

Getting Started in Syria

With ancient ruins from many great civilisations, medieval souqs, fascinating cities and beautiful mountains and valleys all located in a reasonably compact area, you can cover a lot of territory in a small amount of time in Syria. If your time is limited, however, we can't emphasise enough how important logistics are. Trying to cover every Roman ruin in a week will see you, well, ruined. Make sure to leave yourself enough time in your itinerary to wander the souqs of Aleppo and Damascus. For advice, see our suggested itineraries (p17).

In general terms, Syria is suited to all budgets, but there are cities and towns that some travellers prefer to visit on a day trip, as there's no suitable accommodation within their price range.

WHEN TO GO

The best time of year to visit Syria is spring (March to May) when the weather is mild and wildflowers are in bloom. During May the weather can be warm enough for swimming and the mountains are carpeted with colour. In Damascus, the winter rains clear the haze that obscures the city for some of the year. The rain swells the rivers, so the wooden *norias* (waterwheels) in Hama are turning and fresh, clean water flows through Damascus. If you can't make the spring, aim for autumn (September to November), between the intense heat of summer and the cloud of winter.

Temperatures soar from June to the middle of September, and summers can be uncomfortably hot. On the coast at Lattakia, it can be extremely humid, while the interiors will be very hot and dry. This may be fine if you want to lie on a Mediterranean beach, but it is not ideal

TRAVELLING SUSTAINABLY IN SYRIA

Sustainable travel is about minimising your impact and maximising your connection with the people and the environment. It's about making a positive contribution and having the most rewarding and inspiring travel experiences of your life. Travelling by the sustainable travel ethos is one of the most direct and personal ways you can make a difference to two of the biggest issues affecting our world, especially the Middle East: poverty and peace.

- Do ask before taking close-up photographs of people – use sign language if you have to.
- Learn the traditional Arabic greeting, *salaam alaykum*. It really makes a difference – the fact that it means 'peace be upon you' makes it all the more compelling.
- Do have respect for local etiquette. Men should shake hands when formally meeting other men, but not women unless the woman extends her hand first. If you are a woman and uncomfortable with men extending their hand to you (they don't do this with local women), just put your hand over your heart and say hello.
- Learn at least a little about Islam (such as remembering the Five Pillars of Islam, p42).
- Don't wear revealing clothing – what's fine at a club in Beirut is not OK in the souqs of Aleppo. Syrians and Lebanese take pride in their appearance; it's good manners to do so as well.
- Don't display overt affection in public.
- When haggling in the souqs, always do it in a good-humoured manner (see The Art of Bargaining, p235).
- Buying locally made crafts and curios means your money goes directly to the community.

For online currency conversions, go to www.xe.com.

See Climate (p229) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the latest travel advisory warnings.
- Checking the status of border crossings in the region.
- Getting a new passport if your current one contains an Israeli stamp.
- Ensuring you have proof of the relevant vaccinations (see p405) for the region.
- Applying for a Syrian visa (see p237).
- Making copies of important documents – main passport pages, travel insurance details and original receipt for travellers cheques.
- Carrying an Arabic phrasebook – an '*al salaam 'alaykum*' (peace be upon you) works wonders in turning suspicion to a smile.

for exploring the large exposed ruins at Palmyra, Apamea or Bosra. Travel in the northeast of the region and through the desert can become a real endurance test. Heading out early and returning to the hotel for an afternoon siesta is necessary to avoid heat stroke and exhaustion (for more advice, see p409). The winter rains can make sightseeing difficult, but if you're lucky enough a blanket of snow may cover Damascus and the mountains.

If you are heading to Syria during school holidays, you should book accommodation well in advance. Religious and state holidays shouldn't seriously disrupt any travel plans. Some services may be cut back, but transport, hotels, restaurants and many businesses function as normal – well, as normal as they do in this lackadaisical country.

The Muslim fasting month of Ramadan may require a bit more planning: make sure you eat breakfast at your hotel, as some cafés and restaurants close during the day, and some offices operate reduced and erratic hours. Despite the inconveniences, it is a fascinating time of year to visit and Ramadan nights, particularly during the final three days of Eid al-Fitr, can be particularly lively. You may wish to schedule your trip around annual festivals, such as those in Damascus, Palmyra and Bosra. For details on these and other special events, see p231; for more information on holidays, see p231.

COSTS & MONEY

Once you're on the ground, Syria is a great-value destination. If you're visiting on a 'time-poor, cash-rich' vacation, you can live it up at elegant restaurants and top-end hotels in Syria for far less than you could in Europe. At the finest Damascene restaurants, a feast with wine for two will cost around US\$40, while a romantic room in a boutique hotel can be had for US\$120. At the other extreme, a delicious shwarma and fresh fruit juice can be had for US\$4 for two. You can spend as little as US\$5 to US\$10 at a decent sit-down restaurant.

Staying in dorms in hostels and living on shwarma, you could scrape by on an average of US\$25 per day – making Syria a popular destination to learn Arabic (see Dialling In Your Dialect In Damascus, p102). A more comfortable budget – staying in hotels as opposed to pensions or hostels and eating in restaurants as opposed to street food – would be US\$70 to US\$80 (per person, travelling as a couple).

You can live very well indeed for US\$100 a day. Travel is also inexpensive, with a bus ride from Aleppo to Damascus costing £150 – and it's been that price for years.

HOW MUCH?

Postcard £E40
Newspaper £E10
Fresh fruit-juice cocktail £E75
Bottle of Lebanese wine £E600
Short taxi ride £E40

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Litre of petrol £E6.85
Litre of bottled water £E30
Bottle of Barada/Almaza beer £E75
Souvenir T-shirt £E200
Shwarma £E75

TOP PICKS



SYRIA

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Pre-departure dreaming can be done from the comfort of your sofa, preferably with some mezze. If you can't find the following movies in your local video store, art-house cinema or on the foreign movie channel, you can probably find them at www.arabfilm.com. See p70 for more details on Syrian film.

- *Under the Sky of Damascus* (1931)
Director: Ismail Anzur
- *Dreams of the City* (1984)
Director: Mohamed Malas
- *The Extras* (1993) Director: Nabil Maleh
- *Listener's Choice* (2002)
Director: Abdullatif Abdulhamid
- *Sacrifices* (2002)
Director: Oussama Mohammad

TOP READS

Perusing these titles is a short-cut to understanding the hopes, dreams and observations of life and love in Syria. For more details on literature in Syria, see p69.

- *On Entering the Sea: The Erotic and Other Poetry* (1996) Nizar Qabbani
- *Damascus Nights* (1997) Rafik Schami
- *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1997)
Ulfat Idilbi
- *Menstruation* (2001)
Ammar Abdulhamid
- *Just Like a River: from Syria* (2003)
Muhammed Kamil Al-Khatib

LISTENING TO THE LEVANT

Music plays an important role in Syrian culture and was the birthplace of one of the true legends of Middle Eastern music, Farid al-Atrache (see p72). Here's some old and new *oud* (lute) music, some contemporary Syrian pop and Aleppan sung poetry to get you in the mood. All are available on iTunes.

- *Aghany Film El Hob El Kebeer/El Khorog men El Gana* (1964) Farid al-Atrache
- *Eastern Strings: The Art Of Arabian Oud Solos* (2002) Amer Ammouri
- *The Very Best of George Wassouf* (2003)
George Wassouf
- *Syrie Wasla d'Alep Syria Wasla d'Aleppo* (2005) Sabri Moudallal et Son Ensemble
- *Hayati* (2006) Asalah

TRAVEL LITERATURE

As there are very few travelogues focused solely on Syria, you may find yourself selectively reading chapters from foreigner's accounts of travels through the Middle East.

Paul Theroux cleverly writes about his travels to Aleppo, Tartus, Latakia, Qala'at al Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers), Damascus and Maalula in *The Pillars of Hercules* (1996).

While it's only one chapter, Theroux's serendipitous style of travelling is inspiring. *The Street Philosopher and the Holy Fool: A Syrian Journey*

(2006), by Marius Kociejowski, is a humorous and insightful tale of five trips to the Levant.

Robert D Kaplan eruditely writes about his journeys in Syria and Lebanon in *Eastward to Tartary* (2001), cleverly weaving together historical and contemporary characters and stories as he did in *Balkan Ghosts* (1993).

A bittersweet, evocative and quirky account of a gay man's travel in Syria can be found in Robert Tewdwr Moss' *Cleopatra's Wedding Present* (2003). Heartbreakingly, Moss was murdered the day after he finished the manuscript.

Janet Wallach's *Desert Queen* (2001) is a decent account of the often sensuous adventures of feisty Victorian traveller (and friend to TE Lawrence), Gertrude Bell. Bell gives her own gossipy account of carousing with Bedouin tribesmen in *The Desert and the Sown*, first published in 1907.

In *Travels with a Tangerine* (2001), Tim Mackintosh Smith engagingly documents his travels to Damascus, the Crusader and Assassin castles, Hama and Aleppo, as he retraces the journeys of the famous 14th-century Arab traveller, Ibn Battuta. William Dalrymple follows in the footsteps of another earlier traveller – a 6th-century monk – in *From the Holy Mountain* (1998). Dalrymple's visits to Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut and Bcharré offer some keen observations.

For vivid local perspectives on the Syrian capital, read Siham Terge-man's *Daughter of Damascus* (1994), a personal account of growing up in the atmospheric Souq Saroujah in the first half of the 20th century.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on travelling to Syria and Lebanon and, of course, the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask about the latest border openings and closings.

Syria Planet (www.syplanet.com) The best place to go to find Syrian bloggers writing on Syria.

Syria's Ministry of Tourism (www.syriatourism.org) Quite good official travel site.

The Syria News Wire (<http://saroujah.blogspot.com>) A good source of what's happening in Syria, with excellent links to other sites of interest.

There are some wonderful cookbooks on Syria. *Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews* (2007) by Poopa Dweck, Michael J Cohen and Quentin Bacon is simply beautiful, and *Saha: A Chef's Journey Through Lebanon and Syria* (2007) by Greg and Lucy Malouf has splendid photography.

Emusic (www.emusic.com) has an excellent selection of Middle East Mp3s.

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