

First post war tour of Iraq:

In the midst of ancient and modern history

* By Geoff Hann

After Hinterland Travel's six really successful tours of Iraq in 2002, the storm clouds of war finally burst over the country this year. We tried to visit Iraq last March but as the first bombs that signalled the beginning of the war fell on Baghdad we settled for a delightful tour of Syria instead even though that was not our objective. In July, I made a discreet eight-day personal visit to Baghdad. The war was supposedly over. Was it safe for foreigners? Were our Iraqi friends and colleagues safe and well, and could we operate tours again? My verdict after also venturing south to the shrine cities of Kerbala, Najaf and Kufa, was a cautious 'yes'. Although Iraqis were still dazed and shocked by the speed of events, they were not totally subdued and certainly did not express anti-Western views. ➔

رأس آشوري في نينوى بالموصل.
Assyrian head in Nineveh, Mousl.



Children posing at an ancient Assyrian palace, Nineveh, Mousl.

أطفال يقفون في قصر آشوري قديم في نينوى، الموصل.

On my return to UK, I planned, advertised, cajoled lots of people, and finally gathered a small group of all ages and nationalities: three Brits, an American, a Canadian and a Norwegian plus a British-Arab businessman. That was the group for our first post-war tour of Iraq. Why did these people want to travel at this time, given the international press attention? Their motives were mixed: all were anti-war, some were motivated by overwhelming historical interest, others by the political viewpoints of the countries they came from. My motives were a mixture of theirs but, above all, I had an abiding determination to assist and create job opportunities for my friends in Baghdad. I also wanted to make a successful contribution to the 'new' Iraq. Tourism is a potential 'weapon of mass destruction' which we are beginning to understand as we progress! . It can destroy as easily as it can generate income and promote cultural understanding.

Actualy. We are in Amman, we fill our GMC taxis and smoothly progress through to the border and Baghdad. The latest news is of conflict and trouble especially around Baghdad. But we come through Ramadi and Faluja without any problem. On the surface it

looks as if busy towns are getting on with their lives. I am encouraged as we arrive at our Baghdad hotel late in the afternoon and everyone is there to greet us.

For the next two days we explored Baghdad and the environs of the bustling city. Iraqi police (they were not there during my last visit) are controlling the massive traffic a little better but there is still an air of impatience and aggression as Baghdadis are impatient to get things done and make a living for themselves.

The security forces, principally the Americans are everywhere, patrolling, setting up road blocks and supervising the new police force. We skirt around everyone, stopping when we have to but continue with our schedule visiting Argagouf, the Kassite ziggurat and ancient 1,450 B.C city, Tell Harmel the Sumerian priestly site of 2,400 BC. No looting here!

Sadly the National Museum will not be open for some time, but it appears that the world's museums are offering assistance. Baghdad's old city was centred around the Abbasid Palace, the souk and mosques, the Khan Merjan and the surrounding streets. which were crowded and as bustling as ever. But

the people were wary of us as few Westerners, other than officials, are seen in the streets. Eventually our cry 'we are tourists' gets heard and we are welcome indeed. We notice a polite but determined air of guardianship at every ancient place. Our daily meals are the usual long drawn out affairs, plenty of food albeit a third more expensive than in the past, and congenial conversation with everyone.

We leave Baghdad for our journey south. While waiting for our transport early this particular morning I noted the stream of men arriving on our street corner, (close by our hotel is a UN building and many hotels and buildings for the international media). Some arrive by taxi, some on foot, some by bus, others by car - all adjusting their uniforms and the accompanying armband which proclaims that they are Iraqi Police or Protection Force. None are armed, all look serious: it's a risky job but it's a job and eventually it pays. These men will safeguard the future. I salute them.

With an air of expectancy we leave south on the Hilla road and as we reach Mussayab we begin to meet pilgrims making their way on foot to the shrine cities. But first, for us, its ➤



Babylon. Here I have my first problem. We have to convince the guardians of the site - currently the Polish Army contingent - that we should be able to enter this mother of cities. Tel calls, with my reputation and creditability on the line, and we enter under strict security. Thankfully the site has few scars from the war and the Iraqi site guides are in place waiting for the world to visit.

Close by are many ancient sites, one of the most photogenic being Borsippa. This Sumerian site is at least 5,000 years old. Its ancient ziggurat is topped by a Parthian building of the 2nd cent B.C. Opposite is a small mosque dedicated to Abraham who, as a baby, is claimed to have

rested here. Underneath this mosque is a great Sumerian palace. We are in the midst of the history of the world.

Onward, to Kifal. This little town has a turbulent history but as the tomb of Al Kifal or Ezekiel of biblical fame it has an astonishing past from the 6th cent B.C to 1300 A.D and beyond. A very reflective place.

The early Arab city of Kufa is close by. This is the site of the second oldest mosque in Iraq where Iman Ali was assassinated. Here we had an extraordinary experience. We were welcomed in a way that I have never experienced before during my numerous visits to this mosque. Normally access to infidels is

restricted. However we were invited in, visited the place where the assassination took place and mingled freely with the faithful.

Stunned, or at least I was, we moved on to Najaf. Here we saw the great golden dome - also the site of the recent killing of Mohammed Baqir Al Hakim, the head of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and many others who died in another tragic car bomb attack. Although now cleaned, this is a site, next to the shrine, of constant mourning. Another chapter to the martyrdom that permeates Najaf.

Finally we crowned the day with our stay in Kerbala. Crowds were gathering for the next ➤



The post office of Baghdad.

مكتب بريد في بغداد.

day's festival - people from all over Iraq and Iran. They stopped us constantly asking who we were , where we were from and why we were here now. I felt humbled: are we a bridge between peoples or is this just an arrogant supposition? But there are still many days of travel ahead of us and we have to move on. Uruk (Warka) is a major ancient site we have to visit, one of the highlights of our tour. This ancient site is possibly the most important in the whole of Iraq: the largest known Sumerian city, where writing and literature began in 4,000 B.C. It is the city of Gilgamesh, continuously inhabited until Islamic times. We determinedly stagger in the heat to walk around this city and experience its charm. Next we travel to Nasiriya, gateway to the marshes, and scene of very recent conflict. Close by is ancient Ur, the city with the greatest ziggurat in Iraq. It is famous for its royal tombs – and for the past 40 years it has also been the site of a missile and aircraft station which now has new masters. We tread carefully around the new politics - as carefully as we did the around the old and are rewarded with a visit. But we were not alone as parties of young American troops

were also learning about the past on a tour courtesy of Iraqi guides. The lure of ancient Mesopotamia is universal.

Finally we stop in Basra, briefly explore the city, sense the atmosphere discuss the politics and return to Baghdad. My instant impression was that of a lost city. Basra needs to find its soul, its purpose. Did it ever have one cynics may ask ? History says it did during certain periods. Commerce is the answer: that is what has always motivated the entrepot. Let it resume.

This was the south. We had seen the major sites and travelled to Basra. There were many places that we had not seen but these are for another day. Visits to the great sites of Sumerian Iraq are possible - we can be confident about that.

Now, it's the north. Road blocks out of Baghdad are to be expected and we negotiate them easily enough and reach Samarra. The great Golden Dome of the Al-Hadi Mosque and the ancient 8th century spiral minaret beckon us. This has to be one of the finest places in the Middle East: twenty kms of unexcavated old city stretch out

beyond modern Samarra.

We continued north by passing Tikrit, which is at the centre of security activity. In the future it will feature prominently on tourist circuits, as the home of Saddam Hussein. We arrive in Mosul, the hub of the north, an Arabic/Kurdish city of great antiquity with many orthodox eastern Christian churches and many famous mosques. Across the river lies ancient Nineveh, the last capital of the Assyrian Empire which fell in 612 B.C . Today the modern city is encroaching on it. The sheer size of this site and its encompassing 11 kms of walls and gates staggers the imagination. It was encouraging to see that after years of neglect attempts are being made to clean up places of interest on the site and guards are in place to discourage looters.

We use Mosul as our centre and visit the surrounding areas. There is so much to see: ancient Khorsabad, Ashur, Nimrud, the great Assyrian cities of the past, are sites to walk around and marvel at. All are now guarded because looters tried their luck here a few months ago.

Nimrud in particular, is exciting because of ➤



A friendly discussion at Kerbala.

حوار هادىء في كربلاء.

its meticulous excavations which unearth palaces with their great treasures, lost and found in Baghdad recently. Mar Benham and Mar Matti have ancient legends and today are centres of much activity. We always add them to our itineraries.

Iraqis often argue about where the finest masgouf dishes are found. On this visit we had a great Masgouf by the side of the Tigris, in Mosul. It was a warm night with music and many people out enjoying themselves late into the evening. Plus a superbly tasty fish. This relaxed evening was in complete contrast to the tensions of Baghdad where you would not stay out this late. The differences between the north and south of the country at this time were certainly exemplified.

Our stay in Mosul was too short as always. There was so much we did not see. But for me it was a new experience as we crossed the Great Zab river to Erbil, allegedly one of the oldest cities in the world. During Saddam's time it was not possible to visit this city in the Kurdish north and see the rest of Iraq as well. I was astounded at the mound

which dominates the city and awed at what could be in those thousands of years of layers of mankind's history. The modern city is ordered, clean and full of very friendly people who were intensely curious about us - especially when we told them 'we are tourists' - a rare species, in this part of Iraq anyway. But, we had to leave - we had a plane to catch. Before long there was a change of plan - the route via Kirkuk to Baghdad was said to be a problem due to security. I am not sure that I agreed but local knowledge was a key factor. So we returned via Mosul and benefited from being able to see the Arab city of Hatra en route to Baghdad. Slightly out into the western desert, a Unesco heritage site, guarded by American forces and the new Iraqi militia stands the fabulous ancient site. It held out against the Romans and is holding up against modern vandalism. For us Europeans, in contrast to the mud brick albeit much more ancient sites of the south, its identifiably nearer to our conception of temples and buildings.

Now, somewhat satiated we arrived in Baghdad after a journey interrupted by security

road blocks and interesting exchanges between ourselves and American security forces. Maybe our tourist fame has spread!

We visit Khadamiye the last experience for us. This mosque is a wonderful expression of Islamic art and a focal point of all the modern tensions of Islam and the current problems of Baghdad and Iraq. Guarded by Shi'i militia, we were greeted by a mixture of tolerance and intolerance. An experience not to be missed. Having survived all of this intact we departed back to Amman a lot more knowledgeable than we left. Personally I was saddened by the continual guerrilla warfare but heartened by the response of the Iraqi people to their day to day situation. They are a resilient people and I know we will develop the country's tourist potential together in future. I am looking forward to our major tour in March in 2004. ■

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