

Iraqi Kurdistan Trip Report  
Neil Barret  
Lonely Planet Iraq, Thorn Tree Forum

Hi,

I've been a long-term lurker on these forums and benefitted from the likes of FluffyBunny posting scarce information about this region so thought I should contribute.

I flew to Erbil on 13 May, transiting through Istanbul. I was nervous as I fit the profile of a potential jihadist - young, single, male, dark-complexioned, from an EU nation and mysteriously travelling to Iraq for 'tourism'. But the airport security people didn't ask me a single question. I was amazed and pleasantly surprised. I was stamped right in!

Also, I got a 30-day tourist visa. My passport is Irish but all the info online says to expect a 15-day visa on arrival for US and EU citizens. Maybe they've changed the policy. My return flight was booked exactly 15 days after arrival so it's not that he was trying to cater for a return flight booked more than 15 days after arrival.

The major cities here (Erbil/Hawler, Sulaymaniyah/Slemani and Duhok) are safer than most Western cities. City centre parks are safe to wander in the darkness of night and petty crime and assaults are practically unheard of. Kurdish people are very open and welcoming and it won't be long before you make friends, if you are open to it. Just try not to let them pay for everything - to me that is taking advantage of their great hospitality. The general standard of English is poor to very poor, but you can usually find a speaker somewhere to help you out.

The road to Slemani from Erbil passes through Kirkuk, a large city recently retaken from ISIS by the Peshmerga (Kurdish Army). Kirkuk is still very dangerous but the road only passes through its outskirts and the shared taxis will not stop in the city, so you don't need to worry too much. My shared taxi from Erbil to Sulay stopped in a small village 10km beyond Kirkuk and I got stared at with hostility by two men with Islamic-style beards (which are very unusual in Kurdistan for both Kurds and Arabs and mark out highly conservative, religious people), so that was a pretty uncomfortable experience. On the same day I passed through Kirkuk, some ISIS suspects were arrested in the city and were found to possess 30 mortars. Moral of the story is that driving through is fine but don't stop in Kirkuk and try not to let the driver stop in the little village 10-20 km beyond it.

Erbil Citadel is very impressive and worth a visit, as is the main city square, fountains and bazaar that lie below it. There are two nice public parks in Erbil, Abdulrahman Park (which is absolute enormous) and another with cable cars and a chained hot air balloon that rises 120 metres into the air. Both are nice places to absorb the beautiful and happy family atmosphere into the late hours, where little kids run around playing and dating couples meet discreetly. In general there is not a huge amount to do in Erbil - Ainkawa is the more liberal Christian district and is nice to walk around and look at the churches etc. I went to T-Bar in Erbil (one of the most recommended bars online), and while I had a good night it was very male-dominated with 95% of the girls present prostitutes. Iskan is a really nice alcohol and woman-free nightlife street in Erbil. Men watch sport, drink tea, chat and smoke shisha up to 4am or later 7 nights a week. If you go with a Kurdish friend you've made, you're sure to be introduced to a host of his friends.

For the front seat to Suly from Erbil the shared taxi costs 20,000 ID, 15,000 ID for back seat. Shared taxis go regularly, and the journey is around 3 hours, maybe slightly less if you get a suicidally fast driver as I did on the way there. The highlight of Suly is Amna Suraka, the museum remembering Saddam's Al-Anfal campaign against the Kurds. The nearby Azadi Park is also a nice place to visit as is the ancient history museum. But just walking the streets, you will see a prettier, greener, cooler, more relaxed, more liberal city than Erbil.

I was going to take a shared taxi to Halabja and back to visit the memorial to the victim's of Saddam's chemical gas attack of 1988. This would have cost 15,000 ID each way, and would have involved waiting around for a shared taxi back and difficulty getting around once in Halabja. Instead I hired my own private taxi for a negotiated price of 50,000 ID - he would drive the two hours to Halabja, bring me to the monument and also the cemetery, and give me a brief tour of the town, before driving me back to Suly for this very good price. He tried to pay for our lunch but I absolutely didn't let him...remember, you have to fight them to pay at times, or you're taking advantage.

I hired a driver for the less accessible parts of the region, where finding shared taxis would be virtually impossible (and there is no public transport). Iraqi Kurdistan is small and so most things outside of Suly and Erbil can be seen in a couple of days if you hire a driver. In two days we saw Duhok, Lalish, Khanis, Alqosh, Aqrah, Amadiya, Rawanduz Gorge and Gali Ali Bek waterfall, and it didn't feel rushed. Others on here have recommended Karwan Wahed and I hired him based on these recommendations. I don't hesitate to endorse these recommendations - he speaks very good English and has a calm and gentle temperament that put me at ease. He is good-humoured and pleasant to be around and is knowledgeable on all of the main sights in Kurdistan, having been doing tour guiding for several years. His price is reasonable and you can find him at [kurdistantours.net](http://kurdistantours.net). The highlight of this was definitely Lalish, there really is a feeling of peace, spirituality and holiness in this amazing place (and I am not a hippie or religious type!).

I stayed in Marjan Plaza Hotel in Erbil for \$35 per night. It was fairly centrally located and perfectly pleasant but the internet speed was very slow. So I moved to Quaint Hotel in Ainkawa, a nice hotel that had single rooms reduced from \$80 (as it says in their hotel lobby) to \$50 during my stay. Internet speed much better and very nice staff. A lot of hotels can be negotiated down a bit due to a decline in business from the drop in oil price and reduction in the number of expat workers.