

Though it limited the scope of our conversations, the avoidance of politics also took the bite out of potentially tense interactions. No one asked about our religions; and if we offered that Reza's family is Shiite Muslim and mine Orthodox Christian, our Syrian acquaintances would wave their hands dismissively. "It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter," one shop owner said. "There are Shiites, Sunnis, Alawis, Druze, Catholics and Orthodox in this country, but we're all Syrians."

Most locals flinched, if only for an almost imperceptible moment, when Reza and I said we were Americans. Then they'd honey over the tension by pressing glasses of sugary tea into our hands, smiling, and saying, *Ahlan wa sahlan* — "Welcome, and be comfortable."

The closest anyone came to sharing his opinion on our nationality was a man who clapped Reza on the shoulder and said with a grin, "Amrika yes, George Bush no." We agreed, and he offered us a bag of apples.

*How lucky*, I thought in an oddly timed burst of patriotism, *that I can say this about my president.*

**S**yría's crumbling Byzantine pillars and Crusade-era castles brought the cliché to mind: "When in Rome ..." So like a good Syrian I banished inevitably depressing politics from my thoughts. I also shook off worries of theft and violent street crime, which are virtually nonexistent, and enjoyed my time as a tourist.

I'd always imagined Syria, about three-fourths the area of Oregon, as desert country. The nation's larger eastern area is indeed parched, with an eerie rosy-tan beauty most poetic at dawn. But like Oregon west of the Cascades, much of the land north and west of Damascus is green, mountainous and fertile. For a few days we were heartily rained on.

Syria's hot tourist spots, the Crusade-era castles and Roman ruins, stand as testaments of the country's historic shuffle from one imperial ruler to the next. In Bosra, the ancient capital of Roman Arabia, we saw the amazingly well-preserved 1,900-year-old amphitheater where, it's rumored, Christians were fed to lions — until 312 AD, when Roman emperor Constantine had a change of heart and became a believer himself. In Palmyra, we trekked up a barren peak to a castle overlooking the eroding Roman pillars and arches of an ancient market. And we marveled at the man-made channel carved into one side of the Salah al-Din Citadel, a Crusader castle north of Latakia.

The historic mixing of indigenous and imperial peoples — Phoenician, Bedouin, Roman, Ottoman, French — results in today's multifaceted Syria. The coastal mountain town of Kesseb is home to as many Armenians as Arabs, with Catholic and Orthodox churches nestled into the green slopes alongside mosques. Elsewhere in Syria I saw



**The ancient Decumanus at Palmyra**

members of several Christian sects and various branches of Islam coexisting peacefully, lending the country an unexpected cultural richness.

Syria's geographic diversity also gave it an unexpected beauty. In the Qalamoun Mountains north of Damascus we gawked at the 1,500-year-old Christian Mar Musa monastery, whose orange-stone masonry camouflaged its position on a cliff over a desert gully. Trips to the beach brought us wildflowers, sharp crags softened by fog, smooth-pebble beaches and turquoise Mediterranean waters. My shutter-finger was in overdrive, and I kept thinking, "Who would've known this is Syria?"

**J**ust as we began to forget about the messy busi-

ness of governing nations, politics went and messed up our travel plans.

As I lay vomiting (musta been the water) in a hotel bed in my great-grandmother's green, mountainous hometown of Mashta al-Helou, Reza mapped our vacation route. We couldn't go to Israel (which Syrians call Palestine) since the Syrian border patrol wouldn't let us back in if we had Israeli passport stamps. But we could aim for the coast, then dive south through the Lebanese border to Biblos, Tripoli and Beirut, finally taking a bus back to Damascus.

*Inshallah*, Reza added, a habit he had adopted since living in Damascus. It means "God willing," and Syrians tend to tack it onto the end of any statement in the future tense.

I recalled a line in Reza's *Lonely Planet* about unexploded land mines in Lebanon. "Are you sure it's safe?" I asked.

"Oh yeah. We're going to the north; there hasn't been any fighting there since independence in the 1940s," he assured me.

Outside, patriotic music blared at rock-concert volume through speakers in the town square. The election-week celebration would continue for about four hours, the sound waves roiling my gut.

Reza padded into the living area and turned on Al Jazeera English. Now the rat-a-tat of guns on the TV synched with the music outside, and through the chartreuse veil of nausea, I heard the news that a group of gunmen calling themselves Fatah al-Islam, based in a Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli, had robbed a bank, taken over a building and exchanged fire with the Lebanese army. The next day the Lebanese began shelling the refugee camp and closed the border with Syria.

**A**llah, we supposed, was not willing. Faith in God, Reza theorized, contributes to many Syrians' willingness to accept the status quo: Allah, not the individual, is in control. That faith compounds with the sheer age of Syrian civilization to create a strong hegemony — the sense that things are as they are because that's the way they've



**Allah, not the individual, is in control. That faith compounds with the sheer age of Syrian civilization to create a strong hegemony — the sense that things are as they are because that's the way they've always been.**