

Iraq

Long ago in the fertile valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the great civilisations of the age were born. Modern Iraq was ancient Mesopotamia, from the Greek meaning 'between two rivers', and it was here that human beings first began to cultivate their land, where writing was invented and where the Assyrians, Sumerians and Babylonians all made Iraq the centre of the ancient world.

With the arrival of Islam, Iraq again took centre stage. Islam's most enduring schism – between Sunnis and Shiites – was first played out on Iraqi soil. Baghdad also became one of Islam's greatest capitals, home to the Abbasid caliphs whose reign has become a byword for Islam's golden age of learning and sophistication.

The country remains rich with the resonance of a glorious history, but recent history has dealt less kindly with Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein, widespread political repression and conflicts with Iran, Kuwait and the West earned Iraq international infamy and also drew the attention of international human-rights organisations and Western armies in equal measure. Indeed in recent years, few countries have experienced such external interference as Iraq has, culminating in the 2003 American-led invasion of the country.

Iraq has now dominated international news headlines for more than a decade for all the wrong reasons, just as Vietnam did three decades before it. The country's future is uncertain, with Iraqis struggling to eke out an existence and build the institutions of a democratic Iraq against the backdrop of political and religious tension, and amid the numbing constancy of terrorist attacks.

Iraq is now one of the most dangerous countries on earth, but few countries can boast such a rich history. When the country gets back on its feet, it will be one of the great travel destinations of the Middle East.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 434,924 sq km
- **Capital** Baghdad
- **Country code** ☎ 964
- **Languages** Arabic, Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani)
- **Money** Iraqi dinar (ID); US\$1 = ID1469.20; €1 = ID1734.83
- **Official name** Republic of Iraq
- **Population** 26.07 million



WARNING

At the time of writing, Iraq was one of the most dangerous places on earth, with Westerners the targets for kidnapping and suicide attacks and at risk from the generalised violence sweeping the country. Until the situation stabilises, Iraq must be considered off-limits to tourists. For this reason, we did not visit the country for the purposes of updating this chapter.

CLIMATE

Iraq is fiercely hot in summer (May to September); the average summer temperature in Baghdad is 34°C and in Basra 37°C, but daytime temperatures can soar well above that. The north is slightly cooler, while in the south there's debilitatingly high humidity. Winter can be cold and the mountains can become covered with snow. The average winter temperature in Baghdad is 11°C and in Basra 14°C.

HISTORY Ancient Mesopotamia

Iraq's story begins with the Sumerians who flourished in the rich agricultural lands surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers from around 4000 BC. In 1750 BC Hammurabi seized power and went on to dominate the annals of the Babylonian empire. Despite constant attacks from the Hittites and other neighbouring powers, Babylon would dominate the region until the 12th century BC, after which it went into a slow decline. It survived in a much reduced state, and Babylon remained an important cultural centre, but it was not until 626 BC that the New Babylonian Empire regained the extent of power that the Babylonians had enjoyed under Hammurabi.

By the 7th century BC, Assyrian civilisation had reached its high point under Ashurbanipal, whose capital at Nineveh was one of the great capitals of the world with cuneiform libraries, luxurious royal courts and magnificent bas-reliefs that survive to this day. And yet, it was the extravagance of Ashurbanipal's court and the debilitating military expenditure needed to keep his disparate empire together that sowed the seeds of Assyrian decline. Nineveh fell to the Medes in 612 BC. In 539 BC Babylon finally fell to

the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great into whose empire Nineveh was also absorbed.

For the next 1200 years, Mesopotamia would be ruled by a string of empires, among them the Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian and Sassanid.

For more information on Iraq's early history, see p37.

Islamic Iraq

In AD 637 the Arab armies of Islam swept north from the Arabian Peninsula and occupied Iraq. Their most important centres became Al-Kufa, Baghdad and Mosul.

In 749 the first Abbasid caliph was proclaimed at Al-Kufa and the Abbasids would go on to make Iraq their own. The founding of Baghdad by Al-Mansur saw the city become, by some accounts, the greatest city in the world (see p41). In 1258 Hulagu – a grandson of the feared Mongol ruler Genghis Khan – laid waste to Baghdad, and killed the last Abbasid caliph. Political power in the Muslim world shifted elsewhere.

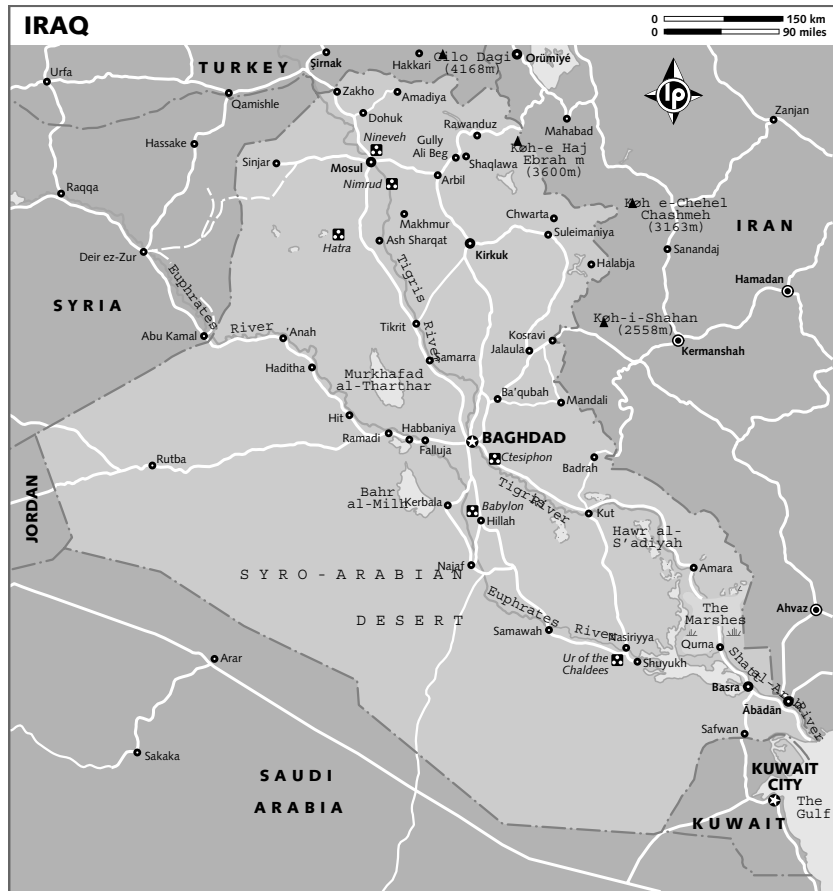
By 1638 Iraq had come under Ottoman rule. After a period of relative autonomy, the Ottomans centralised their rule in the 19th century, whereafter Iraqi resentment against foreign occupation crystallised even as the Ottomans undertook a massive programme of modernisation. The Ottomans held on until 1920, when the arrival of the British saw Iraq come under the power of yet another occupying force, which was at first welcomed then resented by Iraqis.

Independent Iraq

Iraq became independent in 1932 and the period that followed was distinguished by a succession of coups, counter-coups and by the discovery of massive reserves of oil. On 14 July 1958 the monarchy was overthrown in a military coup and Iraq became a republic.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War caused Iraq to turn to the Soviet Union for support, accusing the USA and UK of supporting Israel. On 17 July 1968 a bloodless coup by the Ba'ath Party put General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr in power.

In 1979 Saddam Hussein replaced Al-Bakr as president, the revolution in Iran took place and relations between the two countries sank to an all-time low. Saddam, increasingly concerned about the threat of a Shiite revolution in his own country, declared



that Iraq wanted a return to exclusive control over the Shatt al-Arab River. Full-scale war broke out on 22 September 1980, with Iraqi forces entering Iran along a 500km front. The eight years of war that followed were characterised by human-wave infantry advances and the deliberate targeting of urban residential areas by enemy artillery, all for little territorial gain. A million lives were lost and the economic cost to Iraq alone is estimated at more than US\$100 billion.

In March 1988, just prior to the war's end, the Iraqi government responded to the occupation of northern Iraq by Kurdish guerrillas by killing thousands of civilians, most infamously in Halabja where chemical weapons were used to devastating effect.

Confrontation with the West

Saddam Hussein soon turned his attention to Kuwait. In July 1990 Saddam accused the Kuwaitis (with some justification) of waging 'economic warfare' against Iraq by attempting to artificially hold down the price of oil, and of stealing oil from the Iraqi portion of an oilfield straddling the border. On 2 August 1990 Iraq sent its troops and tanks into Kuwait and six days later annexed Kuwait as Iraq's 19th province. It was a costly miscalculation.

An international coalition – including a number of Arab states – gathered on Iraq's borders before launching a five-week bombing campaign followed by a ground offensive that drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

PROSPECTS FOR AN IRAQI PHOENIX *Roshan Muhammed Salih*

When Iraqis are asked about a possible democratic future they often respond with a sceptical sigh – by and large, their main preoccupations are getting regular electricity and water supplies rather than casting votes.

To ordinary Iraqis the prospect of a peaceful and democratic future remains little more than a pipe dream, the chatter of elites and powerful politicians, the minority who have so far benefited from foreign occupation. The stark reality is that there is a major insurgency in the country that affects the lives of everyone and is hindering the political process.

The failure to incorporate the country's once all-powerful Sunnis into the new Iraq and the occupation itself are fuelling this insurgency. It's reasonable to assume that foreign Islamic fighters, Saddam loyalists and Arab nationalists will always oppose what they consider an occupation. It therefore seems that more bombings and chaos are likely as long as foreign forces remain and the political process is sponsored by outsiders.

Moreover, the fact that the lives of ordinary people have not improved post-invasion means that those who were willing to give the political process a chance are increasingly losing patience with the situation.

Yet in the face of all the death and destruction most Iraqis remain optimistic and show a resilience that is nothing short of heroic.

Foreigners are always surprised to observe how calm Iraqis appear in the face of constant danger, and how they can laugh at their harrowing plight. When a bomb rips through a Baghdad night, residents hardly bother to rouse themselves from their slumber any more. The next morning, they laugh and joke with foreign journalists who were paralysed with fright.

The country's cafés are full of storytellers who crack vicious jokes about the alleged crimes and treacheries of certain religious and ethnic groups, before reminding listeners that 'we must learn to get along, we are all Iraqis'.

Perhaps repression, war and upheaval have become such a way of life that if they didn't laugh they'd be crying. It sometimes seems that a strong sense of religious solidarity and national identity, as well as a good dose of humour, are all that is preventing a full-scale civil war from breaking out.

But despite the country's current dire predicament there are some reasons for hope. Notwithstanding all the scepticism about peace and democracy, there is no doubt that Iraqis would like more of a say in the running of their country, and many see the current political process as the only way of achieving that – a fact evidenced by the 58% turnout in national elections in January 2005.

And the new Iraq is not without its winners. The Shiite leadership has astutely manoeuvred itself into political pole position and the Kurds are consolidating their gains. If US plans come to fruition the future Iraq will probably be run by people who represent the majority of the population.

In addition, and contrary to many Iraqis' expectations, the US has not bailed out after achieving its short-term goals and continues to pump in large amounts of money for the country's reconstruction.

The success of the new Iraq is central to the stability of the whole region.

Turkey is rather wary of the ambitions of the Iraqi Kurds. They fear that if the Iraqi Kurds achieve independence, this result will embolden restive elements within Turkey's own Kurdish population.

Iran, meanwhile, is keen that a Shiite-led government, with whom it may wield political clout, and by whom it would not be threatened, should control Iraq.

Nevertheless, the Iraqi conundrum remains stark: if US-led forces stay for the long term the country is doomed to a prolonged guerrilla war that will derail the political process and destroy any hope of a peaceful and democratic future for Iraq; and if the US-led forces leave there is a real prospect of civil war that could split the nation into three and draw Iraq's neighbours into a regional conflict.

Controversy has persisted over the number of civilian and military deaths in Iraq and Kuwait: estimates range from 10,000 to more than 100,000.

As part of the ceasefire signed on 28 February 1991, Iraq agreed to comply fully with all UN Security Council resolutions, including full disclosure, inspection and destruction of the country's biological, chemical, ballistic and nuclear weapons stockpiles and development programmes.

Kuwait was free but the moral support offered by US president George Bush in calling on the Iraqi people to rise up was not backed by Allied military support and rebellions in the Shiite south and Kurdish north were brutally put down.

UN sanctions caused widespread malnutrition and medical care became inadequate throughout Iraq. Despite the much-abused UN oil-for-food programme, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) over half a million children died as a direct result

of sanctions that did little – if anything – to undermine Saddam and his regime.

In early August 1998, weapons inspectors were denied access to a number of sites and the Iraqi government announced the suspension of all cooperation until the sanctions were removed. The USA, with British backing, responded with four days of air strikes in December.

On 20 March 2003, despite a lack of UN authority, the US launched missile attacks on Iraqi targets, followed soon after by a ground offensive that would sweep American forces into Baghdad, Saddam Hussein from power and most members of his regime into hiding. Tikrit, Saddam's home town, was one of the last cities to fall.

In July 2003 Saddam's feared sons, Uday and Qusay, were killed in a shoot-out with US troops. In December of the same year, a bedraggled Saddam Hussein was found cowering in a hole in Tikrit. Few Iraqis mourned his or his family's demise.

OCCUPIED OR LIBERATED? IRAQ POST-SADDAM *Roshan Muhammed Salih*

Iraq is not a place for the faint-hearted. For foreigners danger and risk are constant companions and for Iraqis hardship has become second nature.

I first travelled to the country in March 2004 to report on the anniversary of the US-led invasion. When I arrived in my Baghdad hotel there was debris everywhere – the result of a massive explosion the previous night that killed 49 people nearby. This remains the reality of occupied Baghdad and the area that surrounds it, often referred to as the Sunni Triangle.

Iraq's capital has become a living hell for its residents – the worst place in the world to live, according to a 2005 survey by Mercer Human Resource Consulting. It is a place where a journey of around a kilometre can take over an hour because of traffic jams caused by heavily fortified US bases and countless checkpoints.

More seriously, Baghdad has become a breeding ground for criminals, gun-runners and drug addicts – anything from an AK-47 to hard drugs is available in broad daylight for knockdown prices. Gangs terrorise the city's residents in a spree of robberies, and newspapers are full of stories about children being abducted at gunpoint outside schools.

Most people in central and southern Iraq are very critical of the US-led foreign presence. This criticism ranges from outright hostility and demands for immediate withdrawal to complaints about how they have handled the post-Saddam era. Irregular water and electricity supplies are major sore points.

Tempers seem to particularly fray during the stiflingly hot summers, when a lack of essentials can be deadly. Despite the national obsession with politics, it is the difficulties of everyday life that have turned many Iraqis against foreign occupation.

As a result of the continuing insurgency, occupier and occupied have little normal interaction. American soldiers barricade themselves behind the high walls and barbed wire of their bases. They are mostly young, have little understanding of Muslim and Arab culture, and can't understand why they are getting shot at all the time.

On the other hand, many Iraqis seem to acknowledge that foreign forces must stay until the appalling security situation is under control. Most people also seem grateful that Saddam Hussein was toppled and that they now have the right to express themselves relatively freely.

Iraq Today

Euphoria on the streets of Iraq over Saddam's demise quickly turned to anger at the inept early days of the US administration. priceless antiquities were looted, the Iraqi army was disbanded leaving massive bands of armed and suddenly unemployed men on the streets, and the process of de-Ba'athification stripped the country of many capable administrators who had joined the Ba'ath Party only under threat of death. Up to 100,000 Iraqi civilians (and more than 1500 US troops) are believed to have died as a direct result of the invasion and its aftermath.

Iraq descended into chaos, the country transformed from one of the most repressive states in the world to its most dangerous, as insurgents – primarily Iraqi Sunnis and foreign fighters – sustained a campaign of suicide bombings, high-profile kidnappings and executions of hostages, and missile attacks on US and civilian targets. The US failed to find the alleged stockpiles of weapons

of mass destruction led many to question the real motives behind the US invasion. When photographic evidence that US soldiers abused and tortured Iraqi prisoners in Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison emerged in May 2004, it was eerily reminiscent of the Saddam era and much of the remnant support for the US occupation evaporated.

For all the devastation, there are small signs of hope. On 30 January 2005 eight million Iraqis cast their vote in elections for a Transitional National Assembly. The government that finally emerged from the elections after months of negotiations granted the most powerful position of prime minister to the Shiites and the post of president to the Kurds. Although the position of speaker of the parliament went to the Sunnis, the majority of Iraq's Sunnis continue to believe that they have been sidelined in the new Iraq. This was particularly apparent in August 2005 when the Shiites and Kurds decided to press ahead with a draft Iraqi constitution

A plethora of newspapers, and TV and radio stations have appeared since the fall of Saddam, expressing every opinion in the political spectrum – perhaps the freest media in the Middle East. This would have been simply unthinkable under Saddam when owning a satellite dish was a criminal offence.

Most of the new media are low quality and a mouthpiece for interest groups, and some have been controversially shut down by the Americans. But in general Iraqis seem to be revelling in their newly discovered ability to talk freely without the risk of being imprisoned, tortured or worse.

Although Iraq's unstable centre grabs most of the headlines, the situation in the country as a whole is far from black and white.

The Shiite-dominated south has been relatively stable since the US-led invasion. Heavily influenced by the clergy, most people have not fought occupation because Shia leaders have bargained that tacit cooperation with foreign forces is their best means of attaining political power after decades of repression under Saddam.

This is probably the reason why British forces stationed in the south have suffered relatively few casualties, and have established a working relationship with local leaders. Ordinary people, however, remain deeply resentful of and humiliated by foreign occupation. This has occasionally spilled over into outright hostility and confrontation, such as during the bloody battle of Najaf in August 2004 when hundreds were killed and injured.

The Kurdish north of the country, meanwhile, seems like a different world entirely, a haven of relative stability and prosperity where many openly laud American forces as 'liberators'. When I visited the Kurdish town of Arbil in April 2004, my Arab companions said they felt like foreigners in their own country.

Unlike other parts of Iraq, the Kurdish north does not feel the strains of occupation and has not been as affected by insurgent activity. It has effectively enjoyed de facto autonomy under UN protection since 1991 and is set to cement that status in the new Iraq. This attitude and success, however, causes deep resentment in many Iraqis, who accuse the Kurds of collaboration.

Nevertheless, for the moment Kurdistan remains the only undoubted success story the US can boast of. But repeating the formula in the rest of Iraq will be a lot tougher.

despite widespread dissatisfaction and even outright rejection among Sunnis.

Although violence continues to be reported across the country, the guerrilla warfare of the insurgency remains largely restricted to the so-called Sunni Triangle centred around Fallujah, Tikrit and Mosul, and Baghdad where the Iraqi government and the greatest concentration of Coalition troops are based.

THE CULTURE

Population

Iraq's population is one of the most multicultural in the Middle East. Around 75% of the population is Arab, 15% is Kurdish, while there are smaller communities of Persians (3%), Turkomans (2%), Yezidis, Assyrians, Chaldeans and the Jezira Bedouin who live in the highlands of the north. Iraq is also a predominantly urban society with 74% living in urban centres. Population density is 54.9 persons per square kilometre.

RELIGION

The official religion in Iraq is Islam: Muslims make up 97% of the population. Shiites account for more than 60% of the population and Sunnis around 35%. There are also small but historically significant communities of Christians who belong to various sects, including Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syrian and Roman Catholics, Orthodox Armenians and Jacobites. Other religious minorities are the Yezidis, often erroneously called devil worshippers, and the Sabaeans (Mandeans), who are followers of John the Baptist.

ARTS

Iraqi cinema – largely a wasteland under Saddam – made a spectacular debut at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival with Hiner Saleem presenting his critically acclaimed *Kilometre Zero*. Set in Iraq's Kurdish north during Iraq's war with Iran, the film follows the journey of a Kurd and an Arab returning the body of a dead soldier to his family.

Iraqi musicians have been much more prolific. Kazem al-Sahir, the current biggest-selling singer in the Arab world, capped a remarkable career by winning the 2004 BBC World Music Award for best Middle Eastern and North African artist for his song 'Hal Endak Shak' from the album *Bare Footed*. He has been fêted across the region since 1996 when he began his collaborations with the

Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, who once wrote songs for Egyptian diva Umm Kolthum. Other well-known Iraqi musicians include Ilham al-Madfai (renowned for giving traditional Iraqi folk music a contemporary twist) and Nasseer Shamma whose *Le Luth de Baghdad* (released by Institute du Monde Arabe) is sublime.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Iraq's upper plain stretches northwest from Hit and Samarra to the Turkish border between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and is the most fertile region, although high soil salinity reduces the cultivable potential to 12% of arable land. The lower plain stretches from Hit and Samarra southeast to the Gulf and contains the marshes, an area of swamps, lakes and narrow waterways, flanked by high reeds. Iraq's northeast is different again, with towering mountains, while Iraq's deserts lie to the west of the Euphrates, stretching to the borders of Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The Tigris and Euphrates converge near Baghdad, then diverge again, before meeting at Qurna to form the wide Shatt al-Arab River, flowing through Basra into the Gulf.

Environmental Issues

Iraq faces a looming catastrophe in water supplies, primarily because of pollution of its rivers. The draining of the marshes (p263) by Saddam Hussein precipitated the decline of numerous species – particularly wetland bird species – and the indigenous culture of the Marsh Arabs. Turkish dams on the Euphrates River have also threatened Iraq's precarious water supplies. Pollution from oil wells, the ongoing threats to public health from uranium-enriched weapons used by all sides during Iraq's various wars, soil salinity, erosion and the encroaching trend towards desertification are other problems in urgent need of attention.

BAGHDAD بغداد

pop 5.672 million

Baghdad, the one-time city of caliphs, pleasure gardens and vast libraries of scholarship, has fallen on hard times, the repository of a nation's anger against yet another occupation by a foreign power. The old

Baghdad, the very name of which conjures up vivid images of golden domes and shafts of sunlight filtering through exotic bazaars, has all but disappeared and the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars have destroyed much of the modern city. But since the 13th century, Baghdad has been as much an idea as a place bearing any correspondence to its glorious past and the one thing its resilient inhabitants cling to amid the uncertain daily realities of modern Iraq is the hope that the Baghdad of legend will once again rise from the ashes.

HISTORY

Baghdad was founded in AD 762 by Al-Mansur, the second caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, on the western bank of the Tigris River and enclosed within a circular wall. Known as the Round City or *Medinat as-Salaam* (City of Peace), the Baghdad of the caliphs was home to their palace and the main mosque at its centre, and was surrounded by forbidding walls entered by four gates. In AD 800 Baghdad had a population of 500,000.

From the mid-9th century onwards, the Abbasid caliphate became weakened by internal conflict, and civil war between Haroun ar-Rashid's two sons resulted in the partial destruction of the Round City. Total destruction came about in 1258 when the Mongols sacked Baghdad, killed the caliph and up to 800,000 Baghdad residents, and destroyed the irrigation system. In 1534 it became part of the Ottoman Empire and centuries of neglect followed.

Although attempts were made to improve the city in the early years of the 20th century, Baghdad's greatest modern developments occurred when large oil revenues began to flow in after 1973.

ORIENTATION

Baghdad extends along both sides of the Tigris River. The eastern side is known as Rusafah and the western as Karkh. The core of the city is a 3.5km by 2km area in Rusafah, extending from Midan Muadham in the north to Midan Tahrir in the south. Sharia Rashid is the main street of this area and contains the city's financial district, and the copper, textile and gold bazaars.

The controversial and fortress-like Green Zone lies on the west bank of the Tigris,

south of Sharia Port Said. The road from here to the airport has the unenviable distinction of being one of the most dangerous stretches of tarmac in the world.

From the 1950s the city expanded enormously, and planned, middle-class neighbourhoods grew between the city centre and the Army Canal. On the western bank are a number of residential areas, including the relatively affluent Mansour district. The grim Shiite suburbs of Sadr City trail away to the south of Greater Baghdad.

SIGHTS

Museums

One the many tragedies to beset Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 war was the looting and subsequent disappearance of countless priceless archaeological treasures and manuscripts. Worst hit was the **Iraqi Museum** (Sharia Damascus); remember that as impressive as the collection still is, it's a fraction of what was there before. Exhibits included Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian artefacts and pieces from the Abbasid period.

Other worthwhile museums that may or may not still be open include: the **Baghdad Museum** (Sharia Mamoun) with life-sized models depicting traditional Baghdadi life; the **Museum of Pioneer Arts** (Sharia Rashid) with pre-1950s works by Iraqi artists and housed in a wonderful old Baghdadi house; the **Museum of Popular Heritage** (Sharia Haifa), another fine traditional home; and the **Museum of Modern Art** (Midan Nafura).

Mosques

The **Kadhmain Mosque** is the most important in Iraq after those at Kerbala and Najaf. Inside are the shrines of the two imams (religious teachers) Musa al-Kadhim and Mohammed al-Jawad. The very large and elaborate mosque has gold-coated domes and minarets and was built in 1515. Built 40 years ago, the **14th Ramadan Mosque** (Midan Fardous, Sharia Sadoun) has lovely arabesques and glazed wall tiles. Another attractive mosque is the **Ibn Bunnieh Mosque**, in front of Alawi al-Hilla bus station.

The **Marjan Mosque** (Sharia Rashid), on the eastern side of the street, was built in 1357, and in its early days served as the Murjaniyya School. In the early 20th century, most of it was pulled down and rebuilt as a mosque.

Mustansiriyya School

Not far northwest of the Baghdad Museum, Mustansiriyya School was built in the reign of the 36th Abbasid caliph, Mustansir Billah, and was the most highly esteemed university of that time. It was completed in 1232 and in its heyday it was renowned for its extensive library and for its enlightened approach of teaching all four schools of Islamic law, rather than one, which had hitherto been the case. It was one of the few structures to survive the Mongol invasion of 1258 relatively intact and, as such, stands as a landmark example of Abbasid architecture.

Abbasid Palace

Another fine remnant of the city's Abbasid architectural glories, the 13th-century Abbasid Palace stands about 750m northeast of the Baghdad Museum. Overlooking the Tigris, it has a fine arch and its resemblance in style and structure to the Mustansiriyya School has led some scholars to believe that it is the Sharabiyya School mentioned by old Arab historians.

AROUND BAGHDAD

THE ARCH OF CTESIPHON سلمان بك

Little is left of the ancient city of Ctesiphon, 30km southeast of Baghdad and east of the Tigris, but its 3rd-century-BC arch is a remarkable feat of engineering for its time. Constructed by the Parthian Persians, the arch was part of a great banquet hall and is the largest single-span brick arch in the world. It survived the disastrous flooding of the Tigris in 1887, which destroyed much of the rest of the building, although a fine relief façade stands alongside.

SOUTHERN IRAQ

Southern Iraq is the spiritual homeland of the Shiites and the cities of Najaf and Kerbala are like all sacred cities the world over – clamorous, devout and brought alive by pilgrims from across the world. The region is also awash with the legends of the past, from the intriguing southern city of Basra – from where Sinbad the Sailor set out on his epic journeys – to the ancient sites of Baby-

lon and Ur of the Chaldees, which are rich with Biblical and Quranic resonance.

BABYLON

Perhaps the most famous of Iraq's archaeological sites, Babylon, 90km south of Baghdad and 10km north of Hillah, has at once become a byword for the sophistication of ancient Mesopotamia and a symbol of modern Iraq's difficulties. Although a small settlement was first built on the site in 2350 BC, its days of pre-eminence did not begin until the 18th century BC when Hammurabi made it the capital of Babylonia. After centuries of decline, the city's golden age occurred during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–563 BC). With its high walls and magnificent palaces and temples, it was regarded as one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Visiting today, there's little to suggest such an extravagant past to anyone except expert archaeologists, although the trace outlines of Nebuchadnezzar's Summer Palace (sections of which are believed to be all that remain of the Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) have been reconstructed. The replica Ishtar gate, temples and amphitheatre give an idea of the city's outline, although the modern brickwork used to reconstruct the structures leaves little sense of the city's antiquity. For those seeking a small reminder of ancient Babylon, the huge and magnificent lion, eroded by time and the weather, offers an enticing glimpse.

KERBALA

pop 434,457

Kerbala, 108km southwest of Baghdad, is one of Shiite Islam's holiest sites and of great religious significance to all Muslims because of the Battle of Kerbala that took place in AD 680 (p53), whereafter Islam would forever be divided between the Sunni and Shiite sects. Hussein ibn Ali, who has become revered as leader of the Shiites, and his brother Abbas, grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed, were killed in the battle, and their shrines were contained in the two mosques here, thereby making Kerbala one of the greatest pilgrimage centres in the Islamic world. In the centre of town, the mosques have stunning domes of gold, exquisitely tiled archways and a buzzing atmosphere that spreads into the

بابل

كربلا

surrounding streets – testament to the fact that Shiite Muslims (including from Iran) are once again permitted to make the pilgrimage unlike during the rule of Saddam Hussein. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the shrines but, with the permission of an attendant, may be able to walk around the surrounding courtyards.

NAJAF

pop 482,583

Najaf, 160km south of Baghdad, is another sacred city for Shiites and was once the centre of Shiite scholarship, home to philosophers, powerful ayatollahs, Quranic schools and extraordinary libraries. It also has the distinction of being founded by Haroun ar-Rashid in AD 791. In the city centre the mosque containing the tomb of the revered Ali ibn Abi Talib (600–61), cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed and founder of the Shiites, is today the reason why Najaf possesses such a powerful hold over Shiites across the world. Its desecration by Saddam's troops during the 1991 uprising further cemented Najaf as a centre of Shiite opposition to the Saddam regime. There is no higher honour for Shiite Muslims than to be buried in graveyards in either Kerbala or Najaf. The latter especially seems to have graveyards all over the place and it's fascinating, if a little macabre, to wander around them. Many of the graves are small shrines.

NASIRIYYA

pop 400,254

Nasiriyya, 375km southeast of Baghdad on the northern bank of the Euphrates, is an attractive if unexciting riverside town, which once served as a base for travellers wanting to visit Ur of the Chaldees. In its prewar days, it had a good museum with an accessible collection from Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Abbasid times.

AROUND NASIRIYYA

Ur of the Chaldees

The ancient Sumerian city of Ur is one of the most impressive archaeological sites in Iraq. Mentioned in the Bible as being the birthplace of Abraham, its earliest buildings date from 4000 BC, although the earliest settlements here may predate that by 2000 years. For three successive dynasties it was

the capital of Sumeria, although it reached its height during the third and last dynasty (2113–2095 BC).

The city's showpiece is its remarkably well preserved ziggurat, one of the finest still standing anywhere in the world and whose current form owes much to Nebuchadnezzar II who made Babylon such a great city. Also impressive are the expansive royal tombs and Sumerian temples.

The Marshes

The marshes originally covered an area of approximately 10,000 sq km between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, stretching from Basra in the south, Nasiriyya in the west and Kut in the north. Some parts were permanent, and others were temporary marshland, changing with the seasons. The marshes were a world of vast expanses of water and shallow lagoons. Here it is sometimes possible to see *sarifas* (Marsh Arab dwellings) with their ornate latticework entrances. The people row *mashufs* (long, slender canoes) through the high reeds. There is archaeological evidence that life has continued here, almost unchanged, for 6000 years and the marshes are also home to many species of water birds.

Sadly, much of the marshes were drained in the late 1980s after Saddam Hussein claimed that Iranian soldiers were using the marshes as a cover for attacks on Iraqi forces. Most Marsh Arabs, who were immortalised in Wilfred Thesiger's *The Marsh Arabs* (p268), had no option but to flee to refugee camps, mainly in Iran, thereby spelling an end to one of Iraq's most enduring and fascinating cultures. In the post-Saddam era, there are plans to re-establish the marshes, although it's unlikely they will ever revert to their former state.

BASRA

pop 2.016 million

Iraq's second-largest city, 550km southeast of Baghdad and 130km from the Gulf, once went by the romantic epithet of the 'Venice of the East', famed for its canals and strategic location at the headwaters of the Shatt al-Arab River. The modern reality is somewhat less inspiring, as the city bears many scars of war and its once-bustling port (Iraq's most important) has yet to fully revive after the long years of sanctions and

الأهوار

البصرة

war. There are extensive palm groves on the outskirts of the city and most of Iraq's dates are grown in and around Basra. Although the city remains on edge, its occupation by predominantly British troops has yet to attract the violence experienced in Baghdad or elsewhere.

History

Basra was founded by the caliph Omar in AD 637 as a military base but the city rapidly grew into a major Islamic city. It became the focal point of Arab sea trade during the 16th century, when ships left its port for distant lands in the East. Its strategic position has made it the scene of many battles, sometimes between the Marsh Arabs and the Turks and sometimes between invading Persians and Turks. In 1624 Ali Pasha repulsed a Persian attack and, in the period of peace that followed, Basra became a mecca for poets, scientists and artists. The peace was short-lived; Ali Pasha's son imposed a buffalo tax upon the Marsh Arabs and the fighting and instability resumed.

Orientation & Information

The city comprises three main areas – Ashar, Margil and Basra proper. Ashar is the old commercial area and includes the Corniche, which runs alongside the Shatt al-Arab River, Sharia al-Kuwait, and Sharia ath-Thawra, where banks and the old Iraqi Airways office are found. Basra's bazaars are also here. Margil includes the port and a modern residential area to the northwest of Ashar. Basra proper is the old residential area to the west of Ashar.

Sights

In the Basra proper area you'll find the lovely **19th-century houses** called *shenashils* by the canal that flows into the Shatt al-Arab River. For most visitors, these houses with their high, pointed windows and ornate, wooden overhanging balconies are the highlights of a visit to Basra and a reminder that Basra's past was far more elegant than its present. In one of the few old houses to have been restored, **Basra Museum** contains a few objects from the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Islamic eras. Not far from the museum is the derelict **St Thomas Chaldean Church**.

The **Floating Navy Museum**, in Ashar at the northern corner of the Corniche, exhibits military hardware from both sides in the Iran-Iraq War, while the **Museum for the Martyrs of the Persian Aggression** (Sharia Istiklal) contains heart-rending displays of the sufferings of the ordinary local people of Basra during the war with Iran.

Basra's **bazaar** in Ashar is one of the most atmospheric in Iraq, a treasure-trove of gold, jewellery and palm products made by the Marsh Arabs. It's a shadow of its former self, but it's propelled by Basra's ever-optimistic merchants and you'll find it's hard not to get caught up in the energy. In parts of the bazaar you'll see old houses with wooden façades and balconies tilting at such precarious angles that it's amazing they manage to stand at all.

Sinbad Island was the home port for the sailor of legend and it was from here that Sinbad is supposed to have begun his voyages. The island used to be attractive, with outdoor restaurants and gardens, but it suffered extensive bombing and now is a little dreary, although like most things in Iraq, there are plans to rebuild.

NORTHERN IRAQ

Northern Iraq is considered by some to be the Switzerland of the Middle East with towering mountain ranges and abundant greenery. It's a stunning area and home to Iraq's most complicated ethnic mix – the northeast is the Iraqi homeland of the Kurds who are in the majority, but the region is also home to communities of Turkomans, Yezidis and Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, not to mention a large proportion of Arabs. Although part of Iraq, its people and its scenery have many connections to neighbouring Turkey and Iran. The north also boasts some of Iraq's most significant archaeological sights, among them Nimrud, Hatra and the legendary Nineveh, while Mosul is a charming city. All in all, it's probably Iraq's most fascinating corner.

ZAKHO

pop 95,336

Zakho, near the Turkish border, is Iraq's most northerly town and is famous for its evocative **stone bridge**, which is well pre-

زاخو

THE KURDS

Iraq is home to over four million Kurds, who are the descendants of the Medes and have inhabited northern Iraq since Parthian times (247 BC to AD 224). The overwhelming majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim and live in the northern provinces of the country. These provinces form part of the ancient Kurdish homeland of Kurdistan, which extends across the modern-day territories of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.

The 1961 Kurdish campaign to secure independence from Iraq laid the foundations for an uneasy relationship between the Kurds and the Iraqi state. Cycles of conflict and détente have consistently characterised the relationship ever since, as greater official recognition and freedom have alternately been offered and denied, culminating frequently in brutal repression.

This sad process was tragically reenacted after the 1991 Gulf War when more than two million Kurds were forced to flee across the mountains from Iraq to the relative safety of Turkey and Iran, countries with their own restive Kurdish populations. Under UN protection, the Kurdish Autonomous Region was set up in northern Iraq. Although ongoing Iraqi incursions and the bitter rivalry between the region's two main parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – frequently threatened the north, Kurdish Iraq became a model for a future federal Iraqi system, characterised as it was by good governance and relative peace.

After the fall of Saddam, there were fears that the Kurds would take the opportunity and go their own way. However, after the Kurds won 17% of the vote in the 2005 elections, Kurdish leaders restated their commitment to a federal but unified Iraq and have, along with Shiite leaders, been at the forefront of moves to build a democratic and plural Iraq.

served and still in constant use. Its age is unknown but it's reputed to have been built by a local Abbasid ruler and is at the far side of town. There's also a stone **castle** with a fine tower. Like any border town worth its salt, Zakho lives and breathes cross-border trade, and the busyness of its markets – Zakho has thrived since the 1990s when Iraq's Kurdish north enjoyed a large measure of autonomy and the town suffered little damage during Iraq's wars – stands in stark contrast to many Iraqi cities further south. The approaches to Zakho are spectacular, crossing many high mountain ridges.

AMADIYA

Like Zakho, Amadiya stands amid some awe-inspiring landscapes and the village itself is breathtakingly picturesque, located high on a plateau 1985m above sea level and surrounded by magnificent mountains and endless green valleys. Coming from Dohuk, 90km away to the southwest, the road passes through scenery that, as the road unfolds, becomes more and more spectacular. It winds through several villages – firstly Zawila, then Suara Tuga, which has a wonderful view of the plain of Sarsang, then through Anshki to Sulaf,

العمادية

a village with waterfalls and plenty of cafés where it was possible to sit and enjoy the magnificent views.

DOHUK

pop 129,127

Dohuk is a small Kurdish town, 73km north of Mosul. It's a pleasant place, with an interesting market and some extant remnants of a castle wall, but otherwise it serves mainly as a base from which to explore the surrounding mountains.

دهوك

MOSUL

pop 2.066 million

When peace returns to Iraq, Mosul, 396km north of Baghdad and Iraq's third-largest city, will be a magnet for travellers. It's Iraq's most ethnically mixed city, with Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians and Turkomans. It's a fascinating town, a meeting place of the peoples of the region, with a polyglot history to match, all of which is reflected in the city's myriad sites just longing to be explored.

After the fall of Fallujah to American forces in late 2004, the centre of the insurgency shifted to Mosul, which is where Kurdish-controlled areas meet the Sunni Triangle.

الموصل

History

There has been a settlement here since Assyrian times. By the time the Abbasids were in town, Mosul achieved commercial importance because of its position on the caravan route from India and Persia to the Mediterranean. Its most important export was cotton. The word 'muslin' is derived from Mosul, and cotton is still produced here today. Mosul was devastated by the Mongols in the 13th century but began to revive under the Ottomans.

Orientation

Mosul's main street and commercial area is Sharia Nineveh. The city centre is Midan Babatub, a huge open area with a fountain in the middle. The bazaar is between here and Sharia Nineveh. Sharia Duwasa runs south from Midan Babatub.

Sights & Activities

Along Sharia Nineveh in the town centre you'll find some delightful **old houses** that represent fine examples of 19th-century Mosul architecture. The exceptional **Mosul House**, built around a central courtyard, has a façade of Mosul marble and hosts life-sized models depicting traditional Mosul life. It has a large wooden entrance. The **old city** is a maze of narrow streets off both sides of Sharia Nineveh, west of the bazaar.

On the western side of the river, **Mosul Museum** once housed a large collection of finds from the successive civilisations of Iraq, from prehistoric to Islamic times, with an emphasis on finds from Nineveh to Nimrud. It's not known how much has survived.

Believed to be the burial place of Jonah, the **Mosque of Nebi Yunus**, on the eastern side of the Tigris, is built on a mound beneath which are buried some ruins of Nineveh, but because of the sanctity of the site, excavation is impossible. A little community of mud-brick houses and narrow, winding streets has grown up around the mosque.

The **Great Nur ad-Din Mosque** was built in 1172 by Nur ad-Din Zanqi and is famed for its remarkably bent minaret, which stands 52m high and has elaborate brickwork.

An essential part of Mosul's multicultural mix is the fact that the city has a higher proportion of Christians than any other Iraqi city. The **Clock & Latin Church** (Sharia Nineveh) is a good place to start as its interior is awash

with blue Mosul marble, lovely brickwork in blue, brown and cream, and stained-glass windows of abstract patterns. Many of the churches are near this one, but hidden away in the labyrinth of old Mosul's fascinating backstreets.

The imposing ruins of **Bash Tapia Castle**, rising high above the Tigris on its western bank, are now the only part of Mosul's city wall still in existence. Just a few minutes away, a little further south on the river bank, are the remnants of the 13th-century palace of the sultan Badr ad-Din called the **Qara Saray** (Black Palace).

Between the two ruins is the **Chaldean Catholic Church of At-Tahira** (Church of the Upper Monastery). The oldest part was built in AD 300 as a monastery, and in 1600 was added to and became a church. In the street running parallel to this is the Syrian Orthodox **Al-Tahira Church** (1210).

AROUND MOSUL Nineveh

نينوى

The ancient city of Nineveh, on the eastern bank of the Tigris and on the outskirts of modern Mosul, was the third capital of Assyria and one of Assyria's greatest cities – many of the Assyrian bas reliefs and other artefacts in museums around the world (eg the British Museum and the Louvre) came from here.

Up until King Hammurabi's death it was a province of Babylonia, but after this time it developed as an independent kingdom. By 1400 BC it had become one of the most powerful city states in the Middle East, but by 500 BC it had been destroyed by the Medes of northern Persia. For 200 years prior to this, however, Nineveh was the centre of the civilised world and Ashurbanipal's 25,000-text cuneiform library was sited here.

There are a few reliefs left *in situ* but Nineveh's charm lies in its historical significance rather than the state of its monuments – few ancient cities in the world have been as extensively looted as Nineveh. In its heyday, Nineveh's walls measured 12km in circumference and there were 15 gates, each named after an Assyrian god. Several have been reconstructed. The **Shamash gate** is just beyond the Ash-Shamal bus station. The **Nergal gate** is about 2km from the university and it has a small **museum** with some Assyrian reliefs and a model of the city of

Khorsabad, which was the fourth capital of Assyria.

Nimrud

نمرود

Nimrud, the second capital of Assyria, is 37km southeast of Mosul and one of the best preserved of Iraq's ancient sites. The city wall has an 8km circumference containing several buildings, the most impressive being **King Ashurnasirpal II's Palace**. On either side of the entrance are two huge sculptures of human-headed lions with hawk wings. Inside are some beautiful bas-relief slabs. Two 2800-year-old **Assyrian tombs** were discovered shortly before the Gulf War. They included large quantities of gold and jewellery from what archaeologists believe are two 9th- and 8th-century-BC tombs of princesses or consorts – possibly of the court of Ashurnasirpal II. One tomb held three bronze coffins containing the remains of 13 people. In one coffin, a woman in her twenties was buried with a foetus, four children and 449 objects. The **Temple of Nabu**, the God of Writing, is also impressive.

Hatra

حتر

Hatra, located 110km southwest of Mosul, is another impressive site, although it's of much more recent vintage (1st century AD) than Nimrud or Nineveh. In architecture, sculpture, metalwork and military expertise, Parthian Hatra was no less advanced than Rome. The ruins, most notably the preponderance of temples and tombs, contain many fine pieces of sculpture.

Sinjar

سنجار

pop 38,437
Sinjar, 160km west of Mosul on the slopes of the Jebel Sinjar mountain range near the Syrian border, is most renowned as the town of the Yezidis, the so-called devil worshippers who are of Kurdish stock. What they actually believe is that the devil is a fallen angel, bringing evil to the world, and must be appeased so he will once again take up his rightful place among the angels. The Yezidis will never say his name, Shaitan, or any similar-sounding word. Their religion contains elements of nature worship, Islam and Christianity. In October a festival is held at the shrine of Sheikh Adi, the sect's founder. Like the Kurds, the Yezidis are friendly and hospitable.

ARBIL

pop 932,854

أربيل

Arbil (also written Irbil; Kurdish: Hewler), 84km east of Mosul, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and headquarters of the Kurdish Autonomous Region. Its beginnings are buried in the mists of antiquity, but there is archaeological evidence that Neolithic peoples roamed the area 10,000 years ago.

The modern town, atop a mound formed by successive building over centuries, is dominated by a **fortress**, behind which are three large **19th-century Kurdish houses** that, along with the fortress, have been turned into **museums**. The houses have ceilings decorated with floral patterns and coloured-glass windows. One has a room with an interesting collection of everyday Kurdish objects and handicrafts, another an art gallery showing works by contemporary Iraqi artists. Nearby is a large **hammam** (bath-house), also part of the house.

Arbil Museum was opened in 1989 and, prior to the 2003 war, housed a comprehensive collection from Sumerian to Abbasid times.

Arbil is also renowned throughout the Middle East for the quality of its carpets and there are few more atmospheric bazaars in the whole region than Arbil's wonderful **covered souq**.

SHAQLAWA & GULLY ALI BEG

شقلوة & قللي علي بيك

The road from Arbil winds steeply upwards to Salahuddin at 1090m above sea level, and then on to Shaqlawa, 50km northeast from Arbil. This is an idyllic town surrounded by mountains and orchards where pears, apples, grapes, pomegranates, almonds and walnuts grow in abundance. From Shaqlawa the mountain ranges begin to close in and the scenery becomes more rugged and dramatic. Gully Ali Beg, 60km from Shaqlawa, is a narrow 10km-long pass with a lovely 80m-high waterfall tumbling into it.

KIRKUK

pop 601,442

Although Kirkuk traces its origins to Sumerian times and was occupied by the Assyrians, the modern city is dominated by the surrounding oil fields – some of Iraq's most prolific. There's little to see and the

city does replicate the 'Wild West' feel of oil towns across the world, but there's a **castle**, some fine **old houses** and a bustling **bazaar**.

IRAQ DIRECTORY

BOOKS

For a comprehensive but highly readable history of Mesopotamia, encompassing the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians among others, *Ancient Iraq*, by Georges Roux, is hard to beat.

Essential reading for anyone hoping to catch a glimpse of the marshes is the excellent *The Marsh Arabs*, written by Wilfred Thesiger who felt a great affinity with the Marsh Arabs and lived with them for five years in the 1950s. Gavin Young also visited the marshes in the 1950s at the instigation of Thesiger. He returned again in the '70s to see how much the Marsh Arabs' lives had changed. *Return to the Marshes* is an account of this visit.

The Longest War, by Dilip Hiro, is a detailed account of the Iran-Iraq War. Hiro offers a similarly dispassionate study of the 1991 Gulf War in *Desert Shield to Desert Storm*.

Yitzhak Nakash's *The Shi'is of Iraq* is the definitive study of Iraq's majority community and essential reading for understanding the sense of historical grievance felt by Iraq's Shiites.

Andrew and Patrick Cockburn's *Saddam Hussein – An American Obsession* is a clear-headed exploration of Saddam's shift from friend of the West to one of its greatest enemies.

To get a sense of how the key players viewed the invasion of Iraq, Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* offers unfettered insights into views within the Bush administration, while *Disarming Iraq* by Hans Blix, former UN chief weapons inspector, is similarly enlightening.

The accounts of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the aftermath are legion, but two of the best are Asne Seierstad's *A Hundred and One Days: a Baghdad Journal*, and Salam Pax – *the Baghdad Blog*, a sobering but often grimly humorous series of reports from arguably Iraq's most famous blogger.

For a journey back to 1960s Baghdad and a window into Iraq's Jewish community, Mona Yahia's fictional work *When the Grey Beetles Took Over Baghdad* is definitely worth tracking down.

A Sky So Close, by the young Iraqi writer Betool Khedairi, is a moving coming-of-age journey through Saddam Hussein's Iraq as penned by one of Iraq's most promising young writers.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Iraqi Embassies & Consulates

Australia (☎ 02-6286 9952; 48 Culgoa Circuit, O'Malley, ACT 2606)

France (☎ 01 45 01 51 00; 53 rue de la Faisanderie, Paris 75016)

UK (☎ 020-7581 2264; 169 Knightsbridge, London SW7 1DW)

USA (☎ 202-483 7500; Iraqi Interests Section, c/o Embassy of Algeria, 1801 Peter St NW, Washington, DC 20036)

Embassies & Consulates in Iraq

Australia (☎ 01-778 2210; austemb.baghdad@dfat.gov.au)

France (☎ 01-719 6061)

Germany (☎ 01-541 3032)

Jordan (☎ 01-542 9065)

Turkey (☎ 01-422 0021)

UK (☎ 01-703 270 0254; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/iraq)

USA (☎ 01-240 553 0584)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Institute for War and Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net) Independent reporting on the latest Iraqi news by local journalists.

Iraq Net (www.iraq.net) Everything from chat rooms to the latest news.

LANGUAGE

Arabic, the official language, is spoken by 80% of the population. The Kurds speak a language that is widely known as Kurdish, but in reality Kurds speak either of two Indo-European languages – Kurmanji or Sorani. The Turkomans, who live in villages along the Baghdad to Mosul highway, speak a Turkish dialect. Persian is spoken by minorities near the Iranian border, while similar numbers speak Assyrian and Chaldean. English is quite widely spoken in urban centres.

For a list of Arabic words and phrases see p679.

MONEY

A new Iraqi dinar came into circulation in October 2003 although its value continues to fluctuate widely. For the record, the exchange rate at the time of going to print was as set out in the table.

Country	Unit	Iraqi dinar (ID)
Australia	A\$1	1077.31
Canada	C\$1	1239.46
euro zone	€1	1734.83
Iran	IR100	16.14
Japan	¥100	1254.37
Jordan	JD1	2059.15
Syria	S£1	27.98
Turkey	YTL1	1080.00
UK	UK£1	2563.46
USA	US\$1	1469.20

SOLO TRAVELLERS

You'd have to be mad.

VISAS

At the time of writing, Iraqi embassies overseas were extremely reluctant to issue visas to anyone other than journalists, aid workers and others with contracts for the reconstruction of the country.

TRANSPORT IN IRAQ

Iraq has a good network of roads and a rail line connecting Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, but at the time of writing, Iraq was not safe for independent travel or travel by public transport.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Both Royal Jordanian Airlines and Iraqi Airways have resumed their flights into Baghdad from Amman in Jordan, but the spiralling descent into Baghdad International Airport, necessitated by constant insurgent attacks on aircraft, means that only those who absolutely *must* fly into Baghdad do so.

GETTING AROUND

At the time of writing, shared taxis and a few buses were operating between Baghdad and Damascus (Syria) or Amman (Jordan), while cross-border traffic between Turkey and relatively peaceful northern Iraq was also possible. Iraqi Airways is also planning to operate domestic flights connecting Baghdad to Basra, Suleimaniya and Arbil.

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