

Visiting the war fields of Khuzestan

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



Visiting the war fields of Khuzestan



one soldier's belongings from the war

I arrived in Ahvaz, the capital city of the Iranian province of Khuzestan a few days after the end of the Iranian New Year. Holidaymakers had already returned home and roads were less crowded. It was the beginning of spring and the weather was very mild and pleasant as I began to discover Khuzestan which is to be found in the south west of the country.

Khuzestan may be known as one of the richest resources of petrochemical raw materials thanks to its extensive oil and gas fields, but beneath the surface of this wealthy province lies many untold stories spanning more than a thousand years.

This land witnessed an Arab invasion under the flag of Islam that fought the Zoroastrian regions of Iran and slowly turned it into a country populated by Muslims. History repeated itself, fourteen centuries later when the secular Arab Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein invaded the newly born Islamic Republic of Iran.



the Shalamcheh Shrine and mosque

The eight years of a destructive war turned the life of the people of this region upside down and opened a new chapter in the history of the country. Saddam's political greed to capture oil rich Iranian lands fueled his fully armed military machinery. On the other hand, there were some very young men, Islamic revolutionary guards militias (Pasdar) and volunteers (Basiji), ill-equipped, but motivated and inspired by Islamic values and the teachings of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. They readily sacrificed their lives by defending their land, and in the process generating extraordinary scenes of bravery and heroism.

Iranians are accustomed to preserve and praise the shrines of the descendants of Prophet Mohammed, and great scholars of Islam all over the country. The epic sacrifice of the few to stand against aggression generated a new atmosphere of heroism and valour to praise the defunct of the war, keeping their name and paradigms alive. In every city, you can find colourful banners with monuments, and fountains surrounded by tulip flowers in the centre of city squares. It has become a usual scene in post-revolution Iran and a pride for cities and villages to raise awareness of their sons who lost their lives in the battlefield by building sanctuaries and memorials.

Just as in the west, we visit places connected to the military past such as Culloden, Waterloo, the cemeteries of WWI and WWII, Gallipoli and remember the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918 when WWI ended so Iranians visit their war monuments. With the improving of relations between the UK and Iran (the first direct flight by BA has been announced) so it becomes possible for Europeans to visit those war monuments.



the memorial for Christian martyrs

What I had before me was an exciting expedition not only to a land with hundreds if not thousands of historical monuments and holy shrines but also the opportunity to visit the sites of the battles that took place during the Iran-Iraq war.

Abolfazl Masjedi is a war veteran who was seriously wounded during the war; his vision slowly weakened and became partially blind. He used to be a commander in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Sepah Pasdaran Enghab Islami) and faced me looking very calm and serious. The man, who hides his exhaustion and injury from the war, is a living memory of the war, with gun shell fragments still lodged in his head. He is now an official narrator of untold stories and guide of the sites connected to the war.

Listening to his memories and stories of the war as we travelled to visit Shalamcheh, a small village on the border with Iraq. This was the site of one of the bloodiest battles in human history where over 85,000 souls from both sides were killed. The soil of this land was irrigated with the blood of young and old Iranian soldiers, Padars and Basijis (volunteers) who stood for their principles against aggression to push Iraqi forces back. I was told that the number of shells landing on this field was equivalent to the whole number of shells in WWII. Today, an octagonal shaped shrine and mosque act as a holy memorial of their names in a deserted flat land.



The museum. A soldier is seen defending Khorramshahr before it was captured. Behind the exhibit you can see the photograph on which this installation is based.

It is hard to imagine the fate of those who engaged in this battle. I saw pilgrims stepping on this land to pray for the departed. Some walking barefoot and some were prostrate on the ground, kissing the soil, crying and seeking intercession. The Rahian Noor, (which translates as 'The Followers of Light') is the name of an official organisation, which manages trips to shrines and war memorials, not only for Iranians but also for foreign tourists.

I stand on a small manmade earthwork overlooking the Iraqi border posts which were at a short distance away. The area has been reconstructed with tanks and armored vehicles around trenches. Red flags with the names of holy personalities have been raised across the water channel to symbolise the ideals of resistance and martyrdom. Loud speakers play somber songs and military drum beats.



the line of red flags

Shalamcheh reminded me of Waterloo in Belgium, the site of the battle between Wellington and Napoleon, where 200 years ago 65,000 French, British and their ally soldiers lost their lives in one single day. There is a lion mount, a memorial museum and permanent exhibitions exactly on the same spot where the battle took place.

There are differences of opinion among Iranians about highlighting martyrs. The critics say: "they are just a bunch of bones, why spend so much money on this propaganda." However, most revere the life of the martyrs and this has become a growing trend since the corpses of dead soldiers found inside Iraq are still being discovered and returned to be buried in different locations in cities in Iran.



The Mosque when Khorramshahr was freed

I continued my journey through desolate landscapes but soon drew closer to wetlands, passing through marshlands before reaching Abadan and Khorramshahr. These beautiful cities were considered to be the brides of all cities in Iran but are still recovering from the devastating war. The port city of Khorramshahr was captured by Iraqi forces after resistance in 1980 and consequently the city was reduced to ruins. It took over 578 days to free the city from the hands of Saddam's regime. The city was called "Khonin Shahr" (bloody city) because so much blood was spilled to save the city.

Despite the reconstruction of the city and extensive efforts to revive the local economy it appears that, after more than 35 years, little has been done to return it to its original glory. The continuing economic sanctions, close proximity to the Iraqi border and the fear of the outbreak of another unexpected war has always been the main factors discouraging wider development plans.



at the museum where cars are upside down or standing on their ends in memory

The port city of Khoramshahr is blessed by the two waterways of Karun and Arvand Rud (Rud means River). Karun rises from the Zagros range in the north of Iran and passes through Khoramshahr and ends at its confluence with Arvand Rud. The strategic position of Khoramshahr at the bank of Arvand River and closeness to the Persian Gulf makes it a politically and economically important port city to manage large cargo ships and therefore an important place during the war.

In my short visit, I managed to see Khoramshahr's Great Mosque, the only construction that remained partly intact during the occupation of the city. There are still the remains of gunshots in the walls of the mosque, which was the main stronghold during 35 days of resistance before Iraqis captured the city.

I crossed a beautiful white bridge connecting the north and the south of the city heading towards the city's Holy Defense Cultural Center in Saheli Boulevard. This waterway passage, which was destroyed during the war, has been called "the resistance bridge" because of the resistance of the city's citizens.



the resistance bridge

The well curated war museum in the cultural centre on the banks of the Karun River displays weaponry, uniforms, personal belongings of soldiers, various models of destroyed houses, the images of martyrs and many shocking photos taken during the war. There are outdoor and indoor exhibits to resemble the war zone. In one corner, you see several cars upside down. That is what Iraqi soldiers did to the large number of cars parked in Khoramshahr's Custom Centre to prevent the landing of Iranian parachutes. An audiovisual room is continuously showing the videos of marching soldiers and scenes related to the freeing of Khoramshahr.

Iran commemorates the anniversary of the war in about a fortnight's time on 22nd September. Every year there are a series of programs, exhibitions and events across the country. It is a great opportunity for those who are interested in studying different aspects of the history of the war and to see how similar and different the memories are compared to Remembrance Day in the UK.



Khorramshahr mosque today

The most important industrial landmark of Abadan and the significant economic hub of the country is the Abadan Oil Refinery, built by the British in 1912 under the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which later changed to BP. This giant industrial heritage, located in a strategic position near Arvand and Bahmanshir Rivers and the Persian Gulf, is connected to several nearby oil fields and provide feeds through heavy pipes to Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad and other cities. The refinery was damaged during the war and its oil production was interrupted. It took several years to be restored after the war to gain higher capacity of crude oil barrels per day.

The Oil Museum opposite Abadan Takhti Stadium holds historical documents, oil machinery, equipment and old vehicles used in the refinery. An old oil port with heavy cranes of Ekvan and Gogerd are also part of the museum. There is also an exhibition about the process of rebuilding the refinery after the war.



the Christian church

As I was driving around the city, I stopped by the white Armenian Church of St. Karapet built in 1958 in Abadan next to the Mosque of Imam Musa-Ibn-Jafar. The church, part of a complex including a school for Christians, is a registered national monument, which was partly destroyed during the war. The building was restored in 2000 to become one of the religious attractions of the city. A small number of minority Christian residents have now returned. The proximity of the

church and the mosque indicates the mutual respect among the believers of Islam and Christianity in Abadan. Two other churches of Ashuri and Christopher built in 1928 and 1951

were destroyed during the war and there is nothing of them. It was also interesting to see a memorial outside the church dedicated to Christians who were martyred during the war.



one of the buildings left by the British

For British visitors, there is also a heritage to see. As I was driving around the city, I could see many villas, houses and buildings made of brick that were built by the British, as there were many British engineers who used to manage and maintain the refinery before the revolution.

Abadan and Khoramshahr are two flourishing islands of prosperity with a very bright future as Iran is opening up to foreign tourists. The military heritage is just one aspect of tourism that will be developed

There are the ancient cities of Shush, Shushtar and Dezful for example. Khuzestan has a combination of tourist attractions including religious shrines, war memorials, historical monuments and ancient heritage which, as tourism grows, should be available for British visitors to see as part of holidays offered by tour operators.

For more about Iran, click [here](#).

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