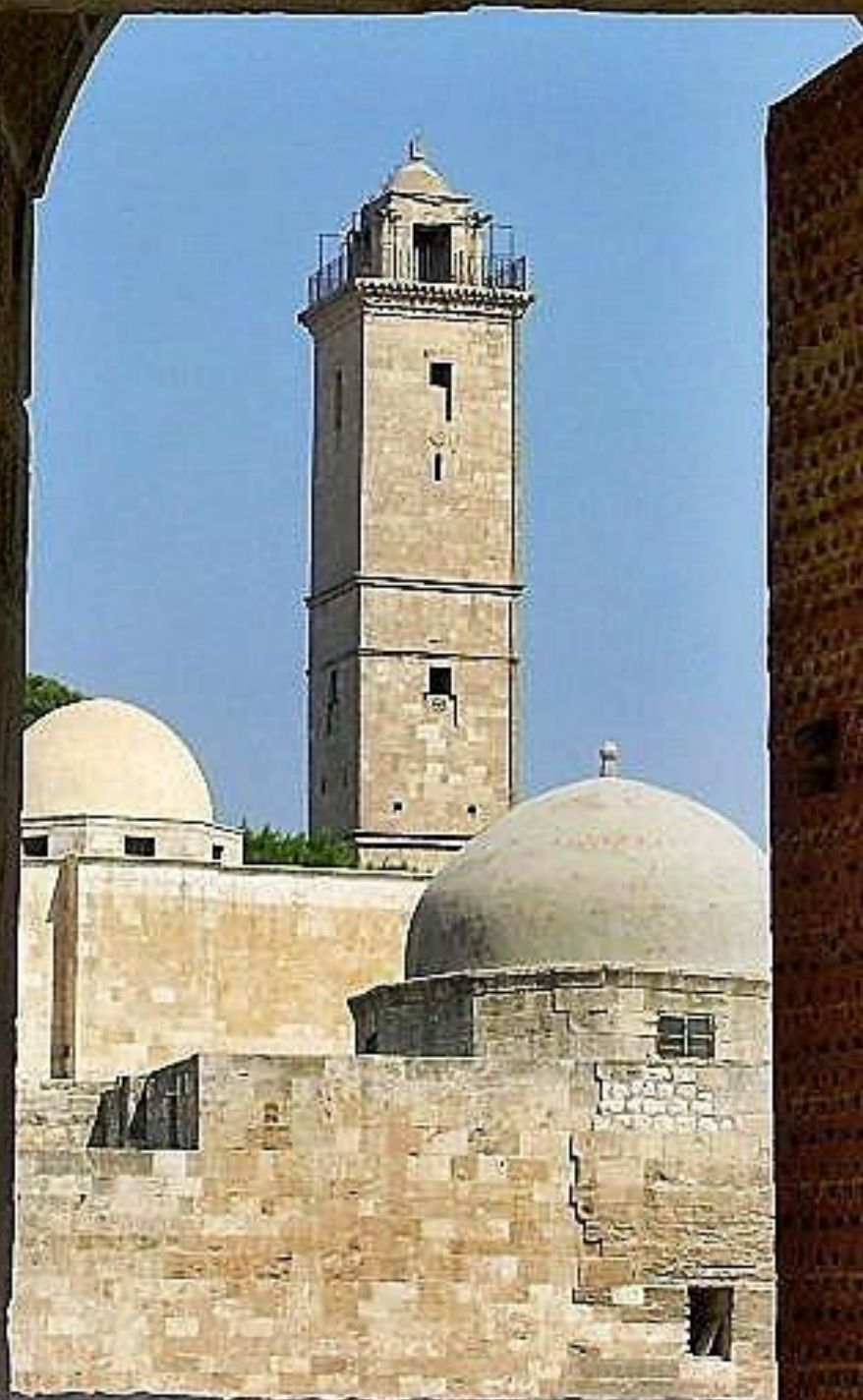


CYCLE TOURING SYRIA (1)

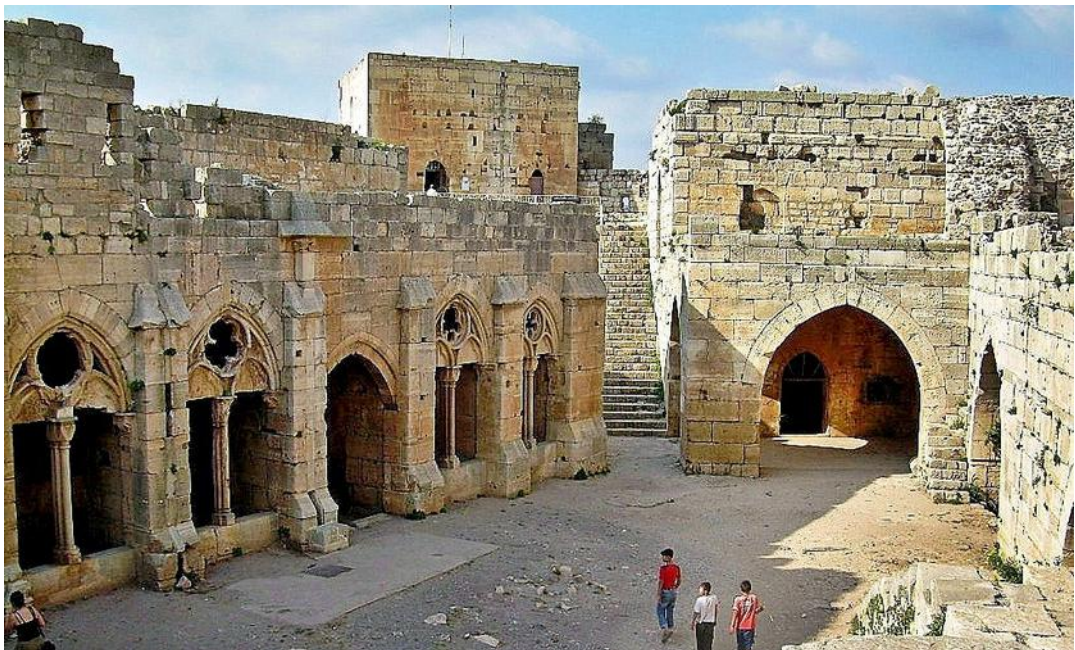
Between Sand and Citadels



Leana Niemand

<https://capetocape2.blogspot.com/>

<https://payhip.com/LeanaNiemand>





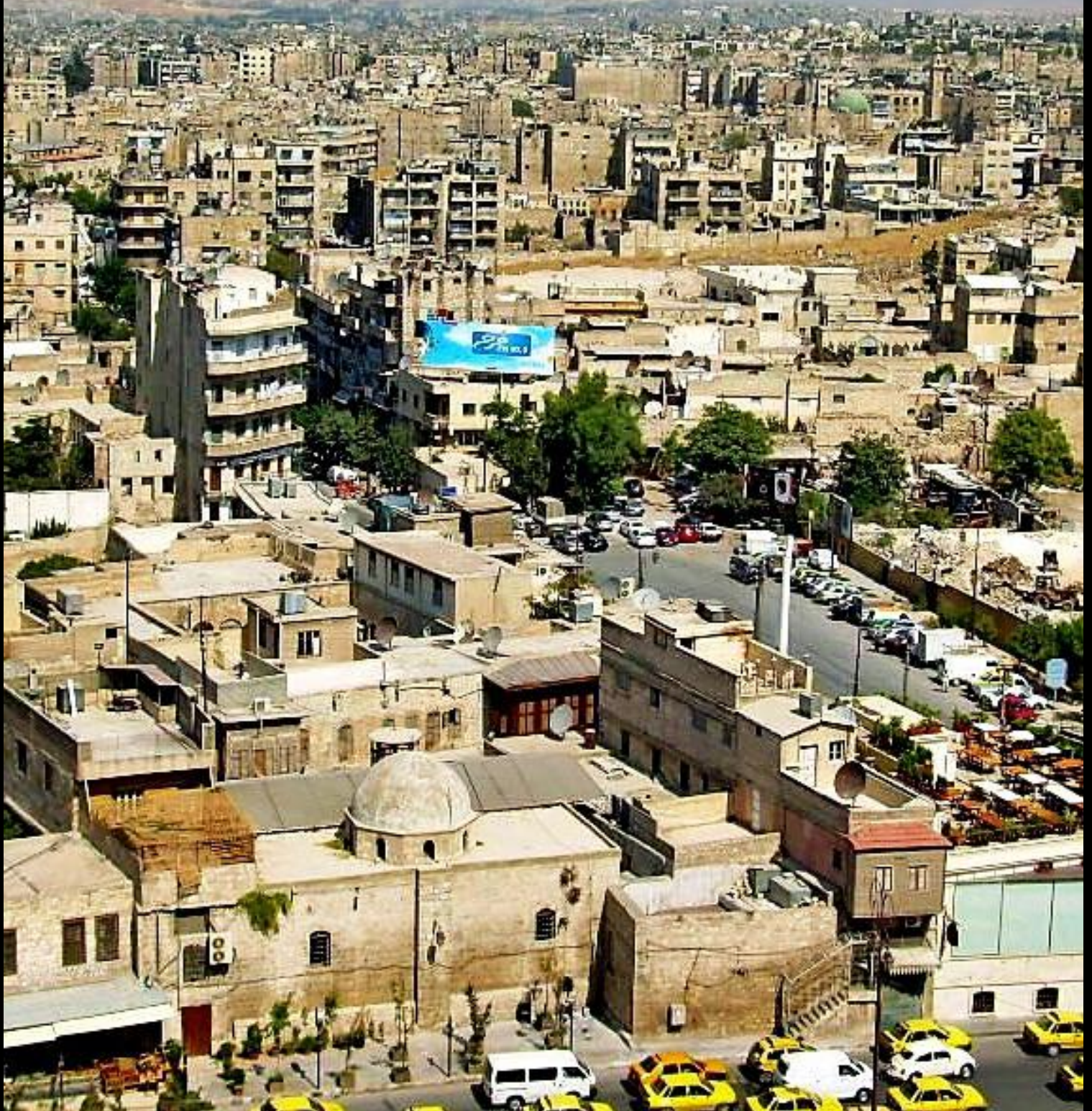
CYCLE TOURING SYRIA (1)

Between Sand and Citadels



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Between Sand and Citadels



Acknowledgements

My journey through Syria was shaped as much by the road beneath my wheels as by the kindness that met me along the way. To the strangers who offered generosity without hesitation — a cup of water, a place to rest, a moment of shared humanity — your quiet acts of grace humbled me and carried me farther than any map could show.

To my sister, Amanda, whose steady hands and meticulous care kept my scattered journal entries and photographs in order. You turned chaos into a record, and for that I am deeply grateful.

To my dear friend Val Abrahamse, who held the threads of my life back home while I wandered the world: your diligence and trust gave me the freedom to chase this dream without looking over my shoulder. I owe you more than these pages can say.

This blog is not only a record of where I travelled, but of those who helped me keep moving. My gratitude runs deeper than these words can hold.



SYRIA (1)

Between Sand and Citadels

PROLOGUE

Syria arrived first as a whisper on the wind, a name carried across borders like a rumour of ancient things. A land older than memory, where stones keep their own counsel and the desert watches without blinking.

I entered it twice — once with the naïve courage of a woman who believes the road will always rise to meet her, and once with the quiet resilience of someone who knows that sometimes the road does not.

Between those two crossings lay sandstorms and citadels, courtyard homes and chaotic streets, the laughter of strangers, and the soft, stubborn beating of my own heart as it learned — again — that the world is far kinder than it appears from a distance.



Atakia, Turkey to Aleppo, Syria (110 kilometres)

Leaving Atakia, Turkey, I pedalled toward the Syrian border with the kind of optimism that only comes from not fully understanding the situation. I had absolutely no idea whether visas were issued on arrival — a detail most sensible travellers would have checked before cycling toward a new country. But there I was, rolling toward the unknown, rehearsing my most innocent smile and hoping it would translate across cultural and bureaucratic boundaries.

Just as I was preparing myself for the possibility of sleeping at the border like a stray cat with panniers, the universe intervened. Four motorbike riders appeared — the rugged, dust-covered, overland-to-South-Africa type who look like they've survived at least three deserts, two corrupt checkpoints, and a questionable kebab. They introduced me to Ahmed, a tour guide who seemed to possess supernatural administrative powers.

Ahmed took one look at me — sweaty, hopeful, clutching my passport like a toddler holding a favourite toy — and immediately adopted me. He guided me through the forms with saintly patience, nodding kindly as I fumbled through basic questions. Then, in true mystical-guide fashion, he vanished. Not suspiciously — more like a man who had other bureaucratic fires to put out.

Three hours later, he reappeared with my visa as casually as if he'd just fetched a loaf of bread. I could hardly believe it. Three hours! That's practically warp speed in visa time. I've waited longer for toast. I thanked him profusely, thanked the motorbike riders, thanked every deity I could think of, and cycled into Syria before anyone could change their mind.



My first thought upon entering was: *What have I done?* Everything was different — the culture, the language, the landscape, the food, the architecture. Even the air felt ancient, as if it had been circulating since the dawn of civilisation. Syria wasn't just a conservative Muslim desert country; it was one of the oldest inhabited regions on earth. Archaeological finds date back 700,000 years, which is roughly how long the traffic jams feel.

The day's cycling was uneventful in the way that only long stretches of cotton fields and quiet villages can be. Each community had the same comforting trio: a mosque, a market, and modest courtyard homes that looked plain from the outside but were apparently palatial inside. I loved the idea so much I swore I'd build a courtyard home someday — preferably without Syrian traffic outside.

Speaking of traffic: biking into Aleppo at 18h00 during Ramadan was like entering a video game set to "Impossible Mode." Thousands of hungry drivers were racing home, and as a woman on a bicycle, I felt somewhere below "stray goat" on the traffic hierarchy. Then the heavens opened, the streets flooded instantly, and I rode straight into a drain cover that tried to claim part of my anatomy I thought I may still have a use for in the future.

Miraculously, I survived and found a reasonably priced hotel called — appropriately — the Hotel Tourist. Achmad from the hotel took pity on me and offered to show me around. Bless him.



The next day, I explored the citadel, market, and museum, then got lost in the labyrinth of identical alleys. By evening, Achmad accompanied me again, and we ended up in a typical Syrian eatery. Syrians, I discovered, are some of the friendliest people on earth — endlessly curious, endlessly kind, and endlessly amused by a lone woman on a bicycle.



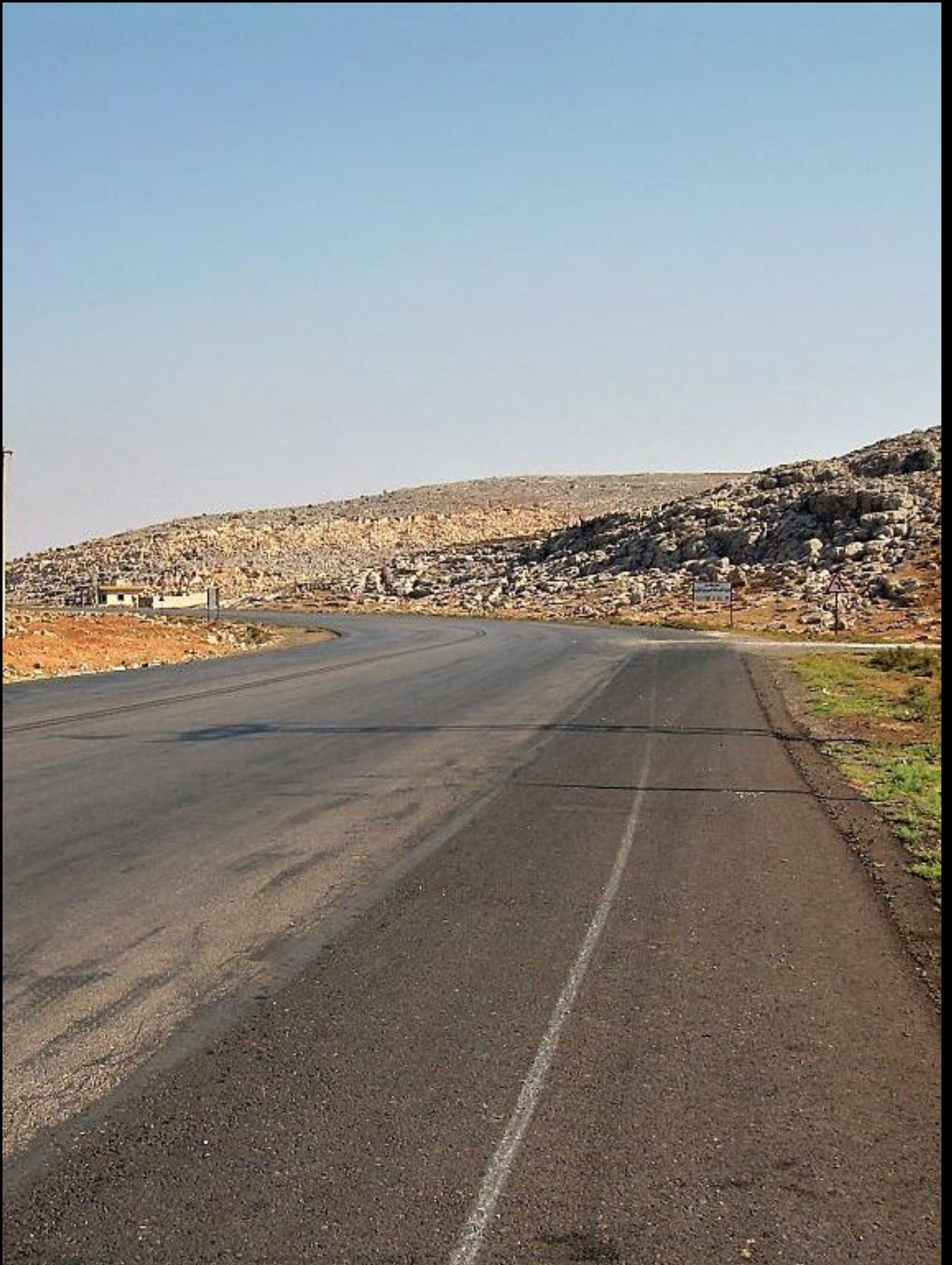


Aleppo to Idlib (66 kilometres)

I left Aleppo feeling rather pleased with myself for having survived the traffic, the flooding, and the drain-cover incident that nearly ended my future romantic prospects. As I was wheeling my bike out the door, Achmad — sweet, earnest Achmad — presented me with a watch. I stood there blinking at it, unsure whether this was a cultural gesture or a personal one. Whatever it was, I thanked him profusely, strapped it on, and pedalled away feeling both touched and slightly bewildered.

My first full day of cycling in Syria was a 60-kilometre battle straight into a headwind that clearly had unresolved emotional issues. It pushed against me with the determination of someone trying to prevent a bad decision. The landscape rolled by in shades of dusty beige and muted green, and every now and then, a passing driver would slow down to stare at me as if I were a hallucination brought on by dehydration. An unaccompanied woman on a bicycle in Syria? It was as if I'd broken several laws of physics simultaneously.

By the time I reached Idlib, I was sun-baked, wind-whipped, and ready to collapse into any accommodation that didn't involve livestock. I asked around for a place to stay and, in the process, met Ahmad — yes, another Ahmad. Syria is full of them, and they are all delightful. This Ahmad invited me to stay with him and his wife, Somod. Before I could even protest, I was ushered into an entire apartment that they insisted I take for myself. I felt like royalty, albeit a sweaty, wind-blown version.



That evening, I was invited to supper with Ahmad, his wife, his brother, and sister-in-law. They sat on a mat and ate with their fingers, and I joined them, trying my best to mimic their graceful movements. They laughed kindly as I fumbled, dropping bits of food like a toddler learning fine motor skills. Despite Ramadan, Somod had prepared a feast — fragrant dishes, warm bread, and flavours that made me want to weep with gratitude. Ahmad was the only one who spoke English, but somehow, we all communicated, laughing, gesturing, and sharing food in a way that transcended language entirely.

When I finally returned to my room, I was full, humbled, and deeply grateful for the kind of hospitality that makes you question whether you've ever been truly generous in your life.



Idlib to Latakia (130 kilometres)

The next morning, I set off on a 130-kilometre ride toward Latakia — a distance that sounded manageable until I remembered the mountain range standing between me and the coast. The road wound up and over the hills, and the headwind returned with a vengeance, as if it had been waiting for me. I pedalled slowly, stubbornly, and with the grim determination of someone who refuses to admit she's made a terrible route choice.

The people I encountered along the way were endlessly accommodating. They waved, smiled, and offered food and drink with such insistence that I began to worry I'd never make it to Latakia because I'd be too full to move. Asking for directions, however, was a challenge. Most people couldn't read English maps, and my Arabic consisted of "hello," "thank you," and "do you have a room?" Still, they tried. They pointed, gestured, argued among themselves, and eventually sent me off in what was hopefully the right direction.

For most of the day, Syrians simply stared at me, mouths agape. I could almost hear their thoughts: Is she lost? Is she mad? Does she know where she is? To be fair, I wasn't entirely sure of the answers myself.

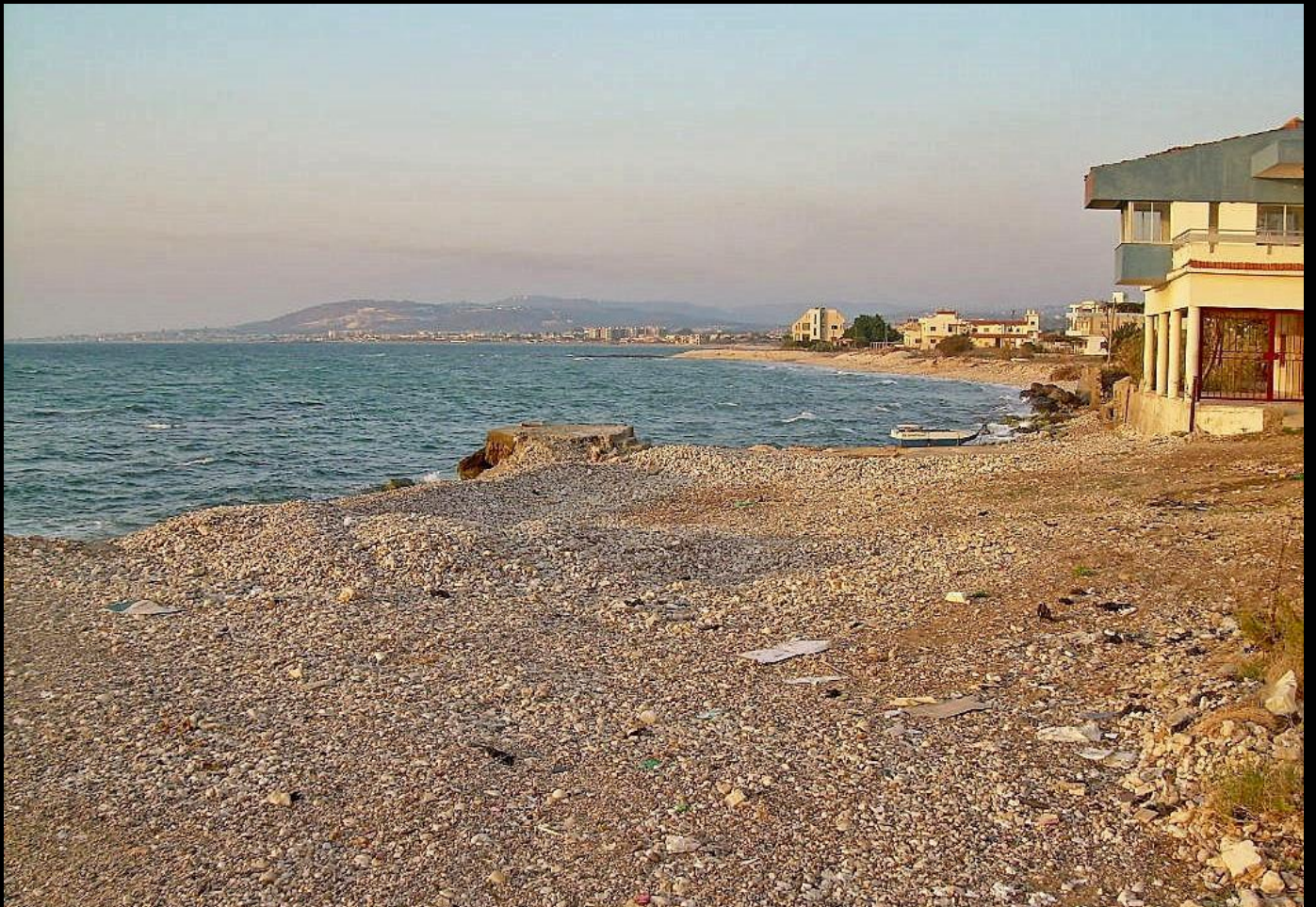
By late afternoon, I rolled into Latakia, exhausted but triumphant. The traffic was as chaotic as ever, but the sight of the Mediterranean lifted my spirits. I'd made it — wind-burned, sun-scorched, and slightly delirious, but I'd made it.



By morning, I thought Latakia deserved a day of exploration, and I set out eagerly, though cautiously, because Syrian traffic is not for the faint-hearted. There seemed to be no rules whatsoever. Drivers hooted constantly — not out of anger, but seemingly out of habit, boredom, or perhaps as a form of echolocation. It seemed everyone did whatever they pleased, and yet, miraculously, there were no accidents. It was like watching a flock of birds move in perfect chaotic harmony, except the birds were cars, trucks, and three-wheeled pickups carrying everything from people to building rubble.

Those three-wheelers were my favourite. They chugged along so slowly that I could easily overtake them, much to the delight of the children riding in the back. They would cheer, wave, and shout encouragement as if I were competing in the Tour de France.

Latakia itself was steeped in history — Seleucids, Romans, Umayyads, Abbasids, the French — everyone had ruled it at some point. You'd think a city with such a dramatic past would be overflowing with ruins, but strangely, only a Triumphal Arch and the remains of the Temple of Bacchus had survived. The rest had been swallowed by time, war, and modern development. Still, the city had a charm that made up for its lack of ancient monuments.



Latakia to Tartus (85 kilometres)

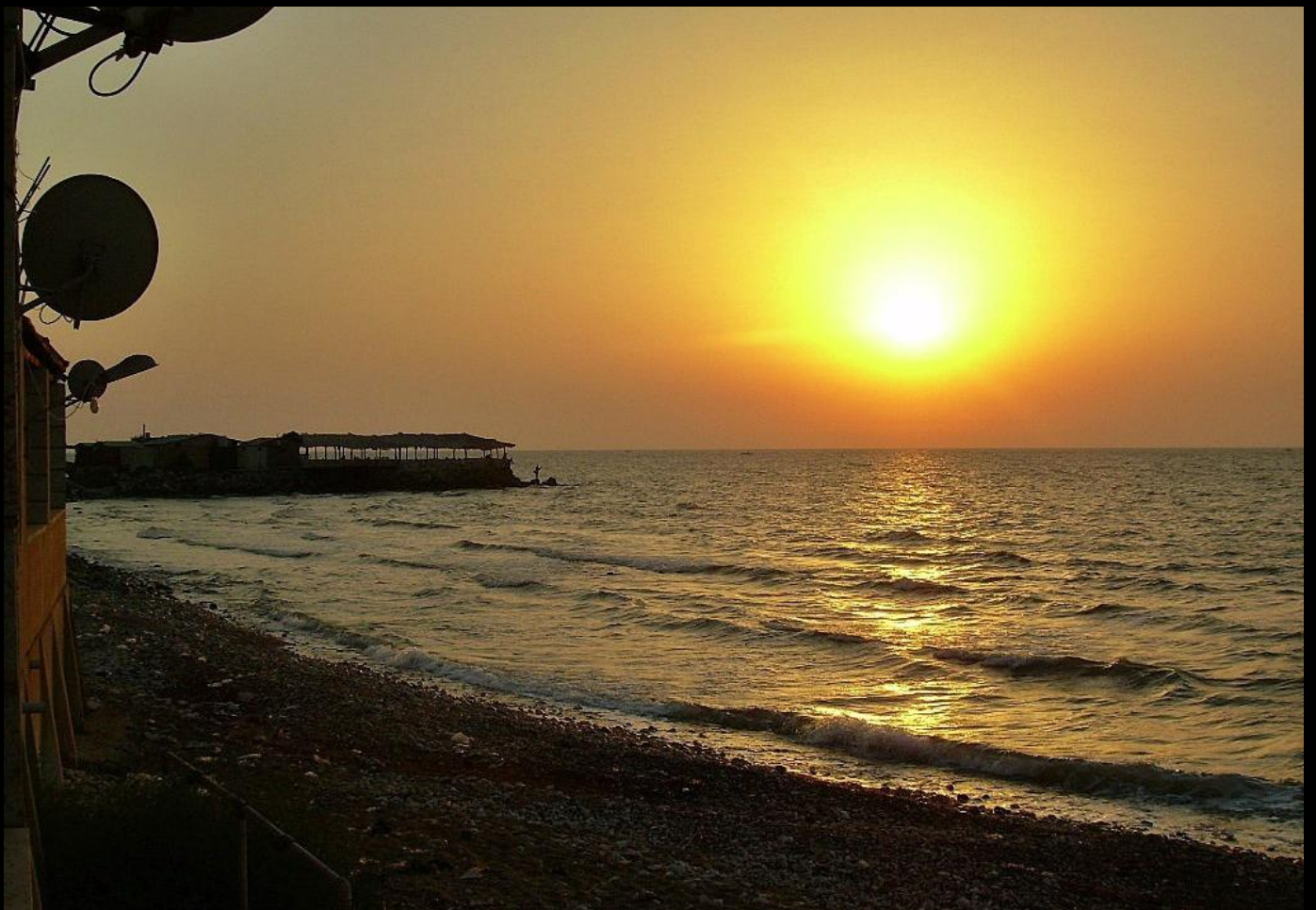
I woke to brilliant weather — the kind of sunshine that tricks you into believing the day will go smoothly. I set off along the coast toward Tartus, enjoying the sea breeze and the gentle roll of the road. For a few blissful hours, everything was perfect. Birds chirped, the Mediterranean sparkled, and I felt like the heroine of a travel documentary.

Then the itching began.

At first, it was a polite little itch. A whisper of irritation. Then it escalated into a full-scale assault. By midday, I was covered in lumps and bumps, scratching like a flea-ridden street dog. I tried to ignore it, but the itching had ambitions. It wanted to be noticed. It wanted to be the main character.

By the time I reached Tartus, I was hot, tired, itchy, and dangerously close to tears. I checked into an overpriced chalet, hoping for relief, only to discover the place was infested with creepy crawlies. Actual, visible, scuttling creatures. I stood there, staring at them, thinking: Of course. Of course, this is happening. Why wouldn't it?

I briefly considered sleeping on the beach, but the coastline was so filthy — littered with plastic, bottles, and unidentifiable objects — that even my itchy, exhausted self had standards. Besides, I didn't want to scandalise the conservative locals by accidentally exposing an elbow or, heaven forbid, an ankle while swimming.



It was one of those days where you feel profoundly sorry for yourself, and the universe doesn't even bother pretending it cares.

I woke the next morning with a swollen eye and even itchier bites — a combination that made me look like I'd lost a bar fight with a mosquito gang. I was in no mood to explore, but I forced myself out, determined not to let Tartus defeat me entirely.

The historical centre, tucked inside the old Crusader-era Templar fortress walls, was interesting enough, though surprisingly little of its medieval past remained. A few old buildings clung on, stubborn and weathered, but the rest had been swallowed by modern life. I wandered around, trying to appreciate the history, but the constant staring made me feel like a walking billboard. There were so few tourists that I stuck out like a neon sign, and in my itchy, swollen state, I wasn't exactly in the mood for attention.

I retreated to my room, scratched miserably, and contemplated the life choices that had led me here.



Tartus to Homs (110 kilometres)

The next morning, I set off toward Homs along a busy highway. Thankfully, a tailwind pushed me along, and I made good time. The traffic, however, remained a mystery. Red lights seemed to be decorative suggestions rather than rules, and traffic police had to physically intervene to prevent total chaos. I watched them with admiration — they were like conductors of a very loud, very unpredictable orchestra.

Later that evening, I took a taxi to a recommended restaurant. The taxi driver, for reasons known only to him, decided to stay and join me for the meal. He spoke no English, and I spoke no Arabic, so we sat there in awkward silence, eating together like two strangers on the world's most uncomfortable blind date. I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to buy him dinner, or whether he was supposed to buy mine, or whether we were simply trapped in a cultural misunderstanding with no escape route. Whatever the custom, I would have been far more comfortable eating alone.

Since I'd seen almost nothing of Homs the previous day, I dedicated the next one to exploring. I wandered through the ancient markets, sampling pastries so sweet they could have powered a small city, and drank tiny cups of strong coffee that made my heart race like I'd been plugged into a generator.



It was sweltering hot, and I marvelled at how the women managed to stay fully covered in black. The men, at least, had the advantage of long white robes that looked marginally more breathable. The city was a jumble of noise and colour — hooting cars, bustling markets, and the melodic call to prayer echoing from numerous mosques. It was chaotic, overwhelming, and utterly fascinating.

Homs to Damascus (80 kilometres & Car)

The scenery changed abruptly as I left Homs and headed inland toward Damascus. One moment I was surrounded by olive trees, pomegranates, and figs — the next, I was cycling through a vast, empty desert that looked like it had been designed by someone with a limited colour palette and a strong dislike for vegetation. The wind picked up, turning into a ferocious, sand-flinging beast that reduced visibility to a few metres. Everything was coated in a grey-yellow haze, including me.

I battled onward, head down, trying to keep the sand out of my eyes and my dignity intact. I was so focused on not being sandblasted into oblivion that I barely noticed the van parked beside the road. A sweet French couple waved me over and offered me a lift to Damascus. Normally, I would have politely declined, determined to cycle every inch of the journey. But this was not a normal day. This was a “take the lift or die trying” day. I accepted immediately, grateful beyond words.

They drove me straight to Damascus and parked their van in the backyard of St Paul’s convent. I pitched my tent in the herb garden, hoping I wasn’t flattening anything sacred or culinary. Parsley, basil, divine intervention — who knows what I was sleeping on.



I woke early the next morning to the sound of the gardener watering the garden — including, nearly, my tent. I waved goodbye to my French rescuers and set off into Damascus traffic, which was every bit as life-threatening as I remembered. I found an inexpensive hotel, cleaned it to a habitable level, and settled in to wait for my sister Amanda, who was flying in for a holiday.

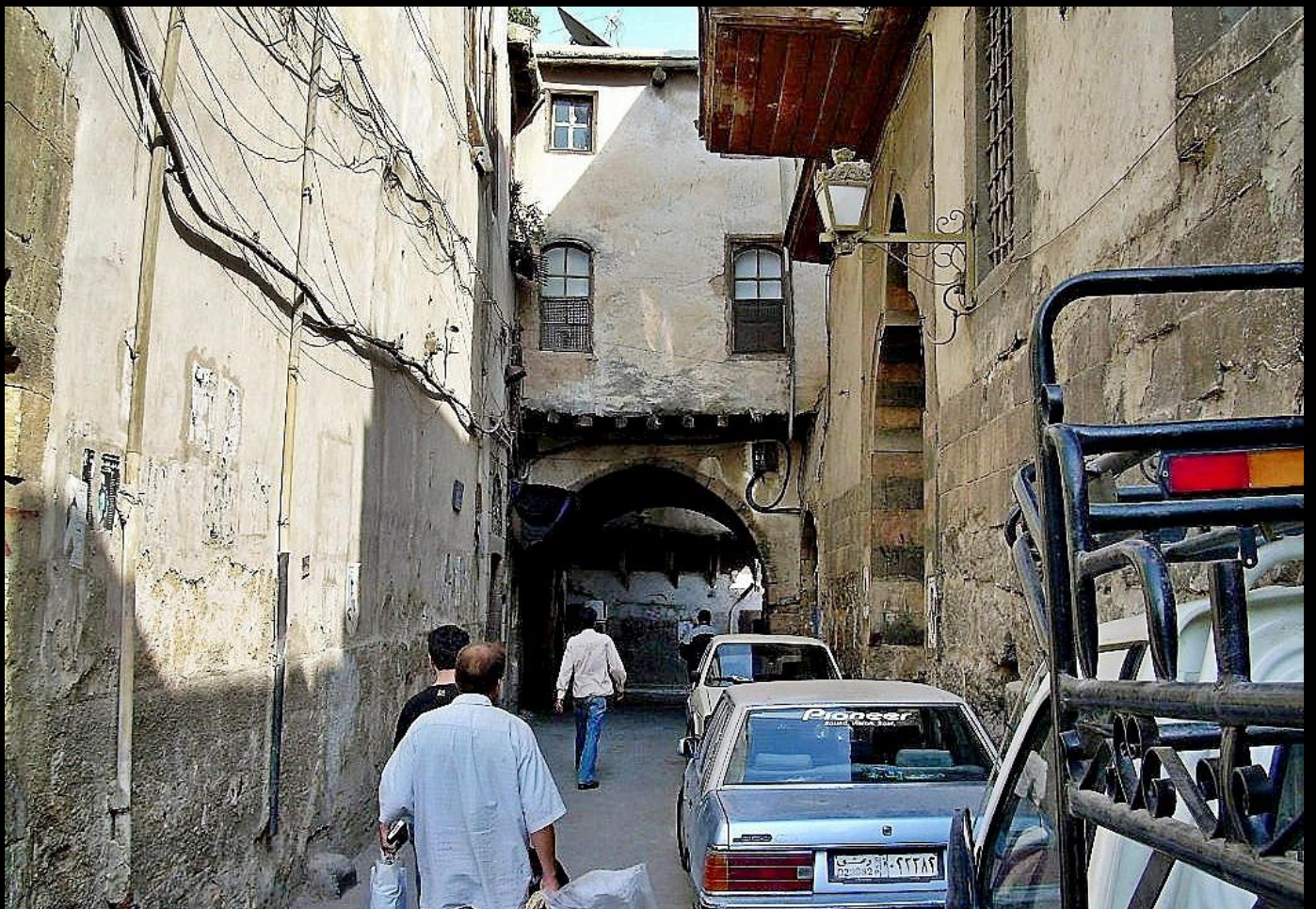
While waiting, I made a horrifying discovery: my passport was practically full. I had stared at the expiry date for months, feeling smug about how much time I had left, and never once considered the number of remaining pages. Rookie mistake. I learned that I couldn't order a new passport in Syria, Jordan, or even nearby Lebanon. My only option was to return to South Africa, get a new one, and hope I could resume my journey without losing momentum — or my sanity. It was a costly lesson, and I mentally kicked myself for not checking sooner.

Amanda arrived in the afternoon, and we immediately set out to explore the old part of town. Damascus, being the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, wears its history like a layered robe — ancient markets, beautiful mosques, narrow cobbled lanes, and a sense of timelessness that makes you feel both insignificant and privileged to witness it.

The markets were fascinating, full of colour and noise and the smell of spices. The traffic, however, was a nightmare. Crossing the street required forming a human wall with other pedestrians and hoping for the best. It was less "crossing" and more "collective survival strategy."





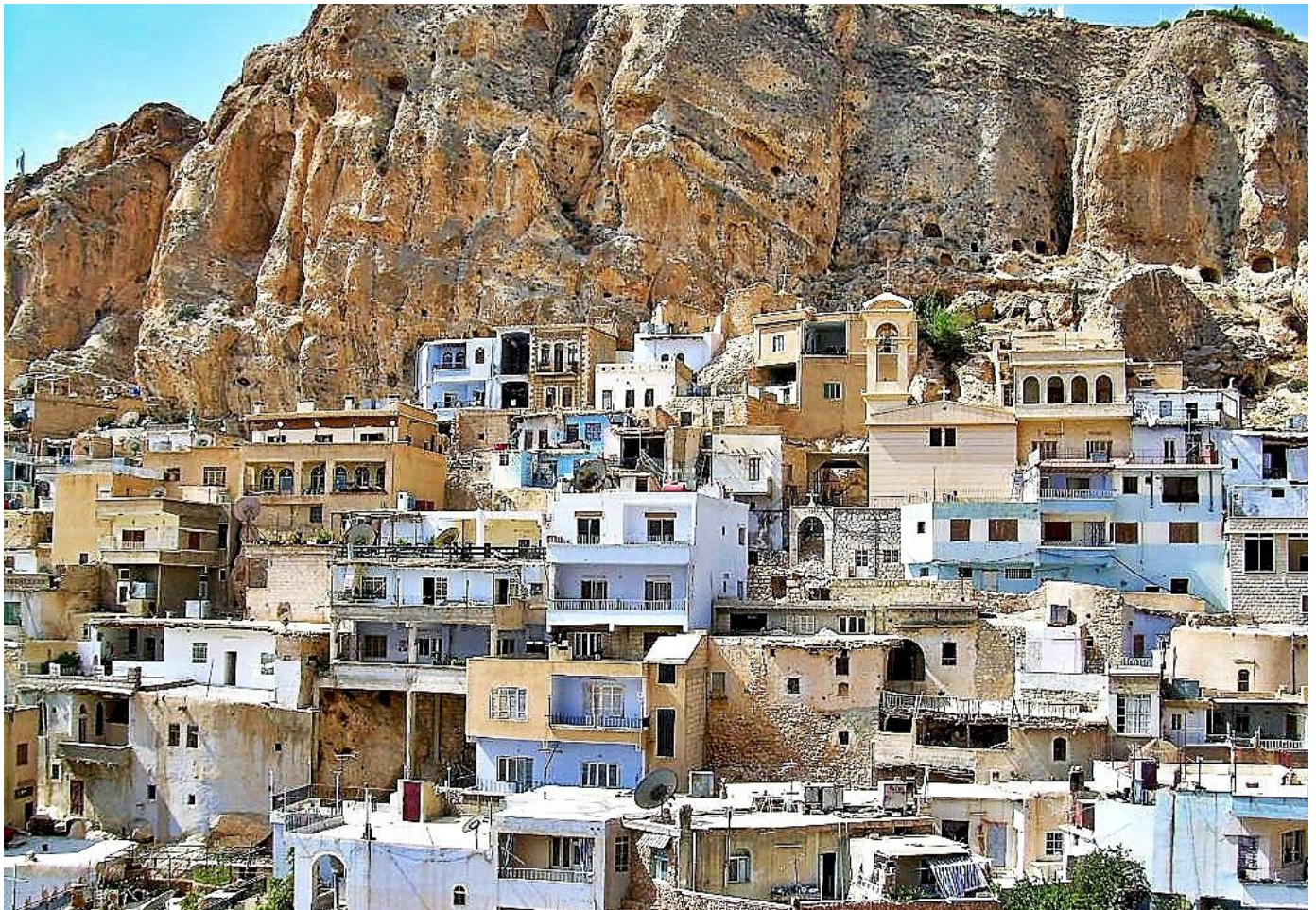


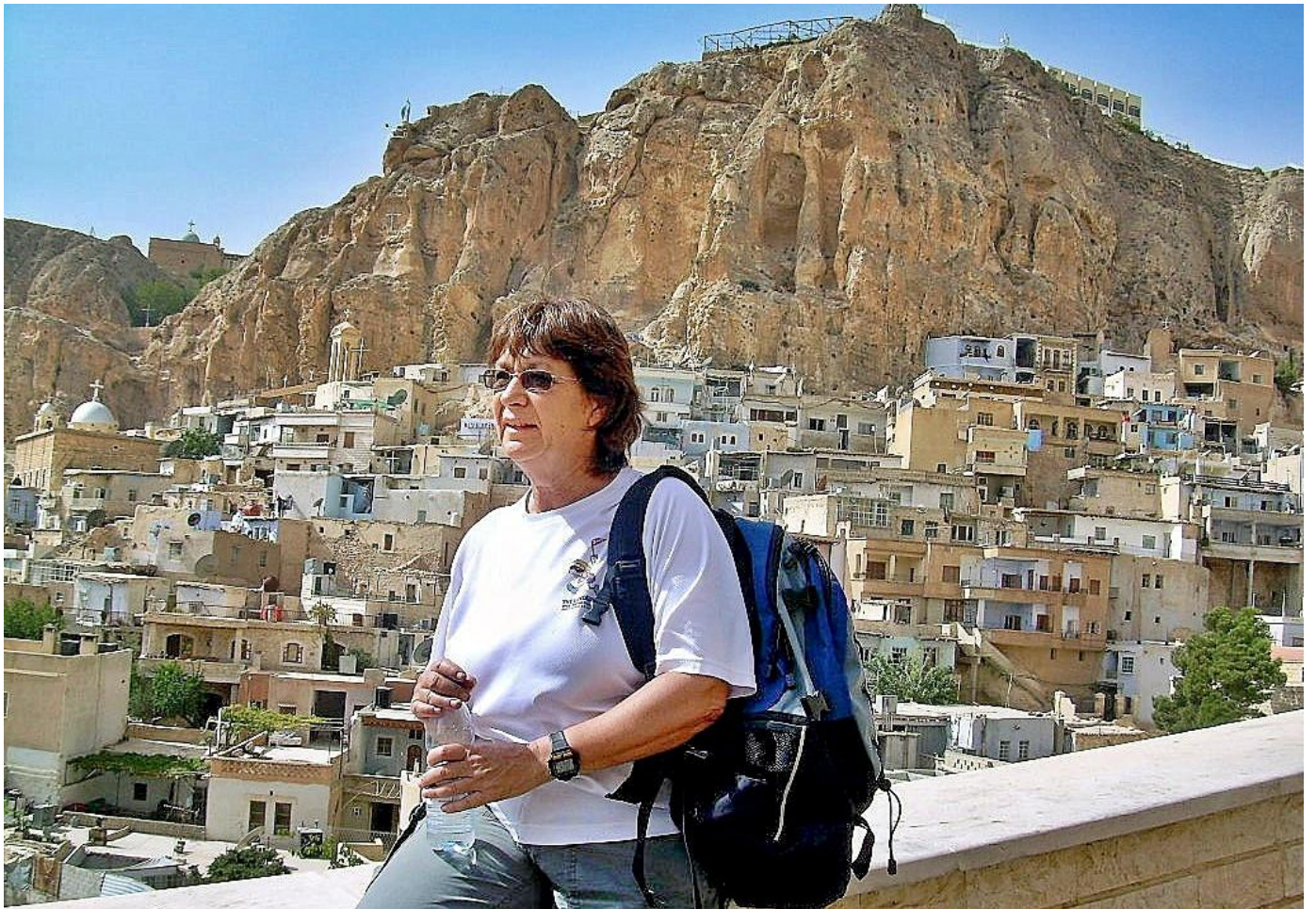
Maalula

After breakfast the next morning, we took a taxi to the Shrine of Saida Zeinab, said to contain the grave of Muhammad's granddaughter. The shrine was beautiful, serene, and filled with worshippers. From there, we caught a minibus to Maalula, a historical town where houses cling to the cliffs like stubborn barnacles. Maalula is one of the few places where Aramaic — the language Jesus presumably spoke — is still used. Hearing it spoken felt like stepping into a time machine.

We quickly adapted to the Syrian lifestyle, where nothing opens before ten, breakfast lasts until midday, shops close between four and six, and then stay open late into the night. This schedule suited Amanda perfectly. She thrives in the late-morning-to-late-evening window, whereas I tend to operate on the "up at dawn, asleep by ten" model. Still, travel has a way of bending your habits, and I found myself adjusting without too much protest.







Damascus to Aleppo (Bus)

We caught an early morning bus to Aleppo, where I had left just about 2 weeks before. I didn't mind, as it has historical records dating back to 5,000 BC. I was excited to show Amanda the covered souqs in the old walled city — a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world's largest covered market. The souqs stretched for approximately thirteen kilometres, a labyrinth of narrow alleys packed with people, goods, spices, sweets, textiles, carpets, and the famous Aleppo soap made from olive oil.

The Al-Madina Souq wasn't just a marketplace; it was the beating heart of the city. Traders shouted, customers bargained, tea was poured, gossip was exchanged, and life pulsed through every corner. It was chaotic, overwhelming, and utterly captivating.

We also visited the citadel, dating back to the 3rd millennium BC. Perched in the centre of town, it offered grand views over old Aleppo. Standing there, looking out over the ancient city, I felt a sense of awe — and also a sense of relief that I wasn't currently navigating its traffic on my bicycle.



Aleppo to Hama

Travelling without a bicycle felt like cheating, but it was undeniably efficient. Amanda and I hopped on a bus to Hama, and before we knew it, we were checking into a hotel and hailing a taxi to Krak des Chevaliers — the kind of castle that makes every other castle look like it's not really trying.

Krak des Chevaliers is the best-preserved medieval castle in the world, and it knows it. It sits on its hill like a smug stone giant, radiating the confidence of a fortress that has survived centuries of sieges, storms, and tourists. First occupied by Kurdish troops in the 11th century, it later became a Crusader stronghold, housing up to 2,000 people — infantry, crossbow specialists, mercenaries, and, according to records, a mere 60 actual knights. Sixty! The rest were essentially medieval interns.

We wandered through its vast halls and towering walls, marvelling at the sheer scale of it. Amanda snapped photos like a woman possessed, while I tried to imagine what life must have been like here — cold, drafty, and full of men arguing about whose turn it was to fetch water.

Back in Hama, we still had time to visit the city's famous norias — enormous wooden water wheels dating back to the medieval Islamic period. They creaked and groaned as they turned, lifting water from the Orontes River with the weary dignity of ancient machinery that refuses to retire. There were six of them left, still in working condition, still beautiful in their own rustic way. Standing beside them, listening to their rhythmic moaning, I felt like I'd stumbled into a living museum.







Hama to Palmyra (Bus)

The next morning, we boarded a bus to Palmyra — the legendary oasis town, once ruled by Queen Zenobia and home to the ruins of the “Pink City.” Founded in the 3rd millennium BC, Palmyra had been one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world, a wealthy caravan stop on the trade route between Persia, India, and China. Even in ruins, it radiated grandeur.

The colonnaded street stretched for 1,100 metres, lined with towering pillars that seemed to glow in the desert light. The Temple of Ba'al rose from the sand like a memory refusing to fade. It was impossible not to feel small in the presence of such history — small, and also slightly sunburned.

While wandering the ruins, we befriended a local man who invited us to visit his family living in the desert. This is the kind of invitation that sounds both magical and mildly alarming, but we were swept up in the romance of it all. Before we knew it, we were packing our belongings and climbing onto camels for the journey.







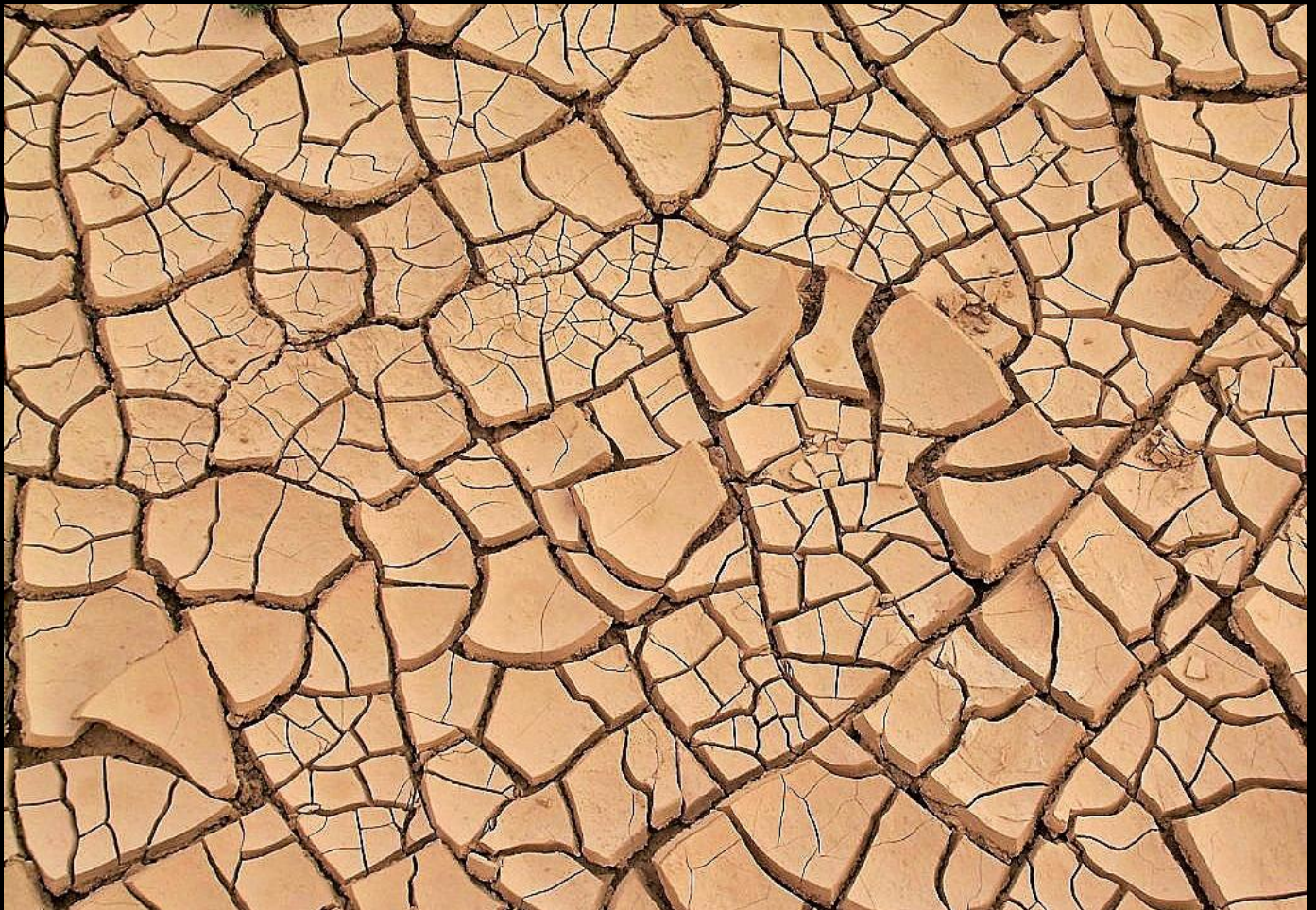
If you've never ridden a camel, imagine sitting on a moving barstool while someone tilts the floor beneath you. The camels lurched forward with the enthusiasm of creatures who had absolutely no interest in our comfort. We rocked across the desert for hours, our backsides slowly losing all feeling. By the time we reached the Bedouin camp, we were walking like two people who had recently survived a minor earthquake.

The camp itself was fascinating — a cluster of tents decorated with woven carpets, warm and inviting inside despite the harshness of the desert. Communication was limited to smiling, nodding, and hoping we weren't accidentally insulting anyone. At one point, we were fairly certain we received an offer of a few camels in exchange for ourselves. Not many camels, mind you — we were clearly past our prime bargaining years — but still, it's nice to be wanted.

That evening, we accompanied the family to a waterhole to give the camels a drink. On the way back, a sand-bearing wind — a Khamsin — rolled in. We watched it approach like a wall of dust swallowing the horizon. Within minutes, visibility dropped to a few hundred metres, and the sky turned the colour of old parchment. It was dramatic, unsettling, and oddly beautiful.

Back at camp, we sheltered in the main tent with the men, while the women — adorned with traditional facial tattoos — cooked in separate tents. This arrangement made me deeply uncomfortable, but I was a guest, and guests adapt. When the food arrived, it was served on large trays: rice topped with chicken thighs. Being vegetarian, I hesitated, but refusing would have been rude. So I closed my eyes, swallowed the chicken thigh whole, and hoped no one noticed my internal crisis. Unfortunately, my speed was interpreted as hunger, and I was promptly given a second portion. I ate that one too, because sometimes survival requires sacrifice.







The next morning, the camels returned us to Palmyra. Our backsides protested, but our hearts were full. It was an unforgettable experience — surreal, awkward, beautiful, and deeply human.

We barely had time to shop for souvenirs before catching a bus to Amman, Jordan — another ancient land with its own stories waiting to be discovered.





About this Blog

This blog chronicles my cycling journey from Turkey to Damascus, where I reunited with my sister for a backpacking holiday to explore the wonders of Syria and Jordan. The route I took was just one of countless possibilities, and I acknowledge that it might not be the most optimal path available.

Daily Distances Cycled

The recorded distances may not reflect the shortest routes between two points, as I occasionally took detours. However, the daily kilometres noted were accurate according to my odometer. The readings sometimes differed from distance markers and maps, occasionally overestimating or underestimating the actual distance.

Time of Year and Date

This book chronicles my cycling trip through Syria during September and October 2007. Many things may have changed since then, and the roads could be in better or worse condition now. The places where I stayed may have been upgraded or demolished. The hills may not have been as steep as described, but they certainly felt challenging at the time.

Insurance

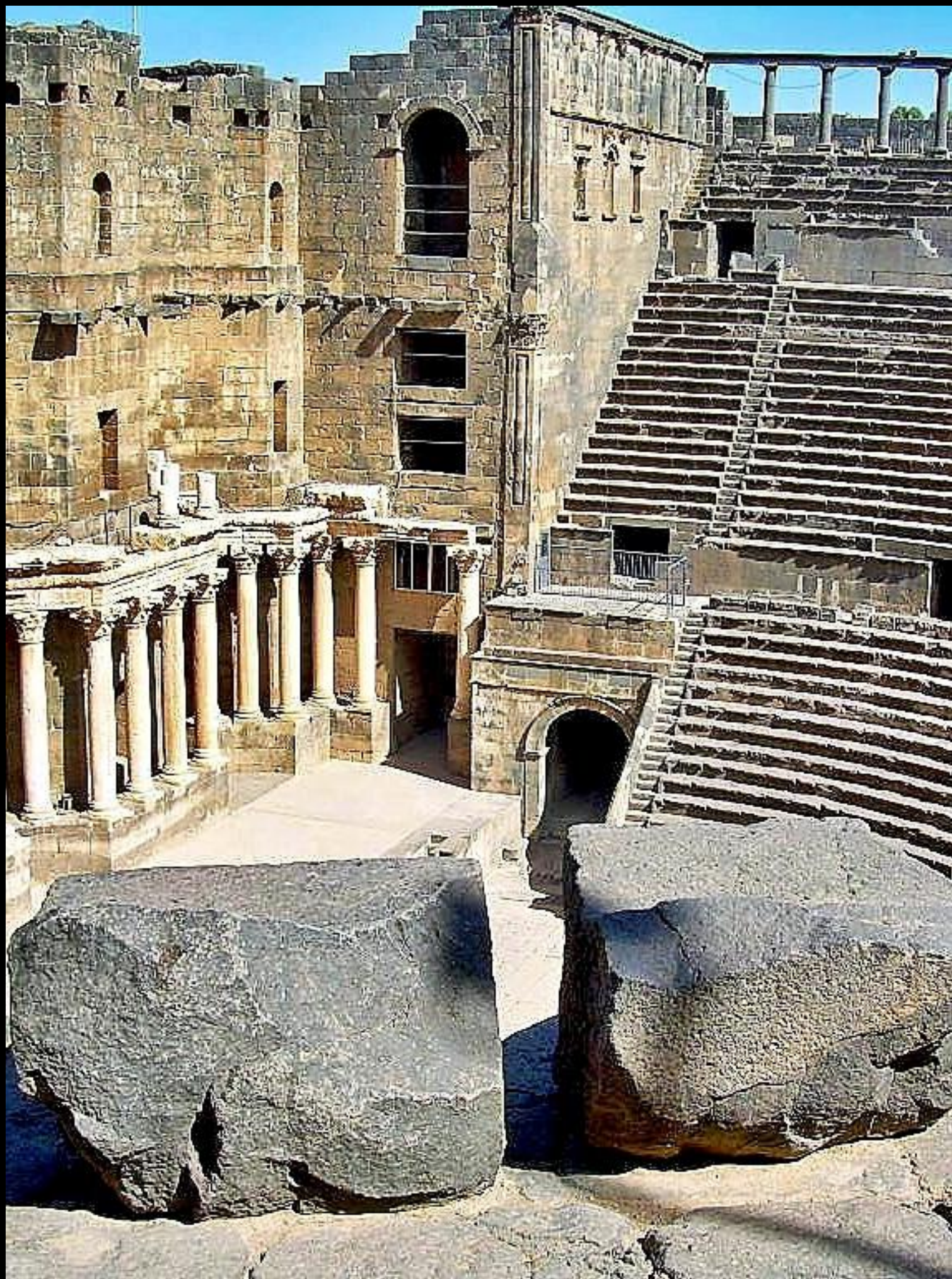
It is essential to have a travel insurance policy that covers theft, loss, and medical issues. Be aware that some policies specifically exclude "dangerous activities," including scuba diving, motorcycling, and even trekking. While cycling is generally not considered dangerous, it is important to read the fine print of your policy.

Clothing

Since cyclists spent most days cycling, it's crucial to invest in high-quality, padded cycling shorts. I personally cycle in regular sandals, but any comfortable footwear will suffice. In Syria, the Mediterranean climate along the coast features mild, rainy winters and hot, sunny summers. Conversely, the inland areas experience moderately cold winters and scorching summers. Don't forget to pack personal toiletries like insect repellent and anti-chafing cream. Wearing a cycling helmet is also recommended.

The Bicycle and equipment

When choosing a bicycle for your needs, comfort is most important. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore components, Alex rims, and Schwalbe tyres. To carry my belongings during the ride, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers, which can be a bit pricey but are definitely worth it in the long run. It's essential to know how to fix a punctured tube, and it's also convenient to have a phone holder on the handlebar for navigation purposes. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is also a must-have for carrying a camera and other items you may need throughout the day.







About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.





There's nothing more exciting than being on my way to a place I've never been before.



