

SYRIA



REGIONAL INFORMATION



General Info

Syria – the gem of the Middle East

Syria is a country steeped in history and tradition. The region has been inhabited by Romans, Umayyads, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Ottomans – all of whom left their mark. Today it is a vibrant, friendly country with an excellent cuisine and incredible sights.

People



Religion & Culture

Predominantly Sunni Muslim

About 74% of Syria's population is made up of Sunni Muslims. Alawite, Ismaili and Twelver Muslims make up a further 13% (including the country's president who is Alawite). Christians comprise about 10% and Druze around 3%. Many of the minorities are concentrated in particular areas, e.g. Christians in Damascus, Aleppo and the North East. 90% of the Alawite live in or around Latakia.

Population

A young and growing population

Descended from the Levantines and closely related to the Lebanese and Palestinians, Syrians are descended primarily from Aramaic-speaking forefathers. The population today stands at just over 20 million but it is still growing. It is also a young population with under 15s comprising more than a third of the total population. Average life expectancy is 71 years and the literacy rate is around 80%.

Language

Arabic is the official language of Syria

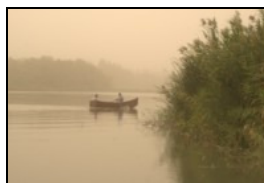
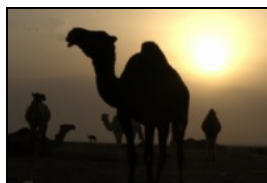
Arabic is the official and mostly widely understood language in Syria. Kurdish is widely spoken in the Northeast and Armenian and Turkish are spoken amongst those minorities. French and English are spoken by many educated Syrians and Aramaic is still spoken by some communities such as the Syriac in Maalula.

Food

Delicious and exotic

Syrian food is quite similar to its more famous cousin – Lebanese – and it is every bit as good, if not better. Flatbreads, chickpeas, couscous, herbs, lemon, cheese, curd, nuts, lamb and chicken are common ingredients. Mezze, a selection of hot or cold starters - including hummus, tabbouleh and kibbeh - is a common way to start a meal. Baklava (pistachio pastry) is a delicious sweet and strong black tea is the ubiquitous accompaniment though black coffee is also widely available.

Environment



Geography

Roughly twice the size of Portugal

Syria covers over 185,000 sq kms, making it roughly twice the size of Portugal. Standing on the frontiers of three continents, Syria is divided between the following geographical regions – the Mediterranean coastal plain, the Jabal an-Nusayriyah mountain range that runs parallel to the coast and the Eastern plateau, a predominantly barren region. Deforestation, desertification and a lack of potable water are constant environmental threats in Syria.

Flora & Fauna

Mediterranean and desert species

Syria is home to bears, antelopes, and deer but more commonly found are squirrel, wildcat, otter, jackals and hare. In the desert, the viper, lizard, and chameleon are found in relatively large numbers. Camels are kept by Bedouin herders and can be seen throughout Syria. Birds include flamingo, hawk, pelican, various ducks, snipe, and other game birds. Mediterranean flora dominates the coast and occasionally alpine flora on the mountains. Oak, eucalyptus, tamarind, chestnut, pine, the Aleppo cypress, olive, fig, orange, pistachio, almond, apricot and pomegranate trees can also be found.

Climate

From desert to Mediterranean climates

The climate in Syria varies considerably according to region. The 60% of Syria's total land mass that lies east of Damascus and Aleppo is desert and experiences a dry hot climate, with occasional, sometimes heavy rain (though annual rainfall is less than 200mm). Winters can be very cold here. To the north and west, the "fertile crescent" has rainfall of between 200 and 500mm and a more temperate climate. Coastal regions are more temperate again with a typical Mediterranean climate whereas Syria's mountains regularly see snow in the winter.

History & Economy



History

Ottomans and Ataturk

With both Damascus and Aleppo laying reasonable claim to be the worlds oldest continually inhabited city, Syria has history by the bucket full. Today you can find evidence of many great civilisations throughout the country - from the Romans, the Byzantines, the Persians, the Ottomans to the Greeks. After falling to the French in 1921 Syria gained its independence in 1944. From then until the late 60s there was great upheaval including wars with Israel. In 1970 Hafez al Assad assumed control and his son Bashar is president today.

Economy

Agriculture, industry and energy

Syria's economy is driven primarily by agriculture, industry and energy. From a highly nationalised economy in the 1960s Syria is slowly reforming its economy. Private banking only became legal in 2001. The government is now promoting agriculture over industry to increase exports, achieve food self-sufficiency and stem rural migration. Oil however is still its major export and income from tourism is rising steadily. The government spends 7% of GDP on the military compared with only 2% on healthcare.