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## The Road Back to Damascus

By SETH SHERWOOD

I FELT someone staring at me.

As I discreetly tried to photograph a Damascus sidewalk stand of militant Islamic religious posters — including the [Hezbollah](#) leader Sheik [Hassan Nasrallah](#) and his Kalashnikov-toting guerrillas — I looked around and realized that the young, rough-shaven salesman had spotted my camera.

“Where you from?” he said, in English, as women in headscarves battled for plastic shoes from an adjacent sidewalk dealer.

“New York,” I answered, lowering my lens and awaiting a tirade against my country — or worse. Instead, he broke into a smile.

“New York, great city!” he said. “Ahlan wa sahlan bi Sham.”

Ahlan wa sahlan bi Sham: Welcome to Damascus. During a weeklong visit in May — during which I explored the Old City of Damascus (including its proliferating nightclubs), the Silk Road bazaars of Aleppo and the ruins of ancient Palmyra — unexpected welcomes seemed to erupt from every corner of this ancient nation of Bronze Age, Classical, Biblical and Islamic history. No matter where I was or whom I encountered, local greetings were never long in coming.

Though most Americans might be wary of sojourning in a country whose authoritarian government stands accused of some serious charges — financing Hezbollah, allowing foreign fighters into neighboring Iraq and assassinating the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri — a week among the regular citizens of [Syria](#) and its cultural riches is eye-opening.

When I boarded Syrian Air in [Paris](#), I knew only that Damascus claimed to be the oldest inhabited city on Earth and that some favorite writers — [Mark Twain](#), Gustave Flaubert, Agatha Christie — had been swept away by the country’s lore-filled past and landscapes. Many people told me vaguely to be careful, though none had ever been to Syria. My few acquaintances who had braved the country despite its tarnished reputation assured me that all would be fine. Head straight to the legendary Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, they said. Fill up whenever you can on excellent grilled lamb, baba ghanouj and pomegranate juice. And leave your preconceptions at passport control.

The country I discovered, in addition to being friendly and largely free of crime and related hassles, even showed glimmers of creaking open to the West after decades of closure. Under its [London](#)-educated, 41-year-old president, [Bashar al-Assad](#), Syria has instituted private banking, removed a number of long-standing import barriers and passed measures allowing foreigners to own property. A Four Seasons

hotel opened in Damascus with great fanfare in 2005; a five-star Inter-Continental is under construction.

A huge two-panel billboard in central Damascus embodied the changes afoot. One side trumpeted the “3rd Annual Tourism Investment Market Forum.” On the other, the avuncular white-bearded face of Colonel Sanders, ringed in red Arabic script, heralded the arrival of Kentucky Fried Chicken in Syria.

GO back as far as you will into the vague past, there was always a Damascus,” wrote Twain, who visited in the 1860s. “To Damascus years are only flitting trifles of time. She measures time not by days and months and years, but by the empires she has seen rise and crumble to ruin. She is a type of immortality.”

He was scarcely embellishing. The Babylonians blasted through under Nebuchadnezzar, before the Persians did likewise under Darius and Xerxes. The Romans captured the country in 63 B.C., and Mark Antony campaigned there against the Parthians. It was on the road to Damascus, most famously, that the Jewish traveler Saul was blinded by the light, initiating his conversion to Christianity and a new identity as the Apostle Paul. And it was on the road to Damascus, six centuries later, that the Prophet Muhammad stopped in his tracks and refused to enter the city, saying that “man should only enter paradise once.” In succeeding centuries, the Egyptians, Ottomans and French all took their turns as occupiers before Syria became independent in 1946.

Today, the route to the inner sanctum of the eighth-century Umayyad Mosque — the spiritual and historical heart of Damascus’s Old City — seems culled from some time-worn star map. First you cross under the Roman archway, just south of the tomb of the fabled Islamic warrior Saladin, who defeated Richard the Lionhearted during the Crusades. Then you enter the vast gates of the mosque, whose stony expanses rest atop a former Byzantine church, which overlays a mostly vanished Roman temple to Jupiter, itself erected on the former site of a disappeared Aramaean shrine. Finally, you make a quick jog across the courtyard, past the mausoleum of John the Baptist and into the tomb of Hussein, a grandson of Muhammad and a martyr venerated by Shiite Muslims.

The afternoon I visited, the stone room echoed with clicking prayer beads, muttered Koranic verses and sobs. Men prostrated themselves, pressing their foreheads to the stone. Student-age girls and toothless, wizened old women in black veils wept openly. One bespectacled young woman cried uncontrollably, grabbing at the walls.

Places of powerful faith fill every corner of Damascus. In a small, silent street in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, I tracked down the Church of Ananias, the man who cured St. Paul of his blindness and baptized him into Christianity. Though entirely empty of worshipers, some handwritten notes and trinkets from visitors were stuck between the stones. “Clean and serene for 60 days,” read a green keychain, in English. Utterly different again, and equally haunting, was the reconstructed ancient Jewish synagogue in the National Museum, an evocative time capsule of relics from forgotten Bronze Age cities, vanished Roman outposts and other Ozymandian monuments pulled from Syria’s sands.

Found at the city-state of Dora Europos, a trade center decimated by the Persians in the third century, the towering stone walls of the synagogue glowed with painted panels of temple priests, strange animals, sad-eyed women, scrolls, menorahs, winged angels, horse dancers and serene-faced desert wanderers.

“It’s astonishing to find a synagogue that has paintings,” said Michel al-Maqdissi, the museum’s director of archeological excavations, speaking in French. A small radio filled his office with an opera aria. “The Jewish religion forbids painted representation, just like in Islam. It accepts decorative elements, but not the human form. That’s why it’s such a unique piece.”

Nearby, the lanes of the Old City brimmed with energy. Black-veiled women led teenage girls — some in loose robes, others in punishingly tight jeans — into fabric stalls. With chiming bells, bicyclists parted the crowds to deliver loaves of bread while old men rolled Sisyphean pushcarts of pastries and bottles of deep blue bilberry juice.

“Ahlan wa sahan,” said Tony Stephan as he ushered me into his antiques and craft emporium along Souk al-Hamidiyah, the most famous of Damascus’s venerable bazaars. Elderly and courtly, he gave me a tour of his store, which was stocked floor to ceiling with inlaid wooden boxes, elaborate backgammon sets, hammered urns, mosaics, Bedouin jewelry and rich textiles — many of them woven on a click-clacking loom in back.

“That’s [Jimmy Carter](#), that’s [Warren Christopher](#), and that’s Nancy Kissinger,” he said, pointing out photos of the famous figures who, in times of less fraught international relations — before the White House had declared the country a “rogue nation” and a member of the “junior varsity axis of evil” — had snapped up furnishings and fabrics in his shop. Much more recently, in April, the House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) and her delegation had strode through the souk during an official visit — the first in recent memory by a top American official — prompting local talk of a possible rapprochement.

Twilight in the Old City evokes a certain wistfulness. As the final call to prayer echoes through the blue-black evening, strolling couples and families fill the paved lanes around the mosque, licking at ice creams from the venerable parlor Bakdash. In the cafes, old men in threadbare suits sip Turkish coffee and chat. I whiled away more than a few nights among those smoking narghiles, as water pipes are called there, and drinking mint tea at the old world Al Nafoorah coffeehouse, as the nightly pageantry of Damascus flowed past. It was the perfect place to meditate on the city, a great palimpsest on which so many peoples, faiths and empires wrote their stories.

To see the most famous of Syria’s crumbled cities, Palmyra, I set out at dawn. The bus rolled across the arid emptiness, past loping camels, past goatherds in checkered headdresses, past tents of Bedouin nomads. Finally, three hours later, the majestic, blocky ruins emerged. Corinthian columns, eroded archways, theaters, ornate hillside tombs and temples to forgotten gods — Bel, Nebo, Arsu, Baalshamin — spread across the landscape.

Here, in Syria’s largest oasis, an ancient Silk Road trade center flourished some two millenniums ago. Someone surveying the landscape then would have seen a thriving market city, echoing with talk in Aramaic and filled with arriving camel trains bearing ebony, dried foods, spices, perfume, ivory and silk from as far away as [India](#) and [China](#). From Palmyra the exotic goods would be shipped westward to Rome — which for a time controlled Palmyra — where they fetched up to 100 times their original cost.

Today, a surreal Hollywoodesque scene was playing out among the ruins as hundreds of Syrian teenage

boys dressed in gladiatorlike costumes prepared a tightly choreographed dance number for the annual Palmyra Festival, which was scheduled to kick-off at dusk. In the well-preserved amphitheater, workmen were deploying a stage, curtains and lighting banks to accommodate the [Bolshoi Ballet](#) and various orchestras on the festival program. This week, the dead city would live again.

The miles of stony passages and thousands of shops in the souks of Aleppo, another Silk Road stop that's now Syria's second-largest city, briskly destroy flimsy descriptors like "diverse" or "eclectic." Such hollow words splinter under the tonnage of caftans, coffee beans, lutes, Teletubbies, silk cushions, mosaics, perfumes, gold, carpets, gumdrops and olive-oil soaps.

Dodging mule-carts and mustached men chewing pistachios — a local specialty — I flowed with the thick crowds past ornate Ottoman-era stone warehouses and the eighth-century Great Mosque, resting place of the head of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist. Time seemed barely to exist. The stone arches, massive wooden portals and iron-barred windows appeared unchanged since their construction in the Middle Ages. Today, the only signs of 21st-century life were the schoolgirls in Barbie backpacks milling about the battlements of the storybook medieval citadel and the screaming schoolboys fighting unseen invaders.

A kind of phantom world lurks among the time-worn stones of Aleppo. Strolling the souks, I could not help thinking that I was walking in the footsteps of [Mohamed Atta](#), the Egyptian leader of the Sept. 11 hijackers. As an urban planning student in the 1990s, he spent several months in Aleppo, writing a thesis that argued for the preservation of the age-old Islamic market against the threat of modernization. Later, sitting in a club chair in the bar of the Hotel Baron, a faded grande dame from the era of steamer trunks and ragtime, I half expected [Charles Lindbergh](#), T. E. Lawrence, Teddy Roosevelt or Agatha Christie to descend from their old rooms.

Married to an archeologist who worked in Syria, Christie wrote some of "Murder on the Orient Express" while holed up here. The young Lawrence also worked on archeological digs in the area, though apparently he found time for less rugged and martial pleasures. "These three days have been frenzied rushes and bargains for antiques (we have spent nearly two hundred pounds) from breakfast till after dinner in the evening," he wrote to his mother in 1912, gushing about having spotted "the loveliest painted and lacquered gilt ceiling that I ever dreamed of."

BACK in the Old City of Damascus, midnight settled on the Christian Quarter and a slow-moving line of black S.U.V.'s and silver Audi sedans cruised slowly down the Roman-era Straight Street, depositing the well-heeled and the high-heeled at trendy new resto-lounges tucked in the surrounding labyrinthine lanes.

Famous as the place where Saul received his baptism and was christened Paul, "the street called Straight" (as it's called in the Bible) and its environs are once again witnessing some astonishing conversions, as young, enterprising Syrians transform Old World buildings into 21st century D.J. bars, clothing shops and stylish small hotels.

"You can see renovation everywhere," said Amjad Malki, a co-owner of the jet-set Villa Moda fashion boutique, as we dined on grilled meats and excellent mezze dishes at the stylish Al-Khawali restaurant. In

what was a 17th-century stone stable, Mr. Malki's shop has swapped hay and oats for Prada handbags, Jimmy Choo shoes and Dolce & Gabbana leopard-skin bikinis, as well as dresses by Kenzo, which was host of a fashion show in Villa Moda's upstairs salon a few months ago.

"People are buying, and prices have tripled," Mr. Malki said, ticking off a list of hotspots like Leila's restaurant and the Talisman hotel, where Ms. Pelosi and President Assad lunched during her visit. "It's the place to be."

Inside the Marmar nightclub, a Damascus favorite of expatriates and the Syrian upper crust, evidence of the city's elevating style quotient was all around — D.J.-remixed club beats, madly dancing bodies, low necklines, high hemlines, clinking bottles of German beer, a haze of Gauloise cigarettes, T-shirts reading "Rock Star" and "Tequila Lounge." Even a few gay Middle Eastern men discreetly mingled in the global crowd, which showed no signs of flagging even as 4 a.m. approached.

"Five years ago, night life was not really a socially acceptable thing," said Omar Barakat, an extremely tall Syrian electrical equipment importer, battling with the loud remix of "Sweet Dreams Are Made of This" shaking the dance floor. Now, he said, "the scene is improving so much."

Surveying the blissful tumult, Firas Salem, a 20-something Syrian corporate lawyer, couldn't suppress a grin. "We didn't use to have people kissing in a public places," he said. He added that he had once lived in London but was drawn back to his hometown.

"Damascus is becoming a cool place," he said as throbbing electronica and chatter in a half-dozen languages spilled into the ancient streets. "Something strange is happening."

## VISITOR INFORMATION

### HOW TO GET THERE

Because of [United States](#) sanctions against [Syria](#), there are no direct flights from the United States to Damascus. Al Italia airlines ([www.alitalia.com](http://www.alitalia.com)) offers flights to Damascus from Kennedy airport in New York with a connection in [Milan](#) for around \$1,520. An alternative — and potentially cheaper — option is to fly to [Europe](#) independently and then use Syrian Air ([www.syriaair.com](http://www.syriaair.com)) from any of several European capitals. Flights from [London](#) Heathrow to Damascus cost around £296 (about \$592 at \$2 to the pound) for departures in late June.

A visa is required for Americans entering Syria. It can be obtained from the Embassy of Syria, 2215 [Wyoming](#) Avenue NW, [Washington](#), D.C. 20008; (202) 232-6313, ext. 106; [www.syrianembassy.us](http://www.syrianembassy.us); the fee is \$100.

### HOW TO GET AROUND

Traveling around Syria is extremely cheap. The Kadmous Transport company (963-11-331-1901; [www.alkadmous.com](http://www.alkadmous.com)) provides comfortable modern intercity buses all over the country. A trip from the Damascus bus station (called Mahata al-Pullman) to Palmyra costs 120 lira (as Syrian pounds are commonly called; about \$2.25 at 53 lira to the dollar) and takes two to three hours. A trip to Aleppo, four

to five hours away, costs 230 lira for the extra-comfy “V.I.P.” bus. There are several buses a day to and from each destination. Buy your ticket at the bus station about 30 minutes ahead.

Within Damascus and Aleppo, the abundant yellow taxis can be hailed on the street any time of day or night. A daytime journey within the city rarely costs more than 50 lira. By night, few drivers use the meter (il-adaad in Arabic). Just get in, announce your destination, and give 75 lira upon arrival. If you try to negotiate a price in advance, the driver will typically ask for much more.

## SAFETY AND SECURITY

In the wake of a 2006 attack attempt on the American Embassy in Damascus — during which one Syrian security guard was killed before the attackers were killed or subdued — the online travel advisory of the State Department urges American citizens “to defer all nonessential travel to Syria.” (A full text of the advisory is at [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/tw/tw\\_3036.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_3036.html).) More recently, in April, a Canadian traveler, Nicole Vienneau, disappeared during a stay in the city of Hama and has not been found.

That said, Syria remains a tightly controlled society that is largely devoid of street and organized crime, due in part to extensively deployed police and undercover intelligence services. Militant groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood are officially banned and suppressed — sometimes very brutally — by the nation’s ostensibly secular Baathist leadership. For travelers, the risk of theft, attack or even harassment remains small. In my own travels, I never felt threatened and never once heard of any other tourists being accosted.

## WHAT TO SEE

In Damascus, your best bet is to simply get lost in the truly ancient Old City, with its Roman arches, medieval citadel, venerable Islamic madrassas, and Ottoman mosques and palaces.

Built in the early eighth century, the imposing Umayyad Mosque (Muslim Quarter, Old City) is one of the holiest sites in Islam. Its grounds contain the tombs of three remarkable historical figures: the martyr Hussein, grandson of Muhammad; John the Baptist; and the fabled Islamic warrior Saladin. Free entry.

A 15-minute walk outside the Old City walls, Syria’s National Museum (Shoukri al-Quwati Street, 963-11-221-9938 ) contains relics from an amazing array of peoples and civilizations — Hittite, Canaanite, Assyrian, Babylonian, Aramaic, Roman, Byzantine — that flourished or set up camp in Syria. Entry 150 lira. Also in new Damascus is the excellent Atassi Gallery (Rawda, New City, 963-11-332-1720; [www.atassigallery.com](http://www.atassigallery.com)). It is run by the knowledgeable, multilingual Mouna Atassi, one of Syria’s leading authors on contemporary art, and specializes in the top Syrian artists of the 20th century.

In Aleppo, the gloriously ruined medieval citadel (Old City, admission 150 lira) offers sublime views from its crenellated ramparts. The Great Mosque, just north off the main east-west thoroughfare of Souk al-Atarin, was built in the eighth century and then rebuilt, after a fire, in the 12th. A kind of little brother to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, this one holds what is said to be the head of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist. Free admission.

In Palmyra, exploring Syria's most famous ruined city — a Silk Road stop that was founded around the second millennium B.C. and flourished under Roman control in the first few centuries A.D. — could take a couple of hours or a couple of days, depending on how keen you are to explore every temple, tomb and theater. The ancient city comes alive twice a year, for the Palmyra Festival in May and the Silk Road Festival in the fall.

## WHERE TO STAY

The Old City of Damascus is witnessing a boom in boutique hotels. Near Bab Touma gate, in the thick of the dining and nightlife scene, the intimate eight-room Beit al-Mamlouka (963-11-543-0445; [www.almamlouka.com](http://www.almamlouka.com)) is loaded with Oriental carpets, impeccably chosen traditional Syrian furniture and even frescoes and mosaics. Doubles from \$135. In the more tranquil Jewish quarter, the 16-room Talisman (116 Tal El-Hijara Street, 963-11-541-5379; [www.hoteltalisman.net](http://www.hoteltalisman.net)) is a neo-Sultanic conversion with a courtyard pool, a vaulted period-rich lounge and a hammam. Doubles from \$175. Along Straight Street is Al Khair Palace (Bab Sharqi, 963-11-543-1716; [www.alkhairpalace.net](http://www.alkhairpalace.net)). The 12 rooms are smallish but tastefully furnished with Syrian inlaid wooden furniture. Doubles are \$90.

The colonial-style Hotel Baron (al-Baron Street, 963-21-211-0880; [www.the-hotel-baron.com](http://www.the-hotel-baron.com)) in Aleppo is more to be recommended for its history — [Charles Lindbergh](#), Agatha Christie and T. E. Lawrence all stayed there — than for its somewhat worn and chipped time-warp décor. Doubles from \$50. The cozy 14-room Beit Wakil (As-Sissi Street, Al Hatab Square, 963-21-211-7083; [www.beitwakil.com](http://www.beitwakil.com)) is in a nicely restored 16th-century mansion in the Al Jdeidah quarter; it also has one of the city's best restaurants. Doubles are \$100 and \$130.

## WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Unless otherwise noted, prices reflect a three-course meal for two, without wine.

In Damascus, in an old stone house refitted with slick contemporary furnishings, Al Dar 111 (Christian Quarter, Old City, 963-11-542-3232; [www.aldar111.com](http://www.aldar111.com)) does excellent *fatoosh* (finely chopped salad with tangy grenadine, molasses and pomegranate), *baba ghanooj* (enlivened with sesame, tomato and lemon juice) and *sujok* (diced lamb sausages with peppers and spices). Around 1,000 lira. Carnivores will enjoy the mixed grill of skewered meats and the Tunisian sausages stewed in zesty tomato-onion sauce on offer at Leila's Restaurant and Terrace (Muslim Quarter, 963-11-544-5900). In a stylishly modernized old courtyard house next to the Ummayed Mosque, the restaurant also does [vegetarian](#)-friendly *baba ghanooj*, hummus and *burek* (cheese pastries). Terrace tables have killer views. About 1,000 lira.

Just off the southeast corner of the Ummayyad Mosque, Al Nafoorah is the ideal place to sip Turkish coffee (35 lira), smoke a *narghile* (100 lira) and watch Damascene life go by.

When in Aleppo, Bazar al-Charq (Karmel Street, 963-21-224-9120; [www.bazaralcharq.com](http://www.bazaralcharq.com)) and its Orientalist-fantasy décor merit a visit for the sublime *lahmeh bi karaz* (kebab in sour cherry sauce) alone. The hummus (with ground lamb and pine nuts) and chicken with sesame sauce are also worth indulging in. About 900 lira.

## WHERE TO SHOP

Damascus's Old City is a giant Aladdin's lair of Middle Eastern treasures. In the main bazaar, Souk al-Hamidiyeh, Tony Stephan (963-11-245-1075) stocks an excellent selection of silver, carved wooden furnishings, hand-woven caftans and shimmering Damascene fabrics, some of them created on site. For contemporary styles, Anat (Bab Sharqi, 963-11-542-7878; [www.anat-sy.org](http://www.anat-sy.org)) sells modern folkloric-chic textiles, handbags and women's clothing handmade by rural Syrian women using traditional techniques.

## WHERE TO PARTY

Done up in kitschy Middle Eastern gothic décor, Oxygen (963-11-544-4396), a bar-restaurant in the Christian Quarter of the Old City (a few twisting streets southwest of the Bab Touma gate), is where young Damascenes go to pre-party. The local Barada lager (100 lira) is a crisp Syrian answer to Rolling Rock. After midnight, especially on Thursdays, head a couple of blocks north to Marmar (al-Dawanneh Street, 963-11-544-6425). The 600 lira cover charge gets you three drinks, D.J.-spun dance [music](#) and a spirited Syrian and international crowd.

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