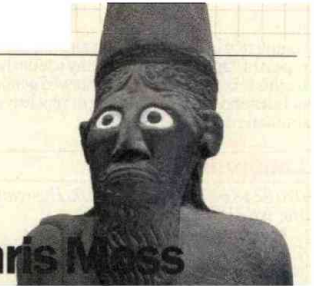


Travel

Big trips, short breaks and going green Edited by Chris Moss



Road to Damascus

St Paul was converted there.
So was **Chris Moss**

After the blinding midday sunlight, the inky dark came as some relief. As my pupils dilated, I could make out holes in the ceiling left by bullets fired during an uprising against the French in the 1920s. In the thin shafts of light I saw rows of veils on mannequins' heads, a perfumier's kiosk straight out of 'The Arabian Nights', a shelf of suspender-belts and stockings, a luthier's, a wedding-gown shop and then, coming first as a heady aroma and then as a palette of warm hues, a spice store, packed with cardamom, cumin, lemongrass and rose-petal. In the middle of the thoroughfare was a man dressed as a genie, wearing a fez, a crimson waistcoat and a treble clef of a moustache, and serving cups of tamarind juice.

If I knew more about the Middle East, I might have guessed that the old El-Hamidiyeh souk of Damascus would be a wondrous place. I hate shopping, but you'd have to be a miser not to enjoy the colour and clamour of this classic Arabian arcade. Off the main drag were narrow alleys, dimly lit but thronging with people. There were women in full burkas, lads in football shirts, girls in hipster jeans, groups on pilgrimage from Iran and delivery boys slaloming through on bicycles. At a shop called Bakdash, two men were preparing artisanal ice cream, thickening it using wooden mallets according to an age-old technique.

Licking my cone, I window-shopped – although there were no windows – for a full hour until the long arc of the souk came to an end and I emerged into a small square. Above me were the lofty columns of a temple of Jupiter dating from the first century AD. Just beyond,

and framed by the Roman ruins, was the Umayyad Mosque, built around AD715. A Christian church dedicated to St John the Baptist once stood on the same spot and Muslims believe Christ will come down from heaven on Judgment Day and use one of the three minarets of the mosque as his portal. Before all this – we're talking 2500BC – there was an Assyrian sanctuary here. It is this layering of important cultures and the extant architecture that won Damascus's Old City Unesco World Heritage Site status in 1979.

A melting pot for traders, with foundations that go deeply back in time – it's one of the oldest permanent human settlements on the planet – the Syrian capital is a heady, stimulating, enlightening place to pass a weekend in the sun. I confess that I didn't do much homework on Syria (not counting a theology degree two decades ago) and my preconceptions didn't extend very far beyond a mental image of glum-looking President Bashar al-Assad, lies and defamation from Washington DC's PR operation and St Paul's conversion on the city's outskirts. But, bizarrely, the lack of prior knowledge made the trip all the more edifying, as well as exciting.

The National Museum of Damascus, built by the French in 1936, provides a crash course in the Ancient Near East. The most eye-catching rooms are those containing sarcophagi, beautiful items of jewellery and stone idols, and there's even a full-size third-century synagogue, transferred piece by piece from Dura-Europos on the Euphrates river. But the most stirring exhibit, for me, was a tiny, cylindrical teaching tool made from clay and dating from the second millennium BC. It was etched with letters from the Ugaritic alphabet, the first language using characters signifying sounds instead of cuneiform pictographs – and the

ancestor of Phoenician, Hebrew, Greek and, of course, English.

I spent the late afternoon inside the mosque. It was my first time inside a church of Islam, though whatever expectations I might have had would in any case have been shattered. The Umayyad complex is a huge walled piazza that could grace any Italian city, though without the cafés and bars. As the sun slipped slowly down, kids ran about playing, couples took pictures of each other, families lounged around and chatted and groups of pilgrims followed a turbaned mullah wielding his official guide's flag. Adjacent to this tranquil, but highly social, open space was a large prayer hall – the first Islamic nave to be built to the now

Christian quarter (I'd wake to the bells the next morning). I strolled down Straight Street – the main east-west thoroughfare, given its rectitude by the Romans. It was on Straight Street that Acts of the Apostles locates the house of Judas (not the betrayer, just a nice Damascene chap), where Saul (aka St Paul) stayed for three days, fasting after being told by Jesus to stop persecuting him. Now it's where many of the city's antique stores are found. In each window were pretty coloured glasses, abstract Arabic artworks, hookahs, lyres, books and bric-à-brac. The shop owners were pulling down their shutters. The wail of the Salat rang out over the city. It was the fifth and final prayer of the day – Isha – when Muslims ask for guidance and mercy before retiring for the night. After the full-on exposure to a teeming, thrilling city straddling modernity and the ancient world, both exotic and at the root of my own culture, the night and the summons to prayer came as some relief. Damascus was my first foray into the Middle East the first of many, I hope.

Calls to prayer rippled across the city canopy

classic spread-eagle design – where a handful of men were kneeling and praying. But most of the faithful were resting, taking time out, reflecting, strolling, talking in hushed tones.

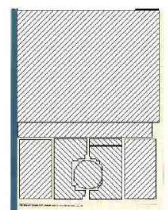
As the crescent moon came up (honestly) calls to prayer began to ripple across the city canopy, and it was time to head for dinner. Syrian hospitality is all about abundance and generosity, and at the very smart Naranj restaurant, a request for a small sampler of dishes was treated with due contempt. Up on the terrace, I was in a group of five, and we feasted on enough tabouleh, nutty houmous, kibbeh, cheese and spinach, chicken croquettes, moutabal (aubergine dip), stuffed vine leaves and myriad other delicious Arab-Levantine dishes for a family of 20. It was helped down with a bottle of Ksara from Lebanon, after which came a binlid of doughnuts and other honey-coated carbo-bombs that rounded off the evening and the collective waistline.

It was a short walk back to my hotel, a converted Arab townhouse in the

While in Syria

Turn left at Iraq to take in two more World Heritage Sites
 Damascus offers several millennia of delights but if it's your first time in Syria, you'll want to see a few other attractions. The easiest route is a long zigzag across the country taking in three Unesco World Heritage sites.

The first zig was east towards the Iraqi border. The road soon leads you out of Damascus's suburbs. Nothing much grows in central Syria and the



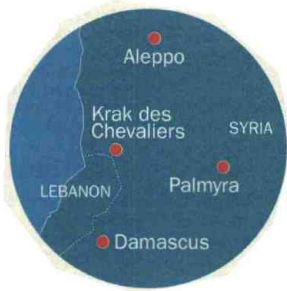
only colour to break the monotony of desert was to be found in posters of Assad, always with the national flag.

After a tea stop at the **Bagdad Café 66**, we came to a junction: right for Iraq, left for Palmyra. Huge lorries rumbled by, freighting fuel and carrying food aid, medicines, timber, textiles and cotton. There have always been caravans of goods in the Fertile Crescent. At Palmyra, 120km south of the Euphrates, we toured the Temple of Ba'al that sprang up in the mid-first century, when Palmyra was a wealthy hub on the Silk Road linking Persia with the ports of Roman Syria and Phoenicia. At dusk, with dromedaries winding between the gates and pillars of a colonnaded street, it was timeless – as was the vendor on a motorbike who insisted, and insisted, and insisted I buy a necklace made from camel bone.

The following day we zagged to the **Krak des Chevalliers**, the Crusader fortress built in the eleventh century and described by TE Lawrence as 'perhaps the most wholly admirable castle in the world'. From outside, it's an impressive hulk of a building, with thick walls and one single link to the world beyond – an aqueduct gagging for some drops of poison to punish the Crusaders within. Inside is a labyrinth of corridors, patios, chapels and stone-walled rooms that served as the bedrooms, kitchens and dining rooms of the Knights Hospitallers.

The last stop was **Aleppo**. Dusk was approaching as we arrived to see inside the city's citadel, built between the third millennium BC and twelfth century AD. The entrance to this mighty bulwark is tremendous: a long stone ramp leading up to huge doors. Inside are all sorts of trick windows and spyholes for watching (and, when necessary, pouring hot oil on) unwelcome visitors.

That evening we had shisha on our hotel roof and watched a million twinkling lights come on in the ancient city. The silhouette of the huge **tell** (artificial mound), on which the citadel was erected, was visible. Aleppo, like all of Syria, was truly magical to look at yet many of its mysteries are hidden, buried beneath a restless, chaotic modernity.



Get packing

Tour

Exodus (www.exodus.co.uk/08458639601) offers a 16-day highlights tour of Syria and Jordan, taking in Damascus and Aleppo as well as the Krak des Chevalliers, the ruins of Palmyra and Jerash, the dead city of Rasafa and the preserved ruins at Bosra in Syria. The trip also includes Jordan's Wadi Rum and Petra. Prices from £1,499 including BMI flights.

Fly

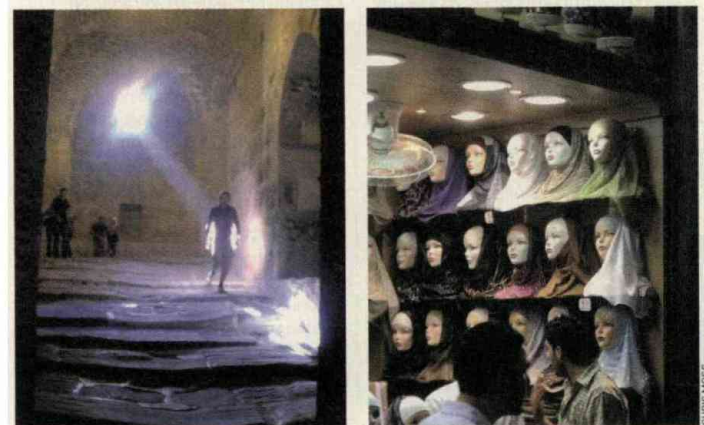
BMI (www.flybmi.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Damascus, with connections to Aleppo. Return flights from £336 including taxes.

Visa

A single-entry visa for UK citizens costs £32. Visit the Syrian Embassy website at www.syremb.com.

Eat

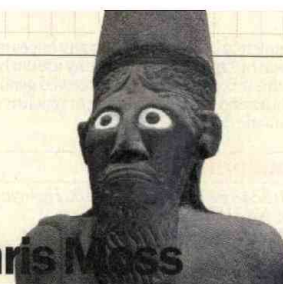
Naranj (Lattakia Street, +963 11 541 36 00) has a spacious ground floor, buzzing with locals; the outdoor terrace on the first floor is great for shisha and for meze marathons.



Damascene-setters Clockwise from opposite: The Westway meets downtown Damascus; Stone idol at National Museum; Tamarind juice seller in El-Hamidiyeh souk; Veils for sale; The road to Palmyra; Chris Moss sees the light in Aleppo's citadel

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GREG FURNESS