

DISCOVERING

IRAQ

SEEING IS BELIEVING

by Miquel Silvestre



Ancient Mesopotamia is a very interesting destination.

But, is it possible and safe to get there by bike? They say that Kurdistan is stable with the government maintaining the security, and situations have improved since the latest bombings in Erbil in 2004 and 2007. However, despite such triumphant propaganda, the truth is that the region is still in a precarious balance. Turks, Syrians and Iranians do not look favorably upon the birth of an independent Kurdish political entity. And then there are the Sunni terrorists who seem to be willing to blow any semblance of normalization out of the country....

My arrival in Istanbul coincided with a suicide attack that the government blamed on Kurdish separatists. What will I find in the barren eastern tip of Turkey? Military, tanks, controls? Ironically, nobody bothered me. The police looked at the motorcycle as we approached the checkpoint with a curious and

non-hostile attitude. A greeting, and then the barriers were opened without even asking for documentation... the complete opposite of what I encountered from in the Western Sahara, where the traveller is routinely questioned.

Diyarbakir is famous for having the second longest wall in the world, which completely surrounds the old city. The poorest of the population inhabit the upper region overlooking the Tigris. I chatted with three street sweepers who spoke openly about politics. Its principles were basic but clear: Turkey is the enemy, since it denied their rights and democracy. As we talked, two policemen riding Honda Varaderos approached us. I feared that they would interrogate me for recording with a video camera. But they were only curious about my motorcycle. They smiled and showed me a thumbs-up, the international sign of approval.

One of the Kurds said they knew a Christian in Iraq, a guy named Jan who would help me. It is always useful to have local contacts, especially when you do not know what lies ahead, so I took his phone number.





"I REALIZED THAT I DID NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THIS GUY AT ALL AND COULDN'T ESCAPE FEELING PARANOID."

THE BORDER

The border post appeared about ten miles from Silopi, and the line of trucks to it were endless. That post is the only way of land communication with the West. Due to an embargo, the Iranian border is not suitable for entering Western goods, and the Syrian border requires a crossing through the Sunni hornet's nest. My appearance seemed to cause both astonishment and joy within the Secret Service members. What in the hell was I doing there? Where did I come from? How much did my bike cost? Was I a follower of real Madrid or Barcelona?

Getting the bike into the country proved to be a difficult task. Kurdistan tries to be a modern state, but still pursues the age-old bureaucratic systems of that region—loaded with slow and incomprehensible procedures. Although a mechanic identified the brand, model, number of cylinders, chassis, and license plate of my bike

and handed me the necessary document, when I showed it to leave Kurdistan, it turned out to be insufficient. Try as I might, I couldn't understand what was missing or necessary. While waiting, I called Jan, who agreed to help. He told me he would come to pick me up, but time passed and he failed to appear. So, I decided to make my way to the town of Zakho, which was just ten kilometres away.

In Zakho, as I was trying to find a hotel, a young man approached—it was Jan! He had recognized me because of the motorcycle, and then invited me to stay at his home. He climbed on the bike behind me and then proceeded to guide us down the dark alleys of a suburban neighbourhood.

I realized that I did not know anything about this guy at all and couldn't escape feeling paranoid. I was placing myself in his hands without any guarantee that what the

others told me about him was true. Iraq is a country that is objectively dangerous, no matter what Kurds say. After all, the Kurds are stakeholders in selling a security image. I felt I wasn't in control of the situation and was worried about where I was being led.

We rounded another corner and left the city lights. The alley was dark and deserted. Jan then instructed me to stop in front of a garage. As we entered it felt like being swallowed by the earth. How can I be sure of anything in this country where so little seems to be known—who did I know—who knew my location...?

A metal door opened slowly... my pulse quickened... an electric light spilled through a crack in the door... then a seven- or eight-year-old girl, with huge green eyes, peered out at me. She looked calm even though she was probably as surprised as I was. Then she smiled and asked, "How are you?"

"I am very happy to be here," I replied, telling her precisely how I felt at that moment. Once I saw those eyes, so pure and innocent on such a young face, I knew I had come home. And, nothing bad would come it.





EN ROUTE

The most striking part of the road was the horrible condition of the asphalt. The heat, coupled with relentless passage of heavy military convoys, had drawn a wave of tar on the pavement. However, in Kurdistan there was no trace of American soldiers.

The soldiers who met me at the checkpoints were all young Kurds in their new uniforms. They were friendly and talkative, but that meant I was continually stopped and delayed by a barrage of innocuous questions, presentations and handshakes to satisfy their curiosity. They just wanted to chat and take pictures—lots of pictures! “Mister, mister...” they’d say. Apparently I was a “mister” and therefore not a terrorist, or a threat to Kurdistan. Being a “mister,” was my best ally.

Heading south, I passed traffic signs with “suggestive indications” for Baghdad, Basra, and Kirkuk, but it was the one that would point me to the detour to Erbil that needed my attention. The Kurds had built a new road that bypasses the perilous Mosul—a deviation that was only 20 kilometres from the nest of snakes.

Before entering the Kurdish capital, there was one last checkpoint to make it through. And there a captain, who wanted to prove to his men that he took his job seriously, inspected every single piece of documentation along with a full scrutiny of all of my gear. I knew that he was just showing

off, so I remained calm and smiled. The best thing to do in these situations is to demonstrate that nothing irritates you, that you have more time to waste than they do.

The majestic old town stood out on a hilltop in the middle of the metropolitan area. The walls were tall and stunning. I drove all the way up and went inside only to discover that it was empty—the town was abandoned and half-ruined, although in process of restoration. It was an incredible place but, apparently, the government had forced the inhabitants to leave so they could rebuild the neighbourhood turning it into a museum and tourist attraction.

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It was at that point that I needed money, but the only ATM was located in the Sheraton Building. This was a western luxury bunker whose visit requires passing two checkpoints and a metal detector arch (where they seized my Swiss Army knife!). The place housed U.S.A. executives, diplomats and perhaps also spies—and there I was, with my black motorist uniform. I asked for water and I was informed that a bottle was \$2.50... so I satisfied my thirst drinking tap water.

MOUNTAINS

Travelling eastward into the mountainous heart of the country... deep gorges, bared peaks, narrow roads, and gravel tracks. It was getting dark as I rode through a canyon and reached another checkpoint. The darkness made it too dangerous to proceed so the *peshmergas* invited me into their check post for some food and tea. The post had a sand floor and a drainage hole in the corner. I asked permission to sleep there, but they told me that only a few hundred meters away was a hotel. A hotel with European-style cabins in the middle of mountainous nowhere? It seemed so surreal.

The next day I woke up in my cabin to a glorious view of the horizon. It was clear and pure with an infinite blue sky above... beyond were eternal mountains... the timeless sun peering over them. The hotel manager told me that

the owner had come to meet me and I was invited to his table. He was an educated Kurd, who lived in Sweden, but spoke English very well. He showed me a model of a complex they were planning to build to attract tourism. It was at the heart of the Kurdish mountains, in a very unsettled area, and to be located just 70 kilometres from the border of Iran.

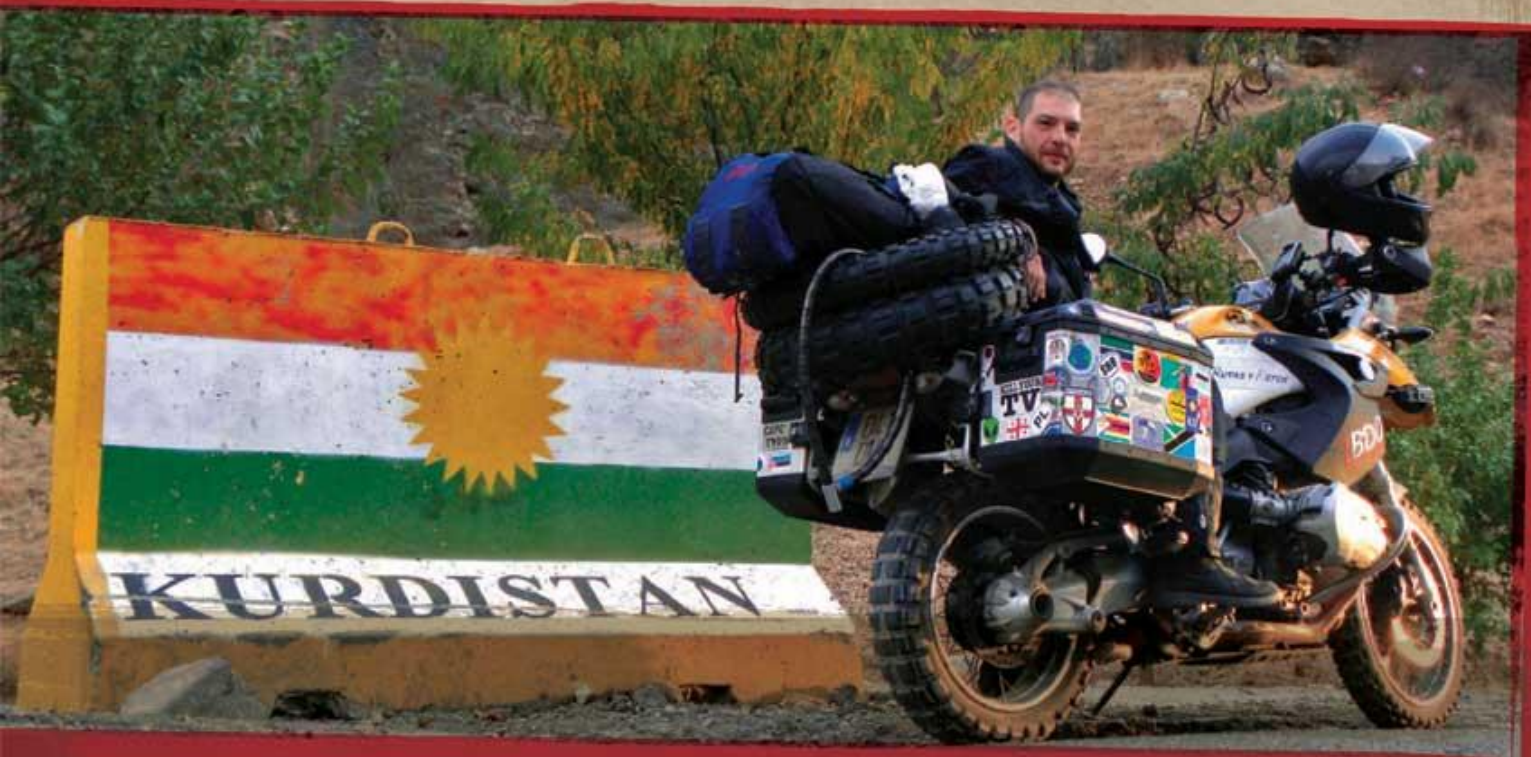
The guy was surprised to see me there. He wanted to know the reason why I had travelled to Iraq... not exactly an easy question to answer. So I asked him, "Do you watch the news on television?"

"Yes," he said.

"Well, I do not," I replied. "I do not believe what they say on television. I prefer to see life for myself."

ADV

"I DO NOT BELIEVE WHAT THEY SAY ON TELEVISION. I PREFER TO SEE LIFE FOR MYSELF."



Miquel Silvestre (www.miquelsilvestre.com) is a Spanish writer and motorcycle traveller. So far he has ridden across more than 70 countries and is currently planning a multi-year adventure following the route of former Spanish explorers. The project is called *Ruta de los Exploradores Olvidados*—The Forgotten Explorers Route (www.unmillondepiedras.com).

Miquel will begin his travels through all five continents by following the routes of such historical figures as Captain Francisco de Cuellar, who was shipwrecked in Ireland. Who, after escaping from the British, went to Antwerp and wrote of his misadventures to King Philip II. And Adolfo Rivadeneyra, a Spanish diplomat who travelled by foot and documented his fantastic journey through

Iraq and Iran to Persia. Miquel will follow Fernando de Aranda, the architect of Damascus, who wrote in stone and built more than seventy large buildings in Syria, including the beautiful station of the Hijaz, or Zenobia—Palmyra's first hotel. And Cesareo Fernandez Duro who, at the estuary of the Ifni River, set the location of a medieval Castilian castle and with it, where Spain, according to treaties, found a city.

Our Duty to Remember

BMW Motorrad Spain and Miquel Silvestre are looking to resurrect the memories of many lesser known explorers—tracing the humble human stories of these great men.