

# Saidnaya and Maaloula:

## The Historic Aramaic Towns of Syria

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It takes less than an hour's drive from downtown Damascus to reach the charming old Aramaic town of Saidnaya in the foothills of the majestic Anti-Lebanon mountains. The town is famous for its Christian holy sites and monasteries as well as for its inhabitants who belong to the Syriac minority.



Panorama of Maaloula from The Convent

منظر بانورامي لعلولة من جانب الدير

The Syriacs, who gave their name to the whole modern country of Syria, are the grandchildren of the ancient Arameans. The area called the "Fertile Crescent" to which Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and parts of Jordan, Iraq and Turkey belong was once the territory of numerous prosperous Aramaic city-states.

The ancient Greeks were probably the first to call the Aramean population Syrians; the name "Aram" was first mentioned around 2300 BC. Many Aramaic

tribes developed into special ethnic groups and acquired names of their own such as the Canaanites in Palestine, the Palmyreans in Syria, the Nabataens in Jordan, the Chaldeans in Iraq and so forth. The Aramaic language in its various dialects has been spoken for thousands of years by the people living between the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. It was the mother tongue of Jesus Christ and the Holy Bible was originally written in old Aramaic.

The towns of Saidnaya and the scenic Maaloula, which are clumped stunningly against the sheer cliffs of the Qallamoun mountains 20 km to the north of Saidnaya, are the religious and cultural centers of the Syriac-Aramaic minority. The most important monument in the town is the Convent of Our Lady of Saidnaya. From a

distance it looks like a fortress, perched on a rocky hillock in the town center. The convent that hosts a school, monastery for nuns and an orphanage is a famous pilgrimage site for Christians and Muslims alike. The object of adoration is an icon of the Virgin Mary supposedly painted by Saint Luke located in a small dark shrine-like room. The main chapel has an antique wooden iconostasis and numerous gold-painted icons. The convent was founded by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the sixth century.

Amongst the houses of the town there are several small churches, monasteries and shrines dedicated to various saints. Many of them are very old but have undergone comprehensive restoration. Around the town there are two religious sites worth

visiting: the Monastery of Mar Thomas and the Cherubim Convent situated strategically on the highest point of the local mountain range.

Saidnaya overlooks a fertile valley rich with orchards, grape vines and olive groves that host many open-air restaurants and hotels. The town is rapidly growing with a lot of new construction sites. Many of the buildings are second homes and summer houses for the wealthy Damascenes.

The very picturesque town of Maaloula has succeeded in preserving its antique and at the same time cozy character more than the modern Saidnaya. Modern Aramaic (Syriac) is still widely spoken in the town. The caves around the town suggest that it was a pre-historic settlement and one of the earliest centers of Christianity. ▶

The most important tourist attraction is the defile of Saint Thecla. According to legend, Thecla was the daughter of a prince who converted to Christianity and ran to hide in Maaloula. Her father sent soldiers to execute her for her conversion to the new faith. Finding herself trapped against the cliffs, she prayed to God for help. Her prayers were answered and a narrow path (the defile, or gap between two mountains which we see today) opened in the rocky mountains, allowing her to escape to a little cave in the cliffs.

The Convent of Mar Thecla that hosts the holy shrine of Saint Thecla is a very popular pilgrimage site for Christians from all over the Arab Middle East. The Convent of Our Lady of Saidnaya and the Convent of Saint Thecla belong to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchy of Damascus, one of the oldest

Christian communities worldwide, established in the fourth century AD.

The Monastery of Mar Sarkis (or Saint Sergius) is believed to have been founded in the fourth century. It is dedicated to the saints Sarkis and Bacchus who were Roman soldiers. They converted to Christianity and were sentenced to death because they refused to honor the Roman god Jupiter. The main chapel in the monastery shows old Roman and Byzantine ruins integrated in the modern construction. The monastery is a pilgrimage site, especially for Catholics in Syria and Lebanon.

Maaloula is famous for the traditional and authentic architecture in the old part of the town. Many old buildings, especially the churches and shrines, have been extensively restored. Unfortunately for visitors, numerous houses were demolished and

replaced by modern constructions that offer more comfortable living conditions. The warped, hanging and partially roofed paths and stairs all over the old town make a walk through it a unique experience; it is a walk through the whole history of the Syriac-Aramaic people, their culture, religion, architecture and language.

Both towns are often visited by local, Arab and international tourists. They are included in package tours and are a must for individual tourists. The rich history and the religious exclusiveness as well as gorgeous geographic location and the hospitality of the people make the two towns one of the most unforgettable sites in Syria. They are evidence of the religious and cultural richness of modern Syrian society and an irreplaceable landmark of human civilization. ■



A Nun in the Convent of Mar Thecla

راهبة في دير سانت تقلا



The Defile in Maaloula

الشنق الجبلي في معلولة