

Important tourism facts about Syria

Understand

Syria has a population of 17.8 million people (UN, 2003), of which 6 million are concentrated in the capital Damascus. A moderately large country (185,180 sq km or 72,150 sq miles), Syria is situated centrally within the Middle East region and has land borders with Turkey in the north, with Palestine and Lebanon in the south, and with Iraq and Jordan in the east and south-east respectively.

The population of Syria is predominately Arab (90%), with large minorities from other ethnic groups: Kurds, Armenians, Circassians and Turks. The official language is Arabic, but other tongues that are occasionally understood include Kurdish, Armenian, Turkish, French and English. The Syrian Republic is officially secular, but is nonetheless greatly influenced by the majority religion of Islam (90% of the population, split between 74% Sunni Muslim and 16% other Muslim). There is a large Christian minority that amounts to about 10% of the population.

The President of Syria is Bashar al-Assad, who replaced his father Hafez al-Assad soon after his death on 10 June 2000. Having studied to become an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) in Damascus and London, Bashar was groomed for the presidency after the 1994 car accident of his elder brother Basil. As a consequence, he joined the army and became colonel in 1999. Bashar's modernising credentials were somewhat boosted by his role in a domestic anti-corruption drive. More recently, however, Bashar's style of leadership has more closely come to resemble that of his father as a non-democratically elected and autocratic ruler, after an initial period of increased openness. Bashar's position as head of the Syrian state rests on his presidency of the Baath Party (the only legal political party) and his command-in-chief of the army. A "cult of personality" is widely promoted for Bashar Assad and his late father - their images are to be seen everywhere in the streets of Syria.

Assad's regime and the Baath Party own or control the vast majority of Syria's media. Criticism of the president and his family is not permitted and the press (both foreign and domestic) are heavily censored for material deemed threatening or embarrassing to the government. A brief period of relative press freedom arose after Bashar became president in 2000 and saw the licensing of the first private publications in almost 40 years. A later crackdown, however, imposed a range of restrictions regarding licensing and content. In a more relaxed manner (perhaps owing more to the fact that these matters are largely beyond possible government control), many Syrians have gained access to foreign television broadcasts (usually via satellite) as well as the three state-run networks. In 2002 the government set out conditions for licensing private, commercial FM radio stations, ruling at the same time, however, that radio stations could not broadcast news or political content.

Get in

Citizens of countries which have no Syrian embassy/consulate can obtain visas at land borders. For example the charge as of February 2008 was \$50 for Irish passport holders and \$35 for Dutch passport holders. Please note that citizens of countries with a Syrian embassy/consulate must obtain a visa from that mission. The visa issued MUST have two stamps and a signature. Otherwise the visa is considered invalid and you will be turned back at the border. It is necessary to keep the beige arrival form as it must be submitted upon departure.

Citizens of Arab countries do not require visa. Visas are needed for most individual travelers. A "letter of recommendation" stating that your consulate has "no objection" to your visit to Syria is required for many nationalities.

In Istanbul, Syrian visas are issued within one day and the consulate will issue visas to travellers passing through, not just people resident in Turkey. The cost is for EU citizens is 45 Euros and for Canadians the cost is 30 euros as of October 2007. For American citizens, the Syrian government has tightened restrictions and is requiring visas issued from the embassy in DC even if you are applying in the country you have residence in. Visas through the embassy in Washington now cost \$131 for a single entry or double entry. Visas are available at the Turkish, Lebanese and Jordanian borders, but this requires waiting up to 11 hours while the request is faxed to Damascus, processed, and faxed back. Whether you can get in or not can be very capricious. It is possible for Americans to get in this way, but other nationalities are more likely to get in, especially if they do not have a Syrian consulate in their home country (e.g., New Zealand or Norway).

If going by land, and you are planning to get a visa on the border, bring US Dollars or Syrian Pounds. Foreign currency will not get a good exchange rate and at most crossing there are no facilities for credit/debit cards. Travelers checks are also not accepted.

By plane

Syria has three international airports: Damascus International Airport (DAM), 35km (22miles) SE of the capital, Aleppo International Airport (ALP) just northeast of Aleppo in the north of the country, Lattakia International Airport, south of Lattakia, main sea port of the country. The first two airports have regular direct flights served by Syrian Arab Airlines and

the British airline bmi to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, while the third one for the time being is connected only with the capital city of Egypt, Cairo. Flights from Damascus and Aleppo compete with other international carriers serving the same destinations. Syria levies an airport departure tax of 200 Syrian Pounds. Damascus international airport is served by many of the larger European carriers to the Middle East including Lufthansa, British Airways and Aeroflot. Low-price tickets from Europe can sometimes be found, but until the recent war in Lebanon, cheaper fares could sometimes be obtained through Czech Airlines, Cyprus Air or Malev. Royal Jordanian can be reasonable through Amman.

Upon arrival, a free entry visa can be delivered to almost all travelers if they are being received by local Travel Agency. Call the Syrian Embassy in your home country for more information
By train

There are two international train connections to Syria: Tehran - Aleppo - Damascus and Istanbul - Aleppo

* Turkish Railways page "trains to Middle East". Shows up to date prices, timetables. The Syrian Railways site has not been updated in English for some time so this Turkish page is a better source of information.

Flying to Istanbul followed a train/coach down to Damascus is a very cheap alternative to flying direct to Damascus (£200 return flights from the UK to Istanbul) it takes about 36 hours max to Aleppo (leaves on Sunday morning; see <http://seat61.com/Syria.htm>). Contrary to popular belief it does not continue to Damascus, you have to change trains. Seat61 is very accurate and should be consulted.

All trains from Istanbul are operated jointly between TTCD (Turkish) and CFS (Syria) and are by far the cheapest way into Syria from Europe, flying to Istanbul and continuing by rail can cost €200 - €300 less than a flight to Damascus.

Tur-ista travel agency can book your train tickets before you get to Istanbul, this is a good idea with trains booking up very quickly (Tur-ista tel: +90 (212) 334 2600).
By bus

Buses run from Turkey, with frequent connections from the city of Antakya (Hatay). You can also travel by bus from Jordan & Lebanon.

When arriving into Damascus by bus, make sure to move away from the bus terminal to find a taxi to the centre of town. Otherwise, you run the risk of paying several times the going rate, which should be around SYP150, as cars posing as taxis operate next to the terminal.
By car

When traveling from Lebanon, service taxis (taxis that follow a fixed route only, usually from near one bus station to another) are a convenient way to reach Damascus, Homs, Tartus, Aleppo or other Syrian towns. A shared service taxi from Beirut to Damascus will cost about \$10 per person (\$20 to Aleppo) and \$75 for a private taxi. In most cases it is necessary to buy a Syrian visa before leaving home, often costing about \$100 or less, depending of the country of residency. It's possible, to obtain free entry visa for tourists if being received by a local Travel Agency. It is also possible to arrive by car from Turkey. A private taxi from Gaziantep Airport (Turkey) will cost about \$60.

Service taxis run from Dar'a across the Jordanian border to Ramtha; from there minibuses are available to Irbid and Amman -- the stop in Dar'a permits a side trip to Bosra, with UNESCO-recognised Roman theater and ruins.
By boat

* The nearest car ferry port is Bodrum in Turkey.

* Occasional passenger ferries run between Latakia and Limassol, Cyprus. This service has come and gone over the years, and only 4 sailings in each direction are scheduled for 2008. Confirm that the departure will occur with Varianos Travel before making plans that incorporate this route. [2]

* Latakia and Tartous serve as ports of call for a number of Mediterranean cruise lines.

Get around

By taxi

The taxis (usually yellow, and always clearly marked) are an easy way to get around Damascus, Aleppo and other cities. Arabic would be helpful: most taxi drivers do not speak English. All licensed taxis carry meters, and it is best to insist that the driver puts the meter on, and watch that it stays on. Most drivers expect to haggle prices with foreign travellers rather than use the meter. A taxi ride across Damascus might come to £S30. Taxis from the airport can be booked in advance, either by phone, or on line through the respected Syrian agency "taxitel"

The flat price to and from Damascus airport to the city centre seems to be S£1200-900. It always better to ask how much you want to charge from this point to the other point you are going to. However, there is also a bus from Baramkeh station to the airport for 25S£.

By microbus

The minibuses (locally called servees, or meecro) are little white vans that carry ten, or so, passengers around cities on set routes for about £S10. The destinations are written on the front of microbus in Arabic. Usually, the passenger sitting behind the driver deals with the money. You can ask the driver to stop anywhere along his route.

Often, minibuses will do longer routes, for example, to surrounding villages around Damascus and Aleppo, or from Homs to Tadmor or Krak des Chevaliers. They are often more uncomfortable and crowded than the larger buses, but cheaper. Especially for shorter distances they have usually more frequent departures than buses.

By bus or coach

Air-conditioned coaches are one of the easy ways to make longer hauls around Syria, for example, the trip from Damascus to Palmyra. Coaches are cheap, fast and reliable way to get around the country, however the schedules, when they exist, are not to be trusted. For the busy routes it's best to simply go to the coach station when you want to leave and catch the next coach, you'll have to wait a bit, but most of the time it's less of a chore than finding out when the best coach will be leaving, and then often finding it's late.

By train

The Syrian railways are reasonably modern. Rail travel is inexpensive and generally punctual, although railway stations are often a reasonable distance out of town centres. The main line connects Damascus, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zur, Hassake and Qamishle. A secondary line serves stations along the Mediterranean coast.

In the summer, on Fridays, a little steam train leaves from the Hejaz Railway Station in Damascus (which has a good restaurant) and climbs into the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. Many locals enjoy the ride to picnic in the cooler mountains.

By Bicycle

While traveling by bicycle may not be for everyone, and Syria is by no means a cycle tourist's paradise, there are definite advantages. Syria is a good size for cycling, accommodation is frequent enough that even a budget traveller can get away with "credit card" touring (though in the case of Syria, it might be better to refer to it as fat-wad-of-cash touring). There are sites that one can not get to with public transportation like the Dead Cities and the people are incredibly friendly often inviting a tired cyclist for a break, cup of tea, meal or night's accommodation. The problem of children throwing stones at cyclists or running behind the bicycle begging for candy and pens (such as in parts of Morocco) does not seem to have appeared in Syria. Locals young and old alike will, however, be very curious about your travels and your bicycle and if you stop in a town you can expect a large crowd to gather for friendly banter about where you are from and your trip.

Wild camping is quite easy in Syria. Perhaps the biggest challenge is not so much finding a place for your tent but picking a spot where locals will not wander by and try to convince you to come back to their home. Olive groves and other orchards can make a good spot for your tent, except on a rainy day when the mud will make life difficult. Another option is to ask to pitch your tent in a private garden or beside an official post like a police station. It is unlikely you will be refused as long as you can get your message across. A letter in Arabic explaining your trip will help with communication.

Unfortunately, the standard of driving skills in Syria is extremely low and other road users tend to drive very aggressively. They do seem used to seeing slow moving traffic and normally give plenty of room as they pass. Motorcycles are perhaps the biggest danger as their drivers like to pull up alongside cyclists to chat or fly by your bike for a look at the strange traveller and then perform a u-turn in the middle of the road to go back home. Perhaps the safest option in this case is to stop, talk for a few minutes and then carry on.

Finding good maps tends to be another problem. You should bring a map with you as good maps are hard to find in Syria. Free ones are available from the tourist bureaus but they are not very good for cycle touring. Even foreign-produced maps can contain errors or roads that don't exist, making excursions away from the main route a challenge. Asking several locals for the right road is a good idea when you come to a crossroads. Without good maps it can be hard to avoid riding on the main highway, which while safe enough (a good wide shoulder exists on almost all the highways) is not very pleasant due to the smokey trucks and uninteresting scenery.

You should think about bringing a water filter or water treatment tablets with you. Bottled water is not always available in the smaller towns. Finding local water is easy. Tall metal water coolers in many town centres dispense free local water and water is always available near mosques. The Syrian word for water is pronounced like the English word "my" (as in "that is my pen") and if you ask at any shop or home for water they will happily refill your bottles.

Buy

The unit of currency in Syria is the Syrian pound or 'lira' (£S). All prices are now in even numbers of pounds, so the subdivision 'piastre' is obsolete.

Exchange rates (current in April 2008):

- * 1 UK£ = £S 101
- * 1 USD\$ = £S 45
- * 1 Euro = £S 71
- * 1 AUD\$ = £S 47
- * 100 JAP Yen = £S 50

In recent years, a number of ATMs have become available in most major cities: banks, main squares, and 5 star hotels. However, it should be noted that not all ATMs access the international networks. The Real Estate bank has the widest network that will accept foreign cards but cards may also be used in machines run by the Bank of Syria and Overseas and the Commercial Bank of Syria.

One thing to keep in mind is that exchange rates using the ATM system are lower than the official rate which is still lower than street rate. Many private money changing offices exist, but will change cash only. Note that it is nearly impossible to change traveller's cheques in Syria, so do not rely on them but bring cash or credit cards instead. (If you're feeling lucky or desperate, the Commercial Bank of Syria may be able to exchange themm.)

Credit cards are becoming more widely accepted, and are even accepted at many smaller shops and budget hotels. Don't count on acceptance, though, as it is far from universal. It is also virtually impossible to get an advance on your credit card in Syria if you are out of Damascus and Aleppo.

An international student card reduces the entry fees to many tourist sites to 10% of the normal price, if you are younger than 35 years. Depending on who is checking your card it is even possible to get the reduction when you are older than 35 or have only an expired card. It is possible to buy an international student card in Syria (around U\$ 15). Ask around discretely.

Eat

An artistically-arranged plate of falafel

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Falafel, deep-fried chickpea patties, are available for 15 to 30 SP. Another popular vegetarian meal is Foul. Don't let the name put you off. It's actually pronounced 'fool' and this fava bean paste is topped off with cumin, paprika and olive oil and served with bread, fresh mint and onion; is not only tasty but filling.

You may also be able to order a salad of Fatoush with your soup. Chopped tomatoes, onions, cucumbers and herbs are mixed together in a dressing and finished off with a sprinkling of fried bread that resembles croutons. Cheese may also be grated on top.

Meat wraps such as shwarma cost 35 to 50 SP. A half-chicken with bread and mayonnaise dip to take away costs 175 SP.

Lunch or dinner in a fair restaurant costs 450 SP. An expensive restaurant lunch or dinner will run about 1000 SP.

Drink

Generally you can drink water from the tap, it is extremely safe, but if you're unsure ask the locals first. This water is free compared to bottled water, which comes at anywhere between 15-25 Syrian Pound for 1.5 litres.

Fresh fruit juices are available from street stalls in most towns. A large glass of mixed juice (usually banana, orange juice and a few exotic fruits like pomegranate) costs 40-50 SP.

Beer is cheap, costing from 35 SP in a shop and anywhere from 50 to 100 SP in most budget accommodation and local bars for a half litre bottle or can. Syrian wine can be found starting at about 150 SP and Lebanese and French wines are also available in a higher price bracket, starting at 350-400 SP.

Sleep

A budget traveler spends about 250 to 500 SP a night for a rooftop.

A double room you can find for around 800 SP, although this cost may be higher in Damascus. A double room in a three stars hotel costs about \$50 USD, \$80 USD for four stars, and can reach \$250 USD in a five star hotel.

Work

If you entered the country on a tourist visa, don't try to work and earn money. Foreign workers should always get official approval to work.

Stay Healthy

Local pharmacies are well stocked with treatments for most common ailments such as stomach bugs and traveller's diarrhoea. Pharmacists often speak a little bit of English. You can ask your hotel to call a doctor if necessary and a visit to your hotel room will cost about 700-1000 SP as of November 2007.

The best treatment of all, of course, is to stay healthy in the first place. When eating, pick restaurants that are busy.

Contact

Tourist Information Offices; Damascus: 2323953, Damascus Int'l Airport: 2248473, Aleppo: 2121228, Daraa (Jordanian-Syrian border gate): 239023, Lattakia: 216924, Palmyra (Tadmur): 910636, Deir-az-Zur: 358990

Phone

The international calling code for Syria is +963.

Internet

Syrians were only allowed access to the Internet after 2000 when the new President relaxed most (if not all) restrictions to its use. The advent of the Internet has created a mini-boom with internet cafes in most cities. In more rural areas, however, it will be hard to find a connection and surprisingly in Aleppo, internet cafes remain expensive and hard to find. Prices may vary according to connection speed; dial-up, ISDN, DSL or satellite. The authorities have blocked direct access to most pornography and all Israeli sites.

Prices for high-speed access are quite varied. As of November 2007, Aleppo's Concord internet cafe was charging a hefty 100 SP an hour, while in Hama the going rate seemed to be 75 SP for an hour and in Damascus the price dropped to around 50 SP an hour (less if you pay for several hours in advance).

Newspapers

* Syria News, [3] Syria News Powered by SyriaHit is Syrian website directory daily Syrian news from all over the world, weather forecast and download center

* Syria Times, [4] The English-language version of the Syrian daily national newspaper Tishreen

* The Syria Report, [5] English-language business newsletter on Syria