

Before Arrival

Visas

Your visa will be sponsored by the University of Basrah, and endorsed by the Governor of Basra Province. To begin the visa process, **email a full-color scan of the detail page of your passport to:** Ms. Bayan Mahdi at bclimate2013@gmail.com. The University of Basrah will then generate a letter of invitation and sponsorship.

As soon as you receive the letter of invitation, you can apply for a visa from the Iraqi Embassy in Washington D.C. at: <http://www.iraqiembassy.us/page/visas-to-iraq>.

This process can take up to four months, so do not delay. If you have not received your visa by 1 October, immediately notify: Ms. Bayan Mahdi at bclimate2013@gmail.com. The University of Basrah will obtain a Letter of Arrival that you can use to obtain a visa on arrival at Basra International Airport.

Immunizations and Medications

While not required, it is strongly recommended that you have current immunizations for the following illnesses: Influenza (Flu), Tetanus, Typhoid, and Hepatitis. Also be sure to bring sufficient prescription medications to cover the length of your trip plus any flight delays.

Major medications (including antibiotics) are inexpensive readily available from Iraqi pharmacies. However, given the long travel time, 8-hour time zone difference, aridity, and prevalence of with-born dust, digestive upsets and headache are common side-effects. It is therefore a good idea to bring a small supply of your preferred over-the-counter pain relievers, anti-diarrheal medication (such as Loperamide), anti-nausea medication, allergy and sinus congestion relievers, and antacids, so that you have them ready-to-hand as you travel.

Trip Insurance

To address any family, workplace Risk Management, and your own concerns, we *strongly* recommend that you purchase comprehensive trip insurance (including emergency medevac and health care). [Chartis TravelGuard Gold](#) coverage is inexpensive, and ensures that you are compensated for costs of trip delay, emergency medical treatment, and medevac to any hospital of your choice. Your travel agent can easily add this to your ticket cost, or you can book directly. Whichever provider you choose, be sure that there is no exclusion for Iraq, or for “acts of war or terrorism.” Sadly, such acts can occur anywhere in the world – including in cities that you may transit en route to and from the conference.

Personal Items and Attire

Everyday electronics like smartphones, digital cameras, DVD players, and laptop computers are ubiquitous in Iraqi cities. However, batteries are expensive, so be sure to bring enough for your trip.

Iraqi electrical outlets are 220v and accommodate both British and European plugs. Most electronic power converters accommodate 110-220v—check yours to be sure. Plug adapters are cheap and available at most airports. Hotels provide bathrobes, toiletries, towels, and hair dryers. However, water and soaps in Iraq are fairly harsh, so you may wish to bring your own products.

If you have a handheld GPS, remove all batteries, store them separately, and place the GPS in checked baggage. Iraqi customs authorities are primarily concerned with illegal import of high-end technical equipment. Keep a list of make, model, and serial numbers of any high-cost equipment.

Conference attire is “business casual” as appropriate to any professional gathering. Men should bring a jacket and tie for evening dining. Women should refrain from wearing short skirts, revealing blouses, or

baring their upper arms. Shorts are not appropriate for either sex, except for men specifically engaging in athletic activity. There is no requirement for non-Muslim women to wear any headcover (“hijab”), although you may wish to carry a scarf when outside to protect your hair from high wind and dust.

Getting to Basra

Several major airlines serve Basra International Airport (BSR). If you book a “through” ticket from your point of origin, you will be able to check baggage all the way to your final destination, even if you have a layover stop. Major “gateway” airports to Basra are Istanbul (Turkey) and Dubai (UAE).

Airlines



[Turkish Airlines](#), named Best European Airline in 2012, flies daily to BSR from Istanbul Ataturk International Airport (IST). Connections are available from major cities worldwide. If your connection requires an overnight stop, you must purchase a Turkish Visa (cost \$20.00). This visa will be valid for 90 days, so you can use it for your return if needed. For a “mini vacation,” stay overnight in the [Sultanahmet](#) district, home of the Hagia Sophia and Sultan Ahmet (Blue) Mosque, served by shuttles, taxis, and the city Metro.



[Emirates](#) airlines flies daily to BSR from Dubai International Airport (DXB). Connections are available from major cities worldwide. If your connection requires an overnight stop, you must purchase a United Arab Emirates Visa (cost \$20.00). This visa will be valid for 90 days, so you can use it for your return if needed. Several hotels are convenient to the airport, with free shuttles running every half-hour.

Dhows (cargo freighters) on Dubai Creek

On Arrival

You will exit your plane by stairway, and board a runway bus to travel the short distance to the terminal. Once in the door, if you already have a visa in your passport, proceed straight ahead through Passport Control.

If you have a Letter of Arrival, first go to the Interior Police booth, which is to the right of the seating area. Hand your LoA and passport to the desk officer, then cross the lobby and enter the Visa Waiting Room on the opposite side. Listen carefully for your name (they may call either your first or last name). When called, proceed to the visa counter. The fee is \$82.00, in cash. Carry the exact amount, as no change is available. As soon as your visa is stamped, proceed through Passport Control.



Once through Passport Control, enter the baggage claim area to retrieve your luggage, then exit via the customs desks into the main lobby. You will not need to stop unless directed. If you have expensive gear, now is the time to produce your list of serial numbers. Customs officials will verify and stamp it, so that you have no problems on departure.



As you exit the terminal, you will see a row of black SUVs. Have no fear: these are the official shuttles to the external security checkpoint. Board a shuttle. From this point on, **BE SURE TO KEEP YOUR PASSPORT ON YOUR PERSON AT ALL TIMES**. You will pass through several checkpoints, and you may be required to show your passport at each. The shuttle will deliver you to the external meeting point. Your vehicle and driver will meet you there and deliver you to your hotel.

Accommodation

The Ministry of Tourism limits accommodation options for international travelers to specific, rated hotels. Two are recommended in Basra

Mnawi Basha

The Mnawi Basha (“Pasha Mhana”) is named for the Ottoman commander who once ruled military encampments in this area. It overlooks Al-Tairan Square and date palm gardens that line a creek running through the city center. Facilities include sauna, indoor pool, fitness center (with ladies’ hours), coffee shop, gift shop, wireless internet, and a buffet restaurant featuring Basrawi cuisine. Rooms are comfortably spacious, clean, and include television, mini-fridge, and private bath. Home-away-from-home to businesspeople from throughout Eurasia, it has a genuinely cosmopolitan ambience.

Basra International

The Basra International Hotel, a five-star phoenix resurrected from the ashes of the former Sheraton International, overlooks the Shatt Al-Arab (Arab River) directly adjacent to the University of Basrah Marine Science Center docks. Its impressive, three-story, marbled reception atrium, plush side lobbies, conference facilities, and outdoor pool are unmatched anywhere in Iraq, and host many meetings and receptions serving the greater Gulf region.

Out and About



University of Basrah and the UB Marine Science Centre

The University of Basrah was founded in 1968, comprising over 20 Colleges grouped on separate campuses for Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Allied Medicine, and the Chancellery. Thanks to three wars interspersed with decades of economic sanctions, it is currently undergoing its third renovation and rebuild.

U. Basrah boasts the only research center in Iraq dedicated to the study of estuarine, coastal, and marine environments. The Marine Sciences Centre's departmental offices and laboratories are located north of the city at the Garmat Ali campus. Additional facilities include river- and ocean-going research vessels anchored at the MSC's docks on the Shatt Al-Arab near the Basra International Hotel, and a research field station near Hareer, in the East Hammar marshes, south of the city.

Basra City

Shatt Al-Arab



Formed by the confluence of the **Tigris** and **Euphrates** Rivers, the **Shatt Al-Arab** (Arab River) carries the lifeblood of Basra's port-based economy. From the Basra-Baghdad railway junction at **Ma'qil Dockyards** north of the city, southward to its outlets in the Gulf, the river teams with boats and shipping.

All road bridges crossing the river were destroyed during the wars, limiting cross-river traffic. However, in an amazing feat of engineering, one half of the **Abu Bushayr Bridge** has been re-righted onto its pilings as far as **Sinbad Island**. Formerly a favorite honeymoon hotel, it has now been colonized by marsh refugees. From there, the remnants of the **Bridge of Boats** (pontoon bridge) have been pulled into service for the remainder of the crossing.



In addition, diesel-powered Ashar Boats (reminiscent of Bogart and Hepburn in *The African Queen*) operate as inexpensive water taxis, ferrying passengers to schools and shopping districts on the opposite shore. Most depart from the downtown Corniche (riverwalk), where families often go to dine on floating restaurants or cool off with an evening stroll. Further downstream, in the heart of the former presidential palace compound, the palace is undergoing conversion to become the new Basra Museum of Antiquities.

Old Merchant Quarter



The fin de siècle (pre-WWI) merchants' quarter once boasted blocks of genteel courtyard houses with elaborate wooden porticoes that extended over Basra's many canals. A few of these Ottoman *shanasheel* houses still stand, although the canals have long since fallen into disuse (as have the houses fallen into disrepair). The former Basra museum, now the **Basra Heritage Museum**, is undergoing renovation, but may be visited by prior appointment.

The **Basra Writers' Union**, a cheerful consortium of poets, playwrights, journalists, and novelists, has adopted an attractive, three-story structure that encircles an interior atrium/courtyard. The Union sponsors various literary events and welcomes drop-ins. A wall-long mural depicting this idyll of "the Venice of the East" may be viewed in the Mnawi Basha Hotel lobby.

Transforming City Infrastructure



Construction, construction, construction is ongoing everywhere in Basra (with accompanying skyrocketing land values). An energetic governor funded by repatriation of “petrodollars” to the province has jumpstarted many infrastructure improvements, such as increased electricity output, road paving, sidewalk refurbishment, overpass construction, street sweeping, and garbage collection.



Public planting is re-transforming boulevard medians back into public parks and gardens. Date palms—nine million of which were destroyed in the wars—are making a comeback as ornamental specimens. Retail nurseries line the city’s creeks, which are slowly returning to their function as green corridors through built up areas. And, beloved by kids of all ages, Basraland

Amusement Park has reopened, adding sparkle to the evening skyline.

Zubayr



Southwest of Basra proper, Zubayr’s population, swelled by refugees of marshland drainage, is growing exponentially—placing it in direct contention with **Old Zubayr**, which comprises some 30 square kilometers of scattered potsherds and other archaeological remains now under serious encroachment by unregulated construction, slums, landfills, and garbage dumps. Founded as a military encampment over 2,000 years ago, Old Zubayr is situated on the site of the “Battle of the Camel.” Fought in 656 between allies of Alī ibn Abī

Ṭālib (cousin and son-in-law of prophet Muhammad, and regarded by Shias as the first Imam) and allies of Aisha (widow of Muhammad), who wanted vengeance on those who assassinated the previous caliph. Aisha’s supporters Zubayr ibn al-Awwam and Talha ibn Ubayd-Allah both fell in the course of the battle, and were buried there—the Talha Shrine now demarcates the ground. Shortly thereafter, Ali became the fourth Caliph. To halt the destruction of this unique site, pivotal to all of Islamic history, Basra Governorate plans to conduct geophysical (remote sensing) survey to fully map the remaining below-ground foundations.



South of Zubayr lies the just-completed, half-billion dollar **Basra Sports City**, slated to host the 2015 Gulf Cup of Nations. The government-funded project boasts a main stadium (capacity 80,000), secondary stadium (capacity 20,000), four five-star hotels, four training soccer fields, sports team housing, and a fire station. Bridges will cross a large man-made lake surrounding the

main stadium.

Health and Safety

Personal Safety



As compared to northern and central Iraq, southern Iraq has suffered from little partisan violence. Within Basra, there has been no incident of any attack on foreign civilians or civilian vehicles in years. While checkpoints are still ubiquitous, they are staffed by police professionals. (Note: Police checkpoints are security zones. DO NOT attempt to photograph them.) At present, Basra City has much lower rates of violent crime than most major American cities, and none of that crime is directed at foreigners. The airport, hotels, and university are all situated within walled, guarded, controlled-entry compounds. Visitors in the company of Iraqi hosts need have no concerns for personal safety, beyond those for any large urban area anywhere in the world. Thousands of business contractors and tourists transit Basra annually without incident.

Thus, simply take normal safety precautions when travelling to Basra, as you would for any urban area. Be sure that your hosts know when, and on what flight, you will arrive, and that they are prepared to meet you at the airport. Carry your passport, hotel address, and emergency contact information on your person. Don't "flash your cash." Don't give details of your travel plans or appointment schedule to strangers with no need to know. Don't wander the streets of the city alone: you don't know where "bad" neighborhoods are. If you find yourself separated from others, hail a yellow taxi, and tell the driver the name of your hotel. Steer clear of public arguments, demonstrations, or police/military activity.

Eating and Drinking



Basrawi cuisine draws inspiration from many sources, including Arabian, Persian, Turkish, Indian, and East African. The staple dish is rice, often cooked with rich, nutty spices and other flavorings. Flatbreads, baked in a *tanoor* (clay cone oven), may be offered instead of cutlery. Meat staples include mutton, lamb, beef, and chicken, either roasted, ground and mixed with spices and cooked in long "fingers" (*kebab*), or served in savory soups and stews.

Given its delta setting, it is no surprise that fish is extremely popular here. Gulf-caught pomfret is most commonly served whole and batter fried. Carp are served head off, split, roasted in wire racks surrounding open charcoal pits, and gently seasoned "family style" on a bed of rice (*masguf*).

Common side dishes include fried or roasted peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, and onions, as well as chickpeas, beans, corn, carrots, and cabbage.

A wide variety of *mezze* (appetizers and condiments) are served with every meal, including varieties of pickles, chutneys, hummus, tabouli, baba ganoush, and diced cucumber-tomato salads.

You need have no gastronomic worries about breads, grains, pickles, soups, stews, cheeses, or well-cooked meats and vegetables. However, indulge in fresh vegetables and salads with discretion. If you are a wide and frequent traveler, you will probably encounter no (or minimal) upset. If you are not, your intestinal flora may not be up to the task of coping with their local competitors.

No water from any tap anywhere in Iraq is potable. Drink ONLY bottled water, from a bottle with an intact seal. Your hotel will provide drinking water in your room at no charge.

Emergency Healthcare

In addition to U. Basrah's own College of Medicine, several new hospitals, both public and private, have opened in Basra over the past several years. Many staff are Western-trained, and are extremely competent at stabilizing and preparing patients for evacuation to healthcare facilities of their choice, should the need arise.

Conference Information

Costs

All conference fees, meals, local transportation, and local tours will be provided by the University of Basrah Marine Science Center.

The only costs to presenters are airfare, visa fees, and accommodation.

Tours and Special Events

The East Hammar Marshes



No trip to southeastern Iraq is complete without a visit to the Mesopotamian marshlands. From the MSC's Hareer Field Station, we'll travel by powered canoe (**mashuf**) into the realm of reed houses, water buffalo, fishermen, and kingfishers...