

# TOURING IRAQ AND ITS ANTIQUITIES

MAY 17, 2024



Babylon ruins with Saddam Hussein's palace in the background.

TRAVEL • BY: SHARON HOGE

*“Are you out of your mind ?!!* Please be careful, people warned when they heard I was booked to visit Iraq at a time when its neighbors were lobbing weapons at each other. Although anxious to see the “cradle of civilization, I was mildly apprehensive, and in fact seven of the twelve travel agents

who'd signed up for our week-long tour backed out. But the remaining five of us, well-traveled women spanning ages 40-80ish, spent six wonderful days on the Cadence Vacations/100 Hala trip, driving up and down the country without incident or concern, visiting precious ancient sites and encountering friendly locals.

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Group members were from New York, Long Island, Canada, and California.



Our Iraqi guide Muhammad learned English from watching American TV. *The Sopranos* was his favorite.



Ivona with typical kids curious to meet us.



Outside our hotel in Nasiriyah.



Mohammud assembling the group to depart from Mosul.

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*In a survey of world history, central Iraq is where it begins.* The Tigris and Euphrates rivers, running parallel, encircle the fertile lands of Mesopotamia. Four thousand years before 01 AD, before Egyptian, Greek, and Roman achievements, Sumerians in Mesopotamia were building giant brick and mud palaces and altars, devising the arch, vault, wheel, ventilation, writing systems, and other basic features which were “rediscovered” during later eras.

In coming centuries, subsequent tribes and peoples left behind a fascinating variety of styles and artifacts. We saw some of the oldest objects on earth in the Baghdad and

Nasiriyah museums and rambling around actual sites not yet cordoned off to restrict tourists.

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The Iraqi National Museum has reopened after terrible 2003 lootings.



Along with original artifacts, the museum shows copies of pieces relocated to museums in Europe.





Glazed tile preserved from the Babylonian Procession Gate to King Nebuchadnezzar's palace



Copy of the ancient Babylonian laws inscribed as the Code of Hammurabi.



Baghdad's Martyrs' Memorial was commissioned by Saddam Hussein.



In Baghdad a monument to Saving Iraqi Culture.



A reconstructed Ishtar Gate leads into the vast ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.



Map of ancient Babylon.



A site presumed to have been the location of the Tower of Babel.



Facade of Saddam Hussein's plundered palace.





Grandiose entry hall to Saddam Hussein's palace.



Rubble and graffiti in Saddam Hussein's plundered palace.



Euphrates river flowing past Hussein palace terrace.



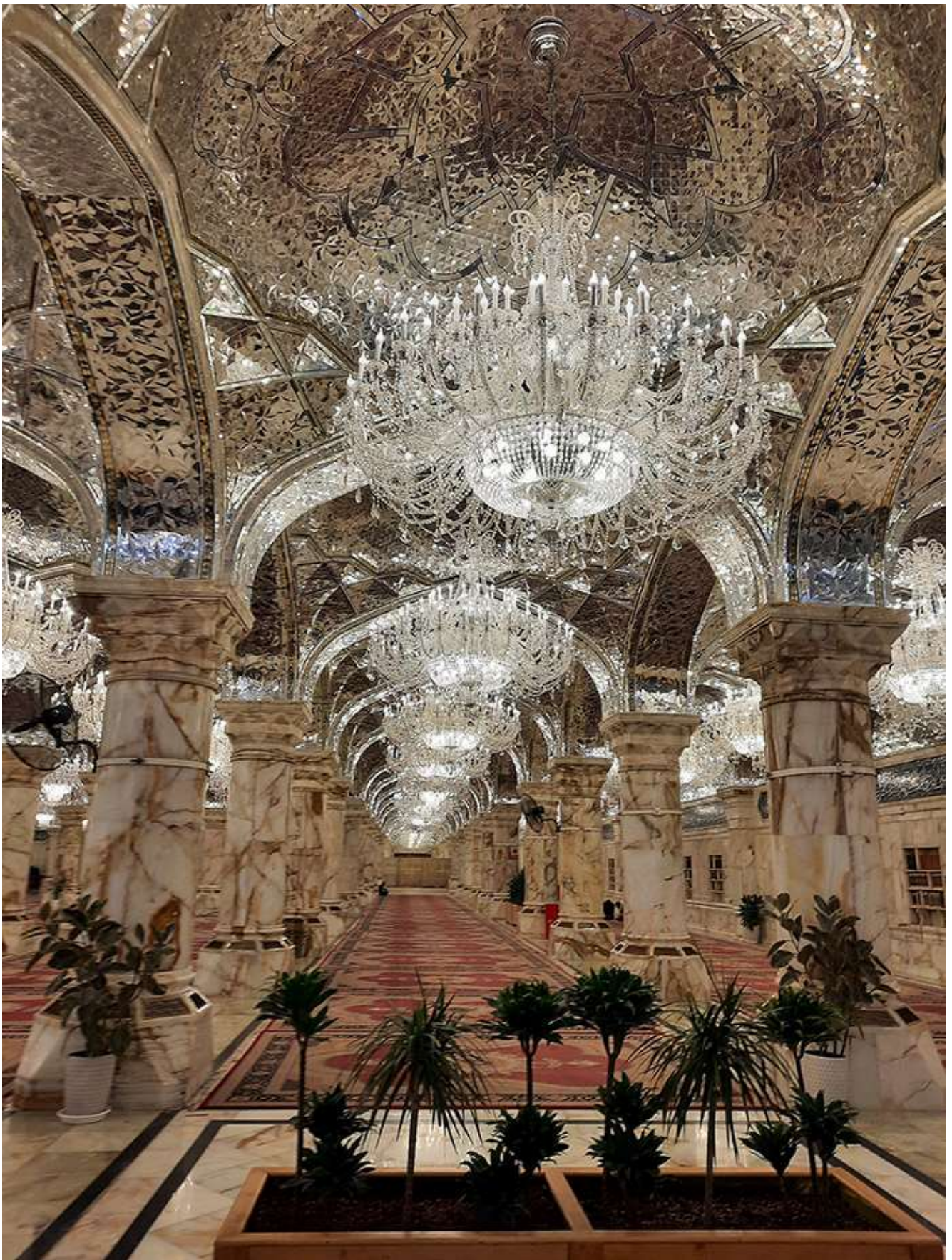
View of Babylon ruins from Saddam Hussein's palace.



Golden facade of the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf.



Entering the massive Shrine of Imam Ali.



Gleaming interior of the mosque containing the Shrine of Imam Ali.



Ruins of Uruk date from the 5th millennium BC.





Ground at the Uruk site is literally covered with pottery shards.



Uruk was the home of mythical hero Gilgamesh.



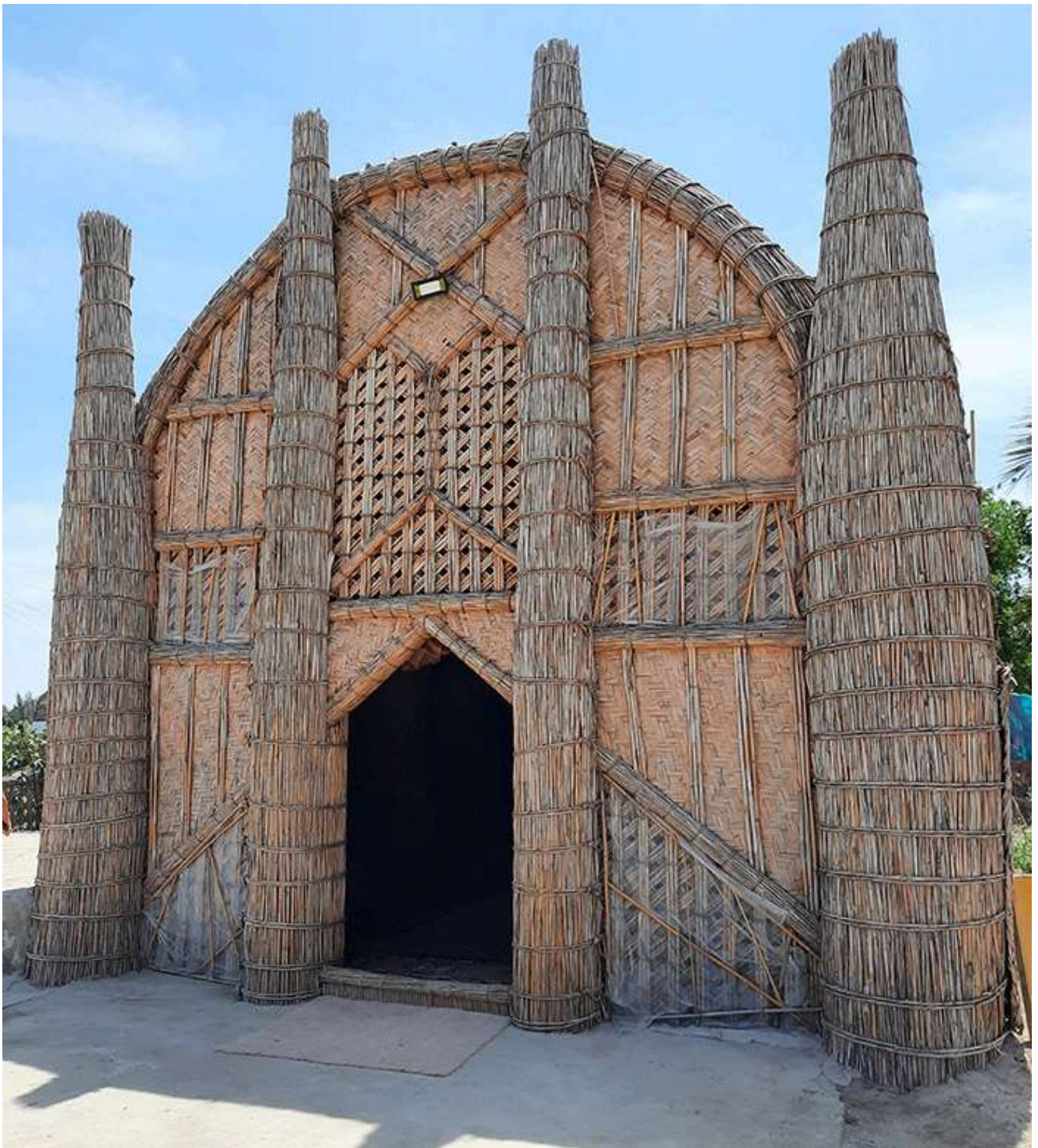
The largely reconstructed Ziggurat of Ur, originally built by Sumerians in the 21st century BC.



Pausing before a climb to the top of the Malwiya Minaret.



Catastrophically drained by Saddam Hussein, the Mesopotamian marshes are being revitalized.



Buildings in the marshes are fashioned from reeds.

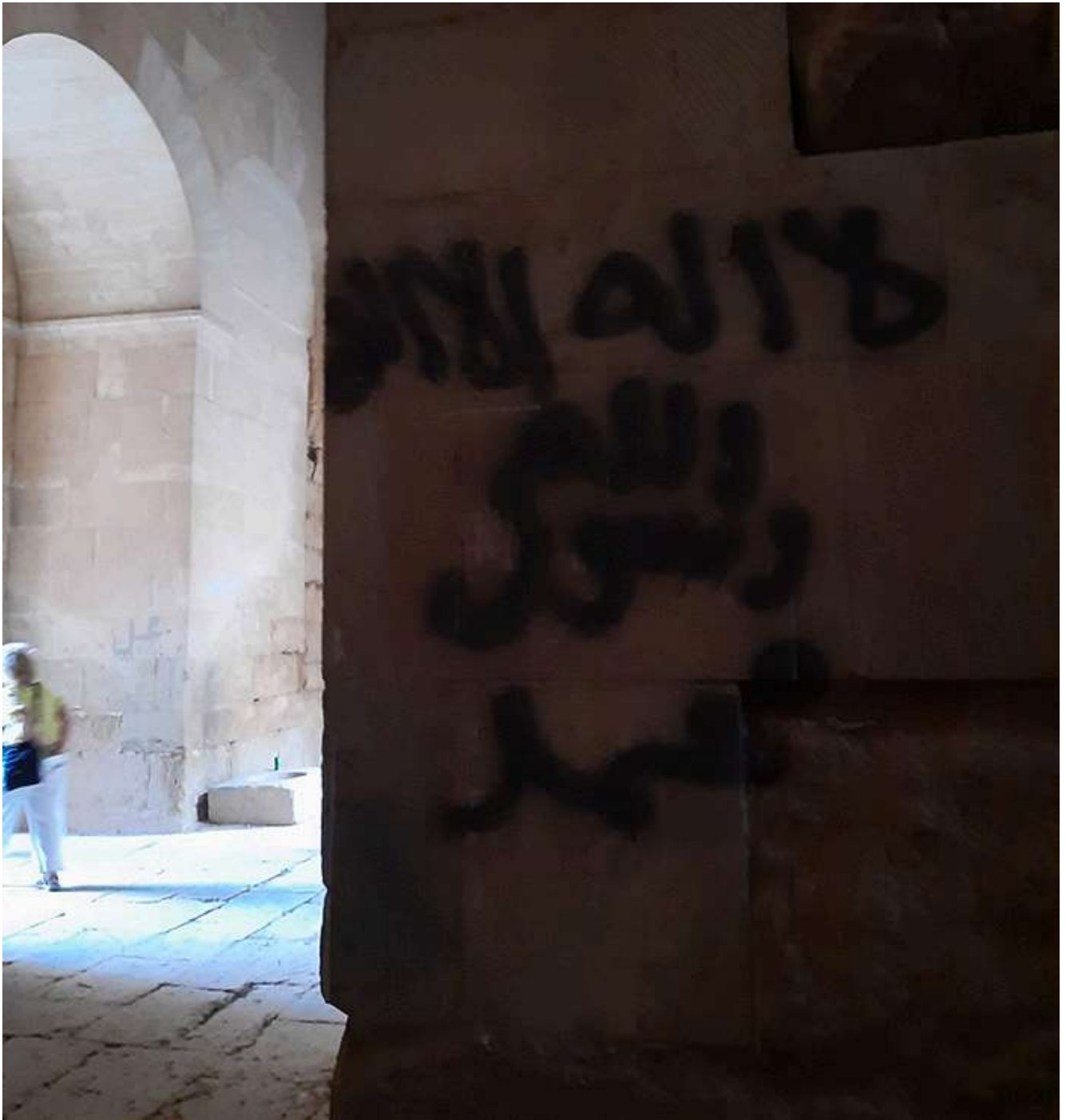


A boat ride through the recovering marsh waters.



Used as ISIS headquarters, ancient UNESCO city Hatra was preserved from enemy bombing.





ISIS graffiti in Hatra.



ISIS destruction in Mosul.



Mosul's iconic leaning tower minaret is under restoration.



Restoring Mosul from the ground up.



Monument in Mosul honoring the rebuilders.



A rebuilt city square in Old Mosul.



Classic Mesopotamian designs on the modern wall.



The circular Citadel towers over modern Erbil, the capital and most populated city in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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*We were careful to keep our legs and arms covered* and wore colorful cotton \$2 abayas to visit mosques. Everywhere we encountered teenagers, women in purdah, waiters, shopkeepers delighted to hear we were from Canada and Ameeeeeeerica stopping us to take selfies — schoolchildren practicing their English, parents holding up babies to pose with us in photos, security guards grinning and waving us through. On one street in Mosul, a yellow car pulled over, six guys in construction vests jumped out stopping traffic to have their pictures taken with us.

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Local women pitched in to help us put on cover-up abayas.



Crowding around to take photos.



Stopping traffic to pose with us for selfies.



Passing through a checkpoint.

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*Our guides tried to keep an eye on us as we strayed* through the tempting wares and spices at bazaars and storefront shops. Nighttime is lively, stores stay open until almost midnight. Never feeling threatened or unsafe, we'd stroll home past curbside cafes and brightly lit shops selling clothing and food. On solo shopping missions we found fresh dates at supermarkets, sandals and flower print pumps at fashion stores, indulgent ice cream at coffee shops, and local beer at fully stocked stores selling liquor.

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Baghdad's iconic Al-Rasheed Street.



Brightly lit cities bustle with nighttime activity.



Friendly vendors.



Street-side naan bread bakery.





A browser at a neighborhood supermarket.

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*The food our guides ordered was traditional, healthy, generous, and affordable. Ready-made falafel shop sandwiches cost only about \$2 and \$15 was the main course price for our very fanciest dinner. Almost every meal started with plates of tahini, yogurt cucumbers, and chopped tomatoes, jalapenos, pickles, eggplant, followed by chicken and rice or long patties of grilled lamb served with greens, onions, and more tomatoes. The seasoning was delicious, even beneath its crispy grilled skin the chicken meat was savory. Plentiful bottled water, fruit juices, and soda substituted for alcoholic beverages which aren't served in restaurants. Ubiquitous at every meal were big rounds of puffy white naan bread — we'd use it as sandwich wraps or "plates."*



Meals begin with an array of cold dishes.



A typical falafel sandwich.



Fresh salads to fill falafel wraps.



Roadside fruit and vegetable stand.



Chicken kabab and grilled lamb is a typical dish.



Carp — opened, seasoned, and grilled is a traditional specialty.

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*Accommodations were clean and comfortable.* The capital city's Baghdad Hotel was a 5-star with spacious rooms, spa facilities, a huge outdoor pool surrounded by restaurant options. In outlying areas the 3-4 star hotels were suitably contemporary and efficient. In rooms with balconies — or tiny windows — we found crisp white sheets, tissues folded into elaborate peaks, little boxes of dental, shaving, and cotton swab amenities. TV and English language channels were hit or miss, but when the wifi worked it was almost faster and more efficient than what I have at home. Ironically in a country of sandals, every hotel was equipped with shoeshine machines.

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Entrance to the 5-star Baghdad Hotel.





Velvet curtains cover the door leading to a balcony overlooking the pool.



Restaurants encircle the Baghdad Hotel's outdoor pool.



Reception lobby in Najaf's Al-Zaitoon Hotel.



View from the Barada Hotel cafe.



A comfortable room in Mosul's Ewan Hotel.



A colorful highway rest stop.

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*We did encounter primitive and features not unexpected* in a developing region. Once or twice every day the electricity would go out –always restored within a minute or two. Secondary roads were bumpy, restaurants and highway rest stops tended to be fitted with squat facilities instead of sit-down toilets. Luggage is scanned at some hotels, museums, and mosques. Amidst the rebuilding, lingering signs of war devastation are unsettling, and especially in the southern districts trash proliferation is unsightly. We had to have our passports at the ready for frequent checkpoint stops where photography was restricted, but guards who caught us snapping pictures simply wagged their fingers “No-no” and sent us off with smiles and salutes.



Checkpoints separate the country's 18 governorates.



Passports are checked at security stops.

*We weren't the only tourists.*

We'd run into occasional Australians and Germans and local Iraqis exploring their country's treasures. A couple times we intersected with a busload of tourists from Italy, their guide told me his company welcomes one or two Italian groups per month.





Our own guide,  
Mohammed, **from100**  
**Hala** (it translates to “100  
welcomes”) told me he’s anxious to share the heritage he’s  
proud of. Email: **info@100Hala.com**

Yasser of Cadence Vacations organized  
the trip and guided us.

His firm is collaborating with Cadence Vacations (Email:  
**info@cvc.vacations**) to promote more visits to the ancient  
land of Gilgamesh, the Tower of Babel, the Arabian Nights.

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*Pictures by Sharon Hoge and Ivona Piwonska*

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