

NEW PROJECTS BOUTIQUE HOTEL SYRIA



Syria's boutique hotel market



As Syria enjoys a growing and promising tourism market, **Elissar Saddy**, Hodema's Damascus office manager, takes a look at how the government is working accordingly to brand the country as a regional and global center of history, culture, arts and leisure

Damascus, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, has history reaching back for centuries. Old Damascus has a rich and storied history where a myriad of cultures and exquisite cuisines meet with beautiful scenery, marvelous sights and enticing smells. Few cities can offer this variety of a locale, natural, cultural, and urban, to enjoy.

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The old Damascus area is a district that has been preserved for more than four centuries and it is home for the latest rage in the country: boutique hotels. The city has seen a large number of boutique hotels, restaurants, and art galleries spring up over the last few years, luring Syrians and foreigners alike. The trend has landed on the pages of international travel sections; British Vogue ran a 16-page fashion spread on visiting Damascus in May 2009.

However, it is the city's more recent history that is reshaping contemporary Damascus. As Syria is focusing on tourism and development,

scores of traditional Arab houses from the 17th to 19th centuries have been restored and reopened as boutique hotels and restaurants in the capital's protected old area.

The scheme is far better funded and staffed than other restorations in the Old City, which, along with Aleppo, has the highest concentration of preserved and traditional Arab residential architecture in the Middle East. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) aims to set standards in preservation practice, expand the shrinking

number of traditionally skilled craftsmen and carpenters, and produce a model for cultural and tourist development.

After refurbishment, traditional Damascene houses, such as the merchant houses from the Ottoman era, are converted into charming boutique hotels. Furnished with antiques and built around the traditional internal courtyard, they can offer between 4 and 40 rooms. Already, 15 boutique hotels have emerged in the Old City and each property promis-



es to take you back in time to Syria's traditional way of life where you will be sipping hot tea, enjoying a juicy orange plucked straight from your tree, while sitting around the soothing water fountain.

In Aleppo's covered souks and ancient churches, a UNESCO world heritage site, visitors can stay in a 16th century palace, where rooms (starting at \$US 90 a night), are built around a series of interior courtyards with marble fountains and jasmine trees.

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Such small and discreet hotels in historical settings are defining a new vision of luxury and an untapped image of hospitality. What is fascinating is that this past remains very much alive today. A visit to the old city is not a visit to your conventional historical place that has been redesigned and restructured to attract and please the traditional tourist. To the contrary, it is a visit to a place where Damascene people, merchants, and craftsmen continue to live and work as they have been doing for centuries; an experience akin to taking a trip in time to ancient Rome. The experience is ranked



unique and magnificent for tourists, however, Damascenes have expressed some of their concerns regarding the greatest face-lift to ever overcome their city.

Reuters recently quoted Syria's tourism minister Saadalla Agha al-Qalaa stating that he expects the number of hotel beds to double to nearly 90,000 in the next 3 years. And according to the Associated Press, the government has recently issued nearly 50 hotel and 120 restaurant and cafe licenses, therefore it is urgently necessary that rigid rules and regulations are put in place now so that developers abide with it before it is too late. When looking at the boutique hotel

market in Syria, one must look at the limited supply of old houses to be converted. Many of the residents of the old city of Damascus are renters, while the owners have moved out to new Damascus. Hence, the burden of maintaining and restoring these houses falls on the shoulders of said renter who cannot afford the annual expenses.

Some even claim that they would evacuate these houses if they were well compensated financially. This leaves the old city with more empty and abandoned houses to turn into investments; leading to gentrification thus increasing property value rates whilst bringing a new population to the neighborhood.

The old city of Damascus is thus trapped between a rising tourist industry and a clinging traditionalistic old residential quarter with both sides tugging at opposite ends of the rope. The outcome is uncertain; will owners hold on to their traditional houses or sell them for the money-spinning business?

In Damascus' Old City, property values for intact traditional houses are rising quickly. Yet, this is not restraining the development of boutique-hotels as businessmen continue to scour for what limited number of properties remains suitable for refurbishment. The main concern here is to maintain the true identity of Damascus.



The effect of such development on the historic architecture and space of the Old City is a growing concern for architects and historians. Builders keep adding elements to the houses that do not necessarily fit with the style or function. Traditional materials of wood and dried mud bricks, used for hundreds of years as weather bearing material to withstand the city's harsh winters and hot summers are often replaced by concrete blocks and cement plaster to cut costs and maximize returns.

Developers should be stopped when just taking into consideration the end product that tourists will see and the related Return on Investment. In this area, the government is trying to tap into the most important and unique endowment of the city; it's globalized history. ■ hodema.net