

# Damascus

دمشق



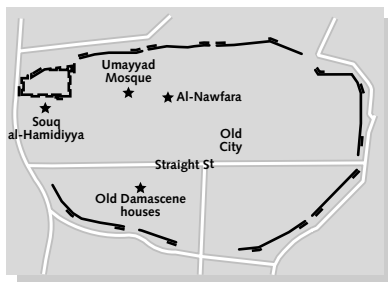
Legend has it that on a journey from Mecca, the Prophet Mohammed cast his gaze from the mountainside onto Damascus but refused to enter the city because he wanted to enter paradise only once – when he died. In a place that vies for the title of the world’s oldest continually inhabited city, this is but one of thousands of stories.

With its position as the first stop for travellers from the east, and with the Barada River flowing down freely from the mountains where the Prophet stood, Damascus has always been a coveted capital. The machinations of those wishing to claim the city as their own is as fascinating as the wealth of architecture and culture they left behind, with Damascus collecting the calling cards of myriad civilisations. There is hardly a city in the world that has packed so much history into such a small space as the Old City. Thankfully, the Old City is still the Damascus that sustains the romantic notion of the Orient, filled with bazaars and blind alleys, minarets, mosques and fountain courtyards, street-cart vendors and coffeehouses.

While the Barada may not flow as it once did, today Damascus is finding a new spring of life. Boutique hotels now flourish in delightful old Damascene addresses, restaurants refine what is one of the world’s most complex cuisines, and art galleries are riding an incoming tide of creativity. There is a new modern sophistication in the city, but for those looking for the Damascus of countless stories, it’s still right where it’s always been.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Lose yourself in the labyrinthine lanes of Damascus’ **Old City** (p85), where thousands of years of history confront you around every corner
- Marvel at the architectural magnificence of **Umayyad Mosque** (p88), one of Islam’s most notable buildings
- Haggle for Oriental handicrafts on **Straight St** (p112) or in the hustle and bustle of **Souq al-Hamidiyya** (p115)
- Admire the decorative interiors of the **old Damascene houses** (p92)
- Dine on the Middle East’s tastiest cuisine at an atmospheric **Old City restaurant** (p106)
- Be amazed by the traditional storyteller’s ability to engage his audience at the coffeehouse **Al-Nawfara** (p109)



■ AREA CODE: 011

■ POPULATION: 4.5 MILLION

## HISTORY

‘...no recorded event has occurred in the world but Damascus was in existence to receive news of it. Go back as far as you will into the vague past, there was always a Damascus... She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies.’

*Mark Twain,  
The Innocents Abroad, 1869*

Damascus lays a strong claim to being the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Hieroglyphic tablets found in Egypt make reference to ‘Dimashqa’ as one of the cities conquered by the Egyptians in the 15th century BC, but excavations from the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque have yielded finds dating back to the 3rd millennium BC. The name Dimashqa appears in the Ebla archives and also on tablets found at Mari (2500 BC).

In the earliest times it was a prize city, constantly fought over. Early conquerors include the fabled King David of Israel, the Assyrians in 732 BC, Nebuchadnezzar around 600 BC and the Persians in 530 BC. In 333 BC it fell to Alexander the Great. Greek influence declined when the Nabataeans occupied Damascus in 85 BC. Just 21 years later, Rome’s legions sent the Nabataeans packing and Syria became a Roman province.

Under the Romans Damascus became a military base for the armies of legionnaires fighting the Persians. Hadrian declared the city a metropolis in the 2nd century AD and during the reign of Alexander Severus it became a Roman colony.

With the coming of Islam, Damascus became an important centre as the seat of the Umayyad caliphate from 661 to 750. When the Abbasids took over and moved the caliphate to Baghdad, Damascus was plundered once again.

After the occupation of Damascus by the Seljuk Turks in 1076, the Crusaders tried unsuccessfully to take the city. They made a second attempt in 1154; this time a general of Kurdish origin, Nureddin (Nur ad-Din), came to the rescue, occupying Damascus himself and ushering in a brief golden era.

During his time business prospered, triggering a corresponding building boom. Notable monuments from the era include the Maristan Nureddin, Madrasa an-Nuri and the Hammam Nureddin, one of the oldest public baths in Syria.

A brief occupation by the Mongols separates the successors of Nureddin as rulers from the Mamluks of Egypt, who rose to power in 1260. During the Mamluk period, Damascene goods became famous worldwide and attracted merchants from Europe. This led to the second Mongol invasion under Tamerlane, when the city was flattened and the artisans and scholars were deported to the Mongol capital of Samarkand. The Mamluks returned soon afterwards and proceeded to rebuild the city.

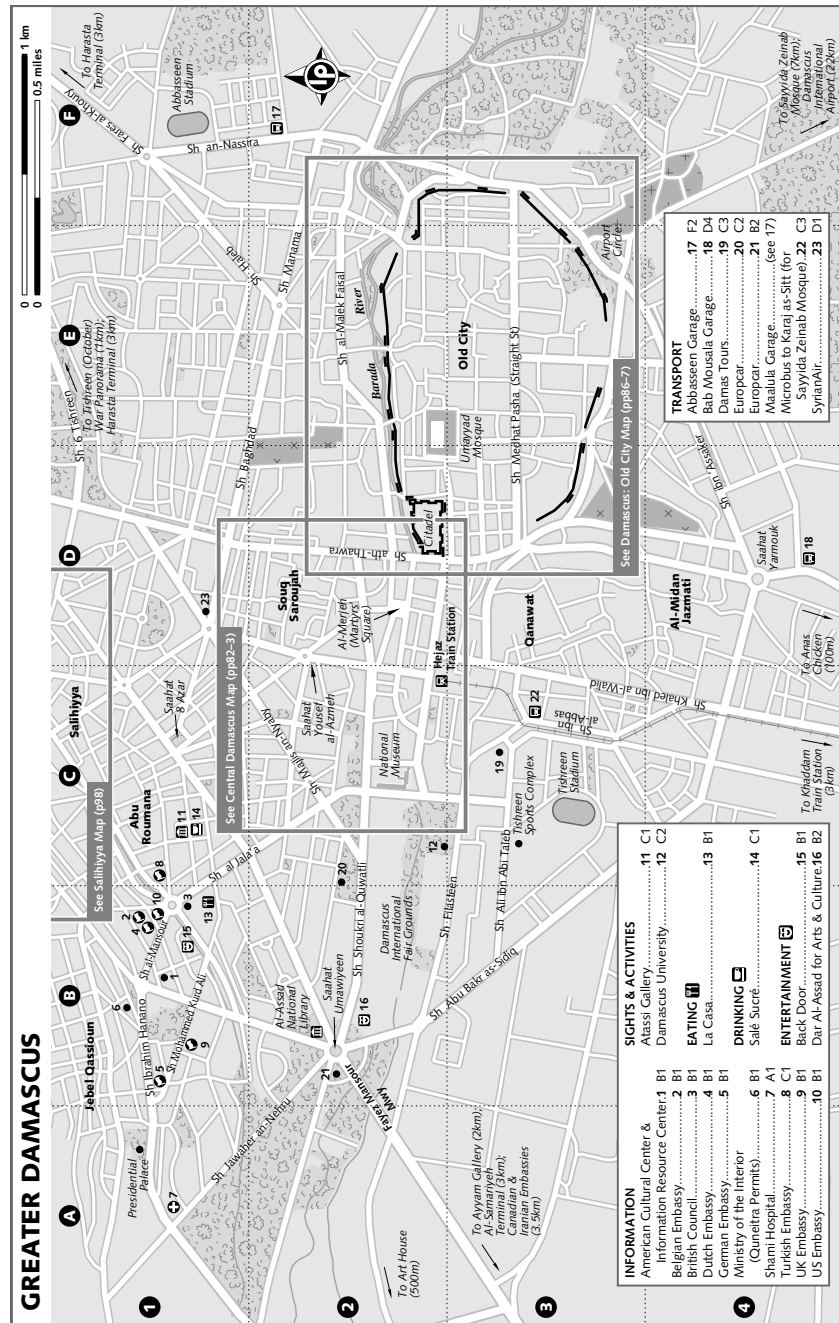
From the time of the Ottoman Turk occupation in 1516, the fortunes of Damascus started to decline and it was reduced to the status of a small provincial capital in a large empire.

The Turkish and German forces used Damascus as their base during WWI. When they were defeated by the Arab Legion and the Allies, a first, short-lived Syrian government was set up in 1918.

The French, having received a mandate from the League of Nations, occupied the city from 1920 to 1945. They met with massive resistance and at one stage in 1925 bombarded the city to suppress rioting. French shells again rained on the city in the unrest of 1945, which led to full independence a year later when French and British forces were pulled out and Damascus became the capital of an independent Syria.

## ORIENTATION

There are two distinct parts to Damascus: the Old City and everything else. The Old City lies largely within its imposing walls, but also extends southwest of the walls, past Cemetery Bab al-Saghir and Bab Mousala (Saahat Yarmouk or Al Yarmouk Sq) to Sharia al-Midan. Modern Damascus sprawls around the Old City, stretching in all directions, climbing the slopes of Jebel Qassioun (Mt Qassioun) to the north and petering out towards the plains to the south. All the parts likely to be of most interest to visitors are contained in roughly 4 sq km and are accessible on foot. The official street signs do not always



correlate with the commonly known names of various streets and squares – we give both where appropriate.

The Old City lies on the lowest ground around the banks of the Barada River. It's still partially walled and oval in form. The main access from the new city is via the covered Souq al-Hamidiyya, which leads directly to the centrepiece, Umayyad Mosque. South of the mosque is Sharia Medhat Pasha, the ancient Straight St, which bisects the Old City on an east–west axis.

The heart of the modern city is Al-Merjeh, also known as Saahat Shohada (Martyrs' Sq), a landscaped traffic island about 500m west of the Old City walls. Many cheap hotels and restaurants are around here.

The rest of 'downtown' Damascus lies north and west of Al-Merjeh. You'll find the closest thing Damascus has to a 'main street' two blocks west of here, beginning at the old Hejaz train station as Sharia Said al-Jabri (the main post office is here), and continuing for a couple of kilometres via Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh (Yousef al-Azmeh Sq), near the main tourist office. You'll find many airline offices and banks on this street, which changes its name twice en route, becoming Sharia Bur Said after Saahat Ash-Sham until Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh, and Sharia 29 Mai (29 May St) between there and Saahat Al Tajrideh Al Maghribiyeh (also known as Saahat as-Sabe Bahrat or 17 April Sq).

Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh is a focal point for the modern city centre, into which all roads run. The road running to the west, Sharia Maysaloun, has more airline offices and the swish Cham Palace, and off Maysaloun runs Sharia al-Hamra, Damascus' main shopping street. This area is known commonly as Salhiyya.

At its extreme western end, Maysaloun intersects with Sharia al-Jala'a, which is the main thoroughfare through the wealthy diplomatic district known as Abu Roumana. Here you are already on the lower slopes of Jebel Qassioun; there's plenty of greenery and the air seems distinctly fresher and more breathable than it is down below.

## Maps

For information regarding maps of Damascus and Syria, see p232.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Librairie Avicenne** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 221 2911; 4 Sharia Attuhami; ☎ 9am–8.30pm Sat–Thu) One block south of Cham Palace, Damascus' best bookshop stocks foreign-language publications including a decent range of Syria guidebooks, coffee-table books on the Middle East, phrase books, and novels in English and French.

**Librairie Universelle** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 230 0744; ☎ 9am–8pm Sat–Thu) Just west of Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh, it has a smattering of novels plus Middle East gift books.

The Cham Palace (p105) also has a small but good bookshop, with a selection of guidebooks and gift books related to Syria and the Islamic world.

*Time*, *Newsweek*, the *International Herald Tribune* plus a limited selection of international publications are available at Librairie Avicenne, the Cham Palace bookshop, and a couple of newsstands, including one near the end of Sharia Majlis an-Nyaby, close to the intersection with Sharia al-Jala'a, and another (the best) one block north of the main tourist office.

## Cultural Centres

The city's cultural centres offer language courses, libraries, resource centres, and vibrant programmes of performance, music and film.

In some cases only citizens of those countries can access facilities; call ahead and take your passport.

**American Cultural Center & Information Resource Centre** (Map p80; ☎ 3391 4444; [http://damascus.usembassy.gov/cultural\\_programs.html](http://damascus.usembassy.gov/cultural_programs.html); 87 Sharia Ata al-Ayyoubi; ☎ 1–5pm Sun–Thu) The Cultural Center hosts lectures, events, exhibitions and courses, while the Information Resource Center has a library where US citizens can read American press, among other things.

**British Council** (Map p80; ☎ 333 0631; fax 332 1467; [www.britishcouncil.org/syria](http://www.britishcouncil.org/syria); Sharia Maysaloun; ☎ 8.30am–8.30pm Sat–Thu) Primarily a teaching and resource centre, the Council occasionally hosts cultural events. Visit the website for details.

**Centre Culturel Français de Damas** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 231 6192; fax 231 6194; [www.ccf-damas.org](http://www.ccf-damas.org); off Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; ☎ 8.30am–9pm Mon–Sat) French speakers should check out the Centre's comprehensive programme of films and lectures. It also offers a stimulating programme of theatre and music performances, many of which are free.

### CENTRAL DAMASCUS

<b>INFORMATION</b> Central Post Office.....1 E5 Centre Culturel Français de Damas.....2 F4 City Telephone Office.....3 F6 Commercial Bank of Syria.....4 E5 Commercial Bank of Syria.....5 E4 Commercial Bank of Syria.....6 F5 Commercial Bank of Syria.....7 E6 Commercial Bank of Syria.....8 E3	DHL.....9 E5 Egyptian Embassy.....10 A3 Express Mail Service.....(see 1) Immigration & Passport Office.....11 E5 Internet Café Smile.....12 G3 Jordanian Embassy.....13 A3 Kodak Express.....14 E6 Laundry Shop.....15 G4 Librairie Avicenne.....16 D3 Librairie Universelle.....17 F3	Main Tourist Office.....18 E2 Pluto Photo Services.....19 D3 Tourist Office.....20 D5	<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b> Army Museum.....21 C5 Artisanat.....(see 51) Beit al-Haramein.....(see 26) Beit al-Rabie.....(see 27) National Museum.....22 B5 Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya.....23 C5
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To Salhiyya via Saahat 8 Azar (600m)

<b>SLEEPING</b> Afamia Hotel.....24 E5 Al-Faradis Hotel.....25 F5 Al-Haramein Hotel.....26 G4 Al-Rabie Hotel.....27 G4 Al-Rais.....28 G6 Balkiss Hotel.....29 H5 Cham Palace.....30 E3 City Hotel.....31 E5 Four Seasons Hotel Damascus.....32 C4 Ghazal Hotel.....33 H3 Orient Palace Hotel.....34 E5 Sultan Hotel.....35 E6	<b>EATING</b> Abu Rashid.....36 G6 Al-Hallabi.....(see 32) Al-Arabi.....37 G5 Al-Kamal.....38 E2 Al-Masri.....39 E5 Al-Santir.....40 E5 Al-Sehhi.....41 E1 Downtown.....42 A2 Fruit & Vegetable Market.....43 G4 Gemini.....44 A2 Pit Stop Café.....(see 44) Pizza Roma.....45 C3
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See National Museum Map (p96)

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<b>DRINKING</b> Ash-Sharq al-Awsat.....46 F4 Elias Hayek.....47 G5 Inhouse Coffee.....48 A2 Jet Set.....(see 30) XO Bar.....(see 32)	<b>SHOPPING</b> Abdul Razeq Mousali.....50 E3 Artisanat.....51 D5 Hassab Al-Kazaz & Sons.....(see 51) Ibrahim Tawil.....(see 51) Oriental Center Arts.....(see 51) Radwan Al-Taweel.....(see 51)
<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> Centre Culturel Français de Damas.....(see 2) Cinema de Cham.....49 D3	<b>TRANSPORT</b> Budget.....52 C4 Hertz.....(see 30) Kadmos Ticket Office.....53 F4 Main Central Microbus Terminal.....54 B5 Microbus to Bab Mousla Garage & Minibus for Sayyida Zeinab Mosque.....55 F6 SyrianAir.....56 E3 SyrianAir Main Office.....57 E5

See Damascus: Old City Map (pp86-7)

## Internet Access

There are internet cafés all over Damascus, and most charge the same rates, roughly \$E50 to \$E60 per hour.

**Amigo Net** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 542 1694; Sharia al-Kassaa; ☎ 10am-midnight) Just north of Bab Touma and the Old City.

**Internet Café Smile** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 232 6239; Sharia Souq Saroujah; ☎ 11am-midnight Sat-Thu, 2pm-midnight Fri) Convenient for Souq Saroujah's budget hotels; also organises parcel shipping.

**Spotnet Café** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 543 3374; www.spotnetcafe.com; opposite Elissar, Bab Touma; ☎ 10am-2am) Friendly staff and reasonably fast access for the Old City.

## Laundry

There are laundries all over Damascus, but long-term travellers like the **laundry shop** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Bahsa; per item \$E25-35) in Souq Saroujah. Staff take about 24 hours to turn around your washing. Most hotels can arrange to have laundry done.

## Media

The national, government-owned, English-language daily newspaper, the *Syria Times* (www.syriatimes.tishreen.info), provides an intriguing insight into Syrian politics, society and everyday life. More helpful to travellers is the glossy *What's On Syria* magazine (www.whatonsyria.com), with features on everything from Syria's videogame culture to the popularity of ballroom dancing in Damascus, along with reviews of cultural performances, art exhibitions and films, as well as entertainment listings. It's available at hotels, cafés and bars.

## Medical Services

There are numerous pharmacies dotted around Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh.

**Shami Hospital** (Map p80; ☎ 373 5090-94; Sharia Jawaher an-Nehru) This private hospital has an excellent reputation among expats, with many doctors speaking English.

## Money

Very few banks will change travellers cheques so it's best to leave them at home and bring US dollars instead, withdraw cash using your ATM card or get cash advances on your credit card.

There are dozens of branches of the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) all over Damascus, with the main branches at **Saahat**

**Yousef al-Azmeh** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Sat-Thu, to 2pm Fri), opposite the Hejaz train station (Map pp82-3), on Sharia Bur Said (Map pp82-3), at the corner of Sharia Said al-Jabri and Sharia Jumhuriyya (Map pp82-3), on the west side of Al-Merjeh (Map pp82-3) and at Bab ash-Sharqi (Map pp86-7). Branches keep the same opening hours. Most have ATMs, as do the many new private banks that have opened in recent years, including Bank Audi, Byblos Bank and the Real Estate Bank of Syria. There is also an ATM at the airport, although it often runs out of money.

## Photography

Along Sharia al-Jumhuriyya are a few camera stores selling memory cards, mini-tripods and other accessories; they also do camera repairs if you're desperate.

**Kodak Express** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Mousalam al-Baroudi; ☎ 9am-7pm Sat-Thu) About 100m west of Hejaz train station. Stocks memory cards and film.

**Pluto Photo Services** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Maysaloun; ☎ 9am-8pm Sat-Thu) Just west of Cham Palace; good for emergency camera repairs or spares.

## Post

**Central post office** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Said al-Jabri; ☎ 8am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri & national holidays) Just down from Hejaz train station, there is a poste restante office inside (passport required; \$E10 charge per letter) and a parcel post office outside and around the corner.

**DHL** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 096-345 345; Sharia Omar ben Abi Rabia; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, 9am-2pm Fri) Not far from the post office, and west towards Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; a better option if sending carpets or valuables home.

**Express Mail Service** (EMS; Map pp82-3; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu) A faster and more secure mail service than the regular post; located in the parking lot behind the central post office.

## Telephone & Fax

There are card phones scattered around Damascus, but you're better off buying a SIM card for your own mobile. For more details on card phones and phonecards, see p236.

**City telephone office** (Map pp82-3; Sharia an-Nasr; ☎ 24hr) A block east of the Hejaz train station.

## Tourist Information

The staff at the tourist offices are friendly and speak some English. However, beyond free maps and a monthly brochure of cultural events they have little to offer and are

poorly informed on the sorts of things that most visitors might want to know.

**Main tourist office** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 232 3953, 221 0122; www.syriatourism.org, damascus@syriatourism.org; Sharia 29 Mai; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Sat-Thu) Just north of Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh.

**Tourist office** (Map pp82-3; Ministry of Tourism Bldg, Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Thu) Despite being in the Ministry of Tourism building, this office is often closed. It's near the National Museum and Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya.

## Visa Extensions

**Immigration & Passport Office** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 221 9400; Al-Merjeh; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Take your passport and several photocopies of your main passport pages, and pay \$E25 for the forms and process. Fill out the forms on the spot, then return to collect your passport the next day. There are dozens of shops doing passport photos and photocopies in the surrounding streets.

## SIGHTS

### Old City

Although settlement of the Old City dates back to as early as the 15th century BC, and there's strong evidence of both Hellenic and Roman city styles, the Old City's character is essentially medieval Islamic. It remains unchanged from that time to an astonishing degree.

The Old City can be confusing for the first-time visitor but it's a magical, meandering place to explore. If possible, allow a couple of hours each for the sights listed here.

### CITY WALLS & CITADEL

First erected by the Romans, the **Old City walls** (Map pp86-7) have been flattened and rebuilt several times over the 2000 or so years since. What stands today dates largely from the 13th century. They are pierced by a number of gates (the Arabic for gate is *bab*, plural *abwab*), only one of which dates from Roman times, the restored **Bab ash-Sharqi** (East Gate). Until the 20th century there were 13 gates in the city walls, all closed at sunset, and there were inner gates dividing the Christian, Jewish and Islamic quarters. These inner gates are now gone, as are several of the main city gates. Most impressive of those remaining are the northern **Bab al-Farag** (Gate of Joy); **Bab al-Faradis** (Gate of Paradise), with a short stretch of market enclosed within its vaulting; **Bab as-Salaama** (Gate of Peace), the best-preserved of the

gates and a beautiful example of Ayyubid military architecture; and, in the south, **Bab as-Saghir** (Little Gate).

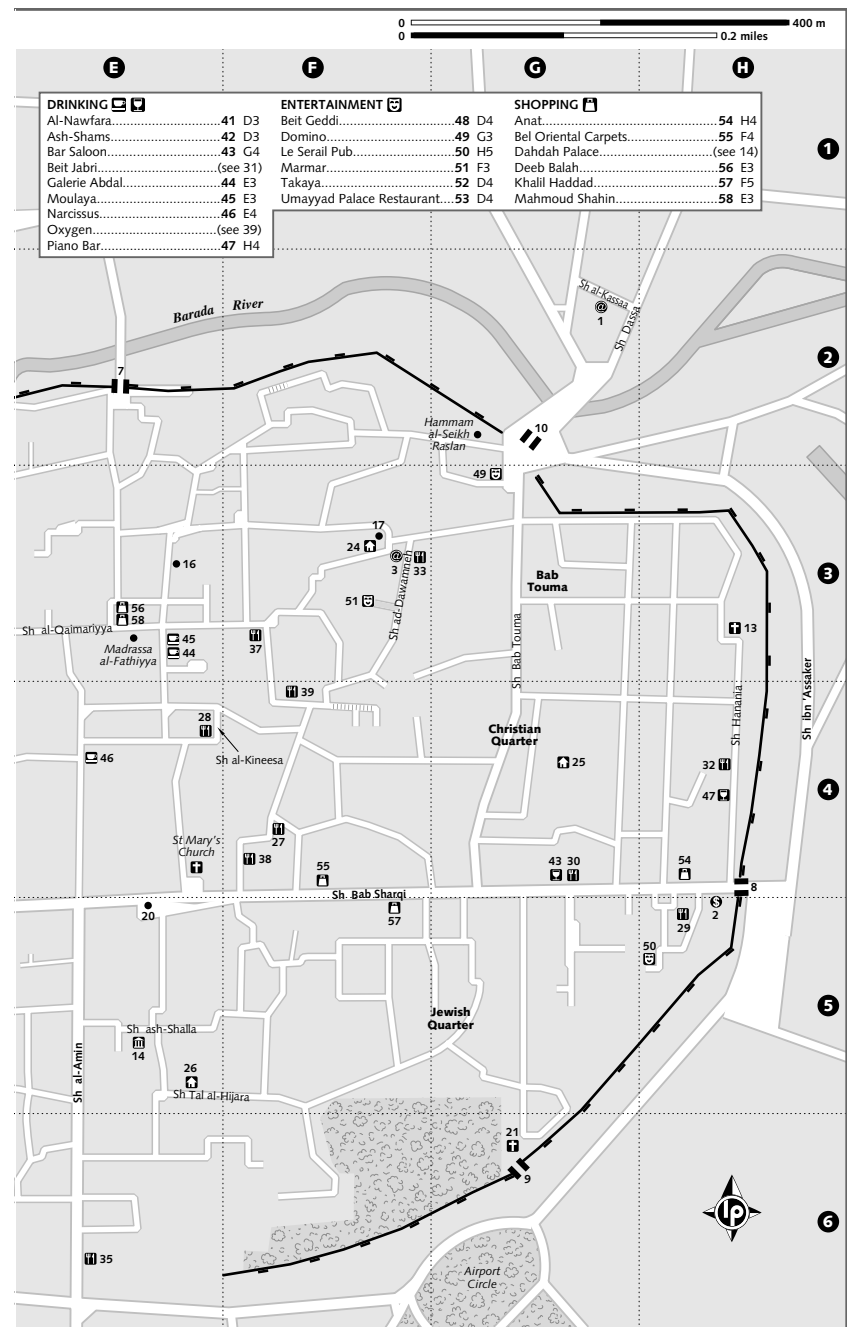
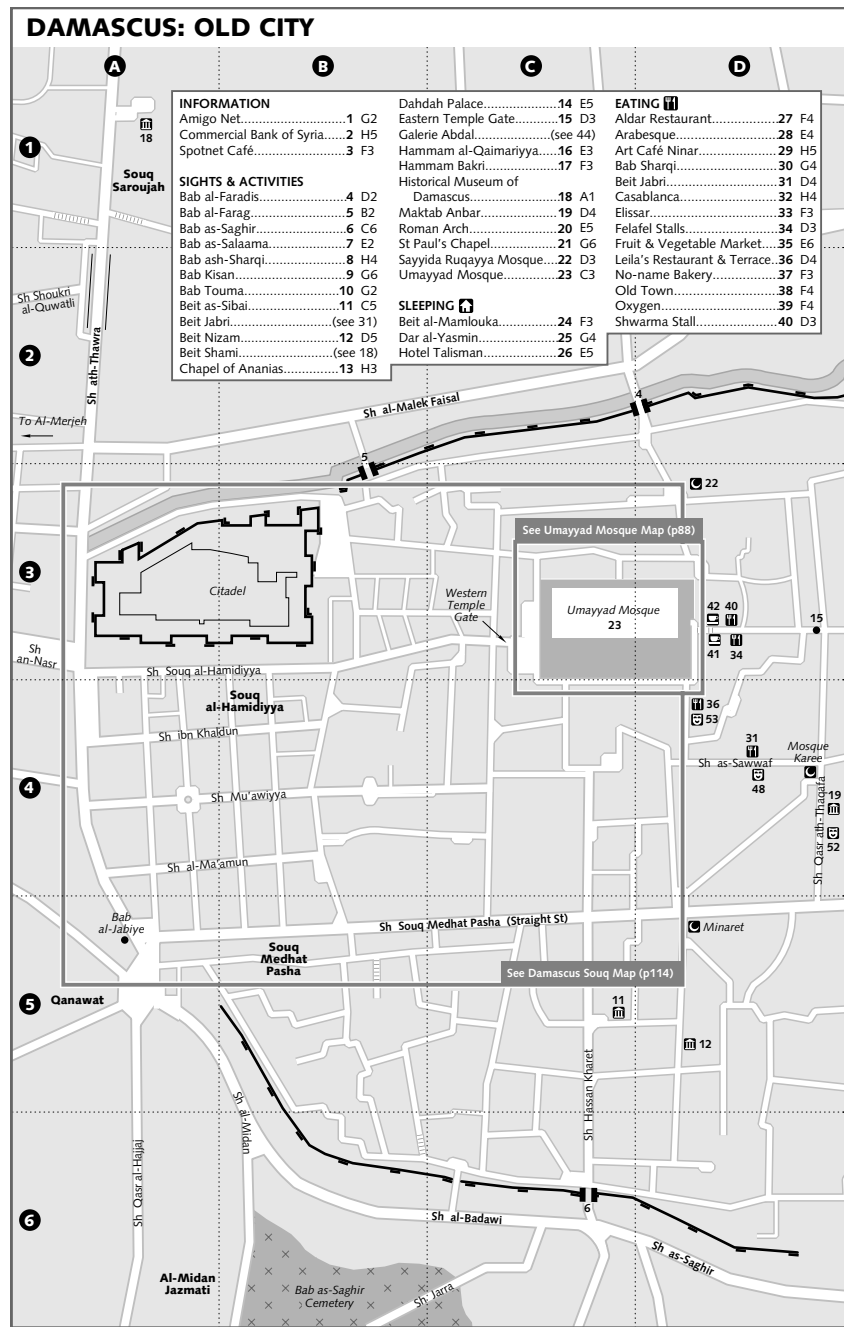
For most of their length, the walls are obscured by later constructions. It's not possible to do a circuit of the walls, nor get up on the ramparts. However, there is a fine short walk between Bab as-Salaama and **Bab Touma** (Thomas' Gate) along the outside of the walls by a channel of the Barada River.

The **citadel** (Map p114; ☎ 9am-3pm Sun-Thu, open later for concerts) anchors the northwest corner of the Old City, its imposing stone walls confronting the six lanes of traffic on Sharia ath-Thawra. Built by the Seljuks between 1076 and 1193, the citadel was further fortified by the Zangid ruler Sultan Nur al-Din and by the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin in the 12th century to resist Crusader attacks. Modifications were added by the Mamluks and Ottomans, and during the French mandate it became a prison, which it remained until 1985. The citadel has been recently restored, and it's possible to wander the grounds (allow two hours) for free, although some time in 2008 ticket offices will be installed and a visitors centre will open, featuring a bookshop, interactive kiosks and a mosaic exhibition. Guided tours will be conducted. Concerts are held frequently in the citadel grounds, especially during summer evenings, when you might see anything from a symphony orchestra to jazz bands. The Jazz Festival is held here in July.

### SOUQ AL-HAMIDIYYA

سوق الحميدية  
Just to the south of the citadel, **Souq al-Hamidiyya** (Map p114) is the long, covered market that leads into the heart of the Old City. A cross between a Parisian passage, a department store and a Middle Eastern bazaar, its main thoroughfare is lined with clothes emporiums and handicrafts shops (see Shopping the Damascus Souq, p115), while its narrow side streets are crowded with stalls selling everything from cheap shoes to kids' toys. A vault of corrugated-iron roofing blocks all but a few torch-beam-like shafts of sunlight, admitted through bullet holes punctured by the machine-gun fire of French planes during the nationalist rebellion of 1925.

Although the street dates back to Roman times, its present form is a product of the late 19th century: the two-storey shops, the roof and the generously wide street



DAMASCUS

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are all due to a bit of civic smartening up that was carried out in honour of the visiting Ottoman sultan, Hamid II (hence the name, Al-Hamidiyya). In 2002 the street was extensively renovated, stripping away decades of messy signage and random shop-front accretions, to restore the souq to something like its original 19th-century appearance.

At its eastern end, Souq al-Hamidiyya re-emerges back into glaring sunlight at the spot where the **western temple gate** of the 3rd-century Roman Temple of Jupiter once stood. The outer walls of the Umayyad Mosque, directly ahead, mark the position of the temple itself, but here, on ground now occupied by stalls selling Qurans and religious paraphernalia, was the propylaeum (the monumental gateway to the temple complex). What remains today are several enormous Corinthian columns carrying fragments of a decorated lintel.

### UMAYYAD MOSQUE

الجامع الأموي

One of Islam's most important buildings (its first great mosque), the magnificent **Umayyad Mosque** (Map pp86-7; admission \$E50; ☞ dawn until after sundown prayers, closed 12.30-2pm Fri for noon prayers) is Syria's most significant religious structure. Its architectural and decorative splendour ranks with Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock, while in sanctity it's second only to the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina. It possesses a history unequalled by all three.

Worship on this site dates back 3000 years to the 9th century BC, when the Aramaeans built a temple to their god, Hadad (mentioned in the Book of Kings in the Old Testament). It was a cousin to the great Temple of Bel at Palmyra (p207) and the Temple of Jupiter at Baalbek (p358). With the coming of the Romans the temple became associated with the god Jupiter and was massively expanded.

The walls of the mosque as seen today were just the inner court of the temple. Around this was a large courtyard with four access points – traces of two of these grand gateways still exist and are described in the Souq al-Hamidiyya (p85) and Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque (p90) sections. After Constantine embraced Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Jupiter was ousted from his temple in favour of Christ. The former pagan shrine was replaced by a basilica dedicated to John the Baptist, whose head was said to be contained in a casket here.

When the Muslims entered Damascus in AD 636 they converted the eastern part of the basilica into a mosque but allowed the Christians to continue their worship in the western part. This arrangement continued for about 70 years. But, during this time, under Umayyad rule Damascus had become capital of the Islamic world and the caliph, Khaled ibn al-Walid, considered it necessary to empower the image of his city with 'a mosque the equal of which was

never designed by anyone before me or anyone after me'.

Consequently, the Christians were elbowed out of the basilica while the Roman and Byzantine constructions were flattened. For the next 10 years more than 1000 stonemasons and artisans were employed in building a grand new mosque. According to historical accounts, practically every wall was covered with rich mosaics, precious stones were set into the prayer niches, and the wooden ceiling was inlaid with gold and hung with 600 gold lamps. It cost seven years of taxes from the whole of Syria to build. While the mosque has been ravaged by invading Mongols, rocked by earthquakes and gutted by fire, what remains is impressive.

### Visiting the Mosque

The tourist entrance is through the northern Bab al-Amara, and the ticket office is on the left; look for the amusing sign that says 'Putting on Special Clothes Room'. Here, women are provided with a hooded cloak that must be worn in the mosque, while men in shorts or sleeveless shirts will also be asked to don one. As in all mosques, shoes must be removed at the threshold. Photography is permitted.

### Mausoleum of Saladin (Salah ad-Din)

قبر صلاح الدين

In the small archaeological garden that lies along the north wall of the Umayyad Mosque are a few columns dating back to the original Roman Temple of Jupiter, and a small white building topped by a rust-red dome, which is the **Mausoleum of Saladin** (☞ 10am-5pm). The famed, chivalrous adversary of the Western Crusaders died in Damascus in 1193, and the original mausoleum was erected on this site that same year. It was restored with funds made available by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany during his visit to Damascus in 1898.

For a man who was famed for his austerity, the mausoleum is a fittingly modest affair. Inside are two cenotaphs. The walnut-wood one on the right, richly decorated with motifs of the Ayyubid period, contains Saladin's body, while the modern tomb in marble on the left was donated by Kaiser Wilhelm.

Admission is included in the ticket for Umayyad Mosque.

### Arab Epigraphy Museum

For most visitors this will be a case of a building being more engaging than its contents. The **Arab Epigraphy Museum** (adult/student \$E75/10; ☞ 9am-2pm Wed, Thu & Sat-Mon, 9-11.30am Fri) has a small but fascinating calligraphic exhibit of illuminated manuscripts, while the 15th-century Madrasa al-Jaqmaqiyya in which the collection is exhibited is a fine example of Mamluk-era architecture.

### Courtyard

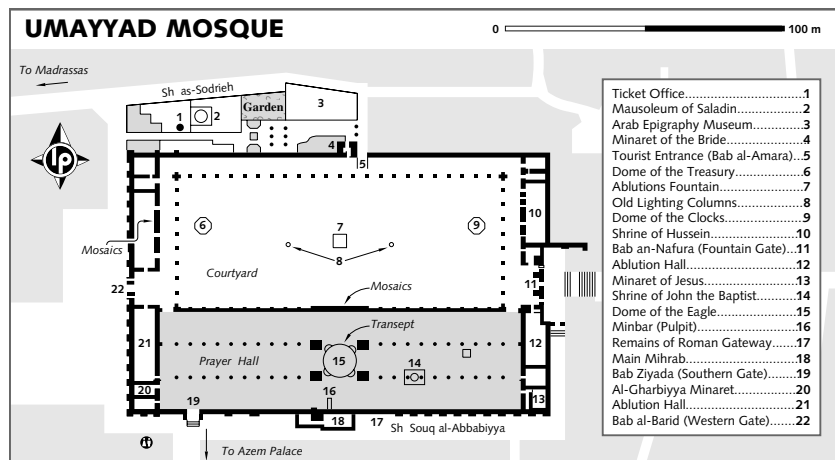
The northern part of the mosque is an expansive, open courtyard with a white limestone floor, flanked on three sides by a two-storey arched arcade. The fourth side is the façade of the prayer hall, dominated by a central section covered with enchanting, shimmering, golden **mosaics**.

A larger expanse of mosaic also remains on the western arcade wall. Stretching some 37m in length, and executed in shades of green and lime on a background of gold, the mosaic depicts fairy-tale-like towers, domes and forests. Damascenes believe it's the Barada Valley and the paradise Mohammed saw in Damascus.

In the centre of the courtyard is an odd square-shaped **ablutions fountain** topped by a wooden-canopied pulpit, while flanking it are two old **columns** that used to hold lamps. The small octagonal structure on the western side, decorated with intricate 14th-century mosaics and standing on eight recycled Roman columns, is the **Dome of the Treasury**, once used to keep public funds safe from thieves. It's counterbalanced by a domed structure on the eastern side, built in the 18th century and known as the **Dome of the Clocks** because it's where the mosque's clocks used to be kept.

### Minarets

There are three minarets dating from the original construction, each of which was renovated and restored by the Ayyubids, Mamluks and Ottomans. The one on the northern side, the **Minaret of the Bride**, is the oldest; the one in the southwestern corner, the Mamluk-styled **Al-Gharbiyya minaret**, is the most beautiful; while the one on the southeastern corner, the **Minaret of Jesus**, is the tallest, and so named because local tradition has it that this is where Christ will appear on earth on Judgment Day.



### Prayer Halls

On the southern side of the courtyard is the rectangular prayer hall, its three aisles divided by a transept. The hall as seen today is the Ottoman reconstruction that took place after the devastating fire of 1893. At the centre of the hall, resting on four great pillars above the transept, is the **Dome of the Eagle**, so called because it represents the eagle's head, while the transept represents the body and the aisles are the wings.

Looking somewhat out of place in the sanctuary is the green-domed, marble-clad **shrine of John the Baptist** (Prophet Yehia to Muslims). The story goes that during the building of the mosque, back in the early 8th century, a casket was discovered buried under the old basilica floor. It contained the biblical character's head, still with skin and hair intact, and that's what's in the shrine. However, this is one of several claimed final resting places for the relic, and unless the saint was endowed with multiple heads, the authenticity of claims has to be seriously doubted.

To the eastern side of the courtyard, but a part of the mosque building itself, is the **shrine of Hussein**, son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet. He was killed by the Umayyads at Kerbala in Iraq. The shrine attracts large numbers of Shiite Muslims (Ali is regarded as the founder of Shiism), and black-clad Iranians are a common sight, making straight across the courtyard for this part of the mosque.

### NORTH OF THE MOSQUE

Two fine old madrassas (schools where Islamic law is taught) face each other across a narrow alley less than 100m northwest of the Umayyad Mosque. Both of these schools were erected in the 13th century during the ascendancy of the Ayyubids. On the left (west), **Madrasa al-Adeliyya** (Map p114) was begun under Nureddin and continued under a brother of Saladin, Al-Adel Seif ad-Din, whose grave it contains. Its façade is considered a classic example of Ayyubid architecture.

**Madrasa az-Zahariyya** (Map p114), on the eastern side of the alley, was originally a private house belonging to the father of Saladin. Following the death in 1277 of the great Mamluk sultan and nemesis of the Crusaders, Beybars, the building was converted into his **mausoleum** (قبر بيبرس; ☞ 9am-5pm, closed Fri). Someone will usually be around to let you in for a look. Note the band of splendid mosaic decoration in a style similar to that in the Umayyad Mosque.

From the madrassas, head north, past the doorway of Hammam az-Zahariyya, and then bear right; following this narrow alley leads you to a small square at the main entrance to Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque.

### Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque

جامع السيدة الرقية  
For centuries the mausoleum of Ruqayya bint al-Hussein ash-Shaheed bi-Kerbala (Ruqayya, the Daughter of the Martyr

Hussein of Kerbala) was hidden among the clutter of tumbledown Damascene housing just to the north of Umayyad Mosque. In 1985 the Iranians (Ruqayya being a Shiite saint) began construction of a **mosque** (Map pp86-7) around the mausoleum, designed very much in the modern Persian style. While the portico, courtyard and main 'onion' dome are relatively restrained and quite beautiful, the interior of the prayer hall is a riot of mirror mosaics. Except during Friday prayers, non-Muslim visitors are welcome (modest dress is required and women must cover their heads).

From the mosque, follow the lane that runs due east, and turn right (south) at the T-junction leading to a crossroad marked by the half-buried remains of the **eastern temple gate** (Map pp86-7). The gate served as the eastern entrance to the compound of the Roman Temple of Jupiter, the site now occupied by Umayyad Mosque.

### Sharia al-Qaimariyya

Running from the Umayyad Mosque all the way to Hammam Bakri near Bab Touma, Sharia al-Qaimariyya is a bustling artery that's worth wandering, and its loveliest stretch is between the eastern temple gate and the mosque. Shaded with vines and its walls hung with vividly coloured carpets, the lane widens slightly to accommodate a burbling fountain and Al-Nawfara and Ash-Shams, two atmospheric **coffeehouses** (p110). The former has been around for more than 200 years.

Beside the coffeehouses, a broad flight of stairs carries the alley up to the eastern wall of Umayyad Mosque, shaped by elements of what was originally part of the main Roman-era monumental entrance to the inner courts of the temple – now the mosque's **Bab al-Nafura** (Fountain Gate). The street loops around the southern wall of the mosque and reconnects with Souq al-Hamidiyya.

### SOUTH OF THE MOSQUE

South of Umayyad Mosque is the heart of the **Damascus souq** (Map p114), with stretches of stalls devoted to spices, gold, sweets, perfume and fabrics. If you can drag yourself away from the colourful and fragrant displays, there are also wonderful examples of architecture, including numerous khans, or travellers' inns, and a beautiful palace complex.

One of the liveliest thoroughfares, with its glittering gold and silver sellers, is **Souq as-Silah**, running due south from Bab Ziyada (set into the southern wall of Umayyad Mosque), out of which crowds of people continually emerge. After 100m, turn right (west) to Azem Ecole, Madrasa an-Nuri and Maristan Nureddin, or left to the splendid Azem Palace. Continue due south and you're in **Souq al-Bzouriyya** (literally the Seed Bazaar, but in reality the Spice Souq), heavily scented with cumin, coffee and perfumes. Halfway along, on the left, is Hammam Nureddin (p100), the most elegant of Damascus' old bathhouses. Just beyond the hammam is the grand entrance to **Khan As'ad Pasha** (Map p114; ☞ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu), arguably the finest and most ambitious piece of architecture in the Old City – a cathedral among khans. Built in 1752 under the patronage of As'ad Pasha al-Azem, it encompasses a vast space achieved through a beautiful arrangement of eight small domes around a larger circular aperture, allowing light to stream in above a circular pool. The domes are supported on four colossal grey-and-white piers that splay into elegant arches. Beyond the khan, the souq intersects with Straight St.

### Azem Ecole

مدرسة العظم  
Built in 1770 by a member of the Azem family (successive generations of whom governed Damascus from 1725 to 1809), **Azem Ecole** (Map p114) is a former madrasa and a gem of urban Ottoman architecture. It has a beautiful little courtyard, hemmed in by a delicate three-storey gallery, the upper floor of which is wood. Currently it houses a souvenir store (see p113).

### Madrasa an-Nuri

المدرسة النورية  
Just 50m beyond Azem Ecole, **Madrasa an-Nuri** (Map p114) is easy to pick out because of its crimson domes. The structure is fairly modern and not particularly noteworthy but inside is a surviving part of a madrasa dating from 1172, which houses the mausoleum of Nureddin, the uncle of Saladin, who united Syria and paved the way for his nephew's successes against the Crusaders. It's not necessary to enter the building to see the tomb chamber. Instead, walk down the narrow market alley beside the madrasa and peer in through a big iron-grille opening in the wall.

### DIY DAMASCUS

It's time to put away the guidebook and get lost in some of the city's fascinating neighbourhoods – try these for starters:

- Christian Quarter, Old City (Map pp86-7) – the streets parallel to Sharia Bab Touma are where the sights and shops are; instead, cruise the cross-streets and little cul-de-sacs to see how the locals live.
- Jewish Quarter, Old City (Map pp86-7) – avoid Straight St and stroll the labyrinthine backstreets around Bab Sharqi, through the Jewish Quarter's dusty, dilapidated lanes by Dahdah Palace to Beit Nizam.
- Salihyya's old quarter (Map p98) – after exploring Sharia Madares Assad al-Din, meander the ramshackle streets north of here before exploring the streets south; Sharia al-Nawa'er is charming, with a few Ottoman-era buildings.
- Salihyya's new city and Abu Roumana (Map p80) – from Salihyya's old quarter, stroll downhill via posh Abu Roumana's elegant apartments and embassies to new Salihyya and Sharia Maysaloun; on the backstreets you'll enjoy all kinds of architectural styles, from grand Art Deco to pretty wrought iron from the French mandate period.

**Azem Palace** قصر العظم  
If you are only going to visit one building in Damascus, in addition to the Umayyad Mosque, then it should be this, a stunning *tour de force* of all that's wonderful about Damascene architecture.

**Azem Palace** (Map p114; adult/student \$£150/15; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 9am-3.30pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar, closed 12.30-2.30pm Fri) comprises a complex of splendid buildings, courtyards and gardens that were built between 1749 and 1752 as a private residence for the governor of Damascus, As'ad Pasha al-Azem. It remained the Azem residence until the beginning of the 20th century, when the family moved outside the Old City and the house was sold to the French to become an Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art. Badly damaged by fire during uprisings against the French in 1925, it has since been beautifully restored.

After buying your tickets turn left, then right, into a small leafy courtyard, before entering the main courtyard, which has a serene central pool and fountain. The courtyard is fringed by low-rise buildings, all boasting the beautiful black basalt, limestone and sandstone banding technique known as *ablaq*, a characteristic of Mamluk architecture typically found throughout the Levant and Egypt, and later adopted by Ottoman masons.

Off the courtyard are a number of sumptuously decorated rooms with wooden panelling, lustrous blue tiling, painted ceilings and coloured paste work – a technique in which a pattern is incised into stone and then filled in with pastes made from different coloured stones to give the effect of an immensely complicated stone inlay. This area served as the *haramlik* (family or women's quarters).

Also known as the Museum of the Arts & Popular Traditions of Syria, the rooms contain rather kitsch mannequin displays, each with a different theme (the wedding, pilgrimage etc), and displays of exquisite ceramics, costumes, textiles and musical instruments.

#### STRAIGHT STREET (WESTERN END)

Known also as Souq Medhat Pasha (the covered western part) and Sharia Bab Sharqi (the eastern part), the main east-west street that bisects the Old City has historically

been known as **Straight St** (Map pp86-7), from the Latin, Via Recta.

While it's not exactly straight these days, this street was the main thoroughfare of Damascus during Greek and Roman times, when it would have appeared something like the main avenues still seen at Apamea (p168) or Palmyra (p208). It was four times its present width and planted with a seemingly endless row of columns that supported a canvas street covering.

The street is busiest at the western end, where it's largely devoted to shops selling textiles and clothes. There are several old khans in this area, their gates still locked at night. On the north side are the pretty **Khan az-Zeit** (Map p114) and, some 300m further north, **Khan Jakmak** (Map p114); on the south is **Khan Süleiman Pasha** (Map p114), built in 1732, with a central courtyard that was formerly roofed by two domes.

South of the western stretch of Straight St are several old Damascene houses (see below) and twisting narrow alleyways that are worth exploring.

#### OLD DAMASCENE HOUSES

Unseen behind the high walls within the Old City are hundreds of delightful houses built around courtyards and featuring their own elaborate decoration (see Damascene House Decoder, opposite). Unfortunately, many of these treasures are in a sad state of disrepair, but a loop off Straight St takes in several examples, all of which have benefited from renovation.

Just a few steps away from Khan Süleiman Pasha, **Beit al-Aqqad** (Map p114; ☎ 223 8038; www.damascus.dk in Danish; 8-10 Souq as-Souf; ☎ 9am-3pm Sat-Wed, 9am-1pm Thu) was formerly the home of a wealthy family of textile merchants. It now houses the Danish Institute in Damascus. Visitors are welcome to come in and look at the courtyard, which is graced by a massive expanse of gorgeous inlaid-stone decoration.

Head south down Sharia Hassan Kharet and take the first left for **Beit as-Sibai** (Map pp86-7; Sharia al-Qabbani; ☎ 8am-2pm Sun-Thu), built between 1769 and 1774, and beautifully restored. This splendid building is the sort of place you could imagine living in. In fact, for a time during the 1990s it served as the residence of the German ambassador. Now it's mostly used as a set for historical TV

#### DAMASCENE HOUSE DECODER

The wonderful courtyard houses of Damascus were built on variations of the same basic theme, and architectural elements are common through them all. Here's how to tell your *'ataba* from your *qa'a*.

- **Dihliz** – the entrance court or corridor that prevents the main courtyard from being seen by visitors. The *dihliz* was often plain and neglected, at worst filthy, to deter looters.
- **Courtyards** – every Damascene house has at least one, some modest, others grand, featuring marble and stone banding, geometric decoration and mosaic paving. They had birds singing in cages, and were always fragrant with citrus trees and cascades of jasmine. The most extravagant houses had up to three courtyards: the first, the *salaamluk*, was the public courtyard for entertaining guests; the second, the *haramlik*, was the private courtyard reserved for women and family; and the third was the *khadamlik*, for the servants.
- **Fountains** – a trickling water fountain made from decorative stone or marble mosaic, often filled with floating rose petals, is a cooling feature of every courtyard.
- **Liwan** – facing north for maximum coolness, with high ceilings to catch the breeze and circulate the cool air, the enormous, arched alcove dominating the courtyard is the *liwan* or summer room. The main room for entertaining in warm weather, it's generally elaborately decorated, with intricately painted ceilings, cushioned banquettes and carpeted floor.
- **Qa'a** – facing the *liwan* from across the courtyard, the raised *qa'a* or reception room is the main indoor entertainment area, with even more ornate decoration, carved ceilings, elaborate glass chandeliers, and carved wood or mother-of-pearl inlaid divans covered with cushions.
- **'Ataba** – the threshold or first part of the *qa'a*, often at ground level, featuring a small fountain and a decorative niche for holding water jugs and nargileh pipes.
- **Ajami** – the technique of decorating wooden panels with a raised, elaborately painted pattern, gilding and lacquer.
- **Muqarnas** – highly decorated, painted wooden ceilings featuring boxed-in beams; they are reminiscent of Oriental carpets.
- **Hammam** – the wealthiest houses would have a marble-floored hammam or steam bath with stone fountain off the *haramlik*.

If you're keen to learn more, pick up a copy of Brigid Keenan's coffee-table book *Damascus: Hidden Treasures of the Old City* (2001).

dramas and as an atmospheric venue for ministerial functions. Visitors are welcome to wander around.

Walk on past Beit as-Sibai and turn right at the T-junction for **Beit Nizam** (Map pp86-7; Sharia nasif Pasha; ☎ 8am-2pm Sun-Thu), another breathtakingly beautiful 18th-century house, although in this case executed on a far grander scale. It has been organised around two large courtyards, the one to the rear coloured by orange trees and rose bushes. In the mid-19th century it served as the French consulate. Like Beit as-Sibai, it's often used as a set for film and TV productions.

A five-minute walk east through the back alleys brings you to **Dahdah Palace** (Map pp86-7; 9 Sharia ash-Shalla; ☎ 9.30am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat,

to 7pm in summer), an 18th-century residence owned by the Dahdah family. Ring the bell for an informal guided tour by the charming Mrs Dahdah and her daughter (both of whom speak excellent English) of the graceful courtyard, fragrant with jasmine and lemon trees, the *liwan* (summer room), and the reception room with its exquisite niche. They also sell antiques (see p114).

From Dahdah Palace, backtrack to Sharia al-Amin, turn right then left onto Straight St, then turn right for **Maktab Anbar** (Map pp86-7; Sharia Qasr ath-Thaqafa; ☎ 8am-6pm Sun-Thu). Built in 1867 by a Jewish trader – who, legend has it, travelled to India and returned with a hat full of diamonds – the extravagant palace was seized in 1890 when he couldn't pay



his taxes, and was turned into a women's boarding school. These days it houses the architects responsible for the preservation and renovation of the Old City. There are three splendid courtyards featuring exquisite decoration and lush gardens.

From Maktab Anbar continue north and take the first left after the mosque; 50m along on the right is **Beit Jabri** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 3200; www.jabrihouse.com; 14 Sharia as-Sawwaf; ☎ 9.30am-12.30am). Its courtyard is home to a hugely popular café (see p108), which is a lovely place to linger for a while. After you order, take the steps up to the beautifully restored *qa'a* (reception room) at the far end of the courtyard.

### CHRISTIAN QUARTER

No longer gated, the **Christian Quarter** (Map pp86-7) begins where a small **Roman arch** stands on a patch of grass beside Straight St. It's all that remains of what was probably a grand triple arch, which once marked an important intersection. Occupying the northeastern part of the Old City, the quarter is home to numerous churches representing various denominations, including Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Greek Catholic, Syrian Catholic and Maronite. The wealth and education of the city's Christians is reflected in a thriving commercial atmosphere and a lively dining and drinking scene.

### Chapel of Ananias

كنيسة حنانيا

In the far northeast corner of the Christian quarter, the **Chapel of Ananias** (Map pp86-7; Sharia Hanania; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Wed-Mon) is

housed in a cellar that was reputedly the house of Ananias, an early Christian disciple (see Biblical Damascus, below). To find the chapel, take Sharia Hanania, the last street on the left before Bab ash-Sharqi; it's at the far northern end in a crypt below the house.

Sharia Hanania is a lovely little street that's home to souvenir and antique shops, restaurants and bars.

### St Paul's Chapel

كنيسة مار بولس

The Old City gate, **Bab Kisan** (Map pp86-7), purportedly marks the spot where the disciples lowered St Paul out of a window in a basket one night, so that he could flee from the Jews, having angered them after preaching in the synagogues (see Biblical Damascus, below). Beside the gate, sealed since at least the 18th century, is **St Paul's Chapel** (Map pp86-7), dedicated to the saint. Follow the driveway up to the new convent on the left and push open the heavy wooden doors into the back of Bab Kisan, which now contains the small chapel.

### Central Damascus

The modern city may be short on sights and bereft of beauty but it's bustling and lively, with a vibrant social life, and definitely warrants some of your time. Start with a visit to the National Museum and its neighbour, Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya. The backstreets of Souq Saroujah are also worth a wander, as is the atmospheric old neighbourhood on the upper slopes of Salihyya (the lower slopes of Jebel Qassioun).

### BIBLICAL DAMASCUS

Christianity has been on the scene in Damascus since early in the 1st century. Saul of Tarsus, who had been the scourge of Christians in Jerusalem, was riding to Damascus on the instructions of the Jewish high priests in order to arrest Christians living there. En route he was blinded by a vision of God near the village of Darayya outside Damascus. He was led into the city to the home of a Christian named Judas. There he was cured of his blindness by Ananias, who had also received a vision: 'Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight...' (Acts 9:11). Converted, Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle, and was baptised in the Barada River (not recommended today); he later spread the word of God throughout the Roman Empire.

His conversion outraged the Damascene Jews and when he began preaching around town he was forced to flee the city: 'And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped' (2 Corinthians 11:33). The houses of Ananias and Judas, and the 'window' of St Paul, are all commemorated in Damascus and held in reverence by the city's Christian communities. You can visit both the Chapel of Ananias (above) and St Paul's Chapel (above).

### AL-MERJEH

المرجه

Writing in 1875, Isabel Burton, wife of the British consul, describes the 'green' **Al-Merjeh** (Map pp82-3) as looking like a 'village common'. By the end of the 19th century it was the hub of Damascus, a small park housing the city's best hotels, and a terminus for trams. Damascus was the first city in the Ottoman Empire to possess electric trams, with six lines converging here, and the power supplied by a waterfall on the Barada River. Another century on and the trams were gone. Al-Merjeh is now a traffic island with a tiny patch of grass at the centre. It's also known as Saahat ash-Shohada or Martyrs' Sq. The martyrs referred to were victims of the French bombardments in 1925. The column at the centre has nothing to do with martyrs; instead, it commemorates the opening of the first telegraph link in the Middle East – the line from Damascus to Medina. The surrounding streets are busy with cheap eateries, pastry shops and budget hotels.

### HEJAZ TRAIN STATION

محطة الحجاز

A little south and west of Al-Merjeh, the grand **Hejaz train station** (Map pp82-3), completed in 1917, was the northern terminus of the Hejaz Railway, built to ferry pilgrims to Medina (see The Hejaz Railway, p395). Compared with the transport palaces of Europe the station is a provincial affair, but the interior has a beautiful decorated ceiling.

The actual platforms of the station are closed – a much-delayed project was to see the station expanded to include a high-rise hotel, shopping mall and underground railway – and all trains now leave from Khaddam station. There is a pleasant bar-café, a steam locomotive dating from 1908, and a public water fountain erected at the same time as the station.

### SOUQ SAROUJAH

سوق ساروجه

A charming, laid-back neighbourhood of narrow alleys lined with small shops and punctuated by medieval tombs and mosques, **Souq Saroujah** (Saddlers' Bazaar; Map pp82-3) is a fascinating place for a stroll.

In medieval times the areas immediately outside the city walls were developed as burial places for the dead; you can still see

this today, with large areas of cemeteries lying to the south of the old cities of both Damascus and Aleppo. Occasionally, however, the needs of the living would overwhelm those of the dead. Such was the case with the area now known as Souq Saroujah. During the Ayyubid era the fields just north of the Barada River became a favoured location for the tombs and mausoleums of nobles, and for several hundred years this site served as an exclusive burial ground. As the city expanded under the Ottomans, and space within the city walls was at a premium, the cemeteries became built over with the houses of well-off Turkish civil servants and military officers.

Unfortunately, the needs of the living are pressing once again, and many of the fine old houses have been demolished in the name of redevelopment. Of the handful that remain, **Beit al-Haramein** and **Beit al-Rabie** now serve as backpackers' hotels (see p103), while the venerable **Beit Shami** is now the Historical Museum of Damascus.

### Historical Museum of Damascus

متحف تاريخ دمشق

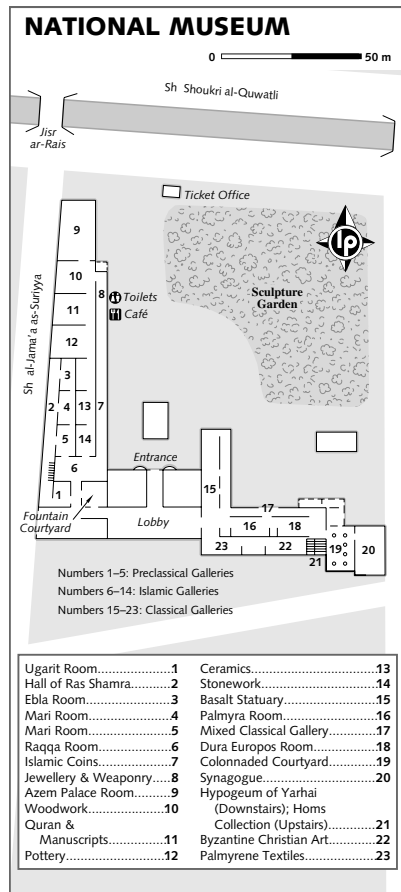
The **historical museum** (Map pp86-7; Sharia ath-Thawra; adult/student 5£75/5; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) is in an attractive old house with eight richly decorated rooms off a central courtyard. A couple of rooms hold displays of photos and diagrams relating to old Damascus, and there is a superb large-scale model of the Old City, but it's the rooms themselves, decorated in typical Damascene fashion with inlaid marble, carved wood and painted ceilings, that are of greatest interest.

The museum is off Sharia ath-Thawra, where the flyover comes down north of Sharia Souq Saroujah, beside two tall modern buildings. It's on Ministry of the Interior property and visitors have to pass through a guarded gate to reach the arched entrance.

### NATIONAL MUSEUM

المتحف الوطني

The most important of Syria's museums is the **National Museum** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; adult/student 5£150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar), and you'll get more out of Syria's archaeological sites if you take in the museum before and after your visits to the sites.



Purchase your ticket at the gate then stroll through the shady **sculpture garden**, which is best appreciated after seeing the museum proper.

Enter through the main gate of Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi, a desert palace west of Palmyra dating from AD 688, the time of the Umayyad caliph Hisham. The gate was transported to Damascus stone by stone and reconstructed as part of the museum façade.

Within the museum, the exhibits are presented thematically and grouped into preclassical, classical and Islamic sections. Exhibits are labelled in English, Arabic and French, but *The Concise Guide: National Museum of Damascus* is also available at the gift shop and is well worth buying.

The **lobby** is devoted to Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi, with large black-and-white photos of the palace with its façade still *in situ*. Upstairs is an airy gallery displaying a series of finely carved stone screens removed from the Qasr.

### Preclassical Galleries

The **Ugarit Room** (1; see map) is devoted to finds from Ugarit (p149) and contains stone tablets inscribed with what is believed to be one of the world's earliest alphabets, along with beautiful bronze figurines. The **Hall of Ras Shamra** (2) contains finds from ancient Syria, including more from Ugarit and other sites. It leads into the **Ebla Room** (3), and on to two **Mari Rooms** (4 & 5), devoted to artefacts from the Mesopotamian city (p223) in the southeast of Syria, near the border with Iraq. The distinctive statuettes in here, with their feather skirts and lively black eyes, date to the 2nd millennium BC, making them roughly the same age as the Great Pyramids of Giza.

### Islamic Galleries

The first room of the Islamic galleries, the **Raqqa Room** (6), contains artefacts, pottery and stucco panels recovered from the old Abbasid city (p216) destroyed by Mongols in 1260. A staircase leads up to the **Modern Art Galleries**, which were closed at the time of research, while the long corridor (7) running north begins with carved wooden fragments of a ceiling found at Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi, goes on to **Islamic coins** and then leads to **jewellery and weaponry** (8), where some heavy jewellery pieces and wonderfully ornate weaponry are displayed. They embody the two traits for which the Mamluk dynasty was renowned: artistry and violence.

Off the far end is **woodwork** (10), where a large room is devoted to the intricate style of woodwork that developed throughout the Islamic era as a result of the religious ban on figurative representations. This room is dominated by two great cenotaphs: the one nearest the entrance, decorated with a beautiful star motif, dates from 1250; while the second dates from 1265 and comes from the Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque in Homs (see p157). Other objects here include domestic furniture from some of the old houses of Damascus.

North of the woodwork room is the **Azem Palace Room** (9), which is a reconstruction of an original room from Azem Palace (p92) in the Old City.

The remaining rooms of the Islamic galleries are devoted to the **Quran and manuscripts** (11), **pottery** (12), **ceramics** (13) and **stonework** (14).

### Classical Galleries

The classical galleries make up the whole east wing, with the first room containing a large collection of **basalt statuary** (15), executed in the black stone typical of the Hauran region. There's also an excellent mosaic here, recovered from Lattakia, which depicts the Orontes River in the form of a god.

The busts in the **Palmyra Room** (16) are representations of the dead. They would have fitted like seals into the pigeonhole-like chambers in which bodies were stored. To see how this worked, pass through the **Dura Europos Room** (18), which contains jewellery and ceramics from this Roman site on the Euphrates (p222), and down the stairs to the **Hypogeum of Yarhai** (21), which is an extraordinary reconstruction of an underground burial chamber from Palmyra's Valley of the Tombs (p209). Seeing this helps make sense of Palmyra's funerary towers,

and some of the museum exhibits there (which is where this reconstruction truly belongs).

Beside the staircase down to the hypogeum is a staircase that goes up to the **Homs Collection** (21 upstairs). Alongside some exquisite gold jewellery, there are coins depicting Venetian doges (chief magistrates), the Roman emperor, Philip the Arab and Alexander the Great.

The other attraction worth seeing is the **synagogue** (20), across a colonnaded courtyard. Dating from the 2nd century, it was discovered at Dura Europos, from where it was removed and reconstructed here. Other than its age, the most interesting features are the beautiful floor-to-ceiling wall frescoes. Executed in a colourful naive style, they depict scenes from Old Testament events, from the crowning of King Solomon through to the reign of David, the story of Moses and the flight from Egypt.

This is a real oddity in that depictions of the human form go against Talmudic traditions.

While the frescoes are faded (hence the low light in the room), the fact that they've survived at all is because the synagogue lay buried under sand for centuries until its discovery in the 1930s.

### DAMASCUS' ART SCENE

With a burgeoning contemporary art scene that's as vibrant as that of Cairo, Beirut and Dubai, a tour of Damascus' art galleries is a great way to while away a few hours. Art fans should check *What's On Syria* for details of more galleries and the latest shows, as many exhibitions are held in some of Damascus' old houses. Here's a taste of the city's best:

- **Atassi Gallery** (Map p80; ☎ 332 1720; www.atassigallery.com; 35 Sharia ar-Rawdah, off Sharia al-Jala'a; ☹ 10am-2pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu) Damascus' premier gallery has a lively programme of regularly changing exhibitions, featuring some of the Middle East's most respected modern artists, from renowned Aleppan sculptor Abdel Rahman Mouakket to mixed media by Baghdadi-born Ali Talib.
- **Ayyam Gallery** (off Map p80; ☎ 544 5794; www.ayyamgallery.com; Samawi Bldg, Mezzeh West Villas, 30 Chile St; ☹ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu) In a chic, sleek art space designed by Syria's revered architect Ghiath Machnok, this is one of the region's most exciting galleries, showing engaging work by Syrian artists such as Abdulla Murad, Safwan Dahoul, Mounzer Kamnake, Youssef Abdelke and Fadi Yazigi.
- **Art House** (off Map p80; ☎ 662 8112; behind the Children's Hospital, Mezzeh; ☹ 10am-9pm) This small gallery in the atmospheric lobby of the Art House hotel (p105) hosts regular art shows alongside a programme of music recitals and concerts. There's also a lovely terrace café for lunch.
- **Galerie Abdal** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 5794; Sharia Shawesh; ☹ 10am-1am) A café with an exhibition space above that hosts regularly changing shows (see also p110).

**TAKIYYA AS-SÜLEIMANIYYA** التكية السليمانية  
Lying immediately east of the National Museum, **Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya** (Map pp82–3) was built over six years, beginning in 1554, to a design by the Ottoman Empire's most brilliant architect, Sinan. A favourite of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, Sinan would later create the splendid Süleymaniye Mosque that dominates Istanbul's skyline.

The Takiyya (an Ottoman term for a Sufi hostel) is a more modest affair than the Istanbul mosque, blending local Syrian styles (the alternating Mamluk-era black-and-white banding and honeycomb-style stonework over the main entrance) with typically Turkish features (the high central dome and pencil-shaped minarets). It has two parts: the mosque to the south, and an arcaded courtyard with rooms that would have housed pilgrims. The former hostel area is now the Army Museum (see below).

Under the patronage of Süleyman's successor, Selim II, the Takiyya compound was extended with the addition of a small madrasa. Built around a central courtyard and fountain, the madrasa now serves as Artisanat, an appealing handicraft market, where the former students' cells are now shops and ateliers (see p114).

#### ARMY MUSEUM

المتحف الحربي

The **Army Museum** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; adult/student SE5/3; ☎ 8am-2pm Wed-Mon) has a fascinating collection of military hardware from the Bronze Age to the near present.

Exhibits range from flint arrowheads to a pile of the twisted remains of planes shot down in the 1973 war with Israel.

#### Salhiyya

الصالحية

Salhiyya (Map p98) sprawls along the lower slopes of Jebel Qassioun, taking in the upper part of the modern city centre, as well as a ramshackle old quarter of small shops, atmospheric souqs and Islamic monuments on the lower part of the mountain.

The old quarter, also known as Al-Char-kassiyeh, first developed in the 12th century, when Nureddin settled Arab refugees here who had fled the Crusader massacres in Jerusalem in 1099. What developed in the subsequent four centuries was a dense neighbourhood of mosques, mausoleums and madrassas, 70 in total, representing a significant portion of the city's 250 official monuments. Strung out along Sharia Madares Assad al-Din, popularly known as Souq al-Joumma, few of the buildings can be seen from inside but just strolling by the domes and decorated portals makes for a wonderful one- or two-hour walk. It's now a lively souq street, so don't be surprised to see men riding donkeys or hear traditional street criers selling their goods.

The reason few buildings can be visited is that while they're ancient enough to warrant preservation orders, many of the monuments are being put into service (due to the pressing needs of locals), albeit rarely for the purposes intended. The small

#### THE CRIES OF DAMASCUS

As you stroll the Old City's ancient alleys, at some point you'll come across a man leading a donkey or horse – his bridle prettily decorated with colourful ribbons and pompoms – pulling a cart from which its owner sells fresh fruit and vegetables, water or gas bottles. He'll periodically call out in Arabic as he moves through the streets, announcing his arrival and that he has something to sell. In the old days these salesmen were everywhere, each specialising in something and calling out some clever cry or witty sales pitch. The apricot seller would yell out 'I am the seller of sweetness and tenderness'; the cucumber trader might cry 'Who has got a pool to have these fish swim in?' (as locals kept the cucumber in their fountains to keep cool for salads); while the knife seller would call out 'Who wants to kill his mother-in-law?'

14th-century **Tomb of Emir Kajkar** serves as a Christian centre; the neighbouring **Tomb of Amat al-Latif** (1243) harbours a human-rights organisation; while **Madrassa Morsidiyya**, complete with the only surviving example of a square 13th-century minaret in Damascus, is a kindergarten. Across the street a 14th-century tomb, with elaborate carved-stone decoration around the doorway, is now somebody's home, judging by the satellite dish on the dome.

There are one or two hidden gems worth investigating. Tucked down narrow Sharia al-Nawa'eer, the 14th-century **Jamaa al-Jedid** (New Mosque) contains the tomb of Ismat al-Din Khatun, wife of first Nureddin and then his successor Saladin. The richly decorated burial chamber is worth a look.

Back on Souq al-Joumma, just a short distance east and facing a small square, is the modest **Mosque of Mohi al-Din**, with a beautiful late-Mamluk minaret. This is very much a community mosque, with men dozing in the shade of the prayer hall, but it's also a popular pilgrimage site – buried here is the body of Sheikh Mohi al-Din al-Arabi (who died in 1240), a great Sufi mystic whose writings are supposed to have greatly influenced Dante. The tomb is downstairs, off to the left-hand side of the entrance courtyard; only men are allowed in. The claustrophobic chamber is filled by a cenotaph, enclosed in silver casing and illuminated by fluorescent green light.

Leaving the mosque, **Imaret Sultan Süleiman**, another building designed by Sinan (the architect behind Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya), is across the main street. Historian Ross Burns, in *Monuments of Syria: A Historical Guide*, suggests the **Hanbila Mosque** is worth a visit for the Crusader columns in the courtyard; however, it's often locked.

To reach Salhiyya, walk north from Saahat 8 Azar (8 March Sq), also known as Saahat Arnous, in Central Damascus, along the bustling shopping street of Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser. Cross Saahat al-Jasr al-Abiyad (Al-Jasr Sq), and continue up Sharia Afif until you get to Sharia Madares Assad al-Din (Souq al-Joumma). If taking a taxi, it's best to say Al-Jasr Sq, as drivers don't know where to take you if you say 'Salhiyya'; they will probably drop you on Sharia al-Hamra or Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser.

#### Greater Damascus

##### JEBEL QASSIOUN

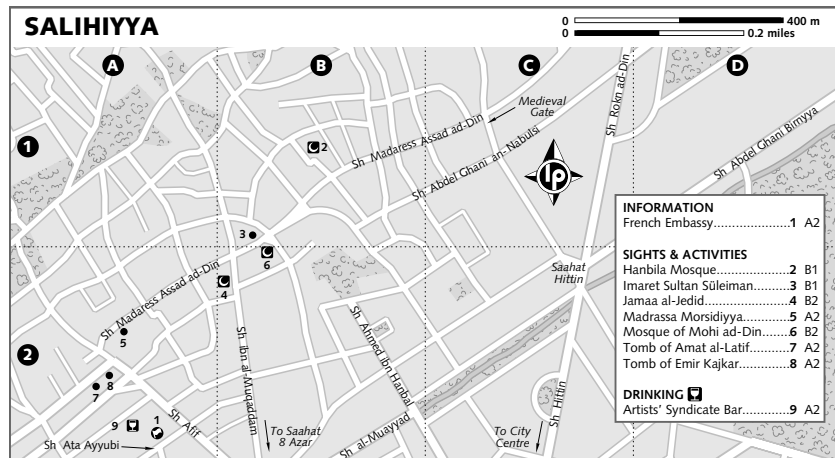
جبل قاسيون

That bare rocky rise northwest of the city, **Jebel Qassioun** (Mt Qassioun; 1200m; Map p80) provides a useful orientation tool. It's from the top of this mount that Mohammed is said to have looked down on Damascus and made the observation that opened this chapter. The distinctly urban view today is hardly one of paradise, but it looks stunning at dusk, when the city lights up. There is no public transport to the popular viewing points, so hire a taxi and negotiate for the driver to wait.

#### TISHREEN (OCTOBER) WAR PANORAMA

بنوآراما حرب تشرين

Created with the help of the North Koreans, this **memorial** (Sharia 6 Tishreen; adult/student SE150/15; ☎ 9am-9pm Wed-Mon) to the 1973 war with Israel is quite extraordinary. The tour takes in paintings of various historical battles, a film, the moving panoramic painting, a 3D mural and diorama depicting the Israeli devastation of the town, and a room filled with portraits of former president Hafez al-Assad. You'll gain a great insight into the battle over the Golan Heights and the fighting in and around the town of



### RICHARD BURTON, RENAISSANCE MAN

Adventurer, scholar, master of a couple of dozen languages or so, and translator of *The Thousand and One Nights* and *Karma Sutra*, Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–90) was one of Britain's most fascinating and controversial explorers. His disdain for authority and keen interest in sexuality (not welcome in those prudish times) may have impeded the attainment of higher posts in both his military and diplomatic careers, but his thirst for knowledge of languages and cultures saw him lead an extraordinary life.

Having undertaken diverse challenges, from travelling to Mecca disguised as a pilgrim for the hajj to searching for the source of the river Nile, Burton took up the post of British consul to Syria in 1869. Although the consulate building was in the city, Burton and his wife Isabel chose to live in Salihiyya (p98), which at that time was a Kurdish village of 15,000 inhabitants, separated from the city by fields of orchards. Their house, as described in Isabel's letters, was flanked on one side by a mosque and on the other by a hammam, and had a rooftop terrace where the Burtons would entertain guests.

Being the colourful, unconventional character that he was, Burton lost no time in making enemies while trying to ease tensions between the Christian, Muslim and Jewish populations. After only two years in his post, the foreign office in London felt compelled to remove him following numerous petitions of complaint, thus ending what he would later refer to as the two happiest years of his life. Indeed, his love of Arab culture is reflected in his tomb in Surrey – it's in the shape of a Bedouin tent.

For more on Burton's intriguing life, check out *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton* by Fawn McKay Brodie and *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton* by Mary S Lovell.

Quneitra, which isn't otherwise possible; it's definitely worth seeing if you're planning a visit to Quneitra (p130).

The panorama is located about 2km northeast of the centre, on the road to the Harasta bus terminal; take a Harasta microbus and ask to be let out when you spot the plaza on the opposite side of the highway filled with captured Israeli jeeps, tanks and fighter planes.

### SAYYIDA ZEINAB MOSQUE

جامع السيدة زينب

This splendid Iranian-built mosque on the site of the burial place of Sayyida Zeinab, granddaughter of Mohammed, is about 10km south of the city centre, in a neighbourhood that is popular with Iranian pilgrims and is now home to most of the city's Iraqi refugees. Stylistically, the mosque is similar to that of Sayyida Ruqqaya in the Old City, with a glistening gold onion-shaped dome, intricately decorated blue tiles covering its façade and two freestanding minarets.

Women will have to don a cloak, available at the entrance, before entering, and men should wear trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. The main entrances to the sanctuary are on the northern and southern sides, and

non-Muslims may stroll the courtyard that surrounds the central **mausoleum** as well as take a peek at the glittering interior, lined with mirrored tiles and dripping with chandeliers, although they can not actually enter the mausoleum. Their eyes brimming with tears, the Muslim faithful kiss and stroke the silver grate surrounding the tomb of Zeinab, a much-venerated descendant of the Prophet.

To get here, take a microbus for Karajat as-Sitt (\$£5) from Sharia Fahkri al-Baroudi in the city centre; at Karajat as-Sitt change to a different microbus for the mosque (\$£5). A return taxi from the city centre should cost \$£500.

### ACTIVITIES

If you're a male and visit only one hammam in Damascus, make it busy, men-only **Hammam Nureddin** (Map p114; ☎ 222 9513; Souq al-Bzouriyya; ☎ 9am-midnight), accessed from the spice souq that runs between the Umayyad Mosque and Straight St. Founded in the mid-12th century, it is one of the grandest and oldest functioning hammams in the country. It has an excellent heated steam room, and the full deal of massage, bath and sauna with towel, soap and tea costs \$£500 (bath only is \$£200).

**Hammam az-Zahariyya** (Map p114; ☎ 8am-midnight Tue-Sun & 5pm-midnight Mon men, 9am-5pm Mon women), next to the madrasa of the same name, just north of Umayyad Mosque, has been in use since the 12th century. It's clean and well looked after, and a scrub, sauna, massage and tea costs \$£560.

Opposite Beit al-Mamlouka hotel near Bab Touma, local favourite **Hammam Bakri** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 542 6606; Sharia Qanayet al-Hattab; ☎ 10am-5pm women, 5pm-midnight men, closed Fri) charges about \$£300 for a scrub and massage. Charging similar prices, **Hammam al-Qaimariyya** (Zuqqaq Hammam; Map pp86-7; ☎ 7am-noon & 5pm-midnight men, noon-5pm women), north of Sharia al-Qaimariyya and 300m east of Umayyad Mosque, is also popular with locals.

### WALKING TOUR

Wandering the historic Old City streets is the most wonderful thing to do in Damascus.

For something different (most people enter by Souq al-Hamidiyya), begin your tour at the Bab al-Jabiye end of Souq Medhat Pasha. This will take you directly into the hustle and bustle of this ancient road and centre of commerce known as **Straight**

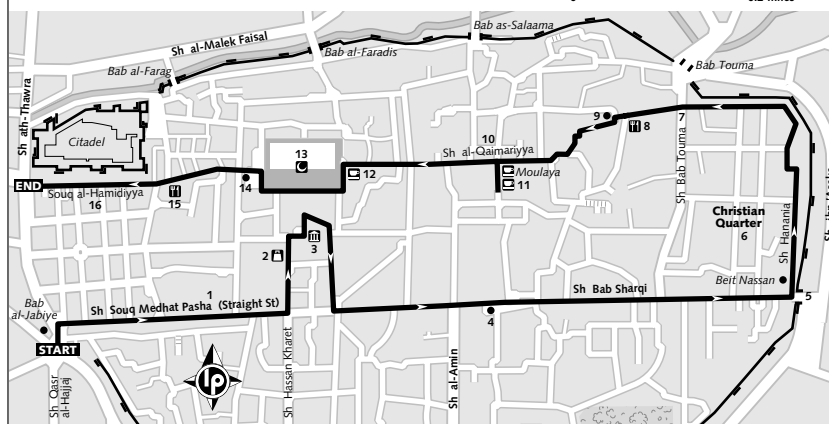
#### WALK FACTS

**Start** Bab al-Jabiye

**End** Souq al-Hamidiyya

**Duration** two hours to half a day

### DAMASCUS WALKING TOUR



**St (1; p92)**. As you make your way along this exotic street you'll pass scores of tiny stores selling textiles, *jalabiyya* (robes), *kufeyya* (chequered scarves worn by Arabs), coffee, olive oil and spices. Notice the tattooed faces of the Bedouin ladies shopping, and the dignified faces in the framed portraits hanging at the back of most stores – a sign of respect to past family members, who ran these small businesses decades before. If you look up you will see bullet holes caused by planes at the end of the French mandate.

When you reach the end of the covered part of the souq, take a slight detour into the spice souq on your left, and head to **Al Ghaoui Confiseur Chocolater (2)**, 'purveyors to Queen Victoria', for a retro box of chocolates. If you're in the mood for some peace and tranquillity before you push on, slip into the beautiful **Azem Palace (3; p92)** to enjoy the glorious courtyard garden. Return to Straight St and continue, passing the small shops selling wooden spoons and plastics, pots and pans, and sweets and nuts. You're likely to be offered a taste of pistachios or cashews – don't hesitate to try before you buy.

You'll soon notice antique shops and some second-hand stores selling engraved brass and copperware, wooden mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, boxes and backgammon boards, carpets and kilims, coloured Oriental lamps, and other old Damascene delights. More interesting and original

souvenirs can be found here and further along Straight St in the direction of Bab ash-Sharqi, than can be found in Souq al-Hamidiyya. Drag yourself away from the great shopping to note the **Roman arch** (4; p94), evidence that this was the main street in Roman and Greek times.

Once you arrive almost at **Bab ash-Sharqi** (5; p85), turn left into Sharia Hanania and the **Christian Quarter** (6; p94). There are even more shops here, but there are also some historic sites worth a look, including the courtyard of the fine old Beit Nassan. Stroll this characterful residential street until you arrive at busy **Sharia Bab Touma** (7). Cross the street, continuing past **Elissar** (8; p107), until

you arrive at **Hamam Bakri** (9; p101). Turn left into the narrow alley **Sharia al-Qaimariyya** (10), one of the Old City's liveliest arteries. It's lined with ateliers, art galleries, CD shops, hole-in-the-wall bakeries, carpet shops and renovated cafés, and you could spend hours dawdling along here.

Stop for lunch or a coffee and nargileh with young Damascenes at **Galerie Abdal** (11; p110) or **Moulaya** next door. Otherwise, continue along this charming lane to its prettiest part, shaded with vines, where you'll find two of the city's most atmospheric old coffeehouses. Stop at **Al-Nawfara** (12; p110) to get your coffee fix, while being entertained by

the dying art of the *hakawati* (traditional storyteller) – see The End of the Story? (p109).

Take a left turn and follow the walls of **Umayyad Mosque** (13; p88), but save your visit to this exquisite building for another day, when you aren't too tired to appreciate it (unless you're looking for some well-earned peace and tranquillity). Pass under the **western temple gate** (14; p88), stopping for the best ice cream in town at **Bekdash** (15; p107), and perhaps one last spot of shopping in the magnificent **Souq al-Hamidiyya** (16; p113).

## COURSES

Studying Arabic in Damascus is phenomenally popular. Courses are offered at the following centres.

**British Council** (Map p80; ☎ 333 0631; fax 332 1467; www.britishcouncil.org/syria; Sharia Karim al-Khalil, off Sharia Maysaloun; ☎ language courses 9am-8pm Sun-Thu, 10am-5pm Sat) offers regular, intensive courses in both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Syrian Colloquial Arabic (SCA), at three different levels.

**Damascus University** (Map p80; ☎ 212 9864; Arabic Language Department, Faculty of Letters) offers six Arabic courses in one academic year, with each course lasting two months, and a one-month introductory course. Each class is five days a week, 3½ hours a day.

## DAMASCUS FOR CHILDREN

As elsewhere in the Middle East, Syrians love children. Even the very best restaurants in Damascus are accommodating when it comes to children, but a must (for kids of all ages) is an ice cream from **Bekdash** (p107) in Souq al-Hamidiyya.

In the souqs, urban-dwelling youngsters should enjoy the shopping experience – especially seeing sweets sold off a cart. Children will enjoy the garden area of the **National Museum** (p95), although the exhibits inside are not geared towards children. Boys and girls with a bent for the aeronautical will like looking at the old propeller and jet-powered aircraft at the **Army Museum** (p98). The rest of the time, though, you'll find yourself explaining the significance of the sights, certainly enough to keep any adult busy.

All the five-star hotels boast kid-friendly facilities, including baby-sitting.

## TOURS

The best way to see Damascus is on foot – perhaps with a taxi back to your lodgings after a long day's walk. All hotels across all budget categories operate myriad tours; prices range from a minimum of SE250 per person in a shared minibus if organised through a budget hotel, to up to US\$100 a day with private driver if organised through a four- or five-star hotel. Several travel agencies around the Cham Palace offer half-day and one-day excursions around Damascus and to destinations outside the city such as Palmyra and Bosra; however, you're better off organising tours or a private driver through your hotel.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**International Flower Show** Held in Damascus every May.

**Jazz Festival** Held in July in the citadel.

**Silk Road Festival** Held in late September, it celebrates Syria's long cultural history with events held in Aleppo, Damascus and Palmyra.

**Damascus International Film Festival** Held in November and December every year, showing an eclectic range of films, including many pan-Arab productions. There's sometimes also a theatre festival held at the same time.

## SLEEPING

There's plenty of accommodation across all price brackets in Damascus, with some characterful new accommodation in the Old City. It's best to book in advance, though, as the good places fill up fast. Where room rates are specified in US dollars, the hotel expects payment in same. Credit cards are not accepted for budget and midrange options.

## Budget

The bulk of the cheap hotels are found around Al-Merjeh, with the best budget hostels in Souq Saroujah, centred on atmospheric Sharia Bahsa, a little lane north off Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli. Here you'll find Ghazal Hotel, Al-Haramain and Al-Rabie, Damascus' most popular backpacker places.

**Al-Haramain Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 231 9489; fax 231 4299; Sharia Bahsa; roof mattress SE200, s/d SE400/700) In a ramshackle old house on a leafy alley, Al-Haramain was once the long-standing backpacker favourite. Amenities are basic, but the hotel is somewhat redeemed with friendly reception staff, a long list of

## DIALLING IN YOUR DIALECT IN DAMASCUS

With agreeable living expenses, a wonderful historic city to explore and friendly locals ready to engage with you, Damascus is becoming the destination to learn Arabic in the Middle East. Learning Arabic takes serious dedication and students often commit to living and learning in Damascus for over a year. This is one language where an immersive experience is really beneficial.

An introductory one-month intensive university course (around SE16,000) is popular, followed by tailored, private classes (around SE500 per hour) that help students expand their language skills. Most students find the going tough, because there is both classical Arabic and modern Arabic. Maj Greitz, a Swedish student who has been living in Damascus for six months, says, 'Arabic is in a totally different league [to learning other languages]. There is the alphabet, the new sounds and learning 'two' languages at the same time, and it's an incredibly hard language to get a grip on. At one stage though, there was a feeling of magic, when I started to learn how to read and write, when I could actually put words together on paper. It was pure magic!'

Students generally rent a room in a house with other students or with a local family. If you stay with a local family and they don't speak your native language, it can be trying if you've just arrived and your spoken Arabic isn't up to carrying a conversation, as Maj discovered: 'They were super nice people, but it was a big effort every time I wanted to ask for something or for some other reason had to communicate with them. I think at a later stage of studying it would have been more useful for me to stay with them.' But sharing with other students has its challenges as well, because it's very tempting for everyone to just speak English after a hard day trying to think in a different language, robbing you of valuable Arabic practice time.

Students are flocking to Damascus study for a variety of reasons. Maj has been active in the plight of the Palestinians and outspoken against the invasion of Iraq, and plans to work here, if possible, after finishing her law degree. Maria Fernandez Coll, a long-time Arabic-language student from Spain, came to study Arabic because she was studying translation and saw that there was a need for Arabic translators. Chiara Chierici from Italy, who has studied Arabic for two years, simply fell in love with the language.

Regardless of what path you take to learn, the students we spoke to all had the same final advice – just get out there and try to speak Arabic! Chiara offers her advice: 'Don't be shy, go around and watch the people around you, sit in a tea shop and take your time.' Maj says, 'I think I would have tried to get a basic level in spoken Arabic faster, and then talked to more people, without being scared of making mistakes.' Maria says, 'You have to seize the opportunity to learn from the people in the street and spend your time with them. It was the biggest challenge, being able to communicate with the local people in their own language. I was studying for a long time and now I'm more or less able to do it. It is the best part of the learning, when you start practising it and you see that people understand you more and more.'

services, and public spaces that encourage chilling out. This place is still one of the budget travellers' favourites in Damascus, so book in advance to secure a room.

**Al-Rabie Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 231 8374; fax 231 1875; Sharia Bahsa; roof mattress \$E200, s/d with shared showers \$E450/700, d with shower \$E1000) The reigning backpackers' favourite, Al-Rabie offers travellers a tranquil, leafy courtyard retreat from the bustling streets of Damascus, as well as simple, clean accommodation and friendly hosts who know what visitors want and can seemingly fulfil your every wish.

**Al-Rais** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 221 4252, 245 8039; Sharia as-Sandjakdar; s/d \$E500/1000) One block east and south of Al-Merjeh, this one's very popular with visiting female Arabs and little or no English is spoken. The clean, simple rooms are light and bright, and come with a fan and a small TV.

**Balkiss Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 222 2506; fax 245 3734; Al-Merjeh; s/d \$E500/1000; ☎) This centrally located hotel, close to Al-Merjeh in the neighbourhood of the same name, is good value and an excellent choice for male travellers. The reasonably clean rooms are fitted out well for this price, with fridge, air-conditioning and fan, satellite TV and alarming tiger-skin bed covers, which could take your mind off the not-so-great private bathrooms. The clientele is predominantly Arab and Iranian.

**Ghazal Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 231 3736; www.ghazalhotel.com; Sharia Souq Saroujah; dm/s/d/tw \$E300/600/1000/1000; ☎) A welcome addition to the Souq Saroujah accommodation scene, this budget hotel owned by three friendly brothers is a relaxing, if somewhat offbeat, place to stay in this popular area of Damascus. Externally resembling a beach shack, it's an endearingly homely affair, with a suitably languorous feel. Double and twin rooms have new beds, spotlessly clean sheets, and hot water.

**Sultan Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 222 5768; fax 224 0372; Sharia Mousalam al-Baroudi; s/d/tr US\$23/31/39; ☎) The kitsch Arabian Nights-style common areas and a long list of services (eg organising tours and drivers, book exchange, laundry service, airport transfers) are the big attractions at this travellers' favourite just west of Hejaz train station. You certainly don't come here for the spartan rooms; while spotlessly clean, they come with little more than a fan and air-conditioning.

## Midrange

The city's midrange options offer good value for money compared with Beirut, for instance.

**Afamia Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 222 8963; www.afamiahotel.com; Sharia Omar ben Abi Rabia; s/d/tr from US\$30/35/45; ☎ ☎) After a recent renovation the Afamia is arguably Damascus' best value midrange hotel. The unrenovated 'Classic' rooms come with satellite TV, fridge, air-conditioning and hairdryer, but for US\$5 extra the renovated 'Executive' rooms have the same amenities plus swish new carpets, curtains, lamp shades and bedspreads, new bathrooms, flat-screen TVs and complimentary ADSL internet.

**Orient Palace Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 223 1351; fax 221 1512; Saahat Hejaz; s/d US\$28/40; ☎) Opposite the old Hejaz train station, the splendid Orient Palace Hotel has been around since the 1920s, and depending on your level of enthusiasm for faded grandeur, it either retains plenty of period charm or resembles an early-20th-century medical institution. Rooms are big, and although a bit fusty, they're clean and most have balconies. These days the hotel fills quickly with Iranian tour groups.

**City Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 221 9375; fax 245 3817; off Sharia Omar ben Abi Rabia; s/d/tr US\$30/40/45; ☎) Also known as the Hotel al-Medina, this recently renovated and centrally located hotel offers decent comfort levels at a respectable price. The rooms come with fridge, satellite TV and hairdryer, and are decorated with inlaid mirrors, quilted brocade bedspreads and small desks. The hotel is fantastically popular with Iranian tour groups, so book ahead.

**Al-Faradis Hotel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 224 6546; fax 224 7009; Al-Merjeh; s/d from US\$62/67; ☎) This comfortable four-star business hotel is in an excellent location, perfect for shopping the souqs as well as the odd pilgrimage – the hotel does a roaring trade hosting tour groups from Iran, here to explore the mosques of Damascus. The rooms are spacious, comfortable and well equipped, if a tad old-fashioned, and have fascinating views of the city.

**Dar al-Yasmin** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 3380; www.daralyasmin.com; Bab Touma; s/d/tr US\$85/100/125; ☎) In a restored old Damascene house with grey granite and white striped walls, traditional décor, and elegant courtyards with trickling fountains, this is an attractive boutique hotel in the Old City. The 18 rooms

are set around two appealing courtyards, the first of which is quieter despite being above reception (rooms on the 1st floor are best), and the hotel also boasts its own small hammam with sauna and massage.

## Top End

Damascus has benefited from a spate of elegant new boutique hotel openings in the Old City in recent years, which are a wonderful way to begin or end a Syrian sojourn. Prices listed do not include taxes, which add another 10%, and all hotels accept major credit cards.

**Beit al-Mamlouka** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 543 0445; www.almamlouka.com; opposite Hammam Bakri, near Bab Touma; d from US\$135; ☎ ☎) Occupying a splendid 17th-century house on a busy narrow alley in the Christian Quarter, this intimate boutique hotel is a gem. Rooms are beautifully decorated with rich brocades, heavy drapes and Oriental chandeliers. We love the impressive attention to detail, from the fine decorative painting on the walls to the TV and air-conditioning cleverly hidden away.

**Cham Palace** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 223 2300; www.chamhotels.com; Sharia Maysaloun; s US\$150-210, d

US\$160-240; ☎ ☎ ☎) One of the better hotels in the national chain, this one has a wonderfully chintzy lobby – worth a look even if you're not staying – but many of the 400 rooms are small and it's worth checking a couple out before setting your bags down.

**our pick Hotel Talisman** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 541 5379; www.hoteltalisman.net; 116 Tal Sharia al-Hijara; d/ste from US\$175/225; ☎ ☎ ☎) In an elegant, restored Jewish palace down a dusty alley in the crumbling Al-Jdeida quarter of Damascus' Old City, the Talisman offers up a true *The Thousand and One Nights* experience. The spacious rooms are individually decorated with mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, coloured glass chandeliers and carpets, along with mod cons like flat-screen TVs and DVD players. Rooms are set around two courtyards, one featuring an elegant *liwan* and a swimming pool, stunningly lit at night by Oriental lanterns. The second courtyard is smaller and more serene, with potted fruit trees. A wonderful property.

**Art House** (off Map p80; ☎ 662 8112-15; www.arthousedamascus.com; behind the Children's Hospital, Mezzeh; d from US\$250; ☎ ☎ ☎) In an exquisitely restored old stone mill, this elegant

## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Reforms by the young president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, may not have been as wide-ranging as many might have hoped, but there is certainly a feeling of optimism in the capital. Culture and tourism are high on the agenda and Damascus has responded with a flurry of art gallery and hotel openings (including the long-awaited Four Seasons). In the Old City the changes might not be readily apparent – apart from a more lively café scene – but behind the high walls and heavy doors, a revolution is occurring.

May Mamarbachi, owner of the boutique hotel Beit al-Mamlouka, meticulously restored this elegant 17th-century home over three years, all the while earning herself a PhD in Islamic Architecture. At the Hotel Talisman – with only a 'Hand of Fatima' doorknocker to distinguish it from the other houses in the street – a Jewish palace is now home to 17 rooms of Ottoman-era opulence. Outside the Old City, Art House is a project by the same entrepreneur as the Hotel Talisman. Here architect and manager Ghiath Machnok has converted an old mill into a unique property where artists and musicians meet, play and display – it's almost an artists' retreat as much as a hotel.

Back in the Old City, Beit al-Mamlouka and Hotel Talisman will soon be joined by several new properties. Mamdouh Akbik, owner-manager of the Afamia Hotel and member of the Chamber of Tourism, is one of many developers spreading blueprints out in the courtyards of run-down or derelict Damascene properties. Skilled craftsmen who can do *ajami* (the technique of intricately painting, gilding and lacquering wooden panels) and other old techniques are in high demand. Regulations regarding restoration are exacting, but Mamdouh, currently restoring a 150-year-old house to create an intimate hotel, says that while the Municipality and Antiquities regulations are tough, it's all going to be worth it, because 'we don't want the Old Town to lose its charm, its sense of normality, of community'. Mamdouh tells us that we won't recognise the ancient centre in another year – but you'll need to knock on the right door to see the changes.

boutique sleep is much more than a hotel. With regular art exhibitions, musical concerts and tai-chi classes, and a relaxing creekside location, Art House has become a destination in itself for artists and musicians. The public spaces are dramatic, with bare stone walls and high ceilings, particularly the grand lobby-cum-gallery reached via a sweeping staircase. The individually decorated spacious rooms are each inspired and named after a different artist.

**Four Seasons Hotel Damascus** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 339 1000; www.fourseasons.com; Sharia Shukri al-Quatli; d from US\$265; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Situated near the National Museum and close to the chic shopping and cafés of the new town, this plush piece of paradise in dusty downtown Damascus has been a huge success since opening. The spacious, comfortable rooms are richly decorated with all the creature comforts you expect from a luxury hotel, the food is fabulous and the faultless service, easily the best in Syria, is memorable.

## EATING

There are restaurants scattered all over Damascus. The best in terms of quality and service are in the modern city, the most atmospheric are in the Old City, and there are cheap eateries all over.

## Restaurants

Most Damascus restaurants open around noon for lunch and serve throughout the day until after midnight or when the last diners are ready to leave – which, because locals don't dine until 10pm or later, could be close to 2am. While reservations aren't necessary, it doesn't hurt to phone ahead – get your hotel to book for you and you'll get better service. Most restaurants have menus in English and Arabic but won't automatically give you a menu with prices, or the menu may have prices for meals but not for alcohol. Press the waiter for a menu with prices if you want one. Good restaurants serve complimentary fruit platters for dessert.

## OLD CITY

**Abu al-Azz** (Map p114; ☎ 221 8174; Souq al-Hamidiyya; lunch \$E300, dinner \$E500; 🍷 9am-late) This place is popular with locals as much as tourists – Arab families pack the place over summer. Look for the sign 'Rest. AlEzzAlShamieh Hall', then pass through the bustling ground-floor

bakery and up a narrow staircase to two floors of dining; the upper level is the most atmospheric. Expect mezze, salads and kebabs, live Oriental music all day, and whirling dervishes in the evening from around 10.30pm. No alcohol served.

**Al-Khawali** (Map p114; ☎ 222 5808; off Straight St, cnr Maazanet al-Shahim; meal per person \$E400; 🍷 noon-2am) Devotees swear the Syrian cuisine served here is some of the best in the city. Try the *jedy bzeit* (lamb with lemon sauce), *shish taouk* (marinated chicken on skewers) served in pottery Turkish-style, or the chef's special chicken and thyme. It's off Straight St, in a beautifully renovated old Damascene house. No alcohol or credit cards.

**Oxygen** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 4396; Bab Touma; meal per person \$E400; 🍷 noon-2am) This eatery-cum-bar has a dance-club vibe, especially late at night when the big-screen TV blares. The Syrian and French food offers no surprises but it's good for groups, especially if you want to stay on and drink for a while after dinner.

**Arabesque** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 543 3999; Sharia al-Kineesa; meal per person \$E500; 🍷 noon-late) Dress up a little for this elegant, cosy local favourite serving up the usual Syrian and French cuisine. There's a decent wine selection but no credit cards are accepted.

**Casablanca** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 541 7598; Sharia Hanania; meal per person \$E500; 🍷 1pm-1am) While Damascenes dress up on weekend nights, when cheesy live piano music is on offer, management is forgiving of travellers dropping by this elegant local favourite in casual gear. The French-heavy menu also features delicious Syrian standards such as mezze mixed grills. Alcohol is served and credit cards are accepted.

**Leila's Restaurant & Terrace** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 5900; Souq al-Abbabiyya, opposite east minaret of Umayyad Mosque; meal per person \$E500; 🍷 11am-2am) This al fresco rooftop restaurant overlooking Umayyad Mosque has the most magical setting in Damascus, especially for sunset drinks – the fresh mint lemonade (\$E75) is thirst-quenching – or later for dinner when the city lights twinkle. The menu features delicious Arabic mezze (\$E50 to \$E150) – try the eggplant *kibbeh* (cracked-wheat croquettes) – and succulent grills. Alcohol is served, but it's not on the menu – ask the waiter what is available.

**Old Town** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 542 8088; off Sharia Bab Sharqi; meal per person \$E500; 🍷 noon-late) Expensive cars are often parked outside this long-established restaurant in an elegant covered courtyard. Italian is served up alongside Arabic and French. Unfortunately service can be dreadful. Alcohol is served, but Old Town doesn't take credit cards.

**Aldar Restaurant** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 5900; off Sharia Bab Sharqi, beside Assieh School; meal per person \$E700; 🍷 11am-2am) In a chic conversion of an old Damascene building, stylishly blending old and new, Aldar dishes up some of the tastiest Syrian cuisine in the city, with creative touches added to classics. For starters, don't miss the tasty, cheese *borek* (filled pastry) and the spicy *sojok* meatballs with a green pepper, onion and tomato sauce (\$E150). Book a table for the live jazz on Tuesday night. Alcohol served, credit cards accepted.

**Elissar** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 542 4300; Sharia ad-Dawamneh, near Bab Touma; meal per person \$E800; 🍷 noon-late) The atmosphere in the lovely courtyard of this old Damascene favourite, with fairy lights and trickling fountain, surpasses the quality of food and service these days (both of which are hit and miss). However, it's popular with the diplomatic crowd, who garner more attention than most patrons. When the Syrian and French dishes are good they're great. Alcohol served, no credit cards.

## CENTRAL DAMASCUS

The cheaper eateries are around the Al-Merjeh area (no alcohol, no credit cards), while the more stylish midrange places are in the new town to the north, and usually serve alcohol and take cards.

**Al-Arabi** (Map pp82-3; Al-Merjeh; meal per person \$E150) Situated on a pedestrianised street off the southeastern corner of Al-Merjeh, Al-Arabi consists of two adjacent cheap restaurants, one more casual, the other a little fancier with a separate family section. Perhaps only for the culinary adventurous, specialties include sheep testicles (\$E95 for 200g), sheep-brain salad with potatoes (\$E90), and the local favourite, fried sheep brain with two fried eggs (\$E90).

**Al-Sehhi** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 221 1555; Sharia al-Abed, off Sharia 29 Mai; meal per person \$E150; 🍷 noon-midnight) This modest family restaurant confines itself to the basics – mezze, grilled meats, and very good *fatta* (an oven-baked

bread dish soaked in tahini and spread with chickpeas, minced meat or chicken; \$E70). There's a separate 'family area' for women diners. No alcohol or credit cards.

**Al-Kamal** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 222 1494; Sharia 29 Mai; meal per person \$E200; 🍷 11am-midnight) Located near the main tourist office, this place resembles a Parisian bistro. Regulars come for the good-value French *plats du jour* and home-style Syrian dishes, including *kabsa* (spiced rice with chicken or lamb).

**Gemini** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 311 2070; Sharia al-Amar Izzedin al-Jazzar, off Sharia Maysaloun; meal per person \$E700; 🍷 noon-2am) This ever-popular eatery sees affluent groups of friends and families filling its tables for long leisurely meals. It's very Western, with a menu embracing Tex-Mex, French and Italian (from nachos and fajitas to pastas and veal escalope), good glasses of white wine, and Norah Jones on the stereo. Alcohol is served and credit cards are accepted.

**Ourpick Al-Hallabi** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 339 1000; Four Seasons Hotel Damascus; meal per person \$E900; 🍷 noon-4pm & 7pm-2am) This is the city's best restaurant, serving up refined Aleppan cuisine in opulent surroundings. Don't miss classics like *kibbeh safarjaliieh* (*kibbeh* with quince and pomegranate sauce), or one of Chef Mohammed's own inventions such as *shahba hommos* (hummus with *mouhamara* – a spicy capsicum dip). There's excellent service and a superb wine list, and credit cards are accepted.

## ABU ROUMANA

**La Casa** (Map p80; ☎ 333 1288; Sharia Abdol Malek; meal per person \$E240; 🍷 9am-1am) Popular with middle-class Damascenes, who hang out here for hours playing backgammon and smoking sheesha, this is one of the few places where you'll see local girls drinking non-alcoholic beer. The menu features sandwiches (\$E160) and pastas (\$E240), but the big fresh salads are the local dish of choice (\$E150 to \$E300). No alcohol or credit cards.

## Quick Eats

### OLD CITY

**Bekdach** (Map p114; Souq al-Hamidiyya; ice creams \$E50; 🍷 9am-late) A purveyor of scrumptious ice creams made with *sahlab* (like semolina powder). The generous servings of creamy ice cream are topped with crushed pistachio nuts. A souq shopping must.

**Beit Jabri** (Map pp86–7; ☎ 544 3200; www.jabrihouse.com; 14 Sharia as-Sawwaf; mezze ££40–125, juices ££60–125, sheesha ££120; ☎ 9.30am–12.30am) Popular with locals and tourists alike, this casual café in the lovely courtyard of a splendid old Damascene house (see p94) serves up Syrian standards like mezze and kebabs, alongside international dishes such as ‘beef stricanof’. Locals mainly come for the sheesha and coffee, but the fresh juices are delicious.

**Bab Sharqi** (Map pp86–7; Sharia Bab Sharqi; pizzas ££80–150, pasta ££130; ☎ 11am–midnight) It’s hard to get a table out the front of this excellent pizzeria-cum-takeaway place, especially on a summer evening, when students linger over cheap cold beers (££60), bottles of Syrian wine (££350), Italian-style pizzas and delicious *toshka* (Armenian toasted meat and cheese sandwiches; ££150).

**Art Café Ninar** (Map pp86–7; ☎ 542 2257; Sharia Bab Sharqi; pizzas ££150; ☎ 10.30am–2am) Don’t be surprised if you see local artists sitting at the wooden tables painting and sketching, or a poet jotting down lines of verse in a notebook. Damascus’ bohemian set flocks to this casual eatery in a big stone building, for the art exhibitions, excellent pizza and cheap beer. Be a local and drop by late.

On leafy Sharia al-Qaimariyya, east of Umayyad Mosque, near Al-Nawfara coffeehouse, are a couple of excellent **felafel and shwarma stalls** (Map pp86–7) that do delicious shwarma and enormous felafel and salad sandwiches for around ££50. There are more **shwarma and felafel places** (Map p114) in the covered shopping lane (specialising in Qurans, prayer beads and kids’ toys) that runs north off the main drag of Souq al-Hamidiyya. And if you turn left at the end of this lane you’ll come to two more popular places, **Shwarma Majed** (Map p114) and **Castello Fast Food** (Map p114), the latter good for a Western hamburger.

#### CENTRAL DAMASCUS

**Al-Masri** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 333 7095; Sharia Said al-Jabri; mezze ££30, mains ££100; ☎ 7.30am–5pm) ‘The Egyptian’ is popular with local office workers, with a menu featuring the kind of home-cooked fare you’d find in Cairo’s backstreets, along with local favourites such as *shakshouka* (fried egg and mince meat; ££90) and *shish taouk* (££90).

**Pizza Roma** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 213 3046; Sharia Odai bin ar-Roqaa, off Sharia Maysaloun; pizzas ££65–270;

☎ 11am–late) You can eat in or take away from this casual pizzeria west of Cham Palace, where the speciality is American-style deep-pan pizza and pasta (££80). No alcohol or credit cards.

**Pit Stop Café** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 333 7095; Sharia al-Amar Izzedin al-Jazzari, off Sharia Maysaloun; meal per person ££300; ☎ 9am–2am) This buzzy modern eatery below Gemini serves up delicious cheesy pizzas, crepes and salads.

**Downtown** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 332 2321; Sharia al-Amar Izzedin al-Jazzari, off Sharia Maysaloun; meal per person ££450; ☎ 10am–1am) You’re more likely to hear French being spoken than Arabic at this hip contemporary café. It has Scandinavian-style décor (think chocolate wood and clean lines) and the most decadently delicious sandwiches, salads and fresh juices in Damascus. Try the caviar *en croute* sandwich with cucumber, dill, caviar, cream cheese and a boiled egg (££500), and the strawberry and blackberry juice (££155).

Of the many pastry shops on the southern side of Al-Merjeh, one of the best is **Abu Rashid** (Map pp82–3), down the pedestrian lane on the southeastern corner of the square and up the top of the steps. It does delicious *kibbeh*, cheese or meat *borek*, and *ouzi sarrar*, a samosa-like pastry of rice, meat, peas and spices.

Around Al-Merjeh you’ll find cheap shwarma and felafel eateries and excellent fresh juice (££50) stands, right on the square. If you’re staying near the post office, then **Al-Santir** (Map pp82–3) is a perennially popular place doing Western-style toasted sandwiches.

#### AL-MIDAN JAZMATI

You’ll see few tourists in this old Damascus neighbourhood southwest of the Old City. Its main artery, Sharia al-Midan, is a 24-hour street but it’s most atmospheric late at night, when locals head here for the hot chicken, shwarma and Arabic pastries. It’s quite a scene, with the outdoor tables crammed with people tucking into the tasty takeaway and cars slowly cruising by taking in the action. Scores of shops line the street – it’s a Middle Eastern gourmet delight, with white cheeses, olives, pickles and delicious sweets – and you’ll notice prices are considerably cheaper here than in the rest of Damascus. Tucked down the laneways are some of Damascus’ most historic mosques.

**Anas Chicken** (off Map p80; ☎ 212 1111; Al-Midan; shwarma ££60; ☎ 24hr) Locals swear this is the best eatery on the street. Its speciality is succulent roasted chicken with thick, hot, freshly fried potato crisps, and there are also tangy chicken shwarmas.

#### Self-Catering

There’s a decent **fruit and vegetable market** between Al-Merjeh and Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli (Map pp82–3), and another on Sharia al-Amin in the Old City (Map pp86–7).

For piping-hot, freshly baked bread, hit the no-name bakery on Sharia al-Qaimariyya near the CD shops; locals line up here every evening for the city’s best croissants for their breakfast the next day. There are several hole-in-the-wall bakeries at the northern end of Sharia Bahsa in Souq Saroujah.

#### DRINKING Coffeehouses & Cafés

Coffee in Damascus ranges from the traditional, short black Turkish coffee and light cardamom-scented Bedouin coffee, to good

#### THE END OF THE STORY?

In one of the tales in *The Thousand and One Nights*, a king commissions a merchant to seek out the most marvellous story ever. The merchant sends out his slaves on the quest and at last success is achieved – a slave hears a wondrous story told in Damascus by an old man who tells stories every day, seated on his storyteller’s throne.

Jump forward several hundred years or so, and in Damascus today there is still an old man who tells stories every day, seated on his version of a storyteller’s throne. His name is Abu Shady and he’s the last of the Syrian *hakawati* (professional storytellers).

*Hakawati* were a common feature of Middle Eastern city street life as far back as the 12th century. With the spread of coffee drinking during Ottoman times, the storytellers moved off the street and into the coffeehouses. As with many Arab traditions, the art of public storytelling has largely failed to survive the 20th century, supplanted in the coffeehouses first by radio, then by television. According to Abu Shady, the last professional storyteller in Syria went into retirement in the 1970s. As a boy, Abu Shady went with his father to watch the *hakawati* perform at the coffeehouses, and fell in love with stories.

‘It was my habit to read too much,’ he tells us. ‘When I was young I would run away from my job at the library to read books.’ Abu Shady trained as a tailor but he would read every moment he could – Jean Paul Sartre, Victor Hugo, Maxim Gorky, Khalil Gibran...

When the last *hakawati* decided to retire and stop performing at Al-Nawfara coffeehouse, its owner, Ahmed al-Rabat, told Abu Shady ‘You’re the only one who can tell stories like him. You have to take over.’ Because Abu Shady respected him like a father, he did, and in the 1970s revived the profession of storyteller.

Since then Abu Shady has been appearing nightly at Al-Nawfara in the lee of Umayyad Mosque. Costumed in baggy trousers and waistcoat with a tarboosh on his head, he recounts nightly from his volumes of handwritten tales. These include the legendary exploits of Sultan Beybars and Antar ibn Shadad, both Islamic heroes and – as Abu Shady tells it – regular doers of fantastic feats, sorcery and cunning roguery. He also invents his own stories, incorporating current events from articles he reads in the paper, such as incidents from the current war in Iraq or the situation in Palestine. The assembled listeners know the stories, but it’s Abu Shady’s delivery that they come for: he interjects with jokes and comments, works the audience, punctuates the words with waves of his sword, and smashes it down on a copper-top table for startling emphasis. The audience responds with oohs and aahs, cheering and interjecting comments of their own. Sadly, the numbers present are small these days. Abu Shady says that nobody has the time any more to listen to stories.

We ask Abu Shady what the future is for the *hakawati*. He admits with a smile and glint in his eye that his son is learning to tell stories, but he tells us ‘It’s up to him...’ It’s clear he’s secretly hoping the young man will take over. Like us, Abu Shady doesn’t want to see the final chapter close on the era of the storyteller.

You can see Abu Shady perform nightly at Al-Nawfara coffeehouse (p110), from around 7pm, give or take an hour or two.



Italian espresso and every conceivable kind of Starbucks-inspired mochaccino you can imagine. It could cost anything from £50 to a traditional coffeehouse to £125 for a fancy frappé at a contemporary café. Nargileh or sheesha pipe ranges from £100 to £150.

## OLD CITY

**Galerie Abdal** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 5794; Sharia Shaweesh; ☎ 9.30am-12.30am) A loud and lively vibe and regular art exhibitions have made this a long-standing favourite with artists and students, and it's very female-friendly. With a similar feel and attracting a similar crowd, Moulaya next door is another arty place that's perennially popular.

**Beit Jabri** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 3200; 14 Sharia as-Sawwaf; ☎ 9.30am-late) Locals drop by for coffee, nargileh and conversation in the pretty courtyard of this elegant old house.

**Narcissus** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 543 1205; Sharia al-Amin; ☎ 10am-late) Groups of young Damascenes head to this big old Damascene house in the evenings to smoke nargileh and snack on Arabic mezze.

**Al-Nawfara** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 472 900; Sharia al-Qaimariyya; ☎ 8am-late) Nestled in the shadow of the Umayyad Mosque's eastern wall, 'The Fountain' is the most atmospheric of Damascus' traditional coffeehouses. This is where you can watch Abu Shady, the last of the *hakawati* (professional storytellers). Every evening around 7pm (give or take an hour or two), Abu Shady takes the chair to tell his version of fables and folk tales, and while his performance is in Arabic, it's enthralling – see *The End of the Story?* (p109) for more. If you can't find a table here, head across the lane to Ash-Shams, which occupies a former hammam.

**Tche Tche** (Map p114; ☎ 221 6339; Sharia Madhat Pasha, cnr Al Dakkakeen; ☎ 10am-2am) Locals climb the stairs of this stylish sheesha café for the aromatic nargileh, long coffee menu and Middle Eastern pop music.

## CENTRAL DAMASCUS

In Central Damascus you'll find a number of simple, old-fashioned coffeehouses, noisy with the staccato clacking of dominoes and backgammon counters. They're frequented mainly by males who sit around puffing nargileh, and women won't always feel comfortable. The rooftop coffeehouse Ash-Sharq al-Awsat (Map pp82-3), be-

tween the blue-tiled Iranian cultural centre and Shoukri al-Quwatli flyover, sees the occasional budget traveller dropping by.

The downtown shopping district of Salihhiyya has a number of stylish contemporary cafés, particularly in the streets around the chic shopping street of Sharia Hafez Ibrahim. Frequented by young Damascenes, these cafés are a great place to meet locals, and women will feel as comfortable here as they would in any European city.

**Inhouse Coffee** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 333 6039; Sharia Hafez Ibrahim; coffees £80-150; ☎ 7am-1am) This funky café with its lime-and-black décor is always busy with local hipsters smoking, chatting and checking their email on their PowerBooks. It serves excellent espresso and myriad variations of macchiato, latte and decaf coffees. Try the iced spiced chai latte or spicy espresso with cinnamon on top. There are happy hours between 4pm and 5pm and between 9pm and midnight, when you get 50% off coffee and food – ideal if you're on a budget and hanging out for good coffee. There's also complimentary wireless internet.

## ABU ROUMANA

**Salé Sucre** (Map p80; ☎ 333 7315; Sharia al-Rawda; sandwiches £125, cakes £60; ☎ 8am-late) Affluent Damascenes, old and young, love this charming café-bakery. It's the place to head if you're craving good coffee and European café staples such as crusty French baguettes, quiches and German-style grain breads. The tangy citron tarts are sublime.

## Bars

Although some restaurants in Damascus serve alcohol, there are few dedicated bars. The best place to head is the Old City, around Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi, which is nightlife central for Damascus. No alcohol is served in the Muslim neighbourhoods, so the action focuses on the Christian Quarter. Things don't kick off until around midnight, and Thursday and Saturday are the big nights.

## OLD CITY

**Bar Saloon** (Map pp86-7; 148 Sharia Bab Sharqi; ☎ noon-2am Mon-Sat) This endearingly dingy little liquor store-cum-bar is frequented by a motley crew of bohemian types, elderly locals, foreign Arabic students and travellers,

## GAY & LESBIAN DAMASCUS

Just as President Ahmadinejad of Iran asserted that his country had no homosexuals while giving a speech at Columbia University, Syria officially boasts similar statistics. In a nation where every man and woman is expected to get married (to a member of the opposite sex, of course), Damascus isn't about to host an ironically themed Gay Pride march down Straight St.

That said, cruising among gay men does occur, notably in the souqs, the hammams and the area around Cham Palace. But as always in Middle Eastern countries, discretion is advised as homosexual acts are illegal and can land you in prison. While behaviour that is interpreted as being 'homosexual' in nature can also land you in prison, overall the secret police are far more interested in political subversion than in those wishing to make a dent in Syria's 100% heterosexual statistics.

all engaged in heated debate of some sort. Visitors might feel they've encroached on some sort of clique, but it's less exclusive than first appearances suggest and the beer's cheap.

**Piano Bar** (Map pp86-7; Sharia Hanania; ☎ noon-midnight) This old-fashioned bar-restaurant is stuck in a bit of a time warp, but it's worth dropping in to check out the spectacle of Syrian karaoke.

**Oxygen** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 4396; Bab Touma; ☎ noon-late) This funky lounge bar with eclectic décor and art on the walls is a long-standing favourite with young affluent Damascenes. It has a strict door policy, so dress up. Things don't heat up until very late.

## CENTRAL DAMASCUS

There are several bars located in the modern city centre.

**Artists' Syndicate Bar** (Map p98; Sallat ar-Rawak al-Arabi, Sharia at-Tantawi; ☎ 5pm-midnight) This al fresco garden bar-cum-restaurant in residential Salihhiyya may not be the most exciting place for a drink, but it's one of the few places in this area and is mildly intriguing.

**Jet Set** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 223 2300; Cham Palace, Sharia Maysaloun; ☎ 6pm-3am) Damascus' swankiest bar-cum-club sees a moneyed young set heading here late for the latest hits spun by local DJs.

**XO Bar** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 339 1000; Four Seasons Hotel Damascus; ☎ noon-2am) This elegant, low-lit, gentlemen's club-style bar, with plush sofas and Orientalist paintings on the wall, is ideal for whispered conversations – of romantic couples, local politicians and businessmen, and journalists and peacekeepers just back from Iraq. Travellers head here for a cocktail before or after dinner at Al-Hallabi (p107).

## Liquor Stores

Damascus has no shortage of liquor stores selling beer, arak, spirits, and Syrian and Lebanese wine, in the Christian Quarter of the Old City and the modern town. A central liquor shop is **Elias Hayek** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Ramy; ☎ 10am-8pm Sat-Thu), on a side street running south off Al-Merjeh.

## ENTERTAINMENT Cinemas

**Cinema de Cham** (Map pp82-3; Cham Palace, Sharia Maysaloun; tickets £150) Home to the Damascus International Film Festival, this excellent cinema screens everything from European art house to Hollywood blockbusters and the occasional Middle East film subtitled in English. Check *What's On Syria* to find out what's showing or just drop by the cinema.

## Pubs & Nightclubs

**Marmar** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 544 6425; Sharia Dawamneh, near Bab Touma; ☎ 9pm-late) Tucked down a tiny passageway signed by a pink neon calligraphic squiggle, this pub is one of Damascus' best for DJs and live music. On weekends it pounds and heaves with a sweaty, young, bohemian crowd of locals and foreigners, while midweek sees the occasional film screened on its walls.

**Domino** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 543 1120; Saahat Bab Touma; ☎ 11am-late) A sheesha café serving light food by day and a casual bar in the early evening, Domino curtains off its windows and becomes a full-blown dance club after 11pm. It's one of the Old City's hottest night spots.

Popular spots for DJs and live bands on weekends, and films midweek, are **Le Serail Pub** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 373 7061; off Sharia Bab Sharqi, near Bab Sharqi, follow the graffiti-like painted 'pub'

signs; ☎ 9.30pm-very late) and **Back Door** (Map p80; ☎ 444 6255; Barada Club, Sharia Masr; cover charge \$500; ☎ 9.30pm-very late). Back Door's DJs spin an eclectic selection of sounds, from hip-hop to Oriental lounge, and it also hosts the occasional live performance of *tarab*, an intense, improvisational form of Middle East music; reserve a table for Thursday night and don't arrive before midnight.

### Theatre, Music, Opera & Ballet

**Dar Al-Assad for Arts and Culture** (Map p80; ☎ 245 6165/6144; www.daralassad.sy, www.opera-syria.org; Saahat Umawiyyeen, Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; tickets \$580-150; ☎ Dec-Jun) This is home to the superb Opera Theatre, Drama Theatre and Multi-Purpose Hall, all venues for nearly nightly performances of world-class opera, drama, classical music, and even folk music and pop concerts. Don't miss a performance by the acclaimed National Symphony Orchestra. You can pick up a programme from Dar Al-Assad, check the website, or see *What's On Syria* for more details. Tickets are dirt-cheap for such high-quality performances.

**Art House** (off Map p80; ☎ 662 8112; behind the Children's Hospital, Mezzeh; ☎ 7-11pm) A welcome new venue, this boutique hotel-cum-art space hosts classical-music recitals (along with jazz concerts) and an excellent summer music festival.

All of the foreign cultural centres host performances of classical music, opera and ballet. Most notable is the **Centre Culturel Français de Damas** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 231 6192; fax 231 6194; www.ccf-damas.org; off Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; ☎ 8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat), which offers a vibrant programme of concerts and cultural events, from piano recitals to jazz (local and foreign) and mixed-media happenings with video installations. Its summer music festivals, held in atmospheric Old City locations, feature everything from Oriental jazz to the well-regarded Women's Orchestra of Oriental Music. Check café noticeboards and the centre's website, or phone for information.

### Traditional Dance & Music

**Abu al-Azz** (Map p114; ☎ 221 8174; Souq al-Hamidiyya; ☎ 9am-late) A three-piece band plays Oriental music at this Old City restaurant throughout the day and whirling dervishes perform around 10pm.

**Umayyad Palace Restaurant** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 222 0826; opposite Umayyad Mosque; lunch/dinner \$5350/600 +

10% tax; ☎ 12.30-5pm & 7.30pm-midnight) This restaurant offers a meal and floorshow package that includes a band and dervishes, but if you go on a night when there isn't a tour group, the performance is half-hearted and disinterested at best. You're better off heading to one of the many Old City restaurants and cafés that feature an *oud* (Arabian lute) player in the evenings.

Similar in style to Beit Jabri, and just across the lane, the fairy-lit **Beit Geddi** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 543 1607; Sharia as-Sawwaf; mezze \$535-100; ☎ 9am-1am) has a musician playing the *oud* from around 8pm on Friday and Saturday nights, while at **Takaya** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 545 0770; Sharia Qasr ath-Thaqafeh; mezze \$60-125; ☎ 9am-1am) the *oud* player strums Oriental classics from around 9pm most nights.

### SHOPPING

Damascus is arguably home to the Middle East's best and most authentic shopping, most of which can be found in the rambling medieval souqs that spread through much of the northwestern quarter of the Old City (see Shopping the Damascus Souq, p115). Scores of antique, carpet and handicraft stores are dotted around the souqs, in the lanes surrounding Umayyad Mosque, along Sharia al-Qaimariyya, and in the Christian Quarter near Bab Sharqi on Sharia Hanania, which is the well-trodden tourist route up to the Chapel of Ananias. Straight St, in particular, is lined with small family-run businesses that specialise in one particular type of product, such as finely engraved brass- and copperware, handcrafted wooden mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, richly decorated brocade, colourful handmade Oriental carpets, and even dazzling swords – although sadly the long tradition of Damascene steel is now reduced to one or two practitioners making ceremonial pieces. The selection tends to be better on Straight St than at the emporiums in the souqs, and prices are also more negotiable.

In Central Damascus, the place to head for gold jewellery, handcrafted *ouds*, and wooden inlaid boxes and backgammon sets is Handicrafts Lane, a small shaded alleyway adjoining the Takiyya as-Süleimaniyya complex, just south of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli. Off the lane is a Turkish madrasa, now Artisanat, a handicraft market where the former student cells are now occupied by traders and

### APPRECIATING THE ARTISANS

As you wander the narrow alleys of the Old City, you'll hear the beating of brass and copper and the sounds of sawing and hammering, and smell wood chips, fresh paint or furniture polish. Follow your nose and ears and you'll find a tiny workshop where artisans and artists sit patiently carving elaborate wood decoration, creating mother-of-pearl inlaid mosaics, engraving intricate patterns on brass goods, or simply painting and sculpting. These are some of the best ateliers for seeing handcrafted goods made using traditional techniques:

- **Oriental Center Arts** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 222 2700; Artisanat; ☎ 9am-8pm) Saeed Zozoul creates exquisite furniture, mirror frames, picture frames, and decorative panels and ceilings for old Damascene houses by shaping raised patterns using gypsum and plaster, painting them colourfully, then carefully applying gold leaf to embellish them further. Each piece takes about four days and can be made to order in five.
- **Radwan al-Taweel** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 221 5493; Artisanat; ☎ 9am-8pm) Sixty-year-old Radwan has been engraving intricate arabesque patterns on copper and brass coffee pots, tea sets, lamps and trays since his grandfather taught him as a child. He takes about two days to decorate a large tray. Ask and he'll happily show you his well-used tools of the trade and his techniques. Radwan is very proud of the recycled brass shells, remnants from the war with Israel, that he engraves to produce umbrella/walking-stick holders – particularly the one he designed for Gadaffi.
- **Hassab al-Kazaz & Sons** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 222 4830; Artisanat; ☎ 9am-8pm) These beautiful, bold-coloured glass chandeliers, lamps, vases and decorative objects are hand-blown. Ask and they'll take you to the workshop out the back where they're made.
- **Ibrahim Tawil** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 09-8899 3789; Artisanat; ☎ 10am-8pm) Great-nephew of the famous *oud* (Arabian lute) maker Hanna Nahaat, Anton (Tony) Ibrahim Tawil makes beautiful *ouds* in this dusty workshop. Expect to pay from \$3000 for a quality instrument suitable for learners.
- **Deeb Balah** (Map pp86-7; Sharia al-Qaimariyya; ☎ 10am-9pm) Deaf sandal-maker Deeb handcrafts simple leather sandals and Turkish-style slippers with colourful brocade patterns. He helpfully reads lips in English, so you can order a size or style to suit (from US\$20 to US\$35).
- **Mahmoud Shahin** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 541 3324; Sharia al-Qaimariyya; ☎ 10am-8pm) Palestinian philosopher-writer-artist Mahmoud (see Mahmoud Shahin, p116) can be found most days in his tiny atelier drinking Turkish coffee and smoking cigarettes while he paints his small, striking paintings of veiled ladies, sensual shapes of women and other, often surreal, scenes.

craftspeople who are happy to demonstrate their skills at engraving and painting. The whole complex is lovely and certainly worth a look. For tips on getting the best deal, see The Art of Bargaining, p235.

The main commercial downtown shopping area is situated north of the Cham Palace, on Sharia al-Hamra, in the surrounding streets, and on pedestrianised Sharia Salihyya, which are all jam-packed with cheap clothes, lingerie and shoe shops. Sharia Hafez Ibrahim is the place to head for chic fashion boutiques.

### Antiques & Handicrafts

Bustling **Souq al-Hamidiyya** (Map p114) is not only a wonderful place to shop for the

atmosphere, but it also has some of the city's best antique and craft shops. **Tony Stephan's** at No 156 is renowned for the finest quality at the best prices, with a wide range of beautiful textiles, splendid mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, old Bedouin jewellery, and intricately engraved copper- and brassware. The quality is unsurpassed, so if you only have time to shop at one store, make it this one.

**George Dabdoub** (Map p114), on the small square in front of the entrance to Azem Palace, sells jewellery, brass, icons, brocade and carpets. The courteous staff and fair prices make this an easy place to shop.

Atmospheric **Azem Ecole** (Map p114) is situated in an elegant old madrasa and has some stunning stuff, including Bedouin

jewellery, silk brocades and brass. Staff can be a little pushy and prices a little high; it's best for those who've honed their bargaining skills.

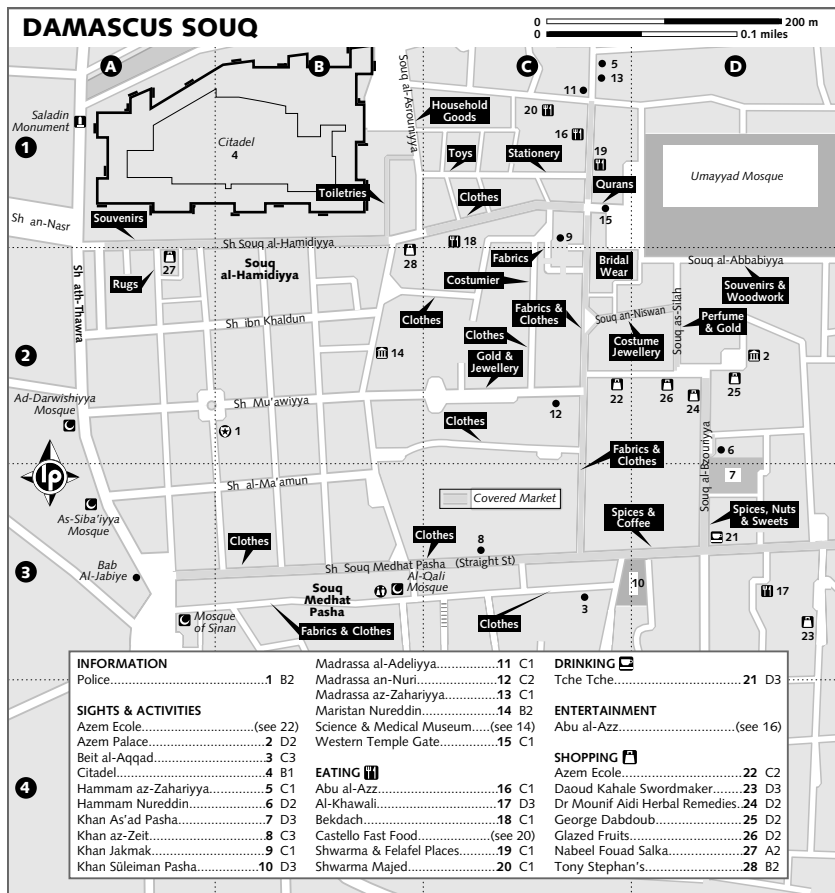
For inlaid wooden boxes, chests and backgammon boards, visit **Khalil Haddad** (Map pp86-7; 115 Sharia Bab Sharqi; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat), who fronts the actual workshop in which this exquisite work is produced. There are also many other workshops along Sharia Bab Sharqi and the surrounding streets with similar quality handicrafts.

**Dahdah Palace** (Map pp86-7; 9 Sharia ash-Shalla; ☎ 9.30am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm in summer) has a room full of old 'finds', including coins, figurines and tiles recovered from demolished Damascene houses. See also p93.

### Brocade, Textiles & Traditional Garments

Damascus' famous brocade and silk textiles, in the form of shawls, throws, cushion covers and bedspreads, make wonderful souvenirs and gifts. Quality is assured at **Tony Stephan's** (Map p114), **Azem Ecole** (Map p114), Artisanat (handicraft market; Map pp82-3) off Handicrafts Lane and **Sharia al-Qaimariyya** (Map pp86-7). These are also great spots to find traditional black Palestinian dresses with red embroidered cross-stitch patterns.

A wonderful one-of-a-kind store, the not-for-profit **Anat** (Map pp86-7; ☎ 542 7878; Sharia Bab Sharqi, near Bab Sharqi; ☎ 10am-8pm winter, 10am-2pm & 5-10pm summer) is the place to shop for original gifts and souvenirs handmade in a workshop



### SHOPPING THE DAMASCUS SOUQ

The Damascus souq (Map p114) is not as strictly ordered as its Aleppo counterpart, with few areas devoted strictly to a single type of goods. The main covered market, **Souq al-Hamidiyya**, starts with glitzy souvenir shops and ends with prayer beads and Qurans. In between, the majority of stores sell clothing of some description, typically poor quality, if not outright trash. But trashy can be fun – there are dress shops to make a drag queen swoon, while some of the lingerie has to be seen to be believed.

Alleyways to the north are more routinely domestic – toiletries, household items, toys, school books and stationery. The south is more colourful, particularly narrow, sloping **Souq Khayyat** (Tailors' Souq), filled with cubbyhole traders dealing in bolts of fine cloth and richly coloured garments, from the practical (scarves and pants) to the peacock (belly-dancing outfits and wedding dresses).

The most aromatic and enchanting passage is **Souq al-Bzouriyya** (Seed Bazaar), which is the covered area running south from Umayyad Mosque. This mixes jewellery with perfumes, spices, nuts and sweets, all illuminated in the evening by glowing chandeliers. It's an alluring place in which to linger and examine little curiosities, such as the glazed-fruit shop and, just around the corner, Dr Mounif Aidi's herbal remedies. Al-Bzouriyya gives way to **Souq al-Attarine**, actually a stretch of Sharia Medhat Pasha (Straight St), which is devoted to spices and coffee.

In the souq, spice and food shops open as early as 7am, and most other shops open around 9am or 10am. Shops start to close at around 6pm, and by 7pm nearly all the shutters are down. Most of the souq stays closed all day Friday, although the shops and businesses in the Christian Quarter close on Sunday instead.

in the Palestinian refugee camp from embroidered textiles produced by women in villages all over Syria. Traditional Syrian and Palestinian embroidery techniques are employed to create contemporary items, including coin and cosmetic purses and hand and shoulder bags (in hundreds of sizes), cushion covers, slippers and clothes. The profits from the sale of these exquisite products are shared among the women.

For red-and-white (Bedouin) and black-and-white (Palestinian) *kufeyya* (chequered scarves), *dishdashas* (men's white dress), tarbooshes (traditional red hats) and wooden canes, head to the covered **Souq Medhat Pasha** (the area around Sharia Souq Medhat Pasha, the western end of Straight St; Map p114) and **Souq al-Khayyat** (Map p114).

### Carpets & Rugs

At the western end of Souq al-Hamidiyya there are several excellent rug and carpet traders, although prices tend to be higher here, and better bargains can be found on **Sharia al-Qaimariyya** (Map pp86-7) and the eastern end of **Straight St** (Map pp86-7), in the area around the Roman arch. There are several shops with good selections, including **Bel Oriental Carpets** (Map pp86-7) and **George Dabdoub** (Map p114).

### Music CDs

You'll find a dozen tiny CD stores on lively **Sharia al-Qaimariyya** (Map pp86-7) specialising in contemporary Arabic music, from lounge and trance to folk music and jazz. CDs cost around S£200. You'll see some selling for as little as S£25; avoid buying these, as they're pirated and Syria musicians struggle enough as it is. Look out for Lena Chamamyam, Kulna Sawa, Itar Shameh and InsaniT.

**Abdel Razeq Mousali** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Bur Said, south of Saahat Yousef al-Azmeh) This is the city's best music store, with an extensive selection of music, from the giants of the Arab world (Umm Kolthum, Fairouz, Farid al-Atrache and Abdel Halim Hafez) to jazz, classical and contemporary Arabic music.

### MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

The beloved *oud* (Arabian lute) is a difficult instrument to master, and Western-trained musicians will find the different styles of tuning and playing bewildering at first, but it's a wonderful souvenir for musicians. Head to the workshop of **Ibrahim Tawil** (see Appreciating the Artisans, p113), great-nephew of the famous *oud* maker Hanna Nahaat. There is another workshop on Sharia Bahsa in Souq Saroujah selling

**MAHMOUD SHAHIN: PHILOSOPHER, POET, PAINTER**

Amid the carpet- and trinket-sellers along pretty, cobbled Sharia al-Qaimariyya, writer, philosopher and now artist Mahmoud Shahin sits quietly in his little atelier and paints. His works, often colourful, thought-provoking, dense and detailed, hang on the walls, while books he has written sit on a shelf, waiting for the occasional customer who takes an interest in this Jerusalem-born artist's unique take on life and wants to read more. Seemingly content now that he's replaced the pen with a brush (he didn't do this until 1995, when he was 51), he's free to pursue subjects such as the devil, heaven and hell – subjects that attract the censors if tackled in written form. And there's plenty of personal history to propel his paintings as well. Mahmoud grew up in the countryside until 1967, when his father's land was lost to Israel. Israel and Jerusalem feature in some of his works, but he doesn't want to return; instead, he listens to what is going on and directs those thoughts into his paintings.

*ouds*, but the quality is poorer here. At the entrance to Souq al-Hamidiyya, **Nabeel Fouad Salka** (Map p114; Souq al-Hamidiyya, shop no 25; ☎ 8am–8pm) sells high-quality *ouds*, along with mother-of-pearl decorated drums and other instruments.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

See the Getting Around section of the Transport chapter (p390) for information on transport options between Damascus and the rest of the country.

**Air**

The **Damascus international airport** (☎ 543 0201/9) is located 26km southeast of the city centre. There's a money exchange and a couple of ATMs in Arrivals, although the ATMs are not always in operation. The departure tax is \$£200.

From Damascus, SyrianAir flies several times daily to and from Aleppo (from \$£1200, one hour), and far less frequently to Deir ez-Zur (from \$£1400, one hour), Qamishle (from \$£1600, 80 minutes) and Lattakia (from \$£1000, 45 minutes); frequency of services to the last three destinations can vary dramatically according to season and demand. Return fares are double the single fare.

For the main carriers that fly to Damascus, see p390.

**AIRLINE OFFICES**

You'll find many airlines have their offices on Sharia Maysaloun and Sharia Fardous, one block to the south of Maysaloun (Map pp82–3). Their opening hours are typically 9am to 6pm Sunday to Thursday (closed Friday).

There are several **SyrianAir** (☎ central sales & reservations 00963 11 168, airport 00963 11 169; www.syriaair.com) offices in Damascus, but the **main office** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 245 0098; Sharia Said al-Jabri), across from Hejaz train station, is the best, with staff who speak English. It's more convenient to check timetables and buy tickets online.

**Bus**

You will find two main bus stations in the city of Damascus.

Harasta terminal (Karajat Harasta), 6km northwest of the city centre, is for departures to northern destinations. To get here, take a microbus from Al-Merjeh or the eastern end of Shoukri al-Quwatli for \$£10, or a taxi for around \$£80.

The new **Al-Samariyeh terminal** (Mezzeh West) has replaced the old Baramke terminal. Just opened at the time of research, it was a massive new car park with covered waiting areas and poor signage. It's on the far western outskirts of the city. This is where you catch buses going to southern destinations such as Bosra, Der'a and Suweida, and buses and service taxis to Beirut and Amman, along with some international services to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and the Gulf.

In addition, there are several other microbus and minibus stations serving regional destinations (for details, see opposite).

For a description of the various kinds of buses, see p399 in the Transport chapter.

**NORTH OF DAMASCUS**

All the big private bus companies run Luxury Pullmans from Harasta terminal. Prices are similar and destinations include

Aleppo (one way VIP/non-VIP \$£230/150, five hours), Deir ez-Zur (\$£200, seven hours), Hama (\$£90, 2½ hours), Homs (\$£75, two hours), Lattakia (\$£120, 4½ hours), Palmyra (\$£150, four hours) and Tartus (\$£110, 3½ hours).

The touts can be annoying: as soon as you've cleared the security checks at the entrance, expect to have your sleeves tugged by guys wanting to lead you to their office. Ignore them and make a beeline for one of the two most reputable companies, Kadmos or Al-Ahliyah. Booking in advance is rarely necessary and you'll never have to wait more than an hour or two to get a seat on your bus of choice, but if you feel more secure booking in advance head to the handily placed Kadmos ticket office (Map pp82–3), in the arcade by Victoria Bridge.

**SOUTH OF DAMASCUS**

A number of bus companies head south, but Damas Tours (Map p80) is the best, running good buses with air-con out of the new Al-Samariyeh terminal to Bosra (\$£80, two hours, every two hours from 8am until 10pm) and Suweida (\$£60, one hour 40 minutes, approximately every hour from 8am until 8.35pm). Al-Muhib also runs buses south at exactly the same times as Damas Tours and for the same price. Der'a (\$£60, one hour 20 minutes) is serviced by Al-Soukor and Al-Wassim.

**LEBANON, JORDAN & EGYPT**

From Al-Samariyeh terminal, private bus companies have frequent services to Beirut (\$£200, 4½ hours), departing every hour or so between 7.30am and 6.30pm, plus several buses daily to Amman (\$£400, five to seven hours depending on border formalities – although some travellers have reported formalities taking so long as to extend the full trip to eight to 10 hours). Service taxi is considerably faster; for details, see p118.

Services to Egypt (from US\$50 including ferry fare from Aqaba to Nuweiba, around 30 hours) vary dramatically depending on the season, with few services in winter and many more in summer.

**TURKEY**

Buses to Istanbul (\$£2000, 30 hours) and other Turkish destinations, such as Antakya (\$£450) and Ankara (\$£1600), all depart

from the Harasta terminal. If you can't get a direct bus, take a bus to Aleppo, from where half a dozen buses run regular services across the border. This is also a cheaper option for those on a tight budget.

**Car & Motorcycle**

If you are travelling independently by car or motorcycle, see p400 for more information. Travellers are increasingly hiring cars for the convenience it brings. A popular option is to also hire a driver for a day (see p401 for details). For car-rental options try the following:

**Budget** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 499 9999; opposite Four Seasons Hotel Damascus)

**Europcar** Saahat Umawiyeen (Map p80; ☎ 222 9300; Sheraton Damascus Hotel & Towers); Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli (Map p80; ☎ 222 9200; Le Meridien Damas)

**Hertz** (Map pp82–3; ☎ 223 2300; www.hertz.com; Cham Palace)

**Microbus & Minibus**

It's easier and more comfortable to use Pullman buses, but there are a few destinations where a microbus or minibus is the only option, including Quneitra, Zabadani and the Barada Gorge, Dumeir, Seidnaya, Maalula, An-Nabk and other destinations to the immediate north of Damascus.

The main microbus station is Bab Mousala garage (Karajat Bab Mousala, also known as Karajat Der'a; Map p80), in the neighbourhood of Bab Mousala about 1km south of the Old City. From here there are services for the Hauran region, including Suweida, Shahba and Der'a (for Bosra and the Jordanian border).

There are minibuses to Bab Mousala from a stop on Sharia Fakhri al-Baroudi (one block south and east of the Hejaz train station), although it's simplest to take a taxi, which should cost about \$£50 from the city centre.

There are further minibus/microbus stations in the northeast of the city: Abbasseen garage (Karajat Abbasseen; Map p80) and Maalula garage (Karajat Maalula; Map p80) are located about 200m south of the Abbasseen stadium and just east of Saahat Abbasseen. These are where you come to catch transport to destinations to the immediate north of Damascus. Again, the easiest way of getting here from the city centre is by taxi (\$£50).

## Service Taxi

The main service-taxi station is at the new **Al-Samariyeh terminal** (Mezzeh West) on the far western outskirts of the city. Taxis leave throughout the day and night for Amman (S£400, five to seven hours, although sometimes longer depending on border formalities) and Irbid (S£250, 3½ to five hours) in Jordan, and Baalbek (S£300, 2½ hours) and Beirut (S£300, from four hours, depending on border formalities) in Lebanon.

## Train

One of the landmarks of Central Damascus, Hejaz train station (Map pp82–3) is currently closed for extensive (and repeatedly delayed) redevelopment into a shopping mall, hotel and transport hub. All services go from **Khaddam train station** (☎ 888 8678), about 5km southwest of the centre. Take a taxi here for around S£50 from Al-Merjeh. There are several services a day via Homs and Hama to Aleppo, on clean new trains, including an overnight service (1st/2nd class S£300/250, six hours). Tickets for trains can be bought at both the Khaddam and Hejaz stations, providing you can find someone on duty.

The Damascus to Amman train service stopped running in 2006, although there are indications it may resume at some stage in the future.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

For a taxi from the airport to the city, buy a ticket from the official taxi desk in Arrivals for S£700. For £800 you can travel with Star Taxis, in new, clean, air-conditioned cars.

There's a Karnak airport bus service (S£50, 30 to 50 minutes, half-hourly between 6am and midnight) that runs from the airport forecourt (outside Arrivals/Departures) to the new Al-Samariyeh bus station (off Map p80) on the western outskirts of Mezzeh. It's more convenient to take a taxi directly to your hotel.

## Bicycle

There's a group of about four or five bicycle repairs and spares shops lined up along Sharia Khaled ibn Walid, about 500m due south of the main post office. Don't expect to find any esoteric parts for your mono-shocked mountain bike though.

## Microbus

Damascus is compact and easy to get around on foot, but minibuses can be a handy way to travel the longer distances for those on a very tight budget.

While minibuses are popular with Arabic students living in Damascus, travellers without any Arabic might have difficulty locating the right bus, as route names are posted in Arabic only on the front of the bus.

Fares range from S£5 to S£10, paid on the bus. While the buses run set routes and there are fixed stops, drivers are flexible and will generally pick up and set down anywhere.

The main central terminal is at Jisr ar-Rais (Map pp82–3), the flyover west of the National Museum.

From here you can get minibuses to Bab Touma, Muhajireen, Mezzeh, Saahat Abbasid (or Abbasseen garage for Seidnaya and Maalula) and Harasta terminal, the northeastern bus station. The latter two can also be picked up along Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli.

Minibuses for Bab Mousala garage leave from another station on Sharia Fakhri al-Baroudi (Map pp82–3), as do others that take you to the microbus for Sayyida Zeinab Mosque.

## Taxi

While there appear to be thousands of yellow Damascus taxis motoring down every street, finding one with a working meter is increasingly rare – unless you use the new **Star Taxi** (☎ 9207), with good drivers and vehicles, meters that work and services to the airport, Jordan and Lebanon. The fare for a city-centre ride starts at around S£25 (although can be as low as S£15 if you find a driver willing to use a meter) and can rise to around S£50 for a cross-town fare. State your destination or a well-known nearby landmark and negotiate a price before getting in.

Note that it's extremely difficult to find an empty taxi around 4pm to 6pm (rush hour) on working days and throughout the evenings when people are heading out or home from shopping. Allow an hour to get to any of the bus terminals during rush hour.

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