

Iraq?

Despite getting within five miles of one of the most dangerous cities in the world, Kirkuk, I felt 1,000 miles from the dangers of Iraq while visiting the northern part of that country, more commonly known as Kurdistan. I had to remind myself that I technically was in Iraq but for all practical purposes I was in another country with its own flag, own security and own customs. Kurdistan was an unbelievably welcoming place to visit as exemplified by having a policeman apologize to me for checking my passport when he saw I was an American as well as not having to pay for a single meal while in the country.

Two of the real challenges in visiting Kurdistan are finding a cheap hotel and transport as there is intermittent buses running only between major cities, which leaves the more expensive shared taxi option. Fortunately, at my moderately cheap hotel in Dohuk, I found another American and a Spanish person who had the same itinerary. We went to the car park that would have taxis headed to Amadiya and started to negotiate. Eventually, we settled on a taxi driver who seemed and actually turned out to be trustworthy, so we used his services the entire time we were in Iraq. His name sounded a little like Starbucks and he said it was okay for us to call him that.

We first went to the small village of Lalish, having to stop a couple of times to ask people living in tents on the side of the road for directions. The village is a sacred place for the Yazidi faith who worship the peacock angel. This angel fell from grace so some accuse them of being devil worshipers, but they are not. In the village, there are several fenced in white peacocks which are an ode to this god and painted black snakes near the main temple's doorway which is believed to have plugged a hole in Noah's Ark. Within the temple are several red, white and green shiny cloths used to make wishes. Heading further underground is the White Spring which is used for baptisms. A dimly lit room contains several containers of 2,000-year-old oil that is still used in religious ceremonies. Heading out of the sanctuary, there are several other buildings that have snakes, sunshine and burnt out areas on top of the doors which are all religious in nature.

The road from Lalish to Amadiya passed through one of Saddam Hussein's houses perched on top of a hillside and one of the villages that he gassed. About two miles short of the village of Amadiya is a place to get a view of this impressively perched village and buy some items or get some food. Some of those items including nearly liquid peanut butter, freshly cut fruit roll ups drying in the sun and toys including military action figures and American tanks. The restaurant's tables and chairs were often set in a manmade river so



diners could keep cool as water trickled through their toes.

Returning to the pleasant city of Dohuk, the Church of St Ith Laha dates to the Sixth Century. The promenade along a small stream includes several restaurants and several Kurdistan flags painted onto the rocky outcrops along the city. I talked with some of the shoe shiners outside my hotel and walked down Kawa Road to the bazaar stopping by for some tasty natural fruit drinks which I was surprised to see in Iraq.

Another unexpected experience was visiting the amusement park called Dream City.



Invited in by Mickey Mouse and an inflatable man with flailing arms, the park looked similar to any in America. There was a roller coaster, bumper cars, Ferris wheels, video games, and merry go rounds with Kurdish music and American rap including Nelly. The bumper cars were entertaining especially watching a woman who was in full burka. Because no one could see her eyes, no one knew where she was going and thus, she constantly blindsided people.

Erbil is the biggest city in Kurdistan, its capital and makes the claim as the longest constantly inhabited city in the world. More specifically, the citadel overlooking the city claims to have had residents for over 8,000 years with one family currently living in the rundown quarters to keep the streak alive. There were 3,000 war refugees living in the area until 2006 but they have been relocated. What remains is a series of rundown mud brick houses with broken stairs surrounded by propped up fortified walls making the citadel feel like a ghost town. In the center of town is a mosque and bath but both were closed when I visited.

Only a couple functional buildings remain within the citadel, one to the right of the South Gate is the Kurdish Textile Museum, which is both an interesting museum and a place to buy souvenirs with money going directly to the women that make them. Upon entering the museum, there are pictures of famous guests including Senator McCain and several American military leaders. To the right of the gate are a couple of shops that sold hookahs, tea sets, pictures, rugs and America flag pillows. The government buildings were empty but open, so we raided them for water and the air conditioning.

Leaving the South Gate moving toward the city, a statue of Sharafaddin, a famous 12th Century historian, dominates. While looking at the city, one building that stands out is the mosque that resides at the base of the tell. There are several water fountains in the area so there is more water than one might expect. Many of the other buildings look rather drab but there is some greenery including the Martyr Sami Abdul-Rahman Park, named after a Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister who was killed in a 2004 suicide bombing.



The park has beautiful grounds with a variety of flowers, most notably roses with several large water fountains and a memorial to Kurdish martyrs. When we visited the park, it was also housing a birthday party for the child of the caretaker of the park who saw we were foreigners and immediately waived us over to the party. The party was a real highlight of the Iraqi visit as we were immediately made to feel at home. We were given noise makers and hats, asked to dance along to the Kurdish dances and given birthday cake. Also at the party was a lot of fruit to eat, sparklers and a blown-up Santa. Visitors would kiss the child and give presents and then they sang Happy Birthday in Kurdish.

As we headed back to our hotel, we took many more pictures of the people and places of Erbil. One of my fellow travelers was a professional photographer with a professional camera and knew how to ask people for their picture. Thus I got pictures I normally wouldn't get: a man and his son's shop, pictures of women which are difficult in this area and pictures of police and security. In fact, we talked to security and police for about an hour. We got a picture of a heavily armed security guard smiling and giving us a thumbs up. Also, one of the police officers sold the other American his Iraqi police cap as a souvenir and we took a picture together until his boss came into the booth and scolded his subordinate. Then they both laughed and said it was okay and then offered us more water and tea. We asked for a picture with the boss and after saying "No CNN, right?" he agreed.

Taking playful pictures with security and police was one of several highlights while in Kurdistan. Sometimes I had to remind myself I was in Iraq; granted, northern Iraq is much different than the rest of Iraq. The real highlight was the optimism in Kurdistan. Having endured being gassed by Saddam and being treated as second class citizens, there's a real feeling that this is the right time and place for the Kurds.

