

The Passionate Globetrotter

**Kurdistan - No friends
but the mountains**

**Meet Kathrine -
Traveler of the month**

**Via Aurelia - the
road to Tuscany**

MAY 2018





You're diving into The Passionate Globetrotter, a monthly magazine created to inspire you to travel more and perhaps also seek out the roads less traveled and make discoveries of your own.

In this first issue I want to share with you my personal experiences from a road-trip in France and Italy last summer, and in this month's Feature article I will tell you about a destination that you may count among the "roads less traveled", namely Kurdistan.

I also hope you will enjoy reading about the EKN Travel Club and the plans for an event in September / October this year.

And to jog your brain a little, I've even put together a crossword puzzle for you, which gives you the opportunity to win a prize.

I hope you'll enjoy the magazine!





The Passionate Globetrotter

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From the Editor



Welcome to the universe of **The Passionate Globetrotter!**

I'm very excited to be able to release the very first issue of this monthly magazine! I hope it will be an inspiration to you, and a valuable source of information that your future travels will benefit from. Let me just make it clear right from the beginning: I'm not a travel expert of any sort. I'm an explorer, - a curious and passionate traveler who wants to learn about other people and countries, and my greatest wish is to build bridges between people from different cultures and contribute to love, peace and understanding in this world.

I have created the EKN Travel Club because I want to connect with other passionate travelers all over the world, and because I want to share my own travel experiences with you, create events and arrange trips that will give *you* wonderful experiences as well, and also inspire you to look at the world from a different angle.

Some of the places I'm going to write about in this magazine will perhaps be well known to you already, but my aspiration is to share information about the «roads less traveled», and take you to places you might not have heard all that much about, and which may seem very strange to you and even a bit scary, for some reason or other.

I hope that you will read this magazine with an open mind. I hope that you will find it useful, inspiring, exciting and perhaps even fun, and that reading it will make you want to travel more and perhaps start seeking out the roads less traveled, too.

I hope you'll enjoy this month's issue, and if you do: Don't hesitate to join the EKN Travel Club and make sure you'll receive a new issue every month!

Have a beautiful month of May, and I'll see you in June!

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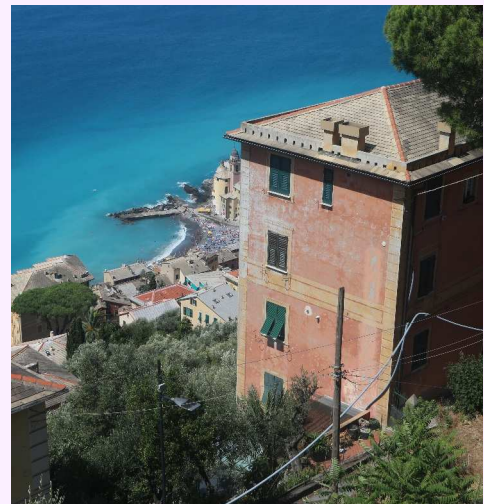
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Crossword Puzzle



ACROSS:

1. Featured this month
8. Island
9. Country
12. City
13. Us
15. Town in Kurdistan
16. Not from
18. Adam Antler
20. Erbil
25. Nonsense / litter
28. Robert
29. Tea in Kurdish
30. Name (male)
32. Allow
33. First person singular of «to be»

DOWN:

2. Town in Kurdistan
3. Country
4. Film character
5. City
6. Anno Domini
7. Country
10. Emily Scott
11. State of Maryland
14. Noun
17. Exclamation
18. Australian Workers Union
19. Name (male)
21. Hewler
22. Emily Bronté
23. Not poor
24. Name (male)
26. Muslim
27. Bathroom
31. Exist

Send in your completed crossword puzzle: Take a picture of it and send it by email to info@elsekosberg.com or by PM on the EKN Travel's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/EKNTravel/ You can win a prize! :)

Welcome to EKN Travel Club!

This club is for you if you

- love to travel
- want to connect with other passionate travelers all over the world
- are interested in information about exciting travel destinations
- would like the opportunity to take part in organized trips and events and benefit from unique offers and info that can make your next journey a more pleasant experience.

All registered members will receive *The Passionate Globetrotter*, our monthly digital magazine, with updated information about the club and exclusive offers not shared elsewhere. Members will get prior access to all upcoming adventures and events created by EKN Travel. The first 4 months of membership are FREE, and will after that cost only \$ 9 / month. The membership can be canceled at any time.

I hope you will enjoy your membership and make the most out of it! Be active and share experiences and information with other members in our closed Facebook group, and I'm sure we'll all become good friends!

You can join the club here:

www.facebook.com/EKNTravelClub





Via Aurelia - main road to Pisa

... and the most scenic road from Nice to Tuscany



In the summer of 2017 I went on a road-trip to Nice and Tuscany with my son. We flew from Oslo in Norway to Nice in France on a warm day at the end of July, and landed at Nice Airport in the afternoon. I had already been to Nice 3 years earlier when I went on a road-trip in Provence all on my own, and had then found a nice hotel with reasonable prices just by the airport. It was the

Ibis Styles Hotel, a modern and quite modest alternative, but very convenient as a starting-point for my journey back in 2014, and also this time, when I came with my son. We had booked a car which we were going to pick up at the airport the next morning, and the Ibis Styles Hotel has its own shuttle service to and from the airport, so it was very convenient and partly the reason why I chose this hotel once again.

The hotel is also situated in walking-distance from the St. Augustin railway station, so transport into Nice town center and also anywhere else you'd like to go by train (like Monaco, which is only 30 minutes away) is very easy. The staff is young and friendly at Ibis Styles, and most of them also speak English, so if you're not familiar with the French language, it's not a problem. The hotel doesn't serve dinner, but there's a nice restaurant at the back of the hotel, by the swimming pool, so you don't have to go far from the hotel to get a good meal. If you want to go into Nice town, however, it only takes 5 - 10 minutes on the train, and the St. Augustin station is a 5 minute walk from the hotel.

So you see: The Ibis Styles Hotel is a perfect starting point, especially if you arrive in Nice by air late in the afternoon and either intend to travel further by train or book a car to go around in the area. Getting a good night's sleep at the Ibis Styles Hotel and then starting off fresh in the morning is what I recommend, especially if you don't know the area. If you intend to stay in Nice all the time and want to explore the city more than anything else, there are of course plenty of nice hotels to choose from in the city center. You'll find lots of information about Nice, the riviera and Provence in the upcoming issues of The Passionate Globetrotter, but right here and now I want to share with you my experience from the road-trip I did last summer with my son, along the Via Aurelia.

We had arranged to pick up the car from Economycar's service desk at the airport around noon the day after we arrived, because we wanted to get a good night's sleep and also a good breakfast before heading off into the unknown in the warm weather. So we enjoyed our breakfast, and then ordered a shuttle transport from the hotel to the airport to pick up the car. We spent a while at the service desk because there were some questions around the car insurance, since we were going to Italy and would not just be using the car in France. There were also special rules for Monaco, if we wanted to pass through there with the car, - so we ended up skipping Monaco on our way to Tuscany, and decided we could go there on a day trip by train instead, when we came back.

This little incident made me more aware of the issues around car insurance, so it was really a good thing, even though it took some extra time out of our day, but now I have useful information to pass on to you so you can make better preparations if you want to go on a similar trip by car: Check which insurance you'll need for the area(s) you'll be going to, especially if you'll be driving through more than one country.

Well, after about an hour at the desk, we got the keys, found the car - which was a nice Peugeot, one of my favourite car brands - and then we headed out of town and started on our way towards Tuscany.

Maybe you're thinking that driving in France and Italy in the high season must be a terrifying experience, but of course that depends on whether you're an experienced driver or not, and also whether or not you're easily stressed out. I myself love driving, and my attitude is that I get what I focus on, so I try to focus on having a nice trip and just "roll with it" and don't worry about what might go wrong. So when I sat myself in that car and headed off to Tuscany, I was optimistic and relaxed, but also very realistic about the fact that I was probably going to get my driving skills tested, especially in Italy. From what I've heard about the Italian driving style, they mostly go by the rule that traffic lights have the following meaning: Green - Go ahead, Yellow - Just for decoration, and Red - Only a suggestion and that they're generally quite casual about the whole "driving business"... So I was prepared to be on the alert most of the time, but the thought didn't stress me out. The weather was beautiful, the car was nice, I was on holiday with my son, I was in France ... It was a great start for any journey, in my opinion.

We wanted to see as much of the landscape and the villages as possible on our way to Tuscany, so we decided not to follow the motorways, but rather the Via Aurelia, which is a much more scenic road. The road took us up the hills from Nice Ville through a breath-taking landscape, along the Alpine Route to Genoa. The view from above Eze was quite spectacular. We could see all the way back to Nice Ville and the airport, and the sight of the many luxury yachts in the bay below was proof that this is the playground for the rich and famous.

From Eze we drove on to Menton, where we stopped and had a delicious lunch at a nice restaurant by the sea, "Le Boss", and then went to have a quick look around the town. Menton is a nice town, and the many yellow houses gives it a very warm atmosphere. But there are plenty of other towns and villages along the way, so we didn't stop for long this time. After a nice stroll along the sea promenade, we drove on towards Sanremo and Genoa.

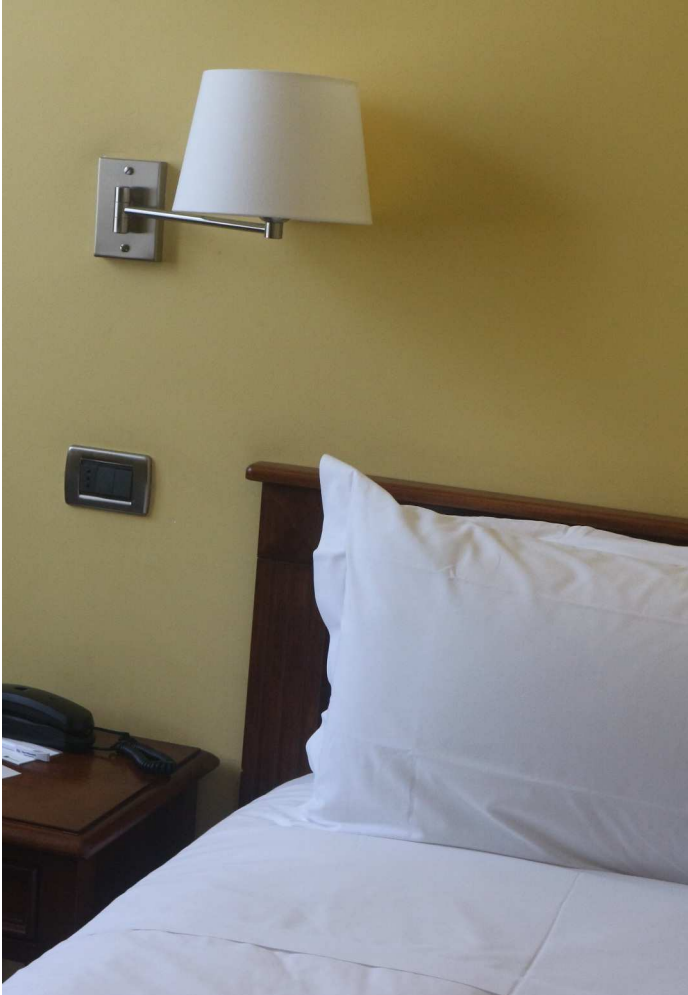
Driving through all these pittoresque coastal villages was really like driving along one enourmously long sea promenade. I mean: it was sometimes difficult to say where one village ended and another one began, - only the road signs indicated a change of community or town border, - but don't get me wrong: This doesn't mean that the landscape was in any way boring or monotonus. It was at times a very winding road, leading us up steep hills and through small forests, but always with a sea view around the next bend and the glimpse of another village clinging on to the surrounding hills and mountains. The traffic was heavy at this time of the year, with hundreds of motorbikes and - as we came closer to Italy - Vespas popping up everywhere, so it was (just like I had foreseen) quite a challenge to be a driver. But we managed to restrain ourselves from making any obscene gestures towards the Italian drivers who sometimes made the





most (in our eyes) horrific moves with their vehicles and parked in the most astonishing places. I actually found it rather amusing, and it only confirmed what I had heard about the Italian driving style.

We reached Genoa as planned on our first day, but it was dark when we arrived, and we hadn't booked a hotel, so we parked the car in a car-park by the harbour and went looking for a place to spend the night. After a few not so successful visits to the nearest hotels and B&Bs, we found a small B&B in one of the back streets. The building was tall and narrow with a steep staircase and the tiniest elevator I have ever set my eyes on (it was so small that it could barely hold 1 person and a suitcase), and the owner was an elderly man who hardly spoke a word of English. Fortunately, my very limited Italian was sufficient enough to secure us the one room he had left on the top floor, and the credit card machine worked just long enough to accept our payment, so after some friendly chatter with the owner, we could go back to the car and get the most necessary luggage and bring it to our room.



The room had no air-condition and was rather modest, but at least it was clean and had its own bathroom, so we decided it would do for one night, and that we would go and look for another hotel when we'd had breakfast in the morning. We decided to spend 2 nights in Genoa so we could explore the town a little, so after having installed the luggage, we went out again to get something to eat and have a look around the neighbourhood to see if there were any interesting sights that we could visit. We found an aquarium by the harbour, so after having checked the opening hours, we decided we would go there the next day. A modest meal and a refreshing shower later, we said good-night and tried to get some sleep in the warm room.... We didn't sleep too poorly, but the breakfast was not the most inviting or varied hotel breakfast I've had in my life, so we finished quickly and left the place, hoping to find a more attractive hotel for the next night. And we were lucky. Arriving at a comfortable Best Western Hotel a bit further into the city center was like coming to heaven after the spartan back street B&B.



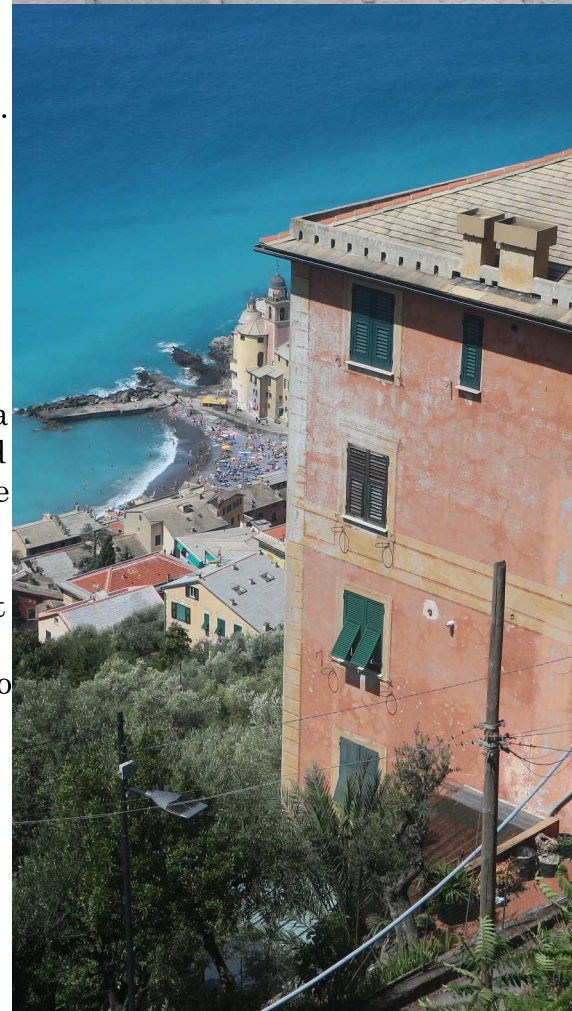
From an elegant Gucci store to the elegant dolphins in the Aquarium of Genoa ...



Walking around Genoa the next day was a pleasant experience, with its old buildings, statues and fountains, elegant fashion stores and restaurants and stylish sports cars. We also found a nice park where we rested our feet and had some lunch, with the pigeons eagerly waiting at safe distance for every bread crumb we might drop.

This Italian port town is packed with appeal but often misses out on the attention it deserves, eclipsed by its more famous city counterparts in the south. Aside from being home to Italy's oldest football team, and the site of Europe's – arguably the world's – first bank, Genoa has bags of medieval charm, complete with cathedrals, tiny alleyways and hidden piazzas. It also sits at the heart of the Italian Riviera – meaning that from its working port you can escape to charming fishing villages and magical coves. The city that the scholar Petrarch described as 'La' has plenty to offer, so stopping here is not a waste of time. Genoa actually has the largest medieval center in Europe, thanks to its success as a Maritime Republic during the Middle Ages. The old town especially is a maze of alleyways ripe for exploration. It's also where you'll stumble across excellent coffee shops and gelaterias.

But quite honestly: The Aquarium was the best. If you ever come to Genoa, I absolutely recommend that you pay it a visit. It was a beautifully organized place, with a great variety of fish and other sea creatures. Actually, it's the largest exhibition of biodiversity and ecosystems in Europe, with 12,000 specimens belonging to 600 animal species and 200 vegetal species, but above all a unique experience above and below the sea surface. And the starting point, a room where you could watch a spectacular film about the aquarium and the exhibition, was a perfect kick-off for the journey through this sea world, a world of colors and elegant creatures moving about in the water. The most elegant of them all were the dolphins. We sat more than an hour outside their huge water tank, watching them move gracefully to the music that was playing in the background. It was a simply beautiful and peaceful experience, and we could barely tear ourselves away from there. But of course we had to in the end. We went there in the evening, and closing hours had to be respected, but we were sad to leave these beautiful creatures behind and return to the streets of Genoa, even though that was pleasant enough.





After a wonderful night's sleep at the Best Western Hotel and an equally wonderful breakfast, we moved on from Genoa the next day, aiming for Pisa.

The Via Aurelia took us through another stretch of breathtaking scenery, up hills and along the coast to La Spezia. We were thinking of making a stop there and go by train to Cinque Terre, but decided that we wanted to concentrate on Tuscany this time, so we passed through La Spezia and headed directly to Pisa.

It was still early in the evening when we arrived there, and this time we had made a reservation at the Casa San Tommaso before leaving Genoa, so we just followed the directions made by the GPS and found it right away. It was situated on a quiet street and had just enough parking spaces to allow us to park right outside the entrance, so it couldn't have been more convenient. Casa San Tommaso is a small guest house in a historic building and set in a traffic-free zone of central Pisa, just 300 m from the Leaning Tower. The rooms offer air conditioning, wood-beam ceilings, and free Wi-Fi, and the property is near restaurants, cafés, and shops.

Visiting the Leaning Tower was of course a must, and the fact that it took us only a few minutes to walk there from our guest-house, was absolutely a plus. There were quite a lot of people visiting the tower that evening, but not at all crowded, like we kind of had expected at this time of summer. We really enjoyed strolling around there in the friendly atmosphere and got plenty of space to take pictures and study the tower and the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, which the Leaning Tower is actually a part of. Construction on this amazing cathedral was started in the 11th century and it was completed in 1092. The front façade of the cathedral is truly ornate with a series of beautiful stone and marble arches and three opulent bronze doors. Furthermore, the interior of the cathedral is also said to be absolutely magnificent. We didn't go inside, but the ceiling of the main aisle is said to be covered with gold decoration and the dome of the basilica has a stunning fresco depicting the Assumption of Mary. The Campanile or bell tower of Pisa Cathedral is a beautiful structure in its own right, but it has been made famous by its noticeable tilt. Constructed in the 12th century after the cathedral, it was soon found that the foundations were unstable and the building began to lean. To this day the tower still leans, and measures have been taken to ensure it doesn't collapse. Aside from posing for funny photos, the architecture of the tower is actually fantastic and the 6 rows of stone arches are simply beautiful. Furthermore, you can climb to the top of the tower for a surreal tilted view of the surrounding city.





I have to admit that we also took a few of those funny pictures where we appeared to support the tower with our bare hands, - just like about a hundred other visitors did. With a leaning tower at hand it was just too hard to resist....

After visiting the Cathedral and the Campanile, we strolled around in the vicinity, where there were several market stalls with souvenirs and also a few places where you could buy food and snacks. I fell for a nice little handbag with a Leaning Tower motif on it, and also had to bring back home a miniature of the Leaning Tower itself. The nice boy that I bought it from, actually gave me another miniature tower as a gift, but since I didn't really need two, I was happy to pass that one on to my son.

Of course there are plenty of other things to see in Pisa, for instance a number of museums. Located on the banks of the Arno River, the National Museum of Pisa is the most prized museum in the city and features some stunning artefacts and sculptures.

If you are looking to learn a little about the history of this fine city, this museum is the place to visit. Notable objects include original sculptures from the Cathedral and Baptistery and some wonderful paintings dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries. Furthermore, there is also a series of ancient manuscripts and other religious relics from the various churches in Pisa. If you choose to visit a museum during your stay in Pisa, make sure it's this one!



We spent only one night in Pisa, as we wanted to move on to the heart of Tuscany, but we had a good night's sleep at Casa San Tommaso, each in our own nice, quiet and comfortable room. The breakfast next morning was not a full continental, but a typical Italian breakfast with sweet cakes and some coffee, which we served ourselves from a counter in a room just below the stairs. Not exactly what we Scandinavians regard as a healthy meal to carry us through the day, but totally acceptable for the price we paid to stay at the guest house.

That day we drove on to our main destination: The Val d'Orca in Tuscany. There were endless motives to capture with our cameras, but I couldn't possibly cover them all in this article, and most of the impressions have been saved in our minds and in our hearts. But our route took us from Pisa on to Siena, and then to Multepuciano and through to Florence. I have been dreaming of going to Tuscany for so many years, and it was definitely no disappointment. My only regret is that we didn't have more time to dive deeper into all the opportunities in the area: Wine-tasting, cookery-classes... among many other things. But then I have an excuse to go there again (as if I need one...!) One day I might even buy an estate there... Time will show! I can dream, can't I..?



On the following pages I choose to let the pictures from Tuscany speak for themselves, because words are not enough and this area simply has to be experienced and not just read about. I hope you'll be inspired to go there yourself....





Florence



Florence was our last stop in Tuscany and Italy before we headed back to Nice.

We checked in at the Hotel Eden on Via Nazionale 55, a quiet street in a 5-minutes walking distance from the Firenze Santa Maria Novella railway station, and otherwise perfectly located for anyone who's interested in cathedrals, good food and art. The rooms in Hotel Eden are spacious, clean and comfortable, each with air-condition and TV and a separate bathroom. The reception is open 24/7, and a continental breakfast is served every morning in a very nice and welcoming breakfast room. We were very pleased with the hotel and the location, and the car was left safely at a garage nearby with security surveillance around the clock. It was easy to get about to many of the most interesting sights from the hotel, like the San Lorenzo Basilica, the San Marco Museum, the Santa Maria Novella Church, and the Via Faenza. We went for a stroll in the area in the evening, got ourselves a good meal at a restaurant nearby, where we also had a nice view to a couple of fantastic musicians who were giving a small concert on the street nearby, one violinist and one who played the viola da gamba. I wish I could give you a taste of their music, but at least I secured myself one of their CDs.



A lot could be said about Florence, but [Emily Kyle](#), CAPA Florence alumna, has summed it up nicely: "The energy of Florence is indescribable: overflowing with bustle and charm, teeming with life. Every corner bears new treasures, every cobblestone a gem. The artistry in the sculptures, the landscapes, the architecture is beyond compare. I feel a sense of humility and awe walking along these ancient streets, which have served as witness to countless revolutions, tread upon for so many centuries by artists and martyrs and geniuses alike. The stones are infused with history and culture and knowledge: I feel it. I feel the presence of generations, I feel the weight of giants." -

With only a little more than a week at our disposal this time, we decided to go on the motoway back to Nice, where we had to deliver the rental car on a fixed date and had also booked a flight back home.

I generally prefer not to go on the motorways when going on a road trip abroad, especially if I'm alone. Yes, it's fast, and it's great if you just want to get from A to B as quickly as possible, but if you want to see the country and be able to stop whenever you want to take pictures, you should stay away from the motorways and choose the more scenic routes and backroads. But since we had already taken the Via Aurelia one way and needed to be back in Nice in time for our flight, we decided to return on the motorway. We also wanted to spend a day or two in Nice and perhaps go on a day-trip to Monaco on the train. But I found it more tiresome to go that way, because it's a very monotonous drive and it made me very sleepy. We had to stop quite often at service stations along the way to get some fresh air and some time to rest my head. But we reached Nice safe and sound in the afternoon, and went straight to the airport to deliver the rental car, since we decided we didn't need it in Nice. I had called the rental company before we left Florence, to ask if we could deliver the car one day earlier than planned, and that was no problem. We had booked rooms at the Ibis Styles Hotel again, and were picked up at the airport by their shuttle transport, so it was very convenient. After having installed ourselves in the rooms, we walked to the St. Augustine railway station and caught a train into Nice town, just to have a stroll along Les Promenades des Anglais before calling it a day. It was getting dark soon, but we needed to stretch our legs a little after the long drive back from Florence, and the temperature was nice at this time of the day, so it was a nice way to end the day. There were lots of people by the sea, but the bathing was





mainly over for the day, so it was not crowded. It was nice to stroll along the promenade and look at the people, and the Hotel Negresco looked majestic in the dark and was a perfect background for a picture.

We passed some street musicians on our walk, and stopped to listen to them for a while. They played great jazz music, Jango Reinhard style, and I wish they'd had a CD available, but unfortunately they didn't. I asked, and when they said, "no, sorry", I suggested that they should make one. With any luck, they might have done that when I come back this year, - because, yes, I'm planning to go back at the end of June. Hopefully, they'll be there, too....

After a little while, we went back to the Ibis Styles hotel, and went to the restaurant at the back of the hotel, by the swimming pool, to have a meal. The owner was very friendly and gave us a lot of attention, since we were almost alone in the restaurant at that point. He answered willingly all our questions about the menu and gave his recommendations, and also came back during our meal to ask if we enjoyed the food and to have a chat in a mix of French and English. The food was excellent, and so was the service, so both my son and I were very pleased with the visit. We were rather tired, though, after the long drive back from Florence, so we decided to return to our rooms and get a good nights' sleep, before heading back into Nice town the next day to explore it a bit further.



After a good continental breakfast the next morning, we walked to the St. Augustin railway station and went into town again. It was a very hot day, but there was a slight breeze coming in from the sea, so it wasn't too uncomfortable for 2 Scandinavians as long as we stayed by the sea front. We felt the heat a bit more

when we were walking the city streets, though, so we tried to get a bit of shade as often as possible.

There's a lot to see in Nice, and there are several nice parks, - one of them is the very popular green walkway in the city centre, the Promenade du Paillon. It's a true green path, connecting the Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Art (MAMAC) to the Théâtre de Verdure and the Promenade des Anglais. This vast garden is also available for events (e.g. art exhibitions, fun activities and large scale events, etc.)

Nice has chosen to become "The Green City of the Mediterranean". There are already 300 hectares of parks and gardens, and another hundred or more hectares of new green areas will be added. Each area has its own identity, rare species and its own particular charm. I myself found it particularly refreshing to walk through the Promenade du Paillon with its mist sprays of water to cool me down on a very hot day. There are also play areas for the children and a lot of sculptures, old and new, which add a lot of interest to the place.

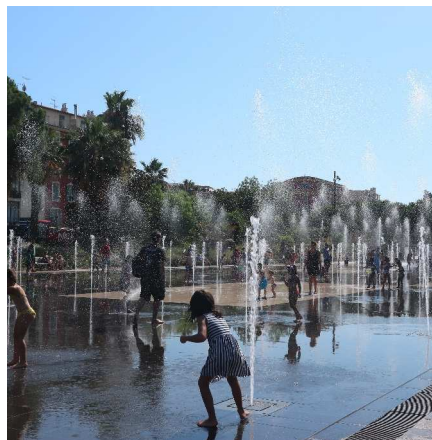
Close to the Promenade du Paillon is the Place Massena. If you visit it, in the very heart of Nice, you will see a large fountain called the "Fontaine du Soleil", the Sun Fountain. There are 5 bronze sculptures in the basin and in the centre stands an impressive marble Apollo. He is 7 meters (23 feet) tall and weighs in at 7 tons. He is definitely the king of the square and you would think this giant would be admired and respected... but not by the Niçois. There's an interesting story about this fountain, which you can find here:

<http://thegoodlifeinfrance.com/the-infamous-story-of-the-sun-fountain-in-nice-france/>

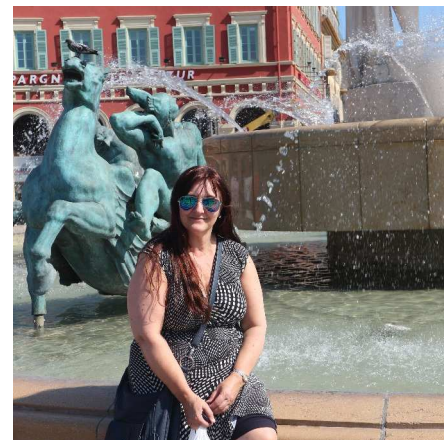
Close by the Place Massena you will also find great shops, like the Galeries Lafayette, which is a personal favourite of mine, and where I've experienced great service by the staff, but of course there are plenty of other shops in Nice, if you're fond of shopping. All-in-all, Nice is a very pleasant place to go, whether you enjoy shopping, sunbathing or culture - or all of it together. It's one of my favourite places to go, especially if I don't have much time at my disposal, because here I get everything I want: French language, nice temperature, good food, lots of things to explore, great shops ... and easy access to many nearby towns and adventures, by train, by car or by plane. It's the perfect starting point for a lot of trips, whether you want to explore the south of France and Provence, or go to Monaco, Italy or even Spain, - all depending on how much time you have, of course. I'm going back in June this year, and this time I also have a special purpose with my trip...



One of many modern sculptures in this park ...



The mist sprays in the park at Promenade du Paillon.



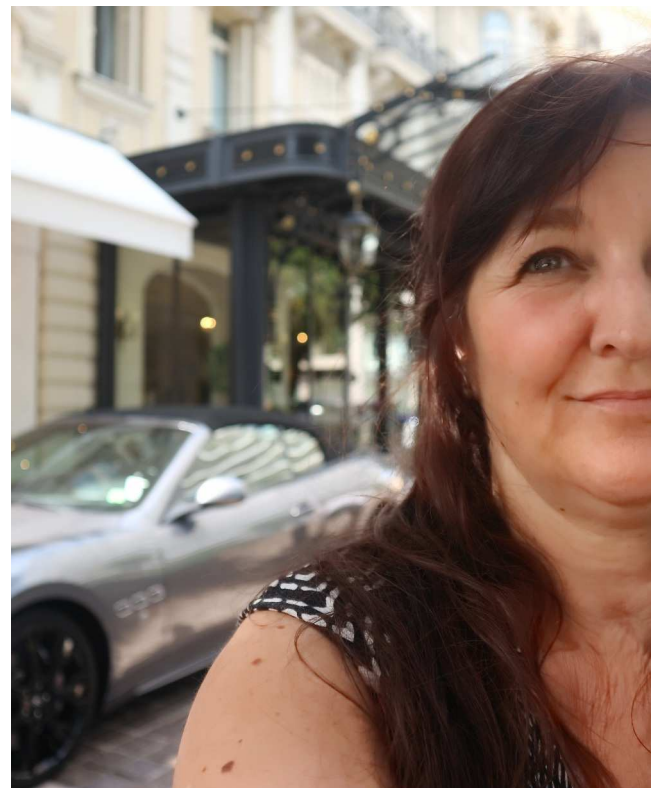
Me in front of the Fontaine du Soleil at Place Massena.

I'm planning an event in Provence in September / October this year, and I'm going down there to check out some venues for the event, as well as some opportunities and sights to explore in the area. You can read more about this planned event on page 38, and also find more details about it in the July issue of The Passionate Globetrotter.

After a great day in Nice and a lovely meal at one of the many local restaurants, we headed back to the hotel. The next day was even hotter, but we had planned to take a train ride to Monaco, and so we did. The trip took about half an hour on the train, and it was with some anticipation that we arrived at the Monte Carlo railway station. I must, however, admit that Monaco wasn't what I had expected, and therefore somewhat disappointing, but perhaps it was just the circumstances that made me feel that way. The fact that the temperatures were very high that day and the hills of Monte Carlo a great deal steeper than what I prefer on a hot day (or even on a rainy day, for that matter...) rather diminished the experience, I guess. But the sea view was great, and when we managed to get ourselves down to the harbour and the park by the Monte Carlo Yacht Club, the breeze from the ocean made the temperature more endurable. We looked around to find the famous glamorous casino, but didn't really see any particularly interesting one (there were several casinos) - but we came across a few nice hotels and fancy sports cars and a Cartier shop and other expensive boutiques, - but that was it, really. I wasn't impressed by far, and just longed to get back to Nice. My son agreed, so after only 3 hours in Monaco, we headed back on the train to St. Augustin station and our rooms at the Ibis Styles Hotel. We had another meal at the restaurant by the pool, and took an early night, since we were going back home the next day. We were both very pleased with the trip, and went home with a lot of nice memories, especially from Nice and Tuscany. I will highly recommend that you follow the Via Aurelia yourself some time. See you there, perhaps?



By the Yacht Club in Monaco... great sea view!



Me and a fancy car outside a hotel, in Monte Carlo.

Meet Kathrine - Traveler of the Month

In this very first issue of *The Passionate Globetrotter*, I'm delighted to introduce you to Kathrine from Norway, who was kind enough to step in at the last minute to answer some questions for this month's column. *(The photos are her own.)*

Here are the Q & A's from the interview:

PG: First of all, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

K: My name is Kathrine, I'm 24 years old. I just finished my bachelor degree a year ago, and I work as a translator and content creator. As part of my education, I spent a year abroad in York, England.

PG: When did you first become interested in traveling?

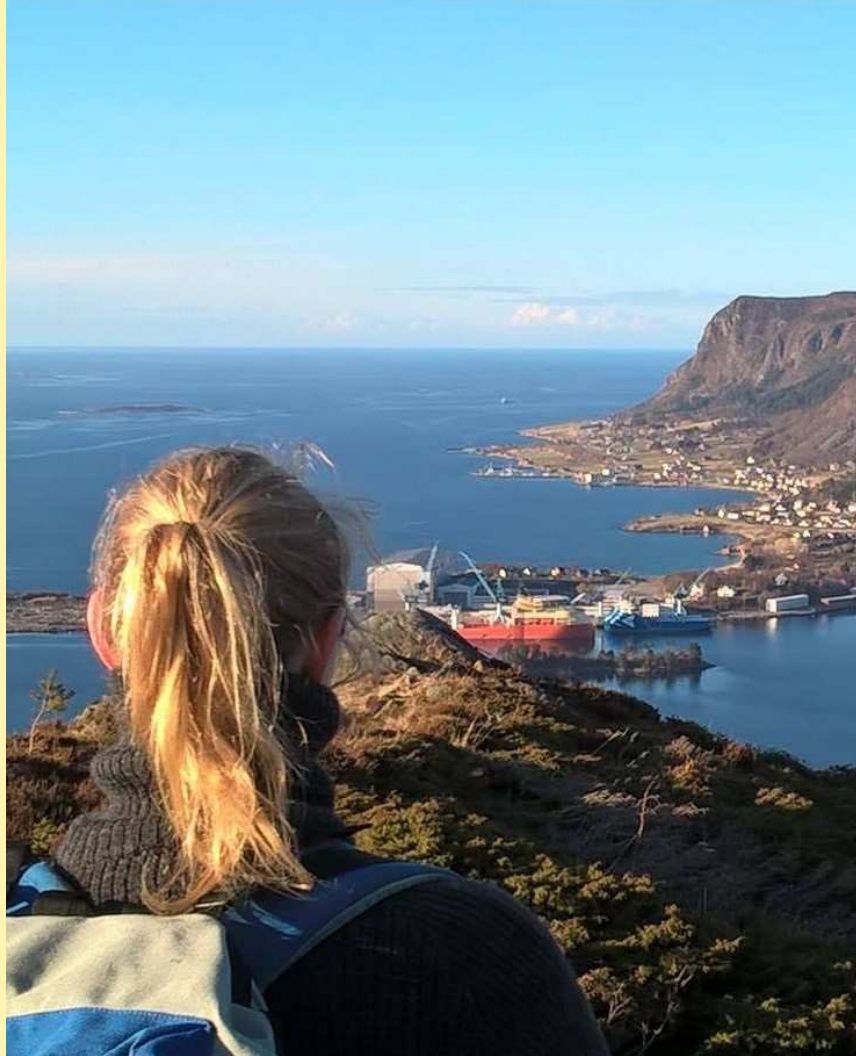
K: I don't really know, but my family have some friends in England and we visited them when I was five years old. That was my first trip abroad, and I remember it was very exciting.

PG: Why did you find it interesting?

K: Obviously, it's very exciting seeing new places and experiencing new things, and having had a taste of it as a young child, I think I found traveling very enjoyable. Growing up, I also watched shows like *Monarch of the Glen*, and *Heartbeat*, and I always wanted to go visit the places where the shows were filmed.

PG: Where did you go on your very first journey abroad? Tell us a little bit about it

K: As I mentioned, my first trip abroad was England, to visit some friends of my family. As I was five I can only remember bits and bobs, but I remember we visited a few castles, went to the zoo, and that I got my face painted as a tiger on the last day there. *(Top photo: Kathrine on a mountain walk in Norway. Lower photo: Calton Hill, Edinburgh. Both photos are her own.)*



We stayed with our friends in Shrewsbury, but we also visited Birmingham where we went to a museum or theme park with mechanical dinosaurs. Turns out I remember quite a bit, eh?

PG: Do you prefer to travel in your own country or abroad? Why?

K: I like traveling in my own country, because of all the stunning scenery, but I think I prefer traveling abroad when it comes to new experiences. When I travel in Norway, it's often to get from A to B, not so much for the experience, which makes it a bit more dull and stressful. Also, traveling abroad means I get to taste new foods, which is something I love doing.

PG: Do you have any favourite places that you return to over and over again? If so: What is it that you like so much about that place (or those places)?

K: I love traveling in England. Spending a year there for my studies just reminded me of how beautiful the country is, and it's so easy to go on day trips when you're there. That means that you get to see a lot more than you might do other places. I stayed in York, which is a hub for the railways. From there I went on day trips to Manchester, Liverpool, Scarborough and Edinburgh, just to mention some. London is also a favourite for its many concert venues and good food.

PG: Do you have a list of places that you want to visit? If so: Which places, and why do you particularly want to go there?

K: Yes, of course – doesn't everyone? Right now, my top destinations are Copenhagen, Berlin, Amsterdam, Morocco and Iceland. The three cities I want to visit are on the list because I've always heard so many nice things about them, and people constantly post envy-worthy pictures on Instagram. Morocco I would like to visit because of the atmosphere and because I want to see the markets in Marrakesh. And finally, I want to visit Iceland because of its amazing scenery and rich history.

PG: How often do you travel?

K: Sadly, right now I'm not really travelling. Since I just got out of university, I have been more focused on working and starting my career. Right now I think it's better for me to save up some before going on some big travel. Also, if I spend a lot of time saving up for it, it will be much more of a reward and I will appreciate it more than if I just rush things now.

PG: Do you have the opportunity to travel whenever you want to? If so: What is it that makes this possible for you?

K: In my line of work I can basically work from anywhere as long as I have a wifi-connection. So the possibilities are there, I'm just not using them at the moment.

PG: Do you travel mostly alone, or with someone else?

K: I don't think I've ever travelled alone, and honestly I think experiences are best shared.

PG: Do you speak any foreign languages? If so, what languages?

K: I speak Norwegian (my native tongue), English and I can understand a bit of French and Spanish. I took Spanish in school, but as I never got to use it, my knowledge of it soon dwindled away.

PG: Do you generally find it easy to communicate with people when you travel abroad?

K: Usually, it's been quite simple in the places I've been. I think the biggest challenge has been communicating in France, since they've always been a bit reluctant to learn English, and I don't speak French very well (or at all, really).

PG: Have you ever experienced anything unpleasant or dangerous while you've been traveling? If so: What happened, and was there any particular reason for it?

K: I don't think I've ever experienced anything that was dangerous, but my boyfriend and I had somewhat of an uncomfortable experience at the subway in London, where there was a guy who was talking to himself, punching in the air and generally seemed to be battling some inner demons. He probably had some mental problems, and even though he probably wasn't a danger to anyone around him, it was uncomfortable, because we couldn't really predict what would happen next. Usually however, my travel experiences have been quite nice, and without much of a hitch (except a few almost missed flights etc).

PG: Do you have any funny episodes from your journeys that you want to share with the readers of The Passionate Globetrotter?

K: On a school trip to York (this was before I spent a year there), I decided I would like to have my hair dyed. Never having dyed my hair before, I recruited one of my friends to help me, and with her help I dyed my hair as a rainbow. We had to use nail polish remover to wash the sink and the shower, and her hands were purple for the remainder of the week!

PG: Do you prefer holidays where there are lots of possibilities for various activities, or do you prefer a quiet holiday with plenty of opportunity to relax? Why?

K: I much prefer to go places where there is a lot to experience. I mean, in a way a beach is a beach and a pool is a pool. When I travel somewhere I like trying out new restaurants and seeing historic places and buildings.

PG: What sort of accommodation do you normally prefer? Hotel, camp sites, private accommodation, holiday apartments ... or something else?

K: I have usually stayed in hotels, but I try to find cheap accommodation wherever I go, because my goal is to spend most of my days experiencing stuff. I don't need the accommodation to be very fancy, since I'm only really in the room to relax and sleep. As long as it has an ok bed and a clean bathroom I'm happy. However, I value my privacy, and will not really stay in any shared accommodation, like hostels. Anything else is fine, when I've travelled in Norway I've loved sleeping in a tent, because it makes me feel closer to nature.

PG: Do you have any favourite means of transport? (Aeroplane, train, car ...?)
If so: What do you think is the advantage of this way of traveling?

K: For me, it really depends what's most practical. I simply don't want to pick.

PG: If money was no issue and you could live wherever you wanted in the world, where would you choose to live?

K: I haven't really given this much thought, but I still think I would prefer living in Norway as my family and friends are here, and I love the nature and all the opportunities we have here. However, I wouldn't mind spending a year in the south of France.

PG: Why there?

K: Because I would really like to experience the slow paced life in a small village (think the show "A year in Provence").

PG: What stops you from doing it?

K: Well, first it's practicality and economy. Secondly, I just think I've always preferred going somewhere to visit, but always going home after. If I really wanted to, I could probably find a way, but right now I'm content and happy where I am.

PG: Are you going on any journey in the near future? If so: Where will you be going?

K: Right now, I don't have any travel plans. We've talked about Iceland, but we have not specific plans yet.

PG: If you were to give any advice to others who want to travel but who might not be so used to it, what would you say?

K: I would say: do your research, have some things you know you want to do or see, but don't plan your entire trip. Unless you have to order tickets a long time in advance, don't have everything set in stone. Make sure you know what you want to see, but choose the day when you're there – it might not be so fun to go to see the gardens at Versailles if it's pouring rain, but the Louvre is perfect. Also, you don't have to stay in the most expensive hotels. Your room is for sleeping, showering, changing clothes and recharging batteries.

PG: Sounds like good advice, Kathrine! Thank you for your time!

Dear Reader:
If you want to be Traveler of the Month in a future issue of The Passionate Globetrotter, just contact me! I would be happy to get to know you, and I'm sure the other readers would, too!



Celebration of Chinese New Year in Manchester, England. (Kathrine's own photo.)

Kurdistan

No friends but the mountains.



Article by Else Kosberg
Unless otherwise stated:
Photos by Else Kosberg

It couldn't be any other way. My very first feature

article in *The Passionate Globetrotter* had to be about Kurdistan, because even though I was born in the north of the world, in little Norway, and I love my homeland and would love to tell you about it, - Kurdistan has changed my life in so many ways. To me, getting to know my Kurdish friends and their homeland, marks a «before» and «after» in my life. So I want to share with you some of what I know about this wonderful place on earth, although the history of this region and its people is not rosy red in any way, and the turbulence in the area is not over by far. That's why I feel that before I tell you any more about it, I need to ask you to read carefully the important note/disclaimer on page 39.

But let me just go back in time a little bit...

It was back in January 1991. I was in the hospital, in the Maternity Ward, where I had just given birth to my eldest

child. I popped into the sitting room in the evening, just to socialize for a little while with the other women on the ward, and the TV was on. It was the news. They talked about the Gulf War. They talked about Saddam Hussain and about the situation in Iraq. About the Kurds. But right there and then, my head was not in Iraq. It was not with the Kurds. As a matter of fact: I really didn't know anything about the Kurds. I knew about Saddam Hussain and had heard about his *actions* towards the Kurds, the genocide, and I was glad when I later heard that he was out of the picture. But my mind right there and then was on my newborn baby, and what they talked about on the news more or less passed me by.

For the next 19 years of my life, my son and my daughter (who was born 2 years later) occupied most of my mind and was really what my life was about. I didn't pay too much attention to the news or to what was going on in the big, wide world. My world was my children.



The day when I learned to know my Kurdish friends, marks a "before" and "after" in my life."

Their welfare, their joys and sorrows, their development and happiness.

So in 2010, when my children were 19 and 17 years old, I still didn't know much about the Kurds. Of course I had heard that Saddam Hussain had been captured and all that, but I wasn't at all into the details about the situation in the Middle East – or anywhere else in the world, for that matter.

When I think about it, it's almost unbelievable! How could it have slipped my attention? I mean: I have been eager to know about other countries, cultures and languages all my life, and I've been particularly drawn to the Middle East, for some reason, - and still: Nearly 20 years of my life went by without me paying any attention to what was happening to the Kurds! My only explanation is that I was living in a kind of «motherhood bubble» and was busy with the home-based business I was trying to make profitable at the time. But I still find it quite astonishing that major events in the world could pass me by like that... And still: I don't think I'm the only person to experience this. We all tend to go about our daily business without paying much

attention to what's going on in the big, wide world. Sure, we hear about it – the tragedies, the wars, the genocides, the refugees ... but we don't get *involved* in it. We shut it out, because there's simply too much of it. We feel helpless. There doesn't seem to be anything we can do about it. So we go on with our daily lives and try to focus on the here and now, our jobs, our mortgages, our families, our friends, our next holiday ... And that's what I did, for so many years. And I didn't travel much, either, because ... well, time, money and family didn't quite allow it. Or rather: It wasn't on the priority list. But I traveled a lot *in my mind* during those years, like I've always done. And I always wished that I could leave all my daily responsibilities behind and just *go somewhere. Anywhere.* Experience something different...





The Kurdish mountains,
Kurdistan in Iraq

To be fair: I did go on a few holidays abroad with my family, - which was lovely, - but we traveled mostly to European destinations like Paris and London, which I will come back to, for sure – but not to any destinations that were vastly different from what I was familiar with or already knew quite a lot about.

And then came the year 2010. The year that completely changed my life. I had just started in a new job the year before, working as a teacher or coach for unemployed people who needed a kick-start to get into the job market and to learn some strategies that could help them find the perfect job for them. I held several courses, each lasting 3-4 months, so I got to know the attendants quite well during that period, but the course which took place in the fall and winter of 2010 was special. It was especially focused on the challenges that people with a foreign background faced in the job market, and it was during this course that I learned about Kurdistan and the Kurds. There had been people from many different countries on *all* the courses, and I always felt that I learned a lot from these people, wherever they came from, but I never learned to know them on a personal level and seldom saw any of them again when a course had ended. But it was different this time. There were a few Kurds on this course, and when they told me they came from Kurdistan, I had absolutely no clue where that was. So I got curious and asked them to tell me more about it, and they explained to me that Kurdistan is not (yet) an independent nation, but a region in the Middle-East which stretches across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. These two men themselves came from Kurdistan in Iraq, and – being a language freak, - I was very interested in learning what their language was. They told me it was Sorani, one of the 3 largest Kurdish dialects.





The other two are Kurmanji and Badini. I immediately got interested in learning more about their language and their homeland, so over the next weeks and months, I talked a lot with them about it. I can't explain what it was, but I immediately felt connected to these people. We were simply «on the same wave-length», and as the months went by, we became very good friends. I also got to know the rest of their family and was invited to their home, and I was blown away with their hospitality and their friendliness, and also with the fact that I could speak so freely and openly with these people, whose cultural and religious background was so different from my own. In fact, they became like a second family to me, and my life can never be the same again because of it. And I wouldn't want it to, either! Sometimes I wonder if I've been a Kurd myself, in a previous life, because the connection I feel is that strong ... I can't explain it.

Since that day when I first met my Kurdish friends, I've learned a lot more about the Kurds, and I've traveled to Kurdistan twice. My last visit was in March 2014, when I spent 10 days there to celebrate Newroz, the Kurdish New Year. I've learned to appreciate and love the Kurdish culture, the people, the landscape, the mountains ... especially the mountains. Maybe it's because I grew up with mountains all around me and they have always felt like solid friends to me and part of what's home... But the mountains in Kurdistan are so huge ... going up into those mountains is a breathtaking experience, even for me. I can't even begin to describe the feeling I had the first time I stood on a mountain in Kurdistan and looked around me. I just had to cry. It was so powerful, and I felt that my heart was going to burst.

(Pictures on these pages: Source Pinterest.)

So how can I describe Kurdistan to you...? Well, let's take some facts first:

Where is Kurdistan exactly?

Greater Kurdistan is a roughly defined geo-cultural region wherein the Kurdish people form a prominent majority population, and where Kurdish culture, languages and national identity have historically been based. Kurdistan roughly encompasses the northwestern Zagros and the eastern Taurus mountain ranges.

Contemporary use of the term Kurdistan refers to the following areas: South-eastern Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan), northwestern Iran (Eastern Kurdistan) and northern Syria (Rojava or Western Kurdistan). Some Kurdish nationalist organizations seek to create an independent nation state consisting of some or all of these areas with a Kurdish majority, while others campaign for greater autonomy within the existing national boundaries. *(Source: Wikipedia.)*

Iraqi Kurdistan first gained autonomous status in a 1970 agreement with the Iraqi government, and its status was re-confirmed as an autonomous entity within the federal Iraqi republic in 2005. There is a province by the name Kurdistan in Iran, but it is not self-ruled.

Iraqi Kurdistan is divided into *six governorates*, three of which (and parts of others) are under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Iranian Kurdistan encompasses Kurdistan Province and the greater parts of West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, and Îlâm provinces. Syrian Kurdistan (Kurdish: Rojavayê Kurdistanê) is located primarily in northern Syria, and covers the province of Al Hasakah and northern Raqqa Governorate, northern Aleppo Governorate and also Jabal al-Akrad (Mountain of the Kurds) region. The major cities in this region are Qamishli (Kurdish: Qami'lo) and Al Hasakah (Kurdish: Hasakah).

Turkish Kurdistan encompasses a large area of Eastern Anatolia Region and southeastern Anatolia of Turkey, and it is home to an estimated 6 to 8 million Kurds. There are another 9 to 12 million Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent in predominantly Turkish regions of Turkey as the majority of Turkish Kurds no longer live in Southeastern Anatolia. *(Photos on this page are from Pinterest.)*



Map of Kurdistan.



Kurdish boys dancing.

Climate

Much of the region has a typical continental climate – hot in the summer, cold in the winter. Despite this, much of the region is fertile and has historically exported grain and livestock. The climate is dominated by mountains in the zone along the border with Iran and Turkey, with dry summers, rainy and sometimes snowy winters, and damp springs, while to the south it progressively transitions towards semi-arid and desert zones. The northern mountainous regions along the border with Iran and Turkey receive heavy snowfall and they are more of an extreme version of the continental climate.

Flora and fauna

Kurdistan is one of the most mountainous regions in the world with a cold climate, receiving enough rain and snow each year to sustain temperate forests and shrubs. In the mountain chains you can find pastures and forested valleys, totaling approximately 16 million hectares (160,000 km²), including firs and countryside is mostly oaks, conifers, platanus, willow, poplar and, to the west of Kurdistan, olive trees. The region north of the mountainous region on the border with Iran and Turkey features meadow grasses and such wild trees as poplar, willow and oak, hawthorn, cherry plum, rose hips, mountain apple, pear, mountain ash, and olive. As a contrast, the steppe and desert in the south have such species as palm trees and date palm.

Animals found in the region include the Syrian brown bear, wild boar, gray wolf, the golden jackal, Indian crested porcupine, the red fox, goitered gazelle, Eurasian otter, striped hyena, Persian fallow deer, long-eared hedgehog, onager, mangar and the Euphrates softshell turtle. Birds include the hooded crow, common starling, Eurasian magpie, European robin, water pipit, spotted flycatcher, namaqua dove, saker falcon, griffon vulture, little crane and collared pratincole, among others.

Rivers

The plateaus and mountains of Kurdistan, which are characterized by heavy rain and snow fall, act as a water reservoir for the Near and Middle East, forming the source of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as well as other numerous smaller rivers, such as the Little Khabur, Khabur, Tharthar, Ceyhan, Araxes, Kura, Sefidrud, Karkha, and Hezil. Among rivers of historical importance to Kurds are the Murat (Arasân) and Buhtân rivers in Turkey; the Peshkhâbur, the Little Zab, the Great Zab, and the Diyala in Iraq; and the Jaghatu (Zarrinarud), the Tâtâ'u (Siminarud), the Zohâb (Zahâb), and the Gâmâsiyâb in Iran. These rivers, which flow from heights of three to four thousand meters above sea level, are significant both as water sources and for the production of energy. Iraq and Syria dammed many of these rivers and their tributaries, and Turkey has an extensive dam system under construction as part of the GAP (Southeast Anatolia Project); though incomplete, the GAP already supplies a significant proportion of Turkey's electrical energy needs. Due to the extraordinary archaeological richness of the region, almost any dam impacts historic sites.

Lakes

Kurdistan extends to Lake Urmia in Iran on the east. The region includes Lake Van, the largest body of water in Turkey; the only lake in the Middle East with a larger surface is Lake Urmia – though not nearly as deep as Lake Van, which has a much larger volume.

Urmia, Van, as well as Zarivar Lake west of Marivan, and Lake Dukan near the city of Sulaymaniyah, are frequented by tourists.

Petroleum and mineral resources

KRG-controlled parts of Iraqi Kurdistan are estimated to contain around 45 billion barrels (7.2×10^9 m³) of oil, making it the sixth largest reserve in the world.

Extraction of these reserves began in 2007. Al-Hasakah province, also known as Jazira region, has geopolitical importance of oil and is suitable for agricultural lands.

Other mineral resources that exist in significant quantities in the region include coal, copper, gold, iron, limestone (which is used to produce cement), marble, and zinc. The world's largest deposit of rock sulfur is located just southwest of Erbil (Hewlêr). In July 2012, Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government signed an agreement by which Turkey will supply the KRG with refined petroleum products in exchange for crude oil. Crude deliveries are expected to occur on a regular basis (*Main source: Wikipedia*).

Recent history

The parliament of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region was established in Erbil in 1970 after negotiations between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mustafa Barzani, but was effectively controlled by Saddam Hussein until the Kurdish uprising at the end of the 1991 Gulf War. The legislature ceased to function effectively in the mid-1990s when fighting broke out between the two main Kurdish factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The city was captured by the KDP in 1996 with the assistance of the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein. (*Photos on this page by Dreamstime.com, the Khormal Forest and river.*)



Some memories from my first trip to Kurdistan in the summer of 2012.



The PUK then established an alternative Kurdish government in Sulaimaniyah. KDP claimed that on March 1996 PUK asked for Iran's help to fight KDP. Considering this as a foreign attack on Iraq's soil, the KDP asked the Iraqi government for help. The Kurdish Parliament in Erbil reconvened after a peace agreement was signed between the Kurdish parties in 1997, but had no real power. The Kurdish government in Erbil had control only in the western and northern parts of the autonomous region. During the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, a United States special forces task force was headquartered just outside Erbil. The city was the scene of celebrations on 10 April 2003 after the fall of the Ba'ath regime. During the coalition forces occupation of Iraq, sporadic attacks hit Erbil. Parallel bomb attacks against Eid celebrations killed 109 people on 1 February 2004. Responsibility was claimed by the Ansar al-Sunnah, and stated to be in solidarity with Ansar al-Islam. A suicide bombing on 4 May 2005 killed 60 civilians and injured 150 more outside a police recruiting centre.

The very recent history also includes the fight against, and victory over ISIS, which the Kurdish freedom fighters, Peshmerga, played a vital part in and should be very much credited for. But even if ISIS has been defeated in this area, the risk of terrorist attacks and bombings is still considered to be fairly high. The political situation is also rather unstable, and there are frequent demonstrations and disturbance in various places across the region.

NOTE / DISCLAIMER:

Due to all these events, I feel the need to point out to you that going to Kurdistan as a tourist is not yet recommended if you are from the Western world and don't speak the language, since very few people in Kurdistan speak English or any other language apart from Kurdish or Arabic, - but I suggest you stay informed about the situation by checking your government's advise on the Internet and also follow the news from the region. That being said, I suggest you go and visit Kurdistan as soon as the general conditions allow it. It will be an experience for life, and I don't think you'll regret it.

People and Culture

The Kurds are an old nomad people of Indo-European origin and the fourth largest people group in the Middle East, and are considered to be the largest ethnic group in the world without a nation of their own. They speak an Iranian language known as Kurdish, and comprise the majority of the population of the region – however, there are also Arab, Armenian, Assyrian/ Aramean/ Syriac, Azerbaijani, Jewish, Ossetian, Persian, and Turkish communities. Most inhabitants are Muslim, but other religions are present as well – including Yarsanism, Yazidis, Alevis, Christians, and in the past, Jews, most of whom immigrated to Israel. Oil and water resources make Kurdistan an important territory for the states that control it, and Kurdish national aspirations are repeatedly wound down by war and other assault. There are no official statistics on the number of Kurds in the world, and the estimates vary between 24 and 40 million. Kurds often operate with estimates of 40 million. A conservative estimate of the number of Kurds is somewhere between 25 and 30 million.

More than one million Kurds live in exile in the United States and Europe. And that's how I met my Kurdish friends. They came to Europe, and eventually to this cold country in the north, to my country Norway, a country with a population of approximately 5 million people, and they've tried to build a new life here, far from their homeland. The Kurds have experienced persecution, genocide, wars ... and they're still fighting for their freedom. And even though many of them have left Kurdistan to live in other countries, their homeland is – of course - always in their heart and in their mind. And after having learned to know them, and after having been to their homeland Kurdistan and lived there for a while with their families and experienced their warmth, their hospitality, their strong family bonds, - I have become a Kurd, too. At least in my heart. And I can better understand now what it is that they miss, living here in my country, - which has also become *their* country, although I guess it will never completely feel like it is. Not like the one they've left. Not like Kurdistan. Because what I've learned about the Kurdish culture is something that I myself miss. Something I remember from my childhood, but which is now somehow lost to me here in my own country: The close relationships with family and friends. The family gatherings. The picnics, the parties, the meals shared ... the singing, the laughter, the warmth, the hospitality, the trust between people who know and love each other ... the house filled with family and friends on a



*Farm house in the
Kurdish mountains.*

regular basis, and the fact that you know all the neighbours ... The good feeling you have when you know that all these people are looking after each other and that they have your back... and all the cousins, near or far, coming together on a regular basis, playing and having fun ... grandparents who are still alive, and relatives who live far away come on regular visits, and you go and visit them, and you are all close, really close.

That's what Kurdistan is all about for me. That's what I miss from my own life, my own culture. We had all that before, when I grew up. Where did it all go? I think it disappeared in the busyness, the strive for a good education, a proper job, the status symbols, the building of our small families (mother, father, 2 ½ child...) ... and the relationship with our near and extended family – siblings, cousins, nephews, nieces, uncles, aunts - sort of vanished with it. We didn't keep in touch. The elder generation died, and the family culture died with them. We live in our own small family bubbles, and the connection we had before is no longer important enough to us. Or so it seems. But I miss all that, and even though I got used to not having it for so many years, I know now – after having been introduced to the Kurdish culture and sort of found it all again, - how much I've really missed it. And I understand why my Kurdish friends long for their homeland, even though there's turbulence, war, difficult economy, corruption, big challenges to be dealt with on a daily basis... It's still their homeland, the land that they love. The land with colors, friendliness, and a mild climate most of the year... the land where you know your neighbours, where you dress up in beautiful traditional costumes and go on a picnic almost every Friday with your family and friends if the weather allows it, spread beautiful carpets out on the grass, light a fire to keep everybody warm and to cook a meal out in the open, play traditional music and dance the traditional Kurdish dances, laugh and talk and play until it's dark, and then go back home and sleep together in a big room and feel the warmth and security of being with the people you love and who you know love you with all their hearts... Who wouldn't miss all that? I sure do...

And that's why I have come to miss Kurdistan when I'm not there. I miss my new friends there, who I feel as close to as my own family, my own flesh and blood. Nothing can ever take the place of my children in my heart, but my new Kurdish family occupies a lot of it, as does my new «homeland»: Kurdistan in Iraq.



*Me on an excursion in the
Kurdish mountains.*

Of course, as I've already explained, Kurdistan is not only part of Iraq, but this part of the region is where the Kurds have achieved autonomy and where you as a tourist will be able to move around most safely. There's been a lot of difficulties in the area and still are, and as I've mentioned earlier, I wouldn't recommend that you go on a visit without thoroughly investigating what are the current advise from your government concerning your security, if you should decide to visit Kurdistan at any point (see Note / Disclaimer on page 39). But, that being said: If you find that the circumstances do allow it, I wouldn't hesitate to go if I were you. You will discover a culture and a landscape and a people that will capture your heart. Of that I'm sure.

If I could only describe to you what it's like to come there... the warmth that hits you the moment you walk out of the plane in Erbil International Airport or the airport of Sulemaniya, (which are the two main airports you can choose between if you decide to go there, and which have flights to and from many cities in the world) ... The warmth goes straight to your marrow. You feel warm inside and out, not only on the surface. But an airport is an airport, you may say. It's when you come out on the other side, out of the terminal, that the journey really begins. The journey into this culture and into this landscape which is Kurdistan.

Like I've already mentioned, the Kurdish people are a heterogeneous ethnic group whose ethnic background comes from many regions and includes many ancient ethnicities that have been absorbed into modern cultures, including Iranian, Azerbaijani, Turkic and Arabic cultures. In this sense, the Kurdish culture shares commonalities with many other regional cultures, and celebrates a unique level of cultural equality and tolerance.

According to the organization *The Kurdish Project*, the Kurds have not only experienced political, but also *cultural* repression. In Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, there were extensive campaigns at forced assimilation. Kurds were forbidden to speak Kurdish in public, they had to change their names to local ethnic names if they wanted a job or to enroll their children in school. Their books, music and clothing were considered contraband and they had to hide them in their homes. If authorities searched their homes and found anything Kurdish, they could be imprisoned, and many people were. In recent years, both Iran and Turkey have relaxed their systemic cultural repression, while Iraqi Kurds have achieved autonomy. (*Photos below are from Pinterest.*)



A Kurdish mother and her daughter.



A traditional Kurdish breakfast.



Kurdish children in traditional clothes.

Kurdish Poetry and Song

Kurdish culture has a rich oral tradition. Most popular are epic poems called *lawj*, and they often tell of adventure in love or battle.

Kurdish literature first appeared in the seventh century AD. In 1596, Sharaf Khan, Emir of Bitlis, composed a history of the Kurds in Persian called the *Sharafnama*. Almost one hundred years later, in 1695, a great national epic called the *Memozin* was written in Kurdish by Ahmed Khani.

Dengbej refers to a musician who performs traditional Kurdish folk songs. The word ‘*deng*’ means voice and ‘*bej*’ means ‘to sing.’ *Dengbej* are best known for their “*stran*,” or song of mourning. Traditional Kurdish instruments include the flute, drums, and the *ut-ut* (similar to a guitar). The music of Sivan Perwar, a Kurdish pop music performer, was banned in Turkey and Iraq in the 1980s, so he left the region to live and work in Sweden.

Kurdish Craft

Carpet-weaving is by far the most significant Kurdish folk art. Kurdish rugs and carpets use medallion patterns; however, far more popular are the all-over floral, *Mina Khani* motifs and the “*jaff*” geometric patterns. The beauty of Kurdish designs are enriched by high-chroma blues, greens, saffrons as well as terracotta and burnt orange hues made richer still by the lustrous wool which is being used.

The traditional Kurdish rug uses Kurdish symbols. It is possible to read the dreams, wishes and hopes of the rug maker from the sequence of symbols used.

Other crafts are embroidery, leather-working, and metal ornamentation. Kurds are especially known for copper-working. (Source top photo: Pinterest.)



Some pictures from my visit to Erbil / Hewler in 2012.



Kurdish Sports

Popular sports include soccer, wrestling, hunting and shooting, and cirit, a traditional sport that involves throwing a javelin while mounted on horseback. Camel- and horse-racing are popular in rural areas.

VISITING KURDISTAN FOR THE FIRST TIME – WHERE SHOULD YOU GO?

When you decide to visit Kurdistan in Iraq (which is the part of Kurdistan that is most available to you as a tourist), you will most likely arrive by aeroplane in Erbil or Sulaymaniyah, which both have international airports and regular flights from several large cities in the world.

ERBIL / HEWLER

If you arrive in Erbil – or Hewler, which is the Kurdish name for the city – you will find modern facades, plenty of hotels, malls like *Family Mall* and *Majidi Mall*, and also an amusement park or two, like *Family Fun* right by the Family Mall ... which means that you can find all the facilities you can wish for and are used to, in this city. Erbil is the largest city in northern Iraq, and it's located approximately 350 kilometres (220 miles) north of Baghdad and 80 kilometres north-east of Mosul. If you want to experience an exciting city under development, you should definitely go here. This is a place where you can explore history and be in a modern city at the same time, and where you can get away from mass tourism. One thing to consider, though, if you fly to Erbil, is that the temperatures can be very high here in the summer months, with an average of about 30 degrees Celsius and some days closer to 50 degrees Celsius. That's why you might want to consider going either in early spring, like March / April, or in the early fall, like August / September, when the temperatures are a bit more pleasant for those of us who are not used to that kind of heat.

Transportation

Erbil International Airport is one of Iraq's busiest airports and is near the city. Services include direct flights to many domestic destinations as well as flights to international destinations in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.



Some of the beautiful traditional Kurdish dresses you can find in the bazaar in Hewler. =>

Erbil International Airport was closed to international commercial flights in September 2017 by the Iraqi government in retaliation for the Kurdish independence vote, and this made it very difficult to travel to and from the region. However, the airport has just reopened in March 2018, which means that the region can once again be reached by air. To get into town from the airport, you can go by bus or share a taxi with someone, but going by car is the most normal way and also the easiest solution. However, if you rent a car you should be aware that the driving style in Kurdistan might be a bit tougher than what you're used to.

Interesting sights and things to do in Erbil / Hewler

Erbil is not just another modern city. Human settlement in Erbil can be dated back to possibly 5000 BC, and it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited areas in the world. At the heart of the city is the ancient *Citadel of Arbil*. The earliest historical reference to the region dates to the Ur III dynasty of Sumer, when king Shulgi mentioned the city of Urbilum. The city was later settled by the Assyrians. A lot can be said about the ancient history of this region, but for those of you who are particularly interested in that, I suggest you take a look at the book list I have put together at the end of the article. You can also find more about Kurdish history on the Internet.

In Erbil, you can walk between many of the different sights in the center of the city. Several of the sights are quite big, though, like the city wall around the Citadel and some of the parks, so if you want to spare your feet, you should move around in a car. Several hotels provide private chauffeurs who are more than willing to show you around in the area. Taxi is the most common way for visitors to get around, though. *Hello Taxi* is an option which costs about 13 dollars for a 15 minutes' drive. Women who travel alone can try *PNK Taxi* which has female drivers. Hiring a car is – like I mentioned earlier - an option if you have the guts to drive around by yourself.

Some of the sights:

Erbil's archaeological museum houses a large collection of pre-Islamic artefacts and is a centre for archaeological projects in the area. In July 2014, *Erbil Citadel* was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, and is absolutely a site that I recommend that you visit.

The modern town of Erbil stands on a tell topped by an Ottoman fort. During the Middle Ages, Erbil became a major trading centre on the route between Baghdad and Mosul, a role which it still plays today with important road links to the outside world. Today, Erbil is both multi-ethnic and multi-religious, with the Kurds forming the largest ethnic group in the city, with smaller numbers of Arabs, Assyrians, Turcoman, Armenians, Yazidis, Shabaks, Circassians, Kawliya, Iranians and Mandeans also extant.

The only religious structure that currently survives in the citadel is the *Mulla Afandi Mosque*. When it was fully occupied, the citadel was divided in three districts or mahallas: from east to west the Serai, the Takya and the Topkhana. The Serai was occupied by notable families; the Takya district was named after the homes of dervishes, which are called takyas; and the Topkhana district housed craftsmen and farmers. Other sights to visit in the citadel include the bathing rooms (hammam) built in 1775 located near the mosque and the *Textile Museum*.

-The covered *Erbil Qaysari Bazaars*, lying below the main entrance to the citadel, with market stalls offering a variety of products.

-The 36-metre-high (118-foot) *Mudhafaria Minaret*, situated in Minaret Park several blocks from the citadel, dates back to the late 12th century AD. It has an octagonal base decorated with two tiers of niches, which is separated from the main shaft by a small balcony, also decorated. Another historical minaret with turquoise glazed tiles is nearby.

-*Sami Abdulrahman Park* is a place where many Kurds spend the sunny afternoons. Buy some food from the market or one of the stalls in the streets and have a picnic in the park.





This is a popular way to spend some time for all the family. The park has a beautiful selection of flowers and plants.

-Franso Hariri Stadium

-The Mound of Qalich Agha lies within the grounds of the Museum of Civilization, 1 kilometre (0.62 mi) from the citadel. An excavation in 1996 found tools from the Halaf, Ubaid and Uruk periods.

-Kurdish Textile Museum

The Jalil Al Khayat Mosque (Photo on the left, by tj.blackwell on flickr.com)

Where to shop in Erbil

You can shop at the great malls, *Majidi Mall* or *Family Mall*, which both have a good variety of clothes, shoes, cosmetic products and restaurants. The Bazaar is also a great place to shop, with all its market stalls full of all kinds of goods, as well as fruit, vegetables and spices.

SULEMANIYE

The second of the larger cities in Kurdistan with an international airport is Sulemaniya. It is one of the major cities in both the Kurdistan region and Iraq, situated 385 Km north of Baghdad and 198 Km north east of Erbil.

The city sits between two chains of mountains (Goyzha & Glazarda) and was founded by Ibrahim Pasha in the year 1784. Claudius James Rich (March 28, 1787 - October 5, 1821), a British traveler and antiquarian scholar, said in his book that Sulaimani – from the beginning of its establishment – had large markets and clean public baths (Turkish design). Today Sulemaniya has developed in most modern life aspects, with hotels, motels, supermarkets & malls, theatres, restaurants & parks

(Bottom picture this page: The University of Sulemaniya, New Entrance. Photo by Diyar Muhammed.)





Transport

There is an international "Sulaimaniya Airport" near Bakrajo, with direct flights from Dusseldorf-Germany, Dubai-UAE, Amman-Jordan, and Istanbul-Turkey. As I'm writing this article, I'm not sure if the airport has opened again after it was closed as a result of the region's vote for autonomy, but if it is, this is a good option for a flight to Kurdistan.

Interesting sights and things to do in Sulemaniya

You can spend your time walking in the streets of this city day or night, with very comfortable temperatures (between 0-35C) most days of the year.

There is a *public park* close to the center of the city, a small one on Salm Street, almost opposite the Palace Hotel. This park is quite busy in the morning with tea drinkers, and has an "avenue of heads", which are stone busts of some important local historical figures. Another nice park is *Mother Park* or *Baxi Daik* north east of the bazaar. It's small, but it's quite new and well designed, with a large statue of a woman as its centerpiece.

Azadi Park is somehow similar to the large park in Erbil. Azadi Park has the grave and legacy of the most brilliant and well known Kurdish poet Sherko Bekas, the father of modern Kurdish poetry.

The Bazaar

Take any street off Mawlawi or Kawa streets and you'll end up in the bazaar. It is huge, and you can easily get lost, but that's considered part of the fun. The most interesting section is probably the maze of covered alleyways between the two main roads. The bazaar is built on a bit of a slope, so don't be afraid to go up or down any stairs you may come across. They just lead to more levels full of shops.

There is also a bowling center, a speed center and many other places to go in Sulemaniya. I myself have only been to Sulemaniya once, to get a Visa and visit some friends, and have not looked around the city that much – yet. But it's a modern and friendly city, as far as I know, and I intend to go there on my next journey to Kurdistan and explore it some more.



Sulemaniya by night (Photos by Sarwar Omar).

Where to shop in Sulemaniya

According to Wikipedia, if you go to the East end of Salm Street, where the gate to the bazaar area is, and then 300 meters north, uphill, you will find the Zara Supermarket. You can also find one in the southeast corner of Azadi Park. In either case, you should look for a large silver dome on top of the buildings. There is also an oriental mall in the centre of town.

Food and drink

There are many different types of amazing Kurdish dishes. Some of the most famous dishes may not be found easily in city restaurants, but in some restaurants you can find Kofta, which is a very tasteful traditional dish. You can go to *Sara Restaurant* near Xasraw xal bridge, where you can find Kebab, Goshty brzhaw (grilled meat) Brnj ("rice") shla and other types of food. Sara Restaurant is said to be very good and clean. If you're looking for more international dishes, you can have pizza and Italian food at *Roma restaurant* at Tooy Malik.

According to Wikipedia, there are two kinds of places to eat in the old part of the city: So-called «sit down places» and more sandwich type places. There are tons of sandwich type places. It costs about 1,000 dinars for a sandwich of chicken, meat, or falafel on a little white bun or wrapped up in a flatbread. (1,000 dinars is roughly equal to 1 dollar or 1 Euro). In a sit down place, you can typically get rice, baked beans, some chicken and clear chicken soup with flat bread. Delicious food and very reasonable prices!

There are also pizza places and juice places where you can get delicious fruit juices for less than a dollar.

Coffee is not big in Suli, and tea is generally a better bet, as in all of Kurdistan. As with anything in Sulemaniya (according to Wikipedia, not this writer's own experience), there are many shops with basically the same selection. The local taste is for instant coffee, and the coffee section of a grocery store will be dominated by MacCoffee and Nescafe. Coffee beans generally come only as little bricks of Turkish coffee, 200 grams roasted dark and ground fine. If you don't want 1/4 cardamom, check the package to make sure it says 100% coffee.

Pasha's coffee (in the bazaar area) is said to be one of the only places in town with proper coffee. They have a sign in Latin, and there is usually a crowd of coffee drinkers out front. You can get good espresso from the machine and they have bulk coffee (28 000 for a kilo of Columbian beans) and coffee makers in styles unavailable elsewhere. (Top photo this page: *Shari Jwan*, by *Sarwar Omar*.) Another town you should visit in Iraqi Kurdistan is situated approximately 2 hours' car journey from either Erbil or Sulemaniya.

RANYA

This is the town where I have spent most of my time during my visits to Kurdistan. This is where a large part of the family of my friends live, and where I spent almost 4 weeks during my very first stay here, back in the summer of 2012, and 9 days in the spring of 2014. Let me give you some facts:

Ranya is a mid-sized town and part of the Sulaymaniyah Governance. According to the 2015 census, Ranya has a population of 229,924. The town is surrounded by *Kewa Rash*, which means "Black Mountain" in Kurdish. The town contains many popular tourist areas, including Darband, Daristan-i-Ranya, and Ganaw, as well as the villages of Dill-I Shawry, Akoyan, Betwata, Sar-u-Chawa and Zew-I Xoshnawati. These locations all have stunning views of the local scenery. The area is known for its produce and agricultural expertise, and the areas surrounding the town are extremely fertile.

Ranya City is located in the north east of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The Ranya District is surrounded by mountains, rivers, and Lake Dukan. The area of Ranya is 884 km² and it includes five sub-districts: Ranya City, Chwarqurna, Hajiawa, Betwata, and Sarkapkan.





Climate

In Ranya, there is 900 to 1,050 ml of rainfall each year. There are four seasons in Ranya, which are affected by the Mediterranean Sea. Summer is hot and dry, while winter is considered the rain/snow season.

Some history

The people of Ranya have participated in a number of revolutions against tyrannical Iraqi regimes, most famously in March 1991. The Ranya Uprising achieved a great victory for the Kurdish people and many refer to the town as Darwaza-I Raparin, the Gateway to Uprising.

Ranya was established in 1789, during the late Ottoman Empire. Following the end of the First World War, Ranya fell under the control of Sheikh Mahmood and the British Empire. The bilateral relations deteriorated between English authorities and Sheikh Mahmood in Kurdistan, and the Ranya region was directly affected. Several movements formed against English authorities, such as the Darband War in 1922. Other notable uprisings took place in 1941 and 1948. After the 1958 Iraqi coup d'état in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region became home to many political activities. Meetings were conducted within the framework of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Ranya became a central location for revolutionary leaders and government authorities. However, as a result of worsening relations between Baghdad and the Kurdish areas, the revolution of September 1961 began. For the next 20 years, Ranya became known as a safe haven for political leaders and revolutionaries.

Between 1982 and 1991, there were a series of uprisings in the Ranya area. On March 5, 1991, Ranya was the first town to rebel against Saddam's regime.

As a result, other towns and cities rose up against Iraq's government, forcing the United States to intervene. The United States launched *Operation Provide Comfort* in March 1991.

Education

According to the last statistics in 2009-2010, there are 24 preparatory schools in the Ranya Directorate. There are 24 kindergarten schools, 114 primary schools, and one industrial preparatory school. In Ranya City, there are four colleges and one university (University of Raparin, The College of Human Sciences, The College of Basic Education, Military Academy College, The College of Nursing Education. There are also several institutes, including the Fine Arts Institute and Ranya Computer Institute. The University of Raparin includes 27 departments and serves over 5,000 students. The university is well known for its nursing program and English and Development Center. The university was founded in 2010.

Interesting sights in Ranya

In the center of Ranya, there is a square to the east called *Qalat*. The Qalat is the oldest square of the city, and is considered the base part of the city. The history of life in that square goes back thousands of years.

Dâristan-i Ranya

Daristan-i Ranya, meaning the forest of Ranya, is just 1 km east of the town center. The forest covers around 600 acres and lies on the main Ranya-Qala Dez road, which is lined by the Kewa Rash, or Black Mountain, chain. The forest and its surrounding greenbelt are perfect for picnics and sightseeing. I went on a picnic here with my Kurdish friends at Newroz 2014.

Qure Goyee

This water spring lies 5 km east of Ranya, on the main road to Qala Dez Ranya. Locals believe the spring has medicinal properties that can help to treat some skin conditions.

Benari Hâjila

Benari Hajila, meaning the mountain of Hajila, is a tourist area in the Hajilah mountain chain, between Ranya and Chwar Qurna. People visit the area for its fresh water and clean air.

Betwâta (Sar-Ashkawtân)

Located 20 km from Ranya town center, Betwata's remarkable geography includes springs and waterfalls, gardens and abundant farmland.

Darband-i Ranya

Darband-i Ranya, meaning the Strait of Ranya in Kurdish, is an attractive area located 6 km east of Ranya. The *Zé-i Bechuk*, or Small River, and Darband's bridge offer a vantage point for some spectacular views. *Darband* is the Kurdish word for strait. When Dukan's dam and lake were established, the body of water reached the strait which gave it an additional beauty.



Doll-i Akoyan and Shawra

Doll-i Akoyan (meaning the valley of Akoyan) and Shawra are located 19 km west of Ranya in a mountainous area characterized by its greenery and scenic views.

Shamshara

Shamshara is located 7 km south east of Ranya. Its history goes back 4,000 years to the Assyrian empire, when it was the capital of the region around Ranya and Pishdar. A team of Danish archaeologists excavated the area in 1957.

Gird-i Dieme

Gird-i Dieme, meaning the hills of Dieme, is adjacent to Ranya, near the Qalat or Citadel quarter. A Danish-led excavation in 1957 discovered many historical documents and a temple relating to the Warka, Houry and Assyrian eras.

Mezari Gor u Gulzer

Mezari Gor u Gulzer (Kurdish: Shrine of Gor u Gulzer) is a cemetery and lies just 15 km west of Ranya, near the village of Kishan in the valley of Akoyan. The Shrine contains the graves of lover Gor and his mistress Gulzer, lying beside one another. This ancient love story goes back 400 years ago.

Takht-i Khorshid-I Khawer Zamin

Takht-i Khorshid-I Khawer Zamin (Kurdish: Residence of Khorshid) is a tourist area and is located near the town of Betwata, just 20 km west of Ranya. The construction of this monument goes back 2000 years.

Other sights in Ranya

University of Raparin

Darwaza Park

Lake Dukan

Bitwen Hotel and Restaurant





My journeys to Ranya and Hewler

Words can't really describe how I feel about these 2 cities in Iraqi Kurdistan – Ranya and Hewler / Erbil, - and especially about the people that I've learned to know there. I've been privileged to be able to visit Kurdistan as a friend and not just as a tourist, and this has given me the opportunity to learn about the culture and traditions and the daily life of the Kurdish people from the inside.

When I first came to Kurdistan in 2012, I was aware that it might turn out to be a tough experience. As a Norwegian woman, brought up in a Christian family and used to the democratic structure of our Norwegian society with equal rights for women and men, and completely unfamiliar with the Middle-Eastern climate and also mostly unfamiliar with both the Kurdish and the Arab language, I was prepared to face some challenges during my nearly-4-weeks' stay there. Yes, I had learned a lot from my Kurdish friends in Norway, about Islam, about Kurdistan, about their culture, but I was aware that actually going to their homeland would be something completely different. Would I be able to stand the heat? Would I get an upset stomach from eating food that I was not used to? Would I make severe mistakes and offend people with my Western behaviour? Would I be able to communicate with them at all?

So many thoughts were spinning around in my head before departure. There were also some practical things to take care of before I could go, like getting a vaccine and some US Dollars. (*See the Practical Information section on page 55.*)

But when all the necessary preparations were made, I set off for Kurdistan together with my Kurdish friends.

We drove by car to my hometown, where we caught the train to Oslo, and from there we flew to Istanbul, Turkey, and then to Sulemaniya, Iraq (*to be continued on page 56*).



Practical information about traveling to Iraqi Kurdistan

You should of course seek advise from your authorities about what kind of vaccines you will need before visiting any country in the Middle East, Asia or Africa, but as a passionate traveler I'm sure you already know this, so I won't get into any details about these things here. Just bear in mind that health facilities in Iraq, and therefor also Kurdistan, are somewhat limited, and you should take precautions. Be prepared for a hot climate. Drink a lot of water to avoid dehydration, but never drink tap water, and check that any water bottle you buy is properly sealed.

The currency in Kurdistan is Iraqi Dinar, but you are advised to bring cash in US Dollars, since Visa and MasterCard are not accepted everywhere. New hotels in Iraqi Kurdistan do accept them, though. There are also very few mini-banks, so you'll need cash from the minute you arrive. If you have to go to a bank, they're normally open from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., but are closed on Fridays and Saturdays. Shops are open most of the day until 10 p.m., but most of them are closed on Fridays, which is the equivalent to Sunday in the Western world.

Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages in Iraq, and very few people speak English.

When you walk on the street and other public places you are advised to wear clothes that cover your shoulders, knees and your navel. This applies especially during Ramadan.

You should always carry your passport with you when you travel in Iraq.

It is strictly forbidden to photograph embassys and military buildings, as well as their surroundings.



(My journeys continued)

While in Ranya, I took part in the daily life of my new friends, and it was in many ways very different from my daily life in Norway. Of course, differences in climate was one reason for this, but also the fact that they are Muslims and have rituals and traditions that I was more or less unfamiliar with before I came there, like praying rituals 5 times a day, with the first one starting early in the morning by the call from the nearby Mosque, and the last around nine o'clock in the evening. Watching my friend's mother doing her prayers filled me with a feeling of peace. It made me feel at home, because it reminded me of the prayer ritual my mother did with me and my sister every morning when we grew up, when we listened to the daily religious broadcast on the radio before school and they always finished off with The Lord's Prayer. It didn't matter if this was a Muslim country and that the ritual was a bit different to the ones I'd been used to from my childhood back home. We pray to the same God, as far as I'm concerned, and that's all that matters.

I spent the nights sleeping on a rather thin matrass in a room that I shared with my friend's sister. The aircondition made the temperature in the room quite pleasant, so I slept well most nights, even though sleeping on the floor was not something I was used to. My friend's sister left early for work a couple of days each week and returned in the afternoon, so I had breakfast with her mother and my friends from back home. We sat on the floor in the kitchen and ate Kurdish bread, which is called *naan*, with yoghurt and sometimes jam or eggs. Tea, or *cha*, from small glasses is an important part of the Kurdish culture, and was served for breakfast, early in the afternoon and whenever it was convenient. I have never been much of a tea drinker myself, perhaps because the tea I was used to earlier was mostly the one in bags, and they can't really compare to the way the Kurds prepare their tea. So to begin with, I made myself some coffee in the mornings, like I was used to, but I soon got a taste for the traditional *cha*, and changed to tea eventually. Sometimes the Kurds also make *nisk* for breakfast. *Nisk* is a soup made with red lentils and onion and sometimes mini spaghetti or rice, and is a very tasteful soup, eaten with bread.

My first trip to Kurdistan took place in the period from mid-June until mid-July, which is high summer, so the temperatures were around 45 degrees Celsius every day. Because of the heat, we didn't go out much during the warmest hours of the day, but did most errands or visits later in the afternoon or in the evening. There was a grocery store right beside the house where we lived, and we could get hold of the most necessary ingredients for



Naan and cha for breakfast (photo from Pinterest).

the daily meals there, so there was really no need to go far from home at mid-day. The women in Kurdistan spend a lot of their time preparing meals for the whole family, and doing household chores and looking after the children, but some of them have a job away from home, mostly in the traditional professions like teaching, nursing or being a clerk or secretary. The women in "my" family were all either working as teachers in schools and kindergardens or as office workers of some sort. But Ranya is not a big town, in comparison to Hewler and Sulemaniya, and in the bigger cities you will find women in many different professions, so I think I can say that the women's role in Kurdistan can vary from area to area and even from family to family. There are women who have joined the Peshmerga, the Kurdish freedom fighters, and there are women who work as beauticians, hairdressers, journalists, TV-hosts, artists, musicians, and politicians, - just like in the rest of the world. But the cultural and religious traditions are strong and very much woven together, so it seems, and family means everything to the Kurds.

I felt privileged to be able to take part in this family's daily life, and even though it's not in their tradition to let guests do any domestic work, they eventually allowed me to help out with preparing the food and doing the dishes, because I insisted on doing my part. I was, after all, going to stay there for nearly a month and I'm simply not used to just sitting there, watching others do all the work, and I claimed that I would become fat and lazy if they didn't allow me to do my share, so they gave in and let me do a little bit. I wanted to learn how to prepare some of their traditional food, like Kobba, Kefta and Dolma, and I was very happy when they agreed to let me take part in the preparations.

There were always many family members around at meal times, so no table would have been large enough. That's why the "table" was set on a big plastic cloth on the floor, and we all gathered around it. This was not new to me, since I had already consumed many meals in the home of my Kurdish friends back in Norway, but doing it here, in Kurdistan, with all their family around me, was a very special experience for me. It made me feel warm and welcome and like one of them. It's a feeling I will never forget, and it's something that has made the bond between me and these people very strong.

The friendliness and hospitality that was bestowed upon me while I was in Kurdistan, - first in 2012 and then in 2014, at Newroz, - reminds me of my childhood and the bonds I felt back then to my family, our friends and neighbours. Every Friday in Kurdistan, if the weather allowed it, we went on a picnic somewhere in the area, in some valley or other up in the mountains, - and so did everybody else in Kurdistan (or so it seemed). The celebration of Newroz, which is the Kurdish New Year and takes place in March, was a particularly nice experience, with picnics 3 days in a row. Dressed up in the beautiful traditional costumes and with the cars filled up with food, gas burners, carpets to sit on and whatever else we might need, - we drove an hour or two away from the city and found a nice spot to spend the day. We helped each other spread carpets out on the ground, and while the women started preparing the food, the men gathered branches to light a bonfire or prepared the gas-burners or grills for the kebabs or chicken meat we had brought with us. The children were playing, there was fun and laughter and traditional dancing, and good conversations. When the sun set and it became darker, we sat around the bonfire and had some coffee or tea from a kettle over the fire, and there was more singing and dancing. Sitting there with my Kurdish friends among the giant Kurdish mountains, celebrating Newroz, moved me to tears, - and still does, whenever I think of it. The history of the Kurds, and the importance of those mountains to the Kurdish people, moves me.

My life will never be the same again after having been to Kurdistan, and I know I'll be going back. Right now I don't know when, due to the difficult situation there,, but I know I will go back some day soon.

Ranya will always be special to me, and I was privileged to be able to visit many cultural institutions and events while I was there, partly because of the connections that one of my friend's family members have in the city. One of the events was the opening of a photo exhibition in a park there, which was also covered by national television. I arrived at the exhibition with my friend's family member and we walked into the park together with the photographer himself and 2 military guards with guns in their hands, so of course everyone's eyes were on us, and I felt almost like a celebrity myself, arriving in style like that. I must admit that I rather enjoyed the experience. I was actually interviewed by one of the TV stations, who heard that I was a Norwegian and therefor something quite out of the ordinary in those parts of the world, so it was a real "happening" as far I was concerned and something I will always remember.

I also got the chance to visit a local school in Ranya, just as they were celebrating the end of term before the summer holidays, and it was nice to see all the children who were dressed up and eager to show their parents some of what they'd learned during the school year. Just like everywhere else in the world, and still special.

I also visited a new library or culture institution that had recently been built there, and I was thrilled to be able to talk to a group of artists who were staying there at the time, - painters, musicians and film-makers, I believe they were. I know I want to learn even more about the Kurdish culture the next time I visit.





And then there's Hewler...

Going to Hewler to meet even more of my friends' family, - spending 5 days there, visiting each of their homes, sharing meals with them, going to Family Mall and Family Fun with some of the women and children, going into the city center, visiting the bazaar ... having good conversations and sharing fun and laughter ... being embraced by their warmth and hospitality, encouraged by their smiles, touched by their concern for my welfare and for my soul ... It was beautiful. I am forever thankful for their kind words and for welcoming me into their lives.... They will stay in my hearts and in my memory for as long as I shall live. I only hope I'll be able to go back while the old people are still around. And I hope I'll be able to pick up enough of the language to be able to talk to them without an interpreter. Because I want to ask them about their early days, - how things were in Kurdistan when they grew up. I want to hear their stories.....

So I'm working on learning the language, this language which is so different from my own ... this poetic language which is the "heart language" of my friends. I want to learn it, not only to communicate with words, but to be able to understand them better, to communicate from the heart. The language is the very core of who they are, who we all are. How we express our thoughts and our feelings. If I can learn their language better, I will understand who they are at a much deeper level. And that's important to me.

I miss Kurdistan.
I miss my new friends there.
But I will go back.
Soon.
Inshallah.

If the situation allows it, you should go there, too, some day. But like I've mentioned earlier: Make sure you check out your government's recommendations regarding your security and the general information about the area, before you go. Then - if you find that it's safe: Go. Go to this "invisible nation" in the Middle East and let it capture your heart. Like it has captured mine. You won't regret it.

*I hope you've enjoyed what I've shared with you in this article.
If you want to learn more about Kurdistan and the Kurds, check out
the book list and links at the end of the magazine, on page 62.*

Join us in sunny Provence in the fall!

The EKN Travel Club will be going to Provence for a week in the fall, in September / October, and you are invited to come along. We will be staying in a beautiful villa in breathtaking surroundings, and this will be a week where you can fill up with new energy, mentally and physically. Allow yourself to be spoiled, to share fun and laughter with fellow passionate globetrotters, go on wonderful adventures, eat delicious food, take part in physical activities if you want to - or just lie by the pool, if you like, or choose your own preferred way of relaxation in the wonderful villa or in the beautiful surrounding area.

One thing's for sure: You will be well taken care of during this event. There will be seminars with interesting and inspiring topics, fun workshops, good conversations, and of course plenty of interesting and exciting visits in the area.

There will be more than enough time to do some exploring on your own, but if you prefer doing things in the company of others, in a group, there will be great group activities to choose from every day. Trust me: You never have to be alone when you join EKN Travel Club's events, unless you choose to be.

This event will be a wonderful combination of a Retreat and an





Adventure holiday, and it's completely up to you what you primarily want to focus on: Quiet relaxation or activities of some sort.

A full program will be revealed in a later issue of *The Passionate Globetrotter*, as well as information about how you can secure your spot. If you've never been to Provence before, this is an excellent opportunity to experience this wonderful region without having to figure everything out on your own, like where you should stay, what there is to see and do, etc. - and you will be among people with a shared interest in traveling, adventure and meeting new people. Who knows ... maybe you'll find friends for life on this trip!

This first event will be open to everyone who wants to come along, members and non-members alike, but there are only 8-10 spots available, so members of the EKN Travel Club will have priority and will also get a special price. So if that sounds interesting to you, don't hesitate to become a member! (*See page 6 for club info.*)



If you've already visited Provence before, don't believe for a minute that you've seen everything there is to see! The area is packed with beautiful villages and interesting sights, and has a varied landscape, just waiting to be explored. And nothing beats sharing all the experiences with others. People who are as passionate about traveling as you are. I'm going to Provence at the end of June to get the total "package" together, and will be back in the next issues with more detailed information, as well as on EKN Travel's Facebook page. So stay tuned, and make sure you join the club!

Read more!

If you want to read more about the featured places or regions in this magazine, here's a list of recommended books and links that you can check out:

Kurdistan:

"A people without a country - The Kurds and Kurdistan" by Gerard Chaliand and David McDowall, Olive Branch Press 1993, ISBN 0-940793-92-X

"Invisible Nation" by Quil Lawrence, Published by Walker Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 2008, ISBN 978-0-8027-1611-8

"Kurdish Culture and Identity", edited by Philip Kreyenbroek & Christine Allison, Zed Books Ltd. London and New Jersey, 1996, ISBN 1 85649 329 6

"As strong as the Mountains - a Kurdish cultural journey" by Robert L. Brenneman, Waveland Press Inc., 2007, ISBN 13: 978-1-57766-477-2

"Kurdistan - A Nation Emerges" by Jonathan Fryer and others, Stacey International, 2010, ISBN 978 1 906 768188

"Kurdistan - In the Shadow of History" by Susan Meiselas, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, ISBN-13: 978-0-226-51928-9

Nice and Provence: *Markets of Provence: Food, Antiques, Crafts, And More*, by Marjorie Williams, St.Martins Press, N.Y., 2016, ISBN 978-1-250-0

Provence & The Côte d'Azur: Discover the Spirit of the South of France, by Janelle McCulloch, 2015, ISBN-13: 978-1452140513.

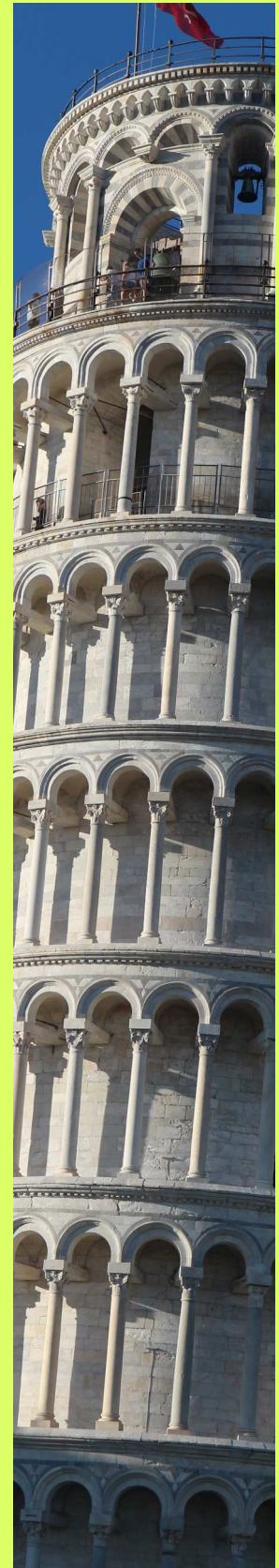
Tuscany:

The Most Beautiful Country Towns of Tuscany, by James Bentley and Alex Ramsey, Thames & Hudson, 2001, ISBN-13: 978-0500510520.

Tuscany in Mind: From Byron and the Brownings to Henry James, D.H. Lawrence, Robert Lowell, --Two Centuries of Great Writers Seduced by Tuscany, - by Alice Leccese Powers, Vintage, 2005, ISBN-13: 978-1400076758

Tuscany & Umbria, by Nicola Williams, Lonely Planet, 2008, ISBN-13: 978-1741043136.

Seeing and Savoring Italy: A Taste and Travel Journey through Northern Italy, Tuscany and Umbria, by Pamela Marasco, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010, ISBN-13: 978-1453654675.





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Tuscany; Italy



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