

My Baghdad Beckons With Bazaars, Cafes, Hopeful People: Travel

Review by Michael Luongo



Oct. 14 (Bloomberg) -- If [Martha Stewart](#) decorated war zones, these weirdly cheerful Baghdad checkpoints might have been the result.

When I was last here in 2007, checkpoints were anxiety-inducing wastelands of sand-blasted concrete. The Iraqis have since made over these symbols of occupation, painting them with ancient Babylonian scenes and festooning them with wreaths of bright plastic flowers.

Makeover madness hasn't made checkpoints more convenient, but the slowdowns let me talk at length with people like

[Mohammed Rasim Kasim](#). He runs the [Tawasin Cultural Society](#), which promotes culture in this ancient, fabled city.

Used to meeting journalists focused on war, he tells me, "your visit makes me happy. You're here to photograph beautiful things, not explosions."

It was Friday, the Muslim day off, and the streets were quiet as the lazy Tigris, overgrown with reeds, flowed by.

We were on our way to the book bazaar in Mutanabi Street.

"Friday is a special day," Mohammed says. "It's when all the poets come to make speeches, to talk about their books."

Massive orange awnings between the colonnaded, yellow brick buildings shade the street from the sun. It's men only, in dishdashas, the long traditional clothes, their heads bent over books spread on plastic tarps along the pavement.

Babylonian Goddesses

The first vendor I meet is 45-year-old Jawad Khadam, who sells Iraqi travel books. Money with Saddam's stern face juts from his racks, next to key chains with Babylonian goddesses and glossy postcards. It all seems prematurely hopeful. I ask who buys them and he says, "not foreigners. Here, there's very little. It's Iraqis mostly." Gifts for overseas family.

At first, the people are as wary of me as I am of them. As I wander about, the disconcerted looks at first seem threatening, but the mood changes instantly whenever I say, "shlonik," Iraqi Arabic for 'How are you?'

"We are a closed people," Mohammed says. "We don't see many foreigners. We want to talk." Still, I notice that he tells people I'm Canadian.

At Mutanabi's end, we hit the Shabandar Cafe. Opened in 1917, it's crowded with writers and nerdy

paparazzi. A photographer shoots a few frames of me. Conversation clatters, bouncing off brick walls decorated with images of old Baghdad. Spread out on divans, most of the men are old enough to be my father. They're alternating between pinching tiny, wasp-waisted glasses of sugary tea and smoking fruit-scented tobacco from shisha pipes.

'Focus of the World'

Here I meet Soheil Najm, editor of *Althaqafa Alajnabia*, or Foreign Culture journal. He's surprised I'm asking about tourism. "The disaster is the security. That's the main thing. We need very much to solve this problem," he says, adding nostalgically, "Iraq was a focus of the world."

Soon, other writers surround me to talk about their books. When we finally leave, I meet the owner, 75-year-old Mohamed Kadhem al-Kashali, on a raised divan at the entrance. Behind is a photo of him, majestic in a robe and turban, sitting near Steven Vincent, an American journalist murdered in Basra in August of 2005.

It's not the only tragedy that the walls record. Five portraits trimmed in black memorialize his sons and grandson, killed by a car bomb outside in March 2007. He looks down sadly, but then brightens, making me sit next to him for photos, saying, "I want this to be a base where visitors from other countries can meet the elite of Iraq, the intellectuals, the artists. This is a special place."

Din of Hammers

The copper souq, a short walk away, announces itself with a deafening din of hammers on metal. Inside, brass and copper plates gleam under the hazy lights. Wandering through the warren of shops, I turn a corner and I gasp.

I'd come across the leather market, its ceiling covered with Stars of David, vestiges of an era when Baghdad was home to more Jews than any city in the world. Each brick dome, dating from the **Abassid** period, nearly 1,000 years ago, is pierced by a small hexagon through which light pours, illuminating the dust above the workers, their thick metal tools appearing to throw off sparks when they catch the light.

My visit surprises two shopkeepers. They look at me, astonished, crying out, "Hello! Hello! Hello!" again and again in English, touching my arms, as if to see if I'm real.

Ottoman Manse

From there we headed to the **Al Akkad** Gallery, in a 1903 Ottoman mansion overlooking the Tigris on Abu Nuwas Street, named for a notoriously erotic 8th-century poet. The owner, 41-year-old Haider Hushim, opened the gallery in July of 2001, when the street was among the city's most glamorous.

"It was a very nice place, opposite the Palace of Saddam," he said, pointing to the Republican Palace's blue dome across the river.

The location proved a liability. The palace became the U.S. Embassy and soon, insurgent rockets were landed nearby. "It was so ugly," he said, adding that art once commanding \$30,000 sold for as little as \$200. He was forced to close for a few years.

Haider rents the gallery out for other cultural projects, and I stumbled here upon Hayder Daffar, director of the 2005 "Dreams of Sparrows," the first Iraqi-produced war documentary. He was shooting a commercial, dreams still a theme. A man and woman writhed on a bed, fabric bunched around their heads. But war was inescapable.

Dreaming of Bombs

"In his dream, he is walking along and there are bombs that explode, and we are using red and black cloth for this," Hayder tells me, an ironic laugh as he looks at the video monitor, realizing how it sounds to an American.

Abu Nuwas becomes my favorite haunt. My August trip corresponded with Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting. I did the Iftar, the evening meal breaking the fast, with local residents at Tigris restaurants, dining on mazgoof, river fish roasted over an open fire.

Afterwards, we'd stroll the carnivalesque promenade with its rainbow lights, popcorn vendors and children on rides. Surprisingly, I find evening also brought giggling young men and women secretly reenacting Abu Nuwas's poetry behind dark bushes.

The sun over the Tigris mesmerized me. Each night I'd watch it sink in brilliant reds through the suspension cables of the 14th of July Bridge. Named for the 1958 coup that deposed King Faisal II, it resembles San Francisco's Golden Gate and links the Green Zone to the rest of Baghdad.

As the tranquil river grew reflective and birds dodged helicopters in the sky, I'd wonder about my fellow Americans on the other side, hiding behind concrete blast walls, afraid to experience the Baghdad I'd fallen in love with.

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