"As I ran I took off my burqa and threw it away"

Since the fall of Islamic State,laughter has returned to the streets of Mosul with children playing and men and women casting aside stautious religious and social rules.

Ella Pellegrini, who travelled there recently with photographer

Across the river from the wedding hall, the Old City was still in ruins, destroyed either by the bombs of Islamic State, or the air strikes which pounded the city for months when the International Coalition was driving the group out.

Bodies and improved explosive devices are no longer being found in the rubble. But entire districts have been obliterated, businesses destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people are homeless. The historic al-Nuri Mosque, a 900-year-old architectural gem in the heart of the Old City, where Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stood to declare the caliphate across Iraq and Syria, has been reduced to a pile of stones, blown up by Islamic State in their final stand.

Police and heavily-armed soldiers patrolled the streets. Every wall which still stands is peppered with bullet holes and shrapnel.

But 18 months after Islamic State was finally driven out, Mosul is coming back to life.

Agenda witnessed four weddings take place on a sunny afternoon last month, something that would have been unthinkable under Islamic State, which banned marriage between unrelated couples.

Agenda spoke to a young couple who had married recently and are now living in the city. The groom, in his 20s, said: "I am happy to be married. I am happy to be living in Mosul."

The bride, also in her 20s, said: "I am happy to be married. I am happy to be living in Mosul."

Later in the day, a group of women were seen walking through the streets of Old Mosul, talking and laughing. One woman said: "I am happy to be living in Mosul."

The city is vibrant, with restaurants and cafes open, and people going about their daily lives.

The Islamic State caliphate that once ruled much of Syria and Iraq has been defeated, and the city is slowly returning to normal.

The ruins of the Old City are a reminder of the damage that was done, but the people of Mosul are determined to rebuild and move on.

The future of Mosul is uncertain, but the people are resilient and determined to make the best of their situation. The city is a symbol of hope for the future of Iraq and the region.
When I went out I had to cover top to toe in black and only my eyes were showing. Towards the end we even covered our eyes.

Marcos Al-Jabot

PROTECTIVE MOTHER: Amira Mohammed, 54, (above) hid her daughter and other girls at home to keep them away from the clutches of evil Islamic State members; horses and carts are used to remove rubble from the home of Amjad Saleh Taha (inset) after it was destroyed by an air strike.

Isis plot on them in a hole and they used a smoke screen to hide from the air strike.

Beyond the walls of the named Al-Nuri mosque, in an old, winding backstreet, half a dozen little girls trooped in and out of the court yard of a house owned by Amira Mohammed, 54.

They're neighbours and friends of Mrs Mohammed's daughter Monia. All and all of them lost three years of their early schooling when Islamic State came and their terrified families kept them home.

All new aged nine or 10; they would have been forced under Islamic State to cover up in heavy clothes, and cover their heads once they turned nine, the age some of the extremists believed girls were eligible for marriage. They could have been forced to marry an Islamic State fighter.

Inside, the children, barefooted and wearing colourful tops and trousers, were finished school for the day and are running wild through the streets with the boys, climbing over piles of rubble and hurling collectible cards into the air. They don't have much, but they do have their freedom.

"My daughter is studying in the second grade," Mohammed says. "She didn't go to school because of Isis. We didn't want our girls going anywhere near the house.

The top floor of her house was blown off in an air strike. Large pieces keep falling off and she cannot afford to get them repaired now. She sleeps there with him in their basement, where they have tied the rooms and made them unhabitable.

"The husband is dead, she has no income, but she is determined to stay in the house where she raised her five daughters. 'It's been my house forever, my parents and my grandparents. The house is damaged and we live it all the same.'"

Her husband Ali Darwi, 77, died of a heart attack in 2014, during the Islamic State time. She stayed not knowing what to do.

"We couldn't afford to go anywhere else. If we left it someone would take it or ISEd would control our house," she said.

"ISis came and asked us to leave. That would stay in the basement. I had my daughter here (staying in the basement)."

Eventually, the family fled in the final days of the liberation battle on June 30, 2017, when a safe corridor was opened up. They came back in July 2018 to find the home damaged. Every room had been looted.

Mohammed says the government provided electricity to the area between 7pm and 6am. She has a generator for other times. They use the neighbour's toilet. She has large painful sores on her hands and arms, caused by stress. "We don't have any income. People help us, and God," she says.

Mouloud is only years away then being a fully functioning municipality. The city no longer being a fully functioning municipality. Mouloud would welcome foreign experts and companies to help with the reconstruction.

We are working there to ensure a sustainable environment for the community to come and rebuild," he says. "Mouloud now needs for any foreign company or country to come and rebuild. The Old City, particularly around west Mosul. It is our dream. We will achieve it."

Security and security advisor Dr. Ramoud Mutial, from Baghdad, said,"We were happy to show our support to Mosul in February. I met some pregnant women and women carrying newborns. They were very happy." He said, "And also plenty of medications, alcohol, which is a sign of ISIS."

Many people who can afford it are living in the east side. There is a market area, shopping, people staying outside. There are plenty of students."

Mutial says the-Newel headquarters have told him the birthrate has risen 12 per cent this year, compared to 2012.

"In five days and four nights we saw 45 weddings," he says. "People are married. They want to make a marriage and make a family."