

# Travels in Syria

First printed in the *Columbia Writer's Guild Anthology 2018*

A true Story by Drew Coons



<https://morethanordinarylives.com/>

## Travels in Syria

“I want your address. I will come to America. I will keel you.” The large, surly Arab looked us in the eye as he spoke. As my wife and I glanced at each other, she whispered, “He’s kidding, right?” After all, he could kill us right then and there if he really wanted to. *Surely this must be a form of Arabic humor*, we thought. Rather than risk provoking him by refusing and remain on the safe side, we only gave him our office address.

We traveled through Syria just before the civil war there started. We spoke through a translator to large groups of Christians and some Muslims about having rewarding marriage relationships. We taught in all the places you’ve seen on the news: Aleppo, Homs, Damascus. About 5% of Syrians are considered Christian—that is, born of Christian parents. Local Christians organized our engagements.

“You are the head of the snake!” another Arab snarled at us regarding America. But not all Syrians felt that way. One young man who served as a tour guide for us expressed admiration for the US. Dressed in jeans and a polo shirt, he studiously acted American and used American lingo. This marked him in Syrian culture as a rebel, a bad boy. Why would he do this? We passed three pretty Muslim teenage girls completely covered by black hijabs except for their faces. Their expressive eyes had been highlighted with heavy false eyelashes and dark liner. To our surprise, the girls took the initiative to call out flirtatiously to the bad boy. He shrugged them off. “Happens all the time,” he explained.

Despite a few detractors, most Syrians are hospitable and welcomed us warmly. We generally felt safe when under the protection of our hosts, especially when they housed us in a convent. Hospitality in Syria is equated to personal honor like depicted in the Bible’s Old Testament. Many Syrians invited us into their homes where they went to tremendous effort to prepare special Arab dishes for us. One charming Arab custom is that a guest is supposed to adamantly deny food, even if he is starving. The host then insists and, if necessary, takes the guest’s plate and piles it with food. Having been in several Arab

cultures previously, we knew and followed the customs. This required us to eat and praise everything regardless of any potential consequences.

And consequences there were. After a week, I became as sick as any tourist to Mexico has ever been. Fortunately, we take anti-diarrhea and stomach medicines along on our trips so that we can do our job no matter how badly we feel. But the generous invitations to Arab homes continued to come. Remember the Arab custom about food and hospitality? Regardless of how much I insisted that I couldn't eat, our gracious hosts knew better. I can now testify from personal experience, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Every culture also has surprises. Syrians are bird fanciers. Most have in their homes pampered pet birds—parrots, canaries, doves—which are extraordinarily tame and appear to enjoy family festivities. The biggest public activity on Saturdays in Damascus is the "pigeon exchange." Hundreds of men, young and old, gather all morning at an outdoor rendezvous buying, selling, and trading pet birds. Now whenever western media shows Arabs in angry mobs, I also remember the other picture: coarse-looking men gently handling and admiring pigeons.

Our speaking engagements required travel between towns. Buses are the most economical and convenient transport. We had to take one five-hour trip between Aleppo and Damascus without an Arabic-speaking guide. Our hosts bought our tickets and put us on the "luxury express" bus. We enjoyed riding through the barren Syrian desert in cool air-conditioned comfort. About halfway to our destination, the bus stopped in a smaller town. We had been told by our hosts before leaving Aleppo that a stopover of fifteen to twenty minutes would give us a break. I got off the bus to look around and use the toilet.

In my absence, police commandeered the luxury bus and moved it. I came back to find our comfortable bus and my wife had vanished. Nobody could understand my English as I asked where the bus and my wife had gone. Close to panic and watched by hundreds of robed Arabs, I ran everywhere, looking into every bus. Finally, through a thick hedge, I glimpsed a large vehicle moving. After climbing over a ten-

foot wrought-iron fence and fighting through the hedge, I found a second bus terminal. There I discovered my wife making quite a spectacle of herself protecting our luggage and trying to keep an alternate bus to Damascus from pulling away and leaving us behind. Someone banged on the side of the bus. The driver stopped just long enough for us to jump on with our suitcases.

This local bus could only be described as decidedly non-luxury, and we had lost our nice seats. In Syria, a woman has the right to not sit next to any man who isn't her husband. Since two seats together no longer remained available, the driver invited my wife to sit in the front next to another woman who traveled alone. I ended up sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the back bench of the bus with a ragged group of desert dwellers. Their swarthy un-shaven looks would have frightened the mujahedeen's "holy warriors," let alone me. All they needed was bandoleers of bullets across their chests to be picture perfect. Soon, the warm afternoon air and motion of the bus lulled one man next to me to sleep. His turbaned head gradually slipped over onto my shoulder. I "accidentally" kicked his leg, which startled him awake. But gradually his head nodded over onto me again. I sat there thinking, *Not everybody gets a chance to do this*. He woke from his nap as we pulled into Damascus and never seemed to notice his pillow.

Our talks on marriage and relationships in Syria were a sensation. The crowds laughed at our stories and responded with gratitude. Arabs clustered around us after every session expressing personal difficulties with relationships and asking sincere questions. Even the undercover police monitoring us seemed to enjoy our presentations. You can always pick secret police out of an audience because they don't bring a spouse, and nobody sits next to them. Serving our fellow man, especially those very different from ourselves, is truly a privilege and an adventure. Adventures are not necessarily fun at the time. And yet, if we embrace them, they will enrich our lives and our understanding of others.