

# How I Found Peace in Iraq

The first time I went to Iraq, I didn't tell anyone that I was going. Not my closest friends, not even my team at Terre Entière. We specialise in cultural tours and have managed to carve out something of a reputation for our knowledge of the Middle East. However, travelling to conflict zones holds absolutely no appeal for us. In deciding to go to Northern Iraq, I was well aware that I would be staying in the completely pacified areas of Kurdistan. But the powerful worldwide media coverage of the American intervention in 2003 and everything that has happened since then has a very real and immediate consequence: if you tell someone that you're going to Iraq, they think that either you're a soldier, or a special correspondent, or quite simply mad!



As soon as I landed on Iraqi soil, I first of all experienced a sort of fear mixed with pride. Fear, because I knew that what I was doing was something completely new and I was still wondering whether it might not actually be risky. And then pride, because I immediately felt that I was right not to be put off by the pictures with which we are constantly bombarded, showing nothing but war in this country. The days that followed were quickly to confirm this and the reality of the situation in fact far exceeded my expectations: in just one week, I crossed more than one quarter of Iraqi territory without the slightest hitch; I made friends for life and visited magnificent natural and archaeological treasures.

The purpose of this trip was not simply to take a few days away from it all. It was most definitely professional, because I wanted to examine the extent to which it might be possible to organise group tours to this cradle of all our civilisations, this land which carries an incomparable wealth of history and which in one way or another, is the heritage of each and every one of us. I got the answer to my question very early on: not only is it possible to organise tours to Iraq, but I would go further and say that it's my duty to propose tours to this country. It's not right to ignore a country with such a warm and welcoming population, and it's inconceivable to ignore the immense cultural heritage of Iraq.

when running a company that specialises in cultural tours.

From that moment on, my conviction was so strong that it swept away any remaining fears. I knew well that we ran the risk of being taken for fools or madmen. I was well aware that Iraq's reputation meant that it would not become a major tourist destination overnight. But I was also lucid and responsible enough to know that I could and indeed had to begin to organise tours to the peaceful areas of the country, which corresponded more or less exactly to the autonomous province of Iraqi Kurdistan.



Terre Entière organised its first tour on the occasion of the Christmas 2008 celebrations. Our group could include twenty travelers and in just a few days we had reached the maximum numbers. None of the participants was there for dubious motives or on the hunt for thrills. They all knew that they were going to regions that were at peace, but there were nonetheless no shortage of surprises: the impressive citadel of Erbil reminded everyone at the beginning of the tour that this capital city was once inhabited by the Assyrians thousands of years ago! The visit to the summer palace of King Sennacherib with its faces of gods carved into the rock led us all to wonder how it was possible that we were the only ones to be visiting such a marvel. The multicoloured town of Dohuk impressed everyone both by its vitality and its tranquillity. And just for the fun of it, we took a car trip northwards up a mountain that dominated the region that many call the "Switzerland of Iraq". One day we were in a desert, hiding from the heat, while the next morning our feet were crunching through the snow that had fallen without interruption during the night.



Since the success of this first tour, our company has continued to be committed to showing Iraq in a different light. A number of cultural tours set off in 2009 and this year saw the birth of our subsidiary, Babel Tours, with the aim of developing tourism in all regions of Iraq, as and when they find peace. We are already receiving requests from all continents and is welcoming its first groups. In our offices and out in the field, preparations are already under way for the first tours to the major archaeological sites of Southern Iraq. A multi-confessional team of tourism professionals is now actively working for all those who wish, in complete safety, to discover the lands which are home to some of the finest treasures of the heritage of all mankind.

In 2008, 212,000 tourists visited the Kurdistan Region. The majority of tourists coming to the region are Iraqi Arabs from the middle and south of the country. In the summer, thousands of Iraqis flee the hot weather of the rest of the country and cool themselves in the Kurdish mountains.

The Kurdish Ministry of Tourism announced plans of a number of tourism projects in Erbil city that will cost five billion and 400 million dinars. The projects include building a hospital to treat tourists in Koya city, building a tourism compound in Gali Ali Bag waterfall, a project to attract more people in Shanadar cave, and decorating the gates of the cities of Shaqlawa, Soran, Merga Sur, Choman, and Hajji Omaran in Erbil province. In Kurdistan there are more than 700 archaeological sites and very few of them have been excavated.

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