LOS DICALLY MENTS Issue 72 | Oct - Nov 2010 | Www.hospitalitynewsmag.com | MIDDLE EAST

NEW PROJECTS BOUTIQUE HOTEL SYRIA



Syria's boutique hotel market



As Syria enjoys a growing and scores of traditional Arab houses number of traditionally skilled promising tourism market, Elissar from the 17th to 19th centuries duce a model for cultural and Saddy, Hodema's Damascus as boutique hotels and restaurants tourist development. office manager, takes a look at how the government is working The scheme is far better funded Damascene houses, such as the accordingly to brand the country as a regional and global center of history, culture, arts and leisure

has history reaching back for cen- than four centuries and it is home turies. Old Damascus has a rich and for the latest rage in storied history where a myriad of the country: boutique cultures and exquisite cuisines hotels. The city has meet with beautiful scenery, mar- seen a large number velous sights and enticing smells. of boutique hotels, Few cities can offer this variety of a restaurants, and art locale, natural, cultural, and urban, galleries spring up to enjoy.

"When looking at the boutique hotel market in Syria, one must look at the limited supply of old houses to be converted"

est continuously inhabited cities that has been preserved for more

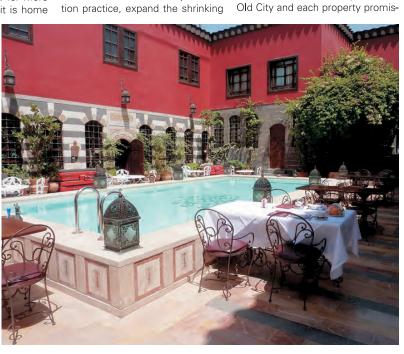
over the last few vears, Juring Syrians and foreigners alike. The trend has landed on the pages of international travel sections; British Vogue ran a 16-page fashion spread on visiting Damascus in Mav

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

from the 17th to 19th centuries craftsmen and carpenters, and proin the capital's protected old area.

Middle East. The Aga Khan Damascus, one of the world's old- The old Damascus area is a district Development Network (AKDN) aims to set standards in preservation practice, expand the shrinking

After refurbishment, traditional and staffed than other restorations merchant houses from the in the Old City, which, along with Ottoman era, are converted into Aleppo, has the highest concentra- charming boutique hotels. tion of preserved and traditional Furnished with antiques and built Arab residential architecture in the around the traditional internal courtyard, they can offer between 4 and 40 rooms. Already, 15 boutique hotels have emerged in the



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.

"In Damascus' Old City, property values for intact traditional houses are rising quickly. The main concern here is to maintain the true identity of the capital"

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

tourists, however, Damascenes have expressed some of their concerns regarding the greatest facelift 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

be converted. Many of the residents of the old city of Damascus tic old residential quarter with both 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.

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.

industry and a clinging traditionalissides 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 Some even claim that they would 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.





Hospitality News - N° 72 - OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2010 - 93 92 - Hospitality News - N° 72 - OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2010