

American in Kurdistan - short trip report
John Shipala
Lonely Planet Iraq, Thorn Tree Forum

Hi All,

Just returned from a nice three day trip to Kurdistan. Flew into Erbil via Dubai and Fly Dubai which was fine even if weather on both ends made us about an hour and a half late. Clearing customs and getting my baggage was all pretty easy and once I came out of the (really nice and new) airport, you hop on the shuttle bus and are taken to the arrivals area to grab a taxi, get picked up, etc... As far as taxis go, I know the ones which are waiting for you in advance of the shuttle bus are more expensive, but as I didn't take one, I can't say how much...

Anyway, hopped in a taxi and it was \$15 (USD or Dinars are fine) to the Merci Hotel in the south of the city. From a functionality and cost pov, the Merci was great. \$30 a night arranged through Karwan (more on him in a second) and while the single room was on the small side, it was clean, comfortable, had good wifi, a ton of tv channels and plenty of hot water. If you're looking for a nice, inexpensive room, I highly recommend them (and Karwan is able to get you a better rate than booking.com).

Spent the pm in Erbil at the market, citadel, a couple of parks, etc..., and it was a really cool experience. The tourist infrastructure isn't very developed in Erbil but I was glad I spent the time there I did (also went to the Family Mall on the back end of the trip).

Next day I headed out of the city to Lalish (spiritual center of the Yazidis) which was really cool and then on to Dohuk which was a surprisingly nice and cosmopolitan city after a stop at the Chaldean Catholic monastery of Saint Hormizd. After Dohuk, we headed out to see the old Roman bridge in Zakho which was also a really nice city and then back to Erbil with a few smaller stops on the way. Getting out via the airport was also very easy. Lots of checkpoints, but the Kurds know what they're doing and everything is really seamless/easy...

As far as safety goes, it was a total non-issue. There are quite a few checkpoints when you get out of the city, but those were all very easy exercises where as soon as they heard I was American (can imagine the same thing applies to anyone with an EU or friendly nation passport - they don't get many tourists there!), it was pretty much a friendly wave through. Again, a total non issue both in and outside of Erbil.

As I mentioned earlier, I had arranged my trip through Karwan Wahed of Kurdistantours.net, and, in keeping with other reviews, he was awesome. In addition to being a great, laid back/go with the flow guy, Karwan's a very safe driver (in a part of the world which is "adventurous" from a driving pov) who's really plugged into what's going on with a ton of great connections. In addition, he's very knowledgeable about the region's unique history with an excellent command of English to boot (this is a rarity in Kurdistan). When it comes to hotel bookings, driving, playing tour guide and arranging for all things in Kurdistan, I'd recommend him in a heartbeat.

In closing, of the +85 countries I've been to, Kurdistan/Iraq is right up there in terms of a very authentic, road less travel destination. Is a really interesting and unique (and safe) place and one I'm very glad to have had the experience of visiting when I did. Definitely check it out if you can.