



Images clockwise from left: Standing Guard at a checkpoint, Above: An outdoor Cafe Below: A vendor serving tea by the roadside, Buying Fish from a roadside tank.

No visit to Baghdad is complete without eating Masgoof, local river or tank fish that is cleaned, flat opened and placed near a wood fire by stakes to cook slowly and then served on a platter of bread or rice with delicious pickles and greens. Baghdad is also well known for the various types of kebabs (skewered meat or chicken cooked on charcoal) and I recommend the offerings of the Samad Restaurant in the Al-Mansoor district.

Although life is difficult Baghdadis are more positive and optimistic about the future than they were nine years earlier when I visited Baghdad during the Saddam era. Most people are hopeful that as the political situation stabilises and the various municipalities establish themselves and their respective programs of work and civil projects Baghdad and the rest of Iraq will recover from years of neglect and bad management and governments.

We wanted the children to see the countryside outside Baghdad so for \$300 we hired a driver and an SUV for three days to visit some others cities. It was a pleasant excursion to about 100 miles south of Baghdad and it was noticeable that these cities were more relaxed than Baghdad. Streets were bustling with people and street traders offering their wares. The roads were good but interrupted by security checkpoints before and after every town or

village. The countryside is flat with many rivers and streams zigzagging across it making the area fertile and green but interspaced by patches of yellow desert. As the roads snake through the countryside they are lined on either side by farms, fruit orchards, orange groves and palm trees. This part of Iraq and the area further south are rich with history and monuments of ancient times where early civilization started. In addition to relics of the Babylonian and Sumerian eras there are many shrines of various saints and prophets such as Jonah and Abraham and ancient temples some of which with original Hebrew markings still visible. As places of worship with many millions of visitors every year the shrines and the areas around them were clean, well maintained and well looked after.

During our stay the weather was pleasant albeit dry and somewhat dusty as it is expected for the time of year except for the last day when it rained heavily all the way back to the airport for the return leg of the journey. The journey to the airport to fly back to Beirut meant going through very tough check points where the security staff were more thorough and detailed than those at other checkpoints that we had come across during our travel in the previous week.

On balance it was a good trip but it was sad to see Baghdad so run down and broken up into small isolated districts. On the other hand there is hope that the place will rise from the ashes again as people get to grip with their own responsibilities and decide for themselves the course that the country will run.

As a footnote I asked the children the other day what they remembered most about the trip to Iraq the thirteen year old said the tiring journey from Beirut to Baghdad, the twelve year old said that she remembered the shrines with the golden domes, shopping and seeing the family and the youngest five year old said he remembered seeing the family and the toys he was given.

