

El-Madain

Tourism In The Heart Of History

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A piece of land about one km² in El-Madain, south of the capital Baghdad, has three claims to fame: the historical buildings and tombs of the companions of the Prophet . It is also the site of one of the great battles fought by Moslems, a watershed for the Islamic faith.

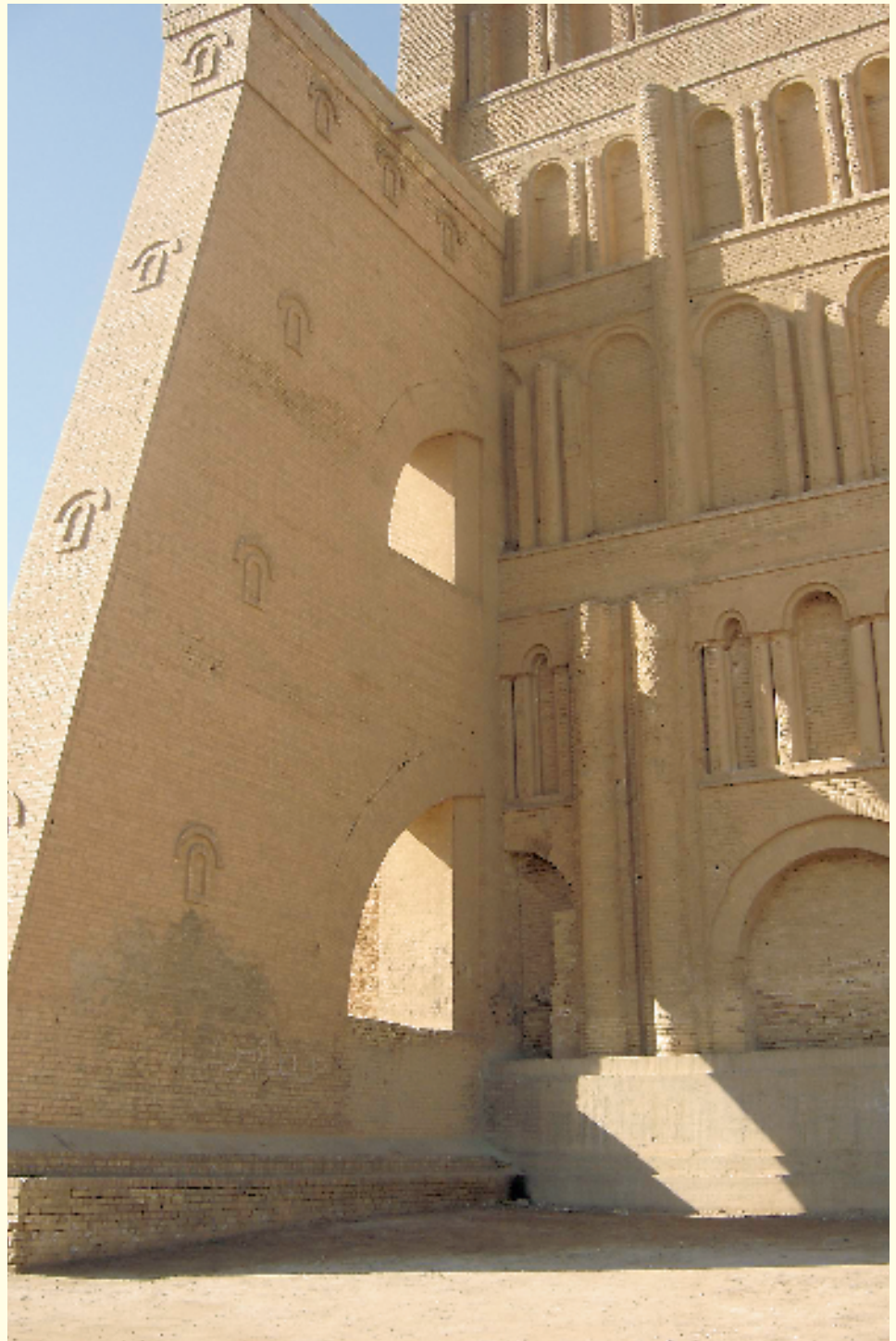
The place and its name

This city is located some 40 km to the south of Baghdad and has several names, "El-Madain" (Aramaic), "Ctesiphon" (Persian) and "Seleucia" (Greek). It was founded by the Parthians, who came from the south of Iran and conquered Iraq in 141 B. C. They made Ctesiphon their capital. The Sassanides used it as their winter capital in addition to the summer capital, Soussa in Iran, after the Sassanide Ardashir vanquished Artaban, the last Parthian king in 224 A. D. The Sassanides controlled Iraq, until the Muslim conquest.

It seems that the choice of this area as the capital of the great states of that time was justified by military considerations. It is naturally protected by the Tigris river from the east and the abundance of water encouraged the construction of stable dwellings. The palace founded by Shabour I (241-275), called the White Palace or the Palace of Kisra, is the most remarkable monument in the area. It shelters the most famous arcade in history, known as the "Arch of Kisra".

The Arch of Kisra

The Arch of Kisra is regarded as one of the largest and highest arches of the old world, part of the White Palace whose walls have disintegrated. Only one arch remains, revealing the size of the palace. The arcade is about thirty meters high, 25.5 m wide with walls 7 m ➤



The Arch of Kisra

جانب من الطاق ويلاحظ جمال الزخارف



The mosque of Salman El-Farissi

مسجد سلمان الفارسي المجاور للمرقد

thick at the base. The palace faces east with three doors. The first door opens towards the right, the second towards the left close to the opening of the palace, and the third close to the west wall. On the left of the palace, one finds a large wall reaching the top of the arcade, 6m thick at the base. This wall has recently been supported by bricks and cement to stop it from collapsing. The other wall, to the right of the palace, collapsed in 1887 following a rising of the Tigris.

Foreign archaeological excavation missions, in particular the Germans in 1931 in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of New York, revealed many of the palace's secrets. The surface of the city was estimated at 3 km². This mission discovered various constructions including the city wall and its contour. It appears that this palace was composed of a large house in the center and the throne room, surrounded by small rooms in the north and the south. Opposite was a long corridor which ended in the axis of the house. This building was made of bricks and exquisitely decorated outside and inside with gypsum. Marble statues adorned the front.

The excavations discovered various articles dating from Hellenistic, Parthian, Sassanide and Islamic times: decorated pottery, glass bottles, gypsum engravings, marble statuettes, copper utensils and silver and copper coins.

Old Arabic books evoked the splendid decorations of this palace, its gold engravings and invaluable stones, silk curtains, prestigious carpets, statues which decorated its facades and corridors, and Assyrian and Persian writings which decorated the walls of the house.

Tombs of the Prophets, Companions of Ahle-Al Bait

After the conquest of Iraq, during the reign of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, this area was chosen by some of the Prophet's companions as a place to live, among them Salman El-Farissi, who was designated governor of Iraq by Omar.

He was called Rozaba, but after he embraced Islam, the Prophet gave him the name Salman. The people of Iraq called him "Salman Bek", meaning "Salman the Pure One". He died in 34 A. H. (655 A. D. approximately) and was buried in El-Madain, a little to the north of Taq (Arch).

Mausoleum of Salman El-Farissi

The mausoleum is composed of a vast esplanade, with two large gates, and many halls. Some were transformed into a religious school. At the top of the mausoleum, one finds two high minarets and four domes: one above the tomb of Salman El-Farissi, two at the top of the mausoleum of Abdullah Ben Jaber Al-Ansari and Assayed Taher, and the last on top of the mosque.

On the right hand side of the mausoleum, there is a mosque jam-packed on Fridays. A make shift roof to stop the rain or provide shade from the sun has to be erected when the mosque is full. By crossing the esplanade, one comes to a small door with the Prophet's saying: "Salman belongs to Ahlu Al-Bayt".

At the exit, a hall extends from a surface of 60m² which includes a small library of Qurans. This building was recently restored, and its ceiling decorated with beautiful Islamic inscriptions. In the middle is a small door which leads directly to the tomb.

The tomb is located in the middle of a small nicely decorated mausoleum, including a ➤



Within the same mausoleum one finds another tomb: that of the companion Abdullah Ben Jaber Al-Ansari, son of the famous companion Jaber Ben Abdullah Al-Ansari, a highly respected scholar of Quran and Sunna, who fought in 18 battles at the side of the Prophet. He died in 78 A. H. The tomb of Assayed Attaher Ben Mohammed Al-Baqir, Ben Al-Imam Ali Ben El-Housein Ben Ali Ben Abi Taleb is also in this mausoleum.



The Tourist Complex

جانب من المجمع السياحي

small grid overlooking the adjacent hall and a metal door leading to the tombs of the companions Houdaifa Ben Al-Yamae, Abdullah Ben Jaber Al-Ansari and Assayed Attaher Ben Mohammed Al-Baqir. At the top of the mausoleum, is a wooden case decorated with silver and a bronze lamp on each corner.

The tomb of Houdaifa Ben Al-Yaman

To the left of the tomb of Salman El Farissi, is the tomb of the companion Houdaifa Ben Al-Yaman, one of the valorous Moslem warriors and an eminent expert in the Quran and Sunna. The Caliph Othman Ibn Affan appointed him governor of El-Madain. After the assassination of Othman, the Caliph Ali Bin Abi Talib, confirmed him in this position. He died in 36 A. H. His tomb and that of the companion Abdullah Ben Jaber Al-Ansari were on the bank of the Tigris but, in 1931, floods prompted their transfer to the current location. The mausoleum

of this companion has the same dimensions as that of Salman El-Farissi. At the top of the tomb, there is a wooden case nicely decorated with an aluminum framework on top.

Other tombs

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El-Qadissiya Panorama

This is also the site where the Muslims defeated the Persians at the battle of El-Qadissiya. The Moslem army under the command of Saad Ben Abi El-Waqasse was directed towards El-

Madain; as soon as they reached Kisra, the soldiers remembered the promise of the Prophet related to its conquest. The city was subjected to a siege in the month of Dhi Al-Hijja in 14 A. H., until its inhabitants escaped. Saad Ben Abi El Wakasse then entered El-Madain and the White Palace with his army.

The panorama representing the battle of El-Qadissiya with sound effects, was built in in a special building, together with two other buildings, one for equipment, the another for the staff. This building was regularly visited, particularly by students. Unfortunately, after the fall of the former regime, the panorama was plundered and became a ruin, like the Palace of Kisra.

The tourist complex

On the banks of the Tigris, in the middle of the citrus fruits and palm trees, approximately one kilometre from the palace of Kisra, the tourist complex of El-Madain was built in the 1970s. This complex is composed of a two-storey, 20 room hotel, five villas each with two bedrooms, a reception, kitchen and bathroom, 16 apartments and 16 single rooms.

There are also a supermarket, an olympic swimming pool and a park with leisure facilities for children. On the river side, is a barge which was intended to be a floating casino. Accommodation is cheap: \$20 for one night in the villa, \$18 for the studio. Before the occupation of Iraq, it was very difficult to get a room in this complex on Fridays, because it was the favorite place of honeymoon couples and those who like peace and quiet. Many families went there at the time of religious festivals (Eids): especially Fitr (end of Ramadan) and Adha (the Hajj). But, following recent events there are no more tourists and this complex provides free accommodation for the displaced families of Fallouja.

El-Madain, like Iraq's numerous other tourist attractions, is waiting for a time of peace when locals and foreign visitors can enjoy the country's magnificent ancient heritage. ■