

# Dreams of Syria

Words and pictures  
by Tim Lyddiatt

With its vast suqs, expansive historical sites and stunning scenery, travelling over land through Syria is a dreamlike overload of the senses.



The ancient city of Palmyra



look like bullet holes and the sun streams in as if spun from glass. And everywhere there is noise: the sounds of hustle, of commerce, and the sounds of the call to prayer. In Palmyra, the sun rises pinkly

swimming pool sky. Syria is sensory overload; just a few hours from the Gulf, it can seem like another world.

It started in Damascus, a huge sprawling mess of the old and the new, and the oldest continually inhabited city on earth. Here, down shaded market streets, between wide arcing highways, in rundown apartments and vast hilltop villas, nearly 70 percent of Syria's 20 million people live, work and drive. All at the same time. To cross a road in

**T**he dark alleys of the suq in Aleppo throng with people, the air scented with cardamom, grilled meat, and the sweet, thick smoke of a thousand shisha. Between the meandering hordes, small boys, moving like smoke through trees, carry copper trays laden with tiny glasses of sweet, strong coffee and mounds of syrupy pastries; their ducking and weaving fluid, almost imperceptible, unlike the bakers, who haul trolleys, overloaded with bread, freshly baked in firestone ovens, and move through the crowd like fists. In Damascus, the high arched roof of al-Hamidiyeh suq is peppered with what

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over ancient stones - the peach light reflected in the city's ruins: its columns and arches; its arrow straight streets still paved after all this time - and urges them from sleep. The mountains around Maloula are high and rugged; their cliffs jagged shards in aggressive opposition to the gently rising fields: the birds circling high above, flirting with thermals in a cloudless

Damascus is to take your life in your hands and fling it to the other side.

You can wander for hours in al-Hamidiyeh suq through wide, darkened alleys, looking at everything that is for sale. And everything there is for sale: from 'antique' knick-knacks of dubious providence to the noble, exquisite real thing; from carpets (hundreds of carpets:

thousands even; from Iran and Pakistan, Turkey and Armenia) to children's toys, shoes, watches, and everything else in between. The most amazing fabrics light up the suq in vivid colour, whilst shop after shop is filled with women taking time over choosing their favourites from an unbelievable range of (tiny) lingerie.

Along the way through the suq we were greeted by hawkers and scouts, their instincts homing in on tourists. But our pale faces were not singled out; the suq is filled with tourists from all over the Gulf, from Egypt and Lebanon. Everyone, it seems, is on holiday in Damascus. The suq was thriving; the life blood of the city, and every shop, stall and counter has its scout. In broken English, they smiled and attempted to usher us into their stores. Occasionally we succumbed, and were welcomed - down some grubby alley, up winding stairs, through hidden doorways - with sweet tea and a chair by the enthusiastic merchant hoping to make the sale. We haggled, we decried, and the prices came crashing down. We bought nothing that day, and felt stronger for doing so.

For every seller were twenty buyers and progress through the suq was slow. But in the midst of this ordered chaos stands the Umayyad Mosque: a haven of calm, an escape from the madding crowd. But that is not to say that the mosque isn't busy, it is; but there is a serenity there that transcends all the tourists, and the Damascene seeking refuge from the hurly-burly outside. It is vast,

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this mosque, both inside its carpeted chamber and outside, in the gold walled marble courtyard: my favourite place in Damascus. When it was built in 705AD, Umayyad Caliph al-Walid ibn Abdul Malek said of its design, "whose like was never built before, nor will ever be built after." And certainly in terms of scale Umayyad is impressive, but it has cultural and religious significance as well.

This courtyard, shadowed by three minarets, all built in different styles, has walls lined with what's left of history's largest golden mosaic. The interior walls of the prayer hall are covered with mosaic panels, made of coloured and gilded glass, portraying scenes from nature; the dome is greyish-blue and is celebrated for

its magnificence, and the prayer hall contains a domed shrine venerated by both Christians and Muslims: the tomb of St John the Baptist. It was this that saw the first ever visit to a mosque by a Pope of the Catholic Church in 2002, and the reason that many make pilgrimage to Damascus from all over the world.

But for me it was a feeling that ensured we



*Tout Sharmi anyone?*



*Fabulous fabrics*



*Heidi and Tim*

visited the mosque twice in two days. Despite the endless tourists, their guides and their cameras, we sat on the floor in the corner of this vast expanse of searing marble, ignoring the running, jumping and laughing children - their mothers huddled and gossiping - and a calmness descended upon me unlike any other I have ever experienced. This is a sacred space, filled with history, and the community of souls that have ever walked there.

Damascus lives off its belly. And its belly is filled on the pavements: The juice bars slicing and crushing, squeezing and squashing 24 hours a day. We ate myriad variants on the theme of freshly baked flat breads topped with different herbs and

sauses: the street side too hot to walk past, let alone to work in. Zatar is green and slightly crispy, like dried basil or oregano. Tomato paste with chilli and cumin is also popular and the falafel is cooked in rings in giant pots, like donuts on Brighton pier. Meat lovers can buy whole chickens and wolf them down with just bread and Labneh; its salty skin crispy and brown, and deserving of being eaten last. Shawarma is cheap and double wrapped in bread: like wearing a wetsuit in a sleeping bag. The sweets are mounded in shop windows on every corner of every street. Outside, pastries and cakes are nut-laden and drowning in syrup, orange blossom water or sticky date molasses. You can buy kilos of nuts and coffee and the smell of cardamom is everywhere and is only challenged by the aroma of grilled





The Suq in Aleppo

- its streets wide and lazy, its buildings low, as if seeking shelter - but in the middle of the highway, on the edge of the desert: almost on top of the stones. I keep referring to them as stones but this is neither a fair nor accurate description. There are utter ruins, and columns marooned by history's detritus, but there is also the huge temple of Ba'al. Considered by some to be, 'the most important religious building of the first century AD in the Middle East,' it originated as a Hellenistic temple, of which only fragments survive,

moon to the fleshy pink of dawn. It was spectacular. But having seen the show, we scrambled outward, away from the temple, the columns and the too few tourists that this site deserves - the camel men struggling to ply their trade. We walked for hours. Over low hills and dry river beds, we came across the funerary monuments in the Valley of the Tombs. Stretching for a kilometre, these are large structures, richly decorated. The tombs, some of which are below ground, but others rising to three or four storeys, were sealed with limestone slabs adorned with human busts representing the 'soul' of the persons interred.

And there are lots of them. As the sun climbed further in the sky, we stopped looking in every one, and made our way back to the relative modernity of our hotel room. Later, we realised that in more than six hours of walking around Palmyra, we had not over trodden a single one of our steps.

I seem to have run out of time and of space on the page. And this, in a way, is entirely appropriate. We spent too short a time in Syria, and in each of the places we visited there. I have not here explored the old city of Aleppo in the North, its youngest streets



Removal Man!

Umayyad Mosque



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meat as the official olfactory memory of this mountainous and windswept land.

From Damascus we travelled the 100 or so miles to Palmyra, and about 2,000 years back in time. In the midst of the first century AD, Palmyra, a wealthy and elegant city located along the caravan routes linking Persia with the Mediterranean ports of Phoenicia, came under Roman control. Already wealthy, Palmyra offered refuge from the harsh Syrian desert: its oasis pouring forth water and sustenance, as well as the opportunity to trade. The oases now dried, Palmyra stands skeletally beneath the blistering sun; its stones standing singly, describing an ancient town.

We arrived by bus at noon. The driver, eager to please, dropped us not at the small village that has sprung up nearby

and measures more than 200 metres square.

And it is more or less intact.

Only a roof is missing to rest upon walls that climb as if to touch the sky, and broken columns suggest a fit of rage rather than the passage of time. The altar, though weather worn and softened somehow, still raises itself up in demand of sacrifice, threatening the calm. Outside the temple, Palmyra marches outward in straight lines and colonnaded streets. A monumental arch is richly decorated and the theatre, 12 long tiers of stone centred around a stage. Behind the theatre, a small Senate is where the local nobility passed laws and made political decisions, and it was at the 'Tariff Court' behind, where passing caravans would pay their dues.

The site is vast. On our second day there, we rose before the sun and watched from a hillside as the main city turned from the ghostly white of the

still half a millennia old; and I have not visited here the Crusader Castle at Krak des Chevaliers, the best preserved on earth, or Hama's great water wheels that irrigate huge swathes of land, turning them lush and green. Nor have I told you about where we stayed, and more importantly, where to avoid. I have not mentioned the boutique hotel (in Aleppo) where the menus had no prices and we feared the worst, only to be aghast by how little we had paid for what we ate. And I have made no mention of any of the people, their stories, advice and jokes all a blur of Pidgin English and our even worse Arabic. Syria seems like a dream now; fast paced and vivid and indelibly marked upon me. We will return there soon I'm certain, and attempt to absorb even more of the same ■

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