

Najaf

The city of knowledge and peace for believers

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حضرة الإمام علي (ع)
Imam Ali Shrine.

City Tourism

Najaf is considered one of the most holy places in Iraq. It has the shrine of Imam Ali, and is surrounded by a number of religious schools. It has become the seat of the Marjiaiah (highest religious authority) in the Shii faith in Iraq and neighbouring Islamic countries. Its religious university is known as 'Hawza Ailmiah" (The Seminary) and it is the centre of intellectual movements. It has produced lots of well known poets and thinkers. The world's oldest and largest cemetery is also in Najaf.



A meeting at Al-Shakiry mosque.

ندوة في مسجد الشاكري.

Najaf is a city which never sleeps. It is always busy throughout the year, especially near the shrine of Imam Ali with about 15,000 foreign visitors daily, in addition to visitors from other cities in Iraq, and those who come to bury their dead in Wadi Al-Salam. They all move in an area of one square mile.

Name and location

The city is located 160 km to the south west of Baghdad on the western hilly range of Iraq, about 70 m above sea level. The Arabic name "Najaf" means "The place that is hard for water to reach", since it is on high ground. Today's Najaf is the Najaf of al-Kufa. Hira, which was near the present location of Kufa, was once the capital of Al-Manathira, the dynasty that ruled until the Islamic conquest. Hira was famous for its Christian monasteries. Najaf was formed and expanded due to the presence of the shrine of Imam Ali, which

transformed it into a holy and respected city. The total area of Najaf is about 1338 km. It is made up of the old city and the modern city. The houses of the old city around the shrine of the Imam were built in the 1920's. Most of these houses have a basement known as "Sardab" which is used for sleeping during the hot summer days because it is cool. The Sardab was also used for keeping food in the days before refrigeration. It is found in every house in the old city including schools and mosques and is considered one of the marvels of Islamic architecture with its decorated ceilings, Arabesque, arches and a network of tunnels which helped defeat invaders and saved the city's inhabitants. Najaf has wide markets, especially the large market which starts at the eastern wall of the city and ends at the shrine of Imam Ali. It also has lots of alleyways and squares.

The modern city, built during the 1960s and

70s, is located far from the shrine. It is distinguished by modern houses, wide streets and large buildings. It also houses the city's manufacturing and service sector. Historians say that the tomb of Imam Ali was first discovered by Dawood bin Ali al-Abbasi around 139 AH/ 756 AD. The Imam was buried secretly. The Abbasi Caliph Harun Al-Rashid in whose time Arab and Islamic Civilization expanded rapidly, substantiated the discovery around 170 AH/ 786 AD during a hunting holiday. He stopped at three white hills to look at the valley in between where the tomb was located and ordered the building of a dome of red mud. The tomb has been renovated many times. Around 287 AH/ 900AD, Zaid Al-Daai, built a dome on the grave and surrounded it with a wall and a fort with seventy layers. The grave is referred to as "The Haidari Garden", Haider being one of the names of Imam Ali. It was subsequently rebuilt and renovated by the Buwaihi Adhid Al-Dawlah. Further rebuilding took place after it was destroyed by fire. The present building was the creation of Shah Safi the grandson of Shah Abbas I who ordered the expansion of the courtyard, the gilding of the dome and decoration of the halls and walls with Kashani stones in 1095 AH/ 1684 AD.

The shrine consists of the courtyard, the halls and the four-sided tomb in the middle which is covered with windows of silver and gold. The courtyard has four gates with arches. The tomb is covered by a golden dome made up of 7777 golden bricks and surrounded by two golden minarets about 35 m high and contains 40000 gold bricks. The gold in these bricks is about _ cm thick. They were laid on the orders of Nader Shah, who visited Najaf in 1156 AH/ 1743.

Treasures of the Haidary Shrine

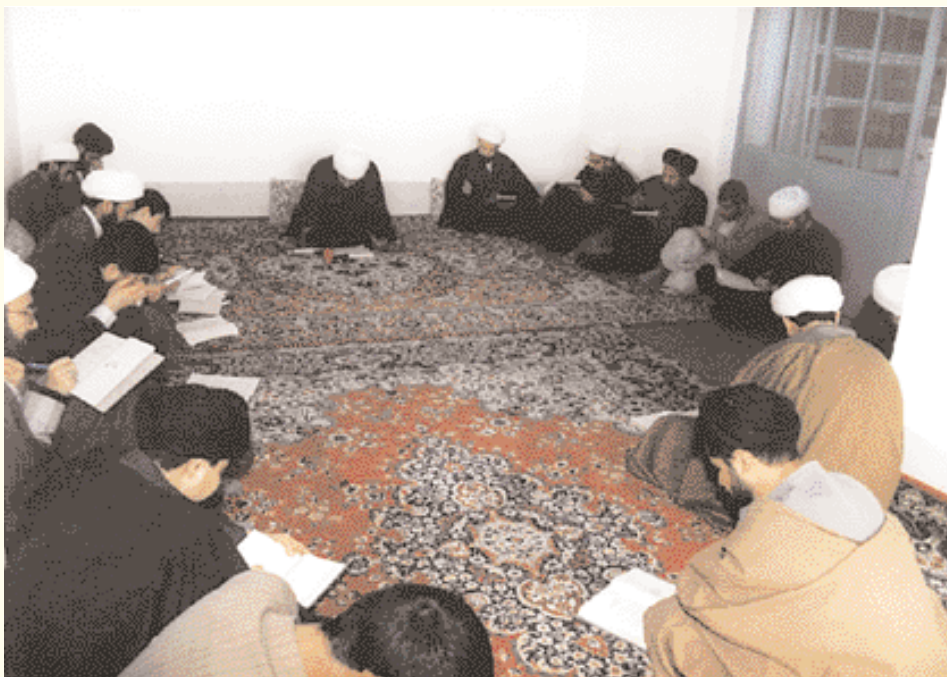
The shrine contains unique treasures mostly donated by rich foreign visitors or gifts ➔

City Tourism



The cemetery of Najaf.

مقبرة النجف.



Students in Najaf.

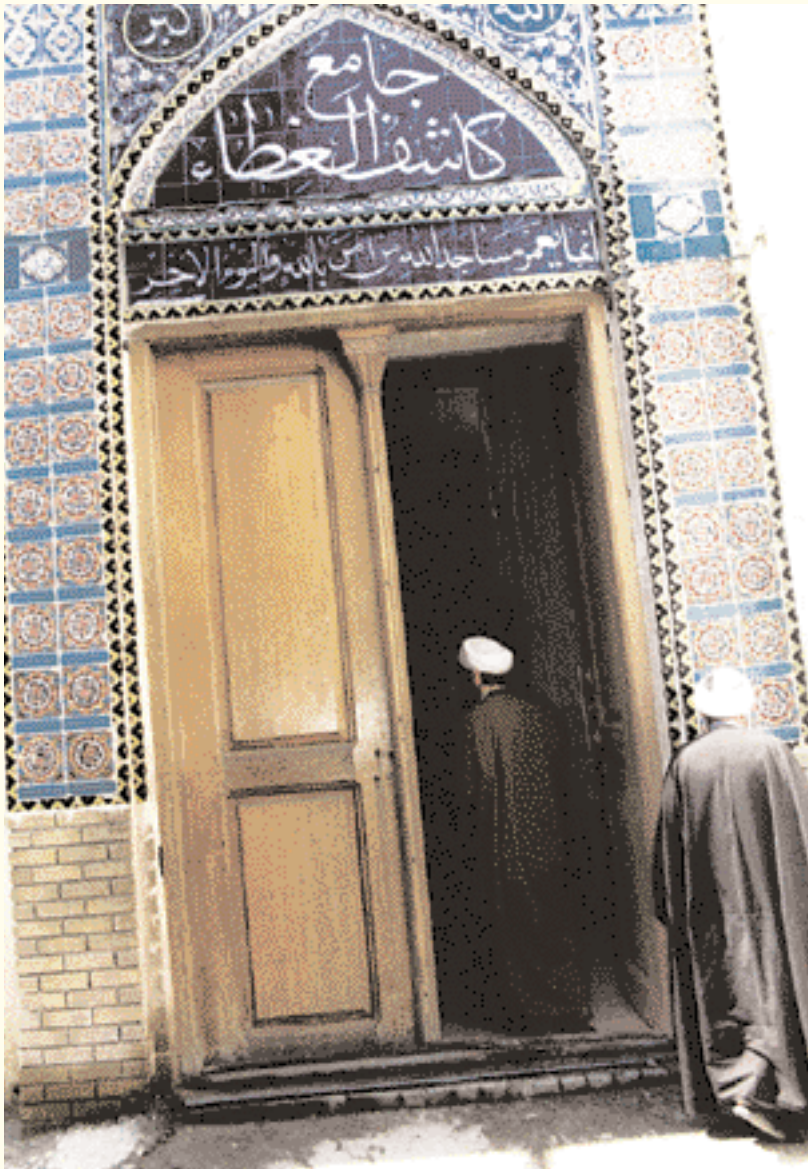
طلاب علم يتدارسون.

which are kept in special safes and Sardabs and not often displayed. The most famous gift was the personal crown of Shah Nader Shah covered with pearls. The Persian carpets are beyond imagination. There is a purple velvet carpet embroidered with diamonds, pearls, emeralds and corundum. There are two carpets measuring 4m by 2m which the experts are at a loss to value. The carpet presented by Shah Abbas Safawi measures 7m by 3m and it is made of silk and gold. There is also a carpet made totally of pearls in varying sizes with a crown in the middle carried by two angels and surrounded by a peacock, an incense burner, lion and a parrot. It bears a pearl inscription: "No young man but Ali, no sword but Thoulfaqr."

The Seminary

The seminary, founded by Sheikh Tusi in 448AH/ 1056 AD, became the most ➤

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Kashif Al-Ghita mosque.

جامع كاشف الغطاء.

important religious school in the world. It specializes in fiqh, Hadith, Quranic studies, Arabic, philosophy and logic and caters for students from throughout the Muslim world. The method of instruction is unique as the student has complete freedom in selecting his teacher, topic and lecture times.

The student is awarded the highest degree - Ijtihad - after passing three stages; the introduction, discussions based on certain books and finally discussions without relying on a single book. The final stage is the most important and only 3 percent of students are successful. The student may have to reapply several times before passing it successfully. The normal length of study is five to seven years.

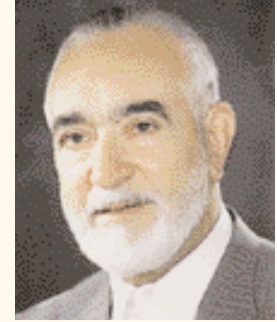
These stages are not restricted -by strict time- they depend on the hard work of the student

and may take 15 years to complete. The tradition in these schools is that the student may become a student and a teacher at the same time, if he shows competence and his teachers are convinced of his ability to teach. Tuition is free and the religious authority provides financial support, books and other necessities. At present five thousand students are enrolled in Najaf's 25 religious schools.

Ayatollah Al-Sistani

The man who heads the Marjiaiah in Najaf at present is Syeed Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani, aged 74. He came to Najaf in 1951 to study religion and lives in a small house in the Bouraq quarter of the old city about two hundred metres from the shrine of Imam Ali. The Syeed has a wide network of representatives inside and outside Iraq who

Shakiry champions manuscript preservation



Hajj Hussein Shakiry is one of the most distinguished contemporary sponsors of education and the pursuit of knowledge in Najaf. He has used his money, time and effort to struggle, together with Shaikh Abdul-Hussein Al-Amini, to collect books and manuscripts from all over the Islamic World. The collection turned the "Ameer Al-Muminin" library into one of the most important libraries dedicated to the preservation of Islamic heritage. He also stood by Shaikh Mohammad Ridha Al-Mudhafar, with his money and efforts, to support the Muntada Al-Nasher Society and to build Al-Fiqh College from which many excellent scholars and poets graduated. He also contributed to the renovation of imams' shrines and mosques in Kerbala, Kadhumiah and Baghdad.

Mr. Shakiry is the author of around 100 books about imams and religious figures, as well as books on prayers and biographies of personalities he meet during the past sixty years.

A real Islamic tourist he has travelled extensively and published his diaries in a book called Memories.

A generous man, he helped many needy individuals and deserves the title mujahid - he fought with his money and his time. Mr Shakiry was forced to leave his country Iraq and suffer exile after his hard earned wealth was confiscated.

May Allah give him a long life to continue with his quest to turn Najaf into a Mecca for knowledge seekers.

keep him in touch with developments in various fields. He also runs a large number of religious schools and cultural foundations, such as Al Murtadha and the Centre for Creed Research. These centres have web sites and Syeed Al-Sistani answers questions. There is also a TV centre. The authors visited the Syeed on the 30th September but were not allowed to take photographs.

The Cemetery of Wadi Al-Salam

The cemetery of Wadi Al-Salam is one of the oldest and largest cemeteries in the world. Coffins are bought from neighbouring countries in accordance with the wishes of thousands of Muslims who state in their wills that they they should be buried in Najaf. Lately the burials have been restricted to ➤

City Tourism



Al-Shakiry mosque.

مسجد الشاكري.



A seminary school.

مدرسة دينية.

Iraqis from inside or outside of the country. It is not possible to count the number of graves in Wadi Al-Salam but on average there are about 150 burials per day. The number of winter burials is double that of summer burials. The cemetery is divided into two parts; the old and the new. In addition to the normal graves there are vaults with two to three sub floors underneath and each floor contains a

line of crypts which number between five and eight. There are two types of rooves: normal roofing and rooves with several bereavement rooms for family and friends. Most of the houses of Najaf were built on old graves. If you look at Najaf from a height you will see green and turquoise domes. The cemetery has teams of people who assume responsibility for preparing the dead and



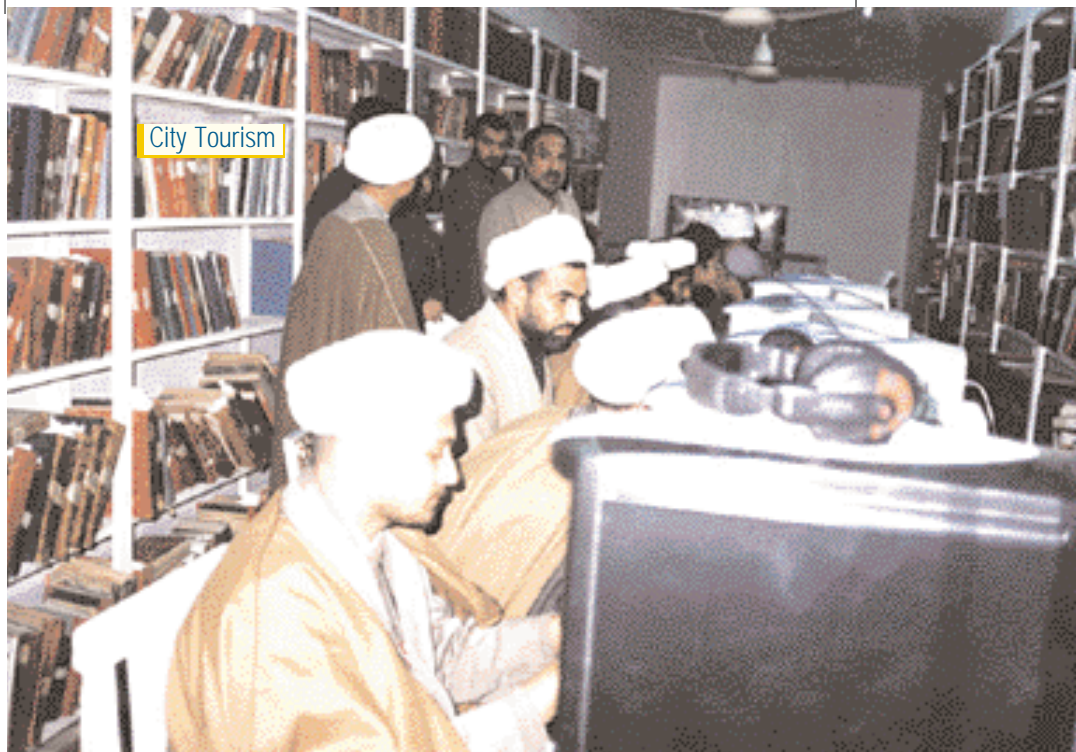
The shrines of Prophets Hud and Salih
مرقد الانبياء هود وصالح

washing and shrouding the bodies. The coffins are taken in procession three times around the holy shrine before being interred in Wadi Al-Salam. According to local custom, the families of Najaf have their own burial teams. Ulama, kings, sultans and army leaders are buried in Najaf, including Adhid Al-Dawlah Al-Buwaihi, Shah Abbas I and Sultan Mohammad Al-Qajari.

The most recent cemetery in Wadi Al-Salam is the cemetery the locals call the "Cemetery of the Mahidi Army" set up five months ago for the militia killed in recent hostilities with the allies during May and August.

Mosques

Najaf is truly the city of mosques – around 125 in total. There is no quarter or street without a mosque which could be small for the locals or large and attended by visitors to the city. The Imams of these mosques are normally led by distinguished scholars. The most prominent scholars and well known families in Najaf have their own mosques, the most famous being: Al-Tusi to the north of the shrine in Al-Amarah quarter, Al-Hindi in Al-Rasoul Street to the south of the shrine, Al-Hannanah on the left side of the road between Najaf and Kufa, Al-Shakiry mosque in Imam Ali street at the entrance to Najaf and Kashif Al-Ghita mosque in Al-Amarah. ➔



The computer centre.

مراكز استخدام الكمبيوتر في الحوزات



Al-Zahra Seminary.

معهد الزهراء للعلوم الإسلامية.

Libraries

The schools of Najaf are great centres of learning, which have produced famous books written by great Ulama. Orientalists, researchers and postgraduates have focused their attention on these libraries: the richest and oldest in Iraq. There are many private libraries belonging to religious families, such as the library of Ali Kashif Al-Ghita, Hadi Kashif Al-Ghita, Bahr Al-Ulum and Al-Qazzwini.

The famous public libraries are: Imam Al-Hakim library in Al-Rasoul Street, Al-Alameen library in Al-Tusi mosque, Al-Haidary library and Ameer Al-Muminin library in Al-Huwaish quarter. This library contains more than half

a million books and manuscripts in all fields of knowledge. One of its rare books is a Quran written by Imam Ali himself in Kufic style with no dots on the letters. The copy, written on deer skin, has the stamp of his son Al-Hassan which proves its authenticity. Some of the rare manuscripts are: Qurans written on the skin of snakes, Ibn Sina's Al-Shifa dated 496 AH, Al-Kashif wa Al-Bayan by Al-Thaalabi. One of the new libraries in Najaf is "The Ahlu Albait Public Library" in the vegetable market, opened in 1993 with manuscripts dating back 500 years, such as those of Zubdat Al-Usul as well as local, Arab and foreign current periodicals. There is also the Al-Shakiry library, next to Al-

Shakiry mosque in Imam Ali Street but its entire contents were confiscated by the previous regime.

Cultural centres

Najaf and culture are two inseparable friends. The city is full of cultural establishments which offer free services to religious students and researchers. These establishments are equipped with internet facilities and centres which save the manuscripts on CD. One famous centre is Kashif Al-Ghita which has a religious school, internet services and manuscript restoration facilities. They have saved more than 1800 manuscript on 74 CDs. Other centres are: The Renewal of the Shii Heritage in Al-Rasoul Street, the Creed Centre, al-Murtadha and the Historical Document Centre in Al-Madinah Street. These centres have connections with universities and research centres world wide. There is also the Muntada Al-Nashr Centre set up in the 1930s. Al-Muntada founded primary and secondary schools in the thirties and forties and a college in the late fifties. In the early sixties it was converted into the Fiqh College. Efforts are being made to re-open the college after the building was confiscated by the previous regime in 1991.

The Najaf pearls

The land of Najaf is famous for precious stones, especially its beautifully shaped, transparent pearls. Rings made from these pearls are believed to bestow the benefits of Allah on the wearer.

Like its pearls, Najaf is one of Iraq's precious cities and the focal point of Iraq's religious tourism. "We see Iranians, Pakistanis and Muslims from all over the world, coming for visits and buying things to take with them as gifts", explained Emad Hussein Alwan, manager of Najaf's Nabaa Hotel.

Construction sites, many of them hotels in the making, line a thoroughfare leading to Imman Ali's shrine and the market that surrounds it, where political ambition and commercial bustle that mark the city meet. ■