

# Around Damascus & the Hauran

## ضواحي دمشق وحوران



Heading south from Damascus towards the Jordanian border is a region of fertile agricultural land, rolling hills and fruit orchards that gives way to harsh, rocky basalt plains (known as the Hauran) straddling the Syria–Jordan border.

The black rock gives the villages and towns a peculiar, brooding quality that is best appreciated at Bosra. With its impressive Roman remains and one of the world's best-preserved Roman theatres, it's one of Syria's highlights and a must-do day trip from Damascus. The intriguing Druze towns of Suweida, Shahba and Qanawat can be visited on the same trip. Suweida has a well-regarded museum while the ruins of Shahba and Qanawat are worth a wander.

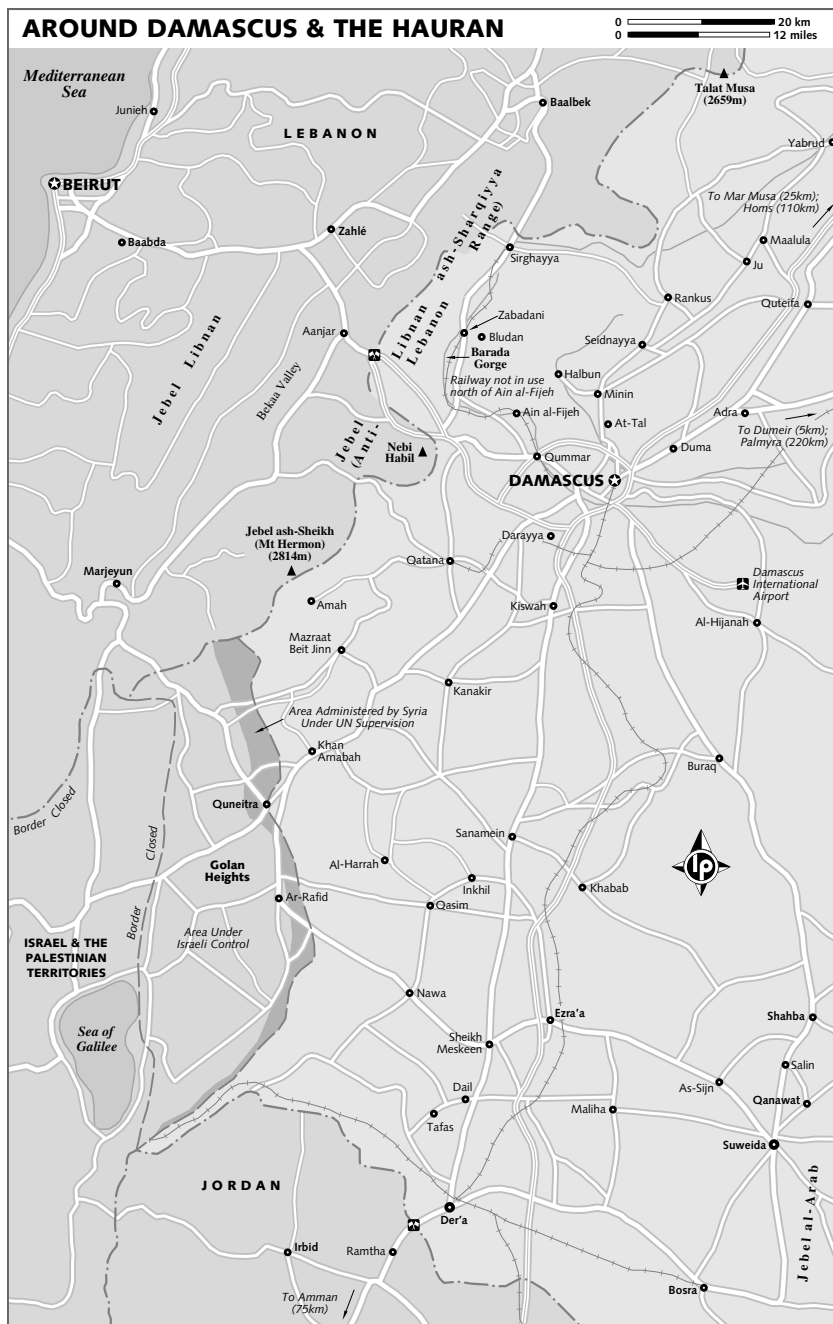
For those with an interest in Middle Eastern politics and history, a visit to the ghost town of Quneitra, within the UN-monitored Golan Heights, is a moving experience. The Israelis captured the town during the Six Day War of 1967, and deliberately destroyed it on their withdrawal.

There are several places of interest to the northeast of Damascus, off the Damascus–Aleppo Hwy (Hwy 5), including a number of predominantly Christian towns and villages and a handful of remote monasteries. To the west is the Barada Gorge, incised into the Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range). Half the fun of a visit to the gorge is getting there via the snail-paced, narrow-gauge steam train. The other half is watching the locals at leisure, especially on a Friday, when picnicking families make the most of the Syrian weekend.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Relive the time when ancient **Bosra** (p125) was the capital of the Roman province of Arabia with a ramble around its remarkably well-preserved citadel and theatre
- Discover why magical little **Maalula** (p121) is Syria's most enchanting village
- Get monastic for a night or two at the remote hilltop monastery of **Mar Musa** (p123)
- Marvel at beautiful 4th-century mosaics at the impressive **Suweida museum** (p129)
- Sit back and enjoy the snail's pace of a journey on the jolly steam train to the locals' favourite picnic spot, **Barada Gorge** (p125)
- Be moved by the senseless destruction at the ghost town of **Quneitra** (p130) in the UN-patrolled demilitarised zone of the Golan Heights





## DUMEIR

الضمير

☎ 011

The restored **Roman temple** at Dumeir, a dusty little village some 40km northeast of Damascus on the Palmyra road, was dedicated in AD 245 to Zeus Hypsistos (the 'supreme' Zeus, or Zeus Baal Shamayin in Syria), during the reign of the Hauran-born emperor Philip the Arab. The temple was built on the site of a Nabataean altar, and there's evidence that the building's purpose was changed during construction. It may have been intended as a staging post at the intersection of two key caravan routes, a sacred compound, or simply a public fountain. Whatever the case, the temple is impressive. The great traveller Gertrude Bell said it reminded her of Baalbek (p354) in Lebanon.

The rectangular structure sits in a pit, the result of excavations and reconstruction work. Inside you'll find Greek inscriptions and carved reliefs. If you're coming from Damascus, the temple is off to the right of the main road just before you enter Dumeir. If the caretaker isn't around, someone will fetch him to let you in – tip him around S£50.

## Getting There & Away

There are regular minibuses to Dumeir (S£20, 45 minutes) from the Abbasseeen garage in northeastern Damascus.

## SEIDNAYYA

صيدنايا

☎ 011

Perched spectacularly on an enormous rocky outcrop, the Greek Orthodox **Convent of Our Lady of Seidnayya** could easily be mistaken for a Crusader castle at first glance, particularly at night when it's splendidly lit. In fact, the convent stands on the site of one of the most important places of Christian pilgrimage in the Middle East, due to the presence of a portrait of the Virgin Mary purportedly painted by St Luke. All manner of miracles have been attributed to this icon, to the extent that, at the time of the Crusades, the Christians considered Seidnayya second in importance only to Jerusalem. Veneration of the icon is fervent, and it's fascinating to witness Muslim pilgrims as well as Christians.

One legend has it that the Byzantine emperor Justinian ordered the building of the convent in AD 546 on his way to

Jerusalem, while another story has Audixa, wife of Emperor Tandosius, secluding herself here in AD 434 after a fight with her husband, and presenting the revered icon to the convent. What is known is that it was built on the site of an earlier Greek shrine and rebuilt following earthquakes. Medieval masonry is evident in the lower walls, but most of the structure dates from the 19th century.

Ascend the four flights of stairs, duck through the low wooden doorway, and admire the beautiful mosaics on your left before proceeding to the courtyard. The main chapel, on your right, is crammed with modern icons and other testimonies of faith from the convent's visitors. The pilgrimage shrine containing the famed relic is to the right of this chapel, in a small dark room. Remove your shoes and ensure you're modestly dressed; long skirts or trousers, long-sleeved shirts and a headscarf (for women) are appreciated.

After visiting the chapels, head to the roof – there are wonderful views over the town to the plains beyond.

The **Feast of Our Lady of Seidnayya** is held on 8 September each year, and the spectacle is worth attending if you're in the area. The main celebrations begin on the night of the 7th, and both Christian and Muslim pilgrims attend from the Middle East and beyond.

The town itself dates back to the 6th century BC and is scenically situated in the heart of the Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya. It's modern and unremarkable, though, with little of interest beyond the convent, warranting no more than a half-day excursion. It's possible to combine Seidnayya with a visit to Maalula, although public transport between the two is infrequent.

## Getting There & Away

Travellers generally visit Seidnayya on a day trip from Damascus. There are regular minibuses to Seidnayya (S£25, 40 minutes) from the Maalula garage in northeastern Damascus.

## MAALULA

معلول

☎ 011 / pop 5000

In a narrow valley in the foothills of Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya, Maalula is an enchanting little village in which yellow-stone

and silvery-blue-painted fairytale houses are stacked up against a sheer cliff. There are few sights to see, but it's a pleasant place to explore for an hour or two.

If arriving by minibus, alight at the main village intersection, where there's a traffic island and the road splits. Head right up the hill, and at the top head right again; the road switches back, climbing steeply to the small **Convent of St Thecla** (Deir Mar Teqla), tucked snugly against the cliff. From here there are pretty views of the village.

The convent was established near one of the holiest Christian shrines, the Shrine of St Thecla. Thecla was a pupil of St Paul and one of the earliest Christian martyrs – see *The Acts of Paul & Thecla*, opposite, for more about her life. As one legend has it, after being cornered against the cliff at Maalula by soldiers sent to execute her, Thecla prayed to God, lightning struck the cliff and a cleft appeared in the rock face, facilitating her flight.

The convent itself, a sanctuary for nuns and orphans, is of minor interest, but ahead lies the legendary escape route, **St Thecla Gap**. Cut through the rock by run-off from the plateau above the village, this narrow, steep-sided ravine resembles a mini version of the famed *siq* (gorge) at Petra. There are a few shrines within its walls, though electricity lines, graffiti and litter mar the experience.

At the end of the canyon, head to the left and follow the road for picturesque views of the village and valley, and the Byzantine **Monastery & Church of St Sergius** (Deir Mar Sarkis, also known as the Convent of Sts Serge and Bacchus). Built in AD 325, it's one of the oldest churches in the world. According to legend, Sergius (Sarkis) was a Roman legionary who, after converting to Christianity and refusing to make sacrifices to the god Jupiter, was executed.

The impressive low wooden doorway leading into the monastery is over 2000 years old; however, the highlight is the small church itself, which still incorporates features of the pagan temple that previously stood here. Note the hole in the circular altar, there to release the blood spilt from pagan sacrifices.

The splendid collection of icons includes some 17th-century gems, including several by icon-painting icon 'Michael the Crete'.

The hillside south of the church is riddled with small caverns that archaeologists believe were inhabited by prehistoric man some 50,000 to 60,000 years ago. More recently, they were used as underground places of worship and burial in the years before AD 313, when Constantine permitted religious freedom. This road loops back to the village, where it's possible to catch a minibus back to Damascus.

### THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHRIST

The mainly Greek Catholic village of Maalula is one of the last remaining places where Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, is still spoken. Aramaic was once widely spoken in the Middle East and is one of the oldest continually spoken languages in the world, reaching its zenith around 500 BC. It bears similarities to both Arabic and Hebrew. The number of speakers was steadily dwindling until recently, but now interest in keeping the language alive has increased dramatically.

At the peaceful St Ephrem's Clerical Seminary, in Seidnaya, pilgrims are coming from all over the world to study religion in Aramaic while learning the language. According to the priests there, the students know how important the preservation of the language is, and also want to hear the words of the bible in the same language that Christ spoke them.

In Maalula's Monastery and Church of St Sergius, Aramaic is proudly alive and well. More than 5000 local worshippers all speak Aramaic. Until recently it was mainly used as an oral language, despite having a written form. However, the Syrian Government recently established an Institute for Aramaic, and new texts and language-learning materials are being written in the ancient language.

So was the Aramaic spoken in Mel Gibson's epic, *The Passion of the Christ*, accurate? Maalula's locals say that the first time they saw the film, they were so moved they didn't pay attention. On a second viewing, however, they realised they could barely understand a word of the dialect that Mel had used...

### THE ACTS OF PAUL & THECLA

A saint in most Christian religions, we know about St Thecla and her miraculous escapades through the apocryphal writings of St Paul. While there are plenty of other versions of the story, this is the version apparently told by St Paul himself.

Thecla, a young girl who was engaged to be married, heard St Paul's 'discourse on virginity' and decided from that point on to follow God and the teachings of the apostle. Thecla's mother, and of course her fiancé, were furious and both St Paul and Thecla were to be punished. Thecla was to be burnt at the stake, but a wild storm put out the fire and she escaped. Later, after being sentenced to be devoured by wild animals for pushing away the advances of a nobleman, she survived by having a lioness fight to the death for her. While escaping would-be captors yet again, at Maalula, Thecla reached a dead end; however, lightning struck a wall of rock, splitting it open and allowing her safe passage. As she ran through the passage it closed behind her, effectively locking her captors out.

Thecla lived the rest of her pious life in a cave at this spot, and was soon seen as a 'female apostle' and a little bit of an early feminist icon. After her death her followers considered her a martyr. You can walk Thecla's path through the gorge, but don't try her other miraculous feats!

### Sleeping & Eating

As Maalula is an easy half-day trip from Damascus, there's no need to stay overnight unless you want to attend the Festival of the Cross (13 September) or the St Thecla Festival (24 September).

**Maaloula Hotel** (☎ 777 0250; maaloula@scs-net.org; s/d US\$95/111; 📍) This comfortable four-star offers clean, spacious rooms, and full amenities include a good restaurant serving Syrian and European food, and a coffee shop and bar.

**Convent of St Thecla** It's also possible to stay overnight in simple rooms at the convent. There are no fixed rates; make a generous donation instead.

**La Grotta** (☎ 777 0909) Adjacent to the Monastery and Church of St Sergius, this sparkling clean café in a light-filled stone building serves up excellent pizza, sandwiches, ice cream, cold beer and drinks. There's also a pleasant sun terrace.

There are a few snack places in the centre of town near the convent.

### Getting There & Away

From Damascus, minibuses (£25, one hour) depart from Maalula garage. In Maalula, buses stop at the main intersection in the village centre, just downhill from the Convent of St Thecla.

To proceed to Mar Musa, grab a Damascus-bound minibus and ask to be let off on the Damascus–Aleppo Hwy (a 10-minute ride away); there, flag down any bus or minibus going north to Homs or Aleppo

and ask to be let off at Nebek. From Nebek you will need to negotiate with a driver (around £300 each way) to take you to the monastery.

### MAR MUSA

مار موسى

At the ancient **Monastery of Mar Musa** (☎ 011-742 0403; www.deirmarmusa.org; admission by donation), also known as the Monastery of St Moses the Abyssian or Deir Mar Musa el-Habashi, it's very much like the last 1500 years never happened. A throwback to the 6th-century heyday of Byzantine Christianity, when the arid alienating landscape provided shelter for thousands of tiny, isolated, self-sustaining and pious communities, Mar Musa is one of the very few monasteries to survive.

Perched high on the edge of a cliff, facing east over a vast, barren plain, Mar Musa is well and truly off the beaten track. It's over 17km from the nearest town, the last stretch involving a sweaty 20-minute walk along a steep-sided rocky gorge.

According to legend, the monastery was founded in the 6th century AD by Moses (or Musa), the son of the King of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea), who chose monastic life over the throne. The church was built in the 11th century, according to Arabic inscriptions on the walls. By this time the monastery was the seat of a local bishopric, flourishing into the 15th century, then gradually declining until it was finally abandoned in the 1830s. An Italian former Jesuit rediscovered it in the 1980s and, with the help of the local community

**MEDITATIONS ON MAR MUSA** *Terry Carter*

Along a dusty, almost deserted road about 60km from Damascus we passed a utility truck. Instead of the usual sheep or goats in the back, there was a lone backpacker in his early twenties – telltale white iPod earphones firmly in place – accompanied by several bales of hay. He smiled as we drove past, making our way to Mar Musa, another 20km or so away.

As we pulled up we were stunned by the dramatic setting, and even more stunned by the hike that lay ahead of us, up to one of the most fascinating monasteries in the world. By the look on our driver's face when he saw the path, we could tell that this was one sight our torpid friend would not be leaving the car for.

It seems odd that an Italian priest perched 1320m above sea level in a half-ruined monastery could have an impact on world peace. But people tend to forget that Syria is the home of a number of religions and subdivisions of religions, making it a fascinating country for those of an ecumenical bent. Father Paolo came to remote Mar Musa in the early 1980s. The brilliant frescoes of the church had barely a roof over them and the rest of the monastery was in ruins. With EU funding and massive amounts of hard work, the monastery and small church have been restored, and more work is going on to create separate women's lodgings at this mountainside retreat.

Mar Musa attracts backpackers, religious scholars and intellectuals, those looking to promote religious harmony, and those that just want to get away from it all. When we arrived there were just three women and seven men in residence – mainly Syrians, here for a long-term stay. As we chatted and sipped tea, aromas from the hearty lunch being prepared wafted over to the communal table where it would be served. From here the view down to the plains was stunning and worth every torturous, sweat-soaked step to get up here.

The monastery offers several ways for you to give something back if you stay here, from helping with studies on sustainable development of agricultural activities, to building new accommodation or simply cooking and cleaning. The knowledge that you take away from the experience – that people of different religions and cultures can live together in harmony – is what keeps Father Paolo here.

As we drove away, the backpacker we had seen before was walking alone on the stark road that leads towards the monastery. He had already put away his iPod. We didn't envy the hike he had before him, but we did the experience that he'd have.

and foreign funding, undertook to renovate the place and have it reconsecrated (see Meditations on Mar Musa, above).

A highlight of a visit here and the pride of the monastery is its ancient church, which contains several layers of beautiful frescoes, dating to the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. Note the fresco of St Simeon, who appears to be in a cage on top of his pillar.

Since 1991 the monastery has been home to a small group of monks, nuns and novices, who numbered ten at the time of writing. As well as being mixed sex, Mar Musa is doubly unconventional in that it is also ecumenical, with both Syrian Catholics and Syrian Orthodox Christians represented within the community.

Visitors are made very welcome and it's possible to stay here. Basic accommodation and simple meals are free (bring your own sleeping bag; check the website for more information), but guests must take an

active part in the community's life, praying and meditating with the monks, and helping out with cooking, cleaning and other manual work. Telephone or email if you're coming in a group, or would like to stay longer than one night.

**Getting There & Away**

To get to Mar Musa from Damascus, take a microbus from Abbasseen garage to Nebek (نبيك; S£30, 50 minutes), 80km northeast of Damascus on the road to Homs and Aleppo, or take a bus from the Harasta terminal. Coming from Maalula on a Homs or Aleppo bus, you'll be dropped off on the highway at the Nebek turn-off, a 2km walk from town, but you have a good chance of getting a ride in. A taxi from Damascus or Homs will cost S£1500 return.

Once in Nebek, you should be able to negotiate a driver for the 17.5km to Mar Musa (S£300 return, 30 minutes); make

sure to arrange for the driver to wait or return to pick you up, as the phone at Mar Musa doesn't always work. Once dropped off, you must walk the last 1.5km (about 20 minutes) along a steep winding path.

**BARADA GORGE**

وادي بردى

The Barada River flows into Damascus from the west, winding down from the magnificent Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya and through low foothills to reach the city. The valley through which the Barada flows is splendid, with the river's fertile, green banks making a dramatic contrast to the rocky red mountains around it. Damascenes flock here on Fridays and throughout summer for riverside picnics. For the traveller, the main attraction is the trip through the magnificent Barada Gorge (Wadi Barada) on the narrow-gauge train called 'the Zabadani Flyer', so named because the main destination was once **Zabadani** (الزبداني), only 50km from Damascus but a rollicking three- to four-hour journey by train.

These days the train only goes as far as leafy **Ain al-Fijeh** (عين الفجة), with its charming two-storey train station, but it's still fun. The antiquated wooden carriages are generally loaded with a wonderful cross-section of Syrian people – from elderly veiled women with children and grandchildren in tow, to groups of flirty teenage couples – all hauled by a groaning, wheezing old Swiss-built steam train. According to local legend, west of Ain al-Fijeh, on the mountain of Nebi Habil, is the site where Cain buried Abel after killing him.

Pretty Zabadani, situated on a fertile plain of fruit orchards, is still the Barada's most popular destination. Its 1200m altitude means it's considerably cooler than the capital. The hills here are clustered with holiday homes and the main street lined with restaurants and cafés. Downhill from the station is the older part of the village, with an old mosque and Catholic church. Wealthy Damascenes prefer the smaller, more exclusive getaway spot of **Bludan** (بلودان), some 7 km east of Zabadani.

**Getting There & Away**

The Zabadani Flyer leaves from Khaddam train station in Damascus at 7am on Friday (S£30), going as far as Ain al-Fijeh and returning to Damascus around 4pm.

**EZRA'A**

ازرع

☎ 015

Tiny Ezra'a has two of Syria's oldest still-functioning churches, the Basilica of St George and, just nearby, the Church of St Elias.

The Greek Orthodox **Basilica of St George** (Kineeset Mar Jirjis) stands on the site of an earlier pagan temple, as suggested by an inscription, dated AD 515, above the west entrance (to the left of the current entrance), which reads:

What once was a lodging place for demons has become a house of God; where idols once were sacrificed, there are now choirs of angels; where God was provoked to wrath, now He is propitiated.

The basilica's excellent state of preservation can be explained by the fact that it is believed to be the burial place of St George. (For more on St George and Syria, see p136.) There are no fixed opening times; if the church is locked, ask the locals for the caretaker or priest.

The 6th-century Melchite Greek Catholic **Church of St Elias** is also well preserved. It was one of the first churches anywhere to be built in the shape of a cross, a style that would later become popular.

If you have your own wheels, Ezra'a can be easily squeezed into a day trip to the Hauran region.

**Getting There & Away**

Minibuses to Ezra'a (S£25, 1½ hours) depart when full from the Bab Mousala garage in Damascus, dropping you off in central Ezra'a; the churches are 3km to the north. If you're lucky you might find a taxi or a ride, otherwise you'll need to walk.

**BOSRA**

بصره

☎ 015

The brooding black basalt town of Bosra (or Bosra ash-Sham), with its impressive, imposing citadel and one of the best-preserved Roman theatres in existence, is a must-do experience. The Nabataean capital in the 1st century BC and the capital of the Roman Province of Arabia from AD 106, Bosra has multiple layers of architectural history, making it one of Syria's most

engaging sights. As there is little else to see in town, a day trip from Damascus leaves ample time for most travellers to take in everything at a leisurely pace.

## History

Bosra was mentioned in Egyptian records as early as 1300 BC, but it was not until the Nabataean kingdom relocated here from Petra, and Rome crowned it capital of the Province of Arabia, that its importance was secured. The fertile land surrounding the city, and the 1st-century construction of a road linking it with Damascus in the north and Amman in the south, ensured Bosra would become an important centre of trade and a key stop on caravan and pilgrimage routes throughout the Middle Ages.

During the Byzantine period, Bosra became a bishopric then archbishopric, and during the 6th century the largest cathedral in the region was built here, becoming one of the greatest in the East. Before the town's fall to the Muslims in 634, the young Prophet Mohammed, passing through with his merchant uncle's caravans, encountered a wise

priest named Bahira who, during theological discussions with Mohammed, revealed to him his future vocation as the Prophet.

An impressive example of Arab military architecture, the citadel was built in the 11th century and strengthened further by Saladin in the 12th century, enabling it to withstand both Crusader and Mongol attacks.

Today Bosra's friendly inhabitants live among the ruins of the old town.

## Orientation & Information

The ruins and modern town lie just to the north of the main east-west road between Der'a and Suweida. Al-Muhib buses drop off outside their office 100m short of the citadel; Damas Tours buses and minibuses from Der'a pass the citadel and drop off 400m further along the road. Money can be changed at the Bosra Cham Palace hotel.

## Sights

### CITADEL & THEATRE

The **citadel** (adult/student SE150/10; ☎ 9am-8pm Jul-Aug, to 7pm Sep-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Jun) is a unique

construction that began life as a classical Roman theatre and later had its impressive Arab fortifications grafted on. It's a wonderful experience to be lost within the dark, cavernous fortress halls, only to pass through a sunlit opening to find yourself looking down onto a vast terraced hillside of stone seating.

Buried under sand and long obscured by more recent buildings, including ramshackle residents' houses, the theatre's full glory was only laid bare in the 20th century. Built early in the 2nd century AD, it accommodated 9000 people (6000 seated and 3000 standing) and followed the conventions of Roman theatre design. The stage is backed by rows of Corinthian columns and originally had a façade of white marble, decorated with statues, and a wooden roof, while the rest of the theatre was covered by a retractable cloth shading. During performances perfumed water was sprayed into the air, a fragrant mist descending soothingly upon the spectators.

The citadel was built around the theatre in stages. The first walls were built during the Umayyad and Seljuk periods, with further additions made by the Ayyubids in 1200, following Crusader attacks in 1140 and 1183. The Ayyubids strengthened the fortifications by constructing more towers, resulting in the ring of eight towers connected by thick walls, encircling the theatre like a protective jacket.

The southwest tower contains a museum of popular culture and tradition, with scenes of Arab life depicted using mannequins and various exhibits of clothing and utensils. It's often closed, so ask at the ticket desk as you enter.

The theatre blossoms into life for the **Bosra Festival** (August to September; held every odd-numbered year and there is talk to make it an annual event), when it becomes an impressive venue for drama and concerts.

### OLD TOWN

The remains of the old Roman town lie north of the theatre, covering around 1 sq km. The best approach is to walk around the north side of the citadel and then bear right for the Bab al-Qandil. As the site is unbounded, there is no admission fee or opening hours.

The **Bab al-Qandil** (Gate of the Lantern) is a monumental arch, with one great central arch flanked by two smaller arches. Dating from the early 3rd century, an inscription on one pillar states that it was erected in memory of the Third Legion, which was garrisoned here.

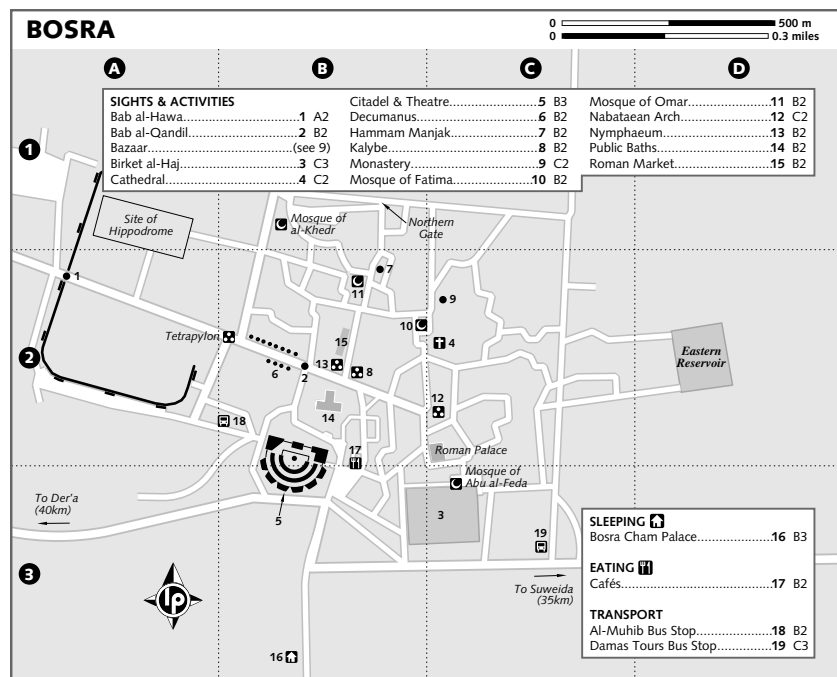
The gate marks an intersection with the old town's main east-west street, the colonnaded **decumanus**, which has been excavated to reveal its cobbled surface and parallel rows of column bases. At the western end of the decumanus rises the **Bab al-Hawa** (Gate of the Wind), a plain, single-arched structure that's flanked by the remains of the Roman-era city walls.

Returning east, the large dilapidated structure off to the right (south) is what remains of the **public baths**. Though the building is in a bad state, it is possible to get some sense of how it functioned. You enter off the decumanus into a large octagonal room that would have served as the changing hall; from here you pass into the **frigidarium** (cold room), which leads to a **tepidarium** (warm room) with a **caldarium** (hot room) either side.

Almost opposite the baths are four enormous Corinthian columns set at an angle to the decumanus – this is what's left of the **nymphaeum**, or public water fountain. On the side of the street heading north you can see another column and lintel incorporated into a modern house. It is believed that this is what remains of a **kalybe**, an open-air shrine for the display of statuary.

This street leads north, past the remains of a long rectangular **Roman market** with a paved plaza, to the **Mosque of Omar** (known by locals as Jami al-Arus), still in use today. According to local legend, it was built by (and named for) Caliph Omar, under whose leadership Syria was conquered in 636, making it one of the earliest mosques in the world. However, more recently archaeologists have identified it with Caliph Yazid II, placing its construction around 720. Further restoration of the mosque by the Ayyubids took place in the 12th or 13th centuries.

Nearly opposite the mosque, the **Hammam Manjak** was only fully revealed in the early 1990s. Built in 1372 under the Mamluks, this bathhouse served the passing pilgrim trade, and archaeologists consider it a masterpiece of medieval architectural engineering.



Head back south and bear left for the small **Mosque of Fatima**, notable for a square minaret separate from the main building. Built by the Fatimids in the 11th century, it was named after the Prophet's daughter. North of the mosque is Bosra's oldest **monastery**, thought to have been built in the 4th century. Locals believe this is where Mohammed met the priest Bahira. The façade has been rebuilt but the walls and apse are original. The square in front of the monastery is a makeshift **bazaar** where a couple of stalls sell dusty antiques and bric-a-brac.

South of the monastery lie the ruins of the **cathedral** (c 512), considered another masterpiece of early Christian architecture. It represents one of the earliest attempts to surmount a square base with a circular dome and was rebuilt a number of times before abandonment. Only the nave and two antechambers are still standing.

Continuing south, this small street intersects with the eastern end of the decumanus, marked by a **Nabataean arch**. Marking the edge of the Roman city, the gate was also probably the entrance to a Nabataean residence, thought to be the home of the Christian bishop. Beyond this is a massive Roman reservoir, 120m by 150m, which goes by the name of **Birket al-Haj** (Pool of the Pilgrimage), a reference to the era when Bosra was a stopover for pilgrims heading to Mecca.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Bosra Cham Palace** (☎ 790 881/2/3; www.chamhotels.com; s/d US\$110/130; 🍽️ 📺 📶) A few hundred metres south of the theatre, this comfortable five-star is Bosra's only accommodation, boasting two decent restaurants, a bar and a café. Reservations are essential during the Bosra Festival.

There are several decent yet unremarkable cafés in the square beside the citadel/theatre, and a couple of cheap felafel and grilled chicken places on Sharia Ghasasena, near where the Damas Tours bus stops.

### Getting There & Away

Damas Tours and Al-Muhib both run frequent, direct bus services between Bosra and the new Al-Samariyeh bus station in Damascus (£60, two hours). Return buses leave every two hours, from 6am to 6pm, but it's wise to double-check departure times

at the bus company office when you arrive, and buy your return ticket in advance. Allow at least two hours for a quick look, half a day for a more leisurely visit. There are no buses from Bosra to Suweida.

### SHAHBA

شها

☎ 016 / pop 22,000

Shahba, 90km south of Damascus, was founded as Philipopolis by the Hauran's most famous son, Emperor Philip of Rome. Construction of Philipopolis began in AD 244, the year of Philip's accession, and it was laid out in a classic Roman grid pattern oriented to the cardinal points of the compass, with four great gates in the surrounding walls. Unfortunately, building was halted abruptly when Philip was murdered five years into his reign. The town thrived for another century – as the magnificent 4th-century mosaics in Suweida's museum testify – but it was later abandoned. It only came to life again in the 19th century when settled by the Druze, who still comprise most of the population today.

The road from Damascus slowly climbs from the plain below up towards Shahba, entering via the partially reconstructed Roman north gate and proceeding down the modern main street, following the ancient town's *cardo maximus* (main north–south street). A roundabout at the town centre lies at the intersection with the Roman-era east–west *decumanus*. Ruins are everywhere and all the sights of interest are no more than a few minutes' walk away.

If you head right along the partly intact cobbled *decumanus*, past four **columns** on the right (the remains of a temple portico), you'll see a number of buildings of interest on the left, arranged around a large open space that was once the **forum** of Roman Philipopolis. The best-preserved of these buildings, on the south side of the square, appears to have been a family **shrine** dedicated to Philip's father, Julius Marinus. A set of stairs in the southeast corner gives access to the roof for a view over the site. The impressive structure on the western side of the forum, consisting of a series of niches arranged in a semicircle, is the remains of a palace facade. Just behind the shrine lies a modest **theatre**, with fish sculpted on the walls of the vaulted passages that lead to the seats.

Follow the street in front of the theatre 400m west to reach the remains of the town's **Roman baths** and, on the opposite side of the street, a small **museum** (adult/student £5/15; 🕒 9am–6pm Wed–Mon Mar–Nov, 9am–4pm Wed–Mon Dec–Feb) with some fine 4th-century mosaics.

### Getting There & Away

Suweida-bound buses pass through Shahba, which is 20km to the north, so the best way to visit both places is to hop off in Shahba, take a look around, then hop on one of the frequent minibuses heading south to Suweida (£5, 15 minutes) that stop on the main street. Otherwise, minibuses from Damascus (£25, 1¼ hours) run direct to Shahba from the Bab Mousala garage.

### SUWEIDA

السويدا

☎ 016 / 62,000

Capital of the Hauran, Suweida has a place in the hearts of many Syrians for two reasons: it's the centre of the viticulture industry (Syria's best wine and arak come from here) and the birthplace of Farid al-Atrache, a giant of the golden age of Arab music (see Farid al-Atrache, p72). For the casual visitor, however, anything of interest in this largely Druze town has been swept away by modern expansion. The town centre is unremarkable and the main reason to visit is Suweida's impressive museum. There is little else to keep you overnight, and it's an easy day trip from Damascus.

### Orientation & Information

The main bus station is on the northern edge of town, a little over a kilometre from the centre, and just west of a large roundabout with a bronze relief of Basel al-Assad on horseback as its centrepiece. The museum is east of the roundabout (follow the road uphill for a kilometre) in an imposing grey modern building on the left.

To get to the town centre from the bus station or museum, walk due south to central Saahat Assad (Assad Sq), which resembles a large parking lot. It is distinguished by a prominent statue of the ex-president; nearby is another of Sultan Basel al-Attrache, hero of the 1925 revolution. The square is home to the minibus station, a good produce market selling delicious, fresh, locally grown fruit, and a modest shopping area. There's a branch of the **Commercial Bank of**

**Syria** (🕒 9am–2.30pm Sat–Thu) one block east of Saahat Assad that will change cash.

### Sights

The French helped to build and curate Suweida's **museum** (adult/student £150/15; 🕒 9am–6pm Apr–Sep, to 4pm Oct–Mar, closed Tue), housing an impressive archaeological collection covering the Hauran history from the Stone Age to the Roman era. There's prehistoric pottery, an extensive array of basalt statuary, and a kitschy-cool popular-tradition section. The highlight is the stunning 4th-century mosaics from Shahba. Descriptions are in Arabic and French only.

Suweida is graced by enormous, creamy stone **villas**, set among lush gardens with fruit trees. They were built with foreign remittances from Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, second homes to Syrian expatriates from Suweida.

The only other points of interest are the old Ottoman-era **Governor's Residence** and an **arch with columns** that was once the old city gate, but is now stranded on a roundabout on the Der'a road.

### Eating

There are numerous eateries in the town centre, including **Al-Amir** (Sharia 29 Mai), which serves decent Syrian fare, and **Asrar** (Sharia Hafez al-Assad), which does shwarma, grilled chicken and kebabs.

### Getting There & Away

Luxury buses run frequently throughout the day between Damascus (from the new Al-Samariyeh bus station) and Suweida (£40, 1¼ hours); in Suweida catch them from the main bus station. A minibus from Damascus (from the Bab Mousala garage) takes 1¼ hours and costs £25.

### QANAWAT

قنوات

☎ 016

The village of Qanawat was a member of the Roman-inspired Decapolis, a politico-economic alliance of cities in the region that included such major centres as Jerash, Philadelphia (Amman) and Gadara (Umm Qais) in Jordan. While Qanawat flourished during the time of Trajan (AD 98–117), it declined with the arrival of Islam and was all but abandoned before being resettled by Druze in the 19th century.

Today it's a small agricultural hamlet of low black-stone buildings, many constructed from blocks from the ancient structures. Famed for its abundant and delicious fruit – try the mouth-watering mulberries or apricots – the area is beautiful in spring and early summer, when the fruit falls from the trees and the fields are carpeted with wildflowers.

Qanawat is a short minibus ride northeast of Suweida. Hop out at the *al-muderiyya* (town hall), a small, single-storey building with an entrance gate surmounted by the colours of the Syrian flag. Beside the town hall, a road is signposted 'To the ruins'. It runs up beside the picturesque gorge of Wadi al-Ghar, and from the road you can see the ruins of a **theatre** and a **nymphaeum**.

At the top of the hill is an open square with Qanawat's most interesting monument, the **Saray** (Palace; adult/student £5/3; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue), a ramshackle complex of temples. The most intact building is Roman, dating from the second half of the 2nd century AD. It was later converted into a Byzantine basilica when the area was given over to Christian worship. On entering the basilica you'll see recessed niches to the right; once a shrine, each niche probably held a small statue. The second area, with two rows of columns, is dominated by a monumental gateway on the north side. The pretty reliefs of grapevines you see are evidence of the region's centuries-old connection with viticulture.

As you leave the Saray, turn left to see the fine underground **cistern**, now minus its roof covering so you can see the rows of stone arches. Beyond are the remains of yet another **temple**, possibly dedicated to Zeus.

Return to the town hall for the minibus back to Suweida, but first take a quick stroll 200m south, where off to the right (west) are seven columns standing atop an almost square platform, the remains of the **Helios temple**. Today it's hemmed in by fertile farmers' gardens.

### Getting There & Away

Minibuses regularly depart from Suweida's bus station for Qanawat (£5, 10 minutes), more frequently in the morning, less so in the afternoon.

## GOLAN HEIGHTS

### مرتفعات الجولان

The Golan Heights in the southwest of the country mark the border between Syria and Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Originally Syrian territory, the Golan was lost to the Israelis in the Six Day War of 1967. After the Yom Kippur War of 1973, a delicate truce was negotiated between Israel and Syria by then-US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, which saw Syria regain some 450 sq km of lost territory. A complicated demilitarised buffer zone, supervised by UN forces, was also established, varying in width from a few hundred metres to a couple of kilometres.

In 1981 the Israeli government upped the stakes by formally annexing part of the Golan and moving in settlers. In Israeli eyes the heights are an indispensable shield against potential Syrian attack. The Syrians, of course, see things differently.

Syria's position is straightforward – Israel must completely withdraw from all of the Golan Heights before Syria will contemplate peace. This approach has been met by an equally intransigent response from Israel. It's hard to see the Golan Heights stalemate being broken any time soon.

While travel through the Golan Heights is not allowed, you can visit the town of Quneitra.

### QUNEITRA

It's been 30 years since a shot has been fired in Quneitra, once the area's administrative capital, but the ruins of this destroyed town serve as a bitter daily reminder of the conflict. Before the Israelis withdrew from the town after the 1973 ceasefire, they evacuated the 37,000 Arabs here and systematically destroyed Quneitra, removing anything that could be unscrewed, unbolted or wrenched from its position. Everything from windows to light fittings was sold to Israeli contractors, and the stripped buildings were pulled apart with tractors and bulldozers.

Quneitra today is a ghost town. The rubble of demolished houses lies next to the empty shells of mosques and churches rising among strangely peaceful scenes of

### القنيطرة

### CROSSING INTO JORDAN

If you are looking for the best way to get between Damascus and Amman, then stick with the regular twice-daily direct bus, which goes by the alternative border crossing at Nasib/Jabir, southeast of Der'a. True, you could maybe knock a dollar or two off the fare by doing it yourself in a combination of minibuses and service taxis, but the inconvenience renders the exercise uneconomical and frustrating. However, if you are down in the Hauran already and don't want to double back to Damascus, crossing the border independently is straightforward enough, although it can involve a bit of hiking. Service taxis shuttle directly between the bus stations in Der'a and Ramtha (on the Jordanian side), and cost £150 or JD2 per person.

Otherwise, you need to hitch or walk. Try to get a local bus from the Der'a bus station (on the outskirts of town) into the centre of Der'a, to save yourself the first 3km of walking. From there, head south on the Jordan road (signposted) and hitch or walk the 4km to the Syrian checkpoint. Once through formalities here, it's another 3km or so to the Jordanian checkpoint. The soldiers here may not allow you to walk the last kilometre or so to the immigration post, but are friendly and will flag down a car or bus for you. From Ramtha, minibuses go on to Mafrqa, Irbid and Zarqa, from where you can proceed to Amman.

There is no departure tax and a Jordanian visa can be picked up on the spot at the border post for JD10 (approximately US\$15).

devastation. The main street's once-prosperous banks and shops are lifeless, and the pockmarked hospital is the centerpiece for what has become something of a propaganda exhibit demonstrating the Israelis' senseless aggressiveness.

Quneitra is under Syrian control within a UN-patrolled demilitarised zone. There's a UN checkpoint in the town and barbed wire marking the border between Syrian territory and Israeli-occupied land. From a viewpoint near the checkpoint you can easily make out Israeli communication and observation posts on the other side. Much of the area is riddled with land mines.

Before visiting Quneitra, it's worth paying a visit to the Tishreen (October) War Panorama in Damascus (p99).

### Entry Permits

To visit Quneitra you must obtain a permit from the **Ministry of the Interior** (Map p80; ☎ 8am-2pm Sun-Thu), off Saahat Adnan al-Malki in Abu Roumana, the embassy district of Damascus. To reach the building from the square, head west uphill with the steep grassy park on your right. Take the flight of stairs in front of you. The Ministry is in the unsigned, four-storey building second from the left (number 15). Hand your passport to the guys in the portable

white guard box-cum-office. You won't be allowed inside so you need to patiently wait the 15 to 20 minutes it will take to get your permit. You have the option of getting the pass for that particular day or for the following day – it's best to arrive before 9am and get it for that day.

### Getting There & Away

Official advice is to visit Quneitra from Damascus with your own car or with a driver and car (from US\$60). There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, the Syrian intelligence officers who guide you around the site don't like doing it on foot (it's a large site and they have to do it several times a day) and have been known to turn visitors on foot away at the checkpoint. Secondly, when you get your permit, you'll be required to provide your car registration number, and the name and identification card of your driver if you have one. Thirdly, if you don't speak Arabic, an English-speaking driver will be a great help, as the officers don't speak English – they're just there to make sure you don't wander off into any minefields. When you arrive at the checkpoint you'll be asked for your permit and presented with your 'tour guide'; tip him generously at the end of your visit.

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