

IN SEARCH OF ZARATHUSHTI KURDS

While in Iran we decided to pay a visit to the Zarathushti Kurds and get to know them. We went to Marivan the Kurdish border town in Iran and from there crossed the Bashmahk border into Suleymania in Iraq. We had our own car and had planned to drive across the border and be mobile. At the border, we were told that we need to get the 'Green Slip' for the car from the Iranian customs, who required the original papers of the car and the presence of the owner. Since we had neither of them we were forced to park our car at the border and go without it.

The no-mans land between the two border gates was over a kilometer long with duty free shops and immigration and custom offices of both countries. We were made to buy health insurance from a guy sitting in a container and then buy some other slip from another container before we were allowed to enter the immigration office. The immigration officer made us pay 25,000 Dinars each which converts to about \$30. The result was a 30-day visa to stay in Iraq. Then we walked out of the building and there was a sign that said 'Entry to Iraq' it was a caged corridor that led us to a container where our bags were X rayed and our passport stamped. On the other side, we were back on the same road that had the duty-free shop. We walked about half a kilometer and we were at the Iraqi gate which was unmanned. The Iranian gate we entered was unmanned too. We wondered if it were not for the signs could someone just walk in and out?

Outside the Gate taxis were available some of the drivers spoke Persian other didn't. We showed them the address of the fire temple, whose inauguration just a few months ago, was all over the social media. We had through friends contacted the people involved, who were happy to invite us and had send us the address and contact numbers.

A younger driver who had as a child taken refuge in Iran during the 8 year Iran Iraq war and knew Persian fell to our lot. It was a 120 km drive through the mountain passes before we reached Suleymania or Sulamani as the locals call it.

Kurdistan is a mountainous area with cities developed in lush valleys, entry to the valley is through narrow mountain passes, which has helped the Kurds preserve their language and culture in the safety of these cities. The entry to the Kurdish area begins in Iran from Hamadan (ancient Hekmataneh) where we find the 'Ganjnameh' two stone tablets carved into the mountain, side by side, by Daryush the Great and his son Khashayar.



Here they proclaim their achievements in the name of Ahura Mazda, it is the gateway to the west with a lovely waterfall and every traveler that passed by would naturally stop here and thus read the tablets. The first valley is the city of Sanandaj and the next is Marivan with a beautiful lake and tasty fishes.



On the Iranian side, the border to Iraq was only 15kms from our lake side hotel in Marivan but on the Iraqi side Sulmani was 120kms and took us an hour and a half. We had plenty of time to talk with our driver. It was the month of Moharam the first month of the lunar year according to the Islamic calendar. While the Sunni Muslims celebrate their New Year the Shia Muslims wear black and flog themselves with chains and mourn the death of Imam Hussain over a period of 40 days. They also go on a pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq where Imam Hussain was martyred. The Kurds are mostly Sunnis, so I asked the driver if there were Shias among the Kurds. He said “We are first Kurds and everything else comes after that, but yes we have Shias we also have Jews Christian and Aryan”. I asked him what he meant by ‘Aryan’ he said ‘Zardashti’. He further explained that “We Kurds are all ethnically Aryan but Islam was forced upon us, but I am not religious”. I told him the address we were looking for is a Zardashti temple and we were to meet some people there. We then discussed a little about the Zardashti religion. He then asked me if I had the phone number of the people, which I gave him, the next moment he was calling them and asking for direction. When we reached the city, he called them again and managed to dropped us across from where our host were waiting for us with their cars.

To greet us were Mrs. Awat Darya, she is the representative of the Zarathushtis in the Kurdish Provincial Government. Her husband Jamal a retired officer of the Kurdish Army and Mr. Azad the director of the Yasna organization and Mr. Esam a representative from their Syrian chapter. We got into the two cars and drove to their temple, where we meet Mr. Qadr the Atravan (mobed) and a group of officials of the Yasna organization. We presented them with a Khorda Avesta which Qadr the Atravan accepted with tears in his eyes kissed it and held it close to his heart. He wore a white Kurdish dress with a red shawl tied around his waist with three knots in the front representing the Kushti.



The temple was in a rented average size house, they had a small prayer room with a huge Fravahar on the wall and benches for the people to sit on. The other rooms were converted into an office, a meeting room and of course a kitchen. They had a small yard by the prayer room where they lit the fire. We gathered in the prayer room where the Atravan prayed by reciting the Gathas in Kurdish language.



We then discussed various matters and they said "We do not need any financial help but we need lots of help to increase our knowledge". They would also love to have an Afrigan – Afargani, for their North American style Dar e Mehr. Qadr the Atravan (mobed) spoke Persian and it would be good if he could visit the Iranian mobeds to learn some of the rituals and how to perform prayers. We may need to teach them a lot but I believe we should not disturb their concept of the Kushti.

Kurdish concept of the Kushti.

The Kurds are from the ancient Median tribe and they believe that Zarathushtra was from Media and so also were the wise man who went in search of baby Jesus. The dress that we see in pictures worn by Zarathushtra is an adaption of the Kurdish national dress proudly worn daily by every Kurd in all walks of life. The shawl similar to the one around the waist of Zarathushtra is what they use as their Kushti. They tie three knots to represent Good Thoughts Good Words and Good Deeds and is a public manifestation of their belief. Every Kurd walking the streets of Kurdistan irrespective of their religious belief has this shawl around his waist. Even the women wear it on their native and ceremonial dresses. **To brand the shawl as a Kushti is a very important movement.** Every individual Kurd, every single day, while getting dressed to leave the house, while tying the shawl around their waist will look at the shawl and debate what it represents and if she/he should return to her/his ancestral religion.



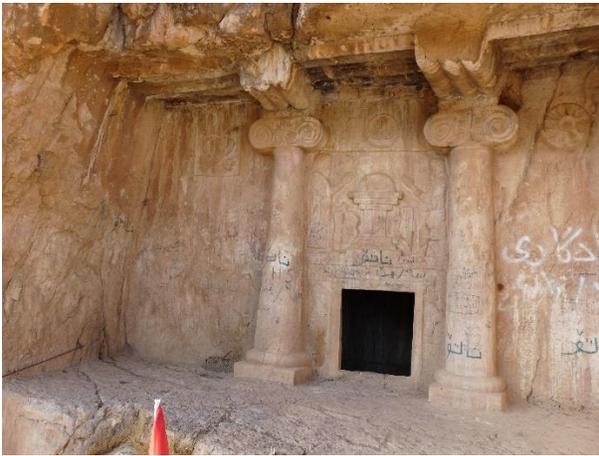
KURDISTAN



Ancient Relics

After about 45 minutes' drive from the city into the mountains we came across what they call the 'Qz Qapan' caves. It is exactly like the graves of Daryush and Khasayar and others at Nagshe Rostam in Shiraz. High up on the face of the mountain they have carved into the mountain pillars and the bas relief of a king with a bow in hand and a priest with the fire burning in an urn in the center. There was a small opening

and inside they said there were three chambers. They thought it was a temple but it is exactly a replica of Nagshe Rostam.



Atravan Qadr led us in prayers.

When we returned to our cars we had a major problem with them and had to wait a few hours to get help. As a result, we had just enough time for a late lunch and had to return back to Marivan in time to retrieve our car. We missed out on being able to meet the other group called the 'Zand' organization. Had we not taken our car to the border we could have stayed an extra day.

It was a successful trip for we came to know our fellow Zarathushti Kurds and how sincerely they are trying to revive their ancient faith. Mrs Awat has established a link with the Provincial Government of Kurdistan In Iraq and has obtained permission to practice their faith and built for themselves a fire temple. She has dedicated her time and energy and has succeeded towards establishing a healthy relation with the officials. Atravan Qadr is busy translating the books into Kurdish and needs help. They are respectful of all other religions and do not consider themselves as converts but consider it a revival of their ancient faith. Conversion from Islam could bring dangerous consequences. So, they do not attribute their revival to the deeds of ISIS. They have established links with other Kurdish cities and have members even in Syria whom we also met. This trip was arranged on the spur of a moment and we did not know what to expect now that we have the information we hope to visit them again and stay longer, we invite other to do the same, and help them in whatever way we can. While being respectful of their culture and their type of Kushti.



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