

Impressions of Damascus, a Beautiful City, Amazing, Kind People

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I've only passed through [Damascus](#) once before, in 2002 on my way to Baghdad. What meets you today is a beautiful city with checkpoints all over the place, your car trunk will be opened and papers checked. Seemingly useless explosives detectors are used – useless because they don't catch that many drivers here today have a revolver or hand-grenade under their seat.

But you'd probably be surprised, like I was, at how normal it otherwise feels.

Traffic is intense, pollution thick, shops are filled with goods, I see fewer beggars here than in Lund, Sweden. People enjoy excellent food (I haven't had such good meals for long) at restaurants with live music and entertain themselves at the omnipresent cafés.

As everywhere else in war zones, people whose lives have been shattered in many ways – and there are few here in Damascus who have not been hit one way or the other by the war – do their best to maintain some kind of normality.

I've seen it elsewhere such as in Sarajevo – the women in particular dress up elegantly and often sexily in the public space, hang out with friends, drink cappuccinos and check their mobiles incessantly to *be* and to *appear* as someone in control although life is close to unbearable. Human pride and determination comes out very strongly in war zones – as much, I would say, as human evil.

What will surprise you is the (limited) destruction by those who are here called the terrorists around town and Israeli bombings. It's just to take a walk in the magic old, beautiful town with its narrow-narrow lanes and you'll see houses where mortars have fallen through the roof and killed people or hit the ground. Clearly visible.



From a alleyway in Damascus Old Town

During “the crisis” – as it is called here – since 2011, Damascus has grown from 4,4 million in 2010 to 7,5 million people in 2015. There are huge numbers of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in all cities and towns here, some coming in also because of the drought before the crisis. The humanitarian needs are rampant – but you never heard about those types of problems in Damascus.

The large hotels here are filled with media people, diplomats and weddings And life must go on.

Prices at the huge luxury hotels such as Four Seasons, I’m told, are exorbitant – 400 USD for a room per night. And there is an upper class – probably corrupted by operating through the sanctions – who can pay anything for it.

I am thoroughly happy that I live in what my “fixer” says is the best hotel in Damascus, the [Beit Awali](#) in the old town where the network is totally reliable. It’s immensely genuinely historic and beautiful and the owner and staff care for it – and for its guests – in a way that is so very touching.

And the price is 70 USD per night incl a fabulous breakfast. (Traveling on TFF’s shoestring budget this is the best bargain ever. Thank you to those of you readers here who have helped make this possible*).



The inner court of the Beit Awali Hotel

Damascus is *both* a modern town at the foot of large whitish mountains around with boulevards, parks, squares and huge gray apartment buildings *and* the old town so filled with history and atmosphere. I can't help but loving it.

Apart from occasional shootings that seem to take place quite far away followed by ambulance sirens, it is easy to forget that one is in the capital of the one of most hard hit countries in the world. (Some of these shootings may also be wedding celebrations, it depends on the time of the day).

The people here - everyone you meet - are kind and hospitable, exactly as I have experienced it in Iraq and Iran.

There is a depth of thousands of years of civilisation, a reception and acceptance of the visitor, the stranger, that cannot but touch my heart. They would seem to have very good reasons to hate someone looking Western like me. I've met nothing but smiles and kindness so far.



The President is everywhere. And so is alcohol and other commodities

May the suffering of these good-hearted people soon end.

Nobody deserves this life however nice and easy it may look on the surface. Beneath there is so much sorrow.

During my first five days here, I have come in contact with many who have lost brothers and sisters – one of them 8 in just one attack – people whose family members are in the Army and have seen more violence and death at the age of 25 than anyone should in a lifetime.

That's why we must discuss peace and reconciliation and constructive re-building of the Syria that *is* still possible.

* [You can support this mission in Syria at any time here](#). Thanks!

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