

In the Baghdad undertow

I drove past the National Antiquities Museum almost every day that I was in Baghdad, usually en route to the Palestine Hotel or al-Mutanabi market.

Across the street is where a British journalist was killed this week. I had always wanted to go into the rather modern and austere-looking brick building that gave away none of the ancient and illustrious heritage that lay within its foundations. When I was there, ferocious American tanks guarded its not yet open for business entrance.

Security in Baghdad was always something to think about, but for a novice gauging a situation like that is next to impossible. I asked everyone I knew about their assessment, journalists, residents, soldiers, and it was hard to draw any conclusions. With one journalist dead and another in a coma, it now seems likely that Westerners, not just soldiers, have become legitimate aims for rebel factions.

It's a funny thing how you get used to tanks on the streets, barbed wire, soldiers checkpoints and being stopped.

I needed to go into one of Saddam's old palaces in which the Americans have set up a base, the charming one with four

heads of Saddam on pillars. It's easy being Canadian no doubt, and the female American soldier, who was both bored and had to search me, asked totally deadpan if I had any nuclear weapons on my body. Oddly, I didn't.

Despite my complete apprehension about going to Iraq in general for exactly this reason, once there I rarely felt threatened or worried about my safety.

I was also lucky enough to bump into two ex-British soldiers who I travelled with from Amman to Baghdad, and back again. This is the road that bandits inhabit, and the man from the UN to whom I also spoke, said they were banned from using it. I had no problems.

Still, there were definitely sections of the city that I avoided due to the soldiers' advice.

However, I walked through markets in the centre of town in pursuit of Saddam memorabilia. I went out to restaurants. On my last night, Raed and Wisam, my two Iraqi friends who acted as my driver and translator, took me to a characterless place for kebabs – the staple food even if you are vegetarian.

All too aware of my security concerns,

they would always say "Don't worry it's safe."

The second floor was the "family floor", a nice euphemism for where they put women and children. It was unfortunately shut, and so the only other woman was shoved right at the back of the restaurant, close to where I was seated.

The place had a threatening feel to it with lots of sinister-looking bearded men. When I mentioned something about this, Raed and Wisam laughed, saying that the main branch was in Fallujah, the town west of Baghdad where much of the rebel activity is taking place. I would have to drive past it on the way to Amman the next day.

None the less I often drove at night just before the 11pm curfew through the dark Baghdad streets. I got caught up in insane traffic jams, had fresh fruit juice at Uday's favourite place on Baghdad's poshest street, visited friends, had coffee in dingy coffee houses, tea at Al Muthaf I Bahgdadi, built in 1890 by Mrs Bell. Admittedly, I was never alone, which I think made a difference.

Reports of rapes and kidnappings have



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escalated, and when I was there people spoke alarmingly of how a school bus of young girls had just disappeared without trace. Many women had taken to wearing hijabs to make life easier.

Yet, in total contrast, at some intersections there are little stalls that sold booze at the roadside – beer, whisky.

At the house in which I stayed, where my friends probably correctly assess that they are the targets of Ba'athist assassination plots, 20 or so men at various times walked around with guns. It was quite possibly the riskiest place for me to have chosen.

The streets weren't teaming with frenzied masses, shooting and looting and demonstrating, but there is clearly a dangerous undertow.

Just thinking of being in the same country as Saddam Hussein should send shivers down any spine, mine included.