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MIDDLE EAST ITINERARY / ROUTE INTRODUCTION

Your routes in Jordan and Syria on a Backroads of Asia trip are dictated primarily, as always, by the itinerary. That means that on The Cradles of Our Civilisation sector in Syria you must visit Aleppo, Palmyra and Damascus. On the East of Suez sector you must visit Crac des Chevaliers and Damascus.

You will have more time in both Syria and Jordan on the Cradles sector. You must bear in mind that there will be a number of people doing a Backroads who will probably not want to see everything twice and whilst the combined itineraries EOS and COC, demand that they see Damascus on both runs, they need not (though they may enjoy to) see anything else twice. This must be balanced by the fact that EM's not doing the whole Backroads trip may have to miss out on something. It is a trick to strike the right balance, especially in Jordan, but as a rule stick to the itinerary.

On the Cradles sector you will have approximately 7 nights in Syria. Avoid doing Crac des Chevaliers, you've done plenty of castles, so spend them in Aleppo, driving through the desert to Palmyra (or possibly out along the Euphrates to Lake Assad, the ancient city of Ar Rassafah, camp at Halabiye and so return to Palmyra via Dayr Ez Zoor) then onto Damascus for 2 or 3 nights depending on the weekend / visas / truck health etc.

On the East of Suez sector you will have about 4 days so Damascus for 2 days, Crac des Chevaliers en route to say Aleppo (everyone likes it). On a westbound trip you will cover the longer itinerary coming north through Syria on the Cradles sector etc.

In Jordan a Cradles trip gives you about 6 nights in Jordan and an East of Suez 5. On the Cradles you must include Amman, Jerash, the Dead Sea, Petra and Aqaba. On an East of Suez just Aqaba, Petra and Amman. One other spot you will invariably visit at some stage is Wadi Rum. It is difficult not to visit the Dead Sea twice as everyone wants to go there, so perhaps it is best to do Wadi Rum on the Cradles trip on which there are fewer deserts and is more time.

Possibility:

On the Cradles: Jerash, Dead Sea via Amman, Showback Castle (1/2 Kings Highway, 1/2 Desert Highway), Petra, Wadi Rum to Aqaba through the desert.

On the East of Suez: Aqaba, maybe quick stop at Wadi Rum for lunch, Petra, Showback, Amman via Dead Sea and straight to border via Amman.

One more point to consider:

The Egypt itinerary is now pre-booked/arranged with Hamis Travel in Cairo for all 3 groups who run it together (Cradles/East of Suez/Backroads). It involves the overland group arriving late the night before the first day of the new group, ie. an eastbound Backroads of Asia group will have an East of Suez contingent joining in Cairo (it will lose the Cradles group on its return to Cairo at the end of the Egypt sector). The itinerary now gives 2 days in Cairo at the start and leaves time for you checking administration before leaving.

BEWARE

In Moslem countries and in India, the girls will be subjected to numerous unwanted harassment from the local men, so advise them to take appropriate precautions so as avoid any nasty situations arising I.E proper dress - headscarves at ALL times in Iran and long sleeves and pants elsewhere. If staying in cheap hotels, lock the door when they are inside; never go to the toilet alone - even when rough camping; don't sleep alone away from the group when rough camping or in campsites; don't let a man you don't want to talk to induce you into a conversation - its quite acceptable for a woman in a Moslem country to ignore or be rude to a man who provides unwanted attention. A few simple precautions can prevent nasty incidents occurring.

General History

Syria remains one of the hardest line Arab countries although visiting it or passing through it is no problem for visitors. The civil strife in the Lebanon and continuing friction with Israel have recently taken their toll in Syria and the internal situation, always a little uneasy, is now fraught.

History

Historically Syria included the whole Mediterranean Arab world - Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and modern Syria. It was an important Phoenician trading post and later an equally important part of the Roman, Persian, Egyptian and Babylonian Empires - and for that matter anyone else who was in the empire building business. Finally it ended up as part of Ottoman Turkey and got dished out to France (along with the Lebanon) when it broke up after WWI. This event caused considerable local anger as the region had been independent for two years from the close of WWI until it was unilaterally handed over to France in 1920.

The French never had much luck with their Syria-Lebanon mandate and during WWII agreed that it should become independent. Typically they proved reluctant to actually grant that promised independence after the war but Syria finally did achieve it in 1946. A period of some political instability and a brief flirtation with the idea of a United Arab Republic followed but during the '70s a more flexible, though still tough, attitude has been adopted.

Facts

The Syrian population of approximately six million occupies an area of 182,000 square km. The economy is principally agricultural as the land bordering the Mediterranean is fertile - it becomes progressively less so inland, eventually sloping off into a barren desert. Syria also has some limited oil resources.

Climate

Syria has a Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters close to the coast. Inland it gets progressively drier and more inhospitable.

ALEPPO (Halab)

North of Damascus and Homs and near the border with Turkey, there are a lot of things to do in this interesting town. There is a good museum, the souk is superb and there are many caravanserais. It's easy to spend days wandering around the souk. You can also have tea in the Baron Hotel of Lawrence of Arabia fame.

PALMYRA (Tadmor)

On the route across the desert from Damascus to the Euphrates (Furat), Palmyra was at one time a Greek outpost of considerable importance. It was an Assyrian caravan town over a thousand years BC but only enjoyed its later Greek period of glory for two centuries.

In 106 AD it was annexed by the Roman empire and became a centre of unsurpassed wealth. In 226 the Romans lost it and in 241, following its recapture, it was sacked and subsequently has been deserted. The ruins are superb.

DAMASCUS

Damascus is probably the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. It was a centre as long ago as 5000 BC. Later it was a Persian capital, fell to Alexander the Great, became a Greek centre and then a major Roman city. In 635 AD, with Byzantine power on the decline, Damascus fell to the Moslems and became an important Arab city. In 1400 it was sacked by the Mongols and then had centuries of slow decline under the Mamluks and the Ottomans before eventually passing to French mandate and eventual independence. Today Damascus has regained some of its former glory and has a population of about a million.

Most of the city walls and gates are still standing in the old biblical part of the city. Souk el Hamidiyeh is the foremost bazaar with a covered walkway of shops and stalls. Right at the back of the souk you come out at the Omayyade Mosque, the most important Moslem shrine. Next to this is the Kasr el Aazemn, an old palace which has been converted into a museum. Further into the old city is the Byzantine church of Marie (in Kannisat el Mariamyeh) and further still the Chapel of St. Paul (according to the Bible Paul was cured of blindness on the Damascus road). The tomb of John the Baptist is also supposed to be in the old city. Damascus is a very pretty city (especially compared to the rest of the Middle East) with lots of trees and parks. The heavy Syrian atmosphere is always there.

SYRIA

GENERAL INFORMATION

GMT + 3 hours

Banks - 0800-1400, closed Fridays. Insurance - On border - Cost approx US\$ 67.00

Shopping - Difficult to get fresh vegetables and meat on Friday (Jordan similar).

Language - Some French and English

Roads in towns - Good tarmac. Good signposting on roads to major centres but poor signposting

ROUTE: See the Syria route planner 1.

ALEPPO (See map No. 3)

Distance - Approx 40 km from border

Driving Time - 1.5 hours

Money Change - Open every day (including Fridays) near tourist office. Open until 7.00 pm each night. Best to change money in Aleppo, jewellery shops. Getting difficult to change money in town as people are scared. Tourist Office Guides. - Abdulah or Ahmed Mallah - should give 48 to US\$ 1.00 The barman in the Baron Hotel will also change money

Banks - Closed Friday and after 2 pm

Camping - Camping Kaddour (See map No. 2). SP 120 P/P.

Alternative cheap hotels on Al Ma'ari Street an Behind (S£ 150 per person per night). Post Hotel - Yamouk in Al Ma'ari St - very close to tourist info car park, where you can leave truck.

Excellent restaurant for group meal Alkindi in one of the streets parallel to Al Ma'ari st. behind Yamouk Hotel at clocktower end of street. Wine, Beer, Spirits

Citadel - 200sp entrance fee, good views of city, closed on Tuesdays.

Bazaar - Excellent! Not touristy, very old. Has good vegetable/meat market

Turkish bath - Excellent, near citadel - different days for men and women - quite expensive but worth it if you have time to spare

St Simeons Church - Same distance north of town, meant to be good if you have lots of time.

Telex & Fax - Tourist Hotel, post office square. Freindly and helpful.

Telex only - Amir Palace, not so helpful.

Workshops, tools, spares - Many shops behind the Baron Hotel, between it and the clocktower. Cheap hotels and eating houses are also in this area.

Parking - Suggest you drive up to the citadel - can usually park up here, and its handy for shopping in the souk (entrance 300m from citadel) and turkish bath.

***** NB FAX GROUP LIST AND ARRIVAL DETAILS FOR RAMTHA BORDER *** TO MR ZIAD & TELEX HIM IN AQUABA TO ARRANGE THE FERRY TICKETS.

ALEPPO-PALMYRA 1. via Desert Route - allow two days, (should only take 1.5)
2. via Hama & Homs (less than 1 Day)
3. via Lake Assad, Ar Rasafar, Halabye, & Deir es Zoor.

1. DESERT ROUTE - See map No. 4.

Leave Aleppo 10 km towards Ar Raqqa, turn right to As Sfire, cross railway and ask for Khanaser, go through Khanaser. About 2 km turn left onto dirt track. Hold a compass bearing of 160 degrees if you have one but there is no need. Head south of south east and most importantly ask locals at any camps you may pass for Tadmor (Palmyra) Spot radio tower, go under power lines up hill to Esriye - approx 110 kms from Aleppo. Hellenistic ruin on RHS. You may well miss Esriye - don't worry the trick is to find the gap through the hills.

About 27 kms south of Esriye the way should veer east and even north of east a little before veering gradually to the south again (see map). You should be asking for Waddi Mwrah (Mera) which is the route through the hills. Approx 80 km from Esriye cut through hills, across various creek beds, past lake on LHS. 1 hour to Palmyra from Lake. Generally, keep clear on the distance you have travelled (tricky!) and ask a lot for Tadmor.

Shopping - do prior for 2 days. Fuel + water tanks full.

2. HAMA

Giant water wheels. (See map No. 5)

From here

a. Take road to Selemiya, Christian majority. Road gradually deteriorates to tracks and desert to Palmyra. Stop each junction and check way.

b. Hama-Homs. Nothing very attractive about Homs. For Palmyra take road to Damascus on outskirts of Homs is large roundabout - turn left. Hama to Palmyra via Homs takes approx 4 1/2 hours.

3. LAKE ASSAD - AR RASSAFAH - HALABYE - DEIR ES ZOOR

This route is excellent for the Cradles sector, and you can come back up the west side on the EOS so that the Backroads people dont get the same thing twice.

Driving time - Aleppo - Lake Assad - 3hrs

Camping - Rough camp approx 145 ks east of Aleppo. Just before a railway bridge over the road, turn left. Follow this down to the lake. Can also camp near to Rasafeh - lovely at sunset to walk around the ruins.

Can turn right on a gravel track/new road before you reach the slipway and follow it over a causeway onto a headland. Take the main road up over the hill to a car parking area. Wonderful view and swimming but exposed in cold weather and might get busy during holidays. Looks like they are making a park. Now has barrier but if you are friendly they may show you in. Otherwise plenty of other space.

LAKE ASSAD - HALABYE VIA AR RASAFAH (not Raqqa/ Pass close)

Driving time - Assad - Rassafah 1hr (Ancient ruins of walled city in the desert). Look for the way into the huge underground storage rooms in the southwest corner.

Driving time - Rassafah - Halabye 2.5 hrs

Take turning off the main Aleppo road to Halabye & Zalabye and a few Ks to ancient walls
Spend a lazy afternoon swimming in the Euphrates and exploring the ruins and camp?

Alternative - can desert drive through to the Palmyra road by carrying straight on at Rasafeh if you want - easy
2WD OK.

HALABYE - PALMYRA VIA DEIR ES ZOOR

Driving time - 5 hrs

PALMYRA

Easternmost point of the Roman Empire. An oasis town. Roman streets, temples, amphitheatre and castle on hill.

Guide - Khaled Mohammed - very good. Ph 407, contact from Zenobia Hotel or ask for him at the temple of Bel - SP 200 p/p entry fee and Tower Tombs SP 100 p/p - Approx 480 Syrian Pounds = US\$ 10 per group.

Museum - Worth approx. one hour.

Camping - Behind Zenobia Hotel. 150 sp /head

Outside shower/toilet. Has become rather expensive. Rough camp amongst tower tombs or near city ruins within easy walking distance of the Meridien Hotel's cocktail bar!

Rough camp in desert behind Arab Castle, just follow the new tar road out of town - v. peaceful.

Sulphur springs Meridien Hotel, ask at reception. The public springs are cheaper but rather crowded. The hotel springs don't cost much and are easier for the girls. Can also use pool and excellent hot showers for S£ 200.

Then ajourn to the cocktail bar -

A1.PALMYRA-DAMASCUS

Distance - 245kms

Driving Time - 4 hours

Roads - O.K. tarmac, bit bumpy in places.

Watch your temp Guage - long very gentle hill that looks flat, but your bedford will tell you otherwise!

KRAC DES CHEVALIER (East of Suez only)

From Homs head west towards Tartous on bypass. Turn right small sign Hossn (can see castle on hill). Follow road through small villages. Very steep up to castle, open 8.00am to 5.00pm (1/2 hour before sunset). Totally preserved crusader castle, inhabited by locals until the 1930s. Overtaken by French and renovated.

Entrance 200SP

Camping - Past castle at Round Table restaurant for SP 50 P/P and 25 SP for shower. In winter can camp in room downstairs.

Manager Akram very friendly. Beer available

Group meal at SP 175 P/P - excellent value and great food

- St. George's Monastery - Return to road junction at the bottom of the hill, turn left, can camp in stables adjacent.

Entrance - 200 SP P/P. Guide 500 SP for whole group. Excellent guide "Walid", ask at castle entrance or in restaurant at the top. Price neg. but definately worth it.

DAMASCUS (See map No. 6)

Camping - 5 km north of city centre heading into town from north on motorway on RHS main road. Look for signpost on right "camping & swimming pool". Camping New Kaboun. Very secure, showers, run by Egyptians. Small swimming pool.

Can arrange fresh bread in the morning. Now there are 2 campsites next to each other and they are cutting each others throats regarding prices. Camping cost 150 SP/ head quite expensive, but very nice clean loos, hot showers, helpful manager and good place for truckwash and repairs. Use Camping new Kaboon, the second one (closest to Damascus.)

Might consider a hotel in town. Can organise this through Kiwan if you book in advance.

This is a good place to get starter motors, injector pumps etc repaired - the manager of the campsite will show you where to go.

Steam clean just outside camp 200m to left.

Theres also electricians, windscreen repairers etc who come to camp and do repairs.

Be sure to order delicious real bread the night before, from camp manager - he can also get eggs and basic foods - no beer at campsite.

Money - Can change money for driver at campsite with manager.
Better rate in town.

Gas - Fill up at campsite 150 Sp.

Agent - Yassar Kiwan
S.T.T.A.(Syrian Travel and Tourism Agency)/Allied Tours
El-Marjeh Square, P.O.box 4227
Damascus
Tel: (00963 11) 225673/221888/2217294 or 2239715
Tlx: 411345 KIWAN SY
Fax: 00963 - 11 - 2245241

Extremely helpful for anything you need in Damascus and border entries into Syria.

Note - Kiwan charges a lot to use his Telex- better to go to public office.

Pakistan Embassy - Open for put in 9.00-11.00am and collect 3.00pm. Closed
Fri, Sat, Mon.

Egyptian of Embassy. - Kiwan has forms. I form + 1 photo Syrian Pounds 750. Kiwan can give you the address
Put In 09.00 P/U 14.00 same day. No need for all the group to go in, just one person. No problems, v. helpful and you can then save Aqaba for the beach.

Main sights - Bazaar, Palace (Kasr el Aazen), Mosque (Jaameh el Omayyade) and museum.

Parking - In large carpark between Telecommunications office and bazaar

Mail Stop - Poste Restante in P.O. near parking

Shopping - Good market near bazaar
- Canvas bazaar good for tent and equipment repairs

- Group Meal clean and - Excellent Syrian meal in small restaurants off Marjeh square - try Al Arabi - cheap and friendly. Have a beer at the bar in Al Siyaha hotel just over the road (side entrance, up the stairs) good sleazey atmosphere. See the lonely planet food section.
- Possible to book - ask Kiwan, Ali Baba Restaurant. Use Kiwan's name should be able to get good group meal for 250 sp/ head.
- Repairs - Many workshops/spare parts close to camp, all very helpful
- CASSETTES - NAI. Ask Kiwan for directions. \$2.20 each, CD recorded on Maxell.

Shop is in Shaalan st. walk or get a taxi + free T-Shirt for driver.

Good to contact Telstar Travel in Amman to arrange West Bank or Egypt Ferry tickets. (See page).

Also good to contact Hamis in Cairo to confirm your arrival date at Nuweiba and transfer to Cairo and hotel bookings at Fontana. Important to go over the itinerary with Hossam (Hamis Travel), ie dates, times, train bookings & hotel vouchers etc. at some stage. Don't forget that group members ending in Cairo will require transfer back to Cairo from Nuweiba/St Catherines.

DAMASCUS-JORDAN BORDER (DERAA)

Distance - 135 km

Driving time - 2.5 / 3 hrs

From parking turn right. At city gate turn right. Follow narrow road around and where road divides go right still following the main drag. At T junction turn right. 100m to r'about, take second exit (dual).

At first major crossroads turn left. Follow to large square about under flyover.

G.S.O. then follow to main r'about. G.S.O. for a few ks until you spot large exit to right now marked Autostrade.

Better idea - get a map from Kiwan. You will have to take the last turning off the autostrade to get to Der'a.

There is not yet a border crossing on the new road.

Group visa available on border for groups of 10 people or more.

** N.B. Must telex Telstar, AQABA before arrival and fax a pax list with your arrival date and time. Mr Ziad charges all inclusive price of \$US 10.00 per person + US\$ 25 for truck when entering from Ramtha/Der'a (and US\$ 5.00 when entering at Aquaba). This should include the tip for Ibrahim, the tourist policeman who will have to help you get the group visa at Ramtha if Mr Ziad doesn't send a man of his own. Ziad will send Ibrahim a fax of the group list with a telstar stamp on it which is required for the visa.

BOSRA if you have time, just before border, turn east - excellent amphitheatre.

Accomm Can also stay in the Youth Hostel inside the Citadel 100 SP per person. Excellent spot for night before the border

DIESEL Diesel is cheaper and better quality in Jordan, so don't worry about filling up in Syria - in fact Syrian diesel is often contaminated - suggest leaving Jordan full and top up in Syria before going to Turkey.

BORDER

SYRIA - do carnet in building on east side. Customs will want to check the carnets at the channels before allowing you through. Park up hill next to "Passengers" building and get passports stamped.

JORDAN - (Al Ramtha) Customs

Passports stamped - still charging Brits for visas 10.75 Dinar Diesel tax 80 JD

Insurance 21 JD

Entry Permit/Customs duties 8 JD

If you have 5 or more you will get a group visa which is free for all. (Charge made of US 10.00 per head by Ziad though payable to Ziad in Aqaba).

If Ziad's man is not there you will be approached by a guy from the tourist police/office who should have a copy of the group list (which you faxed to Ziad) with a Telstar stamp on it. He will organise the group visa as well as do the carnets, diesel tax, insurance etc. They should not expect a tip for their services since Ziad is already paying it. If he hasn't payed it you should pay no more than 20 JD. (outrageous!) which Ziad will reimburse you for in Aqaba. Charge large commission on T/C's as they do it per cheque.

N.B. Group visa fee of US\$ 10 P/P charged by Telstar in Amman and US\$ 5 P/P charged by Telstar in Aqaba when coming from Egypt, are now payable by the group, as per new pre-dept info (Check Yours).