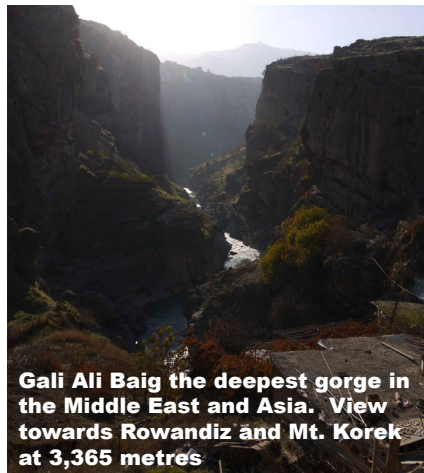


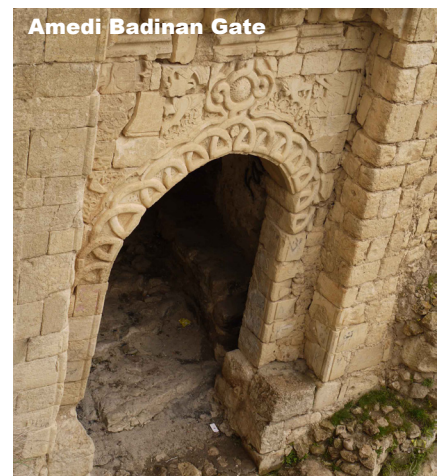
The beauty **of the Other** Iraq

It has to be said that towns and cities in Kurdistan are not particularly beautiful, except Amedi from the distance. It is the northern dramatic soaring peaks, cut by deep chasms and the world famous historical ruins in the southern plains, which lure travellers.

The sight of Amedi is lovely – a dramatically perched town on a flat rock outcrop attached by narrow rock to the mountain. Across the valley, the sheer cliffs of the Zagros Mountains give the perfect backdrop. Not much remains as a reminder of the 5000-year lineage of this town, except the 600 year-old Badinan Gate with its Zoroastrian symbols and snake over the arch.



Gali Ali Baig the deepest gorge in the Middle East and Asia. View towards Rowandiz and Mt. Korek at 3,365 metres



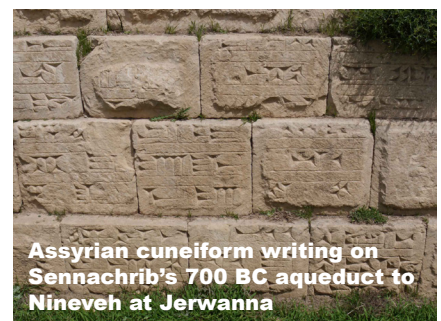
Amedi Badinan Gate

The topography of Kurdistan splits naturally north and south. To the north, the Zagros, Kuhrud and Alborz mountain ranges, rising to over 3,600 metres, run roughly parallel to each other east/west. The southern half of Kurdistan has flat fertile plains and is the cradle of our collective history.

It is generally agreed by archaeologists that man's move from hunter-gatherer to agrarian began south of the Zagros. Since then the land has been fought over and occupied by many including Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, Mongols and Ottoman Turks.

Kurds love their mountains. In the spring, and wearing traditional clothing, Kurds empty out of towns and villages to picnic in them with their families. The kick-off for the spring picnics is Nowruz, Kurdish New Year on the spring equinox, the most important holiday in the year.

For men, tradition consists of brown or khaki baggy trousers



Assyrian cuneiform writing on Sennachrib's 700 BC aqueduct to Nineveh at Jerwanna

caught at the ankle in a narrow band and at the waist with a large colourful piece of material wound round like a cummerbund.

For women and young girls, traditional dress is vibrant – diaphanous, shimmering colours of reds and yellows; the long sleeves and long baggy pants caught at the ankle and wrist. For many women this is the only time, apart from weddings, that such clothing is worn.

North/south travellers must use the deep *Baig* or gorges and mountain passes. A popular round trip from Erbil, the capital, goes through the magnificent *Gali Ali Baig*, a gorge cutting through the Zagros on the Hamilton Road, named after the New Zealand engineer who supervised the work in the 1920s. The return route to



Girl in traditional dress at Nowruz



Amedi Town and the Sagros Mountain range to the south

Erbil could go through another chasm further west and past the Shanidar Cave where remains of Neanderthals were found.

The ancient Erbil Citadel is a *tell* or man-made mound that has been built, through accretion of buildings built on top of the previous ones since at least 6500 BC and perhaps longer and lays claim to be the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world.

There are thousands of these *tells* rising like pancakes on flat land between Pakistan and Greece, but most were abandoned at the end of the Bronze Age. Aleppo, Damascus and Jerusalem are all built around *tells*.

The current buildings on the Erbil Citadel are Ottoman Turkish and in a considerable state of disrepair. It is on the short list for UNESCO World Heritage status and currently there is an active plan to revitalize the place with homes for fifty families, art galleries, restaurants and boutique hotels.

Within an easy day trip from Erbil is the flat open Gaugamela valley where Alexander the Great defeated Darius III and the Persian Empire in 331 BC. Facing Alexander's vastly out-numbered Macedonians were the phalanxes of Persian infantry, war chariots and Greek hoplites. After defeat that day, Darius would abandon his magnificent chariot at Erbil Citadel before fleeing east.

Just to the south of Gaugamela lies Mar Matti (St. Matthew's Monastery), a Syrian Orthodox monastery founded in AD 363 by St Matthew who converted the Persians to Christianity and developed a true monastic ethos. It is a similar age to Egypt's venerable monasteries of St Catherine and St Anthony,

Go 10 km further west to stand on the impressive remains of



Sulaimani is Kurdistan's second city

Sennacherib's 700 BC aqueduct from Khennis to Nineveh at Jerwana, the point where the aqueduct had to cross a river; many outside stone blocks with clear distinct cuneiform writing.

Most nationals do not need a visa at the split new and efficient airport to enter the country. A great many Kurds are well educated with excellent foreign language skills acquired when they were refugees abroad during the dangerous Saddam years.

Agreed that Kurdistan will not be on the average tourist route yet, but there is undeniable pleasure in standing in



View to Pires Mountain with pass

places where events happened that impacted and shaped our histories – and having the place all to yourself. The infrastructure for tourism is being built apace. This young country is rapidly rebuilding.

If it continues to weather the storms in the next couple of years and remain a safe place, perhaps you should consider it for an unusual and interesting holiday.



Mar Matti - exterior. The surrounding villages are all for Christian refugees from Mosul and Baghdad fleeing sectarian violence



Aerial view of Erbil Citadel. Photograph courtesy of UK Royal Air Force, published in 'Antiquity' 1936