My Trip to Syria

April 18 – May 3, 2001

Wednesday April 18

My flight into Damascus, scheduled to arrive at 5:35 am, in fact arrived 40 minutes early at 4:55.

There was a strange and still-unexplained mix-up at the airport. I stood in line at passport control as usual, then when it was my turn handed my passport to the two officials, who looked it over carefully, and began slowly and methodically tapping information into their computer. This went on for several minutes, much longer than would normally take at a U.S. or European passport control, but I was in no hurry, and waited patiently while they thumbed through the passport, discussed things among themselves, stamped this form and that, etc.

Then out of nowhere another man, in civilian clothes but wearing an expensive leather jacket and carrying a cell phone, obviously an airport official of some kind, came striding up to me and addressed me in Arabic. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but distinctly heard the word "Mazin."

Now floating around in my mind was the notion that my cousin Mazin had something to do with air traffic control, and I also seemed to remember something being said about him expediting Dad's passage through the airport, so I leaped to the conclusion that this must Mazin, here to expedite my passage through the airport. He was about the right age and build, and besides, who else could possibly be singling me out for personal attention?

So I enthusiastically shook hands with him and greeted him in English, saying something like, "Oh, you must be my cousin Mazin!" He gestured to the passport officials to hand over my passport, which they did, instantly, without a word of demurral, then he beckoned to me to follow him, and we just breezed through passport control.

We picked up my bag at baggage claim, then we strode off to customs control, where again we breezed right through; he just indicated to the customs officials that I was with him, and nobody argued. This was clearly a man with clout. Then we walked out into the main floor of the airport, where I expected to find Dad, thinking he would already know that the flight was early, but Dad was nowhere to be seen. It was still only about 5:10 am. I began to think that perhaps Dad had decided not to come out so early after all, and that someone else would pick me up, or that there would be a message for me to take a taxi to Dr. Fouad's.

Then we had some sort of confused conversation, in which neither of us really understood what the other was saying. He seemed to think there should be a ride waiting for me, and I tried to tell him that I was expecting my father to meet me. Then he got on his cell phone and talked for a few minutes, then shortly after a driver showed up—the Man With Clout indicated to me that this was my driver. OK, fine, I thought, Dad isn't here, but this guy will drive me into Damascus. Then the driver asked something in Arabic, and the MWC translated, "What's the address?" which seemed odd to me, surely he knew the address already. "I don't know the address," I replied, which seemed to come as baffling news to them. I tried to explain why I didn't know the address—I was expecting to be met.

Some more mutually uncomprehending conversation took place, after which the driver was dismissed, and the man again indicated for me to follow him, and we began walking up a set of stairs that led up into, I assumed, the administrative offices of the airport, where somehow things would get straightened out. After we had gone up a couple of flights the man pointed to me and said a name—Mohammed Mazin something, but I didn't catch the last name. What was he trying to say to me—that I was Mohammed Mazin? No, I told him, I'm not Mazin, you're Mazin. I'm Hammoude. Some more incomprehensible conversation. He still seemed to believe I was someone other than I was, so I produced my passport and pointed out the name in it—Here, I said, Hammoude, that's me.

At this point he dropped me like a hot potato. He led me back down to the main floor, then disappeared as abruptly as he had appeared. To this day I still don't know what this was all about.

So then I wandered outside into the pre-dawn light to look for Dad, then wandered back inside, then decided just to sit tight and wait. And sure enough, at about 5:30, I spotted Dad, also wandering around looking for me.

So then we greeted each other like long-parted father and son, and Dad led me outside to meet Firaz, who drove us into Damascus as the dawn came up over the city.

When we got to Dr. Fouad's, Dad made us some tea, and we sat up talking for an hour or so, then I went to bed and slept until about 10:30.

Then I awoke and got dressed, and we went upstairs to meet Senna, and Dad and I sat down for breakfast—the traditional Syrian breakfast consisting of a variety of sweet and savoury things to choose from: boiled eggs, cheese, black and green olives, zata, hummus, leban, halvah etc., all accompanied by pita bread and tea. Those traditional breakfasts at Senna's were one of the things I enjoyed most during my stay, especially when the whole family participated; they were so egalitarian and simple, with lots of tasty things to choose from, and one could eat as much or as little as one chose.

After breakfast Dad and I took a taxi to Adnan's, where I met Adnan and Um-Mazin for the first time since I was eight years old. Um-Mazin speaks no English and I no Arabic, so we were able to communicate only in the most basic way, but she seemed a very sweet woman. I was very sorry to hear of her sudden death just a few weeks later, and I'm glad I had the opportunity to meet her. On this occasion I had the first of many pleasant conversations with Adnan. Though he had been rather unwell recently and was still physically weak, he was very alert and humourous, and we always had lively and entertaining conversations.

We visited Adnan's frequently during my stay, and there were usually other family members there—most frequently his children Mazin, Senna and Neda. But also at other times there were Mazin's son Louai; Neda's children Mejd, Hala and Zena; Fatma and her son Khalid; Bishr and Firaz; Belkis, Walid and their son Emad. Sometimes there would be quite a large group of people congregating at Adnan's, as is appropriate, as he is now the patriarch of the family, from whom many are descended.

After we went back home, I went back to bed again and slept for a few more hours—I was dead tired after so much travelling, and jetlagged by the ten-hour time difference. Dad woke me up at about 9 pm, then we went upstairs again, and I met the rest of my host family: Dr. Fouad, Rena, Ammar and Heba; all of whom would be perfectly charming and hospitable throughout my entire stay.

Later that evening Dr. Fouad, Ammar, Dad and I drove into the Old City for a late dinner at this wonderful place called the Narcissus Palace. The Old City is full of very old houses built in the traditional Middle Eastern style, consisting of two stories built around a central courtyard, frequently with a fountain in the middle. Some of these houses have beautiful courtyards, with marble flooring in traditional Arabic designs, a cool fountain plashing, and often small trees or shrubs. You can occasionally catch glimpses of these courtyards walking through the Old City, and a small number are open to the public, but in most cases these are entirely hidden behind the nondescript wooden entrance door.

A modern fashion is for some of the biggest and best of these houses to be turned into restaurants, and the Narcissus Palace is just such a place. From the outside it's just a plain door, but then you step through the doorway and walk down a short passage, then it opens up into a beautiful spacious courtyard, with a large fountain in the middle, filled with tables and chairs.

And filled with people—the place was jumping—this was obviously a popular place. And there were clearly only Damascenes there; besides myself there were no other tourists there (who can be spotted a mile away by dress and demeanour)—this is the kind of place that does not appear in any guide book, is known by word of mouth by the local population, and would be hard to find without a local connection.

There was live entertainment—a singer/instrumentalist (a stringed instrument—a guitar maybe?) who sang traditional songs, frequently accompanied by the enthusiastic diners. We had a great meal there in the traditional Syrian style, in which a large number and variety of dishes are brought to the table—as it would turn out, the first of many great meals I would eat during my stay. Along with most of the other diners Dr. Fouad and Ammar also smoked a *narghile*, or hookah, the traditional Middle-Eastern water pipe. I tried a *narghile* myself, but became light-headed and dizzy almost immediately from the potent tobacco, and that was enough for me. But I can say this: it's a smooth, cool smoke.

And some fantastic people-watching. Lots of newly-liberated Syrian girls in blue jeans and extreme eye makeup, enjoying their new-found freedom and, in a startling visual incongruity, *narghiles* of their own.

Thursday April 19

For the first few mornings I would wake up quite early, around 6 or 7 am, and spend the next couple of hours reading in bed. I had brought several books with me. Aware that my knowledge of the Middle East was inadequate, I had bought an introductory undergraduate history textbook—*A Concise History of the Middle East* by Arthur Goldschmidt—to learn something about the whole region, and began reading it before leaving Seattle. It's well-written and easy to read, and helped to give me some basic knowledge of the region's culture and history. I also bought an excellent travel guide, *Syria: The Rough Guide*, which was my major resource for deciding where to go and what to see, and one book of fiction, the May selection for my book group: *The House of Mirth*, by Edith Wharton.

Most mornings I would read the history book for an hour or so. Dad would wake up at about 7:30, then at about 8 make tea or coffee, and bring me a cup in bed.

Some mornings I would head out early at about 8:30, before the household upstairs was awake, to go off sight-seeing somewhere; other mornings Dad and I would go upstairs at about 9 to have breakfast with the Farhoud family.

On this morning I left quite early to have my first real look at Damascus. I took a taxi to the Old City, and first looked around the outside of the Citadel, but couldn't go inside, as it was undergoing renovation.

Then I walked through the Souk El Hamidiye, the major souk and a main entrance to the Old City. At one time or another I spent a lot of time walking through the souks of the Old City, and they are of course one of the most memorable sights of Damascus, full of life and colour, a feast for the senses. One image out of many: the Islamic women, veiled from head to foot except for a narrow opening through which a pair of brown, liquid, almond eyes can be seen. Passing like shadows in the souks, they might meet my direct gaze for an instant, the briefest of glances, before flicking away.

So I walked down El Hamidiye all the way to the magnificent Umayyad Mosque which stands at its far end. As I entered the mosque I was approached by a local guide who offered to give me a tour of the mosque for 300 Syrian pounds (henceforth lira), and I took him up on it. As it turned out of several guides I hired he was the best; he spoke good English, was extremely knowledgeable about the mosque, and was altogether personable and friendly. His name was Abdul. We spent about 90 minutes walking around the mosque together, then we stopped for coffee at one of the traditional cafes at the eastern gate of the mosque.

Then I went back into the mosque, and walked around it on my own. It's great to have a good guide, to learn something about what you're seeing—it gets placed in context, given meaning; otherwise you're just a clueless tourist. But it's also worthwhile to take the time to look at things on your own, at your own pace. The Umayyad certainly warrants both experiences. I spent another two hours or so inside the mosque, quietly walking around the great courtyard and the enormous prayer hall, or sitting down for long periods, just watching and listening.

For much of the time I was watching the people rather than the mosque, and could write pages about what I saw. People make pilgrimages from all over the Islamic world to this mosque; for them it's a pinnacle of experience, and it shows, in how they interact with the mosque, in how they pray to their God. The faith, the unquestioning, total belief—this was extraordinary to witness.

Then I spent the rest of the afternoon walking through the Old City and looking at various sites along the way: the Tomb of Saladin (not especially interesting), numerous ancient madrasas (Islamic schools) and khans (merchant hostel/warehouses). From the Umayyad I walked through the textile souk to Straight Street (Bab Sharqi Street), then all the way along Straight Street to Bab Sharqi, the eastern gate of the Old City.

By this time I was quite hot and thirsty, so I stopped in a little cafe for a cold beer. Then I decided to go completely off the beaten track, and walk into the northeastern part of the Old City—the old Christian quarter, shown as a mysterious-looking maze of streets on my map. This was a labyrinth of narrow, twisting streets, and in no time at all I was more or less lost. But it was a beautiful part of the Old City, and very different from the bustling, crowded souks—here it was quiet and peaceful, with only the occasional puzzled bypasser. I just kept going, trying to keep going in what I thought was the right direction, and I eventually came out onto a busy street, which appeared to be the plumbing fixture souk—it had every conceivable kind of bathroom appliance, fixture and fitting.

That's another wacky thing about Damascus—the way the same kinds of merchant all cluster in the same area. You can be walking along, and suddenly you realize that you're completely surrounded by stores all selling children's toys, so you must be in the toy souk.

So I followed the plumbing fixture souk, until it eventually brought me out back near the Citadel, then I knew where I was again.

Then I took a taxi back home. That evening we had dinner with the Farhoud's, and the evening ended as they usually did, with Dad and myself and the family relaxing in the living room, watching TV or talking, or I would take my book with me and read. Then usually Dad and I would go off to bed at around 11.

Friday April 20

Dad and I had breakfast with the family, then we spent most of the day at Adnan's. Various people showed up there at different times—this was the day I met Fatma, Belkis and her husband Walid, then later their son Emad. This was also when I met Neda and three of her children for the first time: Mejd, and her unbelievably charming daughters, Hala and Zena.

In the afternoon a take-out lunch was delivered to Adnan's and we sat down to eat—as well as Dad and myself and Adnan and Um-Mazin, Fatma also had lunch with us.

Adnan was quite ill while I was there, and at 86 is becoming frail. But at various times I spent quite a lot of time talking with him. Language difficulties prevented me from conversing with some of my relatives the way I would have liked, but Adnan and I found it quite easy to communicate with one another—he has not forgotten his English.

On this day I also discovered that Emad and Mejd both speak very good English, and I spent some time talking with them and getting to know them. Mejd in particular is a very sophisticated English speaker, with crystal-perfect grammar and a gigantic vocabulary.

Saturday April 21

After my usual reading in bed for an hour or so, I left early to continue my tour of Damascus. I took a taxi to Hedjaz Station, then spent a few minutes looking around the largely deserted station. There is a row of Ottoman-era railway carriages standing on one of the platforms there which have been converted into little cafe, and I made a mental note to go back there for a beer sometime.

I hadn't eaten breakfast yet, so I walked a couple of blocks to the fairly upscale Semiramis Hotel, and had a continental-style breakfast of coffee and rolls in their elegant dining room on the 5th floor, sitting at a window overlooking the noisy and bustling city.

Thus fortified, I walked back to the Old City, once again walked through El Hamidiye and the textile souk, but this time turned east and walked through the perfume souk (the perfume souk!) to the Azem Palace, built between 1749 and 1752 by the Ottoman governor of Damascus, and another Old City architectural highlight. It's a beautiful palace, but it also houses the Museum of Popular Arts and Tradition, which is rather awful, consisting of wax dummy dioramas in many of the rooms of the palace.

Leaving the Azem Palace I turned south, and walked through Bzouriyeh Street, the spices & confectionery souk—a wonderful souk, with all the varieties of herbs and spices piled high in their bins, and many kinds of confectionery. Along the way I briefly looked inside the Hammam Nur-al-Din, a beautifully restored Turkish bath, and also looked at several khans in this area. Some of these are in sad disrepair, but one of them was absolutely spectacular—the Khan Assad Pasha, built in 1752 by the same Ottoman governor who built the Azem Palace. You could easily miss it; it's currently undergoing renovation, and not obviously apparent that you can go inside. The entrance is a huge iron door on Bzouriyeh Street, which was closed, but built within the door is a smaller door, which stood open. You have to crouch to step through it, but when you do, you find yourself in a enormous spacious courtyard, with nine spectacular domes soaring above you—a huge central one surrounded by eight others. And it's very quiet and peaceful, in stark contrast to the chaos of Bzouriyeh Street just a few feet away.

Then I walked to two former grand residences, the eighteenth century Nizam Palace, and Dar Anbar, built in 1867. Dar Anbar was a beautiful place, with three lovely courtyards, one leading into the next, each with flowers and cool fountains. Of all the residences and palaces I saw, I think this may have been the one I liked best, because of its cool, graceful elegance.

I then walked back out through the souks, through the streets to Martyrs Square (Marjeh), then through Yousef al Azmeh Square to the city Tourist Office. I wanted to pick up a good map of Damascus, and also see if they had any other useful information. You can never have too much information.

By this time it was about 1 pm, and I was under very strict instructions from Mazin to be back home and ready to leave for lunch at his house no later than 2 pm, so at this point I took a taxi back home.

I took a quick shower and shave, then at about 1:45 Mazin showed up and began shouting at me (from the upstairs apartment!) to hurry up and get ready to go. He has a very loud voice, and he likes to shout—he shouts at pretty much everybody.

Then at 2 pm sharp, Mazin, Dad and I set off in Mazin's car to drive to his house. He lives in an apartment in the outskirts of Damascus, and there I met his family—his wife and his children Mohammed Khair, Marwa and Louai. His son Louai is one of the most amazingly good-natured and sweet-tempered boys I've ever met.

Lunch, of course, was wonderful, as these traditional Syrian family meals always were. After lunch Dad and Mazin slept for a while, and I played with the children—Mohammed showed me his computer, then we all played cards together.

That evening Dr. Fouad took the whole family—Senna, Rena, Ammar, Heba, Dad and myself out for a late dinner at Old Damascus, a restaurant in the Old City. It was a wonderful evening, with great food, and marvellous entertainment. The food was in the usual Syrian style, in which the waiters bring a great variety and abundance of dishes—so much so that merely placing all the dishes on the table becomes a logistical problem.

And there was also great live entertainment—a traditional musical group consisting of a singer and several instrumentalists, which I enjoyed very much. Then at one point a couple of women from the audience got up on stage and danced, which was just fantastically entertaining. These were a couple of broads who were well past their prime, wearing too-tight pants, and too much makeup. So they were kind of a spectacle. But one of them danced rather beautifully—she had a natural feel for the music and the movements, and she invested her dancing with an effortless, humourous seduction. I just couldn't take my eyes off her.

And as if all that weren't enough, a short while later two whirling dervishes came out and did their whirling dance, which was stunning—I watched entranced. It was a lovely evening, to end a lovely day.

Sunday April 22

At 9:00 am Hisham came to pick Dad and me up in his car, and we set off to visit Maalula and Seydnaya, two popular destination spots to the north of Damascus. We picked up some take-out breakfast, and ate in the car on the way.

We went to Maalula first, and Dad and Hisham sat in a coffee shop while I went off to look around. I first toured the obligatory and largely uninteresting Monastery of St. Tekla, then walked to the top of the dramatic escarpment, at the foot of which the town is built. There are towering cliffs all around the town; it's a spectacular setting. There is a narrow twisting gorge that leads from behind the monastery all the way up onto the top of the escarpment, where there's a lovely view of the surrounding countryside.

As I was climbing up the gorge, I met a huge crowd of schoolchildren on their way down, and in no time at all was surrounded by all these children, about 12 or 13 years old, intensely curious about me, the bolder ones up close, the more timid in the ranks behind, the boldest of all willing to try out their English on me, to the shrieks and giggles of the others. A few minutes later their teachers began to show up and some of them talked to me also; there appeared to be about six teachers herding the group along. This was a school outing from Homs, it was explained to me. They were all in very high spirits, teachers included, as school outings always are.

I am left with one unforgettable image: looking around and being surrounded by the incredibly beautiful brown eyes of these many children, all gazing directly at me.

I clambered up the gorge, and slowly made my way up to the top of the ridge. At the top there is another small monastery, housing the Church of St. Sergius, a beautiful, intimate fourth-century (*fourth-century!*) structure. Very quiet and peaceful inside, and almost nobody else there.

Scattered around the top of the ridge there are numerous man-made caves cut into the rock, and I spent a while exploring these, then made my way back down by the road to the center of Maalula to meet up with Dad and Hisham.

We then drove to Seydnaya, another popular tourist destination. The major thing to see here is the Convent of Our Lady, a huge, castle-like structure built atop a hill outside the town. There is a parking lot just down the hill from the convent, which was full of cars and tour buses, constantly coming and going. As I was about to climb the series of steps up into the convent, I noticed a group of teenage girls looking at me, and slowly realized that this was the same school outing from Homs, who had preceded us to Seydnaya, and again in no time at all, this time not just myself but also Dad and Hisham were surrounded by these many girls and their teachers.

Again, again, those amazing brown eyes from Homs.

On the previous encounter our communication had been the usual well-meaning confusion between people who don't speak the same language, but this time Dad could fill in the gaps. It was explained that this was my father, and I was his son, come to visit the land of my father's birth. This all went over extremely well, and one of the teachers was moved to kiss me on the cheeks. It was really a nice moment.

One of the teachers was an unmarried woman, perhaps in her late thirties, and this led to some mischief on the part of her students. Was I married? they wanted to know. No, I'm not. Would I like to marry her? Oh yes, in a minute, I replied. No language necessary for them to understand that, and they shrieked with delight. They made us pose next to one another, and took pictures. She will no doubt face additional mischief when they are developed.

Then I climbed up the steep stairs into the convent. It's a maze of stairs and courtyards, very interesting to climb around and explore, and with great views from the roof. On the roof I met a Syrian family having a picnic lunch, and they insisted I share some of their food, and I talked for a while with those of them who could speak some English. This sort of thing happened to me several times on my travels, encountering people who were friendly and hospitable, or curious, or who wanted to practice their English. I mention this partly to contrast it with something very different that happened to me on my last day in Syria.

The convent is a real working convent, with the nuns living their daily lives there. It's a rather beautiful place, and they had done a nice job of combining the private and public areas of the convent–there were places you could walk and places you could not, but you could walk past and clearly see the private areas such as the kitchen and living quarters. It reminded me in some ways of my time at King's—the same beautiful and agedness of setting, the presence of visitors in close proximity to the authentic occupants, the same core integrity preserved.

Monday April 23

There were two places I wanted to visit today: Quneitra and Burqush.

Quneitra is a town in the Golan, the bitterly disputed area occupied by Israel since 1967. Almost all of this area remains under Israeli occupation, except for a narrow buffer zone between Syria and the disputed territory, supervised by the United Nations. Quneitra lies within this zone, about 70 km southwest of Damascus, and is the only part of the Golan that can be visited from Syria.

When the Israelis pulled back to the current border in 1973 they removed the entire population of 37,000 and destroyed the town completely—all the buildings were blown up or bulldozed, or otherwise rendered uninhabitable. It's now a ghost town, but you can still see it if you are willing to follow the right procedure. A written permit is required, good for one day only, and you must see the town with a military escort—you cannot go on your own.

I got up early and left at about 8:30, taking a taxi to the Ministry of the Interior to get my permit. I handed my passport to the official in the booth outside the building, who then went inside the building while I waited in the morning sunshine outside. After about ten minutes he came back and returned my passport, along with the required permit.

I then walked to the bus station to find a bus to Quneitra—from the Ministry building a walk of about 2 km. I very often walked when it would have been much quicker, and inexpensive, to take a taxi. At one time or another I spent many hours, and many miles, walking the streets of Damascus. But there is no better way to come to know a city. This morning was a perfect time to walk; it was a beautiful sunny day, and I was happy to walk through the streets and squares, the noise and traffic of early morning Damascus.

I got to the bus station to find it a scene of busy chaos, with microbuses—micros (pronounced "meecro"), the ubiquitous white Mazda minivans—coming and going constantly, people everywhere, all the signs written in Arabic, and no way to get any information. This was the first of several times I took buses in Syria, and it always required a small act of faith on my part—at a certain point I had to relinquish control, put my fate in the hands of others, and simply trust that things would turn out OK.

I said "Quneitra" to one of the people who seemed to have something to do with the bus station, and this word was echoed to first one person and then the next, then a micro came by and I was pointed to it, "Quneitra, Quneitra," various voices said. "Quneitra?" I queried the driver; "Quneitra," he affirmed, so I got in, though the bus was otherwise empty.

The micros are very informal; there are no bus stops, no schedules; people just wave the driver down, who stops to pick them up and drop them off wherever they happen to be. It is of course in the driver's interest to fill his bus, and this one drove very slowly through the crowded streets, calling his route out of the window, looking for passengers. As we made our way out to the main southwest road out of Damascus, the bus slowly filled up.

It took about an hour and a half to get to Quneitra, picking up and dropping off passengers along the way. As we neared Quneitra the bus gradually emptied, because few people go there, and for the last few kilometers the bus was empty except for the driver and myself. Then about 2 km from our destination we came to a UN/Syrian military checkpoint, where my passport and permit were checked, and after a few minutes a Syrian army escort got on the bus with me. Then the bus drove us the last couple of kilometers, dropped us off at the edge of town, then turned around and drove away, leaving us alone in the silence that is Quneitra.

When I expressed my interest in going to see Quneitra, there had been some doubt and dissuasion among my relatives, the general view being that this was no more than a set of collapsed buildings, with nothing much to see, and probably not worth the journey. But I believe otherwise—there is very definitely something there to see.

It is, of course, a tragic place. And a surreal one, because it's also quite beautiful. It rests in a beautiful setting, the green rolling hills of the Golan, and as we began walking on this warm, sunny day, I couldn't help but appreciate how pleasant it was to be out in this tranquil countryside in the sunshine.

But the violence and destruction that took place here is quite plain to see. The town has been destroyed completely—most of the buildings have collapsed entirely, and those that remain standing have been damaged beyond any possible salvaging, with broken beams hanging and reinforcing bars sticking out at all angles. It would have taken determination, and organization, to destroy a place as thoroughly as this.

Yet all this destruction stands in the most perfectly calm and peaceful setting. I was struck almost immediately by the silence—in Damascus I had become accustomed to the constant noise of people and traffic, but here there are no human sounds at all—only the sounds of the birds, to whom this place has now been given over.

And the road we walked on was somehow incongruous too—it was a new, recently-asphalted road, yet with nothing on either side to justify its presence—it gave the same sense of unreality that one might experience walking down, say, an airport runway.

We walked along, my young escort and I, speaking French, which we discovered we were able to communicate in. *Voilà Israel*, he said, gesturing with irony to the west, to the hills of Israeli-occupied Golan rising in the haze across the valley.

We walked around a bend in the road, and there stood a UN observation post, a recently-built two storey structure surrounded by razor wire, now revealing the reason for this brand new, barely-used road. On the top storey stood a huge pair of military binoculars on a tripod, and behind them a UN soldier, gazing endlessly across the border into Israel.

We kept walking and came to the hospital, a large two storey building that remained standing. But it had been completely gutted, and every wall, inside and out, had been machine-gunned—there did not appear to be any surface without bullet craters. We went inside and walked up the stairs—everything smashed, everything broken, the debris crunching underfoot. This place too has been given over to the birds, and as we stepped into one room or another, they would fly out before us, out of the windowless openings.

We walked up onto the roof, where a soldier patrolled with his automatic weapon—for what purpose, I don't know. The roof gave a panoramic view of the countryside, and the ruined town. So many broken buildings, and the shadows of so many broken lives.

We kept walking, sometimes on the road, sometimes between the houses, where grasses and plants have now taken over the land. We went into the mosque, and the church, both still standing, but gutted out shells, with nothing inside. We walked through the main shopping area in the town center, where all the stores are now just empty cells.

After about an hour and a half we made our way back to our starting point, and soon after a microbus came to drive us away from this sorrowful place.

I cannot claim to understand the world any better for having seen Quneitra. But somehow I feel it was worthwhile for me to have walked through it, and perhaps the same experience is worthwhile for anyone. Though I can only imagine how unhappy it must be for Syrian eyes to witness this. In any event, it remains one of my most affecting memories of Syria.

My next destination was Burqush, a relatively minor and little-known Byzantine/Roman ruin. It's a bit difficult to get to; you have to get to the town of Qatana, about 26 km west of Damascus, then from there follow a back road up into the hills for about another 10 km, then follow a farm track for yet another kilometer or so, then finally there is a 20-minute hike up a steep hill to the actual site.

For this reason it is rarely visited—in fact no one I spoke to had even heard of it, including my relatives. I had to pull out my map and point to this little dot in the middle of nowhere to show there really was such a place. But going to this sort of off-the-beaten-track place appeals to me very much; I like the idea of having to work a little bit to get somewhere, and you can be pretty sure of having some solitude when you do get there—no tourist-laden air-conditioned tour bus is going to make the trek to a place like Burqush.

A visit to Burqush can be conveniently combined with one to Quneitra, because Qatana can be reached along a side-road from the main road between Damascus and Quneitra. My plan was to take the micro from Quneitra to the Qatana turnoff, then flag down another micro into Qatana, then . . . I don't know. Maybe find a local taxi or other driver willing to take me up to the site.

But the driver of the micro from Quneitra, who spoke some English, said he knew exactly where Burqush was, and offered to drive me there, wait for me, then drive me back into Damascus, all for 300 lira—a pretty good deal for both of us, so I said OK. He was a pleasant, friendly guy, and we chatted about this and that along the way. The trip back was much quicker, since we didn't have to keep stopping for passengers, but when we got to the Qatana turnoff, he wanted to turn right instead of left. So then we stopped and had an argument about which way to go. It turned out he was thinking of a different ruin just a couple of kilometers east off the main road to Damascus, but eventually I convinced him that no, we had to drive about 6 km west into Qatana, then another 10 km or so after that. This was clearly more than he had bargained for. Well, OK, but it was going to cost more than 300. How much then? I don't know, depends how long it takes. Well, OK, let's go.

There is a good main road into Qatana and we got there in no time at all, but then it took us a long time to find the right road to Burqush. We tried this narrow back road and that, stopped several times to get directions, and eventually after about an hour or so managed to get on the right road. But this still was not the end of our problems, because at a certain point we would need to take a little farm track off this road, and there are many such farm tracks, and absolutely nothing is signposted. Eventually my driver flagged down a local guy in a pickup truck, and after a brief negotiation subcontracted him to lead us to the right turnoff for a fee of 75 lira.

So we get to this completely nondescript, unlikely looking farm track, which the guy in the pickup insists is the right direction. Another moment at which an act of faith is required. So my driver hands over the 75, and the guy in the pickup drives off, cackling with glee over his quick 75 lira score.

We then set off along this bumpy track, and after a little while I begin to wonder how we are ever going to find the place; there are hills and ridges all over the place, and I have no idea which is the right one. Also, we can only drive very slowly along this track, and I don't really know how far it is—it could be one kilometer or fifteen. But we keep lurching along, and after a little while I spy what could possibly be a man-made structure at the top of a ridge—a wall maybe, or the corner of a building.

A little further along we find a little flat open area near the base of this ridge, and some sort of stone cistern—also a good sign, so we park there and decide we'll try this ridge, and we start to hike our way up. Whether it's the right place or not, it's a beautiful place to be hiking on this warm sunny day. It's a dry environment, but there are beautiful flowers and other plants growing on this hillside.

There is no sort of path so we hike our way straight up, and in no time at all we are out of breath. It's clear that neither one of us is in good condition for this sort of climb. And my companion has only thin street shoes, not at all suitable for this terrain; I at least have boots. But we keep going. About half way up I stop to catch my breath, and rest for a moment in the classic uphill climber's pose: leaning on the uphill knee, head down, panting. And looking down my eyes pick out something on the ground that doesn't quite fit—its shape and colour somehow out of place. I bend down to pick it up, and there resting in my palm is the handle of an ancient jug. And at that moment, out here on this remote hillside in the middle of nowhere, I know for sure this is the right place.

A few feet further up I find another piece of broken pottery, and another, and as our eyes adapt we realize that the ground is scattered with many pieces of broken pottery. Some of these little pieces show the design cut into the clay by the potter on the outside, and on the inside the striations left by his fingertips, those many centuries ago.

Finally we reached the top, and as we did so the ruins revealed themselves to us. By this time we were hungry, and the first thing we did was find a place to eat our lunch. We had stopped in Qatana to buy some sandwiches and some bottled water, and we ate them sitting on the ridgetop, my companion and I, looking out across the desolate landscape.

At this point the border with Lebanon is only about 2 or 3 km away, and a little bit higher up the ridge we found a little cinder-block hut that turned out to be a border outpost, occupied by two Syrian soldiers. My driver disappeared inside to have tea with the soldiers, while I took an hour or so to clamber around the ruins.

The site may be considered minor by regional standards, but I thought it was marvellous. There are two major structures: a Byzantine basilica, and a Roman temple, and evidence of various other buildings. Not just a pleasure, it was a privilege to be in this remote and starkly beautiful place, and walk among these ancient buildings. In some ways it reminded me of the day I spent at Castell-y-bere with Mum in Wales—like there, an ancient ruin in a lonely setting, completely deserted, and no sound but the wind.

We scrambled down the hill and drove back to Damascus, arriving at Dr. Fouad's at about 4:30 or 5 pm. For his day's work the driver managed to extract from me a whopping 1000 lira, more than triple his original quoted price—a testament not so much to my generosity, as to my extremely poor negotiating skills. And also my inexperience—I had made the artless blunder of not renegotiating a firm price back at the Qatana turnoff, now leaving myself open to my driver's greatly superior bargaining skills. But I didn't really mind, and didn't put up too much resistance. He deserved his win—he'd been a great travelling companion, and had really entered into the spirit of the thing, determinedly asking for directions until we found the right road, then hiking up with me in his inadequate street shoes, which many drivers would not have, preferring instead to sit down by their vehicle and smoke cigarettes. So all things considered, it was a good day for both of us.

I got back to Dr. Fouad's to find Dad very upset, as Adnan had taken a sudden turn for the worse and been very ill that day. In the evening we went to visit him, finding that though weak, he was feeling much better. We stayed with Adnan for an hour or so, then Firaz came to pick Dad and myself up.

Firaz drove us first to his father-in-law's house, where we met his wife and his in-laws. After visiting with them for a while, we (Firaz and his sister-in-law, Dad and myself) then drove over to Meisa's, where we also visited for a while. Forty years later, Meisa was very much as I remember her. Then the five of us drove up to Mount Quassioun, the great hill that overlooks Damascus, to see Damascus at night. And it was a beautiful sight, the lights of the city spread out before us.

One of many things that struck me about Damascus was the number of mosques—they are everywhere. Driving along one of the main city roads I would look out of the car window, and count the minarets of five or six mosques, all in sight simultaneously. This night on Mount Quassioun, looking out across the city, gave me a new way of appreciating just how many mosques there are. The minarets are traditionally lit up with bright green light, so at night time you see the green lights of mosques, a multitude of them, scattered throughout the city. Damascus: a city of green light.

Then the five of us finished the day by going to a traditional restaurant and having the traditional Syrian dish tessiyeh.

A complex, varied, unforgettable day in Syria.

Tuesday April 24

In the morning Bdia's daughter Hoda came over to meet Dad and me, and we sat down for the traditional Syrian breakfast with her, Senna and Heba.

At about 11 am I left to see some more of the Old City, arranging to meet Dad there at 1:30. I took a taxi to Hedjaz Station, then walked to the Old City and again entered through Souk El Hamidiye. By this time I was getting to know my way around quite well.

I first walked to Maristan Nur al Din, a medieval hospital founded in 1154, which now also houses the Museum of Medical History. The building is interesting enough, but fell far short of others I had already seen, like the exquisitely beautiful Dar Anbar. Regrettably, I was starting to become complacent about architectural sights. And the museum, like that in the Azem Palace, was instantly forgettable. But then they usually are, and I know this, and wondered to myself why I keep going to museums at all; they are almost always a disappointment.

I then walked over to the big Greek Orthodox Church, also known as Mariamiye. It took me a while to figure out how to get in; the main gate was closed, and though I walked all around the entire block of city that contains the church, I couldn't find any other open entrances. Finally I went through a little door into some offices, and asked a receptionist if I might go inside; he just shrugged so I took it as a yes and kept going. I went down a couple of flights of stairs, then out into a courtyard, and eventually found my way into the church.

And discovered why the main gate had been closed: the church was closed for renovation in preparation for the upcoming visit by the Pope in early May. The inside of the church was full of men on scaffolding, spraying and scrubbing the stonework and chandeliers with detergent. And a lot of ancient grime was coming off; it was easy to see which parts had been cleaned and which had not. Nobody seemed to mind me being in there, so I took a look around, and chatted for a while with a couple of the men in charge—the cleaning contractor, and the foreman of the cleaning crew. As on other occasions, they were very interested in hearing where I was from, and why I was in

Damascus, and in practising their English.

I had arranged to meet Dad in the Hariye district of the Old City, so then I walked over to Hariye. I got there a bit early, so I walked around for a while, then met Dad in the central square at 1:30.

We then walked over to the business office of some friends of Dad, where we had arranged to meet a group of four of his friends at 2 pm for lunch. We waited until 2 pm, but they didn't appear, so we kept waiting. And waiting! Finally two of the friends appeared and we left with them at around 3:30, then drove up to Fijeh, a little town up in the mountains to the northwest of Damascus, on one of the tributaries of the Barada River.

We had lunch at a beautiful cool riverside restaurant, sitting outside on the terrace, right by the side of the fast-flowing stream, with a canopy of grape vines overhead for shade. Eventually the two missing friends did show up, then we ordered lunch.

This particular lunch, I think, surpasses all others in terms of the most extravagantly large amount and variety of food that can be piled onto a table at the same time. When the food arrived it was brought by three or four waiters, supervised by the head waiter, and set down and arranged with the brisk professionalism of the career waiter. As more and more dishes kept coming, the waiters moved things this way and that to make room on the table, until eventually there was no more room. But still the dishes kept coming. So then dishes got placed on top of other dishes, balanced on the gap where three other dishes came together. And still they kept coming. It actually had a comedic quality, like something you might see in a Marx Brothers movie, like the Stateroom Scene, where absurdity gets piled on top of absurdity, but all with the utmost seriousness. The lunch continued to rise in the vertical dimension, until finally huge rounds of flat bread arrived, and were draped all over the top of everything else, so we could no longer even see the dishes beneath.

Wednesday April 25

In the evening we were scheduled to have dinner at Belkis's, but with an early start I would have time to get to the magnificent Roman theatre at Bosra, 67 miles south of Damascus, and back in time for dinner.

I took a taxi to the main Tourist Office to get information on the bus service to Bosra, but found nobody there except a non-English-speaking cleaning lady. So I walked over to the other, smaller Tourist Office in town, where a young woman told me I should go to the Deraa bus station, and gave me directions to get there.

To save time I took a taxi, but when I got there I quickly realized that the woman had misdirected me. For this 67 mile ride I had intended to take one of big, comfortable Pullman buses with direct service from Damascus to Bosra, but there was no Pullman service available at the Deraa station—instead this bus company operated only the smaller, cramped, vintage buses. I can't really blame her, since the whole bus situation in Damascus is enormously confusing, with a bewildering number of local and regional bus companies operating out of several different bus stations scattered throughout the city.

But it was too late to do anything else now, and I was willing to go in for the authentic vintage bus experience, so I clambered aboard what I thought was the bus to Bosra. The bus was absolutely packed, with just one seat remaining, all the way in the back, where I squeezed myself in, shoulder-to-shoulder with my neighbours, and with my knees pressed up against the seat in front. There was less legroom here than in the most closely packed airplane seat. It was also hot as hell in there, and we then began a very uncomfortable 2-hour journey. But authentic, I have to say.

I took out my Syria travel guidebook to read along the way, and this generated interest from my fellow riders, and it got passed around and thumbed through among the nearby rows of passengers. Finally we reached our destination and thankfully emerged, but this was not Bosra as I had thought, but the nearby town of Deraa, where I had to change buses for another half-hour ride into Bosra.

I walked around the town center and had lunch at a little outdoor restaurant, then went into the highlight of the Bosra site: the main citadel and theatre complex. It's a very impressive site—the centerpiece is the huge Roman amphitheatre, dating to the second century, with 37 tiers that can seat six thousand, and standing room for a further three thousand. And surrounding the theatre is the Arab citadel, built in the thirteenth century in response to the Crusader threat.

I spent a couple of hours looking at the site—walking around the theatre tiers in the bright sunlight, exploring the maze of murky vaults and passageways beneath, and walking around the ramparts and battlements of the surrounding citadel. On one of the topmost battlements I met and chatted with a couple of fellow-travellers whom I would later run into again in Palmyra: Karl from Montreal, and Corinna from Germany.

There is a sculpture garden and cafe on one of the terraces at the top of the citadel; after admiring the ancient sculptures, I stopped in the cafe for a very welcome cold beer. Barada, the domestic brew, I assume named after the river.

By this time it was almost 4 pm. I had to be back in Damascus no later than 7 pm for dinner, and the latest direct Pullman bus that would get me back in time left at 4 pm—the next bus didn't leave until 6 pm, which would be too late. So at this point I had to leave, and unfortunately wasn't able to see any more of the very extensive Bosra site. But the theatre and citadel were certainly impressive enough.

I hopped aboard the 4 pm Pullman to find Karl and Corinna sitting there, and chatted with them for about 30 minutes, until the bus broke down just at the turn on to the main highway to Damascus. After about 20 minutes a relief bus showed up, and we all piled off the one bus onto the other; in the rush I left my sun hat on the seat beside me. I later made strenuous efforts to retrieve that hat, recruiting Rena to assist me on the telephone, but we were ultimately defeated by the massive dysfunctionality of the bus company lost and found office. But I like to think the hat is now shading the sun from a new Syrian owner.

That evening we had an enormous, fabulous dinner at Belkis's. Present were: Dad and myself, Fatma, Belkis and her husband Walid, Walid's brother and sister, Belkis's son Emad and his very beautiful and very pregnant wife, and Belkis's daughter Zeena. Emad speaks very good English, and I spent most of the time that evening chatting with him and his wife.

Thursday April 26

In the morning I made a quick trip into town to look at one or two other sights in the Old City, which to me was an endlessly engaging place. Though I used my travel guide as direction to the prescribed noteworthy sights, often these were less interesting to me than just the Old City itself—the labyrinth of narrow streets, the souks, the shops and noise and people, the animatedness—and I was happy just to walk around among these unfamiliar sights and sounds.

I took a taxi to Bab Sharqi, then walked to the Chapel of St. Ananias, reputedly where St. Paul the apostle was given shelter by Ananias following his blinding and conversion. Still following the footsteps of St. Paul, I continued to St. Paul's Chapel, a chapel built into the Old City wall, said to mark the spot where Paul was lowered in a basket to flee the city. Then after this pleasant walk a taxi back home.

A short while later Mazin's driver appeared to drive me to Adnan's, where Dad and I visited and talked with him for a while. Then Mazin drove Um-Mazin, Dad and me to Neda's for lunch. Neda and her husband Akram were there, and her four children: son Mejd, daughter Maha, and her enchanting youngest daughters Hala and Zena.

After the lavish meals at Old Damascus, Mazin's, Fijeh, Belkis's and other places, I had begun to grown accustomed to extravagantly bountiful Arabic meals. But Neda may possibly have outdone everyone—the meal she served was quite spectacular—an enormous, beautiful feast.

After lunch we spent the rest of the afternoon talking in their living room. I had previously met Maha briefly, but this was the first time I could have a real conversation with her, and I found that like her brother Mejd, she speaks extremely good English, and the three of us spent most of the afternoon chatting together.

Friday April 27

In the late afternoon Hisham came to pick up Dad and myself, and drove us to his house for dinner. There were several of his relatives there—his wife and his sister, two of his daughters, one of them with her husband and two young children. Dinner was, as always, an abundance of beautiful dishes.

I had been recounting my daily travels to Dad at the end of each day, who of course wanted to hear all about where I'd been and what I'd done. And sometimes at these family dinners I would be asked about the places I'd visited, and I'd describe them to a larger audience. Somehow during this dinner the Hammam Nur-al-Din came up in conversation, the renovated Turkish bath I had looked at briefly the previous Saturday. Some people already knew about this hammam and its interesting history, and as the conversation went back and forth Dad became interested, and decided he'd like to go there and have a Turkish bath himself.

So later that evening, Hisham drove Dad and me into the Old City and dropped us off at the hammam. It's really a marvellous place, very grand inside, with gleaming white, Ottoman domed chambers throughout. It's also very old, having been first contructed in around 1160, so one way or another it's been in business for about eight and a half centuries. In the early years of the last (20th) century it was converted to a soap factory, but it has recently been beautifully restored to its original purpose as a Turkish bath.

So Dad and I went in for the full deluxe treatment, including steam, soaping and scrubbing, massage, and tea at the end. We first went into the steam room, which was very, very hot, with a domed roof, and little side-rooms, also domed, with little round coloured glass inserts in the ceiling to admit some coloured daylight. Sitting with our backs against the wall the heat was just barely tolerable; when we stood up, the steam about our head and shoulders felt scalding hot. After getting thoroughly steamed, the next step was to be soaped and scrubbed all over by one of the attendants, with some sort of exfoliating device—like a loofah, only much, much more abrasive. Then we went into the massage room, where a man with enormously strong and powerful hands gave us a full body massage.

Then after all of this, feeling pink, rosy and relaxed, we were wrapped in towels and robes and led to the comfortable sitting area or salon, and served with tea.

Hammam Nur-al-Din is on Bzouriyeh Street, in the heart of the Old City, and not very far from the boarding school where Dad boarded as a child. I was very curious to see the places where Dad had lived and grown up, so when we left the hammam we walked over to look at Dad's old school. Though it was closed at this time of night, the building is still there, and still appears to be a school.

Incidentally, on another occasion, Mazin took us to the house that Dad grew up in. It's now unoccupied and abandoned, but still there in the same spot. I was happy to be able to stand in Dad's street, look at his door and windows, and look up at the balcony where photographs were taken that I have seen.

By this time it was about 9:30, and soon it would be time for the nightly whirling dervish performance at the Old Damascus restaurant, that had impressed me so much the previous Saturday, so this was a great opportunity to see it again. So at this point Dad took a taxi home, and I walked over to Old Damascus to watch the whirling dervish show, which was just as captivating a second time.

Then a late taxi back home.

Saturday April 28

Thus far I had spent all my time in Damascus, or visiting places that could be seen in a day from Damascus. But I very much wanted to see something of the rest of the country, and today left to spend a few days travelling elsewhere. Since Dad was leaving early on Wednesday morning I had to be back no later than Tuesday afternoon, giving me only three days, so I had to limit my travel to what could be seen in that short time. Consulting my map and guidebook, I determined that I could reasonably visit Palmyra and Crac des Chevaliers, two of the architectural highlights of Syria, and perhaps also include a brief visit to the picturesque town of Hama.

The architectural jewel of Syria is, of course, the ancient city of Palmyra, so that was my first priority. So early in the morning I took a taxi to the big Pullman bus station, and got on the bus to Palmyra.

I found myself sitting next to Ron, a big, blue-eyed, laid-back Australian who had been travelling the world for *two and a half years*. He had been just about everywhere. He had managed this extraordinary feat by means of extreme economy of expenditure—he took buses instead of taxis, stayed in the cheapest hotels, ate as cheaply as possible, and never, ever, tipped. By these and other devices he was able to travel on a fraction of what I spent in a day. Man, the guy was tight with money. So Ron and I sat and chatted in our air-conditioned bus during the 3-hour journey out into the baking Syrian desert.

When we got to Palmyra (or rather Tadmor, the small town adjacent to the ruins), for some reason the bus dropped us off a good distance from the central town square. There were plenty of taxis around willing and eager to drive us there, but no, Ron would never pay for a taxi when he had legs to carry him, so we had to walk a mile or so under the scorching desert sun. Which was just fine with me—I'm a great walker myself.

As soon as we got to the central square we met two other travellers—Emily and Elvia, a pair of sisters from Chicago. They had arrived shortly before we did, and had been eating breakfast at an outdoor cafe on the square, so we gratefully dropped our packs and sat down with them, and talked, of course, about travel—where we had been, and where we were going next. These were also very experienced travellers—they had been travelling continuously for 6 months, starting in Japan, I think they said. Though they started out as wealthy Americans, they too had become extremely budget-conscious—a hazard, apparently, of extended travel.

As we sat there talking, who should come walking by but Karl and Corinna, the couple (temporarily; they were originally solo, but had met in Damascus and for the moment were travelling together) I had met on Wednesday in Bosra, so they sat down with us too. Then a little while later a Finnish guy called Pekka came by whom Ron had previously met on his travels, then a guy from Houston whom somebody knew, and they sat down too. So in no time at all we were this little group of travellers who all just happened to be in Palmyra at the same time.

I was reminded of my summers as an undergraduate, when I would hitchhike across Europe, staying in youth hostels or sleeping under the stars, and when at any particular point in time there would be a community of young hitchhikers and backpackers crisscrossing the continent. Travelling on multiply intersecting paths from one place to another, you would often meet the same people at different places. You might stay in a hostel and have breakfast with some fellow travellers in the morning, keep leapfrogging them on the road, and eventually end up on the same ferry in the afternoon, or perhaps in the same hostel at the end of the day.

During the baking heat of the afternoon we sat in the shade at our table and talked. At various points we each went off to find accommodations—in the end everyone except me stayed at the same budget place for the rock-bottom price of about 150–200 lira. I took a look at one of the rooms, but decided to go more upscale and found a better hotel for 500—an early indication of a basic difference of attitude between me and my companions.

There are a number of very interesting tombs in the area. Most of these can be visited at any time, but the biggest and best are only open to the public for a brief period at 4:30 pm each day, so at 4:30 we all piled into a microbus for a trip to the tombs. But not before Emily had bargained endlessly with the bus driver about the cost of this trip, trying to get him to come down in price by what seemed to me an entirely trivial amount—the equivalent of 50 cents per head.

While this was going on I was approached by a guide, offering our bus a guided tour of the tombs. Based on my previous good experience with a guide at the Umayyad Mosque, I was all for hiring him, but knowing how resistant some of the others would be to spending money on a guide, and in view of the general difficulty that groups have in coming to consensus about anything, I just hired him to guide our whole group for 350 lira. He turned out to be an excellent guide, and made our tour of the tombs much more interesting, and I think the others appreciated him too. We first drove to an above-ground tower tomb, then to an underground tomb, and both were quite fascinating.

On a nearby hill overlooking the Palmyra site is an Arab castle, Qala'at ibn Maan, and after dropping off our guide back in town, the bus drove us up and left us at the castle, so we could watch the sunset from there. From the castle there is a wonderful panoramic view of the harsh Syrian desert, with the ruins of Palmyra spread out below. Beautiful in the late evening sunlight. We explored the castle, then sat on one of the topmost ramparts and talked as the sun went down.

Then we hiked back into town, a beautiful walk as the light faded, and went back to our respective hotels to shower and change, arranging to meet up later for dinner.

The next day we would see the main attraction, Palmyra itself, and some of us decided to get up early to watch the sunrise from the ruins. Also, I very much liked the guide we had met, and wanted to ask him to be our guide for the ruins—I knew he would make the experience much more interesting. His name was Hussein, and he was a local man, born and grown up in Tadmor, and tremendously knowledgeable about the history and archaeology of Palmyra. He was also quite a bit more patrician than the average tourist guide/hustler—he carried himself and spoke with propriety, with a kind of dignity, demanding a commensurate respect.

A few of the other people, in particular the sisters from Chicago, felt the same way, and on the walk back into town we had talked about hiring him as a group the next day, and decided that I would contact him and set it up. When I got back to my hotel I called his number and left a message, but as I was leaving my hotel to meet the others at their hotel, I just happened to meet him on the street. Perfect. I could take him with me to meet the others, determine who was interested, and arrange the time and price.

It was easy enough to determine who was interested in a guided tour: me, Emily, Elvia, Karl, Corinna, and I think Pekka. It was also easy enough to arrange the time: some of us were going to get up before dawn to experience the 5:40 am sunrise at the ruins—OK, so then Hussein would meet us there at 6 am to give us a formal tour.

But when we started talking about price, somehow everything fell apart. Hussein wanted 100 lira per head, which seemed perfectly reasonable to me—$2, less than the price of an espresso. But Emily, the relentless negotiator, quickly figured he would make 600 lira on this deal, and wanted a group discount—how about 300 for everybody?

To me, this haggling over a few cents here or there seemed pointless, even distasteful. To be sure, my situation was very different to these other people's—I was travelling for only three days and unlike them didn't need to be concerned about making my resources stretch out for months. Also, I was constantly relating things back to prices in the US, where it costs $10 to buy lunch, or park your car for the day; whereas these long-time travellers had become fully acclimated to what local currency is worth locally.

But still. Tourists the world over make an implicit bargain with the local population. We are cluttering up their landscape, breathing their air, frequently offending their sensibilities with our insensitivity, infantile peevishness and narrow bourgeois values. Personally I'm always faintly embarrassed to be there at all. So what's in it for them? It seems to me that the least we can do is put our dollars into their economy with some measure of grace and good humour.

Long-time travellers are apt to claim poverty of means as justification for this chronic chiselling, but this is a bogus claim. As a relatively wealthy foreigner, it is disingenuous to claim poverty when this is an artificial poverty, resulting from an earlier decision to quit well-paid employment, and instead travel for an extended period of time. For anyone with a genuine interest in maintaining some minimal level of tourist generosity, the solution could hardly be more simple: take a shorter trip.

So anyway. Emily came out with her lowball 300 offer, but instead of coming to the obvious compromise of 450 for the group, which would probably have made everyone happy, somehow everything went sideways. Perhaps Hussein was offended at being lowballed. Perhaps Emily was too locked into the idea of wringing the absolute best deal she could get out of every situation, and simply couldn't get past that.

But in any case things went back and forth, and Hussein politely repeated that his offer was 100 per head, and that he would give the tour at this price even if only one person showed up. Though of course this actually makes perfect sense, the apparent illogic of this baffled some in the group, especially Corinna, who said, "But you are saying the same things no matter how many people are listening, right? So shouldn't it be cheaper if there are more people?" which struck me as a particularly crass comment.

Hussein responded to all this with admirable composure, but somehow a group deal did not get struck, and eventually he left without anything having been settled, except that I at least would show up for his 100 per person tour, and any others were welcome.

To me this all seemed a bit idiotic. And especially so, given the professions of we who were trying to save a dollar. We were not impoverished students, or minimum-wage earners, struggling to make ends meet. We were: Andrew, an electrical engineer; Emily, a software development manager; Elvia, an architect; Karl, a chemical engineer; Corinna, an investment banker. An *investment banker*. Who thinks that prices “should” be set on the basis of some sort of abstract logic.

But then we put this rather awkward tableau behind us, and went off to look for a place to have dinner, and soon found a place with a very nice open air garden, where we could dine alfresco. And where Emily, bless her heart, negotiated a complete dinner for everyone for 200 lira each. But it was really a nice dinner, and lovely to eat outside in the warm evening air and the deepening sky, and I very much enjoyed the companionship of these fellow travellers, met for a brief moment in Palmyra.

After dinner some people went for a drink, but I wanted to get an early night in preparation for my pre-dawn rising in the morning. So I walked around the middle of town for a little while, then went to bed.

Sunday April 29

The next morning I got up at 5:00 am, and walked over to the other hotel to meet the other early risers: Emily, Elvia, Karl and Corinna. The five of us hiked out to the ruins in the early desert chill, and walked through them in the pale morning light. We went over to the beautiful Roman theater, and sat on its rim as the sun came up over Palmyra.

Then at 6:00 am I went over to the monumental gateway to meet Hussein, who, true to his word, had arisen at that hour and was there to guide only a single person—myself. Because as it turned out, no one else came with me. But he gave me a great guided tour—for an hour and a half he and I walked together through the ruins, and talked about the history and meaning of this ancient city.

The deal we had made was for 100 lira per person, and he gave me the tour on that basis without reservation or complaint. But of course I had to offer him more, and he accepted 200—though this was still little enough for his time and trouble.

Then I hiked back into town to my hotel for breakfast, then afterwards sat for a while at the cafe in the main town square and chatted with Ron, Elvia, Pekka and others who came and went at various times.

I mentioned previously that I had left my hat on the bus coming back from Bosra; if ever there was a place where I needed a hat, Palmyra was surely it. So then I went looking for a hat among the nearby shops off the town square. I went from shop to shop, but everything I found was cheap touristy trash, that I couldn’t bear to pay for and put on my head—I’d rather risk sunstroke. I was on the point of giving up when I went into a little shop and encountered a Swiss woman who was trying on a headscarf, and I happened to notice she had a beautiful, well-made, first-world hat. Our eyes met; I told her she looked very handsome in the headscarf; she should certainly buy it. And perhaps she no longer needed her hat, and would consider selling it to me? I tried it on—it was a perfect fit. So she sold me her fine linen Swiss-made hat for $7.

There is an archeological museum right on the main square, and out of some odd sense of obligation I went in to look around. But as usual, I found the museum to be generally a disappointment. Why do I keep doing this to myself, I thought, as I left. Will I never learn?

Then I hiked back over to the ruins, and spent a couple of hours walking through them on my own. By now it was the middle of the afternoon, and extremely hot, and there was almost nobody else around—anybody with any sense was in the shade. But I would be leaving in a few hours, and this was my last opportunity. But hot though it was, this was the time I could best appreciate the size and splendour of Palmyra, walking around the empty ruins in the scorching desert sun.

Before leaving I looked at a couple of other things—there is a huge temple somewhat separated from the main site, and nearby the oasis to which Palmyra owes its existence—a true geographical oasis, where water flows directly out of the ground, supporting a lush grove of trees out in the middle of the desert.

Eventually I walked back into town, said my good-byes to a couple of companions whom I ran into in the square, and walked to the outskirts of town to a little dusty bus station, where at 6 pm I got on the bus to Homs.

The ride to Homs took a couple of hours, and by the time I got there it was dark. I hired a taxi to help me find a place to stay, and eventually wound up at the Hotel Raghdan—a fairly awful place, but right in the center of town.

After checking in I went out to look around town. Homs gets kind of a bad rap in the travel guide books—it's described as ugly and not very interesting, but I liked it. Even at 9 o'clock at night the place was completely alive—all the little stores were open and brightly lit, there were crowds and traffic, restaurants full of diners, bustling movement and activity everywhere. After my long day in Palmyra and the long bus ride to Homs I was tired and thirsty, and now what I wanted more than anything else was a cold beer to end the day. But I couldn't find one. I walked here and there, dropping into this restaurant/cafe and that, but at each place was told, "Sorry, we don't serve beer here." I even got the sense that asking the question was slightly improper, but this may just have been paranoia on my part. I couldn't even find a store that sold beer, so I could take a bottle back to my hotel room.

After a while my desire for a cold beer grew into an obsession, and in the end I took a taxi to the luxury Safir hotel, about 2 km away, and found what I was looking for in their overpriced but extremely comfortable bar. But bliss to sit there at the end of a long day in a well-upholstered armchair, with a frosty one at my elbow. Then a pleasant walk back through the city streets to my hotel in the center of town.

Monday April 30

In the morning I took a quick walk through the souks, which were just around the corner from my hotel, but they were nowhere near as extensive or interesting as those in Damascus. Then I walked a couple of miles to the main city bus station; a very pleasant walk through the morning city bustle.

At the station I found the usual scene of busy chaos, and as usual put my faith and fate in the hands of the first boy who laid claim to me. "Crac des Chevaliers" I told him, and he then led me this way and that through the noise and confusion, and finally pointed out the bus I should get on. I looked at it with some dismay—this was not the comfortable air-conditioned Pullman I had been expecting, this was just another cramped microbus, already packed with people. Did I really want to spend an hour or so being bounced around inside this hot, overcrowded death-trap?

As I stood there in indecision I heard my name being called, and looking toward the rear of the bus, who should I see there but Ron grinning at me, his beefy shoulder leaning out of the window, and in the seat next to him Pekka. What an amazing coincidence to run into the two of them again in Homs, amid all that confusion. The two of them had taken the bus to Hama the previous day, and just that morning come down to Homs. They had already scoped things out and told me this was the only bus to the Crac; it was this or nothing, so I paid off the kid and squeezed in. And then an hour-long journey out to the Crac.

Crac des Chevaliers, an enormous Crusader fortress built in the twelfth century, is said to be the finest medieval castle in the world, and I can well believe it. It is absolutely magnificent, set on a high, wind-swept ledge, with panoramic views across the hills and valleys in every direction. It's still in virtually the same condition as when the Crusaders abandoned it in the late thirteenth century, with massive, terrifyingly high and steep fortifications on all sides. As Pekka observed, this would be a difficult place to assault even with modern weapons.

We spent the whole afternoon looking around the castle, walking around the outer walls, clambering around on the topmost battlements, and exploring the maze of vaults and tunnels and chambers beneath. Standing on one of the highest terraces, I was struck by the immense size of the place. It is a gigantic monument to man's willingness to invest resources in warfare. Like a modern aircraft carrier, it represents the ultimate capabilities of the technology of the time, and a colossal investment of labour and materiel. Perhaps in another 900 years someone will wander the abandoned hulk of one our battleships with similar wonderment.

There is a cafe on one of the castle terraces, and after a while Pekka and I went there for a beer. This was the first time

I had spoken to him at any length, and I discovered that of all the people I had met at Palmyra, he was the closest to me in terms of temperament and philosophy. We sat there for quite a while, drinking beer and talking in the sunshine.

There are various other castles and ruins in this general area—Byzantine, Roman, Arab, Crusader—but there was one in particular I was interested in seeing: the Roman temple at Hosn Suleiman. Like Burqush, this is a relatively minor site. But it's higher up in the mountains, well off the beaten track and somewhat inconvenient to reach, and so infrequently visited—and so for me a worthwhile destination.

My plan was to hire a taxi to take me from Crac des Chevaliers to Hosn Suleiman, wait for me there, then drive me on to Hama that evening. Since Ron and Pekka were going back to Hama that evening anyway, I tried to talk them into doing this with me, and also various other travellers we met at the Crac who were returning to Hama.

But the only person who bought into the idea was Pekka, who really seemed to understand the concept perfectly. So we arranged for a taxi to come pick us up at about 4 pm. When it arrived, the taxi turned out to be a microbus, new and in unusually good condition, and inexplicably with a crew of three—in addition to the driver there were two other men who sat shoulder-to-shoulder in the front seat while Pekka and I spread out in the back. Were they unauthorized passengers, taking advantage of a free ride to Hama? Or friends of the driver, just along for the outing? We didn't know, and it somehow seemed impolite to ask.

It took us about an hour to get to our destination, by way of a very pleasant scenic drive through this much less travelled part of Syria, along narrow mountain roads and through frequent picturesque villages.

Hosn Suleiman is situated in a beautiful natural amphitheatre in the mountains, in a kind of bowl with hills rising on all sides, and has been a site of worship for a succession of cultures and religions since around 2000 BC. The Roman temple whose ruins still remain was built sometime before the end of the 2nd century, or over 1800 years ago.

This was a very different site to the Crac des Chevaliers we had recently left. Topographically it's situated in an enclosed valley rather than atop a high ridge, and architecturally is relatively modest. The Crac has a massive, complex, overwhelming presence; one gets lost in its multitude of levels and parapets, passageways and chambers. By contrast Hosn Suleiman is quite simple: a large outer wall enclosing what is now an open meadow, and in the center a cella, or sacred inner temple. The outer walls are largely intact, though the cella is now mostly a jumbled pile of stone blocks. The whole site is something you can look at and basically comprehend.

Our three drivers sat next to the minivan (and smoked cigarettes) while Pekka and I walked around the site and the surrounding area for an hour or so. There were sheep grazing in the meadow within the temple walls, and local children playing among the tumbled pillars and huge stone blocks—a most unusual playground to have on ones doorstep.

Then we drove on to Hama. Our drivers dropped us off at the Cairo hotel in the middle of town where Pekka and Ron were staying; since they were staying there I took a room there also.

Tuesday May 1

When I got up the next morning Ron was nowhere to be found and Pekka was feeling unwell and sleeping in, so I took off on my own to look at Hama. It's a pleasant, picturesque town on the Orontes river, with a number of riverside parks, and of course, the norias or mediaeval waterwheels for which the town is famous. The wheels continue their stately turning today, and continue their endless, mournful groaning as the massive wheels turn in their wooden bearings.

I ate breakfast in a riverside cafe in the center of town overlooking a group of norias, then walked through the town for two or three hours—first downstream through a riverside park, then through a market and some of the other main city streets. Then I turned and walked upstream alongside the river, and after a mile or so came to a spot where there is a group of four beautiful norias, and beside them a riverside restaurant. I sat on the shady terrace at the river's edge and drank a couple of cold beers as the river flowed by, accompanied by the hypnotic turning and groaning of the norias.

I continued walking upstream and eventually came to a bridge, then crossed the river and returned to the town center. On this side there was no riverside path, and I made my way back in an *ad hoc* way, following this back street and that, until eventually arriving back at my starting point. By this time it was early afternoon and time for me to think about returning to Damascus. There are several bus companies in town; I checked their schedules and booked myself a seat on a Pullman leaving at 3 pm.

It took a couple of hours to get to Damascus, then instead of the usual taxi I took a series of microbuses to get back to Dr. Fouad's—a bit of a challenge since I had no idea where they went, or even where I was in the city. But with the assistance of helpful Damascenes who told me which bus to get on, and where to get off, then which other bus to get on, eventually I made my way home.

By this time it was about 6 pm, and Dad was at Adnan's. So I phoned him there and walked over to face their reproaches for my late return—though I had said I would be back on Tuesday, and it was Tuesday!

Wednesday May 2

This was the day Dad left, and Firaz came by at about 5:30 am to take us to the airport to see him off. At the airport I spotted the Man With Clout again, and this would have been the perfect time to find out what that thing had all been about, but we were busy getting Dad checked in, and we let the opportunity slip by. Now we will likely never know.

This was my last day in Damascus, and still many things one could see in this historic city. I spent this last day walking about the city, visiting the places that interested me most—some conventional, others more offbeat. After Firaz dropped me off at home, I took a taxi to the Takiyyeh Mosque, then after looking at it walked through the adjacent Handicraft Market, a relatively peaceful and unhurried place where craftsmen make and sell their traditional handmade goods.

This would have been the time to see the extensive National Museum as it's right next door, but it would have taken up most of the day, and I'd much rather be out in the city and see a variety of things, than remain indoors and see only this. So I passed the museum by, and instead walked over to Martyrs Square (Marjeh), and spent an hour or so looking through the surrounding streets, a chaotic bustle of trades and businesses.

My next stop was the renowned Bakdash ice cream parlour in Souk El Hamidiye. This is a *de rigueur* stop for any visitor to Damascus, and had also been highly recommended to me by Ron. This is a much larger place than most of the tiny establishments in the souks; it goes back a long way from its store front, and even has a little courtyard in the back. They make the ice cream right there on the premises, and sell it as fast as they can make it—this place was doing a furious business, its long tables inside packed with people, and they were also doing a non-stop take-away business, as people picked up ice cream at the front to eat as they strolled through the souk. So I sat in there and enjoyed my freshly-made, pistachio-covered ice cream as the world went by.

Next stop: the main Shiite Mosque in the Old City, whose name I forget. But this is an amazing place—as someone said, if they were to build a mosque in Las Vegas, this is what it would look like. It's unbelievably garish and ornate, with glittering mosaic mirrors everywhere; yet somehow this all works; the place is actually quite beautiful and impressive in its own ostentatious way. I found a quiet place to sit against the wall, and stayed there for a long time, looking at the spectacular interior decoration, and watching the people come and go at their worship.

I was reluctant to leave, but eventually I got up and began walking to the Salihiye district, another very ancient part of the city. This is a longish walk, about 3 km or so, and it took me a while to get there. On the way I found myself at one point walking alongside a high wall, and seeing a little entrance stepped inside to discover myself in a large cemetery. Except for its permanent residents it was completely deserted, and I was suddenly in an enclosed world of stillness in the heart of the city. Like any cemetery it invites contemplation, and I walked slowly along its narrow pathways among the silent multitude of tombs and monuments to the dead. Not mentioned in any travel guide, unvisited by any Pullman-borne tourist, it stood in peaceful contrast to the frenetic world of the living outside.

Then on to Salihiye, where I spent the rest of the afternoon walking through its narrow winding lanes and markets, and looking at many of its thirteenth century madrasas, mosques, and mausoleums.

My time here was drawing to a close. But there was one last thing I wanted to do before leaving the city of Damascus. So at the end of the afternoon I took a taxi back to Hedjaz Station, to the row of Ottoman train carriages converted into a cafe I had noted eleven days earlier. They had done a beautiful restoration job; one of the carriages had been converted into several small compartments where two or three people could sit in plush Ottoman intimacy, while another had been converted into a more open, pub-like space.

And I noted to my delight that they were serving beer in the traditional dimpled English beer glasses. There is surely no glass in the world out of which a beer tastes better. So this is how I ended my time in the city of Damascus, drinking a beer in an Ottoman railway carriage in Hedjaz Station—a perfect ending.

Well, not quite. On entering the carriage I had heard the unmistakably clear, round syllables of educated English, coming from a group of three men sitting at one of the larger tables. With the instant congeniality of someone unexpectedly hearing his native language in a foreign land, I walked over and asked if I might join them.

But for one tragic moment I had forgotten our legendary British standoffishness. I realized my mistake at once—I had committed a clumsy breach of etiquette. Only one of the three acknowledged my presence in any way, and after a painfully long pause, gave a noncommital assent. Standing there foolishly it felt too awkward to retreat at this point, so I sat down.

But it was clear that these men had no interest in friendly discourse with an outsider. I quickly gathered that they were academic archaeologists, two professors and I think a Ph.D. student, from Nottingham and other English universities, here to do field research in some of Syria's abundant archaeological sites. They had been chatting about this dig and that dig, this colleague and that—the usual academic shop talk. And they continued to do so while ignoring me totally—not one single word of conversation came towards me. After five minutes or so of this I managed to interject an appropriately inane conversational gambit, "So, you're archaeologists then?"

Never has a conversational opening fallen on less fertile ground. The question was acknowledged in the most minimal way possible—there was no shifting of position in seats, no turning of shoulders, no responding question to me, no names offered or solicited, and only the briefest of eye contact from one of the three and none (I do not exaggerate, truly none) from the others. My God, these guys were priggish.

Well what to do. These clowns were ruining my last moments in Damascus. Three major options. One: get up and walk away. Two: sit there indefinitely until things maybe warmed up a bit. Three: begin to subject them to subtle and exquisite torture by means of sublimely thickheaded obliviousness, together with an endless series of banal comments and interruptions. I was as British as they were, and just as lethal . . .

I was certainly tempted. But after another five minutes or so I really had little choice but to pick up my glass and move to another table. Of course I acknowledge that technically the error was mine—if a group of people don't want to talk to a stranger, they certainly need not.

Thursday May 3

My flight the next morning was at 8:25 am, and in an act of kindness and hospitality typical of my entire stay, Firaz came by at 6 am to drive me to the airport.

And so ended one of the most interesting and eventful travel experiences of my life—and my introduction to half my living relatives.

Thank you to the many relatives who welcomed me into their homes and made my stay memorable. My thanks to my kind hosts Dr. Fouad, Senna and family, my uncle Adnan and Um-Mazin, Aunt Fatma, cousin Mazin and family, cousin Neda and family, aunt Meisa and family, cousin Belkis and family, Hisham and family, and the many other spouses and siblings, sons and daughters not mentioned by name.