

Tim Jepson takes the road to Damascus and finds a capital city steeped in history – Syria’s unspoilt urban delight, ravishing and raw yet secular and safe – without the typical drawbacks of Middle Eastern destinations.

# A LOVEABLE OLD ROGUE

Umayyad Mosque is one of Islam’s most magnificent buildings.





**T**ricky, Damascus, because it's in Syria, and Syria, as we all know, is a rogue state. But don't judge a country purely on its politics. Judge it instead on a place like Damascus, Syria's sublime capital, increasingly recognised by those in the know as one of Arabia's most rousing cities.

It's not hard to see why. For a start, it's the world's oldest continually inhabited city – 5,000 years and counting – crammed with history and resonant with names such as Saladin, Hadrian, St Paul, Nebuchadnezzar, Tamerlane, Alexander the Great and Lawrence of Arabia. It's also a city with streets so old they are mentioned in the Bible, a city with the Middle East's most evocative souk, one of Islam's greatest mosques, a stunning museum and hundreds of beautiful historic buildings.

Damascus is a tolerant and safe city. A secular state, this is a place where Christians, Muslims and Jews live, work and worship together, where women can walk home alone in the small hours and where there is no record of any Westerner being mugged, let alone kidnapped. Best of all it is a city of wonderful people, Damascans being unfailingly polite, hospitable and proud of their country's long history (if not its recent past). Absent from their ranks are religious zealots, the hassling would-be guides typical of other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, and completely lacking in the souvenir hustlers.

#### What to see

First on the list must be the Old City's souk. Wander, wander some more and wonder – this is a magical labyrinth, with exotic sights and smells at every turn, barely changed since the days Lawrence of Arabia strolled the twisting alleys. At its heart is the vast Umayyad Mosque, one of Islam's most magnificent buildings, second only in spiritual significance to the mosques of Mecca and Medina. The mosque dates from 708, but worship on the site goes back at least 3,000 years, when the Arameans built a temple to Hadad, the Levantine rain god. This was followed by the Romans' Temple to Jupiter and a Byzantine cathedral. It's a surprisingly relaxed place, easy to visit for Westerners, male or female.

Nearby is Khan As'ad Pasha, the most staggering of 18 surviving medieval caravanserais in the city. Also close by is Straight Street. In the New Testament, Ananias is commanded in a vision to go to the 'Street which is called straight (Acts 9:11), there to meet Saul (later St Paul) after his conversion 'on the road to Damascus'. It is, as Mark Twain, pointed out, the only 'joke' in the Bible, because the street is not straight.

The house of Ananias can be visited but also be sure to see Maristan Nur Ad-Din, a former medieval hospital, as many of the old Damascene houses as you can find open, and the staggering National Museum, filled with treasures from some of the 4,000 (largely unexcavated) archaeological sites across Syria.

## GETTING THERE

Abercrombie & Kent offers tailor-made trips to Damascus and Syria, including all visa, guide and ground arrangements. A four-night stay at the Four Seasons starts at £1,670 per person, including flights, breakfast, guides and excursions. The company also offers the 'The Road to Aleppo' itinerary from £2,458 per person, including three nights at the Four Seasons Damascus, two nights in Aleppo and a night each in Palmyra and Hama.

**Abercrombie & Kent** Tel: 0845 618 2213  
www.abercrombiekent.co.uk

## WHERE TO STAY

**Four Seasons**, Shukri Al Quatli Street  
Tel: +963 11 339 1000, www.fourseasons.com

**Beit Al Mamlouka**, Bab Touma  
Tel: +963 11 543 0445, www.almamlouka.com

**Talisman** 116 Tal El-Hijara Street  
Tel: +963 11 541 5379, www.hotelatalisman.net

## WHERE TO EAT

**Old Town**, Off Sharia Bab Sharqi  
Tel: +963 11 542 8088

**Bait Jabri**, Al-Sawaf Street  
Tel: +963 11 541 6254, www.jabrihouse.com

**Leila's**, Souk al-Abbabiyya  
Tel: +963 11 544 5900

**Al-Khawali**, Al-Saollamy Street  
Tel: +963 11 222 5808

**La Montagna**, Jebel Qassioun  
Tel: +963 11 373 1110

**Ahla Talleh**, Jebel Qassioun  
Tel: +963 11373 0855

## WHERE TO BE SEEN

**Z-Bar Omayad Hotel**, Brazil Street  
Tel: +963 11 221 7700, www.omayad-hotel.com

**Marmar**, Dawam-neh Street  
Tel: +963 11 544 6425

**Casablanca**, Hanania Street, Bab Sharqi  
Tel: +963 11 541 7598

**Piano Bar**, Hanania Street, Bab Sharqi  
Tel: +963 11 542 0542

## WHERE TO RELAX

**Hamman Bakri**, Qanayet al-Hattab  
Tel: +963 11 542 6606

**Nur Ad-Din**, Souq al-Bzouriyya  
Tel: +963 11 222 9513

### Where to stay

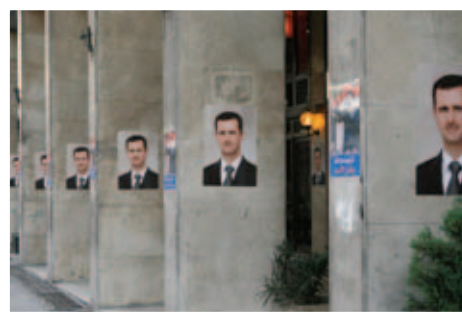
The Four Seasons is an exacting luxury hotel chain, and doesn't launch hotels lightly, so the fact that it opened a property in Damascus in late 2005 suggests it sees it as a city with a promising future. The 297-room, 17-storey building is already a Damascene landmark and the obvious first choice for a stay in the city. Service is what you would expect of a Four Seasons hotel – impeccable – and the rooms wonderfully spacious, with the odd Arabic decorative touch to offset the





Above, The Bab Touma quarter, heart of the Old City's nascent nightlife district.

Left, Damascus is a historic and secular city, a where Christians, Muslims and Jews live, work and worship together



views over the Umayyad Mosque. Al-Khawali offers an equally captivating view over the domes of Khan As'ad Pasha, though Damascus's most breathtaking panorama is from Jebel Qassioun, the 4,000-foot mountain above the city. La Montagna (no alcohol) and Ahla Talleh are the best options here, though the food is second to the views.

### Taking it easy

Sightseeing and dining could keep you happy for days in Damascus, with excursions to majestic Roman sites such as Bosra and Palmyra available for a change. But you could also play golf – ask the Four Seasons' concierge to organise a round at Ebla Cham, 30 minutes' drive from the city centre. Better still, go native and indulge in a hammam (traditional bathing), either at Hamman Bakri in the Old City, preferred by those in the know (sessions for women by prior arrangement), or the more touristy (and more beautiful) 12th century Nur Ad-Din, also in the Old City (men-only).

### Hit the town

Nightlife? In Damascus? You'd think not, but the locals do go out, and not to the invariably dismal hotel bars cited by most guidebooks. True, after hours for many Syrians means a post-dinner raki or nargileh (hookah-pipe), but dig deeper and you'll find a handful of discreet little places beloved of the Damascene elite. One is the Four Seasons XO bar – dark and sumptuous – another the exclusive Z-Bar (reservations required). Or try Marmar, a long-standing fixture of the Bab Touma quarter, the heart of the Old City's nascent nightlife district, or the Casablanca and Piano Bar. ■

## BEAUTIFUL HOUSES ARE BEING CONVERTED INTO RESTAURANTS

predominantly Western fabrics and furnishings.

The hotel is a short taxi ride or a pleasant 15-minute walk to the Old City. No hardship this, but if you want to stay in the Old City itself – and somewhere with more local colour – then there are currently just two options, though more will surely follow. Both are converted historic houses, just two of the hundreds of glorious old buildings in the Old City.

The first is Beit Al Mamlouka, opened in April 2005, where a redoubtable wooden door opens to reveal an unexpectedly airy courtyard of fountains, orange trees and eight rooms decorated in traditional and beautiful Damascene style – all wood, marble, mother-of-pearl, painted tiles and rich fabrics. Similar, and a little more recent, is the Talisman, where the 15 rooms, though still delightful, are perhaps a little less seductive. A lovely pool, however, is a distinct bonus.

### Eating out

Let's not pretend otherwise: Syrian food consists largely of meze – extremely good meze, to be

sure, but there will come a time when you want a change. When you do, head for Il Circo in the Four Seasons, where the contemporary Italian food delights visitors and pasta-starved locals alike. Here, as elsewhere, note that alcohol is readily available, either in the shape of excellent Syrian beer, fine Lebanese red wines or rather more dubious local whites. Establishments where you won't be able to drink tend to be those close to mosques.

Apart from the Four Seasons, the trend in restaurants is similar to the trend in hotels – head towards the Old City, where increasing numbers of beautiful houses are being converted into restaurants. The pioneer of the so-called courtyard restaurant was Old Town, still a reliable if rather tame choice, with a meze-dominated menu dotted with the occasional Italian and French inspiration. Another old favourite is Bait Jabri, housed in an 18th-century Ottoman mansion and popular with an eclectic and welcoming mix of locals.

Also popular is Leila's, mainly because it offers the city's most sublime roof terrace, a great place to be, especially at night, when you can enjoy floodlit