Palmyra to the Euphrates

تدمر إلى نهر لفرات

Palmyra, Syria's star attraction, is a sublime sprawling archaeological site, spectacularly set between a lush date palm oasis and a majestic mountain-topped castle, in the middle of a vast emptiness. The Orontes River is to the west and the Euphrates to the east. But the apparent emptiness of the landscape is deceptive.

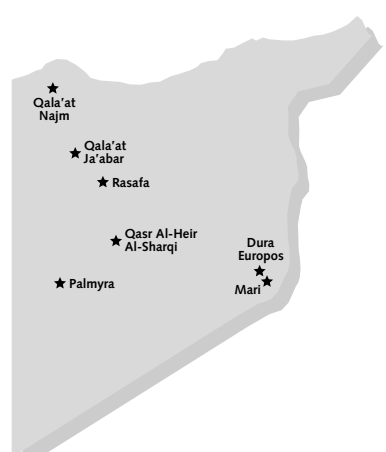
While little could surpass the spectacle of the Palmyra ruins – particularly with a backdrop of the rising or setting sun – the desert of this northeastern region of Syria is dotted with other ancient sites of both archaeological significance and jaw-dropping beauty. Majestic Qala'at Najm dominates a rugged hill jutting into the awesome Euphrates River while the isolated Qasr Al-Heir Al-Sharqi is dramatically sited in a sparse, arid plain.

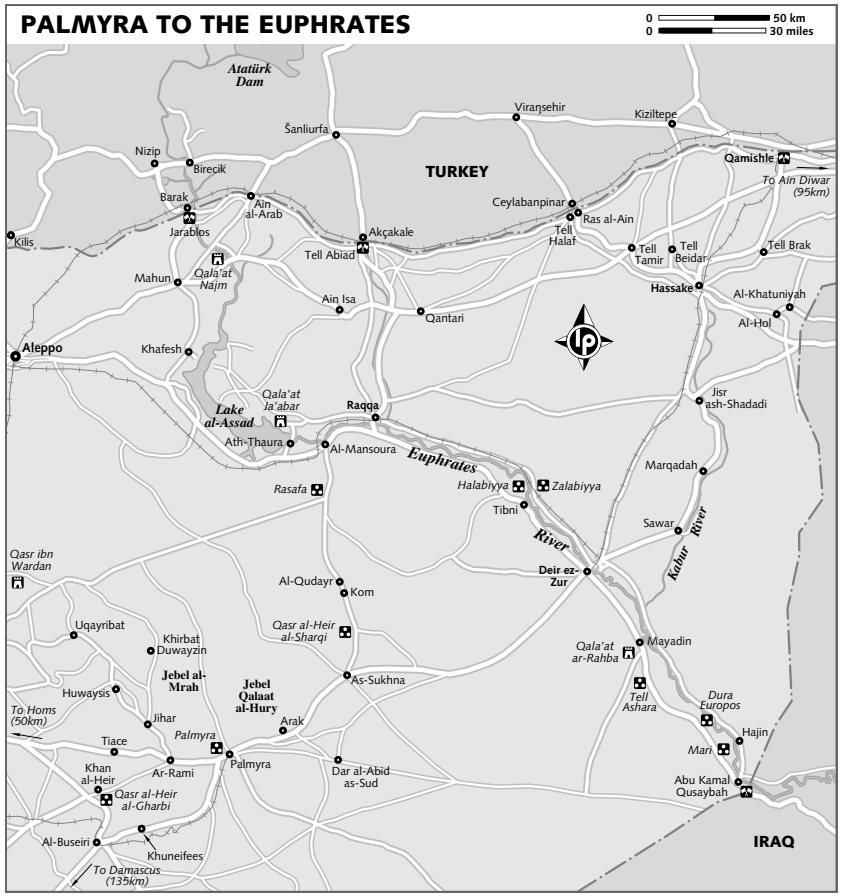
The vast desert is not only home to the splendours of past civilisations. For many Bedouin and other seminomadic people, life continues here as it has done for centuries, and while their method of transport may have changed – from camel to donkey to pick-up truck – the hospitality of these nomads living in an inhospitable environment has not. The chance to share a cup of tea with the Bedouin may well be a highlight of your visit to Syria.

The harsh, extreme northeast of the country is also home to about one million Kurds, a stateless people still struggling towards some day attaining their own homeland. It is here also that the cool green ribbon of the Euphrates, which provides welcome relief for the traveller, continues its journey before emptying into the Gulf after having travelled more than 2400km from its beginnings high in the mountains of eastern Anatolia in Turkey.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Rise early for sunrise and picture-perfect light at the sublime ruins of **Palmyra** (p202)
- Savour the splendid vistas of the awesome Euphrates River from **Qala'at Najm** (p216)
- Surround yourself with the azure waters of Lake al-Assad from the top of **Qala'at Ja'abar** (p214)
- Explore the striking ruins of **Rasafa** (p217), which rise dramatically from the featureless desert
- Chat to Bedouin shepherds on the road to remote **Qasr Al-Heir Al-Sharqi** (p213)
- Step back 5000 years and imagine the ancient civilisation of the Mesopotamians at **Mari** (p223)
- Enjoy ancient **Dura Europos** (p222) overlooking the Euphrates River





PALMYRA تدمر

☎ 031 / pop 50,000

Palmyra is Syria's star tourist attraction and one of the world's most splendid historical sites. Known to the locals as Tadmor (its ancient Semitic name), Palmyra's intriguing history, along with the profusion of colonnades, temple remains and funerary towers, in a mesmerising desert oasis setting, renders visitors speechless.

The ruins, dating largely to the 2nd century AD, cover some 50 hectares and have been extensively excavated and restored. Nevertheless, archaeologists continually make new finds. In 1994, for instance, Belgian archaeologists stumbled across Roman tombs southeast of the Temple of Bel. The new town has grown around the ruins, especially towards the west, and now has more than 40,000 inhabitants who survive on agriculture, trade and tourism.

History

Tadmor is mentioned in texts discovered at Mari dating back to the 2nd millennium BC. Early rulers included the Assyrians and Persians, before the settlement was incorporated into the realm of the Seleucids, the empire founded by a former general of Alexander the Great. From an early time Tadmor was an indispensable staging post for caravans travelling between the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and Arabia. It was also an important link on the old Silk Route from China and India to Europe, with the city prospering greatly by levying heavy tolls on the caravans.

As the Romans expanded their frontiers during the 1st and early 2nd centuries AD to occupy the eastern Mediterranean shores, the Seleucid dynasty failed. Tadmor became stranded between the Latin realms to the west and those of the Parthians to the east. The oasis used this situation to its advantage, keeping the east–west trade routes open and taking the role of middleman between the two clashing superpowers. The influence of Rome grew, and the city they dubbed Palmyra (City of Palms) became a tributary of the empire and a buffer against rivals to the east. The Palmyrenes were permitted to retain considerable independence, profiting also from rerouted trade following the defeat of the Petra-based Nabataeans by Rome.

The emperor Hadrian visited in AD 129 and declared Palmyra a 'free city', allowing it to set and collect its own taxes. In 212, under the emperor Caracalla (himself born of a Syrian mother), Palmyra became a Roman colony. In this way, its citizens obtained equal rights with those of Rome and exemption from paying imperial taxes. Further wealth followed and Palmyra spent lavishly, enlarging its great colonnaded avenue and building more and larger temples.

As internal power struggles weakened Rome, the Palmyrenes strengthened their independence. A local noble, Odainat, defeated the army of one of Rome's long-standing rivals, the Sassanians, and proclaimed himself 'king'. In 256 the emperor Valerian bestowed upon Odainat the title of 'Corrector of the East' and put all Roman forces in the region under his command.

The most glorious episode in Palmyra's history – which also led to the city's subsequent rapid downfall – began when Odainat was assassinated in 267. His second wife, Zenobia, took over in the name of their young son, Vabalathus. Rome refused to recognise this arrangement, particularly as Zenobia was suspected of involvement in her husband's death. The emperor dispatched an army to deal with the rebel queen. Zenobia met the Roman force in battle and defeated it. She then led her army against the garrison at Bosra, then the capital of the Province of Arabia, and successfully invaded Egypt.

With all of Syria and Palestine and part of Egypt under her control, Zenobia declared her independence from Rome and had coins minted in Alexandria bearing her

THE PROBLEM WITH PALMYRA

Palmyra's economy is largely dependent on tourism, and many locals support large extended families with proceeds from operating the town's hotels, restaurants and shops. When tourist numbers plummeted after September 11, 2001, local businesses hit hard times and competition between them became fierce – and sometimes nasty. The restaurant business, for instance, is fiercely competitive and running down the competition is the local sport. Wherever you eat, expect to hear tales of horror about others. Just ignore it.

The hotel scene is just as combative, the major object of disaffection being Al-Faris Hotel, over a kilometre outside town. If you're arriving in Palmyra by bus, you may be 'encouraged' to alight at Al-Faris rather than at the official bus stop in town, but don't get off the bus unless you want to.

Those travellers who make it past Al-Faris and into town will no doubt encounter another competition-fuelled annoyance upon arrival – the hotel touts. These guys (often kids) will try to take you to one of the hotels in town paying them a commission. Be aware that if you turn up at a hotel with one of them, an extra 10% to 20% will be added to the quoted cost of a bed or room to cover his commission. And beware of the old 'That hotel is full/dirty/closed/a brothel' spiel about the hotel you've already booked; the touts will say anything to steer you towards a commission-paying place.

Some local business-people understand that this has created a poisonous atmosphere in the town and note that many visitors are choosing to take a day trip here instead of staying overnight; others take a shorter-term view and will do anything to get your business, regardless of the long-term effect on the town.

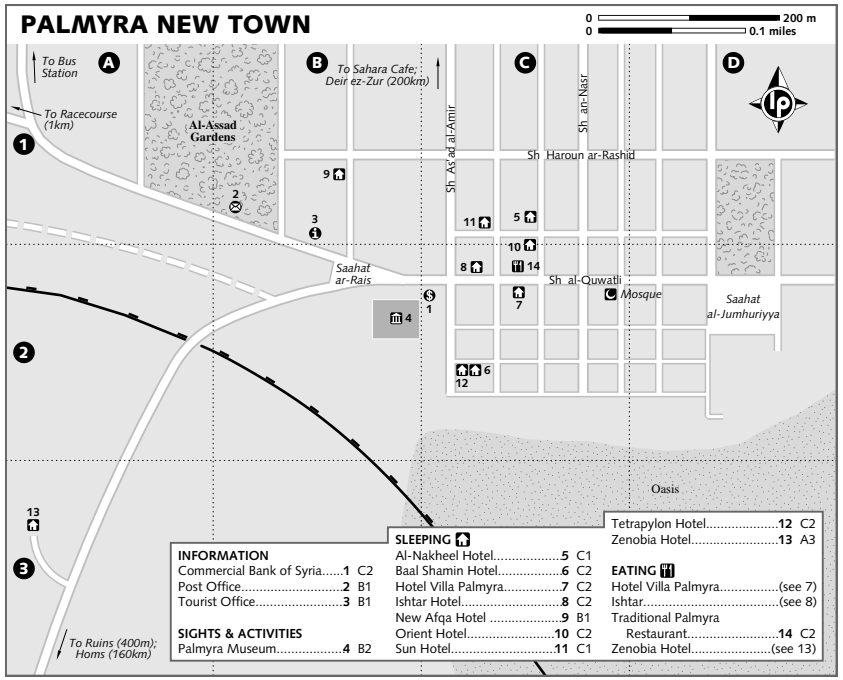


image and that of her son, who assumed the title of Augustus, or emperor.

Claiming to be descended from Cleopatra, Zenobia was, it seems, a woman of exceptional ability and ambition. Though she was headstrong and wilful, the 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon also said of her in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire:*

> She equalled in beauty her ancestor Cleopatra and far surpassed that princess in chastity and valour. Zenobia was esteemed the most lovely as well as the most heroic of her sex. She was of dark complexion. Her teeth were of a pearly whiteness and her large black eyes sparkled with an uncommon fire, tempered by the most attractive sweetness. Her voice was strong and harmonious. Her manly understanding was strengthened and adorned by study.

The Roman emperor Aurelian, who had been prepared to negotiate, could not stomach such a show of open defiance. After defeating Zenobia's forces at Antioch and Emesa (Homs) in 271, he besieged Palmyra itself. Zenobia was defiant to the last and instead of accepting the generous surrender terms offered by Aurelian, made a dash on a camel through the encircling Roman forces. She headed for Persia to appeal for military aid, only to be captured by Roman cavalry at the Euphrates.

Zenobia was carted off to Rome in 272 as Aurelian's trophy and reputedly paraded in the streets, bound in gold chains. Later freed, she married a Roman senator and lived out her days in Tibur (now Tivoli), close to Rome.

Zenobia's defeat marked the end of Palmyra's prosperity. A further rebellion in 273, in which the Palmyrenes massacred a garrison of 600 Roman archers, elicited a brutal response and Aurelian's legionaries slaughtered large numbers and put the city to the torch. Palmyra never recovered. The emperor Diocletian (r 254–305) later fortified the broken city as one in a line of fortresses marking the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, and Justinian further rebuilt the city's defences in the 6th century. The city survived primarily as a military outpost and the caravan traffic all but dropped away.

In 634 the city fell to a Muslim army led by Khaled ibn al-Walid, and from this time Palmyra all but fades from history. Architectural and archaeological evidence tells that the Arabs fortified the Temple of Bel, which became host to a small village, and a castle was built on a nearby hilltop, but the great city itself was largely abandoned. Its structures were devastated by earthquake and largely covered over by wind-blown sand and earth.

It wasn't until 1678 that Palmyra was 'rediscovered' by two English merchants resident in Aleppo. Few followed in their footsteps; the buried desert city was an often-dangerous five days' journey from civilisation. It took a 1751 expedition, which resulted in drawings and the first tentative excavations, to truly pique travellers' interest. Throughout the rest of the 18th and 19th centuries a steady flow of intrepid visitors made the expedition out from Aleppo or Damascus, although it wasn't until the early 20th century that the first scientific study began. The earliest surveys were carried out in the 1920s by the Germans. In 1929 the French took over.

Work intensified following WWII, and continues to this day.

Orientation

Modern Palmyra is laid out on a grid pattern. The main street is Sharia al-Quwatli, which runs east from the main square, Saahat ar-Rais, which is on the western edge of town. On the south side of this square is the museum.

The ancient site is just over 500m southwest of here along a road that crosses a reconstructed section of Zenobia's walls, which runs just behind the museum. The town is tiny and can be walked from end to end in 10 minutes.

Arriving buses drop off in one of three places: the Karnak office in the centre of town; the Sahara Cafe on the northern outskirts of town, from where a taxi will cost S£25; and near the new Palmyra bypass in the west of town, from where it's a 10-minute walk, straight on ahead, to the town centre. (See Getting There & Away, p213, for more details on buses.)

Information

Several hotels have set up computers in their foyers to allow guests to use the internet, such as the Ishtar Hotel (p211), and a new internet café was about to open at the time of research, Moon Light Internet Café.

CBS (Commercial Bank of Syria; Map p204; Saahat ar-Rais; 🕒 8am-8pm Sat-Thu) In front of the museum; there were plans for an ATM at the time of research.

Post Office (Map p204; Saahat ar-Rais; 🕒 8am-2pm) Also has a couple of cardphones in front of the main entrance, accessible 24 hours.

Tourist Office (Map p204; ☎ 591 0574; Saahat ar-Rais; 🕒 8am-2pm) Across from the museum; staff can organise guides and provide a map.

VISITING PALMYRA

Although visitors can no longer expect to enjoy the ruins in complete solitude, the flow of tourists is still often little more than a trickle. Added to which, the site is so vast that it is easy to lose yourself and imagine that you're a 19th-century adventurer stumbling across the fallen, half-buried city for the very first time. This is especially true at first light. For this reason, if no other, avoid visiting Palmyra as a day trip from Damascus or Hama because no matter how early you set off, you'll arrive too late to see the ruins at their best. The heat and the touts can get a little too much in the middle of the day as well.

The unhurried traveller could easily spend several days wandering around the main site, which spreads over a very large area, bounded by what have come to be known as Zenobia's walls. Then there are the funerary towers and underground tombs, as well as Qala'at ibn Maan, the Arab castle on the hill. A visit of less than two days sells the experience short for most travellers. It's also highly recommended that you see the site both at sunrise, when the early morning light infuses the stone with a rich pink hue, and again at sunset, ideally watching the sun drain from the ruins from the vantage point of the castle or the rocky outcrops to the south. During the rest of the day, find some shade and read a book.

Sights

PALMYRA MUSEUM متحف تدمر

Only the keenest of archaeologists would benefit from a visit to Palmyra's modest **museum** (Map p204; adult/student S£150/10; 🕒 8am-1pm & 4-6pm Apr-Sep, 8am-1pm & 2-4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue). With its poor labelling, it adds little to the experience of Palmyra. There are a few highlights, however, including a large-scale model of the Temple of Bel that gives a good impression of how the complex would have looked in its original state, and some fascinating friezes depicting camel trains and cargo ships, attesting to the importance trade played in the wealth of Palmyra.

There are some dynamic mosaics found in nobles' houses east of the Temple of Bel, including one representing a scene from the Iliad in which Ulysses discovers Achilles disguised in women's clothes, concealed among the daughters of the king of Scyros (this scene is also portrayed in a fresco in the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers – see p210).

Other notable exhibits include a collection of coins depicting Zenobia and her son, discovered in 1991, and countless busts and reliefs that formed part of the panels used to seal the loculi in Palmyra's many funerary towers and hypogea (underground burial chambers; to see exactly how this worked, visit the Japanese Tomb, p210). The most outstanding piece in the collection is a 3m-high statue of the goddess Allat, associated with the Greek Athena, discovered in 1975 by Polish archaeologists.

THE RUINS

Set the alarm for an early start to beat the heat – from May through to September the sun can be merciless – and take plenty of water and a hat. Follow the road that runs south directly opposite the tourist office to reach the Temple of Bel and monumental arch, the latter being the best place from which to start exploring.

Depending on the heat and your energy levels, you may need to organise transport to visit Qala'at ibn Maan (the Arab castle), the Valley of the Tombs and the hypogea; most hotels are keen to oblige.

Although there is no admission fee to the main site, the museums, Temple of Bel, Qala'at ibn Maan and some of the tombs charge admission. The main site has no fixed opening times but paying attractions keep set hours.

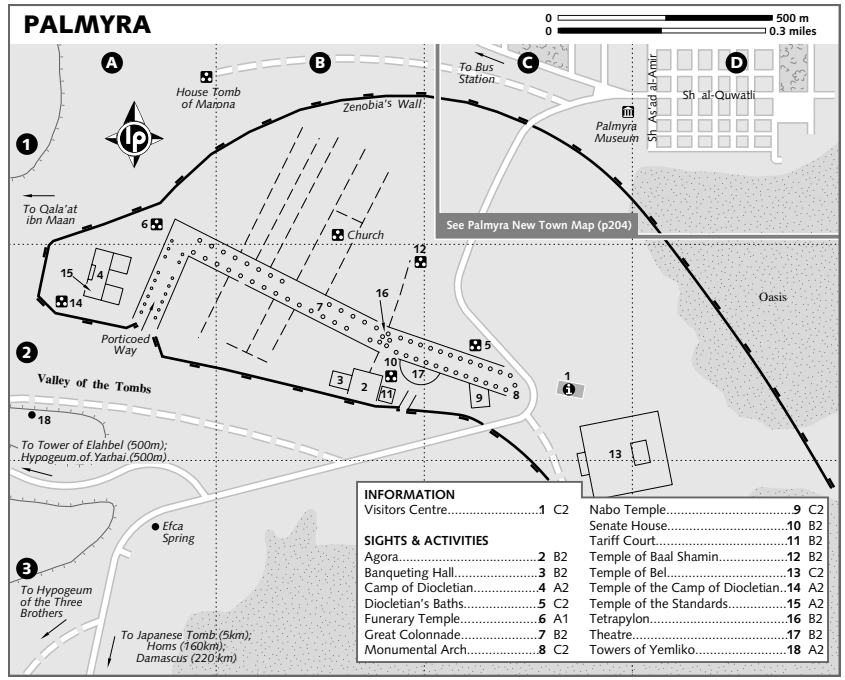
THE GOOD THINGS IN LIFE AREN'T FREE...

Admission fees at Palmyra are a little steep for Syria; however, everything else is so inexpensive in Syria, there is really nothing to complain about! But you'll be surprised to learn that there have been fees to visit Palmyra for nearly 200 years.

The Middle East has always attracted intrepid female explorers and adventurers – Gertrude Bell, Lady Jane Digby and Freya Stark to name just three – but Lady Hester Stanhope was one of the more extreme examples. She was the niece of a British prime minister and, as such, a one-time resident of 10 Downing St. On the death of her beloved uncle and her removal from the centre of British politics, Lady Hester decided to travel abroad and find herself a new court. Along with her retinue she travelled in the Middle East, interfering in local affairs but winning the admiration of the Arabs, who regarded her as a queen.

One of her greatest moments of glory was, in 1813, riding into Palmyra on an Arab stallion at the head of her travelling procession. On this occasion she was hosting a fete for the local Bedouin, during which she ordered that a silver dollar be given to all present. To the grand sheikh of the Bedouin she presented a piece of paper, handwritten, on which she directed him to charge every traveller who visited the ruins a thousand piastres. 'This enormous tax,' wrote traveller John Carne in *Letters from the East* (1826), 'which it is impossible to escape, causes several travellers to leave Syria without seeing the finest ruin in the world'. One visitor who did attempt to evade the tax, reports Carne, had his hut set on fire by the Arabs.

At least the penniless traveller of today is able to visit a great deal of the site for free and finds cash admissions barring the way only to a few selected sections, such as the Temple of Bel. And if the traveller decides to give these sights a miss and hold back on the cash, the chances of having the hotel burned from under them are these days very slim.



Temple of Bel معبد بل

The single most impressive part of the ruins and the most complete structure is this **temple** (Map p207; adult/student S£150/10; 🕒 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue), also known as the Sanctuary of Bel. Although very little is known about Palmyra's deities, Bel is assumed to be the most important of the gods in the Palmyrene pantheon, the equivalent of the Greek Zeus or Roman Jupiter.

Raised on a slight tell (mound) indicating the existence of a pre-Classical settlement on this site, you enter the temple through the ticket office, just north of the main monumental entrance. The keeplike entrance was created by the Arabs when they converted the temple into a fortress; an inscription in a recessed arch dates the work to 1123–24.

The complex consists of two parts: a huge walled courtyard, or **temenos**, and, at its centre, the temple proper or cella. The courtyard was originally surrounded by a 15m-high wall, but only the northern side is original, dating from the 2nd or 3rd century AD; the rest is of Arab construction. A double colonnade used to run around three sides of the interior while the fourth (western) side had a single row of columns much taller than the others. Some of these can be seen to the right and left of the entrance.

Just to the left of the entrance inside the courtyard is a **sunken passage** that enters the temple from outside the wall and gradually slopes up to the level of the courtyard. This was probably used to bring sacrificial animals into the precincts. The podium of the **sacrificial altar** is on the left, and beside it are the foundations of a **banqueting hall**. The remains of another platform are to the right and this was possibly used for religious purification ceremonies.

The **cella** (Map p207) was completed in AD 32, a date given in a dedication inscribed on a pedestal found inside, and now exhibited in the Palmyra Museum. It's unusual in that the entrance is in one of the sides rather than at an end, and is offset from the centre. Inside is a single chamber with *adytons* (large niches) at either end. The *adyton* ceilings, carved from single slabs of stone, are magnificent: the northern ceiling has a

cupola featuring seven busts of divinities and the 12 signs of the zodiac, while the southern ceiling has a circular pattern of acanthus leaves surrounded by a ring of geometric patterning all inset within a square frame, itself surrounded by an elaborate pattern of hexagonal coffers. The stepped ramp leading to the southern portico suggests that it may have contained a portable idol used in processions.

The earth-coloured building by the Temple of Bel was originally the residence of the Ottoman governor of Palmyra. It later became a prison, and at the time of research was about to open as the new **Visitors Centre** (🕒 8am-6pm).

Great Colonnade الشارع الطويل

The spine of ancient Palmyra was a stately **colonnaded avenue** (Map p207) stretching between the city's main funerary temple in the west and the Temple of Bel in the east, and covering a distance of almost 1km. Unlike the typical Roman model, Palmyra's main avenue was far from straight, pivoting decisively at two points – a result of piecemeal growth and improvisation. Where the modern asphalted road slices across the ancient way is an imposing **monumental arch** (Map p207). Dating from the reign of Septimius Severus, when Palmyra was at its peak, the construction is actually two arches, joined like a hinge to swing the street through a 30° turn, aiming it at the Temple of Bel.

The section of street between the Bel temple and the arch has largely vanished, with just a few sparse columns to indicate the route the colonnades once took, but the section west of the arch is magnificent. This section lies at the heart of the ancient civic centre; it has been heavily restored and gives a very clear idea of how the city must have appeared in all its original splendour.

The street itself was never paved, probably to save damage from camel caravans, but flanking porticoes on either side were. Each of the massive columns that supported the porticoes has a small jutting platform about two-thirds of the way up, designed to hold the statue of some rich or famous Palmyrene who had helped pay for the construction of the street.

Nabo Temple معبد نبو

The ruined area to the left immediately after passing through the arch is a small trapezoidal **temple** (Map p207) built in the 1st century AD and dedicated to Nabo, the Palmyrene god of destinies. All that's left are the temple podium, lower courses of the outer walls and some re-erected columns.

Diocletian's Baths حمامات ديوكلسيان

On the north side of the great colonnaded way, four columns standing forward of the line of the portico announce the location of what was once a public bathhouse founded by Diocletian. These columns once carried a pediment over the entrance, but this has been lost. The **baths** (Map p207) survive only as trenches and as outlines scored in the baked earth.

Theatre

Palmyra's **theatre** (Map p207; adult/student S£150/10; 🕒 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue), lies on the south side of the street, accessed between two arches in the colonnade. Until the 1950s it was buried beneath sand but since then it has been extensively restored.

Beneath the platforms on many of the columns are inscriptions with names for the statues that once stood there: representations of prominent people including emperors, princes of Palmyra, magistrates, officials, high-ranking priests and caravan chiefs.

The freestanding stage façade of the theatre itself is designed along the lines of a palace entrance, complete with a royal door and smaller doors on either side. From the rear of the theatre, a pillared way once led south to a gate in the city walls dating from the era of Justinian. North of this pillared way are the substantial remains of the Tariff Court and agora (opposite).

Tetrapylon التترابيل

Perhaps the most striking construction at Palmyra, the **Tetrapylon** (Map p207) marks the second pivot in the route of the colonnaded street. It consists of a square platform bearing at each corner a tight grouping of four columns. Each of the four groups of pillars supports 150,000kg of solid cornice. A pedestal at the centre of each quartet originally carried a statue. Only one of the 16 pillars is of the original pink granite (probably brought from Aswan in Egypt); the rest are a result of some rather hasty reconstruction carried out from the 1960s onwards by the Syrian Antiquities Department.

From here the main colonnaded street continues northwest, while smaller pillared transverse streets lead southwest to the agora and northeast to the Temple of Baal Shamin.

Agora السوق العامة

The **agora** (Map p207) was the hub of Palmyrene life, the city's most important meeting space, used for public discussion and as a market where caravans unloaded their wares and engaged in the trade that brought the desert oasis its wealth. What remains today is a clearly defined courtyard measuring 84m by 71m. Many pillars survive to indicate that the central area was once enclosed by porticoes on all four sides and that the pillars carried statues. The dedications reveal that the portico on the north held statues of Palmyrene and Roman officials, the eastern one had senators, the western portico was for military officers, while on the south side, merchants and caravan leaders were honoured. Sadly, today no statues remain and most of the pillars are small stumps.

Adjoining the agora in the northwest corner are the remains of a small **banqueting hall** (Map p207) used by the rulers of Palmyra. South of the agora is another large, walled rectangular space, known as the **Tariff Court** (Map p207), because this is where the great tariff stele (now residing in the St Petersburg Hermitage) was found. The enormous stone tablet dates from AD 137 and bears the inscription 'Tariff of Palmyra', setting out the taxes payable on each commodity that passed through the city.

The small structure at the north end of the court, closest to the theatre, has a semicircular arrangement of tiered seating leading archaeologists to believe that it may have been the city's **Senate** (Map p207), or council building.

Temple of Baal Shamin معبد بعلشمين

Dating from AD 17 and dedicated to the Phoenician god of storms and fertilising rains, this small shrine is all that remains of a much larger compound. It stands alone 200m north of the main colonnaded street, near the Zenobia Hotel, in what was a residential area of the ancient city. Baal Shamin was an import, like Bel, who only really gained popularity in Palmyra when Roman influence was at its height.

Although the temple gate is permanently padlocked, it is possible to peer inside. Fronting the **temple** (Map p207), the six columns of the vestibule have platforms for statues, and carry inscriptions. The column on the far left, dated AD 131, has an inscription in Greek and Palmyrene that praises the secretary of the city for his generosity during the imperial visit of 'the divine Hadrian' and for footing the bill for the temple's construction.

Funerary Temple

Beyond the Tetrapylon the main street continues for another 500m. This stretch has seen much less excavation and reconstruction than elsewhere and is still littered with tumbled columns and assorted blocks of masonry. The road ends at the impressive portico of a **funerary temple** (Map p207), dating from the 3rd century AD. The portico with its six columns stands as it was found but the walls are a relatively recent reconstruction. This was the main residential section of town and streets can be seen leading off to both sides. There is scattered masonry everywhere, in places literally heaped into small hillocks of statuary fragments and decorated friezes and panels.

Camp of Diocletian مخيم ديوكلسيان

Southwest of the funerary temple, reached via a porticoed way, is an extensive complex known as **Diocletian's camp** (Map p207). Dating from the late 3rd or early 4th century AD, it comprises the remains of a monumental gateway, a tetrapylon and two temples; one of these, the **Temple of the Standards** (Map p207), dominates from an elevated position at the head of a flight of worn steps. The 'camp' was erected after the destruction of the city by Aurelian. The extent of the complex and the fact that it was built on top of, and incorporates, earlier structures of evident grandeur has led some historians to speculate that it occupies what had been the palace of Zenobia.

Behind the complex a section of fortified wall climbs a steep hill – from where there are excellent views of the site – then descends, edging around the southern edge of the city.

VALLEY OF THE TOMBS وادي القبور

To the south of the city wall at the foot of low hills is a series of variously sized, freestanding, square-based towers. Known

PALMYRA TO THE EUPHRATES

as the **Towers of Yemliko** (Map p207), they were constructed as multistorey burial chambers, stacked high with coffins posted in pigeonhole-like niches, or loculi, which were then sealed with a stone panel carved with a head and shoulders portrait of the deceased; you can see dozens of these stone portraits in the Palmyra Museum, and in the National Museum at Damascus (p95).

The tallest of the towers – at four storeys high – is the most interesting. It dates from AD 83 and although it is kept locked you can peer in through the barred entrance. There is also an interesting carved lintel above the doorway and an inscription further up identifying the family interred within. A rough path winds up behind the towers to the top of a rocky saddle for a wonderful view of the Palmyrene landscape.

Further west, deeper into the hills, are plenty more of these funerary towers, some totally dilapidated, others relatively complete. By far the best preserved is the **Tower of Elahbel** (adult/student S£75/5), which is situated about 500m west of the Yemliko group. Built in AD 103, it has four storeys and could purportedly accommodate up to 300 sarcophagi. It's possible to ascend an internal staircase to visit the upper storey tomb chambers and to get out onto the roof. Also here is the chamber that formerly housed the **Hypogeum of Yarhai**, dismantled and reconstructed in the National Museum.

To visit Elahbel it's necessary to buy a ticket at the Palmyra Museum and join an organised foray led by a caretaker; these depart at 8.30am, 10am, 11.30am and 4.00pm Wednesday to Monday and 9am and 11am Tuesday. From October to March the last visit is 2.30pm. At all other times the tomb is locked. The visit also includes the Hypogeum of the Three Brothers, which makes it worthwhile.

HYPOGEUM OF THE THREE BROTHERS مدفن الاخوان الثلاثة

In addition to the funerary towers, Palmyra boasts a second, later type of tomb, the hypogeum, which was an underground burial chamber. As with the towers, this chamber was filled with loculi fitted with stone carved seals. The best of the 50 or more hypogea that have been discovered and excavated, apart from the Hypogeum of Yarhai, is the **Hypogeum of the Three Brothers**, which lies just southwest of the Palmyra Cham Palace hotel.

The tomb dates from AD 160 to AD91. It is very modest in size but contains some beautiful frescoes, including portraits of the three brothers in oval frames. There are also three large sarcophagi topped by figures reclining on couches. You'll notice that these figures, like many in the Palmyra Museum, are headless; the official Palmyra guide suggests that this is because early tomb robbers found they could quite easily sell the stone heads.

The hypogeum can only be visited as part of an organised group, through the museum.

THE JAPANESE TOMB

Discovered in 1994 and opened to the public in 2000, this underground tomb takes its name from the nationality of the archaeological team responsible for its immaculate restoration. The tomb dates from AD 128 and is occupied by two brothers with the unlikely names of Bwlh and Bwrp. The entrance is richly decorated and gives way to a main gallery lined with a pigeonhole arrangement of loculi sealed with carved busts and decorated with an ornate frieze and painting of a family banqueting scene. Two side chambers contain sarcophagi topped by family sculptures. The ensemble is superb and helps make sense of all the miscellaneous bits of sculpture exhibited in the Palmyra Museum.

The tomb is in the Southeast Necropolis, which is several kilometres beyond the Palmyra Cham Palace. It's not attractive scenery to hike through, but if you do want to walk, continue on the road south of the hotel for 2km taking an immediate left after the petrol station, and the necropolis is a further 3km. The best way to get here is in a car, either by taxi or as part of an organised trip. Either way, check with the museum first that the tomb is open.

QALA'AT IBN MAAN قلعة إبن معن

To the west of the ruins perched high on a hilltop, **Qala'at ibn Maan** ((Map p207; adult/student S£150/10; 🕑 9am-dusk) is most notable as the prime viewing spot for overlooking the ruins of Palmyra. The castle is said to have been built in the 17th century by Fakhreddine (Fakhr ad-Din al-Maan II), the Lebanese warlord who challenged the Ottomans for control of the Syrian desert. However, it's also possible that some sort of fortifications existed up here well before then.

The castle is surrounded by a moat, and a footbridge allows access to the rooms and various levels within. However, it's not necessary to enter the castle to enjoy the views. The best time to go up is in the late afternoon, with the sun to the west, casting long shadows among the ruins below. To reach the castle on foot is quite a hike with a scramble up a steep zigzagging path to reach the summit. Approaching by car is easier and most of the hotels in town organise sunset trips up to the castle for around S£150.

Sleeping

There are far more beds than there are tourists in Palmyra and it's rarely hard to find a room, except during the Palmyra Festival. All the same, book in advance to avoid dealing with the touts: see The Problem with Palmyra, p203.

BUDGET

All of Palmyra's budget accommodation is located on or just off the main street, Sharia al-Quwatli.

Baal Shamin Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 5910 453; roof mattress S£100, dm/s/d S£125/200/300) The rooms here are spartan but they are also fairly clean, and chatty manager Mohammed Ahmed camps in the prettily decorated lobby and entertains guests with tea and coffee. Breakfast is S£50.

New Afqa Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 5791 0386; roof mattress S£100, s/d S£250/500) This is a fairly decent option: rooms are comfortable if a little spare, and there's a spacious reception with satellite TV and beer in the fridge.

Sun Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 5911 133; sunhotel-sy@hotmail.com; roof mattress S£125, dm/s/d S£150/250/400) This cosy hotel with family room is more like a European pension with its homey feel – the owner, Mohammed Talla'a's mother even cooks (breakfast costs S£50). Rooms are clean with bathrooms and kilims on the floor.

Al-Nakheel Hotel (Map p204; ☎ /fax 5910 744; s/d US$10/15; ❄) Decorated like a traditional Bedouin tent, with kilims on the floors and walls, and cushions scattered everywhere, this small hotel has lots of character and is one of Palmyra's more attractive budget options. Some rooms have TV and air-con and some don't, so let the hotel know when you book if mod cons are important. Breakfast is included in the price.

Ishtar Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 591 3073; www.ishtarhotel.net; Sharia al-Quwatli; s/d/tr US$17/25/35; ❄) With some of the most welcoming and accommodating staff in Palmyra, and spotlessly clean rooms, the Ishtar is Palmyra's best budget option. In addition, there's a great little restaurant and bar in the lobby – and cold beers at the ready when you return from the ruins.

MIDRANGE

Midrange hotel rates can drop very quickly into the budget range out-of-season, so don't hesitate to ask for a discount when booking.

Orient Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 5910 131; orienthotel@hotmail.com; s/d US$30/40; ❄) This family-owned hotel with its farmhouse-scene paintings and frilly floral bedspreads is favoured by the tour companies, and rightly so – the rooms are spotlessly clean with gleaming en suites complete with fresh towels and toiletries, TV and fridge. Room rates include breakfast.

PALMYRA FESTIVAL

Since 1993, Palmyra has been the scene of a popular annual festival also known as the desert festival or traditional festival – and it's one that's worth planning your visit around if you're here at this time of year. During the day at the hippodrome below Qala'at ibn Maan there are horse and camel races – with the handsome horses displaying why they're so loved by the Arabs and the camels always providing amusement due to their stubborn nature. Along with Bedouin crafts on sale, in the evenings, there are music and dance performances, some of which take place in the old theatre in the ancient civic centre – the spotlit ruins make an excellent backdrop to the entertainment. The best bit is seeing 'Queen Zenobia' (played by an under-employed Syrian actress) make her dramatic entrance in a horse-drawn chariot. Aimed largely at a tourist audience (both Syrian and international), the festival runs for three or four days, usually towards the end of April or beginning of May.

PALMYRA TO THE EUPHRATES

THE BEDOUIN

Mounted on a camel, swathed in robes and carrying a rifle for security and a coffee pot for hospitality, the archetypal Arab, as portrayed by Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia,* is no more. Certainly not in Syria, anyway. Although still known as Bedu, these days few of Syria's 100,000 Bedouin population could be regarded as desert wanderers. They used to make their living guiding caravans across the deserts and supplying camels and protection against bandits but the overland trade routes died with the coming of the aeroplane. The grazing lands of Syria have depleted as well and this has reduced the number of Bedouin involved in raising animals from Bedouin camps.

Those who still herd goats, sheep and, most romantically, camels (their frugal intake allowing the Bedouin to *really* roam), continue to wear traditional dress though. This can include, for men, a *kanjar* (dagger) – a symbol of dignity, but these days used for precious little else – while women tend to dress in colourful garb, or sometimes black robes, and occasionally sport facial tattooing and kohl around the eyes. Working in the often-searing sun day after day, the traditional dress is as much about keeping the sun off as it is about modesty.

While the battered pick-up truck might have replaced the camel as a means of transport for most, the black goat-hair tents (*beit ash-sha'ar;* literally 'house of hair') are still the preferred address. Camps you'll see on the way to Palmyra often house a dozen or so Bedouin – all members of an extended family.

One other constant of Bedouin traditional life remains their famed hospitality. Born of the codependency the nomads developed in order to survive in the desert, modern-day hospitality manifests itself in unmitigated generosity extended to strangers. Should you be fortunate enough to encounter the Bedouin (and many Palmyra hotels now offer trips out to Bedouin camps) you can expect to be invited into their tents and offered bitter black coffee, sweet tea and possibly even something to eat. Money is not expected in return so you should try to be a gracious guest and not take advantage of their hospitality.

The best encounters, rather than these prearranged and often awkward meet-and-greets, are ones where you come across Bedouins guiding their herd of sheep or goats in the most remote parts of Syria. We've met teenage boys who were learning English through books and TV and helped them with their pronunciation, an enigmatic young girl eagerly accepted our offer of a fresh bottle of water on a hot day, and we had a boy atop a donkey share some of our food – all encounters that linger long in our memories.

Hotel Villa Palmyra (Map p204; ☎ 5910 156; villapalmyra@mail.sy; Sharia al-Quwatli; s/d US$50/60; ✖ 💻) Extensively renovated in 2007, this smart hotel has marble-tiled floors, comfortable, spacious and well-equipped rooms with fridge and TV, and very spiffy bathrooms. Many rooms, along with the top floor restaurant, have unsurpassable views over the oasis to the ruins. Breakfast is included in room rates and there's a business centre with internet access. Credit cards are accepted.

Tetrapylon Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 5917 170; www.tetrapylon.com; s/d US$70/80; ✖) The plastic rainbow-coloured décor of this modern, new hotel may be reminiscent of a McDonalds or IKEA kid's playground, but the place is spotlessly clean and the rooms come with satellite TV and minibar. Rates include breakfast.

Zenobia Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 591 8123; cham-resa@net.sy; s/d US$70/80; ✖) Built around 1900, renovated in 2007, and overlooking the ruins, the Zenobia has the most character of any of Palmyra's hotels. The comfortable, generously sized rooms are plush with kilims and Orientalist paintings on the walls, and mother-of-pearl inlaid wooden furniture. Book rooms 101 to 106 for views of the ruins. The hotel also has Palmyra's best restaurant (see opposite. Credit are cards accepted.

Eating

Certainly not celebrated for its dining opportunities, Palmyra's food scene is steadily improving with the opening of several new hotel restaurants.

Traditional Palmyra Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 910 878; Saahat ar-Rais; dishes S£100-250; 🕒 11am-late) This place focuses on Syrian food and does a decent Bedouin-style *mansaf* (rice dish), along with good mezze and kebabs.

Ishtar (Map p204; ☎ 591 3073; Sharia al-Quwatli; meal per person S£300; 🕒 noon-11pm) In the lobby of the Ishtar hotel, this friendly restaurant hasn't been open for long but its home-cooked Syrian food is going down a treat. Expect a soup, mezze and grills for S£300, plus there's a daily chef's special.

Hotel Villa Palmyra (Map p204; ☎ 913 600; Sharia al-Quwatli; meal per person S£400; 🕒 noon-11pm) Long considered one of Palmyra's best restaurants. At the time of our visit, the nameless restaurant at the Hotel Villa Palmyra had not yet reopened after extensive renovation. Its Arabic food had always been very good, alcohol was served, and the restaurant has spectacular views across to the ruins.

Zenobia Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 591 8123; meal per person S£400; 🕒 11am-late) Easily Palmyra's best restaurant, the Zenobia serves up delicious Syrian food on a shady terrace overlooking the ruins. The Zenobia soup with *kechk* ('cheese' made from fermented corn) and meat (S£125) is rich and tasty, the plate of six mezze absolutely delicious, and the mixed grilled meats succulent. This is one place where we recommend an early dinner, so you can enjoy the sunset over the ruins.

Entertainment

Once the sun goes down, there's very little to do in Palmyra. But before the light completely fades, it's worth taking a seat at the outdoor terrace at the Zenobia Hotel (above) to cool off with a chilled Barada beer (S£100) while watching the ruins turn a flaming pink. Back in town, the Ishtar Hotel (p211) and Hotel Villa Palmyra restaurant (above) both have cave-themed basement bars.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Palmyra's 'bus station' is on the edge of town, some 2km north of the museum (taxi S£25), at the Sahara Café. Buses depart more frequently for Damascus (S£125, three hours) and Deir ez-Zur (S£85, two hours), generally on the hour every hour from sunrise to sunset.

MINIBUS

Minibuses (S£40) for Homs (two hours) depart frequently throughout the day from 6am to sunset, from the eastern end of the main street at Saahat al-Jumhuriyya.

QASR AL-HEIR AL-SHARQI

قصر الحير الشرقي

Driving through the rocky moonlike landscape, the majestic East Wall Palace or **Qasr al-Heir al-Sharqi** (adult/student S£75/5) appears suddenly out of nowhere. One of the most isolated and startling monuments to Umayyad Muslim rule in the 8th century AD, the palace held a strategic position, commanding desert routes into Mesopotamia. As support from the nomadic Arab tribes (of which they themselves were a part) was one of the main Umayyad strengths, it is no coincidence that they made their presence felt in the desert steppes.

The palace complex and rich gardens, once supplied by an underground spring about 30km away, covered a rough square with 16km sides. Built by the Umayyad caliph Hisham abd al-Malek (r AD 724–43), the palace long outlived its founders. Haroun ar-Rashid, perhaps the best known ruler of the Abbasid dynasty that succeeded the Umayyad, made it one of his residences, and evidence suggests that it was only finally abandoned as late as the 14th century.

If you have any interest in archaeology, a visit to the palace, 120km northeast of Palmyra, makes an excellent excursion from the town. Once you arrive, simply begin your explorations; the friendly teenage Bedu caretakers will see you and come and collect the ticket money at their leisure; if it's a hot day, offer them a ride back to their home.

Sights

The partly restored walls of one of the main enclosures, with their mighty and defensive towers, are the most impressive remaining sign of what was once a sumptuous anomaly in the harsh desert. The ruins to the west belong to what may have been a **khan**. In the southeastern corner are remnants of a **mosque**; the column with stairs inside was a minaret. The remains of **baths** are to the north of the main walls. Traces of the old perimeter wall can just be made out to the south, bordering the best track leading here from the highway.

The castle had a counterpart southwest of Palmyra, **Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi** (West Wall Palace), but little of interest remains at the

site. Its impressive façade was dismantled and reconstructed at the National Museum in Damascus (p95).

Getting There & Away

The only way to get to Qasr al-Heir al-Sharqi is by private transport. Most of the hotels in Palmyra are more than happy to oblige with a car and driver, with most hotels charging around S£1500 to S£2000 for a half-day trip. Some of the hotels also offer the worthwhile combination of Qasr al-Heir ash-Sharqi and Rasafa (p217). If driving from Palmyra, set the trip meter to zero at the As-Suknah turn-off. The turn-off to the palace is on a dirt road exactly 38km from here, on the left.

LAKE AL-ASSAD بحيرة الاسد

The glorious azure-coloured inland sea that is Lake al-Assad is Syria's pride and joy, and with good reason – a visit here is as invigorating as a trip to the seaside.

By the time the emerald green Euphrates enters Syria at Jarablos (once the capital of the Neo-Hittite empire) it is already a mighty river. To harness that power for irrigation and hydroelectricity production, one of the Assad regime's most ambitious plans, to dam the Euphrates, went into effect in the 1960s. Work began at Tabaqah in 1963 and the reservoir started to fill in 1973. Now that it's full, it stretches for some 60km, and the electricity produced was supposed to make the country self-sufficient.

The flow of the Euphrates, however, has been reduced by the construction of Ataturk Dam in Turkey, and Syria and Iraq are concerned that the Turks may at any time decide to regulate the flow for political reasons. The decision by Istanbul in late 1995 to proceed with construction of a further dam, the Birecik, has only served to heighten the two Arab countries' worst fears. The Turks deny all claims of having used their position to reduce the flow of the river, attributing any slowing down to natural causes.

The dormitory town of Ath-Thaura (the Revolution; الثورة) was built at Tabaqah to accommodate the dam workers and farmers who had to be relocated because of the rising water levels. Not only villages, but also some sites of both historical and archaeological importance, were inundated. With aid from Unesco and foreign missions, these were investigated, documented and, whenever possible, moved to higher ground. The 27m-high minaret of the Maskana Mosque and the 18m-high minaret from Abu Harayra were both segmented and then transported, the latter to the centre of Ath-Thaura.

Qala'at Ja'abar قلعة جعبر

Appearing to rise out of the turquoise lake, **Qala'at Ja'abar** (adult/student S£150/10; 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) is as impressive from a distance as the water vistas are from atop the citadel.

Situated on the bank of Lake al-Assad, about 15km north of Ath-Thaura, the castle was built entirely of bricks in classic Mesopotamian style. Before the lake was dammed, the castle had rested on a rocky perch since before the arrival of Islam, had been rebuilt by Nureddin (Nur ad-Din) and altered by the Mamluks. It makes a spectacular backdrop for a day by the lake, and on Friday this is an extremely popular picnicking spot with locals. It is also an ideal place for a swim but women might feel more comfortable swimming from a hired boat, away from prying eyes.

If the citadel is locked, collect the key from the caretaker Abdullah at the restaurant on your right before the citadel. There's a pleasant leafy terrace at the restaurant where you can sit in the shade overlooking the lake, or down on the grass by the water, and have a feast of some 10 dishes including mezze, salad, fresh fish and chips (S£300) and sheesha. It's possible to camp here for S£150 with your own tent, or you can hire a big tent for S£3000. Abdullah will also rent you a boat (S£50 per person per hour) to cruise around the citadel to take photos and out to a small island in the lake where you can swim and sunbathe in privacy.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Without your own car, Qala'at Ja'abar can be difficult to get to. It's necessary to go via Ath-Thaura, either coming from Raqqa (S£30 by microbus) or Aleppo (S£70 by bus). Raqqa is the much closer base; from Aleppo it can be a long and hassle-filled day. You can negotiate with a local driver in Ath-Thaura; expect to pay about S£500 return.

ASK THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

Canadian Greg Fisher is a doctoral student in archaeology and history at Oxford, specialising in the Roman Near East. A frequent visitor to Syria, he's studying the relationship between the Roman Empire and Arab confederations of 6th century Syria. Fresh from a research trip to the Roman ruins in Syria, Greg gives us his ruins rundown:

What makes Syria's ruins special? The sheer quantity and quality; Syria has ruins from many periods. The Roman and Byzantine remains are stunning, ranging from massive deserted cities overlooking the Euphrates, to tiny hidden churches with mosaics and inscriptions, to entire abandoned landscapes dotted with buildings. It's one of the best repositories of ancient architecture in the world.

What gets you excited when visiting ruins? Syrian archaeology is still in its infancy. Major studies only began in the 19th century and these are constantly reinterpreted as new evidence comes to light. There's always a chance you'll find something new. At Palmyra, you'll find bilingual inscriptions in situ or half-buried on columns in the sand. At Rasafa, some of the churches still have wall paintings. In other countries these artefacts have been stolen, put in museums or simply vanished. To find them here brings a sense of historical immediacy, which is exciting.

What should travellers not miss? Rasafa (p217), Zenobia (Halabiyya; p218) and Dura Europos (p222) are musts. Everyone heads to Palmyra – one of the most stunning sites in the ancient world – but if you visit Rasafa, you'll see exquisite architecture in an unparalleled setting, and you'll be alone. At Zenobia, you can climb the massive Roman walls and see for miles across the Euphrates flood plain and get to explore one of the world's most unique fortification designs. At Dura Europos, you can marvel at the tenacity of those who lived in this harsh environment, and try to imagine the horror they faced when it fell to the Persian army in the 3rd century.

Do archaeologists need good imaginations? Can you 'see' chariots charging down the Cardo Maximus? Absolutely! So often we're only left with what's underground. After doing something like calculating the height of the missing ceiling from the arch springers you dug up, a little imagination goes a long way. In Syria we're spoiled because of the quantity of sites that retain original features. When I first visited Rasafa, I sat outside the ornamental north gateway for half an hour, just feeling the heat beating down and listening to the wind. Imagination comes easily at times like that.

What are your thoughts on the state of Syria's sites? I'm worried about the threat from the environment (climate, earthquakes, etc) on remote sites. Even at Palmyra, a massive amount of work remains to be done and there are only limited resources available from international teams and the Syrian government. It's easy to see the physical decay of walls, artwork, etc, but the very richness of Syria's archaeological heritage makes it hard to prioritise. Conservation remains a priority, as does maintaining the physical security of artefacts, especially mosaics – too many end up on the black market for 'collectors'.

Thoughts on the state of preservation in the museums? The National Museum in Damascus has one of the world's most impressive ancient collections but it needs reorganisation and modernisation. Labelling is missing and the environment isn't kind on exhibits – the priceless Dura synagogue artwork probably isn't doing well without humidity and temperature control. Syria has an immensely rich cultural heritage that deserves to be looked after.

What are the most recent interesting discoveries? New mosaics and inscriptions often turn up but what's more interesting is the constant reinterpretation and reevaluation of this heartland of the Roman Empire, which is a result of the growth in excavation, analysis and research. Every season adds more to the puzzle.

What's the best bit about exploring Syria? The quality of the sites and the high probability that you will be the only person there.

What else is out there to be discovered? So much – a lot of the major sites remain unexcavated or partially excavated. There are many inscriptions out there that might help us understand the society and culture of the Near East better. Syrian archaeology has a long life yet.

If driving, from the centre of Ath-Thaura, you have to head out towards the north of town. You will have to show your passport at the police checkpoint on the way. The turn-off for the citadel is a few kilometres further on to the left, and from here it's about another 10km. You may be able to get a ride with a family on Friday when the dam is crowded with picnicking day-trippers. On other, quieter days, be prepared for long waits.

QALA'AT NAJM قلعة نجم

Majestic Qala'at Najm, the northernmost castle on the Euphrates, has been splendidly restored and is a magical site to explore as much as it provides a superb vantage point for spectacular river vistas.

Originally built under Nureddin in the 12th century, it was later reconstructed under Saladin (Salah ad-Din) and commands a natural defence position over the Euphrates plain; the views across what was once a strategic crossing point are alone worth the effort of visiting.

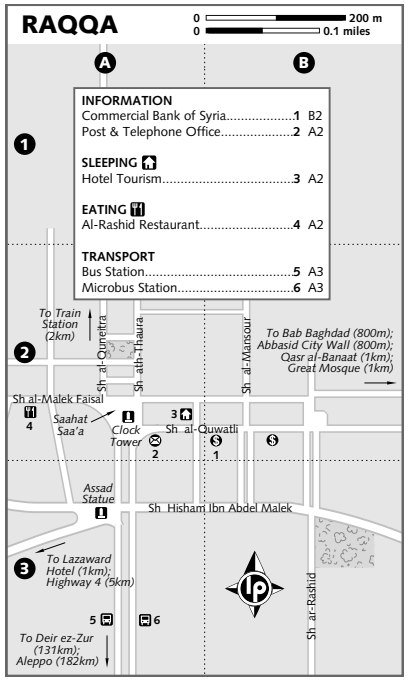
Jassim, the caretaker, will let you in to the castle and give you a guided tour of the bakery and kitchen, sauna, palace and mosque. As there was no entrance fee at the time of research, a tip of S£100 is in order for his troubles.

The citadel is best visited with your own wheels or with a car and driver. It's possible, although difficult, to get close by public transport – take a bus to Ain al-Arab (عين العرب) from Aleppo's East Bus Station or City Bus Station (p193; S£40, two hours) and get off at the village of Haya Kebir. However, from Haya Kebir it's 15km to the castle, and getting a ride with a local is the only way. An early start is essential, as there's not a lot of traffic on this dead-end trail. The road passes through rolling wheat fields that form a cool green carpet in spring.

RAQQA الرقة

☎ 022 / pop 187,000

Raqqa is a dusty town with little to detain a traveller, but in the 8th and 9th centuries AD, as the city known as Rafika, it was reputedly a glorious place that served as a summer residence of the legendary Abbasid caliph Haroun ar-Rashid (AD 786–809), of *The Thousand and One Nights* fame (see The Thousand & One Nights, p68). The area around the city had been the site of numerous cities that had come and gone in the preceding millennia, including Nikephorion, founded by the Seleucids (sometimes attributed by legend to Alexander the Great). After the Mongol invasion in 1260, Rafika virtually ceased to exist.



Orientation & Information

The heart of town is a quiet square, Saahat Saa'a (Clock Square), with a clock tower at its centre. The site of the old city lies to the east, reached by following Sharia al-Quwatli. The central bus station is on Sharia Saa'a, 300m due south of the clock tower. There's a post and telephone office on the east side of Saahat Saa'a, and a local branch of the **CBS** (Commercial Bank of Syria; Sharia al-Quwatli) with an ATM.

Sights & Activities

Only a few scant remnants that barely hint at the city's glorious past remain. The partly restored, mid-12th-century **Bab Baghdad** (Baghdad Gate) is about a 15-minute walk to the east of the clock tower. Built of mud-brick, it's relatively modest in scale and stands off to the side of the modern road. Running north from the gate is a heavily restored section of the old **Abbasid city wall**, punctuated at regular intervals by the bases of what were once more than 100 towers. After about 500m, there's a break in the walls for Sharia Tahseh (also known as Sharia Shbat); take the first left inside the walls and 200m down is the 9th-century **Qasr al-Banaat** (Maidens' Palace), with four high-arched *iwans* (vaulted halls) around a central courtyard.

Continue west along Sharia Tahseh; north of the first major intersection (with Sharia Seif ad-Dowla) are the remains of the **Great Mosque**, built during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur in the 8th century and reconstructed in 1165 by Nureddin.

Sleeping & Eating

The options are unappealing, and unless you must, avoid staying at Raqqa.

Hotel Tourism (☎ 220 725; Sharia al-Quwatli; s/d S£300/500) One block east of the clock tower, this place is depressingly gloomy with grimy rooms that were occupied by Iraqi refugees looking for work when we stopped by. The shared toilet facilities are particularly grim.

Lazaward Hotel (☎ 216 120-22; Sharia Saqr Quraysh; s/d US$24/34; ✖) Raqqa's best hotel is a three-star with dirty carpets, sticky furniture and a grotty bathroom. There's a decent rooftop **restaurant** serving Syrian food and beer with interesting views over town; breakfast (included in room rates) is surprisingly good, although service is excruciatingly slow.

Al-Rashid Restaurant (☎ 241 919; Sharia al-Malek Faisal; meal per person S£250; ☽ noon-midnight) Although this shabby school hall looks far from promising from the outside, the food is fine; expect mezze, chicken and kebabs.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Several bus companies operate from Raqqa's central bus station, including Kadmous, which has several daily services to Aleppo (S£90, 2½ hours), Damascus (S£190, six hours) and Deir ez-Zur (S£70, 2½ hours). If the times of the Kadmous departures don't suit, try one of the other companies. Alternatively, take a microbus.

MICROBUS

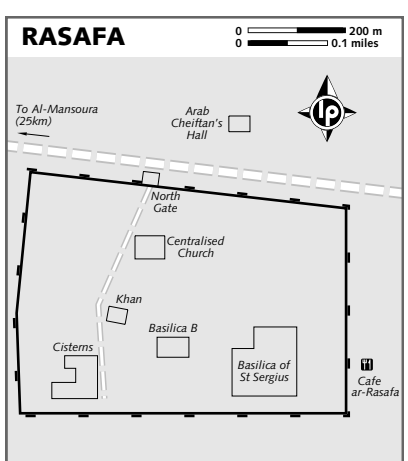
The microbus station is across the road from the bus station. From here there are regular services west to Al-Mansoura (for Rasafa; S£20, 20 minutes), Ath-Thaura (for Qala'at Ja'abar; S£25), Aleppo (S£80) and Deir ez-Zur (S£65).

RASAFA الرصافة

Striking Rasafa, an ancient, long-abandoned walled city, lies 25km south of the Euphrates highway, rising up out of the featureless desert. It's a fascinating place to explore, made all the more intriguing by its remote location. Bring a hat for protection against the sun as there is no shelter inside.

History

Raqqa was possibly inhabited in Assyrian times, and Diocletian established a fort here as part of a defensive line against the Sassanian Persians late in the 3rd century AD. A desert road led through Rasafa from the Euphrates south to Palmyra. About this time a cult to the local martyr St Sergius began to take hold. Sergius was a Roman soldier who converted to Christianity and was executed for refusing to perform sacrifices to Jupiter. By the 5th century Rasafa had become an important centre of Christian worship and an impressive basilica had been built.



A century later the city was at the height of its prosperity. The Byzantine emperor Justinian (r AD 527–65) further fortified the growing settlement against the threat of Persian assault. Ultimately, this was to no avail as Rasafa capitulated to the eastern empire in 616.

Following the Muslim Arab invasion of Syria the city was occupied by Hisham abd al-Malek who pursued an energetic building policy, constructing a whole series of castles and palaces in Syria (including Qasr al-Heir ash-Sharqi, see p213); here in Rasafa he adorned the existing city with a palatial summer residence. Just seven years after Hisham's death, the palace and city were razed by the Baghdad-based Abbasids, fierce rivals of the Umayyads. The city remained occupied but with a much reduced population.

It was finally abandoned altogether when invading Mongols swept across northern Syria in the 13th century.

Sights

The walls, enclosing a quadrangle measuring 550m by 400m, are virtually all complete. The main entrance is by the **North Gate**. Once inside, you are confronted by the immensity of the place, mostly bare now save for the churches inside. Little excavation has yet been done and you should stroll around the defensive **perimeter walls** before exploring the site. At certain points it is possible to climb to the upper terrace for enhanced views.

Three churches remain standing. The grandest is the partially restored **Basilica of St Sergius**. The wide central nave is flanked by two aisles, from which it is separated by a series of sweeping arches resting on pillars and a pair of less ambitious arch and column combinations. This and the two other churches date from the 6th century. In the southwestern corner of the complex lie huge underground **cisterns** that could keep a large garrison supplied with water through long sieges.

There's a small café, **Café ar-Rasafa**, outside the east wall of the site selling snacks and drinks.

Getting There & Away

Rasafa is best reached by your own wheels as transport is infrequent. Catch a microbus from Raqqa to Al-Mansoura (S£20, 20 minutes) then negotiate a driver (S£500 return) or wait for a lift to take you the 25km to the ruins. If you're impatient, you can ask one of the pick-up drivers lounging around here to take you there and back for an emperor's ransom – S£200 would not be unusual.

HALABIYYA حلبيه

The captivating fortress of Halabiyya (also known as Zenobia) was founded by Queen Zenobia, the rebellious Palmyrene leader, in the years immediately preceding her fall in AD 272. It was later refortified during the reign of Justinian, and it is mainly these ruins that survive today.

The fortress town was part of the Byzantine Empire's eastern defensive line against the Persians (which failed in AD 610). The walls are largely intact, and there are remnants of the citadel, basilicas, baths, a forum, and the north and south gates. The present road follows the course of the old colonnaded street.

Lovers of castles could spend hours here exploring the walls; however, the lush Euphrates setting and views are equally as engaging for some.

Zalabiyya زلبيه

Across the river and on a hill further south is the much less intact forward stronghold of the main fort, Zalabiyya. In summer, the Euphrates is sometimes passable between the town and the fort, which is what made Zalabiyya necessary. The views back to Zalabiyya from here are worth the effort of getting here. Along the way you'll pass friendly farmer families working the fields together.

Getting There & Away

Halabiyya and Zalabiyya are not easy to reach without your own transport. They're best visited with a car and driver and the drive here along the verdant flood plain of the Euphrates is rewarding. Halabiyya is the more interesting of the two, and at least the first stage of the journey is straightforward enough. Get a Deir ez-Zur bus from Raqqa and get out at the Halabiyya turn-off. Try to negotiate with a local to take you the rest of the way (around S£500 return) or undertake the 8.5km walk. To get to Zalabiyya, 4.5km from Halabiyya, head north, crossing the pontoon bridge and passing a train station

en route. The hardest bit is getting back. If you're here in the afternoon, you might be able to get a ride with a passing truck.

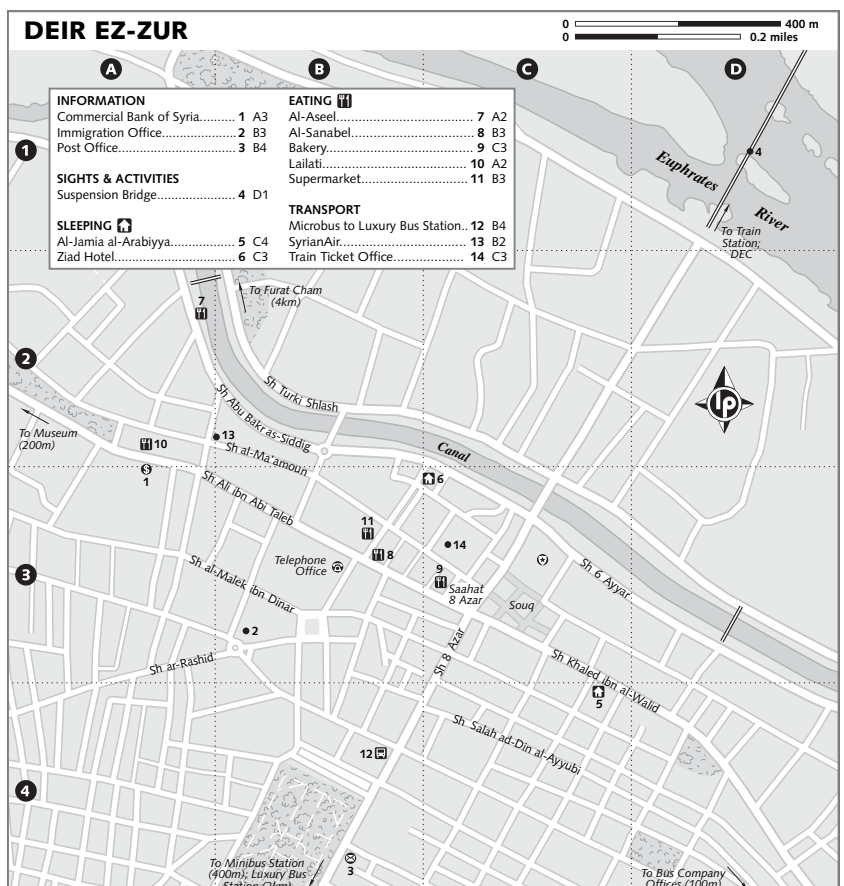
DEIR EZ-ZUR دير الزور

☎ 051 / pop 263,000

Deir ez-Zur ('Deir' to the locals) is a busy little market town by the Euphrates. On weekdays its streets are filled with colourfully dressed farmers from the surrounding countryside, in town to buy and sell produce at the small but thriving souq off the main square. While it became something of a boomtown in the early 1990s with the discovery of high-grade oil nearby, this didn't seem to affect the essential character of Deir ez-Zur.

The character of the town is heavily influenced by its distance from Damascus and its proximity to Iraq. The dialect spoken here is much rougher than the Syrian Arabic spoken elsewhere in the country and some of the vocabulary even differs – the standard Syrian greeting of *kifak* in Deir becomes *shlonak*.

Many travellers find themselves stopping over in Deir en route to the ancient sites of Mari and Dura Europos. Although there really isn't that much to see in town, it has a pleasant riverside setting and a wonderful fragrance of jasmine, and the pedestrianised shopping lane Sharia al-Maisat buzzes at night. Men far outnumber women here, more than any other Syrian



town, so females travelling solo may not always feel comfortable.

Orientation

The centre of town is the main square, Saahat 8 Azar, a scruffy, dusty place with the busy souq on its east side. The main north–south road, which runs from the canal through to the square, is bisected by the main east–west axis, which also runs through the square and is called Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid to the east, and Sharia Ali ibn Abi Taleb to the west. The body of water flowing just north of the square is not the Euphrates but a canal. The river is a further 200m north.

Information

CBS (Commercial Bank of Syria; Sharia Ali ibn Abi Taleb; 8am-12.30pm Sat-Thu) About a 10-minute walk west of the main square, it has an ATM.

Immigration Office (8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) A good place to extend your visa; the process takes only about half an hour. You need two photos and it costs S£25. To find the office, walk south from the telephone office, then diagonally across the square, turning right onto Sharia ar-Rashid; it's the low concrete building on your right.

Post Office (Sharia 8 Azar; 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to 1pm Fri) Halfway between the main square and the minibus station.

Sights

MUSEUM

Deir ez-Zur's small **museum** (Saahat ar-Rais, Sharia Ali ibn Abi Taleb; adult/student S£150/10; 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue) is worth a look if you have some free time. While the pieces in the collection may not be as valuable or striking as those in the two national museums in Damascus and Aleppo, the presentation of the exhibits include helpful, detailed explanations provided in several languages including English. The focus of the collection is on prehistoric and ancient Syria, and important finds from digs in the Euphrates and Jezira (the region between the Tigris and Kabur Rivers), with smaller sections devoted to Classical Syria and the Arab Islamic period.

RIVER

To get to the main body of the Euphrates, cross the canal and head north up Sharia 7 Nissan (the continuation of Sharia 8 Azar) for 500m. You hit the river at a point where it's crossed by a narrow 400m-long **suspension bridge**, for pedestrians and bicycle users only. It's an impressive structure, and a favourite place with the locals for an evening promenade. On the other side of the bridge is a small recreation ground where the local boys swim.

Sleeping

Al-Jamia al-Arabiyya (351 371; Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid & Sharia Maysaloun; s/d S£325/400) Though it has shabby, spartan rooms the hotel is kept reasonably clean. Rooms are equipped with fans, basin and balcony. Toilets (squat) and showers are shared. The owner Nuredin speaks English.

Ziad Hotel (214 596; fax 211 923; Sharia Abu Bakr as-Siddiq; s/d US$25/35;) This hotel will come as an absolute blessing! Just west of the main square and overlooking the canal, its 33 rooms are spacious and spotlessly clean, with thick mattresses, air-con, fridge and satellite TV. The free breakfast is simple but fresh.

Furat Cham (225 418; www.chamhotels.com; s/d US$160/190;) Located 5km out of town along the river, the overpriced Furat Cham should only be a last resort. Staff are pleasant and the buffet breakfast is good, but not good enough to justify paying these prices.

Eating

There may not be many restaurants in Deir but there are myriad eateries selling hot chicken, shwarma, kebabs, and burgers along Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid.

Al-Sanabel (Sharia Ali ibn Abi Taleb; meal per person S£150; 11am-10pm) This dirt-cheap, neon-lit snack bar is west of the main square and offers succulent spit-roast chicken, shwarma and chips.

Lailati (229 648; Sharia Ali ibn Abi Taleb; meal per person S£250; noon-midnight) In a renovated Art Deco building with Orientalist paintings on the walls, this casual eatery 400m west of the main square is easily Deir's best and buzziest. Attracting a chatty crowd of families, young couples and groups of women (a rarity in this part of the country) the menu is a mix of Syrian standards plus international dishes – everything from pizza to hamburgers – and it's all good.

Al-Aseel (Sharia Abu Bakr as-Siddiq; meal per person S£250) A small place beside the canal, about 800m west of the centre, Al-Aseel has outside seating in summer and an indoor restaurant for the colder months, and dishes up decent Syrian staples.

ENGAGING WITH THE EUPHRATES

The Euphrates (a combination of Greek words that translates to 'gentle current') is one of the world's great rivers, and its significance of predates Biblical times. But it is the mention of the river, known as 'Perath' in Hebrew and 'Al-Furat' in Arabic, in both the Book of Revelation and by the Prophet Mohammed that makes it most intriguing.

The river starts in northeast Turkey only 80km from its partner, the Tigris, and makes its way through Turkey, then Syria, meeting up with the Tigris in southern Iraq before heading into the Persian Gulf. The total length of the river is about 2800 kilometres and it's one of the four rivers that flow from the Garden of Eden, according to the Bible. Along with the Tigris, its water supply was important in the development of Mesopotamia – the world's earliest civilisation. The name Mesopotamia is Greek for 'between rivers', referring to the Euphrates and the Tigris.

While the Euphrates languidly flows through Syria, political tension flows through the countries that it services. Turkey, Syria, and Iraq all have a vested interest in the Euphrates for irrigation and the creation of hydroelectric power. The Southeast Anatolia Project in Turkey is the biggest development project ever in the country and involves the construction of 22 dams and 19 power plants, most of which are now completed. Syria has created the Tabaqah Dam on Lake Assad, which has doubled the amount of irrigated land in Syria.

The consequences of a severe drought would severely affect the livelihood of millions of people across Turkey, Syria and Iraq. However, would it be a catastrophe of Biblical proportions? The Book of Revelation in the New Testament of the Bible warns that when the river Euphrates runs dry, Armageddon follows. The Prophet Mohammed warned that the river will one day dry up, revealing unknown treasures that will cause widespread war. See it while you can.

DEC (220 469; meal per person S£350; 6pm-late) A large dining hall on the north bank of the river, this place fills up after 10pm and is particularly popular with groups and parties. Food is the standard mezze, and kebabs and beer are served. To get here, cross the suspension bridge; as you do so you'll see the restaurant's illuminated Viking ship sign off to the right.

There are also a couple of restaurants on the south bank of the Euphrates, north of the suspension bridge. Though their pleasant riverside settings compensate for the mediocre food, they're little more than open-air terraces; have a drink only and eat elsewhere.

SELF-CATERING

You'll find hole-in-the-wall bakeries on the main street where huge discs of flat bread (S£10) are pulled out of the clay ovens continually. There's a decent supermarket west of the main square and several grocery stores along Sharia Ali Ibn Abi Taleb.

Entertainment

There are a number of grubby coffeehouses on Ali Ibn Abi Taleb and a popular place at the junction of Sharia Khaled Ibn al-Walid Sharia Sobhi; both are filled most evenings with old men engrossed in high-volume games of cards, dominoes and backgammon.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is about 7km east of town. The 'regular' flights between Deir ez-Zur and Damascus have been known to get cancelled – regularly (S£1400, one hour). A shuttle bus runs to the airport from the office of **SyrianAir** (221 801; Sharia al-Ma'amoun; 8.30am-12.30pm Sat-Thu).

BUS

The luxury bus station is 2km south of town, at the far end of Sharia 8 Azar. There's a local microbus service (S£10) to the airport from a stop about a five-minute walk south of the main square, on the right-hand side; otherwise a taxi (ask for '*al-karaj*') will cost S£30. Several bus companies depart regularly for Damascus (S£200, seven hours) via Palmyra (S£75, two hours) and to Aleppo (S£145, five hours) via Raqqa (S£65, two hours). Kadmous, Al-Furat and Raja have town centre offices on Sharia Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi, about 400m east of Sharia 8 Azar; otherwise, if you're flexible, you can just show up at the bus station and buy a ticket.

MINIBUS & MICROBUS

The minibus station is on Sharia 8 Azar about 1km south of the main square. From here there are regular departures for Raqqa (S£65, two hours), for Hassake in the northeast (S£80, 2½ hours) and south to Abu Kamal (S£60, two hours) for Mari and Dura Europos.

SOUTHEAST OF DEIR EZ-ZUR

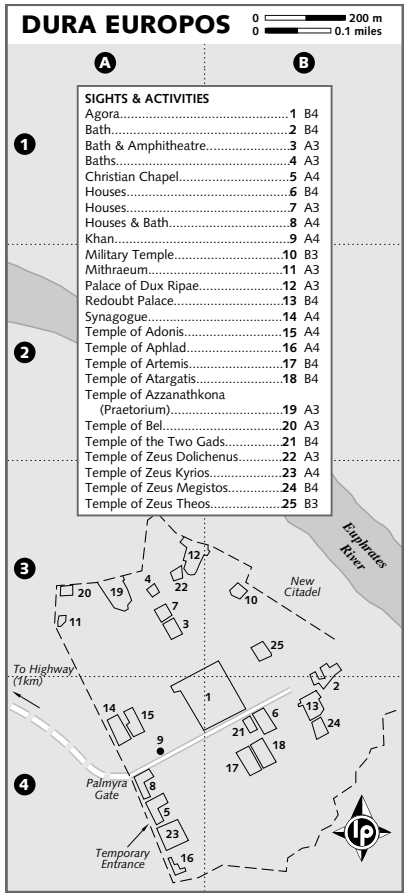
Poplars, fir trees, oleanders, eucalypts and sunflowers, roadside markets selling produce fresh from the vegetable garden, old guys dozing behind pyramids of watermelons, women with water-containers balanced on their head crossing the highway… the route from Deir ez-Zur to Dura Europas is one of the most fascinating in Syria. It's as verdant as they come, because the road southeast follows the fertile Euphrates River flood plain. All the way down to the Iraqi border, the route is dotted with sites of archaeological interest. With a car, you could visit the lot and be back in Deir ez-Zur for dinner on the same day. With a very early start, it might just be possible to do the same with a combination of microbuses and catching rides with locals.

Dura Europos تل الصالحية

With extraordinary views over the Euphrates flood plain, the extensive, Hellenistic/Roman fortress city of **Dura Europos** (☎ caretaker 09 654 6597; adult/student S£75/5) is by far the most intriguing site to visit on the road from Deir ez-Zur to Abu Kamal.

Based on earlier settlements, the Seleucids founded Europos here in around 280 BC. The town also retained the ancient Assyrian name of Dura (wall or fort), and is now known to locals as Tell Salhiye. The desert plateau abruptly ends in a wall of cliffs dropping 90m into the Euphrates here, making this the ideal location for a defensive installation.

In 128 BC the city fell to the Parthians and remained in their hands (although under the growing influence of Palmyra) until the Romans succeeded in integrating it into their defensive system in AD 165. As the Persian threat to Roman preeminence grew, so too did the importance of Dura Europos. It is famous for its reputed religious tolerance, seemingly confirmed by the presence of a church, synagogue (now



in the National Museum in Damascus; see p95) and other Greek, Roman and Mesopotamian temples side by side.

The Sassanian Persians seized control of the site in 256, and from then on its fortunes declined. French and Syrian archaeologists continue to work on the site.

Bring plenty of water and a hat for protection against the sun. Phone the caretaker if he's not around to let you in.

SIGHTS

Touring the Ruins

The western wall stands out in the stony desert 1km east of the main road; its most imposing element is the **Palmyra Gate**. Just inside the Palmyra Gate and past some houses and a bath was a **Christian chapel** to the right, and a **synagogue** to the left. The road leading towards the river from the gate passed Roman **baths** on the right, a **khan** on the left and then the site of the Greek **agora**.

Opposite the agora are the sites (little remains) of three **temples** dedicated to Artemis, Atargatis and the Two Gads. The original Greek temple to Artemis was replaced by the Parthians with a building along more oriental lines, characterised by an internal courtyard surrounded by an assortment of irregular rooms. These were added to over the years, and even included what appears to have been a small theatre for religious gatherings. In the block next door, the temple dedicated to Atargatis was built along similar lines. Precious little remains of the temple of the Two Gads, where a variety of gods were worshipped.

At the northwestern end of the city the Romans installed themselves, building barracks, baths, a small **amphitheatre** and a couple of small **temples**, one to Zeus Dolichenus. West of the **new citadel**, which commands extraordinary views over the Euphrates Valley, the Romans placed their **Palace of Dux Ripae**, built around a colonnaded courtyard of which nothing much is left.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Any microbus between Abu Kamal and Deir ez-Zur will drop you on the highway near the ruins – it takes 1½ hours to get here from Deir. Ask to be dropped off at Tell Salhiye and the site is clearly visible from the road about 1km distant.

Mari تل الحريري

The ruins of **Mari** (Tell Hariri; adult/student S£75/5), an important Mesopotamian city dating back some 5000 years, are about 10km north of Abu Kamal. The mud-brick ruins are the single greatest key serving to unlock the door on the very ancient past of Mesopotamia – but to those without an archaeological or historical bent, they are not all that inspiring.

The most famous of Mari's ancient Syrian leaders, and about the last of its independent ones, was Zimri-Lim, who reigned in the 18th century BC and controlled the most important of the trade routes across Syria into Mesopotamia, making his city-state the object of several attacks. The Royal Palace of Zimri-Lim was enormous, measuring 200m by 120m, and had more than 300 rooms. Today, sheltered from the elements by a modern protective roof, the palace remains the main point of interest of the whole site.

The Babylonians under Hammurabi finally destroyed the city in 1759 BC. Before this, Mari had not only been a major commercial centre but also an artistic hothouse, to which the many fragments of ceramics and wall paintings discovered since 1933 amply attest.

Large chunks of pottery still lie scattered about the place, but the most interesting discoveries are on display in the museums of Aleppo and Damascus, and in the Louvre. Excavations begun in 1933, financed largely by the French, revealed two palaces (including Zimri-Lim's) and five temples: a great many archives in Akkadian – some 25,000 clay tablets – were also discovered, providing valuable insights into the history and workings of this ancient city-state. Teams continue to work at the site.

Although attributed to Zimri-Lim, the **Royal Palace** had been around for hundreds of years by the time he came to the throne. Comprising a maze of almost 300 rooms disposed around two great courtyards, it was protected by earthen ramparts. Interpretations of what each room was used for vary. For instance, some say the room directly south of the central courtyard was a throne room; others say it was a sacred hall dedicated to a water goddess. It appears that the area to the northwest of the central courtyard served as the royal living quarters; the baths were located immediately to the right (directly north of the central courtyard).

Just to the southeast of the palace complex are several temples. A temple to Ishtar stood to the west of the palace.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is a microbus from Abu Kamal that goes right by Mari. It leaves from a side street east of the square and takes about half an hour by a circuitous route (S£15). Alternatively, if you are coming from Deir ez-Zur, buses will drop you at the turn-off from the highway (ask for Tell Hariri). From this same spot it is normally possible to catch a ride with a local or pick up a passing microbus for the return trip to Deir ez-Zur.

AGATHA & SIR MAX

Agatha Christie's husband was Sir Max Mallowan, a noted archaeologist who in the late 1930s excavated in northeastern Syria. Between 1934 and 1939, accompanied by his already famous crime-writing wife, he spent summer seasons at Chagar Bazar, 35km north of Hassake, where they had built a mud-brick house with a beehive dome. While at Chagar Bazar, Mallowan was also digging at Tell Brak, 30km to the east, where he unearthed the remains of the so-called 'Eye Temple', the finds from which are displayed in Aleppo's National Museum (p184). Christie spent her time here writing.

Surprisingly, given all the time she spent in the country, Syria did not find its way to a starring role in any of her more famous mysteries. Instead she dreamed up *Appointment With Death,* set around Petra, where she and Mallowan had visited on one of their journeys home; and *Murder on the Orient Express,* which opens in Aleppo but then unfolds aboard the train on which Christie frequently travelled between Europe and the Middle East. The Syrian desert also features in a short story 'The Gate of Baghdad' (published as part of *Parker Pyne Investigates,* 1934), and Aleppo cameos again in *Absent in the Spring* (1944), a novel written under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott.

Her time onsite did result, however, in a substantial and humorous autobiographical work called *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946). This is the tale of an archaeologist's wife, a lively account of hiring mouse-killing cats, disinterring corpses and constipation. Solving murders seems a breeze by comparison.

THE NORTHEAST

Bordered by Turkey and Iraq, there are no major monuments or must-see sites in this Kurdish region in the northeastern corner of the country. Only about one million of a total of some 20 million Kurds live in Syria. The rest are spread across southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq and northwestern Iran.

The area between the Kabur and Tigris Rivers, also known as the Jezira, is an increasingly rich agricultural zone, helped along by underground aquifers and the irrigation schemes born of the Lake al-Assad project on the Euphrates to the west.

The numerous tells dotted around the place are a sign that this area has been inhabited since the 3rd millennium BC, its mainstay being the wheat and cotton crops that still predominate. The tells are increasingly attracting archaeological teams, and although there is generally precious little for the uninitiated to see, you can visit the sites so long as you respect the teams' work. They are generally present in spring and summer. **Tell Brak**, 45km northeast of Hassake, was excavated under the direction of Max Mallowan (see Agatha & Sir Max, above).

Ras al-Ain رأس العين

There's not a lot to this Kurdish town on the Turkish border and you cannot cross into Turkey from here. In summer, the attraction is a restaurant in the main park (near the road to Hassake), where they set the tables in the shin-deep water from nearby sulphur springs and you cool your heels as you eat.

Of interest only to the most enthusiastic of archaeologists is **Tell Halaf**, 3km away, the site of an ancient northern Mesopotamian settlement discovered in 1899 by Baron Max von Oppenheim, a Prussian engineer overseeing the construction of the much-trumpeted Berlin–Baghdad railway. Although plenty more artefacts are said by locals to be buried here, you'll see nothing other than a bald artificial hill. The bulk of what was found went to Berlin and was destroyed in WWII. Replicas were made of some artefacts, which can be seen at Aleppo's National Museum (p184), including the giant basalt statues at the entrance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you must, Ras al-Ain is best visited with your own wheels. The microbus from Hassake, about 75km away, takes about 1½ hours (S£55) and no public transport returns in the afternoon.

Qamishle القامشلي

This characterless Kurdish stronghold is situated at a crossing point on the Turkish border in the northeast. The town has had a troubled and violent past and tensions periodically run high between the Kurds and Turkish and Kurds and Syrians.

There's nothing to see in Qamishle and the town rarely sees travellers passing through. The border is mainly used by Iraqi refugees crossing to renew their visas. As a result there are long lines and infuriatingly long waits; some travellers have reported waiting all day.

The Turkish border is about 1km from the town centre; you have to walk across the border. Once on the Turkish side, it's a further five minutes' walk into Nusaybin, where it's possible to pick up a *dolmus* (minibus) for onward travel. The crossing is officially open from 9am to 3pm.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotels here are full of male refugees and Kurdish workers. Many appear to be operating as brothels. The only accommodation in town we can recommend is the **Hotel Semiramis** (☎ 421 185; s/d/tr US$15/22/24), 100m south of the bus station. The basic rooms are fairly clean and the manager is friendly.

Across from the Chahba Hotel there's a nondescript **restaurant** (meals around S£200), where you can get *foul* (fava bean soup), mezze and kebabs.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airport is 2km south of town, although we're not sure why anyone would want to fly here. Take a taxi or any Hassake-bound bus. The SyrianAir office is just off the main street, two blocks south of the Semiramis. At the time of research there were weekly flights to and from Damascus.

Bus

Buses operate from Qamishle to major destinations, including Damascus (S£350, 10 hours) and Aleppo (S£180, six to eight hours), departing from a station on Sharia Zaki al-Arsuzi, the street running beside the river.