

# Iraq's Marshlands

## Eden Again

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Iraq has a charming, unique and beautiful region that has been described as the Venice of the Middle East due to its splendid nature and magnificent landscapes. It is one of the largest ecosystems on the planet, with the strangest aquatic environment, where man, animals, birds and fish all live on water in a magical and independent eco system cut off from the world. This region bewitches all who see it. The British doctor George Row left his profession and turned archaeologist when he saw it for the first time. The marshes are the largest resting place for birds migrating from Siberia to Africa. They provide Iraq with more than half of its fish and milk. Researchers and explorers call them Eden: a heavenly garden lost in the South of Iraq.

### What are the marshes?

The marshes are a group of lagoons and lakes that cover between 15 - 20 thousand km<sup>2</sup>. Most of the marshes are situated between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in a triangle formed by the cities of Al-Amara, Basra and Nasiriah, in the South, while the

remaining part flanks the left bank of the Tigris. Since the quantity of water in the marshes depends on the amount of rain and snow, their area changes from one year to the next and from one season to another, according to the volume of water in the two rivers. The largest marsh is called Al-

Huawiza, with an area of 2,863 km<sup>2</sup>, followed by Al-Hammar, with an area of 2,441 km<sup>2</sup>. The population of the marshes is between 600 and 750 thousand. It is a region that is changing countinuously: in the years of prolonged floods, the marshes are widened, covering large areas of land, while in the years of drought they are reduced. ➔

صيادون في الهور .  
Fishermen.



Boat repair.

اصلاح المشحوف عند حافة هور الحمار.



Al-Hammar.

هور الحمار.



The buffaloes.

الجاموس.

### Historical background

The history of this region goes back to the Sumerians, who created one of the earliest civilizations of Ur, near Nasiriah, 5,000 years

ago. The old Iraqis built their civilization on the edge of the rivers in the middle of water flats. The Sumerians, discovered the secrets of the water and the marshes, and were also

pioneers in adapting to their environment. They built their temples and houses on reed marsh beds and constructed the first boats. The marshes date back to time immemorial. They were created by the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates which renewed the fertility of the land, fed the marshes yearly and ensured the continuity of the cycle of life. Their location on flat low plains enabled the water of the surrounding streams and channels to fill them to a depth of 10 feet.

The region is unique because of several islands above water level, where the rice cultivators and buffalo keepers live. The shores of the marshes are lined with palm trees, extending over large areas along the banks of rivers and streams. The region also has the largest reed forests in Iraq.

The reeds, cited in the Epic of Gilgamesh, represent the heart of the marsh region and play an important role in its economy. They are the essential ingredients for making paper which the state purchases from the local inhabitants who use the reeds for weaving mats and building houses. They export the mats to neighbouring regions, along with raw canes which are thrown into the water in large bundles so the current ➤

can carry them to Basrah. The mats of the marsh dwellers were found in Ur and Uruk. There are many types of reeds. The most unusual are the strong "narsi", used to make "fala" (fishing poles or spears) and oars for boats. The other types are used to build houses and mats. The reeds have a unique characteristic: their roots live for 300 years, even without water.

### Winter resort for birds

There are two varieties of birds in the marshes not found elsewhere in the world: the Basra sparrow and the Iraqi prattle. Al-Huawiza and Al-Hammar marshes give sanctuary to two-thirds of the migrant birds from the West of Siberia and from Central Asia, which move in winter towards Africa. The birds have local names and are divided into three categories by the marshlands inhabitants: 'free birds', fish-eating birds and birds of prey. The free birds, the most common of which is the drake, hide in the reed and papyrus forests of the distant marshes. They have brilliant, beautiful colours and make a tasty meal. Most of the free birds come from the

Black Sea to the paddies of the marshes, where they feed on grains. They are hunted at night with nets and are the mainstay of the marshlands economy.

The fish-eating birds, especially the storks and pelicans with their sharp beaks, come from the coasts of Africa and South East Asia. They are seldom hunted as their meat is not tasty and Islamic Law prohibits eating them, so they can return home in peace.

The birds of prey, especially hawks and eagles, feed on meat. They are excellent divers and easily catch fish in the water. These birds are hunted daily with traps. It can take months to catch a hawk, which is sold for a very high price to hunters in the Gulf. Another bird of prey with thick feathers and strong wings and body is known locally as the "Sister of Massoud".

There are hundreds of other birds, some migrant and others who live permanently in the marshlands and lay their eggs in the forests of reeds and papyrus. Some birds like, the Gallinule, are seasonal visitors. There are also grey and the black crows and different species of sparrows and

nightingales known locally as the "Birds of the Sheikh's daughter".

### The largest fish reservoir

The marshes have the largest reservoir of fish, along a stretch of more than 120 miles, on both banks of the Tigris, up to Al-Hammar, which produces more than 2,000 tons annually. The marshes supply 60% of Iraq's fish. The fishermen know all the spots where the fish hide, as well as the types of fish. They go for the expensive varieties which swim at night to the largest marshes to feed on the roots of aquatic plants. The fishermen, in turn, prepare their nets at night and follow the movement of the fish with their lamps. This fishing method is called the "Light and Spear". The fishermen gather during the day in large numbers, to throw their nets and use fishing spears when the fish try to escape.

The "Fala" (or spear) is the most used widely-used fishing instrument. It consists of a three – four meter stick with a piece of iron with sharp tridents in the shape of the fingers of a hand, fixed at its tip. The fishermen take advantage of the darkness to board their ➤



نقل القصب.

Transporting the reed.



canoes and hunt the sleeping fish in the transparent waters of the marshes, using the light of the lamps. Grilling is the best method for cooking fish. They are washed, cleaned, covered with clay and put in a fire of dry reeds. When the fish are cooked they are eaten with freshly baked bread, which is cooked in a clay oven. The flavour is exquisite and can compete with the world's finest restaurants.

### Complete ecosystem

Besides buffalo, fish and birds, the marshes form an integrated environment for vertebrate and microscopic animals - cows, boars, otters, beavers and reptiles, such as tortoises, snakes and lizards and five types of frogs. Some of the plants grow out of the water while others are submerged underwater.

### A unique way of life

The inhabitants of the marshes have a unique way of life adapted to their geographical, social, and economic conditions. Although most of the inhabitants are settled, some, such as "al-Ma'dan" move from one island to another, far from the influence of the outside world. Many had not seen a car until the 1960s. They keep buffalo, their main source of livelihood and move with them within the perimeter of their tribe. Sometimes the buffalo are left alone for long hours in the water and in the evening find their way home without a guide.

Since the marshes are spaces dominated by water, with swamps, rivers and ditches, the inhabitants built their reed houses in the middle of the water on artificial islands. Each house has a small forecourt, usually made from reeds and mats. The building materials are abundant, cheap and at the disposal of all. Coupled with traditional building methods and the age-old custom of working collectively to build their houses, there is not a single family that does not have its own dwelling. These houses vary according to their function. First there is the community - a collection of 300-400 shacks, in the crowded areas. The shacks are used for storage or middle class dwellings.

The guest house (al-Mudif) is the focal point of the village. It is the house where guests ➤



Fishermen.

صيادون في هور الجبايش.



Houses in the deep marshes.

بيت في عمق هور الجبايش.



The clay oven for cooking bread.

التنور الذي يستخدم في عمل الخبز.





A house in the marshes.

بيت في هور الجبايش.



View of the marshes.

هور الجبايش .



The cattle live with their owners.

الانسان والحيوان يعيشون سوياً .

are received and meetings held. It is built with great care because it is like the parliament of the region - a place for meetings, as well as for resolving conflicts among local inhabitants and outsiders. The sheikh of the tribe has the final say. The religious men, who come from the sacred cities of Iraq, particularly the descendants of the Prophet, enjoy great respect. They conduct ceremonies of condolences to commemorate the martyrdom Imam Hussein. These rooms are also used to receive guests and visitors who come to the region. They are offered beverages, food and accommodation in the tradition of Arab hospitality.

The "Raba'a" (living room) is reserved for the family and is used by the permanent inhabitants of the marshes. "Al-Ma'dans" live generally on small islands called "al-Ishan" in the deep and permanent marshes. The buffalo shepherds live on "al-Iwan" (rafts) that are transportable particularly during times of flood. These dwellings are built with reeds, papyrus and clay, and consist of a single room that can be pushed from one place to another when necessary. They are often gathered together to form a floating island in the middle of the water.

Al-Chabaich are artificial islands built with clay, reeds and papyrus where the ground is raised above the natural islands or artificial islands are built. This type of dwelling is famous in the Chebaich district which has 1600 islands housing 31 villages.

Despite their harsh natural environment the marsh Arabs have managed to adapt to their habitat. The water is no impediment to mobility and they can easily reach the cities on the edges of the marshes. They utilize different types of boats and even the children can manage the smallest. The tarradah, a large, transport boat once used in raids and inter-tribal wars, is now the proud possession of sheiks and the wealthiest inhabitants who fish from it and transport their guests. "Al-Mashuf" ( a 2 meter canoe) is the most widely used because it is light and easy to manoeuvre in the middle of the channels. "Al-Jalabiah" is an amazing boat made from animal dung. The animals are transported in large barges called "al-balams". Some "al-Mator" and "al- ➤





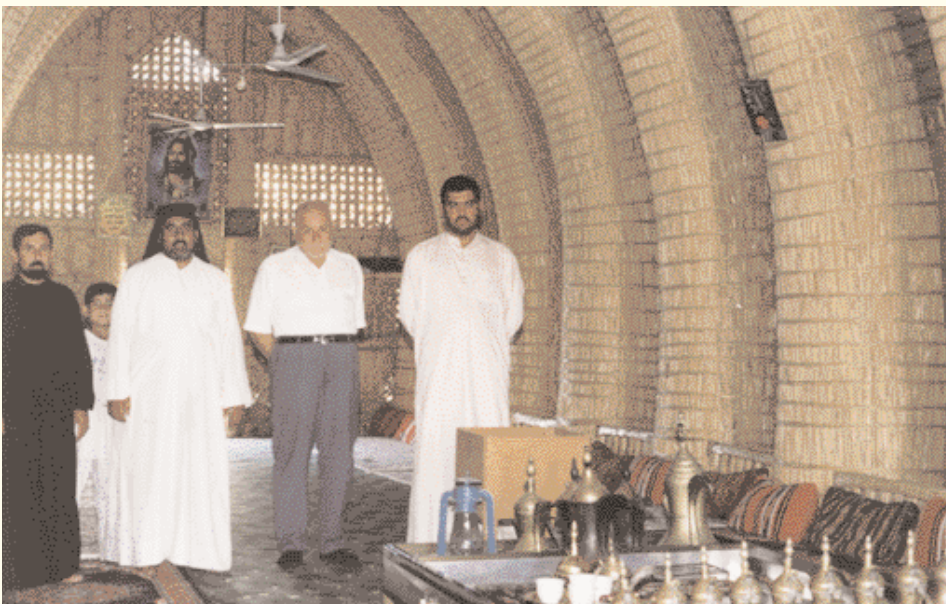
The animals live with their owners.

زربية الحيوانات.



Children in the marshes.

أطفال الجبايش.



The guest house of Al-Khayon family.

مضيف آل خيون في الجبايش.

"Shakhtura" are motorised. They are made locally with local wood or Java wood covered with asphalt.

## Cultural life

The enchanting beauty of the landscape, with blue skies, green plants, blue water and singing birds, make the marsh Arab a poet, a story teller, novelist or lover of literature in general. When one is born among the reeds, he grows up listening to all types of poetry, classic and vernacular. The beauty of nature has influenced numerous writers, poets and painters in these floating islands. Poetry sessions are held in "al-Mudifs" well into the night. The people recall that during one of the floods that devastated the region, a family placed all their furniture in one boat and the library in another. This shows how much the marshlands inhabitants love books.

## Women of the marshes

The women are kind, with innocent smiles and very friendly. They have beautiful faces and black eyes. Nature is their make-up- they have no need for cosmetics. They are also very strong physically and work in agriculture, fishing, caring for young buffalos and other animals and making "al-Qemar" (a thick, high-fat cream made from buffalo milk). They also do the house work and bake bread, just like their ancestors five thousand years ago.

## Famous visitors

The magic of the marshes attracted many researchers, archaeologists and lovers of leisure who came to visit and stayed for a long time. Among the most famous foreign visitors was Wilfred Thesiger, a British officer of Irish origin who, devoted his life to travel after he left the army. He lived in the marshes for a few months every year from 1951 to 1957 with the shiekhs of Albu Mohamed tribe. His book "The Marsh Arabs", published in 1964, brought the marshlands to international attention.

The novelist Kevin Maxwell was invited by Thesiger to spend several weeks in the marshes in 1956 and he also wrote a book. The American anthropologist Henry Field sent a delegation of scientists to study ➤

the inhabitants of this region during the 1930s. The results are published in "Anthropology of Iraq". These studies dealt mainly with the Albu Mohamed tribe in Al-Amara marshes.

Another explorer who visited was Gavin Young, author of "Return to the Marshes," which has been translated into Arabic. He knew Thesiger and helped him photograph the area during the 1950s. Some academics conducted scientific surveys of the marshes: the best-known is Dr. Shakir Mustafa Salim, who obtained his doctorate from the University of London for his work on "al-Chabaich".

### Draining marshes

The ecology experts described the draining of the marshes as not only an ecological disaster, but also a loss of cultural life. In fact, the draining has caused the disappearance of the cradle of the Sumerian civilization and the end of a unique way of life that has lasted some 5,000 years, what a tragedy!

The efforts of the international institutions and the non governmental organisations, adopting projects to revive this region, are the only way to return it to what it was. And, really, these efforts have achieved some of their aims, with technical and financial support, the aid of the relevant Iraqi departments and locals, to

return some 35% of life to the region.

The Iraqi government, international institutions and the non governmental organisations are now adopting projects to re-flood the marshes. The areas of Al-Karmashiah, Um-Najla, Al-Ad, Al-Musahab, Assailal in Al-Hammar, the zones of Al-Chabaich, Abu-Zarak and Awina in the central marshes, and Al-Huawiza, have been flooded through breaks in the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. The return of the water has given the area a new lease of life. A museum dedicated to the culture of the region is under construction.

The rejuvenation project is expected to take about five years and Iraq will see Eden again. ■



سرب من البط داخل هور الجبايش.

Ducks in the marshes.