

SURPRISED BY KURDISTAN

“You’ve been WHERE?” is the most common response when I talk about what I did last January. “Iraq,” I repeat. “But in the north,” I add quickly, “where it’s very stable and safe.” I don’t want them to think I’m a complete nutter.



“So what was it like?” is usually the next question.

“Cold,” I reply. “It snowed.”

They look surprised: “Snow in Iraq? You’re joking!”

But snow in Iraq was not the only surprise that our missions team faced. There was the hospitality of the Kurdish people; their resilience in the face of decades (no, centuries) of persecution; their stories of survival under gunfire and gas bombs; their willingness to move forward with enthusiasm; their desire to learn English. Then there was the massive rebuilding that is taking place. For us there was the fun of being a team of ten Kiwis and Aussies, together in a totally new and surreal environment; walking through a foot of snow across an old mine-field; meeting the Iraqi President’s wife in a swanky restaurant; drinking tea in a refugee camp; having dinner in a Chinese brothel (actually a Chinese restaurant, but the large red lanterns and ‘Love Bar’ sign apparently had a deeper meaning!). We went tenpin bowling and rode dodgem cars with our students; we had meals in their homes and met their families; we talked

with them about God and shared stories of Jesus. These were just some of the amazing experiences that we were privileged to enjoy. The unplanned side-trips to Jordan and Israel only happened because the airlines messed up our itinerary, but I suppose you have to take the bad with the good!

We had been invited by an Iraqi university to teach a conversational English course. When we arrived, the university put us up in a nice hotel, arranged visas, transport, classrooms and students. Our team worked in teaching-pairs with classes of about ten students, teaching four hours a day. Our course was a big hit, with its fast-moving and interactive menu of games, activities, debates and role-plays. The students (including college and university lecturers, with doctorates) had not come across anything like it before, and some even drove an hour or more from other towns to join us.

The positive reports filtered out. A TV crew even showed up at our graduation and we were featured on the regional news. Apparently not many foreigners come to do this kind of stuff. Nor do they take the opportunities to connect with the students outside of the classroom as we did.

We not only showed the film from the C.S. Lewis book, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”, but we also broke into small groups afterwards to talk about its meanings. We prayed for, and sometimes with, our students. We connected with the local Christians. We laughed a lot with our

students, but cried too as we toured the museums of their sad history. We ate and drank and danced. By the end of the three weeks, we were exhausted.

“Please, will you come back again?” the students asked us, and the university officially invited us to return next year.

So it’s on again in January 2012. If you have a love for Jesus that you are not ashamed to talk about, a desire to serve people, and a willingness to trust God in a challenging situation while working with a spectacular team, we’d love to hear from you. ☞

Bernie works with Culture Connect, an Interserve ministry to people of non-English speaking backgrounds in Australia.

If you would like to join the 2012 mission team to Kurdistan, please contact us on 0800 446 464 or email talk2us@interserve.org.nz
Limited spaces are available. Training and orientation will be provided.

THE KURDS WERE VERY OPEN to talking about spiritual matters in general. Because they come from a broadly Muslim background, almost everyone believes in God, which makes discussions about spiritual matters easier. We were asked questions about Christianity, and also discussed their faith with them. The Kurds have been treated really poorly throughout history, and many of them reject Arab culture on principle. This means there is more freedom and willingness to question Islam, entwined as it is with Arab culture.

The most unforgettable night happened in our



Our guide standing beside the grave of his two daughters who were killed in the chemical attack on Halabja.

hotel’s restaurant. The food was spectacular: we had ‘shish kebabs’ where the meat was actually skewered on swords and set on fire. We were having such a great time that the security guards, who were carrying assault rifles, were giving us suspicious looks. Then we discovered the reason behind the heightened security: Hero Ibrahim, the first lady of Iraq, was eating in the restaurant. When Bernie asked if our team could take a photo with her, she agreed, and so I now have a photo of myself with the President’s wife. ☞

Matt, 24, is from Christchurch.

BECAUSE WE DIDN’T want to teach six days a week, day six was designated as ‘field trip’ day: the class would take us out somewhere to help us understand their city and their culture, and they had to practise their English in a practical environment.

One place they took us to was known as ‘The Red Building’ – the ex-headquarters of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party in Sulaymaniyah. Until 1991 it was a place where the locals were tortured and disposed of by the regime of that time. It is now riddled with bullet holes – a way that the locals vented their grief after the hell they were put through. Inside the burnt-out shell of the building is a museum of models and photos of the treatment that went on in that place. Outside are captured Iraqi tanks and artillery. The experience really helped us understand a little more of the Kurdish psyche.

We also went to the Kurdish town of Halabja, which gave me more of an understanding of the tension between the two main ethnic groups here in Iraq. On 16 March, 1998, Iraqi aircraft launched a five-hour chemical bomb attack on Halabja’s residential areas, killing 5,000 people and injuring around 7,000 to 10,000 more. Our guide was one of few survivors. The windows of his truck were up when the gas hit the ground and so he was not harmed, but all those who were sitting on the back of his truck died within seconds. Due to these attempts at ethnic cleansing in the North, there is so much bitterness and unforgiveness. So many lives changed due to grief which hasn’t healed. ☞

Jeremy, 27, is from Auckland.

