

Destination Syria & Lebanon

The rise and fall of myriad civilisations in Syria and Lebanon and, indeed, in the whole of the Levant (also encompassing Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories), has contributed to creating a region as diverse as it is venerable, and as vulnerable as it is invincible.

With the world's most precious of ancient ruins, medieval souqs that hum incessantly with the banter of hagglers, cities that pulsate with life day and night, and Islamic mosques and Byzantine churches so sublime and sacred that worshippers of all religious persuasions make pilgrimages to them – not to mention mountain forests thick with cedar, pine and eucalypt, sparkling Mediterranean bays, blazing desert moonscapes, and luxuriant river plains – Syria and Lebanon are tailor-made to be tourism magnets.

And in the past, they were. The 'road to Damascus' (the conversion of St Paul to Christianity) attracted Westerners as early as the 1800s to discover Syria's mysterious charms, while in the 1960s there was no more swinging place than Beirut, known then as the 'Paris of the Middle East'.

Today, unfortunately, the vilification of Syria in the West, Israel's 2006 bombardment of Lebanon, and a series of assassinations and explosions in Lebanon in 2007, have had government travel advisories periodically listing the countries as no-go areas. It's perhaps ironic then that these are two of the friendliest countries on the planet. Both are the embodiment of the hospitality and generosity for which the Middle East is renowned.

Despite the warmth of the Syrian people and a back door that's always been ajar to pilgrims, traders, archaeologists and travellers, Syria was pretty much closed to 'the West' under the late President Hafez al-Assad. While there were hopes the country would open up more under the leadership of his son Bashar al-Assad, it's really only the economy that has seen significant liberal reforms and talk of political reform has remained just that.

The generosity of spirit of the Lebanese is just as striking. This is a country where doors are flung open, where people love to socialise. But unfortunately Lebanon has had its fair share of guests who've overstayed their welcome (Syrians) and gatecrashers who were never welcome (Israelis). The 2006 war added another brutal chapter to Lebanon's never-ending story of woes. The 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, who was responsible for Lebanon's reconstruction and revitalisation after the devastating 1975–90 civil war, was one of an ongoing series of assassinations. Since then, the government has been in a state of flux, with the presidency and the parliament paralysed in a standoff that could degenerate into another civil war.

While travelling amid this political conflict and turmoil it's paradoxical that you will never feel safer or more at home. Don't be surprised if you're handed a bag of pistachio nuts as they're being passed around a bus, if you're invited to share a pot of tea at a ruins ticket office, or if a family you've chatted to at a restaurant offers to pay for your meal.

Syria and Lebanon offer an abundance of compelling sights and captivating landscapes, yet here the journey is just as important as the destination, because it's the people you'll meet in the streets, bus stops, souqs and cafés who will make your experience all the more enriching, rewarding and memorable. See these fascinating countries and befriend their people now – before politics takes another ugly turn.

FAST FACTS

Population:

Syria 20,000,000;
Lebanon 4,100,000

GDP per capita:

Syria US\$5350;
Lebanon US\$6100;
USA US\$43,444

Inflation:

Syria 10%; Lebanon 4%

Unemployment:

Syria 20%; Lebanon 20%

Life expectancy:

Syria 70; Lebanon 73

Iraqi refugees in Syria:

1,500,000

Palestinian refugees in

Lebanon: 395,000

Literacy rates:

Syria, male 86%,
female 74%;
Lebanon, male 91%,
female 82%

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SYRIAN SOJOURN

Two Weeks / Syria

Spend three days in **Damascus** (p78), exploring its atmospheric **Old City** (p85), Umayyad Mosque, souqs and historic houses. Visit the **National Museum** (p95) in preparation for Syria's archaeological sites. Do day trips to **Maalula** (p121), the convent at **Seidnayya** (p121), the monastery at **Mar Musa** (p123) and visit **Bosra** (p125) for its Roman theatre.

From Damascus, travel to **Aleppo** (p172), allowing two days to explore its citadel, souqs and Al-Jdeida quarter. From Aleppo, take day trips to the basilica ruins of **Qala'at Samaan** (p195) and the **Dead Cities** (p198) of Jerada, Ruweiha, Serjilla and Al-Bara, and the Roman ruins of **Apamea** (p167), before taking the train to the lively seaside city of **Lattakia** (p144). Stop by **Tartus** (p137) on the way to **Hama** (p160) and stay for a couple of days to see its *norias* (wooden waterwheels) and visit **Qasr ibn Wardan** (p169) and the **beehive villages** (p171). Head to **Homs** (p155) and **Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers)** (p133) for the night, then allow a day or two in **Palmyra** (p202) to see the spectacular ruins, before returning to Damascus.



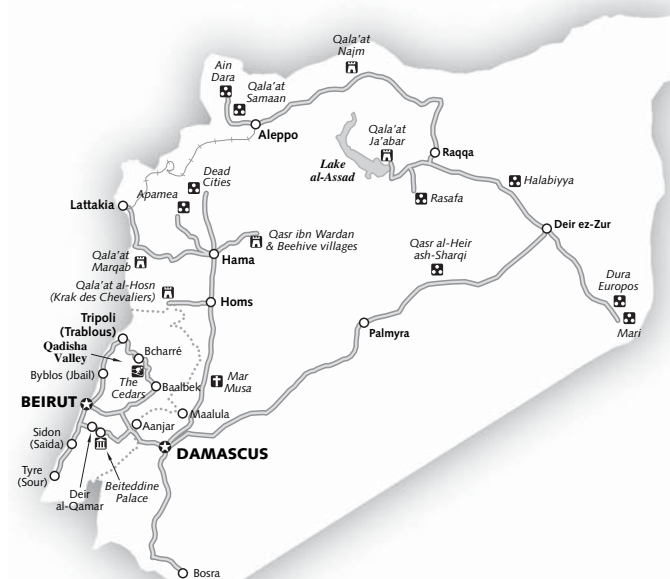
Your Syrian Sojourn is a busy but satisfying two-week trip that covers the best Syria has to offer. Starting off at Damascus the trip takes in the country's most captivating sights, ending with two of the best, Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) and Palmyra.

LEVANTINE ADVENTURE

Four Weeks / Syria & Lebanon

Begin in Beirut so you only enter Syria once, avoiding a multiple entry visa. Spend two days in **Beirut** (p262), travelling north to **Byblos** (p306) for a night, then **Tripoli** (p326) for another, before heading to the **Qadisha Valley** (p337), **Bcharré** (p339) and **the Cedars** (p342) for a day, then across the mountains (impossible during winter) to **Baalbek** (p354) for a night. Go south to **Aanjar** (p351), the Chouf Mountains and **Beiteddine Palace** (p320); stay overnight in **Deir al-Qamar** (p317). Heading south, spend a night each in **Sidon** (p363) and **Tyre** (p372), bussing back to Beirut and across to Damascus. Dawdle for five days in **Damascus** (p78), doing day trips to **Maalula** (p121), **Mar Musa** (p123) and **Bosra** (p125). Head to **Homs** (p155) and **Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers)** (p133) overnight, then to **Hama** (p160) to spend a couple of days doing day trips to **Qasr ibn Wardan** (p169), **beehive villages** (p171), **Apamea** (p167) and **the Dead Cities** (p198). From Hama, cruise across to **Qala'at Marqab** (p143) and **Lattakia** (p144) to catch your breath before taking the train to **Aleppo** (p172) for a few days. Do a day trip to **Ain Dara** (p196) and **Qala'at Samaan** (p195) before setting out to the Euphrates, best-explored using your own wheels and sharing the cost of a hire car or driver. Cruise up to **Qala'at Najm** (p216), then via Raqqa to **Qala'at Ja'abar** (p214) on **Lake al-Assad** (p214) and camp overnight. Leave early to allow detours to **Rasafa** (p217) and **Halabiyya** (p218) on the way to **Deir ez-Zur** (p219). Stay two nights, visit **Dura Europos** (p222) and **Mari** (p223), then hightail it via **Qasr al-Heir al-Sharqi** (p213) to **Palmyra** (p202) and back via Damascus to Beirut. Phew!

You want to see it all? You want the classic Syrian and Lebanese sights? The great archaeological ruins? The grand mosques? The crusader castles? But you want to get off the beaten track too? Aanjar, Qala'at Najm, the Euphrates? Then this itinerary is for you.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

COMPLETELY LEBANON

Two Weeks / Lebanon

What was once a classic route has become a bit of an off-the-beaten-track trip for some travellers, unnerved by the political tensions in Lebanon. The country is still as captivating as ever and its great sights haven't gone anywhere so get out there and see the best it offers in one complete journey.

Begin by spending a few days in beguiling **Beirut** (p262) before cruising up the coast to **Byblos** (p306) for its picturesque old port, timing your explorations so that you are strolling around the ruins at sunset – a sublime experience. Next, head to **Tripoli** (p326), taking a few days to explore its ancient khans, mosques, hammams, souqs and the Crusader castle in nearby Enfe.

Enjoy the dramatic vistas and charming villages of the **Qadisha Valley** (p337) on your way to **Bcharré** (p339) and **the Cedars** (p342). Outside of winter, take the mountain road to the Bekaa Valley and **Baalbek** (p354) to enjoy the best-preserved Roman temples in the world. Drop in to Zahlé for lunch and to one of the **Bekaa Valley's vineyards** (p352) for some wine-tasting.

Next, visit the exquisite Umayyad ruins of **Aanjar** (p351) before heading to the Chouf Mountains and the charming village of **Deir al-Qamar** (p317). Nearby is the lavish **Beiteddine Palace** (p320) and its delightful gardens with Byzantine mosaics. Make your way to **Sidon** (p363) to see its stylish **Musée Du Savon** (p367), **labyrinthine souq** (p367) and **Sea Castle** (p366).

Head south to **Tyre** (p372) for its pretty bay and ruins, which include the world's largest **Roman hippodrome** (p376). Head back along the coast to Beirut for one last taste of the city's vibrant nightlife.



Unfortunately fewer travellers are doing this former classic route these days due to political tensions in the country. Completely Lebanon takes you to the country's most captivating sights, starting and finishing in the capital. Note, during winter you usually can't cross from Bcharré to Baalbek.

THE EUPHRATES & THE EMPTINESS Five Days / The Euphrates River

Alongside the Nile and Tigris, the Euphrates is one of the great rivers of the Middle East. Flowing through the northeastern region of Syria, bordering Turkey and Iraq, this area is known as the Jezira, or 'island'. As the Euphrates cuts through the dry rocky desert, nourishing the landscape, it blankets its banks and surrounding flood plains in green, its fertile soil yielding wheat, cotton, sunflowers and oil. To explore this region, from **Aleppo** (p172), head northeast to **Qala'at Najm** (p216) for your first spectacular view of the river, before veering southeast via **Raqqa** (p216), a dusty little town, to the dramatic **Qala'at Ja'abar** (p214), a Mesopotamian citadel overlooking **Lake al-Assad** (p214), where you can swim, eat freshly caught fish and camp for the night.

Leave early to allow detours to **Rasafa** (p217), an immense walled city with basilica ruins that rises dramatically out of the empty desert, and **Halabiyya** (p218), a unique fortification that sprawls down a hill, on the way to **Deir ez-Zur** (p219).

Base yourself here for a couple of days, so you can visit the archaeological sites along the Euphrates River towards the Iraqi border. **Dura Europos** (p222), an extensive Hellenistic/Roman fortress city, offers breathtaking views of the Euphrates and desert, while the mud-brick ruins of **Mari** (p223) might not offer beautiful vistas, but are one of the most important ancient Mesopotamian sites. Take time in Deir ez-Zur to enjoy the riverside setting and bustling little souq, before heading via the remote and dramatic desert palace of **Qasr al-Heir al-Sharqi** (p213) to the spectacular Roman ruins of **Palmyra** (p202), before travelling southwest to vibrant Damascus.

This trip is best made with your own transport, by driving yourself or hiring a car and driver. Some have even done this journey by bicycle. You can still follow this route using public transport, but you should allow an extra couple of days.



TAILORED TRIPS

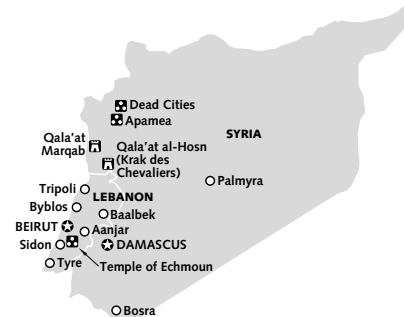
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVENTURE

If you're interested in archaeology, then Syria and Lebanon have some of the world's most important sights, including a long list of ruins easily as impressive as Pompeii or Persepolis.

From **Damascus** (p78) you can travel north to visit **Apamea** (p167) with its 2km-long colonnades, and the eerie Byzantine **Dead Cities** (p198). **Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers)** (p133) and **Qala'at Marqab** (p143) are musts for fans of Crusader castles, while the city of **Palmyra** (p202) is one of the world's greatest sites. **Bosra** (p125), in the south, was once the capital of the Roman province of Arabia.

In Lebanon, the city of **Tyre** (p372) boasts Roman and Byzantine ruins and the world's largest **Roman hippodrome** (p376). At **Sidon** (p363), the **Sea Castle** (p366) dates back to Phoenician times, although the present structure was built by the Crusaders. The **Temple of Echmoun** (p370) is the best preserved of the Phoenician ruins.

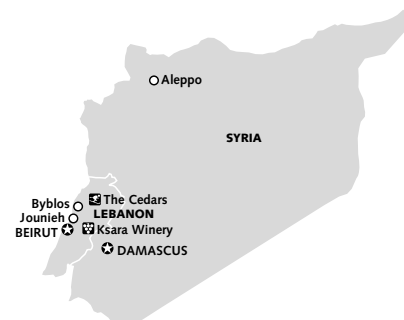
In **Beirut's Downtown** (p274) you'll find excavations from the Bronze Age and Roman remains. In the north, **Byblos** (p306) has 7000 years of history to explore in its Phoenician, Greek, Roman and Crusader ruins. Although **Tripoli** (p326) was settled around 1400 BC, its Crusader castle and medieval structures are mostly intact. **Baalbek** (p354), with its monumental temples, is the most impressive ancient site in Lebanon, followed by the Umayyad ruins of **Aanjar** (p351).



THE GOOD LIFE

Good food, good wines, good hotels. After checking in to Beirut's **Hotel Albergo** (p283), make a booking to dine on superb Italian at chic little **Olio** (p283). Stop at Jounieh's legendary **Chez Sami** (p305) for succulent seafood before an overnight stay (in a room with sea views) at **Byblos Sur Mer** (p311) in Byblos. Reserve a table for dinner at **Bab El Mina** (p311). Over lunch at Pepe's **Byblos Fishing Club** (p312), pay homage to the '60s jet set whose pics adorn the walls. If you like winters in the Alps, you'll love the lodge style of **L'Auberge des Cedres** (p343) at the Cedars. Outside winter, take the mountain road to the Bekaa Valley and the **Ksara Winery** (p351), picking up some wines before heading to Damascus.

In Damascus, a room in elegant Old City boutique **Hotel Talisman** (p105) is a must, as is dinner at the city's finest restaurants **Al-Hallabi** (p107) and **Aldar Restaurant** (p107). Fly to Aleppo for an Oriental palace experience and stay at **Beit Salahieh** (p187) in the Governor's Suite. Lunch at **Cordoba** (p189) for tasty Armenian food, and for dinner feast on delicious cherry kebabs at **Beit Wakil** (p189) and **Beit Sissi** (p189). True foodies should line up with the locals in the early morning for hot steaming bowls of Syria's best **foul** (fava bean soup; p189).



On the Road



TERRY CARTER Coordinating Author

It had been one of those days as a traveller where things just didn't go to plan. We had been driving for hours in the desert looking for a little-visited set of ruins. Our driver, having managed to get off course by a couple of hundred kilometres, declared he was too tired to drive. After I steered us to Palmyra we dumped our bags and headed straight to the ruins. The touts had thankfully retired for the day and we had Palmyra all to ourselves. The light was Palmyra perfect.



LARA DUNSTON Coordinating Author

The Euphrates is one of *the* great Middle East rivers, like the Tigris and the Nile. For me, it's one of those must-sees. I love the way it gives life to the desert, blanketing its otherwise arid banks in green. And there's nothing like viewing the Euphrates from atop the massive walls of a magnificent Arab castle, such as this one at Qala'at Najm, built by Nureddin in the 12th century. It had been a long hot drive to get here and when we clambered to the top and took in that view, it was all worth it.



AMELIA THOMAS At Baalbek's creaky old Palmrya Hotel – one of the world's greatest old-timer hotels – I met charming tour guide Charbel Saliba who, with a grin, insisted on taking me up to the town's old Roman quarry to see the world's largest cut stone. It was only on getting there that he confided its local name, Hajar al-Hubla (Stone of the Pregnant Woman). 'Go on', he giggled, 'Stand on top!' Obliging, I clambered its age-worn slope, carved with ancient graffiti, to the Lebanese flag at the pinnacle – no easy feat when, as I was then, you're six months pregnant.

See full author bios on p422

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