

# Around Damascus & the Hauran

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Heading south from Damascus towards the Jordanian border is a region of fertile agricultural land, rolling hills and fruit orchards that gives way to harsh, rocky basalt plains (known as the Hauran) straddling the Syria–Jordan border.

The black rock gives the villages and towns a peculiar, brooding quality that is best appreciated at Bosra. With its impressive Roman remains and one of the world's best-preserved Roman theatres, it's one of Syria's highlights and a must-do day trip from Damascus. The intriguing Druze towns of Suweida, Shahba and Qanawat can be visited on the same trip. Suweida has a well-regarded museum while the ruins of Shahba and Qanawat are worth a wander.

For those with an interest in Middle Eastern politics and history, a visit to the ghost town of Quneitra, within the UN-monitored Golan Heights, is a moving experience. The Israelis captured the town during the Six Day War of 1967, and deliberately destroyed it on their withdrawal.

There are several places of interest to the northeast of Damascus, off the Damascus–Aleppo Hwy (Hwy 5), including a number of predominantly Christian towns and villages and a handful of remote monasteries. To the west is the Barada Gorge, incised into the Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range). Half the fun of a visit to the gorge is getting there via the snail-paced, narrow-gauge steam train. The other half is watching the locals at leisure, especially on a Friday, when picnicking families make the most of the Syrian weekend.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Relive the time when ancient **Bosra** (p125) was the capital of the Roman province of Arabia with a ramble around its remarkably well-preserved citadel and theatre
- Discover why magical little **Maalula** (p121) is Syria's most enchanting village
- Get monastic for a night or two at the remote hilltop monastery of **Mar Musa** (p123)
- Marvel at beautiful 4th-century mosaics at the impressive **Suweida museum** (p129)
- Sit back and enjoy the snail's pace of a journey on the jolly steam train to the locals' favourite picnic spot, **Barada Gorge** (p125)
- Be moved by the senseless destruction at the ghost town of **Quneitra** (p130) in the UN-patrolled demilitarised zone of the Golan Heights



