

Feeling the heat in Baghdad

I had been told all about the corkscrew and the 45 degree descent, not to mention the RPGs. Yet the landing into Baghdad airport was not nearly as dramatic as the one I had anticipated. The corkscrew is a long circle round the airport, not a wild hair-raising dive, and rather like landing at Heathrow, minus the possibility of getting shot down.

The airport is almost entirely empty: Baghdad, oddly, is still not a tourist hotspot. A few old Iraqi Airways jets without engines stand on the sidelines, abandoned like so much else.

Waiting to get processed we stood under the eight-pointed star that became a Ba'ath party symbol under former President Saddam Hussein, and it is everywhere.

One American aid worker told me that schoolchildren had a number of set pictures they were supposed to place inside.

The usual processes of international travel haven't quite been reconstituted, but unlike my last trip in June, this time the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority, stamped my passport, first with an exit imprint, then with the correct entrance stamp. This makes it seem real. Baghdad.

It's all too real for most Iraqis, though, and surreal for those of us not used to hearing bomb blasts, gunshots, and sitting with weapons no matter where you go.

In the summer the heat made it impossible to function, then the air-conditioning units, for those lucky enough to have them, made so much noise and blasted such cold air it was almost as bad as the heat.

At least you couldn't hear the gunfire, which now punctuates the air day and night, and seemed most enthusiastic when Iraq beat North Korea at football.

Freedom of movement has without question been curtailed.

The market I went to on numerous occasions last time has been bombed. Explosions rocked the house I stayed in, and the friend with whom I stayed has been a target of assassination attempts as a result of being part of the Governing Council.

Still, commerce is returning to the streets, the shops are full of goods, and breaking the fast during Ramadan, everyday people flock onto the streets to shop - there are air conditioners, generators, toys and pomegranates, now in season, and something like 400 000 cars have flooded

into the country since the end of the regime and the opening of the borders.

The sense of danger lurks round every corner, primarily because it *is* around every corner, and its very randomness makes it more frightening and certainly less containable.

Another friend, Raed, has also been shot at, and has lost all the animation and joy he had in June. While he would never say it, he is depressed, and his family, educated, English-speaking, all want to leave. It's harder for them now because they can't even claim political asylum.

They are tired of having lived through three wars, tired of the present insecurity, of the unemployment, and uncertainty of what if anything the future holds. They were also tired of Saddam Hussein.

Amidst the normal craziness I go to Al Sa'ah, the restaurant Saddam used to frequent. Its brown leather banquettes are packed with people and beside me sits a couple who are eating something that looks very good indeed. I ask Wissam, a friend, what it is, only to be answered in English by them, offering me some chicken.



HEIDI
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ON THE AGENDA

The Palestine Hotel is deserted, and the zone around it heavily fortified. For someone like me without a sense of danger, even I can pick up the tension. It is the eeriest part of Baghdad that I have been to, and the one in which I feel most uncomfortable.

I try not to stay. The staff employed at the empty café don't have much choice except to mill around.

There you feel like a sitting target, and for good reason. The hotel was bombed this week.

Paradoxically, property prices have skyrocketed in certain areas due to them being in part "secure" zones. Houses in al-Mansour, for example, sell for more than \$1-million in this unstable climate, and rents are often \$50 000 a year.

It's an intense and historic time to have gone, and a situation whose outcome cannot yet be predicted. As always, it is a relief to leave, a choice I have unlike many Iraqis.