

Orontes Valley

وادي العاصي



Bordered by the coastal strip to the west and the scorched desert to the east, the Orontes Valley provides a distinctively different experience from Aleppo to the north and Damascus to the south. While Syrians try to break land-speed records between the aforementioned cities, there are enough attractions in the region to make this more than just a blur outside a bus window.

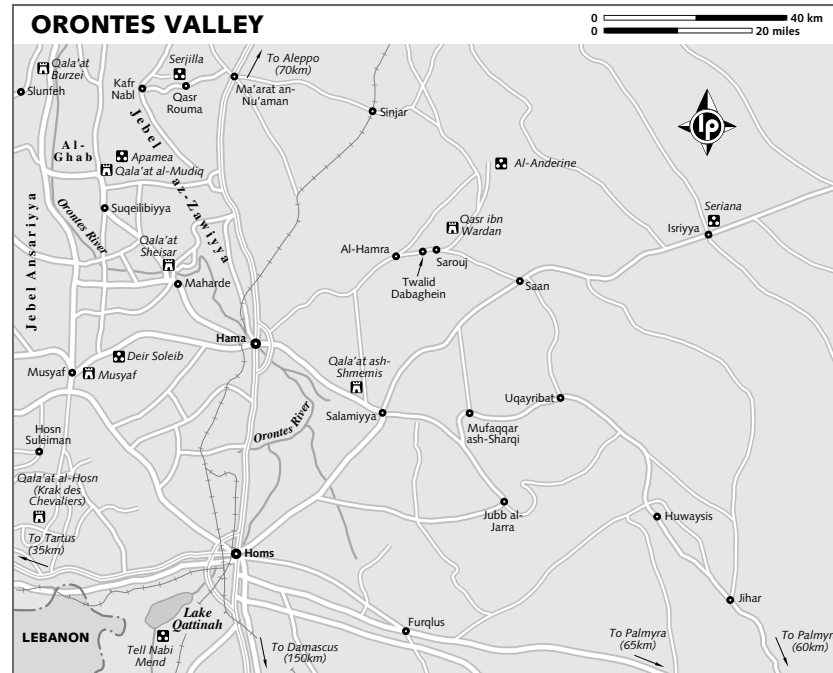
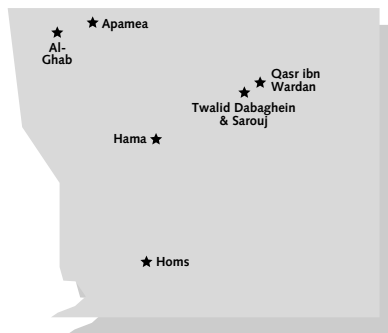
Homs, Syria's third-largest city, and Hama, its fourth, are attractive stops on the journey north. Homs has a lovely restored souq, a relaxed Christian quarter and friendly locals. Hama is famed for its large *norias* (water wheels) and riverside parks. It's most active in summer, when the wheels groan with the flow of the Orontes River, known as Nahr al-Aasi (Rebel River) due to the fact that it flows from south to north – the opposite of most rivers in the region.

The striking Roman ruins of Apamea are well worth visiting for the colonnaded grace of the *cardo maximus*, both longer and wider than Palmyra's. Careful restoration over the last few decades has turned this once-shapeless site into an evocative one. Far less complex in structure are the intriguing beehive houses found at Sarouj and Twalid Dabaghein, which are still used as dwellings. These conical mud-brick structures are an arresting sight.

While the castle of Musyaf is suitably imposing, its connection with one of Islam's most fascinating sects, the Assassins, is the highlight. Members of this radical, mystical group were known for their ability to infiltrate their enemy and kill its leader, giving rise to the English word 'assassin'.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore **Apamea** (p167), Syria's second-most impressive archaeological site after Palmyra and definitely one for fans of colonnades
- Shop for gold, spices and sheesha pipes and watch artisans at work in the restored souq of **Homs** (p156)
- Adjust your ears to the torturous sounds of the groaning old *norias* of **Hama** (p162)
- Enjoy the glorious views over **Al-Ghab** (p166), Syria's most fertile farming valley, from Jebel Ansariyya
- Investigate the intriguing **beehive houses** (p171), still used as dwellings, in Twalid Dabaghein and Sarouj
- Climb the stairs of the Byzantine church at **Qasr ibn Wardan** (p169) to see a Martian landscape



HOMS

☎ 031 / pop 823,000

With a history stretching back to the 1st millennium BC, Homs, Syria's third-largest city, at one time gave birth to a dynasty of Roman emperors, and under the Byzantines was an important centre of Christianity. These days, its Christian neighbourhood is one of Syria's most welcoming and relaxed, and Homs' citizens are some of the country's friendliest. That, combined with the city's myriad leafy parks and gardens, sprawling al fresco coffee shops, outdoor corn-on-the-cob stands and restored souq where artisans still work, make Homs a wonderful place to kick back for a couple of days.

History

Digs at the tell (artificial mound) to the south of the centre of the modern city indicate there were settlements in preclassical times. However, Homs only gained importance during the Roman era. Formerly known as Emesa, the town benefited from close ties with Palmyra, 125km to the east.

Its regional importance was further enhanced around AD 187, when Julia Domna,

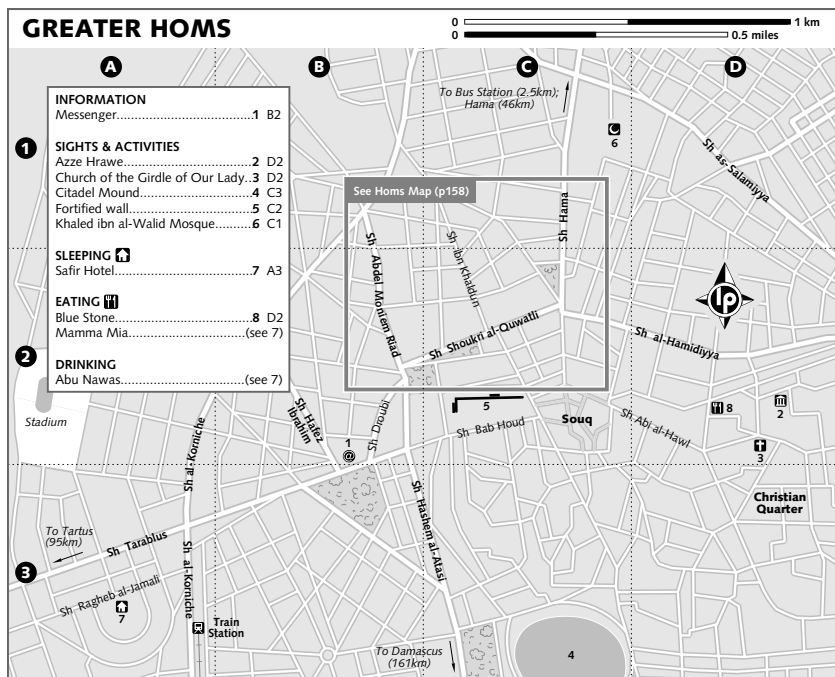
حصص

daughter of an Emesan high priest, married a Roman garrison commander, Septimius Severus, who six years later would become emperor of Rome. They founded a Syro-Roman dynasty that spanned four emperors (reigning from 211 to 235). Unfortunately it was a dynasty most noted for its rapid decline into depravity. Most notorious of all was Elagabalus, whose four-year reign of chaos was abruptly terminated when he was assassinated by his own Praetorian guards, seeking to restore some order to the empire.

Under the Byzantines, Homs became an important centre of Christianity, and it still has a very large Christian population. After falling to a Muslim army led by the general Khaled ibn al-Walid (revered as the warrior who brought Islam to Syria) in 636, Homs became an equally fervent centre of Islam.

Orientation

Central Homs lies either side of the main east-west axis of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli, a short but wide strip of road punctuated at either end by a large roundabout; the one at the western end is distinguished by



a clock tower. Cheap accommodation and eats are found in the side streets south of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli. The old city and souq lie southeast. The main bus station is around 2.5km northeast of town.

Information

Commercial Bank of Syria (Map p158; ☏ 8am-12.30pm Sat-Thu) There's no shortage of ATMs in Homs.

Foreign-exchange booth (Map p158; ☏ 8am-7pm) Grudgingly cashes travellers cheques; shuts for a few hours in the early afternoon for lunch.

Immigration office (Map p158; Sharia ibn Khaldun; ☏ 8.30am-2pm Sat-Thu) For visa renewals; it's on the 3rd floor of an administration building just north of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli. On the ground floor are photo studios that do passport photos.

Messenger (Map p156; ☎ 221 2336; Sharia Tarablus; per hr \$€50; ☏ 24hr) This excellent internet café has plenty of terminals and offers 50% off the rate after midnight.

Post office (Map p158; Sharia Abdel Moniem Riad; ☏ 6am-5.30pm Sat-Thu) About 200m north of the clock-tower roundabout.

Telephone office (Map p158; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☏ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to 1pm Fri) Just east of the

clock-tower roundabout; there are several card phones inside and cards are available from the counter.

Sights

OLD CITY & SOUQ المدينة القديمة والسوق
Little remains of the old city of Homs. Its walls and gates were largely demolished in the Ottoman era, although there is a short section of **fortified wall** (Map p156) with a circular corner tower just south of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli. Half a kilometre to the south a large earthen mound marks the site where a **citadel** (Map p156) once stood.

A little way south of the roundabout at the eastern end of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli and tucked down a laneway is the unassuming 20th-century façade of the **An-Nuri Mosque** (Jamaa an-Nuri, also known as Jamaa al-Kebir; Map p158), which is actually much older than first appearances might suggest. Just north of the prayer hall, the mosque courtyard contains a curious long, low platform, with an ancient capital embedded in its western end.

A few steps from the mosque is Homs' restored old **souq** (Map p156), which buzzes

in the evenings when the whole city seemingly comes out to shop. With its grey stones, vaulted ceilings and elegant white lamp posts, it's one of Syria's most attractive souqs. The artisans, carpenters, cobblers, metalworkers and knife-sharpeners sitting cross-legged on the floors of their workshops make it all the more fascinating, and it's an easy place to while away a couple of hours. Great buys include gold, sheesha pipes, spices and clothes.

CHRISTIAN QUARTER

From the souq, head east along Sharia Abi al-Hawl to explore the old Christian Quarter (Map p156). Along this street numerous expanses of black-and-white-banded stonework mark out buildings from the Mamluk era, all still in use as shops and dwellings. Encouragingly, there are plenty of signs of renovation and reconstruction.

Continue due east, straight over the crossway – this leads through a grey stone wall to the **Church of the Girdle of Our Lady** (Kinnesat al-Zunnar; Map p156; Sharia Qasr ash-Sheikh). In 1953 the patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius Aphraim, declared a delicate strip of woven wool and silk, found in the church six months earlier, to be a girdle worn by the Virgin Mary. The story is that it had survived intact since the ascension of Mary into heaven, preserved in one container or another in a church on this spot. The church is an attractive little grey-stone building with a red pantile roof, and is still an active centre for Syrian Orthodox worship.

From the church follow the road that heads off to the north, taking the first right for the **Azze Hrawe** (Map p156; Sharia Omar al-Mokhtar; ☏ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu), a Mamluk-era residence of impressive size. It was being restored at the time of research and should soon open to the public as a National Folklore Museum. There's a beautiful big courtyard with a fountain and a *liwan* (summer room) featuring exquisite carved-wood decoration. Don't hesitate to knock on the door if it's closed; nobody minds you snooping around.

MUSEUM

In the big Department of Antiquities building on the main street, Homs' **museum** (Map p158; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; adult/student \$€150/10; ☏ 8am-4pm Apr-Oct, to 3pm Nov-Mar, closed Fri) con-

tains a rather modest collection of artefacts, from prehistoric to early Islamic, unearthed in the region. Labelling is in Arabic only.

KHALED IBN AL-WALID MOSQUE

جامع خالد ابن الوليد

Built as recently as the first decade of the 20th century, Homs' best-known monument, Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque (Map p156), is an attractive example of a Turkish-style mosque. The black-and-white Mamluk-style stone banding in the courtyard is particularly striking. Inside the prayer hall, over in one corner, is the domed mausoleum of Khaled ibn al-Walid, the military strategist and hero who conquered Syria for Islam in AD 636 (see Khaled ibn al-Walid, below).

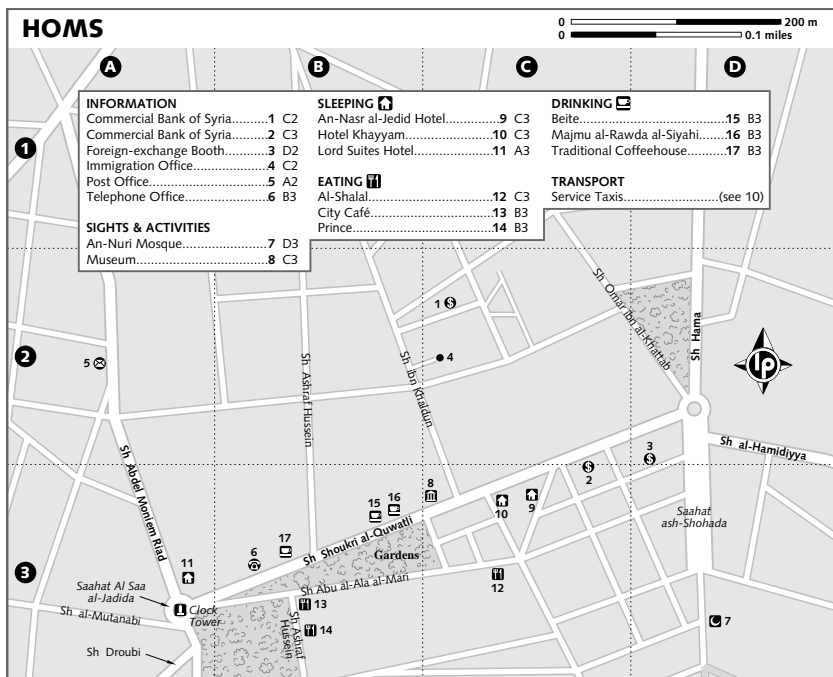
You can enter the mosque if dressed modestly. Women have to borrow a *yishmak* (as they call the *abeyya*, or woman's cloak, here), cover their hair and also must enter through the small side door on the right to see the marble tomb. Do not enter during prayer.

The mosque is in a small park off Sharia Hama, 500m north of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli.

KHALED IBN AL-WALID

One of the great generals of Islam, this Homs hero (glorified at the mosque that bears his name) initially fought against the Prophet Mohammed before converting to Islam between 627 and 629 and playing a major role in its expansion. He joined forces with the Prophet for the invasion of Mecca in 629 and went on to greater victories after the death of Mohammed in 632. Khaled was the key leader in taking Syria for Islam in 633-634; in 635 Damascus surrendered. At the Battle of Yarmuk in 636 a last-ditch counterattack by Emperor Heraclius' army resulted in it being routed; 50,000 Byzantine troops were slaughtered.

Khaled ibn al-Walid's military achievements are legendary – he won more than 100 battles without loss while usually outnumbered – and his tactics, including the use of the pincer movement to surround enemy troops, have been studied by military planners throughout history. To his disappointment he died in his own bed in Homs instead of in a fierce battlefield scrap, in 642.



Sleeping

There are several budget hotels on and around Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli but they're a grim bunch; it's better to upgrade to Lords or Safir.

An-Nasr al-Jedid Hotel (Map p158; ☎ 227 423; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; s/d/tr/q \$E205/375/440/560) In a beautiful hundred-year-old building with high ceilings, this place has enormous rooms with balconies, decorative windows, and a big common area with a massive picture window looking onto the main-street action below. With a little renovation it could become Homs' backpacker favourite. For now, it's a passable budget place with clean sheets and hot water (showers \$E50), although it's a little grubby and the showers are a bit too close to the squat toilets for our liking. Still, it's Homs' best budget hotel.

Hotel Khayyam (Map p158; off Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; s/d/tr/q \$E225/450/625/800) If you can't get into An-Nasr al-Jedid, try this place on the side street next door as a last resort. Communal toilets are of the squat variety, and showers cost \$E35.

Lord Suites Hotel (Map p158; ☎ 247 4008; www.lordsuiteshotel.com; mh@mail.sy; Saahat Al Saa al-Jadida; s/d/tr US\$50/70/100; 🚿) Apart from the science experiments in the soap dispensers, this is a spotlessly clean, modern place and an excellent midrange choice. The rooms, which are actually one-, two- and three-bedroom suites, are enormous, with a separate living area, making them an excellent choice for families and friends who want to bunk down together. There's a big buffet breakfast (included), and rooms come with fridge and satellite TV. Ask about discounts in winter.

Safir Hotel (Map p156; ☎ 211 2400; www.safirhotels.com; Sharia Ragheb al-Jamali; s/d/f US\$136/152/190; 🚿 📺) This excellent five-star has plush, comfortable, well-equipped rooms, a massive swimming pool and tennis courts, a handful of good restaurants, cafés and bars, and a bookshop with a small selection of titles on Syria and the Middle East. It's popular with tour groups so book ahead. Credit cards are accepted. It's 1km southwest of the centre or a brief \$E25 taxi ride.

Eating

Blue Stone (Map p156; ☎ 245 9999; cnr Sharias al-Jibawi & Qasr ash-Sheikh; meal per person \$E300; ☎ 9am-late) In a big grey stone building with huge picture windows looking out onto the street, this is the most happening bar-café-restaurant in the Christian Quarter. It positively hums in the evenings with the chatter of flirty young couples gazing into each other's eyes, same-sex groups of friends comparing rings (girls) and ring tones (boys), and families tucking into pizzas, pastas and big bowls of salad. While there's a full bar, sheesha is the intoxicant of choice.

Mamma Mia (Map p156; ☎ 211 2400; Safir Hotel, Sharia Ragheb al-Jamali; meal per person \$E350; ☎ noon-midnight) This is one of Safir Hotel's two restaurants. In a cheery trattoria, it dishes up generous servings of hearty Italian to a predominantly local crowd. The pizzas (from \$E100) and pastas (\$E250 to \$E450) are both excellent.

Prince (Map p158; Sharia Ashraf Hussein; chicken & chips \$E150; ☎ 9am-midnight) is a basic snack joint serving up bigger-than-usual shwarmas, grilled chicken and other street-food standards, as well as fresh fruit juices. Next door, **City Cafe** (Map p158; ☎ 239 755; Sharia Ashraf Hussein; ☎ 24hr) serves up similar fare. Around the corner there are a few more cheap takeaway places doing kebabs, hot chickens, lafel, hummus and salad, the best of which is **Al-Shalal** (Map p158; Sharia Abu al-Ala al-Mari; ☎ 24hr), where locals line up for succulent shwarmas and juices.

Drinking

Majmu al-Rawda al-Siyahi (Map p158; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☎ 10am-late) This big, shady, garden café (whose name means something along the lines of "Tourist Garden Association") is on the north side of the main street, close to the clock tower. Having a coffee here is a must just to take in the vibe, especially during summer evenings when the place is packed with locals.

Beite (Map p158; ☎ 234 032; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☎ 9am-late) Next door to Majmu al-Rawda al-Siyahi, this is a chic, new, two-storey café. The name translates to 'my home'; you have to press the buzzer beside the massive wooden door to enter. Its covered rooftop terrace is where Homs' affluent set meet.

Traditional coffeeshouse (Map p158; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☎ 8am-late) A little down the road from

the cafés above, and in complete contrast, is this coffeeshouse. It's in a big, old, atmospheric stone building and is largely frequented by backpackum-playing old men.

Abu Nawas (Map p156; ☎ 211 2400; Safir Hotel, Sharia Ragheb al-Jamali; ☎ 9am-late) If you're heading to Mamma Mia at the Safir Hotel, you can also get a drink in this bar, which is 1970s retro and fairly low-key.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There are two bus stations: the new 'hop-hop' minibus station, about 8km south of the city centre on the Damascus road; and the main 'luxury' bus station (Karajat Pullman), which is about 2.5km northeast of the city on the Hama road. To get between town and the main bus station costs around \$E30; between town and the microbus station costs up to \$E50.

At the main bus station you'll find all the usual private companies, including Al-Ahliah and Kadmos. From here there are frequent departures to Damascus (\$E80, two hours), Aleppo (\$E90, 3 hours) and Tartus (\$E45, one hour). There are buses to Hama from here but it's more convenient to catch a minibus.

MINIBUS

Bright, new minibuses flit in and out of the new 'hop-hop' bus station, most of them going to Hama (\$E25, 45 minutes). They depart as soon as they're full and you can generally turn up at any time, climb straight in, and expect to be away in less than 10 minutes.

TRAIN

The **train station** (Map p156; Sharia al-Korniche) is a 20-minute walk from the centre, so it's best to take a taxi (\$E30) if you have heavy luggage and it's hot. There are around four departures each day on sleek new trains, heading south to Damascus (1st/2nd class \$E120/60) and north to Aleppo (\$E120/60).

Getting Around

To get into town from the main bus station costs around \$E30; from the microbus station around \$E50.

Expect to pay no more than \$E25 to travel within the city.

HAMA

☎ 033 / pop 495,000

Hama is one of Syria's most attractive towns, with the Orontes River flowing through the city centre, its banks lined with trees and gardens and the ancient wooden *norias* (water wheels) groaning. While there isn't an awful lot to see, the peaceful atmosphere and tiny but charming old town make it a pleasant enough place to spend a couple of days. It's also a good base for excursions to some of the worthwhile sites further north up the Orontes Valley or further afield, such as Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers; p133) or the Dead Cities (p198).

History

Excavations on the city's central tell have revealed that the locale was settled as long ago as the Neolithic Age. There are historical references to an Aramaean kingdom of Hamah (or Hamath), which traded with Israel during the reigns of biblical David and Solomon (1000–922 BC). Occupied later by the Assyrians, Hama joined Damascus in a revolt against their foreign conquerors in 853 BC, defeating the troops of Shalmaneser. Under Sargon II the Assyrians wreaked their revenge, and in 720 BC the city was razed and its citizens deported. By the time of the Seleucids, the Greek dynasty established by one of Alexander's

generals, the town had been renewed and rechristened Epiphania after the ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r 175–164 BC). It remained an important Roman and Byzantine centre until its capture by the Arabs in AD 637.

The town prospered under the Ayyubids, the dynasty founded by Saladin, but was often fought over by rival dynasties in Damascus and Aleppo, which it lay between.

The most recent chapter in Hama's history has been one of the country's saddest. It was here in 1982 that the repressive nature of Hafez al-Assad's regime was most brutally demonstrated. The details of what happened that bloody February are hazy at best, but it appears that about 8000 government troops were moved in to quash a rebellion by armed members of the then-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Fighting lasted three weeks and the level of destruction was immense. Only those who knew the city before this calamity can fully measure the damage. As recently as 1955, travel writer Robin Fedden wrote in his book, *Syria: An Historical Appreciation*, that Hama was 'extraordinarily unspoilt with houses that overhung the water and an extensive old town in which modern buildings barely intrude'; this is no longer the case. The heart of the old town was completely razed.

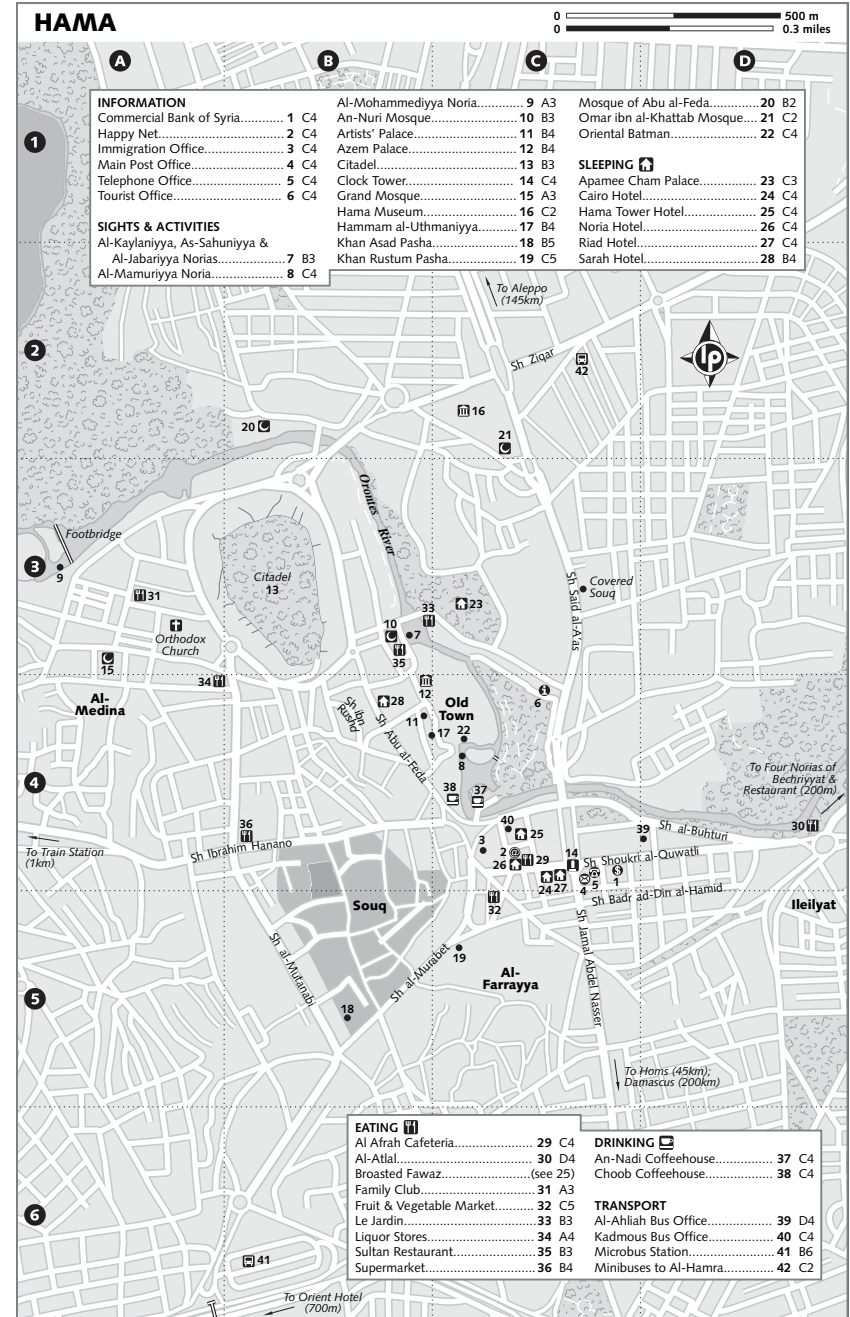
MASSACRE IN HAMA

The massacre in Hama in 1982 is one of the darkest events of modern Syrian history. The story goes back to the 1930s, when Syrian students joined the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which called for a return to the Quran and what they considered to be the true word of Mohammed. In Syria they were opposed to the ruling Ba'ath party, which after 1970 was dominated by the Assad dynasty, whose Alawite religion the Muslim Brotherhood opposed.

Tensions kept escalating and on 7 July 1980 the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Hafez al-Assad. After the failed attempt, the government passed a law making membership of the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death. In late January 1982 the Muslim Brotherhood declared Hama a 'liberated city' after removing Ba'athists and government officials from their homes and workplaces, with at least a couple of dozen casualties. On 2 February 1982 the government struck back, with intensive shelling of the city followed by a warning that anyone left in the city would be declared a rebel. In the fighting that followed, between 10,000 and 25,000 people were killed, out of a total population of 350,000, and mosques, churches and archaeological sites were damaged and destroyed.

The massacre achieved the result that Assad wanted – the Muslim Brotherhood was smashed, with many of its leaders in exile and eventually gaining political asylum in other countries. While support for the methods of the Muslim Brotherhood was not great before the massacre, Assad earned himself many enemies after the event and the rest of his reign was tainted by his brutal response to the uprising.

HAMA



Orientation

Central Hama sticks to the switchbacks of the southern bank of the Orontes River. Its main drag, Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli, runs east-west, while Sharia Jamal Abdel Nasser runs north-south, becoming Sharia Said al-A'as north of the river. Immediately west of the centre is the 'old town' and the citadel mound, and west of this is the traditionally Christian neighbourhood of Al-Medina with its two main shopping streets Sharia al-Mutanabi and Sharia Ibn Rushd. It's all very compact and easy to get around on foot.

Arriving by bus, you are most likely to be dropped off on Sharia al-Buhturi, the riverside street, one block north of the main cluster of hotels on Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli.

Information

Ad-Diah (3 Sharia Abdel Alwani) Hama has Easycomm card phones; buy phonecards at this telecoms shop.

Commercial Bank of Syria (Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm Sat-Thu) This main branch, just east of the clock tower, has an ATM. There are other ATMs all over Hama.

Happy Net (☎ 216 057; off Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; per hr \$50; ☎ 24hr) Internet access; in an arcade between Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli and the Hama Tower Hotel. The Cairo and Riad hotels also offer internet access to guests.

Immigration office (Sharia Ziqar; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) On the northern edge of town, near the museum, in a two-storey modern building with the word 'Passport' in English in massive letters above the main entrance. You need four photos and \$50; the whole process takes less than an hour.

Main post office (Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu) Centrally located, beside the clock tower on the main junction in town.

Telephone office (Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli) Just behind the post office.

Tourist office (☎ 511 033; Sharia Said al-A'as; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) In a small building in the gardens, just north of the river. The staff here don't have anything much to tell you and didn't even have maps when we visited.

Sights

NORIAS

النواير

Hama's most distinctive attractions are its *norias*, wooden water wheels up to 20m in diameter (the equivalent in height of a four- or five-storey building), which have graced the town for centuries. The land around the Orontes is considerably higher than the river itself, which is deeply incised into

its rocky bed, making it hard to irrigate. The *norias* were constructed to scoop water from the river and deposit it into aqueducts, which then channelled it to nearby fields and gardens.

There have been *norias* in Hama since at least the 5th century AD, as attested by a mosaic displayed in Hama's new museum, but the wheels seen today are the design of the 13th-century Ayyubids, who built around 30 of the things. Of these, 17 *norias* survive, dotted along the course of the river as it passes through town, although all have been reconditioned and/or rebuilt during the late Mamluk and Ottoman times. The *norias* still turn, but only during spring and summer; at other times the waters of the river are diverted into more modern irrigation schemes elsewhere, reducing water supplies.

The most central *norias* are right in the middle of town in an attractive park setting. The most impressive wheels, however, are about 1km upstream, and are collectively known as the **Four Norias of Bechriyyat**. They are arranged as two pairs on a weir that spans the river.

In the opposite direction, about 1km west of the centre, is the largest of the *norias*, known as **Al-Mohammediyya**. It dates from the 14th century and used to supply the Grand Mosque with water. Part of its old aqueduct still spans the road. Beside the *noria* there is a small stone footbridge that crosses the river and leads to another bit of parkland and an open-air coffeehouse.

OLD TOWN

المدينة القديمة

Most of the old town was destroyed in the 1982 bombardment, leaving only a small surviving remnant edging the west bank of the river, between the new town centre and the citadel. In sum, it amounts to little more than a twisting, atmospheric alley that runs for a few hundred metres.

Approaching from the south, pass the riverside Choob coffeehouse, then swing off to the right, just before what looks like an arched gate but is in fact part of an old aqueduct. The lane passes the oddly named **Oriental Batman** (☎ 224 957; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thu, 3-9pm Fri), a junky antique-cum-bric-a-brac shop, then turns north just before **Al-Mamuriyya**, a *noria* that dates from 1453. Sticking with the alley, pass the historic **Hammam al-Uthmaniyya** (bath & sauna \$150, massage

\$100; ☎ men 8am-noon & 7pm-midnight, women noon-6pm), which is spotlessly clean and popular with the locals. Virtually next door, the so-called **Artists' Palace** (Ateliers des Peintures; ☎ 9am-10pm) occupies a former khan, or travellers' inn; the old storerooms are now used as makeshift studio and exhibition spaces for local artists, some of whose work is for sale. The khan doesn't really compare with those seen in Damascus and Aleppo, but a little further is a much more noteworthy monument, the Azem Palace.

Ross Burns, historian and author of the sage *Monuments of Syria*, regards the **Azem Palace** (Beit al-Azem; adult/student \$150/10; ☎ 9.30am-2.30pm Wed-Mon) as 'one of the loveliest Ottoman residential buildings in Syria'. It's the former residence of the governor Asaad Pasha al-Azem, who ruled the town from 1742. The palace has strong echoes of the more grandiose building of the same name in Damascus, which is hardly surprising as the latter was also built by Al-Azem after he was transferred to the capital. Burns singles out the *haramlik* (family or women's quarters), the area to the right of the entrance, as being particularly noteworthy.

A short distance north of Azem Palace is the splendid riverside **An-Nuri Mosque**, built by the Muslim commander Nureddin, uncle of Saladin, in the late 12th century. If you cross the bridge beside the mosque, you have a very picturesque view of the river and three *norias*, which are, from east to west, **Al-Kayaniyya**, **As-Sahuniyya** and **Al-Jabriyya**.

CITADEL & GRAND MOSQUE

القلعة والجامع الكبير

The term 'citadel' is a bit of a misnomer, because it refers to what used to be rather than what is. What the locals call Al-Qalaa, or 'the castle', is actually no more than a great earthen mound, or tell. Danish archaeologists who carried out extensive work on the tell found evidence of continuous settlement since Neolithic times, particularly during the Iron Age. Sadly, apart from a few unrecognisable fragments, nothing remains as all the stone was long ago carted off for use in other buildings. The area has been landscaped and developed into a picnic and recreation area, with a small café; it's popular with locals, particularly on Fridays and public holidays.

Looking north from the tell, just over the river, you'll see the small **Mosque of Abu al-Feda**, resting place of the 14th-century soldier-turned-poet of that name, who was also a noted historian, astronomer and botanist. His treatise on geography was a major resource for European cartographers from the Renaissance onwards. He was elevated to become emir of Hama in 1320. During his rule, Abu al-Feda commissioned his own mosque and tomb beside the Orontes in what he wrote was 'one of the most delectable of spots'.

About 400m southwest of the citadel is the **Grand Mosque** (Sharia al-Hassanein; ☎ sunrise-sunset), which, after being almost completely destroyed in the fighting of 1982, has since been faithfully restored. It was originally built by the Umayyads in the 8th century, along the lines of their great mosque in Damascus. It had a similar history, having been converted from a church that itself had stood on the site of a pagan temple.

HAMA MUSEUM

متحف حماة الاثرية

Hama's excellent regional **museum** (Sharia Ziqar; adult/student \$150/10; ☎ 9am-4pm Nov-Mar, to 6pm Apr-Oct, closed Tue), located about 1km from the centre, is housed on the ground floor of a striking sandstone building. Each room is devoted to a particular era, including Neolithic and Palaeolithic, the Iron Age, Roman and Islamic. There's some interesting material on finds at the citadel mound, including a splendid 2.5m-high, 10-tonne black basalt lion that once guarded the entrance to an Iron Age palace. Other stand-out items are some intricate 8th-century bronze and gold-leaf figurines with blue lapis eyes; an exquisitely rendered 3rd-century mosaic, depicting a group of young women playing music and dancing; and a fragment of a 5th-century Byzantine mosaic, recovered from Apamea, that depicts a *noria*.

To get to the museum, walk north along Sharia Said al-A'as and take the first left after the large **Omar ibn al-Khattab Mosque**, completed in 2001.

SOUQ

السوق

Hama was never a great trading centre and today its main **souq** (off Sharia al-Murabet) is modest, with hardly any of the great commercial khans that fill the old cities of Aleppo and Damascus. The two noteworthy khans

that Hama does possess have long since been pressed into other uses: **Khan Rustum Pasha** (1556), just south of the town centre on Sharia al-Murabet, is an orphanage (although it's occasionally open to the public as an exhibition space); while **Khan Asad Pasha** (1751), also on Sharia al-Murabet but further south, is now a local Ba'ath Party branch.

Tours

The Cairo and Riad hotels in Hama run excursions with negotiable itineraries to places that would be hard to get to in one journey using public transport. Popular options are full-day trips involving two or three locations, such as Apamee, Musyaf and Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers; ££2300); four of the Dead Cities (££1500); the Dead Cities, Ebla, Qala'at Samaan and Aleppo (££3500); or the beehive houses and Qasr ibn Wardan (££1100). It's also possible to hire a car and driver and put together your own itinerary. Expect to pay between US\$70 to US\$100 for the day; ask your hotel to organise a driver.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Cairo Hotel (☎ 222 280; cairohot@scs-net.org; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; dm/s/d/tr/q ££175/350/500/650/750; 🚽 📺) This backpacker favourite near the clock tower has clean dorms and rooms with fridge, satellite TV and private bathrooms. In summer you can crash on a mattress on the roof for ££100. Air-conditioning is ££50 extra, breakfast ££100 and internet access ££75 for an hour. Staff are welcoming, speak English, and can arrange trips around the region (see above).

Riad Hotel (☎ 239 512; riadhotel@scs-net.org; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; dm/s/d/tr/q ££175/350/500/600/750; 🚽 📺) Similar in many respects to the Cairo, and equally as popular with backpackers, this is another decent budget option. All rooms have fridges and TVs and the back rooms have great balconies. There's a good communal kitchen and a pleasant dining area. As at the Cairo, the staff are friendly and can arrange tours (see above).

Hama Tower Hotel (☎ 226 864; fax 521 523; off Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; s/d/tr US\$25/30/35; 🚽) It's hard to beat the central location and spectacular views at this good option occupying the top floors of a tower block overlook-

ing the river. Rooms are simple yet spotlessly clean and come with fridge and TV. Breakfast is delicious although the stunning views are distracting. There's an all-day coffee shop and staff can order in dinner if you fancy eating on your balcony. Discounts are offered off-season.

MIDRANGE

Noria Hotel (☎ 512 414; www.noria-hotel.com; Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli; s/d/tr/q US\$25/35/47/55; 🚽 📺) This large, modern three-star has a smart reception area with – refreshingly – women at the counter. The spacious rooms have air-con, fridge and satellite TV, and were being renovated at the time of research; the plush new rooms were to include internet access. Guests can take advantage of the tours organised out of the Cairo Hotel.

Sarah Hotel (☎ 515 941; Sharia Abu al-Feda; s/d US\$27/35; 🚽) In a picturesque area in Hama's tiny old quarter, the simple rooms here are looking a little worn around the edges, but there's a café-restaurant on premises and the location is unbeatable.

Orient Hotel (☎ 225 599; www.orienthouse-sy.com; Sharia al-Jalaa; d/ste US\$60/75; 🚽) In a splendid, restored 18th-century building, with beautifully decorated ceilings, Oriental lamps and a big central light-filled courtyard, this is Hama's most atmospheric accommodation. There is a new extension so ask for one of the rooms in the Ottoman-era building. Rooms are well equipped with TV and fridge, and there's a restaurant on site. The only downside is the location, at least a 20-minute walk from the centre; take a taxi.

TOP END

Apamee Cham Palace (☎ 525 335; www.chamhotels.com; Sharia abi Nawas; s/d/tr US\$110/130/150 plus tax; 🚽 📺) This elegant tower has plush, comfortable rooms with all the mod cons you'd expect from a five-star. Located on the river, it's a lovely walk from here to the town centre through the old quarter. The lobby is disquietingly empty unless there's a tour group staying, but you won't spend much time there anyway.

Eating

Dining in Hama is limited to some pleasant waterside terrace restaurants and a few takeaway places specialising in delicious succulent hot chickens.

RESTAURANTS

Le Jardin (☎ 525 335; Sharia abi Nawas; meal per person ££300; 🕒 10am-late) Overlooking the splendid An-Nuri Mosque, river and water wheels, and serving alcohol (beer ££95), this leafy, terrace café-restaurant is a wonderful place to while away a few hours puffing on a nargileh (££100) as you take in the atmosphere. Local families love it here, and on weekends fill their tables with plates of mezze (££60) and kebabs (££100). It's part of the Apamee Cham Palace; credit cards are accepted.

Al-Atfal (☎ 222 234; Sharia al-Buhturi; meal per person ££300; 🕒 9am-1am) On a tree-shaded terrace beside the river, this casual restaurant serves up the usual mezze and meaty grills, as well as hamburgers and pizza. It's the first place on the left as you walk east from the centre along Sharia al-Buhturi. No alcohol is served; credit cards aren't accepted.

Sultan Restaurant (☎ 235 104; meal per person ££300; 🕒 8am-2am) This café-restaurant in a lovely waterside stone building was closed for renovation at the time of research, but the owners assured us that opening was imminent. To get here, pass through the low, vaulted tunnel beside the An-Nuri Mosque.

Four Norias (Sharia al-Buhturi; meal per person ££400; 🕒 9am-late) On the banks of the river beside the *norias*, around 500m east of the centre, this large open-air terrace restaurant is popular with groups and families and gets lively on summer evenings. There's a long list of mezze and kebabs, and costumed boys serving nargileh. No alcohol; no cards accepted.

Family Club (Nadi al-Aili; Sharia Kawakili, Al-Medina; meal per person ££450; 🕒 6pm-late) At the rear of a building a block north of the Orthodox Church, this church club welcomes anybody to its open-air terrace restaurant on the 1st floor. The food is good – it's the usual Syrian staples.

QUICK EATS

In the couple of blocks along Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli and its side streets, there are a number of cheap felafel, shwarma, kebab and chicken restaurants. Go to any that seem to be doing the most business with the locals. A long-standing favourite is **Broasted Fawaz** (☎ 223 884; same block as Hama Tower Hotel; meal per person ££200; 🕒 8am-late), for its deliciously succulent hot chickens and freshly fried hot potato crisps with garlic sauce.

SWEET HAMA

Although you can find it elsewhere in Syria (and Lebanon, especially Tripoli), a Hama speciality worth trying is *halawat al-jibn* – a soft cheese-based, doughy delicacy, drenched in honey or syrup and topped with pistachios, and often served with ice cream. It's made by taking raw cheese and reducing the salt content by soaking, then melting, stirring and stretching the cheese to make dough. This dough is rolled out and cut, with each piece then filled with *kashta*, a creamy dessert filling, and rolled to form a cylinder. The result is sweet, delicious, filling and quite irresistible. It's easy to find in Hama, as a lot of places around Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli sell it – a few sell nothing else but this decadent treat.

Almost anytime you can pick up dessert at **Al Afrah Cafeteria** (Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli), an ornate, old-fashioned, marble-fronted café on the next block where locals line up for the sweets with sugar syrup.

SELF-CATERING

For fruit there is a good little **market** just off the western end of Sharia Shoukri al-Quwatli, while for groceries there's a Western-style **supermarket** (cnr Sharia Ibrahim Hanano & Sharia Al-Mutanabi), which, though small, is decent and well stocked. You can get takeaway beer at a couple of **liquor stores** at the northern end of Sharia al-Mutanabi, near the citadel.

Drinking

The open-air **Choob coffeehouse** is set in a garden of shady eucalyptus trees and has views of the river and *norias*. There is also another open-air coffeehouse, **An-Nadi**, next to the big city-centre *noria* and facing the Choob across the river; a third is by Al-Mohammediyya *noria*, west of the citadel. Open from early until very late, all are frequented predominantly by men, so some women may not feel comfortable here.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The main bus companies, Al-Ahliyah and Kadmous, have their offices in the town centre on Sharia al-Buhturi, and the buses stop out front.

Al-Ahliyah has the greatest number of departures and the times are posted inside the office in English. It has frequent services to Damascus (S£90, 2½ hours), Aleppo (S£80, 2½ hours), Homs (S£30, 45 minutes), Tartus (S£80, two hours), Lattakia (S£100, three hours), Idlib (S£50, one hour) and Raqqa (S£145, five hours). Note that if you're travelling to Homs, departures by microbus are far more frequent.

For roughly the same prices, Kadmous, facing the river west of the main bridge, has several buses a day to Damascus and more frequent departures to Aleppo, Lattakia, Tartus, and Palmyra (S£85, three hours), which continues on to Deir ez-Zur.

There are no direct services to Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) from Hama; you have to change at Homs.

MICROBUS & MINIBUS

The main microbus station is a 15-minute walk from the centre of town, at the south-western end of Sharia al-Murabet in a dusty lot at the junction with the main Damascus road. From here there are regular departures to Homs (S£25, 45 minutes), Musyaf (S£25, 45 minutes), Salamiyya (S£20, 40 minutes) and Suqeilibiyya (for Apamea; S£25, 40 minutes).

The minibus station is a further 200m left and along the Damascus road. Services depart from here for Homs (S£15), Salamiyya (S£20), Suqeilibiyya (S£15) and Musyaf (S£15).

For minibuses to Al-Hamra (for Qasr ibn Wardan; S£20) there's a separate station north of the river on Sharia al-Arkam. Head up Sharia Said al-A'as, past the tourist office, and take either the third or fourth street on your right (you won't miss it); it's about a 10-minute walk from the centre.

TRAIN

The train station is just under 2km from central Hama. There are around four daily departures on sleek new trains to Damascus (1st/2nd class S£120/60, around two hours) and the same number in the opposite direction to Aleppo (1st/2nd class S£120/60, around two hours).

Getting Around

Hama's centre is compact and it's easy to get around on foot. Local buses may come

in handy for getting to and from the bus and train stations, both of which are uncomfortably far from the town centre; they leave from Sharia al-Buhturi beside the bridge. You pay the S£2 fare on the bus. Alternatively, a yellow taxi will cost around S£30 to either minibus station or the train station.

AROUND HAMA

There are three main excursions to make from Hama around the Orontes Valley. You can travel north to the Roman-era ruins of Apamea, west into the hills to the Assassins' castle of Musyaf, or east out to the Byzantine ruins of Qasr ibn Wardan. Each of these trips takes about half a day but could be extended by adding in extras, such as stopping off at Qala'at Sheisar on the way to Apamea, or swinging past Qala'at ash-Shmemis (قلعة الشميس) on the way back from Qasr ibn Wardan.

Hama also makes a good base for visiting Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers), via a change of bus at Homs, while the Dead Cities are only 60km to the north and easily reached by microbus.

All these trips can be done fairly easily through a combination of public transport and hitching, or alternatively you could take advantage of the organised tours offered by some of Hama's hotels (see p164).

Al-Ghab

الغاب

From Hama the Orontes River flows north-west for 50km and then into Al-Ghab plain, a vast, green, agriculturally rich valley stretching between Jebel Ansariyya to the west and Jebel az-Zawiyya to the east. As you drive through here, expect to see trucks piled unimaginably high with produce, sacks of potatoes, wheat and bales of hay, along with colourfully painted pickups with farm workers in the back – men with red-and-white *gutras* (headcloths) and women in headscarves and big straw hats.

It's said that in ancient times the pharaoh Thutmose III came here to hunt elephants, and a thousand years later Hannibal was here teaching the Syrians how to use elephants in war. Under the Seleucids the plain must have been as rich and fertile as it is now, as it supported large cities such as Apamea, but as the population dwindled the untended land degenerated into a swamp. In recent times,

with World Bank help, this low-lying area of some 40 sq km has been drained and criss-crossed with irrigation ditches, returning it to its former status as one of the most fertile areas in Syria.

Qala'at Burzei

برزاي قلعة

One for completists only, at Qala'at Burzei you will find the minimal remains of a once sizable Crusader castle. The castle was built in the 12th century but fell to Saladin not long after, in 1188. The most intact part of the ruins is the watchtower that guarded the eastern approach, and you can also pick out the keep on the far western side. It's a bit of a scramble to get up to the ruins, so wear decent footwear.

The site is about 4km north of the turn-off for Slunfeh on the Jisr ash-Shughur road (No 56) and is accessed by a side road off to the west.

Apamea

أفاميا

Apamea (Afamia in Arabic) would be considered one of the unmissable highlights of Syria, if it weren't for the unsurpassable magnificence of Palmyra. As it stands, the ruinous site is like a condensed version of Zenobia's pink sandstone desert city, but built in grey granite and transposed to a high, wild, grassy moor overlooking Al-Ghab plain.

The site has no set opening hours as it's fenced and there's nothing to stop anyone wandering across it at any time. However, an admission fee (adult/student

S£150/10) for the site is payable at the ticket office, and ticket officials occasionally patrol the site.

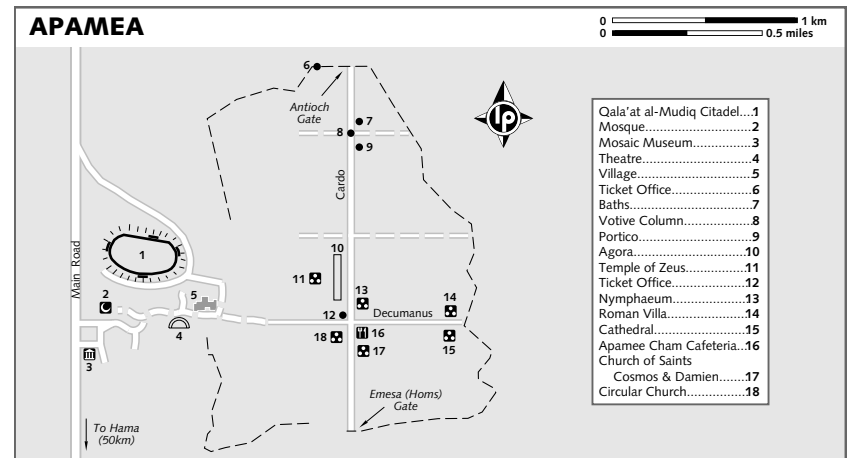
The site lies about 1km north of the main road; the turn-off is marked by a long, low, old grey-stone building housing a museum devoted to mosaics, which is also worth a visit.

Once at the site, expect annoying guys to follow you around on foot and on motorbikes in an attempt to sell you fake 'antique' coins and postcards. Don't encourage them: ignore them completely and they'll go away. If you act nice, they won't leave you alone. There's a sweet old man at the end of the site near the cafeteria who sells soft drinks, water and postcards – buy something from him instead.

HISTORY

Founded early in the 3rd century BC by Seleucus I, a former general in the army of Alexander the Great, Apamea became an important trading post and one of the four key settlements of the empire to which Seleucus gave his name. It was connected by road to another key Seleucid town, Lattakia (Laodicea), which served it as a port. Seleucus had great skills as a diplomat: while Laodicea was named after his mother, he also took due care to keep things sweet with his Persian wife, Afamia, by naming this settlement after her.

As a result of the rich pasture of Al-Ghab, Apamea was renowned for its horses. According to Greek historian Strabo, the city



had some 30,000 mares and 3000 stallions, as well as 500 war elephants.

Apamea was seized by the general Pompey for the Romans in 64 BC, and only entered into its true golden era in the 2nd century AD, when much of the city was rebuilt after a severe earthquake in AD 115.

In its heyday, Apamea boasted a population of about 500,000 and was notable enough to be visited by Mark Antony, accompanied by Cleopatra, on his return from staging a campaign against the Armenians on the Euphrates River. Prosperity continued into the Byzantine period, but the city was sacked by the Persians in AD 53 and again in 612. Barely a quarter of a century later, Syria was seized by the Muslims and Apamea fell into decline. It assumed importance during the Crusades when the Norman commander, Tancred, took possession of the city in 1106. The occupation was short-lived, however, and Nureddin won the city back 43 years later. Eight years on, the city was all but flattened in a devastating earthquake.

The site was not abandoned completely: a nearby hilltop that had served as an acropolis under the Seleucids and Romans became a citadel under the Mamluks. It sheltered a small village, which later became a popular stopover for pilgrims on their way south to Mecca. The village, which takes its name Qala'at al-Mudiq from the citadel, has long since outgrown its fortified walls and now tumbles down the hillside to the main road.

SIGHTS

Mosaic Museum

Just off the main road, at the foot of the hill that leads up to Apamea, is a restored Ottoman khan that dates from the 18th century and was used as a trading post on the route to Mecca from Constantinople. It is now the fabulous setting for a heartbreaking **mosaic museum** (adult/student SE75/5; ☎ 8am-3pm Wed-Mon). The mosaics include some very fine pieces housed in the former stables around the central courtyard, along with an odd assortment of architectural bits and pieces. The heartbreak comes in the level of neglect and preservation of the treasures, with leaks in the building's roof causing unchecked water damage.

On exiting the museum, turn right and follow the road left, then right, up the hill for the site's ticket office and main entrance to the ruins.

Theatre

Part way between the museum and the site proper, and off to the right, is a hollow filled with the barest vestiges of what was a 2nd-century-AD theatre. After serving as a convenient quarry for the neighbouring village for centuries, the remains are less than impressive, yet archaeologists believe that this may once have been the largest theatre in the eastern Roman Empire, bigger even than the one at Bosra.

Cardo

The main feature of the ruins of Apamea is the north-south cardo (main street), marked out along much of its length by parallel colonnades. Several lesser decumani (east-west cross-streets) intersected the cardo, and the main surviving decumanus now serves as the modern access road to the site – you'll walk or ride up it from the main highway. The junction of the cardo and decumanus is the main entry point for the site.

At 2km Apamea's cardo is longer than the one at Palmyra. Many of its columns, originally erected in the 2nd century AD, bear unusual carved designs and some have twisted fluting, a feature unique to Apamea. Visitors to this site as recently as 50 years ago would have seen nothing of this; in what's termed 'reconstructive archaeology', the columns have been recovered from where they once lay, scattered and overgrown with weeds, and have been re-erected by a Belgian team that has been working here since the 1930s.

North of the main junction, parts of the cardo still retain its original paving, visibly rutted by the wear of chariot wheels. To the right are the remains of a **nymphaeum** (monumental fountain), while a little further on and off to the left, two rows of column bases lead to a pile of stone blocks that were once part of the entrance to the **agora** (forum). Considerably further to the north is an impressive and beautiful **portico**, set forward of the main colonnade and composed of taller columns crowned by a triangular pediment. Just beyond the portico is the base of a large **votive column** in the middle of the street: this would have marked an important intersection.

Beyond the column is the best-restored section of the cardo, with raised paved areas either side of the street, and behind them the

lower portions of facades that would most likely have been shops – it's possible to gain a clear impression here of how the cardo must have looked in its heyday. The northernmost end of the cardo is marked by the recently restored **Antioch Gate**, beyond which once stretched the ancient city's necropolis.

Decumanus

دوكومانوس

About 400m east from the main junction and café area, there are the remains of a **Roman villa** with an impressive entrance and colonnaded courtyard. Across the way is a **cathedral** from about the 5th century.

Qala'at al-Mudiq Citadel

القلة

The citadel of Qala'at al-Mudiq, which sits atop a spur just west of the ruins of Apamea, is, typically, more impressive from the outside. It dates from the 13th century and occupies what had been the acropolis of the ancient city. Inside is a tumbledown village with colourfully painted doors, many painted with the palm tree scene representing paradise that indicates the occupants have done the hajj.

It's worth visiting for the views out over Al-Ghab, and of the theatre and ruins. You can walk up to the citadel or, if you have a car, drive up and park in the central square.

Take the narrow dirt path to the right, where you can ask at the house at the end of the lane (with a green door) if you can see the view – it's worth it, as it's spectacular. They're used to visitors and don't mind, but a tip is in order.

Expect to be hounded by scruffy but sweet little children and mangy dogs along the way; you might even score an invitation to tea from a local.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Microbuses (SE25, 40 minutes) and minibuses (SE15, 40 minutes) regularly run the 45km from Hama to the village of Suqeilibiyya, where it's necessary to change to a microbus for Qala'at al-Mudiq (SE15, 10 minutes).

The whole trip takes about an hour, except on Friday, when you can wait ages for a connection. You need to tell the driver to let you off at the museum – 'al-mathaf'. See p164 for information about organised tours from Hama.

Musyaf

مصيف

The solid castle of **Musyaf** (adult/student SE75/5; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar, closed Tue) sits in the foothills of Jebel Ansariyya, about 40km west of Hama. On the way here you'll pass through magnificent mountain scenery dotted with granite and limestone rock formations and thick with pine forests, olive groves and flowering shrubs. Shepherds herd their flocks along the road and will give you a wave as you pass. The air is fresher and the temperature a couple of degrees cooler than down in the valley. It's worth visiting for the journey alone.

Musyaf was an important and well-preserved Ismaili fortress. The outer walls are intact and suitably imposing, especially when viewed against the mountain backdrop. And there are the colourful historical associations.

It's not known when the first fortifications were erected on this site, but there was definitely a castle of some sort here in 1103 because it was seized by the Crusaders. They didn't have enough manpower to garrison it and by 1140-41 it had passed into the hands of the mysterious Ismaili sect, more dramatically known as the Assassins (see *The Assassins*, p170).

The entrance to the castle is via a long flight of stairs at the south, which leads up into the main keep. Opening hours can be a bit hit-and-miss: if the caretaker is not around when you arrive, someone will be loitering around the foot of the stairs and can call him.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses to/from Hama and Homs cost SE15 and SE20 respectively; microbuses cost SE25 and SE30. Avoid making the journey on Friday, when services are greatly reduced. Musyaf is also conveniently visited en route to Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) as part of an organised tour with one of the Hama hotels (see p164).

Qasr ibn Wardan

وردان ابن قصر

A splendid sandstone palace about 60km northeast of Hama, **Qasr ibn Wardan** (adult/student SE75/5; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar, closed Tue) lies on a road that goes to nowhere. There's little out here but hard-baked earth and dust, but it's a fascinating journey all the same – in the space of little more than

an hour you pass from the comforting surroundings of urban Hama to a landscape that in parts resembles Mars. On the way you'll pass through farmland where whole families work the fields alongside each other, and rocky landscapes dotted with brown Bedouin goat-hair tents and Bedouin herding their flocks of sheep.

Erected by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the 6th century (it was completed in AD 564) as part of a defensive line that included Rasafa and Halabiyya on the Euphrates, Qasr ibn Wardan was a combined military base, palace and church. Its appearance, however, would seem to belie any defensive function; rather than a frontier outpost it looks more like a modestly grand public building that would be more at home on some city square. One theory for this is that Qasr ibn Wardan was a base from which to consolidate control over the local Bedouin population, and as such it was meant to impress upon the nomads the strength and status of their would-be overlords.

The palace, assumed to have been home to the local governor, is the building closer to the road and the caretaker will usually open this up first. There are no set opening

hours. The best-preserved part is the south façade, constructed of broad bands of black basalt and yellow brick, through which you enter into a hall with rooms off to either side. Many of the stones lying around are carved with symbols and you can pick out a jar, some scales, a sheep and a fish. In the courtyard two large stones are carved with a sundial and a calendar. On the north side of the courtyard are the former stables, while on the east side, to the right as you enter, is a small bath complex.

The church is architecturally similar in style to the palace but smaller. Its basic form is a square, and it was once capped by a large dome (long since disappeared) and ringed by galleries on three sides. The fourth side is rounded off by a semicircular and half-domed apse that's common to many early Byzantine churches. Stairs in the northwestern corner lead to an upper gallery, which originally would have been reserved for women.

Admission is payable at a small ticket office within the entrance, to the kind caretaker, Mohammed al-Khudr, who has worked here for 10 years. Don't be surprised if he follows you around and offers you tea – he doesn't have too many visitors.

THE ASSASSINS

The group known today as the 'Assassins' were actually Nizari Ismailis, a Shiite Muslim sect. Shrouded in mystery and myriad theories, this small sect had a mountain stronghold at Alamut, in Iran, where one of the myths – or legends – of the Assassins was born. The devotees of the sect were trained to kill up close and personal, with the likely outcome being their own death. According to the explorer Marco Polo, the use of hashish and the promise of a garden of paradise in the afterlife were tools to control the behaviour of the followers of the sect. One theory has it that this is how the word 'assassin' came about – as a derivative of the full Arabic word for hashish.

In Syria the Assassins were notable for their control of the castle at Musyaf. As Shiites they were at war with the ruling Sunni Ayyubid dynasty and, lacking numbers, their preferred method of attack was carefully planned assassinations – they were always concerned with taking out their target with as little collateral damage as possible. As their exploits became well known, the sect found having an insider place a dagger and a note next to the bed of a sleeping enemy was enough to achieve their aims. In fact, legend has it that after a couple of assassination attempts on his life, Saladin (who was laying siege to their stronghold at Musyaf) spotted a figure leaving his heavily guarded tent, having left a note and a dagger at the foot of his bed. Regardless of the status of the legend, Saladin ceased his attacks – as did the Assassins.

The Assassins did take out some notable figures in history: Raymond II of Tripoli in 1152 and Conrad de Montferrat, king of Jerusalem, in 1192. But by 1273, Mamluk Sultan Beybars had not only all but finished off the Crusader presence in the Levant, he had also made certain to take out the Ismaili fortresses as well. For more on this fascinating topic, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*, by Farhad Daftary, as well as Bernard Lewis' *The Assassins*, are essential reading.

BEEHIVE HOUSES

'They are like no other villages save those that appear in illustrations to Central African travel books.' So wrote Middle Eastern adventurer Gertrude Bell after encountering Syrian beehive houses. She was right. These structures are the ultimate in simplicity – whitewashed, conical, mud-brick structures of one chamber, accessed by a single small opening. But they're also well adapted to the climate: the thickness of the walls and lack of windows mean that the darkened interior remains a constant temperature, equally impervious to the heat of summer days and the cold of winter nights.

Although the appearance and building method of the beehive houses has changed little since Bell's time, there are far fewer of the structures these days and less enigmatic concrete boxes have taken over. Those that still exist are mostly used for storage of hay and fodder rather than as family dwellings. You'll see them east of Aleppo on the dusty plains as you head out to the Euphrates, and in the arid areas east of Hama, where in villages like Sarouj and Twalid Dabaghein people still inhabit these intriguing dwellings.

AROUND QASR IBN WARDAN

Between Qasr ibn Wardan and the village of Al-Hamra lie the hamlets of **Sarouj** (سروج) and **Twalid Dabaghein** (دباغين توالد) with their curious beehive houses – see Beehive Houses, above. Beyond Qasr ibn Wardan, a further 25km of rough road leads northeast to **Al-Anderine** (العندرين), another Byzantine settlement of which precious little remains today. The defensive settlement was dominated by a cathedral, but only a few pillars still stand.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Although public transport doesn't go all the way out to Qasr ibn Wardan, it is still relatively easy to get there under your own steam if you're happy to get a lift with locals. Take a minibus from Hama to Al-Hamra (SE20, 45 minutes). From Al-Hamra you have to hitch the remaining 20km; although there's not much traffic going this way, whatever there is will most likely stop and take you on. You shouldn't have to wait much longer than 20 minutes or so for a ride out and about the same for the ride back.

While catching a ride with locals is not unusual in Syria, locals no longer recommend that single women travellers hitch in this area, since a young Canadian backpacker sadly went missing here in 2007. It's worth noting that the young woman was the first foreigner ever to disappear in Syria, and it's not yet clear if she even disappeared on the way here.

Sarouj and Twalid Dabaghein are 50km and 53km from Hama respectively. The Cairo and Riad hotels in Hama both include a visit to the beehive houses as part of their organised trips out to Qasr ibn Wardan (see p164). You can also hire a car and driver or a taxi for around SE600.

Isriyya

أثريا

Only the main temple remains of the ancient desert settlement of **Seriana**, located at the town of Isriyya. Apart from a missing roof, the temple, dating from the 3rd century AD, is largely in one piece.

The stone employed is the same as that used in much of the construction in Palmyra. Seriana was in fact an important way station in the imperial Roman road network, with highways to Palmyra, Chalchis, Rasafa and Homs (ancient Emesa) all meeting here.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Getting to Isriyya can be a bit trying. Buses and minibuses regularly ply their trade between Hama and Salamiyya (السلمية), but this part of the trip is best done with a driver or hire car. From Homs you could hire a service taxi for about SE600 one way. Otherwise, you could take a microbus the first 45km northeast to Saan (SE15). From there you have another 45km of road to travel, and may still be obliged to deal with a service taxi for the remainder of the trip.

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