

The art of the travel guide



It's a rare traveller that heads off into even the not-very-unknown without some sort of guide. Historically, men and women from Europe tackling the Levant would have engaged a panoply of local guides and servants to ease their passage; today, even the most easygoing backpacker will have a quick surf around Trip Advisor before hitching a lift. Some

might even delve into a region's history and literature to round out their experience – and you don't need to be an outsider to revel in the unique joys of discovering new facets to a city, as books like 'Beyroutes' have proved here.

But the most likely choice for voyagers both local and international is still some sort of travel guide.

Numerous options through bookshop shelves, asking you to define what sort of traveller you want to be – Quirky? Hedonistic? Cheap? – but rare is the volume that manages to encapsulate all that a travel guide can and should be. An accurate, usable guide, yes – but one that is also beautifully produced, a joy to explore in itself, can be an inspiration and the best kind of souvenir as well.

Carole Corm, co-author (with May Mamarbachi) of the first Damascus-only city guide, launched in December, might just have pulled it off. 'I think a guide should really help you understand a country,' she says, 'not just guide you to the main tourist sites; [and] highlight positive aspects of a country or a city, so it's a change from the petty politics we read about in the paper every day.' To bring the city to life, the authors 'asked experts to fill us in on all sorts of topics, from contemporary art and architecture, to street food and nightlife. We also asked Damascus residents – from the head of the Syrian symphony orchestra to a famous hotelier – to share with us their local haunts: res-

taurants, cafés, cool neighbourhoods.' The result – a deliciously-textured, art-photograph-strewn volume littered with stories from every era and every walk of life – offers an opportunity for the city, not a brand, to be your guide. A guide is only the first key to a voyage, but one that can make all the difference – 'Damascus: A Travel Guide' understands that. '*Damascus: A Travel Guide*', published by *Les Éditions de la Revue Phénicienne*, is out now, \$25.

