TOUR CODE

KD1

ADVENTURESABROAD

KURDISTAN

'Exploring Iraqi Kurdistan'

9 days

Updated 31/07/2013

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.

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.

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 on-foot 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***

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 *Departure*

Departure from Erbil.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.

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