

Adding to the recent Kurdistan trip reports...

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Just got back a couple of weeks ago from a week in Kurdistan and wanted to share my experience in case it's useful for anyone who is thinking about going. While I haven't posted on this forum before it was super helpful to get a bit of an idea about what travelling in Kurdistan would be like. It also helped me to meet Karwan (who is in lot of posts here) who showed me around the first few days.

I turned up in Erbil on an early flight from Istanbul and had no trouble with passport control and visas. I got a 30 day free visa on arrival by waiting in the regular passport lines. There was a visa booth to the right hand side that I assume was for people who aren't able to get a visa automatically on arrival (note I understand that after being in Iraq you will not be able to get a visa for the US via the online visa waiver system, if eligible for one, but will need to get a tourist visa via longer application and US consulate/embassy visit). After that it was a relatively easy process to collect my bag and jump on the bus to the second terminal where Karwan was kind enough to pick me up.

He'd also booked a hotel room for me at the Merci Hotel which was very comfortable and had organized a very good rate. After a few hours catching up on some sleep, Karwan collected me at the hotel and after a quick visit to one of the main mosques (very beautiful with lots of blue tiles) he dropped me at the citadel to have a look around. While the citadel is obviously interesting and a major part of history, it's really a quick visit given most of the area is closed off due to being in disrepair. Hopefully in a few years there will have been enough stability to restore more of the buildings. More interesting to me was the market area which was pretty busy and I lost an hour or so wandering around. Karwan then kindly invited me to his house for dinner with his family, the food was great and thanks again for the kind hospitality of your family mate!

The next morning Karwan collected me again and we headed in the direction of Lalish, unfortunately we didn't visit on a Friday when there are lots of Yazidi's visiting but I had a great time looking around a bit and hearing about the Yazidi religion. We also visited a couple of other sites including Khanis before heading to Alqosh. Unfortunately because I was a tourist the guard at the checkpoint heading into town wasn't going to let me in but luckily Karwan knew someone from in the town who was kind enough to come speak to the guard and we were allowed to go in and visit the Rabban Hormizd Monastery. What a fantastic place, with a great view and it was excellent to look in the churches and caves. Even though Alqosh isn't that far from Mosul, there wasn't really any signs that a war was going on (and I didn't see many signs of a conflict at all while I was in Kurdistan, aside from the checkpoints, at which the Peshmerga and other guards were very kind and easy to deal with). After Alqosh we headed to Duhok to stay the night and had a quick look at the dam and Zoroastrian site.

The next morning we visited one of Saddam's palaces which was interesting but mainly for the fact that he apparently built them everywhere and only stayed in this one 3 times! Given the long time since it was taken over by the Peshmerga, it's pretty much in ruins now. We then went to Amedi which was an amazing site on approach and once we got into the town. For a little bit of extra breakfast we visited a bakery and the kindness of the Kurdish people (which was

displayed again and again on my trip) came through as the baker refused to take my money for the bread.

Karwan and I then continued on to Soran driving down through the valley between Amedi and Soran. I highly recommend this route as it basically follows the river that runs through the valleys so is 3 hours of breathtaking scenery (which I can only imagine is even better when its greener in late winter and spring). The last little bit of the drive was along the Hamilton Rd which is amazing. A friend of mine and his family have been living in Soran for the last couple of years working for an organization building houses and a school for refugees so after saying farewell to Karwan (who I can't recommend highly enough to anyone wanting a guide in Kurdistan, especially if travelling solo, he basically took a couple of ideas from me about what I liked and turned it into a great couple of days including organizing excellent hotels), I stayed with my friend for a few days. You can see what he's been doing at the following websites.

<http://www.worldorphans.org/the-refuge-initiative/>  
<http://flickerflame.org/>

My visit coincided with Thanksgiving which we celebrated with some other expats working for various charity groups including right in near Mosul. I also was lucky enough to also be shown some his projects and the sites around Soran including various beautiful gorges, the Pank tourist park and Korek mountain chairlift and hotel. On the last morning I was there we drove up one of the mountains behind Soran for the sunrise and it was truly amazing to see the sun rise over the mountains of Iran and Turkey. I highly recommend Soran and Rawundaz to visit in the mountains although I'm not sure how easy it is to organize a hotel in the middle of either of those towns.

My friend was then kind enough to organize a private taxi for me from Soran to Slemani. I'd planned to take a group taxi back to Erbil and then another group taxi to Slemani, but he convinced me that the scenery through the mountain road between Soran and Slemani was not to be missed. The drive was a continuation of the drive from Amedi down to Soran, beautiful mountains and a river. There was talk that the PKK have set up in that area and as a result there could have been some hassles with the checkpoints but I didn't have any problems.

Arriving in Slemani was hectic! It was a Saturday and it seemed like every person in town had decided to walk or drive through the market (which was where I was staying). In the end I jumped out of the taxi a 5 min walk from the Dolphin Hotel where I was booked to stay. The Dolphin Hotel was very neat and tidy and the single room I had was super functional for USD30 a night. Also, amazing internet (which was pretty much the same at all the places I stayed).

The next day or so I spent wandering around Slemani on my own. I highly recommend staying near the market given its where everything seems to be going on and you can lose yourself in the myriad of laneways while enjoying some cheap, great food. I visited the Slemani Museum (good but all you'll need is an hour) and Amna Suraka (closed the first day due to the power being off, very intense place which makes you feel pretty uncomfortable). I also walked around Azady Park which wasn't my favourite park in Slemani – the public park near the market on Salim St was much nicer and seemed to be a bit more of a hive of activity. Only other thing worth mentioning was I found a post office after much searching, it's near the market area just off Mawlawi St, not too far from the intersection with Salim St, Prezaga St and Baban St. They seem to use electronic stickers for post now but I did manage to buy a few stamps as a present.

After a couple of days in Slemani I grabbed a shared taxi back to Erbil (IRD 15k and IRD5k to the garaj from near the market in Slemani - IRD5k seems to be the standard taxi price for most trips in the big towns). I shared with two Kurdish women and a child and even though I didn't know what was going on when they were discussing it, apparently the driver asked them whether they wanted to go via Kirkuk or Koya and they chose Koya. Not sure if to read anything into that about travelling via Kirkuk?

After arriving back in Erbil, I made my way back to the Merci Hotel (same price but a smaller room without Karwan's help) and then easily to the airport the next morning. I arrived at the airport about 2.5 hours before my flight and took only about half an hour to get through the car search, first terminal and then check-in/customs.

Hope some of this has been helpful to someone. I had a great time visiting Kurdistan and would recommend visiting. The people are some of the most friendly that I've met which is amazing given all the unfortunate things that have happened in their corner of the world. Its also a very authentic travel experience, quite different from most places where tourists are hassled or ripped off.

My biggest recommendation is that unless you're on a strict budget, hiring a guide/driver to see places in between the bigger cities is definitely worth it. While you could probably survive on USD30-50 per day if you took shared taxi's between cities, mostly walked otherwise and ate street food, there is a lot that you'd miss by doing this. The drives from Amedi to Soran and Soran to Slemani were major highlights for me and are not routes where shared taxi's go. Hopefully one day I'll get to go back and see some more of the country (including getting up and down some of the great mountains near the Iraq, Iran and Turkey borders).