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Tour Notes

Highlights of Kurdistan

Tour Duration – 8 Days



Tour Rating

Fitness ●●○○○ | Off the Beaten Track ●●●○○ | Culture ●●●○○ | History ●●●○○ | Wildlife ●○○○○

Tour Pace

Busy

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Experience the fascinating Kurdistan region of Iraq
- ✓ Visit the citadel of Erbil, a UNESCO World Heritage Site
- ✓ Stop to some of the oldest constructions in the world such as Jirwana





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Tour Map



Tour Essentials

- Accommodation:** Comfortable hotel accommodation in most places.
Included Meals: Daily breakfast (B), plus lunches (L) and dinners (D) as shown in the itinerary
Group Size: Maximum 12
Start Point: Erbil – you can arrive any time on day 1
End Point: Erbil – you can depart any time after 3pm on day 8
Transport: Private cars or minibuses
Country Visited: “The Other Iraq” (Kurdistan)



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Highlights of Kurdistan

Iraqi Kurdistan is a fascinating place of sheer beauty, warm and friendly people and a rich and challenging history. Although situated in the northern part of Iraq, it is in many ways a world apart. Largely unknown or traditionally avoided by Western tourists, we believe this region is an absolute gem in the making and that now is the time to visit before the crowds discover this hidden world. This tour starts in the ancient city of Erbil, brimming with history and monuments that stand as testament to the numerous influences on the region. From here we head to Dohuk, with its fascinating bazaar before visiting the small town of Zakho with its stunning bridge, and in Suleimaniyah and Halabja we learn about the brutal legacy of Saddam Hussein's regime upon the Kurdish homelands. But Kurdistan is not simply about ticking off the sights; tourists are virtually unknown here so it is not uncommon to be asked to join people for tea or food, or to simply talk or pose for a photo. The Kurds are a proud people and eager to show Kurdistan to the world, and your encounters with these resilient people will undoubtedly be your enduring memory of this trip.

Tour Itinerary Notes

While our intention is to adhere to the day-by-day itinerary as printed below, a degree of flexibility is built in. Overnight stops may vary from those suggested and on occasions alternative accommodation, of a similar standard to that named below, will be used.

Tour Guide

Our guides are a key strength, chosen for their knowledge of and passion for the areas in which they work. All of our guides are carefully hand-picked, and are not just passing through these countries, but are usually locally born. Unlike some companies it should be noted we do not send a guide or tour leader from Undiscovered Destinations in the UK as we have every confidence in our locally appointed representative who is responsible for operating the tour on our behalf. Where possible you will have the same guide throughout your trip but on occasions it may be necessary to change the guide at one or more points during the tour.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in Erbil

Arrive in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, and transfer to your hotel. The rest of the day is at leisure to relax or explore. Overnight Van Royal Hotel or similar. (D)

Day 2: Erbil

We begin our adventure by exploring on foot the 7,000-year-old Citadel of Erbil, one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world and in our opinion, becoming one of the new hot spots of the Middle East. We visit the historic Citadel (Qalat Hawler), as well as the superb Textile Museum which features ancient Kurdish fighting tools, traditional dresses, handmade rugs, jewellery and ancient photos from Kurdistan but also from Iran and Turkey. Continue to the food market and covered Qaysari Bazaar, a labyrinth of streets and alleys selling everything from fascinating antiques to sweet delights. After lunch in one of Erbil's most famous local restaurants, we visit the remaining parts of the iconic Choli Minaret, dated back from the 12th Century. Overnight Van Royal Hotel or similar. (BLD)

Erbil

Erbil is known locally as Hewler, meaning 'seat of the gods' and lays claim to being one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, dating back to at least the 23rd century BC. Throughout history it has been ruled by a succession of invaders, including Turcomans, the Persian Safavids, Ottomans and the British. More recently it became the seat of the Kurdish parliament. Erbil is most famous for its ancient citadel,



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a vast fortress situated on top of a steep earthen mound that has been accorded World Heritage Status by UNESCO. Erbil Citadel was once a Sumerian City called Urbellum or Arbella (4 gods) and it is believed that Abraham passed through this city on one of his journeys. It once housed the Temple of the Goddess Ishtar. It was also the city Darius III fled to after facing defeat by Alexander the Great on the nearby plains of Gaugamela. The city also contains some impressive old houses dating from the 19th century.

Day 3: Erbil - Gaugamela – Jirwana - Lalish - Dohuk (Approx. driving time today: 4.5 hours)

After breakfast, we depart for the fourth century St Matthew's Monastery and take a tour and meet the local monks, then head to Gaugamela, the site of the famous battle between King Darius and Alexander the Great. We then continue our journey to the sacred village of Lalish, home to the followers of the Yazidi faith, stopping en-route at Jirwana, the oldest aqueduct and bridge ruin in the world. In Lalish we learn about the ancient rituals of the Yezidis who are considered by many to be the remnant of the original religion of Kurdistan. We end our day in the picturesque town of Dohuk. Overnight Parwar Hotel or similar. (BLD)

Important Notes: When we visit the village of Lalish, outer footwear must be removed. It is advisable to take a pair of very thick black socks especially for this purpose. Socks are allowed and can be provided locally if needed. We also advise not to wear blue garments as Yezidis people usually do not wear this colour.

Jirwana

Jirwana ancient aqueduct and bridge was built in 690BC at the time of Sennacherib. The site was once part of a vast complex that was built to water the gardens of Nineveh. Huge stones transported by hand from quarries miles away are inscribed with the story of this amazing feat. Here you will find the secret of the, "hidden message of Sennacherib," known by only a few living scholars in the world.

Lalish

Lalish is one of the most unique destinations in the entire Kurdistan Region. It is a cultural and religious experience, as well as a place of calming, serenity, and natural beauty. This small mountain town is the holiest place for the heterodox ethno-religious Yezidi (Yazidi) community. It is the resting place for some of the most important figures in the Yezidi faith such as Sheik Adi (1070s-1162), who essentially codified Yezidi theology and balanced previously disparate teachings. Yezidis are expected and encouraged to make a six-day pilgrimage to Lalish in their lifetime to visit the tomb of Sheikh Adi and other sacred places in the small mountain village. The village is easily recognizable due to the famous conical structures (shrines).

Dohuk

Close to the border with Turkey, Dohuk is a picturesque town situated in a valley surrounded by mountains. Traditionally the region has been associated with agriculture and is locally famous for its grapes – other crops grown here include rice, tobacco, wheat and all manner of fruit and vegetables. Once known for its colourful houses, Dohuk grew in importance during the period of sanctions imposed on Iraq – its proximity to the border meant that it was a hub for smuggling goods.

Day 4: Dohuk – Al Qush – Gara – Dohuk (Approx. driving time today: 1.5 hours)

This morning we visit the churches and monasteries of Al Qush, including the third century Hormizd monastery, once home to around six hundred monks. Then head to the fascinating village of Gara where we visit one of Saddam's palace remains. Later in the afternoon, we return to Dohuk and time permitting can explore the bazaar. Overnight Parwar Hotel or similar. (BLD)

Day 5: Dohuk - Amadiya – Barzan - Rawanduz (Approx. driving time today: 5.5 hours)

Head to the nearby mountain town of Amadiya where we visit the 400-year-old mosque and see the minaret, with bullet holes from the Kurdish Civil War still visible. Then we pass by a third century Synagogue and visit an ancient Egyptian Madrasa, reportedly founded by the University of Cairo centuries ago. After lunch we continue southeast to the town of Barzan, the ancestral home of the Barzani tribe. The current President and



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Prime Minister of Kurdistan are from this region. We stop at the Barzan Memorial Museum recounting the 'Anfal' campaigns by Saddam against the Barzani tribe. Time permitting, we will also visit Mullah Mustapha Memorial for a learning about the history of Kurdistan's most famous leader. Our journey continues through the breath-taking scenery of Barzan. We visit Shanidar, a Neanderthal Cave discovered in the 1950s. Overnight Rubar Resort or similar (BLD)

Amadiya

Amadiya (dating from the Assyrian era) is located on a high promontory above a breathtaking landscape and fed by a geothermal spring originating far below the mountain. 90km northeast of Dohuk, about 1400m above sea level and surrounded by heights it was once an almost impenetrable fortress. The city Gate (Bab Zebar) is located in the eastern side of the City of Amadiya. Its width was 4 metres, built by Imaduddin Al- Zanki in 5-600 AD. A minaret is located in the middle of Amadiya. It is 30 metres high. The Islamic ornamentation (arabesque) is clearly seen on the minaret. It is said that it was built in the time of Sultan Hussein Wali Amadiya as part of an already existing ancient city.

Day 6: Rawanduz - Dokan - Suleimaniyah (Approx. driving time today: 3.5 hours)

Leaving Rawanduz we pass through the mountains and down through Dokan, arriving into Suleimaniyah, the second largest city in Iraqi Kurdistan, and possibly the most relaxed and cosmopolitan. On arrival we visit Suli's bazaar and the locally renowned Sha'ab teahouse. Time and weather permitting, we walk to the summit of Goizha Mountain to get a view over the city. Overnight Ramada Hotel or similar. (BLD)

Suleimaniyah

Suleimaniyah takes its name from Suleiman Baba, the ruler of the emirate of Baban who founded the city in the late 18th century. The city plays an important role today in the promotion of Kurdish culture, and since the war has grown in importance, with numerous factories established here – tourism is also an important part of its economy with people from Iran travelling here. It is home to a couple of fascinating museums – the Amna Suraka which provides an important insight into the horrific treatment of the Kurds under Saddam Hussein, and the Slemani Museum which houses Kurdish and Persian artefacts.

Day 7: Suleimaniyah - Halabja – Suleimaniyah (Approx. driving time today: 4 hours)

After breakfast, visit Sulaymani Museum, Kurdistan's largest collection and Iraq's second largest collection of antiquities. There are other museums in Kurdistan but nothing to equal this one in Sulaymani. The Director of the Museum is often on hand to explain some of the issues facing Kurdistan in the preservation of its antiquities including looters and corrupt officials who have sold the nation's heritage to collectors abroad. Once the visit is over, we travel to the nearby village of Halabja, a place of almost unspeakable horror at the hands of Saddam Hussein's military forces, and visit the fascinating Halabja Museum and Memorial Cemetery before returning to Suleimaniyah. On the way back, we stop at the Ahmed Awa waterfall for a relaxed picnic lunch. The rest of the afternoon is at leisure to explore the city. Overnight Ramada Hotel or similar. (BLD)

Day 8: Suleimaniyah - Erbil (Approx. driving time today: 2.5 hours)

This morning we witness first-hand the terrible legacy of Saddam Hussein as we visit the infamous Amna Suraka (Red House) buildings including the many prison cells and torture chambers where thousands of people, mostly Kurds were imprisoned, tortured or killed. Afterwards drive back to Erbil and, depending on the flight departure time, stop en-route at the ancient Zarzi cave. After lunch, transfer to the airport for your onward flight. (BL)



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Tour Inclusions/Exclusions

Inclusions:

Arrival and departure transfers
Transportation throughout
All accommodation in a single occupancy room
Services of English-speaking guide / tour leader
Meals as listed (B – Breakfast, L – Lunch, D – Dinner)
Bottled water at all meals and on the vehicle
Entrance fees for sites listed as part of the itinerary

Excluded:

International flights
Any airport taxes
Travel Insurance
Visa fee of about USD 75 required of all arriving passengers
Drinks other than water
Items of personal nature

Important Information

Foreign Travel Advice Warnings

We constantly monitor the advice posted by the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In particular we will always advise clients of any travel warnings. At the time of writing the FCDO advise against all but essential travel to the Kurdistan region. Please see - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iraq> It is likely travel warnings will remain in place for some time to come, and we are only able to accept a booking on the basis that you are aware this is the case and confirm that you are still happy to travel irrespective of the current FCDO advice.

Safety of our travellers is our main priority and we want to ensure that this tour is absolutely safe to operate. Please feel free to contact us should you have any specific concerns or if would like to know in detail what measures are being taken to ensure visits remain trouble free and without incident.

It should be noted that this information applies to British citizens. Other nationals are asked to check the current position of their respective government.

Accommodation and Meals

Hotel Check-in Times

As a general rule most hotels will allow guests to check-in from 2pm. Please note that the price of your tour does not include guaranteed early check-in. Therefore please advise us if you would like to ensure that your room is available for an earlier arrival. This is particularly relevant on the first day of the tour and for early morning arrivals. One option is to pre-book and pay for an extra night at the beginning of your tour which will guarantee your accommodation is available irrespective of what time you arrive. Please contact us for information and costs.





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It should also be noted that on many of our tours we have set-aside Day 1 of the itinerary as an 'arrival day'. For this reason and because tour participants are likely to be arriving at different times, and often from different countries, guided sightseeing or other activities are not included. If you are arriving early or before the start date of the tour and would like to organise some extra arrangements on a private basis please contact us.

Accommodation Rating

The accommodation on our *Highlights of Kurdistan* is primarily simple but with reasonable comfort. With a few exceptions you can expect rooms to be en-suite, with private bathroom and when necessary air-conditioning will be provided. In general you will find your hotel has a restaurant.

We welcome solo travellers and single rooms will be allocated subject to the applicable tour supplement. Please note that on occasions you may not always be allocated a double or twin room, as some hotels have designated single rooms. These may be smaller in size. However, the supplement payable takes this into consideration.

Food & Drink

The daily meal basis is shown in the tour itinerary; breakfast (B), lunch (L) and dinner (D). Please note that lunch may be a picnic. Drinks are not included and will be payable locally in cash.

Dietary Requirements

If you have any special dietary requirements you must notify us at the time of booking. While we will make every effort to cater for you, we cannot guarantee that this will be possible.

Budgeting for your Tour

You will need some extra money to cover meals and drinks not included in the tour price, any optional sightseeing, souvenirs and items of a personal nature such as laundry.

Food

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch / Dinner £5 - £10

Drink

The prices for drinks can vary greatly depending upon location and the prices detailed below are an average guide. In general you would expect that drinks purchased in a supermarket or local bar to be less expensive, whilst drinks in an upmarket bar or restaurant may be more expensive.

Bottle of Beer £1.20

Water £0.50

Foreign Exchange

ATM Availability: ATM machines are usually available but most are not connected to international banking networks for inter-bank withdrawals

Credit and Debit Card Acceptance: Card acceptance is very limited in Iraqi Kurdistan, usually only in major international standard hotels which we do not use.

Local Currency: Iraqi Dinar (IQD)

Recommended Currency for Exchange: US Dollars



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Current exchange rate (March 2020): 1 USD = 1,220 IQD

Where to Exchange: Your guide will advise you

Tipping – Guide and Drivers

If you feel that your driver and guide have done a good work and have been helpful, then consider to tip them well. However, there is no obligation.

Merely keep in mind Kurdistan is an oil-based economy and tips that might be acceptable in a poorer African country, in Kurdistan could be taken as a statement the service was not good and it is better to give nothing than inadvertently offend your driver or guide.

Joining your Tour

Flight Information

Our advertised prices do not include the cost of international flights. Please contact us if you would like a quotation to book a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will receive a free airport transfer, both on arrival and departure. In order that the transfer can be arranged please ensure that you advise us of your flight information once available. Please advise the date, time and flight number for your arrival/departure. If we have not been advised of this information at least 2 weeks before travel, then you will be required to make your own way to the hotel on Day 1 of your tour.

Travel Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Undiscovered Destinations that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country and be valid for the entire duration of your holiday.

Visa Information

At the time of writing British, US and Australian nationals require a visa for a tourist visit to Kurdistan, Iraq. For further details please visit the applicable website shown below.

British Nationals - www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

US Nationals - <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>

Australian Nationals - www.smartraveller.gov.au/

Other nationals should check the latest requirements with the authorities in their home country, or with the destination's nearest embassy or consulate.

Should you require any documentation to support a visa application, such as a letter of invitation, upon request this will be provided by Undiscovered Destinations after receipt of your balance payment.

As it is the travellers' responsibility to ensure that they meet all entry requirements it is essential that you check the rules and any other conditions at the time of booking and again when making your balance payment. In addition, we would strongly advise that you make a final check around two weeks before your arrival. This is important as requirements can change at short notice. Undiscovered Destinations, when



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possible, will provide guidance about entry rules, but in the first instance please contact the relevant authorities, including the applicable embassy or consulate for assistance.

Please note that you can no longer pay the \$75 for the Iraq visa in cash. This needs to be paid with a visa or Mastercard. American Express and other cards may be accepted but not guaranteed.

For Kurdistan, you can get an evisa online or visa on arrival. Both are valid only for travel in Kurdistan only.

Passports

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, valid for at least six months after the date of return to your country.

We strongly advise that your passport contains a minimum of two blank pages, as this may be a requirement of the local immigration authorities. In addition certain countries will stipulate that the two blank pages are opposite each other. If you are unable to meet these requirements you may be refused boarding by your airline or denied entry by the immigration authorities.

For specific information about the requirements for your destination please check with the country's embassy or consulate. Alternatively UK citizens can visit www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

Vaccinations & Protection

We strongly recommend that you contact your doctor's surgery or a specialist travel clinic for up-to-date information, advice and the necessary vaccinations. For a visit of less than one month, almost certainly you will be advised to have immunisations against the following: Diphtheria and Tetanus, Hepatitis A, Typhoid, Meningitis.

The legal status and regulation of some medicines prescribed or purchased in your home country can be different in other countries. If you're travelling with prescription or over-the-counter medicine, read this guidance from NaTHNaC on best practice when travelling with medicines. For further information on the legal status of a specific medicine, you'll need to contact the embassy, high commission or consulate of the country or territory you're travelling to.

Preparing for your tour

Climate

The best time to visit Kurdistan is from February to May and September to November.

Clothing

Kurdistan is a very westernized area and there is a great deal of freedom in the region with women often seen in the streets in jeans, rarely in veils. The exposure of limbs and chest is not common amongst local woman; however, headscarves are not required. There are more than 20 seats reserved in Parliament for women and their rights are protected by law. That being said, it is always wise to dress conservatively out of respect for the norms for this part of the world. Scarves are sometimes required when visiting any religious sites so it is a good idea to have one with you.



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It is usually recommended that lighter clothes are worn through the day, and warmer ones at night – in some areas it can get quite cool in the mountains. A hat is also advised to be worn through the day to protect from the sun. You should make sure that you bring a waterproof jacket for any rainy days.

Equipment

The first thing on your list should be a first aid kit. Whilst there is no undue cause for alarm, travellers are best advised to travel well-prepared: adequately immunized, with sufficient supplies of prescription drugs, along with a medical kit. Suncream/sunblock is a must. Insect repellent, including a bite spray will also be useful to have.

Footwear

Comfortable walking shoes/boots are recommended and sandals. When we visit the village of Lalish, outer footwear must be removed. It is advisable to take a pair of very thick black socks especially for this purpose (socks are allowed).

Luggage on tour

Your luggage should not exceed 20kgs (44lbs). One large suitcase/rucksack, and one small hand luggage rucksack is acceptable.

Electric Supply & Plugs

Electrical supply is 220V and plugs usually have two round pins like most European countries or three pins as in the UK. It is recommended that you take a multi adaptor plug.

Photography

You should always ask permission before taking anyone's photograph and respect their decision if they say no, though Kurds love taking pictures and may want to take their own pictures of themselves with you. In more remote areas women and older people often do not want to be photographed.

Taking photos of military installations state buildings, and airports, can lead to problems with local authorities. If you are unsure about whether it is acceptable to take a photo, please ask your guide.

Tour Itinerary Versions

Please ensure that you have an up-to-date copy of these tour notes immediately before you travel, as from time to time our itineraries may be amended, either for operational reasons or in response to feedback from customers. You will be informed of any major changes to your tour but small changes may just be added to these tour notes. These tour notes were updated on 22 August 2023.