

Summer in Syria

June 3rd - 11th 2023



INTRODUCTION:

Beginning and ending in Lebanon's vibrant capital, Beirut, this tour is your opportunity to see Syria at a unique point in its history. Until the recent war, the only thing most people knew about Syria was Palmyra, and now Syria's famous but for all the wrong reasons. But guess what – there's a lot more to it than you'd expect! Starting with the buzzing old town of Damascus, the streets of which are lined with cool bars and cafes, we'll make our way to the war-torn old town of Aleppo, stopping on the way at charming coffee stands and destroyed villages. Shrouded in a coat of destruction, we'll then visit Palmyra, which now requires special permission to get into, but despite its tragic recent history, is still a breath-taking site. A visit to the beach resort of Latakia, an afternoon relaxing in a hammam, and no doubt some genuine Syrian hospitality later, we'll return to Damascus, before ending the tour in Beirut.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Explore the vibrant old city of **Damascus**

Take in the spectacular ancient site of **Palmyra**

See how Syrians relax at the beach resort of **Latakia**

Get a first hand view of how Syria is rebuilding after the civil war

Excited? Come with SAIGA to Syria!

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

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Tour Details:

DATES: June 3rd-11th 2023

PRICE: \$1595 USD (twin share)
Single Supplement \$350 USD



INCLUSIONS:

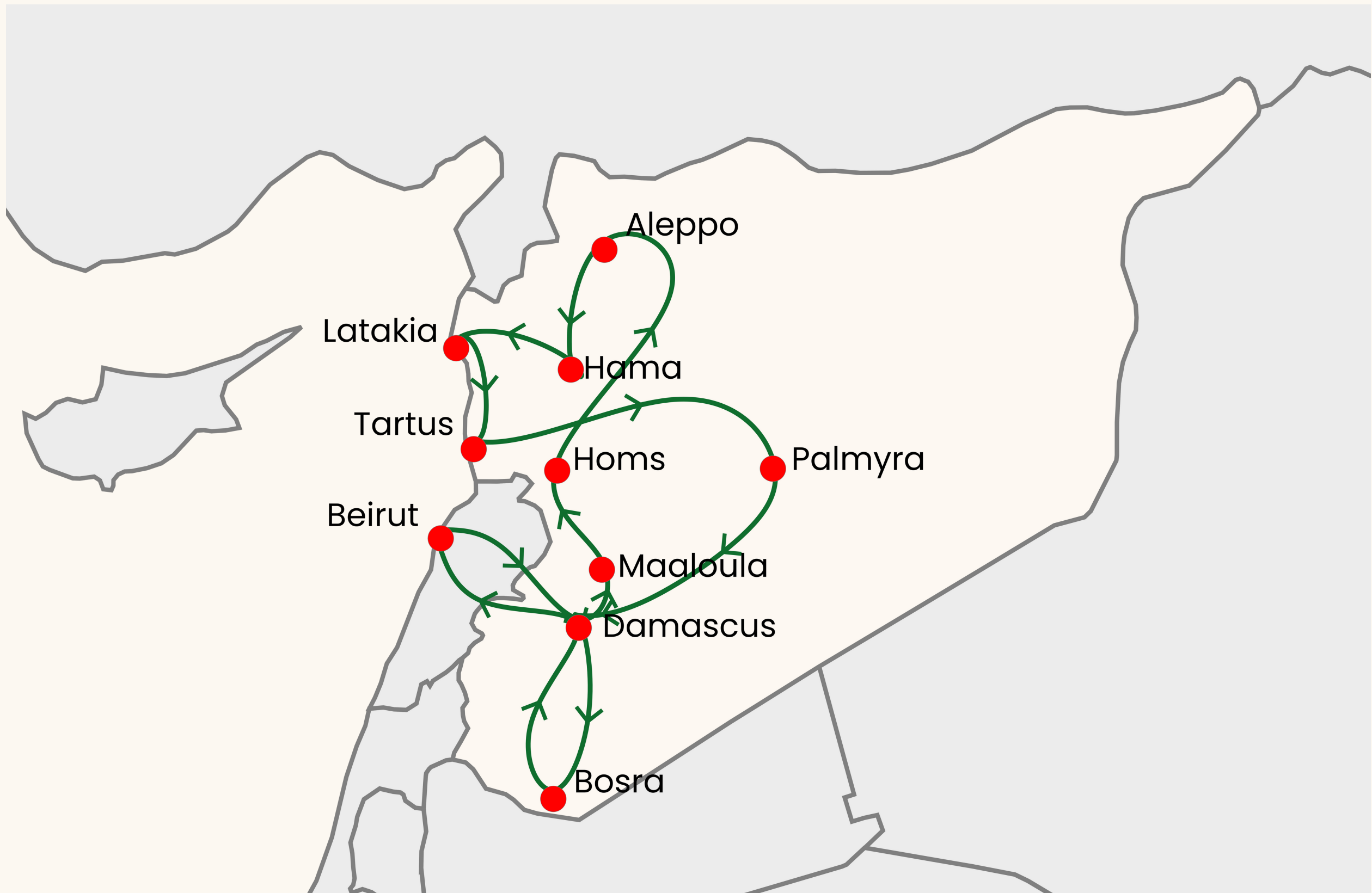
- Visa approval
- Accommodation in twin share at roughly 3 star hotels/guesthouses, breakfast included
- Transport, beginning and ending in Beirut
- Entrance fees to all sites mentioned in the itinerary, except hammam
- SAIGA guide and local guides

EXCLUSIONS:

- Visa fee (paid at the border on arrival)
- Departure tax (approx. \$5, paid at the border)
- Hammam (approx. \$10 per person)
- Meals other than breakfast
- Transport to and from Beirut
- Accommodation and any other services in Lebanon
- Personal expenses such as souvenirs or any optional activities
- PCR Test in Damascus to re-enter Lebanon (approx. \$50 per person)

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Day 1	Beirut - Damascus
Day 2	Damascus
Day 3	Damascus - Maaloula - Aleppo
Day 4	Aleppo
Day 5	Aleppo - Latakia
Day 6	Latakia - Salah al-Din Citadel
Day 7	Arwad - Krak Des Chaveliers
Day 8	Palmyra - Damascus
Day 9	Damascus - Bosra - Beirut



Itinerary:

Day 1: Beirut - Damascus - Saturday June 3rd

- Meet in Beirut at 8:00. Meeting point to be advised closer to the time.
- Begin the drive to the Syrian border, which will take about two hours. We'll stop on the way for a quick breakfast and to buy any Lebanese snacks you might want.
- Cross the border, with a stop at Duty Free in No Man's Land, for some of the cheapest alcohol you've ever experienced.
- The whole border crossing will take around 1.5 hours.
- After clearing Syrian Customs and Immigration, we'll continue our drive to Damascus, another hour.
- Arriving in the old town, you'll immediately be intoxicated by the buzz of the old town as we walk towards our hotel. We'll be staying in a beautifully renovated old Damascene house, complete with a tranquil courtyard surrounding a bubbling fountain, and the distinctive black and white stonework of this part of Syria.
- In the afternoon we'll explore Damascus' old town, bazaar, shopping areas and bar/restaurant street. You might like to try some local ice-cream or have a shawarma, and shisha is available just about everywhere.
- We'll also visit Ananias Church, Damascus' oldest church which happens to be underground, and Omayad Mosque, the main mosque in the centre of the city.
- Free time in the evening to enjoy Damascus' vibrant night-life.

Day 2: Damascus - Sunday June 4th

- Leaving the centre of town, we'll drive to the outskirts of the city and you'll get your first glimpses of the destruction caused by the recent conflict, on our way to the October War Museum, dedicated to the war against Israel.
- We'll visit Kim Il Sung Park for some great photo opportunities. Syria and DPRK have had a long history of friendship and recently the Syrian Government decided to dedicate a park to the founding leader of DPRK, Kim Il Sung.
- Returning to the centre of town we'll visit the National Museum in the afternoon, followed by the Souk Al-Hamidiye and El-Azem Palace
- One of the staples of any Middle Eastern destination, it's time to experience a hammam. Anyone who doesn't want to join in can either hang out with a shisha or a cup of tea inside the hammam's "albrani", translated into English as the "outside section", which is the first room of the hammam.
- It's a very cool experience for anyone, but especially for females it's a great way to see how Syrian women enjoy themselves free of headscarves and social pressures. There will be women of all ages, and they really make a day of it. Children, grandmothers and everyone in between take in snacks and drinks and stay there for hours smoking shishas, listening to music and relaxing.
- If you prefer you can return to the hotel to enjoy the serene Damascene house, or have free time around the bazaar.

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Day 3: Damascus - Maaloula - Aleppo - Monday June 5th

- Today we'll leave Damascus to start exploring the rest of the country.
- Our first stop today will be at Maaloula, a small Christian town that was almost completely decimated by ISIS in 2014.
- We will visit a Greek Catholic church which was destroyed but has already largely been rebuilt.
- This will be your first opportunity to properly explore the destruction that is now so commonplace in Syria, at the Safir Hotel. Until 2014 it was a 4 star hotel with plenty of international guests, but is now a shell filled with rubble. There are still "do not disturb" signs, menus, folders of guest information, time sheets, crockery and all sorts of other things amongst the debris.
- We'll walk through a canyon to the St Sergious and Bakhous Monastery where you'll have the chance to meet nuns who were kidnapped and held hostage for several years.
- Our next stop will be Homs, another of the worst affected places during the Syrian war. We'll take a walk through one of the most destroyed parts of the city, where you can really get a close up look at the damage. A few families have already started moving back in, so kids will come up and want to speak to you.
- We'll make a quick stop at the St. Mary Church of the Holy Belt, the Seat of the Syriac Orthodox Church, where the Virgin Mary's belt was kept until shortly before the war. Fortunately the belt was already removed before the church was looted and all the icons and artwork were burnt or stolen.
- Visit the grave of Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch Jesuit priest who established a community centre and farm in Homs where he worked with the homeless, disabled, sick and hungry, as well as for harmony between Christians and Muslims. Greatly respected by locals, he was then shot dead in the garden in 2014 by members of the Al-Nusra Front, and it is now a memorial to him and his work.
- And finally, we'll visit a popular local restaurant which was the local ISIS headquarters when they were in control.
- Continue the drive to Aleppo with a couple of stops along the way, arriving in the early evening.
- Free time for dinner and the rest of the evening, however if you want to join us, we can take you for the best falafel in Syria .

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Day 4: Aleppo - Tuesday June 6th

- Aleppo was arguably one of the worst affected cities during the Syrian war. Here you'll get the chance to see some of the terrible destruction as well as the opportunity to witness the early stages of rebuilding that Syrians are now doing as they slowly return to their homes.
- Our first stop in the morning will be the famous Aleppo Castle. On the way in and out of the castle you'll also be able to see the destroyed souk.
- There will be time to explore the souk and do some shopping if you like, or if you prefer, you can just enjoy a shisha or a coffee.
- We'll then drive into the old town, one of the areas that was the worst affected by the war.
- Visit a shop which will satisfy all your Syrian souvenir desires – flags, t-shirts, keyrings and Assad branded everything.

Day 5: Aleppo - Latakia - Wednesday June 7th

- Leaving Aleppo, today we'll drive to Latakia, stopping on the way for lunch.
- Arriving in Latakia, in the afternoon, we'll have a chance to enjoy the beach or swimming pools, before heading out to experience the nightlife of this holiday town.
- We'll take a walk through the centre of town, soaking in the atmosphere of this city, very different from any of the places you've been so far. We'll stop at a family run sweet shop, and then after dinner we'll take you to our favourite bar in town.

Day 6: Salah al-Din Citadel - Latakia - Thursday June 8th

- Although not one of the most famous, this might be our favourite Crusader castle. Built on top of a rocky peak in the middle of the forest high in the mountains behind Latakia, the castle itself was built by the Franks, but the spot had been a fortified stronghold for the Phoenicians, Alexander the Great and the Byzantines.
- Rambling and overgrown, it feels like something out of a fairy tale, and we can climb all over the walls for amazing views out over the surrounding valleys. Probably our favourite part though is the massive hand-carved canyon that forms the eastern side of the fortress.
- We won't drive straight back to Latakia – we'll take a little detour through some of the windy mountain roads to our favourite manakish shop in a tiny village. Run from the front of a local family's home, this is really a unique food experience.
- We'll get back to Latakia in the afternoon with time to enjoy the beach again before heading out for another fun night. This time we'll head to the area near Ugarit Port where there are loads of cheap, local restaurants with great views over the Mediterranean.

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Day 7: Arwad - Krak Des Chaveliers - Friday June 9th

- Our first stop today will be at the port in Tartus where we will hop on a local ferry to visit the island of Arwad. Bustling and lively, the island feels a lot more backwards in many ways to the cities on the mainland, but has a really cool atmosphere.
- With no cars, the island is made up of hundreds of tiny alleyways which we'll wander around.
- We can stop and speak to some boat builders, and if we're lucky even see them at work, before stopping for a fresh seafood lunch near the port.
- Returning to the mainland we'll head to Krak de Chaveliers, the most famous of all the Crusader castles. It was first built by Kurds in the 11 th Century, and has changed hands many times, but most recently was damaged in the Syrian civil war. Recaptured by the Syrian government in 2014 it's now safe and possible for us to visit the castle and the surrounding village of al-Husn, which is now mostly abandoned.
- After visiting the castle, we'll visit a nearby café that has a great view overlooking the castle, to sit down with a coffee or a beer or a shisha, and take in our surroundings.
- We'll spend the night in the Valley of the Christians, just below Krak Des Chaveliers.

Day 8: Palmyra - Damascus - Saturday June 10th

- Today we'll visit Palmyra, probably Syria's most famous site.
- Once a lush city on the Silk Road, Palmyra was even briefly its own empire in the 3 rd Century, stretching from Turkey to Egypt. Although the old city was ruined, it was famously in spectacular condition and exceptionally well preserved. Sadly though in 2015 it fell under the control of ISIS, and a lot of the buildings were razed to the ground.
- Until recently it wasn't possible to visit the ancient site, however it is now possible, providing you have the correct permission.
- We will also try and make a stop in the completely destroyed modern town of Palmyra, though this is difficult because of the presence of the Syrian Army and their allies. Even if we're unable to stop though, we'll drive through and you'll be able to see what ISIS accomplished there.
- Leaving Palmyra, we'll drive back to Damascus, arriving in the evening.
- Overnight in Damascus.

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Day 9: Damascus - Bosra - Beirut - Sunday June 11th

- In the morning we'll head down to the south of the country to visit Bosra, which is still under the control of the Free Syrian Army - a very different experience to anywhere else we've been so far. Although they still don't support the Assad Government, they have come to a mutual agreement that means that they're not currently in direct combat with each other. Still though, you'll notice the lack of Syrian flags and pictures of Assad.
- Our first stop will be at the famous amphitheatre. Between its vast size and the fact that it's still almost completely in-tact, it really is breath-taking.
- We'll sit down for a manakish or a falafel and have a chance to talk to a Free Syrian Army soldier, who will share his stories, and also a very different perspective on the situation in Syria than what you'll already have heard.
- Next we'll take a walk through the old city and get a feel for this town, which has a totally different vibe to any other city in Syria. If we're lucky, we might even meet some more people on our way who are happy to share their feelings and ideas on the situation with us.
- Sadly this brings the end of our time in Syria and we will head back towards the Lebanese border. Including the border crossing and a few stops, we'll arrive back in Beirut in the evening.
- Anyone catching a flight this evening can be taken directly to the airport, otherwise we'll be dropped off back in the centre of Beirut.

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