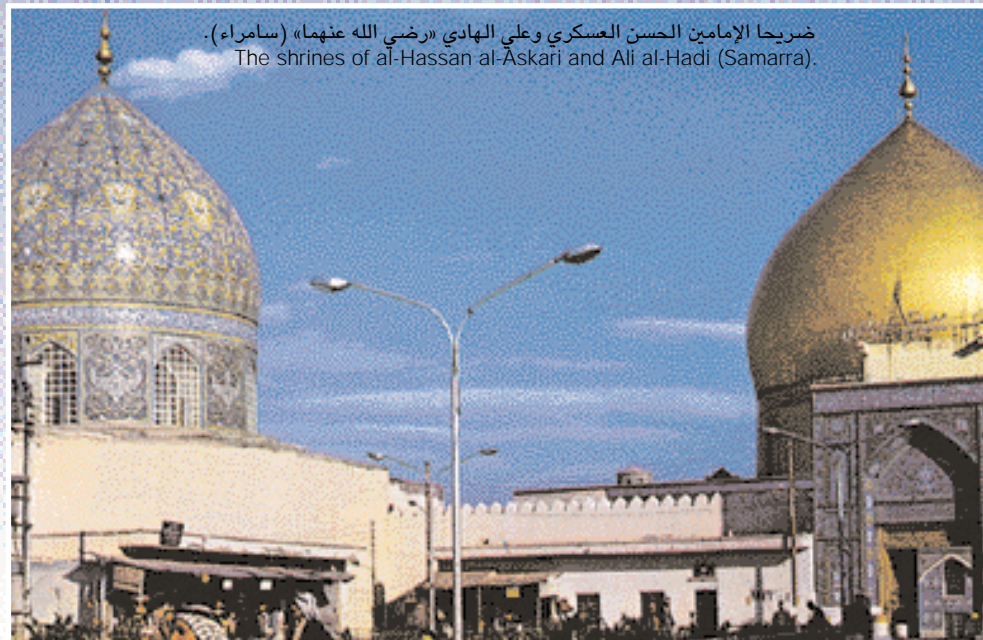


Tourism in Iraq

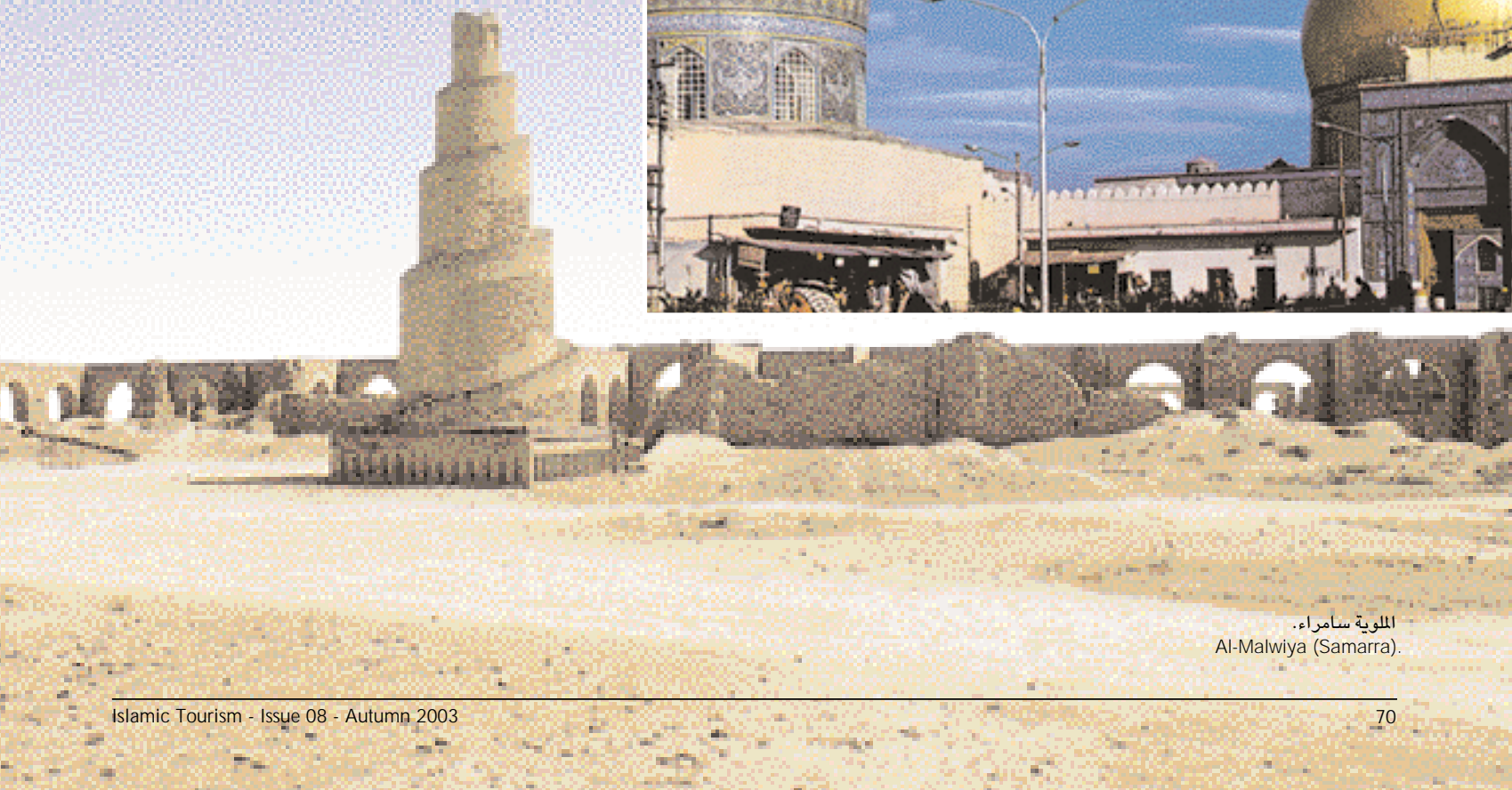
Will rise like a Phoenix from the ashes of wars

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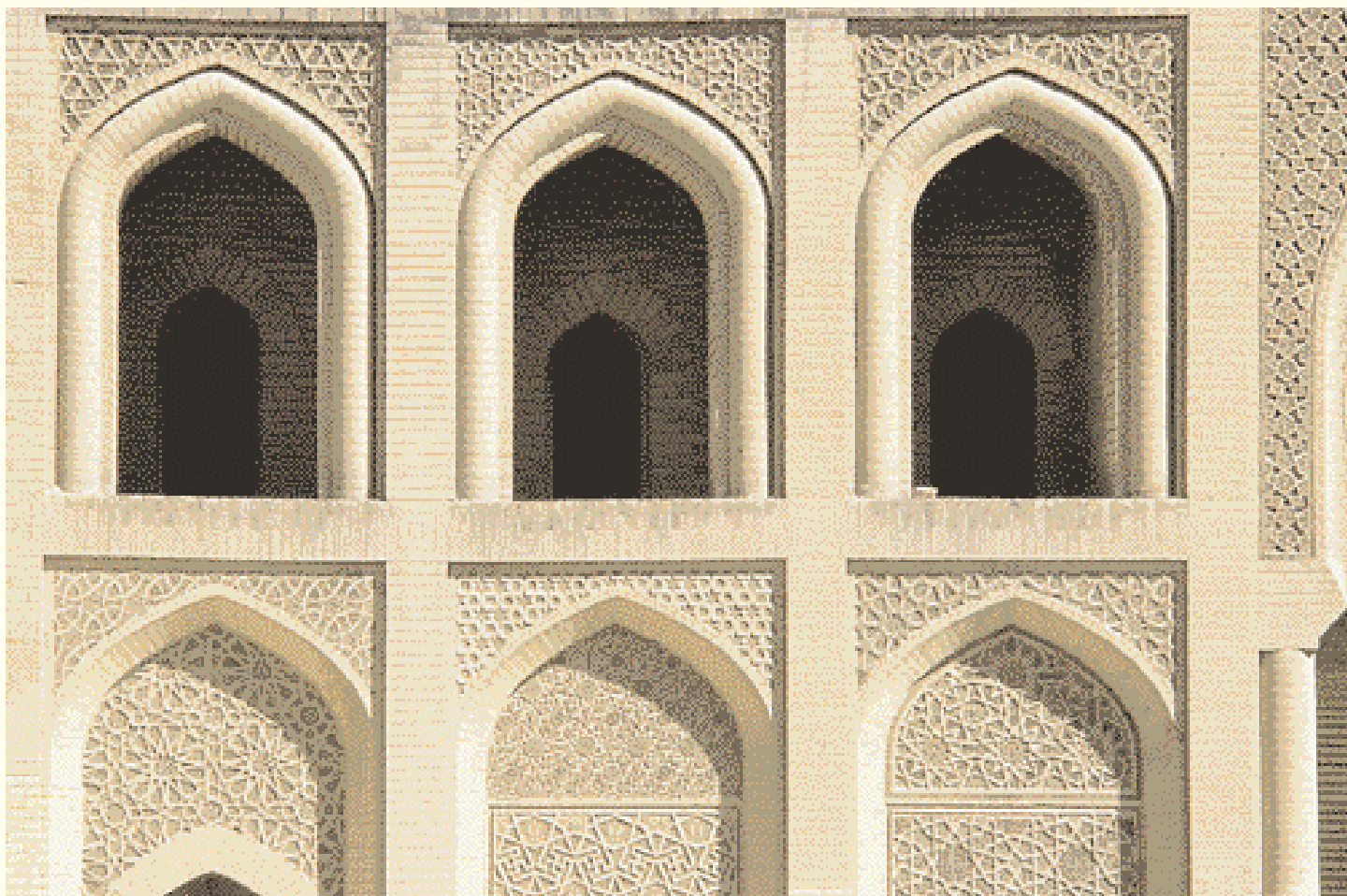
As the guerrilla war in Iraq intensifies even the most intrepid thrill seekers will probably put Baghdad on the back burner for the time being. But not all tourism in Iraq has come to an end. A group of American and British soldiers were the first tourists in post-Saddam Iraq. Before leaving for home they sat spell bound in Babylon while an Iraqi tourist guide enlightened them about the wonders of the ancient world. ➤



ضريحا الإمامين الحسن العسكري وعلي الهادي «رضي الله عنهما» (سامراء).
The shrines of al-Hassan al-Askari and Ali al-Hadi (Samarra).



الملوية سامراء.
Al-Malwiya (Samarra).



Details from al-Mustansiyriah school.

تفاصيل من معمار المدرسة المستنصرية.

“ For today’s tourists a visit to Babylon, 90 km south of Baghdad is a must. It is the most restored of the ancient sites. There is a magnificent lion carved in basalt and Ishtar Gate with some decorations of bulls and dragons in unglazed brick reliefs. The beautiful glazed-brick panels with bulls, dragons and lions (the symbol of the goddess of love and war Ishtar) that decorated the gate were taken to the Berlin Museum before World War I by a German expedition.

Sadly not all military personnel were so appreciative. Aid workers claimed that US forces spray-painted on one of the world’s most ancient structures – the Sumerian city of Ur in southern Iraq – with graffiti and stole kiln-baked bricks.

Once the guns of war fall silent, the dust settles and the rule of law returns to Iraq, its ancient archaeological attractions, sites of Islamic splendour, breathtaking scenery in the north and the magical capital Baghdad could make it the mother of tourist destinations.

Iraq’s magnificent, ancient archaeological sites have acted as a magnet for visitors to the country throughout the centuries. It is a land of clay tablets, cylinder seals, painted murals, ziggurats (pyramids with steps) and ruins of temples and palaces.

The ancient name of Iraq (Mesopotamia) is Greek for ‘land between the rivers’ the Tigris and Euphrates. Historians have labelled Mesopotamia the cradle of civilisation. In 3000 BC Sumerian kings, who ruled at the same time as the earliest Egyptian dynasties, built the first cities. Hammurabi (1792–50 BC), a ruler of Babylon developed one of the earliest codes of law to ensure that ‘justice prevailed in the country’. The hanging gardens of Babylon, a creation of King Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC) are regarded as the seventh wonder of the ancient world.

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Ishtar Gate with some decorations of bulls and dragons in unglazed brick reliefs. The beautiful glazed-brick panels with bulls, dragons and lions (the symbol of the goddess of love and war Ishtar) that decorated the gate were taken to the Berlin Museum before World War I by a German expedition.

Ruins at their best are found in Borsippa, 15 km south of Babylon. If seen at dusk they resemble a science-fiction landscape. Borsippa was the place of worship of Nabu, son of the great Babylonian god Marduk. The seven-level ziggurat has dark green lumps of molten bricks, which scholars believe melted when it was hit by a meteorite. An ancient mound opposite the ziggurat is believed to be Abraham’s birthplace. ➤

Hatra, from the 1st century AD, is a joy to wander through. Like India's Taj Mahal, photographs cannot do justice to the wonder of the site. The remains of 12 small temples have been unearthed along with a Hellenistic temple and several statues of Apollo, Eros and other Greek gods.

Tragic events in the early history of Islam led to the construction of magnificent shrines in the desert cities of Najaf and Kerbala in southern Iraq. Every year, thousands of pilgrims flock to these marvels of the Islamic world, where a tragic massacre occurred some 14 centuries ago.

Hussein's mosque built on the site of the battle fought in AD680, in Kerbala has a gilded copper dome. The main gate has a clock tower of glazed blue brick and golden earthenware.

In Iraqi Kurdistan in the north, magnificent scenery, sometimes

wooded and watered by turbulent streams, sometimes gaunt and bare, but always dramatic and often awesome, greets the visitor. Mountain villages are fascinating places for tourists. They may only be a few miles apart but every settlement has its own unique character. Spectacular views, welcoming people who are as curious about the visitor as he/she is about them, combined with cool, healthy unpolluted air, ensure a memorable visit.

Arbil is believed to be one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. The main tourist attraction is the fortress, which UNESCO has recognised as a historic site. The amazing covered market has everything from fabric and jewellery to cheese made from sheep's milk. The best souvenir is a famous Arbil carpet, second only to Iranian carpets.

Sulaimaniyah city, built 250 years ago by Suleiman the Great is a large elegant city with wide tree-lined streets and pleasant riverside walk. In Halabja nearby is a magnificent monument to the victims of the chemical weapons attack on the city in 1988.

Mosul is famous for its churches and monasteries containing much of the early heritage of Eastern Christianity. The oldest church still in use today is St Thomas built on the house occupied by the apostle.

After the orgy of looting which followed the war, little remains intact in the 28 galleries at the Iraqi National Museum from which hundreds of items have gone missing. Many have been returned but it will take a long time for the museum to return to its former glory. The luxurious Al Rashid Hotel is a burned out shell, the destruction reminiscent of the Mongol invasion of 1258 when the city's major buildings were damaged or destroyed and the treasures looted.

Iraq has always risen like a phoenix from the ashes of vanquished civilisations. It will welcome visitors once again, after this devastating war. Travellers may have to suspend Western concepts of normality as the country forges a new identity and rebuilds its dignity and self respect. But the rewards are the boundless wealth of cultural richness and the refrain, extended to visitors despite everything is always a welcome from the heart. ■

شلال كلي علي بك.
The Gally Ali Beg waterfall.