



# Vignette I.

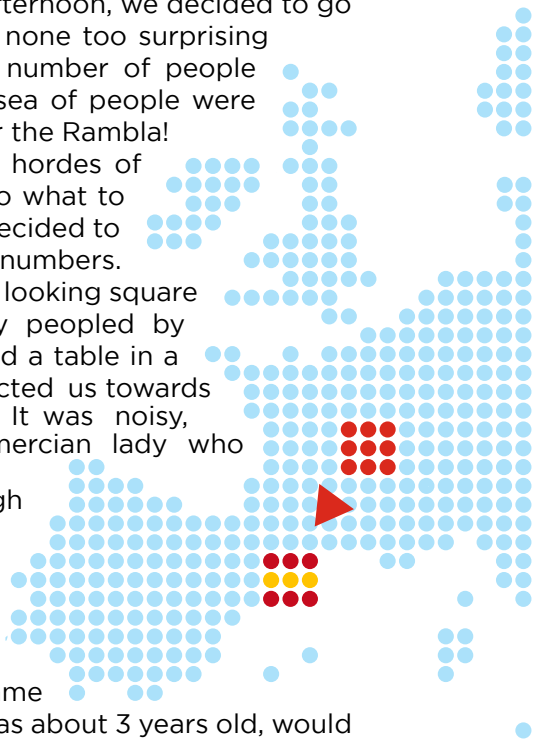
# The Barcelona

Rambla, Guëll Gardens/Park, Montjuïc, Restaurants  
May 2024



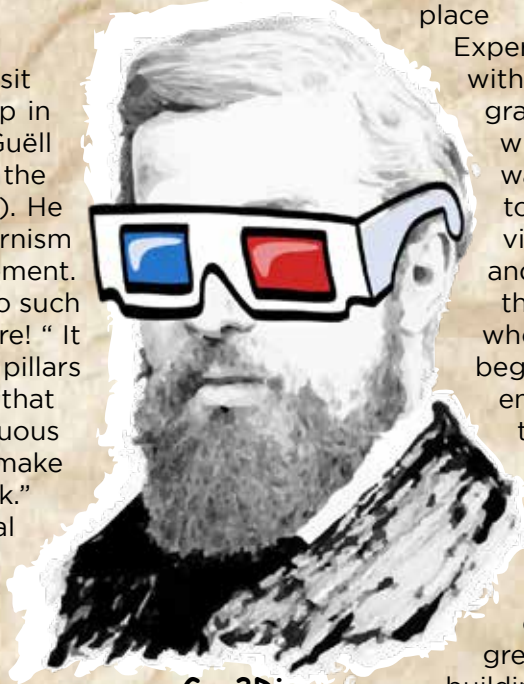
The flight from Geneva to Barcelona was uneventful and lasted about one hour and 10 or so minutes. The weather in Barcelona was better than that in Geneva when we left, which was heartening to say the least given the ghastly weather enjoyed since a few weeks in May.

A friend was accompanying me and he had never been to Spain before. For me it was my fourth visit to Barcelona in about 70 years! Luckily the first four days were pretty clear and pleasant i.e. without rain. In the late afternoon, we decided to go to the famed Rambla and the Plaza de Catalunya. A none too surprising “surprise” awaited us and that was the astounding number of people visiting the Rambla at that time. Literally, a moving sea of people were engaged in the Plaza de Catalunya, and all gunning for the Rambla! We took it in its stride, trying not to bump into the hordes of tourists that we resented, but we were tourists too, so what to say? Or think? It soon became overwhelming, so we decided to take a left on a perpendicular to hopefully loose some numbers. Soon we found ourselves in a rather nice and romantic looking square where there were a number of restaurants, mostly peopled by tourists! Chance was with us, and we were able to find a table in a nice looking place where a smiling young lady directed us towards a table inside as all the “terrace” tables were taken. It was noisy, rowdy and quite happy. The exception was an Amercian lady who was sitting near us at the bar, screaming into her smarthphone to overcome the high decibels in our sound environment. She spent at least an hour recounting her local experiences to someone thousands of miles away who must have been fascinated by the cacophony engulfing her friend’s environment. The place was called “Mono” which in Spanish means monkey. Not sure where the name came from, maybe the owner when he was young (When I was about 3 years old, would be called “Monkey” because i climbed all over the place!) We had a pleasantly tasting dinner which took a while to organise, and after about two hours departed and walked some more, finding that the numbers of tourists hadn’t really diminished by much. However, it was a nice introduction to Barcelona! In full swing and with all the energy that was in the air! We finally decided to take the metro to go back to our neighbourhood and to our stop which was called Gracia.



Can well understand that the locals are more than fed up with the hordes of tourists. But what to do? In some places they are starting to levy extra taxes to try to reduce the tourist flow which seems to span most of the year and not only “the holiday season”.

The next day we intended to visit the gardens that are higher up in Barcelona, called the Guëll Gardens/Park, created by the ubiquitous Gaudi (1852 - 1926). He was the very symbol of Modernism and he dominated the movement. According to him, there was no such thing as a straight line in nature! “ It was he who created leaning pillars like old tree trunks, grounds that undulate, tiled ceilings, sinuous benches and chimneys that make you believe you are drunk.” (From “Barcelone” National Geographic - p.46 - translated from the French). His most famous works in Barcelona are the Casa Milà (La Pedrera), the Casa Batlo, Guëll Park, the Sagrada Familia (Barcelona’s most famous symbol - equivalent to the Eiffel Tower in Paris) and the Palau Guëll among others. A great friendship linked Guëll and Gaudi, who was Gaudi’s patron for many of the creations that Gaudi built. Unfortunately, Guëll passed away in 1918 which much saddened Gaudi.



**Gau3Di**

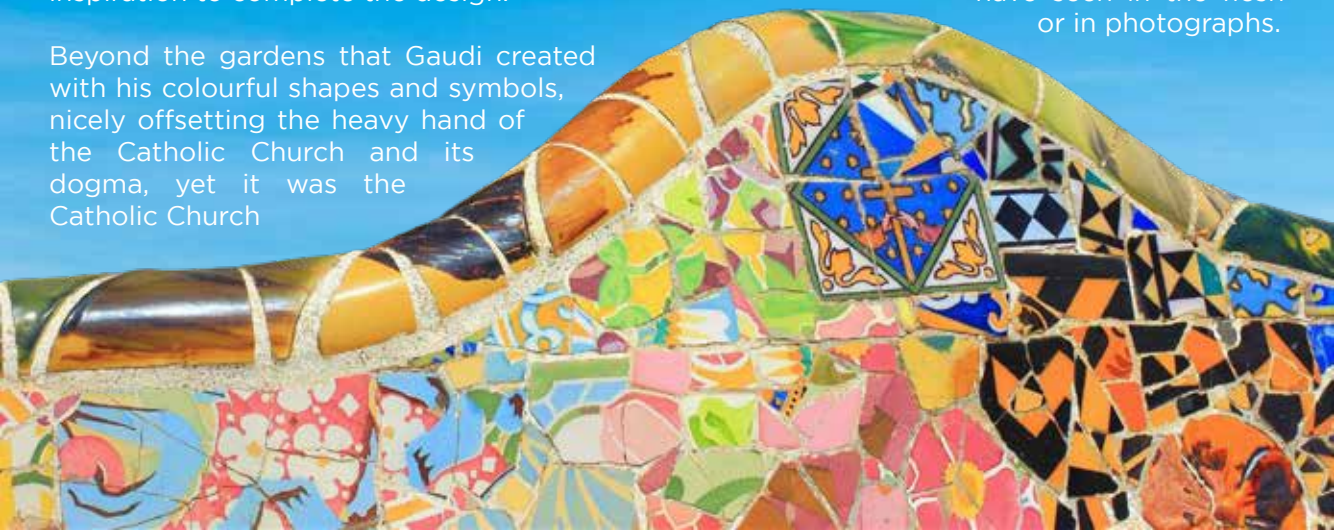
Our endeavours to visit the Guëll Park were thwarted, as when we arrived in the area, there were masses of visitors and even more so in the park itself that seemed to be a sea of people. We thus gave up, and were thrilled to have encountered on the way up a place called “Gaudi Experiència” symbolised with a tiled creature that graces the Guëll Park and which looks like a sort of water lizard. We decided to enjoy an alternative view of Gaudi’s creations and luckily, the 3D film that was the crux of the whole setup was about to begin soon after we entered. To add realism to the effects, the seats were also moving and shaking! After a short generic introduction, the scene showed Barcelona in the 1880’s or so, and moving at great speed between the buildings which was quite an experience! This session afforded a close view of various buildings, notably the Sagrada Familia, and close ups that would have been impossible in the flesh, given the physical distances within the church and heights that were shown. It was also interesting to see how the skyline of Barcelona changed over time. All in all a very worthwhile experience devoid of crowds, as there were few people enjoying said 3D film.

This Gaudi experience must have lasted about 20 minutes and it was very fascinating indeed, and we “saw” how his constructions looked in the Barcelona of that time as the city grew and its intellectual and cultural development raced forward, despite some very negative comments of Gaudi’s contemporaries who were either jealous or were not up to his amazing level of creativity. It should be noted that the Sagrada Familia is now practically finished after more than a century! It was consecrated in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI. It is meant to be finished in 2026, on the centenary of Gaudi’s death. It was initiated in 1880, and in 1882 Gaudi took the direction of the project. The construction only moved forwards with donations which was the rule established by Gaudi. At times such donations were lacking thus slowing down the whole process. During the Spanish Civil War, the original wooden scale model and drawings were burnt, but thanks to his existing buildings, it was possible to get the inspiration to complete the design.

Beyond the gardens that Gaudi created with his colourful shapes and symbols, nicely offsetting the heavy hand of the Catholic Church and its dogma, yet it was the Catholic Church

which authorised Gaudi to build his famed cathedral to reinvigorate the waning faith of rapidly industrialising Barcelona.

The Church wanted to attract more churchgoers. This contrast is particularly visible when visiting the Palau Guëll which almost seems Gothic in its heavy yet sensual and beautiful shapes made for the family of the same name (Gaudi’s main benefactor who supported very much of his work, notably the Guëll Park - which ended somewhat sadly because funds were lacking in the end). One is tempted to look at the heaviness in the construction and rightly or wrongly assume it represents the weight of the Church, contrasted by the childlike exuberance and colourful naive constructions on the rooftop to show a spirit of freedom and naughtily innocent creativity which is so enticing and joyful. I suspect that is what draws so many thousands of visitors to this amazing Palau. So far, I have not been disappointed by the various edifices of his I have seen in the flesh or in photographs.



Besides visiting a favourite spot for tapas not far from the Plaza de Catalunya, going by the pleasant name of “La Bodegueta”, we had to go to one of the hallowed places (supposedly!) to taste the Balearic speciality of “Horchata de Chufa” which is made from fresh tubers of the nutsedge plant. It is a very popular and refreshing drink that is mainly consumed in the hot summer months. The place we were advised to visit for this hallowed drink is called “Tio Che” and sits on the Rambla Pobleu which is rather pleasant, and located on the “Yellow Line” which on the metro map is not far from the seafront.

The address of “Tio Che” was given us by the taxi driver who drove us from the airport to our hotel. Another person advised us to go to another place that was supposed to be the very best in Barcelona, but had lost the address! “Tio Che” was certainly popular and a constant stream of aficionados and or curious first timers seemed to stop and get the fabled drink. Others (a minority), would get ice cream cones that apparently is also made on the spot by the same people or family.





## Vignette II.

# The “Gràcia”



In our neighbourhood named “Gracia” (in reality the name of the metro stop) but suspect that this area is referred to as “Gracia” - there are a number of good restaurants and some very nice places to go for drinks and meet friends. One of the chaps at the reception of our hotel was very generous with his information, and helping us avoid the massive crowds that were prevalent in the downtown and central areas of Barcelona... The second night we meandered our way through a few streets, not far from our hotel, and found our way to a super bar where they also served very pleasant food. Our luck allowed us to find a high bar table in the shape of a barrel with a flat top, and with two high stools right in front of the bar (unfortunately, forgot to write down the name) which was really pleasant. Lots of people passed by and the mood was happy and carefree! As it should be on a lovely summer evening when people are socialising and enjoying their free time!

The next day we decided to avoid the large crowds and chose to go to a place overlooking Barcelona where a large fort was built. The name means “Jewish Mountain” in medieval Latin and Catalan.

According to Wikipedia, it was the birthplace of Barcelona and an important strategic location as it overlooks today's modern harbour. The castle was built in the 17th century, A Jewish cemetery is located on the hill dating back to the Middle Ages. It was also a place of imprisonment and executions, especially during the Spanish Civil War.

It took us some time to realise that we needed to take the metro to reach the cable car which would bring us to the chair lift to finally make it up the hill! We were relatively early which meant that the crowds were rather manageable. At the top we could see the castle or fort, rather massive with a large canon prominently placed over today's harbour, as assume that even in the 18th century or before that was where the harbour was located, but certainly not as large as today's modern harbour which seems to be very active. We chose not to enter the Castel Montjuic for fear of bumping into too many fellow tourists! This hill was also chosen for the 1929 International Exhibition.



On the way back down, we decided to try the place which we had spotted while going up. We feared launching ourselves into a tourist trap. It turned out to be a very good choice! We had no idea that it was a “very good restaurant”! There were some people lining up - as it had not yet opened, but soon enough we were allowed to enter and find a very nice table on their terrace with a gorgeous view over Barcelona. The menu didn't disappoint!

Barcelona is a vast city, with a variety of very interesting attractions, sites, museums, a world famous aquarium located in the harbour. In 4 -5 days you can only do so much. It was my first visit in 20 years, when tourism was on the upswing, but certainly not so massive as in the late spring of 2024! In 2004 if memory serves, after visiting Barcelona (my first trip to Catalonia and Barcelona was in 1954 or 1955! An other epoch!) I took the AVE (Spanish High Velocity: Alta Velocidad Espanola) to Sevilla which cut the trip by half or so compared to the normal train ride. Sevilla is another wonder city!





## Vignette III.



and football

# The Seville



The AVE is in fact the Spanish version of the French TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse: High Speed Train). This was my very first and so far only visit to this mythical city situated in Andalusia, i.e. in the Southernmost part of Spain.

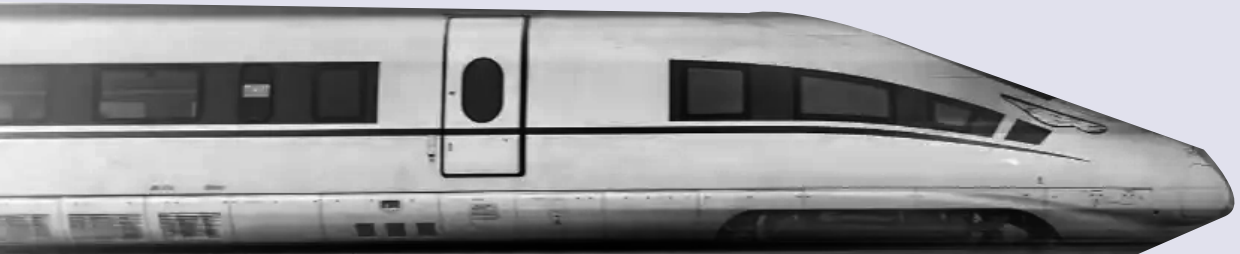
Sevilla sits on the Guadalquivir river, and is the capital city of Andalusia. It is graced by a number of important buildings and monuments, such as the Cathedral of St. Mary of the See, the Plaza de Espana where a large exhibition was held in 1929 and the Giralda Tower which has a connection to the Koutubia in Marrakech (at the time of Carlos V, the Spaniards expelled the "Moors").

I took the AVE from Madrid to meet a friend in Seville, as we had planned to spend about a week or so to enjoy the city and its surroundings. Details have faded from memory, unfortunately. However, there are a few important 'instants' that remain firmly anchored in my thoughts.

We were staying in a nice, clean hotel away from the buzz of all the tourists and central attractions.

It was a lovely neighbourhood, where Sevillanos were living and doing their things, in their rapid, energetic, colourful way. I remember going to a café to have my morning espresso and a sort of danish to accompany it. Of course, it wasn't Danish! Only remember that it was slightly sweet and rather tasty - much more than I expected. Having been there a couple of times, the young and pleasant server remembered what I had the previous day, so he brought my drink and bun. And so it continued for a good part of my stay, and didn't need to say anything, except a friendly "Buenos Dias" that my items would appear very quickly in front of me on the table or at the bar. It was the same routine for many of the locals if not most.

They came in very briefly for their morning ritual, often without a bun, just the coffee, down it and lay coins on the table and departed. Very efficient, yet there was a connivance and understated friendliness in the actions that were repeated daily. The young waiter and older fellows behind the bar, of whom there were two, worked extremely fast and efficiently. I liked the place, as it felt familiar, without having to divulge much of oneself, and the friendly smiles and recognition of each other was reassuring, comforting and very pleasant, I found.



When my friend joined me, the routine changed somewhat, other new places were discovered, and other activities organised. But when I was still alone, I would go through very small streets and find my way towards the centre and the more touristy area of Seville, and get close to the Guadalquivir where lots of sailing boats were parked. It was going through the little streets and finding my way (was sort of proud of myself..!) as the route was intricate, and so pleasurable and not encountering other tourists like myself. One day I came across a Calle Adrian, which instantly increased my affection for Seville, of course!!!

There were immediate thoughts that I had to get myself a place on that street for future summer holidays! Had had that same thought when I was in Valencia, eons before that during the Fallas in 1978, as I immediately fell in love with the atmosphere and the Spanish way of life. (There have been disastrous floods in Valencia in early November 2024. Not sure of the destruction caused, but it is supposed to be quite massive.)



One memorable day, my friend Grégoire and myself, wandered in an area of Seville named Betis, which is also the name of a local football club . Meandering in the area, we needed some sustenance and drink, so we entered a local bar where there were lots of young men. A middle aged barman presided over his domain. We proceed to organise our “tinto de verano” with some light bites as we were told there would be an important football match on the telly a bit later on. Lively conversations were heard and it soon became clear that the majority if not all of the young guys in the pub would root for the Sevilla FC, and the barman for the Real Betis. Feeling sorry for the barman, who was the only one rooting for the Real Betis, I decided to support his club! I must add that I know nothing of football, have never been in a stadium where an important football match was played, but I do know or remember a few names of major and important players such as Pelé, Zinedine Zidane, Maradona, Granit Xhaka, etc.

The clock was ticking, hence the time for the match to begin approached, everybody became a bit quieter and braced himself for the match. As things started, some of the young lads started screaming and getting very excited due to exciting moments where the ball almost made it to the goal! I was leaning on the bar, with my ideological companion and getting sort of interested in the match. Somehow, slowly but surely, I became enmeshed in the atmosphere and started screaming like I had rarely done in my life! Was getting totally obsessed in my support for the Real Betis club, which was supposedly the underdog in that match or in those years...The match went on for the required time, with corners, and other such technical subtleties, and by the end of it, the Seville FC (if my memory serves well - regarding the name of the team) won. Everybody was elated, as the energy expended in screaming, shouting and getting excited was such, that the whole group, myself included and my friend, felt so good and relaxed after all aggression had been safely pushed out, and it was a wonderful feeling, I had never experienced in my life before. It was then that I could finally understand the energy and excitement that swirls around such events, and their healthy outcomes, as long as there are no aggressive battles ensuing from such emotions being poured out. I can only regret that never did such an occasion turn up in my unfootballish life!

There were other memorable moments, clearly. Visiting the surrounding area of Seville, the villages and towns and countryside were a delight. It is now twenty years ago that this trip happened, and I still have very strong and positive emotions linked to it. I do hope to visit Seville again, but in a way fear the hordes of tourists and the consequent transformations.





## Vignette IV.

# Tirana

October 2024



# Day 1

Arrival at 3. 20 PM at Rinas (Tirana's International Airport named after Mother Theresa) after an uneventful flight. The weather was most pleasant, especially after the cold, grey and rainy atmosphere one left behind in Geneva.

We took an "electric taxi" to go to a place sitting atop a hill overlooking Tirana, Lezhe and a few other places. (Lezhe is especially important in Albanian history, as it was the place where Skanderbeg came from, and he is a national hero to this day, even though the events he caused, happened more than four hundred years ago). The view was expansive spanning 180 degrees. The air was cool, with a slight wind and we found a table at the place where the taxi dropped us off at the restaurant "Kalaja e Prezes". We had a view overlooking the vast panorama. We ate local specialties that remind one of some of the food items one finds in the Middle East, with some local adaptations (The Ottomans brought their culinary specialties over to Albania given they occupied the place for over four centuries). There were cheeses similar to the ones one finds in the countries making up the former Ottoman Empire. Lovely bell peppers with a creamy vegetable filling. Corn bread bathing in yogurt with some olive oil, lamb meat balls, salads, fried kashkaval, quite similar to the Syrian variety, and a local feta cheese that was very tasty. Salad, olives and more greeted our plates.

As time passed, we went inside as the cooling winds had become cold! My friends were deciding what to drink, teas or some more manly drinks! I opted for a "Boronisë" tea which in English is translated as 'Rosehip' and my friends went for a plum alcohol to revive their cool innards! I put my lips to the glass when offered the to taste the plum alcohol, and even though I barely humidified my lips, the taste was full and reminiscent of the Yugoslav "Slivovica".



A further trip in an electric taxi, manned by a friendly young chap, whose name is Raimondo, a law student who needs to pay his studies. He spoke very good English, and he confided that he spent 6 months in the Bronx, if memory serves. He thought it was a place to make money, but not a good place to live! He dropped us off in the “Bloku” neighbourhood, near “Joni” restaurant, owned by a friend of Asllan’s - my friend who helped me set foot in Shqipëria (in 2021), that is Albania. (I spent time there from 2021 to 2023 in Tirana). “Joni” means Ionian (as in sea) and its name indicates it specialises in sea food. A new feature on the menu since I was there last time, is a selection of Japanese sea food, raw and cooked. I should add, that the fish selection and quality in Albania is amazing! We opted for light things such as local bread, a sort of focaccia, with a wonderful rendition of cottage cheese, very smooth (not at all like the Anglo-Saxon version) with a pinch of herbs and slightly spicy. Totally addictive with the local bread! Olives, yogurt with garlic were also available, items that in Arabic countries are called “Mukabilat” (starters!) and the Spaniards name them “Tapas”. Then, some octopus and calamari. All excellent. Our Spanish friend who accompanied us, also a fine wine connoisseur, wanted to savour Albanian wine.



We had a rather decent bottle atop the hill, at the Kalaja E Prezes, but “Joni” was the place where thanks to Asllan, I was introduced to Besnik (a famous Kosovar architect, city planner) who mainly works in Albania and now collaborates with Spanish architectural companies, and he loves working with them) and Besnik introduced both Asllan and myself (in 2021) to a wonderful Albanian wine that goes by the name “Nurellari Superiore Riserva” (a combination of Merlot - Cabernet Sauvignon). Thus, we decided to have that same wine, given its flavour and range, and hoped to impress our Spanish companion! The wine was duly delivered to our table, and our Iberian friend was mightily impressed! To augment the oxidation of the wine and liberate its full flavour, it was poured into a carafe to titillate our taste buds!

Fortunately for us, the chap serving us at the table knew Besnik, and told us that he was with friends (Besnik goes there very often, as he designed part of the restaurant and has a number of his recent paintings gracing the walls in the restaurant) having dinner. Asllan went over to their table to greet him, only stating that he was with friends. Later, Besnik dropped by our table and it was great to see him again, as he profusely greeted us, we embraced as we hadn’t met for over a year.

While spending time in Tirana, I met Besnik a few times, and we became quite friendly. Besides being an architect and city planner, he is also an interior architect, has created a number of impressive hotels in Albania, restoring ancient buildings and making them into lovely boutique hotels, and he opened a large and impressive modern hotel in Tiranë in 2022, if not mistaken. In a previous vignette I recounted how even before we ever met, we were linked as in a trip to Prishtina in 1967 (then Yugoslavia) I had met a super chap who, unfortunately passed away a few years ago (I was told in 2021), the uncle of Besnik's best friend in Kosovo. His name was Genci Nimani. In 1967, Genci very kindly introduced me to Prishtina's night life in those days! In the previously cited vignette, I recount how I was entertained and utterly enjoyed the spontaneity of his friends and how they suddenly in the evening all started dancing on the assembled tables with traditional Albanian music (I was living in Switzerland in those days, so it was a marvelously unconventional event for me to witness!!).

Before leaving us, Besnik (now it is October 2024!) pointed to his latest works which sort of reminded me on Nicki de St Phalle's work: rich in voluptuous shapes and forms, and colours. Unfortunately didn't have much chance to discuss his work with him, as he had to leave rapidly. He did invite me to his "Vernissage" a few days later, at an avant-garde gallery in Tirana, but I was returning to Geneva the next day, hence missed the Opening. At around 11 PM we were picked up by Asllan's brother Naim, who drove us home.

**Besnik Grainca**



# Day 2

Fairly early morning affairs relating to bank matters that needed clearing and closing, were attended to. After the serious matters, we walked to a famous restaurant in the middle of a park, named Taiwan - a large complex with various restaurants with different menus. A lovely cappuccino and orange juice, accompanied our chats. My friends plus a new arrival had to bring José, our Spanish companion to a dental specialist for advanced and specialised work, hence a specialist!

## ***Reflections on Tirana after 14 months of absence.***

Walking from Rruga Nikola Filjia 23, to the OTP bank (to deal with bureaucratic matters) and passing by my old haunts, be they cafés, shops and restaurants - I found that many things remained the same, and others have changed: new juice bars, cafés that have been done up, etc. The pace of change is quite rapid, and the increasing numbers of tourists causing bottlenecks at Tirana airport (Rinas, or Mother Theresa International Airport) despite clever adaptations, enlargements, are evident. Just before the C19 epidemic, Albania was the fastest growing tourist destination in Europe (landscape, beaches, mountains, history, art and very reasonable prices, although massification is causing inflation detrimental to the local population - a very simplified economic overview, but the gist is accurate, I believe). What saddens me is that the wonderful Skanderbeg Square has become completely enclosed as the latest hotel construction encircles this amazing square where a lovely 17th century mosque cohabits with a massive communist era building housing a theatre built by the Soviet Union if I am not mistaken.





## Vignette V.

April 2005

# Damascus



# A. Prelude to Damascus, Marrakech!


When I was teaching in my native country, I had a rather nasty car accident which took me off teaching for a year as I was in very severe pain (2001-2002). I started teaching again in September of 2002. It was not easy given my low levels of energy and controlling my very active students was draining me more than I expected. That period was not much fun, nor did I really enjoy the teaching that much, hence at the end of the school year, I asked whether I could teach alternative years: one active teaching, and the other on a sabbatical to pursue my interests and become a better teacher! Unfortunately, this was not a very practical proposition for my employers, hence I decided to become a student in the Middle East, as I had gone to Morocco in 2003, about 5 months after the accident to get out of the cold climate and uplift my sagging morale.

At the time I was seeing a type of physiotherapist to alleviate my condition, and she was excellent and was getting married in that year. To seal her future union with her partner, they decided to travel to Southern Morocco, which they much loved.

Her stories made me salivate and almost jealous! All the sun, brilliant tajine dishes, High Atlas mountain passes, the desert and much more intrigued me a lot. So, in early November 2003 (things were happening in the Middle East....) took a ticket, found a pleasant hotel in Marrakesh, and contacted the same guide that my physio had met and travelled with in his 4x4 motor.

After a couple of days to acclimatise, and discover the lay-out of the city, especially the lovely main square, Jema el Fnaa (also humorously referred to as “Place j'ai mal au foie” - meaning: my liver is in pain square - given all the foods one can eat there at night, and possibly not always being totally hygienic) which would come alive at night, as during the day the pounding heat would discourage most people from wandering around (albeit it was November!). The colours, the food, the people, the architecture and ambiance all contributed to make one feel entranced.



An aerial photograph of a desert canyon. A winding road snakes through the deep, layered rock formations. The terrain is arid and brownish-orange. In the middle ground, there is a small cluster of buildings and a few vehicles. The lighting suggests late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows cast across the canyon walls.

So, I contacted the guide and there were going to be 2 more people in the jeep (this was a group travel!) who turned out to be a Frenchman with his grown up daughter, both of them most pleasant. On the given day, we embarked on our trip and aimed for the High Atlas main pass, called “Tizi n’Tishka” which would lead us towards the desert, a small town named Ouarzazate which translated from the Berber means “Gate of the desert”. The whole adventure was wonderful, in the desert, we slept in tents, were served absolutely delicious meals (one wondered how they did it with the simple means at hand) and saw the sunset and sunrise, which elicited very strong emotions to say the least. A Western lady was seen crying profusely while sunset happened. It is difficult to describe the emotions and feelings that assail one when witnessing such a moment. Suffice it to say, that this trip to Morocco lifted my spirits immensely, despite the physical pain remaining stubbornly present! It was on this trip that I decided that I needed to learn Arabic, given that a lot of very racist comments about the Arab world were published in the press, most likely to justify the various military operations ongoing in the Middle East at that time.

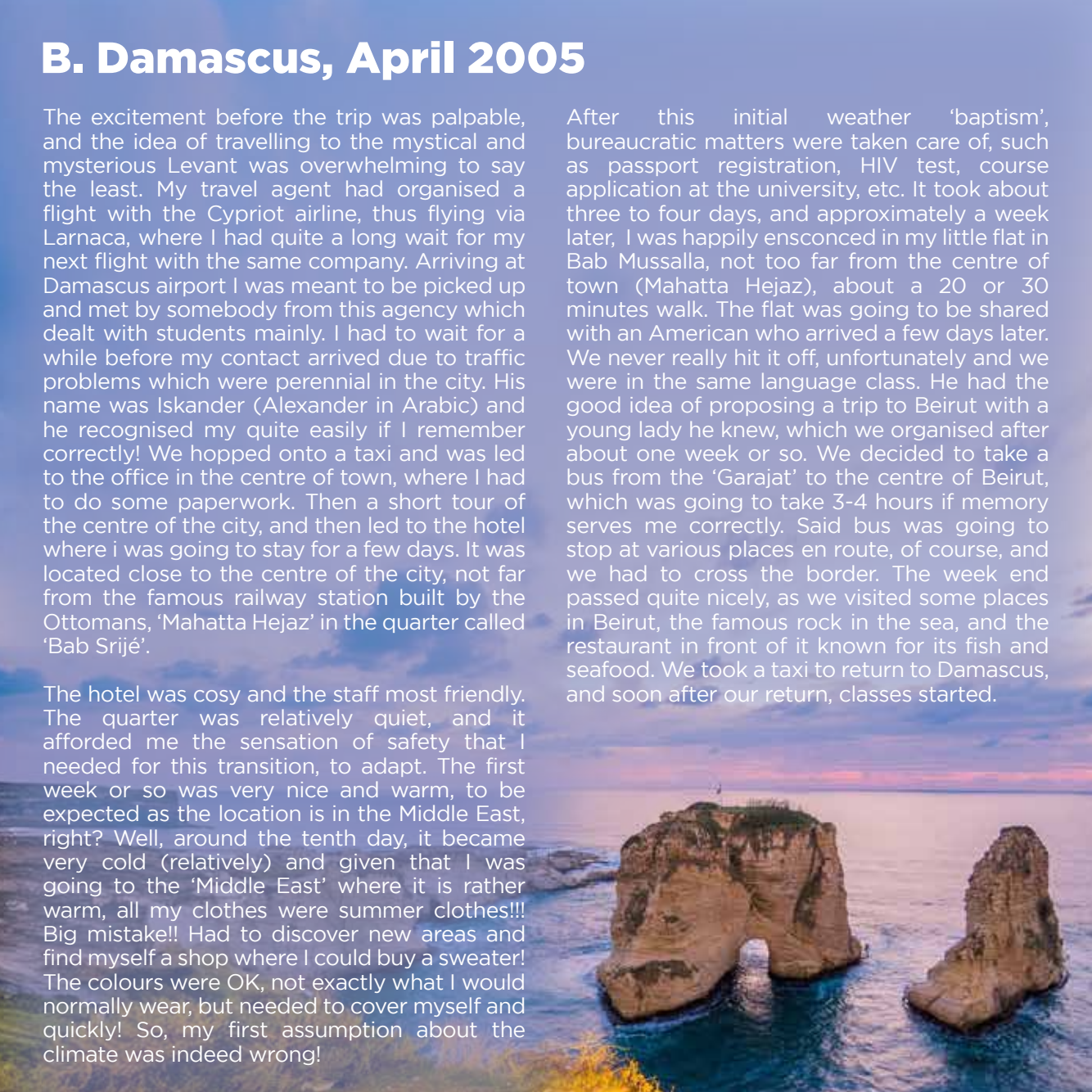
So, at the end of the 2004 school year, I bade my farewell to my school and proceeded to travel to Jordan with a friend to get a better feel for the Levant. It was in April 2005 that I travelled to Damascus to attend courses at the university to learn Arabic. I had discovered a website that helped potential students who wanted to enroll, find a living space, go through the meanders of the official bureaucracy, etc. and thus contacted them to organise matters before I landed.

## B. Damascus, April 2005

The excitement before the trip was palpable, and the idea of travelling to the mystical and mysterious Levant was overwhelming to say the least. My travel agent had organised a flight with the Cypriot airline, thus flying via Larnaca, where I had quite a long wait for my next flight with the same company. Arriving at Damascus airport I was meant to be picked up and met by somebody from this agency which dealt with students mainly. I had to wait for a while before my contact arrived due to traffic problems which were perennial in the city. His name was Iskander (Alexander in Arabic) and he recognised me quite easily if I remember correctly! We hopped onto a taxi and was led to the office in the centre of town, where I had to do some paperwork. Then a short tour of the centre of the city, and then led to the hotel where I was going to stay for a few days. It was located close to the centre of the city, not far from the famous railway station built by the Ottomans, 'Mahatta Hejaz' in the quarter called 'Bab Srijé'.

The hotel was cosy and the staff most friendly. The quarter was relatively quiet, and it afforded me the sensation of safety that I needed for this transition, to adapt. The first week or so was very nice and warm, to be expected as the location is in the Middle East, right? Well, around the tenth day, it became very cold (relatively) and given that I was going to the 'Middle East' where it is rather warm, all my clothes were summer clothes!!! Big mistake!! Had to discover new areas and find myself a shop where I could buy a sweater! The colours were OK, not exactly what I would normally wear, but needed to cover myself and quickly! So, my first assumption about the climate was indeed wrong!

After this initial weather 'baptism', bureaucratic matters were taken care of, such as passport registration, HIV test, course application at the university, etc. It took about three to four days, and approximately a week later, I was happily ensconced in my little flat in Bab Mussalla, not too far from the centre of town (Mahatta Hejaz), about a 20 or 30 minutes walk. The flat was going to be shared with an American who arrived a few days later. We never really hit it off, unfortunately and we were in the same language class. He had the good idea of proposing a trip to Beirut with a young lady he knew, which we organised after about one week or so. We decided to take a bus from the 'Garajat' to the centre of Beirut, which was going to take 3-4 hours if memory serves me correctly. Said bus was going to stop at various places en route, of course, and we had to cross the border. The week end passed quite nicely, as we visited some places in Beirut, the famous rock in the sea, and the restaurant in front of it known for its fish and seafood. We took a taxi to return to Damascus, and soon after our return, classes started.



Given that i knew how to spell my name in Arabic, I was 'promoted' to a slightly more advanced class (hardly!). The teacher was a very charming young lady who was very friendly and fully understood the difficulties of her language for Westerners. We started with the standard topics, such as origin, family, jobs, etc. That was after we spent about 3 weeks learning how to write the alphabet, which is very beautiful, but difficult. Why difficult? Besides being very "photogenic" and elegant, the Arabic script has the specificity of changing shape according to where the letter is situated in a word or standing alone: at the initial position, in the middle or at the end of a word or standing alone. There are some letters that do not attach, otherwise they could be mistaken for another letter. Then, trying to write said letters in a vaguely calligraphic way takes some practice! And a lot of patience! Once that was achieved, we moved forwards with very simple texts and vocabulary. One's name and place of origin, counting, etc.

All of this was not done chronologically, but simultaneously, so we were not stuck for a long time focusing only one one item.

At some stage, the question of learning the calendar months in Arabic was broached with one's birthday date. We had started the language class in early or mid-April, and my birthday happens to land on the 3rd of May, so I did my best to oblige and give the right date, which I think I did. The result was very unexpected: on the 3rd of May, our teacher presented me with an enormous birthday cake which really touched me! I had never expected such a surprise. So, we all tucked in at the end of the class and had drinks with the rather large and tasty cake.

In the beginning, things went quite quickly and by that I mean, soon, there was no English spoken in the classroom (2nd level - after about one month) and all the grammar was explained in Arabic. Total confusion and not understanding any of the complicated terms was quite a challenge in the beginning!

Homework started to increase, but it was still reasonable, such as exercises and verbs that needed to be learned and integrated into one's conversation.

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## c. Language Classes become Serious!

Level 1 class was a very pleasant experience, and did not really show “its teeth” as one imagined that the subsequent classes would proceed in a relatively pleasant way that is to say without major stress or complications, even though it was clear from the beginning that Arabic or rather Standard Classical Arabic (Fuhsa) is no picnic! Well, level 2 began after the first month, i.e. at the end of May when we had a mini exam and a one week holiday to recover from all the grammatical emotions!

My level 2 class was on another floor (one floor above ground floor, possibly symbolising the fact that one had progressed?). There was some revision of basic concepts encountered in level 1, then we moved on further and the speed and quantity of items to digest, understand and integrate became much heavier. In my second level class, I became very friendly with a classmate who was also born in the month of May, and given the zodiac sign is a bull, instead of calling him by his name, (we spoke Spanish together, although he is Sicilian) I baptised him Torito (little Bull) and we got on extremely well, despite our age difference. He was and still is a photographer who makes photos of social situations, events with very deep feeling and tenderness. The first photos he showed me were black and white, taken in the Old City of Damascus. Somewhat run down quarters, visited by history, with people still exercising ancestral trades brought down by generations of forefathers who over time perfected their trade and knew every movement, gesture to achieve the best result, to create a beautiful piece of carved wood, blown glass, chiseled stone.

At times, Torito and I would meet in the old quarter, near Souk Hamediyeh, where he knew some simple and pleasant restaurants. We usually met for lunch and later would go to his place to chat, or study together. I remember this period very fondly, as it was filled with happy moments, good progress in Fuhsa and feeling like a young student, which of course I wasn't! Discovering interesting places in Damascus, be they cafés, restaurants and meeting people and testing one's very basic Arabic on them (and their very encouraging and positive comments were always welcome to help in overcoming the difficulties of this extremely rich language!)

Level 3 was much more demanding and reduced carefree moments substantially: I would get up very early in the morning at around 5.30 AM, have breakfast and be ready at around 6 AM, and review the items studied the previous day until about 8:30 AM and then take a taxi to go to the “Kulia el Adab” which was the part of the university where our language courses were given. Classes lasted till 1 PM, would take a bus to go back to my area, Bab Moussalla to have my liquid lunch at my favourite juice bar there.



## d. My Favourite Juice Bar in Bab Mousalla

After leaving the Language Department at the University of Damascus I would arrive in the Bab Moussalla neighbourhood at around 1:30PM approximately, and would hurry to the Al Yarmook Square, but which most people called Bab Moussalla. The juice bar where I went for lunch was my daily haunt. A nice owner with a friendly smile would welcome you, and in the very limited vocabulary of the first two months, I would order an egg burger and a large orange banana juice when I was very hungry or only the large orange banana juice. The orange banana juice was my standard lunch, also as I remembered that as a baby, my mum would make it for me to make me strong! Fast and nourishing!

After about three months of going there and when I was able to speak more and wasn't afraid of being laughed at, I asked the owner a question that had been tormenting me since the beginning of my daily visits: whether I took the large orange banana juice with or without the egg burger, the price always remained the same! Unfortunately, I never dared ask the owner's name (he must have been in his 40's), and his answer stunned me: "you are a foreigner, you are learning Arabic and you like Damascus, that is my hospitality to you." I was getting a large glass of juice and was paying for a small one, and if the burger was added, the price did not budge. I was very touched by this man's hospitality and kindness. It made me a bit shy, as at that time I could not tell him fluently to charge me the real price given my limited vocabulary. This type of hospitality was repeated by a number of shop owners during my language studies in Damascus. At that time, the economy was just starting to improve as the socialist government controls had been reduced, but it was certainly not bustling in the Bab Moussalla area which was a lower middle class area.



## e. Souk Hamediye on The 2nd Day of My Stay

After having been picked up at the airport, and brought to my hotel in the Bab Srijé (Sarouja) area, the next day I was to be shown around some more and meet my “in house teacher” as I had opted to have somebody to live in as a tutor to help me with the Arabic lessons, and this young chap (who was a student at university) would come in the evenings and spend the night in the third room in the apartment. Meeting up at the office near the Mahatta Hejaz, I met Fadi, and he took me to the Souk Hamediye - a very large Arabic market that has stood on the same street for about 2000 years! It is divided in different areas, each specialising in different wares, be they electric, textile, jewelry, etc. On that day, we were merely going to visit the main and very large section which was the continuation of the Sharia Al Nasr which was intersected by the Sharia Al Thawra.

The Ottomans had built the roofing of the market (similar to the one in Istanbul) and this “main” and central part was rather long, ending towards the square which faced one of the sides of the Omeyyad Mosque. At the end of the main central part, in the square, were some greco-roman columns dating back to the time when the market opened, shall we say! It is said that the columns visible at the end of the “street” as it were, date back to the period of Caracalla, the Syrian emperor whose birth name was Lucius Septimus Bassianus (4th April 188 - 8th April 217). He went insane in the later part of his life which only spanned 29 years. He was the elder son of emperor Septimus Severus.

It was quite an amazing visit to the Hamediye Souk, as there were shops galore with all sorts of wares in the main “street” selling carpets, clothes, different type of spices carefully displayed as little hillocks of varying colours and many more wares. Numerous restaurants and a very famous ice-cream and sweets place, Bakdash, where Fadi took me so that we could have Muhalaya which I recall as a sort of Blancmange and they were especially famous for their ice-creams. There were basically two flavours: chocolate and sweet milk type which were made traditionally with milk, cream, sugar and mastic and sahlab which is made from orchids giving it a chewy consistency. Some say it is much like dondurma. (the same thing, but the Turkish version). Two men in traditional outfits were pounding the pail and the mixture inside the restaurant, thus showing the traditional production of the ice-cream. The fifteenth century is given as the period when this frozen dairy dessert was invented in the Levant. In Arabic it is called “bootha” which means ice-cream. (info re the traditional ice-cream from Wikipedia).

The atmosphere inside Bakdash was like a beehive with lots and lots of people, waiters rushing around to serve their clients rapidly, and there were many children of course. This place in Damascus is extremely famous, and the story goes that the owner (possibly the great great great grandson of the original founder of this dynasty?) was approached various times as business people were interested in acquiring his premises to create a very large restaurant which would be much more profitable than Bakdash? The owner always refused to sell his business. Good for him!!

After this cultural trip into the past of ice-cream making, we proceeded along the main “street” towards the Caracalla columns and see the magnificent Omayyad Mosque, and along our way, I saw a lady with her son, and from afar, both of them looked very Northern European! The mother was a red head with freckles and her son also with freckles and red hair. I was astounded, and even though one could have imagined one was meeting a Scottish or Irish mum with her son, they were absolutely Syrian! It is true that genes are very persistent! It would appear that during the Crusades, many a European crusader went to the Middle East, and the Holy land is not that far from Damascus. I did not attempt to do any research on this matter, but what is clear is that in some remote valleys in Valais, a canton East of the region of Lausanne, going towards Brig (and the perpendicular valleys higher up) when attempting to go over the Simplon pass to cross into Italy, there are people that clearly are descended from Hanniba Barca, who crossed the Alps with his elephants during the Second Punic war. Hannibal was a military genius but how he crossed the Alps with his army, horses, monkeys and war elephants still remains a mystery. What is absolutely proven is that he camped by the River Rhône with his men. Some of them maybe stayed behind and met some nice young ladies!

They look North African rather than of Swiss mountain stock and given the isolation of some of the valleys and traditional habits of the said inhabitants, genes must have persisted for a very long time. Hence, I can well believe that some northern Europeans who went to the Holy land left their mark in that region, and thus explaining such an unexpected sight in Damascus.



## f. Trip to Quneitra with Classmates

Time passed quickly, as there was so much to discover, and a fair amount of studying to do! One of my classmates shared a flat with a Czech-Syrian chap who was keen to take us to the Southern border and show us the destruction around the area of Quneitra. We had to get organised, as we needed a special pass to go that that border area (part of the Golan had been annexed by Israel) as it was sensitive and the authorities didn't want any provocations or problems to be created. Our group consisted of about 10 or 12 pax, and the day we chose to go for this trip was a Friday (like our Sunday in Europe) morning and it would take the whole day. So we agreed to be at the "Garajat" (where all the little buses called "Service" gathered before embarking on their various destinations. It must have been around 9.30 AM and there were no mini-buses except a lonely one in a far corner of the rather large area. We directed ourselves towards that mini-bus which had a sign which read Damascus-Quneitra which was precisely the route we needed. A young chap in his early twenties was the driver, and the Czech-Syrian fellow who spoke both Czech and Arabic fluently was our guide and spokesperson organised the route. We all bounded into the mini-bus and soon departed.

The route took us from Damascus towards the South, through Sahnaya, Sa'asa, Khan Arnabeh and then Al Quneitra. Before that, though we made a pause mid-way to drink something and buy some delicious cherries which superbly replaced our non-breakfast! The driver, whose name was Fouad was shy at first, and we shared our cherries with him. He seemed astonished that we would share with him.

In Quneitra we had to show our special passes and passports, before we could get close to the famous hospital which had been destroyed by the Israelis before they departed from that area, and returned to the part of mount Hebron which they had annexed in the 1967 war. It was quite eerie, the potmarks on the walls, whole walls missing, and then the stories of what happened during the war at that time. One of our classmates, was a Pakistani fellow who had quite a sense of humour, and he made lots of jokes to lighten the atmosphere. After the allotted time spent there (2 hours I believe) we decided to return towards Damascus and en route we stopped at Sa'asa for lunch and had traditional fare, and I asked our driver, Fouad to sit next to me, as he seemed so shy. During lunch it was decided that we would change our route somewhat and would go East and stop by the Assaida Zeineb Mosque before ending our trip. It took us about an hour and a half from our lunch stop to the mosque, and there the young ladies had to cover their heads. The mosque was rather beautiful and also had a very efficient air conditioning system (inside) which was most appreciated, as it was terribly hot to say the least.



After the visit, the group decided that they wanted to go out and party in the evening. I was not really keen, so passed on that. Before most of the group were dropped off, a slightly unfair discussion took place which saddened me, as the Czech-Syrian fellow wanted to show us how well he could negotiate a low price for this whole day tour, as he found the extremely reasonable price asked by our driver to be excessive...In the end, the group decided to pay 800 leira (in those days 1000 leira was 20 dollars) and normally the driver would do 7 - 8 runs during the day, making considerably more than the pittance that was being proposed to him. I decided not to jump off where the group did, and asked in my pigin Arabic to be dropped off at the Garajat, so that I would have the chance to speak to Fouad, give him the difference of the fare and ask him to meet up on week ends and drive around Syria, so that I could discover the country. That he understood, and asked him right away to meet up the next Friday. He indicated that he would have a friend of his, and English teacher call me, so that we could organise the meeting place and the trip where he would take me.



# g. First Trip with Fouad to Homs & Tartous

After I was dropped off at the Garajat (where we had started in the morning of that day) by Fouad and he had understood my pigin Arabic about my desire to travel within Syria and see all the possible sights on the week ends, he made me understand that a friend of his who spoke good English would contact me so as to organise our first trip which was slated for the next Friday.

The friend's call happened on the next Wednesday, setting out the details for this road trip. Time and meeting place were confirmed for the Friday i.e. two days later. I was rather excited, and thought to myself that this would become a great adventure, (which it did) and get away from the big city and get a feel of this country which I came to love dearly, because of its people, customs, traditions and amazing history.

Fearing total boredom between us, I had diligently prepared a number of sentences so that we could start communicating and get to know each other. My linguistic endeavours which took me at least an hour if not more, seemed like a good way to initiate a conversation! On the chosen day, we met and departed, exiting Damascus on the Northern route, Arasta, Duma, Qutayeh, Annabk, Deir Atiyeh, Hassa and finally Homs. After about 15 minutes, my prepared questions, or should I call it my discourse was utterly hollowed out, and I had no more prepared sentences! Luckily I brought my Arabic dictionary with me, so I could look up words and try to construct sentences!

Fouad was extremely patient to say the least: he would correct my pronunciation, and repeat the word numerous times, as my auditive memory was weak (I needed to see the words written to get some hold over them) but in a moving mini-bus, with windows open to reduce the heat, it was difficult! I believe we stopped at a petrol station cum restaurant to have a Turkish coffee and a break from the windy drive. We then proceeded towards Homs, and Fouad decided that he wanted to meet a friend of his he had met during his military service who was from Homs, to bring a bit of social contact, as our stilted conversation was not easy, albeit very friendly but not very meaningful given the small vocabulary that I possessed at the time. As we entered the city, we veered off right as we entered to go to the area where his friend lived.

Before actually ringing the doorbell of his friend's residence, he had called his friend Muhamad and he was very keen to meet Fouad and his Western passenger. At the door, we were greeted by Muhamad's father who was a kindly gentleman, and Muhamad himself. We spent a couple of hours there, being fed delicious snacks and fresh chamomile tea (babooezh) as I had never tasted it in my life. Normally, chamomile tea which I always considered tea for grannies with ailments, tasted boring as far as I was concerned!) At that moment, it was a revelation, a discovery: I had never imagined that chamomile could be so excellent and wanting more of this amazing tea!

After having been well fed and tea-ed, we decided to leave and go towards the sea, one of Syria's sea ports called Tartous, and which lies about 70 kilometres West of Homs (or Hims). The weather was superb, and the drive was very pleasant as the wind when we neared the sea was very pleasant and cooling. We entered the city and chose to drive by the seaside, the "Corniche" as it is called, which stretches from the Southernmost part of the town to the harbour. It was quite crowded, and after a while we parked the car, found a restaurant and tucked in for our meal. Fouad and Muhamad were deep in conversation, recalling their times during their service, and were happy to be spending time together. It was Fouad who invited us for the meal, which was simple and good, but amazingly pricey, so poor Fouad was a bit shocked. Given the good weather and amount of sun, we thought it would be good to go to the beach and enjoy the fresh sea water. We found a sort of club, where the beach was not very crowded, and given the unexpected nature of this sea trip, we didn't have the right gear i.e. bathing trunks, etc. Fellow humans were dispersed further away, so we bathed in our boxer shorts and enjoyed ourselves immensely! It was only when I had the photos developed of our water splurge in boxer shorts, that a scandal erupted at the photo shop back in Damascus... I was still in my Western mode, not thinking of possible cultural barriers being crossed. Later in the afternoon we returned to Homs, had dinner with Muhamad's family and then returned to Damascus late in the evening.



# **h. Moving into The Flat on Durra El Hashimieh**

A number of Levant style houses had been looked at by Iskander and his staff, and one house in particular was rather amazing: it was a traditional Syrian house with an internal courtyard, with an orange tree, a sort of garden and a number of rooms. It would have meant that a rather larger group of people would share this house. For some reason the rental did not go through, be it for admin reasons, or the price. It would have been very interesting, but maybe somewhat cumbersome for a group of students, with the daily routines of washing dishes, cleaning up, etc. etc. It might have been complicated, as such endeavours fall on different cultural habits, and discipline for doing one's part of the job!

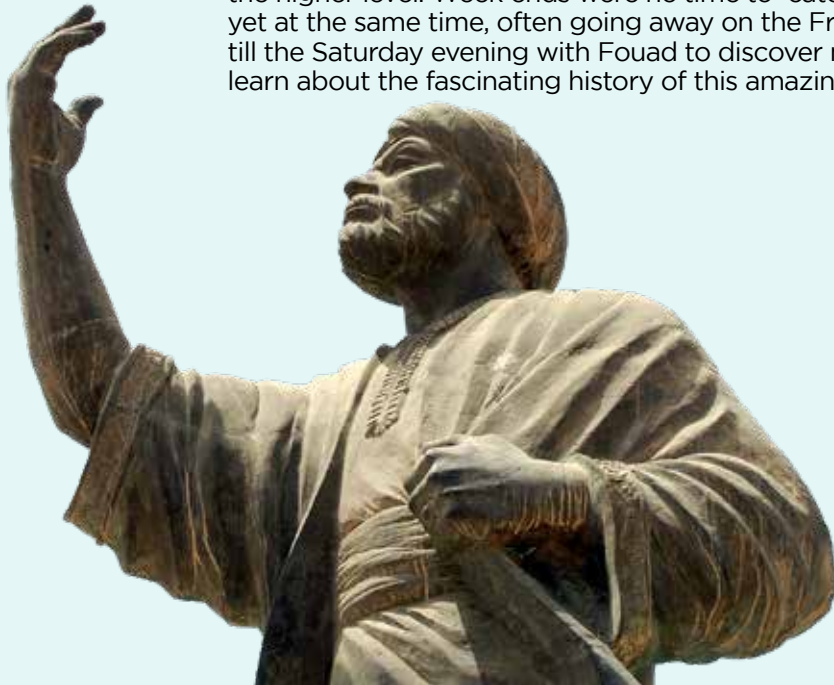
Be as it may, in the end, a much smaller flat was chosen for yours truly and the American student, who after the first couple of weeks, hardly ever was there because he would spend half the night in smokey cafés playing "Tawila" or as we would call it Backgammon. I at times wondered why he would spend so many hours every night playing this game. The flat was on a perpendicular street to Sharya Mushtahed where there was a Middle School that went by the name of Durra el Hashimieh if my memory serves me right. Thus, either the school gave its name to the street or the reverse! Opposite the end of our street (it was a cul-de-sac) sat the hospital named Mushtahed on the large avenue of the same name (it didn't enjoy the greatest reputation, unfortunately).

One day, I was buying food at the greengrocer on my street and had become a regular patron, as he was friendly and a lady whom I had not seen previously, very kindly thought I was an Iranian doctor working at that hospital! I look rather Northern, with blond hair and blue eyes. (It is true that while teaching at the Rosey boarding school, one of my students who was Turkish had blond hair and blue eyes, but he was a Mediterranean blond - which to someone not familiar with more Northern types could confuse). I took it as a compliment, as at that time my Arabic had improved quite a lot, so my accent maybe confused this kind lady!

The apartment had 2 bedrooms, a large sitting room, a pleasant bathroom with a water heater for the bath(which was great in winter as it gave off a lot of heat, so one could warm up if needed, as of course there was no central heating), a moderately sized kitchen ,with one of the walls directly behind the stove so polluted by high heat oil cooking that I called it the "wall of the oils". It was almost black! The apartment was pleasant because it had good natural lighting, probably because it was on the top floor. My "in house"teacher would sleep in the sitting room when he made it (he was always too late - and as a good Swiss, I tried to inculcate a sense of precise time to him...)

As mentioned earlier, my days would start very early, especially after the 2nd level of my Arabic class. At 5.30 AM, ablutions, breakfast and revision of materials seen the previous day. Then a taxi to the Kulia el Adab dept at the university for my classes, which would end at 1 PM, and with the bus I would be at the Saha Bab Mussalla at around 1:30 or so, for my liquid lunch at my favourite juice bar for a banana orange juice and at times with an egg burger. It was quick and nourishing! Then home, for a short review by myself, and from 3 PM till 5 PM I would see my first teacher to review materials of the day.

A short siesta of about one hour till 6 after which time I would prepare my very lazy evening meal consisting of an under licence made Indomee (Indonesian noodle soup package!) and to make it more consistent would add an egg, some chopped veggies and some lemon juice to counter the chemicals in the soup...By 7PM I was ready and would take a taxi to Bab Touma, and from the gate walk to find the house of my Yemeni teacher of Arabic. He would show me more literary items, such as poems or pieces written by famous Arab writers. It was a hard slog for me as I did not get the nuances of the languages that this teacher so passionately loved. I always enjoyed these classes, the atmosphere and unexpected turns that our classes could take. By 10 PM my course was over, I would grab a taxi home and would study what I had just seen with my last teacher till about midnight. I was able to do this for about 4 months approximately. It was a most exciting period, but a very demanding one, as at one stage I had failed my exam to go to the higher level. Week ends were he time to catch up on sleep, yet at the same time, often going away on the Friday morning till the Saturday evening with Fouad to discover new places and learn about the fascinating history of this amazing country.



# **i. The First Trip to Tartous with Fouad alone & Boat to Arwad Island**

At some later stage, after having spent the first trip with Fouad going to Homs, meeting his friend and then going to Tartous to enjoy the sea, Fouad and I went to Tartous straight from Damascus on a week end.

At that time my Arabic had progressed, so it was no longer an issue of being able to communicate or get totally bored with no conversation! We must have left at the usual time more or less, as Fouad had to drive up from Qunaitra (75km South West of Damascus) and the Friday was his day off, so he needed a bit of rest after a heavy week of back and forth between the two points. So, meeting at around 10 AM, we drove out of Damascus, taking the main motorway towards Homs, and from there would veer Westwards with the Tartous motorway, passing by Lake Qattina, Khirbet and passing to the left of the Krak des Chevaliers (visited much later), and approaching Tartous via Al Hamidiyeh, and again, on our left when already on the coast by the sea, one could see an old "Qal'aat" atop a hill, overlooking the sea and the motorway: it must have been setup by the Crusaders and possibly later updated by the Ottomans, so protect the area (and maybe the port was further South compared to the present day location). A sight to behold, and well worth a visit, which we did, but on a later trip to Tartous which was one of my favourites. We arrived in the early afternoon, found our little hotel and had a bit of a rest, as it was tiring given the heat.

By chance, not far from our little hotel, there was a famous fish and seafood restaurant which was recommended by the person at the reception. It was quite a spacious place, with a good view over the harbour, and the little boats and beach that were to be seen on the sea front road or "corniche" as they would call it in Arabic (from the French: usually meaning a road that descends from high up, coming down towards a lake, a sea. There is a sense of height in the word, but not in the Arabic version, as means the coastal road by the sea). The large windows were partially opened, allowing a nice breeze to enter and cool down the temperature. There weren't many people as we had come over right after the afternoon siesta! It must have been about 5PM or so. The menu was presented to us, and we chose the "kreddes" i.e. the shrimp in a special chef's sauce and I remember it a with a fair amount of garlic and some chili. It was excellent to say the least! Both Fouad and I were impressed and almost at the same time cried out that we were going to come back to this place to enjoy more sea foods. The meal ended with good Turkish coffee and we proceeded to stretch our legs by the seaside road, and just revel in the lovely weather and later on enjoyed the sunset at a place near the beach with some more coffee and observing the tourists and families having a good and peaceful time.

The next morning we went to the local museum, which at the time of the French occupation was a church. It had been somewhat transformed, but definitely had lacked financial resources, but there were some very interesting pieces taken from Greco-Roman ruins in the area. They were lying on the floor, aligned in a row and albeit interesting, it was sort of sad to see the items displayed in that way. There probably were many more things, but my memory of the place has become somewhat blurred after almost twenty years.

After a light lunch, and walking by the seaside, we saw a panel indicating that there was a regular service plying the distance between a little jetty and Arwad, the island facing Tartous. The island must be no further than two kilometres, from the beach as the crow flies. So, we hoped on, and enjoyed the salty breeze on the sturdy transformed fishing boat which could transport about 50 or so passengers at any one time. Arwad is very densely built up, not to say packed with houses and people.

We walked around, saw a boat building area where larger wooden boats were being made, mostly fishing boats, sturdy, chubby and I suspect very seaworthy. It was a nice tour, although there was nothing really memorable to see, it was a pleasant experience. Fouad had been observing me quite carefully, especially as I was trying to be responsible and not throw paper napkins and other items in anything but the available bins that one encountered along the roads. Fouad had been smoking a cigarette on the return trip to the city beach, and didn't dare throw the butt into the sea when he had finished smoking! I was quite touched that my example was being followed so well!



## **j. Sandstorm in Damascus**

One day after coming back from my Arabic class, at the usual time as per usual, I had my liquid lunch at my 'friend' the juice-bar owner, then back home from the Midan/Bab Moussalla roundabout, and settled into my daily revisions and reviews of work done previously in class, before meeting my first private teacher for the afternoon.

After my siesta, I noticed that the sky had a strange colour, and that it was cooler than usual. So, went to the sitting room to get a better view thanks to the larger windows available and was stunned to see that the sky had turned into a sort of orange-ochre colour which I could not understand nor compute! It was a mesmerising sight to behold and having never experienced such a spectacle, it took me a while to understand that it must have been desert sand brought all the way from Saudi Arabia by the prevailing winds or possibly unusual winds. My hunch was confirmed later when I met my teacher who also said how amazed he was by the sight. It wasn't an earthquake or anything frightening, but it was stunning and overwhelming at the same time, given that there was nothing one could do to change it.. Any sensible person would say that of any day where there are more clouds or less in the sky! Maybe the colour and unfamiliar and eerie atmosphere that arose from it, caused one to panic in some sort of way as one could not explain it right away. It certainly was a memorable experience!



## **k. Being Taken for an Iranian Doctor at The Grocery Store!**

The street where the flat was located, was a dead end on one side, as it used to connect to the Sharia Al Mujtahed which is a main thoroughfare leading to Bab Moussalla going East and to Umawiyeen Square going West and towards the University of Damascus and the Language Institute at the University. Just crossing to the opposite side of no. 6 Durra el Hashimieh, there was a very nice grocery store where I used to buy my veggies and fruits, and appreciated the family running the shop. One day, on my usual foraging visit, I was going about my business asking about the different items present, and there was a lady who apparently was a regular customer as I understood, and she approached me in Arabic, asking me whether I was an Iranian doctor working at the Mushtaheed Hospital on the large thoroughfare of the same name!

I felt I was being given a very nice compliment, as I thought that maybe my accent in speaking Arabic was similar to Iranian doctors working at said hospital, but it seemed somewhat strange. Maybe my looks (I look sort of Northern European, and not very Iranian! But Iran is a large country, and I have met a few Turks with blond hair and blue eyes, but that is more a "Mediterranean blond type" as far as I can see!) For whatever it was worth, I enjoyed the encounter and finding it a bit strange to be taken for an Iranian, I was quite happy for it, assuming rightly or wrongly that my progress in the amazing and rich Arabic Language (and by no means a cinch!) was progressing well!



# I. The Syrian-Czech Fellow's Clan

For now will name the Czech-Syrian chap Pavel (he also had an Arabic name, Rami), and his father had a flat not too far from my area, i.e. Bab Moussalla, which Pavel renovated while he was in Damascus, working for Syriatel (the main telephone company which dealt with landlines and portable phones). During our trip to Al Qunaitra, he recounted a story which was very interesting for us Westerners. Given his Syrian origin via his father (who was an engineer, and who moved and/or studied in Czechoslovakia) he had strong roots in Syria. His father belonged to a fairly large clan, that was made up of about 900 or so members. At one stage, he formally went outside of Damascus (not sure where) to meet the majority of the clan, on a special day which was important to the clan. There he was introduced to the Elders, and some direct relatives of his father.

It was quite a festive day, and he met masses of people, and couldn't possibly place all the ones he met, as it was quite a number of people of the extended family. He later returned to Damascus, and about a week later, somebody of the clan spotted him in Damascus with a young lady! (one of the Elders, I suppose, or a younger relative of his, or it could have been anybody of the clan!) and reported it, and he was made aware of having been observed somewhere in Damascus going about his business. On the one hand he told us, that it felt like being spied upon, and the social control bothered him, and on the other hand, it reassured him, as should there be any problems with anybody in Damascus, he knew that the clan would be there to protect him. The whole clan knew about about him, and had seen him, but he couldn't know nor remember all the 900 or so members of his clan.



## m. Registering at The Embassy

Once the official Syrian paperwork had been organised, and I was settled in, it appeared logical to go to the embassy and register, should anything happen and to inform my authorities where I was, where I was living, etc. So, with a taxi I went to the location situated in Mezzeh, the modern part of Damascus, slightly outside the centre) and proceeded to show my passport and fill in a standard form. I was very kindly received by a secretary who told me to wait for a little while and that the consul would deal with me. I was very pleasantly surprised, and after a short while, a very friendly man in his forties attended to my paper work, sharing some information about Damascus, etc. We hit it off rather well, and he said that he would take me out for a meal, which I found most kind.

A few days later we met in the centre of the city at a well known restaurant which had a very good reputation. I was quite overwhelmed, and thankful for the attention and contact with this gent, which was most useful and important at a much later stage. The consul, was a real fan of the cultural life of Damascus, and knew all the artists worth knowing, that was clear as he had a passion for art in all its forms. At the time I was focused on learning Arabic, and that was a full time endeavour! Had I not needed to study so hard, I would have probably asked him to introduce me to some of his artist friends, but I suppose that I was shy and didn't want to impose myself nor demand things from him, as he had already been most helpful and kind to me.

Whenever I flew back to Europe, I would announce my departure and when I would return. We maintained contact throughout the time I was in Damascus, and he actually asked for a lengthening of his stay, as he was so attached to the city and its attractions. I remember he drove extremely well in the ghastly Damascene traffic, in part due to people's cavalier ways, but also due to the potholes that car owners were keen to avoid and preserve their cars, so sudden right or left swerves were not uncommon! His car remained immaculate and without any dents or any indication that he was driving in a very congested city and where one had to be really attentive at all times.

The consul played a very important role unbeknownst to him, in the life of Fouad when years later he chose to leave his fatherland and become a refugee in Europe. I am most grateful to the consul for what he did, trusting me, and later when the consul had gone to far away postings when Fouad made his move.



## **n. A French Speaking Friend who left Syria in 2009.**

My friend Philippe was also a student at the Kullia el Adab at Damascus University, and we were in the same class at one stage and maintained contact despite not being at the same level afterwards. We would meet from time to time, and became closer as his departure from Syria approached. He felt that things were not going well for him, as far as integrating locally. He had converted to Sunni Islam some years ago. I do not remember what made him convert and where he did it. An important thing to be aware of, is that the police in Syria did not trust Westerners who had become Muslims. At times, Western Muslims would be approached by the police and interrogated, especially students learning Arabic. Their fear was that these students with religious leanings could be “weaponised” against the Syrian Arab Republic. I remember Philippe recounting such an event where he was interrogated by the police. It was all very civilised, nothing unpleasant, but he found it very unsettling. Towards the end of 2009, he had decided that it was better for him to leave Syria which he adored, and move to Turkey where he would start a small business with a friend. On the day of his departure, I accompanied him to the bus station where he was going to take a bus that would take him to the border, and from there he would find a Turkish bus to bring him to his destination. It was going to be quite a long ride. Before saying our goodbyes, and giving him a small present to take with him, he confessed that he had grown tired of the Sunni version of Islam.

I was stunned, and he asked me not to mention it to possible mutual acquaintances, that he would convert to the Shia form of Islam, as he found it much more open and it allowing for deeper involvement and understanding. He jokingly said that not a comma had changed place in 1300 years in the Coran which made it difficult to see things in a different light.

He stayed in Turkey for about six months, and then decided to return to his home country as business had not turned out to be very good, due to some customs regulations which complicated the sending of certain seeds of rare flowers and the European market not being as attractive as he had hoped. We met a few years later, and after that we lost touch.



## **o. Going to Souk Hamediye & being saved from being run over by a Crazy Mercedes**

It was a very pleasant spring day, and had decided that I needed to go to Souk Hamediye which lies in the direct continuation of the Sharia Al Nasr, and when you enter via the main entrance i.e. from the Sharia Al Nasr, and you walk all the way to the end of the main artery, you land on the side of the Omayad Mosque and before that the Caracalla columns that are still there (Caracalla was a Syrian emperor in Rome). Can't quite remember what those important purchases were, but it didn't take too long, and after leaving from the main entrance, we walked on the Northern side of the Sharia Al Nasr, and it was my very great luck that Fouad was with me then, as with my packages and things I readied to cross the main artery, looking left to make sure there was no traffic, and was about to cross, from nowhere a crazy military Mercedes whooshed by at tremendous speed, and am not exaggerating in stating that it must have been travelling at close to 100 km per hour (in those days it was possible in Damascus!) on this main thoroughfare without any traffic. Had Fouad not stopped me from crossing, I wouldn't be around writing about it. Had the fright of my life, to put it mildly.



# p. The Arabesque Agency in Damascus, near The Hejaz Station

After my first trip to Marrakesh in late autumn 2001, I became rather interested in finding ways of learning Arabic as 9/11 had happened with all the consequences that we know. Marrakesh and the wonderful trip undertaken over the High Atlas mountains and spending a night in the desert, mesmerised me for a long time after the trip. Due to personal circumstances, my professional life was interrupted for a year and when I finished working in June of 2004, I had made up my mind of travelling and learning about the Levant. With a friend, a trip was organised to visit Syria in the autumn of 2004. It was a most interesting trip, meeting some very nice people and discovering places that I had never dreamed of. The friend who accompanied me, knew the Maghreb rather well, and he was very excited to discover this part of the world. It was a delightful trip lasting about two weeks. Upon returning, needed time to digest it all, but had made up my mind to learn Arabic which sounded like quite an adventure and I hoped it would open my mind to better understanding that mysterious world about which I knew practically nothing.

I did a lot of internet searching (those were the Jurassic days of the internet!) to find out where it would be the best to study Arabic, where living would be pleasant, learning conditions optimal and not feel lost. A few places had been indicated to me, notably Yemen, as the Arabic spoken there is supposedly very pure and of a high standard. I am speaking of the Fuhsa Standard Classical Arabic, not the dialectical, known as “Amyeh”.

Classical Standard Arabic is the Lingua Franca of the Arabic world, I suppose to make it simple, we could compare it to “High German” compared to the dialectical variants one finds in Switzerland (from canton to canton it differs - clearly in the German speaking cantons or the bilingual ones such as Fribourg or Valais). The differences between the local Egyptian and the Syrian dialects could be compared to Italian and French, just to give a sort of idea. The newspapers, the radio and television stations in all the Arabic speaking countries tend to use the Standard Classical Arabic, so people who have gone to school and university are well versed in the Fuhsa version of Arabic. The local dialects are like other languages and there are similarities, but pronunciation, grammar and syntax can be very different. Yemen was mentioned as a place where a high standard of Fuhsa is spoken, Syria also, probably because the Damascus dialect is not too far removed from the Fuhsa. There are language schools in various countries besides the two previously mentioned ones. There is the Alif School in Morocco, a couple more in the Lebanon (where French and English are rather widely spoken!). I decided to avoid Beirut, given the ease with which one could speak other languages besides Arabic. Thought it would make learning the language much more difficult. I finally opted for Damascus, as I had already been there in late 2004, and the impressions I had made me feel very comfortable about that choice. There was also Amman, the capital of Jordan, as a choice and due to connections made when travelling there in early 2004.

After the choice of the city, I had to find some sort of organisation that would help a non-speaker of the local language to settle in, get lodgings, apply to a local language institution, help with official paperwork for the police, and medical tests. Maybe I searched for a long time, or not, but the main point was that I found “Arabesque” which fulfilled precisely all the criteria to help a lost foreign student to settle in.

I timidly sent a first email to find out more about the organisation, fees, dates and all the other relevant information. The response was pretty rapid, so I returned the favour and asked more questions and thus a correspondence was established. Plans were starting to form in my mind, and then there was the Hariri assassination in Beirut which caused quite a stir, of course. Hariri was the Prime Minister of Lebanon who was assassinated on the 14th February 2005, causing a massive stir in the Levant and worldwide. The deed was blamed on Syria, but later it turned out that the Syrians didn't have the technology to pierce Hariri's special electronic shield. This event was very worrisome, and delayed my decision to travel to Damascus for my courses. The Arabesk agency in Damascus sent me an email a few weeks later, asking whether I was going to follow the courses or not.



