

FROM Beirut on the coast it is a march of three days through the mountains of Lebanon before you can see the city of Damascus shimmering white on the Ghuttah plain. You come down to Damascus through the long, rugged, and tortuous valley of the Abana, for I prefer the Biblical name to the modern Barada, and suddenly, like a crystal mirage, you see the city and its enviroing orchards—and you may then say, "That is the oldest inhabited city in the world."

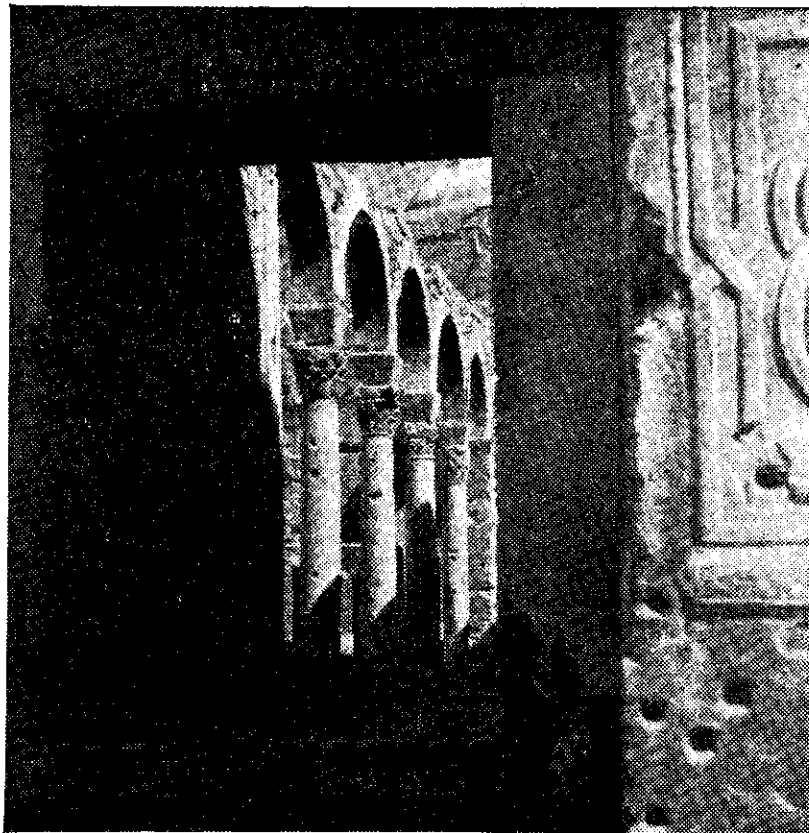
And, lost in admiration, you will press on till you come to the first of the four great gates of Damascus—the gate that faces Lebanon and the sea, through which pass sailor men, and the commerce of the Western world. At this gate, to be strictly honest, there is a railway station, but you will take no notice of this monstrosity; you will go straight to the gate, and will enter the Derb el-Mustakim, the "Street which is called straight."

Not even Broadway, lit by Neon-glamour signs, can vie with the Derb el-Mustakim, the oldest of streets, either in colour or in hustle. Along this cobbled way, for a mile and a-half, are the bazaars and the markets which give life to the Syrian desert, and which once made Damascus the emporium of the East. Bright orange awnings, red camel-hair turbans, and flowing Arab tunics, all combine to make a fascinating picture of colour and movement. At the same time there are parts of the city which belie its fair fame. The smells of Damascus are probably only equalled by the stench of Baghdad. And there are no more prolific carriers of filth and pestilence than the pariah dogs that haunt the streets.

Indescribably Old Houses

Everywhere in Damascus, except in the new suburb built by the French, the houses wear a look that is indescribably old. Some of these houses in the Derb el-Mustakim still retain as built-in supports to the facade the pillars of a colonnade erected by the Romans. On the outer wall, these houses are generally faced with mud, and frequently a dung-heap figures prominently at the door. But it is one of the contrasts of the Orient that, should a door fly open, you may catch a glimpse of green palms, patterned mosaic, and the splash of a fountain in a court full of repose and calm—a haven of peace after the dust and bustle beyond the walls.

A little to the north of the "Street called Straight" is the magnificent Ommiad mosque. As it stands in the hot eastern sunlight this mosque is a patchwork of burning colours. But, day by day, it decays, and the ravages of the Damascenes' worst enemy, fire, have corrupted its spacious architecture. It is said that 1,200 master craftsmen were brought from Constantinople to erect this miracle in marble and mosaic, and that not a pillar was left standing in Syria when its stately colonnades came



THE GATES OF DAMASCUS

(Written for "The Listener" by DORIAN SAKER)



A 16th century plan of Damascus, from the British Museum. The building in the left-hand corner is said to be on the site of St. Paul's conversion. The picture at the top of the page is of the Gateway of the Mosque in Damascus.

to completion. The ceiling was wood inlaid with gold, and there were 6,000 golden lamps to dispel the shadows of night. After all these centuries of fire and sword the mosque is still imposing.

The Gate of Trade

Beyond the Ommiad Mosque and the river Barada, is the north gate, where at early morning the caravans come from the Khens to set out for Aleppo. Flecker, who spent a good deal of time in Damascus, writes of the north gate:—

I am the gay Aleppo Gate: a dawn, a dawn, and thou art there.

Eat not thy heart with fear and hate, O brother of the beast we hate!

Thou hast not many miles to tread, nor other foes than fleas to dread; Homs shall behold thy morning meal, and Hama see thee safe in bed.

The old caravans set out to-day; the weary camels still tread the desert to Aleppo, and Homs, and Antioch. They still carry products which are much the same. The North gatekeeper says:

Sell them the rotten, buy the ripe!

Their heads are weak; their pockets burn.

Aleppo men are mighty fools. Salaam Aleikum! Safe return!

And so the caravans take stocks of apricot paste, and pomegranates, and other fruits; they take silk, cotton, and woollen cloths, some of which are woven in the same looms that the Damascenes were using to make the famous Damask ten centuries ago; they take copper and gold ornaments and tables "botched with pearl"—the favourite of the Damascenes—and they take cabinets of inlaid woods. Doubtless the Damascene merchant is as big a rogue as ever he was.

Pilgrims' Gate

That is the song of the North Gatekeeper's; he sings of the pleasures of honourable trade. But the South Gate is of another kind. Here gather the pilgrims at the beginning of their pilgrimage.

I am the gate that fears no fall: the Mihrab of Damascus wall;

The bridge of booming Sinai: the Arch of Allah all in all.

O spiritual pilgrim rise: the night has grown her single horn:

The voices of the souls unborn are half a dream with Paradise.

"Postern of Fate"

The last of four gates of Damascus is the East Gate, and this is its description.

Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern, Fort of Fear:

The Portal of Baghdad am I, the Doorway of Diarbekir.

These are fear-inspiring words, and not a few caravans lie rotting in the desert, their bones bleaching in centuries of sun and wind, because this warning went unregarded. The Syrian desert, from Beirut to Baghdad, extends for some six or seven hundred miles, and few are the oases in that barren waste. So the message of the East Gatekeeper runs, "Pass not beneath, O caravan, or pass not singing."

And so Damascus stands, the oldest city in the world, in the (Continued on next page)