

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

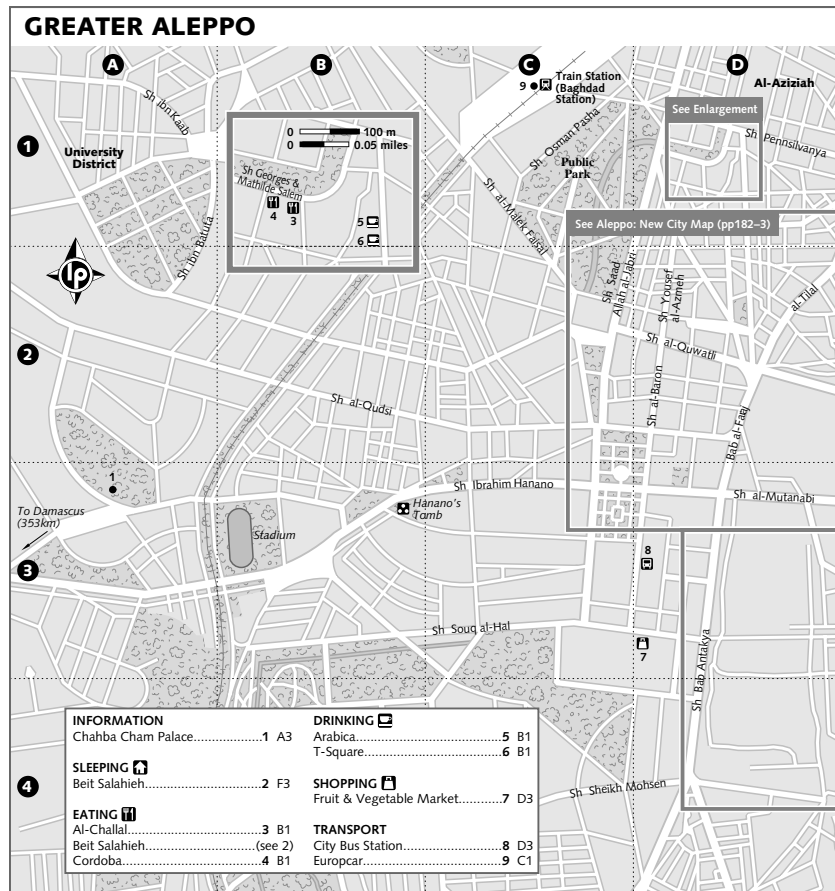
There are two distinct parts to central Aleppo: the New City, with the bulk of the places to stay and eat; and the Old City, with its many sights.

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.



INFORMATION

Bookshops

Chahba Cham Palace (Map pp174-5; Sharia al-Qudsi)

The best bookshop in Aleppo is at this hotel. It has a reasonable selection of books about Syria and the Arab world, some locally produced guidebooks, and a handful of novels in both English and French. There's also a limited range of international newspapers available. It's a \$E50 taxi ride out there.

Librairie Said (Map pp182-3; cnr Sharia Qostaki al-Homsî & Sharia Litani) Has a small selection of dusty old novels as well as the odd Syria coffee-table book.

Internet Access

Aleppo has few internet cafés. You're more likely to find wireless internet access in the modern cafés in the New City, as young Aleppans prefer to use their own laptops.

Concord Internet Café (Map pp182-3; Sharia al-Quwatli; per 30min \$E50; ☎ 9am-11pm) Above a pastry café.

Medical Services

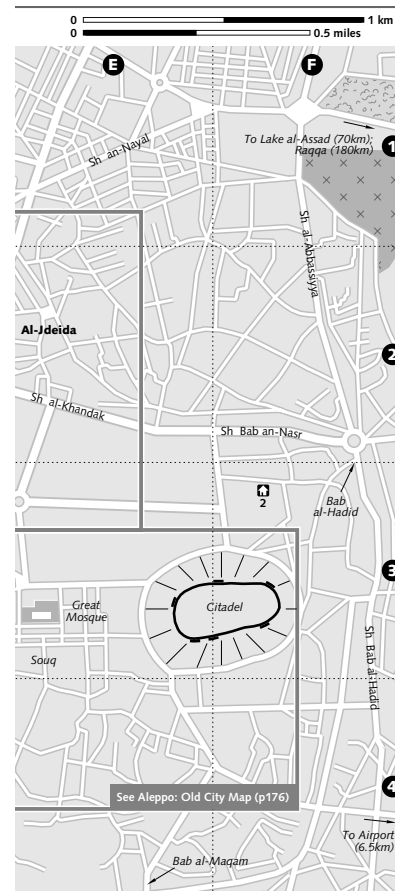
There are pharmacies all over Aleppo, with several congregated around the junction of Sharia al-Quwatli and Sharia Bab al-Faraj.

Dr Farid Megarbaneh (☎ 221 1218) This doctor, who speaks excellent English and French, is recommended.

Money

There are ATMs all over Aleppo, so leave the travellers cheques at home – you'll be hard-pressed to find a bank that will change them.

Commercial Bank of Syria (Map pp182-3; Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; ☎ 8.30am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) It's marked



by a big sign in English but the entrance is hidden at the back of an arcade.

Exchange office (Map pp182-3; cnr Sharia al-Quwatli & Sharia Bab al-Faraj; ☎ 9am-7.30pm) Convenient but doesn't accept travellers cheques.

Post

DHL (Map pp182-3; ☎ 444 0322; off Sharia al-Quwatli; ☎ 9.30am-9pm)

Main post office (Map pp182-3; Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri; ☎ 8am-5pm) On the southwest side of the main square. The parcels office is around the corner to the left of the main entrance.

Telephone

Telephone office (Map pp182-3; Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri; ☎ 8am-10pm) At the post office.

Tourist Information

Automobile & Touring Club Syria (☎ 224 7272)

Look out for the publications, brochures and maps produced by this organisation, available from some hotels, cafés and museums.

Tourist office (Map pp182-3; ☎ 212 1228, 223 0000; Sharia al-Baron; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Sun-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) In the gardens opposite the National Museum. There's little information; the best you'll get is a free map.

Visa Extensions

Immigration office (Map p176; Sharia al-Qala'a; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) On the 1st floor of the government building just north of the Citadel. Bring four passport photos and then fill out forms in quadruplicate. The processing takes around 1½ hours and there's a fee of \$E25. Extensions of up to two months are possible. Get your photos done at one of the shacks on the road across from the office.

SIGHTS Old City

المدينة القديمة

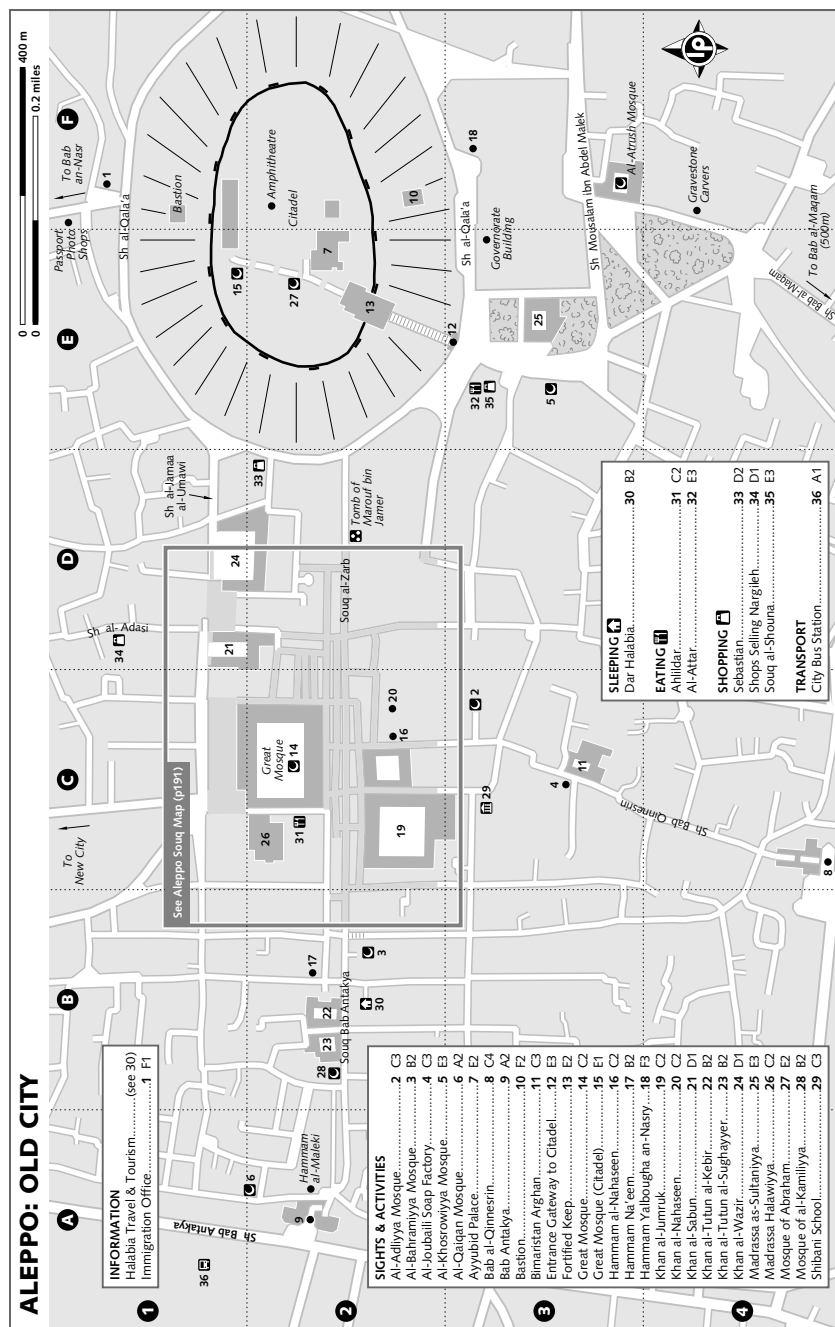
At one time walled and entered only by one of eight gates, the Old City has long since burst its seams and now has few definable edges. Exploring its seemingly infinite number of alleys and cul-de-sacs could occupy the better part of a week, depending on how inquisitive you are. We recommend visiting at least twice: once on a busy weekday to experience the all-out five-senses assault of the souq, and a second time on a Friday when, with all the shops closed, the lanes are silent and empty. Relieved of the need to keep flattening yourself against the wall to let the overlaid donkeys and little minivans squeeze by, you're free to appreciate architectural details.

Begin your exploration of the Old City at Bab Antakya, one of only two remaining city gates, which is on the street of the same name about 500m south of Amir Palace Hotel. From here the sight descriptions below follow a route eastward. The area is just as easily approached from the north via the Great Mosque or from the east starting at the Citadel.

BAB ANTAKYA

باب أنطاكية

The 13th-century Bab Antakya (Antioch Gate; Map p176), the western gate of the old walled city, is all but completely hidden by the swarm of busy workshops surrounding it, but you definitely get a sense of 'entering' as you pass under its great stone portal and through the defensively doglegged vaulted

**KEEPING IT REAL**

More damage was done in the 20th century to the precious historic fabric of our urban spaces than at any other time in history, according to Anthony M Tung in *Preserving the World's Great Cities* (2001). Tung blames concrete and steel, industrialisation and the automobile, but in these respects Aleppo has been lucky. The city enjoyed its greatest period of prosperity under the Mamluks and early Ottomans, when cash from commerce furnished it with the grandest of architecture, but Aleppo was well into decline by the end of the 19th century and languished in the 20th century, subsequently missing out on many of the most destructive aspects of modernism. As a consequence, few cities anywhere in the world have a medieval heritage as rich as Aleppo's.

Unfortunately, misguided planning in the 1950s ploughed major new roads through the Old City, causing considerable damage, compounded by the new building construction that went with them. Since then, Aleppo's Old City has been listed by Unesco as a World Heritage Site – keeping company with monuments such as the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids and Machu Picchu. More significantly, it has been the subject of an ongoing rehabilitation programme managed by the municipality in conjunction with the German government (via the offices of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation or GTZ – see www.gtz-aleppo.org). There are 240 classified historical monuments in the Old City and a strategy for the restoration and rehabilitation of all of them. Tourism is part of the plan, but a balance between this, the privacy of the residents and the preservation of authenticity is paramount. The aim is to nurture local communities and businesses and create more community spaces in the hope that the Old City will survive as a historic but living entity, and not become just another open-air museum piece.

The Old City has more than 100,000 residents. About one third of its houses currently require urgent structural repairs while another third need maintenance or rehabilitation. Financial and technical help has been made available for residents to achieve this. Traffic management and renewal of the water supply and sewer networks are also underway. While much more funding is needed, at least there is a plan in place to preserve what is one of the real gems of the Middle East.

passageway. Once through here you emerge onto Souq Bab Antakya, the bazaar's bustling main thoroughfare, which runs due east to halt abruptly at the foot of the Citadel, some 1.5km away.

Until the development of the New City in the 19th century, this was Aleppo's main street, tracing the route of the decumanus, the principal thoroughfare of the Roman city of Beroia. A great triumphal arch is thought to have stood on the site of Bab Antakya and part of its remains were used in the construction of nearby **Mosque of al-Kamiliyya** (Map p176), 200m ahead on your left. First, take a quick detour left, immediately after the gate, up a flight of stone steps beside a hammam (often flagged by towels drying outside), to a street that follows the line of the old city ramparts. In addition to fascinating views, there's the little **Al-Qaiqan Mosque** (Crows' Mosque; Map p176) with its doorway flanked by basalt Byzantine columns, a façade studded with column segments, and a block inscribed with Hittite script embedded in the south wall.

KHAN AL-JUMRUK & OTHERS

خان الجمرک و غيره
Beyond Al-Kamiliyya mosque, a corrugated-iron roof blots out the sunlight and the souq proper starts. To the left are entranceways to two adjacent khans, or travellers' inns, **Khan al-Tutun Sughayyer** (Map p176) and **Khan al-Tutun Kebir** (Map p176), the little and big khans of Tutun, although in fact they're both fairly modest in scale. A few steps along on the right is **Al-Bahramiyya Mosque** (Map p176), built in early Ottoman style in the late 16th century. From here on, virtually every building is a khan and there are a few in particular worth investigating.

At the point at which the street again becomes spanned by stone vaulting, slip off to the right, then take an immediate left to reach the great gateway of the magnificent **Khan al-Jumruk** (Map p176). Completed in 1574, this is the largest and most impressive of Aleppo's khans. At one time it housed the consulates and trade missions of the English, Dutch and French, in addition to 344 shops. Its days as a European enclave

ALEPPO'S TOP HISTORIC HOUSES

Aleppo has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to traditional houses. While they all look like fortresses from the exterior, a peek inside reveals an oasis of calm. All are in the Al-Jdeida quarter (Map pp182-3).

- Beit Kebbeh
- Beit Sader
- Beit Mariana Marrache
- Beit Balit
- Beit Basil
- Beit Dallal
- Beit Wakil
- Beit Altounji
- Beit Ghazzali
- Beit Ashiqbash (Museum of Popular Tradition)

are now long gone but the khan is still in use, serving as a cloth market. The decoration on the interior façade of the gateway is splendid.

Next to Al-Jumruk (but entered from the east side) is the much smaller **Khan al-Nahaseen** (Khan of the Coppersmiths; Map p176), dating from the first half of the 16th century. Until the 19th century, rooms on the 1st floor housed the Venetian consul, and during the 20th century they were the residence of the Belgian consul, Adolphe Poche, and his family. Madam Jenny Poche, descended from the last of the Venetian consuls, maintains the property, which may well qualify as the oldest continuously inhabited house in Aleppo. Its rooms are filled with a beguiling variety of collections gathered by family members over the centuries, including archaeological finds, antiquities, mosaics and precious early photography, and there's a fine library where Madam Poche's father once waltzed with Agatha Christie. Visitors (no large groups) are welcomed only by appointment; phone the current Belgian consulate (☎ 362 2666).

SOUQ

السوق

Not as extensive as Cairo's Khan al-Khalili or as grand as Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, Aleppo's souq (Map p191) is nonetheless

one of the most atmospheric in the Middle East. Its appeal derives largely from the fact that it's still the main centre of local commerce. If an Aleppan housewife needs some braid for her curtains, a taxi driver needs a new seat cover, or the school kids need backpacks, it's to the souq that they all come. Little seems to have changed here in hundreds of years, and while recent years have seen an increase in tourism, the local trade has yet to be displaced by sightseers.

Parts of the souq date from the 13th century, but the bulk of what stands today belongs to the Ottoman era (largely 16th- to 19th-century). A walk through the souq could take all day, particularly if you accept invitations by the stall owners to stop for tea. For tips on what to buy where, including a detailed map, see Shopping (p191).

GREAT MOSQUE

الجامع الكبير

On the northern edge of the souq is the Great Mosque (Al-Jamaa al-Kebir; Map p176), or Umayyad Mosque, the younger sibling (by 10 years) of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. It's also known as Al-Jamaa Zacharia after Prophet Zacharia, the father of St John the Baptist. Started by Caliph Al-Walid (r AD 705-15), who earlier founded the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the work was completed by his successor Caliph Suleiman (r AD 715-17). However, aside from the plan, nothing survives of the original mosque as the building has been destroyed and rebuilt countless times.

Miraculously, the mosque's freestanding **minaret** has managed to survive in exactly its original form, as built from 1090 to 1092, although it does have a pronounced lean as a result of an earthquake. Standing 45m high, it's majestic, rising up through five distinct levels, adorned with blind arches, to a wooden canopy over a muezzin's gallery from where the call to prayer was announced.

While it's not possible to climb the minaret, visitors are allowed inside the mosque. There's no admission fee but footwear must be removed and women must hire an *abeyya* (hooded cloak) to wear for S£50.

Entrance is directly into the courtyard, the floor of which is decorated by black-and-white marble geometric patterns. Under a strong sun, the reflected light is so harsh it hurts the eyes, while the hot marble scorches shoeless feet.

Inside the prayer hall is a fine 15th-century carved *minbar* (pulpit). Behind the grille to the left of this is supposedly the head of Zacharia. The padlocks fastened to the grille are placed here temporarily by locals who believe that a few days soaking up the *baraka* (blessings) from the tomb will give them strength.

MADRASSA HALAWIYYA

المدرسة الحلوية

Opposite the western entrance of the mosque, this former theological college (Map p176) was built in 1245 and stands on the site of what was once the 6th-century Cathedral of St Helen. The prayer hall opposite the entrance incorporates all that remains of the cathedral, which is a semi-circular row of six columns with intricately decorated, acanthus-leaved capitals. For several hundred years the cathedral and the Great Mosque (built in the cathedral's gardens) stood next to each other, serving their respective faiths, which worshipped side by side in harmony. The cathedral was only seized by the Muslims in 1124 in response to atrocities committed by the Crusaders.

AROUND THE GREAT MOSQUE

The souq is at its most atmospheric immediately south and east of the Great Mosque. This is where you'll find gold and silver, carpets and kilims (see p191).

Away from the shopping temptations, there are another couple of khans well worth your time. In the block east of the Great Mosque is the early-16th-century **Khan al-Sabun** (Soap Khan; Map p176), largely obscured by a clutter of shops but with a distinctive, richly decorated Mamluk façade, considered to be one of the best examples of Mamluk architecture in the city. Internally it's one of the prettiest of khans, with vine-hung trelliswork and the brightly hued wares of carpet sellers draped over the balconies.

The 17th-century **Khan al-Wazir** (Minister's Khan; Map p176), a block further east, also has a beautifully decorated gateway. It's one of the grandest such structures in Aleppo and largely unaltered by modern development.

BAB AL-QINNESRIN

باب قنسرین

Sharia Bab Qinnasrin is the southern continuation of Souq an-Nahaseen (Coppersmiths' Souq, which unfortunately no

longer houses coppersmiths), and it runs down to Bab al-Qinnasrin, the surviving southern Old City gate. It's been a prime beneficiary of the attentions of the GTZ and the Old City rehabilitation project (see Keeping It Real, p177). It only stretches for a little over 500m, but in that stretch there's quite a lot to see.

The Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo, a permanent exhibition in the splendid 16th-century **Shibani School** (Map p176; ☎ 331 9270; Al Jaloum quarter; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Mon), illustrates the work underway to make the city more liveable. The guide Mustapha may even take you to the rooftop to enjoy the spectacular views.

You'll find towards the bottom of Souq al-Nahaseen, just before it becomes Sharia Bab Qinnasrin, a short passageway leading to **Al-Adliyya Mosque** (Map p176), built in 1555 and one of the city's major Ottoman-era mosques. It's worth a quick look inside for the fine tiling. To the south, the street doglegs round the jutting corner of a small khan, now used by shoe wholesalers, beyond which noses are set twitching by the fragrant smells emanating from **Al-Joubaili Soap Factory** (Map p176), ages old and still producing soaps the traditional way using olive oil and bay laurel.

Directly across the street, behind railings, is the splendid **Bimaristan Arghan** (Map p176), one of the most enchanting buildings in the whole of Aleppo. Dating from the 14th century, it was converted from a house into an asylum, a role it continued to perform until the 20th century. The main entrance gives access to a beautifully kept courtyard with a central pool overhung by greenery. Diagonally across, a doorway leads through to a series of tight passages, one of which terminates in a small, octagonal, domed courtyard. Off this are 11 small cells; these are where the dangerous patients were confined.

Continuing south, you reach the huge, wonderfully preserved and tunnel-like **Bab al-Qinnasrin** (Map p176), which, like Bab Antakya, incorporates a defensive dogleg.

CITADEL

القلعة

Rising up on a high mound at the eastern end of the souq, the **Citadel** (Map p176; ☎ 362 4010; adult/student S£150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon summer, to 4pm winter) is Aleppo's most famous and most

spectacular landmark. Dominating the city, it has long been the heart of its defences.

The mound it stands upon is not, as it first seems, artificial: it's a natural feature that originally served as a place of worship, as evidenced by two basalt lions unearthed and identified as belonging to a 10th-century-BC temple.

It's thought the first fortifications were erected at the time of the Seleucids (364–333 BC), but everything seen today dates from much later. The Citadel served as a power base for the Muslims during the 12th-century Crusades, when the moat, 20m deep and 30m wide, was dug and the lower two-thirds of the mound were encased in a stone glacis. Much rebuilding and strengthening occurred during Mamluk rule from 1250 to 1517 and it's largely their work that survives.

Touring the Citadel

To enter, cross the moat by a stepped bridge on the south side. Any attacking forces would have been dangerously exposed on the bridge as they confronted the massive **fortified keep**, from which defenders could rain down arrows and pour boiling oil through the row of machicolations. The **bastion**, off to the right, was added in the 14th century to allow for flanking fire on the bridge.

The first great gate was set to the right rather than dead in front of the bridge to prevent charges with a battering ram. Note the beautiful calligraphy and entwined dragons above the gate and the door decorated with horseshoes. Once through the gate, a succession of five right-angle turns and three sets of steel-plated doors formed a formidable barrier to any would-be aggressors. Some of the doors still remain; one is decorated with a pair of lions, echoing the millennia-old use of lions as guardians against evil, as seen in the National Museum.

Take the path north. On the right is a series of doorways, one of which has steps leading down to two sunken chambers that served as a cistern and prison. Beyond is a set of stairs doubling back to lead up to the remains of an **Ayyubid Palace** dating from the 13th century. The most striking remains are of a soaring entrance portal with stalactite stone decoration. To the rear of the palace is a recently renovated Mamluk-era hammam.

A path from the hammam leads back towards the fortified keep and its heavily restored throne room, with a magnificent, intricately decorated wooden ceiling.

Back on the main path, off to the left is the small 12th-century **Mosque of Abraham**, attributed to Nureddin and one of several legendary burial places for the head of John the Baptist.

At the northern end of the path, opposite what is now a café, is the 13th-century **great mosque**, a rather grandiose title for a building of such humble dimensions. The café is housed in an Ottoman-era barracks, and it's from here that you are gifted with extraordinary views over the collage of roofs, domes and minarets.

SOUTH OF THE CITADEL

Opposite the Citadel entrance is the Ayyubid **Madrasa as-Sultaniyya** (Map p176). The prayer hall has a striking mihrab (niche indicating the direction of Mecca) with eye-catching ornamentation achieved through multicoloured marble inlays. Unfortunately this part of the building is often locked. Also here is the **mausoleum of Al-Malek az-Zaher Ghazi**, a son of Saladin (Salah ad-Din), and one-time occupant of the Citadel.

Across the road to the west is a low, multidomed mosque set in gardens. Known as **Al-Khosrowiyya Mosque** (Map p176), it's notable for being one of the earliest works of the famed Turkish architect Sinan, dating to 1537. It still serves as the main place of worship for the neighbourhood and each Friday streams of men and young boys make a beeline here to assume their places for noon prayers.

To the east of Madrasa as-Sultaniyya is Hammam Yalbougha an-Nasry (p185).

Al-Jdeida

Al-Jdeida quarter is the most charming part of Aleppo. It's a well-maintained warren of narrow, stone-flagged lanes with walls like canyons. The façades that line the alleys are blank because the buildings all look inwards onto central courtyards. Every so often one of the studded wooden doors with their clenched fists for knockers will open and passers-by can get a glimpse inside.

Much of the architecture dates from the Ottoman era, making the quarter younger than the Old City (hence its name Al-Jdeida, 'the new'), but it's equally fascinating. It developed as an area for Christian refugees (largely Maronite and Armenians), who became prosperous traders.

The quarter has been undergoing something of a rebirth in recent years. With the backing of an enlightened city mayor,

private investors have been encouraged to purchase and renovate properties in the quarter and convert them to commercial usage. As a result there are myriad boutique hotels occupying former merchants' mansions and an ever-growing number of restaurants and bars sprouting in striped-stone courtyards and cellars.

AROUND SAAHAT AL-HATAB

ساحة الحطب وحواليها
If there's a heart to Al-Jdeida, then it's Saahat al-Hatab (Hatab Sq) in the oldest area of Salibeh, lined with shops selling oriental jewellery. To the north is **Sharaf Mosque** (Map pp182–3), one of the neighbourhood's earliest monuments, built in the reign of the Mamluk sultan Qaitbey (r 1468–96). At the western corner, just the other side of Orient House Antiques (p192), a stylised sculpture of two robed women marks the turn for Sharia al-Sissi. Along here on the right, **Beit Sissi** (Sissi House; Map pp182–3) is a 17th-century residence that was one of the first of the area's many historic houses to be restored; it's now a renowned restaurant (p189). About 50m further on the left, **Beit Wakil** (Map pp182–3) is two 18th-century houses lovingly transformed into a stunning boutique hotel and courtyard restaurant (p189).

Backtrack across Saahat al-Hatab and make a beeline south along Sharia al-Kayyali. On the right is a door with a plaque announcing **Beit Ghazzali** (Map pp182–3). This is the largest house in the quarter. It was built in the 17th century and served as an Armenian school for much of the 20th century. It's now owned by the city council and is undergoing restoration until its fate is decided. Some of the walls have fine painted decoration and there's a splendid private hammam.

MUSEUM OF POPULAR TRADITION

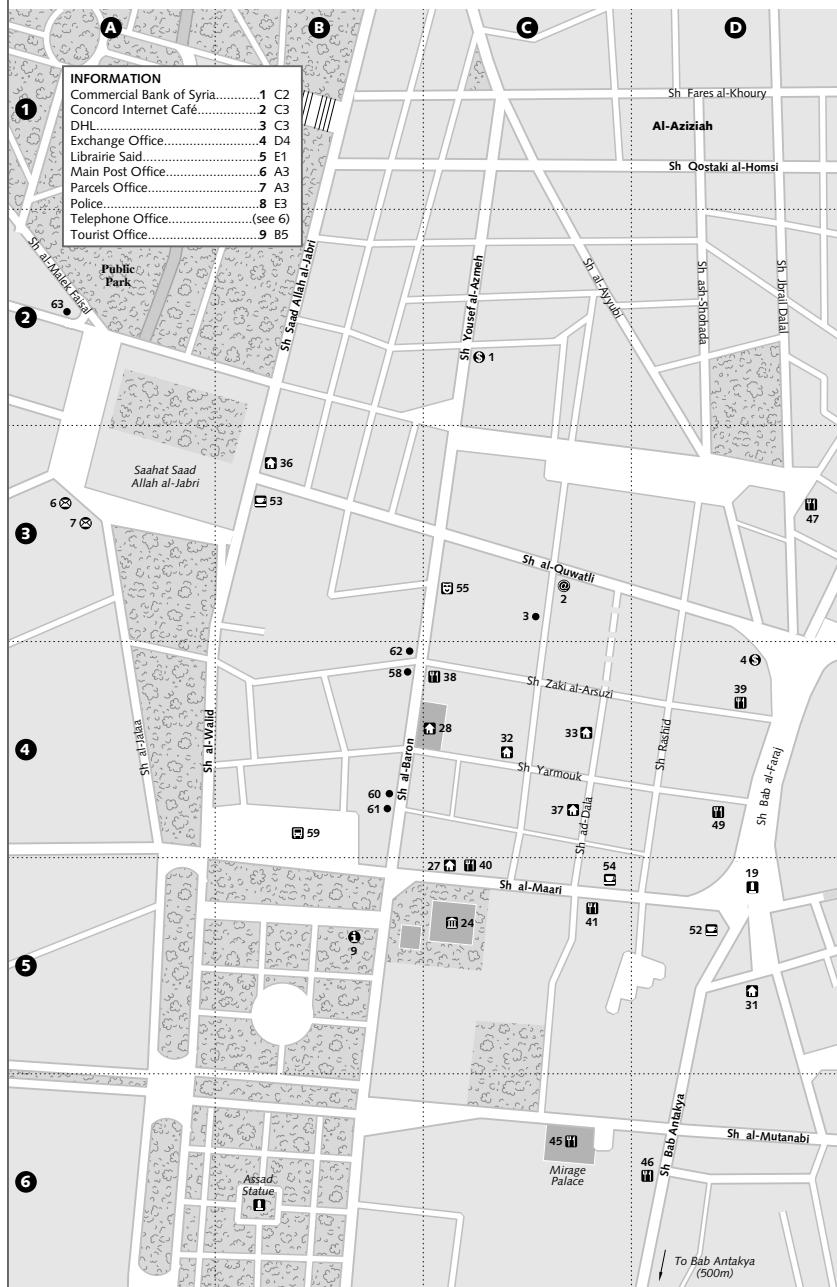
متحف التقاليد الشعبية
A little further down from Beit Ghazzali is yet another house, Beit Ajiqbash (built 1757), now a home for the **Museum of Popular Tradition** (Map pp182–3; ☎ 333 6111; Sharia Haret al-Yasmin; adult/student £575/5; ☒ 8am–2pm Wed–Mon), with fascinating artefacts relating to everyday life in bygone times. The splendid architecture and intricate decoration make this a must-visit.

DIY ALEPPO

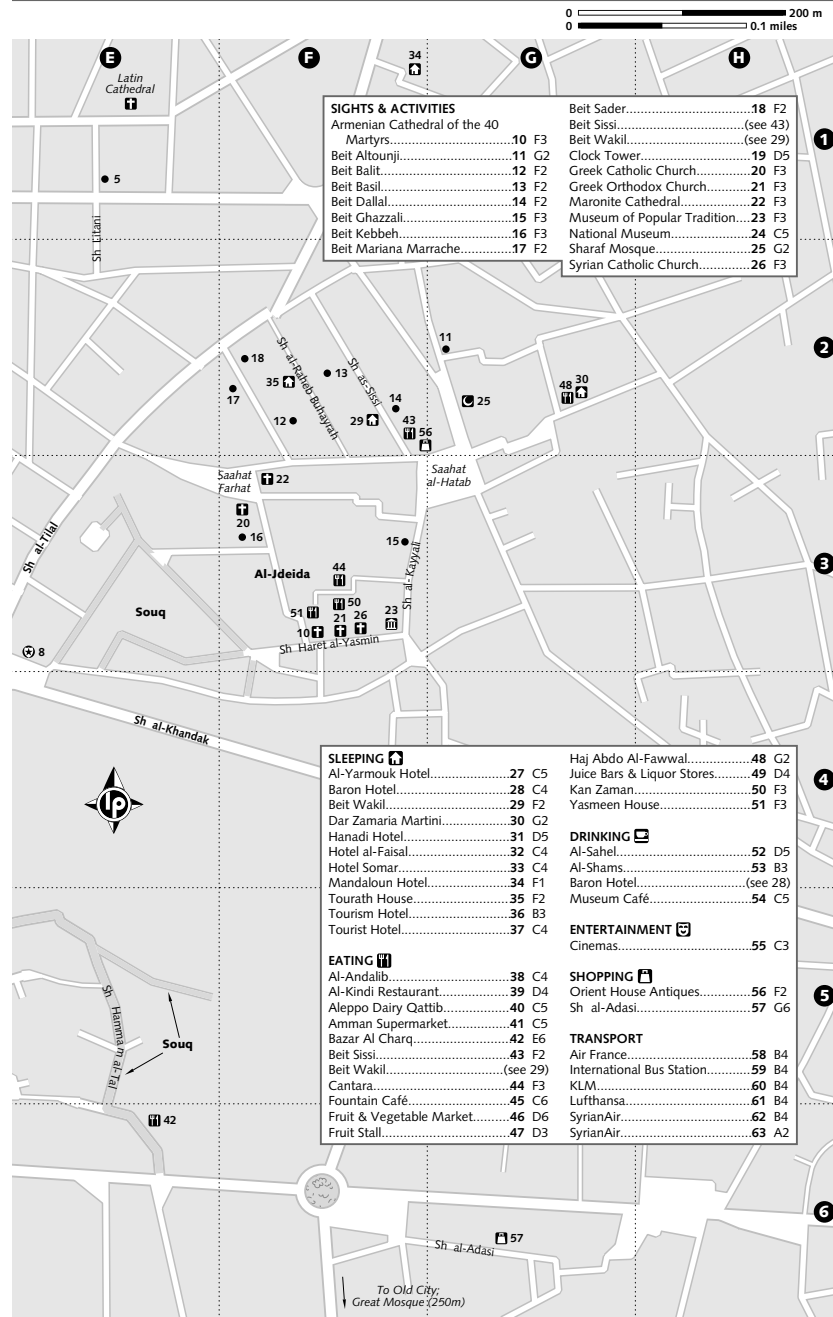
Yep. Keep that guidebook closed and just wander. Aleppo is one of the best cities in the Middle East (perhaps in the world) to just let your curiosity guide you. We'll give you some starting points first, of course:

- Northeast of the Citadel via the Bayada quarter to Bab al-Hadid – this ramshackle area sees few foreigners exploring its fascinating streets. Follow the main thoroughfare past Souq al-Haddadin (Blacksmiths' Market) with diversions through the mazelike Bayada quarter to imposing Bab al-Hadid. Along the way you'll pass some of Aleppo's oldest madrassas, mosques, hammams and palaces. There's been little renovation and no signs exist, so look out for fine architectural details and peak through doors and windows when you can.
- Bab al-Hadid to Al-Jdeida – instead of taking the main route along Sharia Bab al-Hadid and Bab al-Nasr to Al-Jdeida, take the backstreets through the living breathing lanes of this old neighbourhood. People are focused on their everyday life, so you'll be pleasantly ignored, but while it's easy to get lost in the tangle of streets, rest assured someone will point you in the right direction if you can't find your way.
- Northwest of the Citadel via the Farafra quarter to Bab al-Nasr – another old area ignored by tourists, who tend to stick to the main roads en route between the Old City and Al-Jdeida, these dusty streets are home to dilapidated khans, mosques, the Masbanat al-Zanabili (two 19th-century soap-making factories), hammams, palaces and even a synagogue.

ALEPPO: NEW CITY



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CHURCHES & CATHEDRALS

Al-Jdeida is home to five major churches, each aligned to a different denomination. Immediately west of the museum is the **Syrian Catholic Church** (Mar Assia al-Hakim; Map pp182-3), built in 1625 and happy to admit visitors who come knocking. Next stop is the 19th-century **Greek Orthodox Church** (Map pp182-3) and further beyond that, still on Haret al-Yasmin, is the entrance to the 17th-century **Armenian Cathedral of the 40 Martyrs** (Map pp182-3). If possible, it's worth visiting on a Sunday to observe the Armenian mass performed here, which is still pervaded with a sensuous aura of ritual. It starts at 10am and lasts two hours. North of these three, on Saahat Farhat, are the **Maronite Cathedral** (Map pp182-3) and a smaller **Greek Catholic Church** (Map pp182-3), which date to the 19th century.

New City

Most visitors' experience of modern Aleppo is limited to the Bab al-Faraj area, a low-rise neighbourhood of cubbyhole shops, small businesses, *mekaniki* (car repair workshops) and, east of the baroque **clock tower**, the swish new Sheraton hotel.

However, the most pleasant part of the New City is northwest of here, in and around the upmarket **Al-Aziziah** neighbourhood, developed during the 19th century and home to Aleppo's moneyed families, most of whom are Christian. The busy streets are lined with splendid mansions, modern fashion boutiques, lively contemporary cafés and swish new restaurants, and the area has a real buzz about it that other parts of Aleppo lack.

There's a large **public park**, prettily laid out with pathways meandering through well-tended greenery and an impressive fountain entrance off Sharia Saad Allah al-Jabri. If you're through with walking for the day this is a great place to bring a book and picnic.

NATIONAL MUSEUM

المتحف الوطني
Aleppo's **National Museum** (Map pp182-3; ☎ 212 2400/1; adult/student £75/10; ☎ 9am-5.30pm), in the middle of town opposite the tourist office, is rather nondescript apart from the extraordinary colonnade of giant granite figures that fronts the entrance. Standing on

the backs of stylised creatures are wide-eyed characters, replicas of pillars that once supported the 9th-century-BC temple-palace complex at Tell Halaf, near the border with Turkey in the northeast of the country.

From the entrance hall the exhibits were displayed chronologically in an anticlockwise direction, but at the time of research the museum was undergoing extensive 'renovation', which was being conducted with scant concern for safety and little respect for the artefacts. We hope your visit will be more pleasant than our last one. Below is the route through exhibit rooms at the time of research.

Tell Brak

تل براك

Tell Brak, 45km north of Hassake in far northeastern Syria, was excavated by Sir Max Mallowan, husband of Agatha Christie. Most of the exhibits in this room are finds from his digs, although many of the best pieces went to the British Museum in London.

Mari

ماري (تل الحريري)

This room contains some of the museum's best pieces, unearthed at Tell Hariri, the site of the 3rd-millennium-BC city of Mari (p223), on the Euphrates River near the present-day Iraqi border. Look for the tableaux of delicate carved-shell figurines of a general and his fettered prisoners and chariots, which attest to the high level of artistry at this early time, and the wonderful greened bronze lion with a doleful expression. Along with a twin, now in the Louvre in Paris, it was discovered flanking a temple doorway.

Hama

حمام

The exhibits of finds from excavations in 1931-38 at the Hama citadel, dating back to 1000 BC, were no longer on display at the time of research but may reappear.

Ugarit

اوغاريت (رأس شمرة)

Many of the finds display evidence of the links between the one-time busy port of Ugarit (Ras Shamra; p149) and Egypt. The bronze Egyptian figures were probably gifts from a pharaoh to the king of Ugarit. An alabaster vessel bears the name of Ramses II in hieroglyphs, and there's also a lime-stone obelisk.

Tell Halaf

تل حلف

This hall is dominated by figures similar to the replicas at the museum entrance; however, these are millennia old. The figures are believed to represent gods and a goddess; the central one is thought to be Haddad, the weather god, symbolically linked to the bull (on which he stands). The colossi were originally flanked by two wide-eyed sphinxes; a replica of one is here. The large panels are plaster casts of originals that once adorned Tell Halaf's palace walls – the originals were destroyed during WWII in a bombing raid on a German museum.

Tell Arslan Tash

تل ارسلان تاش

The astonishing collection of ivory carving was discovered in the remains of a palace at Tell Arslan Tash, an Aramaean city (ancient name Hadatu) in the northeast of the country, excavated by the French in 1928. They are not Syrian in origin and have been identified as coming from Phoenicia, and are dated to the 9th century BC. There is a series depicting the birth of the god Horus from a lotus flower, which is similar to an alabaster carving of Tutankhamen emerging from a lotus on display in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Tell Ahmar

تل احمر

Tell Ahmar is the site of another ancient Aramaean city, and is near what is now the Syrian-Turkish border, 20km south of the crossing point of Jarablos. The wall paintings displayed in this room were removed from the remains of a palace excavated by the French in the 1920s and date from around the 8th century BC.

ACTIVITIES

Originally constructed in 1491, **Hammam Yal-bougha an-Nasry** (Map p176; ☎ 362 3154; near Citadel entrance) was one of Syria's finest working bathhouses and something of a city show-piece, yet was closed for maintenance when we visited with no opening date fixed. If you can manage to get in to take a look around, there's a splendid sun clock inside the dome above reception. If it is operational again, don't leave Aleppo without having a massage and scrub here.

The renovated, men-only **Hammam al-Nahaseen** (Map p176; hammam only £E300, complete massage & scrub £E500), in the heart of the souq just south of the Great Mosque, is open

long hours and is still a local favourite despite increasingly attracting tourists.

Hammam Na'eem (Map p176; hammam only £E350, complete massage & scrub £E425), also known as Hammam al-Jedida, is a quiet, clean, friendly, men-only place north of the main souq street. To find it, coming from Bab Antakya along Souq Bab Antakya, take the first left after the start of the corrugated-iron roofing and it's just ahead on the right.

TOURS

Halabia Travel & Tourism (Map p176; ☎ 224 8497; www.halabia-tours.com) Run by the friendly and knowledgeable Abdel Hay Kaddar. They can organise visas and meet you at the Turkish, Jordanian and Lebanese borders. A variety of tours are on offer.

Tahhan Tourism (☎ 263 5178) Offers a variety of tours in and around Aleppo, from Qala'at Samaan (US\$55) to Qala'at al-Hosn (Karak des Chevaliers; US\$80), in new air-conditioned vehicles with multilingual tour guides.

SLEEPING

The accommodation scene in Aleppo has improved at the top end, with a slew of new boutique hotels. The midrange options are a little limited but Aleppo's good-value boutique hotels are a good excuse to spend a couple of nights in higher-priced digs. Good, clean budget lodgings are thin on the ground and the handful of recommended places fill up fast. Book in advance.

Budget

Hanadi Hotel (Map pp182-3; ☎ 223 8113; Bab al-Faraj; s/d/tr £E350/1000/1500; 📶) Once you get past the shock of the Barbie-esque colour scheme (think pink), this excellent budget hotel has the makings of a backpacker favourite. It has the friendliest multilingual reception staff in Aleppo, pleasant rooms facing an enormous shady sun terrace, and a long list of services. It's well located 100m south of the clock tower.

Tourist Hotel (Map pp182-3; ☎ 221 6583; Sharia ad-Dala; s/d/tr without bathroom £E400/700/900, d/tr with bathroom £E800/1200) Aleppo's best budget option is more akin to a homely European-style pension than a hotel. The staff are warm, friendly and multilingual, the décor is delightfully old-fashioned and the place is immaculate. Some rooms have shared bathrooms; others have private bathrooms. Booking in advance is essential. Breakfast is £E100.

Hotel Somar (Map pp182-3; ☎ 211 3198, 212 5925; Sharia ad-Dala; s/d/tr US\$13/19/23, without bathroom US\$11/16/21; 🍴) A rather old-fashioned but well-kept little hotel; the walls had been freshly painted when we visited. The simple rooms open onto a couple of leafy covered courtyards dripping with vines. Satellite TV and air-conditioning/heating cost US\$1 extra.

Al-Yarmouk Hotel (Map pp182-3; ☎ 211 6154, 211 6155; fax 211 6156; Sharia al-Maari; s/d/tr SE600/1000/1400; 🍴) The Yarmouk may not see too many Western tourists – it mainly hosts Arab and Russian traders – but the chain-smoking English- and Russian-speaking staff are welcoming and it's a decent fallback if the other budget places are full. Having benefited from a makeover, each of the hotel's three floors has been painted a different colour, so take your pick from glossy lavender, pink and lemon. Rooms with bathrooms come with fridges, TVs, clean sheets and towels.

Tourism Hotel (Map pp182-3; ☎ 225 1602/3/4/5; fax 225 1606; Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri; s/d/tr US\$20/25/30) This retro 1970s-style hotel, opposite the main square in the New City, is a time-machine trip. But go beyond the wood paneling, kitsch chandeliers and tinted mirrors of the lobby, and you get clean modern rooms that represent the best-value sleeps in Aleppo. The spacious, comfortable rooms have small balconies, spotless private bathrooms, satellite TV, air-conditioning and fridges – all for a remarkable price.

THE BARON HOTEL

Built at a time when travel invariably involved three-week sea voyages, a set of garden-shed-sized trunks to be carried by porters, and a letter of introduction to the local consul, the Baron Hotel (above) belongs to a very different era. When it went up (1909–11), the hotel was on the outskirts of town 'in gardens considered dangerous to venture into after dark', and from the terrace guests could shoot ducks on the neighbouring swamp.

The Baron quickly became known as one of the premier hotels of the Middle East, helped by the fact that Aleppo was still a busy trading centre and staging post for travellers. The Near Eastern extension of the *Orient Express* used to terminate in Aleppo, and the rich and famous travelling on it generally ended up staying in the Baron. The old leather-bound visitors book turns up names such as aviators Charles Lindbergh, Amy Johnson and Charles Kingsford-Smith, as well as TE Lawrence (see Lawrence of Arabia, p188), Theodore Roosevelt and Agatha Christie, who wrote the first part of *Murder on the Orient Express* while staying here. Kept securely stashed in the safe, the visitors book sadly isn't available for viewing, but you can see a copy of Lawrence's bar bill displayed in the lounge.

Today, however, it's fair to say that the poorly maintained hotel trades heavily on its history and the nostalgia for an era when travel to the Middle East was a far more exotic affair – that alone makes it worth a toast in the bar.

Midrange

Hotel al-Faisal (Map pp182-3; ☎ 211 4434, 211 2618; fax 221 2573; Sharia Yarmouk; s/d/tr US\$30/35/40; 🍴) With more than a touch of Oriental chintz and grandma-approved décor, this three-star is popular with European tour groups. The rooms have recently been refreshed with a splash of pastel paint, new carpets and floral duvets, and they're extremely clean. Breakfast is filling and there are fascinating views from the breakfast room. The staff are multilingual and helpful. It's a safe choice.

Dar Halabia (Map p176; ☎ 332 3344, 224 8497; www.halabia-tours.com; Sharia Lisan ad-Din al-Khatib; s/d/tr US\$34/48/60; 🍴) Enchantingly situated in an 18th-century stone house a short stroll from Bab Antakya, Dar Halabia is a pleasant retreat and still the only hotel in Aleppo's Old City – for now at least. Spread over two levels, rooms face a sunny plant-filled courtyard – a wonderful spot to chill on a starry evening. All rooms are individually decorated with traditional décor (some more atmospheric than others) and it's good value – if a little quiet at night.

Baron Hotel (Map pp182-3; ☎ 221 0880/1; www.the-hotel-baron.com; 8 Sharia al-Baron; s/d/ste US\$44.40/55.50/88.80; 🍴) Aleppo's legendary Baron is a museum piece – see The Baron Hotel, below. But just like Syria's museums, it's suffering from a combination of neglect and indifference. Even with a 'renovation', which appears to have been little more than a lick or two of paint and upgraded bath-

rooms, it's still hard to justify the room rate given the austere facilities and woeeful breakfasts. Those looking for a place to have a decent kip should look elsewhere. History buffs shouldn't stay anywhere else. The atmospheric bar is worth a visit.

Tourath House (Map pp182-3; ☎ 211 8838/48/58; www.tourathhouse.com; Sharia al-Raheb Buhayrah; s/d US\$50/70; 🍴) This tiny boutique hotel, located in a splendid 260-year-old stone residence, has some of the friendliest and most professional young staff in Aleppo. There is a beautiful courtyard with an attractive *liwan* (summer room) and decorative ceiling that has been turned into a traditional *majlis* (reception room). The rooms, while boasting mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture and wooden shutters, are rather austere, but compared to some of the other Al-Jdeida sleeps, it's great value.

Beit Salahieh (Map pp174-5; ☎ 332 2222; www.beitsalahieh.com; off Sharia al-Kawakibi, btwn Citadel & Bab Al-Hadid; s/d US\$61/82; 🍴) This attractive hotel, formerly known as Diwan Rasmy, is secreted away down a narrow stone-walled alleyway near the Citadel, in the Al-Jibelah quarter. Housed in a converted 15th-century palace, it features a grand central courtyard, sprawling rooftop terraces and covered arcades, beautifully lit by Oriental lamps at night. While there are four traditionally decorated suites, the remaining rooms were unwisely renovated in a bland modern style, but these were soon to be transformed. While the location is fine for daytime exploration, at night the area is very quiet.

Mandaloun Hotel (Map pp182-3; ☎ 228 3008, 219 944; www.mandalounhotel.com; Sharia al-Tilal Hazazeh (Old Fire Station St); s/d US\$67/78; 🍴) Travellers love the Mandaloun, a beautiful courtyard hotel in Al-Aziziah that provides oodles of atmosphere without producing a massive bill when you leave. It's a dramatic three-storey property, and all rooms face the exquisite light-filled centre courtyard. Rooms feature intricately carved wooden shutters and are decorated in a simple but elegant style with wrought-iron beds, local textiles and tiny tables. Air-conditioning/heating, satellite TV and minibar are provided.

Top End

our pick Beit Wakil (Map pp182-3; ☎ 211 8169, 211 7083; www.beitwakil.com; Sharia as-Sissi; s/d/ste US\$77.70/111/144.30; 🍴) Nestled in the stone-

walled lanes of the old Al-Jdeida quarter in a painstakingly restored 18th-century merchant's residence, Beit Wakil was one of Aleppo's first boutique hotels. With its high vaulted ceilings, elegant courtyards, intricately carved stone and Mamluk-era horizontal stripes, it's wonderfully authentic. The tranquil vine-filled courtyard with bubbling fountain is a wonderful spot for a drink, and the restaurant is probably Aleppo's best after Beit Sissi. The suite is worth the extra cash.

Dar Zamaria Martini (Map pp182-3; ☎ 363 6100; www.darzamaria.com; off Saahat al-Hattab; d US\$110; 🍴) This captivating hotel in Al-Jdeida now sprawls across several grand courtyard houses dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, leveraging off the success of the original, more intimate property. While the renovations are wonderful, the hotel lacks the simple elegance of Beit Wakil, although the rooms are significantly more comfortable. There are pretty plant-filled courtyards and beautiful spacious rooms decorated with inlaid furniture, traditional textiles and Oriental carpets. While the rooftop restaurant does a roaring trade, service could be improved – the same goes for the hotel.

EATING

Known for its richness and use of spices, Aleppan cuisine is distinctive within Syria and, in turn, the Middle East. Dining here is a real pleasure. Although street-food joints are ubiquitous, the good restaurants are mostly concentrated in Al-Jdeida and Al-Aziziah. Crammed together on Sharia Georges and Mathilde Salem in Al-Aziziah are half a dozen restaurants and cafés with pavement tables occupied by young Aleppans sipping imported beer and toying with their mobile phones, while inside groups of bejewelled women chatter and pick at mezze.

Most Aleppo restaurants, unless otherwise stated, open around 11am for lunch and serve through until well after midnight – usually until the last diners are ready to leave, which can be 2am or even 3am. Remember, locals dine late and most places don't get busy until 10pm or later. Reservations are rarely necessary, except where noted.

Old City

There are few decent restaurants in the Old City and its immediate surrounds.

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

Has there ever been a movie that gives such a strong sense of a man as David Lean's 1962 movie *Lawrence of Arabia*? The Orientalist fantasies, the emotive soundtrack by Maurice Jarre – it's a true epic. But was the man as immense as the film that he inspired?

Born in 1888 into a wealthy English family, Thomas Edward Lawrence (or TE Lawrence as he's more commonly known) studied archaeology, gaining a keen interest in Crusader castles that saw him set out on a three-month tour of Syria in 1909, covering more than 1600km. On foot. He then studied Arabic in Byblos, Lebanon, and worked on excavations in Syria between 1911 and 1914 and then at the Hittite settlement at Carchemish on the Turkish side of the border on the Euphrates River.

With the outbreak of WWI, Lawrence became an intelligence agent in Cairo. Highly regarded in this capacity, he adopted an attitude that was both unobtrusive and nonconformist. In 1915, as a specialist on Middle Eastern military and political issues, he recorded his ideas on the Arab question and these were taken into consideration by British intelligence. Supporting the cause of the Arab revolt and manifesting his own hostility towards French politics in Syria, Colonel Lawrence favoured the creation of a Sunni and Arab state and in 1916 went to Arabia to shore up the support of the dissident Arabs. Working behind Turkish lines, Lawrence and the Arabs became more of an irritant than an outright fighting force, but their successful guerrilla incursions – in no small part due to Lawrence's brilliance as a tactician – cost the Turks precious resources.

In November of 1917, Lawrence was captured and claimed he was flogged for rebuffing the sexual advances of a Turkish commandant. This was meant to have occurred at Der'a, which most travellers pass through on the way to the ruins at Bosra. While his version of events is disputed by several of Lawrence's biographers, it's clear that whatever occurred had a long-lasting psychological effect on him.

It was the desert revolt of October 1918, however, that etched Lawrence's name into legend. At the side of Emir Faisal, whom he made the hero of the Arab revolt, and of the English General Allenby, Lawrence conquered Aqaba. He then entered Damascus in triumph, marking the final defeat of the Ottoman forces. But due to infighting by the Arabs and a cynical renegeing of promises by the English and the French through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a chance of Arab unity was lost. A disillusioned Lawrence turned down the honours of the Order of the Bath and the Distinguished Service Order in the presence of King George V – who apparently was holding the awards at the time.

In 1921, following the conference in Cairo in which both Lawrence and Churchill participated, Lawrence was sent to Transjordan to help Emir Abdullah – the great-grandfather of the current King Abdullah II of Jordan – to formulate the foundations of the new state. Nevertheless, he later left this position and enrolled with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1922, under the assumed name of Ross, first as a pilot, then as a mechanic under yet another assumed name. During this time he worked on his memoir, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He left the RAF in February 1935, aged 46, and despite looking forward to writing more, all that he achieved at such an early age weighed heavily on him. Lawrence, who had already lived enough life for several men, wasn't to see old age. He died in May 1935 in a motorcycle accident.

Beit Salahieh (Map pp174-5; ☎ 332 2222; www.beitsalahieh.com; off Sharia al-Kawakibi, btwn Citadel & Bab Al-Hadid) As Diwan Rasmay, this boutique hotel had a well-regarded restaurant with stunning Citadel views. At the time of our visit its reincarnation, Beit Salahieh, had not yet reopened the restaurant.

Al-Attar (Map p176; ☎ 333 9033; Sharia al-Qala'a; ☎ 9am-late) One of several sheesha cafés in a row facing the Citadel, Al-Attar's touts are the least annoying and its food is the

freshest. On offer are mezze (SE50), grills – try the *shish taouk* (marinated chicken grilled on skewers) with chips (SE150) – and fresh juices (SE50).

Ahildar (Map p176; ☎ 333 0841; Souq ibn al-Khashab, opposite Grand Mosque exit; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) In an elegant, restored old house with a somewhat disconcerting flat-screen TV decorating the downstairs wall, Ahildar is the only eatery in the souq serving full meals, everything from mezze (SE35 to

SE150) and kebabs (SE150) to French dishes like cordon bleu (SE225).

There are several felafel sellers in the souq, in the area immediately south of the Great Mosque, along with a couple of fresh juice stalls.

Al-Jdeida

RESTAURANTS

Cantara (Map pp182-3; ☎ 225 3355; just off Sharia al-Kayyali; pizzas SE160-260, pastas SE200; ☎ noon-mid-night) A courtyard restaurant, although not in the same league as Beit Wakil or Beit Sissi, Cantara offers an Italian-influenced menu with plenty of pastas and pizzas made in a proper stone oven. Credit cards are accepted and they serve beer and wine.

Kan Zaman (Map pp182-3; ☎ 331 1299; Sharia al-Kayyali; meal per person SE600; ☎ noon-1am) Close to Cantara and across the lane from Yasmeen House, Kan Zaman's beautifully decorated rooms sprawl over several levels, with a couple of romantic nooks for couples. There's a long list of cold and hot mezze (SE35 to SE200), fresh salads (SE75 to SE150) and succulent grills (SE160 to SE250). Credit cards are accepted and alcohol is served.

our pick Beit Sissi (Map pp182-3; ☎ 213 007, 93-500 500; Sharia as-Sissi; meal per person SE700; ☎ noon-late) Splendidly set in a restored 17th-century house with dining in an elegant courtyard (or a cosy interior room in the colder months), Beit Sissi is Aleppo's finest restaurant. Expect Syrian, Aleppan and French cuisine of the highest quality. Don't miss the delicious green beans in olive oil, the tasty ratatouille aubergine, the *sujok* (spicy sausage rolled in Arabic bread, sliced into snail-like pieces and then fried – the best we've tasted!) and the signature dish, cherry kebab. There's a wonderful *oud* (lute) player most nights. Alcohol is served and credit cards are accepted.

Beit Wakil (Map pp182-3; ☎ 221 7169; Sharia as-Sissi; meal per person SE700; ☎ noon-late) Similar in quality and cuisine to Beit Sissi, and just across the alley, Beit Wakil also delights with some equally interesting and tasty dishes. The cherry kebab is a must, along with the *toshka* (Armenian toasted meat and cheese sandwiches). Alcohol is served and credit cards are accepted.

Yasmeen House (Map pp182-3; ☎ 222 4462/5562; Sharia al-Kayyali; meal per person SE800; ☎ from 8pm) With its white tablecloths, elegant Yasmeen

House (in another grand old courtyard house) seems a little more formal than the other restaurants, but its enormous round tables make it ideal for groups. Expect delicious Syrian and Arabic food. Wine is also served – try the excellent Lebanese Ksara.

QUICK EATS

Haj Abdo al-Fawwal (Map pp182-3; off Saahat al-Hatab) Opening early every morning, this is *the* best place to get Aleppan-style *foul* (fava bean soup), delicately seasoned with cumin, paprika, garlic, lemon juice and fresh parsley. Crowds gather around the tiny shop from 7am, bearing empty containers of every size and description, pushing and shoving their way to the front for their share of this aromatic dish. Don't leave Aleppo without trying some for yourself.

New City

RESTAURANTS

Al-Andalib (Map pp182-3; Sharia al-Baron; meal per person SE350; ☎ noon-late) This rooftop restaurant on the same block as the Baron Hotel is popular with travellers who eat early, around 6pm to 7pm. Later on, after 10pm, it tends to be locals only – mostly male, so women may feel uncomfortable. The menu includes kebabs, salads, fries, hummus and a *baba ghanoug* that's a purée of aubergines with tahini and olive oil. The food is fresh and beer is served.

Bazar Al Charq (Map pp182-3; ☎ 224 9120; btwn Sharia al-Mutanabi & Sharia Hammam al-Tal; meal per person SE400; ☎ 11am-late) Delicious food is served in a cavernous, atmospheric restaurant decorated to resemble a bazaar. The *toshka* (SE150) is particularly tasty and the succulent kebabs (SE200) are popular. No alcohol.

Al-Challal (Map pp174-5; ☎ 224 3344; Sharia Georges & Mathilde Salem; meal per person SE450; ☎ 9am-late) This modern eatery attracts an affluent (mainly male) Aleppan crowd. The menu combines mezze and Middle Eastern grills (SE220) with international dishes such as escalopes and steaks (SE250). Alcohol is served.

Cordoba (Map pp174-5; ☎ 224 0868; Sharia Georges & Mathilde Salem; meal per person SE450; ☎ 9am-late) This long-standing local favourite is easily the best restaurant on this strip, with some

ALEPPAN CUISINE

One of the delights of Aleppo is its unique cuisine. Primarily influenced by the exchange between Aleppan and Ottoman chefs, but also influenced by Armenians and Jewish settlers, it's more complex, richer and spicier than your classic Middle Eastern cuisine. Some dishes you must try are *mouhamara*, a traditional dip of walnuts, pomegranate molasses, toasted bread crumbs, olive oil, roasted peppers and spices; *sujok*, spicy sausage rolled in Arabic bread, sliced into snail-like pieces and then fried; and the famous cherry kebab, a lamb kebab with a tasty cherry sauce. Beit Sissi (p189) is a favourite for these dishes (and the Syrian president agrees). In Damascus, Al Hallabi (p107) at the Four Seasons Hotel might not be to everyone's budget, but the chef is Syria's best. He's from Aleppo, of course!

of the tastiest Aleppan food you'll find in Syria. There's no menu in English, but try the *toshka* and *maajouka* (meat, cheese, pistachios and peppers shaped into a patty). Beer and arak are served.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

Fountain Café (Map pp182-3; Mirage Palace Hotel, Sharia al-Mutanabi; ☎ 9am-midnight) This café offers a welcome air-con retreat from the heat and dust outside. Burgers and sandwiches (club, steak, chicken, ham; S£95 to S£160) are huge and delicious, and the iced milkshakes (S£70) are excellent. Head to the adjoining bar if you feel like a cold beer.

Al-Kindi Restaurant (Map pp182-3; Sharia Zaki al-Arsuzi; meal per person S£250) Just off Sharia Bab al-Faraj, this is one of a cluster of similar kebab restaurants, all of which offer reasonable food at budget prices. It has an extensive menu in English made up of myriad mezze and grilled kebabs and is open from early until very late.

In the block bounded by Sharia al-Maari, Sharia Bab al-Faraj, Sharia al-Quwatli and Sharia al-Baron are plenty of cheapies offering the usual fare – prices are more variable than the food so check before you sit down. There's a row of excellent late-opening **juice bars** (Map pp182-3) at the Bab al-Faraj end of Sharia Yarmouk.

SELF-CATERING

The **Amman supermarket** (Map pp182-3; Sharia al-Maari) is a good place for purchasing basics such as bread, cheese and biscuits, along with toiletries. For fresh food, there's a **fruit and vegetable market** (Map pp182-3; Sharia Bab Antakya) and an excellent **fruit stall** (Map pp182-3; Sharia Jbrail Dalal), 200m north of Bab al-Faraj.

Across the road from the National Museum, **Aleppo Dairy Qattib** (Map pp182-3) stocks a range of delicious cheeses, olives and pickles; look for the red-and-white mirrored 'happy cow' sign.

If you take an empty mineral-water bottle to the juice bars on Sharia Yarmouk, they'll fill it up for you to take away. Among the juice bars there are two **liquor stores** (Map pp182-3) where you can buy Al-Chark beer for S£50.

DRINKING

Aleppo is not a late-night city and there's not much going on beyond midnight. The best places for a drink are the restaurant-café of Al-Aziziah or the bar-restaurants in Al-Jdeida.

Cafés & Coffeehouses

The following venues are all open from very early until very late, and some don't close.

Arabica (Map pp174-5; Sharia Bin Silvania) In Al-Aziziah, Syria's Starbucks does delicious iced lattes (S£90) as well as providing a fascinating slice of life that you won't experience in the Old City, especially after 6pm, when the music goes up a few notches and Aleppo's *shebab* (youth) spill out on to the footpath. The café offers free wireless internet and if you don't have your own laptop they'll even lend you one.

T-Square (Map pp174-5; ☎ 460 6033/44; Sharia Bin Silvania) This funky contemporary café-eatery next door to Arabica is where Aleppo's hipsters hang out. It's a great place for meeting locals and people-watching. Like Arabica, the place buzzes in the evenings, when the tables are jammed and it's standing-room only on the pavement.

Museum Café (Map pp182-3; Sharia al-Maari) Male travellers will enjoy this simple coffeehouse in the city centre, but it's men-only so women will feel uncomfortable.

Al-Sahel (Map pp182-3; Sharia al-Maari) This upstairs coffeehouse is close to Bab al-Faraj

and the clock tower. The place is grungy (in an old Aleppan sort of way) and the entrance is in the side street, through the reception of the Al-Sahel Hotel.

Al-Shams (Map pp182-3; Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri) On the corner of the big main square, this men's coffee shop is a popular haunt of Aleppo's chess players.

Bars

Aleppo is Al-Chark territory, which is the less appealing of Syria's two local brews, and there's not exactly a wealth of venues in which to drink it. The atmospheric interior bar or the front terrace at the **Baron Hotel** (Map pp182-3; ☎ 221 0880/1; 8 Sharia al-Baron; beers S£100) is a must, at least once.

There are also a couple of underground cave bars at Beit Sissi (p189) and Beit Wakil (p189) in Al-Jdeida. The one at Beit Sissi is buried deep in former cellars, with goblin faces leering out of the rock walls, while the one at Beit Wakil has colourful décor. Beit Sissi also has a moody low-lit bar upstairs, with a piano player playing tunes in winter.

ENTERTAINMENT

There is no shortage of cinemas (Map pp182-3) along Sharia al-Baron and its northern extension Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh. Most of what they screen is martial arts, soft porn and trashy B-movies. More entertaining are the airbrushed posters outside advertising the movies. These slightly risqué posters, used to entice the almost exclusively male customers, generally depict the very scenes that have been removed by the censor.

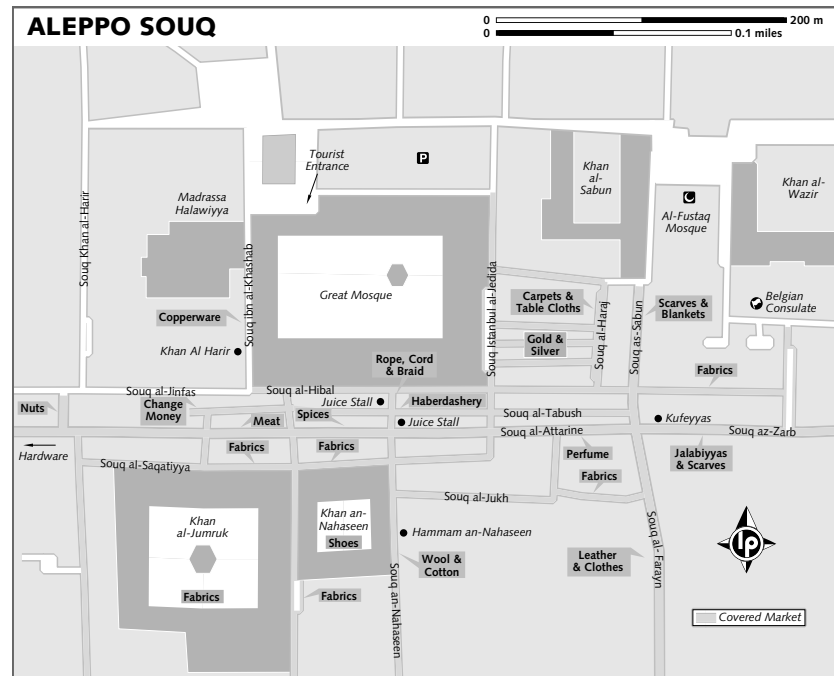
SHOPPING

The best place to shop in Aleppo is without a doubt the souq. This is the place to shop for olive soap, textiles and traditional dress.

Shopping the Aleppo Souq

Aleppo's souq (Map p191) is significantly less touristy than the markets in Damascus, although the pressure to spend is still there. Great buys include textiles, brocade, gold, silver, carpets and olive soap.

Like any Middle Eastern souq, Aleppo's bazaar is broken down into the usual



TOP BUYS IN THE SOUQS

- aged olive soap
- Oriental carpets and kilims
- nargileh/sheesha water pipes
- mother-of-pearl inlaid backgammon sets
- brocades and other richly decorated textiles

demarcations – gold in one alley, spices in another, carpets in one spot, scarves across the way. The exception to this is bustling **Souq al-Attarine**, which sells everything: hardware, clothing, spices, perfumes and even meat.

South of Souq al-Attarine the laneways almost exclusively give way to fabrics, clothing and shoes. Textiles have always been an important component of Aleppo's trade and **Souq al-Jukh** still operates as a major wholesale cloth market.

North of Al-Attarine the souq is at its most dense. Squeezed around the Great Mosque are veins of parallel narrow alleys that in places are barely wide enough for people to pass each other. Here, **Souq al-Hibal** is devoted to shops selling cord, braid and rope, while **Souq al-Tabush** is crammed with stalls selling buttons, ribbons and all manner of things necessary for a woman to run up her family's clothes.

Souq az-Zarb is a good place to head for *jalabiyyas*, the cotton robes worn by women and men alike, which make great nightdresses, or a *keffiyeh*, the distinctive black-and-white or red-and-white head-

dress worn by traditional Arabs in the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Syria and the Gulf States.

Shops in the souq open from early in the morning until around 6pm Saturday to Thursday, while on Friday virtually the whole souq closes and is eerily deserted; many of the small passageways and khans are locked but it's still an atmospheric place for a wander. Shops owned by Christians close on Sunday and stay open on Friday.

Outside the Souq

Sebastian (Map p176; ☎ 332 3672; Sharia al-Qala'a; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu) On the fringes of the souq, this place stocks a small but superb range of high-quality textiles, tablecloths, inlaid backgammon boards and boxes. However, the speciality is rustic kilims, silk rugs and antique carpets, costing anything from US\$50 to US\$15,000. The multilingual owner, Mohammed, is highly knowledgeable, accepts credit cards and provides certificates, but most of all, he won't pressure you to get a sale.

Orient House Antiques (Map pp182-3; 1st fl, Saahat al-Hatab) Over in Al-Jdeida, the Beit Sissi store is a wonderful place to browse for antiques and bric-a-brac.

Saahat al-Hatab (Map pp182-3) is the place to shop for gold jewellery, and there are a few more antique and carpet shops across the square, although prices tend to be higher than at Orient House.

Souq al-Shouna (Map p176) is a handicrafts market behind the sheesha cafés on the south-western side of the Citadel. While there are price tags, bargaining is still possible, although not required.

SOAP IN THE SOUQ

One of the best things about Aleppo's fantastic souq is the olive soap. It's unique, handmade, decorated and 100% natural, being made of 90% olives and 10% bay laurel. And if it's good enough for the great queens of the Middle East (Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Sheba and Zenobia) it's good enough to pack away as a souvenir.

But not all soaps are created equal. The oldest, highest-quality (and most expensive) soap is aged for eight years. The next quality down is aged for only three years and is best kept for the hair and body, while the cheapest soaps are only three months old and used just for your hands. So how do you tell? When cut in half the aged soaps have a brown rim and are a rich dark green in the centre, whereas the younger soaps are a light green all the way through.

Locals buy their soaps by the kilo but they're happy to sell less to tourists. While there are plenty of soap shops on Sharia al-Maari and Sharia Bab Antakya, the best dealer is in the Old City souq – look for Adel and Malek Kaymouz' olive-soap store in Souq Al-Attarine (Map p191).

For nargileh/sheesha pipes, mother-of-pearl inlaid wooden boxes and backgammon boards visit the shops on **Sharia al-Adasi** (Map p176), which is north of the main souq; walk east from the front of the Great Mosque and then head north (left) up the third lane.

Sharia Bab Antakya (Map p176) is the place to head for olive soap, and you'll find more soaps and hammam products in **Souq al-Sabun** (Map p191).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Aleppo has an international airport with connections to Turkey, Europe and other cities in the Middle East. **SyrianAir** (www.syrianair.com; Reservations ☎ 224 1232, 222 0501; central office Map pp182-3; Sharia al-Baron; head office Map pp182-3; Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri) has weekly flights to Istanbul and Cairo and several daily flights to Damascus (from S£1200, one hour). Other airline offices:

Air France (Map pp182-3; ☎ 223 2238; Sharia al-Baron)

KLM (Map pp182-3; ☎ 221 1074; Sharia al-Baron)

Lufthansa (Map pp182-3; ☎ 222 3005; Sharia al-Baron)

Those flying in should take a taxi from outside the airport terminal hall. It takes around 20 minutes to reach the city centre and will cost about S£500. A return taxi will cost a little less.

Bus

PULLMAN BUS STATION

Most buses stop at the **Pullman Bus Station** (Map pp174-5; Sharia Ibrahim Hanano), about 500m west of the National Museum, from where it's a ten-minute walk east to Sharia al-Baron and the bulk of the budget and mid-range hotels. If you're staying in Al-Jdeida, take a taxi for around S£30.

More than 30 private companies, including **Kadmous** (☎ 224 8837; www.alkadmous.com) and Al-Ahliah, have their sales shacks around the edge of the bus bays. It's easy to shop around but there's not much difference in prices. Destinations include Damascus (VIP/non-VIP S£230/150, five hours), Deir ez-Zur (S£150, five hours), Hama (S£90, 2½ hours), Homs (S£100, three hours), Lattakia (S£120, 3½ hours), Qamishle (S£180, eight hours), Raqqa (S£100, three hours) and Tartus (S£130, four hours). Departures are frequent so there's no need to book ahead.

CITY BUS STATION

South of Mirage Palace Hotel, this station (Map p176) is a vast area of dusty bus bays stretching over 500m and incorporating four stations serving local city buses, old battered regular intercity buses, intercity Pullmans, and minibuses that cover the region around Aleppo.

INTERNATIONAL BUS STATION

Little more than a parking lot, this station (Map pp182-3) has private companies running services to Turkey. It's immediately north of the tourist office and behind Sharia al-Baron. Between the handful of companies heading to Turkey (of which Etihad and Volcano come recommended), there are half a dozen daily services to Istanbul (about S£2000, 17 hours) and plenty more to Antakya (S£250, two to three hours). Note that sometimes the Istanbul service requires a change of bus at Antakya. From the same station you can also get buses to Amman (S£550, nine hours) in Jordan.

Car & Motorcycle

Europcar (Map pp174-5; ☎ 222 4854; fax 223 2302; <http://car-rental.europcar.com>; ☎ 8am-7pm) has an office at Baghdad Station but cars can be booked online. For details of average rental rates, see p401.

Service Taxi

Next to the Pullman bus station is a service taxi stand. Service taxis are an inexpensive and slightly faster way to travel, but can be more crammed than buses. Sample fares include Hama S£160, Homs S£180, and Damascus S£400.

Train

Aleppo's train station (Map pp174-5), known as Baghdad Station, is about 1.5km north of the centre in Al-Aziziah. To walk from here down to the vicinity of the budget hotel district takes about 25 minutes; head due south from the station, keeping the park on your right, until you reach a large open square (Saahat Saad Allah al-Jabri), at which point take a left down Sharia al-Quwati.

Trains to Lattakia (1st class express/1st class/2nd class S£120/80/50, 2½ or 3½ hours) depart around four times a day, usually two in the morning and two in the afternoon. There are six return trains,

FROM ALEPPO TO HOLLYWOOD

The name Moustapha Akkad might not be familiar to you, but the *Halloween* series of movies would be. This Aleppo native, born in 1930, was a producer on every *Halloween* movie – all eight of them.

When Akkad decided he wanted to head to Hollywood, his father gave him a copy of the Quran and some cash. Later, armed with a master's degree, Akkad was mentored by film auteur Sam Peckinpah, famous for Westerns such as *The Wild Bunch*. But Akkad had his own epics that he wanted to bring to the big screen and in 1976 directed and produced his first feature, *Muhammad, Messenger of God*, released in the West as *The Message*. Given that Islam forbids images of the Prophet, Akkad made the movie without ever showing the subject of the film. He saw it as a way to help bridge the divide between the West and Islam.

In 1978 Akkad produced the first (and iconic) *Halloween* movie with director John Carpenter, and the franchise from this low-budget horror flick was born. In 1980 he directed his next epic, the now highly acclaimed *Lion of the Desert*, about the real-life Bedouin leader Omar Mukhtar. The film was controversial because of funding by Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

In his films Akkad wanted to show the struggles and heroes of Islam, and his next project was to be the ultimate film about Saladin, to be filmed in Jordan. In a tragic twist worthy of an epic, Akkad and his daughter were killed in the 2005 Amman hotel bombings in Jordan. The Arab and Islamic worlds lost a great storyteller and a brilliant producer on that day.

including two additional evening services. Most travellers love this wonderfully scenic trip. Services to Damascus (1st class/2nd class/sleeper S£240/120/350, 4½ hours) via Homs and Hama operate four times a day on fast new trains: two early in the morning, one in the afternoon and one overnight.

Trains operate between Aleppo and Istanbul via Konya three times a week, with a sleeper service (by far the best and safest option) once a week. At the time of research trains departed Istanbul for Aleppo (single/twin berth sleeper \$US40/60) on Sunday morning, arriving in Aleppo Monday afternoon, and departed Aleppo for Istanbul (single/twin berth sleeper S£5000/7000) on Tuesday morning, arriving in Istanbul Wednesday night.

There's also a weekly train to Tehran via Lake Van in Turkey, where passengers alight and ferry across the lake to meet the Iranian train. Check times and fares on www.tcdd.gov.tr.

GETTING AROUND

Everything in the city centre is accessible on foot. Buses to various parts of Aleppo depart from the City Bus Station behind Mirage Palace Hotel, off Sharia Bab Antakya, but you really won't need to use these. If you must, tickets (S£10) are bought from the driver.

An average cross-town taxi ride should cost S£25 to S£50. Note that taxi drivers here

are often more interested in getting the cash, regardless of whether they get you remotely near where you've asked them to go.

AROUND ALEPPO

There are worthwhile sites around Aleppo to warrant at least two or three days' exploring. A day spent around Qala'at Samaan and another among the Dead Cities to the south could turn out to be highlights of your trip. The fact that these sites are out of the way is half the appeal; however, good weather is a prerequisite, as to explore the sites you'll be out in open, exposed countryside, which quickly turns to mud underfoot in rain.

Although all of the sites around Aleppo are accessible by public transport, if you're short on time, hire a car and driver. While you could approach Aleppo's tourist office and be intercepted by a 'guide' offering his services before you get to within 100m of the door, be aware that many of these guys know little about the sites, speak little English, and probably don't even know the way. You'll waste precious time and are better off organising a driver through your hotel. The going rate is between US\$70 and US\$100 for a full day, depending on the distance and the price of petrol.

With such an arrangement you dictate your own itinerary. With a car you should

be able to cover in a full day all the sites described in the North & West of Aleppo section (below), or all those described in South of Aleppo (p197).

NORTH & WEST OF ALEPPO

The half-dozen major sites north and west of Aleppo are scattered across Jebel Samaan in such a way that it's impossible to combine them all into one trip without your own car. Qala'at Samaan, the jewel of the collection, is fairly accessible by public transport, and from there it's possible to push on to Ain Dara and get back to Aleppo by minibus in one long, exhausting day. Alternatively, you could combine Qala'at Samaan with Qalb Lozeh, if you do a little backtracking. Cyrrhus is more problematic and requires cash and time; if you are planning on visiting the Dead Cities to the south then it's probably not worth the expense to duplicate the experience here.

Qala'at Samaan

قلعة سمعان

The ruined basilica of **Qala'at Samaan** (adult/student S£150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar),



also known as Saint Simeon, is the must-see site of the many archaeological ruins that dot the countryside north of Aleppo. Enough remains of the basilica to impress, with a glorious situation high on a rocky outcrop. The views are excellent. From Aleppo, it's an easy half-day trip; if you set off by 9am you'll be back by early afternoon.

The structure takes its name from a peculiar individual named Simeon. Born around AD 389-90, Simeon was the son of a shepherd who opted at a young age for life in a monastery. However, finding monastic life insufficiently ascetic, he retreated to a cave in the barren hills, where he lived under a regimen of self-imposed severity.

Word of this extremely pious individual got around and people began to visit to seek his blessing. Simeon apparently resented this invasion of his solitude so intensely that he was driven to erect a 3m-high pillar upon which he took up residence so that people couldn't touch him. Legend goes that as his tolerance of people decreased he erected ever higher pillars. In all he's said to have spent close to 40 years on top of his pillars, the last of which was 18m in height. There was a railing around the top, and an iron chain attached to the stone to stop him toppling off in the middle of the night.

Simeon would preach daily from his perch and shout answers to his audiences' questions; however, he refused to talk to women and even his mother was not allowed near the column.

Simeon's increasingly eccentric behaviour eventually drew pilgrims from as far as Britain and France, where he was known as Simon Stylites, a name derived from the Greek word for pillar, *stylos*. The notion of stylism caught on and Simeon inspired a fashion for pious pillar-top dwelling that spread all the way to central Europe, where it eventually faltered in the face of a colder climate.

When he died in 459, Simeon was possibly the most famous person in the 5th-century world. His body was buried in the great Christian centre of Antioch (present-day Antakya) and an enormous church was built around the famous pillar. The church had a unique design with four basilicas arranged in the shape of a cross, each opening onto a central octagonal yard covered by a dome. Beneath the dome stood the pillar. One basilica was used for worship and

the other three housed the many pilgrims. Completed in around 491 after about 14 years of building, it was the largest church in the world at the time.

With the arrival of Islam in Syria, the Byzantine Christians were put on the defensive and the church complex was fortified, hence the name Qala'at (fortress). It eventually fell to the Islamic Fatimid dynasty in 1017 and was apparently never again used as a place of worship.

The church ruins are remarkably well preserved. The main Romanesque façade still stands, while behind it the arches of the octagonal yard are reasonably complete. There's plenty of ornamental carved stonework to admire, although Simeon's pillar is in a sad state and is nothing more than a boulder, reduced centuries ago by pilgrims chipping away at it for holy souvenirs.

The views of the barren hills to the west are stunning and the ruins of Deir Samaan can be seen down to the southwest at the foot of the hill.

DEIR SAMAAAN

دير سمعان

Deir Samaan (Monastery of Simeon) began life as the small Greek agricultural village of Telanissos, but during the first part of the 5th century found itself being rapidly transformed by a steady influx of travellers, and their forerunners, pilgrims. As the antics of Simeon drew ever-larger crowds, so the village expanded to provide hostelries, churches and three monasteries to accommodate the pilgrims.

The basilica and Deir Samaan were connected by a processional way, Via Sacra. A monumental arch remains partway up the slope, marking the old route. In the village there are shells of two of the monasteries, a church and the bazaar; 150m south of the arch are two very impressive hostelries and a tomb chapel hewn out of rock and reached by a stone bridge.

Local people live among the ruins, having built their own dwellings from stone recycled from ancient Deir Samaan, but they don't mind if you wander around.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take a minibus from the City Bus Station in Aleppo to the village of Daret Azze (£15, 50 minutes); they depart every half-hour or

so. During the trip keep a lookout for the 5th-century Mushabbak basilica standing alone in fields off to the left, about two-thirds of the way along the route. From Daret Azze it's about 6km to Qala'at Samaan. The minibus driver may offer to take you the extra distance or you can negotiate with a local taxi driver (around \$100). If there isn't much traffic on the road, you won't have to wait long before a vehicle stops for you.

The last minibus from Daret Azze to Aleppo leaves at about 6pm.

Qatura

قطوره

About 2km west of Daret Azze on the road to Qala'at Samaan is the turn-off to Qatura. Follow this road off to the west and you'll come to more ruins, which include some Roman-era tombs cut into the rock. The last tomb on the road is carved with a reclining figure in much the same style as at Palmyra. You can also quite clearly make out Latin and Greek inscriptions.

To get here, when you pick up a lift out of Daret Azze ask to be let off at the Qatura junction; the ruins and tombs are not much of a walk from there. You shouldn't have any trouble picking up a lift onwards to Qala'at Samaan or back to Daret Azze. If you have your own driver, it's an easy drive from Qala'at Samaan.

Ain Dara

عين داره

A thousand years before Christ, a Hittite temple dedicated to the goddess Ishtar stood on an acropolis off the present-day road that now leads north from Qala'at Samaan to the mainly Kurdish town of Nahr Afreen. The temple was destroyed in the 8th century BC, was rebuilt and then gradually gave way to other constructions.

Excavations on the mound where the temple stood have revealed its layout and, most interestingly, some extraordinary basalt statues and reliefs, which litter the site (adult/student \$175/5; ☀ sunrise-sunset). The single most impressive statue is a huge lion. The views of the surrounding countryside – verdant fields, sunflowers, oleander trees and fruit groves – are spectacular.

The caretaker, who lives in the house at the foot of the hill, will greet you, collect the admission fee, do his best to show you around, and probably invite you for tea.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ain Dara is around 18km north of Qala'at Samaan. You can probably get a ride from Deir Samaan towards Nahr Afreen (you want the road that goes through Deir Samaan, not the one that leads up to Qala'at Samaan) and get dropped off at the turn-off to Ain Dara, sometimes signed 'Tell Ain Dara'.

Alternatively, from Aleppo catch a minibus direct to Nahr Afreen (£20) and from there take one of the irregular pick-ups to Ain Dara (£15), which is 7km to the south. It will drop you at the turn-off just before the village; you can see the acropolis in the distance. Follow the road around (about 2km), or cut across the path and onion fields directly to the site.

Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri)

النبى هوري

In this wonderfully remote location, overlooking the Turkish border and deep in Kurdish territory, is the 3rd-century provincial town of Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri to the locals). The setting is bucolic – Kurdish families riding tractors out to work in the fields together, shepherds lying back on their elbows under the shade of trees, and donkeys grazing by the road. Little is left of the town today, but Cyrrhus once held a strategic position for troops of the Roman Empire and boasted a citadel, theatre and cathedral.

From the dusty town of Azaz the road takes you through pleasant countryside, dotted with wheat fields and olive groves, across two 3rd-century humpback Roman bridges on the Sabun River and past a Roman-era **mausoleum**. Preserved by local Muslims as a holy site, as evidenced by the ribbons you see tied to the bars for good luck, the pyramid-capped monument has survived well. The ground floor has been recycled as the tomb of a local Muslim prophet named Houri. From here, branch right off the road to Cyrrhus, which is just 200m further on.

The easiest structure to distinguish out of what is a fairly crumbling bunch of ruins is the **theatre**. Of the town walls, colonnaded street and basilica in the north of the town, not much remains, but scramble up through the ruins past the theatre to the Arab citadel at the top and you'll enjoy sweeping views across to the Turkish mountains.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses run from Aleppo to Azaz (£15, one hour), from where you'll have to bargain with one of the taxi drivers to take you the remaining 28km to the site, which takes about 30 minutes one way. This should cost around \$1800 return. (Hitching is not recommended, as there is little traffic on this road.)

For a day trip from Aleppo covering Cyrrhus and Qala'at Samaan, hiring a driver and car is a good option. You can probably bargain down to US\$70 or US\$80 from the standard \$US100 starting price for a decent car and English-speaking driver.

Qalb Lozeh

قلب لوزه

One of the very best-preserved examples of Syrian-Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, the church of **Qalb Lozeh** (adult/student \$175/5; ☀ sunrise-sunset) predates Qala'at Samaan by perhaps only a couple of decades. It was built as a stop-off point for pilgrims en route to see Simeon on his pillar. The entrance to the church, flanked by two three-storey towers, its walls and the semicircular apse are almost completely intact. Even some stone slabs of the roof have been retained, but the once-impressive arch between the towers has been lost forever. The simple elegance of the structure, clean lines of the columns around the apse and classical decoration make this church an obvious precursor to the Romanesque style that would later dominate the breadth of European church-building. Expect to be met by the caretaker and his delightful children, who will try to sell you some embroidery; have your change ready.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Qalb Lozeh lies 32km west off the main road from Aleppo to the Turkish border and Antakya. To get there, take a minibus from Aleppo to Harim, which is a small, attractive provincial town crowned by an Ayyubid castle. From Harim you'll need to negotiate a taxi.

SOUTH OF ALEPPO

Ebla, Ma'arat an-Nu'aman, Jerada and Ruweiha are all just off the main Aleppo-Hama highway, and while most are accessible by public transport, it would be difficult

to visit them all this way in a single day. If you have a car and driver, seeing the lot is possible in one long day. These sites are equally easy to visit from Hama.

Ebla (Tell Mardikh)

تل ماردikh

Lying about 60km south of Aleppo, the ancient city of **Ebla** (Tell Mardikh; adult/student £15/10; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar) is of enormous fascination to archaeologists and historians, but less so to most visitors unless they possess a vivid imagination or have done their homework.

The Italian teams (there's plenty of Italian labelling on sights here) excavating the site since 1964 discovered Ebla was one of the most powerful city-states in Syria in the late 3rd millennium BC, but was sacked before the close of the millennium, probably by Sargon of Akkad or his grandson Naram-Sin (c 2250 BC). In its heyday, Ebla probably controlled most of northwestern Syria. It rose again for a relatively brief period from about 1900 BC to 1750 BC, before being destroyed in 1600 BC by Hittite invaders. Troops of the First Crusade passed by thousands of years later, when it was known as Mardic Hamlet.

In recent times, digs here have unearthed more than 15,000 clay tablets in a Sumerian dialect, providing a wealth of information on everything from economics to local administration, and dictionaries of other tongues. However, only a small portion of the cuneiform secrets has been unlocked.

The site lies over a rise about 1km beyond the village of Tell Mardikh. You buy your ticket outside the small, burgundy-coloured, multidomed **museum** (☎ 8am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, to 4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar) dedicated to the story of the excavations, and then continue along the road and over the rise. The shallow remains of the city lie before you, dominated by the limestone tell that once formed the core of the city's fortress. It's forbidden to clamber over the site so stick to the trails around the edge of the excavations. It's best to head straight up the stairs to the highest (and often windiest) point of the site, from where there's a great view of the ruins and village below. The most interesting ruins are probably those labelled 'Palace G', just west of the acropolis, which display remains of a royal staircase, walls and columned halls.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take any Hama-bound minibus (£20, one hour) or one of the less frequent ones to Ma'arat an-Nu'aman (ask for Al-Ma'ara), and ask to be let off at the Tell Mardikh turn-off. From there it's a 20-minute walk through the village of Tell Mardikh to the site. Follow the elegant, tall, white street lamps.

Ma'arat an-Nu'aman (Al-Ma'ara)

معرة النعمان

This lively little market town has a past that's more interesting than the town itself. It was witness to a gruesome bit of history when the Crusaders' behaviour reached a new low. On 12 December 1098, under the command of Count Raymond of Toulouse, the Crusaders attacked the fortified Muslim town of Ma'arat an-Nu'aman, slaughtering thousands. But the horror was amplified by what followed: 'In Ma'ara our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking pots; they impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled', confessed one of the Crusader chroniclers.

The **Mosaic Museum** (adult/student £15/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, to 4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar), housed in the 16th-century Khan Murad Pasha, displays mosaics from the floors of the more important or luxurious buildings and private houses of the clusters of 5th- and 6th-century Byzantine towns that are now collectively referred to as the Dead Cities. The museum is about 50m to the north of the bus station, on the right side of the square.

Further north and off to the right is the **Great Mosque**, whose 12th-century minaret was rebuilt after an earthquake in 1170. From the mosque, head to the right of the square and north for a few hundred metres – where the street opens out you'll see the sad remains of a medieval **Citadel**.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent minibuses to Ma'arat an-Nu'aman (£25, one hour) from Aleppo's City Bus Station. Lumbering big buses also do the run (£15, one hour 20 minutes) from the Pullman station.

DEAD CITIES

The star attraction of the region around Aleppo is the Dead Cities, a series of ancient ghost towns scattered among the limestone hills that lie between the Aleppo-Hama

highway in the east and the Orontes River in the west. They date from the time when this area was part of the hinterland of the great Byzantine Christian city of Antioch. There are reckoned to be some 600 separate sites, ranging from single monuments to nearly whole villages complete with houses, churches, mills, hammams and even wine presses. Taken together they represent a great archive in stone from which historians can put together a picture of life in antiquity.

The great mystery is why the towns were abandoned. Some of the sites, especially Serjilla, have an eerie quality, as though their occupants had just vanished. The latest theory is that these towns and villages were emptied by demographic shifts; trade routes changed and the people moved with them. However, the Dead Cities are inappropriately named: some form part of present-day villages, with people inhabiting the ancient ruins or incorporating oddments of antiquity into the structure of their homes.

The number of sites is overwhelming – we describe only a handful of the most interesting and easily accessible. If you have the inclination, you could spend weeks pottering around these fascinating sites, stumbling across Byzantine-era ghosts wherever you wander. Beware of the present-era wild dogs that inhabit some of these areas and keep a watchful eye when exploring.

Jerada & Ruweiha

جاراده ورويحة

Of these twin Dead Cities, Jerada is the closer to the Aleppo-Hama highway. The site is partially occupied, with some of the big old houses serving as barns for villagers, who have built their own dwellings on the northern fringes of the ruins. These ruins include the extensive remains of noble houses, a 5th-century Byzantine cathedral and a six-storey watchtower. Some of the simple geometric designs on column capitals and lintels are vaguely reminiscent of Visigothic decoration in Spain around the same time.

Follow the road for another 2.5km or so across a barren lunarlike landscape to reach the striking, scattered remains of Ruweiha. The most imposing building here is the 6th-century **Church of Bissos**. Its transverse arches are thought to be among the oldest

of their kind. Just outside, the domed mausoleum housing the body of Bissos (possibly a bishop) has since found its echo in similar designs throughout the Arab world. Few people live among the vast ruins now, although it's a popular weekend picnic spot.

Serjilla

سر جلا

Serjilla and Al-Bara are two of a cluster of five or more Dead Cities strung out on either side of a country lane that runs north from the green-domed mosque just outside Kafr Nabl. About 2km after the mosque you'll see a sign for **Shinshira** pointing off to your right. After a further 2km, off to the left, are the grey stone remnants of **Mahardiyya** buried within some olive groves. Both of these Dead Cities are worth exploring, but if you're pushed for time, skip them and look out instead for the signposted turn-off to Serjilla, to the right.

Serjilla (adult/student £75/5) is undoubtedly the most eerie and evocative of the Dead Cities, especially in winter when the ruins might be shrouded in mist. Serjilla has the greatest number of semi-complete buildings, all of which sit in a natural basin in windswept and hilly moorland. Although deserted for about 15 centuries, the stone façades are clean and sharp-edged and the surrounding ground is covered with short grass. The neatness adds to the spooky air.

At Serjilla's centre is a small plaza flanked by a two-storey tavern and a large hammam. Now stripped of the mosaics that once decorated it, the latter building is quite austere. Next door lies an *andron* (men's meeting place), and further east a small church, along with substantial remnants of private houses and villas. As you clamber down narrow grassy lanes between high stone walls, punctuated by carefully carved windows and doors, you half expect a householder to step out on a quick errand to fetch something from the market.

Al-Bara

باره

Al-Bara is the most extensive of the Dead Cities. It's also the furthest north from Kafr Nabl; you continue on beyond the turn for Serjilla and past another small Dead City called **Bauda**.

Surrounded by rich arable land and occupying a strategic position on the north-south trade route between Antioch and

Apamea, Al-Bara flourished from the 4th century onwards, becoming one of the most important centres of wine and olive-oil production in the region. Even when the trade routes shifted in the 7th century (which saw many neighbouring towns abandoned), Al-Bara prospered and grew. It boasted large villas, three monasteries and numerous churches – at least five can still be detected among ruins that cover 6 sq km.

The town weathered the coming of Islam and remained predominantly eastern Christian – and the seat of a bishopric subordinate to Antioch – until its occupation by the Latin Crusaders in the very last years of the 12th century.

It was from Al-Bara that the Crusaders set out to perpetrate their horrible cannibalistic episode at Ma'arat an-Nu'aman in 1098 (see p198). Twenty-five years later they were driven out and Al-Bara reverted to Muslim control.

As it stands today, there's no obvious route around the site; the land is densely covered by vegetation and you have to tramp through the undergrowth and groves of cherry, apricot and olive trees to discover the old buildings and ruins.

Don't miss the striking **pyramid tombs**, 200m apart, decorated with Corinthian pilasters and carved acanthus leaves, a very

visible testament to the one-time wealth of the settlement. The larger of the two still holds five sealed, decorated sarcophagi. From the pyramids you can wander south past an underground tomb with three arches to a large, well-preserved **monastery**, or head north to find the ruins of the five **churches**.

Getting There & Away

If you don't have your own driver, take a microbus for Ma'arat an-Nu'aman (commonly referred to as Al-Ma'ara; S£20, one hour). For Jerada and Ruweiha ask to be let off at Babila, 7km before Al-Ma'ara, from where you can see the ruins over to the west, 3km away. If you start walking you're bound to be offered a lift before you get too far.

To get to Al-Bara, Serjilla and the other neighbouring Dead Cities, stay on the bus all the way into Al-Ma'ara, where you can catch a microbus for Kafr Nabl (S£10), some 10km away. From Kafr Nabl it's a further 6km to Al-Bara. If the microbus driver offers to take you on, you could offer him an additional S£10 per person. Otherwise walk out of the village, follow the main street, then after about 1.5km bear right at the large new mosque with the green dome; it won't be long before a passing car offers you a lift.