

My visit to Erbil in Spring 2012

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I visited Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan for three weeks in March–April 2012 under the Voluntary Lecturer Programme of the International Mathematical Union to give a course of lectures on Number Theory to final year undergraduate students of the College of Science of Salahaddin University. Here I shall record some of my impressions of the visit in case they are of some use to potential mathematical visitors.

1. Life in Erbil I found it quite convenient that I was booked in a hotel within walking distance of the campus. Also, there were two or three restaurants close by, so I didn't have to go very far for my dinners.

In general, Erbil appeared to be a perfectly normal city, and I didn't get the impression anywhere of being in any kind of danger. The people are very welcoming and as soon as they learnt that I was a professor, they were very respectful.

On working days the campus is quite a lively place and they have a reasonably nice cafeteria. The weekends can sometimes be tedious, so it might be a good idea to have two visitors at the same time so that they can provide each other company.

2. The students The students are very curious, very eager to learn, and there were no problems of indiscipline. The only problem was that some of them were not confident enough to ask questions in English. Fortunately, there was a girl in my class who knew English quite well, and she would sometimes translate their questions for me. They could follow my English easily, but it is a good idea to speak slowly and to write things on the board so that they can take down notes.

The students did not hesitate to approach me at all times with their questions. I was happy to note that even students who were not in my class came to me with their problems in topology, algebra, or analysis. I gave the students many exercises and did some of them in class. I feel that they should learn to work out things by themselves.

Some of the students willingly took me around to show me the citadel and the old bazaar. In general they were quite eager to make my stay enjoyable.

3. My course I had planned a first course in Number Theory, beginning with the definition of prime numbers and going up to quadratic reciprocity. However, because of the lack of time and adequate preparation on the part of the students, I could not cover all the topics I had planned. If I were to do it again, I would supply the background material (in this case the basic properties of groups and rings) to them beforehand, and I would write the notes in advance and distribute them after each lecture. As it happens, they got the full set of notes only at the end of the course.

A computer with an internet connection would have been very useful. It would have allowed me to show the students all the learning material available online, and the sites such as `math.stackexchange.com` where undergraduates can ask questions and quickly get answers from experts.

4. The department I found the colleagues in the College of Science to be very welcoming and very eager to improve their department. This is in contrast to the other countries in the region which are richer but do not seem to have the same desire to cultivate science in their universities.

5. Conclusion This visit was quite an interesting experience, and I would be willing to undertake it again.