

SUMMER PAGES

WAFIK AL-WATTAR > THE RENOWNED UROLOGIST TELLS US SOME OF THE HISTORY OF THE SYRIAN CAPITAL, A CITY THOUSANDS OF YEARS OLD

“Hospitality is one of the greatest attributes of the people of Damascus”



> A cradle of civilisation, Damascus is considered to be the oldest city in the world

Iván Ronda

For more than 6,000 years, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Arameans, Byzantines and Arabs have left their imprint on Damascus, a city which was twinned with Cordoba some years ago. Wafik Al-Wattar left the Syrian capital for Barcelona when he was just 18 years old to study medicine. Today, this urologist works in solving problems of erectile dysfunction and haemorrhoids, his main specialities.

Question: Tell me about Damascus. What is it like?

Answer: It is a very large city, surrounded by mountains. It is very popular with tourists. People have lost their fear of going there. The Syrian government also strongly promotes tourism, to make it known all over the world. It has changed greatly.

What are its main attractions?

Of everything that there is to be seen in Damascus, I would highlight the Great Omeya Mosque, an architectural jewel. It had been a sacred spot since pre-historic times. Later, it was an Aramean temple, a Roman temple, a Byzantine temple, a Christian temple and finally the Muslims converted it into one of the most impressive mosques in the world. The Great Bazaar, one of the best places for shopping, is also very important.

From what you tell me, history plays a very important role in Damascus.

The city has its ancient part and its modern part. The ancient part is near the Great Bazaar, and everything that you can see there is really delightful. Despite globalisation, in Syria they try to maintain their customs and traditions, because it is very important to them to preserve their roots and history. Damascus has a marvellous history, which deserves to be remembered and appreciated by everyone.

I suppose religion plays an important part in its history.

One of the main characteristics of Syria, and of Damascus in particular, is that all the religions of the world have always lived together in peace and harmony. There has never been trouble. A Syrian may be a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim...or whatever. There has never been religious discrimination. This means that everyone celebrates all the festivals – the Muslims celebrate Christmas and the Christians Ramadan. Everyone gets on very well together.

So everything is celebrated to the fullest.

Although these festivals are important, what the citizens of Damascus value most highly are the local neighbourhood celebrations. There, you don't have to go to a discotheque or music bar to have a good time. People get together in a neighbour's house and enjoy the company of their family and friends.

So the city's inhabitants are very close-knit.

This is one of the characteristics of the citizens of Damascus. There they have a phrase which goes, "the neighbour forty doors away from your house is still your neighbour". For the people there, you have to keep in contact with everyone, not only the people living near you.

Neighbours there obviously get on well, but how do they receive tourists?

Hospitality and generosity are the main attributes of the inhabitants of Damascus. There, it seems that foreigners have come down from Heaven. Without knowing them at all, they are invited, welcomed and offered help with anything they want. Tourists feel comfortable from the first day on, as well as very safe.

Is there no crime?

If anything surprises people visiting Damascus, it is the fact that it is very safe. You can go anywhere at any time of the day with no risk of being attacked. Even if there is an incident, the citizens themselves go to help anyone in danger. There is great cooperation among all the people.

What is the best time of year to visit?

The best time is at the end of spring, between May and June. I recommend going during these months, because it is very hot in summer. It is difficult to withstand the high temperatures in August, so you can't enjoy the journey or your stay as much.

What are the typical dishes of Damascus?

There is a great variety of meat, fish and vegetables. A very typical dish is rice and meat pastries, as well as the kebabs, lamb and rice with noodles and pine kernels. There is a lot to choose from. One of the features of Syrian cooking is filling. Courgettes, aubergines and peppers are stuffed with rice and meat, basically.

And the desserts?

Tarts are very typical in Damascus. There are very sweet ones and others less so, and they are eaten with tea. In short, it is difficult for tourists to try everything if they are only in the city for a few days.

KEY SENTENCES

“In Syria there have never been problems between religions”

“It is better to go between May and June, because the summer is very hot”

“In Damascus there is a great variety of meat and fish”

“If anything surprises tourists, it is the fact that the streets are very safe”

Photo caption. Wafik Al-Wattar highlights the hospitality of the Syrian people.
EDUARD GIL

Passion for travelling and medicine

PROFILE

After leaving school, Wafik Al-Wattar (Beirut, 1948) travelled to Barcelona by ship in 1970, to begin studying for a degree in Medicine. He passed through Madrid and Saragossa before finally obtaining a place to study Medicine at the

Hospital Clínic de Barcelona. From an early age, he was sure he wanted to travel and be a doctor. Today he is a renowned urologist who has had consultancies in Barcelona, Mataró, Sabadell, Rubí and, for the last eight years, in Terrassa.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION----->

History: Damascus (brother's blood in Arabic) is proud to be the oldest continually inhabited city in the world. The Old City sprawls around the Great Omeya Mosque, a labyrinth of narrow lanes and alleys, where it is worth while to lose yourself.

Geography: The Arab Republic of Syria borders to the North with Turkey, to the East with Iraq, to the South with Jordan and to the West with The Lebanon, Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. The country has three different regions. In the West there is a coastal plain, separated from the interior by the Yabal Ansariyya, a double mountain range. The centre of the country is formed by a rugged plateau with volcanic peaks. The Eastern region is dominated by the Euphrates Valley.

Currency: The official currency is the Syrian Pound (divided into 100 piastres).

Climate: In the Western part of the country the climate is Mediterranean, but as you go East, it becomes drier and hotter.

Information: Syrian Embassy in Spain (Plaza Platerías Martínez, 1, Madrid. Telephone: 91 420 16 02). Spanish Embassy in Syria (Shafi Street – behind the Hotel Al-Hyat-Mezzeh East. Telephone: 613 29 00 / 613 29 01.

How to get there: In Barcelona, Dahab Travel (Tel: 902 99 85 93. Internet: www.dahabtravel.es) specialises in travel to Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Also, Catai Tours (Tel 91 409 11 25 www.catei.es) offers the "Millenarian Syria" programme, a 7-day itinerary of Damascus, Palmira, Krak des Chevaliers, Hama, Aleppo, the ruins of Apamea, castles and convents. From 1,063 euros.

Where to stay: The Syrian chain Cham Palaces & Hotels (Tel 963 11 223 23 00) has its own agency Chamtour (www.chamhotels.com). In Damascus, the Hotel Cham Palace (Tel 963 11 233 23 00) has 400 rooms and suites.

Where to eat: In Damascus, the Al Khawali restaurant (Tel 221 77 28) and the Jabri House. On the road from Damascus to Palmira, the Bagdad Café (Annabk. P.O. Box 82), a unique scenario in the middle of the desert.

Health: No compulsory vaccinations.

Time difference: +1 hour.

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