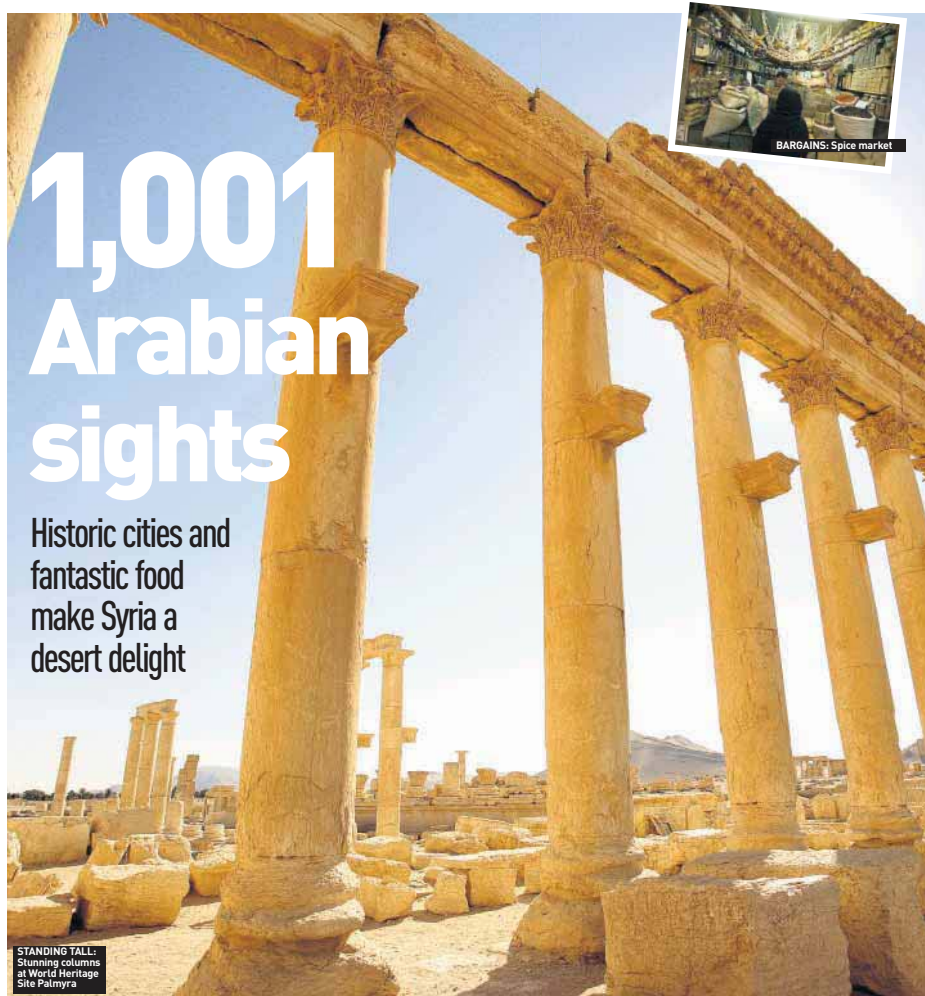


Holiday hot spots

email travel@people.co.uk



PATRIOTIC: Bashar

by **Nada Farhoud**

AFTER decades of being shunned by cautious Westerners, Syria is finally gaining the recognition it deserves as a fascinating holiday destination.

If you have never visited, it's likely everything you've heard about this

place is wrong – it's safe, welcoming and the people are very friendly.

But while it leaps enthusiastically into the 21st century, Syria is still holding on firmly to the culture that helped provide the backdrop to classic tales such as 1,001 Arabian Nights.

All in all a splendid place for my boyfriend, Dan, and I to visit a selection of beautiful cities on a nine-day tour escorted by a patriotic tour guide Bashar - who shares his name with the country's president Bashar al-Assad.

The face of Syria's leader is hard to escape as his portrait decorates most shop fronts and restaurant



walls.

At first the thought of an organised tour horrified me, as I had pre-conceived prejudices about being bussed around with a bunch of strangers.

And when I arrived at breakfast on the first morning to find two American men in their late 60s sitting at the table, I feared I may be right.

However, I couldn't have been more wrong. The mix of ages, interests and nationalities – British, American and Swiss – all brought something different to the group that had gelled together really well by the end of the trip.

This was helped by Bashar, whose relaxed approach ensured everyone's tastes were catered for – including Dan's insatiable appetite for the local delicacies!

When we were not admiring historical monuments in the ancient cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Krak des Chevaliers and World Heritage Site Palmyra, we were sampling the country's fabulous food.

Syria is a foodie's heaven and meals should not be rushed as there is an abundance of mezzes (starters) to work through before you even order your main course.

Don't leave Syria without tasting the houmous (chickpea dip), moutabal (smoked aubergine dip) and kibbeh (deep fried lamb meatballs). If you have room for dessert after plates of grilled chicken, lamb kebabs and fresh salads, try date cakes and the numerous varieties of baklavah (flaky pastries filled with nuts and drenched in honey).

Food is a central part of Syrian life – so don't be offended if someone you meet in the street offers you a bag of nuts, or to come back to their house for a cup of

mint tea and a slice of cake.

And make sure you dine like a local on-the-go and join the queue at one of the many falafel (deep fried chick-peas) shops which will you will find on almost every street corner.

A trip to Damascus's main souk (market) is a must for all cooks. I spent a day working my way through the various spice sellers picking up zaatar (a blend of thyme, marjoram and sesame) and saffron at a fraction of UK prices.

From here, wander through the narrow cobbled alleys of the old town and make your way to the Umayyad mosque – one of the finest in the Middle East.

If you happen to be in Damascus on a Friday (Islamic Holy Day), be sure to visit this beautiful mosque. Don't worry, you won't offend anyone praying.

And a trip to Syria isn't complete until you have experienced a body scrub and massage in a hammam (bath house) – which is the perfect way to relax after lots of walking.

Syria has an abundance of historic sites and beautiful landscapes to keep you

entertained for several weeks.

See this fascinating country, sample the cuisine and befriend the people as soon as you can – before too many travellers discover it.

FACTFILE: Nada travelled to Syria with Imaginative Traveller on the 'Syrian Caravan' trip. Prices start from £540 per person including eight nights hotel accommodation on B&B basis, transport by bus, and the services of an experienced local leader as well as local guides. Flights are available on request. Call Imaginative Traveller Reservations Line on 08450 778803 or book on line at www.imaginative-traveller.com.

TRAVEL TIPS

■ **APPLY** for your visa in advance. Single entry visas cost £32 and are arranged by the Syrian Embassy in London. See www.syremb.com for more information.

■ Try to learn a few words of Arabic before your trip. While most people in the main tourist areas speak English, you will be rewarded for trying.

■ Women should dress conservatively. Men wearing shorts and short sleeves will not be allowed to enter mosques.



DAMASCUS: Great Mosque



FORTRESS: Krak des Chevaliers