

SYRIA

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SYRIA

Part I - 30.05.10 - 5.06.10 - **349 km - 7 days**

Part II - 30.10.10 - 8.11.10 - **375 km - 9 days**

Total: 724 km - 16 days

We have not met yet so poor but in their poverty at the same time so generous, hospitable and kind people. The first time we faced the problem, not as people get, but how to escape from their hospitality. Syrians opened their heart for us and thanks to them we spent in Syria unique, wonderful and unforgettable moments.

CULTURE DIFFERENCES

Our biggest problem was that it was a first time for us to get in touch with such a different culture. Personal distance reduced suddenly from European 50 cm, to 10 cm from my face. We understood exactly what does it mean to talk "face to face" :-)

It was difficult for us to stand the fact that we were never alone! People are very (sometimes too much) hospitable and curious about strangers. For sure it's not a country for lovers who want to whisper to each other in private :-)

When it comes to man and woman relations, on the first day we got scolded by a young Syrian who spoke good English that if we don't want to be perceived as a people with loose morals, we should never say that we are boy and girlfriend. He said: "In my country there is no boyfriend and girlfriend. You are either engaged, or married". So the first words we learned in Arabic were "wife" and "husband". You see how easy it is? You just pass a border and you are married :-)

In Arabic world the division between sexes is very strict. Women should take care of proper dress code while visiting mosques and other places of worship and they should make sure where they can, and where they cannot enter.

Once a guy started to shout at me in very aggressive manner when I stood by the gate of the mosque, just before the time of praying. We were looking for water and I wasn't even on the mosque's territory. I don't know whether he was so angry because I'm a woman so I shouldn't approach mosque when men are praying, or because he found it offensive that I was close to the mosque in tight, cycling outfit when men were gathering there. This way, or that way the incident demonstrates that we should be very careful not to offend cultural codes and religious feelings of our hosts.

Syrians are Muslims. Respect their religion and culture.

Men should never touch any woman and should never look into womens' eyes. Only a husband has

the right to do it.

It's worth knowing, that when you are offered a meal, you should leave something on your plate. This is a signal for your host that you are fine and that you don't want to eat any more. We didn't know it and because we wanted to be polite in European manner, we were eating to the very last bite. Our stomachs were sick and we were probably perceived as really rude people! They probably thought "How much can those Poles eat ????" Us, we were frequently praying for the end of this feast. Well, some example of cultural misunderstanding :-)

Be very careful not to take any photos of any military objects (sometimes they are not well signposted)!!! You can even end up in a prison, as it happened to one of our friends.

Political situation between Syria and Israel is tense. Do not talk about Israel. If you've ever been there, don't talk about it, especially on the border, because they will never let you in.

The left hand is a dirty hand. Arabs don't use toilet paper. They use water and left hand. Therefore (even though, it's not easy) try not to disgust them and eat with your right hand only. Don't greet people and don't make any gestures to others with your "dirty" hand.

Take toilet paper with you when going to the toilet, if you don't want your right hand to become "dirty" too :-)

STEREOTYPES - FACTS AND MYTHS

"You'll have to cover up like Syrian women."

Well, we thought so. Vision of cycling in 45 °C in long trousers and sleeves haunted us. Fortunately shortly after we crossed the border we met a guy who spoke good English and he explained us that those restrictions concern Syrian women and most of Syrians understood that we are tourists and that we are from another culture. He said: "Come on, we have TV, we know how Europeans dress." After that, I felt encouraged to cycle in my cycling gear. Only when we had a rest beside a mosque I covered my legs and arms. I only covered my head when inside of a mosque.

Despite of my European dress I felt absolutely fully respected by Syrian men. Nobody ever gave me even a strange glimpse.

"Arabs are dirty."

We can't say anything about all Arabs but if it comes to Syrians, unfortunately we must admit it. We've never seen before such dirt beside of the roads. They throw their domestic rubbish everywhere on the roadside and they burn it there. The smell of rotting rubbish and smoked plastic is really overwhelming when cycling along main roads. We've never experienced such horror before.

You will notice the difference straight away on the Turkish - Syrian border. Without help of any signs you will know exactly where Turkish territory ends. That's the magic line where tidiness gives way to chaos and dirt.

Toilets are dirty, stalls with food are dirty, cities are dirty, streets are dirty and environmental awareness is sadly non-existent.

DANGERS

Snakes.

LANGUAGE

Arabic. If somebody speaks to you English, you might feel lucky.

ADVENTURES ON THE BORDER = HOW TO GET VISA

We bought our Syrian visas on Bab al Hava Turkish - Syrian border crossing near Hatay (Antakya). Before travelling to Syria we were worried if we can get a visa on the border but it went quite smoothly. If it is your first time in Middle East, be prepared to feel a little bit lost. First you have to wait in one queue, you fill in a form with questions about your occupation, purpose of travel, where you plan to stay etc. Then some guy with moustache takes your passport and leads you to a room where there is another guy with a moustache. It doesn't look like an office. There is a carpet on the floor comfortable armchairs and TV on with some Arabic version of MTV. This is the guy who decides whether you will get your visa or not. First he checks if you have any Israeli stamps in your passport and after some more questions he writes something in Arabic on a piece of paper. It turned out to be a permission to give us visas for 15 days. With this permission you go to another window, where you pay and with a confirmation of payment you finally proceed to a window where you get a visa stamp

in your passport. The guy in the last window wrote something in Arabic on our passports covers. We weren't happy about that but he explained that he has to make a note of the number of the computer he's just registered us on.

O.K. some details. If you arrange a visa at the Syrian embassy, it costs 20 €, on the border we paid 23 €. We are still confused about the duration of our visas. We were told that it's for 15 days and that we can prolong it for free, up to 30 days in any Immigration Office which is to be found in every big town. We didn't have to do that because after 7 days we entered Lebanon, so we don't know how it exactly works. Anyway at the embassy's web page we read that every tourist who plan to stay in Syria longer than 15 days has to report his presence and register in Security Office. There's one more thing - if you have any trace of evidence that you have been to Israel (stamps in your passport or even tickets or some souvenirs), they won't let you in. When you leave Syria, you have to pay also a departure fee. We paid 500 SYP and we had to buy also some revenue stamps for 50 SYP. Make sure that you have this 550 SYP with you to be able to leave Syria because you can't pay it in Euro or in Dollars. Just to make your life easier, on the Talkalakh - Syrian - Lebanese border crossing you obtain revenue stamps at the booth just at the entry, on your left side. We didn't know it and consequently lost lot of time looking for this place.

OVERNIGHT / CAMPING

We faced a problem in Syria with wild camping. Not because of lack of wild space but because of too much hospitality! In Syria we were never alone! In the daytime kids run after you when you cycle, crowd around you when you stop and in the night (I don't know how) they could always find us in the bush! When they find you, they insist to invite you home. It seems that it makes them feel really bad that you - a traveller - sleep outside. It's very nice and kind of them, but when camp is already set and you are in your sleeping bag, it's a hassle to explain for 30 minutes in Arabic, that you are fine. So, either hide well, either get used to be hosted in every village.

WATER

We've never faced any problems with safe, drinking water in Syria. In cities you can obtain it in every mosque. There is also a lot of fountains with drinking water. In the countryside, you will find numerous springs beside the road. You can also ask people in villages or staff at petrol stations to give you safe water.

ROADS / TRAFFIC

Roads are generally quite good and well signposted. We've never been cycling on an unpaved road. All signs are spelled also in Latin alphabet, so it's easy to find a right way. In big cities like Aleppo the traffic is very dense. Everybody beeps and drives as he wants. Well, stay vigilant. They also like to drive against the traffic flow. But apart from the big cities we didn't feel endangered on the road. The biggest problem we faced was the terrible stink from piles of rubbish on the roadsides.

ROUTE

In this trip, we crossed Syria twice. First time we entered Syria from Turkey through Bab al-Hava border crossing (near Hatay). We passed Aleppo, Ebla, Apamea ruins with its magnificent citadel, and a monumental crusader castle Crac des Chevaliers. The second time we started our journey to Syria in Homs. We got there by bus from Antakya (Turkey). The cost was 15 TL (Turkish lira). For bikes, we did not pay though not without a quarrel. We crossed the border again in Bab al Hava. This time, the bus driver arranged for us visa formalities so everything went smoothly without returning to us from one window, to another. This time we went by Homs, Maloula, Damascus, Sweida, Bosra and Dara.

MAPS

We were trying to get a Syrian map in Turkey but it turned out to be impossible. Finally we cycled all the way using just maps from tourist information. The first we got on the border, another one from the office in Aleppo. It worked well. Tourist information in Syria is rather poor. The lady in Aleppo didn't speak English but at least she gave us some brochures with maps.

CURRENCY

The currency is Syrian Pound. It's so small that we give you currency exchange rate for 10 SYP.

1EUR = 50.5 SYP

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1US \$ = 40 SYP
1PLN = 10.4 SYP
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PRICES

Water 1.5 l - 20 SYP,
Bananas 1 kg - 50 SYP,
Melon 1 kg - 7 SYP,
Pita bread 8 pieces - 20 SYP,
Falafel - 20 SYP,
Bulgur 0.5 kg - 15 SYP
Lentils 0.5 kg - 20 SYP
Coca cola - 20 SYP,
Local fizzy drink - 5 SYP,
Dinner in a restaurant - 200 SYP,
Ayran - 20 - 25 SYP,
Internet 1 h - 60 SYP,
Petrol 1 l - 40 SYP,
Stamp to Europe - 35 SYP
Post card - 15 SYP
Overnight in Damascus - 10\$ per night

Entry fee to touristic attractions is fixed and it costs always 150 SYP. If you have ISIC student card, you will pay only 50 SYP. Euro <26 is not accepted.

Don't forget that you will have to bargain, especially in tourist destinations. Prices usually are displayed so it's useful to learn Arabic numbers.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE

If you travel from Turkey, it's best to buy Syrian Pounds there. We did it in Antakya (Hatay) where we got better rate than anywhere else in Syria. We exchanged also some money on the black market with a guy on the border. The rate was worse than in Turkey, but comparable with other places in Syria. You can also exchange money in hotels and banks.

BANKS / CARDS / CASH MACHINES

We've never used banks or cash machines in Syria. We read that it's possible to pay with a card in hotels, restaurants and upmarket shops. We would recommend not to rely too much on cards and to have some cash with you.

INTERNET

We were using internet cafes twice. Once, we had to show our passports. The owner wrote down our personal data in a big book saying that he has to do it because of security matters. It might happen that police would ask who was using internet, so he has to keep track of all clients, even Syrians. YouTube, MySpace and Facebook are forbidden. Once some youngsters showed us how to access Facebook and it worked but if you have most of your contacts and e-mail correspondence on Facebook you'd better think of some alternative.

BIKE SHOPS

We haven't seen any.

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