KURDISTAN: GETTING OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Actually, it's quite easy to do, getting off the beaten path.

The article below from an archaeology magazine talks of many places to visit that illustrate Kurdistan's rich cultural heritage.

Some sites are among the oldest in the world - Shanidar Cave, Erbil Citadel, Dwin Castle, the Jerwan aqueduct, Gaugamela, Lalesh, Mount Maqlub, Al-Qush, and Koya.

Other significant cultural sites mentioned are more recent - Mullah Mustafa Memorial in Barzan, the Halabja Museum-Memorial, and the Red House Prison in Slemani.

From Erbil, for example, an all-day excursion could easily cover Mar Matti Monastery, Gaugamela, Jerwan, Khinnis, and Lalesh. Shanidar Cave and Barzan on another day, returning via Pires Mountain and Gali Zanta. Another day for Halabja (and Tawela) and Slemani, returning via the Jafarati Valley or via Chemi Rezan and Zarzi. Another day to Al-Qush, which is closer to Duhok, and the Halamata Assyrian rock sculptures on Zowaa Mountain above Duhok City. Koya is a half-day trip, and so is Dwin Castle.

Four full days and two half days. Only.

Mar Matti (St. Matthew) Monastery could be another nice half day trip, only an hour and a half from Erbil. Or take a longer return via the picturesque old city of Akre (Aqra). Then to the new bridge over the Big Zab River and onward on a cruising highway almost to Shaqlawa.

By “ClarrySF@aol.com”

Excerpt: “The number of excavation, conservation, and restoration projects here shows that the KRG is enthusiastic about its history, and welcomes those who are passionate about their research. Moreover, the warm and generous welcome extended to travellers by every Kurdish citizen should encourage the international community to celebrate the re-emergence of Kurdistan onto the world stage, as well as demonstrating how rewarding it is to visit a region with such a significant past and such an exciting future.”

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Off the beaten track in Iraqi Kurdistan

For millennia, empires have clashed in the breathtaking landscape of Mesopotamia, leaving in their wake traces of once-great civilisations. Conflict flared again in recent times, and the region was closed to the outside world. Now, as peace returns, archaeologist Rebecca Bradshaw has taken a band of travellers to this remarkable land that lies beyond the usual tourist route.
One of the extant towers of Dwin Castle, in the mountains north of Erbil in Kurdistan.

After several moments of reverent silence, we raised our heads, filed past the TV cameras, thanked our host, and made our way back to the bus. I was visiting the grave of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the man hailed as the father of modern Iraqi Kurdistan, with a group of British tourists. Like other Western visitors, our presence aroused intense interest: as soon as we had arrived at the site in the rural Barzan region of Kurdistan, the site guard had called in the local television network to record our visit. Was this flattery or a thinly veiled attempt at pro-Kurdish propaganda?

Neither, I think. Until recently, the only visitors to Kurdistan, the mountainous region in north-east Iraq, have been Iraqi, Iranian, and Turkish holidaymakers, who drive up into the cool mountains to escape the oppressive heat of the summer months. A few Western journalists (including my father) came in the late 1980s and 1990s to expose the horror of Saddam Hussein’s genocidal campaign against the Kurds, and certainly some businessmen weathered the storm in order to take advantage of the emerging oil industry. So the presence of holidaying Westerners in a region previously plagued by ethno-religious conflict is understandably worth advertising, and serves to demonstrate how safe and accessible Kurdistan is for those curious enough to take the plunge. Those who do will certainly be rewarded: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is setting up activity centres for tourists, and independent enterprises are flourishing. You can now take a zipline down the side of a mountain into a cavernous gorge at the Pank Resort at Rwanduz; or ski and
snowboard in the Zagros Mountains; while for fearless adrenaline junkies, there is paragliding in Mosul.

**Into the past**

To get the best from Kurdistan, however, you only need to do two things: spend time talking, dining, and dancing with the local people; and explore the many cultural and historical sites. This is precisely what we set out to do in April 2013. I was taking a group of British travellers on a pioneering nine-day tour of Kurdistan, an area which roughly corresponds with the territories of ancient Assyria. With Iraq proper, this geographical space makes up the region known as Mesopotamia and contains some of the most significant archaeological sites in the Near East. These sites represent thousands of years of human history, from the prehistoric human remains found in Shanidar Cave to the modern settlements of Kurdish refugees who fled from Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist militias. Many sites are ‘multi-period’, and preserve the material remains of different ethnic and religious civilisations.

The most dramatic example is the monumental citadel in Erbil: at 32m (105ft) high, it preserves the perfectly stratified remains of over 6,000 years of history, an incredible sequence of human occupation. Ceramic evidence indicates that a settlement existed here at least since the Ubaid period (c.5500-4000 BC), and later written evidence reveals that Erbil became famous as Arba Ilu, the City of Four Gods, during the Assyrian period (c.1365-609 BC). Certainly the Great King Ashurbanipal (r.668-627 BC) made Erbil one of his capital cities, and transformed it into a centre of his empire. Erbil was also a significant city during the reign of the Persian Achaemenid dynasty (c.550-330 BC), and later became the capital of the Parthian kingdom of Adiabene (c.247 BC-AD 224).

Ottoman houses atop Erbil citadel, seen from the south, with the fountains of Shar Park in the foreground.

Today, the citadel’s urban fabric is characterised by traditional Ottoman courtyard houses, many of which retain their original timber joists and highly decorated walls and ceilings. Of these, the most spectacular are the multi-storey perimeter houses, which form a solid wall
around the edge of the citadel mound. The Ottomans built a Grand Gate at the south of the citadel. It was demolished in the 1960s and replaced by a modern gate, in Neo-Assyrian style, which was known as the ‘Saddam Gate’. This gate was knocked down in May 2013, and will be replaced by another that has been designed to match the otherwise homogeneous Ottoman-style architecture of the city centre.

Alongside restoration projects such as this, the first excavations of Erbil citadel were launched this year by a small English–Kurdish team overseen by Dr John MacGinnis, who deciphered a previously unknown ancient language preserved in the ruins of another Assyrian city known as Ziyaret Tepe (CWA 50). My own work in Iraqi Kurdistan is part of this project, and I was lucky enough to investigate the Ottoman-era foundations below the ‘Saddam Gate’, before its demolition in 2013.

That a site as significant as Erbil citadel has not been excavated until now illustrates the scarcity of information about archaeology in Kurdistan. For those with an interest in ancient Assyria, for example, the monumental ruins of Nineveh, Khorsabad, and Nimrud are largely off-limits to archaeologists as they lie too close to the contested oil-rich city of Mosul, which is subject to extreme and routine violence. The KRG has more than 3,000 heritage sites within its borders, and 98% have not been examined at all. Reliable information about archaeological sites is often non-existent, hard to find, out of date, or in need of fresh verification.

Unknown cemetery next to Dwin Castle

Dwin Castle, situated on top of a hill in the mountains north of Erbil, is a prime example: three dilapidated lookout towers, parts of the perimeter wall, several door jambs, and what seems to be an original floor level are all that is visible to the naked eye. Archaeological survey and excavation would clarify the state of preservation, and certainly local accounts of the castle’s history suggest this would be a prudent avenue of research. The castle is said to have belonged to Jalaladdin, grandfather of the formidable Saladin, who gathered a Muslim army to free the ancient Levant from the European Crusaders, most successfully at the Battle of Hattin in AD 1187.
While excavation would no doubt enhance our knowledge and appreciation of the site, there are other reasons to visit Dwin. Next to the castle is a cemetery whose origins and development are completely unknown. The light-coloured stone slabs that mark the graves are decorated with carved reliefs, depicting the sun, swords, and geometric shapes. For some visitors, this decoration places the graves firmly within the Zoroastrian tradition – the sun and swords were typical motifs of Zoroastrian religion. Others disagree, arguing that Zoroastrian funerary rites did not involve interment. Furthermore, the drive from Erbil into the mountains is spectacular, particularly in spring. Bright red poppies and glowing yellow flowers cover the green foothills, and from its high vantage-point Dwin Castle commands breathtaking 360° views.

Cuneiform inscriptions on the aqueduct at Jerwan.

One of the more famous archaeological sites in Kurdistan is the field on which Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Achaemenid King Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC. In spring, the field is surrounded by snow-capped mountains, and in these cool temperatures children run through the grass and play on their way home from school. Children also scamper over the monumental remains of the canal built by Neo-Assyrian King Sennacherib (r.704-681 BC) at Jerwan. The canal was designed to transport water from the Gomel Gorge to the royal city of Nineveh, and the formulaic cuneiform inscriptions on the canal confirm its role as part of a complex water-supply network that irrigated the rural landscape and delivered water to major cities. Like Dwin Castle, Jerwan is a major site that has not been adequately studied: the last archaeological report was by James Henry Breasted in 1935.
Celebrating religious plurality
Northern Kurdistan is also home to many Christian communities, and the heartland of the historically obscure ‘Church of the East’. Many of Christ’s Apostles are said to have preached in this area. One of the many monasteries and churches perched in the mountains is the restored Monastery of St Matthew, founded by the eponymous Syriac priest in AD 363. The monastery is carved into the rock of Mount Maqloub. It is known as the ‘Mountain of the Thousands’ after so many monks fled here between the 4th and 8th centuries BC, escaping persecution at home.

Rabban (‘Monk’) Hormizd Monastery, an important monastery of the Chaldean Church built in AD 700, housed a library of ancient manuscripts written on gazelle skins. Rock tunnels and caves stretch back into the mountains from the back of the monastery and served as places of refuge. Despite religious persecution, these sites also experienced periods of prosperity before being abandoned in the wake of the Muslim army of Saladin in the 12th century, and the Mongols in the next.

Given the significance of Christian history in the region, it is interesting that processes of ‘Islamisation’ have fostered the popular belief that Iraq and Kurdistan have always been Muslim. On the contrary, religious pluralism has long characterised the area: Al-Qush was the home of the prophet Nahum, referred to in the Hebrew Bible as ‘Nahum the Elkoshite’, who predicted the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC. His tomb lies in the abandoned synagogue next to the much-restored Mar Gorgis Monastery. Moreover, the Bible states that the prophet Daniel lived in Kirkuk and became governor of Babylon during the reign of
Nebuchadnezzar (c.604-562 BC), and, near Nineveh, there is a shrine to Jonah, who spent much of his life in Assyria. The Medieval Jewish *caravanserai* in Koya is another reminder that Jewish communities thrived here, continuing to do so until the late 20th century. Northern Kurdistan is also home to the site of Lalesh, the principal holy shrine for Yezidis, who are said to be descendants of the Zoroastrians. In fact, Yezidism is a complex syncretic religion that has taken elements not only from Zoroastrianism but from Judaism, Christianity, and Islamic Sufi ritual. The shrine at Lalesh houses the tomb of Sheikh Adī, the founder of modern Yezidism who died in AD 1162. Once barefoot, you can enter the shrine and progress through a series of increasingly low-roofed rooms filled with amphorae-like vessels containing holy oil. Inside these rooms, thousands of knotted strips of brightly coloured cloth are tied around the central pillars, and visitors are encouraged by the locals to untie one of these knots, make a wish, and then re-tie a knot in the same piece of fabric.

Lalesh is the main holy site for Yezidis, believed to be descendants of the Zoroastrians.

Diverse sites such as these reflect the religious freedom and pluralism that Kurdistan enjoyed in the past and continues to enjoy today. Even small Kurdish towns are made up of an eclectic mix of followers of the Chaldean Catholic and Assyrian Orthodox Church, as well as Sunni, Shia, Yezidi, Turkmen, and Kakayee communities.

It is impossible to leave Kurdistan with a holistic impression of the region unless you encounter some of the key sites that mark important events in recent Kurdish history. Many
preserve some remnant of the suffering endured by the Kurds under Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime, but also demonstrate Kurdistan’s ongoing emergence as a semi-autonomous region. The Mullah Mustafa Memorial (mentioned above) is one such site. Halabja, a small Kurdish town on the Iranian border, is another: it is infamous for the 5,000 Kurds killed by the chemical weapon attack orchestrated by Saddam Hussein’s cousin, ‘Chemical Ali’, in March 1988. A vast museum-memorial in the town centre exhibits videos and pictures of the immediate aftermath of the attack, and multiple funerary monuments mark the mass graves into which thousands of Kurds were placed. Similarly, in the liberal and artistic city of Sulimaniyah, Saddam Hussein’s Red House Prison has been preserved as a reminder of all those tortured by the regime, and who can now find safety in the lively cities of their new nation.

No longer an ‘invisible nation’

Though Kurdistan is called a semi-autonomous region, politically it is still tied to Iraq proper, and much domestic and foreign policy (including permits for archaeological investigation) has to be approved by authorities in Baghdad. Despite this, the KRG is actively encouraging archaeological and historical activity. Several distinguished teams are working in the region: work is due to start again at Shanidar Cave, 50 years after the first Neanderthal remains were found in the region. The cave seems to have been a regional home for hunter-gatherers during the Middle Palaeolithic period, and then again in the Neolithic period. The burials of four near-complete Neanderthal adults revealed evidence of funerary ceremonies, and, remarkably, their skeletal remains showed signs of healing, suggesting that injured or deformed individuals were cared for by other members of the community. The number of excavation, conservation, and restoration projects here shows that the KRG is enthusiastic about its history, and welcomes those who are passionate about their research. Moreover, the warm and generous welcome extended to travellers by every Kurdish citizen should encourage the international community to celebrate the re-emergence of Kurdistan onto the world stage, as well as demonstrating how rewarding it is to visit a region with such a significant past and such an exciting future.