



A Weekend in Damascus

are eight luxury converted suites. Rooms are individual and unique; furnished with style, using locally sourced materials. Set around the central courtyard, wicker chairs beckon, fountains gurgle and citrus trees provide shade. It is an oasis of calm and tranquillity. Step outside its doors and you will immediately be within minutes of the rambling streets and ancient culture that the old city, with all its noise and bustle, has to offer. The Manager is a charming lady called May Mamarbachi. She speaks perfect English, and along with her team, is more than happy to offer advice; book trips, restaurants whatever is required. For those interested we stayed in the Ibn Sina suite, and two nights' accommodation plus airport transfer came to 206.00 pounds sterling for this twin room. Book early to avoid disappointment.

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CUISINE

For fast eats, shwarma and falafel stalls abound. For more formal dining I recommend a wonderful restaurant called ARRANCIA; "The Orange Tree" just off Straight Street. It has a lovely roof top restaurant with fantastic food. The lamb in cherry sauce was especially good. Dessert comes in the form of platters of Syrian sweets, biscuits and fruit- reasonably priced although not as cheap as some- wine will put up the costs. Another favourite and certainly worth making a reservation for is the ELISSAR, just a stones throw from Biet Al Mamlouka hotel. It specialises in typical Syrian and French Cuisine and wonderful mezze. Try and book a table in the middle of the courtyard beside the fountain, order a glass of Arak and enjoy the wonderful ambience.

Contemplating a long weekend, not sure where to go? Let me persuade you to consider Syria, or more particularly the old city of Damascus. A world heritage site, it is reputed to be among the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world.

FLIGHTS

There are flights most days. We flew Saudia on a Tuesday lunchtime, returning Friday evening (for about 1600sar each return), which was ideal for an extended Saudi weekend. Importantly, Saudia are fairly relaxed when it comes to excess baggage – very helpful when bringing back souvenirs (see below)!

VISAS

Visas are easily arranged through the Syrian Embassy on the DQ. You don't have to process the visa in person, but a completed form/photo/SR195 is required, and your passport can be turned around in less than a day. Once in your passport, the single-entry visa is valid for entry within 2 months.

CURRENCY

I would strongly recommend getting hold of some Syrian currency before leaving Riyadh. You may have to get some from the moneychangers near Baatha, as banks don't tend to stock Syrian pounds. US dollars work of course, but we saw no cash machines in the old city

ACCOMODATION

I can highly recommend BIET AL MAMLOUKA, Syria's first boutique hotel. A converted 17c Damascene house, it is located in the heart of the old city in the district of Bab Touma, in the Christian quarter. There

