

IRAQ – CULTURAL TOUR IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

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The cultural tour we have prepared for you in Iraq will take place in the autonomous province of Iraqi Kurdistan. We will discover landscapes of breathtaking beauty, from the deserts in the south to the mountains in the north and east. We will have an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the Kurdish identity and culture and the often painful and tragic history of a people that has withstood repeated repression. We will also be encountering the minorities who inhabit these lands and help weave this magnificent human tapestry. More than 4000 years ago, Assyria began a process that was to leave its imprint on the Middle East as a whole. Fourteen centuries later, Medes, Babylonians and Scythians opened a new chapter. We will be following in the traces of a forgotten history and discovering the signs of a cultural renaissance.

Day 1: Paris - Erbil

Paris: meet at the airport and flight to Erbil (not direct). Night in Erbil.

Day 2: Erbil - Dohuk

Morning departure for the site of Bavian or Khans. There you will see Assyrian sculptures considered to be the most important remains in the Badinan region. They were part of one of the summer palaces of Sennacherib, King of Assyria in the 7th century BC. We will continue on to Dohuk and visit the Charsteen cave on the "White Mountain" north of Dohuk. It would seem to date back to the Furthian era, as indicated by the pottery remains discovered on its roof. On the right-hand side of the cave can be seen five symbols etched into the stone, probably denoting the gods of the Sun and the Moon, Ishtar, Mitrwa and Zrwan. We will then travel to Amadiyah, a small Assyrian hilltop fortress. The trade caravans mainly came from Mosul and entered the city through the western gate, which bears the same signs and symbols as those discovered in Babylon. The origins of this gate are attributed to King Naram-Sin (2254 - 2218 BC). Before returning to Dohuk, we will stop at Arader and visit the church of Sultan Mahadouht. This church in particular houses tombs of the Assyrian period. Night in Dohuk.

Day 3: Dohuk

We travel to Al Gara mountain and visit the remains of one of the former palaces of Saddam Hussein, today abandoned. Then on to Zakho, a few kilometres from the Turkish border. The symbol of Zakho, is the Delal bridge, also called the Abbassid bridge because of the presumed period during which it was built from large hewn stones. It crosses the Khabor river at a height of more than fifteen metres. The history of the construction of this bridge remains unclear as no symbols, signs or writing offer any precise identification of its date. We will then move on towards the banks of the Tigris, with a halt at Pishkhabor, where the Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi borders all meet. Return to Dohuk for the night.

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Day 4: Dohuk – Erbil

Departure for Al Qush, the home town of the prophet Nahum, the seventh of the twelve minor prophets. His ministry ran from 650 to 612 BC, at the same time as Jeremiah, and he predicted the destruction of Nineveh. The synagogue of Al Qush contains the tomb of the prophet. In 1948, most members of the Jewish community left the town and the synagogue was abandoned. The site is today protected by the church, but has not been Christianised and remains as it was originally built. The Rabban Hormizd monastery, which was one of the spiritual centres of the Church of the Orient, dominates the village of Al Qush. After a period of significant spiritual influence, this monastery – which was home in the 7th century to the hermit Rabban Hormizd - has been abandoned for centuries. The monastery was built on the hillside and was exposed to attacks and incursions by the armed bandits who ravaged the Kurdish mountains. Mar Hormizd church is the oldest of the buildings on the site and was built in 1300. Despite its simplicity, it can be considered an architectural masterpiece. Visit to the Mar Matti monastery atop Mount Maqloub, one of the best known to the Christians of the Middle East. This monastery belonged first to the Syrians and then the Jacobites. Before returning to Erbil, we will stop in Lalesh where a large community of Kurdish Yazidi lives. Visit to the sanctuary of the Yazidi religion in an old Christian church. This church in particular contains bas-reliefs representing a snake and a peacock, the symbols of the Yazidi religion. Night in Erbil.

Day 5: Erbil – Suleimaniyah

Departure for Suleimaniyah, a city close to the Iranian border. En-route, halt at Koya – previously known as Kakon. The city was an important stopping point for the caravans. The town is today a commercial, cultural and educational centre of Kurdish life that enjoys a considerable reputation; numerous artists, poets and politicians come from there. You will be able to walk through the traditional alleyways of the town and visit Mar Bena monastery, bombarded when Saddam Hussein was in power. The building is currently being rebuilt according to the original plans. Also, visit to the Ottoman fortress, the 18th century caravanserai and the old mosque. We will then continue on to Dukan. Walk around the lake and castle visit. Night in Suleimaniyah.

Day 6: Suleimaniyah – Erbil

Suleimaniyah was founded at the end of the 18th century, under Baban rule. The Babans were to play an important political, economic and social role in the region. Walk through the town and its wide boulevards lined with trees and imposing villas. The town places particular emphasis on promoting Kurdish culture. The university houses a Kurdish cultural centre and one of its faculties is devoted to Kurdish language studies. Visit to the archaeological museum. Continuation to the monastery of Bazyan (5th-6th centuries). The excavations that began in 1987 have revealed a number of coins, two crucifixes – one of mosaic and one of bronze, two tombs and Sassanid style mosaics (5th century). On the road back to Erbil, visit to the sculpted caves at Qazqapan. The engravings represent two kings (of the Medes and of the Lydians) with the attributes of the divine symbols of peace. One door leads to three funerary chambers. This entrance is marked by two ionic columns dating from the 7th-6th centuries BC. Later, stop at the prehistoric caves of Zerzi. Night in Erbil.

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Day 7: Erbil

Day spent visiting Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous federal region of Northern Iraq. Erbil, "Arba Ilu" the city of the four gods, was the religious capital of the Assyrian kingdom and in it can be found in particular the temple of Ishtar (goddess of fertility). The name of Erbil is also linked to the famous battle of Gaugamela during which Alexander defeated Darius III. The day will begin with a visit to the Al Khayat mosque. It was built about three years ago and is the largest mosque in Iraq and the main gathering place for the Muslim community in Iraqi Kurdistan. Erbil is well-known for its citadel, covering ten hectares, which from a height of about thirty metres dominates the plain. Its first occupants took up residence in the 6th millennium BC and the place also provided shelter for its inhabitants during the numerous invasions and wars which marked the history of the region. The city of Erbil gradually expanded into a circle around the fortifications. The journey will continue with a visit to Erbil Museum. It was opened in 1989 and houses collections ranging from the Sumerians to the Abbasids. Finally, visit to the Choli minaret built by Muzaffaradeen Gokburi, Sultan of Erbil (563 - 636). Free time in the bazaars. Night in Erbil.

Day 8: Erbil – Paris

Morning departure to visit Khanzad castle and then Raban Boya monastery in Shaqlawa. Transfer to Erbil airport and flight to Paris (not direct).

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