



« Walk on my Head »
A Kurd story

Today there are close to 40 million Kurds, making them the largest ethnic group in the world without their own country. They can be found mostly in Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq. Despite a tragic history full of genocide, mass migration, and war, the Kurds have built a reputation as the world's most welcoming people.

I decide to go visit them in the two places in which their territory is recognized: in the Kordestan province of Iran and the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq. Massoud Barzani, the leader in the latter territory, hopes to transform his land into tourist destination in the hopes of international recognition. It's a gamble, but one that might just pay off.



All the kurdish men wear baggy pants secured by a wide cloth belt. They are never seen without their rosary.



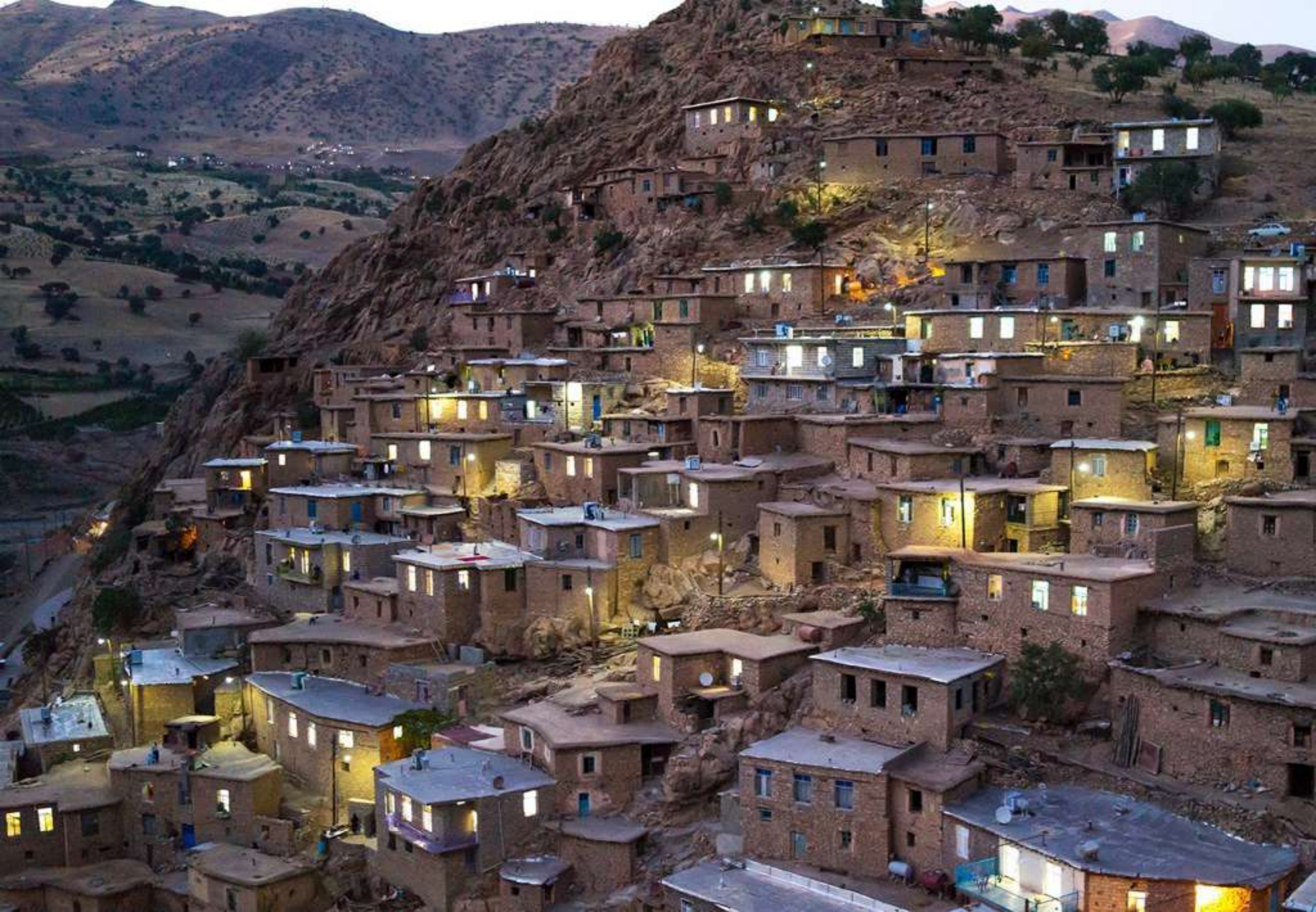
Many young adults have a bandage on their noses. Soon to married, they had a nose job and are unashamed to show it off. It's also a sign of wealth since the operation can be quite costly 1000 euros. "The millionaire's operation", it's dubbed locally.



Kandovan is a troglodyte village, a mini Cappadocia. Houses, barns, and granaries are dug out of the limestone rock.



Tourism has become an important industry here. Everyone has opened up some sort of makeshift tourist shop. Some are annoyed with the local tourists who think themselves paparazzi, while others are delighted by the lure of easy money.



Palangan. At nightfall, the muezzin's calls to prayer echo off the walls of the steep mountain. The faint light emanating from the homes make the town seem almost beyond reality.

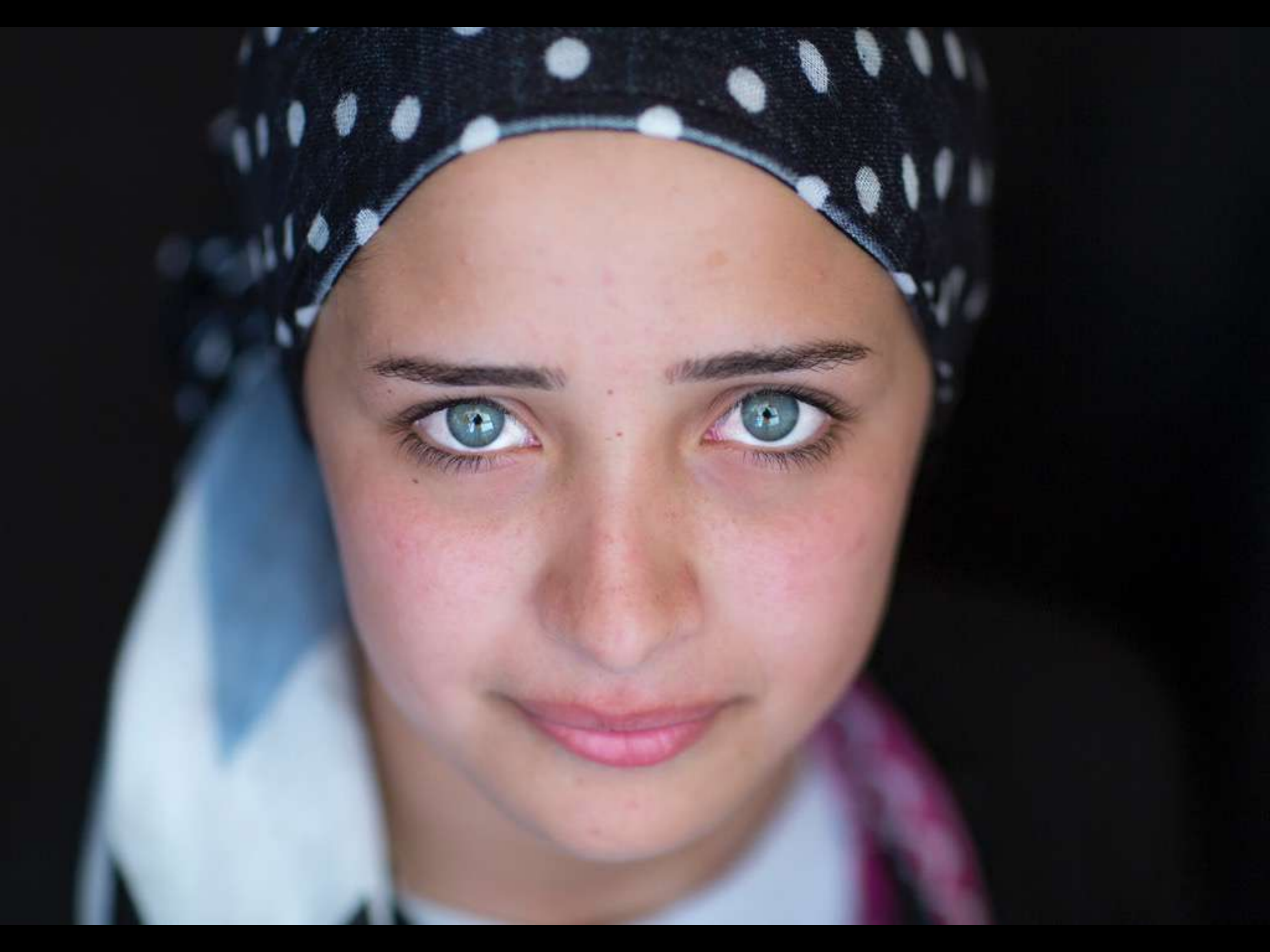


Women cook in round flatbreads in clay ovens. Everywhere I go people offer me more and more.



The beauty of the Kurds is remarkable. I see green, blue, and gold eyes. Masoud notices my astonishment and explains, "The Russians came through here last century!"







In every corner of the Kermanshah's market, I'm offered lemon biscuits known as "berengi". Can't bring any of these home since they crumble so easily. Take a bite and there will be as much on the ground as in your mouth. Yellow crumbs are everywhere.



Iraqi Kurdistan is a haven of peace in a county torn apart by civil war. This autonomous region has experienced a recent economic boom due to oil excavation and it's ready to welcome thousands of tourists. Signs on the highways indicate the road to leading Bagdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk, some of the most dangerous cities in the world.



Suleymanyah, Amna Suraka Museum, dedicated to the remembrance of the war crimes committed in Kurdistan. In this very building, Saddam Hussein and his henchmen tortured thousands of people.



Ghostly statues placed in the dark corridors make my blood curdle. The hatred towards this regime is still very real.



Many Kurds do not like the way their country is changing and entering into the money-driven rat race. A former peshmerga shows me some statues of Chinese dragons that decorate the city. He asserts that there are thousands of Asians here who make a very good living.



Dukan Lake. Its beauty is truly awe-inspiring. On Friday, thousands of people come to take a dip in the pristine turquoise waters. Not a single house, restaurant, or building in the entire landscape... for now.



Farmers still populate the countryside. They live in adobe houses. The people have trouble recounting the years of oppression under Saddam Hussein. They would prefer to return to the city where life is easier but the housing boom makes it too expensive for them.



Koya. A young boy in a wheelchair rolls through the streets. Everyone slips him a coin without him even having to ask. He's a Syrian refugee.



A caravansary in ruins. With grand arcades and wood-carved windows, it's a place I've only seen in movies.



Only two shops are still open. One sells donkey saddles and the other sells hookahs.



Yazidis in Lalesh. Over 6000 years old, Yazidism combines elements from a few different religions. There are hundreds of thousands of believers living mostly in the Mosul in Iraq, Aleppo in Syria, Turkey, Iran, Armenia, and Georgia.



Dozens of jars containing olive oil are aligned. Every night, 365 candles are lit in front of the temple.



Hundreds of colorful scarves are tied to temple pillars. Each knot represents a pilgrim's wish. The following pilgrims will come and undo the knots so as to seize the wish, without knowing what it is exactly. "They are always good wishes," says the Prince.



Tranquility reigns in this place. Children laugh, babies sleep in wooden cradles...



And yet, relations with the neighboring Sunni Communities have deteriorated over the past few years. On August 14, 2007, the Yazidi community became the target of four suicide bombings. The death toll reached 400. It was the deadliest attack in the world since 9/11.



Erbil fortress . This relic of antiquity is on the verge of ruin but the Kurdistan authorities, with the help of UNESCO, hope to save it by converting it into a major tourist attraction. Assyrians, Acadians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and others have called this place home at some point in history. Currently, one family lives there. The government can therefore claim that people have inhabited the fortress for 8000 years without interruption.



One hectare of land goes for about a million dollars. A rumor says that Kurdistan is the new Dubai and the prices subsequently skyrocket. Corruption soon follows.



Jalil Khayat mosque , It's a mix between the Muhammad Ali mosque in Cairo and the Blue mosque in Istanbul. The ceilings reach heights of up to 45 meters, elevating like a colorful symphony.



Modernity and tradition coexist. In front of a brand new shopping mall, teahouses still attract seniors who engage in high-intensity games of dominoes.



Many Syrian Kurds, fleeing the war in their homeland, have sought refuge in Erbil. There is solidarity amongst the Kurds since none of them are strangers to war.



A syrian refugee woman with her two twin babies. She left Syria while she was pregnant. They were born in this camp just a few weeks before. She named them "Kurdistan" and "Suleymaniyah" to show her gratitude to the land that welcomed her.



As I leave, this old woman puts her hands in front of her eyes and says, "You are my eyes." It's a way of saying that I'm someone important to her.



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