



USEFUL INFORMATION ABOUT SYRIA

1. SAFETY AND SECURITY

The number of tourists to Syria is continuously increasing. Syria is generally a safe country with a low criminality rate. Regarding personal security, pick-pocketing and bag snatching can occur, though it is less common than in for example Stockholm, Sweden (generally considered a safe city).

Formally, Syria is at war with Israel. However, no acts of war are taking place. Since 1967, Israel is occupying the Golan Heights at the border between Israel and Syria, 65 km from Damascus. UN soldiers patrol a buffer zone between Syrian and Israeli troops.

You should avoid public political gatherings and demonstrations, which can turn hostile. You are recommended to follow news reports and be alert to regional developments, which might trigger public disturbances.

You are advised to carry a photocopy of your passport, including your visa and entry stamp, as proof of identity at all times.

Photography near military and many other government installations is prohibited.

It is good to always check up-dated travel recommendations with your foreign ministry / home office prior to your travels.

Emergency phone numbers

Police: 112

Fire brigade: 113

The traffic

The traffic in Syria, and particularly in Damascus, is chaotic. Driving cars without lights at night is not uncommon. Likewise driving in the opposite direction occurs on a regular basis. Take care.

2. INSURANCE

Prior to your departure, be sure to arrange a comprehensive travel and health insurance covering the time of your stay in Syria.

3. MONEY

The word for money in Syrian Arabic is *flous* or *masari*. Change, as in change when paying a bill at a restaurant, is called *frata*. And exchange, *masraf*. The Syrian money is called *Lira* (£S) in Arabic and *Pound* in English.

Money exchange

There's at least one branch of the Commercial Bank of Syria in every major town. Most of them will change US dollars or Euros. There are also private exchange offices. They change cash at official bank rates, generally



without charging a commission. Whereas banks usually close for the day at 12.30 pm or 2 pm, the exchange offices are often open longer. Changing money in the street, 'on the black market', takes place but is not allowed in Syria.

ATMs

There is a growing number of ATMs in Syria, particularly in Damascus, but there are still a number of towns that are yet to have machines.

Credit cards

Major credit cards are increasingly being accepted by travel agencies, hotels and shops, but they're not yet accepted in most restaurants.

Travelers' checks

It is becoming difficult to cash travelers' checks.

4. VISAS

Most travelers must have a visa to enter Syria, the only exceptions are citizens of (most) Arab countries. Obtain a visa before arriving at the border, preferably in your home country. If your home country doesn't have a Syrian embassy or consulate, there is no problem applying in another country or obtaining a visa upon arrival – at the border/airport.

Syria does not grant visas to persons carrying passports with Israeli entry stamps.

If you are planning to travel to Lebanon or Jordan during your stay in Syria, you should apply for a double or multiple entry visa for Syria, as these are otherwise difficult to obtain after arrival.

There are different types of visa: transit, single entry, double entry and multiple entry. Transit visas are only good for airport stays. Single-, double- or multiple-entry visas are valid only for 15 days inside Syria and must be used within three months of the date of issue. For travelers entering Syria from Lebanon; if you have a valid Lebanese visa, a Syrian visa will be issued at the border, for a charge. This rule also applies to holders of single-entry visas who cross over from Syria to Lebanon and then return to Syria.

As visa rules are subject to change, always check before your travels with the Syrian embassy/consulate in your home country, or the nearest available embassy.

Visa extensions

If you're staying in Syria for more than 15 days you will have to get a visa extension. This is done at an immigration office, which you will find in all main cities. The length of the extension generally depends on the reason for wanting the extension, eg studies, travel, etc. The specifics vary from place to place but there are always a couple of forms to complete and you need two to six passport photos and a few passport copies.

Students traveling with AMBergh are assisted with the visa extension procedures.



5. GETTING THERE AND AWAY

Land

Syria has borders with Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. It also shares a border with Israel, the hotly disputed Golan Heights, but it's a definite no-go zone that is mined and patrolled by UN peacekeepers.

You need a special permit issued by Syrian state authorities to visit the non-occupied Syrian part of the Golan Heights.

Iraq

The border to Iraq has been at constant debate the last few years due to the number of Iraqi refugees crossing over. Traffic across is restricted to certain categories of individuals (businessmen amongst others, but not tourists). You are not recommended to enter Iraq via Syria.

Jordan

There are two border crossings between Syria and Jordan: at Nasib/Jabir and Daraa/Ramtha. If crossing by car, service taxi or bus you'll cross through the main Nasib/Jabir post, on the Amman-Damascus highway. If you're travelling by train or by local transport, you will use Daraa/Ramtha.

From Damascus there are a couple of daily buses to Amman. Book in advance as demand for seats is high. The famous Hijaz railway trip is another possibility.

Buses and service taxis depart from *As-Sumaria* station in the southern suburbs of Damascus (not far from Mezzeh). An easy way to travel to Amman or Irbid in Jordan is by service taxis. The service taxis are new and in good shape. They carry four passengers to affordable prices. The only hazard is that you may have to wait a bit for other passengers to opt for your destination. If you are in a hurry, an option is to split the cost of empty seats in order for the taxi driver to depart.

The taxi drivers are used to border procedures and will point out where to go and what to do at the different border check points. Jordanian visas are easily issued at the border. They can also be obtained in advance from the embassy in Damascus.

Lebanon

There are plenty of buses from Damascus to Beirut. To travel direct to Baalbek the only option is a service taxi. You can also travel by bus or service taxi to Beirut via Tripoli from Aleppo and Latakia.

An easy way to travel to Beirut from Damascus is by service taxis. Service taxis to Beirut depart from *As-Sumaria* station in the southern suburbs of Damascus (not far from Mezzeh). The service taxis are new and in good shape. They carry four passengers to quite affordable prices and depart once four passengers have shown up (or passengers have agreed to cover the fee of empty seats). The route Damascus-Beirut is highly frequented and you should not need to wait for a long time unless you travel at odd hours. The taxi drivers are used to border procedures and will point out where to go and what to do at the different border check points.

Turkey

There are several border crossings between Syria and Turkey. The busiest border station, Bab al-Hawa, links the city of Antakya in Turkey with Aleppo.

An interesting alternative to the bus might be the weekly train from Aleppo to İstanbul.



You can also make your way by microbus from Latakia, on the Syrian coast, to the border post on the outskirts of the village of Kassab and on to Antakya via Yayladağı.

Over in the far northeast of Syria there's another crossing at Qamishle for the Turkish town of Nusaybin. While Turkish visas are issued at the border, you must already be in possession of a valid visa to re-enter Syria. However, if you hold a passport of a country without Syrian representation, you can get your visa at the border.

Air

Syria has three international airports: Damascus International Airport (35km outside the city), Aleppo International Airport (just northeast of Aleppo), and Latakia International Airport on the coast.

Damascus international airport is served by many of the larger European carriers to the Middle East including Lufthansa, British Airways and Aeroflot. Cheaper fares can sometimes be obtained through Czech Airlines, Cyprus Air, Malev or Turkish Airlines. Royal Jordanian can be reasonable through Amman.

All passengers (both Syrians and foreigners) leaving Syria from Damascus International Airport have to pay a departure tax of 1500 SP/approx. \$32 per person, unless this departure tax has been covered by your airplane company (indicated on your ticket or boarding card).

6. TRANSPORTATION WITHIN SYRIA

By taxi

The taxis (usually yellow, and always clearly marked) are an easy and cheap way to get around Damascus, Aleppo and other cities. Arabic is helpful, most taxi drivers do not speak English. All licensed taxis carry meters. It is best to insist that the driver puts on the meter (the word for meter, *al-'adad*, can be used to pass the message).

By car

Cars can be rented at various Budget and Europcar locations.

Be aware of the chaotic traffic when driving in Syria. There are basically no rules that are actually enforced or adhered to, always expect other cars to run red lights, cut you off, or drive in the wrong direction.

If you have an accident in a rental car, you must obtain a police report, no matter how small the damage or how clear it is who is at fault – otherwise, you will be liable for the damage.

By bus or coach

Air-conditioned coaches are one of the easy ways to make longer travels around Syria. Coaches are cheap, comfortable, fast and reliable. However, the schedules are not quite to be trusted. For the busy routes the best way is to go to the coach station when you want to leave and catch the next coach. You will have to wait a bit, but most of the time it's the best and easiest way.

Several kinds of buses run the same routes. The safest and most comfortable way to travel is by Pullman bus.

Carry your passport at all times as you may need it for ID checks. You will definitely need it to buy tickets.



By minibus or microbus

Minibuses operate on many of the shorter routes between cities and towns. They take about 20 people, and have no schedule, departing only when full. On less popular routes you may have to wait quite some time until one fills up. They set people down and pick them up at any point along the route and are thus commonly called 'hob-hob' (stop-stop).

The microbuses (locally called *servis* or *micro*) are little white vans that carry ten-twelve passengers between major cities and surrounding towns, or inside cities on set routes. Prices are very affordable. The destinations are written in Arabic on the front of the microbuses. If you are uncertain about the destination, make sure to tell the driver and other passengers where you are heading. They will kindly let you know before entering if you have picked the wrong microbus.

Usually, the passenger sitting behind the driver deals with the money (you may avoid sitting there if you don't fancy counting coins). You can ask the driver to stop anywhere along his route (by saying *ila alyamin*, to the right, when you want to get off).

By train

The Syrian railways are reasonably modern. Train travel is inexpensive and generally punctual. The main line connects Damascus, Aleppo, Deir Az-Zur, Hassake and Qamishle. A secondary line runs from Aleppo to Lattakia, along the coast to Tartus and again inland to Homs and Damascus. Worth mentioning is the Lattakia-Aleppo service going through a spectacular countryside.

Travelling by train is a bit slower but often a more pleasant way of seeing the country than from a coach or microbus. First class is with AC, 2nd class is without AC. Student discounts are only given on 2nd-class tickets.

In the summer, on Fridays, a little steam train leaves from the Hejaz Railway Station in Damascus and climbs into the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

By plane

There are airports in Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Qamishli and Deir Azour. You can check the website of Damascus airport, <http://damascus-dam-airport.webport.com/airport.php>, for flight information.

7. THE WEATHER

Along the western coastal mountain range Syria's climate is very Mediterranean. There is a long dry season from May to October. On the coast, summers are hot and humid, with an average daily maximum of 29 C, and winters are mild.

The only areas where summers are cool in Syria, are in places with a high altitude. Slunfeh, Bludan, and Mash-ta al Helou are local favorites. Further inland as you approach the steppe and the Syrian Desert the climate gradually becomes more arid, with colder and more extreme winters and hotter, drier summers.

Snow may occur in winter away from the coast, and frosts are common. A good advice if you plan to spend the winter in Syria is to bring a warm sleeping bag and some warm clothes. Houses are commonly heated with small electrical or gas liquid heaters. It can get quite chilly indoors.



There are few sand or dust storms near the cities but the desert villages are regularly subjected to them. Once or twice a year sand-bearing winds, or *Khamasins*, darken the sky into a dark red color and a fine orange dust layer soon cover the city.

8. FOOD AND DRINKS

Food

Explore the local Syrian dishes and you will be delighted by the fresh salads (*fettush*, *tabbouleh* etc), the street snacks (*falafel*, *shawarma*), the tasty side dishes (*hommos*, *baba ganouj*, *mutabbal*, *muhammara*), the grilled kebab, and the rich warm winter dishes (*foul*, *fetteh*). There is yet another world to discover in the kitchen of Syrian friends and acquaintances. Syrians are very proud of their cuisine and they have reasons to be so. Food is generally safe to eat, even street corner snack.

Water and drinks

Generally you can drink water from the tap. If you are unsure ask the locals first. Bottled water is available.

Fresh fruit juices are available at very affordable prices from street stalls in most towns. You find local and imported beer, wine of Syrian, Lebanese or French origin, and *Arrak*, the local alcohol (similar to ouzo, raki, pastis) at many restaurants in the cities.

9. BUSINESS HOURS

The official weekend is Friday and Saturday.

Government offices are open 8 am to 2 pm daily except Friday and holidays. Post offices are open later in the large cities and often on Fridays. Banks generally follow the government office hours but there are quite a few exceptions to the rule. Private offices are generally open from 10 am to 2 pm, and 4 pm to 9 pm except Friday and holidays.

Restaurants are open between noon and midnight daily. Cafés tend to open earlier and close a bit later. Shops are generally open from 9 am to 1.30 pm and 4 pm to 8 or 9 pm.

Public holidays

Public holidays include Muslim, Christian, and national celebrations. Muslim festivals are timed according to the moon and the dates change from year to year. During the lunar month of Ramadan preceding Eid al-Fitr (Feast of the sacrifice) Muslims fast during the day - no food and drinks between sunrise and sunset - and feast at night. General working hours during Ramadan are 09:00-14:00. Many restaurants are closed during the day and there may be restrictions on smoking and drinking. As Muslim festivals are timed according to local sightings of the moon, the dates given below are approximations.

The official holidays in 2011

1 Jan:	New Year's Day
15 Feb:	Mouloud (Birth of the Prophet)
8 Mar:	Revolution Day
21 Mar:	Mother's Day
17 Apr:	Independence Day
24 Apr:	Easter



1 May:	Labour Day
6 May:	Martyrs' Day
31 Aug:	Eid al-Fitr (End of Ramadan)
6 Oct:	October Liberation War
6 Nov:	Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice)
26 Nov:	Islamic New Year

10. ELECTRICITY

220 volts AC, 50Hz, European-style two-pin plugs.

11. TIME

GMT + 2 (GMT + 3 from 1 April to 1 October)

12. INTERNET

Access to Internet is allowed since about a decade back, although there is filtering of many popular websites (including YouTube, Facebook, Blogspot, among others). You can easily find Internet cafes around the cities. The hourly cost at Internet cafés is quite affordable (around \$1-2). Several cafés in the old town of Damascus, especially around Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi, and in the modern city centers also have wireless connection. The restrictions on the Internet are anything with connections to the Syrian government, terrorism, Israeli sites and any site with political debates.

13. TELEPHONE/MOBILE

The country code is +963. International roaming agreements have been established. Coverage is good, covering 95% of the populated areas.

When buying a local simcard you need to provide the shopkeeper with a copy of your passport. Simcards and credit can be purchased in mobile service shops around the cities.

14. STANDARD MAIL/POSTAGE

Airmail to Western Europe takes up to 10 days. Parcels sent from Syria should be packed at the post office. There are post offices in virtually all towns. Post office hours: Mon-Fri 08:00-14:00, larger branches are open longer.

15. CLOTHING

Male and female visitors are commonly advised to wear loose-fitting clothes and not to reveal too much skin. A headscarf is only necessary when visiting mosques. As a foreigner you may catch enough attention without wearing the tight style of clothing.



16. WOMEN TRAVELING ALONE

Women traveling alone may find that they draw a little too much attention from Syrian men. This is however generally limited to stares or attempts at making conversation.

17. HEALTH

Medicine

Local pharmacies are well stocked with treatments for most common ailments such as stomach bugs and traveler's diarrhea. Pharmacists often speak a bit of English.

If you have a treatment, take it with you. Don't expect to find all medicine in Syria. If you have to buy something from a pharmacy, ask for a "foreign" EU or US brand. You will have to pay a premium for that, but you will increase the chances to have an actual medicine. Some products come from uncertain origin and are ineffective according to certain local pharmacists.

Ambulance

To call an ambulance: 110

Hospitals

For a more comprehensive list of hospitals in Syria, you may turn to the US Embassy in Damascus at:

<http://damascus.usembassy.gov/doctors.html>