

# Orontes Valley

## وادي العاصي



Bordered by the coastal strip to the west and the scorched desert to the east, the Orontes Valley provides a distinctively different experience from Aleppo to the north and Damascus to the south. While Syrians try to break land-speed records between the aforementioned cities, there are enough attractions in the region to make this more than just a blur outside a bus window.

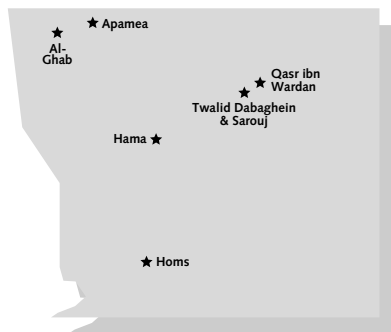
Homs, Syria's third-largest city, and Hama, its fourth, are attractive stops on the journey north. Homs has a lovely restored souq, a relaxed Christian quarter and friendly locals. Hama is famed for its large *norias* (water wheels) and riverside parks. It's most active in summer, when the wheels groan with the flow of the Orontes River, known as Nahr al-Aasi (Rebel River) due to the fact that it flows from south to north – the opposite of most rivers in the region.

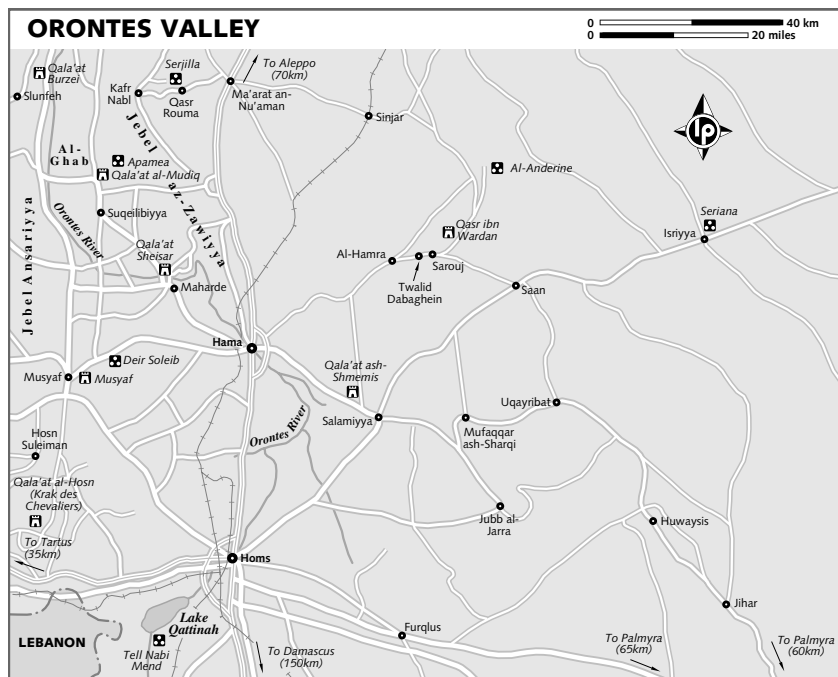
The striking Roman ruins of Apamea are well worth visiting for the colonnaded grace of the *cardo maximus*, both longer and wider than Palmyra's. Careful restoration over the last few decades has turned this once-shapeless site into an evocative one. Far less complex in structure are the intriguing beehive houses found at Sarouj and Twalid Dabaghein, which are still used as dwellings. These conical mud-brick structures are an arresting sight.

While the castle of Musyaf is suitably imposing, its connection with one of Islam's most fascinating sects, the Assassins, is the highlight. Members of this radical, mystical group were known for their ability to infiltrate their enemy and kill its leader, giving rise to the English word 'assassin'.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore **Apamea** (p167), Syria's second-most impressive archaeological site after Palmyra and definitely one for fans of colonnades
- Shop for gold, spices and sheesha pipes and watch artisans at work in the restored souq of **Homs** (p156)
- Adjust your ears to the torturous sounds of the groaning old *norias* of **Hama** (p162)
- Enjoy the glorious views over **Al-Ghab** (p166), Syria's most fertile farming valley, from Jebel Ansariyya
- Investigate the intriguing **beehive houses** (p171), still used as dwellings, in Twalid Dabaghein and Sarouj
- Climb the stairs of the Byzantine church at **Qasr ibn Wardan** (p169) to see a Martian landscape





## HOMS

☎ 031 / pop 823,000

حصص

With a history stretching back to the 1st millennium BC, Homs, Syria's third-largest city, at one time gave birth to a dynasty of Roman emperors, and under the Byzantines was an important centre of Christianity. These days, its Christian neighbourhood is one of Syria's most welcoming and relaxed, and Homs' citizens are some of the country's friendliest. That, combined with the city's myriad leafy parks and gardens, sprawling al fresco coffee shops, outdoor corn-on-the-cob stands and restored souq where artisans still work, make Homs a wonderful place to kick back for a couple of days.

## History

Digs at the tell (artificial mound) to the south of the centre of the modern city indicate there were settlements in preclassical times. However, Homs only gained importance during the Roman era. Formerly known as Emesa, the town benefited from close ties with Palmyra, 125km to the east.

Its regional importance was further enhanced around AD 187, when Julia Domna,

daughter of an Emesan high priest, married a Roman garrison commander, Septimius Severus, who six years later would become emperor of Rome. They founded a Syro-Roman dynasty that spanned four emperors (reigning from 211 to 235). Unfortunately it was a dynasty most noted for its rapid decline into depravity. Most notorious of all was Elagabalus, whose four-year reign of chaos was abruptly terminated when he was assassinated by his own Praetorian guards, seeking to restore some order to the empire.

Under the Byzantines, Homs became an important centre of Christianity, and it still has a very large Christian population. After falling to a Muslim army led by the general Khaled ibn al-Walid (revered as the warrior who brought Islam to Syria) in 636, Homs became an equally fervent centre of Islam.

## Orientation

Central Homs lies either side of the main east-west axis of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli, a short but wide strip of road punctuated at either end by a large roundabout; the one at the western end is distinguished by