

by Ihab Zaki

Very short but worthwhile visit to Damascus

After the usual formalities, which were rather easy but took a while as there many vehicles were passing through, it was onwards to Damascus, a short 1-hour trip from this point. I was amazed at how much Syria had changed over the years. When I was last here it was a sleepy country with majestic ruins and underrated sites. Today it is a very progressive nation, with vibrant cities that feature all aspects of modernity. The tourism boom began 2 years ago and intensified in the last 6 months. The success of the Ministry of Tourism's marketing program targeting Europe, much more favorable coverage in the world media, the internal stability of the country and the recent US removal of Syria from the State Department list of countries with travel warnings have all contributed to the steady growth in visitors. The signs of prosperity are reflected in the number of small boutique hotels that have recently opened in Damascus, Aleppo and Hama. Older typical Syrian homes with large courtyards, magnificent wood painted ceilings and tastefully designed bedrooms with antique furniture have been meticulously restored and refitted with modern conveniences such as A/C, plasma TV and elegant marble and tile bathrooms. Our hotel was a charming house built in the 1800's by a wealthy merchant. The 11 rooms overlooked the typical setting of serene courtyard with fish swimming in the fountain and the scent of citrus trees in the air.



Syria has a long and diverse history dating back as far as 7,000 years. The Canaanites, Arameans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Ottomans, Arabs and French have left their mark on the country in everything from architecture and language to religion and cuisine. For instance, the Assyrians are where the country's name - Syria - came from. The Arameans adapted the Phoenician alphabet for use with their own language, Aramaic. This language is said to be the same one that Christ spoke. Our tour stops in the hillside town of Maalula to visit one of the churches where Aramaic is still spoken. Despite its introduction to the world trend of mass tourism, Syria still manages to somehow maintain that aura of authenticity that allows one to feel transported back a few centuries when

one visits the older sections of cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. The narrow alleys and cobblestone streets are dotted with old homes, many of which have been converted to wonderful restaurants. One can still find old artisan shops that still produce some of the most elegant handmade works in the Middle East, such as copper and silver jewelry and inlaid mother of pearl wood furniture. Amidst all that, you still find some hammams (traditional baths) that offer a glimpse of bygone eras. The streets reflect an intensely colorful ethnic mix, each group possessing a distinct style of dress, hair covering, jewelry and even tattoos.



Damascus offers the perfect mixture of oriental and occidental comparable to Istanbul in its amalgam of old and new, western and eastern, traditional and modern. As you wander through neighborhoods that have remained unchanged for hundreds of years in the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth it is easy to lose yourself in the past.

Our first day in Damascus was quite productive as we visited the museum with its the amazing collection of antiquities followed by the remarkably elaborate El Azam Pasha Palace. We had lunch in an old caravanserai and then went to the ancient Hamideyah Bazaar and visited the Umayyad Mosque. As we entered the courtyard we were greeted by the call to prayer broadcast over a microphone by a chorus of voices. We stopped to listen to the entire recital as it was one of those special moments that are engraved in one's memory for life.



We left Damascus and headed south to view the mosaics at Shahba, the Roman capital at the time of Emperor Philip the Arab. Then onwards to Bosra, which boasts the best preserved Roman theater in the world...don't all Roman cities make the same claim! After lunch, I sadly had to say goodbye to my congenial group to head for the Jordanian border. Leaving Syria behind I continued to Amman to visit our local agent and to inspect a few new hotels. After dinner I was taken to the airport for my flight to JFK. I was disappointed that I would not be able to share the rest of the "Syrian" experience with the group and promised myself that I would not wait so long to return.



My group continued their in depth exploration of Syria. They left Damascus and made a loop through the country visiting the Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers an impressive architectural marvel and the 4th century church of St Simeon situated very near to the Turkish border. Heading east one finds the ancient ruins of Mari and Dora Europus where mosaic masterpieces were discovered. They are now on display in the museum in Damascus. One catches glimpses of the mighty Euphrates, a river that flows past another seat of ancient civilization Baghdad. There are Roman sites such as Apamea, Ebla and the jewel of Syria, Palmyra. They would also be visiting Aleppo with its citadel that today is used for concerts and souk that is one of the most authentic in the Near East. Of all of the tours we offer Syria by far is one of the favorites because of its culture, history, sites, cuisine, shopping and of course Giath!

Know that wherever you go in the Levant the people you meet will most likely be surprised when you tell them you are from the United States. They will pause, give you a big smile, then welcome you and tell you how much they like Americans. The travel season for Syria and Lebanon is somewhat short as winter months can be cold and snowy and summers are very warm. Best time to go is March to May and October to November. Our tours are a nice mix of the old and the new, covering not only the ancient sites but some of the more modern (within the last thousand years or so) offerings. All of our tours are led by Giath Abdallah in Syria who joins the group on any abbreviated (one or two day) excursions through Lebanon. Most departures are accompanied by a lecturer that remains with the group throughout the tour. As always, we want to keep the group small as this enhances the experience.



You can read a report written by Marian Bagley who visited in April 2007. It offers a glimpse (with photos) of what travel in the Levant is like. You can find her review at: http://www.abrock.com/Marian-Levant_web.pdf or call us for a copy on a CD.



If you would like to receive a copy of an itinerary, call us at 1-800-645-3233 or send an email to info@mideasttrvl.com. I have been to Syria, Lebanon and Jordan (which at times are part of the tour but easy enough to add as an extension if not) and available to answer any questions you may have regarding travel to the region. Hoping that if you have been thinking about visiting the Levant you will join us on one of our tours to what we consider to be one of the most fascinating places on earth.



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