

The Coast & Mountains

الساحل السوري والجبال



Syria's 183km-long Mediterranean coastline is dominated by the rugged 250km-long Jebel Ansariyya mountain range that runs along its entire length. Squeezed between the highland and the sea is a narrow coastal strip that widens towards the south, where the country is extremely fertile and agriculturally rich.

The port city of Lattakia (Al-Lathqiyya), with its beach resorts, and the ruined ancient city of Ugarit (Ras Shamra) lie in the north. Boasting a large population of Alawites and Christians, lively Lattakia is one of Syria's most vibrant cities, with a buzzing restaurant and café scene, and a bustling souq and shopping area. It's also one of the country's friendliest cities, making a stay here lots of fun.

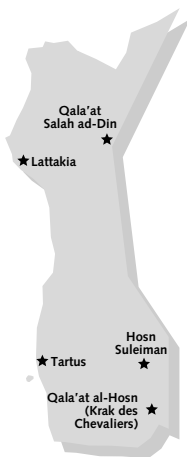
From here roads lead north to Turkey, east across the mountains to Aleppo, and south to Tartus, a secondary port that preserves remnants of its medieval Crusader past in its ramshackle old town and on the tiny island of Arwad.

The mountains behind Lattakia contain thick forests, which are easy on the eyes after the often-featureless interior. Travellers who have spent time in the cities will find the air considerably fresher, too. Following excessive clearing of the forests for timber in the past, the government has laid aside sections for preservation.

Of most interest to travellers is that much of this area was in Crusader hands for centuries. They left behind a chain of spectacular hilltop eyries and precipitously located castles, the undisputed king of which is the stalwart Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at **Qala'at al-Hosn** (Krak des Chevaliers; opposite), possibly the finest Crusader castle in the world, as you mosey around its majestic ruins
- Kick back for a couple of days in the lively port town of **Lattakia** (p144), with its tree-lined boulevards, excellent restaurants, buzzing cafés and bustling shopping streets
- Speculate on how the temple of **Hosn Suleiman** (p142) was constructed so high up in the picturesque mountains
- Appreciate why TE Lawrence thought **Qala'at Salah ad-Din** (p151) was the most awe-inspiring example of castle building
- Roam the ramshackle old quarter of **Tartus** (p137), a low-key port town and a pleasant place to unwind for a couple of days



QALA'AT AL-HOSN (KRAK DES CHEVALIERS)

قلعة الحصن

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Author Paul Theroux described Qala'at al-Hosn as the epitome of the dream castle of childhood fantasies of jousts and armour and pennants. TE Lawrence simply called it 'the finest castle in the world'. Take their word for it: the remarkably well-preserved Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) is one of Syria's unmissable attractions. Impervious to the onslaught of time, it cannot have looked a great deal different 800 years ago, and such is its size and state of completeness that you could easily spend several hours absorbed in exploring it. A torch is handy for some of the darker passages and rooms.

The castle is easily visited by public transport as a day trip from Tartus or Hama. However, visiting by car allows for exploring the surrounding countryside and hilltop resort towns, which is highly recommended. Anybody passing through en route to Homs, Tartus or elsewhere can leave bags and packs at the ticket office.

History

The castle addresses the only significant break in the Jebel Ansariyya. Anyone who held this breach, known as the Homs Gap, between the southern end of the range and the northern outreaches of the Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range), was virtually assured authority over inland Syria by controlling the flow of goods and people from the ports through to the interior.

The first fortress that is known to have existed on this site was built by the emir of Homs in 1031. He was briefly displaced in 1099 by the hordes of the First Crusade passing through on its way to Jerusalem, and was then given the complete push some 11 years later when the Christian knights, now established in the Holy City, began to extend their gains throughout the region. Around the middle of the 12th century the elite Knights Hospitaller replaced the First Crusaders and expanded Qala'at al-Hosn into its present form.

The knights built well and, despite repeated attacks and sieges, the fortress was never truly breached. When the Mamluk sultan Beybars marched on the castle in 1271, the knights at Qala'at al-Hosn were



a last outpost. Jerusalem had been lost and the Christians were retreating. Numbers in the castle, built to hold a garrison of 2000, were depleted to around 200. Surrounded by the armies of Islam and with no hope of reprieve, the Crusaders departed after a month, having negotiated safe conduct to head to Tripoli.

Beybars garrisoned the castle with his Mamluk troops and further strengthened the defences. Today it is possible to distinguish the Frankish aspects of the castle, with their Gothic and Romanesque building styles, and those of the Arabs – there are some beautiful Islamic geometric designs carved into structures on the upper levels of the main complex.