

Iraq, Iran & Afghanistan

Trip notes: EAXX

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

Journey from Baghdad, north to the Kurdish heartland, south to the major Shia cities and holy sites of Karbala, Najaf and Nasiriyah and marvel at the legendary ruins of Babylon and Ur. In Iran, we'll explore Persepolis, Esfahan and Shiraz and spend a night with a nomad family. Finally in Afghanistan we'll explore the fascinating cities of Kabul, Herat and Mazar-I Sharif, hike the breathtaking Panjshir Valley, visit the ruined Buddhas in Bamiyan and marvel at the Band-I-Amir lakes.

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.

Day 14 Baghdad

Returning to Baghdad in the late morning (110 km; 2 hours) we have time to explore more of the city. On the morning of Day 15 you will be transferred to the Baghdad airport for your flight to Tehran.

Days 15-16 Tehran

After arriving at the Tehran airport you will be transferred to your Tehran hotel.

Tehran, Iran's capital, can be described as exciting, noisy and chaotic! With a population of 18 million, Tehran is a sprawling, modern city. One fifth of Iran's entire population live here and it's an ideal place to get accustomed to the Iranian way of life, with the best restaurants, shops and museums in the country.

On our walking tour of Tehran, we will visit the majestic Golestan Palace to see how the former Qajar rulers lived. We will take a wander through the expansive Tehran bazaar to the Imam Khomeini Mosque. We will view the many political murals that surround the former US Embassy to discover more about Iran's recent history. We'll finish the walking tour by relaxing as locals do – smoking a Qalyan (flavoured water pipe), drinking chai and eating dates at a local cafe. Tonight, we'll enjoy some fine Iranian cuisine and some traditional music at a local restaurant.

Day 17 Qom

Leaving the hustle and bustle of the Tehran behind, we travel by mini-van to the outskirts of the city. Here we visit the enormous holy shrine of Iman Khomeini, the father of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. When completed it will be one of the most important buildings in the Islamic World. Revered as the leader of the 1979 revolution, Iman Khomeini was laid to rest here in 1989. People from all over Iran travel here to pay their respects. Afterwards we'll do as the locals do and enjoy a picnic lunch on the lawn that surrounds the shrine. This is a great way to interact with locals and you will soon discover the warmth and friendliness they exude.

While here, we visit the nearby Behesht-e Zahra, a vast cemetery dedicated to the many Iranians who lost their lives during the Iran-Iraq war. Over 200 000 people are buried here and it serves as a moving reminder of the senselessness of war.

Travelling south along the desert road we reach Qom (2 hours), one of the holiest cities in Iran. Founded in the 9th century, Qom is a sacred city and place of annual pilgrimage for the Shiite branch of Islam thanks to the 17th century golden Hazrat-e Masumeh mosque built as a shrine over the tomb of Fatima, the sister of Imam. Qom is also one of the most

conservative and religious places in the country and spending some time here is a great way to gain an insight into how important Islam is to the Iranian people. Shiite scholars and students come from across the world to study in the Madrassas (Koranic schools) of Qom. During our visit here we will learn a little about the teachings of the Koran at these Madrassas.

Day 18 Kashan

Taking a local train we travel from Qom and reach the charming town of Kashan (2 hours). Kashan is famous for its exquisite carpets, silks, ceramics, copperware and rosewater. Our walking tour will see us discover some of the finest traditional houses in Iran on visits to the Khans of Khan-e Borujerdi and Khan-e Tabatabai. These 19th century khans were funded by wealthy merchants and feature elegant courtyards, lush gardens and intricate stonework.

Moving on, we'll wander through of one of the most impressive bazaars in the country, stop off to visit the Agha Bozorg Mosque and Madrasa, ramble through an old caravanserai and perhaps pop into the old mill where the miller will gladly show you the traditional method for grinding flour! After wards, we will relax in the lovely Fin gardens complete with fountains and pools fed by natural springs.

Tonight, we'll be the guests in a local family house where we will have an opportunity to learn how to make delicious Iranian food. Kashan is famous for having the country's tastiest khorosht (a thick meaty stew of vegetables and nuts) and fesenjun (a sauce of pomegranate juice, walnuts, aubergine and cardamom - usually served over chicken or even camel!). These dishes are some of the many delicious specialities that you will help prepare and, of course, eat! Spending time with this family will give you a fantastic insight into the lives of everyday Iranians, and will be especially eye-opening for the women in the group.

Day 19 Abyaneh

Travelling on from Kashan in our private van we reach Abyaneh (2 hours). Abyaneh is a rustic, red clay village at the foot of Karkus Mountains, 2500 m above sea level. Here traditions have endured the test of time.

The village is compact with narrow, sloping lanes. Here, the roofs of some houses are used to serve as the courtyard for other houses higher up on the slope. Intricate patterns and traditional poems are carved into the wooden doors. These poems are a window into history, giving us an insight into old Iranian culture.

Another interesting aspect of Abyaneh is the women's traditional costume. These outfits consist of a very colourful floral scarf and meticulously designed pleated pants.

On our walking tour through the village, you will see local craftspeople at work, and have plenty of opportunities to meet with the villagers. If we're lucky, we may even be able to stop into a local house for a chat, some tea and some dates.

Days 20-21 Esfahan

Leaving early in our private van, we reach Iran's most enchanting city, Esfahan (3 hours). It lies on the banks of the Zayandeh Rud River and is often described by the words: "Esfahan nesf-e Jahan" (Esfahan is half the world). This fascinating city has long attracted travellers from all over the world, and it is here where one can really appreciate the true grace and

beauty of Persian heritage.

We start our walking tour in the enormous Imam Square. Built in 1612 as a royal polo ground, Imam Square is one of the largest and finest public spaces in the world. Its entertainers, storytellers, preachers and silk route caravans have entranced travellers for centuries. Our local guide will give us an insight into life under Persia's greatest ruler, Shah Abbas, and guide us through the Iman Mosque, Sheikh Lotfallah Mosque, and the Ali Qapu Palace.

We finish the tour in Esfahan's lively bazaar, which seems to capture the very essence of ancient Persia. Here the aroma of exotic spices fills the air. The hustle and bustle of activity all around you is mesmerising: merchants selling gold, carpets and handicrafts, locals haggling for a bargain and craftsman busy at work.

It's easy to spend many hours strolling through here, and after relaxing in a local eatery, you will be able to do just that. The bazaar is a shopper's paradise, and is an excellent place to purchase souvenirs.

Day 21 is free for you to explore this wonderful city. Take time to wander along the city's many tree-lined boulevards. Make sure you take a walk by the Zayandeh River, stopping for a well deserved chai at one of the impressive bridges. A visit to the Jameh Mosque (Friday mosque), the Chehel Sotun Palace or perhaps the odd Manar Jomban (shaking minarets) is also highly recommended. Your leader can assist with these visits.

The abundance of fine Islamic buildings, most of which are covered in the blue mosaic tiles for which Iran is famous, the enormous bazaar, elegant gardens and impressive palaces will surely make Esfahan a highlight of your time in Iran.

Days 22-23 Yazd

We depart Esfahan and embark on a local bus ride to Yazd (5 hours).

Arriving in the ancient desert city of Yazd, you will be intrigued by its unique architecture. Badgirs (wind towers) are a feature of most of the buildings in the old city - they trap draughts and direct them into the houses below for cooling. Yazd retains a timeless feel. It was a major stop on the caravan routes to Central Asia and India during the Silk Road period and Marco Polo visited Yazd on his way to China.

It truly is a fascinating place to wander around. There are 12 different bazaars dotted around the city which make for some interesting exploring. Yazd is also Iran's centre of Zoroastrians - one of the world's oldest religions, and the state religion in Persia until the advent of Islam. Upon arrival, we will visit the Artashkadeh, the fire temple of the Zoroastrian community. Here we will see a flame that the Zoroastrians claim has been burning for more than 1 500 years! We will also visit the Towers of Silence, an old Zoroastrian burial ground where dead bodies were left to be devoured by vultures, before burying the remaining bones.

In the evening we will enjoy a meal in a traditional bathhouse that has been converted into a delightful restaurant.

On Day 23 we will tour the mazelike streets of the ancient mud brick old town to learn a little about the badgirs (wind towers) that keep Yazd's houses so cool in the baking summer months. We will also visit the impressive Amir Chakhmaq Complex, the Jameh Mosque and the Water Musuem.

The afternoon is free for you to explore more of the city. One great option is to hire a bicycle and ride through the large mud brick old town. Otherwise, you can simply relax in the courtyard of our hotel, a 19th century traditional mansion, smoke a qalyan or try a Yazd speciality - camel fesenjun!

Day 24 Zein-o-din Caravanserai

The morning is free for you to explore more of Yazd, before we depart for the magnificent Zein-o-din Caravanserai, situated in the desolate Dasht-e Lut desert. This is a classic caravanserai built during the 16th century under the orders of Shah Abbas, who is believed to have constructed 999 such caravanserais to promote commerce. A caravanserai is an inn where Silk Road traders could rest and recover from the day's journey.

Most typically, it was a building with a square or rectangular walled exterior with a single portal wide enough to allow heavily laden animals (such as camels and donkeys) to enter. The courtyard was open to the sky, and the inside walls of the enclosure were outfitted with a number of small bays to accommodate merchants and their servants, animals, and merchandise.

A night's stay here is a wonderful chance to relive the age when merchants travelled the remarkable Silk Road. Most of the rooms remain unchanged from days gone by, with carpets covering raised brick floors. Heavy curtains (rather than doors) separate rooms from the courtyard. Later in the evening we'll be entertained by Baluchistan dancers, who originate from Iran's border with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Day 25 Abarqu

After a hearty breakfast at the Caravanserai, there is time to relax on the rooftop with panoramic views of the surrounding desert. Leaving Zein-o-din Caravanserai we travel across mountain ranges and reach the historical town of Abarqu (5 hours). This typical central Iranian town is located in one of the most famous deserts in Iran, and with the stunning Zagros Mountains as a backdrop Abarqu is a perfect place to see another side of Iran.

Upon arrival we will visit the famous ice house, the Jameh Mosque, the 4000 year old cypress tree, the 11th century Gonbad Ali Dome and the Khan-e Aghazadeh Qajar-era mansion. This town gives you a true taste of life for every day Iranians.

Day 26 Nomad Stay

Leaving Abarqu early, we travel in our private van through the Fars province, in search of our nomad friends (5-6 hours).

Iran has over 500 different nomadic tribes and the largest and most important tribe is the Qashqai tribe. The Qashqai are Turkic speaking pastoral nomads who migrate between winter pastures near the Persian Gulf and summer pastures on the central Iranian Plateau. More than half the area north of Shiraz is home to several different tribes who have gathered in this region over centuries of nomadic existence. These nomadic tribes earn an income from herding cattle and making carpets.

Due to their nomadic existence, we actually have to go in search for the nomad family as there is no set location for them to stay. Arriving in the mid afternoon we are greeted by the

head of the tribe who will settle us into his tribe's nomad tent. This tent, or 'house of hair' is made predominately from goat and sheep wool and is our home for the night.

A stay here is a wonderful opportunity to observe the lifestyle of nomads as they herd their animals, tend to the fields and weave traditional carpets. After sharing a meal with our new friends, we are entertained with traditional nomad song and dance.

Please take note that due to the authenticity of this activity it is impossible to guarantee any set program. No two trips are identical, as each group will stay with a different family. But like any Babel Travel adventure, expect the unexpected. Really, anything can happen from a simple night in with local families to an invitation to a nomad wedding!

Days 27-28 Shiraz

Leaving our new friends, we travel through harsh landscape reaching the city of Shiraz (4-5 hours). This city evokes images of ancient Persia - exotic gardens, lavish mansions, rich red wine, silky woollen rugs, philosophy and poetry. Shiraz has also always been a renowned centre of learning, boasting many of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the country. Known as Iran's poetic capital, it was also home to two of Persia's most famous poets of the 13th and 14th centuries, Saadi and Hafez, whose mausoleums are here.

Our walking tour sees us visit both the Saadi and Hafez mausoleums where you can listen to locals being reciting poetry. Moving on we'll visit the Zand complex of the Karim Khani fortress, Vakil mosque and the Pars museum. We will finish the day by stopping off in one of Bazar-e Vakil's traditional teahouses.

On Day 28 we start out early with our local guide and drive to the cliff face royal tombs of Naqsh-e Rostam where Darius 1 and his successors are buried before continuing on to Persepolis, Iran's premier attraction. The legendary capital of Darius the Great was founded in 512 BC. At this time the Persian empire stretched from the Indus Valley to the Aegean and included Thrace, Armenia, Turkey, Assyria and even Lower Egypt.

Persepolis was as a magnificent setting for celebrations – especially Norouz (the New Year procession) the most important occasion in the Mazdean religion. In 330 BC Alexander the Great burnt the city to the ground, but many reminders of the city still remain.

On our return to Shiraz there is free time to explore more of the city. Why not wander the labyrinth of narrow streets in the old city visiting the traditional handicraft workshops and local markets? For enthusiastic sightseers the splendid mansion of Ghavam Orangery, the sumptuous Garden of Paradise, Nasiralmolk mosque and Khan Madrassa are all worthy of a visit.

Day 29 Tehran

Leaving early, we take the short 1 hour flight back to Tehran. No activities are included today but some of you may wish to explore some more of Tehran upon our return. Other major places of interest include the National Jewellery Museum, Carpet Museum, National Museum of Iran, the Glass and Ceramics Museum and the Islamic Museum.

On the morning of Day 30 you will be transferred to the Tehran airport for your flight to Kabul.

Days 30-32 Kabul

Arrive and check into our starting point hotel – Gandamak Lodge.

Kabul is a feast for the senses – an incessant cacophony of horns honking, donkeys braying and the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer; the air is filled with the aroma of qorna (a local stew that you will certainly sample); and the streets are alive with activity. You will enjoy watching the hustle and bustle of everyday life – women in burqas haggling in the bazaars, men chatting over a game of backgammon and children playing. Do not be surprised at the sound of helicopters, convoys or the occasional car bomb as this country struggles to provide security for its people. You will be briefed by security experts in an informal environment and armed guards will watch over you.

After our group meeting we'll embark on a walking tour of old Kabul. Sights include the Ka Farushi bird market, Char Chata Bazaar, Flower Street, Chicken Street (famous for its tourist fare; carpets, carvings and knives), Pul-i-Khisti Mosque, Abdul Rahman Mosque and the Id Gah Mosque (or the Blue Mosque). After the walking tour we will visit a few local charities and aid centres.

Late in the afternoon you can visit Bagh-e Babur, or Babur Gardens (AFN 300), and the female travellers in the group can visit Bagh-e Zanana which is a park and market for women only. It was designed as a place where women could sell their own products and merchandise directly.

Returning to our hotel, the Gandamak Lodge, we'll enjoy a meal together. After dinner we can stop in for a drink at the bar downstairs to meet security contractors, NGOs workers and war correspondents before drifting off to sleep in a comfortable, colonial style room.

On Day 32 we'll embark on Kabul's secret mansion tour visiting closed homes and embassies.

Later in the day we'll visit the Afghan National Museum (10am - 4pm weekdays, 10am - 1pm Fridays; AFN 250), the destroyed and abandoned Darul Aman Royal Palace and former wealthy neighbourhood. We will also visit the cemetery, the Daoud Kahn memorial, Kolola Pushta fort and Tajbeg Palace.

Late in the afternoon we'll visit the Bala Hissar fort and walk along the top of Kabul's old walls. It's an enjoyable hike and you will be rewarded with views over the city. In the evening we'll visit an Afghan women's help group for a night of learning, food and laughter.

As there is so much to see and do in Kabul, you may want to spend another night here after the trip finishes.

Other places of interest include the British Cemetery where foreigners are buried in Kabul, along with the Memorial plaques commemorating the ISAF forces killed in recent years. Also worth visiting is the famous Intercontinental Hotel once run by the Taliban, the infamous soccer stadium and the Kabul Golf Club.

Day 33 Bagram

Setting off early we travel to Istalif (35 km; 1 hour), then via the Shamali Plain to Bagram.

The first stop today is Lake Qargha. Described as Kabul's lakes district, Lake Qargha is only

11 km west of the city. The Kabul Golf Club is located here and swimming and boating are popular on the lake with plans for water sports in the future. Paghman Gardens is a popular place where people spend the weekends with friends and relatives. At the entrance is the European style monumental gate, a smaller version of Paris' Arc de Triomphe.

Previously thousands of merchants thrived here, but today Istalif is a horrible reminder of the devastation caused by conflict. Despite being nearly destroyed in the war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, pottery tradesmen have started to return in small numbers and the village has begun to come back to life. The colours typically used by the artisans are royal blue and deep turquoise. Their wares range from salad bowls and plates to jugs, teacups and saucers.

The Shamali valley is famous for its fertile plains which produce grapes, almonds and walnuts. This agricultural area is also well known for its strategic geographic location - a buffer and link between the Hindu Kush Mountains and Kabul city. Due to its position, the Shamali has been the frontline for fighting throughout Afghanistan's long history of conflict. The area was densely mined and constant clashes between the warring factions resulted in the majority of the Shamali population fleeing their homes to seek refuge in Kabul or overseas.

After spending a few hours at a children's charity we travel onto Bagram.

Bagram Air Base, or Bagram Airfield as it is referred to by US military, is a militarised airport and housing complex. It is situated next to the ancient city of Bagram, 12 km southeast of Charikar.

Bagram Air Base played a key role during the Soviet War in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, serving as a base of operations for troops and supplies. Bagram was also the initial staging point for the invading Soviet forces at the beginning of the conflict, with parts of two Soviet Airborne Troops' divisions being deployed there.

Following the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the rise of the Mujahidin, Afghanistan plunged into civil war. From 1999 onwards, control of the base was contested between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, often with each controlling territory on opposite sides of the base.

During the US led invasion of Afghanistan, the Bagram Air Base was secured by a team from the British Special Boat Service. As of mid-June 2010, the Air Base has been housing more than 15,000 US and other armed services. It is the biggest military base in Afghanistan comprising of three large hangars, a control tower, and numerous support buildings.

We aim to stay at the Bagram Air Base, but if this cannot be organised then we'll stay at another military base nearby.

Days 34-35 Panjshir Valley

Before setting off for the Panjshir Valley we explore the ancient town of Bagram (Kapisa). This historical town was once a key passage from India along the Silk Road, leading west through the mountains towards Bamiyan.

A further 30 minutes north is the town of Charikar. Following the Soviet intervention in 1979, Charikar was the scene of heavy fighting between Afghan guerrillas (from their

strongholds in the Panjshir Valley) and Soviet and Afghan army units. The city's population of around 130,000 is mostly made up of Tajiks. Charikar is known for its pottery and high-quality grapes.

On the way to Astana we drive through the scenic the Panjshir Valley. You will feel like you're a whole world away from Kabul - the pace of life is significantly slower here. The Panjshir Valley's dramatic landscape makes it ideal for trekking. This area has been the centre of Afghan resistance against the invading Soviets and the Taliban.

The Panjshir Valley has the potential to become a major center of emerald mining. Crystals upwards of 190 carats had been found in the valley, reported to rival in quality the finest crystals of the Muzo mine in Colombia.

Before arriving in Astana, we pass through the village of Bazarak where we'll visit the mausoleum of Ahmed Shah Masood, the legendary Mujahideen fighter and Afghan national hero. An exceptional military strategist, Masood thwarted the Soviets nine times in their attempts to conquer the Panjshir Valley. He continued his struggle against the Taliban until he was assassinated by them on 9 September 2001. Masood was given the name "The Afghan who won the Cold War" by the Wall Street Journal. We will also have the opportunity to meet some of Masood's family members before moving onto Astana.

After about 7 hours we reach the village of Astana, nestled high in the Panjshir Valley. Astana is small enough that you can easily explore it on foot.

On Day 35 we'll visit some local villages, go on patrol with the Afghan Army and meet and work with a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). American/UN reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan has sparked a development boom in the valley with the construction of new modern roads and a new radio tower that allows valley residents to pick up radio signals from the Afghan capital, Kabul

There are many landmines and unexploded ordinances (UXO) in the Panjshir Valley despite a continued presence by ISAF (International Security Assistance Force). Stay on well used paths and steer well clear of red-painted rocks. White-painted rocks indicate paths that have been cleared of mines. Also, it is important that you do not stray more than a couple of metres from the main access road.

Days 36-38 Bamiyan/Band-I Amir Lakes

Leaving Astana early we travel down the Panjshir Valley to Charikar. Here, we'll board an old Russian jet bound for Bamiyan. Please note that this may change and we may travel overland - it all depends on the security situation of the day. Flying over majestic mountains we arrive at arguably the most picturesque region in the country; Bamiyan province. Bamiyan lies at an altitude of around 2, 500 m and is much cooler than Kabul.

Situated on the ancient Silk Road, Bamiyan was at the crossroads between the East and West when all trade between China and the Middle East passed through it. It was also the site for several Buddhist monasteries. During the 5th century two colossal Buddha statues were carved into the side of a sandstone cliff.

Bamiyan was a hippy trail fixture during the sixties, when Westerners came to visit the world's largest Buddha statues, the tallest measuring 53 m. In March 2001, the Buddhas became a symbol of Taliban brutality. Decreeing that statues were idolatrous the Taliban demolished them with dynamite. Even though the two large Buddhas are almost completely

destroyed, their outlines and some features are still recognisable.

Day 36 is a travel day (4-12 hours). Upon arrival in Bamiyan we'll explore the citadel of Shahr-e Zohak (City of Zohak or Red City). On Day 37 we will visit the Bamiyan caves and learn a bit about the rebuilding efforts in the area through a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). If we're lucky, we may be able to take part in a landmine clearing exercise. On the night of Day 37 we'll have a meal with a local Hazara family.

On Day 38 we will visit the Band-I-Amir lakes with a quick stop at Darya Ajdahar (Valley of the Dragon). Very remote and very desolate, Band-I Amir are a stunning group of 5 turquoise lakes; their colour attributed to the rich mineral content of the water. These lakes sit high in the Hindu Kush Mountains at an altitude of 2900 m, and in 2008 were declared the country's first national park.

There are many landmines and unexploded ordinances (UXO) in Bamiyan despite a continued presence by ISAF. Stay on well used paths and steer well clear of red-painted rocks. White-painted rocks indicate paths that have been cleared of mines. Also, don't stray more than a couple of metres from the main access road.

Days 39-40 Mazar-I Sharif

After an early morning flight we reach Mazar-I Sharif.

Mazar-I Sharif is the third largest city in Afghanistan, with a population of more than 700,000. The Shrine of Hazrat Ali, which was later rebuilt as the Blue Mosque, was constructed on the site and the town of Mazar grew around it.

Following 9/11, Mazar was the first Afghan city to fall to the Northern Alliance. The Taliban's defeat in Mazar quickly turned into a rout from the rest of the north and west of Afghanistan. On 9 November 2001 the city was recaptured by the Northern Alliance with help from the US.

Upon arrival we'll explore Mazar visiting the Shrine of Hazrat Ali (Blue Mosque), the local markets and see a game of Buzkashi.

Early on Day 40 we'll explore Mujahideen caves at an old Russian outpost, visit the Qala-i-Jangi fortress and the ancient town of Balkh and, if time permits, we will visit the notorious Sheberghan Prison. Please note that this activity may not be possible due to safety concerns in the region.

The Battle of Qala-i-Jangi took place between 25 November and 1 December 2001, just south of Mazar-I Sharif. It started with the uprising of foreign Taliban prisoners held at Qala-i-Jangi fortress, and escalated into one of the bloodiest conflicts of the War in Afghanistan. One of the 86 prisoners to survive the battle was John Walker Lindh, an American who had moved to Afghanistan to help the Taliban fight the Northern Alliance. Robert Young Pelton, while working for CNN, was the only journalist who managed to interview Lindh.

In the evening we'll visit a local Tajik family home for a traditional dinner and some Pattan dancing.

Days 41-42 Herat

After flying via Kabul we reach the western city of Herat.

Herat is a big, relatively wealthy city situated near the Iranian border. It is the fourth largest city in Afghanistan, with a population of 600,000. Persian-speaking Tajiks make up the majority of the population. Tajiks are ethnically the same as the Persians from the eastern parts of Iran.

At present, Afghanistan's new central government have full control of Herat. The Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police provide security in the city as well as the whole province. The Italian led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) also has a presence in this area.

While in the city we'll wander through the old town, visiting the The Juma Masjid and the silk bazaar. Here you can try your hand at bargaining for a carpet! We'll also visit the Musalla Complex, about 2 km north of the Citadel. After a long day ambling around the town, why not relax and unwind in one of the huge subterranean hamams.

We'll spend the morning of Day 42 at a centre that supports street children and their families. In the afternoon we'll visit the Khwajah Abdullah Ansari shrine.

Late in the afternoon we'll travel 8 km north east of the city and visit the Khwajah Abdullah Ansari shrine, also known as Gazar Gah. The shrine is a funerary compound (hazira) that houses the tomb of the Sufi mystic and saint Khwajah Abdullah Ansari, also known as the guardian pir (wise man) of Herat.

Days 43-44 The Heart of Afghanistan

Our last few days will be a unique treat. After returning by air from Herat, we travel an hour outside Kabul towards the border with Pakistan. Along the way we will visit the historic battlefield of Gandamak and the infamous Puli Charke prison. We will wind our way along dramatic mountains ending up in a small Pashtun village. Here we will be greeted by Pashtuns in traditional style. What will follow will be a night of feasting, Pattan dancing and storytelling by Mujahidin fighters.

This tribe once protected the region for the Soviets but when they began to bomb their villages they joined the insurgency. Today they are on the fence knowing that progress lies with the new government but that the Taliban may return. We will learn about the code of the Pashtun; the way disputes are settled and how blood feuds work.

The following day we will hike the Mujahideen trail guided by fighters and learn about the hard life in Afghan countryside. Sit inside a Mujahideen cave, visit a Russian outpost and see if you can shoot as well as the Mujahideen. Drink from a natural spring and see how the Afghans resisted outsiders for over two decades. After a lunch overlooking a natural stream and picturesque mountains in the distance we will see why people love this country and its people.

This region is close to the Tora Bora mountain range, the former hiding place of Osama bin Laden. In December 2001, it was the location of one of the most important battles of the War in Afghanistan and was the only realistic chance the US forces had of capturing Osama bin Laden.

While here you are free to wander around the village to take in traditional Afghan life. We are introduced to Pashtun cooking and customs while enjoying traditional Pashtun meals

during our stay.

We stay in our homestay for 2 nights. Basic twin share and shared facilities are provided.

Day 45 Kabul

Returning to our Kabul hotel in the early afternoon, there is time for a farewell lunch and a chance to reflect on the wonders we have seen. Day rooms are reserved until 6pm on Day 45.

You are free to depart at any time after 6pm on Day 45, but please arrange for departing flights after 8pm in case of any travel delays. If you plan to linger a little longer in Kabul, post accommodation can be organised through our hotel. Arrival and departure transfers are included in the price of your trip regardless of when you depart Kabul.

Arrival and Departure Transfers

Both arrival and departure transfers (in Baghdad and Kabul at the start/end of the trip) are included in the price of this trip. Departure/arrival transfers for when you depart/arrive in Baghdad, Tehran and Kabul are also included in the price of the trip.

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
Kabul
Afghanistan

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

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: Walking tour and Golestan Palace entry in Tehran, Entry into the Hazrat-e Masumeh shrine in Qom, Entry into the traditional houses, family visit and cooking demonstration in Kashan, Guided tour and entry into Iman Mosque, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and the Ali Qapu Palace in Esfahan, Entry into all sights in our walking tour in Yazd, Baluchistan Dancing performance at the Zein-o-din Caravanserai, Entry into all sights in our walking tour in Abarqu, Guide and transport at the Nomad Stay, Entry into all sights in our walking tour list in Shiraz, Entry and guided tour in Persopolis and Naqst-e Rostam.

AFGHANISTAN: Walking tours in Kabul, Herat, Mazar-I-Sharif, Istalif, entry into the Bamiyan cave complex, visit to the Band-I Amir lakes, exploration in the Panjshir valley, visit to Masood's tomb in Bazarak, homestay, various dinners/entertainment with local families, visits to 10 different charities/NGOs/PRTs/Military Bases/Political and Cultural Groups, visit to the Sheberghan prison and the Qala-i-Jangi fortress.

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 (40 nights), homestay (2 nights), Caravanserai (1 night), Nomad Stay (1 night)

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

44 breakfasts, 44 lunches, 44 dinners. Allow USD 100 for snacks.

A typical breakfast in hotels in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan 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 in Afghanistan to meals with a local family in Iran. The large majority of meals will be traditional fare with between 1 and 10 meal choices in each location.

Getting Around

Private vehicle, taxi, local train, local bus, metro, ferry, plane, walking, camel, donkey

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.

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: Babel Travel will organise your flight from Tehran to Kabul. This flight is included in the price of your trip.

AFGHANISTAN: The national carrier, Ariana Afghan Airlines, is flying with a small fleet of about 14 Airbus and Boeings (plus Antonovs). They have daily flights from Dubai, and periodic flights from Frankfurt, Islamabad, Delhi, Istanbul, Baku and Tehran. Ariana is particularly bad at keeping to schedules, flights can be cancelled or delayed without notice.

A far better option is the independent operator Kam Air, which has twice daily flights from Dubai, twice weekly flights from Delhi and weekly flight from Almaty, Istanbul and Mashad. Some of the flights on the Dubai to Kabul route stop in Herat if you'd prefer to enter the country there. Pamir Airways is a new private airline that offers daily flights between Kabul and Dubai, some stopping in Herat.

Air Arabia flies 4 times per week from Sharjah - however they have currently suspended operations. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flies 4 times per week from Islamabad and 1 time per week from Peshawar to Kabul. Another route in may be via through Tehran or Mashad in Iran. Iran Air has periodic flights from Tehran to Kabul. Air India operates six flights a week from Delhi to Kabul.

The best and safest airline between Dubai and Kabul is Safi Air. They are the only safety accredited airline in Afghanistan. Safi is the only Afghan airline allowed to fly into Europe and has direct flights to Frankfurt, Germany. The service is good and planes are sound. Staff are professional.

Visas

It is your responsibility to arrange visas before you travel. All travellers require a visa to enter Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. 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.

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: Visas for Iran are required by all nationalities. Obtaining a visa for Iran is two-step process:

Step 1: An authorisation code for your visa must be issued by The Iranian Ministry of Foreign affairs.

Step 2: A visa stamp for your passport must be obtained at an Iranian Embassy once the authorization code has been issued.

How to apply for your Authorisation Code: Please immediately fill in the visa application form sent to you by our sales team at the time of booking. You need to fill in your entire program for your stay in Iran. If you are arriving early or staying on afterwards this needs to be written on your application form. As you are technically the responsibility of the Babel Travel operator for your entire stay, only Babel Travel booked activities/accommodation are able to be nominated as part of this visa application. We have filled in the trip itinerary for you.

Return it together with a scanned copy of the first page of your passport via email to info.en@babeltravel.com as soon as possible

Please ensure all details are correct before sending. Any errors may result in your visa being denied or delayed. Please read important visa notes below.

Our agent in Iran will process the applications for the group with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It takes between 3-5 weeks, depending on your nationality for your authorisation code to be issued. All applications are submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 75 & 60 days prior to the first travel date. Applications are only submitted once minimum numbers for the trip to run (4) have been reached.

We recommend your flight to Iran should be as close to the starting date as possible. We also recommend your flights dates should be changeable in case of delays at the embassy issuing the visa.

When approved, your authorisation code will be faxed to the embassy that you nominated in your application. Our Iranian operator will then notify Babel Travel of your authorisation

code via email. We will then inform you. It is vital that you provide us with an email contact at time of booking. On occasions the local operator may contact you directly regarding the information provided for visa processing.

How to obtain your visa stamp: Once you have received your authorisation code from our agent (it will come to you as an email at your nominated email address) immediately take or courier your passport along with your visa fee and photos to your nominated Iranian Embassy to obtain the visa.

The cost of the actual visa needs to be covered by you. Please check your relevant embassy for visa costs.

If you wish to send your passport via mail we recommend that you do this through express post or courier service.

The turnaround time for your visa to be stamped in your passport and returned to your home address may be 3-4 days. Please note that Iranian embassies and consulates worldwide may only open for 2 or 3 days a week due to the large amount of public holidays in Iran. Please check with your nominated Iranian Embassy for their opening times and processing times for visas.

Once your code has been authorised, it is essential that you provide a photo of yourself with your passport to the embassy. For women we recommend you provide a photo with your hair covered by a headscarf (not a hat). If you wish to personally collect your visa at the designated embassy you must also arrive wearing a headscarf.

If you have any questions regarding this process, please feel free to email info.en@babeltravel.com

Important Visa Notes:

1. Visa costs fluctuate and vary, but are usually between EUR 40-70 depending on your nationality. Once your day tourist visa is issued you must enter Iran within 90 days.
2. Entry visas are required by all nationalities before arrival into Iran. They CANNOT be obtained at either the Tehran airport or at any of Iran's border crossings. There has been talk of some nationalities getting a 7 day visa on arrival at the Tehran airport but this is entirely up to the immigration official on the day and we don't recommend you do this. Extending your visa is all but impossible to achieve.
3. Please check that the embassy issues you with a tourist visa and not a business visa (the stamp in your passport must state that the visa is a tourist one). If you are issued with a business visa hotels will charge you the business travellers rates which are often far higher than the tourist rates.
4. 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 Iranian 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) is 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 Iran will be disallowed.

5. Upon arrival in Iran women not wearing an Islamic headscarf, long sleeves, covered shoes and a loose fitting skirt or pants, a coat that comes down to above your knees may be refused entry into the country (to avoid this problem bring with you a thin full length raincoat if you choose to buy a manteau after you arrive). A manteau is a loose fitting trench coat that comes down to just above your knees and is required by law to be worn by all women in Iran. Men must also be conservatively dressed wearing long trousers upon arrival, or they too may be refused entry. Please check important notes in these trip notes for more information on local dress

6. When you fill out your application form don't just write 'retired' or 'student', please clarify your job.

For your nearest Iranian Embassy please check the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran website www.mfa.gov.ir

AFGHANISTAN: Tourist visas are issued for foreign nationals who are interested in travelling to Afghanistan individually or with a group for the purpose of visiting the country or their relatives. This type of visa is issued by the Afghan Missions abroad. The type of visa is valid for one month, and can be extended only once by the Ministry of Interior with the agreement of the Afghan Tourism Organisation. You CANNOT obtain a visa at the Kabul airport or at any overland border crossings. Visa costs vary according to the nationality.

You will 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.

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.

A visa will be flatly refused if your passport contains evidence of travel to Israel. This is not confined to just an Israeli stamp in your passport. You will also be refused an Afghani 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 Afghanistan will be disallowed.

To apply for a visa, contact the Afghan embassy in your country of origin. For more information visit: www.mfa.gov.af/Visa.asp

Permits and Other Legal Requirements

Registration is obligatory within 3 days of arrival in Baghdad. 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! Registrations are not necessary in Iran or Afghanistan.

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. Iraqi 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. It's normally fine to photograph most things in Iran and Afghanistan, again ask your trip leader for advice.

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 of 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 developing countries, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan 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, Iran and Afghanistan

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.

IRAN: As Iran is a desert county it can have extreme weather! Temperatures can reach approximately 45-50C in summer, which means that it can be quite uncomfortable for those not used to this kind of weather. At the other extreme, the winter months can be exceptionally cold. The best time to visit Iran is between April-May and September-October.

AFGHANISTAN: Temperatures in the north can be below freezing for most of the winter, and snow in the higher elevations is common. In higher areas such as Kabul (1700 m), summer temperatures can be 35C and winter around 0C. The most pleasant weather in Kabul is during April, May, June and September-October. The altitude in Bamiyan is 2500 m and many of the mountain passes are between 2700 m and 3400 m. It will get cold – even in summer!

Money

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

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

As at December 2010 EURO 1 = IQD 1, 500

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.

IRAN: Iranian Rial (IRR) is the currency in Iran. As of December 2010, EUR 1 = IRR 14,300

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

Iran is purely a cash economy. This means you cannot use your Visa Card, Mastercard, ATM Card or any kind of western Travellers Cheques while in Iran. Only Cash can be used in Iran. Euros and US Dollars are the only hard currencies accepted at Iranian banks and money-changers (please don't bring British Pounds as it is very difficult to find banks that will change these notes). Having those notes changed into Iranian Rials is a fairly simple exercise. Please make sure that all the notes are unmarked and undamaged in any way and should have been printed since 1996. New and fresh notes are preferred in most banks.

You'll get a slightly higher rate for larger notes (50 and 100 notes) but bring plenty of smaller denominations also (5,10,20 etc). Banks and money-changers can be found in most of the places that we'll visit throughout the country. The largest Iranian Rial note is the IRR 20 000 note (EUR 1.5) but the IRR10 000 notes (EUR 50) are far more widely used. Thankfully new Iranian Travellers Cheques make dealing with such large numbers of Rials much easier. It's a lot safer and easier than carrying around huge wads of notes. It's especially useful for people who plan to buy expensive souvenirs. These cheques are available in 1 million and 500,000 Rial denominations and can be organised easily in most Iranian banks. Changing them back into Iranian Rial notes is trouble free.

Note: you cannot change Iranian Rials into hard currency outside of Iran. Upon arrival at the Tehran airport there are a few places where you can change money and we recommend you change some money at the airport before departing. Remember if you run out of money while in Iran it can be difficult, expensive and time consuming to find banks that can transfer money over to you. Before leaving for Iran calculate how much money you'll think you'll need in either EUROS or US dollars and take that, and a bit extra with you.

AFGHANISTAN: Afghani (AFN) is the currency of Afghanistan. As of November 2010, USD 1 equals 44 Afghanis, while EUR 1 trades at about 57 Afghanis.

One Afghani = 100 puls. Notes are in denominations of AFN 1,000, 500, 100, 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1.

Afghanistan is purely a cash economy. This means travellers cannot use their Visa Card, Mastercard, Credit Cards, ATM Card or any kind of Travellers Cheques while in Afghanistan. US dollars, Euros and British Pounds are the only hard currencies accepted at Afghani banks and money-changers. Having those notes changed into Afghani currency is a fairly simple exercise. Please make sure that all the notes are unmarked and undamaged in any way and have been printed since 2003. New and fresh notes are preferred in most banks. US currency is favoured but only new "big head" notes are accepted. These are recently printed notes with the larger photos of Presidents.

You cannot change Afghani currency into hard currency outside of Afghanistan. At the airport in Kabul airport there are a few places where you can change money (at a poor rate), therefore we recommend you change money in your country of origin. Before leaving for Afghanistan, calculate how much money you think you will need in either Euros, US dollars or British Pounds and take that and a bit extra with you.

Remember if you run out of money while in Afghanistan it can be difficult, expensive and time consuming to find banks that can transfer money over to you. There are only 4 ATMs in Kabul, and withdrawing money is often problematic and not guaranteed.

Babel Travel recommends you take at least USD 3000 with you for your 45 day trip in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. 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.

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

Tipping

Coins and small notes can 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.

Language

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: Persian (or Fārsi) is the national language of Iran. It is widely spoken in Iran as well as Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It has had a considerable influence on neighboring languages, particularly the Turkic languages in Central Asia and the Caucasus' as well as the South Asian languages of Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi. Turkish is understood in Western Iran as is Arabic in the south of the country.

AFGHANISTAN: Dari, an Afghan dialect of Persian, is the mother tongue of about half the population. Pashto is the native language for about 35%, mainly in the South and East. About 11% speak a Turkic native language, primarily Uzbek and Turkmen, and there are also minor languages such as Aimak. Most people speak more than one language; Dari is the historical lingua franca. Today English is also widely spoken in Afghanistan. Signs in English are now common all over the country. A small language phrase book is recommended and we encourage you to learn the basics. Your leader will be happy to help you learn simple phrases.

Dress

As a general guideline, clothing should be lightweight, loose fitting and easily washed. You should keep in mind that Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan 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. It is essential that women wear headscarves in Iran and Afghanistan.

IRAN: Iran is a traditional Islamic nation and a strict dress code is enforced throughout the country. The code of dress must be adhered to at all times. Men must wear long trousers at all times and generally keep themselves neat and tidy. Loose fitting cotton pants are preferable for the Iranian heat. Short sleeved shirts that cover your shoulders and open toed sandals are now acceptable for men - ankles must be covered. Men must wear full length shirts at religious sites.

Women must wear the hejab at all times, apart from in their hotel bedrooms of course. A hejab consists of the manteau, a loose fitting trench coat that comes down to just above your knees plus a headscarf. A headscarf can be of any colour but you'll be better received if you're wearing darker tones. It is now perfectly acceptable for women to wear their headscarf that shows some of their fringe and you'll see many ladies doing so.

A manteau can be purchased in Tehran (approximately EUR 18) in some of the shops along Ferdosi street, a short walk away our hotel. Headscarves are available for about EUR 5. Your leader will advise you of what attire is appropriate during the welcome meeting. Upon arrival in Iran women not wearing a headscarf, long sleeves, sealed shoes and a loose fitting skirt or pants may be refused entry into the country (to avoid this problem bring with you a thin full length raincoat if you choose to buy a manteau after you arrive). Please don't bring any tight fitting clothing with you to Iran as it's forbidden to show any hint of the shape of your body. Many Iranian women wear western style clothing and you'll be shocked at how trendy these girls can be. Make up, lipstick and nail-polish are all the rage. The most comfortable clothes to wear underneath your manteau are full length, lightweight cotton garments like trousers or even skirts. Women must also wear covered shoes or sandals that cover their ankles and skin.

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.

Email

Internet cafes can now be found in many places in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan (in large cities only). The cost for an hour is approx USD 2.

Phone

IRAQ: The local phone systems are 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.

IRAN: Despite massive growth in the domestic Iranian mobile phone market and promises from the Iranian government to open up to foreign companies the Iranian mobile phone network is as yet incompatible with systems in other countries. So, at present, your own mobile phone most probably will not work in Iran. Renting Iranian mobile phones and SIM cards can be expensive and time consuming. The local phone systems are fairly good, although international calls can be expensive

AFGHANISTAN: Fixed line services are available in major cities (digital in Kabul) and mobile phones in most cities. Local SIM cards are available with Roshan being the most reliable service with the widest coverage. SMS is possible to most countries and is often SMS texts are the most efficient and cost effective way to communicate with friends and family. SIM cards cost USD 5, local calls are 5Af/minute (10 cents/min). Outside of major cities your options are limited to a satellite phone. The Thuraya sat phone is an excellent choice for continuous sat phone communications in this region. Please have your phone "unlocked" before arrival and a local "top up" card only works if you have purchased a local SIM card upon arrival. Local rates are reasonable to overseas location. Roaming is not recommended due to the extremely high surcharges. Blackberry service only works in major cities and there may be a surcharge for data. Skype is an excellent way to call both mobile phones and land lines where reliable internet service is available.

Post

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: The postal service is relatively good and stamps are available everywhere. Some major hotels in Tehran, Shiraz and Esfahan will be able to help you with posting letters or postcards back home. An overseas stamp for postcards will cost approximately EUR 2. Posting of parcels can be time-consuming however, and contents of parcels normally have to pass customs inspection before they are sealed for posting.

AFGHANISTAN: The postal service is adequate and stamps are available in some major hotels. An overseas stamp for postcards will cost approximately USD 3. Posting of parcels can be time-consuming however, and contents of parcels normally have to pass customs inspection before they are sealed for posting. You will not be able to predict receipt or deliver of mail. FedEx, DHL and other couriers service the main cities in Afghanistan but are expensive and must clear customs.

Alcohol and Drugs

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: Alcohol is strictly forbidden in Iran and severe penalties will be incurred by anyone attempting to bring it into the country. Drug laws are also extremely strict and travellers face lengthy jail terms if caught. If found, pork, obscene material (magazines, DVDs etc), and controversial literature will all be confiscated by custom officials. Upon arrival, you as a foreigner will likely be whisked through customs but note that random bag checks do commonly occur.

AFGHANISTAN: Being an Islamic country, alcohol consumption is illegal. It is, however, tolerated in some western restaurants in Kabul. Bringing alcohol into Afghanistan is a serious offense as is the importation or exportation of military, antique and other goods.

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

IRAQ: 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.

IRAN: Religion in Iran is dominated by the Twelver Shi'a branch of Islam, which is the official state religion and to which about 89% of Iranians belong. About 9% of Iranians belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, mainly Kurds and Iran's Balochi Sunni. The remaining 2% are non-Muslim religious minorities, including Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians.

AFGHANISTAN: Religiously, Afghans are over 99% Muslims: approximately 80-89% Sunni, 10-19% Shi'a, and 1% other. There are about 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs living in different cities, mostly in Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Ghazni.

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 come 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, Iran and Afghanistan 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 change 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 jewelry 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, Iran and Afghanistan. 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.