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Iraqi Kurdistan: Open for Travelers

Iraq's booming Kurdish region offers historic sites, a temperate climate, and new luxury hotels. But will Western travelers come?

From [January 2014](#)
By [Michael Luongo](#)

It's a Thursday, the beginning of the Islamic weekend—and \$25 endless pizza and beer night at the Rotana hotel in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. A moody jazz band plays as I chat with business consultant Jeremy Oliver, a Texan who has lived here since 2009.

The familiar Western atmosphere is appropriate for the largely expat crowd, hailing from the U.S., Canada, the Czech Republic, and Lebanon. Oliver has invited me to this weekly gathering to meet residents and hear their stories, some of which involve Americans' misplaced perceptions of Kurdistan. For example, says Oliver, "People at home think I'm dodging bullets every day."

It's an impression that Kurdistan is eager to change. A world apart from Iraq's violent south, the history-rich Kurdish autonomous region (about the size of Scotland) is the most stable and attractive part of the country. And it's booming, driven by oil exploration and reconstruction after decades of neglected infrastructure development. The Arab League has taken notice, crowning Erbil the 2014 Arab City of Tourism; it beat out contenders like Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates and Beirut, Lebanon.

It's an admittedly odd designation. After all, this is still Iraq, which few associate with tourism, and Kurdistan isn't even Arabic. The Kurdish language is similar to Iran's Farsi—a vestige of the Persian Empire's rule (look, too, for Ottoman-influenced architecture and local food). This green, mountainous region has a long tradition of being dominated by its neighbors. So the Arab City of Tourism designation presents a rare opportunity for Kurds to introduce themselves on the world stage.

About 4.7 million Kurds live in Iraqi Kurdistan, and combined with brethren in Iran, Syria, and Turkey, they number 26 to 30 million—the largest ethnic group without an independent country. Already, Erbil flaunts a skyline that includes the \$2.3 billion Empire World complex, where a Marriott will open in 2015. Hiltons will follow in other parts of the city. There are already five-star hotels like the Rotana and the Turkish Divan, whose intricate rooftop makes it queen of the nighttime skyline.

It's a vastly different city from my last two visits, in 2007 and 2009, when there were fewer places to stay and far fewer expats. In both cases, I came as a volunteer photographer for cultural diplomacy projects organized by friends at [American Voices](#) and [Musicians For Harmony](#) that brought together musicians from Kurdistan and Southern Iraq. Erbil's 2014 designation piqued my interest once again, inspiring a return visit in September 2013 to investigate how far the city has come as a travel destination—and how far it still has to go.



Michael Luongo

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I'd been sending Sherwan Hamadameen, Erbil's general director of tourism, emails for several weeks without a reply and calling numbers on the [Tourism Kurdistan](#) website that no one ever answered. My arrival, therefore, was a surprise to the tourism officials. But in Middle Eastern fashion, Hamadameen welcomed me into his cluttered office, paperwork on his desk brushed aside to make room for tea.

Hamadameen says his dream is "to make Erbil the best city for tourism in the region. We are trying to be just like Dubai, just like Istanbul, in the image of the world." He tells me of a proposal for a ski resort and a master tourism plan created jointly by the Austrian company Kohl & Partner and the Lebanese company Team International. Visitors, he says, will find more than 3,000 archaeological sites in Kurdistan, and special events planned for 2014 that range from an *American Idol*-style singing contest to sports and cultural programs. (The website [ErbilTourism2014.com](#) promises details coming soon.)

Seventy percent of the city's tourists currently come from the south of Iraq, escaping the heat and violence amid the mountains, waterfalls, and lakes of the Kurdish region—scenery that defies Middle Eastern stereotypes. Most others are Iranian shoppers attracted by the cheaper prices and greater variety of available products. Western tourists, primarily from the U.K., Germany, and America, tend to be business travelers; the goal now is to convert them to leisure.

The opportunity exists, as there's no shortage of sightseeing opportunities, according to Mawlawi Jabar Wahab, a tourism official. Kurdistan has religious sites important to all three major Abrahamic faiths, including a ziggurat-style church in Erbil's Ankawa district, one of the Middle East's largest remaining Christian enclaves. Archaeological wonders, many still unexcavated, date back to the Babylonian Empire. The challenge is making such sites more tourist-friendly—and, of course, spreading the word. But the plan is in motion, and it's working. Kurdistan saw more than 2.2 million visitors in 2012, a 30 percent increase over 2011, with 433,711 from outside of Iraq.



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Those visitors have generally received a warm welcome. According to Harry Schute, a retired U.S. Army colonel who runs the tour company The Other Iraq, "Travelers are pleasantly surprised when they meet and interact with the local people, who are especially friendly to Americans." He explains that, in contrast to the south, "folks here consider the war a liberation, not an occupation," because it eliminated Saddam Hussein, who had slaughtered 180,000 Kurds. Schute's company runs about 8 to 10 group tours a year and arranges day tours for people who contact him once in Erbil.

The verdict is still out on whether U.S.-based tour operators will follow suit. Dan Austin of Austin-Lehman Adventures has looked into Kurdistan and decided to hold off, given the state of much of the region. He said he has also been disappointed by some countries, like Colombia, that have recovered from dangerous reputations yet haven't become as popular as expected, given the buzz. He added, however, that Kurdistan could follow Croatia—"an unknown, which was near a lot of civil unrest, and now is an extremely popular destination."



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If Kurdistan does attract more Western tourists, almost all will get there by plane, in contrast to the many Southern Iraqis and Iranians who often arrive in Erbil by bus or car.

Talar Faiq Salih, Erbil airport's general director, is ready for them. The airport was completely rebuilt in 2010 and gleams with duty-free shops. Salih says airport passenger traffic has averaged 30 percent growth each year since 2006; some 950,000 passengers used the airport in 2012, with 23 airlines connecting Erbil to 15 countries.

"Erbil is a peaceful place in a sea of trouble in the rest of Iraq," Salih says. We're sitting in her office, whose white furniture imparts a 1970s *Space Odyssey* feel—a luminous contrast to the drab offices I've visited. "It's a woman's touch," she says. "The reality is that women are taking charge as well. You can see a lot of women directors on investment boards."

And the country's change extends beyond Erbil. I want to see for myself, so I head to Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan's second-largest city, where a Ramada opened in June. The general manager, Izzettin Yurtsever, a native of neighboring Turkey, meets with me in the sun-filled lobby overlooking the street. Yurtsever views his hotel as a training ground of sorts for a new generation of Kurds as the hospitality industry expands.

Yet the very development spurring business tourism threatens Sulaymaniyah's leafy beauty. A skyscraper has sprouted blocks from the historical bazaar and casts dark shadows over a sculpture-adorned park, an example of a lack of organized urban planning. This incongruous development concerns Azzam Alwash, an American of Arab heritage who heads environmental group Nature Iraq. "I am worried with the economic improvement and the standard of living that nature will suffer," he tells me. Still, Alwash acknowledges, "we live in a global village. It is inevitable that people will want what the West has. The alternative is to live in an isolated society, and we tried that from 1968 to 2003."



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Even if Kurdistan is increasingly connected, its travel industry remains disjointed.

Travelers can choose from a growing lineup of luxury hotels, most ranging from \$200 to \$400 a night. But it takes advance planning to coordinate a tour of Erbil's 8,000-year-old Citadel and its Kurdish Textile Museum, a potential UNESCO World Heritage site in a historic area of Ottoman palaces, bazaars, and alleyways. The concierge at the five-star Rotana hotel tells me that while drivers can take guests to the Citadel, there are few, if any, available trained guides (it's not a common request from the oil and construction clientele). I mention this to hotel general manager Thomas Touma.

A Lebanese born in 1975 at the start of that country's civil war, Touma becomes emotional at the presumptions of someone from a developed country pondering a former war zone's disorganization. "This country was founded only 10 years ago," he reminds me. "What can you accomplish from scratch in only 10 years? There were no houses, no roads, no services, no electricity. They came from so much oppression," he tells me, a view of construction cranes through his office window. "Suddenly, the regime fell in 2003, and they had the opportunity to put together a state."

I ask if Erbil's City of Tourism 2014 designation will help. "No, there are priorities more important than tourism," he replies. "But at least it puts Erbil on the world map."

He looks out the window, musing, "Dubai was not built in a few years," something he says most Westerners don't appreciate. They may be familiar with travel magazine spreads of Dubai, he says, but not with the history and cultural changes behind its development.

Yet, ready or not, Kurdistan is on its way. Just after I landed in September, I met 32-year-old Lithuanian-born Emilis Michles, a freelance Internet security engineer who travels the world, working anywhere there's an Internet connection. Coming to Kurdistan was a way to push his limits and add a new stamp on his passport. His trip was entirely self-arranged, from finding a room in Erbil on Airbnb.com to booking Austrian Airlines with frequent-flier miles.

"It's very exotic," he says, clearly excited to be in Erbil. "I put on my Facebook I am going to Iraq. It gets attention."



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How to Go

Air Travel

For most travelers from North America and Europe, no visa is necessary for Kurdistan for visits lasting up to 14 days. The most convenient connections for North Americans to Erbil are through Europe. Lufthansa flies from Frankfurt and Austrian Airlines from Vienna, both bypassing Baghdad.

Tour Operators

Various companies can arrange package tours that combine land connections, tour guides, hotel stays, and flight arrangements. Among them are the American-owned The Other Iraq (theotheriraqtours.com); Kurdistan Adventures (kurdistan-adventures.com); and British-run Hinterland Travel, which also covers Southern Iraq (hinterlandtravel.com).

Hotels

Noble Hotel: A five-star hotel in the Ankawa Christian district, known for its popular and sometimes rowdy rooftop Mamounia Sky Bar; \$180 a night and up; noble-hotel.com.

The Rotana: Part of the Abu Dhabi-based chain, the Rotana is in the developing Gulan Street business district, including several restaurants popular with expats, an outdoor pool, a spa, and fitness center; \$300 a night and up; rotana.com.

The Divan: Part of the Turkish hotel chain, this five-star is also in the developing Gulan Street business district and features several luxury shops, a spa, and a rooftop sushi restaurant overlooking Erbil; \$280 a night and up; divan.com.tr.



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