



Syria

RICH HISTORY, EXCELLENT PHOTO-OPPORTUNITIES AND GRACIOUS HOSPITALITY MAKE FOR A MEMORABLE VISIT

About Syria

Syria is a republic, with its 18 million population predominantly (90%) Arab. Located at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, it shares a land border with Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.



When To Visit

Spring (March - May) or autumn (September - November) are ideal. Summers are too hot and winters too cold.

Visa Requirements

All foreigners entering Syria must obtain visas from Syrian consulates abroad. If there is isn't one in your country, officials say you can obtain a visa at the border, though it's best to try getting it from another Syrian consulate.

Getting There

Damascus and Aleppo are connected by air to Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. There are road or rail links to neighbouring countries.



Bahrain Connection

Some 80,000 people from Bahrain visit Syria every year. Syria's trade links with Bahrain are underscored by a products exhibition held on the island every year.

By Kate Mitchell and Deirdre Fitzgerald

WE CROSSED THE BORDER INTO SYRIA IN the early afternoon. It was hot and while the border was not busy it did take some time. Our visas were fortunately in good order and after a relatively short wait we were able to proceed.

We learned from some other travellers who had been waiting there four hours that it is definitely worth double and triple checking the visas when you receive them to make sure none of the important information has been forgotten. The Syrians also took some time to register and check our vehicle, going so far as to smell the fuel. A car run on diesel fuel requires a much more substantial duty tax.

The Ministry of Tourism in Syria welcomed us with great hospitality, which was echoed many times over by the many people we met there. We were provided

rooms at the palatial Safir Al-Sayedah Zainab Hotel in Damascus. This lovely hotel is far from the Old City and the centre but just steps away from the beautifully ornate Al-Sayedah Zainab Shrine, which attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims each year and has a lively street market. The rooms are peaceful and luxurious. There is a computer centre with Internet access and delicious food choices.

Another benefit of being so welcomed by the Ministry of Tourism was the tour guide that opened up the country for us. Ahmed Sadat was an incredible resource to us as we attempted a whirlwind tour of his country. He is well versed in the history of Syria and very knowledgeable about current events in the region and around the world.

This perspective combined perfectly with his experience studying English literature and amazing



PAGE OPPOSITE:

The spectacular view of the ruins of Palmyra are best viewed in the evening or in the early morning when the light is best and the tourists have either left or not yet arrived.



Shoppers at the busy, crowded Suq al Hamidiya in Damascus.



Section of a decorative ceiling at one of the older homes in Damascus.



Travel Tip
 Don't accept food in a social setting the first time it's offered. It's polite to decline at least once before accepting.

command of English. We learned so much about the society and cultures of Syria as well as its mind-boggling ancient history.

A STATUE OF SALUHADDIN, THE GREAT WARRIOR, marks the site of the old citadel as well as the entrance to Suq al Hamidiya in Damascus. Instead of repelling crusaders, his horse-borne figure is now drawing us and many other visitors and shoppers into this busy, crowded, covered avenue of shops.

On a short visit to Damascus it is best to focus on the

Old City. Crammed together and soaked in a rich historical past are old houses, khans, mosques, coffee shops, restaurants and suqs all having developed from the remains of the past civilisations of Romans, Byzantines, Turks and Arabs.

Ahlan wa sahlan! You are welcome!

On entering Suq Al Hamidiya, almost immediately two men sidle up to offer very good rates of exchange. We are ushered up the stairs to their cousins' textile shop to sort out the details of the transaction and offered tea. Whilst we wait for the cash all the merchandise is brought out. "You must buy beautiful



LEFT: The shrine to Sayyida Zainab, granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad, in Damascus.

galabiya, or, what else you want?”.

Tourist shops selling carpets, lanterns, wooden boxes inlaid with mother of pearl, backgammon sets, musical instruments and *narjilehs* (hubbly bubbly pipes) are mixed with those selling everyday household items, sweets and surprisingly lurid underwear. Ambling along, the crowd suddenly thickens and we notice hands, holding ice creams, victorious above heads – quarry from the famous Bakdach shop that makes its ice cream on the premises. An inexpensive token from the till will buy a huge vanilla cone that has been generously rolled in sliced pistachio

nuts. Unbelievably delicious.

Damascus and Aleppo vie for the title of the longest continually inhabited city. History is everywhere. The money-changers have told us to look at the roof of the suq where you can see bullet holes expressing joy at the withdrawal of the occupying French, but also marks of the gunfire that quelled the Druze rebellion. This avenue of shops ends dramatically with bright sunlight as you emerge from its covering, revealing the huge remains of the Roman ornamental arch that would have been the entrance to the Roman temple, and behind this the magnificent Ommayed Mosque. The bustle of shoppers and even worshippers seem to pay scant attention to the importance and beauty of this setting.

Bargaining when buying anything is normal and we found that, generally, prices could be reduced by at least 20 per cent. There are not many European tourists in Syria so whilst financially we may be easy targets, we never felt threatened in any way. Quite the opposite; as we wandered through the various suqs selling fabrics, antiques, perfumes, and spices, everyone wanted us to touch, feel and smell with the hope but not expectation of purchase.

We found the Suq Al Bzouriya (spice suq), immediately to the south of Ommayed Mosque as the light was fading and its chandeliers had been lit. To the left and right of this covered area are shops displaying mountains of foil wrapped chocolates and glaze fruits.

The suqs are open from 7am-7pm apart from Friday. However the shops along Straight Street, which are generally owned by Christians are likely to be closed on a Sunday. Beginning as Madhat Basha Street, Straight Street is a quieter area but it is here, just west of the Roman arch, that we found amazing glassware shops. From simple and pretty through to gawdy, all the decorated drinking glasses are very good value, seductive in metallic pastels, silver and gold. Nudging alongside were the sets of tiny cups and saucers used for tea. In this area there are also good antique brass and copper ware shops.

On two occasions, we ate lunch in restaurants that had been converted from 18th century merchants houses. Good examples of these are Beit Jabri and Narcissus Palace, both very close to Ommayed



Mosque (just ask for directions). Covered in winter, the central courtyard is crammed full of tables and chairs. Even though we had come for a late lunch at about 2.30pm, we still had to wait to be seated – giving us time to take photographs of men and women, both young and old, sitting in large groups gossiping, playing cards or backgammon, nearly all smoking hubbly bubbly. Both served traditional Arabic food.

Whether by a group of students, a waiter or even the owner we were welcomed everywhere. Over a cup of tea in Ommayed Palace Restaurant we were told the story of the conversion of this palace basement into a restaurant and many of the antiques that decorate it. The owner, who is an antiques dealer, hopes to convert the upper floors into a hotel.

In the evening, we ventured up to the Christian quarter, which has many more restaurants. Old Town, another well converted old house, serves both Arabic and Italian food and has a piano player in the evening. Whilst strolling back to the hotel, huge flower arrangements outside Cave Baal lured me in to take a look. Designed to look like a cave, this Greek restaurant and bar was very welcoming.

The coffee shops that are dotted around throughout the old city offer a great opportunity to relax, talk to locals and take photographs. In particular, there is a cluster of them around the eastern gate of the Ommayed Mosque where impassive men smoking *narjileh* monitor the world going by.

Hamam Nur Al Din seems to house an equally unmoving group of men of all ages, either resting after their steam bath or preparing to go in. Built in the 12th century this Turkish bath is the oldest and most impressive in Damascus. The photo opportunities in Damascus are wonderful, do remember to take plenty of film. You will need high speed film to take pictures of the Old City because of narrow alleyways, covered suqs, and small windows all designed to keep out the worst of the summer light and heat.

DRIVING IN DAMASCUS IS SOMETHING OF A nightmare. Not a terribly frightening nightmare, but more of a frustrating one. You would think that four reasonably intelligent adults would be able to direct themselves around a city without too much





The Friendship Tour team with tour guide Ahmed before setting out on their camel tour of Palmyra.

Fast Fact
Damascus is possibly the world's oldest continuously inhabited city - there was a settlement here as long ago as 5000 BC.

The mountain resort of Kassab, near the border with Turkey.



trouble... not so! We would circle around an area for half an hour looking for a place that we had spent 45 minutes searching for the day before. The traffic seemed to be following some sort of code of conduct that was completely beyond our comprehension. Of course as soon as we had our wonderful guide, Damascene native, Ahmed Sadat in the car, getting around became a piece of cake.

THE OLD CITY COULD HAVE DELIGHTED US FOR weeks but alas our time was short and we had much more to explore.

We got an early start for the drive to Tadmor where the ancient site of Palmyra is located. The site is located in an oasis far from any of Syria's rivers. It was in turn an Assyrian caravan town, a Greek outpost, and a Roman economic centre before falling to the Muslims in AD 634. The

city's most famous period was when Zenobia, a half-Greek half-Arab queen, became the ruler in AD 267. She claimed to be descended from Cleopatra. One of the more impressive sections of the ruins is her extensive bathhouse.

In the museum you can see an ancient coin with the head of Zenobia. Palmyra's funerary towers and the incredible Temple of Bel are also worthy of note. As we stood in the great temple, Ahmed described to us what historians have pieced together of the huge pilgrimages and religious rites that occurred at the temple.

The spectacular view of the ruins of Palmyra are best viewed in the evening (5-7pm) or in the early morning (5.30-8.30am) when the light is best and the tourists have either left or not yet arrived. The smooth golden stone of the colonnades will contrast beautifully against the surrounding scrubland and the blue sky.



“Palmyra is a Bedouin girl laughing because she is dressed up as a Roman Lady” describes Vita Sackville-West.

The importance of this oasis town grew very quickly as a result of the caravan routes, reaching its zenith in the mid-third century under Queen Zenobia. As an independent state within the Roman Empire, Palmyra had no reason to return revenues to Rome and as a result grew very wealthy. City walls (now being restored) guaranteed that the taxes due on goods sold in or passing through the city, were paid by passing traders.

The majesty of Palmyra is best appreciated by taking a camel tour through the site. It gives you an appropriate vantage point to see how the people had lived and worked. There is so much on show, the main colonnaded avenue, the amphitheatre, the *agora* (old market place), the Roman camp, the Bel Temple: it is quite fantastic to imagine what



The Friendship Tour team at a press dinner in Damascus organised by the Bahraini Ambassador Waheed Sayyar.

must still be buried under the sand.

The museum is set up to take groups around the Valley of the tombs which stretches for a kilometre or so behind Diocletian’s camp. You will need a driver to take you and the guide out to the necropolis. The funerary Tower of Elahbel, built high as the rich liked the idea of continuing to be above ground after their death, could accommodate up to 300 bodies stacked eight high. On the other hand The Hypogeum (underground tomb) of the Three Brothers, with its frescoes and portraits, is also an outstanding example of the respect with which the Palmyrenes held their dead.

In Palmyra’s main street there are plenty of restaurants all the supplying the tourist trade. We found Mansaf, the traditional dish of the desert comprising rice, chicken, pistachios, almonds and spices, was deliciously prepared in the Traditional Palmyra Restaurant.

For those that may have missed visiting the Bedouin on the drive to Palmyra, there is ‘Bedouin Corner’- a camp set about 5km outside the city. Lit by candlelight, guests are welcomed by traditional rababa music, singing and dancing whilst being led to the tent. Here dinner consists of a choice of regional specialities. As well as being able to watch bread being made over the fire, you can sample the narjileh or just join in with the dancing.

EVEN A SHORT VISIT TO SYRIA CAN OFFER SO MUCH to the visitor. Because of its rich history of occupation, there is no uniformity in any of its sites, cities, towns or villages. But what makes it all the





Water vendors are a fairly common sight in Syria.



Christine shops for straw baskets in Damascus.



Christine, Martin and Dierdre wearing Arab costume at the Baghdad Café in Damascus.



more alluring is the infancy of its tourist industry combined with the fact that so much must still be uncovered, buried beneath the sand. Only recently a Royal Tomb dated at approximately 1400 BC has been discovered within a village in the desert. It was virtually untouched surrounded by pottery and gold. Just think how sophisticated and stratified society was at that time in this region compared to the societies in Europe that were in the Stone Age. The present day warmth of the people combined with the exoticness of the history and culture provide an exciting and compelling reason to visit this fascinating country.

OUR STAY IN SYRIA WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN THE same without the overwhelming hospitality of the Bahraini Ambassador Waheed Sayyar, and his kind staff. Mr Sayyar is a man who clearly finds passion in his work and he went to great lengths to





The town of Palmyra contains some of the most famous monuments to the Classical period in the Middle East.

help us make the most of our visit.

We met him on two occasions. First we visited the embassy and had tea. We described our journey and he spoke to us about Syria and its friendly people.

Then on our last evening in Damascus, Mr Sayyar hosted us, the ambassador from Yemen, as well as various journalists, for a delicious meal at the Al-Khawali Restaurant in the Old City. The restaurant is housed in a magnificently restored Ottoman house. We ate our meal in the open-air courtyard surrounded by the delightful Ottoman architectural features found in Damascus. The courtyard, at one time the harem of the house, has been restored with incredible attention to detail creating an atmosphere of sumptuous tranquility.

The food and the setting were truly sensational, but even they did not compare to the lovely company present that evening. At any given time five or more conversations of great interest were occurring.

By the end of the evening we felt we had just spent three hours with our dearest friends. We were able to speak to many wonderful journalists and tell them about our tour. They were especially interested in our impressions of Syria. Even more exciting for us was being able to hear from these journalists about their country and their lives.

Ambassador Sayyar spoke of the history of Damascus as a true scholar. He described Ottoman society and helped us understand the breadth of history in Syria spanning back to ancient times. He is also well informed about present-day Syrian society.

The ambassador dedicates one of his weekend days each week to strolling around the Old City or another area of Damascus and sparking up conversations with people on the street. He said that he enjoys talking to Syrians and making friends. And this indeed makes him a true ambassador.

