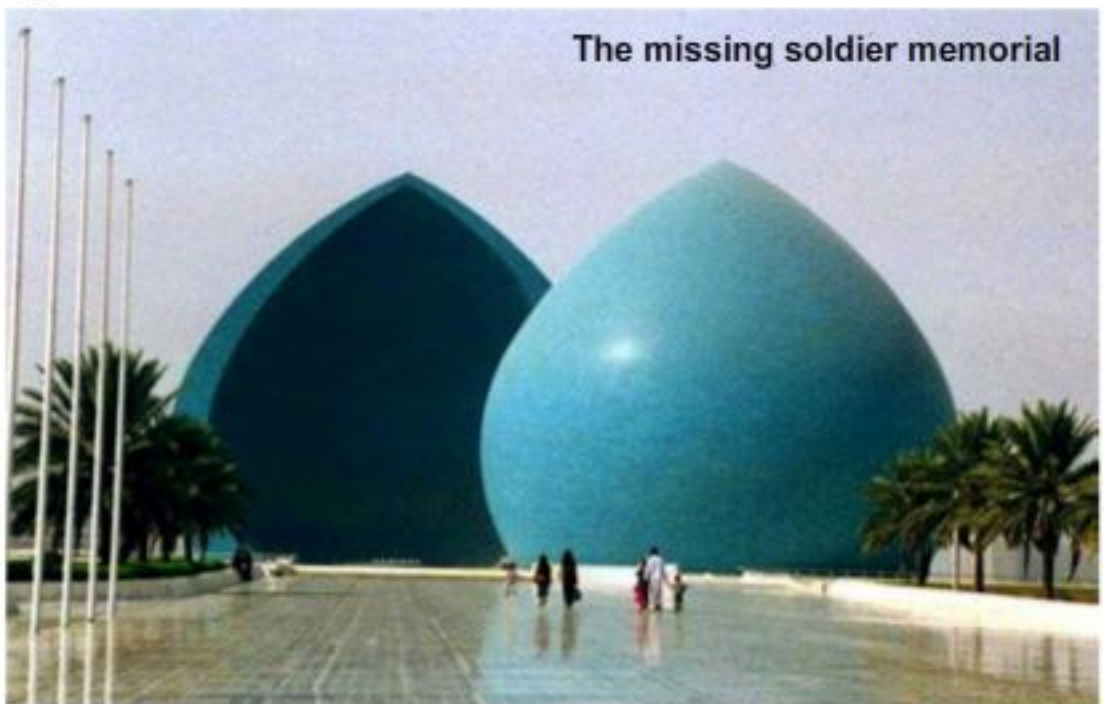
The Marsh Lands: Since the era of Sumerians (4500-1900 BC) Arab marshes which covers a large area covered by water and reeds; Houses with boats made of reeds and people travel from house to house by self-made reed boats; Al- Qurnah, area north of Basrah city, where the Tigris joins the Euphrates is said to be the site of the legendary Garden of Eden, where Adam's

tree stays, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, is found.

The Arab Marshes is the most important wetland in the Middle East; it has a unique eco-system that for millennia has continued with vibrant and diverse wildlife, as well as extraordinary ways of life that grow by the Arabs. It lies in the southern areas of Iraq as a triangle between three provinces, Basrah, Amarah and Nassirya where people have been living for thousands of years

Oases: Iraq has many oases; the most famous and largest oasis is in the western plateau, the Ain Al Tamr, is well known for its palm groves, fruits and lovely scenery with a very pleasant climate, especially in the spring and autumn it has 50 natural springs make it a very attractive spot for visitors, near this oasis lie the historical city of Ain Al Tamr (Shthatha), the first settlements dated back to the pre-Christian era, later became a major military and trade centre.

**The missing soldier memorial**







*Islands:* Abu Nawas Island (Pigs Island) and Al Aerass Island (a romantic island) are located in the middle of the Tigris River near Baghdad,

*Forests:* The forests have different types of trees due to different climates.

In the south, in the district of Abu AlKhasib near Basrah, there is the highest density of palm trees in the world. In the north, is Zawita in Dohok Governorate .

*Mountains:* In the north, there are snow-capped mountains. The geography is dramatic, and there is potential for winter sports and a variety of other outdoor activities. Amadya is one of the most unique places in Iraq it's a village on the top of the mountain in Dyhok.

Lakes, waterfalls, rivers, plains, and valleys: There are many lakes, waterways and waterfalls in Iraq. In the middle and south

of the country is the Razazah waterfalls lakes and many Lake near Karbala, which is famous for its water activities.

Another famous one is the Al Habania Lake, where the Iraqi government has built the largest tourist village complex in the Middle East in the beginning of the eighties, which lies in the middle east of the capital Baghdad and covers an area of about one square kilometre. In the north, Lake Dukan in the mountains of Sulymanya Province where there are many beautiful places such as valleys,

### **Accessibility**

Tourism destinations need to be accessible and easy to reach by tourists in order to be attractive (Holloway 2002); most forms of tourism could not exist without transportation, as it is a fundamental component in tourism and it provides the essential link between tourist's origin and destination areas and facilitates the movement of all stakeholders (Page 2005).



Wadi al-salam cemetery



Geographically, Iraq is a bridge between the East and West and it has accessibility to most of the parts of the world by air, land and sea. With the Far East countries, it is linked by sea through the Arabian Gulf and by air through regular flights, as many international airports connect Iraq to the world through main airports at Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Najaf and Erbil.

Iraq has provided access since the 1940's and coaches have operated from 1919 by Nairn

Transport and they used to run regular services (Fathom 2008). Iraq had 220 km of standard gauge (1.435 m) railways but it is currently in a weak condition and needs improvement (USAID 2007). A travel consultant in the UK, Victor Hunt of travel house uk, said, currently there are flights connecting the UK to Iraq from neighbouring countries such as Jordan (Royal Jordanian Airline) from where local aircraft connect to Iraq. Other airlines include Turkish Airline, British Airways, and Air Bavura Airline,

a carrier based in Dubai, offers flights to Iraq (Erbil, Baghdad). Austrian and Swedish airlines have also re-opened their operations to Iraq (AFP 2008; Hunt 2009). Iraqi Airways started operating on 15 December 2008, on schedule flights from Najaf international airport to Iran and Dubai. Iraq is a long haul destination to England as it is nearly six hour by flight. There are many national and international flights connecting to Iraq from different parts of the world.

## **Amenities**

Amenities are those essential services and facilities catering for the needs of tourists and they include accommodation and food; local transport; information centres and the required infrastructure to support tourism roads, public utility services and parking facilities.

The Ministry of Tourism and Archaeology supervise the Antiquities department and the role of the public sector in tourism management. The Iraq Tourism Board is a self-funded





In 2005, Iraq reported a total of 715 hotels with 22,206 rooms for guests, now operating at a mean average of 22% occupancy, most hotels (58%) are "popular" class, followed by two-star hotels (13%) and one-star hotels (12%); there is lack of five-star hotels currently operating in the country (USAID 2007). Due to war and poor infrastructure, the service level has dropped down from the five-star scales; there is a lack of basic amenities in nearly a dozen hotels in Baghdad.

There are many hotels in Iraq but the luxury ones are few and located mainly in the capital, such as the Sheraton, the Palestine and the Babylon, which are being rebuilt and refurbished (Haynes 2008). However, in the north of Iraq, in the Kurdistan region, they have few five-star hotels, as they have mainly small hotels and few four-star hotels; the region needs investment in hotels, tourism villages and restaurants, as the region's minister of tourism urged investors to promote the

tourism sector.

Employment in hotels fell 15% in 2005, declining from 5,659 in 2004 to 4,789 in the number of total employees in 2005 due to war and instability in the region.

According to the World Tourism Directory, in 2005, there were 48 travel agencies operating in Baghdad but it is difficult to confirm how many of these agencies are still operating now.

The government strategy towards the tourism sector includes simplifying and streamlining the procedures for

immigration and visas and establishing tourist offices in key international capitals as well as encouraging international hospitality industry businesses into the Iraqi market.

Furthermore, it aims to develop natural attractions to attract tourists to an appropriate tourism level, develop the infrastructure of religious cities, develop tourism education institutes and tourist institutes and build the capacities of the tourism workforce. This will be achieved through specialised training





**The  
Marshes**

programs and marketing using the experience of other countries.

A world class tourism industry requires efficient transportation, lodgings, health, hospitality, travel and other services, which are lacking in Iraq due to the war and unrest situation (IZDIHAR 2006). However, there are improvements due to the stable security situation, which has resulted in enhanced electrical

infrastructure, the internet services have freedom to operate and the number of users has increased. USAID is implementing a large-scale program in infrastructure, economic reform, health care, education, agriculture and environment with emphasis on strengthening economic decision-making, institutional capacity building, and public sector rehabilitation; in addition to this, the top four privatisation

zones chosen are tourism establishment, airlines, telecommunications and retail.



**The Obelisk of the King Hammurabi (1700 B.C) / Babylon Portico at the Beginning of Ashtar-Babylon**