

Cycle Touring Syria (1)

One of the oldest civilisations on the planet.



Leana Niemand

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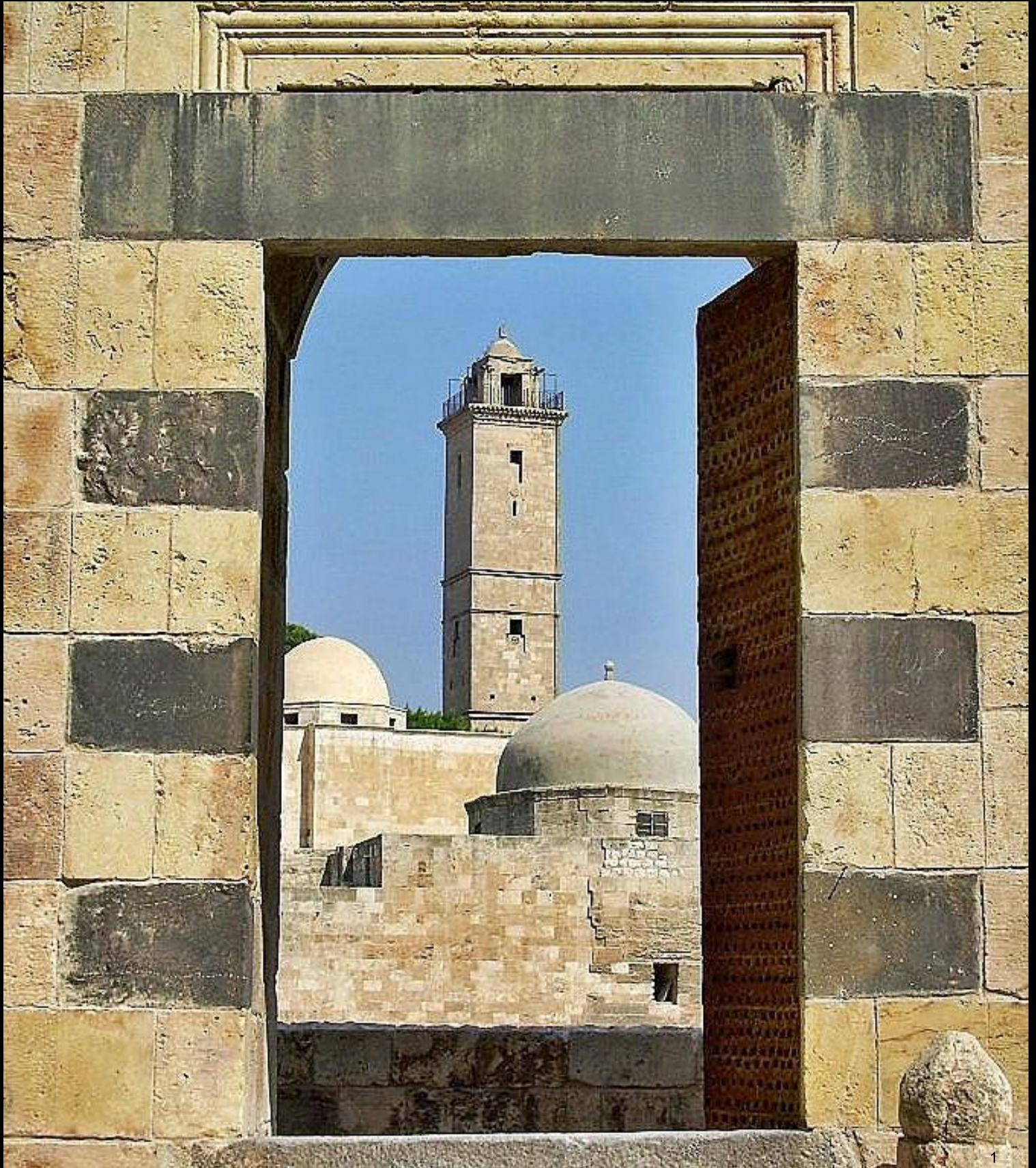
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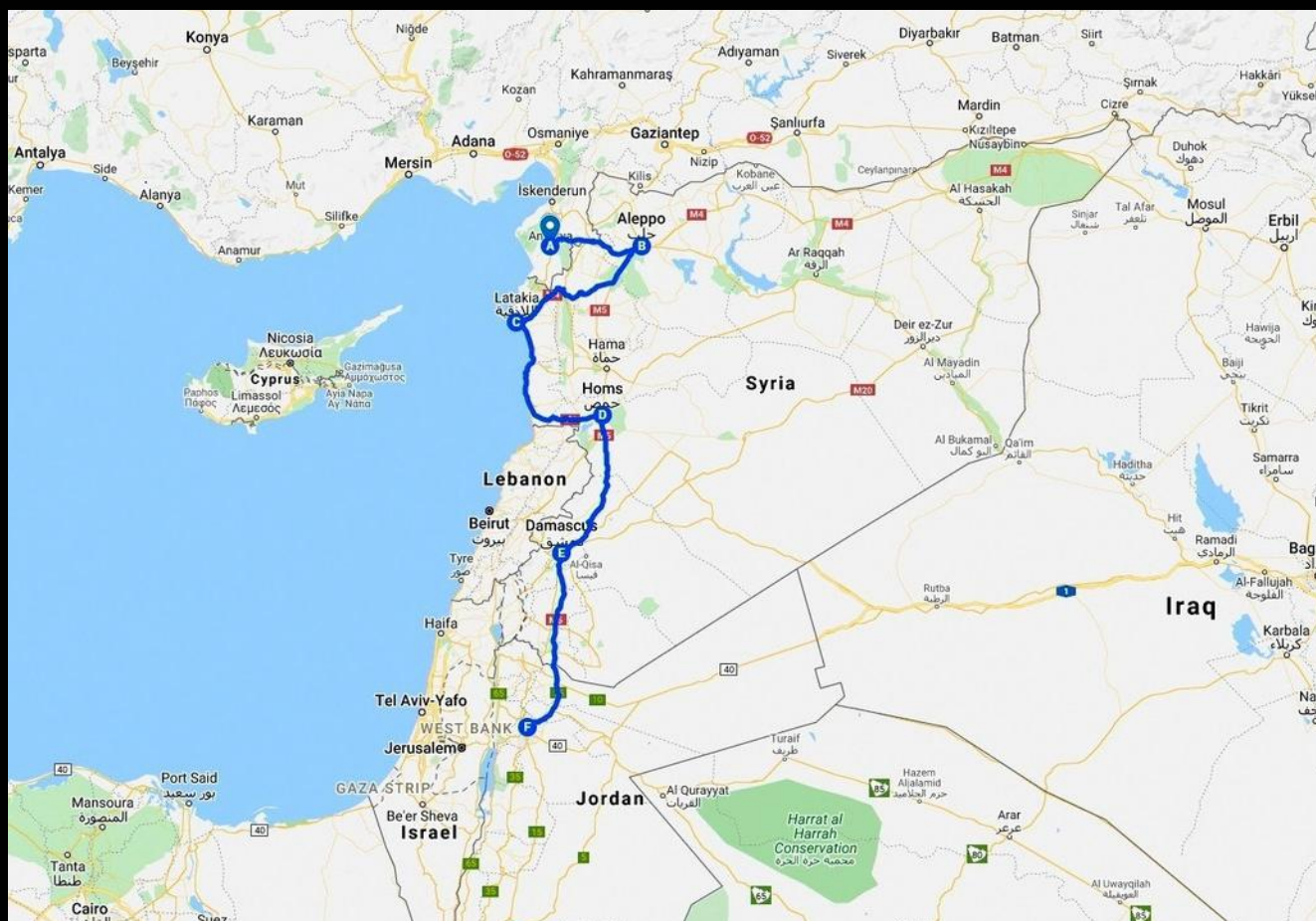
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One of the oldest civilisations on the planet.





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Thank You

I'm immensely grateful for the kind generosity of strangers and the random acts of kindness I experienced during my cycle tour in Syria. It was a humbling experience.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organized. Without her, there would be no record of my journey.

I am much indebted to Val Abrahamse, my friend, for taking care of my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to achieve my dream.

***To my editor Gerda Van Niekerk who not only makes this blog more coherent and engaging but also tolerates my relentless love for Oxford commas –
Thank you***



SYRIA (1)

570 Kilometres – 23 Days

Atakia, Turkey – Aleppo, Syria – 110 kilometres

Leaving Atakia, Turkey, I nervously approached the Syrian border, wondering if visas were issued on arrival. However, what could only have been the visa gods must have been looking after me, as I met four motorbike riders travelling overland to South Africa. They introduced me to Ahmed, a tour guide, who was helping them obtain Syrian visas. Ahmed was incredibly accommodating and helped me complete the forms and then disappeared. Three hours later, I had my visa and was en route to Aleppo, Syria. Sometimes I couldn't believe my luck, and I knew I was tremendously fortunate to meet the motorbike riders as well as Ahmed.

My first thought cycling into Syria was, "What have I let myself into?" Syria was entirely different. It had a different culture, language, landscape, food and housing. Not only was it a conservative Muslim and desert country, but one of the oldest inhabited regions in the world. Archaeological finds indicate human habitation dates back 700,000 years.

Little happened during the day, apart from cotton fields and typical Syrian communities consisting of a mosque, a market, and a few modest courtyard homes. Traditionally, these homes appear unimpressive from the outside but could be quite lavish on the inside. The houses further offered total privacy as well as a communal family area, often fitted with a water feature or even a pool. I was so impressed by this type of architecture that I swore that if I had the opportunity to build a home, it would be a courtyard-style home.



Biking into Aleppo, one of the oldest cities in Syria, was at 18h00, thus in peak hour traffic. By then, I was quite aware that traffic rules weren't the same in all countries, but the horrendous traffic in Syria made no sense whatsoever. I had no idea Aleppo was such a large city. As it was Ramadan, thousands of hungry people were on their way home.

Being a woman on a bicycle, I felt I was at the bottom of the food chain. As if that wasn't enough, it started bucketing down and the entire road flooded in seconds. While trying to stay out of harm's way, I rode through a puddle and my front wheel got stuck in a drain cover. I nearly destroyed a part of my anatomy, which I believed could still come in handy later!

Miraculously, I made my way to the city centre where a reasonably priced abode was uncovered. The aptly named Hotel Tourist was centrally located and clean. Achmad, from the hotel, was immensely helpful and offered to walk me around town.

The following day was spent in Aleppo exploring the citadel, market and museum. Upon returning, I needed a GPS to find the way along the numerous narrow, identical-looking alleys. By evening, Achmad offered to show me more of the town. It turned out an interesting meander ending at a typical Syrian eatery. What a friendly bunch the Syrians are.





Aleppo – Idlib – 66 kilometres

Upon departing, Achmad presented me with a watch. I had no idea what to make of this generous gift, but I thanked him and cycled out of Aleppo. That was just weird! My first full day of cycling was between Aleppo and Idlib, about 60 kilometres straight into a strong headwind.

In Idlib, I enquired about accommodation and, in the process, met Ahmad. He invited me to stay with him and his wife. I was given an entire apartment and was invited to supper. Also present were his brother and sister-in-law. It was a pleasant experience; they did not merely sit on a mat but used no utensils and ate solely with their fingers. Even though Ramadan, Somod (Ahmad's wife) went to great lengths to create various delicious dishes. It was a lovely evening, albeit Ahmad the sole member who spoke English. Still, we communicated and enjoyed each other's company. They showed me how to sit correctly when eating and laughed jovially at me, struggling to eat using only my fingers. Afterwards, I returned to my room well-fed and grateful for such a unique opportunity.



Idlib – Latakia – 130 kilometres

From Idlib to Latakia was a hundred and thirty kilometres. The going was slow as the road led over a mountain range and was coupled with a headwind. However, the people I encountered were immensely accommodating. Still, asking for directions remained tricky as only a few could read an English map. That said, for the best part, Syrians observed me, mouths agape. Their astonishment was primarily due to me being an unaccompanied woman... on a bicycle. Still, virtually all were keen to communicate. In the process, I was offered more food and drink than anyone could consume.

Towards the end of the day, it took cycling through hectic traffic and into a stiff breeze before reaching the historic port city of Latakia.

Latakia

Syria's traffic was astounding. There appeared no rules and, if any, I hadn't caught onto it. The driving seemed aggressive and the constant hooting deafening. Everyone seemingly did their own thing, surprisingly without any accidents - quite astonishing really. Syria was home to the three-wheel pickups. These vehicles carted anything, from people to building rubble. It was pretty easy to keep up or even overtake them, usually to the children's great delight.



Latakia warranted a day of investigating as the site had been inhabited since the 2nd millennium BC. Still, the city was only founded in the 4th century BC under the Seleucid Empire's rule. Eventually, Pompey saw the Seleucids as too troublesome and made Syria a Roman Province. Latakia was subsequently ruled by the Romans, the Ummayyads and the Abbasids, all between the 8th–10th centuries of the Christian era. One would think it was enough for any city, but it wasn't for Latakia. Following World War 1, Latakia was assigned to the French, and only reintegrated into Syria in 1944. Phew!

Strangely, not much remained of its troublesome past except a Triumphal Arch and the ruins of the Temple of Bacchus.

Latakia – Tartus - 85 kilometres

I emerged to brilliant weather and was eager to get underway. The ride was pleasant as it ran next to the ocean until reaching Tartus, situated further south along the Mediterranean coast.

I came out in lumps and bumps, all terribly itchy, and instead of getting better, it seemed to worsen. Irritated, hot and tired, I booked into an overpriced chalet only to discover the place infested with creepy crawlies. It was a day I felt incredibly sorry for myself. Albeit next to the coast, the coastline was filthy and littered with all kinds of rubbish. I thought better of it to swim, not purely because of the garbage but because I was afraid of offending the conservative Syrian Muslims.



Tartus

The following morning, I woke with a swollen eye and even more itchy bites – not something I considered possible. In no mood to explore, I still looked around the historical centre inside the Crusader-era Templar fortress walls, but few old buildings remained. Still, the city was home to a smattering of interesting sites. Unfortunately, the surprisingly few tourists made me stick out like a sore thumb and in no mood to be stared at, I scurried back to my room.

Tartus – Homs – 110 kilometres

My route continued to Homs via a busy highway where my arrival was reasonably early, thanks to a good tailwind.

Still, I could make no head or tail of the traffic. Despite the red lights, no one stopped, and traffic police were required to help regulate the madness.

Later, I took a taxi to a recommended restaurant. The evening turned out rather bizarre as the taxi driver stayed and joined me for the meal. He spoke no English, which made the evening somewhat uncomfortable. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to buy my taxi driver a meal. Whatever the culture, it would've been far more comfortable eating on my own.

Homs

As little of Homs was seen the previous day, it justified an additional day. I walked the ancient markets, ate overly sweet pastries, and drank tiny cups of strong coffee. It was sweltering hot and I wondered how the women managed being completely covered in black. The men, at least, looked marginally better off in their long white robes.

The city was a jumble of noise and colour. Hooting seemed part of driving and the numerous mosques called people to prayer ever so often.

Homs – Damascus – 80 kilometres

The scenery abruptly changed as the route swung inland from Homs to Damascus. The only thing visible was a vast desert. Gone were the olive trees, pomegranates and figs and nothing but barren land surrounded me. A ferocious wind picked up and visibility was down to a few metres of a grey/yellow haze. I battled onward but knew I wouldn't get far in such unforgiving conditions. I had my head down to try and keep the sand from my eyes and scarcely saw the van parked alongside the road. A sweet French couple stopped to offer me a ride to Damascus. I succumbed to temptation as this was too good an offer to decline and jumped in. In no time at all, we were in Damascus.

They parked their van in the backyard of St Paul's convent, and I pitched my tent in the convent's herb garden (hopefully I didn't flatten the parsley).



Damascus

Departing the convent was early as the gardener started watering the garden. After waving goodbye to my saviours, the way into the city centre was in life-threatening traffic. The inexpensive abode uncovered needed cleaning before settling in to wait for my sister Amanda's arrival, coming to Syria on holiday.

The plan was to use public transport to travel to Syria and Jordan. With a shock, I discovered my passport was practically full. On inquiring, I learned it wasn't possible to order a new one in Syria, Jordan or adjacent Lebanon. Another lesson learned. I stared myself blind at the expiry date and never considered the number of remaining pages. This left me little choice but to return to South Africa, order a new one and hopefully be on my way a.s.a.p. A costly lesson, indeed.

Damascus

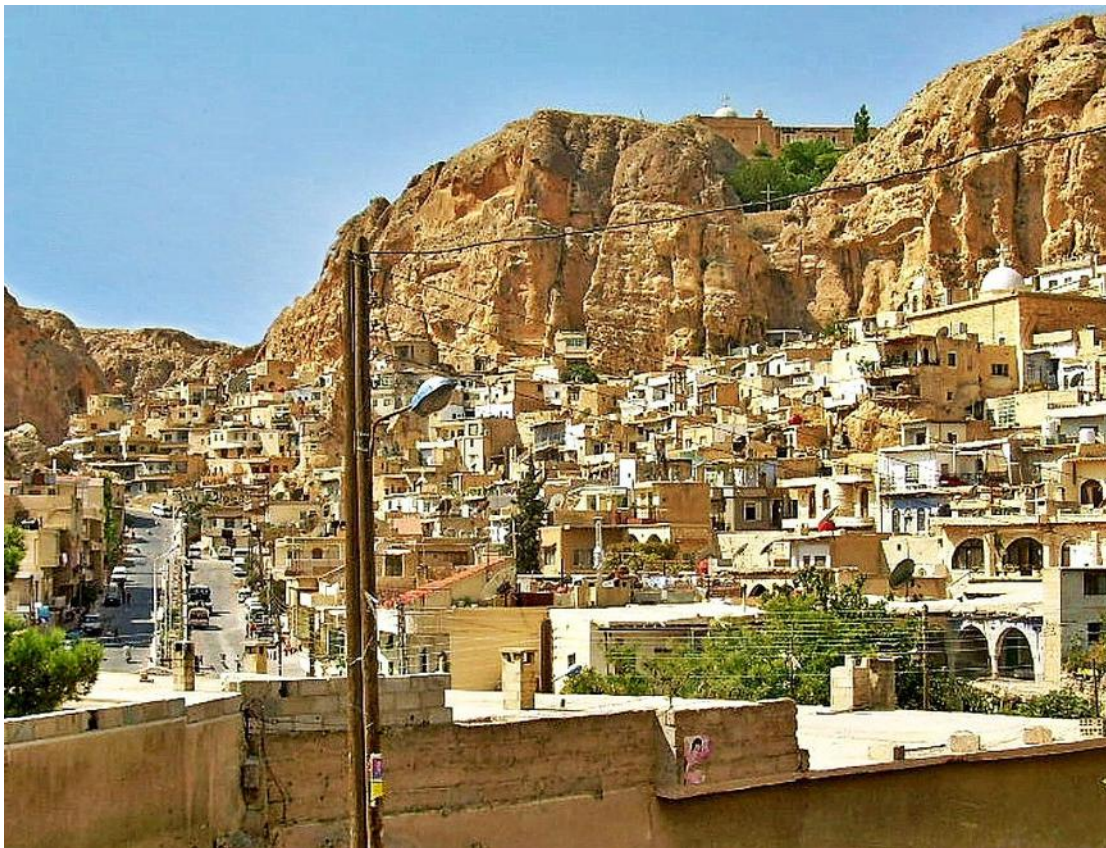
Amanda arrived in the afternoon and, almost immediately, the two of us set out to the old part of town sporting narrow, cobbled pedestrian lanes. Being the oldest continuously inhabited city globally, Damascus was steeped in history, and ancient markets and beautiful mosques abounded. The markets were fascinating and the traffic horrendous. Crossing a street could solely be achieved as part of a human wall.

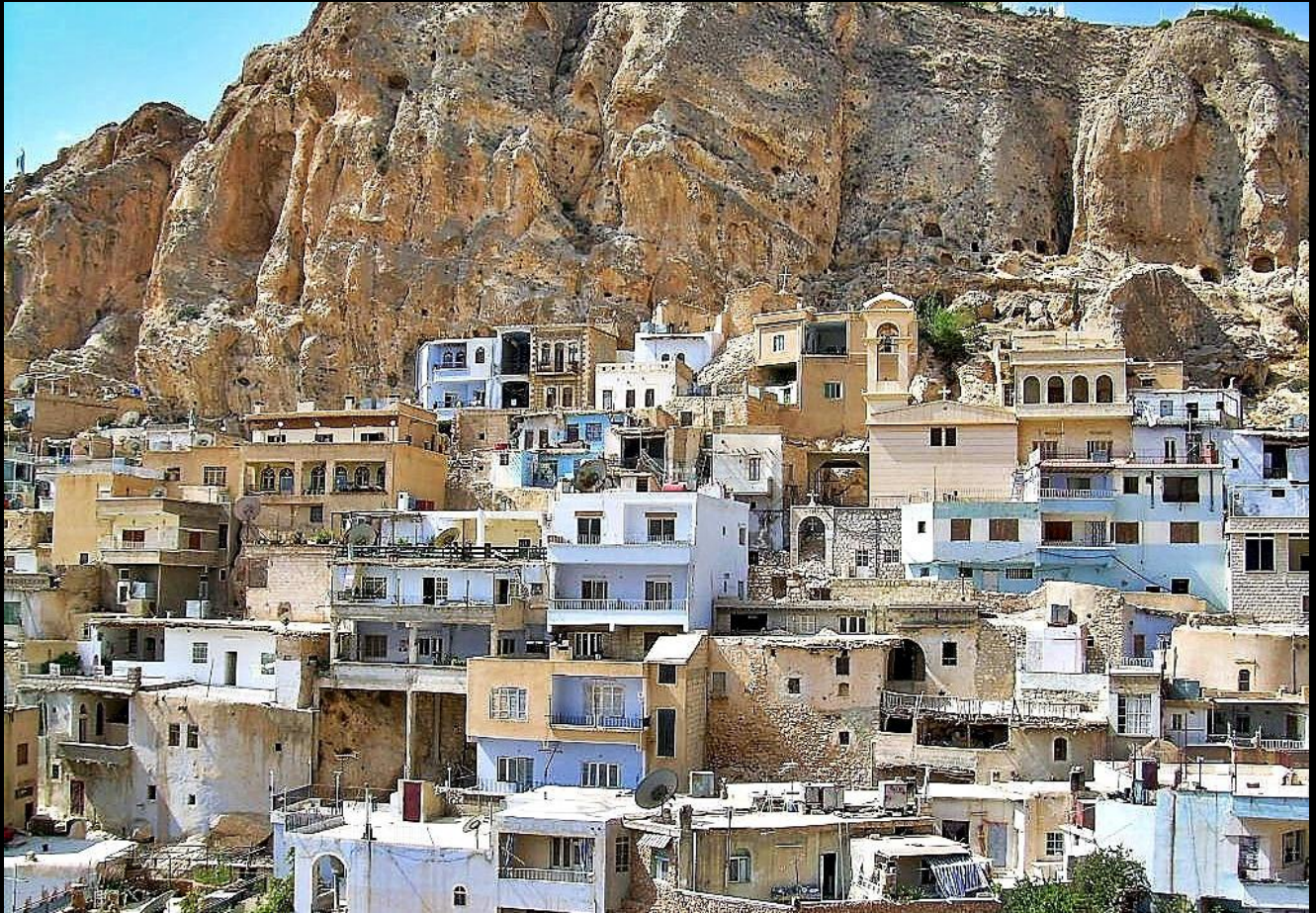


Maalula

Following breakfast, a taxi took us to the Shrine of Saida Zeinab, ten kilometres from Damascus and rumoured to contain the grave of Muhammad's granddaughter. Once done, a minibus took us to historical Maalula, roughly 56 kilometres from Damascus, where houses clung precariously to the cliffside. Maalula was one of the only places where Aramaic was still spoken, a language Jesus Christ presumably spoke.

It didn't take long to get used to Syria's lifestyle, where nothing opened until ten. Breakfast was usually served until midday. Shops closed between four and six and remained open until late, which suited my dear sister's lifestyle. It was thus late before finally turning in.

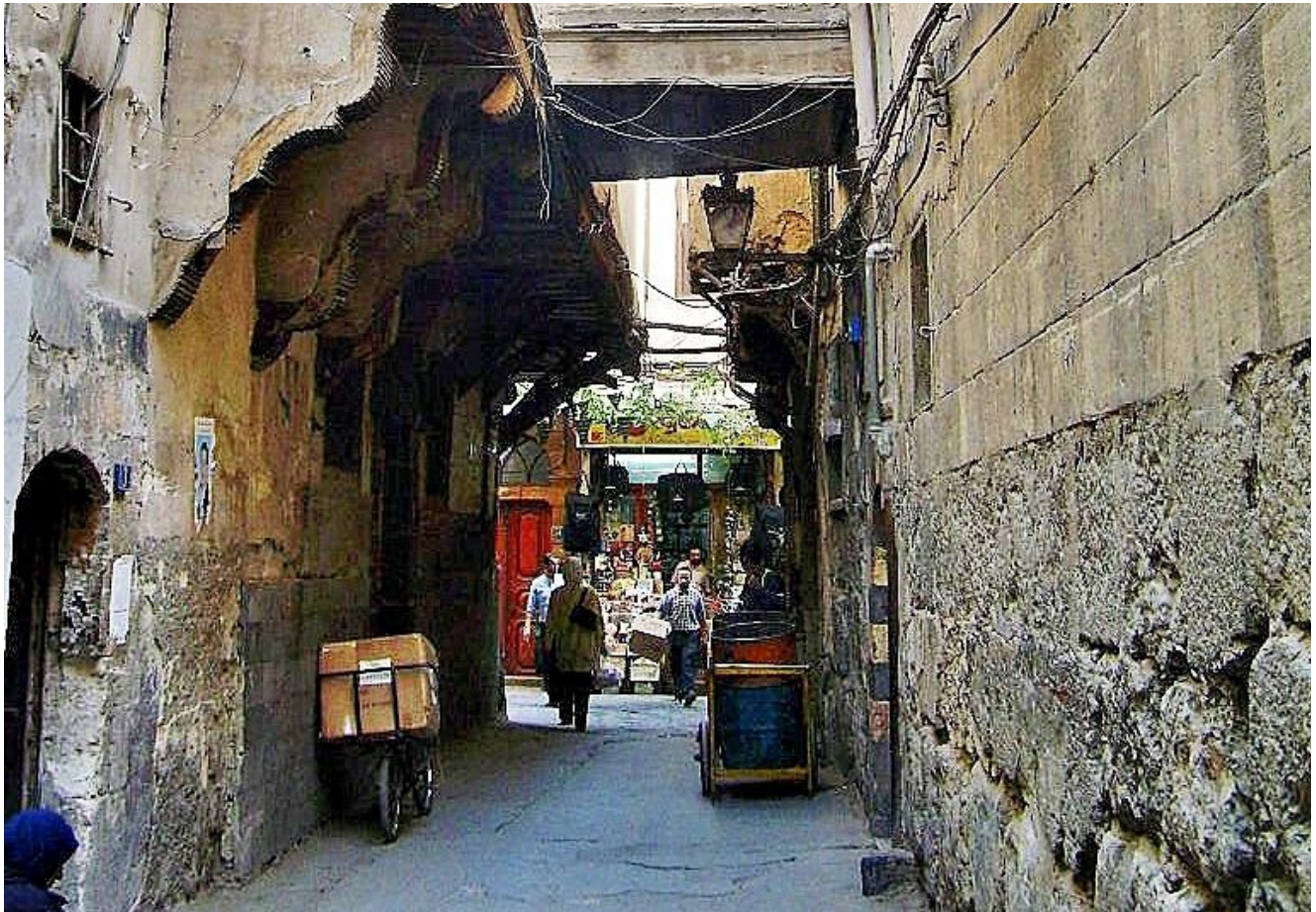




Damascus - Aleppo

An early morning bus took us to Aleppo, where historical records indicate the area has been occupied since 5,000 BC. I was excited to show Amanda the covered souqs in the old walled part of the city (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). It's said to be the largest covered market in the world. Hundreds of long narrow alleys run approximately thirteen kilometres; all jam-packed with people and goods. With its warren of stalls, the Al-Madina Souq formed the city's beating heart. Here one could find anything – from spices and traditional sweets to textiles, carpets, and the famous Aleppo soap made from olive oil. To the citizens of Aleppo, the souqs weren't simply places of commerce but also places of social gatherings to smoke, drink tea and gossip.

We sauntered around the old citadel dating to the 3rd millennium BC. The Citadel of Aleppo, right in the centre of town, sported grand vistas over old Aleppo, dating to the 10th century BC.



Aleppo - Hama

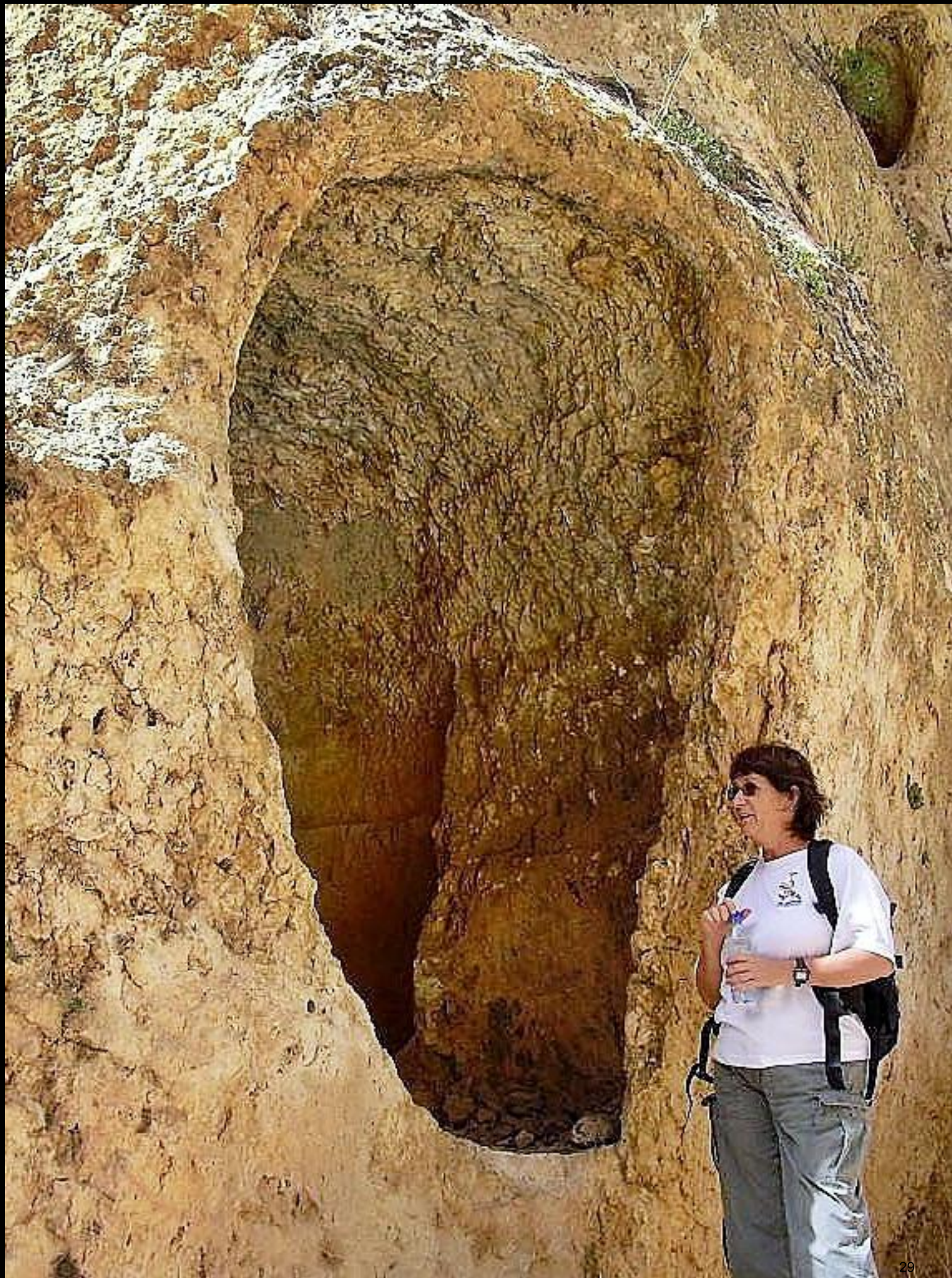
When not travelling by bicycle, getting around was much faster and we moved on to Hama. Once there, no time was wasted grabbing a taxi to the Krak des Chevaliers castle. The castle is the best-preserved medieval castle globally, first occupied by Kurdish troops in the 11th century. After snatching a few pics, we returned to Hama.

In Hama, enough time remained to view the world famous and oldest surviving water wheels (norias), dating to the medieval Islamic period. There remained six of them along the Orontes River and, amazingly, were still in working condition.











Hama – Palmyra

By morning, we were ready to roll and boarded a bus to the oasis town of Palmyra, an ancient city founded in the 3rd millennium BC. Famous as the place where Queen Zenobia ruled and for the ruins of the “Pink City”, once one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world. In those days, Palmyra was a wealthy caravan oasis due to its prominent location on the trade route between Persia, India and China. One of its principal features was a colonnaded street measuring 1,100 metres in length. On our visit, Palmyra’s ruins still rose out of the Syrian desert. It revealed the remains of roads and the temple of Ba’el, considered one of the most significant religious buildings of the 1st century AD.



Palmyra was where we befriended a chap who invited us to visit his family living in the desert. The trip involved a camel ride to a Bedouin camp. We hurriedly packed our belongings and soon rocked across the vast desert by camel. The trip took the best part of the day and we reached camp in the afternoon with sore backsides. Although interesting, the situation was slightly uncomfortable as no one understood one another. Amanda and I were unsure of what was expected of us. We foolishly smiled at them and them at us. We were clearly the topic of conversation, if understood correctly, as we received an offer of a few camels. Hahaha. It couldn't have been many as we were way past the age of receiving any reasonable offers!

By evening, we accompanied the family to a waterhole to give the camels water. On returning, a sand-bearing wind (or Khamsin) raised a wall of dust, quickly engulfing the entire region, and darkening the sky. One could see it moving in from a long way off, and by the time it reached us, visibility was reduced to only a few hundred metres.

At camp, I was surprised at how insulated the tent was. Inside, the tents were beautifully decorated with woven carpets on the walls and the floor. Amanda and I sat with the men in the main tent. At the same time, the women (complete with traditional facial tattoos) lived and cooked in separate smaller tents. This arrangement made me feel awfully uncomfortable. Once done, the food was brought in on large trays. Traditionally, the men eat first, and the women what is leftover (another awkward moment).













We were served rice topped with a chicken thigh. Being a vegetarian, I didn't want to offend and thus closed my eyes and quickly consumed the chicken thigh, hardly chewing the meat. To my hosts, this action translated as hunger and, to my horror, I was promptly given a second portion!

The next morning, the camels returned us to Palmyra. A truly unforgettable experience!

Barely enough time remained to do a small amount of shopping before resuming our bus journey to Amman, Jordan, another ancient country with a long and fascinating history.



About this Blog

This blog chronicles my cycling journey from Turkey to Damascus, where I reunited with my sister for a backpacking holiday to explore the wonders of Syria and Jordan. The route I took was just one of countless possibilities, and I acknowledge that it might not be the most optimal path available.

Daily Distances Cycled

The distances recorded may not represent the shortest routes between two points, as I occasionally took detours. However, the daily kilometres noted were accurate according to my odometer. The readings sometimes differed from distance markers and maps, occasionally overestimating or underestimating the actual distance.

Time of Year and Date

This book chronicles my cycling trip through Syria during September and October 2007. Many things may have changed since then, and the roads could be in better or worse condition now. The places where I stayed may have been upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not be as steep as described, but they certainly felt challenging at the time.

Insurance

It is essential to have a travel insurance policy that covers theft, loss, and medical issues. Be aware that some policies specifically exclude "dangerous activities," including scuba diving, motorcycling, and even trekking. While cycling is generally not considered dangerous, it is important to read the fine print of your policy.

Clothing

Since we spent most days cycling, it's crucial to invest in high-quality, padded cycling shorts. I personally cycle in regular sandals, but any comfortable footwear will suffice. In Syria, the Mediterranean climate along the coast features mild, rainy winters and hot, sunny summers. Conversely, the inland areas experience moderately cold winters and scorching summers. Don't forget to pack personal toiletries like insect repellent and anti-chafing cream. Wearing a cycling helmet is also recommended.

The Bicycle and equipment

When it comes to choosing a bicycle for your needs, the most important thing is comfort. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame equipped with Shimano Deore parts, Alex wheel rims, and Schwalbe tyres. To carry my belongings during the ride, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers, which can be a bit pricey but are definitely worth it in the long run. It's essential to know how to fix a punctured tube, and it's also convenient to have a phone holder on the handlebar for navigation purposes. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is also a must-have for carrying a camera and other items you may need throughout the day.

Recommended Further Reading

I recommend reading "Lonely Planet" for more travel information. The e-book version is usually less expensive.



About Syria (Please refer to your favourite travel guidebook or the internet for a more in-depth overview)

Capital City

Damascus is the capital of the Syrian Arab Republic; it is likely also the country's largest city, following the decline of Aleppo due to the civil war. The city is known in Syria as ash-Sham and is titled the City of Jasmine.

Currency

The Syrian Pound is the currency of Syria. The code of the Syrian pound is SYP.

Language

Arabic is the official language, but Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, English and a smitten of French are also spoken.

Religion

Historically, the region has been a mosaic of diverse faiths with a range of different sects within each of these religious communities. The majority of Syrians are Muslims, of which the Sunnis are the most numerous.

Location and Size

Syria is a country in the Middle East with direct access to the Mediterranean. The land has a total area of 185,180 km² and a total coastline of 193 km. More than half of all residents (56%) live within cities. The highest mountain peak (Hermon) is at 2,814 meters. There are direct national borders with the five neighbouring countries Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Population

The total pre-war population of Syria was around 21 million. More than half this population is now displaced from their homes, either internally within Syria or as refugees abroad. As of December 2021, there were around 6.9 million internally displaced people living in Syria. The current population is estimated at 16.27 Million.

Internet Coverage

Internet services are available but restricted.

The Civil War

Syria isn't currently entirely safe to visit due to the ongoing civil war in some regions. However, tourists can visit government-controlled areas such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Maaloula.



About the Author

Originally from Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. Her passion for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique - a MTB race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo and embarked on a journey that took her all the way to Cape Town. Upon returning, she found adjusting to her regular life surprisingly difficult and decided to continue her travels on two wheels.

In March 2007, Leana and her companion Ernest Markwood began a bike ride that turned into an around-the-world cycle ride. They started cycling together but eventually found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

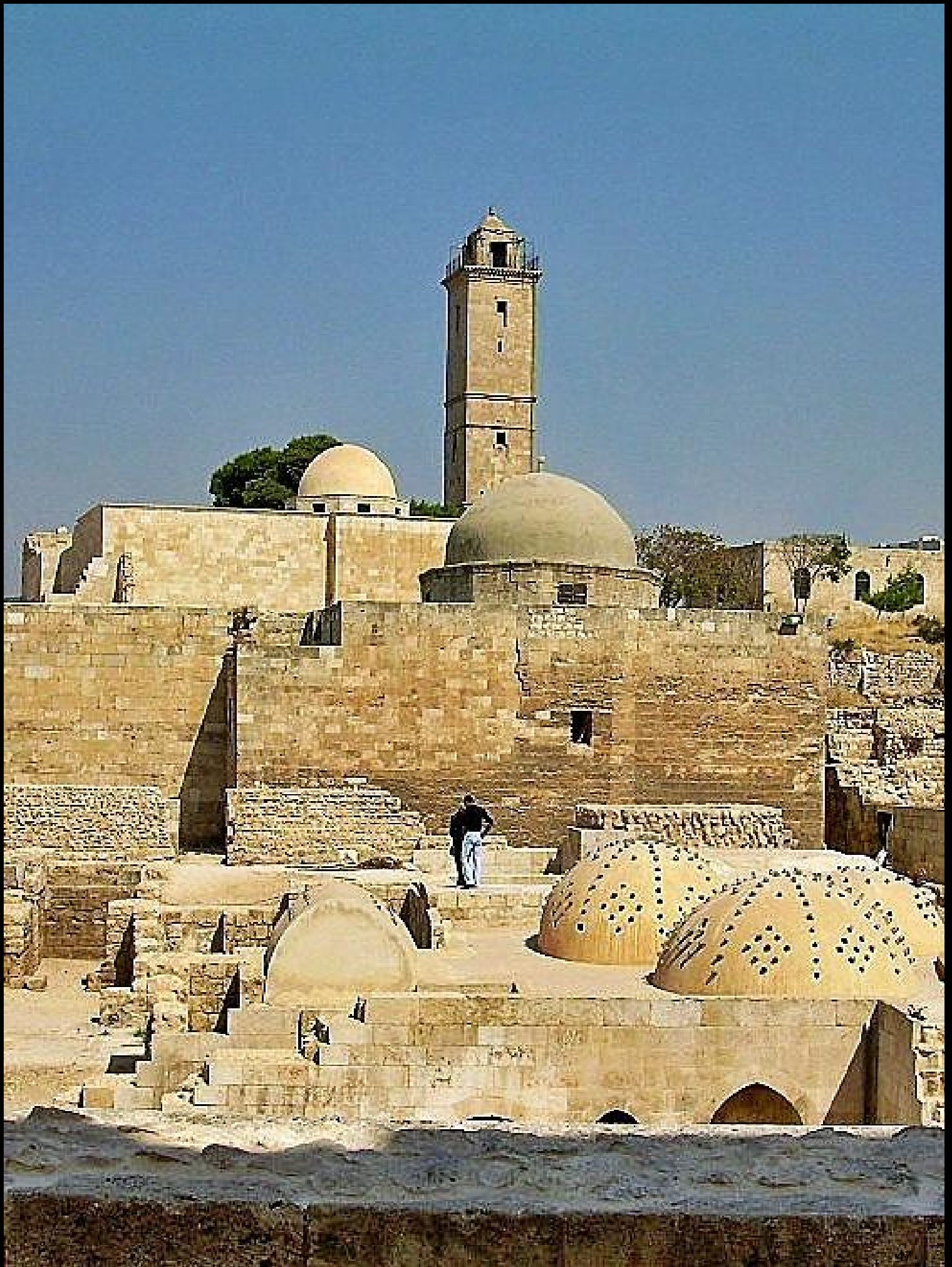
Leana has cycled across Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe, the UK, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. After Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina, and spent several years cycling through South, Central, and North America. She then visited many larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

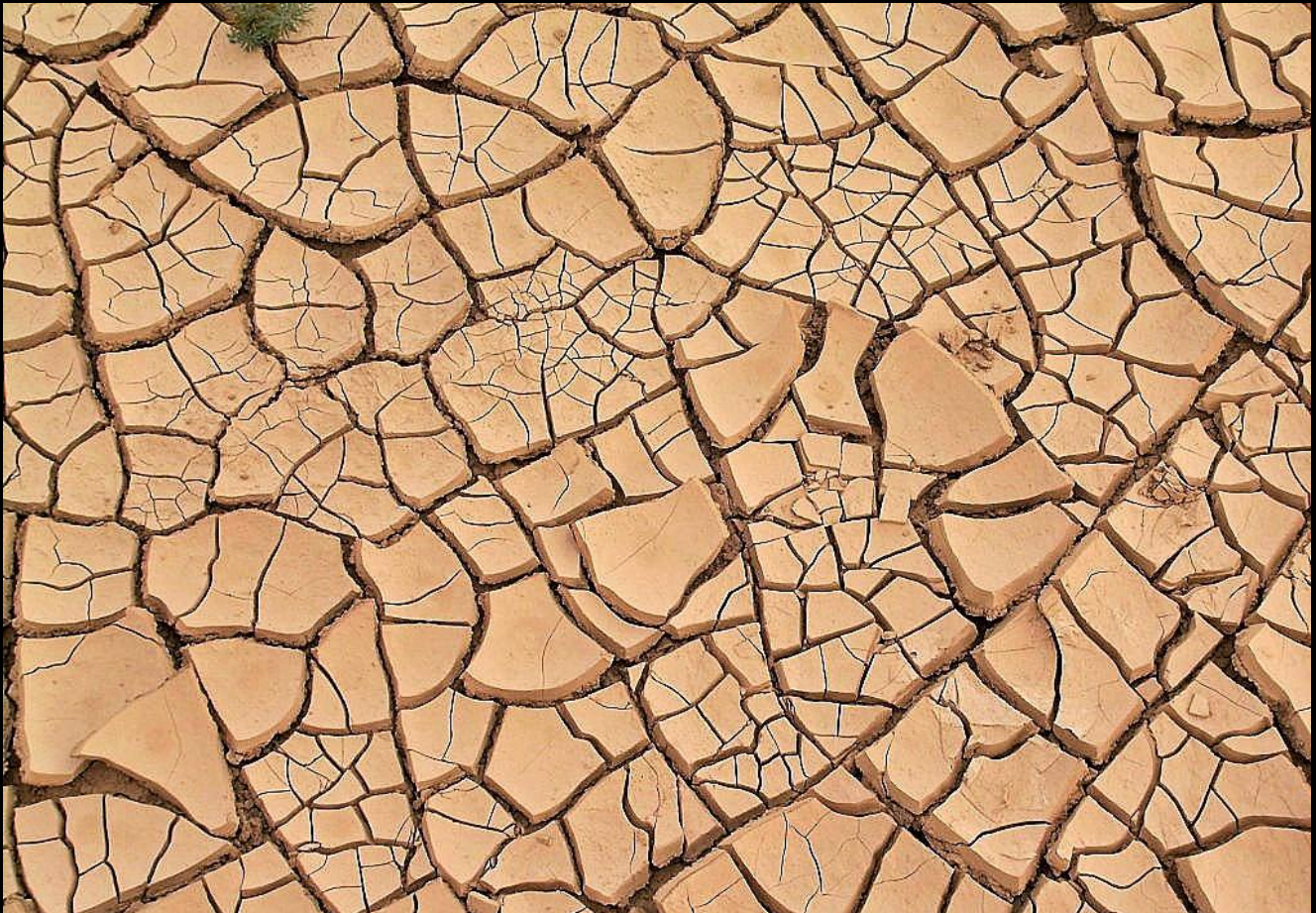
As of now, Leana finds herself back in Southeast Asia.

Picture Credits

Amanda Niemand (p3), (p26 bottom), (p31&32 bottom), (p33 bottom right), (p27), (p48 top), (p52), (p54 top)







**I love the unexpected surprises that bicycle travel
unveils. Every country offers an abundance of
revelations and new experiences.**



