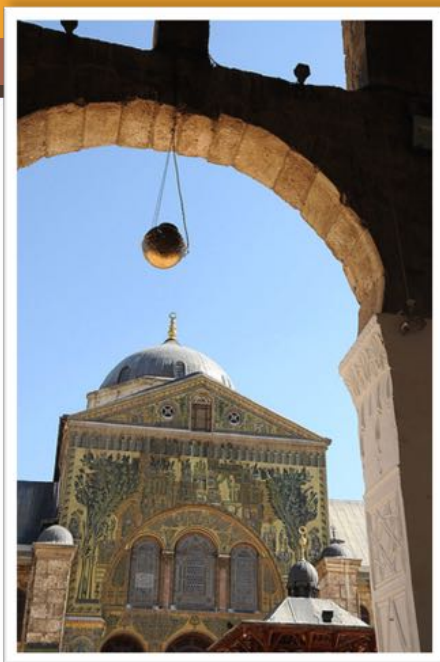


Syria & Lebanon



A war-ridden Beirut and Syria still at “peace”...!

1984 & 1985



Damascus, Syria back in the “good old days” – or...?

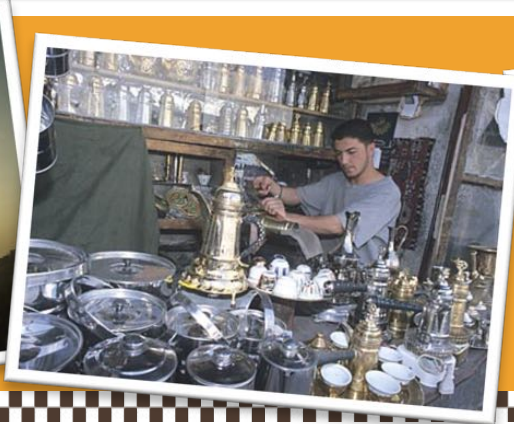
...My expectations are of course high on this my first visit to Syria. I work in Cairo, Egypt at the time (during summer-break from University studies in Lund, Sweden) and take a direct flight from Cairo to Damascus (2 hours). It makes an interesting break for a couple of days. With only 4 days to visit, I decide to cover the capital – Damascus – and the ancient site of Palmyra (Tadmor).

I meet up with a representative from the Swedish embassy, who is kind enough to host my visit in Damascus. I am told that the city is made up of the majority being Sunnites (75%), Christians (15%) and the rest a mixture of primarily Allawi's, Druids and Shiites.

The main attractions and interest for me during this trip is the old souk and the famous **Umayyad mosque. The mosque and part of the old city is listed by the UNESCO world heritage sites.** The mosque is one of the oldest mosque in the world, being built already back in the 7th century. It is a fine piece of architecture with impressive decorations. Inside the mosque rumour has it, one can find the relics from Johannes the Baptist as well as the grave of Saladin.

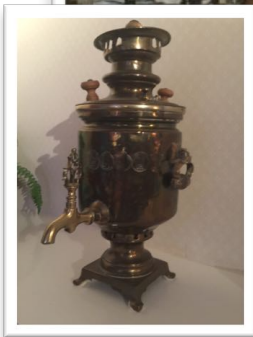
The Al Hamidiyeh Souk, in the old town of Damascus, is full of activities and people. The nice thing is that the people are not nearly as pushy and eager to sell as the sales people are in the Khan-el-Khalil souk back in Cairo. It is also close to the Citadell which winds its way all the way up to the Umayyad Mosque.





The city of Damascus

Visiting the famous souk and the Umayyad Mosque

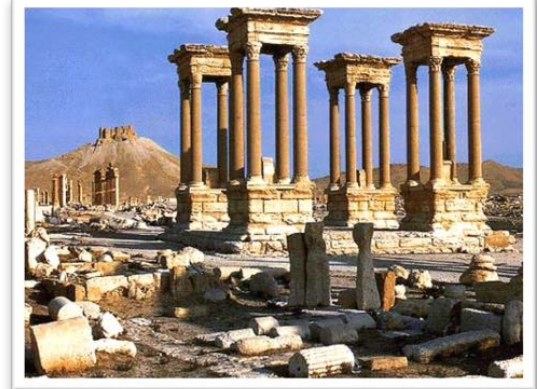
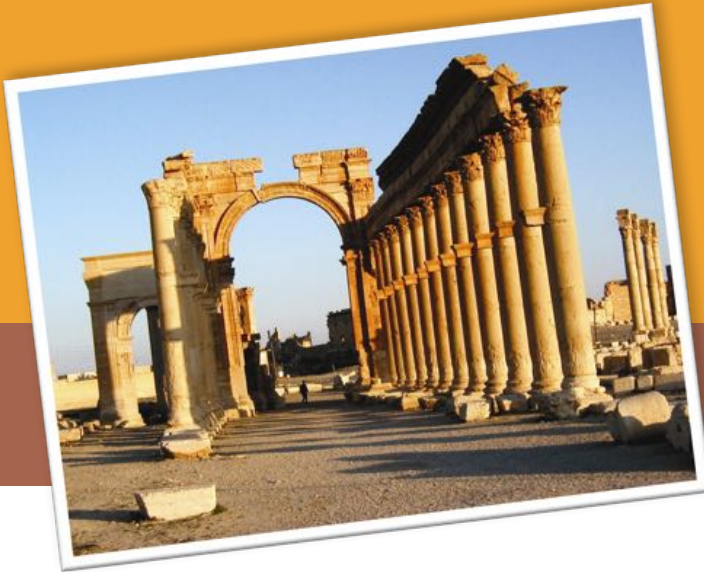


A visit to the local tailor in the souk, Damascus (photo to the left). This time around only for a chat and some chai (tea). What I did buy however was an old Russian tea samovar with all its original signs dated late 19th century (1898).

With only a small budget to travel on at the time, I did not stumble on any culinary highlights. I tried many different types of cuisines, but thought the local swarmas and the Lebanese mezze was probably the best money could buy.

At the time of writing (this section being an update from 2017) the Civil-war had not broken out in Syria. Although Hafez Al-Assad – the father of the present tyrant and dictator Bashar Al-Assad – ruled the country for decades – also he as a dictator with cruel methods - one could at least travel safely around the country back in the 80-ies. The country is today in ruins with over 7 million people on the run either having left the country and having been able to seek asylum in Europe, or in many of the refugee camps spread out primarily in Northern Iraq, Jordan or Lebanon. **Many of the former historical sites are today completely destroyed – such as Homs, Aleppo and Palmyra.**



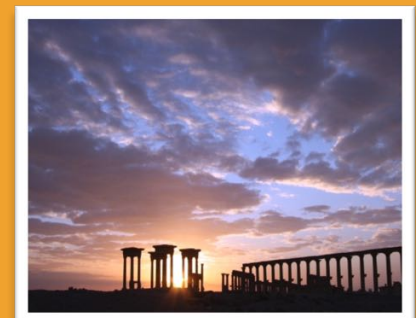
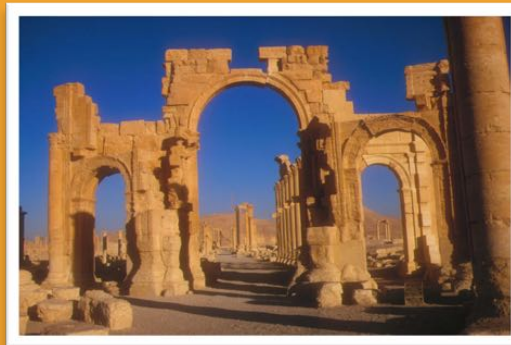
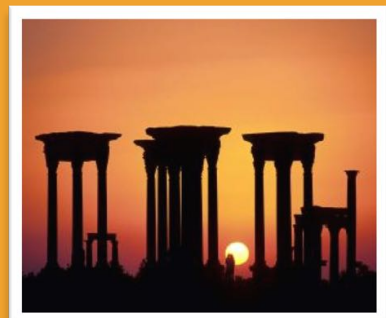


Palmyra (Tadmor) in the north Syria.

The ancient city of Palmyra, Tadmor or the city of Palms as it also has been named, is a Roman archaeological site situated 220 km north-east of Damascus in the Syrian desert.

I travelled the distance on local buses on very poor roads to get to Palmyra. The archaeological site is covered by the world heritage list by UNESCO. King Salomon is said to have founded the city once upon a time to be used as a stop-over and storage on-route the caravan route from the Mediterranean Sea and Euphrates. The Greek later named the city Palmyra. The city was inhabited already 1800 B.C. by Nabataea's as well as Aramées. The trade which came with the Caravans passing through, gave the city its grandour and wealth. Tadmor reached its peak economically around 200 A.D. The city then had strong trade with Persia, India, China as well as the Arabic peninsula.

Back in 1984, when I visited there were only very basic bed-n-breakfast establishments in the nearby town. A visit to Syria is not complete without a stop at Palmyra. Unfortunately, ISIS (Daesh) have held control over this region and have also destroyed parts of it during the occupation. They have also hanged many people from the old pillars just to make a point.





Beirut (East and West)

1985 - a divided Beirut – with military postings

The year after – 1985 – I am back in Cairo to work again. Also, this year, there is time for an excursion. I decide to fly up to Beirut for a long weekend. This is also during the ongoing civil war since the early 70-ies. **Beirut is divided in East and West with a clear demarcation line controlled by militia and constant check-points.**

I remember seeing a huge burst hole in the main building after landing at the airport. After making it to **my hotel, Le Commodore**, I was one of only two hotel guests staying at the time. The other guest a French journalist. We had only electricity once in a while. The diesel generators were the only way to ensure electricity, but these were economized. I had to walk all the stairs to get to my floor (5th) as the elevators were out of use. They had put glass bottles with candles at each landing to guide us up/down each floor.

I made friends with the French journalist at the bar in on the ground floor. He had lots of interesting stories to share as he had been staying at the hotel for some time – using it as his base while reporting on the ongoing war. I also visited the Swedish embassy, which at the time was set-up in an apartment, but just closed down. There were bullet holes all around the entrance – a clear evidence of how unstable the situation was at the time. One evening, when I stood on my balcony looking out over the city, I literary lifted off the floor as a rocket burst only a kilometre away in the city centre. A pile of smoke came up where the hit had been made.

But what intrigued me the most was, in the midst of all the rubbles and ruins, was that there seemed to by “business-as-usual” and people seemed to get on with their business as best as they could. I visited a few restaurants, which were housed behind doors you would never believe hosted a restaurant, and at some of these you could get a fantastic meal. I bought some clothes in a few shops where again, you would not have guessed they sold Armani suits and other top brands. The entrances were often covered with bags of sand for protection from bursts and attacks. It felt very strange and a bit insane, that one could go and by the latest fashion clothes in a city totally destroyed by war – and at ridiculously low prices as well. It would be 28 years until my next visit to Beirut – 2013.



The Swedish flag at the Swedish embassy in Beirut.

