

ASIA · HISTORY · SACRED SITES · CULTURE · OFF THE BEATEN PATH · MOUNTAINS



Iraq

Iraq holds the ruins of Babylon and Ur, the golden shrines of Najaf and Karbala, the reed villages of the southern marshes and the mountain valleys of Kurdistan. Tourism is still in its infancy and conditions differ sharply between regions, so read the FCDO advice first. Those who go find overwhelming hospitality, sweet tea everywhere and history on a scale few countries can match.

**The UK Foreign Office (FCDO) advises against all travel to parts of Iraq.**
Read the latest FCDO travel advice before planning a trip. Your travel insurance may be invalid if you travel against FCDO advice.
FCDO advice last updated 22 July 2026.

 CAPITAL Baghdad	 CURRENCY Iraqi dinar (IQD) £1 ≈ IQD 2,023	 LANGUAGE Arabic, Kurdish	 BEST TIME Mar–May, Oct–Nov
 DAILY BUDGET £40–£180 ££ Moderate	 PLUGS Type C, D, G 230V · UK plugs fit	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 9h via Istanbul, Doha or Dubai ~£450–£850 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+3 standard time

Iraq falls into two travel zones. The Kurdistan Region in the north, with its own government and airports at Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, has the most developed tourism: Erbil's citadel and bazaar, mountain roads to Rawanduz and hilltop Amadiya, and picnics by waterfalls. Federal Iraq to the south holds the great Mesopotamian sites. A typical first trip, usually with a local guide, runs from Baghdad south to Babylon, Karbala and Najaf, then on to Ur near Nasiriyah and the marshes around Chibayish, finishing in Basra. Two weeks covers both zones by air and road.

Very few Western tourists visit, so you will be a curiosity and frequently invited for tea, lunch or a family visit. Costs are moderate: simple hotels and kebab-and-rice meals are cheap, but guides and drivers add up. Expect checkpoints, particularly between Kurdistan and federal Iraq, and keep your passport to hand. Summers are brutally hot, with Baghdad and Basra often above 45°C, so spring and autumn are the times to go. The trip suits experienced independent travellers and anyone fascinated by ancient history, Shia pilgrimage culture or the modern Middle East.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

HISTORY

Babylon

Nebuchadnezzar's capital, about 85 km south of Baghdad, is a UNESCO site of mud-brick walls, the basalt Lion of Babylon and a replica Ishtar Gate. Saddam Hussein rebuilt walls with bricks stamped with his name, and his hilltop palace looms over it all.
- 2

HISTORY

Erbil Citadel

A great oval mound rising some 30 m above central Erbil, inhabited for millennia and listed by UNESCO in 2014. Walk through its restored gateway and lanes, visit the Kurdish Textile Museum, then descend to the Qaysari bazaar below.

3

HISTORY

Ziggurat of Ur

Built around 2100 BC by King Ur-Nammu, this stepped temple platform near Nasiriyah is the best-preserved ziggurat in Mesopotamia. Its partly restored facade and staircase overlook the royal tombs and the house traditionally linked to Abraham.

4

NATURE

Mesopotamian Marshes

The reed wetlands around Chibayish, drained under Saddam Hussein and partly reflooded since 2003, are home to Marsh Arabs who herd water buffalo and build arched mudhif guesthouses. Explore by narrow wooden boat with a local guide.

5

SACRED SITE

Imam Ali Shrine, Najaf

The gold-domed tomb of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, is one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam, beside the vast Wadi al-Salam cemetery. Dress conservatively; women need an abaya, often lent at the gate.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Baghdad

≈ 7.8 million people

Browse Al-Mutanabbi Street's Friday book market, the Iraq Museum's Mesopotamian treasures and the 13th-century Mustansiriya Madrasa, then eat masgouf by the Tigris on Abu Nuwas Street.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Mosul

≈ 1.5 million people

The Old City was devastated in 2017; UNESCO-backed rebuilding of the al-Nuri Mosque, its leaning al-Hadba minaret and nearby churches now draws visitors interested in its recovery.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Basra

≈ 1.3 million people

Iraq's port city lies on the Shatt al-Arab, with a palm-lined corniche, old houses with carved wooden shanasheel balconies and easy access to the southern marshes.

Figures are rounded city populations from the 2024 census, Iraq's first full count since 1997.

When to go to Iraq

Best time: **Mar-May, Oct-Nov.**

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

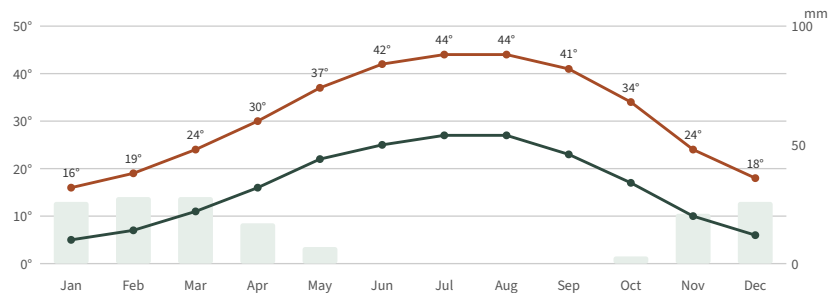
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Baghdad

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Mar	Nowruz Kurdish New Year on 21 March brings bonfires, dancing and mass picnics across Kurdistan; the torch-lit procession up the mountainside at Akre is the most spectacular.
Jun	Ashura Shia Muslims mark the martyrdom of Imam Husayn with mourning processions and passion plays, most intensely in Karbala. It moves about 11 days earlier each year and falls in June in 2026–28.
Jul–Aug	Arbaeen Forty days after Ashura, millions of pilgrims walk from Najaf to Karbala, fed and sheltered by roadside tents. It falls in July or August in 2026–28; avoid the south then unless joining in.

How much does Iraq cost?

SHOESTRING £40 per person / day ≈ IQD 80,921 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £90 per person / day ≈ IQD 182,071 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £180 per person / day ≈ IQD 364,143 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Masgouf Carp split open, propped on stakes around a wood fire and slow-roasted, then served with flatbread, pickles and a tangy tomato or tamarind sauce.	Dolma Iraqi dolma stuffs vine leaves, onions, peppers, courgettes and aubergines with spiced rice and meat, then cooks them together in a sour, tangy broth.	Kleicha Date- or nut-filled pastries scented with cardamom, often called Iraq's national biscuit, baked in huge batches for Eid and served with sweet tea.
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Getting around

Iraqi Airways and other carriers link Baghdad, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Najaf and Basra by air. Between cities, shared taxis and minibuses leave from garages (terminals) when full, and many visitors hire a driver or guide for the south. Expect frequent checkpoints, especially between Kurdistan and federal Iraq, so carry your passport. Within cities taxis are cheap: agree the fare first, or use a local ride-hailing app where available.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE  C D G 230V — UK plugs fit	EMERGENCY NUMBERS Ambulance: 122 Fire: 115 Police: 911 Source: FCDO “Getting help”
DIALLING CODE +964	TIME ZONE UTC+3 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Not safe — drink bottled or treated water

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Not expected in cheap eateries; leave around 10% in smarter restaurants, round up taxi fares, and tip guides and drivers at the end of a trip.

ETIQUETTE

Dress conservatively; women should cover their hair and wear an abaya at shrines. Accept tea when offered, use your right hand, and never photograph checkpoints, soldiers or government buildings.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Baghdad International Airport (BGW), Baghdad; Erbil International Airport (EBL), Erbil; Basra International Airport (BSR), Basra

Visas & entry for Iraq

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must have a visa to visit Iraq.

You are no longer able to get a visit visa on arrival in Iraq. You must apply for a visa on the e-visa portal of the Government of Iraq at least 24 hours before you travel. The visa costs \$160 and is valid for 60 days. Ensure that you have a return ticket in place or a ticket out of Iraq to a third destination. Without such a ticket in place, there is a risk of the airline refusing boarding.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Hepatitis A

Tetanus

Typhoid

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Hepatitis B

Measles

Rabies

Tuberculosis

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

No yellow fever certificate is required to enter.

MALARIA

Very low risk of malaria

- There is a very low risk of malaria in the rural northern area of Iraq below 1,500m, from May to November: awareness of risk and bite avoidance recommended.

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Iraq

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Wed 6 Jan 2027	Army Day
Tue 9 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr (date may shift)
Wed 10 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr (date may shift)
Thu 11 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr (date may shift)
Tue 16 Mar 2027	Commemoration of the Saddam Baath crimes against the Iraqi people
Sun 21 Mar 2027	Nowruz
Sat 1 May 2027	Labour Day
Sat 15 May 2027	Day of Arafah (date may shift)
Sun 16 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Mon 17 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Tue 18 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Mon 24 May 2027	Eid al-Ghadir (date may shift)
Sun 6 Jun 2027	Islamic New Year (date may shift)
Tue 15 Jun 2027	Ashura (date may shift)
Sat 14 Aug 2027	Prophet's Birthday (date may shift)

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Arabic (Iraqi)

ENGLISH	ARABIC (IRAQI)	SAY IT
Hello	السلام عليكم	as-sa-LAAM a-LAY-kum
Thank you	شكراً	SHUK-ran
Please	من فضلك	min FAD-lak
Excuse me	لو سمحت	law SA-maht
How much is this?	هذا بيش؟	HA-tha BEESH

Know before you go

- Check the FCDO travel advice before booking: it differs markedly between the Kurdistan Region and federal Iraq, and affects whether your travel insurance is valid.
- Carry enough cash, mostly in clean, recent US dollar notes, and change it at exchange shops; foreign cards are accepted in few places outside big hotels.
- Keep several photocopies of your passport and visa for checkpoints, and carry your hotel's card in Arabic to show taxi drivers.