



Iraqi Kurdistan

Erbil market place.

سوق أربيل.

The newest frontier in cultural tourism

Geoff Hann

Kurdistan Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan or plain Kurdistan - whatever you call it, its a political statement couched in historical, geographical terms, and in past and future claims for influence and autonomy. In this area it is not easy to stand aside from politics past and present: the recent history of repression and violence is too raw to be ignored by any visitor. Tourists must be sensitive to the suffering of the Kurds – in the area many people stand on a mountain of grief - and behave circumspectly.

I have visited Mosul, Erbil and much of Iraq but as a first time visitor to this region, on a mission to research the possibilities for the development of tourism, I was a little uncertain about what to expect.. Under the Saddam regime it was not encouraged to explore this area in its entirety.

The history is fascinating although obscure in modern scholarship. It is claimed by some that this region is the cradle of civilisation. Certainly the language has very ancient roots. It is mentioned in much of the ancient literature. In more modern times however, it was at the extremities of the Ottoman Empire and therefore a refuge for many dissident

Turks and an area of tribal conflicts between local warlords and on the frontier of the empire. After the break up of the Ottoman Empire it became part of modern Iraq but was still controlled by tribal politics. Under Saddam's regime Kurdish aspirations were ruthlessly suppressed and the region was used as a rest and relaxation resort. Its strategic location on the borders of Syria, Turkey and Iran continues to temper the politics of the surrogate state or province of Kurdistan, further bedeviled by the oil interests of all concerned.

So what happens when we want to visit this intriguing region, described by some as the

'Switzerland of the Middle East' and how can tourism flourish.?

The road to Kurdistan

The most frequently used route is to fly to Diyabakir in Eastern Turkey, a predominately Kurdish ethnic city, and travel by road. This is a favored route due to the frequent and relatively inexpensive international connections.

The road journey and border crossing into Iraqi Kurdistan usually takes about six hours: it is a pleasant, scenic route with its rolling agricultural land and backdrop of snow-clad mountains.

Other possible routes are from Iran by road and the road crossing from Syria near ➤



The mountains in the east .

الجبال الشرقية.

Qamishli to Iraq, but this border is often closed. What should be the easiest and most popular route, the road journey, with its numerous checkpoints, from Baghdad having arrived by air, is fraught with security risks and not advisable for tourists.

Various forms of transport are available on the Turkish route. and after crossing into Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a remarkable, amenable and relaxed atmosphere. Fifteen kilometres south is the nearest border town, Zaku. The world's largest parking lot for trucks can be found between Zaku and the border as it is the major oil route to and from Turkey - a five kilometre line of oil tankers on the road is not unusual.

It took some time to understand the modern geography. Zaku, Dohuk and Mosul are on the major highway to and from Baghdad. But effectively at the turning points east into the first two towns, and west into Mosul, is the almost invisible dividing line between Iraq proper and the semi autonomous Kurdish region, manned by extensive check points with the Iraqi police, the Iraqi army, peshmergas (Kurdish militias) and Kurdish police, out in force. This invisible frontier

travels south, with the main highway to Baghdad to the west, and divides Kirkuk and travels south east to As Sulaymaniyah. Everything east of this invisible line is delineated as the Kurdish Province, which is itself bordered east by the mountain ranges of Iran. The check points are almost too numerous to count. A large network of roads is being built in this easterly zone: this means it will not be necessary for anyone to actually cross into the major road system of Iraq if they do not wish to.

Dohuk

A one hour drive from Zaku brings you to Dohuk, a bustling clean city grouped around a huge market area of narrow streets. There are many hotels and restaurants to cater for most pockets, with the clean, modern Sulav Hotel being particularly good value. New hotels are being constructed and there is an air of determination and optimism about the town. The hotels were originally built to cater for the Baghdad and southern Iraq tourist trade as the Iraqis have always been keen to escape the summer heat of the south. Certainly if you are suffering 40 degrees plus

in a city like Baghdad during the summer a break to the north with its cool mountains, water and greenery would be overwhelmingly attractive.

As a tour operator I could see that this was the future tourist trade capable of great expansion once Iraq settles into a normal existence. It was somewhat saddening to be told that children and students were being encouraged to concentrate on the English and the Kurdish languages and sideline or ignore Arabic. Hopefully this is only a temporary phase: most visitors will always be from the Arab countries south and west. International tourism will no doubt come, but only to an extent.

East of the town leads to the hills which were once heavily forested. This is the picnic area of exceptional beauty: cool in summer and possible for winter sports. In May, an ideal time to visit, the weather was warm and the nights cool.

Erbil

The Kurdish region has two administrative areas: Erbil and As Sulaymaniyah: the largest cities. Coming from Dohuk to Erbil ➤



The mountains in the east.

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Kurdistan.

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takes about 2-3 hours as you have to, sadly, sweep around the Mosul environs road system and check points, going east via Ain Sifni, Badraish and crossing the Zab river at Kalat. Once out of the hills south east of Dohuk the road passes through green plains of good agricultural land scattered with many ancient tells - a good hunting ground for archaeologists. After Badraish, the roads are poor, local drivers are very fast and night driving should be avoided at all costs. For a

short time something seemed very familiar about the rolling hills with poor looking soil and rough vegetation. Then it dawned on me that this terrain answered to the description of Greek historians about the battle of Gaugamela(Arbela)(331 B.C) when Alexander effectively defeated the Persian King Darius and took his empire. The Greeks went on to Erbil, probably crossing the river, as I was about to, at Kalat.

Erbil (Hewler in Kurdish) is a very ancient

city, dominated by the great mound in the centre -probably the site of one of the world's oldest inhabited cities already in decline by the time Alexander reached it. One day an extensive archaeological expedition will undertake a thorough excavation. At the moment the citadel's streets are filled with poorly housed refugees from all over Iraq. It is hoped that eventually this great citadel will be designated a world heritage site.

Modern Erbil is growing apace, roads are being constructed along with hi tech buildings and hotels such as the brand new Sheraton - all glass and security. One of the busiest and comfortable modern, centrally situated, hotels is the Erbil Tower Hotel, an ideal choice for tourists.

At the foot of the citadel is the justly famous covered market and in the crowded side streets almost anything can be bought or sold.

The city has an excellent museum and I was very pleased to see the famous Chola Minaret, a late Timurid building, still standing, although in need of better protection. Two weeks later, when in Srinagar city, Kashmir I was startled to see the same brick detail and minimum tile decoration on a wonderful tomb.

People were universally friendly, extraordinarily polite towards an obviously strange foreigner, wandering their streets. But to get to know a city you have to walk. Lack of the Kurdish language is a distinct disadvantage although many people will speak English and, reluctantly, Arabic. It was interesting that in Erbil, I met a Yezidi, Turcomans, and European Kurds as well as other local people. Many glasses of tea were drunk and I was never allowed to pay.

Mosul is a mere 80-90 kms away and in the future, Erbil and Mosul with its ancient centres Nineveh and Nimrud, combined as twin tourist attractions should prove to be highly interesting for international tourists.

Erbil Airport is eagerly awaiting the promised international services. Any time now is the cry both here and in London. There are planned London-Baghdad-Erbil connections on Iraqi Airways.

Kirkuk

Despite being strongly warned against it, ➤



Kurdistan.

کردستان.



The highway to As Sulaymaniyah is new and fast and travels through rolling green hills with the eastern mountain ranges in the distance. One of the earliest settlements known to man, Jarmo is off the road en route. The city sits almost in a bowl surrounded by hills and is mostly smart and modern, with good hotels. The population looks prosperous and well dressed. My driver said that it was “The Paris of Kurdistan”.

I was determined to visit Kirkuk, that seriously divided oil city. Leaving with a Turkoman driver, I headed south to Kirkuk en route to As Sulaymaniyah traveling for a long way on the Baghdad highway. There are many check points manned by different forces on this road. Some distance from Kirkuk, the road runs alongside a ridge of hills and amazingly every half kilometer or less was a military block house, crumbling and abandoned, perched high on a ridge. These block houses were built by Saddam

Hussein to protect the oilfields and control the Kurdish peoples, but at what cost ?

My ambitions in Kirkuk came to nothing, I still have not visited the tomb of the Prophet Daniel. As we entered the city, crossed the last checkpoint, still in the Kurdish part of town, my driver deemed that wisdom was the better part of valour and we left passing through the slums of Kurdish refugees towards As Sulaymaniyah. It was not for me to argue given the latest round of killings there.

As Sulaymaniyah

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The huge area of market streets and the ➤



As Sulaymaniyah .

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what Kurdistan is famous for: its mountain villages, waterfalls, mountain streams and superb views. Much good advice was given to me, maps scanned, and towns enumerated. Modern maps are quite poor for this whole region and quickly out of date as new roads are constantly being built. With a rather utopian time scale for this journey, an Arab/Kurdish driver, took me for an hour to the town of Dokan. This is where people come to relax, honeymoon, or go just for the weekend and stay down by the river or in chalets close by. Again serious building development is taking place. Staying here was, by Kurdish standards, quite expensive.

places in this region for tourists and to go further north east was not practical time wise.

The home coming journey

Returning to Dohuk via Aqrah I was conscious that I had touched only a few of the possibilities for tourism. The entire region is underdeveloped for modern, international tourism, the language is difficult, although English is widely spoken in the towns. There are a multitude of check points and everywhere, buildings, hotels etc are guarded. Strangely this becomes reassuring once you get used to it.

Rawanduz

Although leaving very early in the morning it was apparent that my chosen route along the ranges traveling far north before reaching Dohuk was not going to be possible in much less than 20 hours of driving. So choices were made and Rawanduz, had to be the main objective - a town which lies close to the main road from Iran. The scenery is magnificent and famous prehistoric caves abound in this region. Many of the buildings and villages are relatively new as there was large scale destruction in various conflicts during the past 30 years.

Unfortunately there are not many resting

The regret must be that cities like Mosul and Kirkuk down to Baghdad cannot be part of a tourist itinerary when visiting this region. But the sheer hospitality is overwhelming, the eastern mountain scenery amazing and the mixture of ethnic cultures very stimulating and interesting. There are many archaeological sites, Assyrian and Sumerian as well as prehistoric that can be added to a tourist circuit.. The determination to stand alone, if needs be, by the bulk of the population is admirable. As a whole the area is amazingly clean and becoming modern in its outlook, certainly in the towns. A great deal of money has been pumped into the economy and this is still the case. Many ➤

modern mosques dominates the city. The streets are remarkably clean, mobile telephone shops abound, and very modern 4 x4 vehicles are very common. There is serious money in As Sulaymaniyah. Again a great deal of modern construction is taking place. The city was bright in the sunlight, felt very safe and is an ideal centre from which to explore the mountains and lakes.

Dokan

The next phase of this Kurdish exploration was to travel back north but along side the easterly mountain ranges. This after all is



As Sulaymaniyah.

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Kurds are returning to their homeland, bringing expertise and funds with them. Hotel building is going apace.

Tourism is a dilemma for Iraqi Kurdistan. International tourism is a fickle beast: it brings international recognition and finance but demands great sums spent on infrastructure. And it has no loyalty: tourists can move on to another destination without warning. Domestic tourism can provide bread for many and steady growth. It is possible to exploit both the

local and international market but that needs careful planning and implementation.

The Kurdistan Development Corporation (www.kurdistancorporation.com) can provide would-be tourists and potential investors with many valuable insights and factual information about the region, including maps of the major cities. The KDC is also organizing a British delegation to the DBXKURDISTAN Trade Show, 15-18 September in Erbil, Kurdistan.



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Erbil .

We can but wish the region well. ■

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