

Transcending Syria

Syria is known for its friendly people, but there is much more. There are amazing souqs, huge castles, creaky water wheels, ghost towns and historic mosques. Combined with the fantastic people, Syria is a welcoming tourist destination.



Upon entering through the 1,000-year-old gates to Aleppo's souq, one seemingly transcends time. There are dates and vegetables, slaughtered slabs of animals, pots and pans, the famous Aleppo soap and sweets made of honey and nuts with merchants dipping a paint brush in honey and then dousing the pastries followed by heaping handful of nuts. There are also old hammams to get a proper bath within the market. However, it's not just the old but the new that is sold in the souq. I took a picture of a stall that sold women's lingerie as a reminder that, yes, Muslim women do wear lingerie.

To the east of the souq is the massive citadel which is amazingly intact. A steep set of stairs leads to the citadel with an entrepreneurial man selling a type of juice at the stair's base. The amphitheater dominates the citadel area but there is also the Great Mosque and Mosque of Abraham to visit. Just south of the actual citadel are a couple of smaller mosques as well as an area where gravestone makers make their detailed gravestones.

On the northern fringe of the souq is the Great Mosque. The minaret is a bit crooked, but it was constructed 1,000 years ago and had to withstand an earthquake. Non-Muslims cannot visit during Friday prayers but can enter at other times. The courtyard's marbled floor combines with both the heat of the day and the fact that visitors have to take off their shoes to make for a scorching walk across the courtyard. Visitors scampered



across the courtyard, running as fast as they could, yelling in pain, trying not to swear – a true test of faith. Inside the mosque there is a memorial that supposedly holds the head of Zacharias, the father of St. John the Baptist.

The public park in the new city is a huge area with many welcoming benches and some greenery. There is a large statue of the former king, King Assad, as well as several posters of his son, the current king, Bashar. Bashar's likeness is common in Syria and is on more than just posters; people have his likeness spray painted on their cars. The nearby Christian Quarter of al-Jdeida, with its many mostly Orthodox churches, is a reminder that Syria is nearly twenty percent Christian. The area also has numerous shops and a museum that looks at traditional



houses. The National Museum has many statues from the Greek and Roman times as well as big eyed sphinxes and cuneiform tablets from Elba.

Hama's norias are wooden water wheels that can be up to twenty meters in diameter. Because they are wooden as are the blocks they rest on, they make a loud and distinct creaking noise. Most norias are in the middle of the old town. This is where I watched the World Cup final with a happy Spaniard, drinking what they called apple flavored beer, but what I called an apple Jolly Rancher in liquid form. There are also large norias west and east of the old city as well where one passes minor smaller mosques and the Hama Museum.

Near Hama is Crac des Chevaliers which is a fortress dating to 1031, which was eventually captured by Crusaders before being taken over by the Mamluks. On the fortress walls are two carved lions, the insignia of the English King Richard the Lionhearted who fought in the Third Crusade. Before entering the outer fortress, there are large horse stables and baths. The inner fortress is protected by the

square tower, southwest fortress, Warden's Tower and a moat. An inner courtyard includes the five pillars, seven arches, an oil storage room and a prayer room.

A tour from Hama generally takes in Crac but also the Dead Cities. The Dead Cities are ghost towns dating back to when Antioch was a power, but no one knows why they were abandoned. Al-Bara is the Dead City with notable pyramid tombs. Serjilla was abandoned in the Fifth Century and is remarkably well-preserved. There are several ancient residential houses as well as water management facilities, press houses and a church as the city was built during the Christian, Byzantine era.

With so much to see in Damascus it is difficult to find a place to explore but most people start with the old city and Umayyad Mosque. The mosque was built in 705 AD when Damascus was part of the Umayyad Empire. The complex is best known for its mosaics which supposedly represent how the Prophet Mohammed saw Damascus and the neighboring Barada Valley. The courtyard contains an absolution fountain and the Treasury Dome with more mosaics placed on top of Roman columns. Also within the complex are the Dome of Clocks and an out of place battering ram on the northern side. Inside the actual mosque is a shrine to St. John the Baptist, an important prophet in the Muslim faith, which supposedly has his head as well as the Shrine of Hussein who is Mohammed's martyred grandson, an important shrine to Shiite Muslims.

Just north of Umayyad are a series of important sites. The Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque is also significant to Shiites as it is dedicated to the daughter of Hussein. There are large chandeliers and the interior is quite extravagant. In the courtyard, a bearded man leads worshippers reciting prayers as this is a place of pilgrimage for Shiites. There are madrassas in the area as well which are also dedicated to prayer and education of the Muslim faith. Nearby, the Mausoleum of Saladin contains two sarcophagi, one presented to the Syrians by the Germans and one that is covered in green and where Saladin is supposed to be laid to rest. Many people take photos next to the sarcophagi as Saladin is an Arabian hero who repelled the Crusaders during the Third Crusade.

Within the confines of the old city are several other places to visit. The citadel is closed to the public but has a small botanical garden next to it. The area between Umayyad Mosque and the citadel is Souq al-Hamidiyya and is a great place to people watch and to pick up a vanilla ice cream cone dipped in pistachio. South of Umayyad is the Azem Palace which has a wide variety of exhibits within the ornate inlaid tile rooms. One interesting exhibit is the special covering for a camel while going on the hajj, the required pilgrimage to Mecca. Camels that were picked to go on hajj would never have to work after completing the trip to Mecca.

The main east-west road in the old city, called Straight Street, leads to St. Mary's Church as well as some old Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches. One needs to venture just a block or two off of Straight Street and get lost on the side streets to get the feel of Old Damascus. This

is especially poignant at night as there is not much manmade light so one again it's a transcending experience.

In the new city, the National Museum has a wide variety of exhibits. One of the most important is the remains of what some believe to be the first alphabet. Just north of the museum is Damascus University where people debated politics on benches, laid on the grass and threw Frisbees around. So basically, the same as American universities, minus the keg stands. Another new city attraction is the Hejaz Train Station built in 1917. The tracks are closed but the depot was quite attractive and holding a book fair when I was there.

A historically important side trip from Damascus is Maalula which is the only Christian city in the world whose residents also speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The Convent of St. Thecla is located within a rocky cliff. Thecla was a pupil of St. Paul and was to be executed by soldiers due to her faith. She prayed to God who sent lightning, breaking off some of the cliff and allowing her to escape. Her shrine is located at the top of the convent underneath a rocky overhang. Passing through the escape route or Thecla Gap is a pathway with the protruding rock. This leads to the Church of St. Sergius who was a Roman soldier that converted to Christianity and was killed when he wouldn't worship the Roman gods. The modest church is one of the oldest churches in the world dating to 325 AD.

Visitors can truly transcend when visiting Syria. The old souqs are the most obvious place to return to a previous time, but there are other places as well. The creaky norias of Hama give the feel of a bygone age although they are not as old as the churches of Maalula. The Dead Cities give a tantalizing view of how Syrians used to live. Throughout Syria, one can feel the historic sites.