

## D · A · M · A · S · C · U · S

### Syrian capital remains city at the crossroads

*How forlorn you have become city of songs, city of gladness?*

— Jeremiah 49:25

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**A**walk into the walled old city in the heart of Damascus puts a visitor squarely in the middle of a quiet, ancient world.

The regular chants of Moslem muezzins vibrate down the sun-striped alleys and walkways. The scents of burning woods, roasted meat and baked unleavened bread mingle here, and there are shouts of children passing a soccer ball back and forth.

The tranquility explodes into a cacophony of car engines, horns and barker's shouts just outside the gate to the old city. Here is modern Damascus, a city of many personalities.

Tourist books describe it as perhaps the world's oldest continuously inhabited city, although several Syrian cities, including Aleppo, claim to be equally old. All date back into the third millennium.

According to legend, Cain killed his brother Abel in the Garden of Eden near here, inspiring the city's name from the Arab words "dam," meaning blood and "shag," or spring.

For Moslems, Damascus is one of the stars of the religious universe and it attracts thousands of them to worship at its more than 200 religious shrines each year.

For Westerners, it is a part of a world that they seldom see, largely unspoiled by the corrosive influence of Western tourists, and for many, one with a fearsome reputation.

Syria remains a country that is poised on the edge of war, and one that has been accused by the Reagan administration of supporting a variety of terrorists. Its staunch allies include Libya's Moammar Khadafy and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The Lebanon war seldom seems far away from the peaceful surroundings of the Syrian capital. The carnage of Beirut lies only 60 miles away.

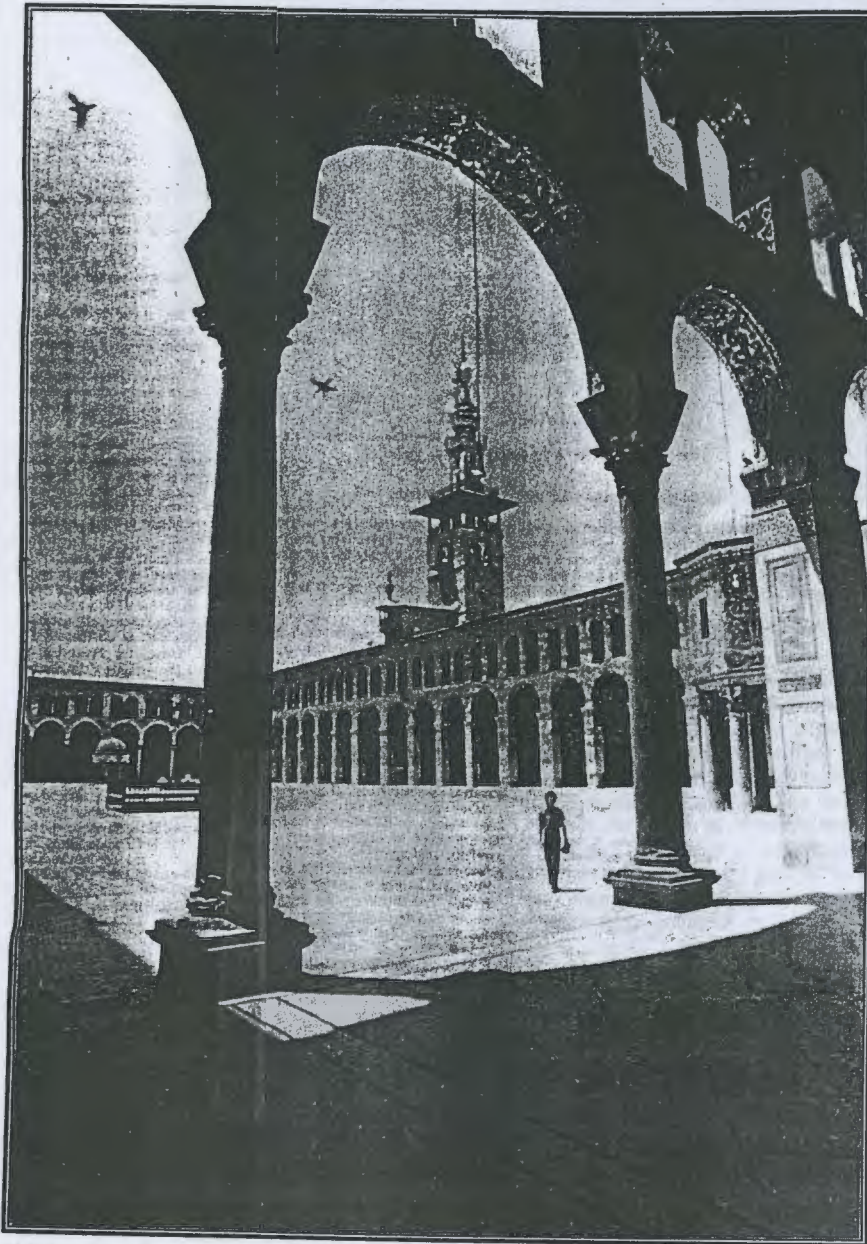
Israeli forces occupy southern Lebanon and the Golan Heights only 30 to 40 miles west and south of Damascus. Syria's other neighbor, Iraq, is engaged in a war with Iran that threatens to engulf the entire Persian Gulf.

It is not surprising that Damascus resembles an armed camp glutted with Syrian soldiers, who pour into the city when off-duty and man hundreds of buildings and checkpoints throughout the capital.

Yet, Damascus is not a dangerous city for tourists in the sense that, say, some large American cities are. The strong military presence contributes to what many Americans living here regard as a controlled, quiet and safe environment.

And even the most gun-shy traveler might be tempted by the unusual attractions of Damascus.

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HOLY PLACE — Silent courtyard of Omayyad Mosque offers peaceful respite from teeming city of Damascus.



ANCIENT CITY — Omayyad Mosque, spiritual center of the old city, dominates Damascus even today.

## Devoted drawn to old city

### ■ DAMASCUS, from Page 1.

The Moslems occupied Damascus in A.D. 635, and it became the opulent capital of the Omayyad empire, which stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the borders of China.

Saladin, the beloved Arab chieftain who drove the Crusader infidels from the Islamic world in the 12th century, lies buried here in a small crypt just outside the walls of the Omayyad Mosque, one of the holiest of Moslem shrines and the spiritual center of the old city.

The solemn silence that reigns over the courtyard of the mosque is broken only by the shifting of a flock of pigeons from one side of the quadrangle to the other. Men, wearing long Arab gowns, and shrouded women peacefully walk in and out of the shadows and kneel to pray in a huge hall that forms the base for the mosque's giant towers and bulbous center dome.

It is said that a part of the body of St. John the Baptist lies in a glass-enclosed tomb in the hall, which has 25 giant portals and is carpeted with more than 600 Oriental rugs.

A walk down the Street of the Straight, once the axis of the old Roman city, leads past several ruins of classic Roman architecture and dozens of little shops selling metal and wood crafts.

They sell a blend of old and new handicrafts ranging from kitsch to high art. Metalsmiths work their magic in gold, steel, brass, copper and silver. Syrian weavers loom intricate designs on golden and silvery silk brocade as thin as fine tissue.

As for the natural concerns of

Americans for their safety in Damascus, Naoras Daker, Syria's minister of tourism, offers soothing advice.

"The question of safety does not exist in Syria," Daker said. He has memorized the statistics that tell of the dwindling of Western tourist dollars. The number of American visitors has fallen about 20 percent to 6,500 a year since the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon.

Syria counted 800,000 tourists last year. Among the largest national group were 46,000 Iranians. The Irani-

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**"The question of safety does not exist in Syria."**

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an women wear the black chadour of devout Shlites and the packed Iranian tourist buses sport photographs of Khomeini.

U.S. Embassy officials have privately advised some American visitors to Damascus to be careful in not inciting anti-American sentiments among the Iranians.

There are a number of luxury hotels in Damascus that cater to Western tastes, including the Sheraton Damascus, the Meridien Hotel and the government-owned Cham Palace. The tab runs from \$80 to \$104 for a single room and from \$97 to \$128 for a double. Tourists should be aware that these hotels can charge extremely high rates for extra service including long-distance telephone calls.

For those with a smaller budget and a rudimentary command of

French, a room at St. Paul's Convent goes for only 50 Syrian pounds per night — about \$7.70. That includes a continental breakfast.

Eating in Syria can be inexpensive, with dinners in moderate-priced restaurants costing about \$10. Syrian cuisine makes heavy use of lamb and grains. Some delicacies are raw freshly ground lamb, spicy kebabs and feeki, a casserole that incorporates steamed bulgur wheat and a sheep's head.

Although there are few foreign restaurants here, the French cuisine in Damascus can be excellent.

"They have the best pastry east of Paris," says Donald J. Cineta, a Fulbright scholar from Portland, who has been studying Syrian history in Damascus for the last year.

From a base in Damascus, it is possible to make day trips to other sights in Syria.

John M. Lundquist, a former Portlander who is now an anthropology professor at Brigham Young University, has worked on several archaeological digs in Syria recently and suggests a journey to Aleppo, the nation's second-largest city, to visit the markets and its imposing citadel, Al-Qalah.

Another side trip might take a visitor through Homs, Syria's third-largest city en route to the Krak des Chevalier, a well-preserved Crusader castle that is near Amar, the home village of the family of Gov. Vic Atiyeh and dozens of other Syrian immigrants in Oregon. It lies about 130 miles from Damascus.

The sprawling ruins of Palmyra, once capital of an ancient nation vanquished by the Roman emperor Aurelian in 270 A.D., lie about 190 miles to the northeast of Damascus.