

Exploring the Middle East

By Shelly Dee

Syria. Lebanon. Damascus. Beirut. Civil War. Axis of Evil. Hezbollah. Assassinations.

This is what came to mind when my husband and I were asked to join an international delegation to learn about recent developments in the Syrian and Lebanese economies. The opportunity to explore museums and UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS), which are among the most famous but least visited in the world, made the invitation irresistible. Our trip began in Beirut. Known as the 'Paris of the Middle East' until the brutal Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990 pitted Palestinians, Syrians, Israelis and Lebanese Christians against one another, the city once again teems with Arabs from all over the Middle East who flock there for the fabulous nightlife and personal freedoms. From our hotel, a burnt-out wreck after the Civil War but now fully restored, we looked out onto the old Holiday Inn, still pockmarked by bullet holes and gaping scars from larger shells. The beautiful old part of Beirut is now being rebuilt and the conservation projects are incredibly ambitious. Once again, it's possible to catch glimpses of the Paris of the Middle East.

On our second day in Lebanon, we visited the WHS of Baalbeck, whose ruins are the largest and among the best preserved religious buildings of the Roman Empire. The greatest of the three temples, the Zeus temple, would have been surrounded by 54 columns, each nearly 20 metres in height.



The Beirut Holiday Inn still bears the scars of war



The old souk in Damascus

At Baalbeck I especially liked the temple to Bacchus, still intact except for the roof. Rarely does one see a Roman temple so perfectly preserved; the carvings of poppies and grapes and a transsexual Cupid on the main doorway made it easy to fantasise about the wine-drinking and drug-induced rituals that might have taken place here.

Returning from Baalbeck to Beirut we followed Bacchus' footsteps, stopping at the winery of the hospitable Ksara family, who welcomed us with a *mezze* of hummus, yoghurts and salads, all scooped up with pita bread instead of fork or spoon. We finished with rich sweet *baklava* and strong coffee. Wine production in Lebanon dates back to the Phoenicians and Ksara's excellent wines are sold all over the world.

The next day we visited Tyre, founded in 2750 BCE and now the fourth largest city in Lebanon. Very near the border with Israel, Tyre was a target of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, which meant that we were nearly the only tourists visiting the ancient sites. Highlights were the large Roman-period hippodrome used for chariot racing, the necropolis and the town itself with its columns, marble pavements, porticos, baths, marketplace and theatre.

Another fabulous Lebanese ruin is the WHS at Byblos, where layers of excavations date habitation back to the Neolithic period. Digs have uncovered Assyrian and Persian houses layered above Phoenician sites; above these are Hellenistic layers, Greco-Roman buildings and finally, the remains of the Muslim, Crusader and Ottoman periods. Situated further from the Israeli border, contemporary Byblos is a picturesque Mediterranean seaport with tourist shops and an annual music festival.

Back in Beirut, we visited the National Museum. Despite efforts to protect the museum during the Civil War, the building and many artefacts were in disastrous condition when the cease-fire was declared in 1991. After massive renovation, the museum reopened in 1999 and is now a modern building with artefacts beautifully displayed. Among the museum's prizes are the 10th century BCE sarcophagus of King Ahiiram, from Byblos, which contains



Author and her husband at Roman amphitheatre in Bosra

the oldest text written in the Phoenician alphabet, and from Tyre, several fabulous Roman-era sarcophagi.

A short flight brought us to the oldest, continuously-inhabited city in the world, Damascus, which dates back to 10,000–8000 BCE. A majority of today's inhabitants are Sunni Muslims. I was surprised to learn there is a small Jewish community and that Christians comprise 15% of the population. Syria is becoming more open and its economy is developing. Despite US imposed trade and financial restrictions, relations between the two countries appear to be thawing.

In Damascus, we visited the Umayyad Mosque built in 715 CE, one of the largest mosques in the world and one of the oldest sites of continuous prayer since the rise of Islam. A shrine in the mosque is said to contain the head of Husayn ibn Ali (great grandson of Muhammed) and another to contain the body of St John the Baptist. Nearby, the ancient House of St Ananias in the old Christian quarter is believed to be where Ananias baptised Paul the Apostle.



Temple of Bacchus, Baalbeck

Next to the mosque is Azem Palace, built in 1750 as a residence for the Ottoman governor of Damascus, and now housing the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions. It is an excellent example of traditional Damascene architecture with separate quarters for the kitchens, the harem's private living area and rooms for the governor and male members of the family to conduct business.

Finally we sauntered through the Souk al-Hamidiyeh, the most famous bazaar of old Damascus. Built during the Ottoman era, its shops offer the famous Damascene textiles and antiques as well as food and everyday items. The souk is still authentic with young girls in jeans, women dressed in full Muslim burqa and men in traditional Arab robes all negotiating the sale of everything from freshly roasted cashew nuts to the widely-used hookah pipe, as well as prayer rugs from Teheran.

On the last day, en route to Bosra in southern Syria, we passed near the Golan Heights, a former Syrian territory which has been controlled by Israel since the Six-Day War of 1967. From our bus, we could see the mountain range that borders the Sea of Galilee from which Palestinian guerillas launched attacks into Israel's spreading settlements.

Once the capital of the Roman province of Arabia, Bosra, also a WHS, was an important stopover on the ancient caravan route from Damascus to Mecca. Bosra's most impressive feature is its superbly well-preserved Roman theatre, which seated 15,000 people and had acoustics so good that even those in cheap seats could hear the actors. In its heyday, the theatre was faced with marble and draped in silk hangings and during performances a fine mist of perfumed water was sprayed over the patrons to keep them comfortable in the desert heat.

On our last day, I explored The National Museum in Damascus. The star exhibit is the reassembled 2nd-century synagogue from Dura-Europas (near the border with present-day Iraq). Its walls are covered with figurative paintings of biblical scenes; the brightness of the painting belies the fact that these scenes are nearly 2000 years old. From the same period is a complete Hypogeum (underground tomb) from Palmyra. One wing of the museum is devoted to the ancient port city of Ugarit (3rd millennium BCE), whose exhibits include the small clay tablets containing the oldest alphabet (Phoenician) in the world.

This special diplomatic trip to Lebanon and Syria, complete with sumptuous private dinners at museums and palaces, visits with dignitaries, trips to rarely-visited wonders of the ancient world and exotic shopping opportunities was an eye-opening introduction to the far west of the Orient. We saw so much but also missed so much – the beaches, the ski resorts, Palmyra, Aleppo – that I would like to return soon for a family vacation. Now is the time to go, before everyone discovers this culturally rich and fascinating part of the world.

Shelly Dee an international banker turned international museum rat, is on the board of the National Museum of Singapore and has served on the boards of the National History Museum in London and the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

Photos courtesy of the author