

Syria Directory

CONTENTS

Accommodation	226
Activities	227
Business Hours	228
Children	228
Climate	229
Courses	229
Customs	229
Dangers & Annoyances	229
Discount Cards	229
Embassies & Consulates	230
Festivals & Events	231
Gay & Lesbian Travellers	231
Holidays	231
Insurance	232
Internet Access	232
Legal Matters	232
Maps	232
Money	232
Photography & Video	233
Post	234
Shopping	234
Smoking	235
Solo Travellers	235
Telephone	236
Time	236
Toilets	236
Travellers with Disabilities	236
Visas	237
Women Travellers	238
Work	239

ACCOMMODATION

Throughout this book we've listed accommodation prices for Syria using both the Syrian pound (£) and US dollars (US\$)

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

PRACTICALITIES

Electricity

- You'll need the European **two-round-pin plug** to connect to the region's electricity supply (220VAC, 50Hz).

Newspapers & Magazines

- Syria's only English-language daily newspaper is the government-owned **Syria Times** (www.syriatimes.tishreen.info)
- **Syria Today** (www.syria-today.com) is the country's first independently produced English-language magazine and covers economic, political and social development.

Radio

- In Damascus you can listen to the **BBC World Service** on AM 1323.

Weights & Measures

- Syria uses the **metric system**. Basic conversion charts are given on the inside front cover of this book.

as quoted by hotels and hostels. Note that in some top-end hotels they will insist that you pay with US dollars.

Throughout this book we have divided accommodation into budget, midrange and top-end categories; the corresponding price ranges are detailed below.

A budget double room will cost under S£1785 (US\$35), a midrange hotel room S£1785 to S£5100 (US\$35 to US\$100), and top-end hotels over S£5100 (US\$100).

Rooms in cheap hotels are often let on a share basis and will have two to four beds. If you want the room to yourself you may have to pay for all beds, or an intermediate sum – try to bargain.

It's worth knowing that during the low season (December to March) and outside the peak holiday seasons (around major religious festivals, such as Eid al-Adha), big discounts are frequently available in Syrian hotels and it's always worth asking about special offers. Prices in some midrange and

top-end hotels also go up by as much as 40% during the Islamic religious holidays due to an influx of Gulf Arabs; see Holidays (p231) for more details. In Damascus, note that religious tourism (mainly from Iran) sees some decent budget and midrange hotels booked up well in advance.

For more details on planning your trip see Itineraries (p17).

Camping

Official camping opportunities in Syria are limited – apart from camping on the roof of a backpacker hostel. If you do decide to camp ‘freelance’, especially in remote areas, be aware that temperatures can drop quite low in the winter months, wild dogs can cause you some concerns and the locals will think you’re nuts.

Hotels

BUDGET

The quality of budget hotel options across Syria is uneven. Some cities have numerous budget lodgings, such as Aleppo, while others that probably should be on the tourist trail have limited options. Considering this, it’s worth planning day trips to sights from places such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Palmyra.

One of the biggest drawbacks with budget accommodation in Syria is that rooms often open onto common rooms with blaring TVs, or overlook busy streets. One word: earplugs! Another drawback is bathroom and toilet facilities that are either inadequate or inoperable. During the hotter months, if there isn’t a ceiling fan, you should be able to borrow a floor-standing fan.

MIDRANGE

Some properties in Syria that should be charging budget rates just scrape into the midrange level – but because they offer decent facilities or service they are worth reviewing. As it stands, midrange hotels vary wildly in terms of facilities; some extras to look for include air-con, satellite TV and a fridge (handy if you’re self-catering).

TOP END

The top end of Syria’s accommodation has improved in both Damascus and Aleppo, with both new boutique and five-star properties having opened their doors. Top-end

POPULATION DATA

The population data in this book is based on the best resource material available, but due to the fluctuation of population numbers in both Syria and Lebanon, the figures may not be accurate at the time of your visit. The figures will, however, will be enough to tell you if a destination is a village or a metropolis.

hotels generally have air-con, satellite TV, minibar, and a restaurant or hotel bar. Many have health clubs and swimming pools. International chain hotels tend to have better facilities and staff.

The countrywide chain of state-owned five-stars, the Cham Palaces (pronounced ‘sham’) get the tour buses, but are of little interest to independent travellers. The notable exception is the Cham Palace in Damascus (p105).

Credit cards are accepted at all top-end hotels.

Rental Accommodation

The best way to find long-term rental apartments in Syria is to ask around. Foreign students living in Damascus recommend **House of Damascus** (www.houseofdamsacus.com) for finding rooms to rent.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

The big cities of Syria are filled with anarchic traffic, poor surfaces and high noise levels, but away from urban areas the mountains and deserts are excellent for cycle touring. In particular, the Dead Cities (p198) and the areas around Palmyra (p201) and Qala’at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers; see p136) are super for cycling.

If you decide to bring your own bicycle, remember that as well as being reckless, Syrian drivers are not used to bicycles. Be extremely careful and don’t assume that you have been spotted. Also keep in mind that bicycle shops are almost nonexistent outside the capital cities, so you need to bring everything you are likely to need, including spare spokes, chain, cables, tubes and tyres. On the flipside, you’ll be warmly welcomed wherever you go – and will probably have trouble getting away each morning! A

well-written blog on what to expect is Travelling Two (<http://travellingtwo.com>).

Trekking

There are wonderful trekking opportunities in Syria, but currently little in the way of organised trips. The Dead Cities (p198) and the areas around Palmyra (p201) and Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers; see p136) are fantastic for trekking. For an organised trip, you could try **Jasmin Tours** (www.jasmintours.com); see p398 for more information.

Water Sports

Your best bet for water sports is Lattakia, where the Shaati al-Azraq (Blue Beach; p146) passes for Syria's premier coastal resort. Access to the best stretches of beach is controlled by Le Meridien and Cham hotels (see p147). Both chains hire out pedal boats, jet skis and sailboards.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are generally open 8am to 2pm Saturday to Thursday, give or take an hour, and embassies and consulates are closed Saturday. Other offices and shops keep similar hours in the morning and often open again 4pm to 6pm. Most restaurants but only a few small traders will open on Friday.

Banks generally follow the government office hours, but there are quite a few exceptions; some branches keep their doors open 9am to noon, while some exchange booths are open until 7pm.

Post offices close at 8pm in Damascus and Aleppo (open on Fridays, too); in smaller cities, post offices close at 2pm. Telephone offices have much longer hours.

OPEN SESAME

Where possible, we've indicated throughout this book opening times of places of interest. However, often the reality on the ground is that site opening hours are at the whim of the ticket office or guardian. If you ask around, 'the man with the keys' can often be located and will be willing to open up. However, all opening hours must be prefaced, therefore, with a hopeful *in sha' Allah* (God-willing).

Principal museums and monuments are open 9am to 6pm in summer, and to 4pm from October to the end of March, while others are generally open 8am to 2pm. Most are closed Tuesdays.

CHILDREN

Children are much loved and fussed over in the Middle East and bringing yours along will open doors and guarantee new friends. For babies and toddlers, major brands of disposable nappies, wet wipes and jars of baby foods are easily available at pharmacies, where the selection is usually greater than at supermarkets. It's a good idea to bring your own powdered formula milk from home, as you might not be able to find a familiar brand. Bottled water is reliable and available everywhere, while hotels and restaurants will usually be happy to provide boiled water for babies' bottles, as well as running bottles and dummies through their dishwasher or boiling them for sterilisation.

If your kids aren't used to the heat, it's a good idea to avoid travel at the height of summer (July and August), when it can become very humid near the Mediterranean coast and dry and dusty elsewhere. Likewise, if they're not keen on shivering in the evenings, it's best not to travel in the middle of winter (late December to early February), when higher altitudes will be snowy and many budget accommodation options might get rather chilly, with unreliable hot water. To cope with the summer rays, sunhats and maximum protection sun block are an absolute must. For winter, bring plenty of cold-weather clothes. See *When to Go* in the *Getting Started in Syria* chapter (p62) and the *Getting Started in Lebanon* chapter (p243) for details on the best times to visit.

Eating out with children in Syria and Lebanon can be a real pleasure, and there are few restaurants – even at the very top end of the price scale – that won't be happy to see small patrons at their tables. Most will be happy to provide child-size portions or simple dishes if your kids aren't keen on the local cuisine, and many restaurants – except the most basic – have highchairs available.

There are also plenty of international fast-food chains, especially in Beirut, vending pizzas, burgers, sandwiches and the like,

for when the familiar is the only thing that will do.

The larger chain hotels in both countries are used to catering for families. Cots can be booked in these hotels, and baby-sitting facilities are often available. Even if you have several small children with you, you'll normally not be required to pay extra, and rollaway beds – or even just an extra mattress on the floor – can accommodate children too big for a cot.

Most top-end hotels also have interconnecting rooms available for families with older kids.

It's a good idea to visit your local doctor or pharmacist before you leave home, and stock up on rehydration salts, fever-reducing medicine and other simple essentials, to counter any minor disasters along the road. A potential worry is the high incidence of diarrhoea and stomach problems that travellers experience in the Middle East.

For more detailed advice on health matters when travelling with children in the region, see p410.

For more comprehensive advice on travelling with children, see Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan.

Sights & Activities

The open spaces of tourist sights can provide ample opportunities for children to expend some of that boundless energy.

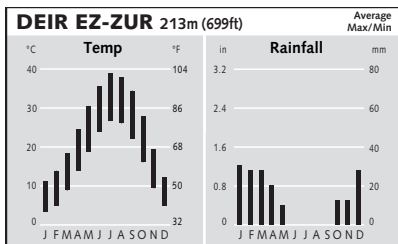
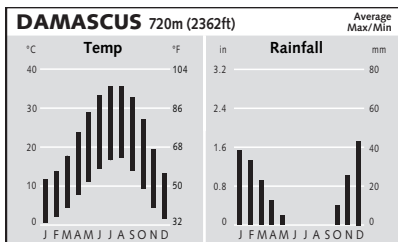
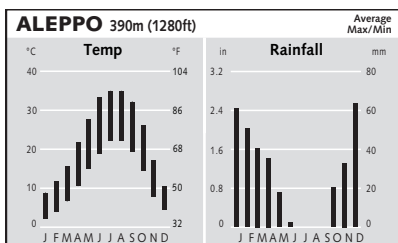
Outside of Damascus, the hotels and beaches of Lattakia (p146) are notable for water-based children's activities.

See also Damascus for Children (p103) for other details on keeping the kids entertained.

CLIMATE

Temperatures range widely from blistering summer highs to snow-laden winter lows. During summer proper (June to August) daily highs average around 35°C on the coast and inland. However, head east into the desert and that rises to an average 40°C and highs of 46°C are not uncommon. In Damascus, the winter (December to February) daily average temperature might be 10°C, although it can get colder and snow is not uncommon.

You certainly get snow on the higher peaks and it's even been known to fall as far east as Palmyra.



COURSES

Language courses are the most popular courses given in both countries, but given that Arabic is difficult to learn, these courses are generally geared to those intending to live and study in Syria (see *Dialling in Your Dialect* in Damascus, p102). For details on courses in Damascus, see p103.

CUSTOMS

Customs officials are now very used to seeing laptops and digital cameras entering the country, but it pays not to look like a journalist or photojournalist – so leave that flak jacket in your bag.

The duty-free allowance is 200 cigarettes and 570ml of spirits.

Don't bring in firearms or ammunition and please, no live, frozen or stuffed birds. Just so you know.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The main danger and annoyance (common to both countries) is the driving style. Chaos coupled with courtesy is the order of the day. If you are driving, relax, get into the swing of it and expect the unexpected. If you have a driver and he's (it's always a 'he') placed all his faith in Allah, shots of coffee, cigarettes and a policy of never driving slower than 160km per hour, ask him to slow down (or say '*shway shway*', slowly, slowly). As a pedestrian, never relax – you're the last thing most drivers are thinking about.

Despite being depicted by the US administration and Western media as a terrorist training ground, Syria is an extremely safe country to travel in. You can walk around virtually anywhere, day or night without any problems. Syrians are friendly and hospitable and if someone invites you to their village or home you should accept their offer.

The general absence of theft is one of the most refreshing things about travelling in Syria. This is no excuse for inviting trouble through carelessness, but at least you don't have to keep a hawk-like watch over your belongings.

There is, however, another kind of petty theft in Syria, overcharging. Few travellers completely avoid the odd petty rip-off, but you can minimise it by asking at your hotels how much things should cost that you want to buy, or how much that taxi should cost. While it is annoying, when put in perspective, the amount is usually petty unless you're a committed shoestringer.

DISCOUNT CARDS

There are no discount cards available for seniors in Syria.

Student Cards

Student cards get huge reductions on archaeological site and museum fees which, after accommodation, are the major expense when travelling in Syria. The standard admission fee is S£150 (about US\$3.25) but with a student card this drops to S£10 (US\$0.22). Ticket officials are often fussy about which kinds of cards they will accept. Student IDs issued by your college or university have a good chance of being rebuffed; you really need an International Student Identification Card (ISIC), or something similar that carries a photo and signature.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It's important to realise what your own embassy – the embassy of the country of which you are a citizen – can and can't do to help you if you get into trouble. Generally speaking, it won't be much help in emergencies if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault.

Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in. Your embassy will not be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you need to get home urgently, a free ticket home is unlikely – the embassy would expect you to have insurance.

If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is out of the question.

Embassies & Consulates in Syria

Note: at present the Canadian embassy provides consular services to Australian citizens in case of emergency, while citizens from Ireland and New Zealand are looked after by the UK. All the following countries are represented in Damascus.

Belgium (Map p80; ☎ 011-6139 9931; fax 6139 9977; www.diplomatie.be/damascus/; No 10 Al Salaam St, Mezzé East)

Canada (off Map p80; ☎ 011-611 6692; fax 611 4000; www.damascus.gc.ca; Lot 12, Autostrad al-Mezze) About 4km west of city centre.

Egypt (Map pp82-3; ☎ 011-333 3561; fax 333 7961; Sharia al-Jalaa, Abu Roumana)

France (Map p98; ☎ 011-330 0200; fax 339 0260; www.ambafrance-sy.org; Sharia Ata Ayyubi, Salihhiyya)

Germany (Map p80; ☎ 011-332 3800/1; fax 332 3812; 53 Sharia Ibrahim Hanano)

Jordan (Map pp82-3; ☎ 011-333 4642; fax 333 6741; Sharia al-Jalaa, Abu Roumana)

Netherlands (Map p80; ☎ 011-333 6871, fax 333 9369; Sharia al-Jalaa, Abu Roumana)

Turkey (Map p80; ☎ 011-333 1411; 58 Sharia Ziad bin Abi Soufian)

UK (Map p80; ☎ 011-373 9241/2/3/7; fax 373 1600; www.fc.gov.uk; 11 Sharia Mohammed Kurd Ali, Malki) Note that you need to make an appointment.

USA (Map p80; ☎ 011-3391 4444; fax 3391 3999; http://damascus.usembassy.gov/; 2 Sharia al-Mansour, Abu Roumana)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

April & May

Spring Flower Festival Held in Hama during the last two weeks of April; expect lots of colour, people prom-enading through into the early hours of the morning, temporary markets, and the sluices open so that the fast-flowing Orontes gets the huge waterwheels turning.

Palmyra Festival Held around the end of April or early May, this popular annual folk festival has desert ruins as its venue, with horse and camel racing during the day and music and dance performances in the ancient theatre (part of the civic centre) by night. For more information, see Palmyra Festival (p211).

International Flower Show Held in Damascus every May.

July

Cotton Festival Held in Aleppo, this festival celebrates the cotton harvest.

September

Bosra Festival Held every odd-numbered year, it's a festival of music and theatre, noteworthy for the chance of being part of an audience in the town's spectacular Roman theatre—cum-citadel.

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

Suweida Apple & Vine Festival Held in late September, this festival celebrates the annual harvest.

November & December

Damascus International Film Festival Held annually, it shows an eclectic range of films, including many pan-Arab productions. There's also a theatre festival.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is prohibited in Syria and conviction can result in imprisonment. In fact, the public position is that homosexuality doesn't exist in Syria, but of course it's no less prevalent than anywhere else in the world. However, discretion is advised.

That said, in his travelogue *Cleopatra's Wedding Present* (2003), the late Robert Tewdwr Moss describes a few months in

Syria during which time he was anything but discreet about his homosexuality, and neither were many Syrians he met.

HOLIDAYS

Islamic Religious Holidays

All Islamic holidays throughout the region are celebrated within the framework of the Muslim calendar, while secular activities are planned according to the Christian system.

The Muslim year is based on the lunar cycle and is divided into 12 lunar months, each with 29 or 30 days. Consequently, the Muslim year is 10 or 11 days shorter than the Christian solar year, and the Muslim festivals shuffle along the Western calendar, completing the cycle in roughly 33 years.

Year zero in the Muslim calendar was when Mohammed and his followers fled from Mecca to Medina (AD 622 in the Christian calendar). This Hejira, or migration, is taken to mark the start of the new Muslim era, much as Christ's birth marks year zero in the Christian calendar.

Eid al-Adha Also known as Eid al-Kebir, the 'great feast', this marks the time of the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. The hajj culminates in the ritual slaughter of a lamb (in commemoration of Ibrahim's sacrifice) at Mina. This marks the end of the pilgrimage and the beginning of Eid al-Adha, or Feast of Sacrifice.

Ras as-Sana Islamic New Year's Day (literally 'head of the year'). This day is celebrated on the first day of the Hejira calendar year, 1 Moharram. The whole country has the day off but celebrations are low-key.

Ashura This is the day of public mourning observed by the Shiites on 10 Moharram. It commemorates the assassination of Imam Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, which led to the permanent schism between Sunnis and Shiites.

Moulid an-Nabi Feast celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed on 12 Rabi' al-Awal. One of the major holidays of the year – the streets are a feast of lights. For a long time this was not celebrated at all in the Arab world.

ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS

Hejira Year	New Year	Prophet's Birthday	Ramadan	Eid al-Fitr	Eid al-Adha
1429	10 Jan 08	20 Mar 08	2 Sep 08	2 Oct 08	9 Dec 08
1430	29 Dec 08	9 Mar 09	22 Aug 09	21 Sep 09	28 Nov 09
1431	18 Dec 09	26 Feb 10	11 Aug 10	10 Sep 10	12 Nov 10
1432	7 Dec 10	15 Feb 11	1 Aug 11	30 Aug 11	6 Nov 11
1433	26 Nov 11	5 Feb 12	20 Jul 12	19 Aug 12	26 Oct 12

Ramadan The ninth month of the Muslim calendar, the month in which the Quran was first revealed. From dawn until dusk, Muslims are expected to abstain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual activity. Non-Muslims are not expected to observe the fast, but eating, drinking and smoking in public is prohibited. Given this, and the fact that people get a little grumpy near the end of the month, it can be an awkward time to visit, but the nighttime activities when the fast is broken are fascinating.

Eid al-Fitr A three-day feast (often longer) that marks the end of Ramadan. Similar in nature to Eid al-Adha. Generally, everything shuts down during this holiday.

Public Holidays

The Islamic holidays (and Christian Easter) change each year. Below are the fixed public holidays. Most holidays are either religious (Islamic and Christian) or celebrations of important dates in the formation of modern Syria.

New Year's Day (1 January) Official national holiday but many businesses stay open.

Orthodox Christmas (7 January) A fairly low-key affair and only Orthodox businesses are closed for the day.

Commemoration of the Revolution (8 March) Celebrates the coming to power of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party.

Easter (March/April) Different dates each year. The most important date on the Christian calendar.

Commemoration of the Evacuation (17 April) Celebrates the end of French occupation in Syria.

May Day (1 May) Official national holiday.

Martyrs' Day (6 May) Celebrates all political martyrs who died for Syria.

INSURANCE

Whichever way you're travelling, make sure you take out a comprehensive travel insurance policy that covers you for medical expenses and luggage theft or loss, and for cancellation of (or delays in) your travel arrangements. Ticket loss should also be included, but make sure you have a separate record of all the details, or better still, a photocopy of the ticket.

Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities, which can include scuba diving, motorcycling, snow sports and even trekking. If you plan on doing any of these things, make sure you get a policy that covers it.

For information on insurance matters relating to cars, see p401. The international student travel policies handled by **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com) and other student travel organisations are usually good value.

INTERNET ACCESS

Since President Bashar al-Assad opened the internet flood gates, online activity has bloomed like a Damascene rose and every major town has at least two or three internet cafés. To date there are only a few national Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and costs are typically £E100 (US\$2) per hour. If you're lugging a laptop then you can get connected in some of the better hotels via an Ethernet (network) cable, but modem connections are still the most common. Hotels promising wi-fi can't always deliver and while wi-fi-enabled cafés have sprung up, generally you're on your own if there is a connection problem. Note that if you're carrying any electrical items that are plugged into a wall socket, power surges pose a real risk to your equipment in Syria, so it's a good idea to pack a portable surge protector.

LEGAL MATTERS

Travellers should have few opportunities to get to know the legal system personally – a good thing in Syria; we hear the food's not so great. Carrying any kind of narcotics (including marijuana/hash) is a foolish undertaking. If you are caught in possession in Syria, you could well wind up doing a heavy jail sentence. If you do cross the law in any way, your embassy can do little more than contact your relatives and recommend local lawyers.

MAPS

A good map is that produced by Freytag & Berndt, distinguished by a red-and-green cover. It shows the country at a scale of 1:800,000 and also carries decent city plans of Damascus and Aleppo. It's difficult to get hold of in Syria. Another sheet map published by GEO Projects, at a scale of 1:1,000,000, also has decent city plans of Damascus at 1:15,000 and Aleppo at 1:12,500 on the reverse side. Tourist offices throughout Syria have free city and regional maps, which are also good.

MONEY

The official currency is the Syrian pound (£E), also called the *lira*. There are 100 piastres (*qirsh*) to a pound but this is redundant because the smallest coin you'll find is £E1. Other coins come in denominations of two,

five, 10 and 25. Notes come in denominations of 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1000.

Common exchange rates are listed on the inside front cover. For information about costs for your trip, see p63.

ATMs

There is a growing number of ATMs across Syria, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. Cash advances are officially not possible as the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) has no links with international credit-card companies. However, a few individual entrepreneurs carry out transactions via Jordanian or Lebanese banks. Bear in mind that the rate they offer may not be too great. If you do need a cash advance, ask at any shop displaying a Visa or Amex sign and chances are you'll be pointed in the right direction.

Black Market

We thought the days of someone whispering 'change money?' in your ear were over, but it still exists. Given that banks offer the same rates, it's inexplicable. Out of banking hours, hotel receptions are often willing to change cash or travellers cheques at the going bank rates.

Cash

Bring as much in cash dollars as you're comfortable with. Many midrange hotels only take US\$ (ie no local currency), although some will take US\$ travellers cheques at a push. Don't forget that if you're flying out, you'll have to pay the departure tax of \$£200, so keep just enough tucked away.

Credit Cards

Major credit cards such as Visa, MasterCard, Diners Club and Amex are accepted by top-end hotels and the swishest restaurants and shops, particularly those that trade with travellers. Credit cards are also handy for buying air tickets (as the only alternative is hard currency) and for most reputable car-rental companies (it will save you having to leave a large cash deposit).

Moneychangers

The banking system in Syria was state-owned until 2004 and its public face is the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS), with at least one branch in every major town. The

majority of branches will change cash and travellers cheques in most major currencies. Each branch has its own quirks: generally speaking, the smaller the town, the smaller the hassle.

There are also a number of officially sanctioned private exchange offices. These change cash, and sometimes travellers cheques, at official bank rates but generally don't charge commission. The other advantage is that whereas banks usually close for the day at 12.30pm or 2pm, the exchange offices are often open until 7pm.

Tippling

Waiters in better restaurants generally expect a tip, and some will help themselves by short-changing you a little, but otherwise a standard 10% of the bill is a good benchmark. Other services are also carried out with a view to being tipped – everything from having your luggage taken to your room to having doors opened for you. In most cases a tip of \$£25 is considered fair. Guides and drivers will expect a tip, although in our experience, services delivered rarely warrant one.

Travellers Cheques

Cash is definitely king in Syria and given that there are now ATMs in the major tourist destinations, cash withdrawals and credit cards are the preferred means of payment. Waiting in line in banks getting travellers cheques cashed is not our preferred way of spending a morning in Syria. Some branches of the CBS will charge a minimum one-off commission of \$£25 per transaction, whether you change one or several cheques. A couple of US\$50 or €50 notes tucked away somewhere are much more useful at a pinch.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Both Syria and Lebanon are photogenic countries with dramatic landscapes and clear Mediterranean light. Dust is a problem in both countries and it is a good idea to keep your equipment wrapped in a plastic bag, even inside a camera bag. Take a soft lens brush and some camera wipes for lens cleaning. A dedicated flash is definitely useful if you want to photograph the dark interiors of churches and mosques, or to help make portraits in the sun.

The best times to shoot are in the morning until 10am and the afternoon between 4pm and sunset. During the middle of the day the harsh sunlight plays havoc with getting a nicely exposed shot.

Photographic Supplies

In Damascus and Aleppo there's a number of specialist photo shops that sell memory cards and spare batteries. Canon and Nikon are best represented.

Restrictions

Be very careful when taking photos of anything other than tourist sites. It is forbidden to photograph bridges, train stations, anything military, airports and any other public works. If you accidentally shoot something sensitive and you're spotted by officials, offer to delete it.

As a matter of courtesy, don't photograph people without asking their permission first. Unless there are signs indicating otherwise, photography is usually allowed inside archaeological sites.

POST

The Syrian postal service is slow but dependable. Letters mailed from the main cities take about a week to reach Europe and anything up to a month to Australia or the USA. Stamps for postcards to the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA cost \$€18. You can also buy *tawaabi* (stamps) from most tobaccoconists, as well as at post offices.

The **poste restante counter** (☎ 8am-5pm, closed Fri) in the **central post office** (Map pp82-3; Sharia Saïd al-Jabri) in Damascus is more or less reliable. Take your passport as identification and be prepared to pay a \$€10 pick-up fee.

SHOPPING

While Syria finally has some High Street shopping and you can buy most of the popular brands you'll find anywhere in the world, it's much more fun to head to the souqs. Every town and village has a souq of some sort, although by far the best are in Damascus and Aleppo.

Carpets, rugs and kilims are best found in the markets of Damascus and Aleppo. You can find gold shops scattered about the bigger cities of Syria, but they are at their most concentrated in parts of the Damascus and Aleppo souqs. As a rule, gold is

sold by weight, and all pieces should have a hallmark guaranteeing quality. Silver is the most common material used by Bedouin women to make up their often striking jewellery.

For centuries Damascus was, along with Toledo in Spain, one of the greatest centres for the production of quality swords. Tamerlane forcefully transferred the Damascene sword-makers to Samarkand in the 15th century, but something of the tradition stuck. Several shops in Damascus still produce them for sale as souvenirs.

From Morocco to Baghdad you will find much the same sorts of engraved brass and chased copper objects for sale. Most common are the very large decorative trays and tabletops, but other items typical of the Middle East include Arabic coffeepots and even complete coffee sets with small cups (the little traditional cups without handles should preferably be ceramic). Incense-burners and teapots are also popular buys.

A local speciality is *ad-dahiri* (the ancient art of brass and copper engraving and gold and silver inlaying), which in the past was the preserve of Damascene Jews. They've all left, but others carry on the work.

Quite a few souq stalls sell either *ouds* (Arabic lutes) or *darbukkas*, the standard Middle Eastern-style drum. The latter can go quite cheaply, and even the *ouds* are hardly expensive at around US\$40 for a typical tourist model, but a decent playable one starts at around US\$100.

Damascus, in particular, is known for its textiles, and has been since antiquity. This has to be one of the best places in the world to look for tablecloths and the like. They are generally made of fine cotton and handsomely adorned with silk. The heavy Damascene tablecloths are just about the most beautiful things to buy in Syria. Made from fine lustrous cotton they come in deep reds, burgundies, azure blues and emerald greens, patterned with geometric or paisley-style designs. The best have traditionally been made in Damascus, but these are becoming much more difficult to find as far fewer are produced these days.

Brocade is another speciality, and the Bedouin-style vests on sale in some of the more reputable shops in the Damascus souqs are very popular. Good ones will go for around US\$15. Along the same line are

THE ART OF BARGAINING

Almost all prices are negotiable in the souq: there is no 'recommended retail price'. Bargaining is a process – no, a ritual – to establish how much the customer is willing to pay. It can be a hassle, but *always* keep your cool and remember it's a game, not a fight.

The first rule is never to show too much interest in the item you want to buy. Secondly, don't buy the first item that takes your fancy. Wander around and price things, but don't make it obvious; otherwise, when you return to the first shop the vendor will know it's because they are the cheapest.

Decide how much you would be happy paying and then express a casual interest in buying. The vendor will state their price, grossly inflated, doubly so if it's a foreigner doing the buying. Respond with a figure somewhat lower than the one you have fixed in your mind. So the bargaining begins. The shopkeeper will inevitably huff about how absurd your offer is and then tell you the 'lowest' price. If it is still not low enough, be insistent and keep smiling. Tea or coffee might be served as part of the bargaining ritual but accepting it doesn't place you under any obligation to buy. If you still can't get your price, then walk away. This often has the effect of closing the sale in your favour. If not, there are many more shops in the souq.

If you do get your price or lower, never feel guilty. No vendor, no matter what they say, *ever* sells below cost.

jalabiyyas, the long and loose robes that you'll see many men and women getting around in. The men's version tends to be fairly sober in colouring, while this kind of women's clothing can be almost blindingly gaudy.

A popular buy with foreigners are woodwork items. They range from simple jewellery boxes to elaborate chess sets and backgammon boards. The better-quality items tend to be of walnut and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. If the mother-of-pearl gives off a strong rainbow-colour effect, you can be almost sure it is the real deal and not cheap plastic. The actual woodwork on many of these items tends to be a little haphazard, even on the better-quality items, so inspect the joints and inlay carefully.

The ubiquitous nargileh (water pipe) are about as vivid a reminder of a visit to the Middle East as one can imagine. Some of the smaller, simpler ones can start from as low as US\$10 to US\$20, but ornate ones will cost considerably more. Remember to buy a supply of charcoal and flavoured tobacco to get you going (apple flavour is a safe choice) if you intend to smoke up a storm when you return home. However, this has to be the most awkward souvenir to cart around with you – and its chances of surviving the post are not good. Buy it on the last day.

Another simple idea (and much easier to carry around) is a *kufeyya* (the traditional Arab headcloth) and *iqal* (the black

cord used to keep it on your head) so characteristic of the region. Be aware that the quality of *kufeyya* varies considerably, with some being very bare strips of white cotton and others densely sewn in red or black patterns. Compare before you buy. Even the quality of the *iqal* can vary. A good set should not cost more than about US\$5 to US\$10.

SMOKING

Syrian men love to smoke. Syrian women love to smoke nargileh. While this is generalising a little, you find smoking ubiquitous throughout Syria. While you might find nonsmoking rooms available in top-end hotels in Damascus, you'll have little luck anywhere else. In restaurants those who are irritated by cigarette smoke won't find this aspect of Syria appealing.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Solo travellers generally have no problems travelling in Syria and Lebanon – apart from continually answering the obvious question, *why are you alone?* In the Middle East family and friends are essential to a happy life, and many people you meet won't understand why you are travelling alone. There are advantages; touts will leave you alone if there are groups to chase and travellers with outgoing personalities will find it easy to strike up a conversation in a café.

If you're travelling solo and want to make friends, plenty of young Syrians and Lebanese are keen to practise their high school or university English. Cafés are great places to meet young locals and get an insight into their lives; they'll probably invite you back to their place for more coffee, tea and conversation.

To meet other travellers, the best thing to do is to stay at *the* backpacker hang-outs in each town and we've mentioned these in the reviews. This is also a great way to do day trips – often people are happy to have an extra person on board to share the cost and you will occasionally find it hard to get on tours as a solo traveller.

Women travelling on their own should exercise a degree of caution; see Women Travellers (p238) for more information.

TELEPHONE

The country code for dialling Syria is ☎ 963, followed by the local area code (minus the zero), then the subscriber number. Local area codes are given at the start of each city or town section. The international access code (to call abroad from Syria) is ☎ 00. Reverse-charge calls cannot be made from Syria; to get the operator dial ☎ 143/144.

Mobile Phones

Depending on your operator, travellers from most countries can use their mobile Global System for Mobile (GSM) phones in Syria. Coverage is not complete across the country, but it's reliable in most cities. Check with your GSM service company for details as to whether they have an agreement with one of the operators in Syria. The best SIM card to buy to use in your mobile phone while in Syria is the Syriatel 'Ya Hala' SIM card, as **Syriatel** (www.syriatel.com) has the best coverage across Syria. At the time of writing, the SIM cost \$650, and the validity of the card (in terms of length of activation) depends on the amount of recharge units you feed the phone. For instance, a \$300 card gives you 16 days and a \$1000 card gives you 60 days of activation. You will need your passport and the cards are available at mobile-phone shops everywhere throughout the country and at the arrivals hall at Damascus International Airport.

PhoneCards

Calling from Damascus, Aleppo and Hama is straightforward – you just use one of the direct-dial Easycomm card phones dotted about town (plentiful in Damascus, less so in Aleppo and Hama). Phonecards are bought from shops – just ask at the nearest shop, no matter what kind of shop it is, and if they don't have them, they'll point you to someone who does. The cards come in denominations of \$200 (local and national calls only), \$350, \$500 and \$1000. For cheaper rates to Australia call from 2pm to 7pm; to the USA from 3am to 8am; and to Europe from 1am to 7am.

Elsewhere in the country, international calls have to be made from card phones located inside or just outside the local telephone office.

TIME

Both Syria and Lebanon are two hours ahead of GMT/UTC in winter (October to March) and three hours ahead in summer (April to September), when daylight saving is used. For more on international timing, see the map of the world time zones (p434).

One important thing to bear in mind regarding time is that Syrians and Lebanese always seem to have plenty of it – something that should take five minutes will invariably take an hour. Trying to speed things up will only lead to frustration. Take it philosophically and don't try to fight it – a bit of patience goes a long way here.

TOILETS

Travellers who have experienced some Middle Eastern toilets need not fear – Syrian and Lebanese toilets are generally very clean. You will find a mixture of Western-style upright toilets and the squat hole-in-the-floor variety, although the latter are becoming less common. In both Syria and Lebanon you are almost always close enough to a decent hotel or restaurant that will let you use their facilities. Remember toilet paper is not always available so *always* carry a small tissue pack.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Generally speaking, scant regard is paid to the needs of disabled travellers in Syria. Steps, high kerbs and other assorted obstacles abound, streets are often badly

rutted and uneven, roads are made virtually uncrossable by heavy traffic, while many doorways are low and narrow. Ramps and specially equipped lodgings and toilets are an extreme rarity. You will have to plan your trip carefully and will probably be obliged to restrict yourself to luxury-level hotels and private, hired transport.

VISAS

All foreigners entering Syria must obtain visas from Syrian consulates abroad, but if there is no Syrian representation in your home country, then *in theory* you should be able to get a visa at the border or on arrival at the airport (for details on obtaining visas at the border see the following section). Some travel companies (tourism operators) in Syria claim to be able to organise your visa by faxing them copies of your passports and associated documents.

The easiest and surest way to get your visa is to apply for it in your home country. Try to avoid applying in a country that is not your own or where you don't hold residency as the Syrians look poorly on this – they will ask you for a letter of recommendation from your own embassy (which is often an expensive and time-consuming proposition); at worst they'll turn you down flat. In fact, US citizens must get their visas at home, as US embassies abroad have a policy of not issuing letters of recommendation – however, amusingly, they will issue a letter stating that they don't issue letters of recommendation. If your home country doesn't have a Syrian embassy or consulate, then there's no problem with you applying anywhere else – but be aware of your own countries' restrictions in issuing letters of recommendation. While there are plenty of reports of visitors getting visas without a letter, or in countries where they shouldn't be able to (in theory), it's always better to plan ahead.

At most embassies and consulates you can apply in person or by post and the visa takes from four days to two weeks to issue. There are rarely any problems with getting the visa; however, if there is any evidence of a visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories in your passport, your application will be refused (for more details regarding passports and visiting Israel and the Palestinian Territories, see p390). There are two

types of visa issued – single- and multiple-entry – but both are valid only for 15 days inside Syria and must be used within three months of the date of issue (six months for multiple-entry visas). Don't be misled by the words on the visa stating a validity of three months – this simply means the visa is valid *for presentation* for three months. Once in Syria it is easy to get your visa extended in the major cities and some towns. Offices where this can be done are noted in the text.

Visas at the Border

The official line is that if there is no Syrian representation in your country, you are entitled to be issued a visa on arrival at the border, airport or port. Conversely, there are multiple Syrian consulates in Australia but there have been plenty of emails from Aussie travellers who managed to get a visa at the Turkey–Syria border with no problems. It's a situation that seems largely governed by the whim of the individual immigration official. Because of this, our advice is get your visa in advance. If that's not possible in your own country then consider picking up the visa en route on your travels. Note that some people have been reporting waits of up to eight hours at the border for faxes from Damascus to get entry visas.

Getting Your Visa in the Middle East

In Jordan, the Syrian embassy in Amman issues visas only to nationals and residents of Jordan and to nationals of countries that have no Syrian representation. So, if you are from a country such as the UK, the USA or France, which has a Syrian embassy, then officially you cannot get a Syrian visa in Jordan. In Egypt, the Syrian embassy in Cairo issues visas to *all nationalities* on the same or next day, depending on how early in the morning you lodge your application. For Australians and Canadians the visa is free, Americans pay around US\$34, UK citizens pay about US\$60 and most other nationalities pay around US\$54; note these prices are approximate and readers have reported paying different amounts.

In Turkey, you can get Syrian visas in both Ankara and Istanbul without too much of a problem. Australians and Canadians pay nothing, while New Zealanders pay about US\$6. German, French and US citizens pay

more, while Brits take all the prizes, paying about US\$60. Nonresidents in Turkey need a letter of recommendation from their embassy, for which they may be charged. UK citizens, for example, have to pay around UK£35 for this service. Visas in Turkey take one working day to issue. Note that the Syrian consulate in Istanbul is only open for applications from 9.30am to 11am, and for pick-up from 2pm to 2.30pm the next working day.

We've had reports that visas issued in Cairo and Turkey are only valid for presentation within one month; ask for more details when collecting.

Visa Costs

The cost of visas varies according to nationality and where you get them. There seems to be little rhyme or reason in deciding which nationalities pay what, except in the case of UK passport-holders, who always pay a lot. New Zealanders need to apply to Melbourne or Sydney as there's no Syrian representation in New Zealand (the same costs apply).

Visa Extensions

If your stay in Syria is going to be more than 15 days you have to get a visa extension while in the country. This is done at an immigration office, which you'll find in all main towns and cities. The length of extension appears to depend on a combination of what you're willing to ask for and the mood of the official you deal with – it's usually one month. You can get more than one extension.

Extensions are usually only granted on the 14th or 15th day of your stay, so if you apply earlier expect to be knocked back. If, as occasionally happens, you are allowed to extend your visa earlier than this, check that the extension is from the last day of your visa or previous extension and not from the day of your application.

The specifics vary from place to place but there are always several forms to fill in, in French, usually containing questions repeated several times in slightly different ways. You need from three to six passport photos. The cost is never more than US\$1. Processing time varies from on-the-spot to come back the following day. Damascus and Aleppo are about the most tedious places to extend your visa, while small towns like Deir ez-Zur or Tartus are the most straightforward.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

As a woman traveller in Syria you can expect little verbal harassment and virtually none if you're with a male companion. The banter is usually inane proposals of marriage or even declarations of undying love, but harassment can also take the form of leering and sometimes of being followed.

If you are being harassed, and if you're in a crowded area, a decent, loud '*halas!*' (which means 'enough') should attract enough attention to embarrass the perpetrator. Otherwise, the best bet is to simply ignore it (see also Tips for Women Travellers, opposite).

VISAS

country	single-entry visa	multiple-entry visa
Australia	A\$35*	A\$45*
	A\$75**	A\$100**
Canada	US\$56	US\$108
France	€26	€49
Germany	€30	€49
Ireland	UK£37	UK£70
UK	UK£37	UK£57***
USA	US\$61****	

* If applying in the Melbourne consular office.

** If applying in the Sydney consular office.

*** British citizens looking for a multiple-entry visa should be aware that visas are not currently issued at a point of entry into Lebanon.

**** In the USA the visa cost is the same for single or 'double' entry. The latter allows you to enter twice – useful if you wish to enter Lebanon and return to Syria. Note that the cost includes a US\$16 visa fee and a US\$45 nonrefundable application fee.

TIPS FOR WOMEN TRAVELLERS

There are a number of things that you can do to lessen the likelihood of harassment, but top of the list is to dress modestly. Other helpful tips:

- Wear a wedding band. Generally, Middle Eastern males have more respect for a married woman.
- If you are unmarried but travelling in male company say you are married rather than girlfriend/boyfriend or just friends.
- Don't say that you are travelling alone or just in the company of another female friend – always say that you are with a group.
- Avoid direct eye contact with local men; wearing dark sunglasses can help.
- On public transport, sit next to a woman if possible.
- Be very careful about behaving in a flirtatious or suggestive manner; it could create more problems than you bargained for.
- If you need help for any reason (directions etc), ask a woman first.
- If dining alone, be aware that some places are almost strictly male preserves, such as the local coffeehouse.
- It is perfectly acceptable for a woman to go straight to the front of a queue or to ask to be served first before any men that may be waiting.
- Women should not get into an unlicensed service taxi if there are no other passengers, especially at night.
- Don't respond to any obnoxious comments – act as if you didn't hear them. If they persist, an easy Arabic word to remember is '*Halas!*' ('Enough!'), best recited in a loud, but firm voice. This should attract enough attention for local onlookers to scold the perpetrator(s).
- Going to the nearest public place, such as the lobby of a hotel, usually works in getting rid of any 'admirers'. If they still persist, however, then ask the receptionist to call the police. This will definitely frighten them off.

While Syria is a very safe country for female travellers, the disappearance of a solo female traveller who was staying in Hama in 2007 serves to highlight the dangers of travelling alone in any country.

The majority of Syrians are conservative about dress. The female traveller wearing shorts and a tight T-shirt on the street is, in some people's eyes, confirmation of the worst views held of Western women.

As hot as it gets in Syria you'll have fewer hassles if you don't dress for hot weather in the same way you might at home. Baggy T-shirts and loose cotton trousers or long skirts will protect your skin from the sun and from unwanted comments.

Unfortunately, although dressing conservatively should reduce the incidence of such harassment, it by no means guarantees you'll be left alone.

Some activities, such as sitting in coffeehouses, are usually seen as a male preserve

and although it's OK for Western women to enter, in some places the stares may cause discomfort. Many restaurants have a 'family area' set aside for women and if you are travelling without male company you might feel more comfortable in these sections. As a rule, mixed foreign groups have no problem wherever they sit, including coffeehouses and bars.

Staying in budget hotels can sometimes be problematic if you're alone. You may have to take a room for yourself if there are no other travellers to share with.

WORK

Unless you are working for a multinational and get a posting, possibilities for working in Syria are severely limited. About the only work available might be as a language teacher. The **American Language Center** (ALC; ☎ 011-332 7236) is probably the best place to try your luck, followed by the

British Council (Map p80; ☎ 011-333 0631, fax 332 1467; www.britishcouncil.org/syria; Sharia Karim al-Khalil, off Sharia Maysaloun; 🕒 9am-8pm Sun-Thu, 10am-5pm Sat), both of which are in Damascus.

Because the British Council is smaller and tends to recruit directly from the UK rather than locally, the ALC should be your first port of call. The ALC prefers people with a Bachelor's degree and some form of teaching experience. A Certificate in Eng-

lish Language Teaching to Adults (Celta), or second language qualification, knowledge of Arabic, postgraduate studies and prior experience in teaching improve your chances.

Native French-speaking travellers could try their luck at the **Centre Culturel Français** (Map pp82-3; ☎ 011-231 6181; fax 231 6194; off Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh, Bahsa; 🕒 8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat) in Damascus.