Tour Code
SQ10

ADVENTURESABROAD

SYRIA & IRAQ

25 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Damascus

Assalamu alaikum! (Peace be upon you!) Welcome to Damascus, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Tomorrow, we'll begin our explorations through the ancient streets and landmarks of Damascus, exploring its fascinating history, stunning architecture, and vibrant markets. The centre of Damascus remains intact after the war; only a small part outside the centre remains off-limits.

Overnight in Damascus.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Damascus: City Touring

Today we begin our exploration (by bus and on foot) with a drive up Mount Qassioun.* As we ascend, you'll notice the city of Damascus gradually spread out below us. Upon reaching the summit, we'll take a moment to appreciate the panoramic view. It's a great opportunity to get a sense of the city's scale and history, and maybe even find a good spot for a photo or two. It's not about 'unforgettable experiences', but rather a chance to simply observe and reflect on the city's layout.

Next, we'll drive down to the National Museum. Here, we'll wander through the exhibits, taking in the archaeological treasures that offer a glimpse into Syria's long and varied past. It's a chance to connect with the region's history, and perhaps learn a little something along the way. After the museum, we'll stretch our legs with a short walk into the old town of Damascus. You'll see remnants of the city's fortifications, including walls, towers, and gates, and of course, the imposing Damascus Citadel.

Continuing our journey, we'll visit the Hidjaz Railway Station. This historic site, built in the early 20th century, served as a key hub for the Hijaz Railway, connecting Damascus to Mecca. It's a reminder of a time when railways played a crucial role in transportation and pilgrimage. Then, we'll move on to Marjeh Square, the heart of Damascus. This bustling public space holds significant historical and cultural importance for the city. It's a place where you can observe daily life unfolding, and perhaps get a feel for the city's vibrant energy.

From there, we'll delve into the Souq al-Hamidiyeh, a renowned covered bazaar and ancient marketplace. Here, local culture comes alive. We can wander through the stalls, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of this bustling market. It's a great place to pick up a souvenir, or simply observe the local commerce.

Next, we'll visit the Umayyad Mosque, an iconic landmark and a significant cultural and spiritual centre. Inside, we'll see the Shrine of John the Baptist. Adjacent to the mosque, we'll also pay a visit to the Mausoleum of Saladin, a historical figure of great importance. We'll then stop at the Al-Seida Raqiyeh Mosque, an important Shia pilgrimage site. It's a place of devotion and reflection, and a significant part of the city's religious landscape.

Finally, we'll wrap up our day with a stop at the historic Al Nafoorah coffeehouse. Here, we can relax, enjoy a traditional coffee or tea, and reflect on the day's experiences. It's a chance to soak in the atmosphere and perhaps chat about what we've seen. We'll be able to watch the world go by for a relaxing end to our day.

* If the route is closed due to ongoing upgrades, we will begin our day at the National Museum.

Overnight in Damascus.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Damascus: Touring Continued

Today we begin by descending into St. Ananias Chapel (today's sightseeing will be conducted on foot). It's a humble space, but one with a strong sense of history. This 1st-century Christian place of worship is believed to be where the Apostle Paul regained his sight after his experience on the road to Damascus. Next, we'll visit St. Paul's Church, a significant pilgrimage site for Christians. It's connected to the

conversion of the Apostle Paul, a figure whose transformation had a profound impact on early Christianity. You can see how this space has been important to people over many years.

We'll then take a stroll along Straight Street, once known as the Roman-era Via Recta. Walking here, you'll get a sense of the city's long history. It's a place where we can imagine the many people who have travelled this route over centuries. Our next stop is Al-Zeitoun Church, the headquarters of the Greek Catholic Patriarchate. Inside, we'll take a look at the grand vaulted ceilings and the sturdy basalt columns.

After that, we'll wander through the winding alleys leading to the Jewish Quarter (Harat al-Yahud) in old Damascus. This neighbourhood has a rich Jewish history, with synagogues, shops, and homes that were once a part of the city's social and cultural fabric. We'll continue towards Maktab Anbar, an architectural gem within the historic precincts of Damascus. Built in the mid-19th century by Anbar Anbar, a wealthy Jewish businessman, it showcases Damascene architectural style. You'll see ornate embellishments, stonework, and a charming courtyard that reflect a mix of Ottoman, Levantine, and European influences.

Then, we'll walk along Midhat Pasha Street, a vibrant thoroughfare in Damascus. This street is known for its rich history and lively atmosphere, it's a place where you can see the city's blend of tradition and modernity. Next, we'll visit Khan Assad Pasha, an impressive caravanserai. This building stands as a testament to the region's rich trading heritage. Our final structured visit will be to Azem Palace, an architectural gem showcasing the beauty of Damascene craftsmanship. It currently houses the Museum of Popular Traditions.

Finally, we'll have some free time to explore on our own. You can revisit a favourite spot, browse the shops, or simply relax and soak in the atmosphere at your own pace.

Overnight in Damascus.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Damascus - Palmyra - Wadi al-Nasara

Today we depart the capital and travel by road north to Palmyra, once a thriving cultural hub of ancient times.* As we walk through the ruins, we'll bear witness to the historical significance of this ancient city, which was once a major center of trade and culture. Unfortunately, Palmyra fell under the control of Islamic militants during the war, resulting in significant damage to its architectural marvels. We'll see the remnants of the magnificent Temple of Bel, the striking Temple of Baal-Shamin, and the remarkable Roman-era tombs, all of which were tragically destroyed. We'll also visit the ancient theater and the grand Monumental Arch, which suffered partial demolition. Is it still worthwhile to visit? YES! The site's aspect is very dramatic and the ruins that remain are evocative of what the place must've looked like in antiquity. Plus our Syrian guide does well in bringing this fascinating place to life.

Finally, we'll head to Wadi al-Nasara, or the "Valley of Christians", a picturesque mountain resort region nestled amidst breathtaking landscapes. As we explore the valley, we'll discover numerous Christian villages, each with its own distinctive charm and character. The serene and peaceful atmosphere of the valley offers a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of city life, and we'll have the chance to relax and unwind in this beautiful setting after a full day of travel and sightseeing.

* This is a full day, partly due to the fact that Palmyra's handful of hotels have not yet been repaired/rebuilt, which makes over-nighting here impossible.

Overnight in Wadi al-Nasara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Wadi al-Nasara - Krak des Chevaliers - Homs - Hama - Aleppo

We have another full day of travel and sightseeing, taking us first to the magnificent Krak des Chevaliers, a medieval castle that stands as a testament to Syria's rich history. Perched on a hilltop overlooking the Homs Gap, this awe-inspiring fortress is renowned for its strategic significance and architectural grandeur. As we explore the castle's imposing walls and towers, we'll gain a deeper understanding of the region's complex history and the importance of this medieval stronghold. Luckily, mostly owing to its centuries-old sturdiness, the castle is only slightly damaged from recent warfare.

Next, we'll head to Homs, a city where the echoes of conflict are still palpable, yet the local community is working tirelessly to rebuild and restore their city. As we walk through the streets, we'll gain a deeper understanding of the profound impact of past adversities on the city and

its people. We'll also witness the resilient spirit of the local community, who are determined to restore Homs to its former glory. We'll also visit the Khalid Bin Al Walid Mosque, one of Syria's most significant religious sites, named after the renowned Islamic general Khalid ibn al-Walid. Unfortunately, the mosque sustained damage during the Syrian civil war, but it remains an important place of worship and pilgrimage.

Next, we'll visit the Khalid Bin Al Walid Mosque, one of Syria's most significant religious sites, named after the renowned Islamic general Khalid ibn al-Walid. Despite sustaining damage during the conflict, the mosque remains an important symbol of faith and community. We'll also explore Hama, a city located on the banks of the Orontes River, famous for its colossal wooden waterwheels known as Norias. These architectural marvels are a testament to the ingenuity of the city's ancient engineers.

Next, we'll head to Hama, a city located on the banks of the Orontes River in western Syria. Here, we'll discover the city's distinctive architectural marvel: the colossal wooden waterwheels known as Norias. These ancient wheels, some of which date back to the 14th century, are a testament to the ingenuity and craftsmanship of Hama's ancestors. Unlike other nearby cities, Hama remains entirely intact.

Finally, we arrive in Aleppo, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. During our stay, as we explore the city's ancient streets and landmarks, we'll witness the juxtaposition of beauty and destruction that defines this storied city. Despite the ravages of war, Aleppo remains a city of immense cultural and historical significance, and we'll have the chance to experience its rich heritage firsthand.

Overnight in Aleppo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Aleppo & St. Simeon

This morning we'll travel north of the city to explore the fascinating history of Saint Simeon, a significant figure in Christian history known for his ascetic lifestyle. In the 5th century, Saint Simeon chose a unique dwelling – he spent 37 years atop a pillar. The site of Saint Simeon, also known as Qala'at Sim'an or the Church of Saint Simeon Stylites, consists of the remains of a 5th-century Byzantine church, which was built around the pillar where Saint Simeon lived. The pillar, which is about 4.5 meters tall, still stands today, although it's surrounded by the ruins of the church and other ancient structures. Despite being a ruin, the site remains an important pilgrimage destination for Christians and a fascinating archaeological site that provides a glimpse into the history of early Christianity in Syria.

Back in the city, we'll visit the Citadel of Aleppo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has stood the test of time. Perched atop a hill, this ancient fortress has witnessed countless battles and struggles for freedom, earning its reputation as a symbol of resilience. As we walk along its walls, we'll gain a deeper understanding of the city's complex history and the significance of this iconic landmark.

We'll also explore the Great Mosque of Aleppo, an architectural marvel that reflects the city's rich Islamic heritage. Although the mosque was destroyed during the civil war, it remains an important place of worship and a testament to the community's enduring faith. As we walk through its ruins, we'll gain a deeper appreciation for the profound loss felt by the community and the importance of preserving the city's cultural heritage.

Finally, we'll wander through the old markets of Aleppo, a testament to the city's rich history and resilience. These vibrant centers of trade were once filled with textiles, spices, and handcrafted goods, and their stunning stone arches and narrow alleys created a unique atmosphere. Although the markets suffered extensive damage during the Syrian Civil War, restoration efforts are underway to revive their traditional architecture and character. As craftsmen return to the markets, breathing new life into the area, we'll witness the enduring spirit of the people of Aleppo, committed to preserving their heritage and rebuilding their city.

Overnight in Aleppo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Aleppo - Maaloula - Sednaya - Damascus

Leaving Aleppo behind, we travel southward back to Damascus with a couple stops en route.

Our first visit is the enchanting town of Maaloula, one of the last remaining Aramaic-speaking enclaves in the Middle East. As we wander through the town's narrow streets, we'll hear the ancient language of Jesus Christ still spoken by the locals. We'll explore Maaloula's rich history, from its Roman-era pagan temple, which was later repurposed into a church, to the Byzantine artefacts that dot the landscape.

We'll also marvel at the architectural wonders of the Deir Mar Taqla, a stunning Greek Orthodox monastery, and the Deir Mar Sarkis, a beautiful Greek Catholic monastery with elements dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries. As we visit these ancient monasteries, we'll gain a deeper understanding of the region's complex history and the importance of these sacred sites.

Next, we'll head to Sednaya, a picturesque town nestled atop a hill. Here, we'll visit the iconic Greek Orthodox Our Lady of Sednaya Monastery, which offers breathtaking panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. Inside the monastery, we'll see an ancient icon of the Virgin Mary, believed by many to possess miraculous powers. As we explore the town, we'll also visit some of its more than 40 chapels and monasteries, each with its own unique charm and character.

We continue back to the capital for dinner and overnight.

Overnight in Damascus.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Damascus: Ezra'a & Bosra

Today, we'll embark on a day trip from Damascus to explore the ancient treasures of Ezra'a and Bosra (not to be confused with Basra in Iraq). Our first stop will be the 1500-Year-Old Church of St. George in Ezra'a, a true architectural masterpiece that stands as a remarkable testament to the region's rich heritage. Constructed of sturdy basalt stone, this historic church has preserved its original fabric to this day, making it one of the world's architectural marvels.

After exploring the church, we'll head to Bosra, a UNESCO Site that holds immense historical significance. As we wander through the ancient city, we'll discover a treasure trove of historical monuments, showcasing a captivating blend of Roman and Byzantine ruins, alongside impressive examples of early Islamic architecture. We'll explore the well-preserved 2nd-century Roman theatre, with its grand colonnades and seating tiers, providing a glimpse into the ancient Roman entertainment culture. We'll also see remnants of early Christian heritage, with the ruins of ancient churches bearing witness to the city's vibrant past.

Return to Damascus for farewell dinner and overnight.

Overnight in Damascus.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Damascus or en-route to Iraq

As our journey to Basra, Iraq may be convoluted and require and overnight connection, we may spend the night here in Damascus after a day at leisure, or fly to a connecting point (such as Istanbul or the UAE) and continue our journey to Basra tomorrow. This situation will become clearer closer to tour date.

Overnight and location of our evening meal TBA.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Arrival in Basra

Arrival in Basra - Welcome to Iraq!

Basra boasts a rich and storied history as one of the Middle East's most significant cities, particularly in the Arabian Gulf. Positioned at the delta where the Euphrates and Tigris rivers meet before flowing into the sea, it has long been a major port and trading hub. Once known as the 'Venice of the East,' the city was famous for its network of canals and elegant buildings with wooden screens and lattices, which lined streets teeming with traders and merchants from India, Egypt, and across the Gulf.

PLEASE NOTE: This itinerary may be subject to change due to political situations, traffic, or other unforeseen events. Historical and cultural sites may be under restoration and/or may close without prior notice, potentially affecting our itinerary. Despite these challenges, we will work hard to deliver a rich and rewarding experience throughout your journey. During this tour there will be a few checkpoints between provinces and cities, and your patience is appreciated whenever these stops cause delays (typically these stops are just to verify documents). Our partners will always monitor any security issues, and if there is any need to alter the itinerary due to difficulty accessing a site or city, Adventures Abroad reserves the right to make any changes to the itinerary if needed.

Overnight in Basra

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Basra Touring & Shatt al-Arab River Cruise

Today we will explore Basra, the second-largest city in Iraq.

Once a prominent city in the Ottoman Empire, Basra became a key port for trade with India, Eastern Africa, and the Far East under the Abbasid Caliphate. After the British Empire incorporated the governorate in 1917, Basra continued to grow as the Republic of Iraq's second-largest city. During the Ottoman period, the city was known for its strategic importance and thriving trade routes.

We will begin our visit at the Basra Museum, housed in a former lakeside palace of Saddam Hussein. The museum's collection highlights the rich history of Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Persian civilizations, along with the city's own history. The museum, which opened in 2016, stands as a symbol of resilience after the original Basra Museum was looted and destroyed during the Gulf War in 1991. The loss of so many historical artifacts led to a collaborative effort to create a new museum that would preserve and showcase Basra's vital role in Iraq's heritage.

Next, we will explore parts of the old city and its historic markets, some of which date back to the 16th and 17th centuries. While many of these markets are now abandoned and slowly deteriorating, they still echo the glory of Basra's past. Residential neighborhoods like Al-Shanasheel provide a glimpse into "old Basra," with their original architectural features. The Shanasheel style, first seen in Basra during the Ottoman era, spread to other parts of Iraq, including Baghdad. These traditional merchant houses, with their wooden facades, balconies, and walled gardens, are often referred to as "Ottoman Shen-ashil Houses."

We will also visit Kuwait Street in central Basra, which gained its name due to the influx of consumer goods from neighboring Kuwait after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The street, often referred to as "Ahwaz Street," is known for its street vendors, predominantly women selling goods popular in Iran, such as natural hair oils and honey.

In the afternoon, we will enjoy a relaxing boat trip along the Shatt al-Arab river—also known as the 'River of the Arabs.' This 200 km-long river is formed by the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and marks the border between Iraq and Iran. The river eventually flows into the Persian Gulf. Geologically, the Shatt al-Arab is relatively recent, as the Tigris and Euphrates once emptied into the Persian Gulf via a different channel further west.

Overnight Basra

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Al-Qurna - Chibayish Marshes Discovery - Nasiriyah

This morning we depart from Basra and begin our journey northward.

Our first stop will be the small southern city of Al-Qurna, where we'll visit the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Tigris and Euphrates originate in the Armenian Highlands of eastern Turkiye and flow through valleys and gorges into Syria and northern Iraq. They meet at Al-Qurna to form the Shatt al-Arab, which eventually empties into the Persian Gulf. Together, these rivers and their tributaries cover an area of 879,790 square kilometers, extending across Iraq, Turkiye, Syria, Iran, and Kuwait. Nearby, we'll also visit the 'Adam's Tree'—a peculiar shrine located on the shore of the Tigris. According to local legend, this small, dead tree is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the very tree that Eve ate from in the Garden of Eden. The tree is protected by low brick walls and surrounded by a concrete plaza, adding a mystic element to the site.

Next, we'll continue on to Al-Chibayish, where we'll enjoy a motorboat ride through the Mesopotamian Marshes—one of the largest wetland ecosystems in the Middle East. Formed by the seasonal flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, these marshes have been critical to the

development of early agriculture and urbanization, giving rise to ancient cities such as Eridu, Uruk, and Ur. The marshes were recognized by UNESCO in 2016 for their historical and ecological importance, though they now cover less than half of their original size due to decreasing water levels. Here, we'll learn more about the Ma'dan people (Marsh Arabs), who have lived in this unique ecosystem for thousands of years. Their traditional lifestyle is deeply connected to the wetlands, and the construction of reed houses from the abundant reeds in the marshes is a key aspect of their culture. This way of life, believed to date back to ancient Sumer over 5,000 years ago, is now nearly extinct.

For lunch, we'll dine in a Mudhif House, a traditional communal dwelling made from reeds and adobe, where we'll experience the hospitality of the Marsh Arabs.

Not far from here is the Chibayish Martyrs Monument, built to honor the Marsh Arabs who were executed by Saddam Hussein's regime following the Gulf War in 1991. The monument stands as a tribute to their resilience and sacrifice.

We'll continue our journey to Nasiriyah, a modern city on the banks of the Euphrates. This evening, after dinner, we'll take a stroll through the local market streets to experience the vibrant atmosphere and immerse ourselves in the local culture.

Overnight Nasiriyah.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Great Ziggurat of Ur - Ancient Uruk - Imam Ali Shrine - Kufa & Najaf

Today, we will visit two of Iraq's most significant archaeological sites: Ur and Uruk.

An early start brings us to Ur, where we'll explore the Great Ziggurat of Ur, one of the largest and best-preserved ziggurats in Mesopotamia. The ziggurat is often regarded as one of the most remarkable architectural achievements of the Ancient Near East. Initially built as an administrative center for the city, it also served as a temple complex and a place of worship. Even after more than 4,000 years, the Great Ziggurat remains well-preserved and is the only major surviving structure of ancient Ur. The Sumerians, from the earliest stages of their civilization, constructed important temples on platforms or, in the case of ziggurats, on a series of stepped platforms. Today Ziggurats can be found scattered across modern-day Iraq and Iran.

Next, we continue to Uruk, one of the most influential cities in ancient Mesopotamia and often considered to be the world's first true city. Between approximately 3600 and 2600 BCE, Uruk became the world's first major city, situated in a fertile region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This city is often credited with introducing key innovations, such as social hierarchies, political structures, writing, religion and literature—foundations of urban life that still influence cities today. Uruk was one of the largest Sumerian settlements and a crucial religious center, continuously inhabited until the 5th century AD. However, over time, the Euphrates River shifted its course, leaving Uruk to slowly decline. The Uruk period marks the emergence of urban civilization in Mesopotamia.

We'll stop for lunch before continuing our journey to Najaf, a city rich in history, culture, and spiritual significance. Known as the holiest city in Iraq for Shia Muslims, Najaf is home to the renowned Imam Ali Shrine, a major pilgrimage site. The shrine's stunning architecture and ornate decorations are awe-inspiring. This evening, we'll visit the Imam Ali Shrine Complex, often referred to as the Imam Ali Mosque. Built in honor of Imam Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Mohammed), the shrine attracts millions of pilgrims every year.

After exploring the shrine, we'll wander through the Grand Bazaar of Najaf, where you can experience the lively market atmosphere and discover local Iraqi sweets, handicrafts, and spices. A short distance from Najaf is Kufa, home to the Great Mosque of Kufa (Masjid al-Kufa), one of the oldest and holiest surviving mosques in the world.

Overnight in Najaf.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 14 Wadi Al-Salam Cemetery - Holy Shrine Of Imam Hussain - Karbala

This morning we begin with a visit to a viewpoint overlooking the Wadi Al-Salam Cemetery. The Wadi Al-Salam Cemetery is not just any ordinary burial site; it holds the distinction of being the largest cemetery in the world, both in terms of area and the number of burials. It is a sacred site for Shia Muslims, carrying immense cultural, spiritual, and historical significance that stretches over many centuries. For more than 1,400 years, Wadi Al-Salam has been the burial ground for millions of Muslims, making it a deeply revered site.

According to UNESCO, the Wadi Al-Salam (Valley of Peace) cemetery is the final resting place of dozens of prophets, kings, scientists, scholars, dutifuls, guardians, and royals. The cemetery spans an estimated 917 hectares (roughly the size of 1,700 football fields, or 13% of the city's total area).

At some point in our time in and around Karbala, we'll visit the shrine believed to be the burial place of the prophet Ezekiel, one of the major prophets in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Located in Al-Kifl (historically known as Kefil), this ancient site has been a pilgrimage destination for centuries. The current structure dates to the 14th century and features a distinctive conical dome and a tomb chamber adorned with Hebrew inscriptions. The shrine represents the rich tapestry of religious traditions that have coexisted in Mesopotamia for millennia, and remains an important site for both Jewish and Muslim communities.

Our day will conclude with a visit to the holy city of Karbala, where we will explore the holy shrine of Imam Hussein and his brother Al-Abbas. This shrine is one of the most revered places for Shia Muslims, as it marks the final resting place of Imam Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who was martyred during the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. The shrine's stunning golden dome and minarets are truly remarkable, as is the inner sanctum where Imam Hussein is buried. The space is adorned with intricate Islamic calligraphy and exquisite craftsmanship, creating a profound atmosphere of reverence and awe.

Overnight in Karbala

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Borsippa, Kish & The Wonders of Babylon

Today, we embark on a journey to Babylon, with a visit to Borsippa en route. Although Borsippa is often overshadowed by its more famous neighbor, Babylon, it is a historically significant site in its own right. The Borsippa Ziggurat, often referred to as the 'Tongue Ziggurat' due to its shape, is one of the most recognizable surviving structures of its kind in Iraq. Archaeologists and visitors alike have been drawn to this monumental site since the 19th century, intrigued by its ancient history.

Not far from Borsippa are the remains of the ancient city of Kish, once a prosperous Sumerian kingdom. Kish flourished particularly in the 3rd millennium BCE, serving as a center of power and wealth. The city, which was also briefly used as a US military base after the 2003 invasion, has left behind remarkable archaeological remnants of its former glory.

From here, we proceed to Babylon, one of the most iconic cities in world history, and a pivotal hub of ancient civilization. Founded more than 4,000 years ago as a small port on the Euphrates River, Babylon grew to become the largest city in the Babylonian Empire, standing as a symbol of power, wealth, and culture in the ancient world. It was the capital of numerous Mesopotamian empires and the site of several legendary landmarks, including the Tower of Babel, the Hanging Gardens, the Lion of Babylon, and the Ishtar Gate, each of which contributed to its fame throughout history.

During our exploration of Babylon, we will visit the Royal Palace, the reconstructed Ishtar Gate (the original of which is now housed in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin), and the supposed location of the mythical Hanging Gardens—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, though their actual existence remains a subject of debate among archaeologists. Babylon's importance truly blossomed under Hammurabi, the Amorite king who ruled from 1792 to 1750 BCE. His military conquests united much of southern and central Mesopotamia, forging the Babylonian Empire and transforming the city into a major cultural and political powerhouse.

The Hanging Gardens are particularly notable, though their exact location or existence remains uncertain. The Ishtar Gate, the main entrance to the inner city, is another architectural wonder, decorated with brilliantly glazed bricks depicting bulls, dragons, and lions. Babylon's remarkable walls, which once encircled the city, were renowned for their impenetrability and made the city an enduring symbol of strength. Art and architecture flourished during Babylon's golden age, particularly in its capital, where monumental structures and intricate designs were crafted to showcase the empire's might and artistic achievements.

After exploring this extraordinary site, we will continue on to Baghdad, the capital of Iraq and the Baghdad governorate. Situated on the Tigris River, approximately 330 miles (530 km) from the Persian Gulf, Baghdad lies in the heart of ancient Mesopotamia, a region renowned as the cradle of civilization. As Iraq's largest city and one of the Middle East's most densely populated urban areas, Baghdad holds both historical and cultural significance. Founded in 762 as the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, the city was the epicenter of Arab and Islamic culture and civilization for more than 500 years, cementing its place as one of the world's most influential cities during that time.

Overnight in Baghdad.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 16 Baghdad City Tour: National Museum, Markets & More

Today we enjoy a thorough exploration of many of the highlights of Baghdad.

We start our day with a visit to the Baghdadi National Museum, a treasure trove of Iraq's ancient history. Housing a vast collection of artifacts from Mesopotamian, Islamic, and prehistoric periods, the museum offers a deep dive into Iraq's rich cultural heritage. The huge collection on display tells the epic story of human civilization, from the earliest settlements to the rise and fall of vast empires. Due to the archaeological riches of Mesopotamia, the museum's collections are considered to be among the most important in the world and are a must-see for any traveller.

From here we will head to the Abbasid Palace, an impressive structure dating back to the Abbasid era, which offers fascinating glimpses of Islamic architecture and the city's historical significance during the golden age of the caliphate. Just a short distance away is the Al-Mustansriya School (Madrassah), a 13th-century institution known for its Islamic education, where you can admire the unique blend of Islamic and medieval architecture that has shaped much of Baghdad's skyline.

Next we will make your way to Qishlah, a historic building originally used as a military barracks in the 19th century and a striking example of Ottoman architecture. Afterwards we will stroll along Al-Mutanabbi Street, Baghdad's famous cultural heart, lined with bookstores, cafes, and vibrant street life. It is named after the renowned Arab poet Al-Mutanabbi and is a gathering place for literary enthusiasts and intellectuals. Don't miss the Mutanabbi statue at the heart of the street, a tribute to the poet's enduring influence.

Nearby we will find Safareen Market, a bustling traditional market where we can admire spices, textiles, and handicrafts, offering a taste of Baghdad's local commerce and culture. We will be sure to take a break at the Al-Shabander Café, one of Baghdad's oldest and most iconic coffeehouses, known for its rich history as a meeting point for intellectuals, artists, and writers.

In the evening we will venture out to the Taq Khasra in Ctesiphon, an ancient Sassanian monument just outside Baghdad. The massive arch, once part of a grand palace, is one of the largest brick arches in the world and stands as a symbol of Iraq's pre-Islamic past. Finally we will end our day with a relaxing visit to Dar Al-Atraqchi Café, where we can enjoy traditional Iraqi coffee or tea in a historic setting, reflecting on the city's vibrant history and culture.

Today's mix of ancient sites, modern cafes, and local markets provides a well-rounded introduction to Baghdad's multifaceted heritage.

Overnight in Baghdad.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 17 Baghdad: Dur-Kurigalzu & Al-Shaheed Monument

For our second day of sightseeing in Baghdad we will begin with a trip to Dur-Kurigalzu, an ancient city located just outside Baghdad, known for its impressive ziggurat and ruins from the Kassite period. This archaeological site offers a rare opportunity to explore the remnants of a once-thriving civilization, with the ziggurat being one of the most significant structures to survive from this era. Afterwards we will head to the Al-Shaheed Monument, a striking symbol of Iraqi patriotism and sacrifice, built to commemorate the soldiers who died in the Iran-Iraq War. Its bold design features two giant, soaring arches that frame an eternal flame, making it one of the most recognized landmarks in Baghdad. A visit here gives you insight into Iraq's modern history and the emotional weight of the country's past conflicts.

Nestled amidst the vibrant streets of Baghdad, the Abu Hanifa Mosque (Grand Imam Mosque) is a significant pilgrimage site for Sunni Muslims. After our visit to the mosque and shrine we will stop by the Saving Iraqi Culture Monument, a powerful symbol of the country's efforts to preserve its cultural identity amidst conflict. The monument's design reflects the resilience and spirit of Iraq's people. Nearby we can explore Khahramana Square, a charming public space famous for its statue of Aladdin's Lamp, which is part of Baghdad's rich folkloric tradition. The area is filled with local cafés where we can take a break and enjoy the vibrant atmosphere.

We then continue with a stop at the Sharazad and Sharyar statue, inspired by the legendary stories of One Thousand and One Nights, symbolizing the city's deep connections to the Arab world's literary and storytelling traditions.

Our day will end with a visit to the Imam Al-Khadim Shrine, an important religious site for Shia Muslims. The shrine is known for its serene atmosphere and beautiful architecture, making it a place of both spiritual reflection and cultural significance. This peaceful, sacred site offers a poignant contrast to the earlier landmarks of the day, providing a contemplative end to our second full day in Baghdad.

Overnight in Baghdad

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 18 Exploring Samarra, Hatra, and Iraqâ€™s Timeless Heritage

Our journey today continues through the heart of Iraq, where we will uncover the fascinating history and architecture of the Samarra Mosque and the iconic Malwiya Minaret, both symbols of the rich Islamic heritage in this region.

Samarra, a city that still retains much of its original layout, architectural splendor, and artistic relics, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007. Here, we'll visit the Malwiya Minaret, renowned for its distinctive spiral design. When it was constructed in the 9th century, it was the tallest structure in the Islamic world, standing as a monumental testament to Abbasid-era architecture.

The Great Mosque of Samarra, also known as the Samarra Mosque, was commissioned by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mutawakkil in 848 CE. Its name, "Samarra," comes from the Arabic phrase 'Surra man r'a', meaning 'a joy for all those who see it'. Unfortunately, much of the mosque was destroyed in 1278 during the Mongol invasion by Hulagu Khan, leaving only the outer walls and the magnificent minaret still standing.

A short drive from Samarra brings us to the Abu Dalaph Minaret, another remarkable example of Abbasid architecture. Built in the 9th century CE, this spiral minaret bears a striking resemblance to Samarra's famous Malwiya Minaret but stands in splendid isolation amid the desert landscape. Though less well-known than its Samarra counterpart, the Abu Dalaph Minaret showcases the same distinctive helical design that characterized Abbasid religious architecture. The minaret once belonged to a grand mosque that has since disappeared, leaving only this towering spiral as a testament to the former complex.

Just a short distance from the Great Mosque, we'll visit the abandoned Qasr Al Ashiq Fortress, a stunning relic from the Abbasid period dating back to 877-882 CE. This rectangular fort, surrounded by massive walls and a protective moat, was excavated and restored in the 1980s. It is now an integral part of the Samarra UNESCO World Heritage complex.

Our next stop is Hatra, a remarkable ancient city once under the influence of the Parthian Empire and the capital of the first Arab Kingdom. Hatra is considered one of the best-preserved cities from the Parthian Empire. The high, thick walls, reinforced by watchtowers, helped the city withstand Roman invasions in 116 CE and 198 CE. The ruins of Hatra, particularly its temples, showcase a unique blend of Hellenistic, Roman, and Eastern architectural styles, reflecting the grandeur of the civilization that once thrived here. Founded on the remnants of an Assyrian settlement, Hatra was strategically located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in a semi-desert region, which made it an important hub for trade and religion. The city grew from a small village in the first century BC to a powerful kingdom by the mid-second century AD.

After exploring the ancient ruins of Hatra, we'll continue our journey to Mosul, where we will delve further into Iraq's rich and complex ancient and modern history.

Overnight in Mosul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 19 Exploring the Resilient City of Mosul & Mor Mattai Monastery

Our day begins with a visit to the historic Old City of Mosul, situated across the Tigris River from ancient Nineveh. The city's heyday flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries when it became a center of culture and commerce. For over 850 years, the leaning minaret of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri stood as a defining symbol of Mosul. Tragically, in 2017, this iconic structure was reduced to rubble by the Islamic State group.

In 2014, ISIL/Da'esh seized control of Mosul, inflicting severe damage to its historic landmarks as part of their campaign to erase the city's rich history. The city's buildings, known for their intricate decorative carvings, reflected a mix of Fatimid architectural styles from Egypt and local Christian Nestorian influences. The narrow alleyways, bustling markets, and distinctive urban layout are remnants of Mosul's Ottoman heritage. As Mosul recovers from the devastation, these sites—mosques, churches, and ancient homes—are being brought back to life. With the support of the United Nations and international partners such as Japan, the UAE, and the European Union, the city has risen from the ashes, with its historic skyline gradually restored.

The restoration efforts are not limited to the Great Mosque of al-Nuri; Christian sites, which were also heavily impacted by the IS occupation, are being carefully rebuilt. Before the 2003 Iraq War, Mosul was home to around 50,000 Christians, but fewer than 20 families remain today.

The reconstruction of these sites is a powerful symbol of cultural resilience and renewal.

During our visit, we will explore the remains of the Al-Noori Mosque and the Mosque of Prophet Yunus, along with other significant landmarks such as the Wall of Nineveh, the Nirkal Gate, Bashtabya Castle, and the ancient residential quarters that reflect Mosul's rich history.

In the afternoon we will travel to Mor Mattai Monastery (Dayro d-Mor Mattai), located about an hour east of Mosul. This ancient monastery is traditionally attributed to Mor Mattai, a 4th-century monk revered as a saint in Syriac Christian traditions. Believed to have been commissioned in the 4th century, Mor Mattai Monastery is one of the oldest functioning Syriac Orthodox monasteries in Mesopotamia. Over the centuries, it has served as the seat and final resting place of numerous Syriac Orthodox patriarchs and scholars.

After a meaningful visit to this sacred site, we will return to Mosul for the evening.

Overnight in Mosul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 20 Mosul - Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan

Today we move on from Mosul and head north to Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan is a captivating destination, renowned for its stunning landscapes, welcoming people, and complex, yet fascinating history. While located in northern Iraq, it feels like a world unto itself. Iraqi Kurdistan has long been a hotbed for ethnic nationalism. Throughout history, the Kurdish people of Iraq have vacillated between autonomy and self-determination, and this has often put them into conflict with the Iraqi government. This lesser known region is an absorbing destination of sheer beauty, warm and friendly people and a rich history.

Our journey through Iraqi Kurdistan begins with a visit to Koysinjaq, a charming town rich in history. Here, we will explore the Chaldean Catholic Church of Mar Yousif, built in 1923 and today standing as a testament to the region's Christian heritage. The church's intricate architecture and peaceful atmosphere offer a moment of reflection before continuing our journey. From Koysinjaq, we'll drive to the impressive Koya Castle, strategically perched on a hilltop. This historic fortress offers breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and valleys.

We next head to Dukan Lake for lunch. The lake, nestled between rolling hills, is a perfect spot to take in the natural beauty of the region. Following lunch, we'll proceed to Sulaymaniyah, one of the cultural hubs of Kurdistan. Sulaymaniyah (Slemani), is a vibrant city located in the eastern part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, near the Iran–Iraq border. Surrounded by hills and mountains, the city is nestled in a picturesque settling with a semi-arid climate. Since its founding, this has been a cultural and intellectual hub, home to renowned poets, writers, historians, politicians, scholars, and musicians. The modern city of Sulaymaniyah was established in 1784 by Ottoman-Kurdish prince Ibrahim Pasha Baban, who named it in honor of his father, Sulaiman Pasha. The city's Old Town, though relatively young in its construction, remains the beating heart of Sulaymaniyah.

We will explore the lively streets and markets, where the vibrant energy of the city comes alive. We will wander through the bustling bazaars, where local crafts, spices, and textiles create a sensory feast. The markets offer a perfect opportunity to soak in the atmosphere and experience the warmth and hospitality of the Kurdish people.

As the day winds down, you'll have a deeper appreciation for the unique blend of history, culture, and natural beauty that defines Iraqi Kurdistan.

Overnight in Sulaymaniyah

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 21 Sulaymaniyah - A Journey Through History & Natural Beauty

Today we take a drive south through the Kurdish countryside to Halabja, where we visit the Shahidan Graveyard—a somber but profoundly important site honouring the victims of the 1988 chemical attack. The memorial's stark white monuments stand against the mountains, each one representing lives lost in one of the darkest chapters of Kurdish history. Here we reflect on the resilience of the Kurdish people and their determination to preserve memory and dignity in the face of tragedy. The memorial's contemplative design, with its symbolic elements and peaceful gardens, transforms grief into a space for reflection and hope.

We then embark on a scenic excursion to Azmar Mountain, one of the highest peaks in the region. The drive itself is magnificent, winding through valleys where Kurdish villages cling to hillsides surrounded by terraced fields and orchards. As we climb higher, the landscape opens up to reveal sweeping panoramas of the Zagros Mountains stretching into the distance. The mountain offers stunning views of the surrounding valleys, their patchwork of green fields and rocky outcrops creating a tapestry that has inspired Kurdish poets for centuries. The fresh, cool air provides a welcome escape from the lowland heat, and we take time to simply breathe in the mountain atmosphere while watching clouds drift through the peaks.

Finally we journey to Qyzqapan, an ancient rock-cut tomb dating to the Median period (7th-6th century BCE). Carved directly into the mountainside, this remarkable monument features intricate reliefs and architectural details that blend Mesopotamian and Persian influences. The tomb's façade displays columns, false windows, and decorative elements that have survived remarkably well over 2,600 years, their crisp edges testament to both the skill of ancient stonemasons and the protective qualities of the local stone. Standing before this monumental carving, perched dramatically on its cliff face with commanding views over the landscape, we witness one of the earliest examples of rock-cut architecture in the region, predating even the famous Persian sites at Naqsh-e Rostam. The setting is as impressive as the monument itself—a lonely, windswept spot where ancient kings chose to proclaim their power for eternity.

Overnight in Sulaymaniyah

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 22 From Sulaymaniyah to Erbil: A Journey Across Kurdistan's Heart

We begin our day with a drive out to the Bekhal Waterfalls, one of the natural wonders in the region. Surrounded by lush greenery and towering cliffs, the falls offer a tranquil escape, where you can enjoy the refreshing mist and take in the peaceful sounds of cascading water. In addition to the natural beauty, the Bekhal Waterfalls are a great place to experience local culture. Nearby, we find several small cafes and shops where we can taste traditional Kurdish specialties. The falls are also popular with families and offer a great place for people-watching.

Continuing on, we make our way to Shaqlawa, a picturesque town nestled in the mountains. Known for its charming traditional architecture and cooler climate, Shaqlawa is a popular summer retreat. We will explore the Shaqlawa Markets, where you can wander through vibrant stalls offering local handicrafts, spices, and traditional Kurdish goods. Here, you can interact with the locals and perhaps pick up a souvenir. After a leisurely stroll through the markets, we will enjoy a delicious Kurdish lunch in one of the town’s rustic restaurants. Here you can savor regional specialties made with fresh, locally sourced ingredients.

From Shaqlawa we will head towards Khanzad Castle, an ancient fortress that stands proudly overlooking the landscape. The castle’s history stretches back centuries, and we will explore its walls and tower, gaining a deeper understanding of the region’s strategic importance through the ages.

Finally, we continue our journey towards Erbil, the ancient capital of the Kurdistan Region. Erbil is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, dating back to 6,000 B.C, and has been inhabited over the millennia by the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Mongols and Ottoman Turks. With so much history and culture, Erbil is a city with fantastic old bazaars, traditional cafés and true 'atmoshphere'.

Overnight in Erbil

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 23 Exploring Erbil: A Journey Through History & Culture

We begin your day in Erbil with a visit to the iconic Erbil Citadel - a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Rising majestically over the city, the Citadel has been continuously inhabited for over 6,000 years, making it one of the oldest settlements in the world. Wander through its winding streets, explore its ancient structures, and enjoy panoramic views of the surrounding city. The Citadel’s historic charm is brought to life through its layers of civilization, with remnants from the Assyrians, Ottomans, and beyond.

Next we take a stroll through the lively Erbil Markets, a maze of narrow alleys and vibrant shops offering everything from colorful textiles and spices to handmade crafts. This bustling market is a sensory feast, where the sounds of haggling vendors, the smell of freshly ground spices, and the vibrant displays of Kurdish products create an unforgettable atmosphere. It’s the perfect place to immerse yourself in local culture, pick up unique souvenirs, and experience the everyday life of Erbil's residents.

Afterward we make our way to the Jolly Minaret, one of the most iconic landmarks of Erbil. This beautiful 19th-century minaret stands tall with its distinctive spiral design and intricate brickwork. The structure offers a striking contrast to the modern cityscape, serving as a reminder of the region's historical roots.

Finally, enjoy some free time to explore the city or markets at your own pace, perhaps visiting a local café or simply absorbing the unique blend of Erbil's history and modern vibrancy.

Overnight in Erbil.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 24 Departure

Departure from Erbil.

SAFE TRAVELS!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast