

Damascus's Splendid Umayyad Mosque

The City's Crowning Glory

By **Habeeb Salloum**

From the dawn of Islam, Damascus and its Umayyad Mosque, one of the most interesting structures in the Muslim world, have been synonymous. For hundreds of years, this great house of worship has been the city's most magnificent historic building - its emblem par excellence.



Roman ruins beside the Umayyad Mosque

بقايا رومانية بجانب الجامع الأموي

Erected on one of the longest established holy sites in the world, it is truly a living history of man. Within its walls are incorporated three faiths, three civilizations and four eras in human history. The mosque replaced the Christian basilica of Saint John the Baptist, which was itself erected on the site of the Roman Temple of Jupiter. An even earlier temple built about 1,000 B.C. and dedicated to Haddad, the Aramean god of thunder, once stood in the same location.

After the Islamic conquest in 635 A.D., Muslims and Christians agreed to partition the church between them, and they began to perform their rituals side by side. For 70 years the Christians and Muslim prayed in the same structure. In 705, when the Muslim congregation grew in size, the Umayyad Caliph, al-Walid, took over the whole building and, in exchange, built four churches for the Christians. He then started building the mosque. A huge number of craftsmen,

including Greeks, Indians, Persians and Syrian Christians spent years embellishing the first sumptuous mosque in Islam. It took ten years and eleven million gold dinars to build what was to become the token of Muslim political supremacy and moral prestige. The artisans who decorated the mosque thought of Damascus as the Garden of Eden and, hence, implanted by way of murals, inlaid with gold, precious stones and coloured glass, motifs ➤



Treasury Umayyad Mosque

بيت المال في الجامع الأموي

duplicating the best elements in nature and man-made structures. Real and imaginary rivers, bridges and splendid palaces emerging from a forest of green trees against a background of gold. Added to the glittering mosaics, the multi-coloured marble marquetry and gold plating combined to give the mosque a magnificent sense of colour design.

In the subsequent centuries, the style of al-Walid's creation was reproduced by mosque architects throughout Muslim lands, especially North Africa and Arab Spain. Its square minarets that are said, to have been copied from earlier Christian churches became the trademark of Muslim houses of worship. Even today, this type of minaret is still to be found throughout North and West Africa.

Some historians believe that al-Walid's minaret was later adopted by European Christian churches and became the square church steeple one sees in western lands. In

the eastern Muslim world, after the demise of the Umayyad Dynasty, the structure and style of mosques changed, especially during the Ottoman period. However, Damascus's Umayyad Mosque continued to retain much of its unique character, including one of the square minarets, and original shape.

In 1069 A. D., much of the mosque was destroyed by fire and, in 1260 the Mongols sacked it. Again in the early 15th century, Tamerlane, the scourge of Asia, burnt the whole of the inside, and finally in 1893, in the Ottoman era it was almost entirely consumed by fire. It was rebuilt, after each destruction, following the original plans as closely as possible.

Stepping into the enormous courtyard from the bustle and clamour of the surrounding souks is like walking unexpectedly into another world. Inside, it is an oasis of coolness, calmness and silence. In its great marble spaces, people feel they have left their worries and stresses at the doorway. The overwhelming sense of serenity in its spacious tranquillity is a moving experience. At one end, near the main entrance, is the courtyard's gem, a small domed building supported by tiny slender Corinthian columns with pictorial-mosaic decorated walls. This tiny structure, considered one of the finest examples of Muslim art, was once the Umayyad treasury where the nation's public funds were kept.

On three sides of the courtyard, known in Arabic as the sahn, are arcades, which consist of columns and piers, topped by horseshoe or Roman arches. Parts of these are inlaid with colourful mosaics - the remains from a time when all these covered walks were gilded. The fourth side runs along the front of the prayer hall, parts of which are inlaid with marble panels topped with beautiful murals - a fantastic glazed mosaic of Arabesque.

The prayer hall, 135 m (443 ft) by 37 m (121 ft), the throbbing heart of the mosque, has an impressive dome and towers above the courtyard. It is a pillared chamber consisting of three aisles with two-tiered rows of arches resting on Corinthian columns, standing on pedestals. On one side, there are three exquisitely tiled mihrabs (niches) and a superb mimbar (pulpit); and near the



Entrance to the Umayyad Mosque

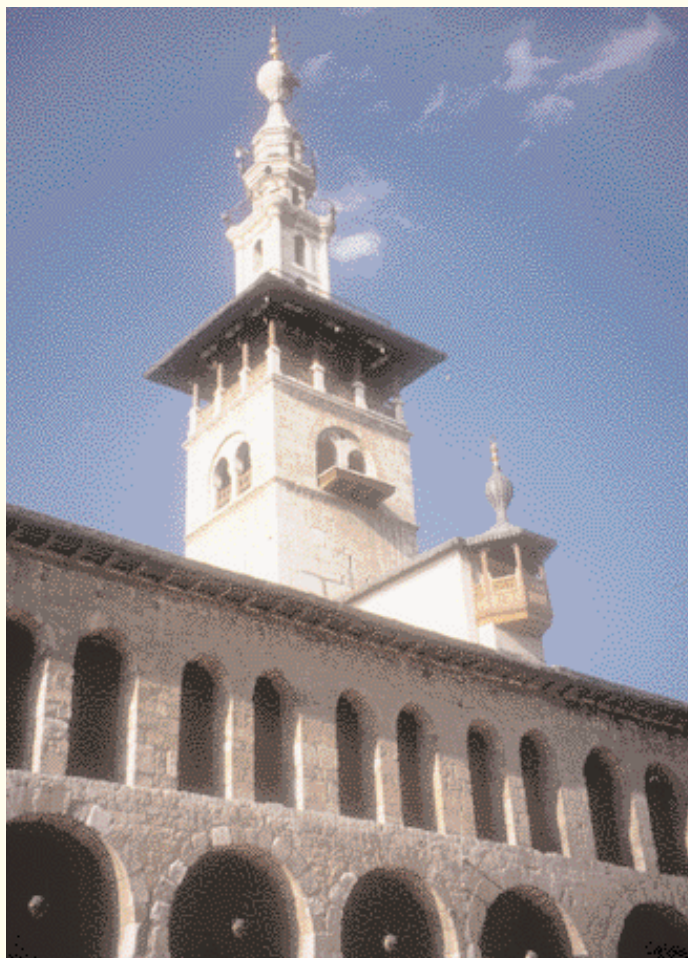
مدخل الجامع الأموي

opposite side the Mausoleum of John the Baptist - known to the Muslims as the Prophet Yahya.

The domed shrine contains the head of this Saint and is the focal point of the whole mosque. Considered a masterpiece of Islamic art, it is venerated by both Christians and Muslims and has been the object of pilgrims since the earliest days of Islam.

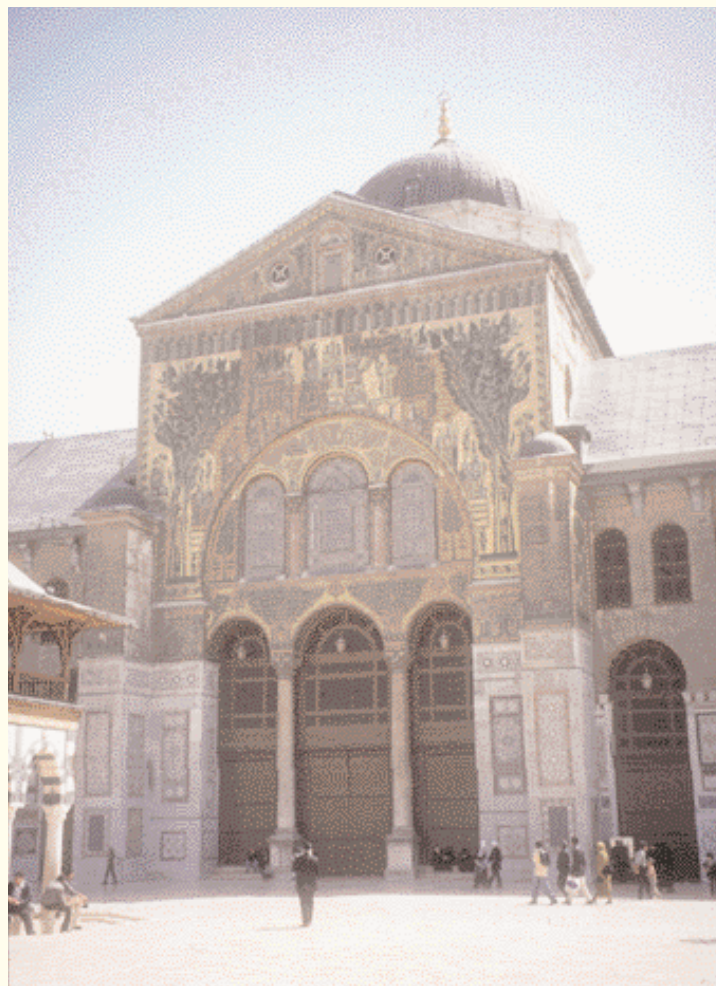
The prayer hall, mihrabs, mimbar, arches, columns and the vast carpeted floor with the worshippers kneeling in prayer blend harmoniously together and create an ocean of calm. The emotional impact created by the soothing surroundings produces an atmosphere conducive to communicating with the spiritual power.

The mosque, open to every sect in the Muslim community, is utilized for worship and as a resting or meeting place. Non-Muslims can visit all or any part of the mosque, except the prayer hall on Fridays, during the hours of devotion. On ➤



Courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque with what was once a treasury

فناء الجامع الأموي مع بيت المال



Treasury Umayyad Mosque

بيت المال في الجامع الأموي

entering, visitors pay an admission fee, then everyone takes off their shoes and women are given cloaks.

There is no doubt that to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, a visit to this first Great Mosque in Islam is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. It conveys, like it has to millions of visitors throughout the centuries, the true majestic quality of Islam and its message.

IF YOU GO

Useful Hints:

- 1) Convert money only in banks. New exchange rates have eliminated the once thriving black market - currently \$1. U.S. equals about 54 Syrian liras in banks.
- 2) Syria is very safe for travellers.
- 3) The best way to get around Damascus is by taxis, which are metered and very cheap - average cost of trips in the city average from \$1 to \$2.
- 4) Four good dining places are the Cham Palace Chinese Restaurant, the best Chinese dining place in Syria; Abo Alez located on the edge of the Umayyad

Mosque; and Beit Jabri and Al Shami House Restaurants, very reasonably priced, they offer excellent Arabic food.

5) Internet cafes are found in all the major cities in Syria. Many use DSL and are very up-to-date. In luxury hotels the price is from \$6. to \$7. per hour; in regular cafes from \$1. to \$2.

Places to Stay in Damascus:

At the top of the range are the Cham Palaces and Hotels - a deluxe chain covering the whole of Syria. In Damascus there are two excellent Cham Palace Hotels. The Cham Palace, the flagship of the chain, located in the heart of town, is the place to stay. A luxury abode, its inside is richly decorated with inland mother of pearl furniture and panels and its lobby is seemingly out of the Arabian Nights. For prices and reservations visit httpsyrianembassy@on.aibn.com or Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2215 Wyoming Ave. N.W., Washington D.C., 20008 U.S.A. Tel: 202/232-6313.a Fax: 202-234-9548. E-mail:info@syrianembassy.us or see website: <http://www.syriatourism.org/new/> ■



منارة الجامع الأموي

Minaret of the Umayyad Mosque