



Pilgrimage in Syria

8 Days

Day 1: Arrival

Arrival to airport

Meet and assist and transfer to Hotel

Dinner and overnight

Day 2: Saydnaya – Maaloula – Saint George – Krak

Saydnaya: It was one of the episcopal cities of the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch. Associated with many Biblical and religious events, local tradition holds it as the site where Cain slew his brother Abel. Pilgrims seek Saidnaya for renewal of faith and for healing. Renowned for its faithfulness to Christianity, tradition holds that the Convent of Our Lady of Saidnaya was constructed by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I in 547 AD, after he had two visions of Mary. Also located in the convent of Saidnaya is an icon of the Holy Mother and Child known as the *Shaghurah* and reputed to have been painted by Luke the Evangelist which is believed to protect its owners from harm in times of danger.

Maaloula: It is the only place where a dialect of the Western branch of the Aramaic language is still spoken. Scholars have determined that the Aramaic of Jesus belonged to this particular branch as well. Maaloula represents, therefore, an important source for anthropological linguistic studies regarding first century Aramaic. There are two important monasteries in Maaloula: Greek Catholic Mar Sarkis and Greek Orthodox Mar Thecla. Mar Sarkis is one of the oldest surviving monasteries in Syria. It was built on the site of a pagan temple, and has elements which go back to the fifth to sixth century Byzantine period. Mar Taqla monastery holds the remains of St. Taqla; daughter of one of Seleucid princes, and pupil of St. Paul. According to legend, in the 1st century C.E, St. Taqla was being pursued by soldiers of her father to capture her because of her Christian faith. She came upon a mountain, and after praying, the mountain split open and let her escape through. The town gets its name from this gap or entrance in the mountain.

Saint George: Located in “the Valley of the Christians” It is said that the monastery was built over remains of an ancient statue of the god Homerus by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I. Beneath the monastery's main courtyard there is an older 13th century chapel with a smaller iconostasis, older than 300 years, its icons depict scenes from the life of Saint George. At this lower level there is also an entrance to what is believed to be the original 6th century monastery.

The modern church was rebuilt in 1857

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Day 3: Krak – Homs – Apamea - Aleppo.

Krak des chevaliers: The original castle was built in 1031 for the emir of Aleppo. During the First Crusade in 1099 it was captured by Raymond IV of Toulouse, but then abandoned when the Crusaders continued their march towards Jerusalem. It was reoccupied again by Tancred, Prince of Galilee in 1110. The early castle was very different to the extant remains. It originally consisted of a single enclosure, coterminous with the inner ward (fortified enclosure) of the present castle. In 1142 it was given by Raymond II, count of Tripoli, to the Knights Hospitaller. It remained in their possession until it fell in 1271. It was expanded between 1150 and 1250 and eventually housed a garrison of 2,000.

In 1163 the fortress was unsuccessfully besieged by Nur ad-Din Zengi, after which the Hospitallers became an essentially independent force on the Tripolitanian frontier. By 1170 the Hospitallers' modifications were complete. In the late 12th and early 13th century numerous earthquakes caused some damage and required further rebuilding.

The fortress was described as "perhaps the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world" by T. E. Lawrence.

Homs: The existence of an archeological Tell in the center of Homs attests to the unique character of this city long before al Roman times. From the time of Byzantine remains two holy places must for pilgrims; Zounnar Church and Saint Elian Church.

Church of the belt of the virgin: provident name of the discovery in 1953 under the altar of the church of an old fabric belt that would have belonged to the Virgin, it was first placed in the 4th century church.

Saint Elian Church: Dedicated to the son of a Roman officer of Emesa, who was martyred at the end of the 3rd century. The martyrrium contains the marble sarcophagus and is home to a remarkable series of 12th century wall painting discovered in 1970. It represents: Christ in Majesty, evangelists, apostles and prophets.

Apamea:

City of the Seleucids kings on the Orontes River. The city flourished and received many distinguished visitors: Cleopatra, Septimus Severus and the Emperor Caracalla. In the Christian era, Apamea became a center of philosophy and thought, especially of Monophysitism. To fight the new heresy the Byzantine Emperor Marcianus created in 452 A.D the monastery of Saint Maron a splendid building. Around it there were three hundred cells inhabited by monks and the monastery governed over fifty monasteries from the sixth to the tenth century.

Both the Jerusalem Targumim considered the city of Shepham (Num. xxxiv. 11) to be identical with Apamea. Since Apamea virtually belonged to Rabbinic Palestine, the first-fruits brought by Ariston from that town were accepted for sacrifice in Jerusalem (Mishnah Ḥal. iv. 11). Apamea remains a titular see of the Roman Catholic Church, *Apamenus in Syria*; the seat has been vacant since the death of the last bishop in 1974.

Day 4: Saint Simeon - Aleppo.

Symeon the Stylite (390 – 2 September 459) was a Christian ascetic saint who achieved fame because he lived for 39 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo. The **Church of Saint Simeon Stylites** is a historical Byzantine basilica dating back to the 5th century; it is based in the dead city of Telanissos, which is adjacent to the ancient city of Antioch. Built on the site of the pillar of St. Simeon, the church is popularly known as either the “Fortress of Simeon”, or the “Monastery of Simeon”. St. Simeon's pillar can still be seen in the center of the courtyard, although it is now only a 2 meter-high boulder due to centuries of relic-gathering by pilgrims. The courtyard is surrounded by four basilicas on a cruciform plan. The east basilica is slightly larger than the others; it was the most important and held all the major ceremonies. Adjacent to the south wall of the eastern basilica is the chapel and the monastery.

Aleppo: Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world; it has been inhabited since perhaps as early as the 6th millennium BC. The long history of the city is probably due to its being a strategic trading point midway between the Mediterranean Sea and Mesopotamia. And its biblical importance comes from being a station on the Fertile Crescent where Abraham, Lot and their families stayed on their way from Mesopotamia to the promise land. The traditional proposed etymology is that the name Halab means "gave out milk," coming from the ancient tradition that Abraham gave milk to travelers as they moved throughout the region. The colour of his cows was ashen; therefore the city is also called **Halab ash-Shahba** ("he milked the ash-coloured"). Until these days pilgrims come to visit Abraham well in the citadel mosque. Beroea (Aleppo) is also mentioned in the Gospel (2 Macc. 13:3) The region of Aleppo is also the home of a several Christian communities and hosts beautiful churches and cathedrals:

The Forty Martyrs Armenian Apostolic cathedral of the 15th century.

Mar Assia Al-Hakim Syrian Catholic church of the 15th century.

The Dormition of Our Lady Greek Orthodox church of the 15th century

The Maronite Saint Elias Cathedral

The Armenian Catholic Cathedral of Our Mother of Reliefs

The Melkite Greek Catholic Cathedral of Virgin Mary.

Day 5: Aleppo – Euphrates – Rassafa - Palmyra.

The Euphrates is first mentioned in Gen. 2:14 as one of the rivers of Paradise. In the original Hebrew, it is actually named Perath. This has been translated as Euphrates. The river is first mentioned in connection with the covenant which God entered into with Abraham (15:18), when he promised to his descendants the land from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates (compare Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:4), a covenant promise afterwards fulfilled in the extended conquests of David (2 Sam. 8:2-14; 1 Chr. 18:3; 1 Kings 4:24). In the ancient history of Assyria, and Babylon, and Egypt many events are recorded in which mention is made of the “great river.” Just as the Nile represented in prophecy the power of Egypt, so the Euphrates represented the Assyrian power (Isa. 8:7; Jer. 2:18).

**Rassafa:**

Biblical *Rezeph* where it is mentioned in Book of Isaiah 37:12. And the byzantine city of Sergio the commander of the Schola Gentilium, Roman elite troop composed of barbarians. Denounced as a Christian he and his companion Bacchus were tortured. Bacchus was beheaded in Resafa in the Syrian Desert near the Euphrates in 303. Rasafa was later renamed Sergiopolis and became one of the major pilgrimage centers of the East. Become the seat of a bishop, Saint Sergio relics were kept in a fortified church. The church was embellished by Justinian in the 5th century. Saint Serge was a very popular saint in Syria and among Arab Christians. Desert nomads regarded him as their saint patron. His feast is celebrated on 7 or 8 October.

Day 6: Palmyra – Mar Moussa - Damascus

Palmyra: The exact etymology of the name "Palmyra" is unknown, although some scholars believe it was related to the palm trees in the area. The city was first mentioned in the archives of Mari in the second millennium BC. It was another trading city in the extensive trade network that linked Mesopotamia and northern Syria. Tadmor is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Second Book of Chronicles 8:4) as a desert city built (or fortified) by the King Solomon of Judea:

Flavius Josephus also attributes the founding of Tadmor to Solomon in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (Book VIII), along with the Greek name of Palmyra. Several citations in the tractates of the Talmud and of the Midrash also refer to the city in the Syrian Desert.

The most striking building in Palmyra is the huge temple of Baal considered "the most important religious building of the first century AD in the Middle East", this temple was converted to a byzantine church and frescos can be still seen on the walls. Near the temple of Baal Shamim (lord of heaven) we still have the ruins of 3 Byzantine basilicas.

Mar Moussa: From archaeological and historical evidence, we know that the monastery of St. Moses existed from the middle of the 6th century and belonged to the Syrian Antiochian Rite. The present monastic church was built in the Islamic year 450 (1058 AD), according to Arabic inscriptions on the walls, which begin with the words: "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate".

Since 1992, the monastery of "Mar Musa el-Habashi" in Arabic or St. Moses the Abyssinian (or the Ethiopian) of the Syriac church, whose spiritual origins date back to the sixth century, finds a new life. This special place of silence and meditation returned slowly to the desert from which it came because of Father Paolo deeply respectful of both Christians and Muslims of Syria. The colorful frescoes of the church dates from the eleventh and twelfth century and they has been subject of a superb restoration. The annunciation is represented over the altar and on the western wall a large Last judgment.

Day 7: Full day Damascus

Damascus is mentioned in Genesis 14:15 as existing at the time of the War of the Kings. Nicolaus of Damascus, in the fourth book of his History, says thus: "Abraham reigned at Damascus". According to the New Testament, Saint Paul was on the road to Damascus when he received a vision of Jesus, and as a result accepted him as the Messiah.

The Damascus Straight Street (referred to in the conversion of St. Paul in Acts 9:11), also known as the *Via Recta*, was the decumanus of Roman Damascus, and extended for over 1,500 meters (4,900 ft). Today, it consists of the street of Bab Sharqi and the Souk Medhat Pasha.

The **House of Saint Ananias** (also called *Chapel of Saint Ananias*) is the ancient alleged house of Saint Ananias, in the old Christian quarter. It is said by some to be the house where Ananias baptized Saul.

The Chapel of Saint Paul is a modern stone chapel in Damascus that incorporates materials from the Bab Kisan, the ancient city gate through which Paul was lowered to escape the Jews. After he began the tireless Christian preaching that would characterize the rest of his life (Acts 9:20-25), Paul himself later says that it was through a window that he escaped from certain death (2 Cor 11:32-33). According to the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Thomas also lived in that neighborhood.

The old borough of Bab Tuma was developed at the end of the Roman/Byzantine era by the local Eastern Orthodox community. Roman Catholic historians also consider Bab Tuma to be the birthplace of several Popes such as John V and Gregory III.

In the Omayyad period, Al-Walid initiated construction of the Grand Mosque of Damascus. The site originally had been the Christian Cathedral of St John the Baptist. A shrine in the mosque is said to contain the body of the Saint.

Christians represent 10% of the population. There are few Christian districts in the city, such as Bab Tuma, Qassaa and Ghassani, and Soufanieh, where a series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary have reportedly been observed between 1982 and 2004.

Day 8: Ezraa –Qanawat - Bosra

Ezraa: In the historical and religious view this is perhaps one of the most remarkable buildings in Syria. The Greek Orthodox Church of St. George is one of the oldest churches still in use in Syria, its architecture has been largely unaffected by its changing fortunes. The church standing on the site of an ancient temple is dated to 515 from the long inscription in the lintel over the main door.

*“The house of god has taken the place of stay of demons
where they sacrificed to idols, are now the choirs of angels”*

Architecturally, the 6th century Church of St. George is notable as one of the examples of a basilica constructed on an octagon-within-a-square plan, surmounted by a cupola with a rectangular external shape.

Qanawat: The ancient Roman city of **Canatha**, mentioned for the first time in the reign of Herod the Great (1st century BC), when Nabatean Arab forces defeated a Jewish army.

Christianity flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries and it became the seat of the bishop and most of the ruins belong to the Christian period, especially the renovated parts of the buildings and the additions that have been made. The monument known as Es-Serai dates from around the 2nd century AD and was



originally a temple, and then, transformed in the 4th/5th centuries, to a Christian basilica. It is 22 m long, and was preceded by an outside portico and an atrium with eighteen columns.

Bosra: Is an extremely ancient city mentioned by Egyptians, Nabateans, Greeks and Romans. In Byzantine period, in 246 and 247 two councils were held at Bostra against Beryllus, and others who maintained with him that the soul perished and arose again with the body. Origen was present at these synods, and convinced these heretics of their errors (Eusebius, *Church History*_VI.19)

The basilica of the martyrs Sergios, Bacchos and Leontios, the cathedral of Bosra, was completed in 513 by Archbishop Julianus. The structure of this monument, a central plan with eastern apses flanked by two sacristies, exerted a decisive influence on the evolution of Christian architectural forms, and to a certain extent on Islamic forms as well.

Bosra played a significant role in the history of early Christianity. It was also linked to the rise of Islam. According to tradition its bishop took part in the Council of Antioch, while the Prophet Muhammad came there twice and, at the time of his first visit, is said to have learned the precepts of Christianity from a Nestorian monk named Bahira.

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