



IRAQI KURDISTAN, the U.A.E., OMAN, QATAR & KUWAIT

18 days

Day 1 Arrival in Erbil

Welcome to Northern Iraq!

We arrive in Erbil (aka Arbil or Irbil), the primary city of Iraqi Kurdistan. We transfer to our hotel and, after a meet and initial briefing, the remainder of the day is yours to relax and / or explore at your own leisure.

Spared from the carnage seen elsewhere in the country, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region calls itself "the second Dubai", because of the many new shopping malls, five-star hotels and skyscrapers under construction. But, unlike Dubai, humans have lived here for nearly 10,000 years, making it one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. Erbil has also been capturing the world's attention for all the right reasons, with National Geographic and The New York Times both listing Kurdistan as a top travel destination for 2011 and 2014.

Overnight in Erbil. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Erbil: City Tour

We formally begin our sightseeing program with a bus* and on-foot exploration of the capital city of Erbil, one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world and one of the new cultural and touristic hotspots in the Middle East.

The highlight of our day is a visit to the historic Citadel (Qalat Hawler). The earliest evidence for occupation of the citadel mound dates to the 5th millennium BC, and possibly earlier. The site of the citadel may have been occupied as early as the Neolithic period, as pottery fragments possibly dating to that period have been found on the slopes of the mound. Today the citadel dominates the city, and is enjoying careful restoration. For more information on this spectacular monument and the efforts to protect it, go to www.erbilcitadel.org. While in the vicinity of the citadel, we'll make a stop at the nearby Kurdish Textile Museum (sometimes closed without notice).

After lunch, we continue to the Christian suburb of Ainkawa, visting St Joseph's Church before proceeding to the Qaysari Bazaar, a labyrinth of streets and alleys selling everything from antiques to sweet delights.

This evening we enjoy dinner at one of the many restaurants in Erbil.

* The Erbil municiple government, with the purpose of reducing traffic congestion in the city centre, is limiting large vehicular traffic in the core, including touring buses. This means that our sightseeing in the centre will be limited to onfoot exploration. That said, the core is compact and our sightseeing is done at a leisurely pace.

Overnight in Erbil. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 Erbil - Lalish - Dohuk

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After breakfast we depart for Ain Sifni and nearby Lalish, home to the followers of the Yazidi faith, where we walk (barefoot) through the sanctuary and, according to some, the resting place of Noah's Ark. The Yazidi are mostly Kurdish speaking people with ancient Indo-Iranian roots, who have their own religion and ethnic identity. We will learn about their faith -- an interesting amalagam of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Mithraism -- and tour their temple.

We continue to the city of Dohuk, where we visit the Folk Museum and walk through the lively bazaar.

Overnight in Dohuk. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 Dohuk & Zakho

This morning we visit the site of Charsteen, located just north of the city at the base of a large modern dam and reservoir. The caves and constructions at Charsteen seem to date back to the Furthian era, as indicated by the pottery remains discovered. On the right-hand side of the main cave can be seen five symbols etched into the stone, probably denoting the gods of the sun and the moon, Ishtar, Mitrwa and Zrwan. To fully enjoy this site you should be prepared to navigate a flight of stone steps.

We then travel by road to the small (Turkish) border town of Zakho to see 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.

Later this afternoon we return to Dohuk where we have some free time to explore, take tea in one of the many chaikhanas (traditional tea houses) before dinner.

Overnight in Dohuk. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 Dohuk - Amediye - Barzan - Shaqlawa - Erbil

We have a full day as we complete our circle route back to the capital. Our first stop is the spectacularly-located mountaintop town of Amediye, where we visit the 400 year old Amediye Mosque and see the minaret, still showing bullet damage from the Kurdish Civil War. The trade caravans along this route 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).

This is a particularly stunning stretch of the Western Zagros Mountains, a fold and thrust belt formed by collision of two tectonic plates -- the Eurasian and the Arabian. The ongoing distortions are clearly visible in the form of strikingly stratified rock formations. We continue southeast through spectacular mountain scenery and the village of Barzan, the ancestral home of the Barzani family, central to Kurdish polictics in the region.

The latter part of our day's journey retraces the steps of New Zealand-born civil engineer, Archibald Hamilton, notable for building the 'Hamilton Road' through Kurdistan from 1928-1932.

We'll make a stop at the picturesque Assyrian / Christian town of Shaqlawa (960 m / 3,168 ft), backdropped by the Safeen Mountains. Shaqlawa is well-known for its organic food products, such as honey and nuts; we'll explore the main street and break for tea here.

We finish our day back in Erbil in time for a brief rest and dinner (depending on today's timing, we may have dinner in Shaqlawa before proceeding to Erbil).

Overnight in Erbil. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 Erbil - Dukan - Sulymaniya

This morning we depart Erbil, passing through Koya in the mountains and down through Dukan and Lake Dukan, the largest human-made reservoir in Iraq. We arrive in Sulymaniya (Slemani in Kurdish), the second largest city in Iraqi Kurdistan and, being a university town, its most relaxed and cosmopolitan.

Our first stop is the Slemani Museum, which has done much to recover artifacts that had been looted from museums throughout the country. Authorities say that close to 15,000 artifacts had disappeared; 6,000 had been recovered by the time the museum reopened in 2009.

After lunch we witness first-hand the legacy of Saddam Hussein with a visit to the Amna Suraka (Red Security) buildings, which include the many prison cells and torture chambers where thousands of people -- mostly Kurds -- we imprisoned, tortured and killed.

We finish our day with an excursion to Azmar Mountain, with its million dinar views of Sulymaniya.

Overnight in Sulymaniya. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 Sulymaniya: Ahmad Awa & Halabja

If today is Friday, our timing works particularly well for a visit to the resort town of Ahmad Awa and a nearby pretty spot near the Iranian border, popular with Kurdish families who come here to kick of the weekend with picnics and revelry. Here we enjoy a traditional Kurdish picnic and possibly even some dancing! Even if our visit does not fall on a Friday, it is still a very pleasant place to visit.

After some time here we visit the nearby village of Halabja, a place of notoriety and horror at the hands of Saddam Hussein's military forces. We pay our respects to the many Kurds who lost their lives here at the Monument of Halabja Martyrs before returning to Sulymaniya.

Overnight in Sulymaniya. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 8 Sulymaniya - Erbil

We have some free time this morning for independent exploration prior to our transfer back to Erbil and our farewell dinner. Our route takes us to the outskirts of the town of Kirkuk, famous for its oil industry, located just outside the Kurdistan region.

Overnight in Erbil. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 Erbil, Iraq - Dubai, UAE

Today we fly from Erbil to Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Dubai is one of the most futuristic cities in the world, and a dynamic city-state at the heart of the UAE. Although it is

not the largest of the emirates, Dubai is one of the wealthiest and most varied. World famous as a duty free shopping centre, it is on the basis of trade (not just oil) that Dubai has built its wealth.

Depending on the timing of today's flight, we may accomplish some of our sightseeing program today on arrival.

Overnight in Dubai. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 Dubai: City Tour

Today we will tour Dubai city to observe the city's layout and modern architecture. This city has many fine mosques, and today we will stop at the elegant Jumeirah Mosque, a landmark of Dubai. This beautiful mosque is a spectacular example of modern Islamic architecture.

Another of our stops will be the Emirates Towers, two of the highest buildings in the Gulf and the most prestigious buildings on Dubai's skyline. One cannot miss the Burj Al Arab Hotel, built in the shape of a billowing Arabian dhow sail and dominating the Dubai coastline. This is one of the world 's most spectacular and incomparably luxurious hotels. We'll also travel to the observation deck of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, for stupendous views.

Although an ultra-modern city in many respects, much of Dubai's heritage has been retained. We will visit the Dubai Museum, housed in the restored Fort Fahidi. Inside this mud-walled fort dating back to the early 19th Century, the displays chronicle the long history of the Arabian Gulf.

From the museum we will explore the 'Creek' area and see the old houses in the Bastakia quarter. A visit to this district is a step back in time to the days before electricity and air-conditioning, where wind towers cooled traditional courtyard houses. Many of the old wind tower houses were built by the wealthy merchants of the past, and Old Dubai was famous for these towers lining the Creek on both sides.

We end our day with a journey across the Creek by water taxi, known as an "abra". The abra is a wonderful vantage point from which to see the modern and old buildings sitting along the Creekside. On the other side of the Creek we will set out on foot to navigate through the bustling alleys towards the spice and gold souks.

NOTE: The order of Dubai area sightseeing may vary at the discretion of your Tour Leader depending on incoming flight times and other logistical considerations.

Overnight in Dubai. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 Dubai - Sharjah - Ras Al-Khaimah - Ajman, UAE - Khasab, Oman

From Dubai we travel north by road to the third largest of the emirates, Sharjah. Spread out along the Khalid Lagoon, Sharjah is an old trading centre with a laid-back feel. Here we will see the King Faisal Mosque, the largest place of worship in the UAE, capable of holding up to 3,000 people in prayer. We also pass through Ajman, the UAE's smallest emirate, which boasts one of the most attractive waterfronts in the country with soft white sand and lofty date palms.

Travelling north we enter into the emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah, the agricultural centre of the UAE. The old town, built around the harbour, is a charming place to wander. North of the town we visit an archaeological site that spreads out around the so-called "Queen of Sheba's Palace".

We cross the border into Oman (have your passports handy!) and travel via a panoramic coastal road overlooking the Gulf of Arabia and the Straits of Hormuz. Our destination is Khasab, local capital of the Governorate of Musandam, the

"Norway of Arabia". The Musandam Peninsula is completely separated from the main body of Oman by a stretch of land belonging to the UAE. Musandam has developed distinct language dialects and cultural mores. A huge pale limestone massif with steep strata crossed cliffs descending into the sea, the peninsula has remained isolated from the rest of Arabia and is still very remote. The area is sparsely populated by the Shihuh tribe, who for centuries have been carving a precarious existence from the seas. Some villages can only be accessed by boat.

On arrival we have a city tour, including the restored Portuguese Fort of Khasab, a museum where many Omani handicrafts items are displayed. We will also pass by the prehistoric rock carvings depicting camels, ships and warriors in the neighbouring village of Qadah.

Overnight in Khasab. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 Musandam Peninsula: Dhow Cruise

Mountains dominate the Musandam landscape as they rise straight from the sea creating a fjord-like coastline (hence the Norway comparison) that is unique in the region. This coastal zone, along with many offshore islands and inlets, abound with wildlife, including seabirds, dolphins, and whales.

After boarding our traditional Omani dhow pier side, the cruise will take you toward Musandam's longest and most spectacular fjord, which is often referred to as 'Norway of the Arabia'; calm, turquoise waters contrast with the creamy white limestone cliffs. Along the way we will pass small fishing villages and perhaps even encounter dolphins. The dhow will anchor in the vicinity off Telegraph Island, allowing you to take a swim or just sit back and enjoy soft drinks, tea or coffee while admiring breathtaking views of mountains rising in the distance to over 2,000 feet. Our cruise continues with lunch provided on board. After the tour leisurely cruise back to Khasab.

Overnight in Khasab. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 Khasab, Oman: Mountain Safari - Dubai, UAE

This tour is by a 4-wheel drive vehicle (closed and air-conditioned). Driving is partially on winding mountain roads. We will be able to enjoy some of Oman's most stunning sceneries. We board our 4-wheel drive vehicle and get ready for an exciting and breathtaking trip to Jebel Harim (translated as the Mountain of Women). With a height of 6,260 feet it is the highest peak on the Musandam Peninsula. During your journey to Jebel Harim, you will be able to enjoy incredible vistas, including terraced mountain villages, lush Acacia forests and wadis (dry river beds). Following a drive of a little over an hour, a stop will be made at a Bedouin village located at an elevation of 3,000 feet. The village of Sayah, surrounded by palm groves, is one of the most picturesque villages on the Musandam Peninsula. After a stop for photographs and to enjoy this idyllic setting, continue with your drive to Jebel Harim. There will be time to admire the grand panorama from the mountain's summit. The return drive takes us past Khawr Najid, a stunning sea viewpoint overlooking the Indian Ocean. We stop at Al Khalidya Nature Park before concluding our adventure back at Khasab.

Later this afternoon we return by road to Dubai.

Overnight in Dubai. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 Dubai, UAE - Doha, Qatar

Today we fly to Doha, Qatar (due to flight availability, we may transfer by road to Sharjah and fly from there rather than from Dubai).

Ruled by the Al Thani family since the mid-1800s, Qatar transformed itself from a poor British protectorate noted mainly for coalescing into an independent state with significant oil and natural gas revenues. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Qatari economy was crippled by a continuous siphoning off of petroleum revenues by the amir, who had ruled the country since 1972. He was overthrown by his son, the current Amir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in a bloodless coup in 1995. In 2001, Qatar resolved its longstanding border disputes with both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Today oil and natural gas revenues enable Qatar to have one of the highest per capita incomes in the world.

Depending on the timing of todays flight, we may be able to accomplish some of tomorrow's sightseeing upon arrival.

Overnight in Doha. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 Qatar: Area Tour

Today's Doha sightseeing will include the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club, where the rich emirs come from all over Middle East. We can walk around the stables, pet the horses, meet jockeys, see the horses training -- an interesting insight into how the rich spend their money.

We proceed to the wonderfully atmospheric Old Souk for a break for lunch and plenty of independent time. This is the most traditional of souks; it first started as a weekend market for local Bedu, selling meat, wool, milk and other staples. Today, this maze of alleyways covers a large area with separate sections selling traditional clothing, hardware, perfumes, spices, incense, and dried fruit. In the Gold Souk one discovers a packed row of jewelery shops selling both locally crafted and imported gold jewelery. We will also visit the private museum of Sheik Faisal Bin Qassim al Thani. Here we find an impressive collection of artifacts, weapons, Bedouin jewelery, traditional clothing and old photographs.

Overnight in Doha. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 Doha, Qatar - Kuwait City, Kuwait

Today we fly to Kuwait City.

During the Iraqi invasion, Kuwait City was extensively bombed and damaged. Buildings were fired upon, set alight, and demolished; roads and bridge links were the targets of explosives, and landmarks were defaced. After the invasion's terrible onslaught, foreign investors and the Kuwaiti government are actively involved in modernizing the city and transforming it into a world-class, state-of-the-art business hub. Today, virtually all traces of the invasion have been cleared, and construction cranes dot the skyline.

Overnight in Kuwait City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 Kuwait City: City Tour

Today we have a guided tour of Kuwait City.

We will begin with one of Kuwait's most famous landmarks, the Kuwait Towers. We will take a high speed elevator to the uppermost sphere of the largest tower (187 m / 600 ft) for a panoramic view from the revolving observation area.

We also visit the Tareq Rajab Museum, a private collection of the Rajab family. The museum deals with calligraphy, pottery, metalwork, glass, wood, ivory and jade carvings of the Islamic world. Early calligraphy is presented in a

separate small room, showing pages from the Holy Qur'an, dating back to the first three centuries of the Islamic period. There are also displays of costumes, textiles, embroideries and jewelry of the Islamic world.

We also visit the National Memorial Museum, which encapsulates the Iraqi invasion and honours the sacrifices that ordinary Kuwaiti citizens, the Kuwaiti military and the allies made in order to beat back Sadam's forces. The exhibits comprise a set of well-crafted models of the city that are illuminated in time with an audio recording in English.

Overnight in Kuwait City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 Depart

Departure from Kuwait City.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.