

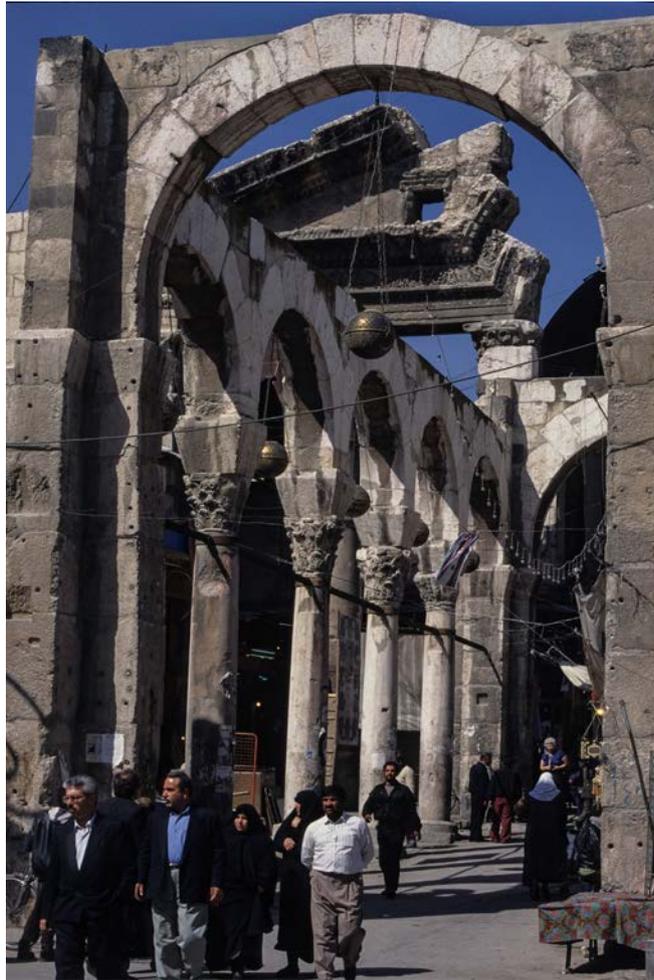
Memories of Syria

before its destruction by civil war

Back in the summer of 1995, Jan and I took a trip round much of Syria. We had really enjoyed a trip to Jordan three years before, and had then been persuaded to set up a geological tour of Jordan with an extension to some sites in Syria. So we flew into Damascus, rented a car (a rather old VW Beetle), and wandered around much of southern Syria for ten days. Ostensibly searching for sites of geological interest, we included the classic historical sites and also came to appreciate this absolutely delightful country. Syria had much to offer, and received less than its due share of visitors and travellers. In each of the following two years, the geological tours were great successes, and participants really enjoyed the friendly people of Syria in places that had not suffered from mass tourism.

All changed in 2011 when Assad's government forces embarked on violent suppression of dissidents, rebels and ordinary people who were demanding improvements to their life-style. It was part of what became known as the Arab Spring. But change did not happen to the good, and the country descended into Civil War, which continues until the time of writing in 2020. Multiple factions have been involved, worst of all being the arrival in 2014 of the destructive Islamic jihadists of ISIS (also known as Daesh) who extended their so-called caliphate into Syria from its origins in war-torn Iraq.

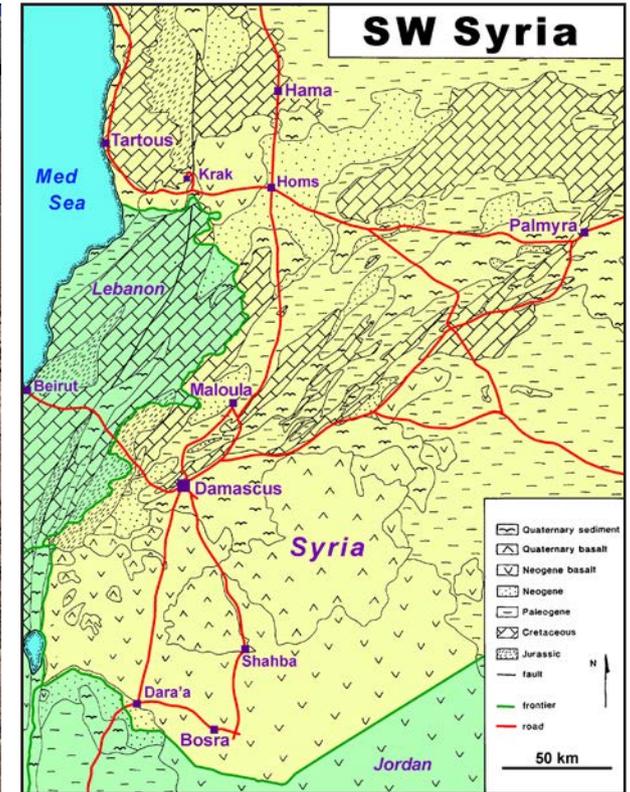
Consequently, Syria is now little more than a shadow of its former self. Millions of Syrians have fled abroad as helpless refugees; the civil structure of the nation has fallen apart, and so much of Syria has been damaged or destroyed, including many of its spectacular historical sites. Collateral damage from military advances has been inevitable, but has been far increased with deliberate destruction by the followers of ISIS who simply destroyed anything that did not conform to their current beliefs.



Grand entrance to the main souq in Damascus.

Syria's mountains are formed of limestone, so appear as diagonal brickwork in the map's geological background.

Not our photo, but one by UN, showing war damage in a suburb of Damascus.



These notes and photographs are simply intended to record a glimpse of what was once a delightful country, so they are written partly in the past tense; they were compiled in 2020. We saw only a fraction of Syria, and were little more than passing tourists, but what we saw was good, and much of it might be rather different now; we have not been back to see for ourselves. One can only hope that Syria can cease its internal fighting, can recover the spirit of a great people, and can someday even welcome a return of visitors from afar.

Damascus

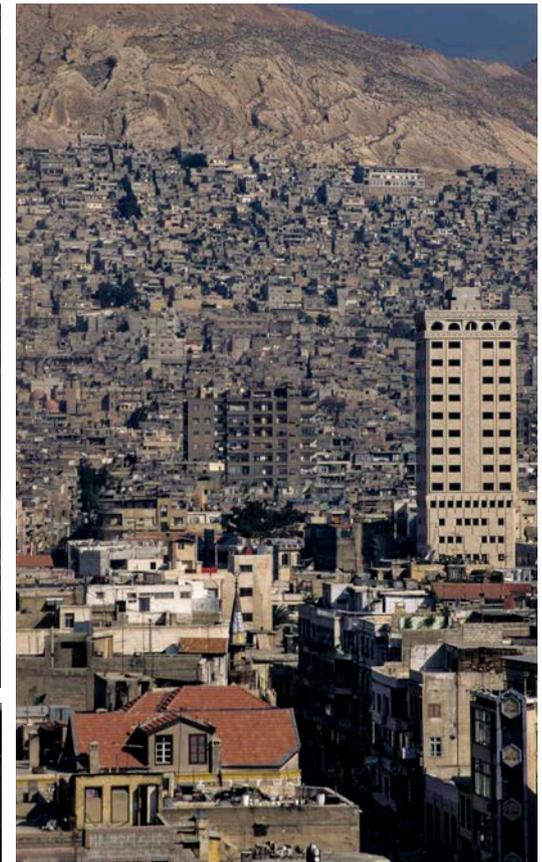
The Old City was fascinating, with the western gate leading straight into Al Hamidiyah Souk. This was the main covered market street, a bit touristy because it was the most accessible; more peaceful and more typical covered souks lay just to the south of Al Hamidiyah. The Omayyad Mosque was open to visitors, though ladies had to wear long robes that were provided. Its architecture is splendid; a temple stood on the site nearly 3000 years ago, but the current structure is only 100 years old. The tomb of St John the Baptist is inside.

Beyond the mosque, a southern covered souk continued east into the uncovered Bab Sharqi Street. This is the “street which is called Straight” where Ananias searched for St Paul (Acts 9:11). It was almost unreal to walk down a street that had been there in biblical times. Now it extended through the heart of the Christian Quarter of the old city, which contained various chapels and churches in a lovely maze of backstreets.

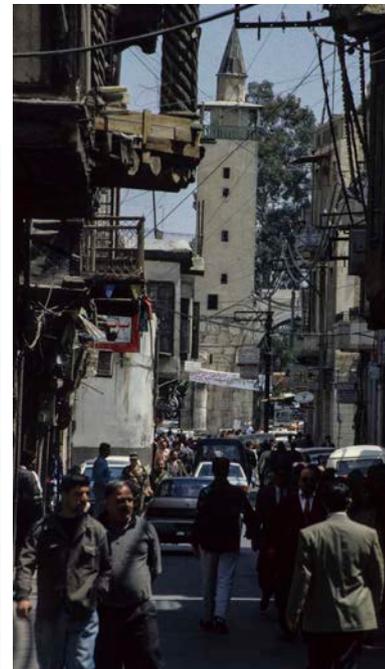
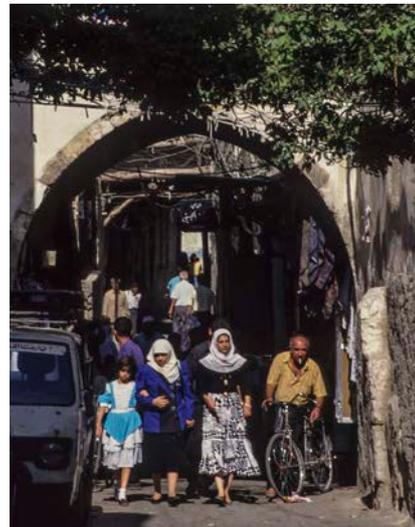
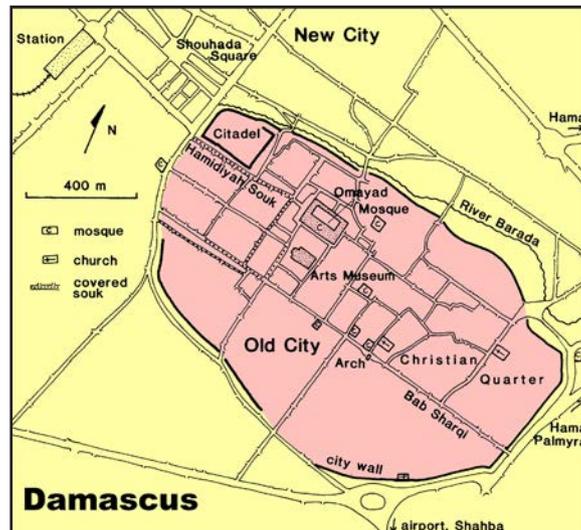
Parts of Damascus have been bombed in the on-going war, but the main damage has been in one of the suburbs, and Damascus has not seen the level of destruction reached in Aleppo and Raqqa.



Scenes along Bab Sharqi, the 'street which is called Straight', in the Old City of Damascus.



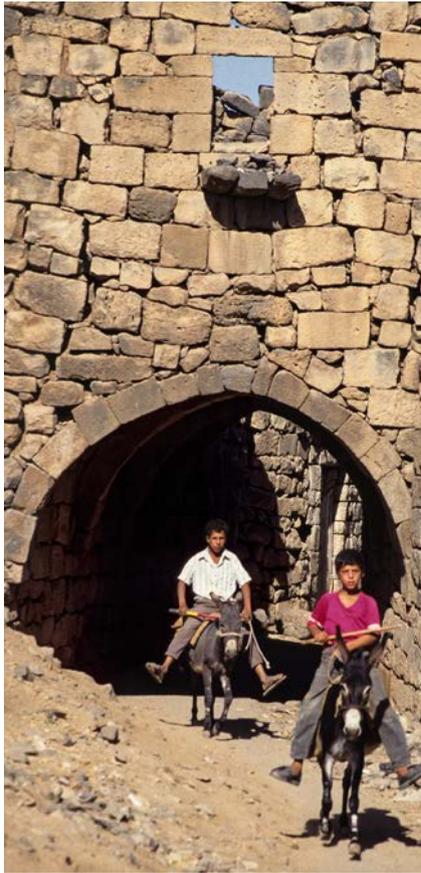
Damascus suburbs spread onto the mountains.



Courtyard of the Omayyad Mosque.

Bosra

Way to the south of Damascus, Bosra was once the northern capital of the Nabataean state, until it was annexed by the Romans in 106 AD, who built the 15,000 seat theatre and greatly expanded the city's structures; it continued to flourish through Byzantine and Christian periods. The Mosque of Omar was built in 720 AD (the only older mosques are in Medina and Cairo). The massive Citadel was built around the much earlier Roman theatre in time to be a fortress during the Crusades, though it was invaded by the Mongols in 1261 and was strengthened through the Middle Ages, when Bosra was again an important trading centre. After about 1700, the site went into serious decline. The new town was built in, on, and partly of, the Roman remains; relocation and re-excavation had been ongoing. The massive and well preserved theatre, inside the fortified Citadel, was magnificent, and apparently suffered minimal damage during the war.



Above: the magnificent Roman theatre at Bosra.

Left, both: among the Roman ruins at Bosra.

Right: road from Shahba across Jabal al-Arab.

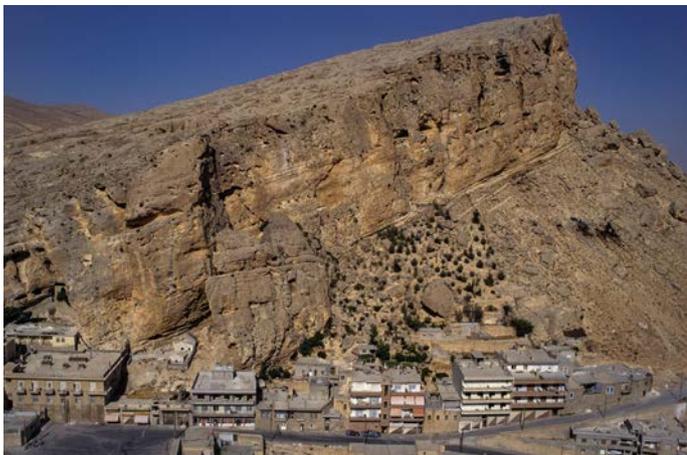
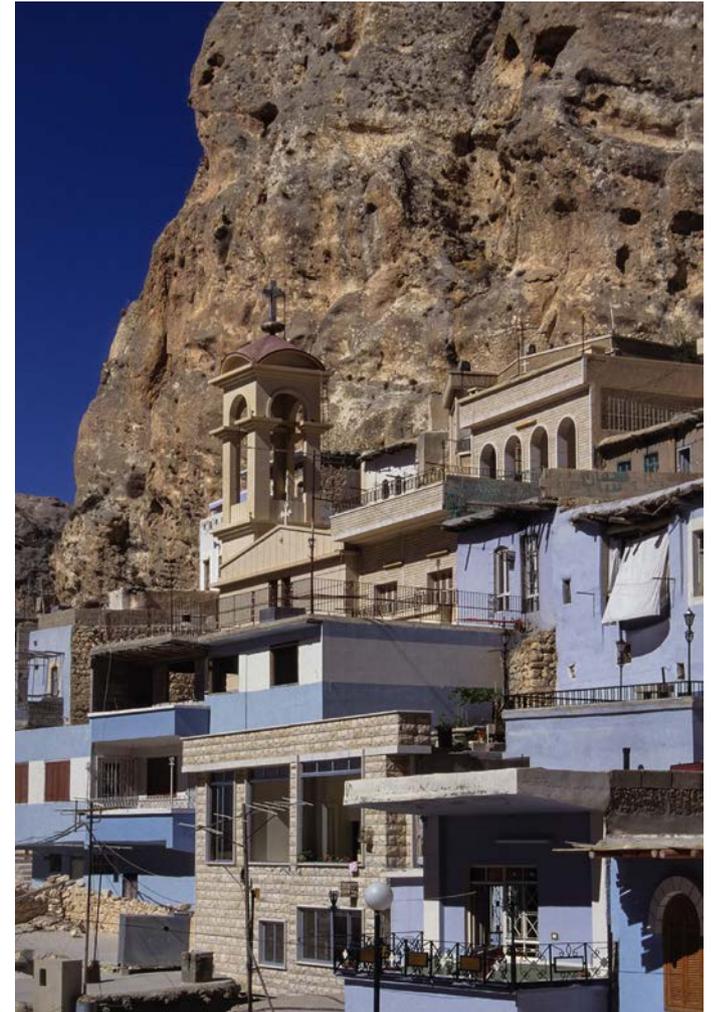
Below: dancing in the Bosra theatre.



Maloula

A cascade of colour-washed houses and Greek Orthodox Catholic churches make this brilliant small town unusually attractive, set right up against a great cliff. A maze of paths, partly covered, straggles between and under the houses of the old quarter; they provide a fascinating walk with the street going under roofs in between houses, all very picturesque. The Convent of St Thecla (Deir Mar Taqla) had been built around a holy, natural cave in the cliff. Its main church lost its roof during the civil war. A spectacular path beside the convent leads up a ravine to the plateau atop the limestone cliff. Communication with the locals can be tricky as they still speak Aramaic (the first language of Jesus).

Between Damascus and Maloula, the hill-top Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya was open, and it seemed strange that we could just wander round, into the chapels, the kitchens, and all the main rooms.



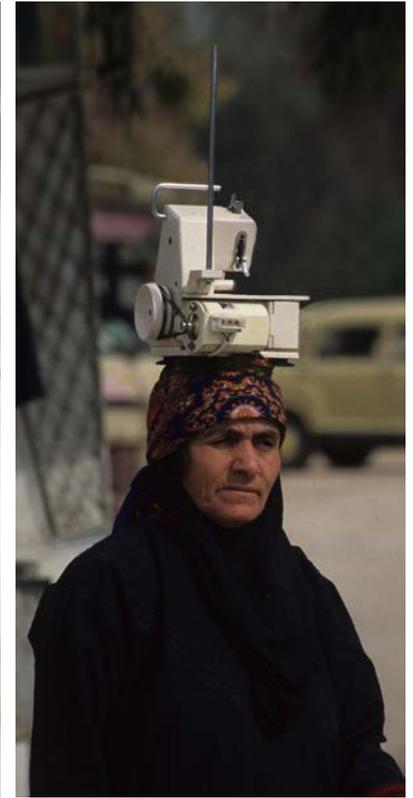
Top: the houses and churches of Maloula that are crammed into the mouth of its main ravine.

Above: one of the picturesque streets that pass beneath the houses in Maloula's old quarter.

Left: the limestone escarpment that is breached by Maloula's two ravines and extends above the newer houses on the town's outskirts.

Above right: one of Maloula's churches built against the cliff.

Right: the Convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya, standing high above its small modern town.



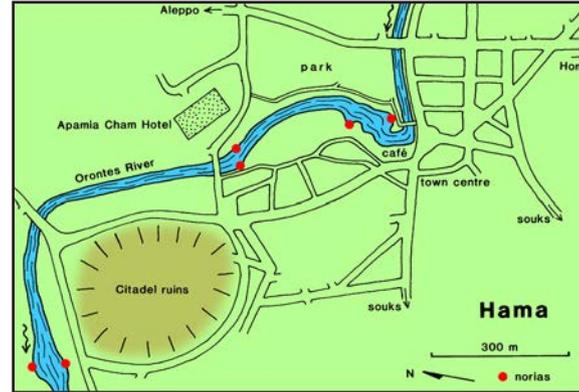
Among the people of Damascus: clockwise from above: carrying loads on the head, traditional and modern; full veils are not common; Jan and the baker; a warm welcome from a local for a foreign visitor; traditional water vendors have rather become visitor attractions; the art of henna; a procession heralded by many trumpets.



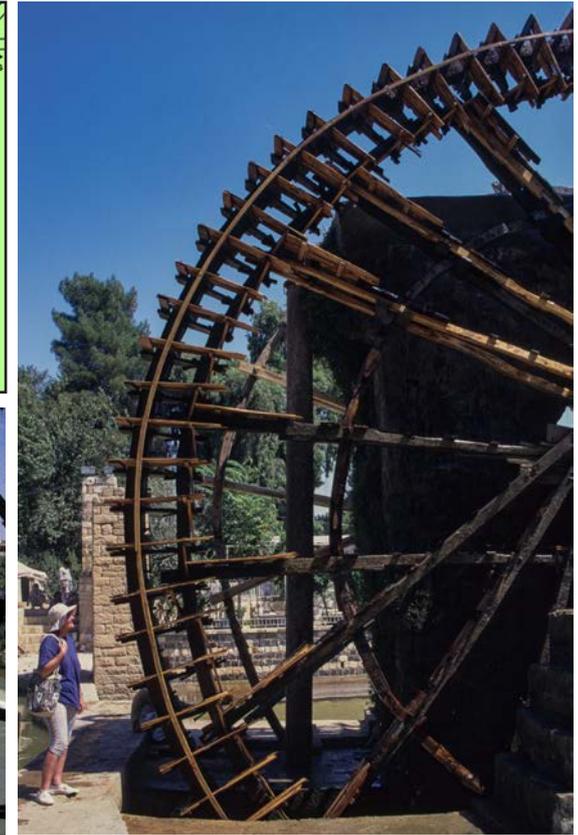
Hama

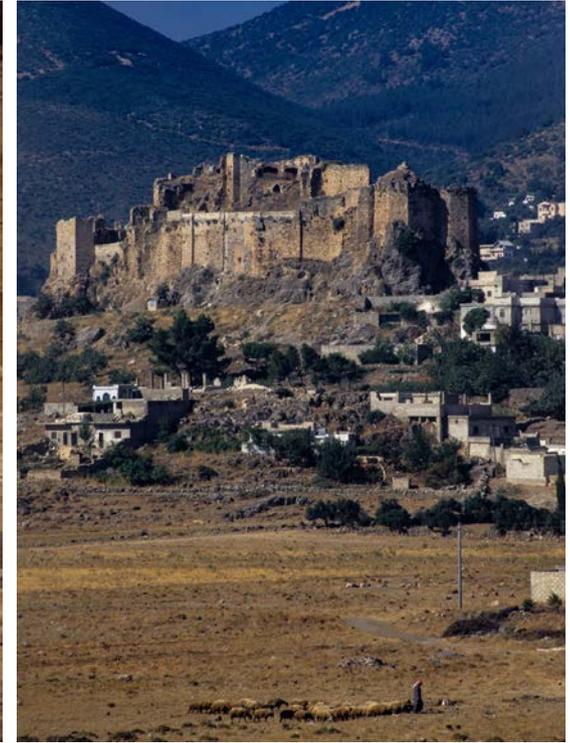
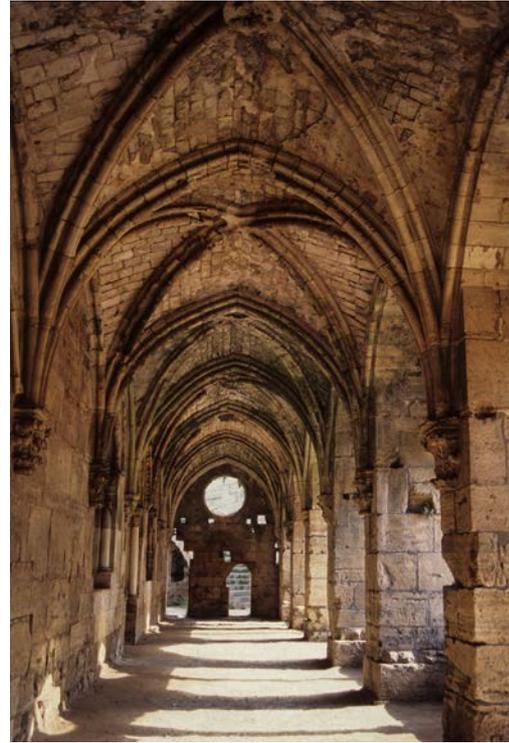
Hama is a delightful city on the banks of the Orontes River. It is famous for its beautiful waterwheels (norias); there were once 185 of them in the valley, built centuries ago to lift water into aqueducts level with the valley terraces, for irrigation and the town supply. The aqueducts are now disused, but a handful of the norias were still turning. Not only beautiful to behold, the most amazing feature of these giant water wheels was the creaking sounds that they made as their huge wooden axles scraped around their wooden seatings. The area by the river had a lively social scene, with cafes and non-alcoholic bars by the water, and were shops open until late. It seemed to be a really friendly town, also distinguished by the large proportion of women wearing veils, whereas the more normal apparel for the ladies of Syria was a tight white headscarf that just covered the hair.

During particularly nasty fighting in 2011 between government forces and a strong rebel base that had formed within the city, much of Hama was virtually destroyed, but it appears that the river and the norias were largely spared from damage..



Scenes among just some of the magnificent norias of Hama, with ancient timbers being tended by one of the few remaining noria craftsmen, and new housing for the modern city.





Krak des Chevaliers

Also known as Hissn al-Akrad, this is the finest surviving Crusader castle. Building started in 1170 and it could house a garrison of 4000. It stands on a crag of limestone commanding strategically important views over the passes, through the mountains from the coast to the desert interior. The castle is truly massive; how it was captured by the Mamluk army of Sultan Baibars, in 1271, defies the imagination. It was the target of artillery fire during the recent civil war; details are unknown, but the damage to such a massive edifice is likely to be superficial. The stone arching in the lower levels was especially impressive.



*Clockwise from top left:
Krak above its modern town;
inside Krak des Chevaliers;
shepherd and his flock below Masyaf,
in the coastal hills;
terraced farmland near Masyaf;
tanks in the desert;
desert road west of Damascus;
a grand new house on the way.*





Friendly Syrian country folk, waving greetings to foreigners at the roadside, and in a village market; the girls' impromptu dancing is amid the ruins of Palmyra.





Tartous

Between Hama and the coast, the limestone hills were productive rural Syria with endless farming and terraced hillsides. Tartous is a fairly modern coastal city of little appeal though its street cafes were very lively in the cool of the evenings. Arwad Island, just a short ferry ride offshore was potentially more interesting, as the entire island is occupied by a town that was an independent kingdom in ancient times. It has a maze of narrow, twisting streets, all of a bit scruffy, and it was the one place in Syria where the locals were less than friendly; perhaps because it was rather spoiled by being inundated by tourists from the inland cities,

Above: foreshore and harbour at Tartous.

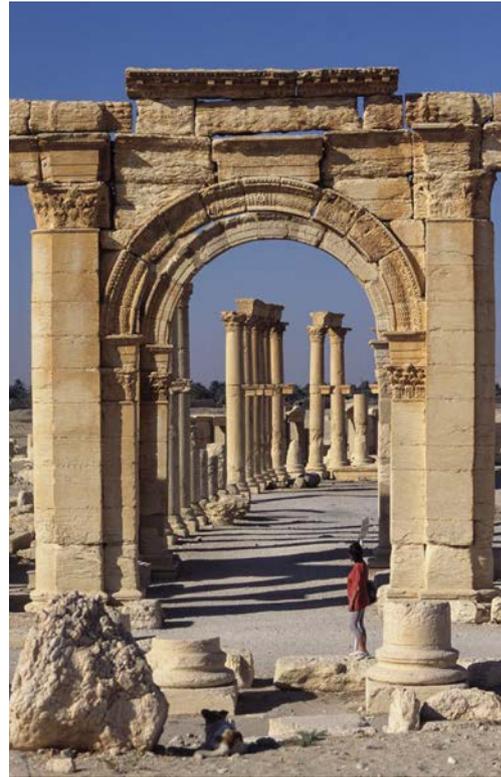
Right and below: beach-front local mosque, traditional boat-building, peaceful back-street, and busy harbour on the island of Arwad.



Palmyra

The town of palms was known originally and in modern Arabic as Tadmor (town of dates). The history of the site is long and it was thriving in the time of Alexander the Great from about 300 BC. Most of what stands now derives from the Roman occupation. The Temple of Bel was built in 32 AD, and most of the colonnaded street dates from the 2nd century. In the twilight of Roman power, Palmyra became an independent state under King Odainat in 258 AD, and he was followed by the charismatic and beautiful Queen Zenobia. But Rome reacted, and the city was sacked by Aurelian in 273. It was finally destroyed by a major earthquake in 1089. The site was rediscovered in 1678; excavations started in 1924, with increased renovation since 1950, and the resident Arab villagers have resettled in the new town of Tadmor.

It is a massive site, spread across the desert with open space on both sides of great lines of stone columns and a scatter of surviving stone buildings. Largest of these was the Temple of Bel, which was well preserved in 1997, but was deliberately blown up by ISIS in 2015. Prior to its destruction, it featured some massive blocks of carved stone standing in place over the inner shrines, with tunnels and drains beneath the outer courtyard. Columns stood on arches over the sunken entrance (for sacrificial animals) just north of the entrance.

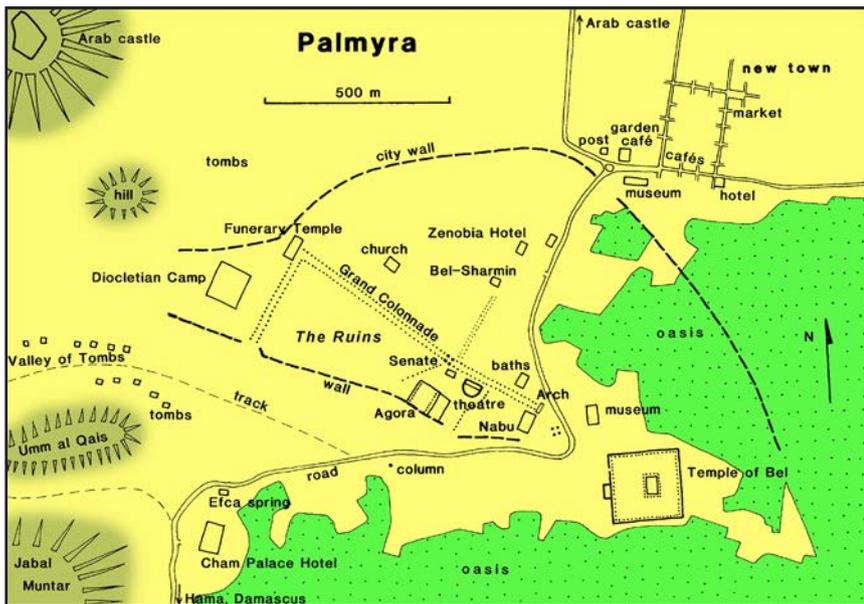


Above: one of the minor arches at Palmyra.



Right: view across Palmyra from the Arab castle with the Temple of Bel in the distance, beyond part of the Grand Colonnade.

Below: desert and hills west of Palmyra.



The Grand Colonnade has the most magnificent lines of tall stone columns that once bordered the main street of the great trading town. Fortunately they did not attract the wrath of ISIS, and survived the war almost untouched. The eastern end was marked by the beautiful Monumental Arch, but this was subsequently destroyed by ISIS.

Restoration of the fabulous structures of Palmyra is already promised by the enthusiastic archaeologists of Syria's Directorate of Antiquities, with active Russian support, but any real progress is dependent on the military and political situations returning to some sort of stability.

*Tony and Jan Waltham
Nottingham, 2020
tony@geophotos.co.uk*



Above and right: the Grand Colonnade, which survives in Palmyra.

Below: the Monumental Arch and the Temple of Bel, both destroyed by ISIS.

