

## Revisiting Baghdad

My wife and I have been contemplating taking three of our children on a trip to Baghdad for quite some time to see the family and see the changes that have taken place since the American invasion of 2003 but have been waiting for improvements in the security situation. The news in the first quarter of this year have been encouraging and feedback from those who had visited recently was positive enough for us to prepare for the trip during the children's Easter break. My 13-year old daughter was rather concerned about the journey and nervous of travelling to a place with car bombs and suicide bombers to such an extent that she offered to stay in Riyadh on her own but at the end she came round to the idea. In the event she enjoyed herself so much there that she would like to go again.

The first step of most journeys is the acquiring of the visa and I was expecting the process to be a lengthy one. In the event it was very simple as we applied to the Iraqi embassy in Riyadh in the normal way and had the required stamp in each of the five passports within one day. In fact, the staff at the embassy were extremely helpful and efficient.

The next step was planning the route as there are no direct flights between Riyadh and Baghdad even though it is only a couple of hours of flying time between the two cities. After considering all available alternatives we decided to fly via Beirut. The journey took two days each way with an overnight stop over in Beirut. Fortunately the first leg of the journey to Beirut with NAS was uneventful albeit later than schedule but the flight from Beirut to Baghdad with a little known company called Flying Carpet was more exciting and extremely tiring. The company operates what should be scheduled flights between Copenhagen and Baghdad via Beirut three times a week. Our flight from Beirut was 3 hours late taking off and the airplane had to return to the airport 10 minutes after being in the air as it developed a technical fault. The usual "it will only take 10 minutes to fix" became an eight hour wait that meant leaving Beirut at 4:00 pm instead of 8:00 am and arriving at Baghdad International Airport at around 6:00 pm. We were all exhausted yet pleased to be at the end of this part of the journey. Although we were tired we were in a much better state than those travelers who had been on that same small aircraft from Copenhagen almost from the night before. Fortunately passport and baggage claim formalities at Baghdad International Airport were relatively brief and quick such that we were outside the terminal building within approximately 30 minutes from landing to be met by a pre-arranged authorised airport taxi. After an exhausting day at Beirut airport it was a relief and quite pleasant to be met by very polite and courteous staff at Baghdad airport.



by Dr. Faez Tuma

The journey from the airport to our final destination in Baghdad took approximately one hour as we had to go through many security check points. It was a huge shock to see Baghdad so run down compared to the city we saw seven years earlier. The high security walls and police / army checkpoints that are manned by very polite, helpful and relaxed personnel broke up the city in an ugly way and added to the misery of driving along congested roads that have not been maintained due to years of sanctions and wars. However, there are signs of improvements as some roads were being resurfaced, pavements being repaired and garbage being collected off the streets but it will take time to address all that needs to be addressed.

Despite all the hardship and difficulties Baghdadis have adapted to the situation and learnt to live very well with daily power cuts, congested roads and frequently interrupted traffic caused by convoys of armoured military vehicles that are either on patrol or on their way to defuse a suspected car or roadside bomb. People are fed up with war and killing and they just want to be left alone to get on with life. As a result of events of the last five years most Iraqis have become suspicious of neighbouring countries and their contribution to the death and destruction that has taken place.

Baghdad has many shopping thoroughfares with shops that are well stocked with goods and foods albeit expensive when compared to current average income and with prices during the years of sanctions when the government provided a limited range of items at subsidized prices. In the late afternoons and evenings streets are full with shoppers or people just strolling along, a good indication of a normal city life.