

The Silk Road Revisited

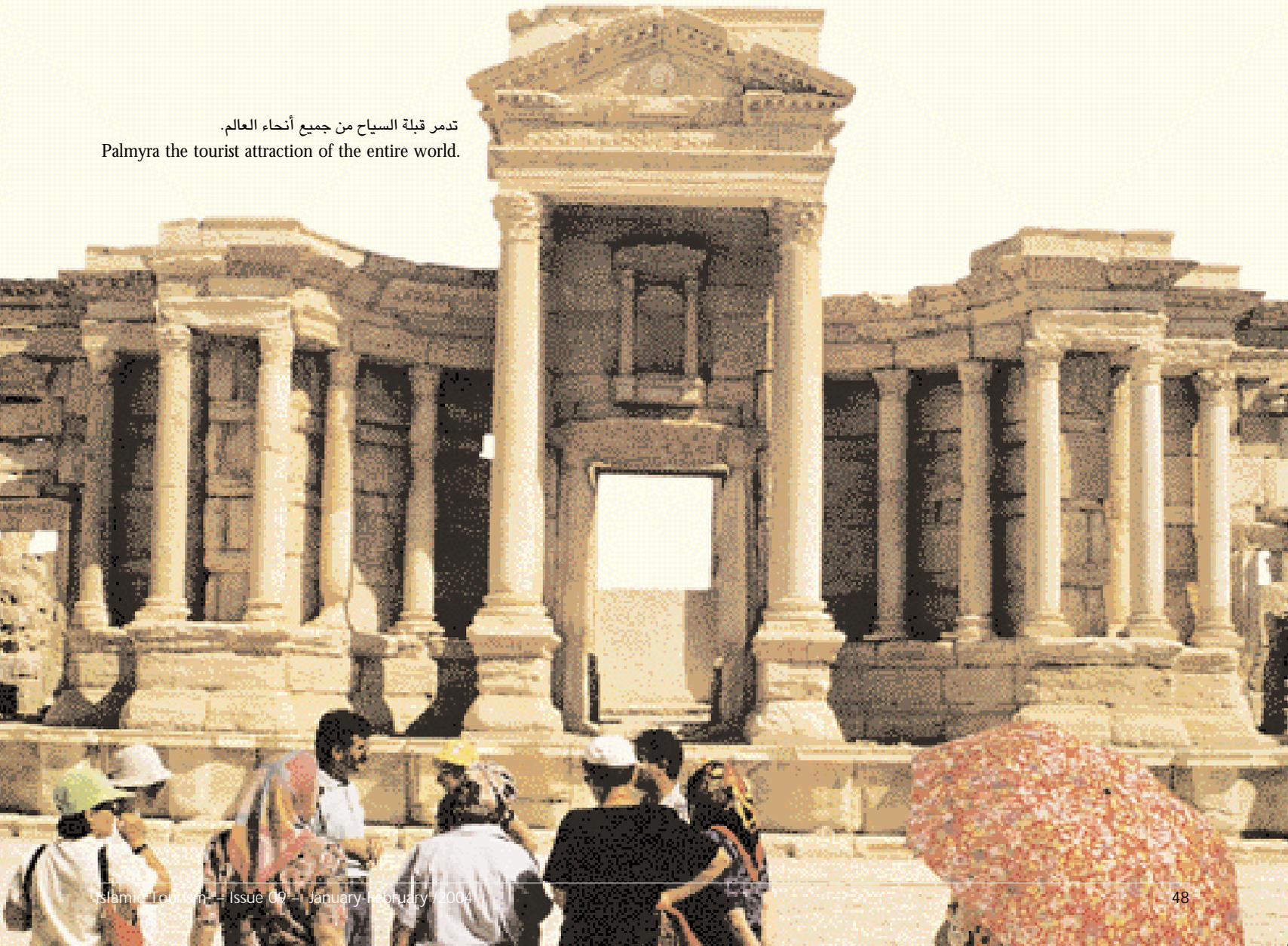
Ancient route of international understanding and friendship

Damascus-Motaz Othman

Historians used the name "Silk Road" to designate the land routes followed by the caravans of the old merchants that carried various goods for sale in the markets of different cities and kingdoms they travelled through. And since silk was the most important and expensive item in their collection of wares the trade and the route became known as 'the Silk Road'. ➤

تدمر قبلة السياح من جميع أنحاء العالم.

Palmyra the tourist attraction of the entire world.



In fact, these caravans transported many varied items depending on the goods of the countries they came from. They traded in silk and ivory from Japan and China, spices from India, carpets from Persia, glass from Venice, fabrics from Anatolia and numerous items as different as chalk and cheese. The large number of khans (resting places for caravans) indicated the routes were almost as varied and numerous as the goods transported.

In addition to land routes, the Silk Road also had its sea routes: Venetian ships used to empty their cargoes in the Askandron port to be transported to various oriental cities and kingdoms. The trade was always a two-way process and they returned to Venice with 'imported' goods.

Along with merchandise the Silk Road was also a road of cultural exchanges as artists and writers accompanied the caravans.

In view of the strategic importance of the cities of Bilad al-Cham, (Syria) the caravans used to gather there en route from the east, west, north Africa, Anatolia (Turkey) and Europe. Aleppo,



قصر العظم.



The arrival of the caravans.

وصول قوافل التجار.

Palmyra and Damascus were the most important stops along the Silk Road.

As a correspondent for Islamic Tourism I attended the Silk Road Festival along with more than 60 journalists from Europe, China and Japan and more than 15 Arab and international satellite stations. We travelled to Syria at the end of last September. Our journey began in Aleppo Castel, then the old Palmyra and ended in the historic palace of al-Azem in Damascus.

The journalists and participants gathered at the Chahba al-Cham hotel in Aleppo where the Syrian Minister of Tourism opened the festival. The next venue was the al-Shaibani School with a magnificent carpet display and fine arts exhibition organised by the French Consulate in Damascus. We walked between the old squares, into the covered markets, to the platform at the entrance to the castle. Old caravans started to arrive from China, Persia and Venice carrying different merchandise. A free trade treaty was then signed between the Venetian Republic and the Aleppo kingdom. There were plenty of Italian flags and other exhibits at the signing. The sky was lit up by a breath taking fireworks display. The castle was covered with different colours and glittering shapes which amazed the participants who were subsequently entertained by different international groups presenting folkloric dance and music.

A workshop dealing with the importance of the Silk Road in the meeting of different cultures and cultural exchange was held on the second day of the festival. Among the participants were the Minister of Tourism and many experts in tourism, art and heritage. The Minister spoke about the vital need for cultural exchange between nations to create a basis for mutual understanding. He also emphasised the past and present role of Syria as a meeting point of different civilizations. The deputy Minister of Tourism answered questions after his press conference.

The third day's activities consisted of a visit to Palmyra which began with a horse race (Arab stallions of course!) and ended with concerts by different local and international groups. There was also a fashion show which highlighted clothes and dresses from different countries along the Silk Road.

The festival ended in Damascus. The closing session was held at al-Azem palace a synthesis of art, beauty, culture and heritage.

The director of the festival, Mrs. Susan Jawzy, explained to Islamic Tourism in a special interview that the Silk Road Festival is an open invitation to all nations to visit Syria and familiarise themselves with its rich past, its ancient heritage and today's culture. Syria enjoys peace and stability – visitors can take advantage of the people's hospitality acquired over thousands of years.

She said that the participation of more than 60 journalists from different countries, especially those countries from which the silk caravans and merchants travelled long ago, are all indications of the position Syria held and still holds as a meeting point between different civilizations and nations. Antiquities are beautiful in themselves but their beauty is enhanced when life is breathed into them through art and cultural and traditional shows which tell the story of their heritage. Next year many more cities will take part in the festival and there will be more activities.

The Silk Road Festival was the first of its kind. It was held in the cities of the ancient Silk Road, which pioneered trade and cultural exchanges centuries ago. The Syrian hosts deserve the highest accolades for their organisational skills and traditional hospitality. The festival represented a qualitative leap in the promotion of tourism and cultural awareness through a focus on Arab identity - particularly its Syrian dimension. ■