

Welcome everyone! In this new interview, my friend Ayser, from Baghdad, has agreed to tell us a little bit about his hometown and country!

Hi Ayser, and thank you for your participation! First and foremost, introduce yourself: what are your passions? What do you study?

Hello! My name's Ayser, I was born in 1995 in Iraq and I was raised in Baghdad. I've lived my whole life in here and have had my fair share of experiences doing so. I'm very passionate about technology and programming. I've majored in Computer Science and have recently achieved my bachelor degree in that field.

And now an overview of your country. What atmosphere do you live in? Are there any places you like that you would like to share, and why?

When people think of Iraq they typically associate it with conflict and war, that assumption does have basis of its own as the past few decades were fraught with peril and conflict. However, It doesn't necessarily define the country, its people and their way of life despite how precarious the situation can be, people still do their best to manage and carry on with their everyday lives like everybody else who lives in relatively safer environments. The past few years have shown gradual stability in that regard, most prominently after the defeat of ISIS and their banishment from the country. We're still recovering and we're a long way from reaching an optimal level of security here. It's still a far more favourable situation than it was say 5 years ago. There are many prominent landmarks and places to visit and see in Baghdad, such as Al-Mutanabi street. it is the historic centre of Baghdad bookselling, a street filled with bookstores and outdoor book stalls. It was named after the 10th-century classical Iraqi poet Al-Mutanabbi. This street is well established for bookselling and has often been referred to as the heart and soul of the Baghdad literacy and intellectual community. There's also Abu-Nua'as street, which was named after the master of all the contemporary genres of Arabic poetry. Another prominent landmark, which was originally opened in 1971 in the Al Zawra'a Gardens area along with the Al Zawra'a Dream Park (amusement park) and Zawra'a Tower. Before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the zoo housed 650 animals. After being nearly destroyed during the 2003 Iraqi war, when only about 35 animals survived, the zoo was reopened in 2003 and now houses about 1,070 animals. It has been recuperating ever since. There are many other places to see here, but those are the ones that typically pique people's interest when they think of popular landmarks in Baghdad.

Now satisfy our imagination by telling us about the local dishes and the ones you like the most!

We've a multitude of popular traditional local dishes here, my favourite would be Dolma, which consists of a stuffing made of rice, minced meat, spices and tomato sauce. It is wrapped in grape leaves and steamed in a pot, it is considered a staple dish when it comes to family gatherings or special events such as feasts and excursions. We also have Masgouf, which is basically carb fish that is seasoned and prepared on open fire. Aside from the aforementioned dishes, Iraqi cuisine consists of many more delectable meals.

Compared to other countries, women are considered differently and have to follow some specific rules and behaviours, such as wearing a veil. Would you like to tell us about this in more detail?

I cannot speak for the middle east as whole, but in Iraq, women aren't necessarily deprived of their basic rights and wearing a hijab (veil) is not enforced by any laws or legislations. Women are free to not dole a veil should they choose not to. They're also not confined by any laws that aren't also enforced on their male counterparts. Iraqi women being deprived of their freedom is a misconceived notion that stems from stereotypes more than anything.

How do political difficulties affect everyday life?

Such conflict typically manifests itself in the form of protests and objection to governmental decisions, those tend to affect the population all together in the sense that they can result in political parties taking action that could potentially hinder everyday life, such as enforcing curfews and strict measures against protestors, which usually snowballs into conflict that would more or less result in nationwide tension that affects the population as whole.

Thank you for your participation and responses, Ayser!

I would also like to thank my girlfriend Emanuela for helping me by asking interesting questions for the interview!