

# Palmyra to the Euphrates

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Palmyra, Syria's star attraction, is a sublime sprawling archaeological site, spectacularly set between a lush date palm oasis and a majestic mountain-topped castle, in the middle of a vast emptiness. The Orontes River is to the west and the Euphrates to the east. But the apparent emptiness of the landscape is deceptive.

While little could surpass the spectacle of the Palmyra ruins – particularly with a backdrop of the rising or setting sun – the desert of this northeastern region of Syria is dotted with other ancient sites of both archaeological significance and jaw-dropping beauty. Majestic Qala'at Najm dominates a rugged hill jutting into the awesome Euphrates River while the isolated Qasr Al-Heir Al-Sharqi is dramatically sited in a sparse, arid plain.

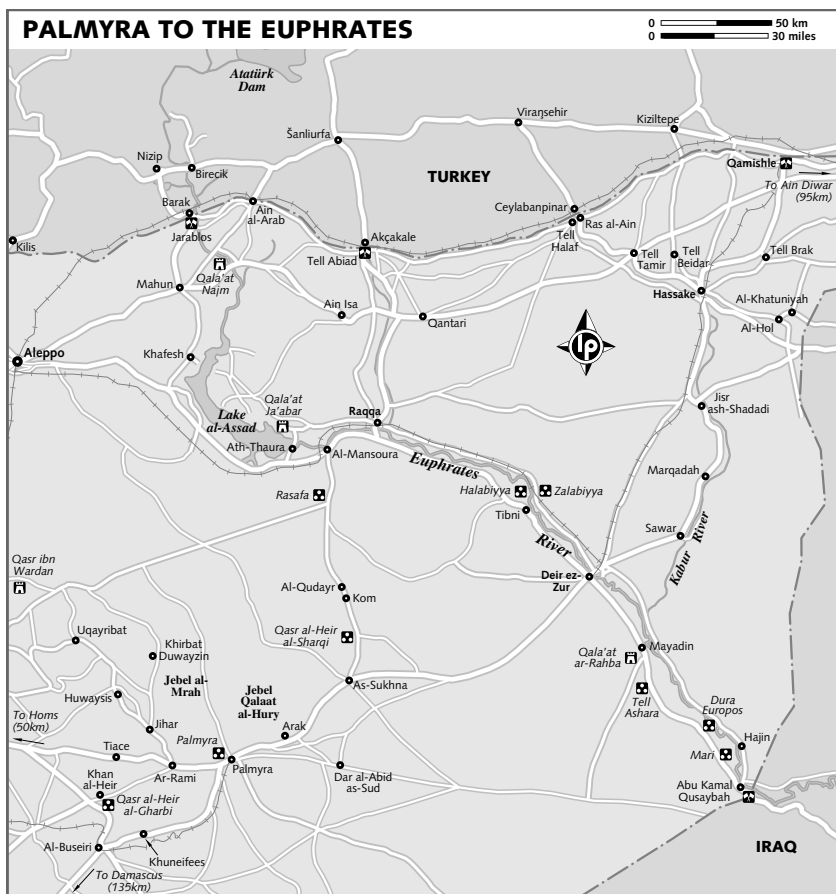
The vast desert is not only home to the splendours of past civilisations. For many Bedouin and other seminomadic people, life continues here as it has done for centuries, and while their method of transport may have changed – from camel to donkey to pick-up truck – the hospitality of these nomads living in an inhospitable environment has not. The chance to share a cup of tea with the Bedouin may well be a highlight of your visit to Syria.

The harsh, extreme northeast of the country is also home to about one million Kurds, a stateless people still struggling towards some day attaining their own homeland. It is here also that the cool green ribbon of the Euphrates, which provides welcome relief for the traveller, continues its journey before emptying into the Gulf after having travelled more than 2400km from its beginnings high in the mountains of eastern Anatolia in Turkey.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Rise early for sunrise and picture-perfect light at the sublime ruins of **Palmyra** (p202)
- Savour the splendid vistas of the awesome Euphrates River from **Qala'at Najm** (p216)
- Surround yourself with the azure waters of Lake al-Assad from the top of **Qala'at Ja'abar** (p214)
- Explore the striking ruins of **Rasafa** (p217), which rise dramatically from the featureless desert
- Chat to Bedouin shepherds on the road to remote **Qasr Al-Heir Al-Sharqi** (p213)
- Step back 5000 years and imagine the ancient civilisation of the Mesopotamians at **Mari** (p223)
- Enjoy ancient **Dura Europos** (p222) overlooking the Euphrates River





## PALMYRA

☎ 031 / pop 50,000

Palmyra is Syria's star tourist attraction and one of the world's most splendid historical sites. Known to the locals as Tadmor (its ancient Semitic name), Palmyra's intriguing history, along with the profusion of colonnades, temple remains and funerary towers, in a mesmerising desert oasis setting, renders visitors speechless.

The ruins, dating largely to the 2nd century AD, cover some 50 hectares and have been extensively excavated and restored. Nevertheless, archaeologists continually make new finds. In 1994, for instance, Belgian archaeologists stumbled across Roman tombs southeast of the Temple of Bel. The

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new town has grown around the ruins, especially towards the west, and now has more than 40,000 inhabitants who survive on agriculture, trade and tourism.

## History

Tadmor is mentioned in texts discovered at Mari dating back to the 2nd millennium BC. Early rulers included the Assyrians and Persians, before the settlement was incorporated into the realm of the Seleucids, the empire founded by a former general of Alexander the Great. From an early time Tadmor was an indispensable staging post for caravans travelling between the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and Arabia. It was also an important link on the old Silk Route