

Saddam Hussein's palaces

Saddam Hussein spent billions building dozens of vast, gaudy palaces all over Iraq, many of which are still occupied by US troops. But the Iraqi government is divided - as usual - on what to do with them once the soldiers have gone

By Colin Freeman

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There is, as yet, no instructed estate agent, but should one come along, their marketing pitch will for once need no over-egging. 'For sale/rent: 80 presidential palaces, average unit living space half-a-million square feet. Attached gardens featuring disused swimming pools, personal zoos/nuclear bunkers etc. Rooms fitted with thrones and gold lavatories, en suite torture chamber optional. Some bomb damage. Suit megalomaniac or similar.'

Saddam Hussein's palaces: in pictures (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/5835896/Saddam-Husseins-palaces-in-Iraq.html>)



The interior of Saddam Hussein's Al-Faw Palace was built with Italian marble, in contravention of trade embargoes Photo: Richard Mosse

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Welcome to what its previous owner would no doubt have termed the Mother of All real estate portfolios – the personal palaces and second-to-82nd homes of President Saddam Hussein, High Excellency, Struggler Against Zionist Imperialism, Field Marshal and Commander of All Iraq, to give him just a few of his self-adopted monikers.

Unlike his collection of personal titles, however, the late Baghdad leader's hoard of property titles has bequeathed a rather more lasting legacy for those who took over when he was deposed in 2003. Hidden behind imposing walls that dominate the downtowns of nearly every city, the palaces have provided the perfect makeshift barracks for US soldiers during the past six years, hosting everything from chow halls and command centres through to internet cafés and Starbucks. Now, though, with US troops completing their withdrawal from Iraq's urban areas last week, the Chez Saddam chain is up for grabs again. So what will happen to it?

The answer, as with so much of Iraq's future, is that nobody is quite sure. Officially, the Iraqi government has earmarked many of the palaces for use as bases for its own military and civil service. But with so many buildings, and some of them several times the size of the White House or Versailles, there is still likely to be plenty of spare space, prompting no shortage of suggestions as to what to do with them.

Some Iraqis want them converted into memorials to Saddam's cruelty, complete with the hooks for hanging people by the hands and cattle prods for dishing out electrical shocks. Some want them converted into six-star Dubai-style hotels or casinos – not perhaps a bad choice, given the general chintziness of the dictator-kitsch decor. Others, meanwhile, want them just flattened. Once again, the Iraqi leader is sowing discord from beyond the grave, as his former subjects find themselves divided over what should happen to them.

'You people in Europe have kept all the castles of your bad guys, so why shouldn't we?' says one former tank commander in Saddam's armies, who, despite describing the former president as a 'dog', retains a grudging nostalgia for the gun-enforced law and order which vanished so dramatically after Saddam's fall. 'We should keep them as historical artefacts.'

'They should be rebuilt for whatever need arises – a museum documenting Saddam's cruelty, a hospital, a mall, an army base,' reckons Ahmed Khalid, a former resident of Baghdad's Azamiyah district, home to a palace belonging to Saddam's son, Uday. 'It's a free space, so why not utilise it?'

'We should knock every single one down completely,' snarls Ahmad Mohammad, a labourer from east Baghdad. 'Iraq should not have any memories of that dog Saddam whatsoever.'

We can now make up our own mind, thanks to these through-the-bombhole pictures courtesy of Irish art photographer Richard Mosse, who recently spent a month touring US Army bases, lugging his ancient Phillips 8x10 Explorer bellows camera wherever he went. But where to start? So vast and sprawling is the network that there really is no easy answer to the question 'Where is Saddam's Palace?' – as this writer found out to his cost when first arriving in post-war Baghdad in 2003. Every Iraqi I asked pointed in a different direction.

Did I mean the Presidential Palace downtown, with its four giant cast-iron heads of Saddam Hussein? Did I mean the Domes Palace next door, with its oval swimming pool, waterside bar and king-size bedrooms decorated with erotic Arab art, thought to have been used as a Barry White-style love nest by the psychotic, sexually predatory Uday? Or could I be looking for the 'Victory over America Palace' out in west Baghdad, a place tailor-made for the phrase 'monument to hubris', commissioned in anticipation of a US defeat but wrecked by US bombers before it was even half-completed?

Equally bewildering was their sheer size. Attempting to rendezvous one day for a US military 'embed' at what was

described as 'the main gate' of the Presidential Palace, I took a taxi only to find at least four entrances matching that description, guarding not just a single building, but a complex as big as a university campus. Which one was the 'main gate', I never found out. All I know is that we got the wrong gate, the one that should also have borne a prominent sign saying: 'No Entry: Use of Lethal Force Authorised'. The moment we approached, the US soldiers guarding it fired two warning shots over the taxi roof, convinced the driver and I were a pair of incompetent carbombers. I never did report for that embed.

That, though, was small beer compared to how unwelcoming the palaces were in Saddam's time. Back then, the Presidential Palace complex was so feared that many Iraqis wouldn't even go near it. If they had to drive past, they would look in the other direction. Yet the fact that his own people seldom entered his palaces didn't stop Saddam lashing out vast amounts on them, creating a network of private playgrounds that make the late Michael Jackson's 3,000-acre Neverland Ranch seem modest by comparison.

A 1999 US State Department study estimated that Saddam had spent at least \$2 billion building nearly 50 palaces since the 1991 Gulf War, despite his people beginning to starve because of international sanctions. True, old school Middle Eastern autocrats have long been fond of setting up a personal residence in every province, although in Saddam's case, it was also linked to his other big personal vanity project: weapons of mass destruction.

Having wrestled agreements from UN weapons inspectors to restrict visits to his personal residences, he realised he could make their job even harder by building as many palaces as possible. In the end he had an area of almost 20 square miles and 1,000 buildings that was off-limits. For an unpopular dictator, it was perfect, allowing him to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. For any CIA-backed foes trying to mount a 'palace coup', the most daunting question was which palace to mount it in.

A quick tour inside any of these residences shows that Saddam's extravagance knew no bounds. Vast crystal chandeliers hang from the ceilings, there are ornate balconies straight out of Tony Montana's villa in *Scarface*. Around the walls of the vast, echoing lounges, huge gilt-framed settees stretch for so long they look like they must have been ordered by the metre. Underneath, the cellars were stocked with fine Champagne, Johnnie Walker Black Label and, er, Mateus Rosé – apparently one of Saddam's favourites.

Outside, the landscaped, manicured gardens featured everything from man-made boating and fishing lakes through to dolphin ponds, private cinemas and even individual 'Granny Palaces' for elderly female relatives. Not for Saddam a mere duck island on expenses, as per the recent British parliamentary allowances scandal. Instead, he commissioned an entire duck palace in the shape of the Al-Faw complex, west of Baghdad, complete with 62 rooms and 29 bathrooms, and used exclusively as a private resort for presidential fowl-shooting parties.

Already, Iraqis are waking up to the tourism potential of such locations, aware that their former ruler has such worldwide notoriety that a Saddam heritage trail might one day be something of a draw for both locals and foreigners. An hour's drive south of Baghdad, on a reed-lined stretch of the River Euphrates, lies the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon and its legendary Hanging Gardens, along with the foundations of the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar II, who conquered Jerusalem 2,500 years ago. It was here that Saddam committed what was – until the Taliban blew up the ancient stone Buddhas of Bamyán in Afghanistan – widely seen as one of the greatest acts of architectural vandalism of modern times.

Viewing Nebuchadnezzar as the first in a long line of great Arab leaders of which he was the latest, he reconstructed an entire palace anew on the ancient foundations. On top of the original remaining brickwork, which bore inscriptions hailing Nebuchadnezzar, the Ba'athist brickies added their own, inscribed with the words 'In the

era of Saddam Hussein, who rebuilt civilisation and rebuilt Babylon.' Then, not content with having graffitied his name all over one of the Seven Wonders of The Ancient World, he also built what he no doubt regarded as an Eighth Wonder next door – a vast four-storey Saddam palace on a man-made hilltop, garlanded with palms and roses, but with all the architectural merit of a giant shoebox.

Yet since last December, when government officials in Babel Province reopened it to the public, it has attracted thousands of visitors per day. For a 1,000 dinar entry fee – about 75p – visitors can wander around the echoing grand halls, inspect the mock-gold plumbing fixtures, and enjoy fine views of the nearby rivers of Babylon. (The Boney M song of the same name was a big hit in Iraq, incidentally, although I remember being told that Saddam then banned it because of the line that goes 'when we remember Zion').

Other attractions at Saddam's Babylon palace include eating sweet dates from Saddam's personal date palm, and paying around £150 to stay a night in the marbled room where he is said to have slept. Despite the vast cost of the palace, he is said to have spent only a few days here, although even so, Babylon is relatively unusual in boasting a 'Saddam Slept Here' room. Many of his presidential palaces he never stayed in at all.

Babel's governors are also reported to be considering plans to turn it into a hotel and casino complex, albeit one which shows that dictators never hold all the cards forever. 'We want this place to send a message to the dictators of the world,' said Hussam Kadhem, the palace's manager, in an interview last month with *USA Today*. 'The message is that they will also lose their palaces, they will lose their riches that come from stealing and oppressing their people.'

One man who is watching the future of the palaces with interest is [Geoff Hann of Surrey-based Hinterland Travel](http://www.hinterlandtravel.com/) (<http://www.hinterlandtravel.com/>), a tour firm that first began taking parties of intrepid visitors around Iraq when Saddam was still in power. Hann took a party around the Babylon site earlier this year – his first tour since 2004 because of security concerns – and believes that in time, many others will follow in his wake. 'In the future, I think these palaces will prove popular, as there is going to be a Saddam circuit for foreign tourists,' he says. 'It is a while off yet though, as there has got to be full security in the country.'

Not all of Saddam's palaces are likely to have guaranteed preservation orders slapped on them. For one thing, his Islamo-Brutalist school of building is of little architectural significance compared to Iraq's real palace treasures, such as the soaring pillars of the pre-Roman sun temple at Hatrain in northern Iraq – best known for its role in the opening scene of *The Exorcist*. And for another, many are built on foundations that are as shaky as Saddam's regime became. Iraq may have been home to the most feared dictator in the Middle East, but it was also home to arguably the region's bravest – or perhaps stupidest – cowboy builders.

These workmen constructed many of the palaces using dodgy materials, ripping off the Anointed One on everything from the wiring to the cement. As photographer Richard Mosse recalls from his recent trip: 'Tiles were falling from Al-Faw Palace because the cement used there had been poorly salinated. You can already see arches cracking and walls beginning to sag. It's just a matter of time before Al-Faw collapses in on itself.'

For any early speculators with a few million dollars to spare, though, now is probably a good time to grab your flak jacket and fly to Baghdad to put in an offer with the Iraqi government. Alternatively, if you'd rather be a palace guest than a palace owner, then sit tight and wait to see if the big names of the global hotel industry move in. The Tikrit Hilton? The Ramadi Ramada? The Four Seasons at Fallujah? Who knows, maybe see you there in a few years' time. Mine's a Mateus Rosé...