

Ruins and Olive Groves – Aleppo to Turkey's border

Start your journey by experiencing a few days in Aleppo or Haleb as it's known to locals. Wander through the passageways of the souk, climb up the citadel for a 360 degree view over the city and sample a glass of Syrian wine in one of the Christian quarter's beautifully restored restaurants. When you're ready for some solitude, leave Aleppo behind for the rolling hills northwest of the city.

Northern Syria possesses a wealth of historical treasures. Evidence of former times is quite literally everywhere you look and you'll pedal past St. Simeon's Basilica, the Dead City of Khabar Shams, the temple of Ain Dara and the Roman site of Cyrrhus to name but a few of the ruins in the area. Cruise over two Roman bridges for good measure.

When you're not absorbing the region's immense history, get a taste of village life in this predominantly rural area. You're as likely to be held up by a herd of sheep crossing the road as by any traffic jams. The quiet roads and endless string of farming fields, forests and olive groves are punctuated only by the proudly Kurdish and bustling market town of Afrin. End your trip by crossing the border into Turkey or continue on your exploration of Syria.

This route is best started on a Friday, not only because of the quieter traffic leaving Aleppo but also because you may then have the good fortune to be invited to share in a picnic with Syrian families at sites like Khabar Shams.

~~ NEED TO KNOW ~~

Accommodation

Once outside Aleppo, wild camping is the name of the game. Your choices are vast, from olive groves to pine forests or even tenting amongst the many ruined cities that are scattered across fields and hillsides. The only other option is to ask local families for a place for the night. There are no hotels or campsites once you leave Aleppo.

Alternative transport

There are a few minibuses plying the back roads, however you'll struggle to push a loaded touring bike into one of these compact vans and you'll almost certainly be charged extra for the privilege. The other option is to flag down a friendly Syrian with a flat-bed truck. Most are only too happy to help out and will likely refuse any payment.

Bike repair

You will need to be largely self-sufficient. Car mechanics are dotted along the route and they can supply compressed air for pumping up tires or help in an emergency but there are few if any dedicated bicycle repair spots.

Difficulty

Moderate to challenging physical terrain. The route out of Aleppo starts out flat but soon turns into rolling farmland. Nothing terribly strenuous appears until just you pass through Afrin and turn towards Midanki. A few of the climbs may see loaded touring cyclists pushing uphill. Navigation is reasonably easy, with plenty of signs for Cyrrhus (al-Nabi Hourri) in particular although you will probably have to ask to find the small stretch of dirt road mentioned on day one. The usual rules about Syrian maps apply: all of them misrepresent the actual direction of the roads to varying degrees. You should collect as many as possible, bringing at least one with you and asking tourist bureaus for local versions.

Duration

About 150km over 2-3 days, depending on how long you linger over history and how well you handle hills, which become more intense in the last third of the journey.

Food

Getting food and tap or well water is easy enough. There are numerous villages and towns en route, many of them with at least one basic shop and a surprising number selling fresh produce. Bottled water may not always be available. Delicate stomachs should carry a water filter or other treatment method. Eating out will occasionally be an option, particularly in Afrin where the street is lined with stands selling falafels, shwarma, roast chicken and kebabs. There is a restaurant at St. Simeon and larger villages may have one place selling fuul or falafels.

Road condition & traffic

Broadly good. The initial stretch out of Aleppo may be busy on weekdays (for a tranquil experience, start this ride on a Friday) but it soon turns very quiet as you branch off from the main road. There is a small section of dirt road after Anadan but it is hard packed so shouldn't be a problem for touring or mountain bikes. The only other potentially problematic section comes after Cyrrhus, when the paving deteriorates in quality. You will find cracks and potholes in the asphalt but it is still quite rideable.

~~ ALEPPO ~~

Aleppo is a city of some 3 million people in northern Syria. Smaller than Damascus, it still offers plenty of attractions to keep most people busy for at least a couple days and the main sites are within easy walking distance of the centre. The spice-laden alleyways of the famous souk demand at least half a day. The citadel offers a further distraction and, when you tire of falafels, the Christian quarter boasts some of Syria's best restaurants; a pleasant place to relax with a glass of wine after a day of exploring.

Cycling into the city can be slightly nervewracking with the usual chaos caused by traffic flying every which way but it is fairly straightforward. There are no cycle lanes or shoulders to speak of once in the city proper so you watch out for the usual hazards of car doors opening in your path and wild taxi drivers. If you aren't feeling quite so brave, lift your bike onto the pavement and stroll into the centre. No matter which direction you're coming in from, chances are it will include at least a small stretch on the motorway but these have wide shoulders so it should make for easy, if noisy, pedalling. The historic centre is well marked with plenty of signs from the outskirts to direct you towards the pulse of the city. Most people will want to make their first stop the area around the clocktower; a bustling district with plenty of budget hotels and places for a quick bite to eat after a day in the saddle. If you get lost, ask for directions to the Sheraton Hotel, a major landmark beside the clocktower.

Where to Stay

Hotel Al-Gawaher on a small alley just off Bab al-Faraj and 30 seconds walk from the clocktower is without question the budget hotel of choice in Aleppo with good-value clean rooms (many with satellite TV and balconies) as well as a lively social scene. Fellow travellers and the manager Ahmed can almost always be found in the evenings socialising over a glass of wine in the second-floor salon or on the rooftop, which offers beautiful views over the city by night. Lucky visitors may even get to sample Ahmed's cooking. Staff are exceptionally friendly and the hotel can arrange tours to nearby sites like Saint Simeon and the Dead Cities. (Single 350 SP / Double 500 SP / Double ensuite 700 SP)

Nearby **Green Star** on Hammam al-Tal is not a bad option if Al-Gawaher is full. The spartan rooms lack charm but they are clean and accommodation on the top floor opens up onto a massive roof terrace, where breakfast is served in the summer. A little English is spoken and the elderly manager is a cheery fellow. Bathrooms are shared. There is a common lounge with satellite TV. (Double 600 SP)

A few streets away on ad-Dala street, **Tourist Hotel** has a good reputation for its attention to cleanliness and is often booked solid. Touts will try to pull you towards the nearby **Springflower Hostel (Al-Rabie)** gets mixed reviews. It has a reputation for scruffy rooms and grumpy staff. On the other hand, some cyclists have managed to negotiate a good rate here so if you're penny pinching this may be your spot.

The Christian quarter and the souk are home to many boutique hotels and the **Sheraton Hotel** is a new five-star addition to the city. **The Baron Hotel**, famous for its once illustrious list of clients including Agatha Christie, is frayed around the edges and in need of renovation. Nostalgics may enjoy popping into the bar for a drink.

(Prices may be higher in peak season including around Eid, the busy spring tourist season and in the summer when people flood in from the Gulf States to enjoy Syria's relatively cooler temperatures.)

Self-catering

Aleppo's bustling souk and the streets around the clocktower have nearly everything a cyclist could want for making meals on the road. Shops tend to specialise in one thing so it may take some time to find everything you want but seeing everything on offer is part of the fun.

Fresh fruit and vegetables are found in the produce market which starts on the corner of Bab Antakya and al-Mutanabi. The merchants are very friendly here. You'll get the best prices if you ask for at least one kilo of something. Overcharging is rare and if you ask for just one bunch of parsley or a couple peppers you'll often find they're slipped into your bag free of charge.

The meat section of the souk is across the road from the produce market and just outside the alley with the meat stalls are a few shops selling eggs. Again, you'll get the best price if you buy 30 at a time but this is impractical for most people and you can buy just a few at a small premium.

Going up al-Mutanabi towards the citadel you'll see several stalls selling olives and cheese. Dry goods like coffee and spices are mostly found in the few streets between the clocktower and al-Mutanabi along with a few shops selling dates and a couple small supermarkets which stock basics like tuna, powdered milk and tinned vegetables.

Walk up al-Maari towards the National Museum and on the left hand side you'll see two small corner stores close together. They sell more exotic ingredients like soy sauce as well as the usual selection of goods.

Beer, wine and other alcoholic drinks are sold from a clutch of shops in the area around the clocktower. You'll find one on Yarmouk Street, another on Zaki al-Arsuzi and two near the start of xxx street. Al-Charq is the Aleppo brew although its unique taste may not suit your palate. Imported beers like Heineken, Efes and Amstel and several brands from Jordan and Egypt are also available (50 SP a half-litre can). Syrian wines (100-250 SP a bottle) range from the sickly sweet to quite good so ask the shopkeeper's advice. The Lebanese wines from houses like Ksara are on the more expensive end of the scale (up to 400 SP a bottle) but are broadly excellent and worth a splurge.

Eating out

Hungry cyclists hunting for fast food will find plenty of options near the clocktower. *Felafel* sandwiches and chicken wraps known as *shwarma* are everywhere. Big appetites will be satisfied by a plate of *kebabs* from one of the many options on Zaki al-Arsuzi street or stop at one of the many restaurants roasting *chicken* and order a portion with bread and hummous.

If you're low on vitamins, a *glass of juice* from the stalls on Yarmouk Street will fit the bill. The house special blend of fruits is called a "mix". A blend of "muz haleeb" (milk and banana) is also popular, as is freshly squeezed orange or pomegranate juice. Those on a budget will want to drink standing up at the bar, a great spot for people-watching as you sip. It costs more to get your juice in a take-away cup.

In the souk, the most bang for your buck comes from the hole-in-the-wall restaurants serving *fuul*, a soup with fava beans and a creamy tahini base, topped off with cumin, paprika and a heavy drizzle of olive oil. It's served with as much bread as you can eat, fresh mint, onion and hot peppers on the side. You can spot the fuul restaurants by the distinctive large copper pot the soup is served from. One bowl will fill you up for the rest of the day and sets you back only pennies.

Hot heads will want to try the *spicy wraps* sold just outside the entrance to the meat section of the souk at all times of the day. Savoury pancakes are fried in oil and served in bread along with red peppers, hot sauce and sometimes a few greens. Show up early and you'll see more than a few locals eating these firey sandwiches for breakfast, washed down with the salty diluted yogurt drink *ayran*.

The old Christian quarter is just the thing for a special night out. It's home to Aleppo's classiest and beautifully restored restaurants, which serve a range of fish, grills, mezze and salads. Sissi House is arguably the most famous, while Yasmeen House is another favourite. Both serve wine.

A quick desert or afternoon treat can be found at the Concord Cafe on al-Quwatli. The internet cafe on the top floor is overpriced but their *pistachio ice cream* is divine and only 25 SP a cone.

Aleppo's best luxury breakfast head to the Sheraton buffet (6:30-10:30am). The heady 600 SP cost is justified by fresh fruit juice, real coffee, pastries and other delights; a welcome change if you've been subsisting on the standard mediterranean breakfast and Nescafe with milk powder for weeks.

Latte lovers can fill their cravings at all hours of the day at a string of American-style coffee bars on the edge of the new Christian quarter of al-Azizyah.

Bike Repair

Don't come to Aleppo expecting to find high-quality bicycle parts but if you need a repair job then the best place to come is a small workshop on Hisham Ibn Abd al-Malek (one street before the Tourist Hotel and Spring Flower hostel). To find it, look for the Otani Tire shop and then go into the dark-looking garage just to the right. Walk towards the back and you'll soon see bicycles piled everywhere. The mechanics here can fix most things for you quickly and charge fair prices. While you're waiting, look on the walls of the pictures of the multi-seat bicycles the owner builds in his spare time. If you just want to buy a new bicycle bell or bungee cord, then browse the streets lined with shops selling car wheels and parts. Many bike supply stores are mixed in between their automotive counterparts.

Sightseeing

- Aleppo's citadel is hard to miss. Perched high on a hill overlooking the souk it affords stunning views over the city. There is a cafe inside but no signs or explanations of the site so you may want to consider taking a guide or buying a book on the history of the site. Closed on Tuesday.
- Even if your panniers are full to bursting, you can't leave Aleppo without seeing its world famous covered souk. It's still very much a working marketplace as well as a highlight for tourists. The main drag runs up to the citadel and it's on this alley that you'll find many of the stalls selling silk scarves, spices and nuts, ornate backgammon boards and jewellery. Wander onto the side streets and you'll discover special areas for gold and fabric. Closed on Friday.
- The Great Mosque is built into the souk although tourists can only enter from the north side. It's nowhere near as fancy as the one in Damascus but still worth a look. Here you can pay the admission fee of 50 SP and women can pick up fetching grey cover-all robes.

- The Museum is on al-Maari, a short stroll west from the clocktower. Closed on Tuesday.
- The Tourist Information office is nearly next door to the Museum.

Staying Connected

The closest internet cafe to many budget hotels is the *Concord* on the top floor of a cafe on the bustling al-Quwatli street but convenience has a price: 100 SP an hour for a mediocre connection, double the going rate across most of Syria. Instead, a 10 minute wander north from the clocktower into the new Christian quarter of al-Azizyeh will lead you to a clutch of spots charging just 50 SP an hour. *Area 51* on the small al-Shyakh Muhmad Abdu street (across from the well-signed Diadora sports store) takes top spot for its super speedy connection and discounts for chunks of time. It's open 24 hours a day. Just down the road are two other internet cafes, *Cool Net* and *Montana*.

~~ ON YOUR BIKE ~~

Your day starts with an easy ride out of **Aleppo**, avoiding the busier roads leading to Bab-al-Hawa and south to Damascus. As you leave the city, watch on the right for a **distinctive mosque** (2km) with its square ornate minarets.

Continue on the main road, always going straight, until you reach the turnout for **Anadan** (12km, pop. 18,000), a chance to stock up on supplies. Up the hill and into the town, keep an eye out on your right for a small shop selling a selection of flatbreads topped with various goodies like cheese, zata'ar spice or spicy tomato sauce (5-10 SP each). They'll warm them in the oven for you and these make a great lunchtime treat.

Ask a friendly local to guide you to the hard-packed dirt road that leads to **Al-Tamoura** and **Borj Haidar**. It's not far (only about 1km downhill from the town centre) but unsigned and slightly difficult to find. It will lead you through fields and olive groves, running north and parallel to a large ridge. Stop to admire the ruins at the southern end of the top of the ridge.

Soon you'll be back on pavement again, skirting past several rock quarries and through the small settlement of **Zaouk Kabeer** (25km, Zuq al Kabir on some maps). The landscape here is stony and you can see the remains of walls painstakingly built from days gone by. You may see local men herding a few cows, sheep and goats over the rocky fields or women drawing water from wells in the village. Just over the next crest is the ruined palace of **Khobar Shams** (27km, free access, no admission or opening times), one of the famous "Dead Cities" dotted around Aleppo and an ideal spot to have your lunch.

This is a favourite picnic spot and Syrian families do lunches in style. Most bring barbeques or build fires to cook feasts of kebabs, fish and other delights. They may even bring along their own carpet to relax on and a nargile or water pipe to pass the hours as the children run off energy in the surrounding countryside.

As a foreign tourist on a bicycle you're almost certain to be invited to share a meal and contributing something from your panniers like a few chocolates or nuts will be appreciated. You may even want to set up camp here for the night. There is no water in the immediate vicinity so come prepared.

Return to the main road and turn right, setting a course for **Samaan Citadel**, where 1,500 years ago a young shepherd climbed atop a pillar to pray and preach for the next four decades. The rolling hills make it easy to get up a good momentum here as one descent after another propels you up the climbs but you'll want to break for a few minutes in the tiny settlements of

Borj Hadar (31km) and **Kafr Nbo** (32km), where ruins have been intertwined with homes and shops.

Soon after the village of

Bassofan (34km) enjoy a downhill run through a forest but prepare yourself for the hairpin turn (40km) that will take you a short distance uphill to **Samaan Citadel** (41km, open 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Oct-Mar, adult admission 150 SP), better known as the Church of Saint Simeon.

Leaving Saint Simeon, return

down the road and set a course for **Afrin** (Ifreen). Coming around the base of the hill you can explore the ruins around the church (free access) before continuing. From here a few choice camping spots appear including some olive groves directly underneath Saint Simeon (slightly rocky but there are flat spots with scenery to die for) and a pine forest a few kilometers further on.

Just after the forest is a small unmarked village (49km) with a shop on the main road selling food and petrol. Continue on through **Barj Abdalau** (53km) and uphill into the town of **Al Basouta** (55.5km, pop. 3,300), a small but bustling place. By now you are out of the rocky hills and the terrain turns more to flat farm land, filled with fruit and nut trees. In the middle of these fields is **Ain Dara** (59.5km) and its unique temple ruins (entrance 75 SP if anyone is there to collect the fee), which sit on a mound just outside the village.

The ancient world is full of temples but none are quite like Ain Dara, which is believed to date back to about 1,000 BC. A huge lion carved out of basalt greets you at the entrance, followed by the temple itself which is surrounded by yet more statues towering over your head and dozens of carvings. As you

Saint Simeon: Life atop a pillar

It was AD 423 when Simeon Stylites took his place on a pillar, graduating to ever higher columns throughout the years. His life finished on one that was a staggering 18 meters high. Pilgrims came from far and wide to hear him preach. After his death they journeyed to see the column where he'd spent so many years. Soon a vast church comprised of several basilicas was built in his honour and devout Christians continued to come to pay their respects, often chipping away a little piece of stone from the pillar as a souvenir. The pillar remains today but it has been cobbled down to the size of a large rock over the years, a fraction of its former height. Much of the site is still incredibly well preserved and it's easy to lose a couple hours admiring the many arches and alcoves of the church, the surrounding complex and the incredible views over the rural landscape.

enter the temple, take care to notice the large footprints. They are believed to be proof that the goddess Ishtar, to whom the temple was devoted, actually visited the site.

Your next stop on the main road is **Afrin** (67.5km, pop. 45,000), a market town with a large Kurdish population. In the town centre you can restock your panniers at the many stalls selling fresh produce or fill your belly with something from the many fast food stands. Falafels, kebabs and roast chicken are all on offer. For falafels, you can do no better than restaurant **Borg Afren**, on the left as you enter the town, across from a military complex and recognisable by the Eiffel Tower on its window and sign. Stuffed with mint and filled with two different sauces, this hole-in-the-wall spot with a few stools is a definite contender for the best falafel in Syria.

After a break it's time to turn around, go back over the bridge and continue on the main road for a short stretch, keeping your eye out for an **unmarked road on your left** (79km), exactly where a large cemetery stands at the corner of the main road and the one you want to take. This is the road to **Midanki** and you should keep straight on it for a few kilometers, only turning left at a stop sign (81.5km). Houses are few and far between here and olive trees appear in their thousands, offering plenty of places to hide your tent in the groves.

Now the signs to al-Nabi Hourri (Cyrrhus) are frequent and soon you'll be on a long descent down to a river, then uphill again to **Midanki** (93km, pop. 4000). For the size of the town, there are a surprising number of shops in Midanki and even a couple simple restaurants, as well as a cooler dispensing free chilled tap water. The next stretch of road to Cyrrhus is increasingly rural and shepherds herding their sheep and goats may well be your most common companions on the road as you work your way up and down the hills.

After a few steep climbs the descent to Cyrrhus begins in the small village of **Saeer** (108km). As you fly down the hill, your first view of **Cyrrhus** (113km, no admission fee or opening times) will be the large and ornate tower that was once a Roman tomb and is still used today as a mourning place for Muslims. Just outside the walls surrounding the tower is a modern graveyard with the remains of ancient columns scattered among the gravestones. Be careful climbing the poorly maintained stairs to the top of the tower (a headtorch is a good idea) but do make the trek up as the views are wonderful from the top.

The rest of Cyrrhus is one kilometer away down a marked dirt road just across from the tower tomb, marked by its citadel still sitting proudly atop a hill overlooking the main site. The city was founded in 300 BC by a general of Alexander the Great and its fortunes were helped by its position as a link on

the busy trading route between modern-day Hatay (Antioch) and the Euphrates river. Throughout the centuries Cyrrhus was controlled by a host of occupiers including the Armenians, the Persians, the Arabs and the Crusaders. Sadly, earthquakes are responsible for damaging much of the site but the Roman theatre (2nd century AD) is still reasonably intact. As you wander among the ruins, do not be surprised to stumble upon the homes of local shepherds, who graze their sheep and goats in the surrounding fields. The site offers a magnificent viewpoint over the surrounding olive groves, across the rolling hills to Turkey and down to the river valley.

Hitting the road again after Cyrrhus you'll fly downhill to the first of two Roman bridges, both still in use today. The only dampener is that the road condition starts to deteriorate here and is broadly poor for the rest of the route with many cracked and bumpy surfaces. Some of the steepest climbs also come in this last stretch of the journey, particularly on either side of **Deir Sawwan** (120km). Take comfort from the fact that your last few kilometers into Izaz will be downhill and the deserted stretch of road after Deir Sawwan makes an ideal spot for wild camping. Before long you'll have mounted the hills and be flying towards Izaz, where signs quickly direct you to the Turkish border or back to Aleppo.