

The Coast & Mountains

الساحل السوري والجبال



Syria's 183km-long Mediterranean coastline is dominated by the rugged 250km-long Jebel Ansariyya mountain range that runs along its entire length. Squeezed between the highland and the sea is a narrow coastal strip that widens towards the south, where the country is extremely fertile and agriculturally rich.

The port city of Lattakia (Al-Lathqiyya), with its beach resorts, and the ruined ancient city of Ugarit (Ras Shamra) lie in the north. Boasting a large population of Alawites and Christians, lively Lattakia is one of Syria's most vibrant cities, with a buzzing restaurant and café scene, and a bustling souq and shopping area. It's also one of the country's friendliest cities, making a stay here lots of fun.

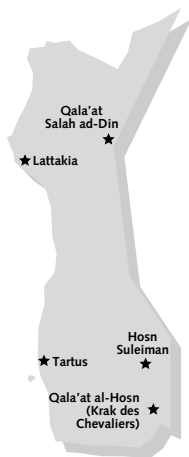
From here roads lead north to Turkey, east across the mountains to Aleppo, and south to Tartus, a secondary port that preserves remnants of its medieval Crusader past in its ramshackle old town and on the tiny island of Arwad.

The mountains behind Lattakia contain thick forests, which are easy on the eyes after the often-featureless interior. Travellers who have spent time in the cities will find the air considerably fresher, too. Following excessive clearing of the forests for timber in the past, the government has laid aside sections for preservation.

Of most interest to travellers is that much of this area was in Crusader hands for centuries. They left behind a chain of spectacular hilltop eyries and precipitously located castles, the undisputed king of which is the stalwart Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at **Qala'at al-Hosn** (Krak des Chevaliers; opposite), possibly the finest Crusader castle in the world, as you mosey around its majestic ruins
- Kick back for a couple of days in the lively port town of **Lattakia** (p144), with its tree-lined boulevards, excellent restaurants, buzzing cafés and bustling shopping streets
- Speculate on how the temple of **Hosn Suleiman** (p142) was constructed so high up in the picturesque mountains
- Appreciate why TE Lawrence thought **Qala'at Salah ad-Din** (p151) was the most awe-inspiring example of castle building
- Roam the ramshackle old quarter of **Tartus** (p137), a low-key port town and a pleasant place to unwind for a couple of days



QALA'AT AL-HOSN (KRAK DES CHEVALIERS) قلعة الحصن

📍 031

Author Paul Theroux described Qala'at al-Hosn as the epitome of the dream castle of childhood fantasies of jousts and armour and pennants. TE Lawrence simply called it 'the finest castle in the world'. Take their word for it: the remarkably well-preserved Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) is one of Syria's unmissable attractions. Impervious to the onslaught of time, it cannot have looked a great deal different 800 years ago, and such is its size and state of completeness that you could easily spend several hours absorbed in exploring it. A torch is handy for some of the darker passages and rooms.

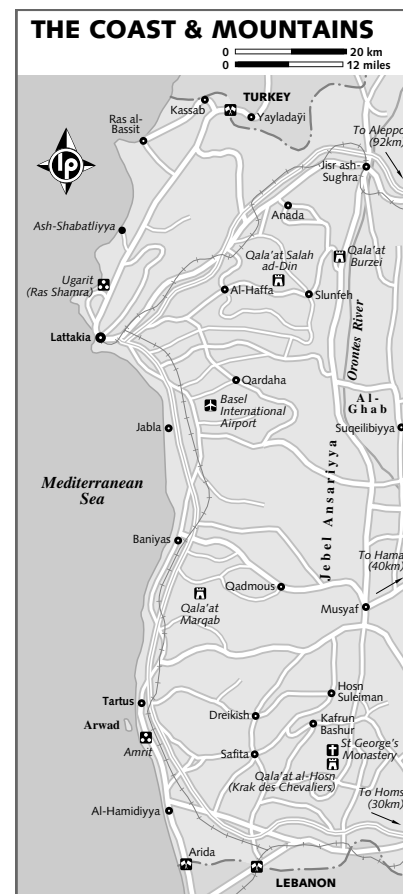
The castle is easily visited by public transport as a day trip from Tartus or Hama. However, visiting by car allows for exploring the surrounding countryside and hilltop resort towns, which is highly recommended. Anybody passing through en route to Homs, Tartus or elsewhere can leave bags and packs at the ticket office.

History

The castle addresses the only significant break in the Jebel Ansariyya. Anyone who held this breach, known as the Homs Gap, between the southern end of the range and the northern outreaches of the Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range), was virtually assured authority over inland Syria by controlling the flow of goods and people from the ports through to the interior.

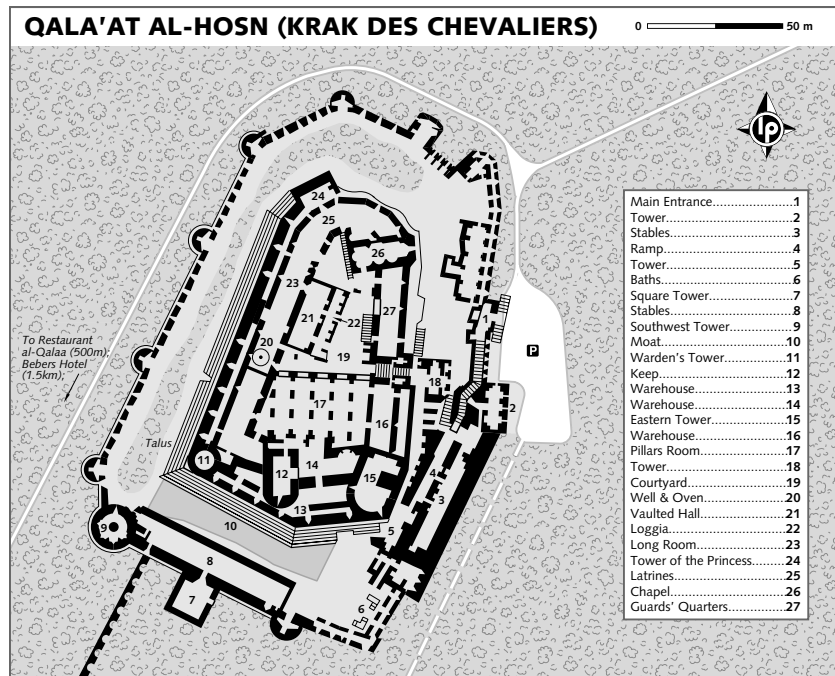
The first fortress that is known to have existed on this site was built by the emir of Homs in 1031. He was briefly displaced in 1099 by the hordes of the First Crusade passing through on its way to Jerusalem, and was then given the complete push some 11 years later when the Christian knights, now established in the Holy City, began to extend their gains throughout the region. Around the middle of the 12th century the elite Knights Hospitaller replaced the First Crusaders and expanded Qala'at al-Hosn into its present form.

The knights built well and, despite repeated attacks and sieges, the fortress was never truly breached. When the Mamluk sultan Beybars marched on the castle in 1271, the knights at Qala'at al-Hosn were



a last outpost. Jerusalem had been lost and the Christians were retreating. Numbers in the castle, built to hold a garrison of 2000, were depleted to around 200. Surrounded by the armies of Islam and with no hope of reprieve, the Crusaders departed after a month, having negotiated safe conduct to head to Tripoli.

Beybars garrisoned the castle with his Mamluk troops and further strengthened the defences. Today it is possible to distinguish the Frankish aspects of the castle, with their Gothic and Romanesque building styles, and those of the Arabs – there are some beautiful Islamic geometric designs carved into structures on the upper levels of the main complex.



Sights

The **castle** (adult/student \$€150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar) comprises two distinct parts: the outside wall with its 13 towers and main entrance; and the inner fortress.

THE OUTSIDE WALL

The **main entrance** (1) leads to a sloping ramp with steps wide enough to allow the garrison's horses to be ridden two abreast. The first **tower** (2) on the left was a guard room and, next to it, the **long hall** (3) served as stables – it's now a dark storeroom filled with building equipment. The ramp eventually emerges in a more open area where the passage doubles back on itself to lead up into the inner fortress, as well as continuing on ahead to exit via another **tower** (5), which gives access out into the moat area. As you emerge look back at the outer face of the doorway to see, carved into the stone, representations of two lions facing each other, possibly symbols of the English Crusader king, Richard I 'the Lion-Heart'.

The **moat** (10) here is usually full of stagnant water. When the castle was occupied,

this water was used to fill the **baths** (6), which you can get down to by a couple of dogleg staircases over in the corner to your left. These stairs lead into a tight complex of rooms and those familiar with hammams will recognise the layout: there's a central chamber with a stone fountain; off it are private washrooms, a couple of which still contain stone basins. This was a Mamluk or later addition.

The cavernous room on the southern edge of the moat measures 60m by 9m and the roof is formed of one single vault – quite an impressive feat in stone. It was most likely used as **stables** (8). On exiting the western end of the hall two sets of stairs (these are quite decrepit, so be careful of your footing) give access to the battlements above. From up here it is possible to gain access to each of the three towers that punctuate the southern wall. The **square tower** (7) bore the brunt of the 1271 attack and was later rebuilt by Beybars. The **southwest tower** (9) was also rebuilt; its central pillar, which supports the upper levels of the construction, bears an inscription in Arabic recording

Beybars' full title, which translates as 'the Manifest King, Pillar of the World and the Faith, Father of the Victory'.

Walking around between the two walls from the southwest tower, you reach the **Tower of the Princess** (24) in the northwestern corner, unusual in that it is wider than it is deep. On the façade are three rows of triple-pointed arches. A large projecting gallery, from where rocks were hurled at assailants, is concealed in the face. The eastern face of this tower has a rear gate opening onto the moat.

Continue walking clockwise to reach a flight of steps leading up into the inner fortress.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take the Al-Hamidiyya microbus (الحميدية; \$€10) from Sharia 6 Tishreen near the train station in Tartus and ask to be let off at 'al-athaar' or 'the ruins'. You'll be dropped at the track leading to Amrit, from where it's a 2.5km walk, half of it through shaded pine forest and the rest through orchards, corn and cacti. You'll pass an army post (the firing ranges are a little disconcerting) and some 200m further on, immediately after passing some communications towers, you'll see the temple remains in the distance on the left – take the dirt track to your left. Continue along the paved road, take the next dirt track on your left, and this will bring you to the **meghazils**.

To get back to Tartus, return to the main road and flag down a microbus – most stop opposite the service station.

THE INNER FORTRESS

The steps lead up into an open, central **courtyard** (19). On the western side is a **loggia** (22), or portico, with a Gothic façade of seven arches, two of which are open doorways. The other five arches are windows, each subdivided by a delicate pillar with an acanthus-leaf capital. It's a surprisingly delicate structure to find in such massively brutal surrounds.

Beyond the loggia is a large **vaulted hall** (21), which was probably a reception room, and beyond this is a 120m **long room** (23) running the length of the western wall. At the northern end is what were the **latrines** (25), used until very recently judging by the smell, while towards the south of the hall

are the remains of a **well and oven** (20), the latter measuring more than 5m in diameter. This area probably doubled as a storage area and granary, stockpiled with provisions against sieges.

The **pillars room** (17) has five rows of heavy squat pillars and is vaulted with fist-sized stones. It may have been used as a refectory. Several nearby rooms were **warehouses** (13, 14 and 16). In one are the remains of massive pottery oil jars and in another there's an oil mill, more oil jars and a well.

Back in the courtyard, the **chapel** (26) has a nave of three bays of vaults. It was converted to a mosque after the Muslim conquest and the **minbar** (pulpit) still remains. The staircase that obstructs the main door is a later addition and leads to the upper floors of the fortress.

The upper floor of the Tower of the Princess is a **café** with tea, coffee, cold drinks and snacks. There are also toilets up here. From the café you can make your way over to the round tower in the southwest corner known as the **Warden's Tower** (11); this was where the Grand Master of the Hospitallers had his quarters. From the tower's roof are some magnificent views; on a clear day you can make out the solitary pale figure of Safita's keep to the west.

Sleeping & Eating

Given that Qala'at al-Hosn is only just over an hour from Tartus, Homs or even Hama, most people visit on a day trip; hence accommodation choices are limited. However, a stay here is relaxing and having time to view the castle from different vantage points and at different hours is as enjoyable as exploring the structure itself.

Beyers Hotel (☎ 734 1201; akrmbibars@mail.sy; s/d/tr US\$25/30/35) This would be the best hotel near the castle even if it didn't have spectacular views of the citadel. The light-filled rooms are clean and comfortable and all come with private bathrooms, fridge and satellite TV. All rooms possess stunning views from balconies or windows that look directly across a valley to the castle, as the crow flies just a few hundred metres away. Rooms 101 and 212 have the best views. The hotel is a 20-minute walk from the main castle entrance. Meals (US\$5) are available.

Francis Hotel (☎ 730 946/7/8; www.francishotel.net; Wadi Nassarah, Amar; ste US\$60-90; ♿ ♿) A ten-minute drive from Qala'at al-Hosn, this enormous hotel-apartment complex is situated on a hillside overlooking Amar. The spacious, well-equipped suites come with kitchenettes and big balconies with breathtaking views. There's an enormous swimming pool, restaurant and bar. Reception staff speak English.

Restaurant al-Qalaa (☎ 734 0493; meal per person £300) This restaurant is in a lone, white, two-storey building immediately west of the castle, on the next hilltop. It's worth dining here for the views alone. The menu features typical Syrian fare, including grilled chicken and mezza.

Getting There & Away

Qala'at al-Hosn lies some 10km north of the Homs-Tartus highway and can be visited on a day trip from either town. Coming from Damascus or Hama, it's necessary to change buses in Homs. Buses from Homs to Qala'at al-Hosn (£30, 1½ hours) leave every hour on the hour; the last bus returning to Homs departs from the castle at 5.30pm in summer or 2.30pm in winter. The Cairo and Riad hotels in Hama run organised tours to the castle (see p164).

From Tartus, catch a Homs microbus. You'll be dropped off on the main highway at the turn-off for the castle, where there's usually a microbus (£60) waiting to take people up the hill. To return, catch the microbus back down to the junction on the Homs-Tartus highway and flag down a passing microbus to Tartus.

AROUND QALA'AT AL-HOSN

☎ 031

The landscape surrounding Qala'at al-Hosn is beautiful – low, rolling, emerald-green hills, shaded with foliage. The high altitude cools the temperature, and the small villages and towns that dot the hilltops, such as **Amar**, **Dreikish**, **Mashtu Helu** and **Safita**, are popular summer resorts, not just with native Syrians but with thousands of Syrian expats returning annually for vacations. Other than the keep at Safita (p142), the area's main sight is St George's Monastery, located in a valley a few kilometres north-west of Qala'at al-Hosn. As there's no way

of getting around by public transport, the only way to see this attractive area is to hire a car or sign up for an organised tour.

St George's Monastery دير مار جرجس

St George is one of the most popular Christian saints in the Middle East, where in Arabic he's known as Mar Jirjis. Traditionally he's thought to have been a Palestinian ancestor in the Roman army who was executed in the 3rd century AD for tearing up a copy of the Emperor Diocletian's decree forbidding the practise of Christianity. Legends about him grew from the 6th century onwards and these stories were likely carried back to Europe by returning Crusaders. In 1348 England's Edward III made George patron of the Knights of the Garter. Long before then, there were churches dedicated to him throughout the Middle East, and the first church on this particular site was built possibly as early as the 6th century.

The **monastery** (Deir Mar Jirjis; ☎ 6am-8pm) of today is fully functioning, and takes the form of a modern, large, walled compound at the bottom of a valley, with the guardian Qala'at al-Hosn clearly visible high on a hilltop just a few kilometres away. The priest or a guide will greet you and show you the 'New Church', dating from 1857, adorned with a fine carved-wood iconostasis depicting various scenes from the life of Christ and topped by a row of wooden birds about to take flight, along with beautiful icons from the Jerusalem school. The 13th-century 'Old Church', accessed across a lower, sunken courtyard, has a smaller, even more intricate iconostasis, which is over 300 years old and depicts scenes from the life of St George. A further 'Old Monastery' dating back to the 6th century was recently opened to visitors.

To get here, take the road from the highway towards Nasira; 4km after the turn-off for Hosn and Qala'at al-Hosn take a fork to the left. If you don't have transport you could arrange to go by taxi from Qala'at al-Hosn; there and back, plus an hour or so waiting time, should cost around £300.

SLEEPING & EATING

Although there's plenty of accommodation scattered around the valley, it's highly seasonal; from mid-June to mid-September you need to book well in advance.

Al-Fahd Hotel (☎ 730 822, 730 559; Al-Mishtaia; d with breakfast US\$20; ♿) Around 2km from the monastery, on the main road, this modest place has simple, clean rooms with private bathrooms, and balconies with brilliant views across the valley to Qala'at al-Hosn.

Al-Wadi Hotel (☎ 773 0456; www.alwadihotel.com; Al-Mishtaia; s/d US\$60/75; ♿ ♿) Next door to Al-Fahd, this excellent hotel with traditional décor – Oriental lamps, kilims and crafts – has loads of character and a ski-lodge feel about it, with its big lobby and fireplace. The comfortable rooms are spacious yet cosy, with minibar and satellite TV, and balconies have spectacular views. The swimming pool is enormous and also has valley and castle vistas.

There are no eating options here other than the hotels.

TARTUS

☎ 043 / pop 93,000

Tartus, Syria's second port, is a small, scruffy town that is unlikely to set pulses racing, but which makes for a pleasant overnight visit. The town's principal attraction is the compact remnants of the Old City (known to the Crusaders as Tortosa), a fascinating little warren. There's also the once-fortified island of Arwad, which lies a few kilometres offshore and is reached by boat or water taxi. Syrians love Tartus for its beaches, but visitors brave enough to pick through the junk on the sand and go for a dip should note the occasional dribble of sewage into the sea.

History

Tartus is thought to have been established by the Phoenicians as a service town for the island of Arados (Arwad) and given the name Antarados (meaning 'Anti-Arados' or 'Opposite Arados'). It wasn't until the time of the Byzantines that Antarados became important – it's said that the emperor Constantine preferred the Christian community on the mainland to the island pagans, and the town became known as Constantinia. With the Byzantine empire's collapse, the town passed into the hands of the Arabs, from whom it was wrested in 1099 by the Crusaders.

Under the new moniker of Tortosa, the town was strategically important for the Crusaders' sea links with Europe. They turned Tortosa into a fortified stronghold

and built a cathedral in honour of the Virgin Mary, who had long been associated with this site. In 1152, after Muslim forces had briefly taken Tortosa, control of the town was given to the elite Knights Templar.

In 1188 Saladin led another Muslim assault and forced the Crusader knights to fall back to the main fortified keep, the town's last defence. This they held, and eventually the Muslims withdrew. The Knights Templar set about refortifying the town and defending the approaches with a series of castles. These precautions enabled them to hold Tortosa against a further two major attacks by the Mamluks, but eventually, as the remaining Crusader strongholds in the Holy Lands fell, the knights retreated to Arwad. There they maintained a garrison for 12 years before finally departing for Cyprus.

The town languished – hence its modest size – and only began to flourish once Syria gained independence. With the subsequent partitioning off of Lebanon and the handing over of the Antakya region to Turkey, Syria found itself with only one functioning port (Lattakia), making it necessary to revive Tartus.

Orientation

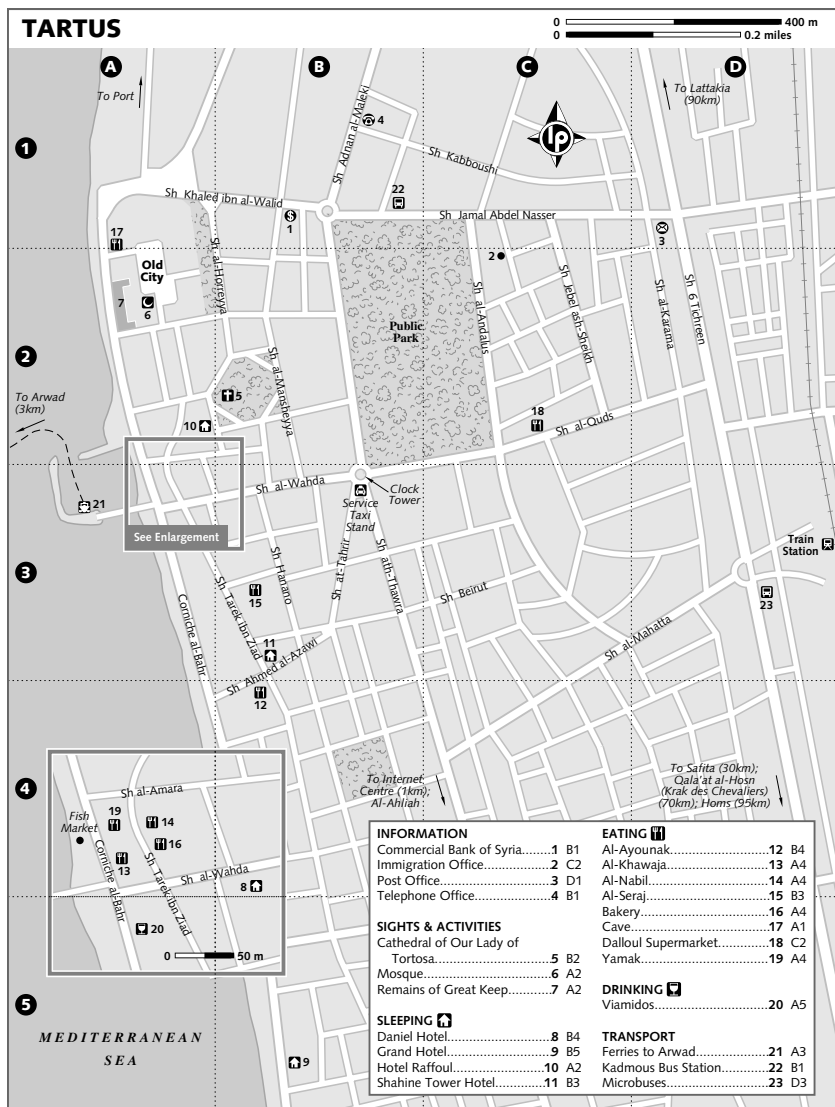
The heart of town is the area around Sharia al-Wahda, stretching between the roundabout with the clock tower at its eastern end and the fishing harbour at its western end. Just to the north is the Old City; south are the town's few shopping streets. The Kadmous bus station is around 500m north of the clock-tower roundabout. Microbuses and trains halt out on the main highway, Sharia 6 Tishreen, which marks the eastern edge of town – from here it's a 15- to 20-minute walk to the centre. The commercial port is north of the town.

Information

Commercial Bank of Syria (cnr Sharia Khaled ibn al-Walid & Sharia al-Orouba; ☎ 8am-noon Sat-Thu) On the northeast side of the Old City.

Immigration office (☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Just south of Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser, one block east of the park (it's well signposted). Visa extensions (less than one hour to process) require two photos and two completed forms, along with £30 for an excise stamp.

Internet Centre (☎ 315 906; Sharia ath-Thawra; per hr £50; ☎ 10am-10pm) As you walk down Sharia



ath-Thawra, it's on the left-hand side about 1.5km south of the clock-tower roundabout; just look for a blue Ericsson sign.

Post office (cnr Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser & Sharia 6 Tishreen; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to 2pm Fri) About a 15-minute walk from the centre of town.

Telephone office (Sharia Adnan al-Maleki; ☎ 24hr Sat-Thu, to 8pm Fri) Just north of the Sharia Khaled ibn

al-Walid and Sharia ath-Thawra junction. There are also a couple of card phones at the post office.

Sights OLD CITY

The Old City is in essence the Crusader fortress of Tortosa, which over the centuries since the (un)holy knights departed

has been occupied by local inhabitants. It's a compact area, tightly wrapped around by Sharia al-Khandek (which follows the course of the **old walls**, still visible in parts) on three sides and the seafront Corniche on the fourth. Between Sharia al-Khandek and Sharia al-Horreyya, a deep and wide grassy ditch remains as evidence of a **moat**.

The best impression of the fortifications is gained from the Corniche: you can pick out the bulky mass of the former **great keep**, or donjon, into which the Crusaders retreated when Saladin laid siege to the town in the 12th century. Much rebuilt and remodelled, it now forms part of a local municipal centre.

From the Corniche a short access road runs up to a ragged square – what would have been the castle's **courtyard**. The edges are blurred by a ramshackle assortment of newer structures, but it all blends with an admirable degree of unintentional harmony with the old broken stonework. It's worth exploring the narrow, snaking passageways off the square for the architectural surprises: a road north exits through a wonderfully muscular medieval gate, while a short flight of steps in the northeast corner leads to an arched passageway and then to the remains of a splendid vaulted hall, now half-open to the sky and sadly used as an unofficial garbage tip.

A mosque, several shops and a couple of coffeehouses around the square buzz with locals going about their business, adding to its modest charm.

CATHEDRAL OF OUR LADY OF TORTOSA

كاتدرائية طرطوس

Part cathedral, part fortress, Our Lady of Tortosa was constructed by the Crusaders in the 12th century, although a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary possibly existed on this site as early as the 4th century AD. Rebuilding on the existing consecrated site meant that the Crusader cathedral stood outside the walled enclave and hence was designed with its own defence in mind. This is particularly true of the rear of the building, which resembles a great keep complete with arrow slits. The only decorative elements are the five arched windows on the main façade (which were finished shortly before the Mamluks took over the

city in 1291) and the rebuilt doorway. It's a splendid piece of Crusader construction.

The interior is more recognisably ecclesiastic, with soaring arches and graceful vaulting, and is home to a tiny **archaeological museum** (adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue). There are some fascinating items on display, including exquisite jewellery, statuary and pottery from sites such as Ugarit (Ras Shamra), Arwad and Amrit, and there's good labelling in English.

ARWAD

أرواد

This small island, 3km southwest of Tartus, would be a gem if only it weren't so filthy. As it is, its walls are covered in graffiti and its streets often sprinkled with garbage. However, the boat ride out, skipping between the tankers, is good fun.

Founded by the Canaanites and in one stage occupied by the Egyptians, the island has a long and eventful history. In Phoenician times it was a prosperous and powerful maritime state, with colonies on the mainland at Amrit, Baniyas and Jabla. It gradually declined in the 1st millennium BC and was of little importance by the time it became part of the Roman Empire. During the Crusades it assumed strategic importance and in 1302 was the last Frankish outpost to fall to the Muslims.

Today there are no cars or wide streets, only a maze of narrow lanes that jog and jink between tightly packed buildings. It's densely populated by inhabitants who commute to the mainland via water taxi each day to work, although plenty are employed in the boat-building that goes on at two sites on the island, on the north and south tips. At any given time there are several timber skeletons of boats in various stages of construction. Otherwise, there's little else of interest.

Little is left of the island's defensive walls (just a stretch on the western side of the island), but two forts remain. The one that you see off to the right as you come into the harbour is closed to the public, but there's another on the island's highest point that houses a small **museum** (adult/student £150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue). Sections of the museum were closed at the time of research, but the few exhibits we viewed were labelled in English. The views

are fascinating. To find the museum just head directly inland and uphill from the harbour, past the souvenir shops selling sunhats, shell necklaces and trinkets, and you'll arrive at it eventually – the whole island only measures 800m by 500m.

To get to Arwad, take either a small water taxi (S£50) or larger passenger boat (S£100) from the port; they leave when full. You have to show your passport to the officials at the desk near the souvenir and snack shops, and once again when you buy your ticket on Arwad for the return journey.

Sleeping

Decent accommodation is thin on the ground in Tartus.

Hotel Raffoul (☎ 220 616, 220 097; Saahat Manchieh; beds per person S£200) Across from the cathedral, this hotel has only 10 rooms, but it's good value. Two of the rooms have private bathrooms; the rest share facilities. It's quiet and very well looked after. Before climbing the stairs, go to the grocer's store on the nearby corner and check in with the owner.

Daniel Hotel (☎ 312 757; fax 316 555; Sharia al-Wahda; s/d/tr S£300/600/900) The rooms here are basic but clean with large beds (with crisp, white sheets) and fans. The managers are helpful, speak English and offer free tea and coffee.

Grand Hotel (☎ 317 797; fax 315 683; Corniche al-Bahr; s/d US\$25/30; 🍷) An old-style four-star, the Grand has plenty of character and is well maintained. Rooms have satellite TV, fridge and stunning sea views across the new Corniche, making the rate a bargain. The downside is that it's about 1km from the centre and surrounded by ramshackle houses and concrete shells of half-finished buildings. Breakfast is S£1.50 extra.

Shahine Tower Hotel (☎ 329 100; fax 315 290; Sharia Tarek ibn Ziad; s/d US\$92/98; 🍷) Tartus' only luxury accommodation, the Shahine has 14 floors of plush rooms and lots of marble and brass in the lobby. It's popular with wealthy Syrians and tour groups. Credit cards are accepted.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

The local speciality, unsurprisingly, is fish, which is sold by weight. About the cheapest place to eat fish is the no-frills Al-Nabil (right), but a variety of eateries line the waterfront.

Al-Khawaja (☎ 213 900; Corniche al-Bahr; meal per person S£500; 🍷 noon-late) Tartus' best restaurant, Al-Khawaja has a casual downstairs eatery and a more refined upstairs restaurant that's popular with big families. The seafood and Syrian staples are all deliciously fresh – the *fatoush* salad (a tangy green salad with a mixture of dried wild thyme and sesame seeds and fried Arabic bread; S£30) and fried *kibbeh* (cracked-wheat croquettes; S£15) were some of the best we've had. Lebanese wine (S£600 a bottle), beer and arak are offered.

Yamak (☎ 328 755; Sharia al-Amara; meal per person S£500; 🍷 11am-2am) Up on the 4th floor of the nondescript Chamber of Commerce & Industry building opposite the fishing harbour, Yamak is another excellent restaurant. Choose your seafood from the iced display of the day's catch. The (cheaper) Syrian food is also good and alcohol is served.

Cave (☎ 220 408; Corniche al-Bahr; meal per person S£500; 🍷 noon-late) Occupying a vaulted hall burrowed into the sea wall of the Old City, the Cave has atmosphere and its grilled seafood is good.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

Snack places specialising in felafel, shwarma and grilled chicken are clustered around the clock tower and Sharia al-Wahda, and south down Sharia ath-Thawra. There's also a cluster of cheap-eats places along Sharia Ahmed al-Azawi, 500m south of Sharia al-Wahda.

Al-Ayounak (☎ 326 086; 7 Sharia Ahmed al-Azawi; pizzas from S£100; 🍷 noon-midnight) This small snack bar at the seafar end of the street specialises in pizzas.

Al-Seraj (off Sharia Tarek ibn Ziad; meal per person S£150; 🍷 11am-late Sat-Thu) Signposted in Arabic only (السرّاج), this place is worth searching out for its friendly service, clean surrounds and very decent, cheaply priced local fare, as well as pizzas.

Al-Nabil (Sharia al-Amara; meal per person S£175) One block back from the fishing harbour (just round the corner from the Daniel Hotel) and open seemingly all hours, Al-Nabil specialises in fried and grilled fish but also does chicken and kebabs.

SELF-CATERING

The small **Dalloul supermarket** (Sharia al-Quds) just east of the public park has groceries and toiletries. For freshly baked bread, rolls and

croissants, there's a small bakery next to Al-Nabil restaurant. A liquor store a couple of doors from the Daniel Hotel sells beer.

Drinking

The best bet for an evening in Tartus would be to settle into one of the coffeehouses along the seafar just north of the fishing harbour; the preferred choice is vibrant Viamidos.

Viamidos (☎ 094-667 887; Corniche al-Bahr; beer S£65; 🍷 24hr) This big, stylish, new café is the hit of the string of cafés on the waterfront and one of the few in Syria to serve excellent coffee alongside decent wines by the glass. Crowded with flirty young couples and groups of friends in the evenings, it's people-watching perfection. It's also very female friendly, attracting plenty of local girls sharing nargileh. The food is great too, with everything from pastas (S£145) and pizza (S£110) to big fresh salads (S£180).

Getting There & Away

BUS

Kadmous (Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser) has a station just off the big roundabout north of the park. Buses depart hourly for Damascus (S£120, four hours), and there are frequent services to Aleppo (S£120, four hours), Hama (S£70, 1½ hours) and Homs (S£70, one hour). Small buses go to Lattakia (S£40, one hour) and Baniyas (S£15, 30 minutes) every 15 to 20 minutes.

Al-Ahliah (Sharia ath-Thawra) is south of the centre; destinations and fares are similar to those of Kadmous, although departures are less frequent.

MICROBUS

Microbuses depart from the main highway, Sharia 6 Tishreen, in front of the train station. Destinations include Lattakia (S£40, one hour), Baniyas (S£20, 30 minutes), Homs (S£35, one hour), Safita (S£15, 30 minutes) and Al-Hamidiyya (for Amrit; S£10, 15 minutes).

TRAIN

At the time of research, infrequent trains ran between Tartus and Lattakia. However, that was all set to change, with the government announcing a long-term plan to inject funds into the national railways and make greater use of its trains.

Getting Around

Everything in the centre is accessible by foot. If you don't want to walk, a local taxi should cost no more than S£30 to take you anywhere around town.

AROUND TARTUS

Tartus is a good base from which to explore the beautiful mountainous hinterland and several interesting sites.

Closest to town is Amrit, although as with many of Syria's preclassical sites, this is really one for the keen amateur archaeologist. Alternatively, head inland and into the hills.

The local transport hub up here is Safita, an attractive hilltop town with an impressive Crusader keep. From Safita you can push on to Hosn Suleiman – there isn't that much there but the scenery along the way is stunning. Tartus is also a convenient base for day trips to the castles of Qala'at Marqab to the north, on the way to Lattakia, and to Qala'at al-Hosn, on the road to Homs. It takes about an hour to get to either of these places.

Amrit

عمریت

Two remarkably odd-looking monuments, erected as long ago as the 6th century BC, dominate the mysterious ancient site of Amrit, 8km south of Tartus. The so-called **meghazils** (spindles) stand in what was once a necropolis and, although origins of this settlement are still a mystery, it appears that Phoenicians from Arwad made the area a kind of satellite or religious zone. The taller of the monuments has four lions carved in a Persian style around the base. Both towers stand above underground funeral chambers (take a torch) and betray a curious mix of Hellenistic, Persian and even Egyptian influences in their decoration.

About 1km to the north you will find the remains of a **temple** built to serve a cult centred on the springs here. The main feature is a deep basin cut out of the rock, which once would have formed an artificial lake. The water that filled the basin came from the nearby spring and was considered to have curative powers. Just 50m to the north you can make out the shape of a small stadium.

Known to the Greeks as Marathos and conquered by Alexander the Great in 333 BC, Amrit had fallen by the wayside by the time it was incorporated into the Roman Empire.

Safita

☎ 043 / pop 33,000

This restful mountain town is a lovely place to while away an hour or two. With the feel of an Italian or Greek Byzantine mountain village, it has narrow twisting alleys, old stone buildings, and lanes shaded by grapevines. Dominated by a striking Crusader-era **keep** (admission \$€100; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm summer, 9am-1pm & 2-4pm winter), all that remains of the once-powerful 'Castel Blanc', Safita would be a lovely place to spend a few days if it had decent accommodation.

Originally built in the early 12th century as part of the outlying defences of Tartus, the castle was rebuilt and strengthened after damage sustained in an attack by the Ayyubid ruler Nureddin (Nur ad-Din). It was garrisoned by the Knights Templar until 1271, when they were driven out by Beybars, who shortly after went on to take Qala'at al-Hosn.

From the very chaotic central town intersection, where most minibuses drop off their passengers, take the road leading uphill to the west. After about 500m the keep is visible ahead. Continue until you see a cobbled lane off to the right and follow it under the arched gate of what remains of the castle's defensive perimeter. If the site is closed, go to the little shop and the shopkeeper will let you in.

At 27m high, the keep is the largest of all surviving Crusader towers. It consists of just one single lower floor and one great upper floor (plus a subfloor passage that leads to a cistern for water storage). The lower level was a grand church with an elegant barrel-vaulted ceiling and an apse in the east wall. Only the arrow slits in the walls betray the room's military function. The church still operates, serving the local Syrian Orthodox community.

Stairs in the southwest corner lead to the upper level, which consists of a large hall divided by massive trunklike stone pillars (note the absence of corresponding pillars in the church below – no wonder the walls are so thick). This upper room probably served as a dormitory for the knights, who lived in monastic conditions.

Another flight of steps leads you up to the roof and spectacular views. It's sometimes possible to make out Qala'at al-Hosn (the two were thus linked in the Crusaders'

صافيتا

chain of communications) to the southeast, and the snowcapped peaks of northern Lebanon to the south.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Tartus, the microbus for Safita (\$€15, 30 minutes) departs from just south of the traffic circle in front of the train station. From Safita, minibuses for Hosn Suleiman (\$€25, 40 minutes) depart from Sharia Maysaloun, 100m south of the town's main intersection.

Hosn Suleiman

حصن سليمان

A worthwhile excursion north of Safita involves journeying 25km along some of the highest mountain ridges of the Jebel Ansariyya to arrive at a remarkable testament to thousands of years of religious fervour. Outside the village of Hosn Suleiman are partial temple walls constructed of huge stone blocks, some of them as large as 5m by 3m. Built high in the mountains, days from anywhere and at a time when travel was by foot or on horse, these walls are quite enigmatic.

Although evidence suggests the site has been home to temples of one religious persuasion or another since the Persian occupation of the Levant, what you can see today was erected mainly under Roman domination in the 2nd century AD.

Four gates permit entry to a large rectangular enclosure. A partially collapsed cella, which is the focal point of worship and offerings in the temple, rises from the centre of the site. The gates preserve the most intact decoration, with columns, niches and inscriptions (the clearest of these can be observed above the east gate). The east and west gates both display the same sculptural adornments: the figure of a bearded man stands above the lintel, while the same area on the inside is dominated by figures depicting two youths and a lion's head. As you pass through each gate, look up to see the outspread wings of an eagle.

Across the road are the less extensive ruins of what appears to be another temple compound, but little is known about its history or function.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Hosn Suleiman is best visited with your own vehicle. Minibuses (\$€25) run at irregular intervals from Safita, taking about 40 minutes; tell the driver you want to go to Hosn

Suleiman. To get back to Safita, stand on the road and flag down any passing public transport – or any transport at all.

QALA'AT MARQAB

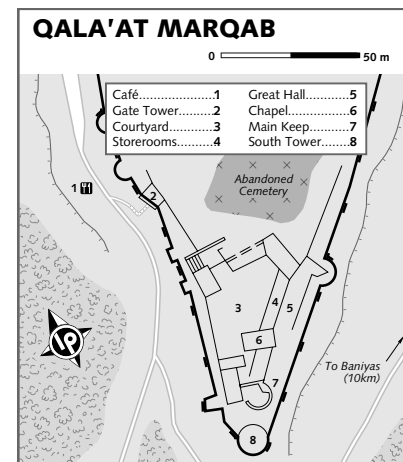
قلعة مرقب

After Qala'at al-Hosn and Qala'at Salah ad-Din, probably the third most impressive of Syria's Crusader castles is the brooding **Qala'at Marqab** (adult/student \$€150/10; ☎ 9am-6pm daily Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Oct-Mar), built from black basalt rock. It's not as complete as Qala'at al-Hosn or as strikingly located as Qala'at Salah ad-Din, but set out on a spur it does command almost limitless views across the Mediterranean to the west and over the valleys dropping away to the east and south.

The original castle was a Muslim stronghold, founded possibly as late as 1062. During the early 12th century it passed into Crusader hands and was part of the principality of Antioch before being sold in 1168 to the Knights Hospitaller. It was the Hospitallers who gave the castle its present shape, concentrating their fortifications on the southern flank where the gentler slopes made the site most vulnerable. Their work was well done (according to TE Lawrence, Marqab combined 'all the best of the Latin fortifications of the Middle Ages in the East') and the castle stood up to two major assaults in the 13th century. Saladin, who in 1188 successfully captured the nearby castle that now bears his name, did not even bother with Marqab but just marched right by, preferring to concentrate on easier targets.

Historians suspect that its eventual fall in 1285 to the Mamluk sultan Qalaun (successor to Beybars) was due to a lack of manpower for the extensive defences. Qalaun brought down Marqab by 'mining': his soldiers dug under the foundations of the castle walls and towers, propping up the tunnels with wooden beams. By lighting a fire and burning the beams, they collapsed the tunnels and brought down the defences above them. Following the surrender of the Crusaders, the Mamluks repaired the castle – you can identify their handiwork in the telltale white bands of the south tower – and continued to use it until they lost power to the Ottomans, who had little use for castles and kept it as a prison.

At the time of research the castle was undergoing major restoration that was due to be completed during 2008.



Touring the Castle

The exterior walls and towers are the most impressive elements of the castle. The entrance is through the square **gate tower** (2) in the west wall. After entering, turn right and walk down between the inner and outer walls, then up the short flight of stairs on the left to what was the inner **courtyard** (3) and the focus of activity in the castle. Across from where you enter the courtyard is a Gothic-style **chapel** (6) with two fine doorways, above which are lots of birds tweeting in nests.

Keep heading south past the chapel to the three-storey semicylindrical **main keep** (7). An internal staircase leads up to the roof, from where you can clearly make out the castle's concentric plan (echoing Qala'at al-Hosn) and enjoy some superb views of the coast. To the north and east are the barely distinguishable remnants of **storerooms** (4) and possibly dining and living quarters.

There is a **café** (1) outside the entrance to the castle, with spectacular views of the coast and olive groves and greenhouses down below.

Getting There & Away

Take a microbus (\$€10) from Baniyas for Zaube – these go by the castle. Services are infrequent so when it comes to returning you may want to catch a ride with some locals if you're in a hurry. Baniyas is reached by microbus from Tartus (\$€20, 30 minutes) or Lattakia (\$€25, 45 minutes).

LATTAKIA

☎ 041 / pop 354,000

Lively Lattakia is not a typical Syrian town. A busy port since Roman times, it is less inward-looking than the rest of the country. The odd sign in Greek, and many more in Russian, point to the town's openness to the sea and its traffic with outsiders, while the

اللاذقية

results of this foreign exchange can be seen in wide, tree-lined boulevards and vibrant cafés (as opposed to the more traditional Arabic coffeehouses).

Lattakia is one of the wealthiest and least conservative cities in the country, due to its many families with expatriate relatives working overseas, and the influx of money

that came its way when local boy Hafez al-Assad ruled the roost. As a result Lattakia has some excellent restaurants and almost as many chic bar-cafés as the capital. Its inhabitants have always been snappy dressers – here the headscarf gives way to tight jeans and low-cut tops.

A stretch of coast has also been earmarked for massive redevelopment, with Gulf money being invested to establish luxurious five-star resorts, shopping centres and marina developments.

Its comparative liberalism and wealth aside, Lattakia has no real attractions, however it is a great place to spend a couple of days and makes a comfortable base for visits to the ruins of Ugarit and Qala'at Salah ad-Din.

History

Lattakia's history dates back to at least 1000 BC, when it was a small Phoenician fishing village. Alexander the Great passed through in 333 BC, shortly after his renowned victory over the Persians at Issus, but Lattakia didn't become a settlement of importance until the arrival of the Seleucids, the dynasty founded by one of Alexander's generals in the 4th century BC. They gave the town its name, 'Laodicea', in honour of the mother of Seleucus I. During Roman times Mark Antony granted the town its autonomy, and in the 2nd century AD it briefly served as the capital of the Roman province of Syria.

A string of serious earthquakes during the 5th and 6th centuries were precursors of troubles to come. Lattakia was badly battered by the Crusader wars, changing hands several times between the armies of the Christians and the Muslims, and it was sacked and pillaged by both.

Lattakia stagnated under the subsequent rule of the Ottomans as other Levantine ports were preferred, and its harbour silted up. Rebellions by the local Alawites against the ruling administration gave the town little chance of regaining its former prosperity. Only when Hafez al-Assad came to power did the fortunes of the town change. There was plenty of local redevelopment, including the largely redundant 'Olympic' stadium and international airport. Equally bizarre was the decision to site the new port terminal on the city-centre seafront,

UP IN SMOKE

Unless your father packed a pipe, you may be unaware that Lattakia is known for its pipe tobacco. But it's not just any tobacco, it's 'smoked' tobacco. The 'Syrian Lattakia' blend, as it's known, is made by smoking the leaves over different woods (such as oak) and herbs before cutting. The technique was apparently discovered after a bumper crop one year in the 1880s, when surplus tobacco was stored in the rafters of farmhouses during winter. When wood was burnt for heating, it gave the tobacco a unique smoky flavour. For many connoisseurs of the leaf, it's the Holy Grail – akin to a hand-rolled Cuban cigar – but because of its strong flavour it's generally only used in small amounts, mixed with other tobaccos to make a blend. These days, the technique has greatly disappeared from Syria and most of the tobacco that's labelled 'Syrian Lattakia' is manufactured in Cyprus – much to the disgust of those with leather elbow patches...

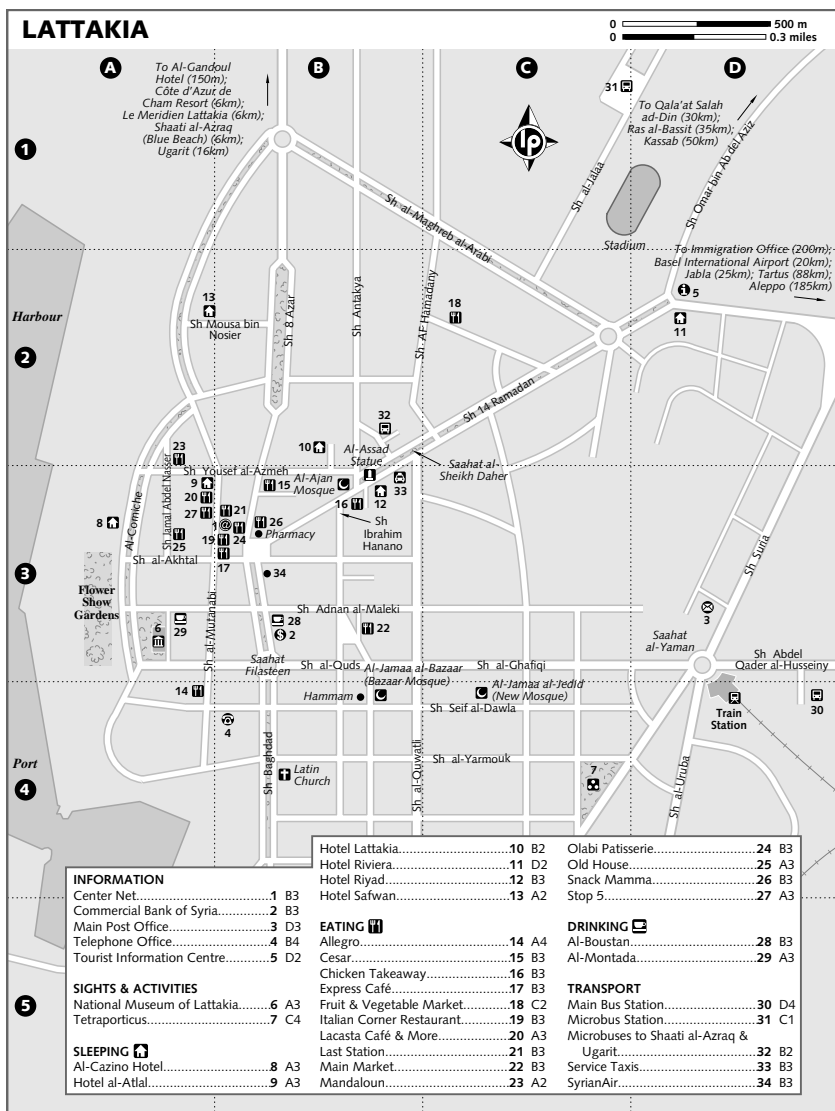
effectively placing an immense physical and visual concrete barrier between the town and the Mediterranean Sea, to which Lattakia has traditionally owed its character.

Orientation

The main north–south street is Sharia Baghdad, home to the main bank, shops and a smattering of cafés and coffeehouses. The other main street is the downmarket Sharia 14 Ramadan, which comes off the northern end of Sharia Baghdad and then runs northeast for 1.5km to the tourist information centre.

Partway along, 14 Ramadan widens out to accommodate a central strip of ornamental fountains and a statue of Al-Assad, a traffic-snarled area hazardous to pedestrians known as Saahat al-Sheikh Daher (Sheikh Daher Sq). Many of the cheap hotels and eateries are clustered around here.

The train and bus stations are almost 2km east of the centre. From either of these transport terminals it takes about 20 to 25 minutes to walk to Saahat al-Sheikh Daher; a taxi will cost £525.



Information

Center Net (☎ 465 310; Sharia al-Mutanabi; SE50 per 30min; ☎ 11am-11pm) Extremely well located among the cafés and restaurants of the 'American Quarter'. Muna, who runs the place, is super friendly and helpful.

Commercial Bank of Syria (Sharia Baghdad;

☎ 8.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) Has an ATM and may reluctantly change travellers cheques. There is no shortage of ATMs in town.

Immigration office (Saahat Jumhuriyya; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Some distance from the centre on the far side of a large traffic roundabout. You need six passport photos; after much shuffling between desks you will get your extension issued within an hour or so.

Main post office (☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu) Some distance from the centre, just north of the train station in a little alley off Sharia Suria.

Telephone office (Sharia Seif al-Dawla; ☎ 8am-10.30pm) Just west of Sharia Baghdad. You can also make cheap international phone calls from Center Net.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 416 926; Sharia 14 Ramadan; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu) Located in the foyer of a municipal building at the eastern end of town. The friendly staff speak English but other than a map there's little information.

Sights & Activities

Lattakia has precious little to show for its 3000 or so years of history. More or less the only existing monument is a right-angled **tetraporticus**, a grouping of four columns, which is all that's left of a Roman gateway that once marked the eastern end of the 2nd-century-AD main street. It's on Sharia Bur Said, a short walk southwest of the train station.

Neither is there much remaining to represent the city's medieval Islamic heritage. The oldest parts are off and around Sharia al-Quds; plenty of historic fragments can be found down the various side alleys. Just east of the Ugarit cinema, keep an eye out for a stone-vaulted passageway, down which are a couple of doorways and windows with some splendid carved stonework. The area just beyond here, around the old fruit and vegetable market, is worth exploring, although the squeamish might want to avoid the butchers' passageways.

The **National Museum of Lattakia** (Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser; adult/student SE150/10; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar, closed Tue), near the waterfront, is housed in what was once an old khan, or travellers' inn, and is worth a quick visit, if just to admire the handsome

building. It contains some inscribed tablets from Ugarit, beautiful jewellery, coins and figurines, ceramics and pottery, and a Crusader-era chain-mail suit and swords.

BEACHES

Six kilometres north of town, **Shaati al-Azraq** (Blue Beach) is Syria's premier coastal resort. While there are a few small stretches of sand in the area, access to the best stretches of beach is controlled by the Le Meridien and Cham hotels; each charges around SE400 per person for nonguests to use the beach and hotel swimming pool. Both hotels also hire out pedal boats, jet skis and sailboards. To get to Shaati al-Azraq take a waiting microbus (SE15) from behind the large white school building on Saahat al-Sheikh Daher.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hotel Lattakia (☎ 479 527; Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; dm/d SE150/250) Tucked away down a narrow alley north of Al-Ajan Mosque, the Lattakia can be tricky to locate; it's best to ask locals for directions. It has a variety of rooms, from dorms to doubles, with or without private bathroom.

Hotel al-Atlal (☎ 476 121; Sharia Yousef al-Azmeh; beds per person SE250) This simple, quiet, family-run establishment, in the heart of the action, is more like a European pension than a hotel. It has freshly laundered sheets, and a pleasant common area with satellite TV and a fridge stocked with soft drinks. Shower facilities are shared but clean.

Hotel Safwan (☎ 478 602; safwanhotel@go.com; Sharia Mousa bin Nosier; s/d/tr SE300/500/700; ☎) Just a little north of the centre, close to the seafont, the Safwan is a bit shabby albeit clean. Rooms come with TV and air-con or fan, and guests have access to a kitchen and fridge. Friendly manager Mohammed, a self-confessed Tintin fan, is helpful and speaks English.

Hotel Riyad (☎ 479 778; fax 476 315; Sharia 14 Ramadan; s/d US\$17/21; ☎) This shabby but clean two-star has a good location, right on the main square. Some rooms have air-con but some only have a fan for the same price. Front-facing rooms have balconies that look onto the action below.

Al-Gandoul Hotel (☎ 477 681; Al-Corniche; s/d/tr US\$20/26/32) The best option in this price

range, this place was undergoing renovation at the time of research. Despite the grotty elevator, the simply furnished rooms (with TV) were clean, although hopefully the renovations involve replacing the dirty, rust-ridden fridges.

MIDRANGE

Al-Cazino Hotel (☎ 461 140; www.alcazino.com; Al-Corniche; s/d/tr US\$50/60/70; ☎) This fine hotel, in an elegant old sandstone building dating to 1923, oozes atmosphere with its grand staircase and warren of halls. Unfortunately the modern, simple rooms don't carry through the character and style of the public spaces, but they're clean and spacious. The front terrace café is a lovely spot for a drink in the evening. Prices drop by US\$10 in the low season.

Hotel Riviera (☎ 211 806, 216 311; riviera@net.sy; Sharia 14 Ramadan; s/d US\$66/77, incl breakfast; ☎) Opposite the Tourist Information Centre, this smart hotel is one of the city's best. A modern three-star with traditional décor, its comfortable rooms have air-con, satellite TV and fridge. Staff are extremely professional and friendly. The only downside is the slightly out-of-the-action location. Major credit cards are accepted.

TOP END

Lattakia's two luxury hotels are 6km north of the centre at Shaati al-Azraq, which is inconvenient for hanging out in town. They're largely patronised by holidaying Syrians and foreigners on package tours.

Côte d'Azur de Cham Resort (☎ 428 700; www.chamhotels.com; Shaati al-Azraq; d with garden/sea view US\$140/180; ☎) The more attractive of Lattakia's two five-stars, this resort comes with a surprisingly sexy swathe of cream sand beach complete with curvy palm trees. The hotel is ornate, with lots of marble and brass, rooms are spacious and plush, and the facilities are excellent, including cafés and restaurants, ATM, internet café, liquor store etc. Out-of-season rates (October to April) can be significantly cheaper. Major credit cards are accepted.

Le Meridien Lattakia (☎ 428 736; www.lemeridien.com; Shaati al-Azraq; s/d US\$170/215; ☎) With its 70s-style décor, this hotel isn't really up to scratch as far as Le Meridien properties usually go. While you won't mind the retro décor in the lobby and bars

(it's almost groovy), the charm fades in the rooms – unless you go for the superior-floor rooms, which have new carpets, a bigger TV, minibar and big balcony. The swimming pool and beachside terraces are pleasant. Major credit cards are accepted.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Most of the restaurants and cafés are in and around Sharia al-Mutanabi, which is known as the 'American Quarter' because of all its Western-style eateries. There are a few restaurants along Sharia Baghdad and a couple of seafood places along Al-Corniche. Most don't accept credit cards.

Italian Corner Restaurant (☎ 477 207; cnr Sharia al-Mutanabi & Sharia al-Akhtal; meal per person SE300; ☎ 10am-midnight) This rustic trattoria, complete with checked tablecloths and waiters in red checked shirts, serves up tasty Italian pastas (SE130) along with crepes (SE110), burgers (SE100) and steaks (SE230). The big glass windows provide good people-watching opportunities and the place hums late at night.

Last Station (☎ 468 871; 20 Sharia al-Mutanabi; meal per person SE300; ☎ 11am-11pm) Popular with local families, this old-fashioned place does tasty food at very reasonable prices. Expect everything from Syrian mezze (SE50) to pizza (SE100). Alcohol is served.

Cesar (☎ 475 403; Sharia 8 Azar; meal per person SE300; ☎ 11am-late) Located in the narrow alley running along the south side of Al-Ajan Mosque, connecting with Sharia 8 Azar, Cesar does good mezze and grilled meats, along with a few Continental dishes such as escalopes and pastas.

Allegro (☎ 458 000; Sharia al-Mutanabi; meal per person SE350; ☎ 11am-midnight) Lattakia's hippest restaurant is in a sleek contemporary space, with lots of chocolate wood and concealed lighting, that wouldn't be out of place in Beirut. It's a great spot for lunch, when it buzzes with noisy groups of locals enjoying the delicious food – a mix of Asian, Mexican, Italian and French that's served up on big white plates. The speciality is the Chateaubriand (SE275). Alcohol is served.

Ourpick Old House (☎ 461 013; Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser; meal per person SE500; ☎ noon-late) This is one of Syria's most atmospheric restaurants. The interior of Old House has been decorated to look like the courtyard

of an old house, with Mamluk-style banding on the walls, intricately patterned tiled floors, and traditional textiles for curtains. Devoted locals of all ages, but particularly Lattakia's old-timers, come for the rich Syrian specialties – the fried *kibbeh* and the *sojouk* (spicy Armenian sausages) are some of the best we've ever had. Service is welcoming and accommodating, and alcohol is served.

Mandaloun (☎ 454 400; Sharia al-Merkan; meal per person £500; ☎ 11-11.30pm) Dress up for this elegant restaurant with stone walls and vaulted ceilings, where you'll be dining with Lattakia's affluent cigar-smoking power set. The French and Oriental cuisine is superb – try the tasty pink lentil soup or hearty traditional French onion soup (both £60), and the melt-in-your-mouth filet mignon (£350). We can even recommend the fish – and we don't say that often in Syria. There are excellent Lebanese wines on the menu and the service is superlative.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

Olabi Patisserie (☎ 094-657 765, 041 3005; Sharia Yousef Shahour, off Sharia Baghdad; ☎ 7am-midnight) Follow your nose to this old-fashioned café-cum-patisserie – you can smell the freshly roasted coffee (espresso, cappuccino etc) a block away. Olabi bakes the city's best cakes, sweets and croissants, and does delicious crepes. A coffee and a cake costs around £150. There's free wireless internet access and during summer they also serve on the terrace across the road.

Express Café (☎ 456 200; 22 Sharia al-Mutanabi; dishes £80-150; ☎ 9am-midnight) This gleaming diner-style cafeteria does excellent burgers (£55), crepes (£90) and pizza (£125). The menu is in English. Pull up a seat at a window table for some people-watching on a weekend night, when Lattakia's teens flirt with each other on the street corner outside.

Lacasta Café & More (☎ 475 744; Sharia al-Mutanabi; meal per person £250; ☎ noon-3am) Lattakia's multitasking locals sip excellent espresso coffee (£50) as they puff on nargileh (£100) and tuck into delicious cakes, crepes and desserts at this stylish café with white leather sofas and enormous glass windows. Sweets are prominent, but the friendly staff also serve up sandwiches and mezze, along with beer and alcoholic cocktails.

Stop 5 (☎ 477 919; 27 Sharia al-Mutanabi; ☎ noon-late) Looking like Mike Brady's den with its wood-panelled walls and chocolate vinyl seats, this casual eatery serves up great pizzas (£100), burgers (£100) and steaks (£180), along with local and imported beers (£50/90) and local and imported wine by the glass (£40/80).

Snack Mamma (☎ 416 929; Sharia 8 Azar; ☎ 11am-late) With its mirrored walls, wood panelling and hanging beads, this tiny Italian trattoria has an endearingly retro feel to it. Locals love the home-style spaghetti bolognese (£100), which flies out the door, and terrific pizzas (£125). Beer (£55) is served.

Cheap eats can be found around the Saahat al-Sheikh Daher area, where you'll find fast-food places specialising in felafel, kebabs and shwarma. There's a good spit-roisserie **chicken takeaway** (£150 for a whole chicken plus salad, hummus and bread) next door to the Hotel Riyad.

SELF-CATERING

There's a small **fruit and vegetable market** (off Sharia 14 Ramadan) just north of the big white high school on Sharia 14 Ramadan. The **main market** (Sharia al-Ghafiqi) is just east of the Ugarit cinema. For bread and other groceries, there are a few little places down Sharia Ibrahim Hanano, off Sharia 14 Ramadan.

Drinking

Al-Boustan (Sharia Baghdad) is a simple coffee shop where old men sip thick, Turkish-style coffee at the pavement tables, while **Al-Montada** (Sharia Adnan al-Maleki) is more of a men's club, where the old guys puff on nargileh as they play chess and cards. Both are open almost all the time.

Women might feel more comfortable at café-restaurants such as Stop 5, Lacasta Café & More and Last Station, where you can have a drink without eating. It's also acceptable at the more casual of the other restaurants to just have a light snack to accompany your drinks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Lattakia's Basel International Airport lies about 25km south of town, close to Jabla. Ordinarily, there are several flights a week to Damascus (£1000, 45 minutes), with flights increasing during summer, when

the airport gets busy with European charter flights. A taxi to the airport from Lattakia will cost about £350.

SyrianAir (☎ 476 863; 8 Sharia Baghdad) has an office in the town centre.

BUS

The **main bus station** (Sharia Abdel Qader al-Husseiny) is about 200m east of the train station. At least a dozen companies have their offices here, including Al-Ahliyah and Kadmous, and between them they offer frequent services to Damascus (£120, 4½ hours), Aleppo (£100, 3½ hours) and Tartus (£35, one hour). There are a few services going to Antakya (£250), and then on to Ankara and Istanbul (about £2000, 17 hours) in Turkey.

MICROBUS

Lattakia's sprawling, dusty **microbus station** (Sharia al-Jalaa) is about 1km north of the centre beside a sports stadium. From here a confusion of services depart frequently for Baniyas (£20, 45 minutes), Tartus (£40, one hour), Homs (£65, two hours), Al-Haffa (for Qala'at Salah ad-Din; £25, 45 minutes) and Kassab (for the Turkish border; £25, 1½ hours).

Microbuses for Ugarit (Ras Shamra; £15) and Shaati al-Azraq (Blue Beach; £15) depart from an alley at the side of the big white school on Saahat al-Sheikh Daher.

TRAIN

The station is 1.5km east of the town centre on Saahat al-Yaman. There are four trains a day between Lattakia and Aleppo (1st class express/1st class/2nd class £120/80/50, 2½ or 3½ hours), and this is the rare occasion when we recommend taking the train over the bus. The trains are new, refreshments are served and even movies are offered. Not that you'll want to watch them – the scenery is beautiful. The track winds its way through the mountains, rattling through tunnels and across bridges high over valleys below. The trains go via Homs and Hama.

SERVICE TAXI

Service taxis used to go to Beirut and Tripoli in Lebanon from Sharia 14 Ramadan, outside the Hotel Kaoukab as-Sharq; however, these services were suspended after the border

TO TURKEY ON THE CHEAP

The cheapest way to get to Turkey starts at the microbus station in Lattakia. Take a service for Kassab (around £25). You actually want to be dropped off 2km before the mountain village, where the road passes within 50m of the border – ask the driver for 'Turkiyya'. Once across the border you'll have to haggle with any taxi driver you find (pay no more than a few dollars) or try to hitch. You want to be taken on to Yayladagvi, from where you can pick up a *dolmus* (minibus) for Antakya and onward connections. A hassle-free but more expensive option is to go with **Al-Hassan** (☎ 352 021), which runs a daily minibuss service to Antakya (£500), departing at 7.30am.

was closed during the troubles in 2007. Until the border reopens, it's best to head to Damascus and travel from there. In the event that the border reopens, service taxis generally depart when full and the one-way fare to Beirut should be around US\$25 per person, although the fare has been known to be higher during tensions.

AROUND LATTAKIA

It's an easy half-day trip to the fascinating ruins of Ugarit, which are worth a couple of hours of wandering, and the splendid Qala'at Salah ad-Din, also worthy of a few hours' exploration. You can do both in a full day. If you have to choose, we'd recommend Qala'at Salah ad-Din, as much for its beautiful location as for the extraordinary fortifications.

The scenery around this fertile region is lovely, with fruit orchards and high cypress hedges, and in season you'll encounter fruit stalls along the road selling apples and oranges.

Ugarit (Ras Shamra)

رأس شمرة
The birthplace of one of the world's earliest alphabets and once the most important city on the Mediterranean coast, Ugarit was also the world's first international port. Evidence suggests that a settlement on this site was trading with Cyprus and Mesopotamia as far back as the 3rd millennium BC. Ugarit was at its peak around 2000 to 1800 BC, when it enjoyed a healthy trade

THE GOLDEN AGE OF UGARIT

Until a worker ploughing a farm near the coast adjacent to Lattakia struck an ancient tomb, the site of Ugarit was unknown. This exciting and important discovery in 1928 led to the excavation of the site the next year by a French team led by Claude FA Schaeffer. What he found was astonishing.

The oldest finds at Ugarit date back to 6000 BC. Findings that date from around 1450 BC to 1200 BC reveal a sophisticated and cosmopolitan metropolis with palaces, temples and libraries with clay tablets bearing inscriptions. These clay tablets, representing a Semitic language – and one of the first alphabets in the world – became a celebrated finding. The site also revealed vast Mycenaean, Cypriot, Egyptian and Mesopotamian influences in the artefacts, a result of trade both by sea and by land.

providing the Egyptian pharaohs with timber and exporting the city's trademark bronze-work to the Minoans of Crete. With the immense wealth accrued from trade, the city's royal palace was developed into one of the most imposing and famous edifices in western Asia. Ugarit's wealth was matched by its learning and innovation. For instance, the palace had a piped water system and drainage, as did the houses of the well-to-do.

The most significant achievement, however, was the development of the Ugaritic alphabet. Tablets discovered here are inscribed with what is thought to be one of the world's earliest alphabets. Prior to the one developed at Ugarit the two known systems of writing were hieroglyphics (developed by the Egyptians) and cuneiform (from Mesopotamia), both of which involved hundreds of pictograms that represented complete words or syllables. Ugaritic is a greatly simplified system of 30 symbols, each of which represents one sound. Some of the tablets discovered list these 30 letters in alphabetical order, providing a key for archaeologists to decipher the unearthed texts. These include stock accounts, commercial records, diplomatic correspondence and descriptions of gods and religion. Taken together the texts are a fantastically important source of information on early life in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean region.

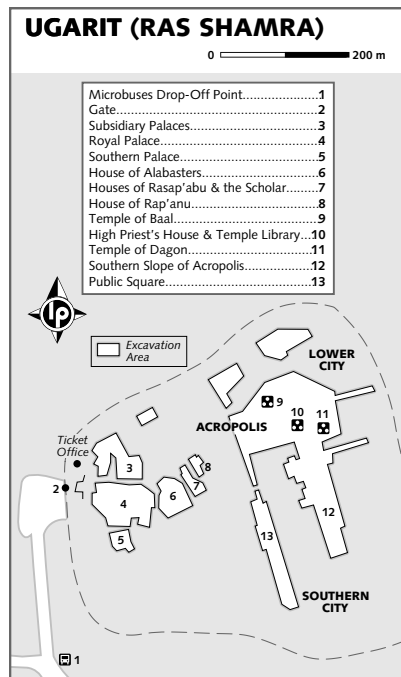
Ugarit's fall was swift and occurred around 1200 BC at the hands of the Philistines. The city never recovered; the invasions heralded the beginning of the Iron Age, and Ugarit was forever left behind.

SIGHTS

Ugarit (adult/student SE150/15; ☎ 9am–6pm Apr–Sep, to 4pm Oct–Mar) was built in stone and, although

the buildings are long gone, the foundations and the lower courses of some walls are visible. Significant artefacts turned up by the digs (since the 1920s) have been removed to museums in Lattakia, Aleppo and Damascus, as well as to the Louvre in Paris. In short, what you'll see here goes only a little way to giving the visitor an understanding of Ugarit's significance.

On the right of the track up to the ruins is the original city entrance, today looking more like a large drainage outlet. Once



inside, you can gain an impression of the layout of the place from the low hill in the northeastern quarter of the site that once served as Ugarit's **acropolis**. What you see stretched out below is a massive jumble of blocks with poorly defined streets and buildings. Among the ruins are vaulted tombs, wells and water channels.

Two temples dominated the acropolis: one was dedicated to the storm god, Baal, the supreme deity for the Canaanites, Phoenicians and Aramaeans; the other to Dagon, the father of Baal and the god associated with crop fertility. What little remains of the **Temple of Baal** (9) is found to the northwest of the acropolis, while the **Temple of Dagon** (11), of which only some of the foundations can be made out, is to the east.

Ugarit's **royal palace** (4) and related buildings were in the west of the city, a short way south of the tourist entrance. Presenting itself now as something of a labyrinth, the palace's main entrance is in the north-western corner, marked by the bases of two pillars. Inside, the rooms are loosely organised around a series of courtyards. It was in storerooms of the palace that a good many of the precious Ugaritic archives were unearthed. The area between the palace and the acropolis was given over largely to private housing.

The Mediterranean Sea is just visible through the trees to the west. It has receded 100m or so since Ugarit's heyday. Don't try to walk directly through to the water as this is a military area. If you follow the road back a bit, you'll find some quiet stretches of water and beach.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Lattakia, local minibuses make the 6km trip to Ugarit (ask for Ras Shamra) every hour or so from a back alley behind Saahat al-Sheikh Daher. Ask the driver where to get off for '*al-athaar*' (the ruins). Coming back, you can flag down any passing microbus, or it's easy enough to hitch.

Qala'at Salah ad-Din قلعة صلاح الدين Although it is much less celebrated than Qala'at al-Hosn, TE Lawrence was moved to write of Qala'at Salah ad-Din, 'It was I think the most sensational thing in castle building I have seen'.

To Lawrence, the castle was Saône (Sayhun in Arabic), which is the name that the Crusaders knew it by, after Robert of Saône, one of the original Crusader builders. The name Qala'at Salah ad-Din was only officially adopted in 1957.

Qala'at Salah ad-Din is a sensational place fundamentally because of its setting – the castle is perched on top of a heavily wooded ridge with near-precipitous sides dropping away to surrounding ravines.

Approaching from the nearby village of Al-Haffa, you'll first see the castle from the top of the ridge to the north. The road then slithers down in a tight coil of switchbacks, crossing a stream at the bottom before winding its way back upwards. Nearing the top, the road turns sharply to enter a flat-bottomed, narrow canyon with sheer vertical sides; the castle sits up on the right, its heavy walls smoothly continuing the line of the rock face to form one towering cliff of stone. Incredibly, the canyon is man-made – the Crusaders laboriously hacked a huge volume of stone out of the hillside to separate the castle from the main spine of the ridge. In the middle of the canyon, they left a solitary freestanding needle of stone 28m high, resembling a Pharaonic obelisk, which provided support for a drawbridge.

The fortifications were begun by the Byzantines in the latter part of the 10th century. The site was chosen for its proximity to, and control of, the main route between Lattakia and Aleppo, and for its command of the coastal hinterland plains. The Crusaders took over in the early 12th century and the construction of the castle as you see it today was carried out some time before 1188, the year in which the Crusaders' building efforts were shown to be in vain. After a siege of only two days the armies of Saladin breached the walls and the Western knights were squeezed out of yet another of their strongholds.

Unlike many other strategic sites, control of which seesawed between the Crusaders and the Muslims, this one stayed in the hands of the Islamic armies. As its importance declined, the castle was abandoned. A small village occupied the lower courts at some point, but its remoteness eventually led to its desertion too.

SIGHTS

The **castle** (adult/student £300/15; ☞ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar, closed Tue) is approached up a flight of concrete steps on the south side, which climb towards a **gate tower** (7) where entry tickets are purchased. After passing through the tower into the castle's interior, a right turn leads to the inner courtyard area of the upper castle. The two **towers** (8 and 9) in the southern wall are both relatively intact, and it's possible to climb the internal staircase in each up to the 1st floor and roof for fine views of the surrounding countryside.

To the left of the furthest of the towers, a doorway leads to a flight of steps descending into the square sunken space of a former **water cistern** (10); a doorway from the cistern links to an adjacent large, low, pillared hall that served as **stables** (11). Incredibly, the damp space still smells of horses. From the stables it's possible to access two of the three small **semicircular towers** (15) of the eastern wall; these were originally built by the Byzantines and later strengthened by the Crusaders.

North of the stables is the largest and most heavily fortified of the castle's towers, the **keep** (12), or donjon, with 5m-thick walls. It was always assumed that any attack would come from along the ridge to the east. In fact, when the attack came, Saladin split his forces: half occupied the defences here as expected, but a second force bombarded the northern walls with catapults from the hilltop across the valley.

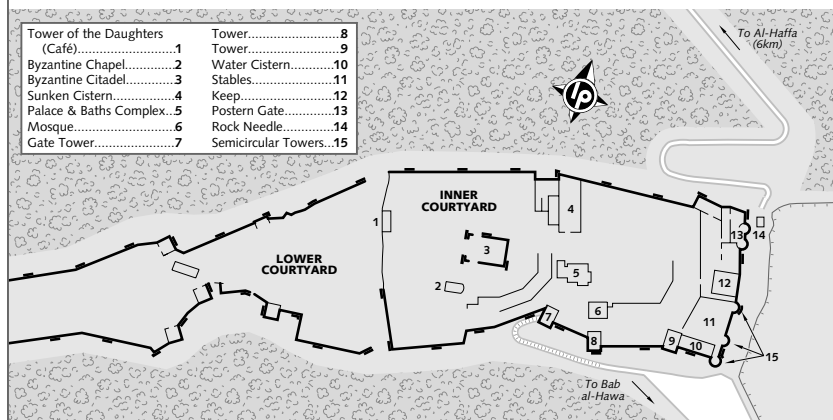
The missiles breached the walls of the lower courtyard and the Crusaders, who were undermanned, were unable to stop the Muslims streaming in. An intact staircase gives access to the roof of the keep, and vertigo-inducing views down into the defile.

The ruins to the north of the keep include the **postern gate** (13), from where the drawbridge was lowered onto the **rock needle** (14). A metal gantry protrudes from the unsealed gateway so the nerveless can step out and peer directly down into the defile.

The most prominent structure in this part of the castle is the **palace and baths complex** (5), easily identifiable by its high, typically Islamic entrance, decorated with stone stalactites and carved geometric patterning. This dates back to the Ayyubid period (1169–1260). Inside is a reception hall with *iwans* (vaulted halls), and beyond that the main room of the baths with a star-patterned floor around a central fountain.

From the palace a path leads north to a modest doorway that, if you step through, gives way to the dizzying spectacle of a cathedral-sized **sunken cistern** (4), which is still partially filled with water. Follow the same path west, passing the remains of the original **Byzantine citadel** (3) up to the right, to the **Tower of the Daughters** (1), which today serves as a small café. From here you can look down on the lower courtyard of the western castle, which is completely ruined and overgrown, and inaccessible. Complete the circuit by returning to the gate tower.

QALA'AT SALAH AD-DIN



ASSAD'S RESTING PLACE Terry Carter

The driver we hired for our visit to the mausoleum of the late president Hafez al-Assad and his son became more open as we approached Qardaha, the birthplace of the dynasty: 'Look at how much money they've spent here, and while the people are poor! He shook his head at each painting and reference to the former president and his 'martyred' son. Even the modern streetlights and white-painted fences, which we had not seen anywhere else, made him upset. 'In Islam, a good Muslim is buried simply, without fanfare,' he continued. 'Look at this waste!'

When we arrived at the mausoleum, it was apparent that some important people were arriving at the same time to show their respects. The gun-toting guards were at first hesitant to let us in, but we *salaam alaykum*-ed every one of them and every black-suit-wearing official we came across. Our driver, who had been criticising Assad just minutes ago, quickly found renewed respect for the former leader. He went in and prayed with the visitors, paying his respects with new-found devotion to the divisive leader.

Hafez al-Assad might not be able to reach out from the grave, but his legacy is a culture of fear that isn't disappearing fast.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Lattakia, take a microbus to the village of Al-Haffa (الحفة; SE20, 45 minutes); they depart from the far right-hand side (as you come from town) of the vast microbus lot. From Al-Haffa the castle is a gruelling 6km walk uphill and downhill – keep on heading east out of the village then follow the signs. The best bet is to haggle with a taxi driver at Al-Haffa; there are usually several cabs loitering where the minibuses stop. The local price is £20 per person – a good test of your negotiating skills. The microbus drivers at the microbus station in Lattakia will drive you to the castle and back for SE200, which isn't a bad deal for a group of four.

Qardaha

القرادحة

Known to all Syrians as the birthplace of Hafez al-Assad, Syria's first president, Qardaha is now equally famed as the former president's last place of rest. Following his death in June 2000, his body was interred in this small hilltop town in a purpose-built **mausoleum** also containing the grave of his eldest son, Basil, 'the martyr' whose car accident saw him predecease his father by six years.

Indications of the hallowed nature of Qardaha are apparent from the approach along an expansive and well-maintained four-lane highway that runs from the coast up to the village. Soon after entering the town, you'll see the mausoleum off to the left – look for a red-tiled pagoda-like roof on a large villa.

The domed mausoleum is an Islamic star in plan, but otherwise the décor is restrained, with intricate floral decoration and verses from the Quran. Internally, it's a vast space, heavy with incense, but empty apart from the two graves. The one belonging to Hafez, a low benchlike cenotaph lying in a sunken section of floor, is in the centre. Basil occupies a similar grave off to one side, covered in a green cloth. It's moving in its simplicity.

There's nothing else to see in town. To return to Lattakia, walk east along the main road; after 400m the way widens and you'll come to a large statue of guess who with four dopey lions at his feet. Microbuses back to the coast depart from diagonally opposite the statue.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Services for Qardaha (£15, 35 minutes) depart from Lattakia's vast microbus station.

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