

Irbil:

Kurdistan's Most Beautiful City

> Text: Walid Abdul-Amir Alwan
Photos: Ahmad Abdul-Latif El-Melh

When one arrives in the north of Iraq, one has the impression of being in a world completely different from the rest of the country. It is a region of gigantic mountains, deep valleys, historical fortresses, cascading waterfalls and spouting water in a beautiful tableau of virgin nature. When one asks the inhabitants of this area, called Kurdistan (country of the Kurds), which includes three provinces - Irbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dahouk - which is the most beautiful feature of their area, they answer spontaneously: the water of Shaklawa, the air of Salah-eddine and the women of Harer. These three elements are joined together in only one province - Irbil.

Irbil is one of the oldest cities of the world, where Neandertal man appeared nearly 50 thousand years ago, in the cave of Shanidar in the north of the city. One of the world's oldest fortresses, inhabited for 7000 years until the present day is also found in Irbil. It shelters the temple of Ishtar as well as the most beautiful resorts and waterfalls of Iraq, and the country's highest mountainous chain: Hasarok.

The name and history

Located 350 km to the north of Baghdad, Irbil is the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Its inhabitants are mainly Kurds, with their specific language and unique clothes. The name of Irbil, comes from the sumerian name "Irbilum", meaning "the city of the gods", or Arba Aylou meaning "the four gods" in Assyrian and Babylonian or from the Kurdish word, Khoulyre, indicating the

"temple of the sun" in reference to the temple of Achtar which was once found there. Archaeologists discovered the shelves of King Acourbanibal in Irbil, which was a thriving city. Numerous historians have described the famous fortress in both Islamic and pre-Islamic times.

Today, Irbil is one of the most important provinces of Kurdistan and one of the most beautiful places of interest in Iraq. It is one ▶



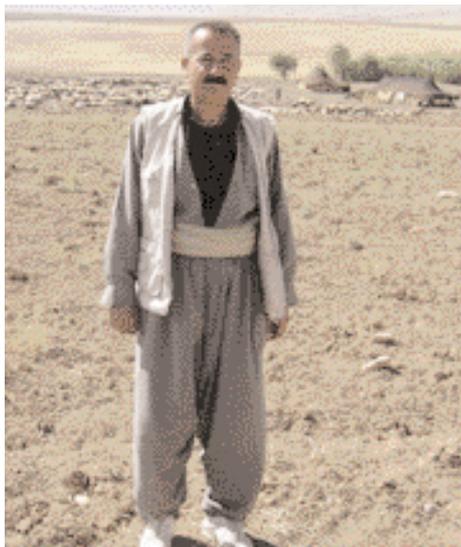
Kali Ali Bek Waterfall

شلال كلي علي بك



Kali Ali Bek Waterfall

شلال كلي علي بك



A shepherd from Harer area راعي من منطقة حرير

of the rare areas in the world with all the elements of tourism: beautiful nature, enchanting mountains, a moderate climate (particularly in summer) and snow covering its mountain tops, where it lies permanently on the peaks of Sri Hassan Bik and the Hasarok chain.

As one walks in the centre of the city, one is seized by the vast urban rebirth which aims at its restoration so that it can accommodate all its visitors. Most inspiring is its ancient fortress, visible from all corners of the city, which draws people to Irbil.

The oldest inhabited fortress

Irbil is one of the longest, continuously inhabited cities in the world. The fortress, built from solid stones, is located at the centre of the city, has a circular form, and is elevated 30 m. Its area is 110,000 m² and extends down gradually towards the space where the city has extended.

It includes three places which preserved their old names, Assaray, Toub Khana and Attakiya, currently occupied by 506 families. The principal attractions of the city, are its large mosque, the "Mosque of Mulla Afindi", built at the time of the Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab by the military chief Atba Ben Ferkad Assalmi, and characterized by its beautiful Islamic architectural style and gigantic minaret.

There is also a hammam (bath), which dates back to the 12th century and was restored in 1775, and at various intervals thereafter.



The castle's entrance

مدخل القلعة

It is surrounded by traditional houses dating back 80 - 150 years.

When walking through this fortress, with its numerous narrow alleys and walkways, it does not feel like a ruin or a museum. The inhabitants go about their daily lives and the

visitor becomes part of the living past. The market is on hand for souvenirs.

To preserve the city's inheritance the Museum of Kurdish Fabric was established housing clothes, furniture, old utensils and other household items which are no longer in use. ▶

بسبب بعده نسبيا، كما أن وجود العديد من المصايف القريبة قد تغني البعض عن التوجه إلى هذا المصيف، لذلك فإن معظم من يزوره هو لغرض الاستشفاء. إن من يروم زيارة العراق، عليه أن يجعل من زيارة إقليم كردستان وخصوصا عاصمته أربيل، إحدى أولوياته، حيث إن جميع أنواع السياحة ومقوماتها يمكن أن تجدها في هذه المنطقة، وأولها الأمان، وما سوف تشعر به من راحة البال والاستمتاع بجمال الطبيعة البكر، والتي لم تتغير أبدا بفعل عوامل الزمن. ■



The road to Shaklawra resort

الطريق الرئيسي المؤدي الى مصيف شقلاوة



Shaklawra resort from the top of the surrounding mountain

مصيف شقلاوة من أعلى الجبل المحيط بالمدينة

الثلوج الجبال المحيطة بالمصيف.

لعل أشهر ما في هذا المصيف هو كثرة العيون المائية، والمعدنية، مثل عين ماء "شيخى بالكبان"، التي يقصدها أهل المنطقة والسياح الذين يعانون من أمراض الكلى.

بالإضافة إلى عين الماء هذه، فإن هناك عين ماء أخرى لعلاج الأمراض الجلدية، لذلك فإن هذا المصيف خير منطقة للسياحة العلاجية، كما إنه يشتهر أيضا بخضرة مرتفعاته المغطاة بالأشجار والغنية بعيون الماء. إن رواد هذا المصيف هم محدودى العدد.

مصيف بيخال

يبعد هذا المصيف 140 كم عن مركز محافظة أربيل، ولا يبعد سوى عشرة كم شرقي مصيف كلي علي بك، ويمتاز باعتدال درجة الحرارة فيه في الصيف. لعل أجمل ما في هذا المصيف، هو شلاله، الذي يمتد بصورة واسعة على طول جبل، وينحدر بسرعة عالية، لذلك فإنه المكان المفضل للسياح لكي يقضوا بعض الساعات فيه، وقد تم تهيئة بعض وسائل الراحة، حيث يضم المصيف سوقا شعبية وعدة مطاعم وكازينوهات، لذلك فإنه المكان المفضل لأهالي كردستان، وخصوصا في الأعياد والمناسبات القومية مثل عيد نوروز الذي يصادف يوم 21 آذار/مارس من كل عام، ويعتبر عيد الربيع العيد القومي لأكراد العراق، وهو بداية توافد زوار هذه المنطقة على هذا المصيف، وحتى نهاية فصل الصيف.

مصيف جنديان

يبعد هذا المصيف 147 كم عن مركز أربيل، ويقع أسفل جبل هندرين وعلى فوهة مضيق رايات، ويمتاز بكثرة الأشجار الباسقة والمياه العذبة، ويشتهر بوجود عين تسمى "العين السحرية"، كونها تنبع من قاع جبل هندرين، وليس من الأعلى، كما هو المعتاد، وهو محاط بالأشجار المتنوعة.

هذا وإن جميع من يقصد هذه المصايف يتخذ من شقلاوة محلا لسكناه، وذلك بسبب عدم توفر أماكن للسكن وبشكل جماعي في هذه المصايف.

مصيف حاج عمران

ويقع هذا المصيف على بعد 180 كم شمال مدينة أربيل، وهو محاذ للحدود الإيرانية ومطل عليها، حيث يبلغ ارتفاعه 1780 م عن مستوى سطح البحر، ويمتاز هذا المصيف عن باقي المصايف ببرودة طقسه في الليل واعتداله في النهار، إذ تبلغ أقصى درجات الحرارة فيه 28 درجة خلال النهار، وفي فصل الشتاء تصل إلى أكثر من 20 درجة تحت الصفر، حيث تغطي

The streets and markets of Irbil are a mixture of ancient and modern full of folkloric items and local crafts, highlighting the cultural heritage of the Kurds. Varieties of dried Kurdish dishes are prepared because of the cold climate and long and hard winter season when the roads are cut off from the outside world by snow.

Souk Al Kaysariya is probably the most famous market with its clothing shops, fabrics and local crafts. In addition, there are shops selling food products, among them curd milk for which Irbil is famous.

Irbil is also the best place in Kurdistan for honey. One finds two varieties: rural honey, collected from a height of approximately 150 m in the mountainous zone with its unique taste and high price and the honey from beehives found throughout the areas where trees and flowers abound. We saw a swarm of bees in one alleyway in Shaklawa, but not a single fly.

There is also the modern market specialised in computers a 'must have' for the young people of this province. Electric appliances are sold in Al Midfariya market, located opposite the town hall in the town's centre. This is also the city of hotels and restaurants with the best hotels in Kurdistan, some ten stories high, surrounded by forests overlooking the countryside, valleys and mountains. The most famous is the Irbil International. The city has its parks and squares including the modern Irbil Park with several swimming pools, cafeterias and statues. The famous Arab poet Al Jawahiri has been immortalised in this park.

As one leaves the centre of this province, in the direction of the station of Shaklawa, the fortress of Khan Zad, a historic site which goes back to the era of the Sourane dystany, serves as another reminder of the proud, ancient heritage.

Irbil's Resorts

The province of Irbil is one of the most important places of interest in Iraq, because of the beauty of its nature, its spectacular snow-covered, mountains and its mild summer temperatures. Its principal tourist attractions include:

The Resort of Salah-eddine

This resort is closest to Irbil, about 32 km, on ▶



Bikhal Waterfall

شلال بيخال



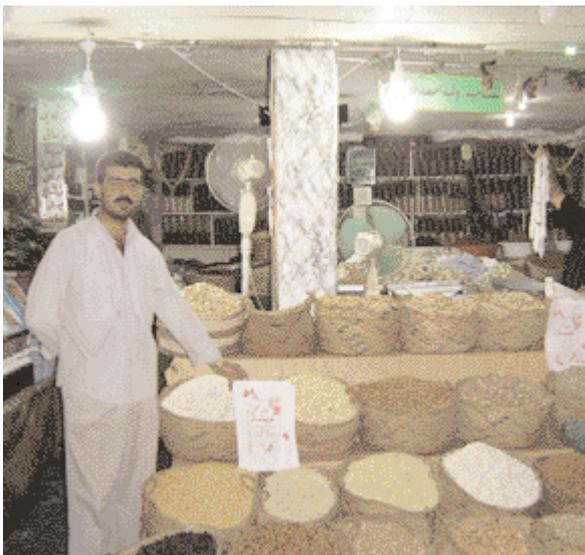
The writer at Bikhal waterfall

مندوب المجلة في شلال بيخال



Bikhal Waterfall

شلال بيخال



Nut shop

محل بيع المكسرات

the winding road leading to Birmam mount (1090 m) with 14 turns. It is located at the top of the mountain where the maximum temperature reaches 36°C, and extends onto the vast plain from Irbil and Safine mount. It is characterized by an abundant forest of oaks and poplars as well as by its fresh, pure air. The Salah-eddine resort has all kinds of hotels, restaurants and leisure facilities. It is not surprising that the governor of Kurdistan selected it for his residence !

Sirah Resh Resort

Located 9 km from Salah-eddine station, this resort is regarded as a complete tourist city, because of the availability of all tourist services.

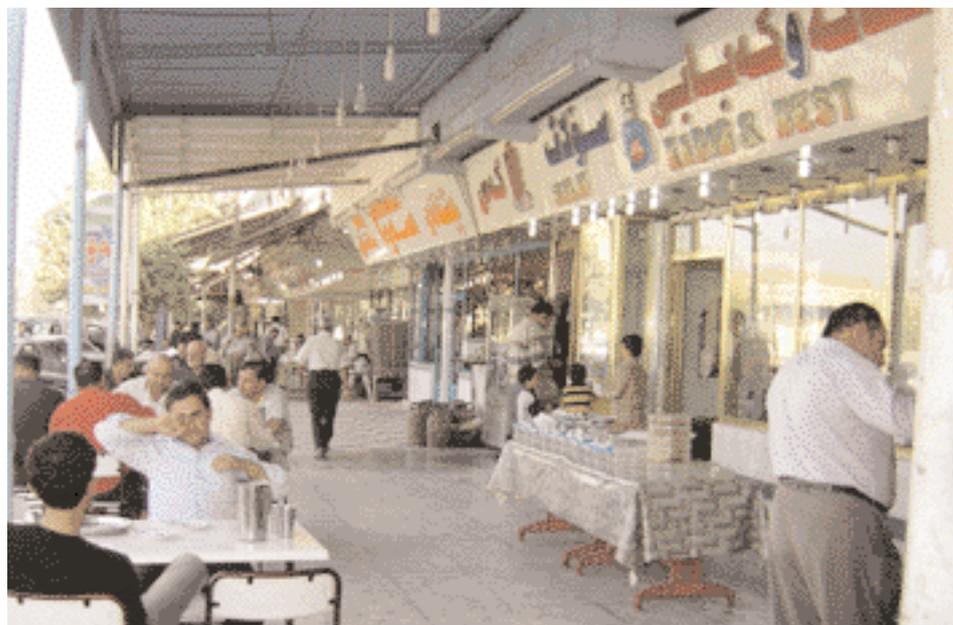
Shaklaw a Resort

Shaklaw a resort, 51 km north of Irbil, at the foot of Safine mount at an altitude of 966 m, is regarded as one of most famous in Kurdistan. It is preferred by Iraqis from central and southern Iraq, as well as nationals of the Arab Gulf. During the tourist season - July and the first half of August – there are insufficient hotels to accommodate the large number of visitors. and many stay in campsites in the fields known as Kurdish "Kabra". Some homeowners turn their properties over to tourists and stay with relatives. The kindness is overwhelming and many visitors return to stay with their hosts year



Nut shop

محلات بيع المكسرات التي تشتهر بها شقلاوة



Irbil's restaurants

مطاعم أربيل

after year. Like Dahouk, Shaklaw a has an institute of tourism.

The resort has a dense forest strewn with many sources of pure water which are among the best in Kurdistan. It is also known for its fruit, walnut and almond trees, pomegranates and vineyards.

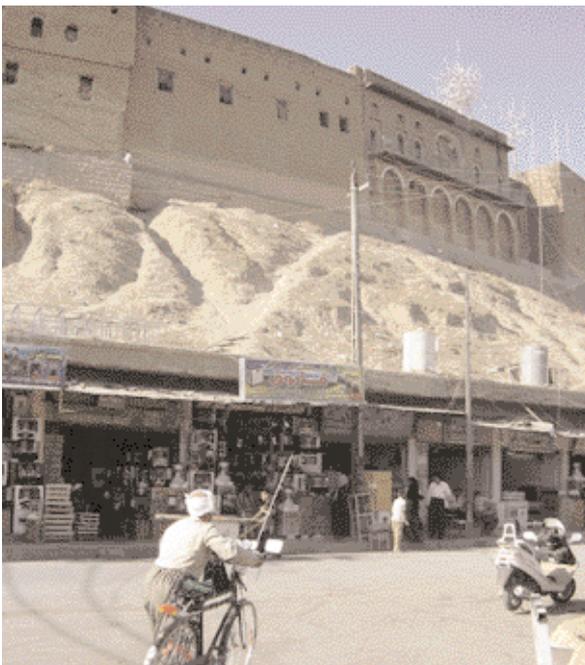
A recently-created arts centre has departments for drawing and data processing, a large library and a conference hall. It publishes a Kurdish review.

One of Iraq's most beautiful Christian holy places, Dir Al-Ruhbane (Monastery of the Priests), overlooks the resort of Shaklaw a.

Visitors are not deterred by its inaccessibility and enjoy the climb. On the ground floor of the monastery are two large rooms, one with a small opening in the top of the wall. The locals believe that throwing seven stones will make your wishes come true and visitors are keen to test this theory. The monastery hosts a large, annual gathering for the Christians of the area.

Kali Ali Bek Resort

Kali Ali Bek, located 130 km from Irbil, between Kourk and Bradoust mountains, is on par with Shaklaw a. It is characterized by ▶



Irbil's Castle

جانب من قلعة أربيل



The castle

القلعة

a beautiful natural landscape, high mountains and an altitude of 800 m.

Bikhhal Resort

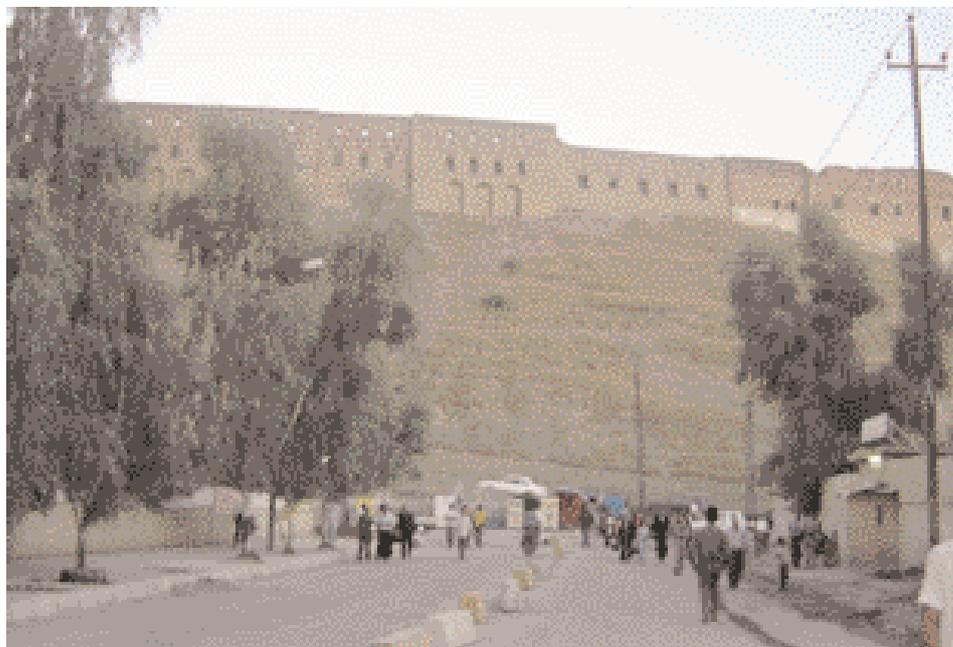
Bikhhal is located 140 km from Irbil and not more than 10km to the east of Kali Ali Bek. This resort is characterized by its mild summer climate. Its main attraction is the fast-flowing, waterfall which covers the side of the mountain. It is a hub of tourism with its souks and restaurants and is favoured by the Kurds at the time of festivals, in particular Nourouz, on March 21. The Kurdish New Year marks the beginning of the tourist season which continues until the end of summer.

Jandiyane Resort

This resort is located about 147 km from the center of Irbil, at the foot of Handrine mount and the edge of Rayate Pass. It is characterized by abundant trees and fresh water springs, including the "magic source" which sprouts from the foot of a mountain. Shaklawa provides accommodation for visitors to nearby resorts which suffer from a shortage of beds.

Hadj Omran Resort

This station is 180 km to the north of Irbil,



Irbil's Castle

قلعة أربيل

close to the Iranian border, at a height of 1780 m. It is distinguished from the other resorts by the coldness of its nights and moderate daytime temperatures of 28°C. The neighbouring mountains are covered with snow.

Hadj Omran is famous for its sources of fresh water and mineral springs, such as "Sheikhy Balkayan", a destination for people who have renal problems, and skin

diseases. The resort would be ideal for medical tourism but its remoteness has detracted from its popularity.

The traveller to Iraq must make a visit to Kurdistan and its capital Irbil a priority. The region has everything a tourist could hope for and, above all, it is not plagued by the violence and bloodshed which stains the rest of Iraq. A magical natural landscape guarantees peace profound. ■