

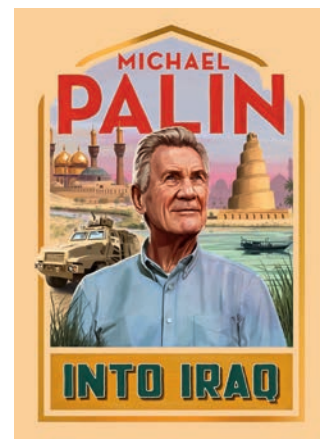
A portrait of Michael Palin, an older man with grey hair, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. He is standing in a library with bookshelves filled with books behind him. He has his arms crossed and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

# Michael Palin – the genial globetrotter



Sie kennen Michael Palin vielleicht noch als Mitglied von Monty Python. In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat der Brite sich ernsteren Themen gewidmet: auf Reisen durch die Welt und in ihre Krisengebiete. LORRAINE MALLINDER hat ihn getroffen

## MEDIUM



Michael Palin's home office is just as you'd expect it to be, with a view over sunlit brick chimneys, old photos and postcards pinned to corkboard, walls lined with books ... and a copy of the 1958 Iraqi Constitution lying somewhere amid the clutter.

"Milk? Sugar?" asks the Monty Python star, making me a cup of coffee. We're here to discuss his latest adventure, a three-week trip to Iraq that has produced a documentary series and a book. The Iraqi Constitution was sent to him just the other day. And by the sound of it, he can't wait to get reading.

"I do feel that the real criterion of a good journey is that, when you come back home, you want to read more and more about the country," he says. "The journey continues."

How to describe Michael Palin? From absurdist joker to master of the travelogue – from *Around the World in 80 Days to North Korea Journal* – he has more experiences packed into his little finger than most of us will have in a lifetime.

You'd think by now, aged 79, that he'd be ready to settle for the quiet life. Instead, he presents us with a trip to a danger zone that is not for the faint-hearted.

It's a moot point. Having recently undergone heart surgery, he did have doubts about the challenge. "That heart problem was always at the back of my mind," he says. "I thought: Will I, physically and mentally, be able to cope with three very concentrated weeks in a country where there are all sorts of difficulties and dangers? – But I'm an optimist."

This ability to see the glass half-full, shines through *Into Iraq*. From the tyranny of

Saddam Hussein's rule, through the doomed US invasion, which started a vicious civil war, to the horrors of Islamic State, Iraq has suffered immensely. But Palin looks back to the glories of Mesopotamia, opening our eyes to the contrasts between the cradle of civilization and what became the heart of darkness.

He does this through simply told anecdotes. Much of the city of Mosul – close to biblical Nineveh – is still in ruins after the coalition bombing that ended Islamic State's barbaric three-year rule. There, he finds a boy and girl sitting outside a bombed-out house. As he takes their picture, tears well up.

But they're not interested in his tears. They lead him to a house where a circle of women preparing lunch ask him in, clearly amused by his presence. Questions about their loss and suffering no longer seem appropriate, as they demonstrate what he interprets as "a sense of pride in their survival". "They didn't want me not to see it. They weren't going to be cowed by it, nobody had chased them, they were allowed to be there," he says. "That was terrifically inspiring."

What we see is a resilience that runs deep in the Iraqi people, transcending any sense of anger over recent troubles. Palin is the first to admit he has no answers to the complex situations he observes. "I don't mind travelling and not being able to come to conclusions. I don't think you have to," he says. "There's lots I don't know and don't understand."

It is perhaps this open-minded approach that allows him to blend the historian's eye for detail with a natural playfulness. In Kirkuk, we see fragments of Iraq's recent history in a city dating back 6,000 years, part of a

**absurdist**

- mit absurdem Humor

**approach**

- Ansatz, Einstellung

**appropriate**

- [ə'prəʊpɪət]
- angemessen

**blend sth.**

- hier: kombinieren

**brick**

- Ziegel

**chase**

- jagen

**civil war** ['sɪvɪl]

- Bürgerkrieg

**cope with sth.**

- mit etw. zurechtkommen

**copy**

- hier: Exemplar

**cow sb.**

- jmdn. einschüchtern

**cradle** ['kreɪdɪl]

- Wiege

**documentary series** ['sɪəri:z]

- Dokumentarreihe

**doomed**

- zum Scheitern verurteilt

**faint-hearted:**

- not for the ~
- nichts für zart besaitete Gemüter

**heart surgery:**

- undergo ~
- ['hɑ:t ,sɜ:dʒəri]
- sich einer Herzoperation unterziehen

**historian**

- Historiker(in)

**joker**

- Komiker(in)

**mentally**

- psychisch

**moot point**

- hier: sensibles Thema

**resilience**

- [ri'zɪliəns]
- Standhaftigkeit, Widerstandskraft

**rule**

- Herrschaft

**transcend sth.**

- über etw. hinausgehen

**travelogue**

- ['trævələg]
- Reisebericht

**vicious** ['viʃəs]

- böse, teuflisch



string of empires – Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Median – the resting place of the prophet Daniel.

Today, Kirkuk is a bit of a mess, despite the wealth produced by its oilfields, which spout up to a million barrels of oil a day. The contrast underlines the country's glaring inequalities, which are clearly on Palin's mind during his travels. Money is not being spent on schools, health and housing, he says. And the country's dependency on oil means it has not developed other sustainable forms of wealth creation.

It's in this depressing landscape that Palin discovers a lonely monument to a lost Britain, a leisure complex for foreign workers built when Iraq was a British mandate. Looking around the dance hall, the swimming pool and garden with recliners, he writes: "Funny enough, it reminded me of some Enid Blyton books.... It seemed utterly, completely English, that place," he says.

Palin wouldn't be Palin without his humour. At the Baghdad Hotel, where he spends his first night in a suite "lit like an interrogation cell with a bedroom attached", he experiences a series of room mix-ups, which takes on far-cical dimensions. In Baghdad Central Station, he discovers "one of the best station buildings in the world", blending Arabic and Muslim motifs in a modern, industrial building. The two clock towers show different times. Neither is right.

He remembers the site of the Garden of Eden, at the meeting point between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The ancient tree in the small park, a successor to the Tree of Knowledge, is "a bit of a swizz, really". As with much of Iraq's biblical heritage, the ultimate in potential tourist attractions is sadly neglected.

The book ends with a striking metaphor. Departing at 5 a.m. on a highway in Basra, he sees the rising sun. In fact, the light comes from the burn-off towers in the oilfields. It's literally a false dawn, like so much of modern Iraq's



A young girl on her way to school walks past the Nahr Bin Omar oilfields near Basra

history, driven by the discovery of oil in the 1920s. Oil has been Iraq's curse, fueling British interference, Saddam Hussein's megalomania and sectarian conflict.

"Listening to Iraqis, lots of people thought that oil was not the great benefit that the world might think it is to a country like that, the world's fifth-biggest oil exporter," he says. As one farmer told him, the country's rivers are drying up. Water, not oil, is the country's most pressing issue. "I got this feeling that something was wrong," he says.

So, where next? Palin doesn't know if there will be more travels. His fascination with travel is partly "an escapism thing", yet he doesn't necessarily search out change. "I've lived in the same house in the same street for 54 years. I've been married to the same woman for 56 years," he says. "I quite like my security at home, I like order. But I just feel that there is a world out there.

"I've been allowed not just to see an enormous amount of the world in different countries, but also to bring back information on those places and to try to put across to an audience what I've seen. That's the pleasure I get out of travelling."

For the millions who have travelled with him around this vast, endlessly fascinating world, the pleasure is shared.

**barrel** ['bærəl]  
• Ölfass (159l)

**burn-off tower**  
• Abfackelturm

**curse**  
• Fluch

**dawn**  
• Morgendämmerung

**escapism**  
• Weltflucht

**far-cical** ['fɑ:ʁɪkəl]  
• absurd

**fuel sth.** ['fju:əl]  
• etw. schüren, verstärken

**glaring** ['gleəriŋ]  
• himmelschreiend

**heritage**  
['herɪtɪdʒ]  
• Erbe

**interference**  
[,ɪntə'fɪərəns]  
• Einmischung

**interrogation cell**  
[ɪn,tə'rə'gɛɪʃən ,sel]  
• Verhörraum

**issue** ['ɪʃu:]  
• hier: Problematik

**leisure complex**  
['leɪʒə]  
• Freizeitzentrum

**literally** ['lɪtərəli]  
• buchstäblich

**megalomania**  
[,megə'ləʊ'meɪniə]  
• Größenwahn

**neglect sth.**  
• etw. vernachlässigen

**recliner**  
• Liegestuhl

**sectarian**  
• sektiererisch

**spout** ['spaʊt]  
• strömen

**string**  
• Reihe

**successor**  
• Nachkomme

**sustainable**  
[sə'steɪnəbəl]  
• nachhaltig

**swizz** UK *ifml.*  
• Enttäuschung

**utterly** ['ʌtəli]  
• völlig, komplett

**vast**  
• riesig