

# Tour of Iraq delivers good food and amazing sights

Michigan travel agency owner Ihab Zaki just returned from taking a group of American tourists on vacation to Iraq.

Yep. Iraq. And he plans to offer two more trips there in November and next March.

Zaki, owner of Spiekermann Travel in Eastpointe, specializes in unusual trips to the Middle East and North Africa. Last year, he was attending a tourism conference in Germany and was surprised to see Iraqi tour operators there and learn that British and German tourists were already back in Iraq, visiting destinations like Basra, Baghdad and Ur.

So he meticulously planned a two-week trip. In March, along with 15 of his most experienced, travel-savvy American clients, he went to Iraq as a tourist despite friends and family "who thought I had totally lost my mind," he says.

So what was it like? Good food, amazing sights, some nerve-racking moments and lots of red tape.

## Puzzlement at airport

They entered Iraq through Turkey, flying from Istanbul to Basra. Right away, they had

paperwork issues. It was so odd that Americans were coming for tourism that officials didn't know what to make of them. Finally, the group boarded a comfortable tour bus and headed for Al Qurna and Basra.

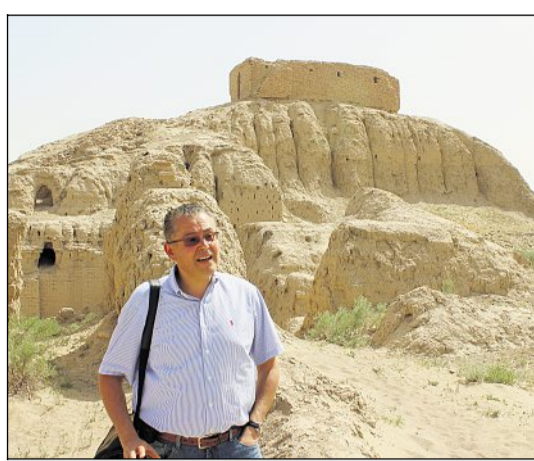


**ELLEN CREAGER  
THE MICHIGAN  
TRAVELER**

"Going to Al Qurna and back to Basra was when we started getting acquainted with the populated Iraqi countryside," Zaki recalled later in an essay that has to be among the first reports of what it is like to be a tourist in Iraq now.

"The chaos of auto jams, the vital pedestrian and petty-merchant life by and on the roads' edges, the costumes of men and women, the crummy houses and occasional mosques, the endless election posters, the numerous flags ... dried mud-flats, green fields and date palms — and the endless checkpoints. Stop the bus. Count us, glance at or collect the passports, and off we go again."

Everywhere, they saw the damage of war, but also pleasing hotels with excellent dinners, and signs of life — including the Basra riverfront "lined with restaurants, teashops, hookah cafés and an amusement park with a giant Ferris wheel. Life does go on."



**Ihab Zaki at the Ziggurat of ancient Nippur, Iraq, in March. He organized a small-group trip and took some American tourists there. SPIEKERMANN TRAVEL**

The group saw Mesopotamian historic sites in Ur, Tell Ubaid and Nasiriya. They took a boat ride through the Marshes. They went to ancient Girzu and Lagash, Uruk, Kufa, Nippur, Ukhaidir, Babylon, and the towns of Al Kifl, Najaf and Karbala. In Karbala, "we passed multiple checkpoints including three just to get near the shrine," Zaki reported.

## Baghdad's difficulties

Memorably, some things struck Zaki: The electric lines, rigged up and tangled, hanging everywhere, so low that sometimes "our guide Bassem would pop the vent open and climb on the roof of the vehicle with a wooden stick to lift the wires" so the bus could pass.

The realities of Baghdad, when it took them an hour to go 10 miles to the National Museum of Archaeology: "Upon leaving our hotel we were hit with one of the ugly realities of Baghdad: traffic. The city has been choked off by the blockage and barricading of almost all side streets for security reasons."

The palaces of Saddam Hussein: "Looking beyond Babylon and the gorgeous views over the Euphrates your eyes settle on the ruined towers of one of the palaces of Saddam. ... It has been looted to the last lightbulb."

If you're interested in knowing more about the "Iraq — Cradle of Civilization" tour (\$7,995 for 15 days, including round-trip flights from the U.S.) call Spiekermann Travel at 800-645-3233.

Contact reporter Ellen Creager, the Michigan Traveler, at 313-222-6498 or [ecreager@freepress.com](mailto:ecreager@freepress.com). Follow her on Twitter @ellencreager

## Travel deal

The new Frontier Airlines route from Detroit Metro Airport to the small Trenton (N.J.)-Mercer County airport still has good deals for travelers.

Book through [www.flyfrontier.com](http://www.flyfrontier.com) and get flights as low as \$49 each way. We found a trip with a June 13 departure and a June 18 return for \$107.99 round-trip.

The airport is 40 minutes from Philadelphia, and rental cars are available at the small airport.

— Ellen Creager

# > WITH THE D



CHARLENE GREGORY

**From left: Sisters Joan Burns of Flat Rock, Lori Mehalko of Grand Blanc, Charlene Gregory of Allen Park and Jill Baker of Allen Park wear the Old English D on the beach in Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic during an April vacation in memory of their late mother, Rosemary Wisser.**

Going on a trip? Take along the Old English D, snap a photo and upload it at [Freep.com/GetPublished](http://Freep.com/GetPublished). Please include information about the photo and a phone number. Check out more reader-submitted photos at [Freep.com/TravelWiththeD](http://Freep.com/TravelWiththeD).

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## Travel Smart

The rumors bubbling for the last year are true. The clever "Wizarding World of Harry Potter" theme park at Universal Orlando is being expanded, and it will open in 2014.

The new section is called Diagon Alley. It will feature places and experiences that Harry and his pals have in and around London and include a major ride based on Gringotts bank.

So far, the park is releasing information in dribs and drabs, but the design of Diagon Alley/London is being handled by the same creative crew that made magic on the first "Wizarding World," which opened in 2010.

Also new: some kind of Hogwarts Express train that will transport visitors between the old and new Harry Potter worlds. Stay tuned. [www.universalorlando.com](http://www.universalorlando.com).

— Ellen Creager

## Cool travel website

**Website:** [www.storybots.com](http://www.storybots.com). Available online; also mobile apps for iPhone and iPad.

**Lowdown:** For the littlest travelers and their parents on the road. For \$4.99 a month you get a series of fun activities for children like Tap and Sing, which teaches notes, chords and melodies, plus activity sheets, ABCs and books that star the child. For parents, a great app called Coin Flip settles lots of arguments in the wiggly back seat.

— Ellen Creager