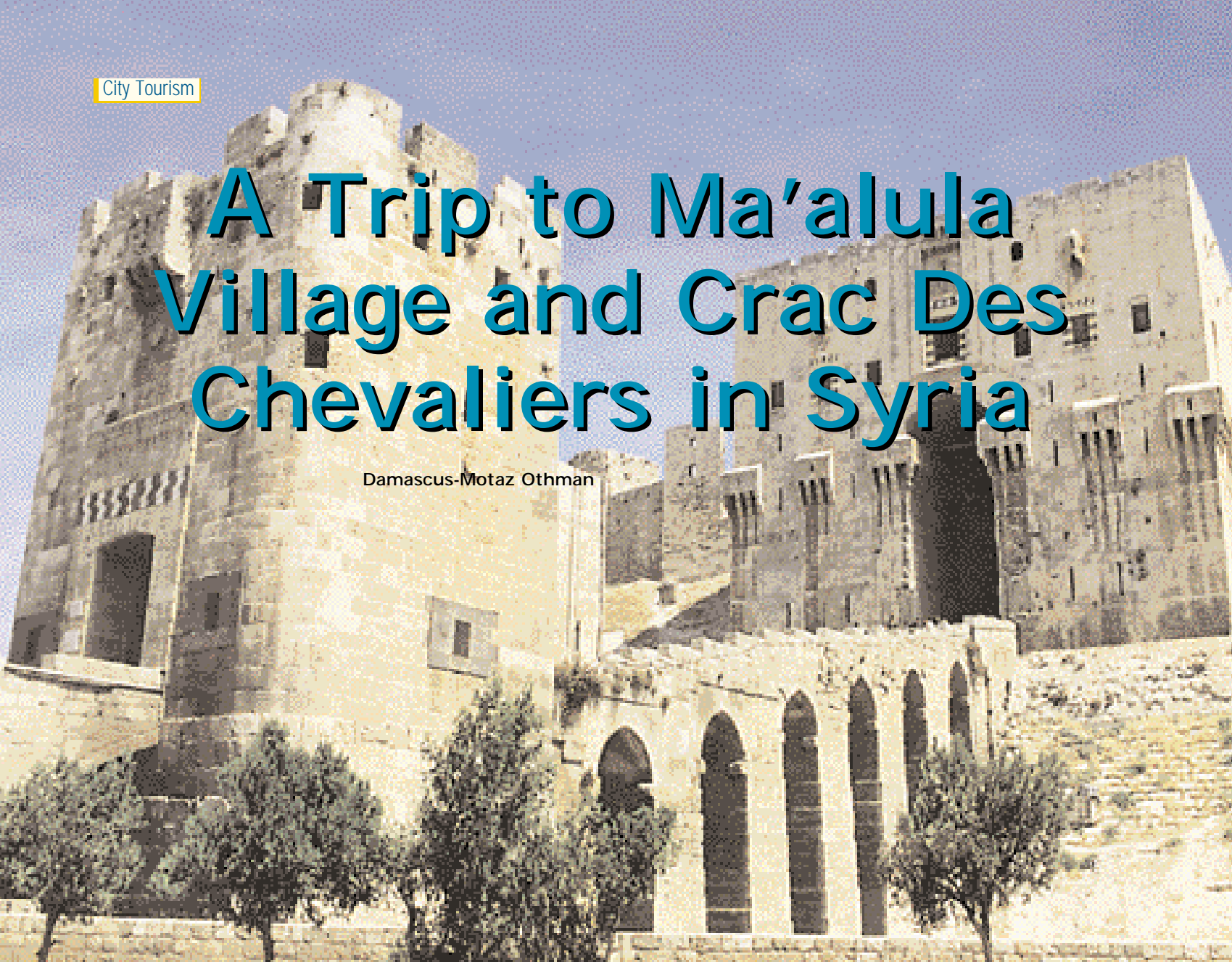




City Tourism

A Trip to Ma'alula Village and Crac Des Chevaliers in Syria

Damascus-Motaz Othman



Crac Des Chevaliers.

قلعة الحصن.

We were given the choice at the end of the UFTAA Congress in Damascus, either to visit Busra (south of Damascus) or Ma'alula and Crac Des Chevaliers (north of Damascus). We selected Ma'alula for several reasons since it is the village I always pass through on my way to Turkey. I always wondered what this enigmatic name means. I also wanted to add this touristy town to my tourism agenda and acquaint the readers with it. With our guide Mohammad and our driver Ahmad we started on our way in a tourist bus that belongs to Cham Tours Company which has a distinguished fleet of tourist buses. Less than an hour later we saw the Syrian Qalamon mountains that surround the stony mountains of Ma'alula, famous for their caves and church (St. Marr Sarkis and Bacchus). We heard prayers said in the Aramaic language (the Language of Jesus Chris) still

used in Ma'alula which has a population of 5000. Most of these people follow the Orthodox sect and different Christian sects hold many celebrations here every year.

All what you see here belongs to past history and hence Ma'alula is an ideal place for those who love the past. The name "Ma'alula", as explained by our guide, is Aramaic for fresh air. (It is close to Alili in Arabic which has a similar meaning). Arabic and Aramic have many words in common.

You can visit Ma'alula throughout the year but the best time is from March to October. You are here at a height of about 1500 m above sea level. The air is dry and fresh and you can quench your thirst with tasty cold water. You will enjoy the hospitality of the people of Ma'alula and you can have a most enjoyable time at Ma'alula Hotel (4 stars) with a swimming pool, health club, large

rooms, numerous restaurants and a platform that allows you to view the surrounding beautiful mountains.

Crace Des Chevaliers, some 200 km north of Damascus was our second stop. It is one of the most important castles from the Middle Ages, built by one of the Kurdish princes to keep an eye on the land route. It was later occupied by the Crusaders who made it their head quarters during their occupation of Cham. It was subsequently liberated by King al-Dhahir Bebrious in 1271.

Today the squatters have been evicted and the castle has been cleaned, restored and turned into a tourist attraction. History books tell the stories of furious fighting around the castle between the Muslims and the Crusaders. Winning these battles was essential for controlling a vast area of land. ■

