

# THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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## **Back to the Iraqi Marshes**

As early as 1978 my wife and I were backpacking in Iraq. Almost 45 years later, we returned there with our own vehicle. Our main focus was on the mudhifs, the meeting houses of the Marsh Arabs in the south of Iraq.

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In 1978 my wife and I were backpacking in Iraq to visit the ziggurats of Ur and Uruk, the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, and the excavations of Nimrud and Nineveh as well as the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. Rather by chance, in the south we crossed the marshes at the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris, where the Marsh Arabs have lived for over 5000 years on artificial islands. At that time we knew not much about this unique culture and had not enough time to penetrate the marshlands. However, we were able to visit a meeting house of the male clan members - called mudhif - in al-Chibayish, and were so fascinated by it that we decided to come back. We had no idea it would take 45 years.

Saddam Hussein came to power and the wars began that shook Iraq almost non-stop from 1980 to 2017. It was he who pushed for the draining of the marshes to punish the Marsh Arabs for their participation in the 1991 uprising against the government. In the process, more than 200,000 Marsh Arabs were displaced and 90% of the ecologically unique marsh landscape was irretrievably destroyed. Yet the Mesopotamian marshes have been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 2016 to prevent its complete destruction. Since then, the marshland has been slowly expanding again. And the mudhifs? Do they still exist and if so, how many of them would still be used as meeting houses today?

In books and on the Internet, we only found pictures dating from times long past. I searched Google Maps meticulously for structures that could correspond to the elongated barrel vaults of the mudhifs. Around al-Chibayish and Nasiriyah, I have identified about twenty mudhifs. With the GPS they are not difficult to locate. Only the people in the villages look at our 4WD car in astonishment and wonder what we are looking for here. Our hit rate is 80%. So, they still exist, the mudhifs. Every time we get out of the car to admire these imposing buildings, it doesn't take long until the men of the associated clan come streaming out of the neighboring houses and ask us into the mudhif. We are kindly invited to take a seat on the cushions. Water and coffee are served. The village dignitaries sit across from us in their traditional dress, leaning on cushions, inquiring – as far as their language skills allow with the help of Google Translator – about our whereabouts or discussing the day's events among themselves. Not without pride they pose alone or together with us in front of or in the pillared hall made of reeds. So, the mudhifs still fulfill their function.

In the village of Al Kurmashiyah al Gharbiyah, situated on a palm-lined canal, we discover a large mudhif on the opposite side of the canal. It is not marked on our map. The reed is still yellow, i.e. it cannot be old. We park our vehicle and cross the canal on a narrow bridge. Immediately we are surrounded by men. Our curiosity brings us an unexpected highlight in the marshes. The mudhif was newly built and inaugurated only yesterday. The celebrations are still in full swing. We are invited in as usual. We are served with water, tea and coffee. The coffee is refilled until we have enough. Now the Sheikh, who has commissioned the new mudhif, appears and greets us warmly. More and more men stream into the mudhif, including young ones wearing modern clothes and haircuts. They line up in a circle, one starts to sing, the others clap and suddenly they all are jumping around wildly. At first, we are a bit scared, because the movements become more and more ecstatic. They are hopping around and waving their arms. As everyone laughs, we quickly realize that it is a dance ritual. All the clan members helped in some way during the three months to create the mudhif and are now enjoying the result. Afterwards, one of the men steps in front of the Sheikh and begins to recite. Even if we don't understand a word, we enjoy the recited art, because our ear recognizes in the sequence of syllables that it is poetry. The English speaking son explains to us that it is a hymn of praise to the builder of the mudhif. As the reciter steps up in front of us and utters similarly beautiful words, and as the party joins in his words, we are moved by this kind reception.

Conversations with our hosts give us additional information about the importance of the mudhif as a gathering place for the clan. The craft of building mudhifs is cultivated as long as the reed grass can still grow as a raw material. As the neighboring countries of Turkey, Syria and Iran dispute the water of the Euphrates and Tigris with Iraq, the water level is constantly falling. Many young men are therefore moving to the cities or emigrating. Those who earn enough there support their families. As guests, we notice nothing of the shortage. We are spoiled with a generous dinner.

The next morning we say goodbye full of gratitude, also to the women who curiously look through the courtyard gate.