

Desperately seeking Syria

By Valerie Edmondson

Three-inch spiked, silver heels flash below the hem of a Muslim woman's black cloak. The simple drape moves like water as she walks. Her hands are gloved. Her face is veiled. But the silver, bangled chain on her boot betrays the severity of this tall, slender woman. She strolls behind a young woman with jeans as tight as skin and long, luscious hair streaked blond. This is Syria — land of a thousand contrasts and contradictions mingling in harmony.

Many of my friends and family were appalled that I would take a job teaching the children of a country labeled an “enemy” by the American government. A few implied I was being a traitor. But the tectonic reverberations of the New York towers' collapse had cracked the porcelain veneer of my American complacency. I became increasingly restless. I was fed up with the media's spin on the Middle East: war and politics without a human face. I read books on the Middle East but I wanted to witness it myself and maybe help bring others closer to an understanding of Syrians as humans, not terrorists.

I've been in Syria since August 2005, teaching English, math and science to privileged Syrian third-graders. The Arab culture seduces me with its gentility, with its ancient, exotic everydayness, with its poetic language. My rooftop apartment is in Aleppo, Syria's northern-most city. It overlooks a stone and concrete city undulating to the horizon. Aleppo and Damascus are the world's oldest continuously occupied cities. Each has a population of about six million: Muslims, Christians and even Jews.

Despite the ravages of 10,000 years of history, or maybe because of them, Syrians are open-minded and compassionate. The country is a sanctuary for Palestinian and Lebanese refugees and, most recently, for one million Iraqis fleeing a shattered homeland. At the beginning of the 20th century, Aleppo adopted Armenians fleeing Turkish persecution and gave them property on which to rebuild their community. Armenians thrive here today.

In the center of the city, the green-domed St. George Church across the street from the twin minarets of the Tawhid Mosque is symbolic of peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians of many sects: Orthodox, Aramaic and Catholic. People are adamant that the teachings of their different religions espouse peaceful co-existence with all. It is something Syrians most value in their diverse society.

Take Friday mornings, for example. They are delightfully noiseless in my neighborhood until a drone at midday begins the call to prayer. An intriguing cacophony slowly rises from the many mosques. But across town near the historic central district, restaurants and shops owned by Christians have been open for a few hours doing brisk business.

I meet with friends for cappuccino and a traditional breakfast of *foule* (fava bean soup). A new, red Jaguar roars by and barely misses a donkey-drawn wagon overloaded with pomegranates and bright orange clementines. I am the only one at the sidewalk table who shudders at the near catastrophe. Traffic safety is not a priority among drivers and pedestrians alike.

If you should happen to meet one of these same drivers in a cafe, however, he will linger all afternoon in polite conversation, sipping tea and puffing on the *argheella* — the Arabic water pipe. Unless your companion is a Kurdish Syrian, he will hate President Bush but he will love the American people and name Bill Clinton as the best American politician. He will express anxiety that American leaders will precipitate an Iraqlike tragedy in Syria. He will condemn Zionists and profess alliance with the Lebanese. He will be nationalistic but he will wish for a more representative, less corrupt government. And he certainly will not reveal the latter in public — unless he is someone like a man I met by chance at a cafe in Damascus.

Whirling dervishes perform at a celebration of Aleppo, a center for Islamic culture. At the far left, the Valley of the Tombs features funerary towers built in the first century A.D. to house the dead from the Roman city of Palmyra in central Syria.



VALERIE EDMONSON PHOTOS

This stranger called himself a Communist. He openly answered my questions about his political beliefs. He told me he had just gotten out of prison, where he had been beaten on a regular basis. He still organizes anti-government rallies despite the consequences because he loves his country, he said.

My traveling companion on the other side of the small, round table shot nervous glances at me as the conversation deepened. She leaned over and whispered that we should lose this guy quickly. But I invited him to walk with us while he told me more of his story. His family and acquaintances shun him because they fear for their own well-being. Finally we, too, felt edgy enough to bid the young man goodbye.

On the other hand, many Aleppians insist the days of being snatched out of their homes for saying the wrong thing are over. They say President Bashir al-Assad, who has been in power since his father's death in 2000, is the most liberal leader they have had in decades and they hope for a gradual change in government. Still, remnants of paranoia haunt a lot of people.

Locals tell me I might be under surveillance because I am an American. If I am being watched, I haven't noticed. I feel safe walking anywhere in the city, day or night. I am thrilled to be stopped on the street by strangers who want to know if I will teach them English.



Author Valerie Edmondson's friend, Erin Whitney-Witmer (PhDChem'06), is charmed by a vendor in Palmyra selling *rebab*ahs. Erin purchased one of the folk instruments, which has a chamber of stretched goat skin.

Syrians are eager to be part of the global community. There's a profusion of satellite dishes on Aleppo's rooftops. It seems everyone has a cell phone. Internet cafes are everywhere. For about 10 cents, you can surf the web for an hour. These places are packed with men and even women until 2 a.m. Unencumbered with patent obligations, music of every genre is cheap and readily available in the many DVD and CD shops.

But the real power of communication here is word-of-mouth. It is rare to see people reading newspapers or magazines in public, but conversation is a lively art. There are few movie theaters, few bars and even fewer music venues. Instead, Syrians visit. When one enters a Syrian home, one is embraced by the entire family.

For instance, a friend and I traveled south from Aleppo to the ancient Silk Road city of Palmyra. One night we wandered away from the ruins into a residential area and bought a *shwarma* (bread-wrapped seared meat with yogurt sauce, mint, tomatoes and parsley) for dinner at a curbside grill. After a short while, a man came by with two young boys. After hesitating they decided to try to speak to us in English.

Five minutes later we were on our way to their home, a four-room apartment in a concrete building. We were welcomed joyously by nine children — ages 1 to 19 — and their mother as if we were long-lost relatives. The family room had a single coal stove in its center. Persian carpets covered the floor. Around the edges of the room were mattresses and pillows covered with colorful cloth.

As we arranged ourselves on the floor, trays of sweets and fruit and glasses of tea were set before us. The family was eager to practice speaking English, so

A statue of Hafiz al-Assad, the father of Syria's current President Bashar, overlooks the Christian Church of St. George and the Tawhid Mosque. These two magnificent religious centers face one another near the historic center of Aleppo.



Children pose for Valerie Edmondson as she passes through a small village near the Turkish border.

we carried on a lively, sometimes silly conversation with several people at once. It was a warm experience with lots of smiles and straightforward, intimate questions. Though the family was not well-off, their exuberance for life made them rich indeed.

Several hours later we declined an invitation to spend the night. "Why do you have to leave?" we were asked several times before a taxi was finally called. The father paid our fare and we were whisked back to our hotel.

Syria is becoming more than just another adventure in my life's journey. I wonder if this place has become another home in my heart. 🐘

Valerie Edmondson (MJour'03) teaches Syrian third-graders at the National School of Aleppo. In her free time, the former Boulder resident studies Arabic and chats with sidewalk book vendors in Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut.

