

Iraq Encompassed

Trip notes: EAXB

Validity: 01/01/2011 to 31/12/2011

Iraq is home to the legendary ancient ruins of Babylon and Ur and the fascinating holy cities of Basra, Karbala, Najaf and Nasiriyah. Journey from the chaotic city of Baghdad, north to the Kurdish heartland and south to the Marshes. Ravaged by conflict and instability in recent times, you will see first-hand what makes Iraq tick and come to love this amazing place.

Itinerary Disclaimer

The information in this dossier has been compiled with care and is provided in good faith. However it is subject to change and does not form part of the contract between the client and Babel Travel. The itinerary featured is correct at time of printing. Occasionally our itineraries change as we make improvements that stem from past travellers, comments and our own research. Sometimes it can be a small change like adding an extra meal in the itinerary. Sometimes the change may result in us altering the trip for the coming year. Ultimately, our goal is to provide you with the most rewarding experience.

VERY IMPORTANT: Please ensure that you print a final copy of your dossier to review a couple of days prior to travel, in case there have been changes that affect your plans. For the latest updated trip notes please visit our website: www.babeltravel.com

Cultural Engagement

Robert Young Pelton and Babel Travel have teamed up to create the first organised entries into the World's Most Dangerous and forbidden places. Our Cultural Engagement trips have been created to challenge the intellectual, emotional, participatory and educational desires of a very select group of individuals. Our trips will maintain the highest level of personal and physical safety based on Robert Young Pelton's 30 years in conflict zones and Babel Travel's experience in the adventure travel business.

These trips are 'dangerous' because they are designed to make you think, our intention is not to scare you. Being inside a country is a completely different experience compared with watching it from the outside and it is bound to energise and engage you. You will be inspired to want to make a difference. Each group is screened, trained and tasked with creating an end product to share with the world. We do not intend to be passive observers. Stories, interviews, research, video and photographs will be combined to create a portal for the next group and the world. Communities in these regions don't have time to entertain outsiders. They are happy to engage, challenge and share with visitors but only if they take their message to the outside world.

Kevin Pollard, Founder and General Manager of Babel Travel, has long wanted to tap into Pelton's expertise and access ever since he read his best selling guide The World's Most

Dangerous Places which was first published in 1993 and is now in its fifth edition. Participants in this program will update the sixth edition and carry on Pelton's two-decade legacy of safely penetrating and making sense of the world's least understood regions.

Cultural Engagement trips for 2011 will include 11-22 day itineraries to Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, North Korea and Colombia with other destinations coming soon. Each journey will cost in the neighbourhood of EUR 5 - 12,000 per person, excluding airfare. Robert Young Pelton will not lead the trips personally, but will choose both the trip leaders (1 western and 1 local) and co-design each itinerary. Each western trip leader has a background in philanthropy, journalism, adventure travel and is considered an expert in the country they are leading trips to. There will be a second unadvertised list of trips for those return members who Pelton will accompany into selected locations.

Robert Young Pelton is the author of a number of books on survival and global conflict. He has journeyed through 36 conflicts and travelled to over 120 countries.
www.comebackalive.com

Trip Structure

The key elements of our Cultural Engagement trips (other than North Korea or other fixed agendas) are:

- 1) Meeting with VIPs and subject matter experts to welcome you to the country
- 2) Charitable social benefit hands on activity
- 3) Political discussions and interaction with at least two opposing entities
- 4) Exposure to authentic, non commercial and socially relevant environments
- 5) Interaction with locals, penetrating discussions and documentation of the countries situations
- 6) Formal interviews, information gathering, fact checking and publication of group's endeavours for public viewing and further discussion
- 7) Traditional interaction with social, political, NGO or other groups to understand how outsiders can engage, understand and better the situation
- 8) Cultural immersion into music, art, dancing, storytelling, history etc
- 9) Contemporary interpretation of culture, historical monuments, natural wonders, landscapes or events by experts
- 10) Trip members questions answered, flexibility in itinerary to take advantage of opportunities or invitations and constant support for unscripted discovery, interaction and follow on relationships

Formal Structure

Each trip member will be sent a personal safety guide culled from Come Back Alive or Dangerous Places on survival in the specific area to which they are travelling. Members will be asked to pick 5 things that they hope to learn. There will be a formal videotape interview of your expectations or goals both at the start and after the trip. Your privacy is assured.

You will be asked to use a skill you have to contribute to a diary, wrap up, interview and query. Each person will be issued with a workbook with suggested questions, discussion points, and a do-it-yourself travel guide creation kit modelled on The World's Most Dangerous Places. The goal is to give structure to exploration and curiosity.

During the trip you will be brought into the narrative and will be filmed interacting, interviewing, photographing or helping. At the end of the trip the material will be assembled

into a web based blog. Should you choose not to be photographed, you will not be included on the public site. Those who wish to have their trip kept private will be respected.

Itinerary

Days 1-2 Baghdad

Arrive and check into your hotel. Your trip leader will leave a notice in the hotel reception with information for our all important welcome meeting, scheduled for 9am on Day 1.

You will need to bring your passport, all vouchers and a copy of your insurance policy to this meeting so that your leader can obtain important details that are essential to the running of the trip. This meeting will give you an overview of all the exciting things you will be seeing during your stay and includes a lot of practical information on how to get the most out of your time in Iraq.

Important Note: it is a condition of joining our trips that you are in possession of a comprehensive travel insurance policy before leaving your country of origin. For coverage in Iraq we highly recommend Ingle Insurance. Visit their website for more information: <https://www.ingletravel.com/en/travel/specialRisk.asp>

With a population of 8 million, Baghdad is the largest city in Iraq and the third largest city in the Arab World (after Cairo and Khartoum). Situated on the Tigris River, the city dates back to the 8th century. Historically, Baghdad was the centre of the Arab and Muslim world where learning and culture thrived. Baghdad was also a popular destination on the hippie trail in the 1960s. Since the "War on Terrorism" of 2003, Baghdad has received significant international media attention, sadly for all the wrong reasons.

During our time in Baghdad (at the start/finish of our trip), we will have an opportunity to explore the following places of interest: The Monument to the Unknown Soldier, Al Shaheed Monument (monument to the Iraqi soldiers killed in the Iran–Iraq War), al-Kadhimiya Mosque, Saddam's Swords of Qadisiyah (also called the Hands of Victory), Baghdad Tower, The National Museum of Iraq, Kahramana and the 40 Thieves Square, Al Kadhimain Shrine, Abu Hanifa Mosque, Firdaus Square, Liberation square and the Arch of Ctesiphon in nearby Salman Pak.

Days 3-5 Samarra/Arbil

Leaving Baghdad early we travel north to Samarra. Located 130 km north of Baghdad, Samarra has a population of 700,000.

It is thought that the name "Samarra" was derived from the Arabic phrase "Sarr man ra'a" which means: "A joy for all who see". In 2007, UNESCO named Samarra one of its World Heritage Sites.

While here we'll visit the city's main sites; al-Askari Mosque and the Great Mosque of Samarra. Travelling north along the Tigris River we pass the US Military Air Base at Camp Balad, the towns of Ad-Dawr (where Saddam Hussein was captured in December 2003), Al-Awja (Saddam Hussein's birthplace), Tikrit and Kirkuk before reaching Arbil. We'll travel a total of 380 kms today.

With a population of 2 million, Arbil is the fourth biggest city in Iraq and is the capital of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Arbil is in the midst of an economic boom with many

modern buildings under construction. Employment opportunities and access to health care and education has significantly improved here in recent years.

The main places of interest in Arbil are: the Mudhafaria Minaret, city park, Qaysari Bazaar, Martyr Sami Abdul-Rahman Park and the Citadel of Arbil. The Citadel of Arbil is an occupied mound, right in the historical heart of Arbil. Some claim that the site is the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world with evidence of occupation dating back to the 5th millennium BC.

While in Arbil we will visit the nearby Mar Matti Monastery. Located on Mount Maqloub, approximately 30 km east of Mosul, Mar Matti was founded in AD 363 by a Syriac Christian called Matti (Syriac for Matthew) who had fled persecution. Today it is recognised as one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world and is currently maintained by the Syriac Orthodox Church.

Day 6 Rawanduz

The town of Rawanduz is situated high in the Kurdish mountains, 100 km north east of Arbil and only 70 kms from the Iranian border. In the past, Rawanduz was known as a centre of Kurdish resistance (Peshmergas) against the Iraqi Government but it has now switched its focus to tourism.

It is estimated that as 2010 there were 350,000 Peshmerga fighters in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Peshmerga are an active partner in the American-led coalition in Iraq. Many Peshmerga are fluent in Arabic, in contrast to foreign coalition troops, and they therefore play an important role in the Sunni triangle of Central Iraq. On the strategic level the Peshmergas are ready to fight a guerrilla war of any invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Pank tourist resort, which was opened in 2007 by Hazem Kurda, a former refugee of Saddam Hussein's regime, is the first of its kind in Iraq. The resort includes a 5 star hotel, restaurants, swimming pools, saunas and tennis courts. It even contains a ferris wheel, toboggan rides, helipads and mini golf! Such opulence is in stark contrast to the rest of the country and does come as a shock. Indulging in the luxurious surroundings, it is easy to forget that you're Iraq. Even more so when you take in the majestic backdrop of some of Kurdistan's highest peaks.

In the evening of Day 6 we'll visit the home of a senior Peshmerga leader for a meal and an opportunity to discuss the past, present and future of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Days 7-8 Basra

Departing very early we travel back down the mountain road to Arbil and board our flight to the southern Iraqi city of Basra. We aim to arrive in Basra just after 12 pm.

Basra is Iraq's main port and is the second biggest city in Iraq with a population of 4 million. Iraq has the world's fourth largest oil reserves estimated to be more 130 billion barrels and most of it from Basra. 70% of Basra's oil bearing fields are unexplored.

The city is part of the historic region of Sumer, the home of Sinbad the Sailor, and is thought to be the location of the Garden of Eden. Built in 636 BC, it also played an important role in early Islamic history. The city is located along the Shatt al Arab waterway and is sometimes referred to as The "Venice of the Middle East" due to its maze of canals that flow through the city.

While here we'll explore old Basra, visit Sinbad Island, cruise the Shatt al Arab waterway and enjoy a traditional meal with a family of Marsh Arabs. We'll also visit the Iraqi Child Rights Network (ICRN). ICRN provides education and child protection services along with improved water and sanitation for families in the region.

Days 9-10 Nasiriyah

This morning we travel past the vast Az-Zubayr oil field. Discovered in 1949, this oil field is one of the largest in the world. It has 5 billion barrels of proven reserves and currently produces 400 thousand barrels per day. Under the field's expansion program, production is expected to reach a plateau level of 1.2 million barrels per day in the coming years.

Passing many Marsh Arab wetlands we reach Nasiriyah (230 km; 4 hours).

Nasiriyah has a population of 800, 000 and is the fifth largest city in Iraq. The city is famous for boat-building, carpentry and silver work and is also the centre of a date-growing area. The old parts of the town are built from sun-dried brick. This part of the town is still enclosed by a mud wall.

While in Nasiriyah we spend a few hours assisting at a Caritas humanitarian aid program. Caritas helps vulnerable people and families such as households headed by women, people with physical and learning difficulties, the elderly and orphans; the program supports orphanages and homes for the elderly and provides food, medicines, medical examinations, blankets and clothing where needed.

On Day 10 we visit the ancient Babylonian city of Ur, known as the birthplace of Abraham. Here, we'll visit the Ziggurat of Ur. Ziggurats were massive monuments which have the form of a terraced step pyramid. Ur is located within the security perimeter for Ali Air Base, one of the largest Military Bases in Iraq. Its ancient ziggurat is visible from nearly every area of the base. Later in the day we visit the 7, 500 year old town of Eridu.

Day 11 Najaf

Travelling via the ancient city of Nippur we reach Najaf (260 km; 5 hours).

Najaf lies approximately 160 km south of Baghdad and has a population of 800, 000. It is one of the holiest cities of Shia Islam and is the centre of Shia political power in Iraq.

Najaf is renowned as the site of the tomb of Ali ibn Abi Talib (also known as Imam Ali Mosque), the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mohammed whom the Shia Muslims consider to be the first Imam. Throughout the Shia Islamic world the city is a centre of religious significance with many Shias making the pilgrimage to Najaf. Only Mecca and Medina receive more Muslim pilgrims.

The Imam Ali Mosque is housed in a grand structure with a gilded dome and many precious objects in the walls. Nearby is the Wadi as-Salam, which is believed to be the largest cemetery in the Muslim world.

On afternoon Day 11 we visit the Imam Ali Mosque, Wadi as-Salam cemetery and explore the town centre.

Days 12-13 Karbala

After a full day visiting the Great Mosque of Kufa (15 km north east of Najaf), the Al-Ukhaidir Fortress and the ancient cities of Borsippa/Birs Nimrud (Tower of Babel), Kish and Babylon, we reach Karbala (180km; 9 hours).

Karbala has a population of 750, 000 and is best known as the location of the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD.

On Day 13 of the trip we visit the Imam Husayn Mosque. Inside, the tomb of Husayn ibn Ali is of great religious significance to Shias, with many making the pilgrimage to this site. Every year millions of pilgrims travel to the city to observe Ashura, which marks the anniversary of Husayn ibn Ali's death.

Days 14-15 Baghdad

Returning to Baghdad in the late morning (110 km; 2 hours) we have time to explore more of the city. Tonight we'll enjoy a farewell dinner and reflect on our time in Iraq.

You are free to depart at any time on Day 15, but please arrange for departing flights after 12pm in case of any travel delays. If you plan to linger a little longer in Baghdad, post accommodation can be organised through our hotel.

Arrival and Departure Transfers

Both arrival and departure transfers are included in the price of this trip. This is regardless of when you arrive or depart Iraq.

Arrival Complications

Arrival transfers are included for all clients arriving in Baghdad. If you have booked your flights separately from your trip please ensure that you inform Babel Travel of your flight details at least one month before departure. If you have not made contact with our representative (please look for the Babel Travel logo and your name) within 30 minutes of clearing customs and immigration, please contact our Iraqi representative. Give this person your exact location in the airport (find a landmark) and you will be attended to promptly.

The Baghdad International Airport (formerly known as Saddam International Airport) is about 18 km from the centre of Baghdad. Please do not leave the airport until you meet with a Babel Travel representative.

Starting Point Hotel

TBA
Baghdad
Iraq

Finishing Point Hotel

TBA
Baghdad
Iraq

Trip Style: Cultural Engagement

This is the only way professionals, intellectuals, and modern day explorers can visit the world's most inaccessible places with comfort, security and insight. Robert Young Pelton and Babel Travel have designed experiences that are both life changing and inspiring. Those who want more from their travels will understand that whilst these trips are intense, they are also engaging and rewarding by opening a window into the rapidly changing world. Accordingly these trips are never the same, never dull and will encourage further exploration. Comfort, safety and value are the cornerstones of planning and the ability to engage and interact with our hosts is critical. This is a trip for those who "do" not watch.

Exploratory Adventures

Our exploratory trips are often our most exciting and memorable Babel Travel adventures. We may have designed a new itinerary or created a first-time adventure to a new land but rest assured; we've been planning this over a long period of time. Our local operators have been operating trips for a number of years in Iraq and we have had a team of on-the-ground staff and researchers (local and western) working hard to put this trip together. Our exploratory trip will be accompanied by a senior member of our Babel Travel team along with one of our on-the-ground managers. These trips are popular with experienced adventurers who thrive on the sense of discovery and serendipity that occur on first time forays into new places. You are part of the exploration, helping make decisions as we go, and sharing insights with guides and local people about your experience.

Included Activities

Walking tours of Baghdad, Samarra, Arbil, Rawanduz, Basra, Nasiriyah, Najaf, Mar Matti Monastery, Ur, Eridu, Nippur, Kufa, Al-Ukhaidir Fortress, Borsippa, Babylon, Kish, Karbala, boat trip on the Shatt Al Arab waterway, various dinners with local families and visits to 8 different charities/NGOs/Political and Cultural groups.

All other activities are optional and at your own expense. If you choose not to participate in the included activities on this itinerary, the cost will not be refunded.

Optional Activities

All of our itineraries include some free time, the amount of which usually depends on the style of trip you are travelling on. Although we do not arrange any specific optional excursions in Iraq, there is plenty of free time for you to undertake activities not covered specifically in the itinerary. We strongly suggest that you make any extracurricular plans after experiencing the country and after discussing with the trip leader and security.

Group Size

Maximum of 12 travellers per group.

Accommodation

Guesthouses/hotels (14 nights).

If you are travelling alone you will be allocated a room with another group member of the same sex. If you are travelling as a couple please note that we cannot guarantee the availability of double beds.

Our main criteria for choosing hotels are neatness and cleanliness. On our Cultural Engagement trips, most of the hotels are 3 to 4 stars - comfortable and sometimes luxurious! Bathroom facilities may be shared and rooms may be multi-share rather than twin. Please bear in mind that hotels can occasionally be challenged with minor problems and technical difficulties. At each hotel your leader will try to organise the rooming arrangements to suit everyone's requirements.

If you have purchased pre or post trip accommodation (if available), you may be required to change rooms for the additional nights.

Early Check-in Throughout the Trip

Throughout the trip we request that our hotels prepare rooms in time for our arrival, however this may not always be possible. Instead we can store our luggage and explore our new destination.

Included Meals

14 breakfasts, 14 lunches, 14 dinners. Allow USD 100 for snacks.

A typical breakfast in hotels in Iraq consists of bread, cucumber, tomatoes, olives, butter, jam, coffee/tea and juice. Local breakfasts are available for the more adventurous at nearby markets.

Meals range from a gourmet dinner in Baghdad, simple lunches at roadside eateries to meals with a local family. The large majority of meals will be traditional Iraqi fare with between 1 and 10 meal choices in each location.

Some popular dishes in Iraq include Kebab (often marinated with garlic, lemon and spices, then grilled), Shawarma (grilled meat sandwich wrap, similar to Döner kebab), Bamia (lamb, okra and tomato stew), Quzi (lamb with rice, almonds, raisins and spices), Falafel (fried chickpea patties served with amba and salad in pita), Kibbeh (minced meat ground with bulghur or rice and spices), Masgouf (grilled fish with pepper and tamarind), and Maqluba (a rice, lamb, tomato and aubergine dish). Stuffed vegetable dishes such as Dolma and Mahshi are also widely available.

Getting Around

Private vehicle, taxi, plane, walking.

We travel in Jeeps or Land Cruisers (and sometimes helicopters and aircraft) as local transport can be unreliable and in parts of the country, dangerous. All our drivers/guides are in daily contact with local NGOs through their satellite phones to check routes and all the latest security issues. In addition to this we travel with at least 3 armed security guards.

Getting There and Away

International flights are not included in the price of the trip. Babel Travel can assist with finding you the right flight.

Currently, Royal Jordanian Airlines operates two round-trip flights daily from their base at the Queen Alia International Airport in Amman. After the 2003 invasion, some of Iraqi

Airways Aircraft were retrieved from storage in Syria and Jordan and are now flying again under the Iraqi Airways name. Iraqi Airways has recently begun computerised operations, and tickets for future European routes are now theoretically available for reservation online via the Iraqi Airways website, but are usually only available in the country you are travelling from, and are only available a few days in advance of the flight. Even if you buy a round trip ticket, you will still need to reserve the date of your return in person in Iraq. The extra you pay for another airline can be very much worthwhile, as Iraqi Airways is still very effort and time intensive to deal with, and flights leaving Baghdad routinely take off several hours late.

In addition to Iraqi Airways, Air France and Turkish Airways have begun operating flights between Istanbul and Baghdad several times per week. Etihad, Gulf Air and Emirates have all begun flights into Baghdad in 2010.

Iraq's departure tax is less than USD 5, but to be safe, have at least USD 20 in Iraqi Dinar at the airport when leaving Baghdad.

Visas

It is your responsibility to arrange visas before you travel. All travellers require a visa to enter Iraq. We update our visa information regularly, but please understand that rules and conditions can sometimes change. It is essential, that you check any possible changes before starting your trip.

Iraqi missions in the following countries are authorised to issue Iraqi tourist visas; United States of America, France, Great Britain, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

You'll need a letter of introduction from your employer/sponsor stating the purpose and duration of your trip. Babel Travel will provide this letter of introduction once your trip deposit has been made.

Please ensure that you have at least 5 blank pages in your passport before you depart for Iraq. You may be denied entry into Iraq (even with a valid Iraqi visa) if you don't have at least 5 blank pages in your passport.

If the visa application form requires a contact address in the destination, please give either your meeting point hotel or the address of our local contact. Babel Travel cannot accept responsibility for anyone who is refused entry to a country because they lack the correct documentation.

A visa will be flatly refused if your passport contains evidence of travel to Israel. Note: this is not confined to just an Israeli stamp in your passport. You will be refused an Iraqi visa if there is an Egyptian entry or exit stamp from the Egyptian/Israeli border (at Taba or Rafah) or a Jordanian entry or exit stamp from the Jordanian/Israeli border (at Wadi Araba near Aqaba, Sheikh Hussein bridge or King Hussein bridge otherwise known as the Allenby bridge) in your passport. Even without actually having an Israeli stamp in your passport, these exit or entry stamps prove that you have visited Israel and entry into Iraq will be disallowed.

Permits and Other Legal Requirements

Registration is obligatory within 3 days of arrival. Our start point hotel in Baghdad will complete the registration on your behalf for free. Do not be tempted to skip registration, as

it is very likely to cause problems when you leave the country - you might not be allowed to board your flight!

Insurance

Our trip prices do not include insurance. However, it is a condition of joining our trips that travellers are fully insured for any medical expenses they might incur while travelling. At the start of the trip leader will ask to see your insurance documents and will note down the policy number and emergency contact number.

We recommend a comprehensive travel insurance policy that covers repatriation and evacuation in case of a medical emergency, kidnapping, serious injury or worse, cancellation and curtailment as well as covering baggage and valuables. You may also need specific cover for expensive camera equipment.

Many credit card companies offer complementary travel insurance. However the majority of such policies offer virtually no cover and cannot be accepted as adequate travel insurance. If you are planning on using credit card insurance you must bring along proof that the policy covers medical emergencies. Failure to be able to provide such proof to the leader will result in you being compelled to purchase a new approved policy before you can join the trip. If your travel insurance was not purchased from Babel Travel or our agents, you will be required to sign a waiver absolving the company and its agents should your policy not be adequate.

Any clients unable to provide proof of adequate travel insurance cover will be required to purchase a policy or will not be allowed to join the trip.

Most insurers require a local police report to support claims for loss of or damage to personal property. Our office can only issue a letter verifying that personal items have been lost or damaged on the trip of USD 50 in value and the leader was informed of the loss or damage at the time that it occurred. We recommend Ingle Insurance for this particular trip; <https://www.ingletravel.com/en/travel/specialRisk.asp>

Please also make sure you have access to an additional USD 500, to be used when unforeseen incidents or circumstances outside our control necessitate a change to our planned route.

Babel Travel's Cultural Engagement trips are insured through Ingle Insurance. These trips cover clients in cases of traffic accidents, medical emergencies (including medical evacuation and repatriation), accidental death and disablement coverage, incidents related to war, terrorism and kidnappings but it does NOT include ransom or extortion insurance. We also do not cover for political evacuation (i.e. preemptively removing participants from a volatile situation before there is a medical emergency claim).

A Word About Safety and Security

By choosing to travel with Babel Travel you can be sure that your personal safety and well-being is our prime concern.

Although the countries we have chosen for our Cultural Engagement trips are generally considered to be mostly safe, it should be known that foreign traveller safety can be associated with some risk. Local and foreign rebel groups, clan and militia rivalries and marauding pirates all add to these risks. Babel Travel will do its best to mitigate these risks

by performing due diligence, daily information gathering and security reviews in what we may consider to be "dangerous or higher risk areas" before travelling there. Babel Travel works closely with local government security forces and monitors these situations to make security determinations on a daily basis. In some extreme cases it may be necessary for our local trip operators to postpone, delay or even cancel the trip in the rare event that safe passage is not possible at that given time.

Our local trip operators and their security force personnel have the ultimate decision in these cases and their decisions are non-negotiable and final. In the event a of a trip being delayed or an area bypassed because of security risks, Babel Travel will make every effort to keep the trip on schedule by either increasing time at one destination, eliminating or skipping an area or staying at another destination point. Your safety is our number one concern, and these adjustments may be necessary to achieve those goals.

We travel in Jeeps and Land Cruisers (and in some cases helicopters and light aircraft) as local transport can be unreliable and in parts of the country, dangerous. All of our drivers/guides are in daily contact with local security briefing services through their satellite phones to check routes for increased security risks. In addition to this, we travel with up to five armed security guards at all times.

Police and Army

You will see armed policemen and military personnel everywhere but you will not have any problems with them unless you have infringed some rule, like taking photographs or filming in prohibited areas.

You will have lots of problems taking photos almost anywhere in Baghdad. Everywhere is really considered an off-limits security area, and lots of photo-taking, even from a vehicle window of a public street, will result in the police stopping the vehicle to ask questions. Iraq security forces can be very prohibitive of photography, but it is possible with common sense. If there in doubt question, your leader will be able to size up the situation.

Travel Warning

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs currently advises against travel to most of the countries we have chosen for our Cultural Engagement trips. Before choosing to join this trip you should first read the relevant sections of their website; www.eda.admin.ch. You can also check security updates in English on the following website; <http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/index.html>. It is also advisable to be aware of the travel warning issued by your own government. We ask that you take out Ingle Insurance which, in itself, will cover you against all issues other than terrorism, and can be upgraded prior to departure to cover all eventualities.

Your Health

All travellers joining our trips are assumed to be in good health and to have a sufficient level of fitness to complete their chosen itinerary. If you have an existing medical condition or disability you must make this known at the time of booking. If accepted on the trip, you must also make your condition known to the leader.

When selecting your trip please carefully read the itinerary and assess your ability to cope with our style of travel. Please contact us at info.en@babeltravel.com should you require any clarification on what is involved on your itinerary. For travellers over 70 years a

completed medical certificate is required. Babel Travel reserves the right to turn away, without recompense, any person who is found, at any time during their trip, to have concealed an existing medical condition. We also reserve the right to turn away any person who we consider incapable of completing the trip. If you are taking any form of medication, please make sure that you bring an adequate supply to last the duration of your trip and inform your leader at the start of the trip. You might not be able to obtain suitable medication during the trip

Although, there are no particular health requirements for this trip, as Iraq has its fair share of health issues, we recommend you consult your doctor before you travel about vaccinations and health risks. Respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis and food-related illness are common, and malaria is a risk in some parts of the country.

It is your responsibility to bring a small supply of items such as insect repellent, aspirin, anti-diarrheals and plasters for small cuts and abrasions. Some travellers like to bring along their own emergency medical kit which may be used by local medical staff in the case of accidents or illness. Your group leader is fully trained in basic first aid and will carry a very well stocked First Aid Kit which can be used in emergencies.

Asthma

For some travellers desert sands can bring on bouts of asthma. If you suffer from asthma even occasionally, we recommend you bring your medication as it cannot be administered by your trip leader and may not be readily available while you are travelling.

Drinking Water

Please DO NOT drink tap water, even in hotels or restaurants as it usually contains high levels of minerals than the water you are used to drinking in your own country. It is fine for a local to drink water from a tap as their bodies are conditioned to it, but for everyone else we highly recommend you drink bottled water at all times. Bottled water is found everywhere and is quite cheap. Upset stomachs generally occur quite quickly if you drink local water, and although it is not really serious - it can hamper your overall enjoyment of a country. Also, please aim to brush your teeth by using bottled water.

Are You Ready For This Adventure?

On most of our itineraries there are long travel days and some rough travelling in areas away from main tourist routes. Mountain passes, bumpy and windy roads can sometimes make for some real challenging travel experiences. If you have experienced motion sickness in the past, we highly recommend you consider medication to help ease the discomfort. On some occasions, we depart very early in the morning to make sure we get the most our time in the next destination. It should be made clear that travel in this part of the world is not for the faint-hearted. Roads are often in a bad state of repair and journeys can therefore be tiring.

The hustle and bustle of crowded bazaars, extreme temperatures, staring crowds, dust, pollution and poverty – all this will probably lead to a dose of culture shock. However you should view these differences as a wonderful and exciting challenge, rather than a deterrent.

As a developing country, Iraq does not have the amenities and facilities you would be used to in your country. Semi clean squat toilets are commonplace.

Overall, patience, understanding and a sense of humour will see you through and you'll no doubt grow to love this amazing place.

Women Travellers

Women travellers will raise a few eyebrows but will generally be treated with great respect. In general, it is best for women to travel in groups, and even better, with men.

Extreme Temperatures in Iraq

Most of Iraq has a hot arid climate. Summer temperatures average above 40C throughout most of the country and frequently exceed 50C or higher! Winter temperatures infrequently exceed 21C with maximums around 15 to 16C and night-time lows occasionally below freezing. Typically precipitation is low with most places receiving less than 250mm annually. Most rainfall occurs months of November to April. Rainfall during the summer is extremely rare except in the very north of the country.

February to April and September to December are the best times to visit the north, central and southern Iraq.

Money

Currency exchange rates often fluctuate. For the most up to date rates please refer to the following website: www.xe.com.

Iraqi Dinar (IQD) is the official currency, however Euros and US dollars are commonly accepted.

As at December 2010 USD 1= IQD 1, 100

You cannot change Iraqi currency into hard currency outside of Iraq. We recommend you bring only foreign cash into Iraq. Before leaving, calculate how much money you think you will need in either US dollars (often accepted in hotels), Euros or British Pounds and take that and a bit extra with you. We recommend you bring small denominations with you along with crisp, large notes. Any defects in the notes (creases, ink stamps and tears) will raise suspicion that you are a counterfeiter and will simply not be taken by moneychangers.

Travellers cheques, credit cards and foreign bank automatic teller machine cards or credit cards are NOT accepted in Iraq. There are many banks in Baghdad, Arbil, Basra and throughout Iraq but not all of them have foreign exchange facilities. Remember if you run out of money while in Iraq it can be difficult, expensive and time consuming to find banks that can transfer money over to you.

Since the introduction of the new Iraqi Dinar, its widespread acceptance and confidence has reduced the prominence of the US dollar, and many shopkeepers are now refusing to accept them. For this reason we recommend you carry mostly small notes in the form of Iraqi Dinars for daily spending cash. Be aware that most vendors do not like to make change for large notes.

Babel Travel recommends you take at least USD 1000 with you for your 15 day trip in Iraq. This will cover all optional activities, snacks, special clothing requirements, some souvenirs and other items. If you're a big shopper we recommend you bring more! Please take into

consideration the safety issues of carrying so much cash with you so bringing a money belt with you is absolutely essential for your trip to Iraq.

Please remember that all Babel Travel trip prices mean no hidden extras, no local payments or kitty and no compulsory single supplements.

Tipping

Coins will also prove very convenient in this tipping culture. Any tip that you wish to give your group leader, local guides or drivers in recognition of service is always appreciated.

People

As of December 2010 the population of Iraq is 35 million people. Around 80% of Iraq's population is Arab; the other major ethnic groups are the Kurds (15%), the Assyrians, the Iraqi Turkmen and others (5%), who mostly live in the north and north east of the country. Around 20 000 Marsh Arabs live in southern Iraq. The Iraqi population includes a community of around 30 000 Circassians, 15 000 Armenians, a community of 2 500 Chechens and around 500 Sub-Saharan African Arabs.

Language

Arabic is the national language of Iraq, but English is so commonly spoken. Kurdish is spoken in the Kurdistan region, in one of two varieties: Kurmanji and Sorani. Kurmanji is spoken in and around Dohuk while Sorani is spoken in and around Arbil (Hewlar) and Sulaymaniyah. These two varieties are mutually unintelligible. However, Arabic is also widely spoken, and the number of speakers of English is on the rise.

Dress

As a general guideline, clothing should be lightweight, loose fitting and easily washed. You should keep in mind that Iraq has very conservative attitudes towards dress, particularly in remote areas. The way you dress will often determine the degree of respect you receive from locals. Both men and women should keep legs, shoulders and upper arms covered at all times. Long pants, dull colours and lack of logos are ideal.

Laundry

Some of our hotels offer a laundry service however this may not be available in all accommodation. As self-service laundries are scarce in the country, we recommend you bring bio-degradable laundry detergent in case you need to handwash your clothes. Your leader can let you know the best places to do your laundry on the trip - usually at any 2 night stop to allow enough time for drying.

Communication

Email

Internet cafes can now be found almost everywhere in Iraq (in the large cities only). The cost for an hour is approx USD 2.

Phone

The Iraqi phone system is fairly good, although international calls can be expensive. A 3 minute call (to Europe) will cost approx. USD 6 from a hotel and approx. USD 4 from a telephone centre. Bringing a phone with SIM capability is a good idea, as a SIM card can be purchased on arrival for less than USD 50. Pre-paid cards are available everywhere.

Post

Posting letters and parcels is time-consuming and very costly. It will cost you between USD 50 and USD 100 to send a letter out of the country with courier services (FedEx or Aramex). Some major hotels in Baghdad, Arbil and Basra may be able to help you with posting letters or postcards back home.

Alcohol and Drugs

Alcohol is legal in Iraq and street vendors widely sell it, but asking for alcohol is asking to be identified as an outsider. Furthermore, while alcohol is legal many insurgent groups in Iraq have targeted alcohol vendors and users.

The possession or use of any illegal drugs is strictly prohibited in all the countries we visit. When overseas you are subject to local laws and the penalties for breaking the law are severe. In order to safeguard the interests of the group as a whole, our leaders are instructed to insist that any person found to be in possession of drugs leave the group immediately. The leader's decision on this matter is final.

If you need to carry certain drugs with you for purposes of medication, please ensure that you also carry a copy of your prescription.

Babel's philosophy of travel is one of respect towards everyone we encounter, and in particular the local people who make our destinations such special places. The exploitation of prostitutes is completely contrary to this philosophy. Our leader has the right to expel any member of the group if drugs are found in their possession or if they use prostitutes.

Religion

An estimated 98% of the population adheres to Islam, while the remainder of the population follows Christianity or other minor religions. Iraq is a Shia majority country and contains the sacred Shia cities of Najaf and Karbala. Most sources estimate that around 64% of Iraqis follow Shia Islam, and around 34% follow Sunni Islam, however the question of religious demographics is controversial and some Iraqis who follow Sunni Islam dispute these figures. Most Kurds are Sunnis, although the Feyli Kurds are largely Shia. Christians number about 250, 000 at December 2010, representing around 1.5% of the population. In 1980, 7% of the Iraqi population was Christian. Almost 800, 000 have fled to other countries, especially after the Invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2010 attacks against Christian churches.

Use common sense and courtesy when speaking to people. Brashly asking people you meet if they are Shia or Sunni is bad form. Talking about this topic before Iraqis themselves broach it is understandably rude. While the public is trying to get beyond the recent sectarian problems, Westerners often seem to them to know how to talk about little else and can seem very brash when spouting out stereotypes they have heard in the news, and which people usually do not fit into very cleanly. They will be polite, but the best rule is to think how you would feel in their place.

Ashura

Our November 27, 2011 departure coincides with the festival of Ashura, which is best viewed in Karbala. The Day of Ashura is on the 10th day of Muharram in the Islamic calendar (5 December in 2011) and marks the climax of the Remembrance of Muharram. It is commemorated by Shia Muslims as a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed at the Battle of Karbala. Some Shia Muslims observe mourning with a blood donation and flailing. Ritual flagellation involving the use of a zanjeer (a chain with blades) is also performed in order to demonstrate solidarity with Husayn. People mourn the fact that they were not present at the battle to fight and save Husayn and his family. Many Shia see taking part in Ashura as an absolution of sin.

Ramadan

Ramadan is a Muslim religious observance that takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar; the month in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. It is the Islamic month of fasting, in which participating Muslims do not eat or drink anything from true dawn until sunset. Fasting is meant to teach the person patience, sacrifice and humility. Ramadan is a time to fast for the sake of God, and to offer more prayer than usual. During Ramadan, Muslims ask forgiveness for past sins, pray for guidance and help in refraining from everyday evils, and try to purify themselves through self-restraint and good deeds.

This period is actually a wonderful time to travel to Muslim countries (we encourage you to travel then) as it gives you an opportunity to view first hand, the sacrifices people make for the sake of God. Sitting with a group of locals when they break their fast, can be one of the more rewarding aspects of your adventure. Approximate dates in 2011 are 1 August – 29 August 2011.

Your Fellow Babel Travellers

On group trips you will be exposed to all the wonderful things that comes with experiencing a destination with like-minded people. Your fellow Babel Travellers will most likely come from all walks of life, and from different countries. We ask you to have patience with all travellers for the sake of group dynamics. We want every one of you to have the best travel experience of your life. Being punctual helps the group. If you are asked to be in a place at a particular time, please ensure that you do so. Being late may mean you'll miss that special cultural performance, spend less time with a local family - or in some cases completely miss an important connection or journey. The best groups are the ones that work together as a team!

Trip Leader

Your Babel Travel trip leader is there to ensure that all aspects of the trip run smoothly. He/she will share their local knowledge, advise you on how to fill your free time and coordinate the day to day running of the trip, although occasionally he/she may need your understanding if things do not go according to plan. If you have any problems on the trip, please let your trip leader know so that steps can be taken to put it right.

In Iraq we also use the services of specialist guides at sights of particular historical interest, and specialised mountain guides for any trekking/ hiking activities in mountain regions. At Babel Travel we aim to support local guides who have specialised knowledge of the regions

we visit - and who better to hear it from than the locals themselves? If you were interested in delving deeper into the local culture then your leader can recommend a local guide service in most of the main destinations of your trip.

Sustainable Travel

We strongly believe that wherever we travel, we should take a responsible attitude with us. Sustainable Travel is about respecting the country we have chosen to visit. Your enjoyment of the trip should never be at the expense of the culture or the environment of the host country. Therefore, we believe that giving back to the communities we visit is essential. In Iraq we have built strong links with local communities, aid agencies, charities, women's and children's groups, hospitals - all of which directly rely on the assistance of donations and products purchased by our travellers and other visitors. We offer Babel travellers an opportunity to interact with locals at these organisations. It is the goal of this program to introduce you to people who are helping to changing the world for the better.

What To Take

What you need to bring will vary according to the trip style you have chosen, the countries you are visiting and when you are travelling. As a guideline, you should pack as lightly as possible - under 10kgs is a great idea! On the vast majority of our trips you are expected to carry your own luggage over short to medium distances (no longer than 20 minutes). Packing light is also crucial as there may be weight restrictions on local aircraft.

Due to the nature of this trip, cumbersome suitcases and wheelie bags are not recommended for Babel Travellers! Most group members carry their luggage in a backpack, although an overnight bag with a shoulder strap would suffice if you travel lightly. Smaller bags with wheels are acceptable (if it has carry straps) but you will need to carry these bags up and down stairs, over bumpy roads, through muddy streets etc. You will also need a day pack/bag to carry water and a camera etc for day trips or walking tours.

It is very important that your bags can be locked. It may be necessary to store your luggage separately (and unattended) from the group.

Checklist

The following is a guide to what you should bring along on your trip and is not meant to be a complete and absolute list. You are welcome to bring less, or more than what is mentioned below.

Travel documents: (your passport, visa, updated travel insurance, flights tickets, travel voucher)

Health requirements and any necessary medication

Money: cash/credit cards, money bag or pouch

First Aid Kit

Alarm clock and torch (flashlight)

Lightweight travel towel

Ear plugs can be very useful

A scarf or face mask for dust and sand

Phrase book

Sunscreen (with high sun protection factor and lip balm)

Sunglasses

A hat

Antibacterial hand gel (wet wipes etc)
Tampons (can be difficult to find on tour)
Day pack to carry your personal needs during the day
A lock for your backpacks - small and large
Conservative attire (you can purchase headscarfs in Baghdad, though they are not required)
Comfortable shoes with good grip and ankle support
Warm clothes

Please check recent temperatures before your trip departs.

Babel Travel leaders collect clothing for poorer village communities. If you have room in your luggage, warm children's clothes and shoes are particularly appreciated.

Your Belongings

Although it can be traumatic and distressing to lose personal belongings, remember that almost everything can be replaced. Your valuables are your responsibility so look after them. Keep items like cash, tickets and passports on your person in a hidden money belt or stored in the hotel safe. Leave all non-essential jewellery and other expensive items at home.

Once on the road you will find that most of our hotels have safety deposit boxes, which is the most secure way of storing your valuables.

Participation Form

All group members on a Babel Travel trip are required to sign a participation form on Day 1 of the trip. This will take place during the important welcome meeting. Please be aware that signing this form is an essential part of travelling with Babel Travel and is a requirement of all travellers.

Feedback

One of the many unique features of our Cultural Engagement journeys is that we putting together a mini documentary and website to show the world what life is really like inside Iraq. You are explorers and your input along with the interviews, documentation and notes is important to show our hosts how they can better understand or get involved. You are responsible for giving a voice to the new friends we make along the journey.

In addition, this trip is the first of its kind and we encourage you to provide suggestions, improvements and enhancements.

Thank you and we look forward to welcoming you.