

4.50 from Aleppo

CRIME AUTHOR AGATHA CHRISTIE HAD ENORMOUS AFFECTION FOR SYRIA, ITS ARTISANS AND ITS MYSTERIES. WHILST EXPLORING THE JEWELS OF THE ALEPPO AND DAMASCUS SOUQS – ON A CROSS-COUNTRY ORIENT EXPRESS-STYLE TRAIN – IT'S REALLY NOT THAT HARD TO SEE WHY...



Dearest Agatha. I thought it was time to update you on my luxury travels through one of your favourite Oriental enclaves. You will be pleased to hear that I am well and making myself at home in Aleppo, which was once so close to your heart. No doubt the jewel in Syria's crown has changed beyond recognition since you were last here. Remember the five star Baron Hotel? Though surely not what it was when you stayed in the now famous room 203, it still has a perfume of exotic romance. Its terrace bar serves antiquated afternoon teas – although the stuffy colonels, dashing archaeologists and grand dames have long since retired – and its nostalgic high-ceiling courtyard is now furnished with princely tour groups from Paris. I imagine you indulging in champagne and caviar rather than sitting at a typewriter inking out *Murder on the Orient Express* if you were here today.

I imagine this is how I may have written to Agatha Christie, on the Queen's finest white stationery of course, if the world's best-selling author were not resting in a cemetery in Oxfordshire. Growing up as a budding sleuth on the streets of Chief Inspector Taggart's Glasgow, I found myself captivated by her work and lost in the pages of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Ten Little Indians*, summer after summer. I was on first name terms with Hercule Poirot and I will never forget reading *Evil Under the Sun* on a windswept Cornish beach aged 12. Yet I never imagined I would find myself walking in the great lady's footsteps, lost in a drama befitting only her finest work, through the labyrinthine mazes of Aleppo's grand-arched souq. 🗨️

I IMAGINE AGATHA CHRISTIE
INDULGING IN CHAMPAGNE
AND CAVIAR RATHER
THAN INKING OUT *MURDER*
ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS



BENEATH THE WALLS OF THE CITADEL, ALEPPO BLOOMS LIKE A DAMASCENE ROSE. EVEN THE PAVEMENT CREAKS UNDER THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

Beneath the crumbling walls of the citadel, Aleppo blooms like a Damascene rose; even the pavement creaks under the weight of history. To the left of me lies a crooked staircase, decorated like Aladdin's cave, where coffee pots and silver urns outdo each other for reflections and shine. To the right are alleyways like dusty bookshelves. Stacked houses

crowd in upon passers by, teetering on the pavement edge like leather bound works of past Arabic masters. Its streets are full of characters that could easily populate a great work of fiction.

Yet despite this backdrop, and considering all the time Agatha Christie spent in Syria – she travelled from the ruins of Tell Halaf and Tell Brak to the magnificent desert Roman city of Palmyra and the Phoenician city of Ugarit – the world's most famous female crime writer never brought the characters of Aleppo or its patchwork streets to life on the page. She personified the passageways of Petra in *Appointment with Death* – also written from her balcony at Aleppo's Baron Hotel – and gave fanciful notions to the modern day tourist booze cruise by plotting a few deaths on the Nile (Hollywood invited a chubby Peter Ustinov along for the ride in 1978). Yet Aleppo missed out on her literary magic. Her most famous book, *Murder on the Orient Express*, though tracing a route through Turkey, Italy and France had its original roots at Aleppo train station, but that was its only appearance in her 80 tome canon. In itself, it is a great mystery, because there couldn't be a better setting for a rollicking crime adventure or whodunnit.

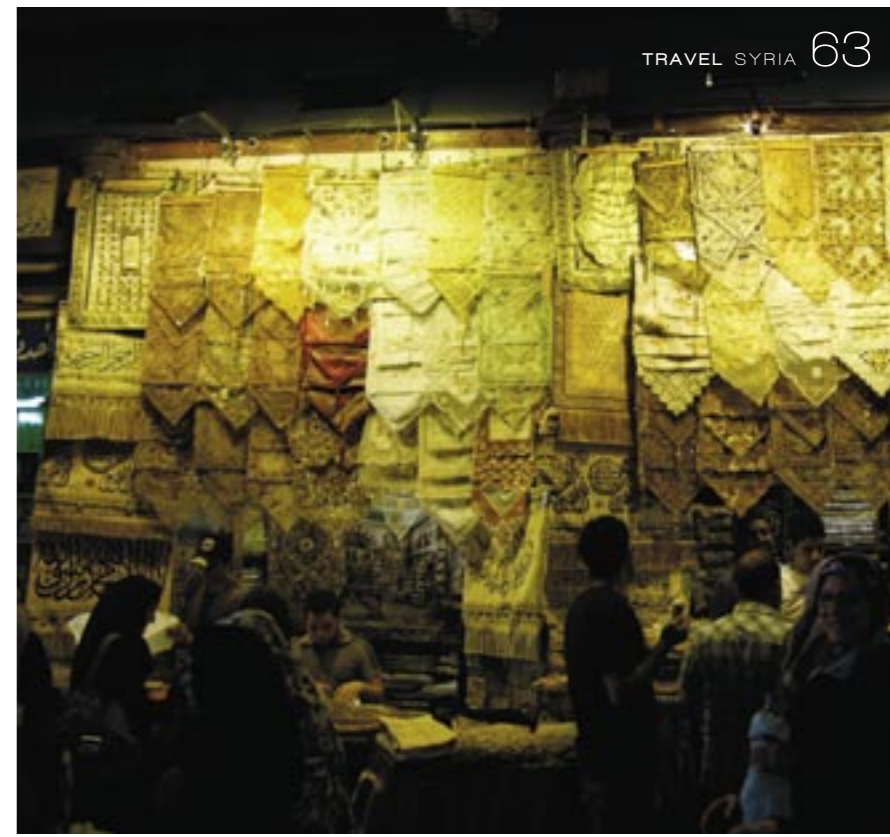
It is deep in the heart of Souq Bab Antakya, where the city's mystery and intrigue really springs to life. Blades fit for moustachioed villains, curved and stealthy, are bartered and sold, tradesmen haggle over criminally low-prices and any number of thieves or men in brown suits could disappear into its lantern-lit lanes.

"It's hand crafted silver, my friend," says the toothless Mohammed, spotting my curiosity. He is a 20-year-old jewellery designer, who has somehow attached himself to my arm like a diamond bracelet chain. He points to the interior and I can see crowns befitting royalty, silver Persian rings and ruby brooches dazzling against the midday sun. As I continue, he points to an overhanging lattice window box. "This is Khan al-Jumruk, which used to be home to the Belgian, French and English consulates," he says. It has now been turned into a massive textile warehouse. "Want to buy a carpet?" bellows a coffee-stained seller, suddenly appearing like a genie from a brass lamp. I get the impression he's telling me rather than asking. Mohammed is all smiling gums: he tells me these are the most sought after carpets in all of Syria.

I continue through the souq's dog-legged archways, imagining detective Hercule Poirot, a hefty porter trotting behind him with suitcases full of monocles and pots of moustache wax, browsing for only the finest Aleppo olive soaps. "It cleans all the leetle grey cells," he would mutter under his breath. Nearby, the Khan al-Nahaseen, once housing the Venetian consul, is still enmeshed in the fabric of the surrounding marketplace. Inside hides a fine oak-wood library, where apparently Agatha Christie once waltzed with drunk dignitaries.

Further on down Souq al-Attarine, I meet the sweating Monzer, proprietor of Sabouni Soap Company, who promises to make my skin literally squeak. His boutique is overflowing with luxury perfume soaps, anointed by the reigning monarchs of the ages – and all of it handmade in the city. Purportedly used by Queen Zanolbia and Cleopatra it must be good stuff. "This is special soap that only gets made in Aleppo," he tells me. "Nowhere else in Syria can this be produced. Some people say that the older the soap gets the better it is, just like a wine. But I don't agree, this soap is two years but is still the best you can get." It looks like a squarely cut brick yet is emerald green at its core.

Opening a pink floral box he encourages me to smell. "This one is for the ladies," he says, raising an eyebrow. "It's scented with rose petals and jasmine." The perfect recipe, I am told, depends on the correct mixture of olive and bay laurel. When smelt, it can have a lethal effect on the local men's behaviour. "They go crazy," he whispers.



ORIGINALLY A STAGING POST FOR TRAVELLERS, THE ORIENT EXPRESS USED TO DEPART FROM BEHIND THE STATION'S DIAMOND CHANDELIERS

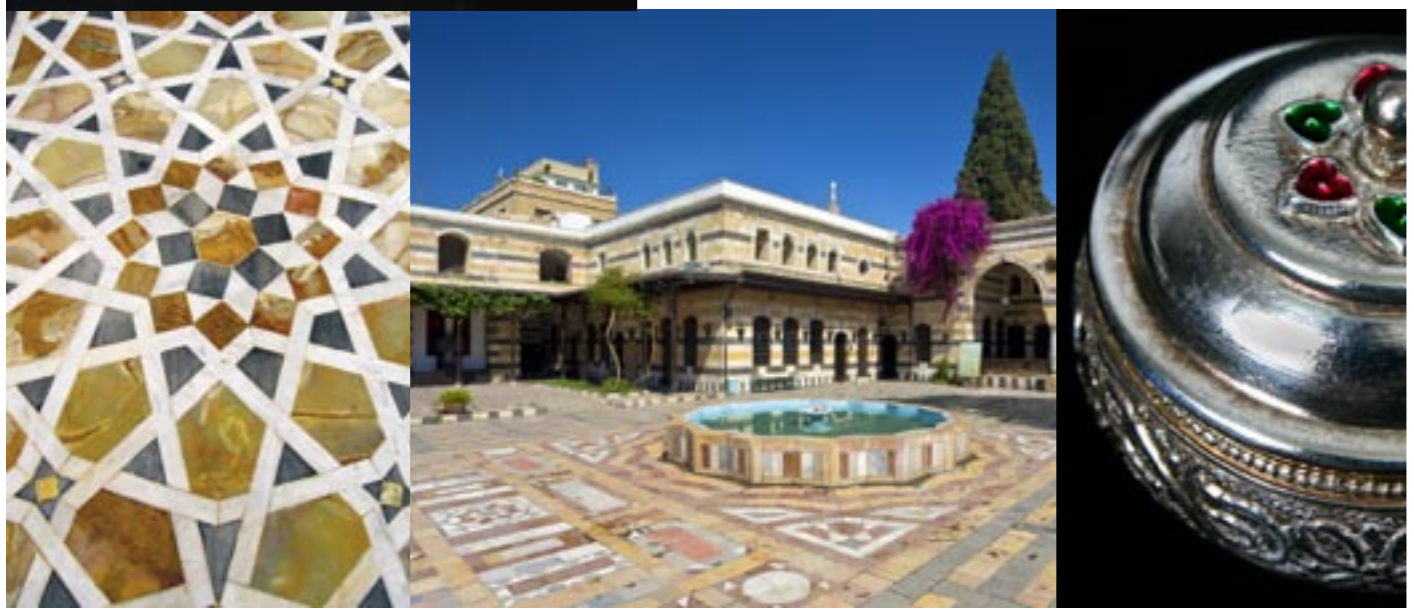
Fleetingly, I then rub shoulders with Amar, a French teacher at a nearby school who offers himself as a guide and silversmith. "I can get you some premium scotch whisky, if you like," he winks. This is the pace at which Aleppo walks. Everyone is in business.

As Mohammed and Monzer and Amar disappear into the darkness, I know that I am totally and completely lost. It may well be the start of an Agatha Christie novel. I seem to recall it from *They Came to*

Baghdad. But in my defense there are 23 kilometres of shops and stands surrounding me, and I'm sure even the great Poirot would have taken a wrong turn.

Finally escaping this shopper's paradise of overflowing carts and iconic water carriers, I stumble upon Aleppo's national museum in the new city. Though it is in slight disrepair, it too was a favourite haunt for the author. She used to while away the days writing in its cool courtyards while her husband Max Mollownan was northeast of the city excavating ruins and temples.

Relaxing back at the Sheraton Aleppo, the Bashir Al-Assad approved centre of the city's five star tourism scene, I settle myself at its rooftop summer courtyard for one of the city's best-kept secrets. Though Ikebana, the city's trend-setting Asian sushi bar downstairs, is decorated with sashimi screens and bubbling fountains – I wonder what Miss Marple would make of a wasabi-doused nigiri sushi or gunka maki? – I instead opt for the city's finest Arabic mezze of fresh baba ganoush, muhammara (a hot pepper dip made from dried peppers, ground walnuts, breadcrumbs and pomegranate syrup) and the most luxuriant kiskash kebab I have ever tasted.



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The next morning, Aleppo's train station greets me with a stony face. A historical legacy from the French's mandate in Syria, it is characteristically set apart from the surrounding melee of porters with caskets and train masters with impatient whistles. At its entrance, a military guard approaches me. His rifle is cocked, teeth crooked and he is grinning like a weasel who ate too much sugar. "Time pleeze," he stutters. It is appropriate; after all, although it's 11am, it feels like a hazy afternoon in the 1930s, and is evocative of a time when travel itself was an adventure.

Of course, there is no smoke billowing from a steam engine, like the *4.50 from Paddington*, or a Shakespearean cast of torn lovers, doctors and thespians – but there easily could have been. Originally a staging post for travellers, the Orient Express used to depart from behind the station's unmissable chandeliers, which dangle like excessive diamond disco-balls. But from underneath the station's clock, the romance of nostalgia – or is that the extra strong Arabic coffee? – begins to seep into my well-travelled socks. I may not be heading to Istanbul or Venice for that matter, but my story will continue in Damascus.

WRITTEN ABOUT
CENTURY AFTER
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EMPORIUM

I see drum stands, Pink Panther toys, Syrian honey and thrones fit for Russian tsars; jars of sea-salt crusted pistachios; grandfather clocks and Kurdish urns; Persian jugs and Egyptian vases. Black veiled women waddle like monochrome penguins, a mass of worshippers congregate and zig-zagging children drip ice cream. It truly is an urban Euphrates, the life and soul of Syria; I am overwhelmed and tired and only wish I had a million Syrian Pounds in my pocket. After all this walking, I dream up an appetising death: I am starving and I could murder a cherry kebab.

This evening I shall then sip Lebanese Almaza beer on the terrace at the Sheraton Damascus, and toast to Syria, my new partner in crime; and tonight I shall sit at my desk typing out my adventure, before sinking into my king size velvet-draped bed, dreaming of Agatha Christie. ✿

Once again I am lost. But this time I am in a different city. The afternoon sun sheds its light on me – unfortunately not like a halo – through golden sheets of corrugated iron and cracked hardwood rafters, to illuminate my predicament in central Damascus. "Are you lost?" squeaks a voice. It is a common question to be asked. The answer is of course no. Me? A travel writer lost? Preposterous. My body is a compass. "I'm just browsing," I say, hiding the tourist map in my back pocket.

Damascus's souq is of aircraft hanger proportions. It has been written about century after century, described as a Parisian gallery and as a Venetian emporium. Writers speak of light cutting through the Damascus souq, illuminating vendors who then disappear into the darkness. But for me it is something entirely different. It is a parade, a non-stop festival of life that should be seized and absorbed; a circus carnival that everyone is invited to. It is more enticing than London's Harrods; more romantic than Paris's Galeries Lafayette. Apparently, it cost seven years of taxes from the whole of Syria to build.

Today, however, it is worth every penny. The walls are covered in wrinkles, the bricks have sagged edges, and like a giant aviary, discarded red ribbons flutter down from the roof like butterflies. Mechanical birds spin in circles, bubble blowers huff and puff, and there is an incongruous mixture of goods on display: pistols and perfumes; gramophones and golden locket; oranges and olive soaps; sheesha pipes and saffron carpets. Somehow, vines stretch across the passageways like elastic bands holding it all together.