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EUROPE

Experiencing the Real Syria

Boutique hotels in Damascus and Aleppo offer intimate service in the center of town



The pillar of Saint Simeon Stylites outside Aleppo CORBIS

By *Don Duncan*

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Aleppo, Syria

In the past few months, the long dried-up Quweiq River that runs through Aleppo has begun to flow anew, thanks to improved relations with neighboring country Turkey, whose dams control much of the water flowing into northern Syria. Changing diplomacy has also helped bring another kind of wave -- tourists.

Visitor numbers through Syria's main airport in the capital Damascus have doubled in the past five years to 4.5 million a year, according to the Damascus Chamber of Tourism, and signs of the bump are apparent everywhere. Damascus and Aleppo are the two cities with the most pulling power for tourists. At the core of their appeal are their respective old towns -- medieval walled cities replete with religious sites, sprawling souks, miniscule porticos and maze-like alleys.

It is in these ancient quarters that perhaps the clearest indicator of Syria's tourism boom is flourishing -- boutique hotels. Run-down or abandoned 17th- and 18th-century "Arabic Houses," similar to riads in Morocco, have become tourism gold for a growing number of hoteliers, who renovate them faithfully into charming, intimate six- to 12-room hotels that cost between €65 and €215 per night.

Common to most of these hotels is a minute, unassuming main doorway that leads to a narrow corridor and then out onto a spacious, verdant courtyard with a central fountain. The hotel rooms are situated around the courtyard, all decorated individually with varying color schemes and crafts. Some hotels name each of their rooms to further distinguish their distinct character, like the Old Vine in Damascus (963-11-545-0164, www.oldvinehotel.com) with its "Blue," "Apricot" and "Sky Room," located on the hotel's spectacular roof terrace.

The advantage boutique hotels have over international luxury franchise hotels is their size and location. The former are more intimate with staff frequently outnumbering guests.

Their location, in the thick of both city's old towns, gives them unparalleled access to the best historical sites and restaurants Syria has to offer. The Old Vine is minutes from Damascus's Omayyad Mosque and sprawling Al-Hamidiyeh souk.

Meanwhile, Aleppo's 22-room Martini Hotel (963-21-363-6100, www.darzamaria.com) is a short walk from the city's 12th-century citadel and is just doors away from some of the best restaurants in Syria, including Sissi (963-21-212-4362), where for just over €18 you can have an excellent Aleppian meal such as *sujok* (spicy sausage rolled in Arabic bread and fried) or sublime cherry kebab for two with wine.

Beit al Manlouka (www.almamlouka.com, 963-11-543-0445), Damascus's longest-running boutique hotel, offers much the same experience as the Old Vine but it has one outstanding addition: for €215 a night you can stay in the "Suleiman the Magnificent" suite, a split-level room with its own internal marble fountain, 18th-century ceiling fresco, heavy casting, golden gilding and thick curtains and bedspread.

Opened last year, Hanania hotel (www.hananiahotel.com; 963-11-543-6990) is



Interior of the Baron Hotel MANUEL COHEN

among a new breed of boutique hotels -- it is driven more by curation, of local emerging artists, than preservation. Each room is decorated around various themes with painting and artwork from Syria's burgeoning art scene.

As the country's second-largest city, Aleppo has long played second fiddle to Damascus -- tourists typically visit for a day and a night as part of a larger trip centered around Damascus. But it is now distinguishing itself as a destination in its own right.

The old city in Aleppo is larger than the one in Damascus and lacks the capital's self-consciousness. No parts of the city feel "made-for-tourists" yet and the streets are refreshingly devoid of the plastic tourist information signs that are

common in Damascus. It is also home to some interesting museums. The Bimaristan Arghun al-Kamili, for example, is a 14th-century psychiatric hospital and was the center of medical advancement for centuries, its expertise reaching as far as Moorish Granada in Spain. It is now a museum where visitors can wander through ancient cell-like patient and treatment rooms with mannequins in period garb mocked up for various clinical procedures.



A guest room at the Old Vine hotel, both in Aleppo. TAMARA ABDUL HADI

Market shopping is generally excellent in Syria, but the experience in Aleppo's souks stands out, owing to its 14 kilometers of narrow, covered bazaars. Unlike Damascus with its tall, corrugated iron ceilings, Aleppo's souks have lower brick ceilings that produce a pleasing tunnel effect. The souks open out to the old city at

intervals through busy gateways that feel like rabbit holes. Visitors disappear into and resurface somewhere entirely different, laden down with spices, leather goods, fabric or fine metal crafts purchased on the way.

Aleppo is expanding its offer beyond its old city. It has new attractions such as a water park and Syria's largest mall, and the area around the banks of the revived Quweiq River -- where sharp boutique and mid-range hotels, bars and restaurants are popping up -- is fast becoming the emblem of the edge Aleppo is developing over Damascus.

Hotels like Park Hotel (963-21-222-3282, www.parkhotelsyria.com), a mid-range city hotel, typify this edge. Its Skybar roof lounge has the best view in the city, a place to watch the sun slide below the ancient minarets, bright red rooftop water tanks and countless rusty satellite dishes.

Another worthwhile boutique hotel in Aleppo is the Al Mandaloun (www.mandalounhotel.com, 963-21-22-83-008), which has much of the same luxury as the Martini Hotel but is less well located in the old city.

The five-star Sheraton (963-21-212-1111) sits at the edge of the old city in view of the towering citadel. Features of the citadel are mimicked in the architecture of the hotel, which opened three years ago. It has a moat and hints of a drawbridge in the design of its entrance. The hotel is also home to several good restaurant options from Italian, to Levantine and east Asian.

A few blocks away is a fallen testament to luxury travel of old. Baron's Hotel (963-21-211-0880) is a grey, thick-stoned hotel, that feels like something out of an Agatha Christie novel. This could be because Ms. Christie actually stayed here in the 1920s. She now has a room named after her in the hotel, as do other famous erstwhile occupants -- Lawrence of Arabia, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Kemal Ataturk. Whether you stay at the hotel or not, a night cap at the Baron's hotel bar is a must. Run by jovial Kikor Mazloumian, its wood panelling, generously upholstered seating, hot port and soft lamplight is, much like the rest of the hotel, a pleasant exercise in time travel.

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