

# Aleppo

حلب



While Damascus was always the 'holy' city, the seat of rulers and wary of foreigners, Aleppo (or Halab as it is known), Syria's second city, has been one of commerce since Roman times. While both cities claim the title of 'oldest continually inhabited city in the world', it's in Aleppo that the legacy of history feels more immediate.

Aleppo today retains that air of an Arabian bazaar city, with people going about business as they have done for centuries. The streets speak a rhythm of sounds – from horse-drawn carts over cobblestones to the more frenetic pace of donkey-riding couriers, still the fastest way through the atmospheric, labyrinthine souq that's fragrant with olive soap, exotic spices, roasting coffee and succulent grilled shwarma.

While Aleppo may not bustle as it did when it was a key stop on the Silk Road, the relative lack of big investment has actually done the city a favour. The World Heritage-listed Old City was saved from irreparable damage by not succumbing to modernisation. Today it is without doubt a fragile treasure, but a new breed of local investors and entrepreneurs have been wisely spending money to immaculately restore some old city treasures. A plan is in place to restore all of the historic buildings in the Old City – still a thriving centre with more than 100,000 residents. This new wave of preservation has brought boutique hotels and restaurants and has not only saved some classic buildings, but has also given the visitor a real feel for the city as it once was.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Haggle beside the locals in **Aleppo's souq** (p191), arguably the most vibrant and authentic in the whole Middle East
- Lose yourself in the labyrinthine alleys of charming **Al-Jdeida** (p181)
- Live like a pasha for a night at one of Aleppo's Arabian Nights-style **boutique hotels** (p187) and try to stop yourself extending your booking
- Explore **Qala'at Samaan** (p195), the hilltop remains of a sumptuous Byzantine cathedral dedicated to an ascetic who lived his life on top of a pillar
- Tiptoe around the **Dead Cities** (p198), the eerie shells of abandoned ancient towns and villages scattered across the landscape
- Savour Aleppo's deliciously complex cuisine at beautiful **Beit Sissi** (p189)



■ AREA CODE: 021

■ POPULATION: 2 MILLION

## HISTORY

Aleppo vies with Damascus for the title of the world's oldest continually inhabited city. In fact, a handful of other Middle Eastern towns make this claim too, but texts from the ancient kingdom of Mari on the Euphrates River indicate that Aleppo was already the centre of a powerful state as long ago as the 18th century BC, and the site may have been continuously inhabited for the past 8000 years. Its pre-eminent role in Syria came to an end with the Hittite invasions of the 17th and 16th centuries BC, and the city appears to have fallen into obscurity thereafter.

During the reign of the Seleucids, who arrived in the wake of Alexander the Great's campaign, Aleppo was given the name Beroia, and with the fall of Palmyra to the Romans became the major commercial link between the Mediterranean and Asia. The town was destroyed by the Persians in AD 611 and fell easily to the Muslims during their invasion in 637. The Byzantines overwhelmed the town in 961 and again in 968 but they could not take the Citadel.

Three disastrous earthquakes also shook the town in the 10th century and Nureddin (Nur ad-Din) subsequently rebuilt the town and fortress. In 1124 the Crusaders under Baldwin laid siege to the town.

After raids by the Mongols in 1260 and 1401, in which Aleppo was all but emptied of its population, the city finally came into the Ottoman Turkish orbit in 1516. It prospered greatly until an earthquake in 1822 killed over 60% of the inhabitants and wrecked many buildings, including the Citadel.

As long as four centuries ago European merchants – particularly French, English and those of the various city-states of Italy – had established themselves here. However,

the flood of cheap goods from Europe in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the increasing use of alternative trading routes, slowly killed off a lot of Aleppo's trade and manufacturing. Today the major local industries are silk-weaving and cotton-printing. Products from the surrounding area include wool, hides, dried fruits and, particularly, pistachios, for which Aleppo is justly famous.

## ORIENTATION

There are two distinct parts to central Aleppo: the New City, with the bulk of the places to stay and eat; and the Old City, with its many sights.

The New City centre lies south of the large public park, focused on the vast public plaza of Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri. West of this square is the modern commercial centre – seen by very few visitors – while east is the main travellers area, bounded by Sharia al-Baron, Sharia al-Quwatli, Sharia Bab al-Faraj and Sharia al-Maari. In this tightly hemmed quadrilateral are myriad budget hotels and eateries. Sharia al-Baron is home to many travel agents, airline offices, banks and cinemas.

The Old City lies southeast of the New City, a 10-minute walk away. The two are separated by a couple of drab, wide avenues (Sharia al-Mutanabi and Sharia Bab Antakya) that feel more Murmansk than Middle East. The heart of the Old City is the compress of streets that make up the city's famed souq. Its main thoroughfares run east–west, slipping by the south face of the Great Mosque and terminating at the massive earthen mound of the Citadel. To the north of the Old City is the Christian-Armenian quarter Al-Jdeida, an area with its own distinct character and charm, and a buffer between old and new Aleppo.

### ALEPPO AND THE SILK ROAD

Aleppo, Palmyra and Damascus were all notable stops on the Silk Road linking China to the Middle East and Europe. The Silk Road didn't only carry goods for sale: the road (actually a route that had several variations) transported knowledge, ideas and religions along its path. From before the birth of Christ through to the late Middle Ages, the route included Aleppo, which became a commercial hub due to its strategic position between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates. As the Roman Empire declined, the route became less travelled, but after the Mongol invasion it was revived and Aleppo prospered once again as a market city during the Ottoman Empire. To this day Aleppo attracts travellers and traders from the Middle East and Africa to its souq.