

Syria's Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

The first thing you'll notice in Syria is the hospitality. Those travelling from Western countries with preconceived ideas about the country being a 'rogue state' or part of an 'axis of terror and hate' will find little to support these notions on the streets of Syria. While Syrians might intensely dislike some Western governments' actions, they make a distinction between the government and the people. The friendliness and offers of tea and a chat are constant and only occasionally linked to the sale of a carpet! However, underneath this hospitality, the Syrians can be a little reserved on some topics, such as their own government's actions. This is tied to the fact that most people still believe someone's always listening, and during Hafez al-Assad's reign they were probably right. Until you really get to know a local well, discussing *their* politics is generally off the table.

Don't be surprised, however, at how many questions *you* are asked – about your family, where you live, your life and how much you earn. While many visitors consider the constant questions about family as being too personal, remember that family is of paramount importance throughout the Middle East. Having a large, healthy family is seen as a gift from God and in traditional Arab greetings it's the first thing you ask about after saying hello.

LIFESTYLE

Family is the core unit of Syrian life, regardless of religious sect or ethnic background. Several generations of the one family will often live together. The elderly are greatly respected and are not placed in nursing homes, as there are usually enough family members willing to take care of them. When a person dies there are three days of mourning when friends and relatives pay their respects. Family and individual pride is very strong and this is one reason that, despite being a relatively poor country, you'll rarely see begging on the streets.

Marriage is a major social event in Syria. There is pressure on women to marry young, and more than a little advice on prospective marriage partners is forthcoming from the family – especially from the older women. These days young people have a greater say in whom they marry; however, many living in rural areas still have partners chosen for them. Young couples who are engaged usually meet under supervision, generally a male member of the girl's family, and in the Muslim population they never live together before marriage. It's common for a couple to save money to buy their own place and they'll often delay marriage until they are financially stable; others will marry and stay at home for a few years until they are able to have a place on their own.

The conduct of young women is constantly scrutinised and they are expected to uphold the standing of their family. Bringing shame on the family can occur through something as simple as being alone with a man not from her immediate family – when girls marry they are expected to be virgins.

For most of the desert-dwelling Bedouin of Syria, the seminomadic life has been replaced by a more settled life in a town or city. There are still a few who keep to the old lifestyle – albeit often with a 4WD parked next to their goat-hair tent. Many work a 'normal' job, but get out to the desert as often as possible to enjoy its peace and solitude. For more on the fascinating Bedouin, see p212.

'Having a large, healthy family is seen as a gift from God'

POPULATION

Nearly two-thirds of Syria's total population of around 18.5 million live in a city, concentrated in Damascus (1.6 million in the city itself), Aleppo (2 million) and between Lattakia and Tartus on the coast. Syria's Muslims make up around 90% of the population and this statistic includes the Ismailis, Alawites and Druze, as well as the Sunnis and Shiites. The Alawites have traditionally occupied the mountainous ranges along the coast, which to this day are known as the *Jebel Ansariyya*, or *Jebel an-Nusariyya*, after the founder of the Alawite sect, Ibn Nusayr. The other 10% of the population mainly consists of Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians. For more on religion, see p42.

Syria has a Palestinian population of around 300,000. The invasion of Iraq also saw an incredible influx of Iraqi refugees, who numbered more than 1.5 million before Iraqis began timorously tricking back to their devastated country (see *Border Crossing Crisis*, p31).

Syria has a youthful population, with over 36% under 15 years of age. Population growth is around 2.5%, down from previous decades but still one of the region's highest. Life expectancy is 69 years of age for men and 71 for women and has been steadily increasing over the last few years.

'Syria has a youthful population, with over 36% under 15 years of age'

SPORT

By far the most popular sport in Syria is football (soccer) and it still remains a male-dominated pastime for participants and armchair fans alike. While results on the international stage have been less than stellar (they've never made it past the qualifying stage of the World Cup, for instance), they do reasonably well in regional tournaments such as the West Asian Football Federation Championships. The national competition, the Syrian League, has existed since 1966 and popular teams to look out for are Al-Jaish (Damascus), Al-Karamah (Homs) and Al-Ittihad (Aleppo). The Syrian Cup, a knockout tournament, is exciting to watch. The only other sport that's overtly popular on the national stage is basketball – but it runs a poor second to football.

MULTICULTURALISM

To the casual observer, Syria appears to be a homogeneous, Arab-Muslim country. However, around 10% of the population is Christian, and a proportion of the Muslim community is Alawite or Druze. In terms of ethnic background the largest minority group in Syria is the Kurds, who make up around 7% of the population and remain a people without a homeland, with the rest of the Kurdish population based in Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

The Armenian community, mainly based in Aleppo, maintain their traditions and culture. The Armenian language is widely spoken and mass is celebrated in the classical Armenian dialect. Much of Syria's large Palestinian population lives on the outskirts of Damascus. While Syria's Arab hospitality has been sorely tested by the influx of Iraqi refugees and the lack of support provided for these refugees by the governments that invaded Iraq, the country has coped reasonably well. All across Syria you'll hear people say that they don't care about ethnicity or religion, nor enquire about it when meeting people, but generally they'll know – either by the dress, accent or name of the person.

WOMEN IN SYRIA

The place of women in Syria today defies traditional classification, although these women must tackle many of the same problems facing women globally. Key issues of concern to women include, but are not