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
Tour Essentials

Accommodation: Comfortable hotel accommodation in most places. Basic
Included Meals: Daily breakfast (B), plus lunches (L) and dinners (D) as shown in the itinerary.
Group Size: Maximum 12
Start Point: Erbil
End Point: Erbil – you can depart any time after 3pm
Transport: Private cars or minibuses
Country Visited: "The Other Iraq" (Kurdistan)
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,
Day 3 - Erbil - Gaulamela – 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 guided by the local monks, then head to Gaulamela, 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 Yazidis 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 Dilshad Palace 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 Yeziids people usually do not wear this colour.

Jirwana
Jirwana ancient aqueduct and bridge was built in 690BC at the time of Sennacharib. 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 hundreds of miles away are in scripted with the story of this amazing feat. Here you will find the secret of the, “hidden message of Sennacharib,” 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 Yazidi (Yazidi) community. It is the resting place for some of the most important figures in the Yazidi faith such as Sheikh Adi (1070s-1162), who essentially codified Yazidi theology and balanced previously disparate teachings. Yazidis are expected and encouraged to make a six-day pilgrimage to Lalish in their lifetime in order 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 - Zakho – Dohuk (Approx. driving time today: 1.5 hours)
This morning we visit the churches and monasteries of Al Qush, including the third century Hurmiz monastery, once home to around six hundred monks. Then head to the ancient Jewish town of Zakho to see the Delal Bridge, a stunning stone arch bridge over the Khabur river and take a walk through the town. Later in the afternoon, we return to Dohuk and time permitting can explore the bazaar. Overnight Dilshad Palace 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 south east to the town of Barzan, the ancestral home of the Barzani tribe. The current President and Prime Minister of Kurdistan are from this region. We stop at the Mullah Mustapha Memorial for a learning about the history of Kurdistan’s most famous leader while enjoying a cup of chai. Our journey continues along the spectacular Hamilton Road and time permitting, we visit Shanidar, a Neanderthal Cave discovered in the 1950’s. We reach Rawanduz in the late afternoon and take the cable car to the top of Korek Mountain where we stay for the night. Overnight Korek Mountain 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 Sulí’s bazaar and the locally renown Sha’ab teahouse. Time and weather permitting, we walk to the summit of Goizha Mountain to get a view over the city. Overnight Hotel Copthorne Baranan Hotel or similar. (BLD)

Suleimaniyah
Suleimaniyah takes it names 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 Musuem which houses Kurdish and Persian artefacts.

Day 7 - Suleimaniyah - Halabja – Suleimaniyah (Approx. driving time today: 4 hours)
After breakfast, 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 Monument of Halabja Martyrs and the 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 Hotel Copthorne Baranan 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)
Inclusions:
Arrival and departure transfers
All accommodation
Services of English-speaking guide / tour leader
Meals as listed (B – Breakfast, L – Lunch, D – Dinner)
Entrance fees for sites listed as part of the itinerary

Excluded:
International flights
Any airport taxes
Travel Insurance
Visas
Drinks

Important Information

Foreign Government Travel Warnings
We constantly monitor the advice posted by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). In particular we will always advise clients of any travel warnings. At the time of writing the FCO advise against all but essential travel to the rest of Iraq, including the Kurdistan region. Please see - https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iraq

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.

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 mid-range with reasonable comfort. The hotel in Rawanduz however is more basic. 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 £5 - £10
- 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

**Tipping – Guide and Drivers**
Tipping is common practice in Iraqi Kurdistan. If your local guide has been helpful then you could think about tipping. This amount can obviously be left to you. When tipping a driver, a guide or hotel staff a few dollars will always be gratefully received.

**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

**Recommended Currency for Exchange:** US Dollars

**Where to Exchange:** Your guide will advise you

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
Most nationalities including UK, EU, US and Australian citizens are granted a visa upon arrival at Erbil airport, which is valid for a stay of one month. The cost of the visa is currently $10 to $20 depending on the nationality of the visitor. Regulations can and do change and so we recommend that you check with your nearest embassy or consulate for the most up to date information. UK citizens can also contact the London office of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Tel. 0207 152 4091).

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 the UK.

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. 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. When it comes to clothing 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.

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 8th July 2019.