

Jordan, Syria & Lebanon(Long Version) Itinerary
compiled w/ assistance of Iren Bencze

December 26 Tuesday

Depart New York/JFK to Paris on Air France. Meals and amenities on board.

December 27 Wednesday

Upon arrival at Damascus airport, assistance with formalities and transfer to your hotel for dinner. (D)

December 28 Thursday

Spend a full day touring in **Damascus**. Sightseeing includes the **Azem Palace** and its gardens surrounded by the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions; the famous **Omayyad Mosque**; the **Hamidiyye Suq** and Artisanat; and the **National Archaeological Museum**. A walk through the spice market will bring you to the Street Called Straight and the house of Annanias. This evening enjoy dinner at a spectacular Whirling Dervish show. Overnight in Damascus. (B, D)

Damascus (al-Shams, Dimashq) is the world's oldest continually inhabited city. Rising as a small village with a temple, it became the place where the Aramean leader, Rezon, established his kingdom at the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. *The National Archeology Museum* houses artifacts from c. 1800 BCE, when City States of Phoenicia become vassals under Egypt and the Assyrian capital of Shubat Enlil was established by king Shamsi-Adad I, in the north-eastern corner of Syria.

Between 333 and 332 Alexander of Macedon, one of history's most brilliant generals, conquers Syria and Palestine (Phoenicia?). Greeks reconstruct Damascus, bisected by Via Recta—"Straight Street." In 301, when Syria became part of the Seleucid Empire, Damascus was an important city.

In 103 BCE the Hashmonean ruler, Alexander Jannaeus, moved eastwards and occupied most of the Hellenistic cities east of Jordan. At the same time, Arabs were raiding from their bases in Lebanon and Upper Galilee and the inhabitants of Damascus appealed to the Nabatean king, for help. King Aretas held the city for about 13 years.

Between 633-634CE Muslim forces moved north into Syria and Palestine and though halted at the Yarmuk, they defeated Byzantine forces at Ajnadain and Pella before besieging Damascus. In 661 Mu'awiya started the Umayyad Dynasty, with its capital at Damascus. The *Umayyad Mosque* dates back to Al-Walid Ibn Abdel Malek (705-715). Between two of its pillars there is a domed shrine, the so-called Tomb of St. John the Baptist.

In 1174 Saladin, a young Kurdish officer appointed first by Nur ad-Din (son and successor of Zengi), takes Damascus. Between 1400-01 Timur (Tamerlane) sacks Damascus.

Between 1749-1752 Ottoman Governor of Damascus builds *Azem Palace (Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions)*.

In September 1918 Damascus was liberated and an Arab government was established. After the corrective movement in 1970 however, it witnessed a new renaissance period characterized by construction of roads and bridges, building of schools, hospitals and sport stadiums, setting up of public gardens and art galleries, and building international hotels and an international airport.

The *Hamidiyye Suq* begins near the Damascus Ayyoubite Citadel and it ends at the large gate of the Omayyad Mosque. It is “one of the most famous and attractive souqs in the world” (Zouhdi). It has a constant show of traditional arts.

December 29 Friday

Drive east (*151 miles*) towards the ancient of lands of Mesopotamia and the oasis city of **Palmyra**. Spend a full day exploring the magnificent site built by Queen Zenobia. Palmyra is Syria’s primary historical site and its ruins of the 2nd century AD city cover many acres. Visit the necropolis, the Cardo, the theatre, the tetrapylon and the temple to Bel. Overnight and dinner in Palmyra. (B,D)

“**Palmyra**--its slender creamy beauty rising up fantastically in the middle of hot stand. It is lovely and fantastic and unbelievable, with all the theatrical implausibility of a dream,” wrote Agatha Christie about the “city of palms” in 1946, in *Come, Tel Me How You Live*.

Palmyra was first mentioned on tablets dating back to the 19th century BCE as Tadmor (city of dates). In 64 CE, the Roman Consul Pompey took Damascus, made Syria a Roman Province, ‘liberated’ the Hellenistic cities and restored their anatomy, although they henceforth came under the aegis of Rome. Palmyra and other Decapolis cities grew in size and witnessed much rebuilding.

Palmyra became a metropolis under the reign of the ambitious 2nd century Arab queen, *Zenobia*. In 267 CE Queen Zenobia’s husband was murdered by the Romans. She went on the warpath between 269 and 270 and drove the Romans out of Palmyra and she went so far as to invade Egypt. The emperor Aurelian captured her in 272 C.E. She was eventually paraded as a prisoner in Rome.

“In the 30 years to the end of the Emperor Diocletian’s reign, Palmyra was transformed into an armed and walled strategic camp, ...,the short straw for the lonely legion standing picket at the dead end of the Roman Empire. As a trading centre, it never recovered, and though in the 6th century the Emperor Justinian strengthened the walls and several churches were built during the Byzantine period, the city was falling to ruin. Though the Umayyads built their fortress-palaces of Qasr al-Heir to the west and the east, the Arabs neglected Palmyra, except to fortify the temple of Bel in the 12th century and perhaps at the same time to build the Arab castle on the hilltop to the northeast. *The temple of Bel* is surrounded by a great blank wall, 200 m on each side. The bleak exterior hides a magnificent internal layout. Slowly the sands washed in and Palmyra was forgotten by the outside world.

Palmyra was rescued from oblivion by the book *Ruins of Palmyra* published in 1753 by Dawkins and Wood, illustrated by their companion Giovanni Borra. The room to the right of the entrance of the Palmyra Museum shows the evolution of the Palmyrene script. Learned travellers visited Palmyra throughout the 19th century, though it was the Russians who first undertook archaeological excavations in 1900, followed since by other European missions and by the Syrians themselves” (Haag 270).

The Cardo (Colonnade): “in walking from the Sanctuary of Bel to the funerary temple, a distance of 1.2 km, you are encountering the several segments of colonnades in the reverse order to which they were built” (Haag 277). “Work on Palmyra’s main colonnaded street (its decumanus) in fact began at its western end; the segment between the funerary temple and the tetrapylon was built during the first half of the 2nd century. Had it been extended in a straight line eastwards,it would have come up to the

propylaeum of the Sanctuary of Bel. But that would have meant the destruction of the pre-existing Temple of Nabu. Therefore that segment of the colonnaded street running eastwards from the tetrapylon and built during the second half of the 2nd century was angled slightly northwards. To finally reach the propylaeum, however, required a rather sharp turn southwards at some point. This was very neatly done at the monumental arch, which was constructed in such a way as to mask the awkward change of angle at that point where the main colonnaded street intersects with the processional way” (Haag 276-7).

December 30 Saturday

Depart Palmyra early this morning heading to (100 miles) **Homs**. Continue (35 miles) to **Krak des Chevaliers**. This magnificent Crusader castle is built high in the hills of the Syrian countryside. Although Kurdish in origin, this fortress was conquered in 1099 by the Knights Hospitaller who assumed control of it and created the castle visible today. It and remained their stronghold until 1271 when they were defeated by Sultan Baybars. Visit (40 miles) the norias on the Orontes River in **Hama** before continuing to (117 miles) Aleppo.

The setting is really wonderful and the walls, towers, glacis and moat are in great shape. We'll climb several levels and view the remains of some of the interiors, including chapel and dining hall.

December 31 Sunday

Spend a full day touring the many sites of **Aleppo**, including the 4th century cathedral ruins of **St. Simeon**. Sightseeing includes Aleppo's famous archaeology museum, its towering citadel, the Omayyad mosque and its colorful souk. New Year's Eve celebration at your hotel this evening. (B,D)

Aleppo's history goes back to the early 2nd millennium BC E when it appears in the Hittite archives in central Anatolia. The invasion of the Sea Peoples led to the destruction of the Hittite Empire, “whose cultural influence in northern Syria survived in the form of small Neo-Hittite states, of which Aleppo was one” (Haag 203).

The *Aleppo Archaeology Museum* contains all historical periods with emphasis on Iron Age classical material. It has a good Islamic collection. There are exquisite ivories, amulets and brooches as well. Unfortunately, signage in English is minimal.

The 55m-high natural mound upon which the towering Citadel is found, first had a religious use: the Neo-Hittites raised a temple upon it in the 10th century BCE. (It is believed to be a spot where Abraham stopped to milk his cow.) It became a citadel during the Seleucid period. As “15th century Aleppo had so grown that it entirely encircled the mound, the Citadel lost its effectiveness as a defensive bastion, and the Mamluks instead concentrated their works on building state apartments” (Haag 215).

The Great (*Omayyad*) *Mosque* was built by the Seljuks in 1092. Its “minaret is handsomely proportioned, none of its four sides decorated in quite the same way but each divided into four registers, the registers separated by finely carved *Kufic inscriptions*.”

On a previous trip, we were very frustrated that so little time was available to visit the souk. There may be more authentic, traditional, “from another century” bazaars in the

world but I don't know of any. In short, the Aleppo souq is a cultural, aromatic and auditory whirlwind.

January 1 Monday

Head south to Damascus today with stops on the way. **We hope to visit a village w/ beehive houses this day.** First stop (*31 miles*) at **Ebla** to see palace archives and other ruins. Excavations here are still ongoing. Take a short side trip (*10 miles*) to **Idlib** to view a museum of artifacts from Ebla. Then on to (*16 miles*) **Sergilla**, one of the many “dead cities” – cities that were suddenly and inexplicable deserted in the 7th century AD. End the day in (*134 miles*) **Lebanon** for dinner and overnight. (B,D)

Excavations at **Ebla** (Tell Mardikh) began in 1964. The Italian team led by Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome “discovered a great Bronze Age trading city of the late third and early second millennium” BCE. In about 2300 BCE the city “became subsidiary to the Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia and was then eliminated as a power altogether by the Hittites in about 1600 BC” (Haag 158) It is estimated to have had a population of about 30,000.

In 1975 Ebla's royal archives (an enormous cache of 15,000 cuneiform tablets) were discovered and they have aroused both scholarly and political controversy. “The problem in a nutshell is that the *archival tablets inscribed in cuneiform* mention names such as ab-ra-mu, Da-u-dum, Mi-ka-ia, Ish-ma-il and Ish-ra-il, similar enough to Abraham, David, Micah, Ishmael and Israel. Further, one tablet was claimed to list the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim and Zoar in the same order as they are found in Genesis 14:2, which was written many centuries later--though subsequently the claim was shown to be false, the names of three of the cities having been misreadings” (Haag 158).

The **Idlib** Museum displays artifacts from Ebla and a model reconstruction of the city.

In 395 CE the Roman Empire was divided into two. Syria falls to Byzantium. Henceforth, the area south of Beroia (Aleppo) prospers and flourishes for a few hundred years before being abruptly abandoned. **Serjilla** is one of the many “dead cities”--suddenly and inexplicably deserted in the 7th century. Its baths are perhaps the best preserved anywhere for the early Byzantine—although much of the decorative work—mosaics—has been plundered over the years.

January 2 Tuesday

The area we travel through today is inhabited by immigrants—from Kurdistan, more recently Armenia—and their descendants. Visit the famous Roman site of **Ba'albeck** with its magnificent ruins. Then travel to (*29 miles*) **Zahle** in the mountains before heading back via **Anjar**, the only remaining Omayyad site and the hunting palace of its rulers, to (*42 miles*) Damascus. (B,D)

Ba'albeck (or Heliopolis, City of the Sun) was in classical times an important caravan station connecting Tripoli to Damascus and Beirut to Palmyra, but its rise to grandeur came with the construction of Roman temples during the first three centuries CE.

Anjar (Haouch Mousa) of the Bekaa Valley possesses the only significant remains of the Omayyad period in Lebanon. Archeologists have excavated and restored here a 7th- and 8th-century town with palaces, baths, mosques, shops and houses.

Zahle is a mostly Roman Catholic (and Maronite) town on the slopes of Mount Lebanon to the west. It has a “statue of the Virgin set on a high concrete tower: in one hand she holds the Christ, in the other a bunch of grapes” (Haag 347).

January 3 Wednesday

After breakfast head south (*90 miles*)towards the Jordanian border. En route visit **Bosra**, the black basalt city with the most preserved Roman theatre in the world. After crossing the border into Jordan, stop (50 miles) to visit **Ajloun** to visit the El-Rabad Castle built by the army of Saladdin to stop the flow of the Crusaders. Then a brief(*7 miles*) journey to one of the most preserved Roman cities in the world, **Jerash**. Amongst the ruins you will walk the colonnaded street of the Cardo, visit the baths and the theatre, and explore the temple of Apollo. Continue to (*75 miles*) Amman. (B,D)

Bosra was first mentioned in the annals of Tuthmosis III (1479-25 BCE). Over a thousand years later it was briefly capital (CE 70-106) of the Nabatlean kingdom, previously centered on Petra in Jordan. But it was the Romans who brought Bosra to eminence, when the Emperor Trajan extended direct rule southwards in 106 CE. Bosra became the capital of the new province of Arabia, whose calendar began with the date of the city’s conquest (Haag 111). It is a black basalt city with the best preserved Roman theatre in the world.

Jerash (Gerasa) is acknowledged as one of the best preserved Roman cities of the world. Visitors can still walk on the 800 m colonnaded street of the Cardo, intersected by two side streets. The round colonnaded Forum is lovely. the Theater is excellent and the Temple of Diana has elegant and lofty columns. Like the other Roman Cities of the Decapolis, Jerash owed its importance to trade.

The wholly Islamic castle of **Ajloun** (Qal’ at ar-Rabadh) was built in 1184 by Izz ad-Din Usama, a nephew of Saladdin, to stop the flow of Crusaders. An inscription on the long South-West Tower says it was added under Sultan Baybars in 1262-63CE (Rollin 77).

Amman (Philadelphia), the capital of Jordan, is a modern city, with clean, wide boulevards and predominantly white buildings.

January 4 Thursday

This morning visit remains of ancient Philadelphia, citadel and Jordan’s National Museum of Archaeology. Then we head south along the Kings’ High-way towards Petra. En route, stop at (*20 miles*) **Ma’daba**, best known for its Byzantine mosaics particularly that of an ancient map of the Holy Land. Continue to **Mt. Nebo** with its commanding panoramic view of the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Allegedly the burial site of Moses, on a clear day you may catch a glimpse of Jerusalem in the distance. Your final stop (*44 miles*) before arriving in Petra is **Kerak**, a crusader’s castle nestled on a high cliff in the Jordanian countryside. (*87 miles*) Dinner and overnight at your hotel in Petra. (B,D)

Mt. Nebo (Siyagha) is possibly the most revered site in Jordan. It is allegedly the location of Pisgah, place of death and burial of Moses. Early Christians built a small

church around 393 CE, and this was gradually expanded. By the 7th century, it was a Byzantine complex to which pilgrims came from far and wide (JTB). Its bronze memorial of a snake on a cross was made by Gian-Paolo Fantoni of Florence. “It symbolizes the serpent lifted up by Moses in the desert, [as] well as the crucifixion of Jesus” (JTB).

Kerak (Charachmoba) Castle lies in the biblical land of Moab and was a Moabite stronghold long before the Crusaders built the castle for which it is famous today. Its biblical name is Kir-haraseth (II Kings 3:25) and it features as the walled city of Charachmoba on the Madaba mosaic map (Rollin 160).

January 5 Friday

Today is dedicated to the exploration of the Red Rose City of **Petra**. Petra is a Nabatean city built in the 1st century AD. Begin at the picturesque Treasury before heading into the city to visit the theatre, the tombs of the Nobles, funeral halls, the baths, and finally, if you have the energy, you can climb the mountain top to see the Monastery. Overnight in Petra. (B,D)

Petra, considered by many scholars the 8th wonder of the world, is a Nabatean city built in the 1st century CE. Carved entirely into the naturally pink rocks, its remains include temples, Roman theatres, monasteries, houses and roads. But its best known features are the rock-hewn tombs. Its main entrance, originally marked by a Roman archway, can be approached through a narrow 1.2 km long gorge hemmed in by 100 m cliffs.

El Khazneh, The Treasury, carved in the first century CE as a tomb for a Nabatean king, is “the monument that dominates Petra. [...It] appears dramatically at the end of the siq.

The theatre was originally built by the Nabateans. It had 7,000 seats. The Romans enlarged it and used it. The tombs of the Nobles (or The Royal Tombs) are perhaps the most impressive of the 500 tombs in Petra. The largest among them, the Urn Tomb, is thought to have been carved around 70 CE, and altered in the mid-fifth century to be used as a Byzantine church.

January 6 Saturday

Visit (*50 miles*) **Wadi Rum**, the desert of Lawrence of Arabia, and its awesome moon-like landscape and ancient cave paintings. Return to (*212 miles*) Amman via the Desert highway. Stop for dinner at Kan Zaman, a handicraft village founded by Queen Noor. (B,D)

January 7 Sunday

Mid-morning flight from Amman back to the U.S. (B)