

IMPRESSIONS OF OUR VISIT TO SYRIA – MARCH 2007

Our visit to Syria was our first one and as for me the first visit for that matter to a Middle East country.

I found travelling with a group and totally organized all right for a first contact, but after this experience I will surely come back to visit Syria on my own to enjoy everything at a much slower pace.

People were very kind, saying welcome to Syria while passing us in the street, which is both surprising and pleasant.

Wandering through the *souks* in Damascus and Aleppo was a great experience and even though the *souks* were very crowded we felt completely at ease.

The sight of the remnants of the Roman Jupiter Temple at the end of the Damascus El -Hamidiyeh *souk* was a big surprise to us. They simply stood there in the middle of the crowd forming part of everyday life without any barrier. I found this very touching though archaeologists will surely disagree.

We all marvelled at the architectural beauty of the Umayyad Mosque, where we stayed for a very long time, admiring the mosaics, decoration etc. and listening to the explanation of our Syrian guide, who was a very good professional by the way,

We also visited the National Museum in Damascus where we marvelled at the treasures it contains. It was like being transported to the roots of civilization: The clay tablets with the cuneiform script, the statue of Ebi-hil of Mari and so many other treasures too many to mention here.

Also our visit to the Christian quarter was astonishing, the small chapels at the corners of the streets, the St. Ananias Church, the Straight Street etc. etc.

Also our visit to the Al Azem palace was a delight to the eye.

It is wonderful to find so many testimonies of ancient times in one city and that it is still actually all around to remind us of long ago times.

It is really a must to conserve the old part of Damascus.

After Damascus we visited Palmyra (Tadmor) which was also wonderful. These must be the most impressive ruins of the Roman Empire by far. The desolate desert extending all around makes a spectacular sight.

We had dinner in a Bedouin tent where a group of Bedouin musicians played for us, so we had a wonderful evening.

Furthermore we visited Aleppo, Apamea, St. Simeon's Church, the Crack des Chevaliers, Hama, Homs.

Each place in its own way was simply incredible.

What surprised us very much was the very green landscape, fish factories included, when we drove from Aleppo to Hama.

Our visit to Maaloula needs a special remark. It is an adorable scenery and passing through the defile to go up to Deir Mar Sarkis is a breathtaking experience.

The fact that Aramaic is still spoken, listening to the prayer in this language, even when we do not understand a word, and being in one of the primitive Christian churches, was all so very moving.

A real pity that time was so short, so that we had to leave without a stroll through the village.

Another marvel was Bosra, linked to the rise of Islam when the Nestorian monk Bahira met the young Mohammad (pbuh) and predicted his prophetic vocation and the faith he was going to initiate.

The Mosque of Umar, one of the oldest surviving mosques in the Muslim world, the Mabrak Mosque the whole maze of ruins and stone streets, the remnants of the old Roman and Muslim city of Bosra were also very interesting to see..

The Roman theatre of course, is overwhelming; the contrast of the black basalt rock with the white marble columns is a magnificent sight.

It is funny (or not?) to see that many people still live among the ruins. We found houses scattered among ancient Roman columns, as well as courtyards with tables and chairs made out of columns and Corinthian capitels.

Unfortunately our trip didn't include Ugarit, Ebla, Mari, Amrit and other sites of such interest.

Summarizing, our trip left us all with a desire to come back and see a lot more of Syria, which has so much to offer to any visitor.

Carla Hamers
Benicasim - Spain