

The New York Times

January 24, 2010

NEXT STOP

Tourists Return to an Ancient Crossroads in Syria

By LIONEL BEEHNER

TO shouts of “yella-yella” — move along! — the driver of a donkey lugging a wagon overstuffed with pistachios parted the throngs of shoppers in Aleppo’s medieval souk. It was the middle of Ramadan, just hours before the iftar, the evening meal when Muslims break their daily fast, and the market’s serpentine rows of squat stalls were filled with black-veiled women and keffiyeh-clad men, sniffing the handmade olive soaps and stocking up on spices.

But there was another kind of shopper blocking the donkey’s path: Western tourists.

Not that Aleppo is any stranger to outsiders — [T. E. Lawrence](#), [Agatha Christie](#) and [Charles Lindbergh](#) all made this city in northern [Syria](#) their stomping ground at one point.

Yet, as tensions between Damascus and [Washington](#) begin to ease, a new wave of visitors is rediscovering this ancient trading center, eager to take advantage of its low prices, spicy cuisine and maze-like bazaar.

In September, tourism in Syria was up by more than a third from the same month a year earlier, and the recent loosening of visa restrictions with [Turkey](#) means that Aleppo is being flooded with traders and tourists from across the border.

“The whole infrastructure of tourism is improving dramatically,” said Joshua Landis, an American professor and Mideast expert who runs a popular blog called Syria Comment (joshualandis.com/blog). “The spate of new boutique hotels and restaurants has shown the moneymaking potential of Aleppo’s Old City. But the pitch is to go now, before the masses arrive.”

What makes Aleppo unique is its blend of Ottoman, Armenian, Jewish and French influences, owing to its historic position at the crossroads of empires.

Bright-green domed mosques rub shoulders with Armenian cathedrals, Maronite churches and even a synagogue. Its setting amid rolling plains dotted with olive groves and the ruins of dead cities calls to mind a scene out of “One Thousand and One Nights.”

Aleppo may also boast the Arab world’s most impressive souk, a sprawling network of noisy corridors and cramped stalls where, for the past seven centuries, every kind of spice, sweet, soap, silk, dried fruit, carpet, metal, jewelry and water pipe imaginable has been sold. If you’ve ever wondered what a slab of camel meat looks or smells like, just wander through the butcher section. And unlike bazaars in [Istanbul](#) or Cairo, Aleppo’s functions as an actual market, not a tourist trap.

The souk is a city unto itself. Old looms turn yarn into splashy-colored textiles, parrots squawk in cages and deific pictures of Presidents Bashar (current) and Hafez (former) al-Assad are everywhere. A buffet of scents — the sweet perfume of smoke, the laurel-like smell of olive soap — follows visitors. Sure, the incessant barking of “Welcome!” and “Where you from?” gets old quickly, but a few shopkeepers at least throw in some humor. “Very expensive. Very bad quality,” one beckoned to me with a wink.

The best time to visit Aleppo’s Old City may be in early morning, when the stalls are shuttered and their inlaid, ornately carved wooden doors become visible. At this hour, the city’s ruddy cobblestone streets go silent, save for the Arabic pop [music](#) blaring from a nearby barbershop, and the floral patterns of the enclosed balconies come into focus.

After the obligatory visit to the Grand Mosque, peek into any of the black-and-white stone archways to check out the courtyards of Aleppo’s khans (inns), full of jasmine and citrus trees. Or climb the stone bridge to the citadel, an imposing hilltop fortress completed in the [13th](#) century. Buried within its ruins are a palace, hammam (bathhouse), temple, dungeon and two mosques. But the best reason to visit is the view of Aleppo’s minaret-dotted skyline.

Afterward, men can head to the restored Hammam el Nahasin for a relaxing massage or steam bath. Or, for a nice chaser, swing by the all-night juice stand on Bab al-Faraj square.

The square is mostly noted for its clock tower and the charmless Sheraton Hotel in the middle of it. In a travesty of 1970s-era Soviet-style urban

planning, large swaths of the Old City were leveled to make room for wider, car-friendlier avenues. In the mid-1980s, the Syrian government reversed course and invited the German aid agency GTZ to rehabilitate its historic buildings.

The center of town is divided into three main parts: New City, Old City and Al-Jdeida, the old Christian quarter. The least impressive is New City, whose mud-caked modernist apartment blocks topped with rusting satellite dishes resemble those in any drab Arab city (though it does boast some of Aleppo's best street food).

Guidebooks single out the Baron Hotel, erected in 1911, as the place to drink in New City. While the musty furniture and faded tapestries of its Old World bar and lobby are worth a look — and the moody desk clerk appears as weathered as the interior's wallpaper — the hotel has lost much of its charm. It is also swarming with loud European tourists.

For a more local crowd, head to Al-Aziziah, a district of New City teeming with crowded bars and cafes. On a Thursday evening last summer, a smartly dressed crowd, most of them students, smoked apple-scented narghiles, or water pipes, their eyes glued to Syrian soap operas playing on big screens.

Or make your way over to Saahat al-Hatab, the main square of Al-Jdeida and maybe the most pleasant section of town. Children kick a ball around the square as old mustachioed men play backgammon late into the night. Some of Aleppo's finest restaurants are tucked within courtyards along this quarter's twisting back streets.

Aleppan cuisine reflects the city's diverse history. It is not uncommon to order a half-dozen dishes in one sitting from as many culinary influences, which might include mezze, or appetizer dishes, of puréed dips with walnuts and hot peppers and main courses of soujouk (peppery sausage) and kibbeh (minced lamb).

And a new wave of Aleppan restaurants is laying claim to rooftops and courtyards across town, while merchants' houses from the Ottoman era are being converted into trendy boutique hotels.

“Before, you had the government-run hotel on the square, and that was it,” said Thomas Pritzkat, project manager of the Aleppo Urban Development

Project. “Now people are buying up old homes and transforming them into hotels and restaurants.”

For tasty tabbouleh salad smothered in parsley on an Oriental-themed rooftop, try Al-Hareer Restaurant. Another Aleppo mainstay is Sissi House, which can feel a bit stuffy — French-only menus, no prices listed — but whose lamb kebob lathered in tangy cherry sauce is worth the visit.

“Aleppo has a rich mix of cultures,” said Karam Artin, 20, an interior design student who was singing at a newly opened karaoke bar bedecked in red velvet. “In a few years, this city will be swarming with tourists, and, hopefully, even more American visitors.”