



THE DAWNING

Syria is finally opening its doors to the luxury medium-haul traveller, and it knocks the spots off Dubai, says Julian Allason.

Chill descends with the sandstorm and Mohammed's invitation to huddle round the iron stove is welcome. Outside the shack the noble ruins of the city once known as "Bride of the Desert" fade into an ochre cloud. Over cups of mint tea, the old Bedouin recalls life here in Palmyra under the pre-war French Mandate. He points across the ruins of the Roman Senate to Zenobia Cham Palace, a small hotel built in 1920 by a French countess with a weakness for desert warriors. As if in deference to Agatha Christie, a regular patron, Mohammed's voice falls to a whisper, "Two of my father's friends spurned her favours. They died horribly."

If so, all was in accord with ancient precedent for, under the third century rule of the beautiful Queen Zenobia, royal whim was law. Tiring of Roman dominion, Palmyra had defied the legions and taken the Levant and Egypt. Such were the riches and power accumulated by this oasis city state at the hub of the caravan routes to Persia that, until AD 274, it resisted successive attackers.

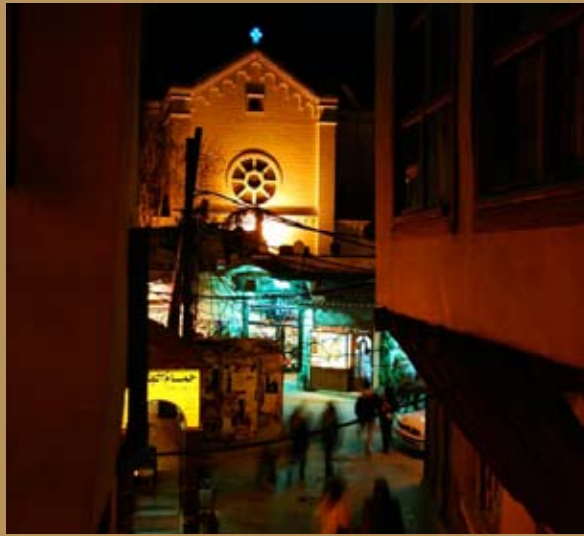
As the sandstorm subsides a Bedouin, muffled by a keffiyeh, rides his camel out from the shelter of the temple of Bel, through the Triumphal Arch and along the Grand Colonnade. He pauses to gaze at the amphitheatre, perhaps the most complete of classical times, upon the restored stage of which performances are still enacted.

"Do not visit Syria unless you plan to see Palmyra," my Damascene friend Riad had advised. Yet it is but one of 4,000 archeological sites dating back to 4000BC and earlier

in the land with the strongest claim to be "the cradle of civilisation". In the National Museum of Damascus are displayed examples of the earliest script, the first alphabet (from which our own is visibly derived) and the discovery of metallurgy. Syria's strategic position on the Silk Road, with ports and on a fertile crescent of irrigated land, had drawn the Phoenicians and the empires of Greece, Rome, Persia and Ottoman Turkey.

Each has left compelling – sometimes habitable – testimony in stone to their way of life. Thus in walled Damascus, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, I had followed in the steps of Saul of Tarsus, blinded after his vision of Jesus. "The Street called Straight" leads to the site of the house of Judas in which the persecutor of Christians underwent conversion to become the great apostle Paul. Seven of the eight city gates still stand, including one from which St Paul was lowered in a basket to effect a midnight escape from capture.

Syria has, until recently, remained conspicuously absent from the Middle Eastern map of luxury tourism. While Dubai, Oman and Jordan have established themselves as flourishing holiday centres, Syria has languished, a political pariah and, by comparison, little visited by westerners. It is not



that the country is unwelcoming: on the contrary, once through the visa bureaucracy the reception could hardly be more friendly or courteous. Unlike their counterparts in North Africa, merchants in the souk do not harass browsers, nor do self-appointed guides press themselves upon visitors. Road blocks are rare and virtually no westerner is known to have been mugged in Syria, let alone kidnapped. For this remains a society in which crime is considered to bring shame upon the family of the perpetrator, and with the ubiquity of the Mukhabarat security apparatus, unlikely to go unpunished. As the *Bradt Travel Guide* drily observes, even honour crimes are few,

and sure to relate to ancient blood feuds, thus unlikely to affect visitors.

This outlook seems set to change. Tom Marchant, co-founder of offbeat travel specialist Black Tomato, rates Syria "the single most intriguing known unknown among medium-haul destinations", while another British tour operator reports bookings up 500 per cent in 12 months. The past three years have witnessed not only the opening of the first *grande luxe* hotel in Damascus, but a renaissance in the Old City. Its roots can be traced back to 2000 when a cosmopolitan lady from Aleppo, May Mamarbachi, acquired a decaying mercantile palace. After nearly two years of negotiations with various ministries she was permitted to convert it into Beit Al Mamlouka, an eight-room boutique hotel of Levantine charm.

From an unobtrusive doorway in the narrow street a passage tunnels into a tranquil courtyard with a fountain, shaded by orange trees. At the southern end a *liwan* – a large alcove leading onto the courtyard – is furnished with divans on which to lounge with a sherbet. Narrow stairs ascend to guest rooms and suites restored to their 17th century splendour (with the addition of lavatories and baths/showers). One boasts an oriel window giving views up and down the street below, and a *konak*, or veiled harem lounge, cantilevered out over it from which the women could watch street life unobserved.

Such has been the quiet success of Beit Al Mamlouka

Main picture: the Triumphal Arch and Colonnade of the ruins at Palmyra during a sandstorm.
Above: a church in Bab Touma in the Old City of Damascus.

OF A NEW SYRIA

that it has inspired the renovation of 20 or so other traditional houses, affording visitors a hotel experience richer and more authentic than to be found in the Gulf states. Other decaying residences have been restored as restaurants, the interiors resembling the cave of Ali Baba; one, improbably, has become an internet cafe. So modest are prices that one can afford to splash out in the Souk al-Hamidiyya on Damascene brocade and backgammon boxes fashioned from rare woods inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Many young women go bareheaded here, and not only members of the well-tolerated Christian minority, whose denominations comprise about 10 per cent of the population. Those sporting Islamic scarfs are as likely to be wearing tight jeans as long coats.

When I pause in the bazaar to watch ladies in hijabs negotiating with the (male) merchant at a lingerie booth, a passer-by hastens to explain, "They are not Syrian, but Iranian tourists. Usually they just go to the ruins and the mosque." The mosque in question is the



magnificent Umayyad, the fourth holiest place in Islam and, somewhat surprisingly, reputed repository of the head of John the Baptist. Emerging from the labyrinthine souk beneath an arch that once formed the entrance to the Roman temple of Jupiter, the massive building can be seen to retain much of the cloistered structure of the Byzantine basilica it replaced. Indeed, for about 70 years it was happily shared by Christians and Muslims. One of the minarets looks as if it has been added to the top of a campanile.

Still open to all faiths, the Umayyad mosque is entered from the western door. A third of the way down its carpeted length – women roped off to the right, men to the left – is a marble shrine of Moorish aspect, the cenotaph of the Baptist. Gathered around it, praying earnestly, are pilgrims – mainly Muslim, for, like the prophets of the Old Testament, John is honoured in Islam, although strictly speaking not venerated. This does not prevent petitions, sometimes accompanied by an encouraging banknote, being slipped under the door of the shrine.

Close by is the Azem Palace of the Ottoman pasha, the Turkish governor of Damascus until defeated in 1918 by Emir Faisal's Arab army guided by TE Lawrence. Tellingly, this serene retreat is built upon the remains of no fewer than five older palaces, each the seat of an earlier imperial power dating back to the second century BC. Just outside the ancient city walls is the Hejaz railway station, whose military timetable was so often disrupted by Lawrence's dynamite during the Arab revolt against Turkish rule. Today a steam locomotive and melancholy booking hall are all that remain, the service diverted to a newer



At a time when religious persecution prevails in the region, the toleration of minorities speaks persuasively in Syrian favour.

terminus where the departure board displays such exotic destinations as Tehran, Istanbul and Amman (this last-named service is sometimes steam-hauled.) For while the Syrian elite may have been educated at the Sorbonne, maintain apartments in Mayfair and holiday in Rome, almost everyone else looks eastward.

For all that, the excitement was considerable when the Four Seasons hotel opened in March 2006, and the city has embraced its airy grandeur. Il Circo, the Italian restaurant, has become the rendezvous of choice for the well-tailored businessmen and raven-haired beauties-who-lunch in a city where foreign restaurants remain a rarity. To this weary traveller a brief occidental respite in one of the 297 spacious guest rooms and suites proves relief from Arab authenticity. The deep bath in which the residues of souk and sandstorm are soaked away is particularly welcome. Interestingly, the introduction of a small spa with Thai therapies has paid off and it is shortly to be enhanced.

The position of the Four Seasons, between a public garden and a busy roundabout, is emblematic of Damascus's own tentative entry into the 21st century. Yet the view from the terrace on which young couples

nibble sweetmeats is of the domes of Takiyya as-Suleimaniyya, an atmospheric mosque whose precincts house weavers, silversmiths and a lute-maker. The courtesies of bargaining are best conducted here over a shared *argileh* – a waterpipe, enjoyment of which undergoes a respectful intermezzo during the muezzin's call to prayer.

Such customs reflect the continuity of life in Syria, a country that, despite having its share of gimcrack modern buildings in the cities, has yet to undergo the dislocation of traditional life experienced elsewhere in the region, despite a rapidly rising population and an influx of refugees from Iraq. Driving west from Homs, midway between Damascus and Aleppo, Riad and I are arrested by a timeless sight. Atop the hill guarding the pass to the Mediterranean is the Crusader castle of

Krak des Chevaliers. All but intact after more than seven centuries, the great bastion commands the landscape, almost unimaginably vast in scale. From within its curtain wall – 100ft thick in places – the garrison of 2,000 Knights Hospitaller and men-at-arms had repulsed Saladin and his Saracen armies to protect a land holy to both religions.

Perhaps the citadel still exerts a certain spiritual power, for in October last year Fra' Matthew Festing, an English member of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, came here to pray in the Knights' chapel. Six months later he was, quite unexpectedly, elected 79th Grand Master of the 12,500-strong religious order, whose activities are now confined to medical care of "the poor and the sick" of all faiths. The symmetry might have appealed to TE Lawrence, a regular visitor, to whom Krak des Chevaliers was "perhaps the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world".

On the road back to Damascus a third language appears on the signposts; to Arabic and French is added Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus of Nazareth. Maloula, to which they point, and two neighbouring villages are among the last places on earth in

which the tongue is still spoken. At an altitude of almost 5,000ft tiny houses cling to the face of the mountain, harbouring a way of life little altered since biblical times.

In the monasteries of St Sergius and St Taqla, the liturgy of the Mass replicates Christ's Last Supper down to the original words of consecration of bread and wine. At a time when religious persecution prevails in much of the region, the toleration of minorities speaks persuasively in Syrian favour.

A week before, when encountering the first fury of the sandstorm, we had sought temporary shelter in the Baghdad Café, an outpost of Hitchcockian remoteness off the road to Iraq. The interior resembled the tent of a Bedouin sheriff, the main concessions to visitors being a rack of postcards, a centurion's helmet of uncertain provenance and the inevitable iron stove on which coffee was brewing. Departing after the storm had abated sufficiently to allow driving, Ahmad, the owner, had refused payment for our refreshments. "You are our honoured guests," he had said. Words that were to be echoed throughout Syria. But a rum way to run a catering enterprise nevertheless. ♦

YOU CANNOT BE SYRIAN

The best times to visit Syria are mid-March to late May and September to November, avoiding summer heat and winter snow. Julian Allason travelled to Syria as a guest of **Black Tomato** (020-7610 9008; www.blacktomato.co.uk) which offers a five-night B&B package (based on two people sharing), including hotels, economy flights from London, guides and drivers, from £999 per person. Prices are for a double room mid-season, with breakfast: **Beit Al Mamlouka**, Damascus (00963-115 430 445/6; www.almamlouka.com), from about £80. **Four Seasons**, Shukri Al Quatli Street, Damascus (00963-113 391 000; www.fourseasons.com), from about £150. **Zenobia Cham Palace**, Palmyra (00963-315 918 123; www.chamhotels.com), from about £67. Hotels and guides can be booked through Agence Beroia (beroia@aloola.sy). Other tour operators to Syria include **Steppes Travel** (01285-651 010; www.steppestravel.co.uk) and **Cox & Kings** (020-7873 5000; www.coxandkings.co.uk). **Syrian Airlines** (020-7631 3511; www.syrianairlines.co.uk) flies three times a week from London Heathrow direct to Damascus, from £295 return. **BMI** (0870-607 0555; www.flybmi.com) flies daily from London Heathrow to Damascus, from £464 return.

Clockwise from top: the town of Aleppo with its Islamic citadel. The Umayyad mosque in Damascus. Beit Al Mamlouka hotel courtyard in Damascus.