

# Travel



# GURU

by Owain Raw-Rees

with its variety a testament to the traditions of the city's various ethnic and religious minorities. Local cooks serve particularly tasty versions of kebab – a seasonal variety has a sauce of fresh cherries, kibbe with sumac and quince, the traditional and the stuffed vegetables. To be recommended is muhammara, a spicy paste eaten like hummus but made of hot pepper, pomegranate juice and ground walnuts. Pistachios are used in many sweets - rolled in dough and soaked in syrup, or embedded in sweet gelatin.

- **Sightseeing**

On a fleeting visit your priorities must be the Citadel and the Souk both conveniently co-located. The Citadel is a large medieval fortified palace in the centre of the old city and it is considered to be one of the oldest and largest castles in the world. The occupation of the hill on which the citadel sits dates back at least to the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. Subsequently it has had many occupiers including the Greeks, Byzantines and the Ottomans. More recently during the French Mandate, 1920-45 soldiers continued to be stationed in the citadel. The bulk of the construction visible today is thought to originate from the Ayubid period, of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. A modern amphitheatre was constructed on a section of an unexcavated surface of the citadel in 1980 to hold events and concerts. Recently a number of conservation projects are being undertaken primarily led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in collaboration with the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities.

As an ancient trading centre Aleppo has probably the best preserved and active souk in the Middle East and on entering it near the citadel the main thoroughfare of the souk continues well over a kilometer to the Bab Antakya – the Antioch Gate which was the western gate of the old walled city. Parts of the souk date from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the souk remains a focal point for local business and trade. It is a shoppers paradise and whilst there is the occasional hard sell in general it is a wonderful place and a must to visit.



- **Souvenirs**

- Clothing – gutras, scarves, shawls, pashminas of every colour and quality. Locally manufactured cotton sarongs for the bath.
- Fabrics and textiles - a huge selection of cotton and silk embroidered table cloths of all colours and sizes, as well as a great selection of carpets and kilims.
- Metal work - daggers with damascene blades, engraved brass and chased copper work, also brass and copper inlaid with silver geometric patterns and Arabic inscriptions.
- Silver - a good selection of locally manufactured jewellery - very little old jewellery is available, however there are a number of modern jewellers producing attractive and original items.
- Soap - locally made natural olive soap made 90% of olives and 10% of bay laurel and available in varying degrees of quality and price.
- Woodwork - all sorts of items ranging from boxes to furniture inlaid with mother of pearl and fine woods.

If you stay for a longer period your hotel can organise drivers on a daily basis to take you out of the city to the surrounding countryside and visit such sites as Qala'at Samaan to the north of Aleppo being the remains of the basilica where the saint Simon Stylites spent nearly forty years on top of a pillar. To the south the dead cities being a series of abandoned Byzantine towns and villages, such as Serjlla, from the fifth century A.D.