

THE MIDDLE EAST'S BIGGEST TRAVEL MAGAZINE

JULY 2010

KANOO WORLD TRAVELLER

Produced in International Media Production Zone

The Real Mexico

Immerse yourself in
the untouched beauty
of the Riviera Maya

KING OF THE CASTLE

The royal residences
you can stay at

INSIDE TRACK

- + Learn to tango
in Buenos Aires
- + Haggle in the
souks of Syria

TOTAL GUIDE

Croatia & beyond

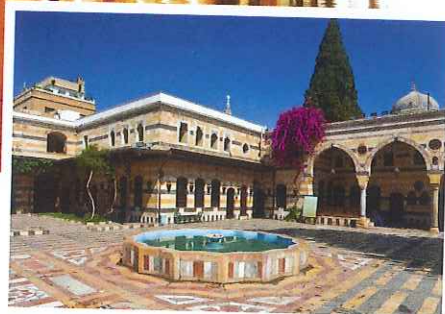
Scrambling around Roman ruins; sailing celeb-style
down an island-speckled coast; exploring capital cities...
Want to do it all? This is the region for you



COMPLIMENTARY NIGHTS AT AL MAHA, KIDS GO FREE AT JUMEIRAH... THE GCC'S HOTTEST SUMMER OFFERS ARE HERE



Umayyad Mosque.
Right: Azem Palace.



Visit Damascus

Sophie Osman enjoys all that Syria's historical capital has to offer.

When compared with its gregarious siblings – Cairo, Beirut – Damascus may not be the most commonly talked-about Middle Eastern holiday destination, but that's because the 'City of Jasmine' is a well-kept secret. Its raw beauty, not yet touched by hordes of tourists, does for the imagination what a day at the spa can do for the body: the chance to lose yourself in its sights and sounds will leave you feeling relaxed, well-fed (and in possession of an enviable photo album).

Of most interest to visitors will be the 'Old City', best described as the historical heart of

the capital due to the myriad interesting sites within the area ('New' and 'Old' are divided by a 2,000-year-old wall, which also provides a handy navigation point). A colourful labyrinth of souks, mosques, street-stalls and bath houses, the Old City is lent an air of mystery by its endless alluring alleyways. Old buildings lean against each other like elderly married couples, fused together over time and shared histories. Adorning them are large, decorative wooden doors hiding beautiful open courtyards, which form the centrepiece to many traditional houses in Damascus.

A chic handful of these residences have been converted into boutique hotels, offering guests a relaxed ambience combining Arabic furniture, beautiful mosaics and jewel-coloured lamps (see 'Where to stay'). When it comes to dining, Damascus not only offers some of the best Arabic food in the Middle East but also allows you to feel the warmth of the renowned Syrian hospitality. Meals can go on for hours as you lie back on the cushioned seats and enjoy the courtyard setting: in fact whether you're there for a

modest coffee and shisha or a full five-course feast, the entire experience will be shrouded in a haze of tranquillity – a perfect reflection of the Syrian approach to life.

Energetic explorers

★ The jewel in Damascus' crown is the beautiful [Umayyad Mosque](#), which is considered to be one of the holiest in the world. The main entrance is separated from the busy Souk al-Hamidiyya by a square humming with people. The vast courtyard is arresting by virtue of its sheer size, with visitors stopping in their tracks to gaze up at the minarets.

★ Take a glimpse at one of the most impressive Damascan courtyard homes with a visit to the [Azem Palace](#) (near Souk al-Bzouriyya, Old City), which provides a striking example of the region's black and white striped stonework. Built in 1749, palatial rooms with beautiful painted ceilings are complemented by the exterior spaces.

★ After all that walking, even the most sprightly explorer will need to kick back and relax. A visit to one of the hammams in the Old City will leave you feeling as good as new, and ready for your next adventure. Check out the [Hammam az-](#)



Clockwise from here: Local Dessert, Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque, Courtyard at the Old Vine, The hotel's luxurious dwellings, Beit Rumman.



OLDIE BUT GOLDIE: Damascus is the oldest continually inhabited city in the world – records show it could have been lived in as early as 6300BC. **SAY A LITTLE PRAYER:** Damascus is said to hold a whopping 2,000 mosques. **BUS-Y CITY:** The main form of transportation is minibus – there are over 100 lines, but no schedule and few official stops, so be sure to shout when you need to hop off.

Zahariyya, close to the Umayyad Mosque, which has been getting people squeaky clean since the 12th century.

Souk-a-holics

★ Directly opposite the Umayyad Mosque is **Souk al-Hamidiyya**. Bustling and energetic, this corrugated-iron-covered area is shady and dim – except where sunlight enters through the bullet holes left in the roof by French enemy planes in 1925. The entrance to the souk from the mosque side will have you rooting for your camera as you try to take it all in: countless women haggling with shopkeepers, extended

families meeting and greeting one another, tea-sellers propping their bicycles up to support the hot urns, and tourists weaving their way through the madness, guidebooks in hand.

★ It's worth stopping for a few moments to watch the crowd fight tooth and nail to enter **Bakdash** (Souk al-Hamidiyya) – a shop selling cones of ice-cream rolled in pistachio nuts. You won't miss it; just look out for the huge mountain of ice-cream in the window. It's well worth braving the crush for this sweet treat.

★ If it's edible wares you're after, visit **Souk**

Al-Bzouriyya (just off Straight Street, Old City) and pick up a selection of famous Damascan sweets: biscuits, nuts, nougat, pistachio – you name it, it's here. The air is infused with the scents of spices and warm bread mingling with strong coffee; you'll be snapping them up (and haggling like a local to get them) in no time at all.

WHERE TO STAY

NO EXPENSE SPARED Old Vine Hotel

92 Ammara Jouaniyeh, Ammara, Old Damascus (www.oldvinehotel.com). A luxury boutique hotel with just nine beautifully appointed suites and rooms, centred around

a relaxing courtyard in the heart of the Old City. From \$150, room only.

MIDDLE OF THE ROAD Beit Rumman

72 Qishleh St, John the Baptist intersection, main road of Bab Toma (www.bietrumman.com). Friendly, warm and welcoming, this traditional boutique hotel is nothing short of spectacular, with comfortable rooms, helpful staff and delicious food. From \$100, room only.

WHERE TO EAT

NO EXPENSE SPARED Leila's Restaurant and Terrace

Souk al Abbabiyya (+963 11 544 5900).

With unrivalled views over the Umayyad Mosque, this glittering rooftop haunt dishes up lentil kibbeh, mixed grills and an excellent sweet cheese dessert called 'mamoul'. Get there early though – this is a popular spot. Main meals from \$10.

MIDDLE OF THE ROAD Bab Sharqi

Sharia Bab Sharqi. One of the city's best (and most in-demand) people-watching spots, this little pizzeria is a hit with hip students and offers a terrific 'toshka' (Armenian-style toasted meat and cheese sandwich) as well as hearty Italian fare. Main meals from \$3.