

IRAQ



Visiting the war-ridden
city of Mosul during the
hot summer...

July 2019



Back again in Kurdistan

I was chit chatting with my hairdresser the other day, while getting a summer haircut. He was getting ready for his annual trip by ferry to Helsinki with his drinking buddies. He asked me what plans I had if any knowing very well I do travel to some odd places from time to time. I told him I had decided on a short break in July and had to choose between Borås (Sweden) and Mosul. Since I'd been to Borås I told him I had settled on Mosul. He then said: Oh great, I hear they produce good wine in the Mosel Valley. I said: Sorry, not Mosel – Mosul, I don't think they produce wine of any quality there. Ah, Mosul in Afghanistan right! No, no, Mosul Iraq I had to correct him.

Why would anyone in their right mind want to go to a war-ridden city anyway. Well, Having recently read the book "The last girl" by the Nobel Peace Prize winner 2019 – Nadia Murad, I just knew I had to go and see for myself and visit the "City of Evil" where Nadia and many other Yazidi women from the Sinjar region were taken, after all their men had been killed. Many of these women were sold off to ISIS soldier to whom they were sexually abused repeatedly during years to come. Many of them are still kept and have not been released even though the war is over since 2017. Mosul was made the capital back in 2014 when the city was captured by ISIS. It was only liberated in 2017, but badly destroyed.

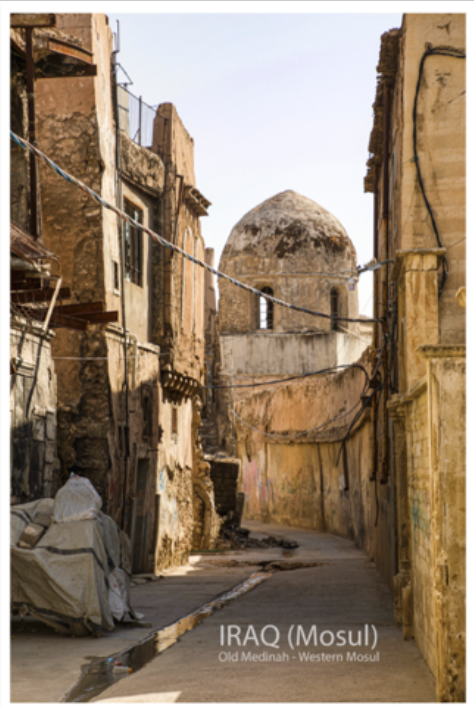


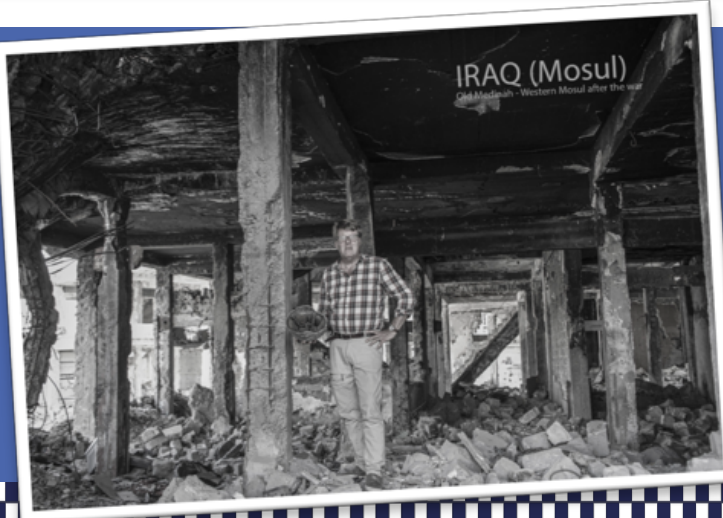
Leaving Erbil for Mosul

Traveling the back-roads in to Iraqi territory

Having arrived to Erbil at around 03:00 AM, Havel were at the airport to pick me up. We drove back to Haval's home, where I spent the night – or what was left of it when I finally hit the sack. We had to get up early for me to meet my guide and "fixer" who was supposed to take me into Mosul. Mosul is not in the Kurdish controlled region of Kurdistan, but in the Bagdad controlled Iraq. This means one needs an invitation and a visa to get in. This is not only costly but is also quite difficult and time consuming. To get a visa to visit Mosul is also very questionable. So, what to do: There are possibilities of crossing the border between Kurdistan and Bagdad controlled Mosul using a guide and so called "fixer". There are no assurances to either getting out of the Kurdish check-points along the way, nor getting through the Bagdad controlled check-points along the way.

My "fixer" Sardad picked-me-up in Erbil and off we went in his old worn car. We had to take the smaller and lesser used back-road instead of the main road. Sardad said he had his "contacts" along this route should they cause trouble at the check-points. We stopped before the check-points to change my clothing. He wanted me to look more like a local – how that now is possible with a blonde tall Swede. Anyhow, we managed to get through the Kurdish check-points (3 in total) without causing suspicion, nor did we have any problems with the 4-5 Iraqi check-points along the road.





East and West Mosul

We met very few cars along the way driving through the battle grounds of Ninewa where Kurdish Peshmergas eventually stopped ISIS offensive towards Erbil. Many of the houses and factories were still demolished. The drive from Erbil to Mosul took approximately 3 hours. **Mosul is divided into East and West Mosul with the river Tigris separating the two**. Some construction has started in rebuilding the infrastructure such as roads. There are subsequently many detours one has to manoeuvre to get through. Sardar seemed to know his ways around the city. We also had the eminent application maps.me to help us navigate. We stopped to look at the Grand Mosque of Mosul. This mosque was a project initiated by Saddam Hussein and never completed to this day. It is closed off, but can be viewed from the road. We also passed the old Amusement Park and park near the river. It holds also a restaurant where some weddings still take place.

We continued at the eastern side of Mosul driving along the river Tigris. We made a stop at a damaged bridge where kids were playing and jumping into the river. On the other side of the river we could see the complete destruction and devastation in Western Mosul. We were heading here in a short while. In order to get across the river, we had to back-track and select a bridge which had not been damaged and also making sure there were not too many check-points which we had to stop at.





Old Medinah – Western Mosul

We crossed a bridge and found a heavily armed and manned check-point upon entering into Western Mosul. We were allowed to drive through without being stopped. We immediately came into the old parts of Western Mosul and probably the most damaged. **On June 10, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq took control of Mosul,** after the Iraqi troops stationed there had fled. Troop shortages and infighting among the top officers and Iraqi political leaders played into Islamic State's hands and fuelled panic that led to the city's abandonment. ISIL acquired three divisions' worth of up-to-date American arms and munitions including mortars and at least 700 armoured Humvee vehicles from the fleeing, or since massacred, Iraqi Army.

Many residents initially welcomed ISIL, and according to a member of the UK's Defence Select Committee, Mosul "fell because the people living there were fed up with the sectarianism of the Shia dominated Iraqi government. During the ISIL government of Mosul, several phone lines were cut and many cell phone towers and internet access points were destroyed. The residents of the city were also de facto prisoners, forbidden to leave the city unless paying a significant collateral of family members, personal wealth and property.

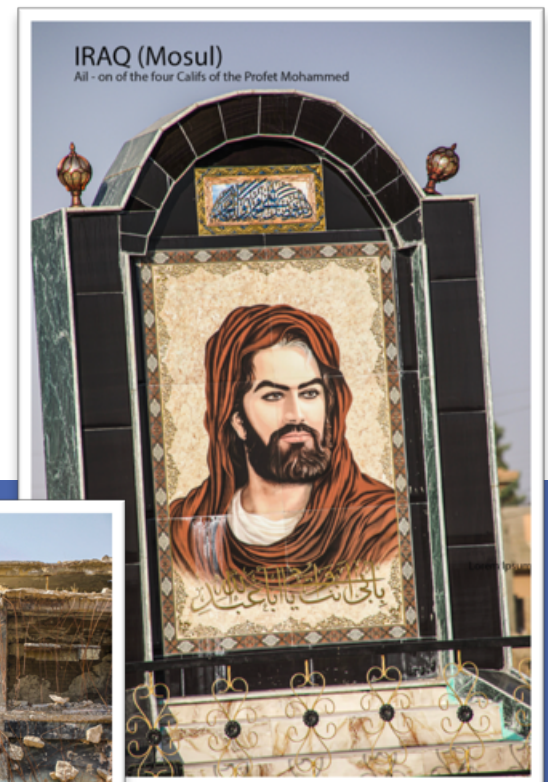




Mosul is liberated in 2017

After more than two years of ISIL occupation of Mosul, Iraqi, Kurdish, American and French forces launched a joint offensive to recapture the city on 16 October, 2016. The battle for Mosul was considered key in the military intervention against IS. Turkish warplanes participated in the coalition strikes on Mosul. This however escalated the dispute between Bagdad and Ankara about the Turkish presence in Bashiqa. A military offensive to retake the city was the largest deployment of Iraqi forces since the 2003 invasion by U.S. and coalition forces. On 9 July, 2017, Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi arrived in preparation to announce the full liberation of Mosul and reclamation of the city after three years of ISIL control. A formal declaration was made on the next day. The battle continued for another couple of weeks in the Old City, however, before Iraqi forces regained full control of Mosul on 21 July, 2017.

Visiting the Old Medinah in Western Mosul, very little reconstruction has started up. There is some rubble which has been cleared to make a few of the main roads available to use again. However, the old city is pretty much destroyed. A few people are seen walking around. Very few live here, as the infrastructure for water, sanitation and electricity still needs rebuilding.



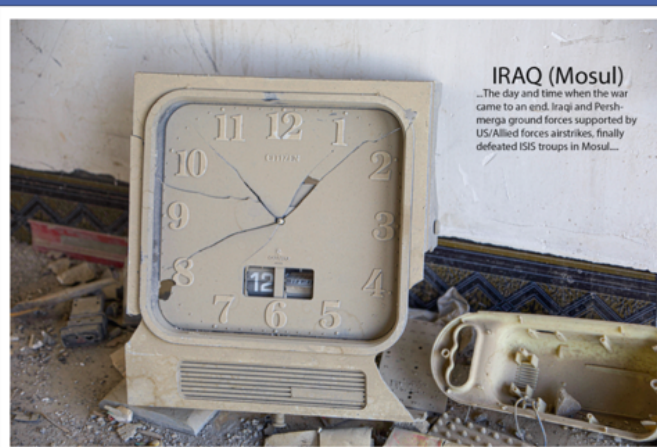
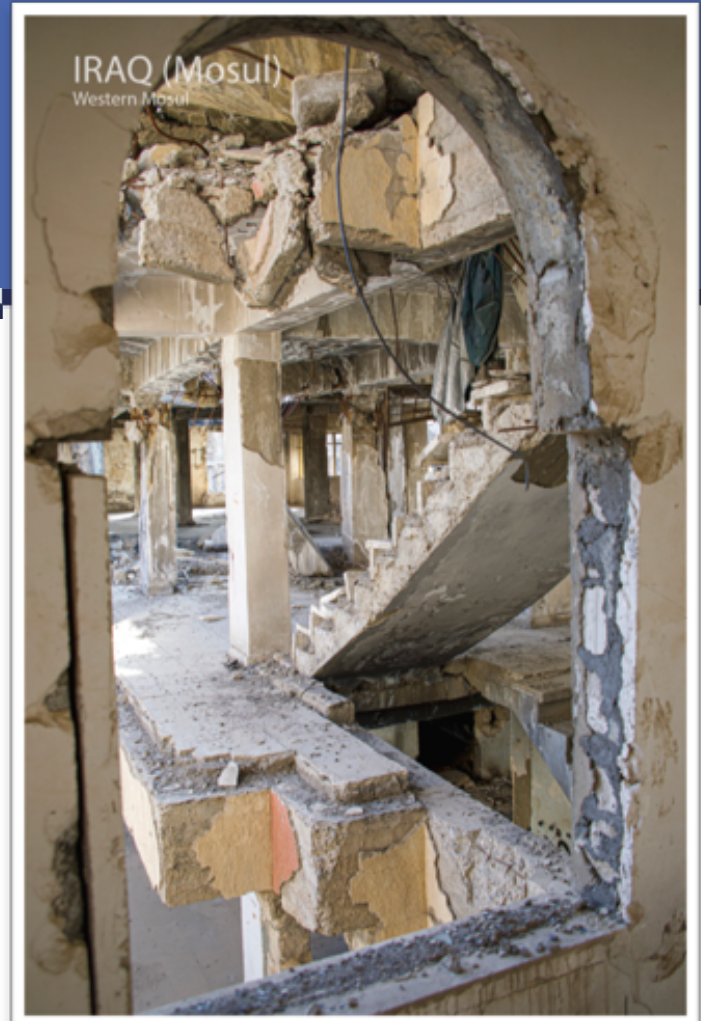


Western Mosul

We were able to park our vehicle and walk around a little bit, however being careful of not walking on "uncleared" alleys for risk of setting off booby-traps and stepping on undetonated explosives. We stopped and spoke to an elderly shop-owner who was back-in-business supplying the people in the neighbourhood with miscellaneous goods. He had lost most of his family and many relatives.

He mentioned that it was only 6 months ago, when dead bodies still lay along roadsides. An estimated 10,000 people died during the war in Mosul. The whole city reeked of death and destruction. There are still dead being buried among the debris which has not yet been cleared.

Information leaflets had been left everywhere so that children and grown-ups could be informed of the danger with bobby-traps and undetonated explosives.



IRAQ (Mosul)
Roadside coffe-break on the
way back from Mosul to Erbil



IRAQ (Mosul)
Western Mosul



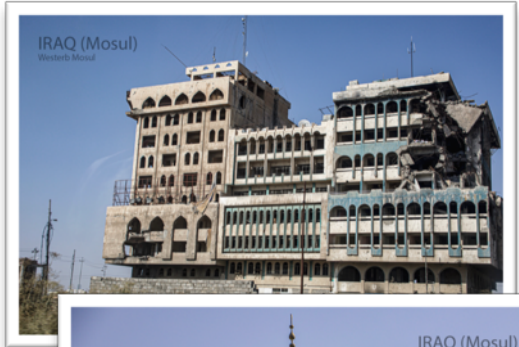
Western Mosul

We stayed as long as we dared, but had to leave Western Mosul before sunset as it was considered unsafe thereafter. We managed also to arrange so that we could stay overnight in one of the very few “hotels” still open. This particular one was used by government officials and a few NGO’s visiting from time to time. A special inspector would have to grant me staying overnight, especially since I did not have an official visa to visit Mosul. We eventually decided to leave Mosul and not stay the night as we had seen most there was to see.

We also stopped at a building, now demolished as the structure was insecure. This particular building was said to be used by ISIL to bring homosexuals up on the roof (7-story building) and simply pushing them from the roof onto the street and thereby killing them.

Sadrar also guided my up into a secured building to the top floor to get a better view of Western Mosul and the destruction. I am not so sure how “secure” the building really was as we saw an undetonated grenade on one of the floors.

IRAQ (Mosul)
Western Mosul



IRAQ (Mosul)
Intact Mosque in Western Mosul



IRAQ (Mosul)
Western Mosul near river Tigris



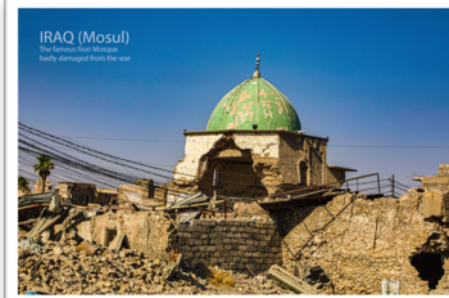
IRAQ (Mosul)
Iraqi flag in Western Mosul



IRAQ (Mosul)
A helmet midst all the debris

IRAQ (Mosul)
Old Mosque in Western Mosul





Leaving Mosul

Having spent a full day in Mosul, we were ready to go back to Erbil again. We traveled the back-roads, same as when we came earlier in the morning. The Baghdad controlled check-points went without any problems. The Kurdish check-points were a little bit more inquisitive about why we had been into Mosul. I had to show my passport, but we passed through as having been on an NGO-mission of some sort. I must say I was shaken up of what I saw in Mosul, but pleased at the same time that we had made it both in an out without any difficulties. My other guide – Haval – had been trying to get into Kirkuk earlier this year with an American. They were not only stopped, but also detained and were lucky to be able to go back to Erbil. It took Haval many phone calls to make this happen. At first, they had wanted to imprison the American for unlawfully trying to enter Iraqi territory without a visa. When visiting Kurdistan back in 2013, it was still possible to drive via Kirkuk which we also did back then. Mosul however, was off-limits to visit in 2013, just half-a-year before ISIL took control of the city.





We spoke with some people living and working in midst of all the destroyed buildings. One man, a shop-owner, he spoke of horrific and frequent public hanging, where ISIS simply used lamppost to hang people in.

Some donations have been made by some foreign countries. However, it seems according to sources that most of this money has filtered down into the wrong pockets. In any case very little reconstruction has taken place to date. Ca: 85% of the population in Mosul are/were Sunni Muslim. They were either directly or quietly supporting ISIS when they came to power back in 2014. The question is where do these people stand on the issue of support today with ISIS being defeated and with a Shia dominated government in Bagdad.

I was told that most people are so tired of the war and the death and destruction it brought along, that also issues/disputes between the Sunni and Shia is secondary today. One should also understand that Shia, Sunni and even Yazidi and Christians were in the past living side by side in Mosul. It will take a very long time to rebuild what once was the second largest city in Iraq with over 1 million inhabitants and the most prestigious universities in the country.





Back again in Erbil after visiting Mosul. Had dinner and a cold beer with Sadrar at the Teachers Club. The following day was free to explore a bit more of Kurdistan and places I did not see on my previous trip back in 2013. Haval and I set out after breakfast at a typical breakfast café in Erbil. We travelled up to the Barzan Gorge where we had a lovely view overlooking the valley. We crisscrossed the area and also made a stop at the Barzan Genocide Memorial, which had recently been erected. This to commemorate all the Kurdish men having been gathered and transported out into the desert by Saddam Hussein's troops back in the 80ies. All men were buried alive and only found many years later. 500 of them had been moved back to a burial site near their old village in Barzan.

