

Syria

Here's a newsflash: contrary to what the US State Department may wish the world to think, Syria is not populated by terrorists, zealots and other bogeymen. In fact, Syrians are among the most friendly and hospitable people in the world, and most visitors to their country end up developing a lifelong infatuation with its gentle charms.

Since Bashar al-Assad took over the reins from his father in 2001, modernisation has been on the national agenda. This is no Levantine backwater – Syria is a modern, efficient and very proud nation with an administration that is becoming more liberal and outward looking by the day. It needs and deserves travellers to bear witness to this fact.

Fortunately, all this modernisation doesn't mean that Syria has lost sight of its past. The country has more than its fair share of significant historical sites, all of which are respectfully maintained by the authorities. The ancient cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Bosra are all listed on Unesco's World Heritage list, as is the sensationally beautiful ruined city of Palmyra. Mighty Crusader castles, labyrinthine medieval souqs, jewel-like Damascene houses and sacred Umayyad mosques are only some of the treats on offer; there are plenty more for those who are keen to search them out. Best of all is the fact that these monuments are often woven into the fabric of daily life – the locals worship in the mosques, shop in the souqs, drink tea in the houses and picnic in the ruins. And they're happy for travellers to join them.

Talking about picnics brings us to the *pièce de résistance* when it comes to a Syrian sojourn – the food. The national cuisine is simply superb, so come with a big appetite. You're bound to be replete in so many ways when you finally tear yourself away.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 185,180 sq km
- **Capital** Damascus
- **Country code** ☎ 963
- **Language** Arabic
- **Money** Syrian pound (also known as the lira; S£); US\$1 = S£51.91; €1 = S£61.30
- **Official name** Syrian Arab Republic
- **Population** 20 million



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Old City in Damascus** (p514) The jewel in Syria's crown is the most beautiful district in the Middle East.
- **Aleppo's souqs** (p538) Nothing beats getting lost in these mazelike lanes.
- **Crac des Chevaliers** (p529) The castle of every child's imagination – it never ever disappoints.
- **Palmyra** (p545) Queen Zenobia's magnificent sandstone city is the ultimate desert oasis.
- **Qala'at Samaan** (p544) Its bizarre history is equalled only by its magnificent location.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Syria has a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers (June to August) and mild, wet winters (December to February) close to the coast. Inland it gets progressively drier and more inhospitable. On the coast, average daily temperatures range from 29°C in summer to 10°C in winter and the annual rainfall is about 760mm. On the cultivated steppe area, temperatures average 35°C in summer and 12°C in winter. Rainfall varies from 250mm to 500mm. In the desert, the temperatures are high and rainfall is low. In summer, the days average 40°C and highs of 46°C are not uncommon. Winter can be extremely cold in mountainous areas, including Crac des Chevaliers.

Spring is the best time to visit as temperatures are mild and the winter rains have

cleared the haze that obscures views for much of the year. Autumn is the next best choice. The busiest tourism periods are Easter, July, August, October and Islamic religious holidays. During these times it is essential to book accommodation in advance. This chapter often quotes opening hours as 'summer' or 'winter'; summer hours generally refer to April to September and winter hours to October to March, but these aren't set in stone and can be dependent on the weather.

See Climate Charts p643.

HISTORY

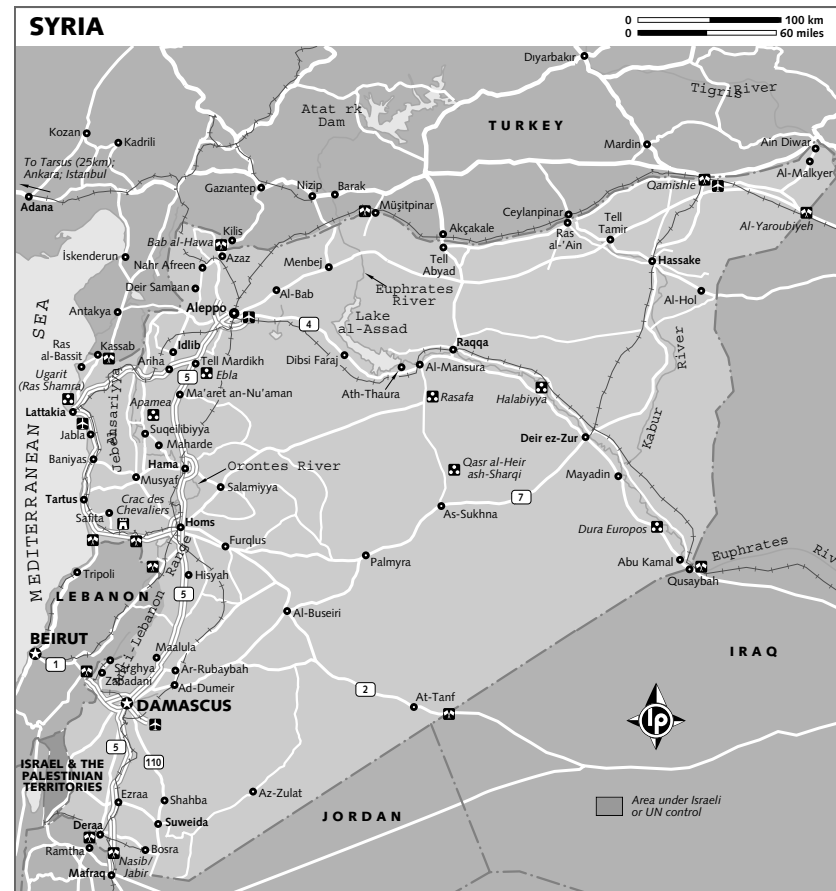
Historically, Syria included the territories that now make up modern Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Syria itself. Due to its strategic position, its coastal towns were important Phoenician trading posts. Later the area became an equally pivotal part of the Egyptian, Persian and Roman empires – and many others in the empire-building business, for that matter. For more details, see p37.

Syria finally ended up as part of the Ottoman domains ruled from Istanbul, and was dished out to France (along with Lebanon) when the Ottoman Empire broke up after WWI. This caused considerable resentment, as the region had been briefly independent from the end of WWI until the French took over in 1920.

France never had much luck with its Syria-Lebanon mandate. Local opposition to its policy of carving up the country into mini-states (Grand Liban, Lebanon, Aleppo and Damascus) and minority enclaves (for the Druze and Alawite) led to revolts against French rule. Elections were held in 1928 and 1932, but moves to establish a constitution were stymied by the occupying power, which compounded its unpopularity in 1939 when it ceded the northern cities of Antioch (Antakya) and Alexandretta (Iskenderun) to Turkey in an effort to ensure Turkey's neutrality in WWII.

After the surrender of France to Germany in 1940, Syria came under the control of the Vichy government; its overthrow in 1941 paved the way for Syria's independence to be formally recognised, though it took a while for the French to acknowledge this and finalise the handover.

A nationalist government was formed under Shukri al-Kuwatli in August 1943,



but the French continued to be in denial about the waning of its influence in the region, bombing Damascus after locals had demonstrated in support of a final handover of administrative and military services to the new government. The situation was only resolved after the British intervened and oversaw the final departure of all French troops and administrators at the end of the war.

A period of political instability followed and by 1954, after several military coups, the nationalist Ba'ath Party (Ba'ath means 'renaissance') took power virtually unopposed. A brief flirtation with the Pan-Arabist idea of a United Arab Republic (with Egypt) in 1958 proved unpopular and coups in

1960, '61 and '63 saw the leadership change hands yet again. By 1966 the Ba'ath Party was back in power, but it was severely weakened by losses in two conflicts – the Six Day War with Israel in 1967 and the Black September hostilities in Jordan in 1970. At this point, Defence Minister Hafez al-Assad seized power.

Assad maintained control longer than any other postindependence Syrian government, with a mixture of ruthless suppression and guile. In 1998, he was elected to a fifth seven-year term with a predictable 99.9% of the vote. It took a failing of health to finally remove the man from power; his death was announced on 10 June 2000.

HOW MUCH?

- Cup of tea £25
- Newspaper £5
- One-minute phone call to the UK £75
- Internet connection per hour £50
- Museum admission £150

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- Litre of petrol £25
- Litre of bottled water £25
- Bottle of Barada beer £60
- Souvenir T-shirt (if you can find one) £500
- Shwarma sandwich £25

Syria Today

Following the death of Assad senior, his son Bashar acceded to power. A new government was formed in December 2001 with a mandate to push forward political, economic and administrative reforms. This has proved a challenge, particularly when it comes to reforming the country's unwieldy bureaucracy, many members of which have been recruited due to their political contacts rather than their level of competence. As a result, change isn't occurring as swiftly as many observers had hoped. Still, you've got to hand it to Assad junior – he's trying.

Improving the country's relations with the international community is proving even trickier. Publicly branded a 'rogue state' by the US president, George W Bush, Syria has recently been forced to withdraw its army and intelligence personnel from Lebanon (see p35). It has also been criticised by the US for its support of Hezbollah and for allegedly turning a blind eye to the movements of Iraqi insurgents. Though making a gallant effort to stand firm in the face of the superpower's displeasure, Syria is looking increasingly isolated on the world's political stage.

THE CULTURE Daily Life

The Syrian labour force is estimated at 5.3 million, and unemployment currently runs at 20%. Women comprise just 20% of the workforce.

Literacy rates are 93% for males and 78% for females. School attendance is compulsory for children aged between six and 12, and there are four national public universities, which have combined enrolments of 173,000. Salaries are generally low, even among these university graduates. An average wage for a doctor, for instance, is US\$400 to US\$600 per month, and one of the greatest problems the country faces is the 'brain drain' that is occurring as many graduates head overseas to find better-paying work.

Families are large, and extended families often live together. Rural–urban migration over recent years now means that about half of the country's population lives in the cities.

Population

Syria has a population of around 20 million, about 90% of which is Arab. The popula-

tion includes some minorities such as the Bedouin (about 100,000) and smaller groupings of Armenians, Circassians and Turks. There are also around one million Kurds.

The country has an annual population growth of 2.4%. Although this is a decline from the 3.6% growth that was seen during the 1990s, it's still very high by international standards. Fifty per cent of the population is under 20 years of age.

RELIGION

Islam is practised by about 89% of the population – 20% of this is made up of minorities such as the Shiite, Druze and Alawite, while the remainder are Sunni Muslims. The business community is mainly drawn from Sunni Muslims.

Christians account for the remaining 11% of the population and belong to various churches, including Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, Roman Catholic and Protestant.

DAMASCUS دمشق

☎ 011 / pop five million

Roads have always led to Damascus (Ash-Sham to locals). One of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, its position in the verdant Ghouta oasis and its proximity to the Silk Road led to it being coveted by waves of conquering empires. Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Umayyads, Mongols, Turks and French were all lured by the city's charms and left their imprint on its physical form, making Damascus one of the most architecturally significant cities in the Middle East. These days, the only foreign interlopers are travellers, who inevitably end up being seduced by its extraordinary Old City and unusual mixture of tradition and modernity.

ORIENTATION

The city centre is compact and finding your way around on foot is no problem. The main street, Sharia Said al-Jabri, begins at the Hijaz train station and runs northeast, changing its name to Sharia Bur Said. It finishes in Saahat Yusef al-Azmeh, the square that is at the heart of the modern city. The

DAMASCUS IN TWO DAYS

On day one, make your way to the magical **Old City** (p514) and spend your day exploring every souq, street and sensational café (two of the best coffeehouses to relax in are **An-Nafura** and **Ash-Shams**, p520). If you're a keen shopper, make sure you check out the city's most famous antique dealer, **Georges Dabdoub** (Map pp516–17), and one of its most reputable carpet dealers, **Khayat Carpets** (Map pp516–17). Both are next to the wonderful **Azem Palace** (p515). After returning to your hotel for a brief rest, move on to Central Damascus for a casual but delicious dinner at **Al Shamiat** (p519).

Day two starts at the **National Museum** (p515). After admiring the collection, saunter past the **Military Museum** (p515) and **Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya** (p515) until you reach the **Artinasat** (p515), where you may want to purchase some locally made handicrafts. Next, walk up Sharia Mousalam al-Baroudi past the historic Hijaz train station to the Old City, where you can enjoy a snack from one of the food stands near the mosque or colonise a table on the outdoor terrace at chic **Leila's Restaurant & Terrace** (p520).

After spending the rest of the afternoon revisiting the souqs you'll probably be in need of a drink with dinner, so make your way to the nearby Christian quarter and the atmospheric **Elissar** (p520).

streets off this square are home to most of the airline offices, the main tourist office, the central branch of the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) and a host of hotels and restaurants. Souq Saroujah, the home of the city's backpacker hotels, is southeast of the square.

South of Souq Saroujah is Martyrs' Sq (known to locals as Al-Merjeh), the city's 'downtown' district. Though it's currently a slightly seedy part of town, this may change with the opening of the enormous new mosque currently under construction. Further east again is the Old City, still ringed by its old Arab walls.

Maps

Avicenne Bookshop (below) publishes a *Syria* map with an inset of Damascus. It costs SE£150. The tourist offices in town and at the airport stock a free *Damascus & Damascus Countryside* map.

INFORMATION Bookshops

Avicenne Bookshop (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 2911; 4 Sharia Attuhami; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu summer, 9am-8pm Sat-Thu rest of year) The only decent English-language bookshop in Damascus; located southwest of the Cham Palace Hotel.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 110)

Fire department (☎ 113)

Police (☎ 112)

Internet Access

The following are a few of the many Internet cafés in Damascus:

Angelsnet (per hr SE£50; ☎ 24hr) This friendly place is usually packed with students from the nearby Damascus University. Connections are very fast. You'll find it behind the Oumayyeh Centre, near the Baramke garage.

Fast Link Internet (Map pp512-13; 2nd fl, Abdin Bldg, Sharia Hammam al-Ward; per hr SE£60; ☎ 10am-11pm Sat-Thu, 5-11pm Fri) Fast connections and good work stations make this a worthwhile option, particularly as it's in the middle of the backpacker quarter. You'll find the street off Sharia Souq Saroujah.

High Point (Map pp516-17; per hr SE£75; ☎ noon-1am) The best Internet café in town, with fast connections and free tea and coffee. Located off Sharia Bab Touma.

Zoni Internet (Map pp512-13; per hr SE£60; ☎ 10.30am-11pm Sat-Thu & 1-11pm Fri) Situated on the 3rd floor of the same building as Fast Link Internet, this café offers an almost identical service, but doesn't burn CDs.

Medical Services

Al-Chami Hospital (☎ 373 4925; Sharia Jawaher an-Nehru) Northwest of the main centre of town. Accepts credit cards.

Cham Clinic (☎ 333 8742; ☎ 24hr) Conveniently located behind the Meridien Hotel. Doctors speak English.

Money

There are several branches of the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) around town, as well as exchange booths where you can change money fairly easily; the branch on Saahat Yusef al-Azmeh will change

travellers cheques. There's also an ATM and an exchange booth at Damascus International Airport (p522). The Thomas Cook Financial Services representative offers no services for travellers.

Amex (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 7813; amexrep@net.sy; Sharia Balkis; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu) The local Amex agent is on the 1st floor, above the Sudan Airways office on the small street running between Sharias al-Mutanabi and Fardous. It offers very limited services, and can't give advances against your credit card, cash cheques or replace stolen ones. One service it does offer cardholders is poste restante (PO Box 1373, Damascus).

Post

Central post office (Map pp512-13; Sharia Said al-Jabri; ☎ 8am-7pm Sat-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri & holidays) Just downhill from the Hijaz train station.

Telephone

City telephone office (Map pp512-13; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 24hr) A block east of the Hijaz train station. Given that there are card phones on almost every street corner, you're only likely to need this place if you have a fax to send (for which it's necessary to present your passport).

Tourist Information

Main tourist office (Map pp512-13; ☎ 232 3953; Sharia 29 Maj; ☎ 9.30am-8pm Sat-Thu) Just up from Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh in the centre of town. Staff don't always speak English.

Tourist office (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 0122; Ministry of Tourism Bldg; ☎ 9.30am-8pm Sat-Thu) A second, smaller office by the Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya, near the National Museum.

Visa Extensions

Central immigration office (Sharia Filasteen; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) You'll find this office one block west of Baramke garage. Go to the 2nd floor to begin filling in the three forms. You'll need four photos (the Kodak Express just west of the Hijaz train station can do them in 10 minutes; \$E200 for eight photos), one entry stamp (\$E25), and two photocopies of the entry stamp and photo page of your passport. You can get extensions of up to one month. Visas take 24 hours to process.

SIGHTS Old City

Most of the sights of Damascus are in the Old City, which is surrounded by what was initially a **Roman wall**. The wall itself has been flattened and rebuilt several times over the past 2000 years. Its best-preserved section is between Bab as-Salaama (Gate of

Safety) and Bab Touma (Thomas' Gate – named for a son-in-law of Emperor Heraclius). For the best view, follow the road that runs along the outside of the wall.

Next to the **citadel** (closed to the public) is the entrance to the main covered market, the **Souq al-Hamidiyya**, constructed in the late 19th century and recently restored to its original state. At the far end of this wide shop-lined avenue is an arrangement of Corinthian columns supporting a decorated lintel – the remains of the **western temple gate** of the 3rd-century Roman Temple of Jupiter. Beyond the columns, across a flagged square, is the Umayyad Mosque.

If you get the chance, read the lavishly illustrated *Hidden Damascus: Treasures of the Old City* by Brigid Keenan before exploring the city.

UMAYYAD MOSQUE

Converted from a Byzantine cathedral (which had occupied the site of the Temple of Jupiter), this revered **mosque** (Map pp516-17; admission \$E50) was built in AD 705. The mosque's outstanding feature is its golden mosaics, which adorn several of the façades around the central courtyard. The three minarets, although subsequently altered, date back to the original construction. The tourist entrance to the mosque is on the north side, which is also where you'll find the small ticket office. Look for the 'Special Clothes Room' sign; women are required to don the grey robes supplied.

In the small garden north of the mosque's walls is the modest, red-domed **Mausoleum of Saladin** (Map pp516-17), the resting place of one of the greatest heroes of Arab history. The mausoleum was originally built in 1193. Admission is included in the price of the Umayyad Mosque ticket.

NORTH OF THE MOSQUE

Northwest of Saladin's mausoleum is the 13th-century **Madrasa az-Zahiriyya** (Map pp516-17; ☎ 9am-5pm), within which is buried Sultan Beybars – another Islamic warrior hero, this time of the Mamluk dynasty. It was Beybars who won several decisive victories over the Crusaders, driving them from the region.

Also near the Umayyad Mosque is the modern Iranian-built Shiite **Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque**, which is dedicated to the daughter

of the martyr Hussein, son of Ali. It stands out for its decoration (covered in gold and shades of blue) and striking Persian styling.

SOUTH OF THE MOSQUE

The **Azem Palace** (Map pp516-17; adult/student \$E150/10; ☎ 9am-3.30pm Wed-Mon winter, 9am-5.30pm Wed-Mon rest of year, closed Fri noon-2pm summer & 11am-1pm winter), south of the Umayyad Mosque, was built in 1749 by the governor of Damascus, As'ad Pasha al-Azem. It's fashioned in the typical Damascene style of striped stonework, which is achieved by alternating layers of black basalt and limestone. The rooms of the palace are magnificent, decorated with inlaid tile work and the most exquisite painted ceilings.

Swinging back to the west, the **Madrasa an-Nuri** is the mausoleum of Saladin's predecessor, Nureddin. Just south of the Souq al-Hamidiyya, the **Bimarstan Nureddin** was built in the 12th century as a mental hospital and was for centuries renowned in the Arab world as an enlightened centre of medical treatment. Around the cool, peaceful inside courtyard are displayed the hodgepodge exhibits of the **Arab Medical & Science Museum** (Map pp516-17; adult/student \$E150/10; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu).

Heading east, about two-thirds of the way along Sharia Medhat Pasha – historically known as **Straight Street** (Via Recta) – are the remains of a **Roman arch**. This roughly marks the starting point of what's referred to as the Christian quarter. **St Paul's Chapel** marks the spot where, according to the biblical tale, the disciples lowered St Paul out of a window in a basket one night so that he could flee the Jews. The old cellar of the **Chapel of Ananias** (Sharia Hanania) is reputedly (but probably not) the house of Ananias, an early Christian disciple.

National Museum

Located off Sharia Shoukri al-Quwati, the **National Museum** (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 9938; adult/student \$E150/10; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Jan, 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, closed for Fri prayers) is well worth at least one visit. Behind the imposing façade (the relocated entrance of Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi, a desert fortress near Palmyra) is an eclectic array of exhibits. Highlights are the hypogeum, which is a reconstruction of an underground burial chamber from the Valley of the Tombs at

Palmyra; the fresco-covered synagogue recovered from Dura Europos; and the Qasr al-Heir galleries. There's a pleasant coffee shop in the courtyard (tea \$E50).

Immediately east of the National Museum is the black-and-white-striped **Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya** (Map pp512-13), built in 1554 to the design of the Ottoman Empire's most brilliant architect, Mirmar Sinan. Part of the complex is now the **Military Museum** (Map pp512-13; adult/student \$E53; ☎ 8am-2pm Wed-Mon).

East of the Takiyya is a small madrasa that now serves as the **Artisanat** (Map pp512-13), an excellent handicrafts market.

ACTIVITIES

There are a few **hammams** (bathhouses) in the Old City, all of which offer a full service of massage, bath, exfoliation and sauna with towel, soap and tea.

Hammam Bakri (Map pp516-17; ☎ 542 6606; Sharia Qanayet al-Hattab; bath only \$E100, full bath \$E230; ☎ women 10am-4pm Sat-Thu, men 4pm-midnight Sat-Thu) A local bath in the Christian quarter, near Bab Touma.

Hammam Nureddin (Map pp516-17; ☎ 222 9513; Souq al-Bzouriyya; bath only \$E150, full bath \$E350; ☎ 9am-midnight Sat-Thu) The oldest **hammam** in the city, located in the covered street that runs between the Umayyad Mosque and Sharia Medhat Pasha (Straight St). Strictly men only.

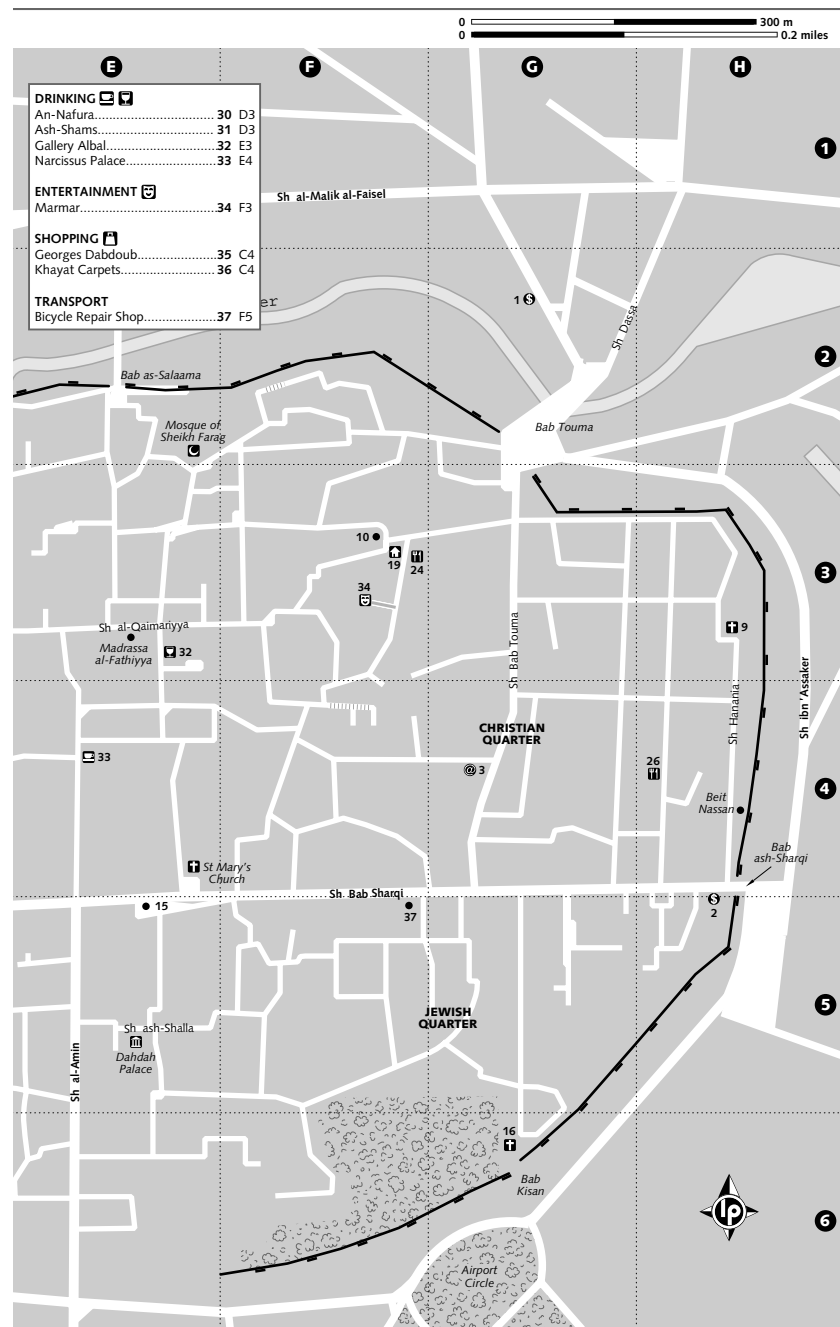
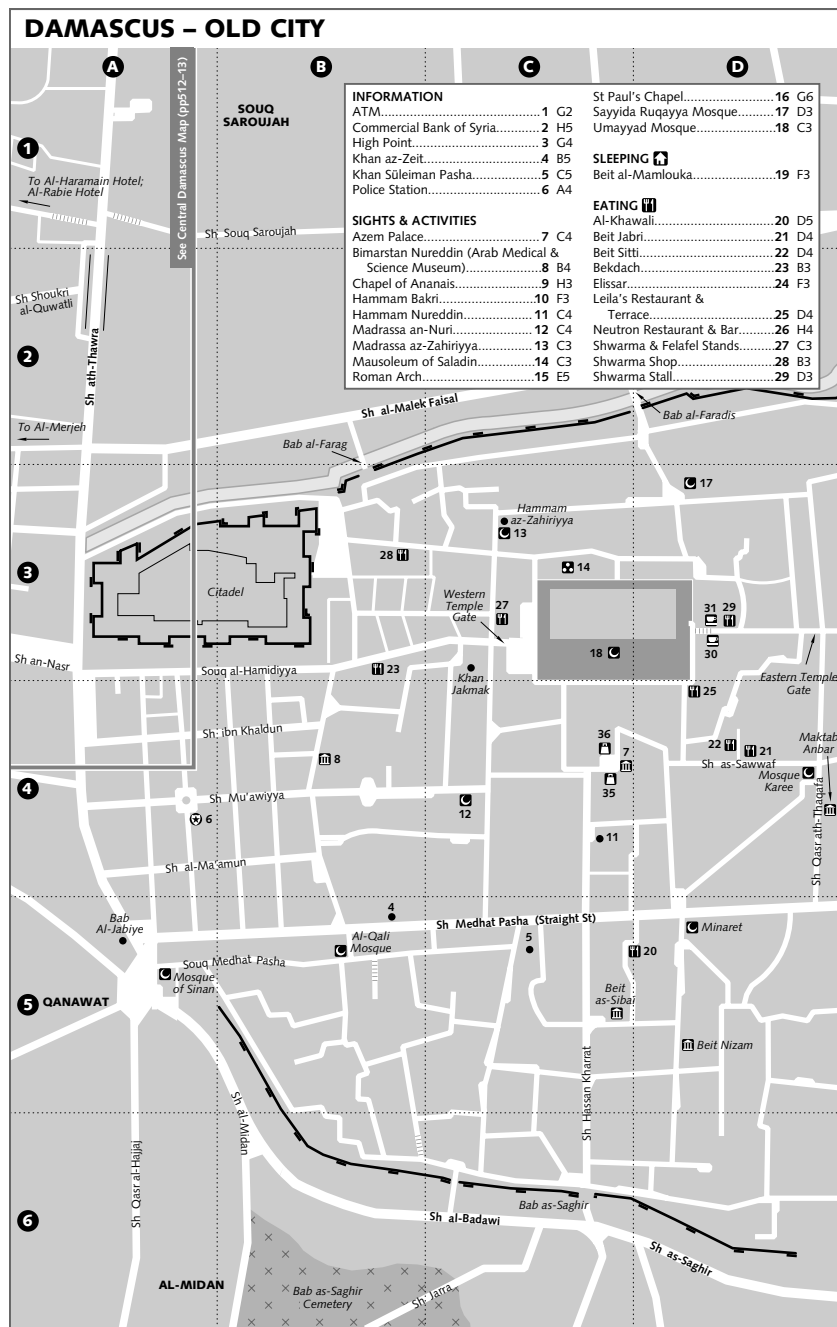
TOURS

The Al-Rabie and Al-Haramain Hotels organise popular day trips by minibus and private car. Prices depend on numbers, but as a rule are around \$E500 to go to Bosra, Suweida and the Sayyida Zeinab Mosque; \$E400 to visit Maalula, Seidnayya and Jebel Qassiou; and \$E600 to visit Maalula and Mar Musa. Though considerably more expensive than doing the trip by public transport, this is a convenient option and worth considering.

SLEEPING Budget

Sharia Bahsa, in the Saroujah district, is Damascus' travellers' ghetto. Here you'll find two perennial favourites, Al-Haramain and Al-Rabie, and newcomer Ghazal House. These are usually full, making booking essential, and have prices that stay the same year-round.

Al-Rabie Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 231 8374; fax 231 1875; Sharia Bahsa; roof mattress \$E150, dm \$E250, d with



THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Sultan Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 222 5768; sultan.hotel@mail.sy; Sharia Mousalam al-Baroudi; s/d with bathroom US\$22/30, without bathroom US\$17/22; 🚽 📺) Just west of the Hijaz train station and a short walk to the Old City, this is the accommodation of choice for most archaeological missions to the country – and no wonder. The 31 rooms are basic but clean; most have tiny private bathrooms and 22 have air-con. What makes the place so exceptional is the level of service: the staff here are among the most friendly and helpful in the country and will happily reconfirm flights; organise bus, train or onward hotel bookings; or arrange car rentals or tours. There's a library of novels to borrow and a lounge/breakfast area with satellite TV, where you can sit and enjoy a tea and a chat with fellow guests. Highly recommended.

bathroom S£800, s/d without bathroom S£350/600) The best of the backpacker choices in Damascus, this enchanting old house has an attractive courtyard featuring trailing vines, an orange tree and a central fountain. Modern additions include a satellite TV and comfortable seating. A few downstairs rooms look onto the courtyard and have tiny private bathrooms. Upstairs rooms feature ornate ceilings and large windows. Rooms at the downstairs rear are reminiscent of prison cells and should be avoided. All rooms are clean and have heating and fans. Showers are downstairs; toilets – some squat – are on both floors. Breakfast is S£75 and use of the kitchen is S£25.

Ghazal House (Map pp512-13; ☎ 231 3736; ghazal_hotel@hotmail.com; Sharia Bahsa; roof mattress US\$3, dm US\$5, s/d US\$7/12) A newcomer to Damascus' backpacker scene, this friendly and clean hotel is poised to become the most popular place in town and is getting rave reviews from travellers. It's in an old house with a courtyard and has showers out the back (24-hour hot water). Breakfast costs US\$1.50.

Al-Haramain Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 231 9489; alharamain_hotel@yahoo.com; Sharia Bahsa; roof mattress S£150, dm S£250, d with bathroom S£900, s/d without bathroom S£350/600) Another attractive old house off this picturesque shop-filled alley. Rooms are basic and only two have private bathrooms, but the comfortable beds, clean linen

and charming central courtyard get the nod from us. Our only reservation is that management crams too many guests into dorm rooms and even puts them on mattresses in hallways. There's a satellite TV in the small foyer and breakfast is available for S£85.

Midrange

Afamia Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 222 8963; afamia@hotel.sy.com; s/d renovated US\$27/30, unrenovated US\$22/25; 🚽 📺) Vying with the Sultan for the accolade of Damascus' best two-star hotel, the Afamia has recently been renovated and offers rooms and amenities that are worthy of four-star status. Plump doonas and pillows on comfortable beds are standout features; the private bathrooms (with hair-dryers) are so clean they gleam. Satellite TV and air-con provide the icing on the cake. Even the unrenovated rooms are impressive, featuring private bathrooms, fans and comfortable beds. All rooms are light and there's a comfortable salon on the first floor where breakfast (US\$2) is served. Extraordinarily good value, and in a great location to boot.

Salam Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 6674; salam.hotel@mail.sy; Sharia ar-Rais; s/d US\$20/25; 🚽 📺) In a quiet but central location, the Salam is extremely clean and all rooms come with satellite TV and private bathroom. Ask for one at the front. It's more comfortable than the nearby Sultan, but doesn't match the atmosphere. Breakfast costs US\$2.

Al-Diwan Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 231 9327; 2nd fl, Sharia Souq Saroujah; s/d incl breakfast US\$24/30; 🚽 📺) With its apricot colour scheme, small rooms and slightly frilly décor, Al-Diwan won't be for everyone. That said, rooms are comfortable and come with private bathrooms and satellite TV. The price is discounted by 20% in winter, making it a very good deal.

Al-Majed Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 232 3300; www.almajed-group.com; s/d US\$40; 🚽 📺) This centrally located place has been built by a local who spent many years working in the Gulf, and the décor and clientele reflect this fact. The extremely clean rooms all come with satellite TV and private bathrooms. Ask for one on the corner, as these have two windows and large beds. Rooms are discounted to US\$30 in winter.

Top End

Beit al-Mamlouka (Map pp516-17; ☎ 543 0445/6; www.almamlouka.com; s/d/st US\$115/210/260; 🚽 📺)

This courtyard house, which dates from 1650, has been converted into a sumptuous boutique hotel. Staying in the Süleyman the Magnificent room with its painted ceiling and marble fountain is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, made even better by the hotel's high level of service and great position within the walls of the Old City. There are only eight rooms, all of which are individually and beautifully decorated.

Omayad Hotel (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 7700; www.omayad-hotel.com; 1 Sharia Brazil; s/d US\$85/95; 🚽 📺 📺) This Art-Deco hulk down the road from the Cham Palace Hotel offers better rooms and infinitely better value for money than its neighbour. The décor has a few discordant notes, but rooms are large and extremely comfortable. The hotel is home to the luxurious Whispers Restaurant Lounge (mains S£300, open from 11am to 2am), and also has a roof terrace where you can enjoy drinks, nargilehs and spectacular views to Jebel Qassioun. Breakfast costs US\$8. Book ahead.

EATING

When it comes to Damascene dining options, you'll have no trouble at all finding a place with the food, atmosphere and budget

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

It's said that when the Prophet Mohammed first looked down from the mountainside onto Damascus, he refused to visit the city because he wanted to enter Paradise only once, and that was when he died. If Bekdach and Ghraoui had set up shop back then, his decision might have been made just that little bit harder.

Bekdach (Map pp516-17; Souq al-Hamidiyya; cone S£25) Find the queues at the mosque end of Souq al-Hamidiyya and you will have found this Damascene institution. Only one flavour is on offer, but man-oh-man, this pistachio-topped ice delight is to die for.

Ghraoui (Map pp512-13; ☎ 231 1323; www.ghraouichocolate.com; Sharia Bur Saïd; for 100g S£100) We start salivating just thinking of the apricot half coated with chocolate; you don't want to know what happens when we recall the fresh cocoa truffle. There's a second branch in the departures lounge at Damascus International Airport.

to suit you. For a big night out try one of the historic courtyard restaurants in the Old City; if you want alcohol with your meal you'll need to venture into the Christian quarter rather than the area around the Umayyad Mosque. In Central Damascus, the best restaurants are found in the area around Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh.

The places reviewed here don't accept credit cards or serve alcohol. Exceptions are noted.

Central Damascus

The side streets off Martyrs' Sq are crowded with cheap eateries, which mostly offer shwarma and felafel, while some of the pastry shops also do good savouries. One of the city's most popular snack stands is nearby, on the corner of Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh and Sharia Fardous. It's a great place to grab a cheap shwarma or fresh juice.

Pizza Roma (Map pp512-13; ☎ 331 6434; 3 Sharia Odai bin ar-Roqaa; pizza around S£100; 🚽 📺) If you're keen on American-style pizzas, this is the most popular place in town. You'll find it west of the Cham Palace Hotel.

Al-Shamiat (Al-Shameat; Map pp512-13; ☎ 222 7270; mezze S£25-55, fatta S£45-85, burgers S£130; 🚽 📺) This narrow neighbourhood eatery serves up excellent food for extremely reasonable prices. Try the absolutely delicious *shish tawooq* (marinated chicken grilled on skewers; S£150). Lone diners are made to feel very welcome.

Siwar al-Sham (Map pp512-13; ☎ 331 9568; Sharia Mousa Ben Nasir; mezze S£20-85, mains S£150; 🚽 📺) This family restaurant behind the Meridien Hotel is cheap and friendly. We recommend the delicious lentil soup (S£30), but feel obliged to make a derogatory comment about the totally appalling muzak (think 'Endless Love' and you'll be sufficiently warned).

Abou Kamal (Map pp512-13; ☎ 221 1159; 1st fl, Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh; mezze S£40-65, salads S£40-175; 🚽 📺) Damascene families, businessmen and ladies who lunch have been ordering from Abou Kamal's extensive and delicious menu for over 60 years. Don't let the blue velvet chairs and tuxedoed waiters frighten you – it's neither as expensive nor as stuffy as it looks.

Al-Kamal (Map pp512-13; ☎ 232 3572; Sharia 29 Mai; mezze S£40-100, mains around S£200; 🕒 11am-midnight; 🚽 📺) Next to the main tourist office and always packed at lunchtime, Al-Kamal

has a Parisian-style décor and a menu that features many home-style dishes as well as truly excellent *fatta* (an oven-baked dish of chickpeas, minced meat or chicken, and bread soaked in tahini; S£85 to S£115). There's a changing daily menu – try the Saudi *kabsa* (spiced rice with chicken or lamb) at S£130.

Old City

In the small alley east of the Umayyad Mosque, just past the two coffeehouses, are a couple of very good shwarma places and a stall that does a great *felafel*. There's another collection of *felafel* and shwarma hole-in-the-wall eateries in the covered market lane that runs north off Souq al-Hamidiyya, just before you reach the mosque.

Beit Jabri (Jabri House; Map pp516-17; ☎ 541 6254; 14 Sharia as-Sawwaf; mezze S£20-125, *fatta* S£65-125) This informal and phenomenally popular café is set in the partially restored courtyard of a particularly beautiful Damascene house. The menu runs from breakfasts and omelettes to Oriental mezze and mains – the quality of the food is OK, but it doesn't live up to the magnificence of the surrounds. Service can be rude.

Beit Sitti (Map pp516-17; ☎ 245 9800) Next to Beit Jabri, this relative newcomer has a similar menu and prices, but its setting isn't quite as attractive. Many locals prefer it for its friendly waiters and occasional live music. To find it, follow the 'Arabic Restaurant' sign and go through the low doorway marked '4'.

Leila's Restaurant & Terrace (Map pp516-17; ☎ 9456; ☎) In the shadow of the Umayyad Mosque, this stylish place gets the blend of Oriental style and European chic just right. Located in a beautifully restored courtyard house with a rooftop terrace and glass ceiling, it serves up some of the best food in the city. Vegetarians will love the lentil *kibbeh* (cracked-wheat croquettes; S£100) and the goat *labneh* (thick yogurt flavoured with garlic and sometimes with mint; S£75); carnivores will be just as pleased with the wide range of succulent grills and roasts (S£175 to S£300).

Al-Khawali (Map pp516-17; ☎ 9793; Sharia Hamrawi; mezze S£15-100, kebabs S£140; ☎) Located in a building dating from 1368, this upmarket restaurant is patronised by the likes of President Assad. Needless to say, its food and

service are as impressive as the absolutely gorgeous surrounds. Try the Al-Khawali aubergine (S£40) and see what great mezze is all about, particularly when served with bread still warm from the house oven.

Neutron Restaurant & Bar (Map pp516-17; ☎ 544 5451; Ja'afar Ave; mezze S£45-125, fillet steaks S£275-300; ☎) One of a growing number of licensed restaurants in the Christian quarter of the Old City, Neutron is noteworthy for its French-influenced menu, full bar and live music (every night).

Elissar (Map pp516-17; ☎ 542 4300; Sharia ad-Dawanneh, Bab Touma; mezze S£30-150, mains S£200-375; ☎) This elegant restaurant is named after a Phoenician princess, and its décor and menu are impressive enough to claim such a pedigree. Situated in an enormous old house with tables filling the courtyard and two upper levels of terraces, it serves up refined Syrian dishes and a few European-influenced mains, washed down by selections from a good wine and arak list. Make sure you're cashed up, as it's pricey.

DRINKING

The finest places to relax in Damascus are the two historic coffeehouses, An-Nafura and Ash-Shams, nestled in the shadow of the Umayyad Mosque's eastern wall. Linger over a tea here should be on every visitor's itinerary.

For something a bit different, **Gallery Albal** (Map pp516-17; ☎ 544 5794; Sharia Shawweesh), about a five-minute walk from the coffeehouses east along Sharia al-Qaimariyya, is a loud Western-style café with an art gallery above. It's where the city's bohemian types congregate.

There are a number of coffeehouses in atmospheric Old City buildings, and most of these also serve food. Our favourite is **Narcissus Palace** (Map pp516-17; ☎ 541 6785; mezze S£25-100), which is packed to its very attractive rafters with young people catching up over a *nargileh* (S£95) and tea (S£25). Music clips blare from the satellite TV, backgammon pieces clink, the fountain gently plays and the extremely friendly staff make sure everyone is happy. Great stuff.

The Star-Crossed Lovers Café, near the backpacker hotels in Souq Saroujah, is a great place to discuss regional politics and local popular culture over a tea. It also serves mega-cheap breakfasts.

ENTERTAINMENT

The most popular nightclub in town is **Mar-mar** (Map pp516-17; ☎ 544 6425; Sharia ad-Dawanneh; admission incl 3 drinks S£600; ☎), a bar-restaurant at Bab Touma that morphs into a club on Thursday and Friday nights and occasionally hosts live gigs on Sundays.

The **Cham Cinema Theatre** (Map pp516-17; ☎ 223 3300; Sharia Maysaloun; tickets S£150; ☎) regularly screens mainstream Hollywood fare in its two wide-screen auditoriums. The only way to find out what's showing is to drop by; screenings are usually at 3pm, 6pm and 9pm.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Several Syrianair offices are scattered about the city centre. A very convenient **Syrianair office** (Map pp512-13; ☎ 245 0097/8) is on Saahat Hijaz, just opposite the train station.

Most of the other airline offices are grouped across from the Cham Palace Hotel on Sharia Maysaloun, or one block south on Sharia Fardous.

Bus & Microbus

There are two main bus stations in Damascus: Harasta garage (*karajat* Harasta), offering Pullman bus services to the north and international services to Turkey; and Baramke garage (*karajat* Baramki), which has services to the south, including to Jordan, Lebanon and the Gulf. In addition there are several other minibus and microbus stations serving regional destinations.

HARASTA

Harasta garage is about 6km northeast of the city centre. All the big private-bus companies have their offices here.

Al-Kadmous runs a 24-hour service to Aleppo every hour on the hour (S£160, five hours); an hourly service to Deir ez-Zur (S£200, six hours) from 6am to 2.30am; 14 buses to Homs (S£70, two hours) between 6.15am to 8.15pm; four buses a day to Hama (S£90, 2½ hours) at 6.15am, 7am, 11.15am and 2.45pm; and hourly buses to Tartus (S£110, 3½ hours) from 5.30am to 11pm. It's the only company running services from Harasta to Palmyra (S£150, four hours); these leave hourly from 6am to 2.30am.

Al-Ahliyah has services to Aleppo (S£150) every hour between 6am and 8pm. It also

has services to Lattakia (S£150, 4½ hours) at 7.45am, 10.15am, 2pm, 4.15pm and 6pm.

If you're travelling to Turkey, Hatay has Pullman services to Antakya (S£300, eight hours) and İstanbul (S£1300, 36 hours), leaving at 10pm daily. JETT buses also travel to Antakya (S£500) and İstanbul (S£1600) at 10pm daily.

To get to Harasta you can take a microbus (S£5) from outside the fruit and vegetable market on Sharia al-Ittihad, just near Al-Haramain and Al-Rabie Hotels. A taxi will cost somewhere between S£40 to S£60. Some taxi drivers will maintain that the official fare between Harasta and the centre of town is S£200, set by the bus garage. This is rubbish – insist that they turn on the meter and make sure that it shows only S£3.50 at the start of your trip.

BARAMKE

Baramke garage is located about a 15- to 20-minute walk southwest of the Hijaz train station. The bus station occupies a square block, which is organised in four quarters. As you approach from the north, local microbus services are in front to the left; buses to southern areas are behind. The front right quarter is for service taxis to Beirut and Amman; behind them is the Karnak lot.

From here Karnak runs buses to Beirut (S£175, 3½ hours) hourly from 7.30am to 12.30pm and then 2.30pm to 7.30pm), plus two buses a day to Amman (S£325, seven hours) at 7am and 3pm. These are the only buses from Syria to Jordan and they operate on a code-share basis with JETT, Jordan's national bus line. You are much better off doing this trip on a JETT bus than a Karnak one, as they're far more comfortable.

If you're travelling to Lebanon and don't want to travel with Karnak, Dreams 2000 runs a service from Baramke to Beirut (S£200, 3½ hours) in Pullman buses. These leave every hour from 6.30am to 10pm. There is no bus service from Damascus to Baalbek.

Karnak has a daily service to Jeddah (S£1200, 24 hours) at 9.30am. There are two services per week on Saturday and Wednesday at 3pm to Kuwait (S£1500, 42 hours). Tickets should be bought in advance.

OTHER BUS STATIONS

Microbuses to Deraa (for the Jordanian border) leave from the Deraa garage in the

south of the city. You are much better off getting a Pullman bus from Baramke.

Service Taxi

There is a service-taxi station at Baramke. Ageing but well-loved yellow American sedans offer a 24-hour service to Amman (£500, five hours) and Beirut (£500, three hours). There are also infrequent service taxis to Baalbek (£200).

Train

All trains depart from the **Khaddam train station** (☎ 6341166), about 5km southwest of the centre. There are four daily services to Aleppo (£140/100 in 1st/2nd class, six hours).

The Hijaz Railway offers a twice-weekly slow and uncomfortable train service to Jordan (£200/US\$4, nine to 12 hours) on Monday and Thursday at 8am; passengers must change trains at Deraa on the Syrian–Jordanian border. For details of services from Syria to Tehran and Istanbul see p543.

The historic Hijaz station was being renovated at the time of research and there are plans to construct a new, purpose-built terminal behind it. This will be the terminus of a new Damascus–Beirut railway line.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Damascus International Airport is 32km southeast of Damascus. In the arrivals hall there's an ATM next to the Commercial Bank of Syria exchange booth. This is enabled for Cirrus, Maestro, Visa and MasterCard. The booth exchanges cash, but not travellers cheques. There's a 24-hour tourist info office, supplying free city maps.

A Karnak airport bus service runs between the airport forecourt and the southwest corner of the Baramke garage (£25, 30 minutes). Departures are every half hour between 6am and midnight. Look for the orange-and-white bus to the right as you exit the arrivals hall.

A taxi into the city centre organised at one of the desks in the arrivals hall costs between £400 to £600, depending on the type of car on offer. It pays to shop around. If you're taking a taxi from the centre out to the airport, expect to pay around £500.

Car rental companies like Hertz and Europcar have booths open from 8am to 10pm.

Bus & Taxi

Damascus is well served with a local bus and microbus network, but as the centre is so compact you'll rarely have to use it. A microbus ride within the city costs £5.

All the taxis are yellow and there are hundreds of them. A ride within the centre of town should never cost more than £25.

BOSRA

بصرة

☎ 015

The black-basalt town of Bosra, 137km from Damascus, is an easy day trip from the capital. Once the main city of the Roman province of Arabia, it's now little more than a backwater. But what a weird and wonderful backwater it is. The gigantic Roman theatre in its centre is incongruous but magnificent, and the atmospheric and substantial ruins of the Roman city contrast to the shantytown feel of the modern settlement. It's well worth a visit.

INFORMATION

Exchange booth (☎ 8am–2pm & 4–6pm Sat–Thu) Near the entrance to the citadel. You can change cash; the Cham Palace Hotel will usually change travellers cheques.

ReefNet Cyber Cafe (☎ 795 881; ☎ irregular) Next to the Al-Dahe office on the town's main street.

Restaurant 1001 Nights (☎ 795 331; www.obeida.9f.com; per hr £50; ☎ 24hr) Offers Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 9am–7pm) In the square near the citadel. Staff are friendly, but don't all speak English.

SIGHTS

The **citadel** (adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am–6pm Mar–Nov, 9am–4pm Dec–Feb) is a unique construction – it began life as a massive Roman theatre and later had its fortifications grafted on. The theatre was built early in the 2nd century AD, when Bosra was the capital of the Roman province of Arabia. The first walls were built during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, with further additions being made in the 11th century by the Fatimids.

The big surprise on entering the citadel is the magnificent 15,000-seat **theatre** – a rarity among Roman theatres in that it is completely freestanding rather than built into the side of a hill. It's a wonderful experience to be lost in the dark, oppressive fortress halls and then to pass through a sunlit

opening to find yourself suddenly looking down on a vast, steeply terraced hillside of stone seating. Bring a torch with you, as many of the passages under the theatre are dark.

Other sites located in the Old Town include various monumental gates, colonnades, Roman baths, vast cisterns and the **Mosque of Omar**, which dates to the 12th century.

SLEEPING & EATING

Restaurant 1001 Nights (☎ 795 331; www.obeida.9f.com; ☎ 24hr) Run by local entrepreneur Obeida Mokdad, this laid-back place is the travellers' hub in Bosra. You can grab a meal (breakfast £100, set lunch/dinner £250) or relax over a tea (£25) or local beer (£50). There's a 25% student discount. Obeida will also let you bunk down overnight in a room off the restaurant; there's a shower and toilet but you'll need your own sleeping bag. Note that single women may not feel comfortable doing this.

Bosra Cham Palace (☎ 790 881; chambsra@net.sy; s/d US\$122/145; ☎ ☎) The Cham Palace is currently the only hostelry in town, making the hefty prices no surprise. In actual fact, it offers reasonable value for money, with well-set-up rooms, nice gardens, a large swimming pool and a licensed coffee shop (sandwiches £150 to £170, tea £65, beer £130). Its Citadelle Restaurant (three-course meal £660) is popular with tour groups.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Two companies run Pullman services between Bosra and Damascus (£50, 1¼ hours): Al-Dahe and As-Soukor (often signed as Al-Skour). These have offices in the Baramke garage. Both leave from here every two hours from 8am to 10pm, and Al-Dahe has one extra service at 3pm.

From Bosra, both companies have services to Damascus every two hours from 6am to 8pm, leaving from their offices (As-Soukor's is west of the citadel, Al-Dahe's is on the main street).

Minibuses run between Bosra and Deraa (£15) between 4.30am and 4pm. These leave when full from the front of the tourist information office. From Deraa, five Pullman bus companies run services to Damascus (£50) from 5am to midnight.

LATTAKIA

اللاذقية

☎ 041 / pop 990,000

Laid-back Lattakia has little in common with the rest of Syria. A busy port since Roman times, it has a Mediterranean feel, an outward-looking inclination and true *joie de vivre*. Its pavement cafés are inevitably packed with locals sipping espresso, smoking margilehs, listening to imported music and telling slightly risqué jokes. In Lattakia, young women don skintight jeans and apply their lipstick lavishly, eschewing the headscarf; young men dress in home-boy uniform, albeit with a Syrian slant. The place offers a refreshing change, particularly if you have travelled from conservative Aleppo.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Virus Internet Cafe (☎ 465 540; Sharia Baghdad; per hr £60; ☎ 24hr) Central location, plenty of terminals and free tea or coffee. Connections can be unreliable.

Y Net Cafe (☎ 471 604; per hr £50; ☎ 9am–3am) A real café, with very fast connections.

Money

There are two Syriabank ATMs on Sharia Baghdad that will give cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, but neither is Cirrus and Maestro enabled. The **Commercial Bank of Syria** (Sharia Baghdad) will change travellers cheques for a flat fee of £25.

Post

Main post office (☎ 8am–2pm Sat–Thu) Some distance out of the centre, just north of the train station, in a little alley off Sharia Suria.

Telephone

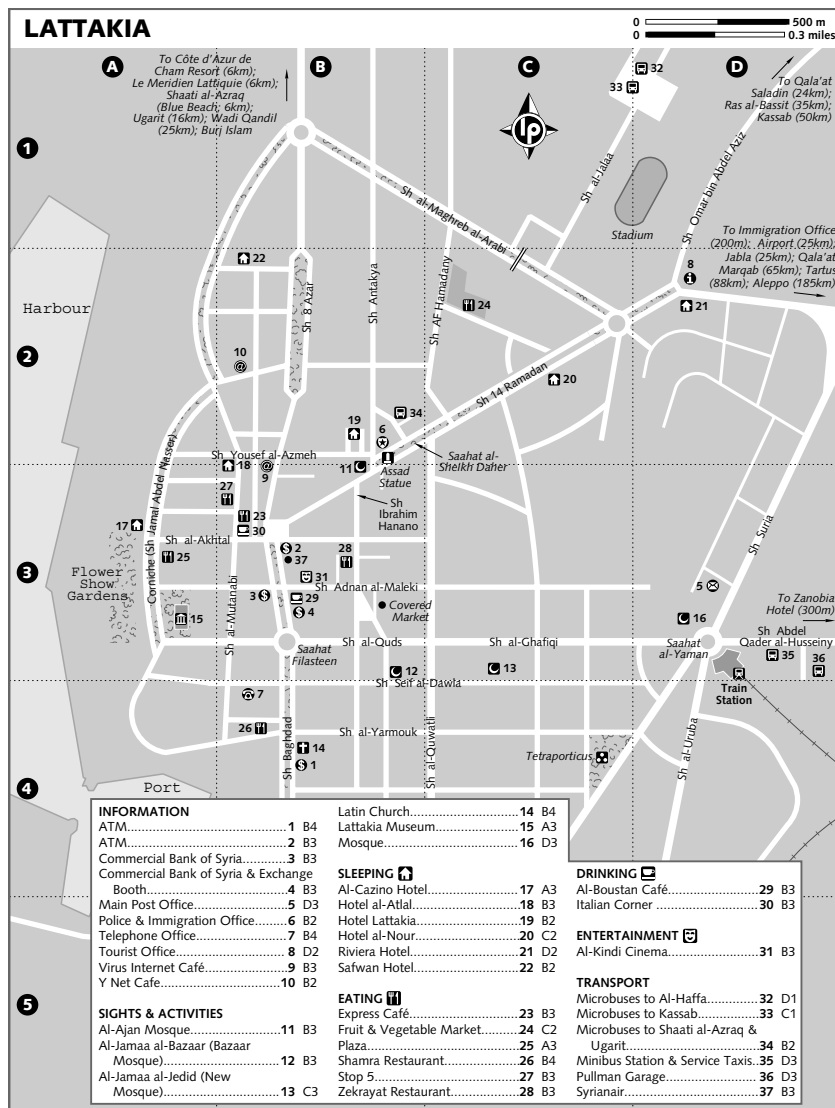
Telephone office (Sharia Seif al-Dawla; ☎ 8am–11pm) To make an international call, buy a phonecard then wait your turn for a free phone.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☎ 416 926; Sharia 14 Ramadan; ☎ 8am–8pm Sat–Thu) Opposite the Riviera Hotel. English-speaking staff supply maps and helpful advice.

Visa Extensions

Immigration office (near Saahat Jumhuriyya; ☎ 8am–2pm Sat–Thu) Beyond the tourist office, on the far side of a large traffic roundabout.



SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The small **Lattakia Museum** (Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser; adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) is housed in a charming old khan near the waterfront. Though its archaeological garden is attractive, the museum's displays are rather unimpressive.

There is a good public **beach** at Shaati al-Azraq (Blue Beach), 6km north of town. Minibuses (£5) leave from a back alley down the side of the big white school on Saahat al-Sheikh Daher. A taxi will cost £100 one way.

Women will feel comfortable swimming at Wadi Qandil, 25km north of town, where

the beach has black sand and clean water. To get here catch a microbus (£10) from the station near the stadium. Microbuses (£10) also leave from here going to Burj Islam, where there is clean water and a stone beach. Ask to get off at Sakhra (the Rock). Women won't feel quite as comfortable here.

SLEEPING

Hotel Lattakia (☎ 479 527; Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; s/d with bathroom 300/350, without bathroom £150/250; 🏠) The cheapest and probably the best of the backpacker options in town, it's much better than the filthy entrance stairs would indicate. Tucked away down a narrow alley north of the Al-Ajan mosque, it has basic rooms and a kitchen that guests can use. Ten rooms on the 1st floor share two bathrooms with squat toilets; the 2nd-floor rooms have private bathrooms, comfortable beds and satellite TV. Three also have air-con.

Hotel Al-Atfal (☎ 476 121; Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; r with/without air-con £700/600; 🏠) Popular with visiting Lebanese families, this quiet establishment has immaculate rooms with snug beds, freshly laundered sheets and private bathrooms (squat toilets). There's a pleasant common area with free tea and satellite TV. Rates are per room, and preference is given to families. Breakfast costs an extra £50.

Safwan Hotel (☎ 093 376 900; safwanhotel@gmail.com; Sharia Mousa bin Nosier; mattress on roof £100, dm £200, s/d with bathroom £300/500, without bathroom £250/400) Run by *Tintin-fan* Mohamad and his family, the Safwan is run-down, but most rooms have satellite TV and private bathrooms, and all have clean linen (albeit on hard beds). It pays to ask to see a few before choosing. Breakfast costs £100.

Hotel al-Nour (☎ 243 980; fax 245 340; Sharia 14 Ramadan; s/d US\$21/26; 🏠) A two-star place overlooking the motorway, Hotel al-Nour has beds resembling concrete slabs, private bathrooms in all rooms, and a fusty but comfortable lounge area and breakfast room. Ask for a room at the rear. Breakfast costs US\$1. Rooms are 15% cheaper in winter.

Zanobia Hotel (☎ 425 703; fax 425 719; Autostrad Zera'a; s/d US\$35/42; 🏠) One of the better midrange choices in town, the Zanobia's major drawback is its location away from

the centre. It's also a bit overpriced for what it offers: clean rooms with tiny private bathrooms and satellite TV. Breakfast costs £125. There is a 20% discount in winter.

Al-Cazino Hotel (☎ 461 140/1; www.alcazino.com; Corniche; s/d US\$40/55; 🏠) In an imposing and well-located French Mandate-era building, this recently opened hotel has large and comfortable rooms with satellite TV and private bathroom. The hotel is home to the city's most popular reception venue, so it can be noisy. Winter rates are US\$5 cheaper.

Riviera Hotel (☎ 211 806; riviera@net.sy; Sharia 14 Ramadan; s/d US\$79/91; 🏠) The best hotel in town, the Riviera offers homely but slightly worn rooms that for this price should offer better fittings (sheets were nylon and there were no hairdryers). Service is pretty lacklustre, too. That said, private bathrooms are large and there is a restaurant and bar off the attractive downstairs lobby. Breakfast is included in the price. There's a 20% discount in winter.

EATING & DRINKING

Snack stalls are located around the Saahat al-Sheikh Daher area. For something a cut above, head for Sharia al-Mutanabi, known as the 'American quarter' because an American school used to be based here.

Shamra Restaurant (sandwiches £50, pizzas £90-130; 🏠) Situated off Sharia Baghdad, this Western-style fast-food place is always packed with locals noshing on good-quality pan pizzas, salads, burgers and spring rolls. The surrounds are clean and pleasant. It's also a good place for breakfast.

Zekrayat Restaurant (☎ 460 858; 🏠) The minute you walk into this bustling place you'll understand why it's the most popular restaurant in town. The attractive courtyard garden and stone-walled dining room of a historic house are jam-packed with locals puffing on nargilehs (£75), indulging in ice-cream sundaes (£65) or sipping fresh-fruit cocktails (£60). But wait, there's more! It also serves up some of the best food in the country – the *mouhammarah* (walnut and pomegranate-syrup dip; £25) has to be tasted to be believed and the *mutabal* (purée of aubergine mixed with tahini, yogurt and olive oil; £25) is just as good. If it had served alcohol we would have moved in permanently. Go.

Express Cafe (☎ 456 200; 22 Sharia al-Mutanabi; burgers \$€90-145, pasta \$€110-135; 🍷) An American diner in the Hard Rock Café style, this bright and noisy place offers burgers, steaks, pizza, and hot and cold sandwiches. It also does great milk shakes (\$€45). There's a bar downstairs (Almaz beer \$€60).

Stop 5 (☎ 477 919; 27 Sharia al-Mutanabi; mezze \$€20-30, pizzas \$€75-125, burger \$€95; 🍷) Resembles a New York bar, with shelves of spirits, posters advertising happy hours and wood-panelled walls. The food is good and management doesn't mind if you sit for a while with a drink (local beer \$€40) and a snack.

Plaza (☎ 461 013; Corniche; mezze \$€20-80, grills \$€90-125; 🍷) Families and groups of businessmen come here to graze on the wide choice of excellent mezze, washed down with arak (\$€50 per glass) or local beer (\$€50). You can sit in the glassed-in area at the front or the over-the-top dining hall in the rear.

There's a real coffee culture in Lattakia, and many places serve up espresso that could stand up and be counted in Italy. Try the sidewalk terraces at **Al-Boustan Café** (Sharia Baghdad; espresso \$€30) or **Italian Corner** (Sharia al-Mutanabi; espresso \$€35, cappuccino \$€50).

ENTERTAINMENT

Al-Kindi Cinema screens Hollywood new releases and charges \$€60 per ticket.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Basil al-Assad International Airport lies about 25km southeast of Lattakia. A taxi to the centre of town costs around \$€250.

Syrianair flies to Damascus on Wednesday at 6pm, Saturday at 4.45pm and Sunday at 9am. A ticket costs \$€560. There's also one flight per week to Cairo.

There's a local office of **Syrianair** (☎ 476 863/4; 8 Sharia Baghdad; 🕒 8am-8pm).

Bus

The Pullman garage is on Sharia Abdel Qader al-Husseiny about 200m east of the train station. Numerous private companies have their offices here.

Al-Kadmous has a 24-hour service to Damascus (\$€150, four hours) leaving on the hour. Its regular minibus service to Tartus (\$€30, one hour) runs between 6am and 9pm, stopping at Baniyas (\$€15) en route. There are also four services daily to

Homs (\$€80, two hours) at 10am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm and 11pm.

As-Salaam runs regular services to Aleppo (\$€100, 3½ hours).

Al-Hassan runs a daily minibus service (\$€500) to Antakya in Turkey, departing at 7.30am. If you call ☎ 352 021 it will collect you at your hotel.

Karnak buses also depart from this station, but its ticket office is just outside the station compound, on the left as you enter the access street. It runs one service per day to Damascus (\$€125) at 7.15am, and one to Homs (\$€75) at 6.30am. It also has a 6am service to Beirut (\$€300) via Tripoli (\$€200) in Lebanon.

Express Tours runs daily services to Beirut (\$€300) via Tripoli (\$€250). These leave at 11am and midnight.

Microbus

The main congregation of microbuses is 1.5km north of the town centre, near the sports stadium. From a huge lot, buses depart frequently for destinations such as Al-Haffa for Qala'at Saladin (opposite), and Kassab (\$€25, 1½ hours) for the Turkish border.

Microbuses for Ugarit (Ras Shamra) go from a back alley down the side of the big white school on Saahat al-Sheikh Daher.

Microbuses to Baniyas (\$€10, 45 minutes), Tartus (\$€35, one hour), Homs (\$€60, two hours) and Hama (\$€60, 6.30am and then every three hours until evening) leave from the minibus station near the train station.

Taxi

Taxis charge \$€25 for trips within town.

A seat in a new yellow service taxi to Lebanon costs \$€300 to Tripoli and \$€500 to Beirut. These leave from the minibus station near the train station. If you call ☎ 353 077 they will collect you from your hotel.

Train

The train station is about 1.5km east of the city centre on Saahat al-Yaman. There are four daily departures for Aleppo: two express services (\$€135, three hours) at 7am and 6.30pm, and two slow services (\$€70/50 in 1st/2nd class, four hours) at 7.50am and 3.20pm. If you're travelling to Aleppo we recommend you take a train rather than the bus, as they are extremely comfortable and the scenery is stunning.

AROUND LATTAKIA

UGARIT

رأس شمرا

The ruins at **Ugarit** (Ras Shamra; adult/student \$€150/10; 🕒 9am-4pm Nov-May, 9am-6pm Jun-Oct) are a city that was once the most important on the Mediterranean coast. From about the 16th to the 13th century BC, it was a centre for trade with Egypt, Cyprus, Mesopotamia and the rest of Syria. The writing on tablets found here is widely accepted as the earliest known alphabet. The tablets are on display in the museums in Lattakia, Aleppo and Damascus, as well as the Louvre in Paris. Today, the masonry left behind shows you the layout of the streets and gives you some vague idea of where the most important buildings were.

Regular microbuses (\$€5) make the trip from Lattakia to Ugarit. A taxi will charge between \$€400 to \$€500 to take you to the site, wait one hour and then bring you back to town.

QALA'AT SALADIN قلعة صلاح الدين

Although Qala'at Saladin is less celebrated than Crac des Chevaliers, TE Lawrence was moved to write, 'It was I think the most sensational thing in castle building I have seen.' The sensational aspect is largely due to the site – the castle is perched on top of a heavily wooded ridge with precipitous sides dropping away to surrounding ravines. It's pretty amazing.

The **castle** (adult/student \$€150/10; 🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar, 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct) is located 24km east of Lattakia and is a very easy half-day trip.

Take a microbus from Lattakia to the small town of Al-Haffa (\$€10, 30 minutes). These leave from the minibus station near the stadium. Taxis and local cars wait at the bus stop at Al-Haffa and will take you the further 6km to the castle. They charge anywhere between \$€200 to \$€500 to take you there, wait one hour and bring you back to the minibus. A taxi from Lattakia will charge \$€500 to \$€600 for the round trip.

QALA'AT MARQAB قلعة مرقب

This black-basalt **castle** (adult/student \$€150/10; 🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar, 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep) was originally a Muslim stronghold, possibly founded in 1062. After falling into

Crusader hands in the early 12th century, the fortifications were expanded. The main defensive building, the donjon, is on the southern side, as the gentler slopes made that aspect the castle's most vulnerable. After several attempts, Saladin gave up trying to take Marqab. It eventually fell to the Mamluks in 1285.

The walls and towers are the most impressive element of what is left today, and the interior of the citadel is rapidly being overrun with vegetation and rubbish. In truth, you're much better off visiting Qala'at Saladin and Crac des Chevaliers, particularly as ugly refineries mar the views to the sea here.

You'll find a restaurant and cheap tea stands near the castle's entrance.

To get there, take a microbus (\$€5) from Baniyas on the coast towards Zaoube – it goes right past.

TARTUS

طرطوس

☎ 043 / pop 773,000

It's hard to see why Tartus is such a popular holiday destination among Syrians. In fact, it's difficult to describe it without using foul language (or at least a string of pejoratives). The beach is revolting – dirty sand, murky water and rubbish everywhere, including the ugly rusting hulks of cargo ships – and the Corniche (the seafront promenade) is basically a big construction site, with derelict unfinished buildings everywhere. In all, it gets the big thumbs down from us. You will do much better to stay in Lattakia.

INFORMATION

There's only one ATM in town, located on the ground floor of the office building opposite the post office. It will give advances on Visa and MasterCard, but isn't Maestro and Cirrus enabled.

Commercial Bank of Syria (Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid; 🕒 8am-noon Sat-Thu) Doesn't change travellers cheques.

Friends Computer Center (Sharia Tarek ibn Ziad; per hr \$€60; 🕒 24hr) Internet access. Walk south from the Shahin Tower Hotel, near the corner with Sharia Ahmad al-Azawi; look for the sign on the street, and the entrance is down the lane.

Immigration office (🕒 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Just south of Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser, one block east of the park.

Post office (☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to 2pm Fri) On the northeast corner of Sharia 6 Tichreen and Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser.

Telephone office (☎ 24hr Sat-Thu, to 8pm Fri) Just north of the junction of Sharias Khaled ibn al-Walid and Ath-Thawra.

Tourist office (☎ 223 448; Sharia 6 Tichreen; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Inconveniently stuck out on the southeast edge of town on the main Homs highway.

SIGHTS

From the outside, the 12th-century **Cathedral of Our Lady of Tortosa** looks more like a fortress – that's no coincidence as its construction was conceived with defence in mind. It's a splendid piece of Crusader construction. Inside is the unimpressive **Tartus Museum** (adult/student £E150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar), which is only worth visiting to see the soaring arches and graceful vaulting of the cathedral's interior.

The island of **Arwad**, visible from the seafront off to the southwest, was also a Crusader stronghold. Small motor launches leave from the fishing harbour every 15 minutes from 6am and 7pm (pay on the return voyage; £E20). There are ship-building yards, dodgy fish restaurants and the remnants of sea walls on the island – plus an unfortunate amount of garbage.

SLEEPING

Hotel al-Menshieh (☎ 220 616, 220 097; Saahat Manchieh; beds per person £E200; ☒) This homely place opposite the cathedral offers the town's best budget accommodation. In a converted 2nd-floor apartment, it has 10 light-filled rooms, three of which have private bathrooms and balconies. It's quiet, comfortable and very clean. If the hotel is locked you need to go to the grocery on the corner, which is owned by the same people. If that's closed, ring the bell at the back of the brown letterbox at the front door. Breakfast costs £E125.

Daniel Hotel (☎ 220 581; daniel-hotel@shuf.com; Sharia al-Wahda; s/d £E300/600) After enjoying a free tea at check-in, you'll be shown your clean but faded room by the helpful staff. The beds here would fail any chiropractic assessment. All rooms have private bathrooms with lukewarm water.

Grand Hotel (☎ 355 600; fax 365 476; s/d US\$25/30; ☒) This hulk of a building at the far end of the Corniche has an institutional feel

but is very popular with holidaying Syrian families over summer. Though the place is run down, beds are comfortable and front rooms have clean private bathrooms, satellite TV and sea-facing balconies. Try negotiating the price down in the off season. Breakfast costs £E150.

EATING

The usual cheap restaurants and snack places (for *lafelaf*, *shwarma*, grilled chicken) are clustered around the clock tower and Sharia al-Wahda, and south down Ath-Thawra. There's also a group of cheap-eats places along Sharia Ahmed al-Azawi (south of Sharia al-Wahda), where the local kids hang out.

Tec Tac (☎ 323 600, 210 600; Sharia al-Corniche al-Bahr) One of a string of coffee shops along the seafront between the fishing harbour and old city, this place serves up pizzas (£E110 to £E135) and *mezze* (£E15 to £E35) to throngs of young locals, including plenty of girls sharing *nargilehs* (£E75). There's an extensive alcohol list.

Sea Whispers (☎ 216 800; *mezze* £E25, grills £E150; ☒) Cowering underneath a bizarrely shaped blue office building, this casual place is invariably packed with locals enjoying decent food accompanied by *nargilehs* (£E60) and cheap local beer (£E40).

Yamak (☎ 328 755; Sharia al-Amarna; fresh seafood by weight & type £E500-1000; ☒) Though it's light on character, this licensed restaurant on the 4th floor of the nondescript chamber of commerce building opposite the fishing harbour serves the best seafood in town. Enter from the side street.

Cave (☎ 221 016; Sharia al-Corniche al-Bahr; mains £E300-750; ☒) A vaulted 85-year-old hall burrowed into the sea wall of the old city, this place has got atmosphere in spades. The food's pretty good, too. The house speciality is seafood (pricey) but there are also grilled meat dishes. Lebanon's national beer, *Almaza*, costs £E100.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Al-Kadmous has a bus station on Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser opposite the park, just past the big roundabout. It has services to Damascus (£E110, four hours) every hour from 2am until 9pm. Buses to Aleppo (£E125, four hours) leave every hour from 4.30am until 11.30pm. Buses to Homs

(£E40, one hour) leave at 4am, 9am, noon, 1.15pm, 3pm, 6.30pm and 9.15pm. There are no services to Hama or Lebanon.

Microbuses depart for Baniyas (£E15, 30 minutes) and Homs (£E15, 1½ hours) from Sharia 6 Tichreen, east of the centre next to the usually deserted train station. Ramshackle minibuses make their way to Damascus (£E75, four hours) from here also. Minibuses to Lattakia (£E30, every 30 minutes from 6.30am to 9pm) leave from the Al-Kadmous bus stop.

A taxi ride anywhere within the centre of town costs £E25.

CRAC DES CHEVALIERS

قلعة الحصن

☎ 031

Author Paul Theroux described Crac des Chevaliers as the epitome of the dream castle of childhood fantasies. TE Lawrence simply called it 'the finest castle in the world'. Impervious to the onslaught of time, Crac des Chevaliers (in Arabic *Qala'at al-Hosn*) is one of Syria's must-see sights.

The first fortress known to have existed on this site was built by the emir of Homs in 1031, but it was the Crusader knights who, around the middle of the 12th century, largely built and expanded Crac into its existing form. Despite repeated attacks and sieges, the castle held firm. In fact, it was never truly breached; the Crusaders just gave it up. Numbers in the castle, which was built to hold a garrison of 2000, had fallen to around 200. Surrounded by the armies of Islam and with no hope of reprieve, Crac must have seemed more like a prison than a stronghold. Even though they had supplies to last for five years, after a month under siege the Crusaders agreed to depart the castle in return for safe conduct.

SIGHTS

The remarkably well preserved **castle** (adult/student £E150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Mar) comprises two distinct parts: the outside wall with its 13 towers and main entrance; and the inside wall and central construction, which are built on a rocky platform. A moat dug out of the rock separates the two walls.

A suggested route for exploration is to walk from the main entrance up the sloping ramp and out to the moat. Visit the baths, which you can get down to by a couple of dogleg staircases over in the corner on your left, then move on to the great hall, from where you can gain access to the three towers that punctuate the southern wall.

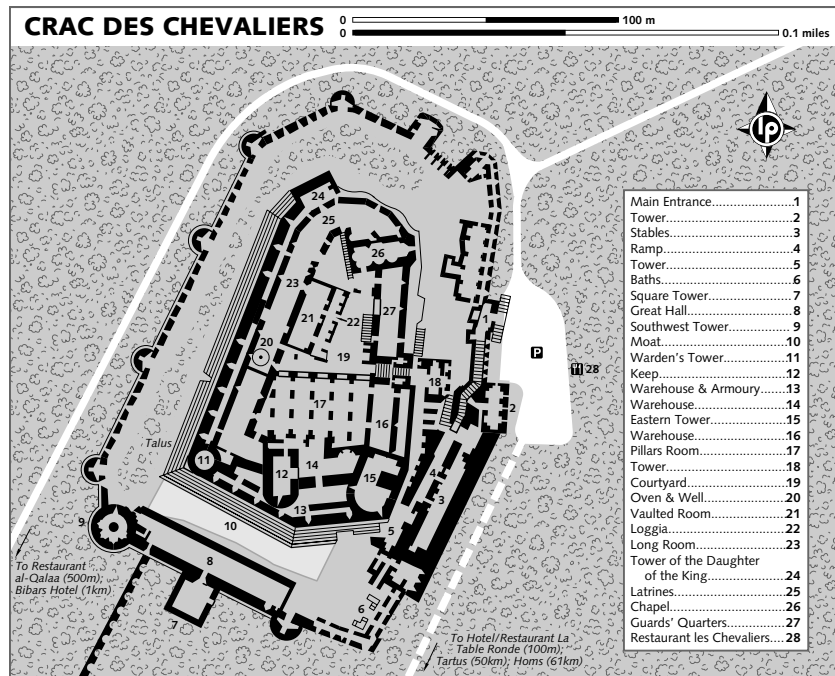
Continue around the wall and enter the inner fortress through the tower at the top of the access ramp into an open courtyard. The loggia, with its Gothic façade, on the western side of the yard, is the most impressive structure in the castle. Beyond the loggia is a vaulted hall and long room, with the castle's original latrines at the north end. Opposite the loggia is a chapel that was converted to a mosque after the Muslim conquest (the *minbar*, or pulpit, still remains). The staircase that obstructs the main door is a later addition and leads to the upper floors of the fortress, where there is a café and public toilets. From here you can make your way over to the round tower in the southwest corner, which is known as the Warden's Tower – on a clear day there are magnificent views from the roof.

SLEEPING & EATING

Crac is only an hour or so from Tartus, Homs or even Hama, so most people visit on a day trip. If you decide to stay the night, there are only two sleeping options around the castle. A decent meal is also pretty hard to come by.

Bibars Hotel (☎ /fax 741 201; akrambibars@mail.sy; Sharia Okbah Ben Nafee; s/d with air-con & view US\$20/30, with fan US\$10/15; ☒) This new hotel has 23 comfortable rooms, 15 featuring balconies and stunning unobstructed views of the castle. All have private bathrooms. The hotel is on the first hill west of the castle, about a 15-minute walk from the main entrance. Breakfast is included in the price. Our experience would indicate that it's best not to eat here.

Hotel La Table Ronde (☎ 740 280; fax 741 400; s/d £E250/500) About 200m south of the castle's main entrance, this run-down place has four grubby and vastly overpriced rooms with uncomfortable beds, squat toilets and basic showers. There is no heating or cooling. When we visited, the owners (who also run Bibars Hotel) were planning to renovate. You can also camp here (£E250). Breakfast costs £E75.



Restaurant al-Qalaa (☎ 740 493, 093 562 236; set menu S£250-300; 🕒 8.30am-10pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-6pm Nov-Mar) Boasting stunning views of the castle and surrounding valleys, Restaurant al-Qalaa is the best eatery in town. Look for the lone white two-storey building immediately west of the castle, on the next hilltop. The sign outside reads 'Alkaa Restaurant'. The all-you-can-eat menu comprises a wide range of mezze as well as grilled chicken or meat. In winter, ring ahead so that the friendly owner-chef can cater lunch or dinner for you. Alcohol is served (local beer S£100).

Hotel La Table Ronde has a large restaurant that serves up lunch and dinner buffets of mediocre-quality mezze and grills for S£200. **Restaurant Les Chevaliers** (☎ 740 411), directly opposite the castle, serves up carbon-copy food at the same prices. Both sell alcohol.

The licensed café in the castle serves mezze, grills and drinks. The quality isn't as impressive as the setting, but it's relatively inexpensive (mezze, grill and drink S£200). A tea costs S£25. There are fast-

food stands in the village of Hosn, but none near the castle.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Crac des Chevaliers lies approximately 10km north of the Homs-Tartus highway. The castle is on the crest of the hill, perched above the small village of Hosn, which is in turn perched above the main highway.

Microbuses (S£25) travel from Homs to Hosn daily, mostly in the morning. If you ask nicely these might drop you at the castle or at the Hotel La Table Ronde, where you can leave your luggage while you're touring the castle. Otherwise you'll have to walk up the hill from Hosn. Microbuses from Hosn to Homs leave between 7am to 3pm when full. For an extra S£25 per person (less if there are a few of you), these will pick you up from Hotel La Table Ronde. Ask its management to arrange this for you.

The only ways to get to or from Tartus are to catch a taxi (S£600 to S£700 one way), or to get on or off a Tartus-Homs minibus on the main highway (S£25). Ask to be let out at 'Qalaa' at al-Hosn'. The microbus serving

the route between Hosn and Homs will drop you at the highway for S£25.

A taxi to Tripoli in Lebanon will cost S£1500 and take 1½ hours.

HOMS

حمص

☎ 031 / pop 1.5 million

There's little of interest in Homs, but it's one of those crossroads most travellers have to pass through at some stage. Roads head north to Hama, east to Palmyra and the Euphrates, south to Damascus and west to Tartus and the coast.

INFORMATION

The **tourist office** (🕒 8am-2pm, 3-7pm Sun-Thu, 9am-1pm Sat) is in front of the Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque. Staff speak very little English.

There aren't too many Internet cafés in the centre of town. One of the most central is **Proxy.net Internet Café** (per hr S£70; 🕒 24hr), which has fast connections and helpful staff. To find it, walk south down Sharia Abdel Moniem Riad from the clock tower and turn right into Sharia Droubi opposite the gardens. Turn right at the T-intersection at Sharia Tarablus and right again at Sharia Hafez Ibrahim. Proxy.net is in the first street off to the left.

SIGHTS

The only building of great note in town is the **Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque**; it's on the Hama road about 600m north of the town centre. It holds the tomb of the commander of the Muslim armies that brought Islam to Syria in AD 636. The small **Homs Museum** in Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli opposite the gardens was closed for renovation at the time of research.

SLEEPING & EATING

An-Nasr al-Jedid Hotel (☎ 227 423; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; s/d S£200/300) Entered from a side street just off Sharia al-Quwatli, this is about the best of the budget places in town – but that's not saying much. It's grubby and has very uncomfortable beds, but the sheets are relatively clean and one of the showers along the corridor can sometimes be cranked up to give out some hot water (S£50 per shower).

Hotel al-Mimas (☎ 211 066; haj885@hotmail.com; Sharia Malaab al-Baladi; s/d US\$30/35; 🕒) This old-

fashioned place is the only decent midrange hotel in town. Clean rooms come with big plump beds, satellite TV and basic private bathrooms. Breakfast costs an extra S£100. It's a kilometre or so southwest of the city centre.

Safir Hotel (☎ 412 400; www.safirhotels.com; Sharia Ragheb al-Jamali; s/d incl breakfast US\$151/169; 🕒 📺 📺 📺) A decent five-star hotel, the Safir offers recently renovated and very comfortable rooms, and excellent leisure facilities. It has a good Italian restaurant (pizza S£90 to S£150, pasta S£125 to S£175) and an eatery with an international menu and a pleasant garden outlook (mains S£300 to S£750, sandwiches S£150 to S£250, open 6am to midnight). Both are licensed and credit cards are accepted. It's near the Hotel al-Mimas.

If you are forced to eat in Homs, we suggest you eat at one of the restaurants at the Safir Hotel or grab something from one of the cheap-and-greasy restaurants in the group one block south of Sharia al-Quwatli, as there doesn't seem to be anything viable in between.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are two bus stations in Homs. The minibus garage is about 1.5km north of the city centre up Sharia Hama, a 15-minute walk from the Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque on the left-hand side of the road. Microbuses also leave from here. The Pullman garage is a further 1.5km (20-minute) walk out of town on the same road (opposite side).

From the Pullman garage, Al-Ahliyah runs luxury buses to Damascus (S£75, two hours) every hour from 4.15am to 11.15pm, and to Aleppo (S£85, 2½ hours) every hour from 7.15am to 10.15pm. To Tartus (S£43, one hour), there are buses at 6.45am, 10.15am, 3pm, 5.45pm and 7pm. Buses go to Hama (S£20, 30 minutes) every 30 minutes.

Al-Kadmous travels to Palmyra (S£100, two hours) at 7.30am, 2pm, 2.45pm, 3.30pm, 5.30pm, 9pm, midnight and 2am. It also runs 12 services to Damascus (S£75) per day. To Tartus (S£40) it runs services at 10.30am, 4.30pm and 7pm, and to Aleppo (S£85) there are services at 6am, 10.30am, 1pm, 4.30pm and 8.30pm.

Microbuses to Hama (S£20, 30 minutes) leave from the Hama garage, part of the minibus station. They run regularly from

6am to 10pm. Battered old minibuses and Karnak buses leave from another part of this station and travel to all parts of Syria.

See p530 for details of getting to Crac des Chevaliers.

A taxi from the Pullman garage to the centre of town costs S£50. To the Safir or Al-Mimas hotels you'll be up for S£75. Microbus service taxis run between the bus stations and the tourist office and charge S£4.

HAMA

حما

☎ 033 / pop 1.5 million

The serenade of Hama's creaking ancient wooden *norias* (water wheels) is famous throughout the Middle East, and makes this attractive town one of the country's tourism hot spots. Best of all, it's perfectly located to be your base when visiting Crac des Chevaliers, Apamea and other sights in the area.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Compu.Net (per hr S£50; ☎ 9am-2am Sat-Thu, noon-2am Fri) The cheapest place in town. Look for the 'CoffeeN@t' sign and go down the stairs.

Space Net (per hr S£60; ☎ 10am-midnight Sat-Thu, noon-midnight Fri) Free tea, helpful staff and the fastest connections in town.

Money

At the time of research there were no ATMs in Hama. Two branches of the **Commercial Bank of Syria** (Sharia Ibn Rushd & Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli) will change cash and travellers cheques (no commission).

Post & Telephone

The new post office is on the north side of the river. From the clock tower, walk north and cross the bridge. Turn right at the first major road and continue walking until you see the post office on the left-hand side of the road, near the Syrian Telecom Office. The phone office is off Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli, at the side of the former post office building. You can find Easycomm card phones around town.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☎ 511 033; Sharia Said al-A'as; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu) Located in a small building in the gardens just north of the river.

Visa Extensions

Passport office (Sharia Ziqar; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Situated on the north edge of town, near the new museum. It's in a modern building with 'Passport' written in English above the main entrance.

SIGHTS

Hama's main attraction is the **norias** (wooden water wheels up to 20m in diameter) that have graced the town for centuries, scooping water from the Orontes River and tipping it into mini aqueducts, where it travels to irrigation channels watering the surrounding fields.

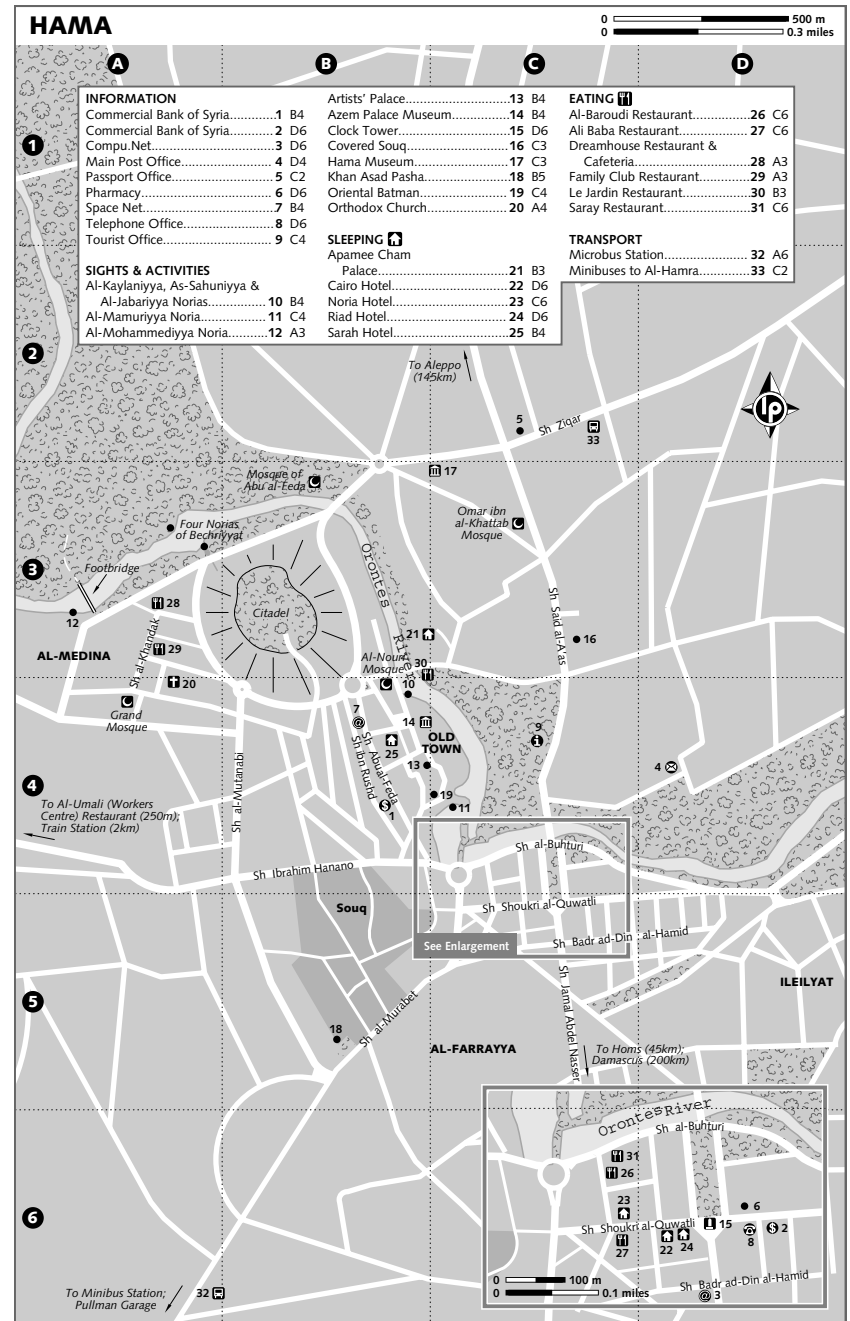
Because both the water wheels and the blocks on which they are mounted are wooden, the friction when they turn produces a mournful groaning. The most impressive wheels are about 1km upstream from the centre of town, in the Al-Medina part of town. The four *norias* here, known as the Four *Norias* of Bechriyyat, are in two pairs on a weir straddling the river. About 1km west of the centre is the largest wheel of them all, known as Al-Mohammediyya.

A 4th-century AD mosaic depicting a *norria* is one of the artefacts displayed in the **Hama museum** (Sharia Ziqar; adult/student S£150/10; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun Nov-Mar, 9am-6pm Wed-Sun Apr-Oct), 1.5km north of the centre past the Omar ibn al-Khattab Mosque. Other exhibits cover the region in the Iron Age, Roman and Islamic periods. All are well presented and have informative labelling in English.

The small but lovely **Azem Palace Museum** (adult/student S£75/5; ☎ 8am-3pm Wed-Mon), in the old part of town, was once the residence of the governor, As'ad Pasha al-Azem (r 1700-42). The palace is reminiscent of the more grandiose building of the same name in Damascus, which is hardly surprising as the latter was built by al-Azem after he was transferred to the capital. The *haramlek* (women's quarters) behind the ticket office is particularly beautiful.

TOURS

Hama is conveniently situated for trips to surrounding sites including Crac des Chevaliers, Apamea and the Dead Cities. The Cairo and Riad Hotels offer a wide range of tours, but these are on the pricey side and, in the case of the Cairo at least, are in old cars reeking unpleasantly of petrol fumes. You may be better off making your way by



public transport or organising your own taxi, particularly if there's a few of you.

If you do decide to go with an organised tour, the Riad Hotel offers tours to Qala'at Shaisar and Apamea for \$E1100 per person, Musyaf and Crac des Chevaliers for \$E1800, or the Dead Cities for \$E1500. The Cairo Hotel will take you to Crac and Musyaf for US\$25, Apamea and the Dead Cities for US\$35 or Beehive Houses/Qala'at Ja'abar and Rasafa for US\$60.

SLEEPING

Riad Hotel (☎ 239 512; riadhotel@scs-net.org; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; dm \$E175, s/d with bathroom \$E350/450, without bathroom \$E250/350; 🍷 🍷) Wow! Freshly painted and extremely clean rooms have satellite TV and good beds; most have private bathrooms. Some rooms have balconies onto the street and comfortable seating; others have queen-sized beds. Breakfast (\$E100) is served in an attractive front room and guests can use the kitchen facilities. The English-speaking staff are friendly and knowledgeable. Fantastic.

Cairo Hotel (☎ 222 280; cairohot@scs-net.org; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; mattress on the roof \$E100, dm \$E175, s/d with air-con \$E450/600, without air-con \$E350/450; 🍷 🍷) The Cairo offers rooms with private bathrooms, satellite TV and comfortable beds. Breakfast is included in the price of all single/double/triple rooms and costs \$E75 for travellers staying in dorm rooms or on the roof. Staff are as friendly and knowledgeable as those at the Riad. Equally fantastic.

Noria Hotel (☎ 512 414; bader@mail.sy; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; s/d US\$22/35; 🍷) The older section of this 4th-floor hotel has spacious, clean and comfortable rooms, some with views of the water wheels. Beware the windowless ones, which are claustrophobic. Rooms in the new section are smaller, but equally comfortable. All have bathrooms and satellite TV. There's a smart reception area and a good restaurant. Service is excellent and credit cards are accepted. The owner of the Noria was planning to open Orient House, a small boutique hotel near the station, in 2006.

Sarah Hotel (☎ 515 941; basarah@scs-net.org; Sharia Abu al-Feda; s/d US\$15/21) Though it only opened in 2000, this place in the city's old quarter isn't wearing too well (damp is a problem). Nevertheless, it offers pretty good value for

money. Rooms are clean, quiet and light, with satellite TV and private bathrooms. Breakfast costs US\$2.

Apamee Cham Palace (☎ 525 335; fax 511 626; s/d US\$122/145; 🍷 🍷) The best hotel in town, offering views over the Old Town and some of the *norias*. Rooms have five-star accoutrements and the extensive grounds house tennis courts and a large swimming pool area. Breakfast costs US\$6. Credit cards accepted.

EATING

Ali Baba Restaurant (Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli) We highly recommend the excellent *felafels* (\$E15) here.

Al-Baroudi Restaurant (☎ 224 213; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli) Basic but clean; we enjoyed the BBQ chicken meal (chicken, salad, hummus and soft drink \$E150).

Al-Umali (Worker's) Centre (☎ 525 771/0; mezze \$E50, grills \$E100) In a decommissioned railway station, this unpretentious place is packed with local families, who order up big from the extensive menu. Try the *fatta haleb* (Aleppo-style *fatta* with meatballs and tomato) and you'll understand why the place is so popular. There's a garden for summer dining. No alcohol or credit cards. To get there, follow Sharia Ibrahim Hanano west until reaching a major junction; the restaurant is on the south side.

Saray Restaurant (☎ 510 830; Sharia al-Buhturi; mezze \$E20-100, burgers \$E100, sandwiches \$E100-150; 🍷) Hama's most stylish dining spot has spectacular views over the *norias* and the river from its large 1st-floor windows. There's a young crowd and friendly management who are happy for you to eat or just have a drink (tea \$E50, beer \$E100).

Family Club Restaurant (☎ 423 510; mezze \$E25, grills \$E150; 🍷) The outdoor terrace here is perfect for summer nights and the cavernous indoor space is a good choice for the rest of the year. One of the few places in town serving alcohol, it serves good-quality standard dishes to large groups of families and friends. A beer costs \$E100. Enter up the marble stairs.

Dreamhouse Restaurant & Cafeteria (☎ 411 687; Sharia al-Khandak; mezze \$E25, grills \$E150; 🍷) The location west of the Citadel may be quiet, but the music videos pump up the action at this large and popular eatery. The menu is in English and includes meals like pizzas (\$E90 to \$E150) and burgers (\$E90).

You can drink beer (\$E50) or a cappuccino (\$E41). Accepts credit cards.

On the river near the Apamee Cham Palace hotel, the enormous glass conservatory of Le Jardin Restaurant overlooks three of the town's *norias* and is a great, if noisy, spot to enjoy an evening beer (\$E78) and nargileh (\$E85).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The Pullman garage is a 20-minute walk southwest of the town centre, just beyond the minibuses station. The microbus station is on the same road, slightly closer to town.

Al-Ahliyah has the most frequent departures from the Pullman garage, with services to Damascus (\$E90, 2½ hours) departing regularly between 3.30am and 10pm; all stop en route in Homs (\$E20, 30 minutes). Services to Aleppo (\$E65, 2½ hours) leave at 6.30am, 7.15am, 8am and 8.30am, and then on the hour from 9am to 11pm. Services to Tartus (\$E63, two hours) leave at 6am, 9.30am, 12.15pm, 5pm and 6.15pm. Services to Lattakia (\$E100, three hours) depart at 6am, 9.30am, 12.15pm and 6.15pm.

Al-Kadmous has services to Damascus (\$E90) at 7am, 9.45am, 12.30pm, 1.45pm, 4.30pm, 8.45pm and 1am. All go via Homs (\$E20). There are extra services to Homs at 6.45am, 8.30am, 9.30am, 2pm, 6.15pm, 6.45pm and 11.15pm. Buses to Aleppo (\$E60) leave at 8.15am, 9.30am, 11.15am, 1.30pm, 2pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm, 7.30pm, 11.30pm and 1.30am. To Tartus (\$E60), there are services at 5am, 5.45am, 7.30am, 9.30am, 11am, 2.30pm, 5.45pm, 6.45pm, 9.30pm and 12.30am. Services to Lattakia (\$E60) leave at 6.30am, 9.30am, 12.30pm, 3.30pm and 7pm, as well as one air-con service per day (\$E100) at 6.15am. The Al-Kadmous service from Hama to Deir ez-Zur (\$E185) via Homs and Palmyra (\$E85) leaves daily at 6.45am, 2pm, 6.15pm and 11.15pm.

Minibuses travel to Homs (\$E18) every 10 minutes from 7am to 10pm, but you're much better off paying the little bit extra to travel with one of the luxury bus companies. Microbuses also travel to Suqeilibiyya (for Apamea) when full (\$E20). There's one daily microbus to Tripoli (\$E200) and Beirut (\$E300).

Taxis from the bus stations to the centre of town charge \$E25 during the day, \$E30 at night. Minibuses from the town centre

to the bus or train stations (\$E3) leave from the clock tower and run between 7.30am and 10pm.

APAMEA

أفاميا

If it weren't for Palmyra's unsurpassable magnificence, the city of Apamea (*a-famia*) would be considered a wonder and one of the highlights of Syria. As it is, Apamea is like a condensed version of the pink-sandstone desert city, but executed in grey granite and transposed to a high, wild grassy moor overlooking the Al-Ghab Plain. The city was founded in the 2nd century BC by Seleucus I, one of Alexander the Great's generals. It prospered until the Byzantine period but then was sacked by the Persians in AD 540 and again in 612. Barely a quarter of a century later, Syria was seized by the Muslims and Apamea fell into decline. It was all but flattened in a devastating earthquake in 1157. The site (adult/student \$E150/10; 🗺️ 9am-4.30pm Oct-Mar & 9am-6.30pm Apr-Sep) is unfenced, but officials patrol it to make sure that visitors have paid the admission fee at one of the two ticket boxes. There's a pleasant but pricey small café near the southern ticket box.

Beside the site is the village of Qala'at al-Mudiq, sheltered in a medieval castle, while down below, beside the main road, is a poorly maintained **mosaic museum** (adult/student \$E75/5; 🗺️ 8.30am-3pm Wed-Mon).

Minibuses (\$E15) and microbuses (\$E20) regularly run the 45km from Hama to Suqeilibiyya; from there microbuses go on to Qala'at al-Mudiq (\$E10). The whole trip usually takes about an hour.

ALEPPO

حلب

☎ 021 / pop four million

Once lost in Aleppo's magical and labyrinthine souqs, you're not going to want to be found. The only thing that gets most travellers out of these fascinating and ever-busy centres of commerce is the lure of some of the country's best restaurants and the promise of an excellent night's sleep at a slew of charming boutique hotels. Called Haleb by the locals, the city is outwardly more conservative than many of

Syria's other cities (it's the only place in the country where you'll see large numbers of women wearing the chador), but beneath the surface there are plenty of friendly fun-loving locals keen to introduce travellers to the city's many charms.

ORIENTATION

Most of Aleppo's cheap hotels are clustered in a compact zone centred on Sharias al-Quwatli and al-Baron. Restaurants, the National Museum and places to exchange money are also here. To the southeast are the citadel and the old city, while northeast of the centre are the main Christian quarters, including the charming cobbled Al-Jdeida district. To the west are the modern commercial centre, the newer suburbs and the university district.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Dummar Bookshop (Map pp536-7; ☎ 221 4800) Located in the foyer of the Amir Palace Hotel, it stocks a small selection of English-language books about Syria.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 110)

Fire department (☎ 113)

Police (☎ 362 4300)

Internet Access

Internet cafés are annoyingly thin on the ground in Aleppo.

3D Net (Map pp536-7; per hr \$E40; ☎ 10am-10pm) A tiny place with dial-up connection only. You'll find it in the lane in front of the Mandaloun Hotel.

Concord Internet Cafe (Map pp536-7; ☎ 212 70060; per hr \$E100; ☎ 9.30am-3am) Above a pastry café on Sharia al-Quwatli. Extremely fast connections go some way towards excusing the extortionate hourly rate. There's another branch in Al-Jameleia, two blocks west of the main post office, near French Sweets.

Money

There are convenient exchange offices outside the tourist office, **Exchange al-Kattab** (Map pp536-7; ☎ 10am-5pm), and opposite the citadel, **Exchange al-Jabri** (Map pp536-7; ☎ 10am-5pm), but travellers cheques are not accepted – for these you'll have to go to one of the two branches of the **Commercial Bank of Syria** (Map pp536-7; Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh), north of Sharia al-Quwatli. At both branches there is a commission of \$E25. At the time of research

there were only three ATMs in town: at the airport, next to the Amir Palace Hotel in Sharia al-Mutanabi, and in the front of the Planet Hotel on Sharia al-Telal in Al-Jdeida.

Post & Telephone

Main post & telephone office (Map pp536-7; ☎ 362 4010; ☎ 8am-5pm) You'll find this in the enormous building on the far side of Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri. For international calls, use the Easycomm card phones dotted around town, including in front of the post office and the National Museum.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (Map pp536-7; ☎ 212 1228; Sharia al-Baron; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Sat-Thu) Located in the gardens opposite the National Museum, it doesn't stock maps and is generally unhelpful.

Visa Extensions

Immigration office (Map pp536-7; ☎ 225 5330; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) In the square near the Chahba Cham Palace Hotel, on the Damascus road.

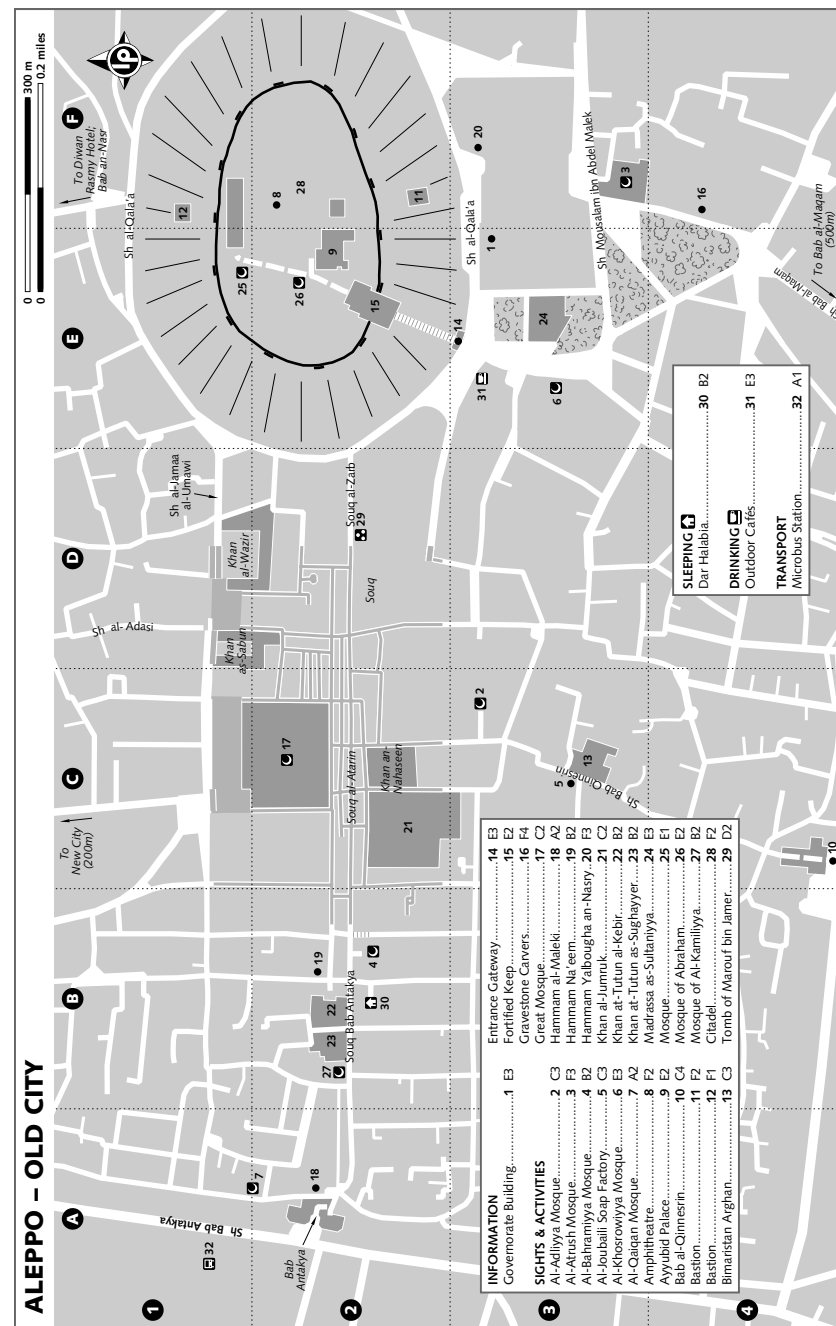
SIGHTS

Old City

The fabulous covered **souqs** of the old city are one of Aleppo's big attractions. This partially covered network of bustling passageways extends over several hectares, and once under the vaulted stone ceiling, you're swallowed up into another world. Parts of these dimly lit and atmospheric markets date to the 13th century but the bulk of the area is an Ottoman-era creation. The main souq, known as the **Souq al-Atarin**, runs east-west between the citadel and Bab Antakya.

In among the souqs are numerous khans, the most impressive of which is the **Khan al-Jumruk** (Map p539). Completed in 1574, at one time it housed the consulates and trade missions of the English, Dutch and French, as well as 344 shops. The khan is still in use, serving now as a cloth market.

On the northern edge of the souqs is the **Great Mosque** (Jamaa al-Kebir; Map p539), the younger sibling (by 10 years) of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Its most impressive feature is its freestanding minaret dating from 1090. Inside the mosque is a fine carved wooden minbar (pulpit) and behind the railing to the left of it is supposed to be the head of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. The mosque was



being painstakingly renovated at the time of research, but it was still possible to visit if you knocked on the door and tipped the caretaker.

CITADEL

Sitting atop a huge manmade earthen mound east of the old city, the **citadel** (Map p539; adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) dominates the city skyline. On the southern side, its moat is spanned by a bridge that then climbs at a 45 degree angle up to the imposing 12th-century fortified gate. Once inside, the castle is largely in ruins, although the throne room above the entrance has been lavishly restored. There's a sparsely endowed museum (£75) in an Ottoman-era barracks, a recently restored *hammam* (not open to the public) and terrific views over the city from the battlements.

Christian Quarter

The Christian quarter of Al-Jdeida is the most charming part of Aleppo. A beautifully maintained warren of long, narrow stone-flagged alleyways, the quarter is currently undergoing something of a rebirth, with age-old townhouses being converted into hotels, restaurants and bars. There are also several churches worth visiting, including the 15th-century **Armenian Cathedral of the 40 Martyrs** (Map pp536-7). The **Museum of Popular Tradition** (Le Musée des Traditions; Map pp536-7; adult/student £75/5; ☎ 8am-2pm Wed-Mon), which occupies a beautiful 18th-century residence, is also worth a visit. Don't miss the guest room, with its amazing silver ceiling and snake-entwined light fitting.

National Museum

Aleppo's main **museum** (Map pp536-7; ☎ 221 2400; Sharia al-Baron; adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 9am-3.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) could be mistaken for a sports hall if it weren't for the extraordinary colonnade of giant granite figures that fronts the entrance. The wide-eyed characters are replicas of pillars that once supported the ceiling of an 8th- or 9th-century-BC temple-palace complex unearthed in the northeast of the country. Inside, the collection is predominantly made up of other finds from northern Syria – there are some beautiful pieces, but it's a pity the labelling is so poor.

ACTIVITIES

At the foot of the citadel, on the southeast side, the **Hamam Yalbougha an-Nasry** (Map p539; ☎ 362 3154; Sharia al-Qala'a; bath only £200, full bath £415) is one of Syria's finest working bath-houses. Originally constructed in 1491, it was most recently restored in 1985. Women are admitted from 10am to 5pm on Monday, Wednesday (in winter only), Thursday and Saturday; men are admitted on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday (in summer only) and Friday from 10am to 1.30am.

TOURS

A good tour guide should cost between US\$40 and US\$50 per day. Ask at the tourist office. **Halabia Tours** (☎ 2248497, 094 245543; www.halabia-tours.com) is recommended if you need to organise transport to other parts of the country or day tours to surrounding sights. Most of the budget hotels offer a range of day trips to attractions in the area; you'll be looking at a base rate of £500 per person to go to Qala'at Samaan, £600 to go to Qala'at Samaan and the Dead Cities, and £800 for a full-day trip to Qala'at Samaan, the Dead Cities and Apamea. Costs will be higher if there are only one or two of you going. If you arrange this yourself through an operator such as Halabia, you'll be looking at around US\$50 to US\$70 plus tip for a minibus and an English-speaking driver for the day.

SLEEPING

The bulk of the budget hotels are in the block bounded by Sharias al-Maari, al-Baron, al-Quwatli and Bab al-Faraj. Many backpackers end up staying at the Zahrat ar-Rabie (Springflower Hostel) on Sharia ad-Dala but we don't recommend that you do the same. Rooms are tiny, dark, grubby and radically overpriced for what they offer. More worrying are the reports (verified by us) we've had from a number of female travellers about sleazy staff members using peepholes to watch guests in the shower. Do everyone a favour and stay elsewhere – hostel owners need to know that they can't overcharge on reputation alone and that sleazy behaviour on the part of staff is totally unacceptable.

Budget

Hotel al-Gawaher (Map pp536-7; ☎/fax 223 9554; Bab al-Faraj; s/d/tr £500/1000/1500) This hotel just off Bab al-Faraj may not be the cheapest

backpacker place in town but it's without doubt the best. Rooms come complete with clean linen, pristine bathroom, toilet paper and soap, fans and electric heaters. Some have balconies onto the street; others have windows onto the interior salons. Those on the 1st floor have satellite TV. There's 24-hour hot water, and two large and pleasantly decorated lounges where you can relax over a tea. A 10% discount is offered in the low season.

Tourist Hotel (Map pp536-7; ☎ 211 6583, 094 786206; Sharia ad-Dala; s/d with bathroom £400/700, without bathroom £350/650; ☎) Run by the formidable Madam Olga and her family, this small hotel is the most comfortable of Aleppo's budget options. It's famous throughout the country for its standards of cleanliness (it's immaculate), and rooms are freshly painted, light and comfortable. Some have private bathrooms. There's 24-hour hot water, fresh linen daily and an optional breakfast (£100).

Hotel Nejm Illahdar (Hotel Green Star; Map pp536-7; ☎ 223 9157; s £250-300, d £400-500, t £700) On the 2nd floor of a building just off Bab al-Faraj, this place has been recently renovated. Cheaper rooms come with fan, balcony and shower cubicle; the more expensive have air-con, comfortable beds and full (if tiny) private bathrooms. When we visited, the cheaper rooms were a bit grubby. There's a lounge with satellite TV, as well as a fabulous rooftop terrace where breakfast (£75) is served in summer.

Hotel Somar (Map pp536-7; ☎ 211 3198; fax 211 4669; Sharia Yarmouk; s US\$17-20, d US\$23; ☎) If you have no luck scoring a room at the Tourist Hotel, the old-fashioned Somar is a decent alternative. Rooms are comfortable and have satellite TV. All come with tiny but very clean private bathrooms. Rooms at the front are the best, as those at the rear are dark. The clientele is predominantly Arab.

Midrange & Top End

Unless indicated otherwise, all of these hotels provide comfortable rooms with heating, satellite TV and private bathroom. All except the Baron accept credit-card payment. Breakfast is included in the room cost given.

Dar Halabia (Map p539; ☎ 332 3344; www.halabia-tours.com; s/d US\$30/40; ☎) The Halabia bills itself as a 'Hotel de Charme' and it's entitled

to do so. Located near Bab Antakya, it's the only hotel in the souq. It occupies three old houses and has 19 rooms, the most attractive of which are on the ground floor around the courtyard of the main building. Although lonely at night when the whole quarter is deathly silent, the hotel is quite lovely, spotlessly clean and great value. There are no TVs.

Mandaloun Hotel (Map pp536-7; ☎ 228 3008; www.mandalounhotel.com; off Sharia Al-Telal; s/d US\$67/78; ☎) Gorgeous is the first word that comes to mind when describing the well-located Mandaloun. A boutique hotel converted from two old houses, it has a magnificent and comfortable central courtyard complete with fountain and antique furniture, as well as a cosy restaurant and bar. The downstairs rooms and suites (US\$100) are knockouts, with four-star amenities and extremely attractive décor. Rooms on the top floor are cramped and nowhere near as nice as their downstairs counterparts.

Beit Wakil (Map pp536-7; ☎ 221 7169; www.beit.wakil.com; Sharia as-Sissi; s/d US\$78/111; ☎) In the Al-Jdeida quarter, this may well be Syria's most romantic hotel. Nineteen small rooms have an almost monastic simplicity and enormous charm. There's a particularly fine triple (US\$133) on the ground floor and a stunning suite (US\$145) in the house's former reception room.

Dar Zamaria (Map pp536-7; ☎ 363 6100; www.darzamaria.com; s/d US\$83/111; ☎) Another boutique hotel in an old and very lovely building in Al-Jdeida, Dar Zamaria is known throughout the city for its attractive and very popular courtyard restaurant. Though quite small and a bit dark, rooms are comfortable; light sleepers might find restaurant noise a problem.

Diwan Rasmly Hotel (☎ 331 2222; www.diwan.rasmly-hotel.com; s/d US\$56/72; ☎) In a maze-like part of town just near the Citadel – tell your taxi driver it's near the 'Jawazat' (former passport building) – this boutique hotel occupies two connected and beautifully renovated houses, one of which is over 500 years old. Public areas are impressive, but the room décor is a bit bland. All rooms are well equipped; ask for number 519, which boasts wonderful views of the citadel. There's a panoramic rooftop restaurant that's perfect for summer nights. Service is desultory.

Baron Hotel (Map pp536-7; ☎ 211 0880/1; hotel baron@mail.sy; Sharia al-Baron; s/d US\$45/55; 🍷) The Baron has a big reputation and an air of Gothic romance, but has seen better days. Public areas (including the famous bar) are looking decidedly worse for wear, and rooms (even those that have been recently renovated) have an institutional feel, uncomfortable beds and peeling paintwork.

EATING

The block bounded by Sharias al-Maari, Bab al-Faraj, al-Quwatli and al-Baron is full of cheap eateries offering the usual array of roast chicken and shwarma. A row of excellent juice stands lines up at the Bab al-Faraj end of Sharia Yarmouk, and there's an immensely popular felafel stand right on the corner here. There are tiny stalls along the length of Souq Bab Antakya/az-Zarb/al-Attarine selling cheap felafel, kebabs, hummus, pastries and fuul.

Abou al-Nawas (Map pp536-7; ☎ 211 5100; Sharia Rashid; mezze \$15-35, mains \$100-200) This long-standing favourite has a menu that stretches way beyond the basics to include the kind of dishes that are usually only ever served up at home (patrons are often invited into the kitchen to choose from the daily pots). There's an excellent value set meal for \$175, which gives you a daily dish of your choice with rice or fries, pickles, tea or coffee, and a sweet. Be clear that this is what you're ordering, because the waiters inevitably encourage you to order a more expensive main dish instead. No alcohol.

Al-Andalib (Map pp536-7; ☎ 222 4030; Sharia al-Baron; set menu \$200) The atmosphere at this rooftop restaurant one block north of the Baron Hotel is boisterous and the place is packed most evenings. It serves a huge set meal of kebabs, salads, dips and fries. There's a \$50 service charge and a limited alcohol list. Come prepared to have a good time.

Al-Kommeh (Map pp536-7; ☎ 211 3550; Sharia Zaki al-Arsuzi; mezze \$20-50, kebabs \$100-120; 🍷) Just off Bab al-Faraj, this cavernous 1st-floor place serves up decent and well-priced mezze and kebabs to a constant stream of local families. The décor is ornate but the squalid toilets let down the side. The downstairs Al-Kindi Restaurant offers more of the same. Neither is licensed.

Bazaar al-Charq (Map pp536-7; ☎ 224 9120; btwn Sharia al-Mutanabi & Sharia Hammam al-Tal; 🍷) Ask

locals to recommend their favourite restaurant in town and the answer will inevitably be Al-Charq. An enormous place designed to resemble a bazaar, it has live music on Thursdays and Saturdays that often entices diners into singing along. The food is great, too. No alcohol is served.

Yasmeen House (Map pp536-7; ☎ 222 5562; www.yasmeenhouse.com; mezze \$45-60, grills \$150-180; 🍷) Run by two friendly brothers who have spent a lot of time in Canada, Yasmeen has a more casual vibe than the nearby Beit Wakil and Sissi House. Peruse the English-language menu (with prices listed); you're sure to find something that appeals among the standard array of mezze and grills. It's licensed, but doesn't accept credit cards.

Beit Wakil (Map pp536-7; ☎ 221 7169; Sharia as-Sissi; mezze \$45-100, grills \$175; 🍷) Aleppo's best restaurant is also housed in one of its most beautiful buildings. Guests sit in an atmospheric courtyard and can choose from a tempting array of mezze and local specialties such as the highly recommended *kabab karaz* (cherry kebab). It's licensed and accepts credit cards.

Sissi House (Map pp536-7; ☎ 221 9411; www.sissi.house.com; mezze \$35-110, mains \$150-220; 🍷) Just off Saahat al-Hattab in the Al-Jdeida quarter, this upmarket restaurant is where Aleppo's glam set hangs out. Like the restaurant at Beit Wakil, it specialises in local variations on Levantine cuisine and offers a choice of over 50 mezze dishes. The licensed menu is in Arabic and French only, and doesn't list prices. Credit cards are accepted.

DRINKING

If you're after a drink only, the upstairs bar at **Sissi House** (Map pp536-7; ☎ 221 9411; 🍷) is open until late and hosts a jazz pianist every night of the week, with a singer on Saturdays. It's the most sophisticated bar in town. Nostalgia buffs may want to pop into the pricey small bar at the venerable **Baron Hotel** (Map pp536-7; ☎ 211 0880/1; Sharia al-Baron), but most visitors prefer the laid-back **Al-Mashrabia Pub & Restaurant** (Map pp536-7; ☎ 224 0249) in Al-Jdeida, where the drinks are cheaper (local beer \$75) and the décor is more atmospheric. There's also an extensive snack menu here.

The outdoor cafés on Sharia al-Qala'a, located opposite the entrance to the citadel are great places to enjoy a coffee, fresh

juice or nargileh and watch the world go by. Equally popular are the restaurants with pavement seating that are scattered around Sharia Georges and Mathilde Salem in Al-Aziziah.

ENTERTAINMENT

Cine Alep (Map pp536-7; Sharia al-Quwatli) screens relatively new Hollywood films in its two cinemas. Tickets cost \$150. Women should be careful if going here alone.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Aleppo's airport offers irregular connections to Turkey, Europe and other cities in the Middle East. There is a regular weekly Syrian-air service to Cairo. Internally, there's a daily flight to Damascus (\$950, one hour). A taxi between the airport and the city centre will cost between \$300 to \$400 depending on the time of day and the city destination.

Bus

The main bus station, as far as most travellers are concerned, is the Hanano garage, about 800m west of the National Museum. All luxury, long-distance buses to destinations within Syria leave from here. It's a short walk to the budget hotel area around Bab al-Faraj; a taxi to the old city or Al-Jdeida will cost around \$50.

From Hanano, Al-Kadmous runs 24-hour services to Damascus on the hour (\$160, four hours) as well as 'VIP' services (\$230) at 10.30am, 5.30am, 3.30pm and 8.30pm. It also runs a regular service to Hama (\$60, 2½ hours) and Homs (\$85, three hours) from 5.30am to 10.30pm, and around-the-clock services to Deir ez-Zur (\$135, five hours).

Al-Ahlih runs one bus per day to Damascus (5am, \$150) as well as buses to Hama (\$65) and Homs (\$85) on the hour from 7am till noon and then hourly from 1.30pm until 9.30pm.

Sarraj runs a minibus service to Damascus International Airport (\$125) every 30 minutes.

Al-Salaam is one of only two companies servicing the Aleppo-Lattakia route. Its 24-hour minibuses leave on the hour (\$100, 3½ hours).

There are no direct services to Tartus or Palmyra. Change at Homs for these.

Seven or eight companies offer daily services from Hanano to Beirut (six hours) via Tripoli (five hours). These include Sarraj (\$300 both destinations), which has services at 10.30am, 1pm, 4pm, midnight, 1am and 2.30am; Ramadan (\$300 Tripoli, \$350 Beirut), at 10am and 11am; and Zetouni (\$250 Tripoli, \$300 Beirut), which has eight services daily from 10.30am to 3am.

You'll find the International Bus Station north of the tourist office. From here, there are services at 5am and 8am to Antakya (adult/student \$250/200), from where you can connect to buses servicing destinations throughout Turkey. There are also buses at 10pm and 11pm to Amman (\$450). All Karnak buses also leave from here.

Microbuses covering local routes around Aleppo leave from the sprawling microbus and minibus station just south of the Amir Palace Hotel near Bab Antakya.

Service Taxi

If you can't wait around for a bus to Antakya, a seat in a service taxi costs \$500. These leave when full from the International Bus Station.

Train

The train station is housed in an attractive old building located about a 15-minute walk from the central hotel area, north of the big public park. The telephone number for Syrian Railways in Aleppo is ☎ 221 3900.

There are two daily express services to Damascus at 4am and 5.25am (\$180) and one slow service at midnight (\$110/75 in 1st/2nd class).

To Lattakia there are two daily express trains (\$135, three hours) at 6.25am and 5.10pm, and two slow trains (\$70/50 in 1st/2nd class) at 7.50am and 3.20pm. Two daily trains travel to Deir ez-Zur (\$115/75 in 1st/2nd class) and Al-Qamishle (\$175/115 in 1st/2nd class) in the northeast at 11pm and 3am. An extra 4pm service travels to Deir ez-Zur only.

There are services to Tehran (\$3850/2750 in sleeper/1st class) on Mondays at 1.10pm, and to Istanbul (\$2815 in sleeper) on Tuesdays at 11.05am.

A taxi from the station to the Al-Jdeida, Bab Antakya or Bab al-Faraj areas should cost between \$35 and \$50.

QALA'AT SAMAAAN

قلعة سمعان

Also known as the Basilica of St Simeon, the ruins of **Qala'at Samaan** (adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Oct-Mar) are among the most atmospheric of Syria's archaeological sites. The basilica commemorates St Simeon Stylites, one of Syria's most eccentric early Christians.

In AD 423 Simeon climbed to the top of a 3m pillar and went on to spend the next 36 years atop this and other taller pillars. He ended his days on one that was a full 18m high. After his death in 459, an enormous church was built around the most famous pillar, and pilgrims from all parts of Christendom came to pay their respects. The site today is remarkably well preserved, with the main Romanesque façade still standing and the arches of the octagonal yard still reasonably complete. Views of the surrounding countryside are simply stunning.

Qala'at Samaan is a 40-minute drive from Aleppo. Microbuses to the village of Daret' Azze (£15, one hour) leave Aleppo every hour or so from the microbus bays and this is as close to the site as you can get by public transport. From here there are no local buses or taxis to take you the remaining 8km, so the only options are to hitch (difficult) or walk. Aleppine taxi drivers will charge \$£800 to take you there, wait one hour and bring you back to town.

DEAD CITIES

These eerie and ancient ghost towns are dotted along the limestone hills that lie between the Aleppo-Hama highway in the east and the Orontes River in the west. They date from the time when this area was part of the hinterland of the great Byzantine city of Antioch, and range from single monuments to whole villages complete with houses, churches and baths. Together they represent a great archive in stone, from which historians can put together a picture of life in antiquity. Some, such as **Al-Bara**, are on intensively farmed land where vegetables, olives, grapes and apricots are grown alongside striking pyramid tombs and ruined

monasteries. In winter these sites are very muddy and can be difficult to explore.

The most evocative of the Dead Cities is undoubtedly **Serjilla**. It has the most semi-complete buildings, all sitting in a natural basin in windswept and hilly moorland. Although Serjilla has been deserted for about 15 centuries, the buildings' stone façades are remarkably well preserved and it's easy to get a feel for what the town would have looked like in its heyday. There's a spooky feel to the place, almost as if you've stumbled upon it just after the occupants have vanished. In fact, some of the buildings have been reoccupied by local shepherds, so don't be surprised if you see chickens wandering around, washing drying on bushes or smoke issuing from chimneys. Though there is a ticket box next to the car park, it is rarely open.

You are best off visiting the Dead Cities on a combined Qala'at Samaan/Dead Cities tour from Aleppo (p540) or in your own car, as they are extremely difficult to reach on public transport and are scattered over a large area. The drive from Qala'at Samaan to Serjilla takes 1½ hours.

PALMYRA

تدمر

☎ 031

In *A Scandalous Life* (Mary S Lovell's fascinating biography of that famous and highly unconventional 19th-century traveller to Syria, Lady Jane Digby) the author spends much time describing Jane's long-term infatuation with the rose-gold ancient ruins of Tadmor (Palmyra). Jane isn't the only Western traveller to have fallen victim to this desert city's charms, and these days Palmyra is Syria's prime tourist attraction.

HISTORY

Palmyra was an Assyrian caravan town for over 1000 years, after which it enjoyed a period of glory for two centuries under the Greeks. It was annexed by Rome in AD 217 and became a centre of unsurpassed wealth.

The city's most famous character was Zenobia, the half-Greek, half-Arab queen who claimed descent from Cleopatra. A woman of exceptional ability and ambition, she became ruler of Palmyra in 267 after the death (in suspicious circumstances) of her husband Odenathus. Zenobia set her sights on

Rome, but her army was soundly beaten by the forces of the Roman emperor Aurelian in 271; he torched the city two years later.

This was the beginning of the end for Palmyra. It fell to the Muslims in 634 and was finally and completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1089.

INFORMATION

Palmyra's helpful **tourist information office** (☎ 910 574; Saahat ar-Rais; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu) is situated across from the museum. There is a **Commercial Bank of Syria exchange booth** (☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Thu, 10am-8pm Fri & Sat) in front of the museum, but it doesn't change travellers cheques. The post office is in front of the Al-Assad Gardens, just west of the tourist office; you can make 24-hour international calls from the card phones in front of the building (cards available inside). **Hani Internet** (☎ 910 878; ☎ 8am-midnight) at the Traditional Palmyra Restaurant charges an outrageous \$£150 per hour for Internet access. The Citadel Hotel and Spring Restaurant were charging \$£75 per hour when we visited, though both warned that price rises were planned.

SIGHTS The Ruins

Bel was the most important of the gods in the Palmyrene pantheon and the **Temple of Bel** (adult/student \$£150/10; ☎ officially 8am-1pm & 4-6pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar but often closed for longer periods over lunch) is the most complete structure and most impressive part of the ruins. Once inside, you'll see that the complex consists of two parts: a huge walled temenos (courtyard) and at its centre, the cella (the temple proper), which dates from AD 32.

Just to the left of the entrance into the temenos is a sunken passage that enters the temple from the outside wall and gradually slopes up to the level of the courtyard. This was probably used to bring sacrificial animals to the precincts. The podium of the sacrificial altar is on the left, and beside it are the foundations of a banqueting hall. The cella is unusual in that its entrance is in one of the sides rather than at an end, and is offset from the centre. Inside is a single chamber with *adytons* (large niches) at either end.

The building beside the temple was originally the residence of Palmyra's Ottoman governor. It now has a ho-hum **Ethnographic Museum** (adult/student \$£75/5; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm).

Formerly connected to the temple by a colonnade, the **monumental arch** across the road now serves as the entrance to the site proper. There is no admission cost to this part of the ruins, though you will probably be stalked by camel owners keen to charge you \$£200 for a 30-minute ride around the site.

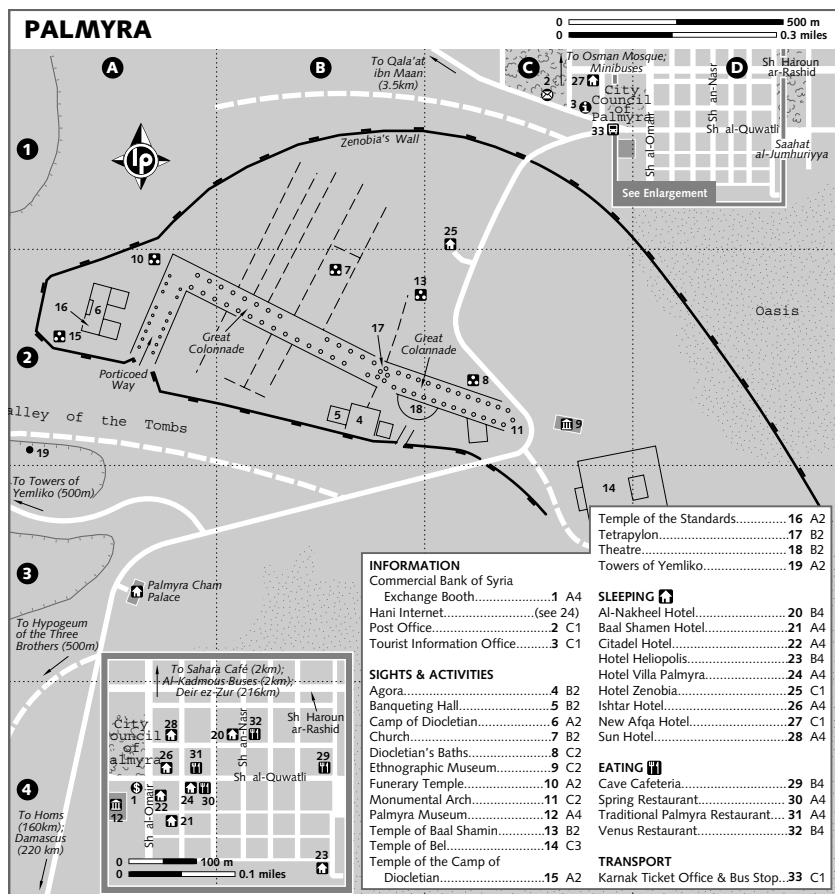
The arch is interesting as it is actually two arches joined like a hinge to pivot the main street through a 30-degree turn. This slight direction switch, and a second one just a little further west, are in themselves evidence of the city's unique development – a crooked street like this would be quite unimaginable in any standard Roman city.

South of the main colonnaded street is the city's **theatre**, which was buried by sand until the 1950s. Since its discovery it has been extensively restored.

About one-third of the way along the colonnaded street is the reconstructed **tetrapylon**, a monumental structure that served to mark a junction of thoroughfares. From here the main street continues northwest, and another smaller pillared street leads southwest to the agora, or forum, and northeast to the **Temple of Baal Shamin**, a small shrine dedicated to the god of storms and fertilising rains.

Beyond the tetrapylon the main street continues for another 500m. This stretch has seen much less excavation and reconstruction, and is littered with tumbled columns and assorted blocks of masonry. The road ends in the impressive portico of a 3rd-century funerary temple. South of the funerary temple, along the porticoed way, is the **Camp of Diocetian**, erected after the destruction of the city by Aurelian. It was possibly on the site of what had been the palace of Zenobia, although excavations so far have been unable to prove this. The camp lay near the Damascus Gate, which led on to a 2nd-century colonnaded street that supposedly linked Emesa (Homs) and the Euphrates.

To the south, at the foot of some low hills, is a series of tall, freestanding square-based towers known as the **Towers of Yemliko**. These were constructed as multistorey burial chambers, stacked with coffins posted in pigeonhole-like niches. The niches were sealed with stone panels carved with a head-and-shoulder portrait of the deceased; you can see many of these in the special displays at the National Museum in Damascus (p515).



It's possible to visit one of these towers, Elahbel, on a tour organised by the Palmyra Museum (adult/student \$€75/5). Tours leave from the museum at 8.30am, 10am, 11.30am and 4.30pm (no 11.30am tour on Fridays; no 4.30pm tour October to March) and include a visit to the impressive **Hypogeum of the Three Brothers**, an underground burial chamber with beautiful frescoes.

Perched high on a hilltop to the west of the ruins is **Qala'at ibn Maan** (adult/student \$€75/5; ☞ noon-sunset Wed-Mon), also known as the Arab Castle. From here there are spectacular sunset views over the ruins. Though it's possible to walk here, many travellers choose to take one of the many tours sold by hotels in town (approximately \$€100 per person).

Palmyra Museum

With labelling in French and Arabic only, and generally poor presentation, it's debatable whether the modest **Palmyra Museum** (adult/student \$€150/10; ☞ 8am-1pm & 4-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) is worth a visit or not.

However, there is a very good, large-scale model of the Temple of Bel that gives an excellent idea of how the complex would have looked in its original state, as well as a couple of dynamic mosaics that were found in what are presumed to be nobles' houses, just east of the temple. There are also countless busts and carved portraits that formed part of the panels used to seal the tombs in Palmyra's many funerary towers.

SLEEPING

Prices vary seasonally and according to demand. This is one place where it pays to haggle.

Budget

New Afqa Hotel (☞ 910 386; mahran_afqa@hotmail.com; roof mattress \$€100, s/d with air-con \$€350/500, without air-con \$€250/300; ☞) This excellent budget choice is run by the genial Mahran and offers basic but clean boxlike rooms, some of which have air-con and bathrooms. The welcoming reception area has satellite TV and beer. Breakfast costs \$€75.

Citadel Hotel (☞ 910 537; razisaleh@hotmail.com; Sharia As'ad al-Amir; dm/s/d \$€150/250/500; ☞) Facing the side of the museum, this popular place has a comfortable foyer with satellite TV and 17 clean rooms. All but the dorm rooms on the roof have small bathrooms. The pick of the rooms are the five new doubles on the top floor. Breakfast costs \$€50. In winter, rooms are discounted to \$€200 per person.

Sun Hotel (☞ 911 133; sunhotel_sy@hotmail.com; dm/s/d \$€150/200/400; ☞) The freshly painted rooms at this small hotel come complete with fans and clean private bathrooms; ask for one with an exterior window. Tidy but dark dorm rooms (also with bathrooms) sleep three or four. Breakfast costs \$€50, and the owner's mum is happy to cook dinner for \$€100.

Al-Nakheel Hotel (☞ 910 744; mohamed1st12@yahoo.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$6/12; ☞) The guy running this small place is extremely enthusiastic and has made a real effort with the décor. It'll probably remind you of your great-aunt's house, albeit with a bit of local colour. Small clean rooms have bathrooms, rug-strewn floors and comfortable beds. One has a balcony with views over the ruins.

Baal Shamen Hotel (☞ 910 453; fax 912 970; mattress on roof \$€100, s/d with bathroom \$€200/300, without bathroom \$€125/250; ☞) It's the cheapest of Palmyra's budget options, but this hotel isn't the best. Five rooms have air-con and clean private bathrooms, the rest are a bit musty and share bathrooms that need a good clean. There's a Bedouin tent on the roof where you can sleep on a thin mattress in summer. You'll have to eat breakfast elsewhere.

Midrange & Top End

The prices given include breakfast. All rooms offer satellite TV, heating and bathrooms. Credit cards are accepted.

Ishtar Hotel (☞ 913 073/4; ishtarhotel@hotmail.com; Sharia al-Quwatli; s/d US\$15/24; ☞) Once you're over the shock of the leopard-skin-covered furniture in the foyer of this friendly hotel you'll be won over by its understated charm. Though small, rooms are comfortable. You can drink in the foyer or in the bizarre cave-cum-basement restaurant. Prices are 30% cheaper March to November.

Hotel Villa Palmyra (☞ 910 156; villapalmyra@mail.sy; s/d US\$40/50; ☞) This new hotel offers smallish rooms with an attractive turquoise décor. There's a rooftop restaurant with great views of the ruins, as well as a downstairs bar and pub. Be very firm when negotiating room prices; the first price we were given was 50% more than what we eventually settled on.

Hotel Heliopolis (☞ 913 921/2; heliopolis-palmyra@usa.net; s/d US\$52/61; ☞) In a quiet location behind Saahat al-Jumhuriyya, this somewhat bland but well-maintained place offers the most comfortable rooms in town. There's a good restaurant on the 5th floor and a downstairs bar. Breakfast is an extra \$€200.

Hotel Zenobia (☞ 910 107; zenobia-hotel@net.sy; s/d US\$50/65; ☞) Built in 1900, the Zenobia can rightfully claim to be one of the most famous hotels in the Middle East, but these days it's short on any kind of charm, period or otherwise. You're much better off staying elsewhere as the rooms are damp, grubby and run down.

EATING & DRINKING

Most places to eat are on or around the main drag, Sharia al-Quwatli. If our experience is anything to go by, you should avoid the Garden Restaurant near the ruins. When we visited, the food was mediocre and the bill involved some creative accounting.

You'll find cheap fast-food eateries selling roast chicken, felafel and shwarma on Sharia al-Quwatli, between the Traditional Palmyra Restaurant and Saahat al-Jumhuriyya. The best of these is probably Zenobia Restaurant. Grocery and fruit and veg shops are also found in this area.

Traditional Palmyra Restaurant (☞ 910 878; set meals \$€250) This small place serves what is probably the best food in town, but you shouldn't expect a gourmet experience. Set meals of decent *mensaf* (lamb on a bed of rice), *kawaj* (meat or vegetables roasted in a terracotta pot) or stuffed vegetables are

served with bread and tea. The atmosphere is friendly and the place has a nice feel overall, though it's pricey for what it offers. There are delicious sweet and savoury pancakes (£100 to £150) on the menu if you don't want the full set meal. A glass of beer costs £75.

Venus Restaurant (☎ 913 864; 🍷) Near the Traditional Palmyra, this place has an almost identical menu. We're not sure whether this type of imitation constitutes a sincere form of flattery or a blatant infringement of commercial rights, but we did note that that its prices were considerably cheaper. The kitchen could do with a good scrub.

Spring Restaurant (☎ 910 307) The Spring has a ground-floor dining area and a dusty Bedouin tent on the roof where you can enjoy a meal and nargileh (£75) in summer. The set *mensaf* meal is £250, *mezze* range from £25 to £50 and grills are £150. Students get a 20% discount.

The Ishtar Hotel's basement restaurant serves a good-value set menu of *mezze*, soup, *mensaf* and dessert for £200. The Hotel Villa Palmyra serves good *mezze* (£25) and has great views, but the grills (£150) are disappointing. The similarly priced food at the Hotel Heliopolis is slightly better.

Locals can be found gossiping over cheap tea or playing cards at Cave Cafeteria near Saahat al-Jumhuriyya. Women won't feel comfortable here.

The Zenobia Hotel has an outdoor terrace overlooking the ruins, where you can relax over a pricey tea (£50) or local beer (£125).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Palmyra doesn't have a bus station.

Karnak buses leave from outside its office on the main square, opposite the museum. Karnak runs one bus per day to Damascus (£110, three hours), leaving at 12.30pm, for which you'll need to reserve a seat in advance. Make sure you get an allocated seat number. There are two services per day to Deir ez-Zur (£80, two hours) at 3pm and 5.30pm, and two to Homs (£75, two hours) at 7.30am and 2.30pm.

Al-Kadmous buses stop at the Sahara Café on the edge of town (2km from the museum; a taxi should cost £25). The ticket office is in front of the café. Buses to Damascus (£115) leave hourly from 6am to 7pm, at 9.30pm and hourly from 12.30am to 6am. Buses to Deir ez-Zur (£85, two hours) leave hourly from 8am to 8pm. Homs (£75) services leave at 10am, 2.30pm, 7.30pm and 2.30am.

Seven **private bus companies** (☎ 913 435) provide 24-hour services to Damascus (£110) and Deir ez-Zur (£90), leaving every 15 minutes from outside Restaurant Palace Palmyra on Sharia Al-Omair, northeast of the museum.

Microbuses (£65) and minibus service taxis (£50) travel to Homs between 6am and sunset. They leave from outside the Osman Mosque.

Travellers find that taxis and minibuses usually charge US\$100 to drive to Aleppo via As-Sukhna (Qasr al-Heir ash Sharqi), Rasafa and Qala' at Je'ber. You may be able to bargain this price down.

SYRIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Though there are no youth hostels in Syria, there are many excellent budget hotels. Mid-range hotels abound in the capital and at least one excellent example can be found in every major tourist hot spot. When it comes to the top end, the choices aren't as extensive. Indeed, four-star hotels are rare, with the only outstanding example being the Omayyad Hotel in Damascus. The five-star scene has been dominated for many years by the lacklustre government-run Cham chain, but this is poised to change with the opening of the Four Seasons in Damascus, the Semiramis Palmyra Palace and the Sheraton in Aleppo.

Prices cited are for rooms in the high season and include taxes. We have defined budget hotels as any that charge up to US\$20 for a double room; midrange as any that charge from US\$20 to US\$80; and top end as those that charge US\$80 plus for a room. In the low season (December to March) you should be able to get significant discounts at all hotels, including those at the top end. Conversely, during July and August it can be extremely difficult to get a room in Damascus, Hama or Lattakia as these towns are flooded with Gulf Arabs fleeing the summer heat of their countries.

Hotels rated two-star and up generally require payment in US dollars. They are increasingly accepting credit-card payments (often with a surcharge) but you shouldn't take this for granted.

BUSINESS HOURS

The following is a guide only. The official weekend is Friday and Saturday. Most museums and sites are closed on Tuesday.

Banks Generally follow the government office hours but there are quite a few exceptions to the rule. Some branches keep their doors open for only three hours

PRACTICALITIES

- As well as the three state-run Arabic daily newspapers, there is one English-language daily, the *Syria Times* (£5). This is published under direct government control and is predictably big on anti-Zionist, pro-Arab rhetoric and short on news.
- You can pick up the BBC World Service on a range of radio frequencies, including AM 1323 in Damascus and the Europe short-wave schedule in Aleppo. See www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice for details.
- Satellite dishes are becoming common in Syria, and international English-language news services such as CNN and BBC World can be accessed in hotel rooms throughout the country.
- The country's electrical current is 220V AC, 50Hz. Wall sockets are the round, two-pin European type.
- Syria uses the metric system for weights and measures.

from 9am, while some exchange booths are open as late as 7pm.

Government offices 8am to 2pm daily except Friday and holidays. Post offices are open later in the large cities and are often open on Fridays.

Private offices 10am to 2pm, and 4pm to 9pm except Friday and holidays.

Restaurants Between noon and midnight daily. Cafés tend to open earlier and close a bit later.

Shops 9am to 1.30pm and 4pm to 9pm summer; 9am to 1.30pm and 4pm to 8pm winter. Often closed on Fridays and holidays.

CHILDREN

Although Syrians are extraordinarily welcoming to children, Syria's hotels have few child-friendly facilities, and hardly any towns have easily accessible public gardens with playground equipment or shopping malls with amusement centres. This can mean that travelling with children is a bit challenging. Fortunately, restaurants are extremely welcoming to families.

Formula is readily available in pharmacies, and disposable nappies are stocked in supermarkets. Restaurants usually have

THE PROBLEM WITH PALMYRA

Palmyra's economy is largely dependent on tourism, and many locals support large extended families with the income they earn from operating the town's hotels, restaurants and shops. Since tourist numbers plummeted after September 2001, these businesses have hit hard times and competition between them has become fierce – and sometimes nasty – as a result. For example, the operators of the Spring and Venus Restaurants are envious of the success of the town's most popular tourist restaurant, the Traditional Palmyra, and regale travellers who will listen to them with rants about the competition. If they start sounding off to you, tell them you're not interested.

Competition is no less heated in the hotel scene, with the major object of disaffection being Al-Faris Hotel, located more than a kilometre outside town. If you're arriving in town by bus, you may be dropped here rather than at the official bus stop in town, but you shouldn't get off the bus here unless you want to.

Those travellers who make it past Al-Faris and into town will no doubt encounter another competition-fuelled annoyance, the hotel touts. These guys (often kids) will try to take you to one of the hotels in town paying commission. Be aware that if you turn up at a hotel with one of them an extra 10% to 20% will be added to the quoted cost of a bed or room to cover his commission. And beware of the old 'That hotel is full/dirty/closed/a brothel' spiel about somewhere that you've already booked; the truth is that these touts will say anything to steer you towards a commission-paying place.

highchairs. Babysitting facilities are sometimes available in top end hotels.

COURSES

If you're a would-be student of the Arabic language, there are a number of options in Damascus:

Amideast (☎ 333 2804; www.amideast.org/offices/syria; Sharia Karim al-Khalil) Offers courses in modern (S£6000 for 40 hours) in colloquial Syrian Arabic at three levels. Small classes with a good reputation.

British Council (☎ 331 0631; www.britishcouncil.org/syria; Sharia Karim al-Khalil) Offers courses in modern standard or colloquial Syrian Arabic at three levels. The regular course comprises 28 hours of classes over seven weeks and runs between September and June. It costs S£9000. There is also an intensive course over 48 hours in July/August that costs S£20,000. You'll find it off Sharia Maysaloun.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Students get massive discounts on site admissions on presentation of an internationally recognised card such as the ISIC.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Syrian Embassies & Consulates

There is no Syrian representation in New Zealand, and citizens are advised to contact the embassy or one of the Syrian honorary consulates in Australia. For the addresses of Syrian embassies and consulates in the Middle East, see the relevant chapter.

Australia Canberra (☎ 02-6286 5235; www.syrianembassyaustralia.org; 41 Culgoa Circuit, O'Malley, ACT 2606); Melbourne (☎ 03-9347 8445; fax 03-9347 8447; 57 Cardigan St, Carlton, Victoria 3053); Sydney (☎ 02-9597 7714; fax 03-9597 2226; 10 Belmore St, Arndcliffe, NSW 2205)

Canada (☎ 613-569 5556; fax 613-569 3800; Suite 3114, 433 Laurier Ave, Ottawa, Ontario)

France (☎ 01 40 62 61 00; 20 Rue Vaneau, 75007 Paris)

Germany Berlin (☎ 030-220 2046; www.syrianembassy.de; Otto Grotewohl Str 3, Berlin); Bonn (☎ 228-819 9220; Andreas Hermes Str 5, D-53175 Bonn); Hamburg (☎ 40-3090 5414; fax 40-3090 5233; Brooktor 11, 20457 Hamburg)

Japan (☎ 358 68977; Akasaka Minato-ku, Tokyo 107)

Netherlands (☎ 070-346 9795; Laan van Meerdervoort 53d, The Hague)

Spain (☎ 239 4619; Plaza Platerias Martinez, Madrid)

UK (☎ 020-7245 9012; http://syria.embassyhomepage.com/syrian_embassy_london_unitedkingdom.htm; 8 Belgrave Sq, London SW1 8PH)

USA New York (☎ 212-661 1313; 820 Second Ave, New York NY 10017); Washington, DC (☎ 202-232 6313;

www.syrianembassy.us; 2215 Wyoming Ave NW, Washington, DC, 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Syria

Most embassies and consulates are open from around 8am to 2pm and are closed on Friday, Saturday and public holidays. The following are in Damascus. Note: the Canadian embassy currently provides emergency consular services to Australians; Irish interests are looked after by the UK embassy.

Canada (☎ 011-611 669; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/syria; Block 12 Autostrad al-Mezze) About 4km west of city centre.

Egypt (Map pp512-13; ☎ 011-333 3561; fax 011-333 7961; Sharia al-Jala'a, Abu Roumana)

France (☎ 011-332 7992; www.amb-damas.fr; Sharia Ata Ayyubi, Salihiyya)

Germany (☎ 011-332 3800/1; Sharia Abdulmunem Al-Riad, Malki)

Iran (☎ 011-222 6459; fax 011-222 0997; Autostrad al-Mezzeh) About 4km west of the city centre.

Italy (☎ 011-333 2621, 011-333 8338; Sharia al-Ayub)

Japan (☎ 011-333 8273; Sharia Shark Asiya al-Jala, Abu Roumana)

Jordan (Map pp512-13; ☎ 011-333 4642; jordan@visto.com; Sharia al-Jala'a, Abu Roumana)

Netherlands (☎ 011-333 6871, 011-333 7661; fax 011-333 9369; Sharia al-Jala'a, Abu Roumana)

Spain (☎ 011-613 2900/1; embespsy@mail.mae.es; Sharia Shafi, east Mezze) Behind Hotel Al-Hayat.

Turkey (☎ 011-333 1411; dakkabe@citechco.net; 58 Sharia Ziad bin Abi Soufian, Al Rawda)

UK (☎ 011-373 9241/2/3/7; Kotob Bldg, 11 Sharia Mohammed Kurd Ali, Malki)

USA (☎ 011-333 1342, 011-333 2814; http://damascus.sembassy.gov; 2 Sharia al-Mansour, Abu Roumana)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Visit the Syrian Ministry of Tourism website (www.syriatourism.org) for festival details.

Bosra Festival This festival of music and theatre is held every September or October in odd years. It offers the chance to be part of an audience in the town's spectacular Roman amphitheatre. Tickets cost from S£25.

Silk Road Festival Held annually in the cities where the ancient caravans once met: Palmyra, Aleppo, Bosra, Tartus, Damascus and Lattakia. A varied programme features overseas acts, concerts, sporting events and dance performances.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is prohibited in Syria and conviction can result in imprisonment.

Cleopatra's Wedding Present, by Robert Tewdwr Moss, is an entertaining account of a gay American's travels through Syria.

HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays (p647), Syria celebrates the following public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Revolution Day 8 March

Al-Adha Day 15 March

Mother's Day 21 March

Easter March/April

Hijra New Year's Day 6 April

National Day 17 April

May Day 1 May

Martyrs' Day 6 May

Liberation War of October Day 6 October

Christmas Day 25 December

MONEY

The official currency is the Syrian pound (S£), also called the lira. There are 100 piastres (*qirsh*) to a pound but this is redundant as the smallest coin is one pound. Other coins come in denominations of two, five, 10 and 25. Notes come in denominations of five, 10, 25, 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1000.

Country	Unit	Syrian pound (S£)
Australia	A\$1	38.06
Canada	C\$1	44.27
Egypt	E£1	9.00
euro zone	€1	61.30
Japan	¥100	44.81
Jordan	JD1	72.75
Lebanon	LL10	0.35
New Zealand	NZ\$1	35.87
Turkey	YTL1	38.14
UK	UK£1	90.57
USA	US\$1	52.91

ATMs

There is a growing number of ATMs in Syria, particularly in Damascus, but there are still a number of towns (eg Palmyra, Hama, Homs, Bosra) that are yet to have machines. Some of the ATM machines that are on the ground give advances on Visa and MasterCard, but are not Cirrus or Maestro enabled.

Banks

The Syrian banking system was opened to private banks in 2004. New, mainly Lebanese, players such as the Banks of Syria & Overseas (BSO) and the International Bank for Trade & Finance (IBTF) are starting to provide much-needed retail services and cre-

ate competition for the state-owned Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS).

Credit Cards

Major credit cards are increasingly being accepted by travel agencies, hotels and shops, but they're not yet accepted in most restaurants. This situation will change as soon as Visa and MasterCard are given permission to set up shop in Syria; at present all transactions must be processed through Jordan, and a surcharge of around 10% is invariably levied on the customer to cover this.

The contact number for Amex in Syria is ☎ 011-221 7813; for Visa, MasterCard and Diner's Club it's ☎ 011-222 1326.

Moneychangers

There's at least one branch of the Commercial Bank of Syria in every major town and most of them will change US dollars or euros. There are also a small number of officially sanctioned private exchange offices. These change cash at official bank rates, and generally don't charge any commission. The other advantage is that whereas banks usually close for the day at 12.30pm or 2pm, the exchange offices are often open until 7pm.

Tippling & Bargaining

Tippling is expected in the better restaurants and by all tour guides. Whatever you buy, remember that bargaining is an integral part of the process and listed prices are always inflated to allow for it. If you are shopping in the souqs, bargain hard – even a minimum amount of effort will almost always result in outrageous asking prices being halved.

Travellers Cheques

It is becoming increasingly difficult to cash travellers cheques in Syria. If you do find a bank that will change your cheques, you must have the bank receipt with the cheque numbers detailed on it. Exchange offices never change them.

POST

The Syrian postal service is slow but trustworthy. Letters mailed from the main cities take about a week to Europe and anything up to a month to Australia or the USA. Stamps for postcards to the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA cost S£18.

TELEPHONE

The country code for Syria is ☎ 963, followed by the local area code (minus the zero), then the subscriber number. The international access code (to call abroad from Syria) is ☎ 00. The numbers for directory assistance are ☎ 141 142 (national calls) and ☎ 143 144 (international calls).

There are two major phone companies in Syria: Syriatel and Spacetel (aka 94).

The easiest way to make calls is probably to purchase an Easycomm phonecard; alternatively you can call from card phones inside or just outside the local telephone office. Buy the necessary card either from a booth within the office or from a vendor who'll be hovering around the phones. The cards will only work at that particular phone office.

Syrian phone charges:

Australia and Asia Per minute £E90 (£E50 per minute from 2pm to 7pm).

Europe Per minute £E75 (£E40 per minute from 10pm to 3am).

Lebanon Per minute £E17.

Middle East Per minute £E35 (£E25 per minute from 9pm to 2am).

USA Per minute £E90 (£E50 per minute from 10pm to 3am).

Within Syria Per minute 300 piastres (average).

Mobile Phones

You can purchase a Syriatel 'Ya Hala' SIM card to use in your mobile phone while you're in the country. These cost £E1000, are valid for 30 days and can be recharged in £E400 units. Spacetel offers a similar card, the 'ANA'. Both cards are available at mobile-phone shops throughout the country (these are ubiquitous) and at the arrivals hall at Damascus International Airport.

Phonecards

Easycomm cards are available from mobile-phone shops and you will find Easycomm phones in most cities. You'll need a £E200 card to make calls within Syria (£E20 per minute), a £E350 card to phone Europe (£E100 per minute), a £E500 card to phone the rest of the world except the USA (£E100 per minute) and a £E1000 to call the USA (£E125 per minute).

VISAS

Most travellers must have a visa to enter Syria; the only exceptions are citizens of Arab countries. Obtain a visa before arriv-

ing at the border, preferably in your home country, well before your trip. Avoid applying in a country that's not your own or that you don't hold residency for as the Syrian authorities don't like this. At best they'll ask you for a letter of recommendation from your own embassy (often an expensive and time-consuming proposition); at worst, they'll turn you down flat. US citizens should be aware that many US embassies abroad have a policy of not issuing letters of recommendation – leading to the ridiculous situation where they issue letters stating that they don't issue letters of recommendation. If your home country doesn't have a Syrian embassy or consulate, there's no problem with you applying in another country; alternatively you can obtain a visa on arrival.

Officially, the Syrian embassy in Amman issues visas only to nationals and residents of Jordan and to nationals of countries that have no Syrian representation. So, if you are from a country such as the UK, the USA or France, all of which have a Syrian embassy, you will not be able to get a Syrian visa in Jordan. That said, we have received recent reports that citizens without Jordanian residence were obtaining single-entry Syrian visas in Amman for JD82.50.

In Turkey, you can get Syrian visas in both Ankara and Istanbul, but you'll need a letter of recommendation from your embassy. There is no Syrian embassy in Lebanon.

There are three types of visa: transit, single entry and multiple entry. Transit visas are only good for airport stays, so most travellers will need a single- or multiple-entry visa. Both are valid only for 15 days inside Syria and must be used within three months of the date of issue. Don't be misled by the line on the visa stating a validity of three months – this simply means the visa is valid for *presentation* for three months. You'll usually require two photographs and have to fill out two forms.

The cost of visas varies according to the reciprocal agreement Syria has made with your home country. For example, UK citizens pay UK£32 for a single-entry visa, US citizens US\$100 and Australian citizens A\$41. If you book travel arrangements through a foreign tour operator that has a working relationship with a Syrian operator, you are entitled to a free visa, collectable at the point of entry.

TRAVEL FROM ISRAEL TO SYRIA

The rule is crystal clear: if border officials see that you have an Israeli visa or stamp in your passport, or if a scan of recent stamps suggests that you have recently travelled through Israel and the Palestinian Territories, you will be refused entry to Syria (p353). However, slight changes are afoot. In a recent meeting with Dr Saadalla Agha Al Kalaa, Syria's minister for tourism, Lonely Planet was told that four groups of eight people or more who are making their way overland from Israel to Jordan and Syria will be allowed to enter the country. Great news. Let's hope that the new rule is extended to independent travellers in the near future.

Visas at the Border

If there is no Syrian representation in your country, you can obtain a visa on arrival at borders, airports or ports. Otherwise you MUST secure a visa in advance. The only official exception is for travellers entering Syria from Lebanon; if you have a valid Lebanese visa, a Syrian visa will be issued without problem on the border – for a charge (p459). This rule also applies to holders of single-entry visas who cross over from Syria to Lebanon and then return to Syria.

Visa Extensions

If you're staying in Syria for more than 15 days you'll have to get a visa extension while in the country. This is done at an immigration office, which you'll find in all main cities. The length of the extension appears to depend on a combination of what you're willing to ask for and the reason you cite for wanting the extension, eg travel or work. They are usually only granted on the 14th or 15th day of your stay, so if you apply earlier expect to be knocked back. The specifics vary from place to place but there are always a couple of forms to complete and you need two to six passport photos. The cost is never more than US\$1. For addresses and further details see the individual city sections.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Syria is an extraordinarily safe country in which to travel, and foreign women are generally treated with courtesy and respect.

Even so, there will still always be a certain amount of unwanted predatory male attention, particularly in Palmyra and in the area around Sharia Baron in Aleppo. To minimise the chance of any unpleasant encounters follow the advice given on clothing and behaviour on p654 and try to sit next to women on public transport.

TRANSPORT IN SYRIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering the Country

For information on Syrian visas and entry requirements, see opposite.

Air

Syria's main **international airport** (☎ 544 5983-9) is just outside Damascus and has regular connections to other cities in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Asia on a variety of European- and Middle East-based airlines. There are other international airports at **Aleppo** (flights ☎ 421 1200, reservations ☎ 421 6900) and Lattakia, but other than one weekly Syrianair flight to Cairo from each of these, they are most frequently used for charters and domestic flights.

Syrian Arab Airlines (Syrianair; www.syriaair.com) is the national airline. It has a small fleet, which includes some recently purchased Airbus. From Damascus, Syrianair flies to destinations including Cairo (US\$158 one way) and Istanbul (US\$194 one way).

Land

Syria has borders with Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. It also shares a border with Israel, the hotly disputed Golan Heights, but it's a definite no-go zone that's mined and is patrolled by UN peacekeepers.

IRAQ

The only open border crossing with Iraq is just south of Abu Kamal in the extreme east of the country. See p269 for details.

DEPARTURE TAX

There's an airport departure tax of £E200 payable in local currency at booths next to airport check-in counters. There's no departure tax if you leave by land.

JORDAN

There are two border crossings between Syria and Jordan: at Nasib/Jabir and Deraa/Ramtha. These crossings are 3km apart. If crossing by car, service taxi or bus you'll cross through the main Nasib/Jabir post, on the Amman–Damascus highway. If you're travelling by train or by local transport, you'll use Deraa/Ramtha. Microbuses from the bus station at Deraa charge S£150 per person to take you across the border to Ramtha. The best way to get to Deraa from Damascus is to catch a bus from Baramke garage.

From Damascus there are a couple of daily buses to Amman (p521), for which you need to book in advance as demand for seats is high, or you can catch a service taxi. The famous Hijaz railway trip (p522) is also a possibility.

Jordanian visas are issued at the border (p403), or can be obtained in advance from the embassy in Damascus. It's cheaper to get it at the border.

LEBANON

There are plenty of buses from Damascus to Beirut, although to travel direct to Baalbek the only option is a service taxi (see p522 for details). You can also travel by bus or service taxi to Beirut via Tripoli from Aleppo and Lattakia (p543 and p526).

See p458 for information on obtaining Lebanese visas on the border.

TURKEY

There are several border crossings between Syria and Turkey. The busiest and most convenient links Antakya in Turkey with Aleppo, via the Bab al-Hawa border station. This is the route taken by all cross-border buses including those from Damascus, Lattakia and Aleppo bound for Antakya and onward Turkish destinations. See p521, p526 and p543 for details.

An interesting alternative to the bus might be the weekly train from Aleppo to İstanbul (p543).

You can also make your way by microbus from Lattakia, on the Syrian coast, to the border post on the outskirts of the village of Kassab and on to Antakya via Yayladağı. Over in the far northeast of Syria there's another crossing at Qamishle for the south-eastern Turkish town of Nusaybin.

While Turkish visas are issued at the border (p633), you must already be in possession of a valid visa to enter Syria – unless you hold a passport of a country without Syrian representation, in which case you can get your visa at the border (p552).

GETTING AROUND**Air**

Syrianair has a monopoly on domestic flights in the country, and operates flights from Damascus to Aleppo, Deir ez-Zur, Lattakia and Qamishle. Under-26s can usually get discounted tickets.

Bus

Syria has a well-developed road network, and bus transport is frequent and cheap. Distances are short, so journeys rarely take more than a few hours. Carry your passport at all times as you may need it for ID checks; you'll definitely need it to buy tickets.

Several kinds of buses ply the same routes, but the most safe and comfortable way to travel is by 'luxury' Pullman bus.

KARNAK & OTHER BUSES

At the time of research the future of Karnak was under a cloud, as the state-owned bus line has been losing money ever since the national bus system was opened to private competition. A government review was looking into whether it should be closed down or not, and the feeling on the street was that it was unlikely to be around in 2006. If it is propped up, the government will need to spend a lot of money upgrading its buses, because at the moment they're very old and none too clean. Fares are usually about a third cheaper than those charged by the luxury buses but given that, you're talking a difference perhaps of less than a dollar...

There's also a third, even cheaper category of buses. These are really old rust buckets on wheels, and buying a ticket is akin to a gamble on whether the vehicle's going to make it or not. Needless to say, this is the cheapest way of covering long distances between towns. These vehicles have their own garages separate from those of the luxury buses. We suggest you steer clear.

MINIBUS & MICROBUS

Minibuses operate on many of the shorter routes, eg Hama–Homs, Tartus–Lattakia

and Homs–Lattakia. They take about 20 people, are often luridly decorated and have no schedule, departing only when full. This means that on less popular routes you may have to wait quite some time until one fills up. Journey times are generally longer than with the other buses, as they set people down and pick them up at any and all points along the route – hence their common name of 'hob-hob' (stop-stop).

The term microbus is blurred, but in general refers to the little white vans (mostly Japanese) with a sliding door. These are used principally to connect the major cities and towns with surrounding small towns and villages. They are replacing the lumbering old minibuses with which they compete, and are faster and slightly more expensive. They follow set routes but along that route passengers can be picked up or set down anywhere. The fare is the same whatever distance you travel.

PULLMAN BUS

The state-owned bus company Karnak once had a monopoly on the road, but since the early 1990s it's been overtaken by private companies operating excellent services. Routes are few and operators are in fierce competition for passengers. Every city bus station (known locally as '*karajats*', or garages) has a row of prefab huts serving as booking offices for the various companies. There's no central information source for departure times or prices so it's a case of walking around and finding out which company has the next bus to your destination. Fares vary little and buses are pretty much the same (large, newish, air-con). Seats are assigned at booking. A rigid no-smoking rule is imposed on most buses, and during the journey a steward will distribute cups of water. A few companies do have the edge when it comes to the cleanliness and road-worthiness of their vehicles; we particularly recommend travelling with Al-Kadmous (sometimes signed 'KT') and Al-Ahliyah.

Car & Motorcycle

You'll need an International Driving Permit (IDP) if you decide to drive in Syria. Traffic runs on the right-hand side of the road. The speed limit is 60 km/h in built-up areas, 70km/h on the open road and 110km/h on major highways. The roads are generally

quite reasonable, but when heading off into the backblocks you will find that most signposting is in Arabic only.

Europcar (☎ 011-212 0624/5; europcar@net.sy) has been joined by **Hertz** (☎ 011-221 6615; fax 011-222 6181) and a number of other international firms, including a gaggle of sometimes dodgy local companies. With the latter, keep your eye on insurance arrangements, which seem quite lackadaisical. Hertz's cheapest standard rate is US\$49/309 per day/week for a Renault Clio, including all insurance and unlimited mileage. Europcar is more expensive, starting at US\$62/412 per day/week for a Peugeot 106 (plus insurance). The local companies can be cheaper. Most of the firms have desks at the airport, and offices on or around the Cham Palace Hotel on Sharia Maysaloun in central Damascus. You'll need an IDP and a deposit of US\$1000 (cash or major credit card); the minimum hire is usually three days.

Local Transport

Service taxis (shared taxis; *ser-vees*) only operate on the major routes and can cost three times the microbus fare – sometimes more.

Tours

Tours of some of the country's highlights can be organised in Damascus (p515), Hama (p532) and Aleppo (p540), among other places.

Train

The Syrian railway system was neglected for many decades, but is improving due to recent government investment, including the purchase of new French-made locomotives. That said, buses are still usually the better option for getting around the country. The only exception to this rule is the Lattakia–Aleppo service; this goes through spectacular countryside, starts and terminates in centrally located stations and is very comfortable.

First class is air-con with aircraft-type seats; 2nd class is the same without air-con. Student discounts are only given on 2nd-class tickets.

The main line connects Damascus, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zur, Hassake and Qamishle. A secondary line runs from Aleppo to Lattakia, along the coast to Tartus and again inland to Homs and Damascus.

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