

# The road to Halfiah

## A trip to the marshes of Amarah

> Report and photos:  
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The city of Missan or (Al-Amarah) is a Sumerian city in southern Iraq, sleeping calmly on the eternal Tigris River. The name comes from the Aramaic “Mi Assen”, meaning “water lagoons.” In this city, Christians, Mandeans and Muslims shared their moments of happiness and misery, as well as their religious holidays. It is a city that gave birth to Iraqi intellectuals, men of letters, poets, and artists. It supplies all parts of Iraq with the best varieties of fish and birds. From this city, we began our journey to Halfiah and its marshes.

### Halfiah and its marshes

**T**he region of Musharrah or Halfiah, administratively dependent of Kahla, is located 21 km from the centre of the city of Al Amarah, where the marshes are part of the southern marshes of al Hawiza, the largest in Iraq (2863 sq km.), whose waters are shared with Iran. We were accompanied by the head of the council of the marshes in the area, and a member of the council who gave us a lift in his car. It is a small country town, crossed by a river where a small iron bridge has been erected, practically in the centre. Once we arrived in this city, our escort parked his car in a small square near the river, and took us in a truck through a road which led to the marshes, some 35 km out of Halfiah.

On leaving Musharrah, we passed a Mandaean graveyard. The people from this unique religion once inhabited an entire district in this region.

This road is dusty and does not exceed six meters. It runs through different villages scattered on either side. From our vehicle we observed a traditional way of life: a woman baking bread in a mud oven, another on the edge of the small marsh washing clothes and dishes, a man in the middle of the marsh carrying reeds in his



Soudah marsh

هور السوداء



A child transporting reeds

طفل ينقل القصب

colour, is highly valued by the inhabitants of southern and central Iraq, including Baghdad, the capital. All visitors to the town of Amarah return with al khirayt, which they offer to their friends and relatives.

### Towards Soudah marsh

The Soudah (black) marsh is the largest marsh in the region. The origin of this name is unknown. It may have been called the black marsh to distinguish it from the white (Bida) marsh. Or the name could have been chosen because of its black water. Our escort told us that the inhabitants of this area believe that there is oil just beneath the marshes, hence the blackish water. Similarly, we found that the fish in this marsh are bigger and better-tasting than those in other marshes, because they feed on water mixed with oil!

On our way we passed many villages: Khouite, Zouida, Har, Shawitat, Mouilha and Ouinah. The road is next to the beautiful vast marsh covered with white water lilies, locally called "Zuhir al Batt" (The Geese's Flower), which permeates the scene with its fragrance. In addition to their sweet fragrance and beautiful colour, the flowers are the favourite food of geese which live in large numbers in the region. Women pick flowers that appear in spring and extract a perfume.

### Fishermen

Fishing is the main business carried out by the residents of Halfiah. Its income is their main resource. The bulk of this activity is concentrated in Soudah marsh. Fishermen use several fishing methods, including large nets during the day. However, they fish with a light source at night venturing to the middle of the marshes before nightfall equipped with an oil lamp. Some of them stand at the rear of the boat, rowing fast to stir the fish while others stand with a spear to catch the large ones which they can easily see beneath the water.

### The inhabitants of the marshes

It seems that the saying: "It is better to hear rather than see the Maldi" does not ▶



Villages on the way

قرى على الطريق



A bridge in Halfiah

جسر ناحية المشرح (الhalfiah)



A failed attempt at shooting birds

محاولة لصيد الطيور لم تكلل بالنجاح



small boat, cows and sheep grazing in the wild; hordes of dogs, some sleeping and others sitting, watching over livestock and people. Herds of cows normally block the road and the truck drivers have to stop momentarily to allow them to cross. These cattle are accompanied by several people, often young boys and girls.

Arab traditions and customs prevail in this area and we were sometimes obliged to descend from our vehicle to greet people on the edge of the road. Some insisted on inviting us to their modest dwellings to share their meal, or at least drink a cup of tea. But we were forced to apologize, being eager to get to the main marshes, which they call the "Soudah Swamp".

We opted for a romantic lunch on the edge of marsh. A family who had just prepared freshly baked bread shared it with us along with fish, fruits and soft drinks bought from the city centre. When it was discovered that we had never eaten rice flour bread our attendant got some flour from one of the residents and made the bread on the edge of the marsh.

The fuel used in this region differs from that used in the city centre. People here make use of cow and buffalo dung, dried to dispel the odour. It becomes a good source of energy, usually used for cooking, baking and heating. The bread has a sacred character in this region and in the centre of this province: all families, including the rich, bake their bread at home in a mud oven or a modern, gas-heated oven. People have a saying: "The house which buys bread from the market loses God's blessing forever."

### Local sweets

This is a region of reeds and papyrus. The reed is an aquatic yellow plant, five to six meters high, found in the middle of the marsh. It is used for the construction of huts and as food for cows and buffaloes. Papyrus is a soft aquatic plant, up to 3 m high, which is also used in construction to cover huts.

This region is famous for the manufacture of a cake called "al khirayt" - the rolled up leaves found in the papyrus, which include a flower with seeds waiting to be pollinated. The women collect the seeds before the flower opens, boil them with dates or sugar and dry them so they are ready to eat. This product, pale yellow in



A village on the road to Halfiah

قرية على الطريق إلى هور الحلفاية



The road alongside Soudah marsh

الطريق المجاور لهور السوداء



A herd of cows

قطيع من البقر

apply to the residents of this region, called Ma'dan. They are the ancestors of the Sumerians, known for their hospitality and respect for guests. As soon they realize that a person is foreign, they are quick to offer him whatever they can, despite their obvious poverty. The draining of the marshes strongly affected their lives: it led to the disappearance of most fish, and birds that migrate from Asia and Siberia in winter. The drainage also increased the salinity of the soil, which has limited the cultivation of the famous marshlands rice grown in flooded areas. Some of the drained marshes have been re-flooded after 2003.

The naturally-beautiful women are the backbone of the economy: they fish going deep in the marshes looking for grass, reeds and papyrus; they sell dairy products and offer a warm welcome to the guests. In the absence of men, they themselves welcome guests. Most of the younger generation have retained the "Niqab" (face veil), according to the customs and traditions of this region.

### Fishing by lamp light

On our way to the Soudah marsh, two of the acquaintances of our escort, made themselves responsible for our security and armed himself with a Kalashnikov and a shotgun.

After passing the police checkpoint we found the edge of the Soudah marsh. The left and right sides of the marshes are surrounded by a dense forest of reeds and papyrus of various heights, which make it impossible to see. The colour of the water is blackish, because of the many shrubs and most probably the oil. There were a dozen boats floating on the water, including the most frequently used, light weight "Mashuf", with an uncanny ability to negotiate water courses. There were no oars for these two metre boats and, at first it looked as if we couldn't explore the marsh. Fortunately, a group of fishermen offered to take us with them in their motorised boat.

The pilot of the boat told us that they would remain in the marsh until dawn. He complained that some fishermen used explosives to fish. The fishermen row deep into the reed beds as far as the Iranian border, where the fish are more abundant in quality and quantity.

The atmosphere of this river trip was quiet, broken only by the noise of the motor. We listened to the sounds of birds and frogs. The boat moved to the right and left as we manoeuvred round the canes. The owner insisted that we should accompany him during the night of fishing, but we apologized because we would only be in the way and we could not delay our return to the city.

Upon leaving the swamp we tried unsuccessfully to shoot birds. Our companions were busy preparing lunch,

starting the fire and roasting the fish. One of them amassed the rice flour and produced thick bread, which he baked on the fire. Normally it is baked on a convex piece of metal heated from underneath.

We ate the best fish meal of our lives. The primitive way in which it was cooked, and even a lack of hygiene, did not detract from the taste of the food in the midst of this beautiful, virgin nature. The hospitality of our hosts left us with a special memory that will always draw us back to Soudah marsh. ■



Soudah marsh

هور السوداء



Fishing boat in a small marsh

زورق صيد في هور صغير