

Global Recruitment

Guide to Erbil

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Contents

Introduction to Erbil	3
The Legal Market	4
Immigration	4
Culture & Law	5
Religion:	5
Regular dress	5
Language	5
Alcohol	5
Lifestyle	6
Shopping	6
Travel	7
Leisure & local attractions	7
Quality of Life & Costs	8
Healthcare	8
Property and residence	8
Education	8
Taxes	8
Safety	9
Utilities	9
Public transport	10
Climate	10
Pets	10
The Little Things	10

Introduction to Erbil

Kurdistan is a distinct region in northwest Iraq bordering Turkey and Iran. Erbil is the Capital and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities (just over 6000 years). The culture and tradition is rich and exudes a distinct identity. The Kurdish struggle for autonomy is an old one and much conflict was seen over the 20th century to attain and in some instances retain independence. Following the Iraq war, Kurds gained more autonomy from the Iraqi government due to the increasingly moderate stances taken by the post-Saddam era. Although still subject to Iraqi law, Kurdistan has its own security forces and administers state affairs fairly independently.

Since western involvement in the region was welcomed, the Kurdish people have favourable opinions and attitudes to western expats and in most cases get along with them quite well. You should note however, the tightly run cities within the region such as Erbil are well protected and governed. Venturing outside of the checkpoints and into unmonitored or otherwise areas is not recommended, after all Iraq is still a warzone. Conversely, Kurdistan enjoys a bubble in which it isolates itself (during the war as well) from the ongoing conflict. Still, do keep up to date on the changing political climate and have a suitable contingency plan in the event of any radical shifts.

The Legal Market

As troops have slowly emptied out of Iraq from the recent conflict, stability has been enshrined in certain regions- Erbil being one of them. Prospecting for oil has unveiled a new market in which businesses and energy companies can thrive while contributing to the local infrastructure and economic development. A few large oil companies have recently moved here and set up shop, attracting businesses and those seeking opportunities. Since energy is not only a booming but lucrative market, Erbil is ripe for growth.

Immigration

Upon arrival you can get a Kurdish visa which allows access to Kurdistan but not the rest of Iraq, it lasts for 15 days. You should check with the embassy as your home country may have a different status upon entry than for example, UK, US etc. There is the possibility of visa extension and you may refer to the Kurdish Embassy for that process. You are unlikely to find work by showing up on a short term visa; as such people establish their contract with an employer before heading to the region. Do be wary that applying for an Iraqi visa is different and that the country itself is closely monitored for immigration and movement. That said, you should refer to the embassy and/or a specialist for the best way to enter and exit safely, efficiently, and without any delays or detention.

Culture & Law

Religion:

Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims and their faith does play a significant role in their daily lives. Although local attitudes are fairly conservative, extremism is not tolerated. While staying in the region, do be sensitive to their cultural and religious needs and practices- remember you are a guest. Otherwise, they are known to be very friendly and accepting people, this is echoed by minority Christian populations living within Erbil who do not see much discrimination. The overall disposition of the Kurdish people is one of cooperation, mutual respect, and kindness. They have a deep sense of togetherness and morality, making them both principled and enjoyable friends and colleagues.

Ramadan: During this period most shops and restaurants will be closed until sundown when Muslims break their fast. Most bars, clubs, restaurants etc. will be closed during the day. Although expats have options, the majority of the cities will be abstaining from business (during certain times) or non-religious celebration. Please familiarize yourself with the local customs and practices as this is a holy period for prayer and reflection. Ramadan lasts about one month and concludes with Eid.

Regular Dress:

The general rule for most is do not expose too much skin, meaning wearing short shorts, a bikini, or displaying yourself in a sexualized or provocative manner. Do not wear tight fitting or see-through clothing. This is reflected in the attitudes of the local populace. You should be sensitive to complainants concerns and offer to remedy your outfit. Otherwise, the police may get involved and you will have to comply regardless.

Language:

People in Erbil mostly speak the Sorani dialect of Kurdish. Few people speak English and you will find it difficult at times to communicate. Kurdish lessons are available (not to mention being immersed in it day to day) and expats are encouraged to help the local students get exposure to English.

Alcohol:

Unlike many other GCC states, alcohol is available for purchase without limitations. However, you should still observe religious and cultural considerations, after all this is a predominantly Muslim country.

Lifestyle

As a developing region, you will not find every last amenity you may be used to, but if you are seeking a safe, friendly and enjoyable place to live then you've found it. Kurds are welcoming and quite tolerant so long as you are of them.

Shopping:

Erbil does not have many large shopping complexes and is mostly comprised of smaller speciality stores. However, due to the boom many international businesses are attempting to set up here and it is projected that offerings will increase as the city develops. Your other option is the Qaysari Souk which is essentially a bazaar with anything and everything on sale. The advantage of the Souk is that you may find many items you would not usually see in chain or department stores. For instance, many seek out antiques, locally handmade items like carpets and other goods. Lastly, payment can be made with either Iraqi Dinar or USD.

The Family Mall: Here you can find some of your favourite international brands such as:

- Blackberry
- GEOX
- Samsonite
- Merrel
- DKNY
- Armani
- Levi's
- Mango

Also you have the option of Majidi Mall:

- Adidas
- Nike
- Ecco
- Movenpick
- Cinema & Game Land
- Pizza Hut
- Swarovski
- Fat Burger

Restaurants: There are restaurants galore in Erbil however you will find the selection relatively limited. Shawarma is a common staple here and is offered by virtually every vendor or restaurant. If you wish to sample a variety of Kurdish food we recommend befriending a local and enjoying a home cooked meal. Nothing beats the source! If you are looking for something more familiar, there are a few western restaurants catering to expats. For example, there is one bar where you can enjoy American fare while enjoying a bar side flat screen TV.

Travel:

With so much history there is much to see in Kurdistan, but do be wary of going to remote areas. Too close to the Turkish border and you may face danger, deviate outside the security forces area and you will have the same issue. Still, with that limitation there is still a lot to take in. For example, a short drive away from Erbil is the site of the famous battle between Alexander the Great and King Darius of Persia. Additionally, there are many ancient religious and archaeological sites to visit, if not for pilgrimage then at least to take in their breath-taking beauty and significance.

Leisure & Local Attractions:

Erbil Citadel: with over 7000 years of history, successive historical powers including Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece have all left their mark here. The area of the citadel is 110,000 metres squares with a layered mound for its topography. This is due to the many times the area has seen changes, renovation, and development. There is a current bid to declare the citadel as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Aqua Tarin Water Park: one of the largest water parks in Iraq. This is a great family outing with restaurants, slides, pools and so much more.

Quality of life & Costs

If you are seeking the London life you will not find it here, but if a place with significantly cheaper cost of living while offering many of the amenities you are used to sounds good, then you are likely to enjoy Erbil. As companies have been or moved there a short time ago, accessibility to luxury items is quite expensive. Incidentally, everything else is far cheaper. You can get a great meal for half the price you would pay in London!

Healthcare:

There are public hospitals but they do not offer the same standard of care that the west is accustomed to. Many opt for private hospitals but you must pay out of pocket or seek care in nearby Turkey. Also be wary of counterfeit medicine, but if you do find a good doctor you can manage. This situation is changing as new hospitals are being built and the quality of service is being focused on.

Property and Residence:

Car - You can buy a good car but they are relatively expensive. There is no car insurance so if you get in an accident and it is your fault, you will have to pay for that other person's loss (including medical bills!), as such we do not encourage this option.

Home - due to rapid expansion and increasing economic strength, Erbil can be expensive if you rent in a newer development (especially if catered to westerners). If you want to live on a tighter budget there are many options available, but they will deviate from a high standard. Many expats rent villas and apartments. Although you can buy, many do not do so right away or wish to stay temporarily. Do see how the city fits your priorities before committing to anything too onerous financially.

Education:

This is an expensive endeavour, but one that is particularly worth the money. Ex-pats send their children to private schools and pay out of pocket. However, many of the students are Kurdish themselves and the government requires that you learn Kurdish alongside English. Further, your child would be taught about a religion, either Christianity or Islam. International schools have started to become increasingly available as more expats come to work and offer accreditation from their respective countries. As development continues offerings will likely increase.

Taxes:

Taxes vary between 3-15% percent based on your income bracket. As such it will be dependent on what you have negotiated as a salary. Funds used for local business or other investment is not taxed (small businesses only) as Erbil wants to meet the increasing demand for growth.

Otherwise, your concern should be how your earnings are transferred to non-UAE accounts. Depending on your home country, you may be subject to taxation on assets brought back.

For example, although returning to the UK with income is not typically taxed, depending on the vehicle you use to move your assets, you may be subject to capital gains tax in the UK. Prudence, insofar as referring to a financial specialist, is highly recommended.

Americans: For US expats and their spouses the laws for taxation in the US have recently changed and affect your income while working abroad. It is far too detailed to discuss here, but we insist that you check with a tax specialist before making any decisions.

Safety:

Kurdistan has its own security force separate from Iraqi officials and military operations; as such they are solely dedicated to protecting the Kurdish region of Iraq. Consequently, security is tight with many checkpoints between the outer areas and the contained region that encompasses Erbil. While Kurds are aware of the surrounding conflicts and keep up with the political situation, they are not particularly worried about safety. For the most part they live regular lives and have confidence in the defence force that has protected them well for many years. However, if you are feeling adventurous and wish to deviate outside of the protected area you will expose yourself to a great deal of danger. The outer region is either unprotected or in the midst of internal southern and western Iraqi conflict. A policy of military isolation is not only geared towards keeping danger out, but to establish greater autonomy for their people. Lastly, crime is low, but women should still take care when out alone.

Utilities:

There have been great efforts to invest in the energy infrastructure in Erbil, but the city still experiences limited supply of electricity and running water at times. As more construction projects are underway, so too are projects to accommodate the increasing demand. For now, utilities can be somewhat unreliable, but the situation is improving.

Public Transport:

We do not recommend using buses as they are known to have stop overs in regions that are unsafe for foreigners. Most use a shared a taxi service that brings you to a central hub, there you wait until there are enough passengers going to the same location. The routes that these taxis use are fairly safe, however if you wish to take even greater precaution you can pay more to take less travelled but safer roads. This is mostly for city to city travel; likewise you can use private hire, or taxis for local transportation.

Climate:

The climate is a hot Mediterranean one. Most people have access to AC and Heating throughout the year, although due to developing infrastructure blackouts or periods of limited service do occur. Do be prepared for the heat and hydrate well! Winters are not as hot and are moderate, dress in layers for a safe bet.

Pets:

Erbil is not a place where many enjoy the company of pets however due to the recent years of westerners coming here to work, there is a stronger presence of animal lovers. Previously, the airport was ill-equipped to deal with the issues of bringing one's pet into the country with the correct paperwork. With the continual development of infrastructure, there has too been an increase in the number and variety of services offered. If you were to bring a pet now you would find that all the necessary processes for easy entrance and proof of international requirements are available. Although pets are somewhat of a novelty to Erbil, the idea is growing on people as more expats bring their furry (or otherwise!) friends with them.

The Little Things:

With so much to consider it is easy to forget the little things. These are far too many to list so do be thorough in your research! This guide is a great starting point and if you do choose to work with Douglas Scott, we'll make sure that you've got all your bases covered. Otherwise, we wish you luck on this new and exciting journey!



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