

Overview of Syria

Syrian hospitality was refreshingly sincere before the conflict, even by Middle Eastern standards, and visitors could expect a warm greeting begun with the phrase, 'Ahlan wa Sahlan', meaning 'you are welcome.'

The country's ancient roots provided a fascinating backdrop to everyday life, with five-hundred-year old souks being a significant part of this experience. A legacy of ancient trade routes, these bustling markets sold everything from handmade chunks of soap and carpets to sheep's tongues. Donkeys, 1960s American car-taxis, bicycles, minibuses and private jeeps vied for places on the streets, while street vendors and shoe-shiners clogged the sidewalks.

Damascus was of particular interest to travellers. As one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, the capital brimmed with history. In the north, travellers celebrated the city of Aleppo for its medieval citadel (now in ruins), elaborately decorated hammans (bath houses), and ancient souk. It was also close to the ruins of St Simeon, perhaps one of the world's oldest churches. St Simeon is yet another casualty of the war.

Syria is still one of the most fascinating countries in the region, and aspects of its rich history have survived. However, foreign offices strongly advise tourists to avoid visiting.

Key Facts

Language:

Arabic is the official, and most widely spoken language. English is widely understood by many educated Syrians in the major cities.

Passport/Visa:

Visitors should be aware that if their passport (or airline ticket) contains an Israeli stamp, or any evidence of an intended visit to Israel, entry to Syria will be refused even if in possession of a valid visa. Visas are not required for any traveller whose passport states that he or she was born in: Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, or Yemen. All travellers must hold return or onward tickets, all documents required for the next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay. It is highly recommended that travellers' passports have at least six months' validity remaining after the intended date of departure from their travel destination.

Immigration officials often apply different rules to those stated by travel agents and official sources.

Currency:

The official currency is the Syrian pound (SYP), which is divided into 100 piastres. Travellers can change money at official exchange offices, hotels and at different shops; GBPs and USDs are the best foreign currencies to visit with. International sanctions have blocked ATMs and credit cards, so travellers will have to bring enough cash for the duration of their stay. If necessary, travellers can withdraw USD from most ATMs in Lebanon, as the capital, Beirut, is about a two-hour drive away from Damascus. Visitors can also exchange Syrian pounds for Lebanese pounds or USD in Beirut. They're unlikely to get the same opportunity outside of Lebanon.

Electricity:

Electrical current is 220 volts, 50Hz. The country uses round two-pin attachment plugs.

Travel to Syria

Climate in Syria

Syria's climate is largely affected by the desert, with hot, sunny summers (June to August) and cold winters (December to February). Winters are milder along the coast, but wet, and humidity is higher in summer. Snowfall is common in winter on the mountains. Summer temperatures can reach in excess of 95°F (35°C) during the day, but evenings are generally cool. Spring and autumn are the best times to travel, with milder temperatures averaging 72°F (22°C) during the day.

Health Notes when travelling to Syria

Travellers will find adequate medical care in Damascus and some coastal areas, though not necessarily in remote regions. Anyone visiting Syria should get travel insurance, as serious illnesses and emergencies may require evacuation to a neighbouring country or Western medical facility.

Safety Notes when travelling to Syria

While life in the capital and Aleppo is starting to get back to normal, most western governments advise against all travel to Syria. The situation remains volatile and dangerous, and the Syrian government does not fully control many parts of the country, especially the north west and north east. Terrorism remains a threat.

Customs in Syria

Syria is predominantly a Muslim country and visitors should respect religious sensitivity, especially when it comes to dress and public conduct. Women, in particular, should wear loose fitting clothes that cover most of the body, though headscarves are unnecessary unless entering mosques. Eating, drinking and smoking in public during the holy month of Ramadan should be avoided, as it is forbidden by the Muslim culture. Homosexuality is illegal; the death penalty is enforced for drug trafficking.

Duty Free in Syria

Travellers are allowed to import 200 cigarettes or 25 cigars or 250g tobacco, 1 pint of spirits, perfume for personal use, and gifts to the value of SYP 250 without paying customs duty. Firearms are prohibited. There is no limit on the amount of tobacco or spirits for export.

Doing Business in Syria

Foreigners should make an effort to arrive on time for meetings, but should remember that Syrians have a looser sense of punctuality and may be late themselves. Business cards are usually exchanged at meetings and it's important to only use the right hand to receive and present them, as the left hand is considered unclean. Meetings can become very animated and can involve many interruptions and tangents to unrelated topics. Foreigners should remain patient and feel free to interrupt to make their points heard. Personal relationships are hugely important in Syrian business culture.

Communication in Syria

The international dialling code for Syria is +963. The outgoing code is 00 followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 0044 for the UK). There is good mobile phone coverage in Damascus; internet access is limited, but is available in the capital.

Tipping in Syria

Visitors ordinarily tip waiters, bartenders, hotel staff and taxi drivers in Damascus. Waiters generally receive a tip of between 10 and 20 percent, depending on the quality of the service. Taxi drivers expect a tip of between 10 and 20 percent; hotel staffs usually receive between 2 and 5 USD.

Passport/Visa Note

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Entry Requirements

Entry requirements for Americans:

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By its very nature much of the information in this travel guide is subject to change at short notice and travellers are urged to verify information on which they're relying with the relevant authorities. We cannot accept any responsibility for any loss or inconvenience to any person as a result of information contained above. Event details can change. Please check with the organizers that an event is happening before making travel arrangements. We cannot accept any responsibility for any loss or inconvenience to any person as a result of information contained above.

US nationals require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Entry requirements for Canadians:

Canadians require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Entry requirements for UK nationals:

UK nationals require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Entry requirements for Australians:

Australians require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Entry requirements for Irish nationals:

Irish nationals require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Entry requirements for New Zealanders:

New Zealand nationals require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Entry requirements for South Africans:

South Africans require a valid passport and a visa for travel to Syria. Visitors must hold return/onward tickets, all documents required for their next destination and sufficient funds to cover their stay.

Tourist Offices

Syria Ministry of Tourism, Damascus: <http://www.syriatourism.org>

Tourist Authority Offices in the United States:

U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt (also responsible for Syria) +20 2 2797 2301

Syria Embassies

In Canada:

Honorary Consulate for Syria in Montreal, Canada: +1 514 992 4432

In Australia:

Honorary Consulate of the Syrian Arab Republic in Sydney, Australia: +61 2 9787 1504

In South Africa:

Syrian Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa: (+27) 12 342 4701

Foreign Embassies in Syria

American Embassy

U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt (also responsible for Syria): +20 2 2797 2301

Canadian Embassy

The Embassy of Canada in Beirut, Lebanon (also responsible for Syria): +961 4 726 700

Australian Embassy

The Embassy of Australia in Amman, Jordan (also responsible for Syria): +962 6 568 8660

Irish Embassy

Embassy of Ireland in Cairo, Egypt (also responsible for Syria): +202 2728 7100

South African Embassy

South African Embassy, Damascus, Syria: +963 11 6135 1520

Currency

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Overview of the Attractions in Syria

Public Holidays in Syria