

Damascus

دمشق



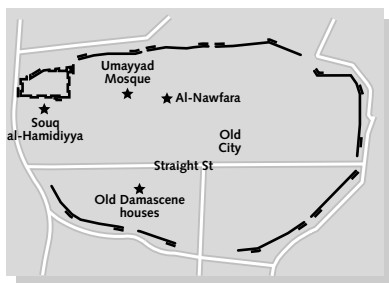
Legend has it that on a journey from Mecca, the Prophet Mohammed cast his gaze from the mountainside onto Damascus but refused to enter the city because he wanted to enter paradise only once – when he died. In a place that vies for the title of the world's oldest continually inhabited city, this is but one of thousands of stories.

With its position as the first stop for travellers from the east, and with the Barada River flowing down freely from the mountains where the Prophet stood, Damascus has always been a coveted capital. The machinations of those wishing to claim the city as their own is as fascinating as the wealth of architecture and culture they left behind, with Damascus collecting the calling cards of myriad civilisations. There is hardly a city in the world that has packed so much history into such a small space as the Old City. Thankfully, the Old City is still the Damascus that sustains the romantic notion of the Orient, filled with bazaars and blind alleys, minarets, mosques and fountain courtyards, street-cart vendors and coffeehouses.

While the Barada may not flow as it once did, today Damascus is finding a new spring of life. Boutique hotels now flourish in delightful old Damascene addresses, restaurants refine what is one of the world's most complex cuisines, and art galleries are riding an incoming tide of creativity. There is a new modern sophistication in the city, but for those looking for the Damascus of countless stories, it's still right where it's always been.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Lose yourself in the labyrinthine lanes of Damascus' **Old City** (p85), where thousands of years of history confront you around every corner
- Marvel at the architectural magnificence of **Umayyad Mosque** (p88), one of Islam's most notable buildings
- Haggle for Oriental handicrafts on **Straight St** (p112) or in the hustle and bustle of **Souq al-Hamidiyya** (p115)
- Admire the decorative interiors of the **old Damascene houses** (p92)
- Dine on the Middle East's tastiest cuisine at an atmospheric **Old City restaurant** (p106)
- Be amazed by the traditional storyteller's ability to engage his audience at the coffeehouse **Al-Nawfara** (p109)



■ AREA CODE: 011

■ POPULATION: 4.5 MILLION

HISTORY

'...no recorded event has occurred in the world but Damascus was in existence to receive news of it. Go back as far as you will into the vague past, there was always a Damascus... She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies.'

*Mark Twain,
The Innocents Abroad, 1869*

Damascus lays a strong claim to being the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Hieroglyphic tablets found in Egypt make reference to 'Dimashqa' as one of the cities conquered by the Egyptians in the 15th century BC, but excavations from the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque have yielded finds dating back to the 3rd millennium BC. The name Dimashqa appears in the Ebla archives and also on tablets found at Mari (2500 BC).

In the earliest times it was a prize city, constantly fought over. Early conquerors include the fabled King David of Israel, the Assyrians in 732 BC, Nebuchadnezzar around 600 BC and the Persians in 530 BC. In 333 BC it fell to Alexander the Great. Greek influence declined when the Nabataeans occupied Damascus in 85 BC. Just 21 years later, Rome's legions sent the Nabataeans packing and Syria became a Roman province.

Under the Romans Damascus became a military base for the armies of legionnaires fighting the Persians. Hadrian declared the city a metropolis in the 2nd century AD and during the reign of Alexander Severus it became a Roman colony.

With the coming of Islam, Damascus became an important centre as the seat of the Umayyad caliphate from 661 to 750. When the Abbasids took over and moved the caliphate to Baghdad, Damascus was plundered once again.

After the occupation of Damascus by the Seljuk Turks in 1076, the Crusaders tried unsuccessfully to take the city. They made a second attempt in 1154; this time a general of Kurdish origin, Nureddin (Nur ad-Din), came to the rescue, occupying Damascus himself and ushering in a brief golden era.

During his time business prospered, triggering a corresponding building boom. Notable monuments from the era include the Maristan Nureddin, Madrasa an-Nuri and the Hammam Nureddin, one of the oldest public baths in Syria.

A brief occupation by the Mongols separates the successors of Nureddin as rulers from the Mamluks of Egypt, who rose to power in 1260. During the Mamluk period, Damascene goods became famous worldwide and attracted merchants from Europe. This led to the second Mongol invasion under Tamerlane, when the city was flattened and the artisans and scholars were deported to the Mongol capital of Samarkand. The Mamluks returned soon afterwards and proceeded to rebuild the city.

From the time of the Ottoman Turk occupation in 1516, the fortunes of Damascus started to decline and it was reduced to the status of a small provincial capital in a large empire.

The Turkish and German forces used Damascus as their base during WWI. When they were defeated by the Arab Legion and the Allies, a first, short-lived Syrian government was set up in 1918.

The French, having received a mandate from the League of Nations, occupied the city from 1920 to 1945. They met with massive resistance and at one stage in 1925 bombarded the city to suppress rioting. French shells again rained on the city in the unrest of 1945, which led to full independence a year later when French and British forces were pulled out and Damascus became the capital of an independent Syria.

ORIENTATION

There are two distinct parts to Damascus: the Old City and everything else. The Old City lies largely within its imposing walls, but also extends southwest of the walls, past Cemetery Bab al-Saghir and Bab Mousala (Saahat Yarmouk or Al Yarmouk Sq) to Sharia al-Midan. Modern Damascus sprawls around the Old City, stretching in all directions, climbing the slopes of Jebel Qassioun (Mt Qassioun) to the north and petering out towards the plains to the south. All the parts likely to be of most interest to visitors are contained in roughly 4 sq km and are accessible on foot. The official street signs do not always