

## The (Training) Road to Damascus

Just before Christmas, my mobile trilled with another possible foreign assignment. It was Meirion Edwards of the Thomson Foundation, which exists to further the cause of training for news people in the many emergent countries of the world.

Thomson have an office in Cardiff and had had a request from Oussamah Cheik, Technical training Director of the dedicated Arab States training studio on the outskirts of Damascus in Syria. 'Could I help with some lighting training for seven days in mid January?'

Yes, I believed my STLD diary to be empty for that time. I *knew* it was empty, it had only just arrived.

Out came the atlas, (again) and I located Syria bounded by Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. Mmmm, not a totally benign part of the world. I met Meirion and he filled in the many gaps in my knowledge of that part of the Middle East. Damascus was, apparently, a regular visit for many TV craft skills people from the U.K. He gave me some names and I subsequently contacted some of them who were all very re-assuring about the 'Training Road to Damascus'. All had enjoyed their stay and were looking forward to returning.

In view of the continuing media coverage of a build up to a war in the Middle East, I wasn't entirely convinced. I checked the Foreign Office web site, Syria was not on either the 'Do not go' or the 'Best not to go' list. After all, the President of Syria did his PhD in London where he met his London born wife. They had recently visited London, Harrods, Tony Blair and H.M. Queen. (Not necessarily in that order)

I weighed up the facts and signed up for the job.

January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003 was cold and if you remember, a couple of inches of snow fell on London and the southeast. BBC News 24 proclaimed it as the first significant snow since February 1994. I had survived a 40-minute (cold but snow less) delay in the Flightlink connection to Heathrow from Cardiff and been pleasantly surprised with the fact that the service arrived at said airport just four minutes late at 1834. I reckoned on sitting down to a sumptuous meal by seven. Dream on.

The aforesaid dusting of snow had, apparently, thrown London's premier airport out of kilter. I found the Hotel Bus stop and queued for a transfer bus. The notice said that the service was every 14 minutes. 40 minutes later, it arrived and one hour and twenty minutes later, I was in my room just 600 metres away. Which was more than can be said for the stoically patient queue behind me, and the people on the ever ringing and hardly ever answered phones that the harassed check in attendant was ignoring in a bold attempt to keep all the customers happy. I had to listen to the man whose key did not fit his room and another man whose allocated room already had an occupant. Stress levels flared. Not a good start to anyone's journey.

In the 'eat as much as you like' of mediocre luke warm buffet, I couldn't help but hear the conversation that an elderly couple were making with someone on the end of a

mobile phone.

“Hello Vic, I was just talking to Lizzie who had heard from Auntie Audrey that we were delayed, but we’re OK and I just want you to know...” Such is the life of the hardened traveller. The TV in my room tells of two plane crashes in disparate parts of the world today. Not what I need to know...



6a.m. meant it was time to stop trying to go to sleep and instead stuff everything back in the just unpacked case. I gave breakfast a miss and queued in real sub zero temperatures on an icy pavement for an H6 bus that was due 15 freezing minutes ago. Eventually it came, and in no time at all (well, two and a half hours) Syrian Airlines was whisking a quarter full Airbus to Munich to spend an exciting 90 minutes on the tarmac whilst

between 5 and seven burly and well insulated porters (twas  $-11^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) jostled a complete kitchen and several Dell computers on board via the ramp outside my window. At least they were only dropping the stuff on the conveyer belt; at Heathrow they had been positively throwing cases on.

Budapest then Istanbul and Northern Cyprus drifted under the starboard wing with the benefit of a winter sunset to back light the whole shebang. Now I was into unknown territory, wondering why the swingy down monitors were saying nine minutes to landing when we were still at 11,370 metres in the direction of up. What disturbed me slightly was that the in flight map/time/height/direction thingy showed that we were due north of Damascus and pointing straight towards Baghdad.



Somewhere over Northern Cyprus

Eventually we swung around and somehow we descended to a safe landing without too many bleeding ears. I emerged from formalities to be met by Ali Sha-ar of ASBU [Arab States Broadcasting Union,] and a beaming driver who picked up my overloaded cases and deposited them in the back of a Peugeot estate car. The Syrian M4 was relatively empty so we sped to my domicile for the next ten days: The Hotel Carlton.

Four stars and three meals a day inclusive in the package. But you're trying to get rid of the Christmas over indulging; I heard a faint voice saying.

Not only that, the starched napkins came with a mandatory muzak accompaniment of Jingle Bells, Auld Lang Syne and Cliff Richard snogging under the mistletoe. It's the 9<sup>th</sup> of January in a Muslim Country! The wine was Syrian, red and cold. That combination is not ideal. As it 'chambréd' the flavour came to the fore and ultimately I decided that maybe cold was best. Two days later, it was suggested to me that Syrian red wine was perhaps best left to the aficionados. And that was from a Syrian. By then, I had also explored 'local' beer, which was 'interesting'.



The room key attached to a lump of brass the size and shape of an anti tank shell and weighing as much as a stage weight, achieved its objective of not ever leaving the hotel.

### January 10<sup>th</sup>

After a slightly jet lagged breakfast, I walked one hundred metres at most to the ABSU TV and radio training Centre which was founded in 1969. Its purpose was (and is) to keep Broadcast staff from the 21 Arab States up to date with Broadcasting technique and technology.



He just popped out of the pavement, Guv. Honest.

I met Oussamah Cheikh, the director of Engineering Training who showed me the studio and its facilities. He brought me up to speed on what was expected of me in the week ahead before being rushed off to an important meeting. As Friday is a holy day I had the rest of the day to do some prep and take a look at Damascus, but not in that order. Oussamah gave me a map of Syria (fortunately with a street map

of Damascus on the back) and having changed some American Dollars for Syrian pounds, (50 of the latter to one of the former) I hotfooted it into town.

The sun was shining and the temperature was a pleasant 15C. Unfortunately, my map was not marked 'you are here' so it took some dialogue with both Oussamah and the Carlton Hotel to determine exactly where I was and which direction I should go. Some two kilometres later, I



noticed from passing posters that it was the last day of the ‘Made in Turkey’ exhibition. Having some transitory affiliation with that country, I thought I’d look in and maybe check out a suitable greeting straight from my impoverished language centre.

As I approached the registration area, I noticed that this was not an exhibition of ceramics, electronics or ‘naughty’ CD’s, but manufacturing machinery; not exactly up mon rue. By this time, I was up against several beautiful smiling Syrian girls who were all trying to persuade me to fill in several pages of a complex registration form. My Arabic was clearly not enough to persuade them that my particular area of expertise was not going to benefit from farming/sweet wrapping/welding/pressing/production line equipment so I smiled and accepted the badge being clipped to my jacket without any further ado. There was no going back.



Health and Safety-1

It was entertaining (in a health and safety kind of way) to see a powerful hydraulic press operating every few seconds without any safety guards, but even more so to see a man with several fingers of his hand enclosed in a huge and bloody bandage alongside a large



Health and Safety-2

woodcutting machine! Once again readers, my knowledge of the local language was not enough to know whether he was a salesman/demonstrator/client of this patently sharp circular saw.



Not before I came across what looked very like a TV location ‘back lot’. Had I discovered the set for Middle Eastenders?

I eventually escaped via some temporary barriers and followed the river through the remainder of a huge exhibition site until it lead me to the old town and the ‘Souk.’



Al Hijaz Railway Station

Istanbul is a very good introduction to the Souk or indoor market. You will be instantly recognised as a tourist and must ignore all requests to see 'gelt' (if they've got it wrong) or 'gold/silver/carpets' if they've got it right. Keep on walking, be polite and/or speak Welsh/Gaelic or Icelandic. It does work, believe me.



There is a railway station, Al Hijaz, in the middle of Damascus, which is now just a museum to the railways, which forged their way through the Middle East in the early part of last century.

The platforms are sadly overgrown and lovely old steam locos just sit on rusting rails waiting for... I know not what. Maybe a sort of Middle Eastern Ian Dow.

The light pouring through the stained glass windows (yes, in a railway station) in to the former booking hall was a sight to behold. The saturated colours made my camera work hard for its living.



Now that's what I call lighting!

A short distance away is the Amayad Mosque in the very heart of the world's oldest continuously inhabited city, which presented images of great colour and beauty. Taking ones shoes off



to walk on polished marble flooring in almost complete silence was a welcome antidote to the heavy traffic and pollution of a city of approximately six million people that surrounded this ancient centre of civilisation.

The Omayyad Mosque. Breathtakingly beautiful in the middle of the worlds oldest continuously inhabited city.





I returned via an incomprehensible network of narrow and twisting streets with overhanging and extremely dodgy looking balconies. Shops seemed to be shoe horned into tiny spaces wherever one looked. Lunch was a couple of bananas and some bottled water back at base camp with some very tired feet. Time to realise that tomorrow was fast approaching and maybe some prepared notes would be beneficial. Busking doesn't always work.

Dinner was enjoyed amidst tables of hookah (Algeda) smoking, card and backgammon playing locals. Their obvious enjoyment (of an entirely male assembly) did make me wonder what their other halves were doing. (Haven't seen Coronation Street or East Enders on the hotel ring main.) Jingle Bells was still escaping out of the ceiling loudspeakers in spite of a passable live singist. Well, I assume he was live, there being no sight line from where I sat.



Saturday Jan 11<sup>th</sup>



The A.S.B.U. training Centre in Damascus.

Time to work for my living. I left the hotel at 0825 for the Training Centre. I arrived 90 seconds later. It's that close. Oussamah met me in his office with a beaming smile and a cup of coffee. I commented on the proximity of the hotel to the ASBU centre.

“That is because” he began, “the hotel was built and is owned by ASBU!” It helps to subsidise the cost of training. Shades of BBC Wood Norton? Didn't work out too well for the BBC though.

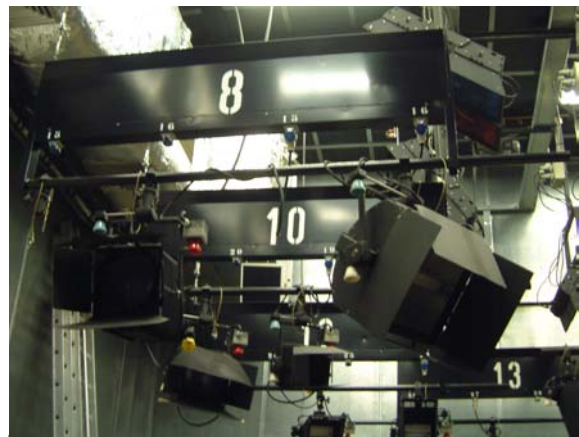


The TV training Studio and Gallery

“There are 21 Arab States in the union” he continued, “and they all contribute to the costs of running the centre and benefit from its existence”.

I was somewhat amazed to know that there were so many Arab States, but then, my political geography petered out in 1960 with my ‘O’ levels. On this particular course, representatives were coming from Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and Iraq. Yes, Iraq. I must have presented a neutral reaction so Oussamah repeated himself. “There are four hoping to come from Iraq”.

The neutral reaction was because I was already in mental overdrive, thinking through my training material and screening it for references to America or anything that might just have triggered off a global war a



All squeaky clean. ADB lamps and an immaculately maintained rig



Studio Gallery

few weeks early. I could only think of my ‘Desktop’ image of Manhattan with the two towers of light that commemorated 9/11 for a time.

After all, Mr Blair had said “We have no argument with the people of Iraq”. I did think that I would just check out

the surnames of our guests from Iraq just in case... Mr Mike (sometimes known as 'Sir Mike') has trodden the uncertain boards of training people from potential or actual war zones. Cyprus and Turkey to name but a few.

I was introduced to Lisa who was to be my delightful and pretty translator for the



Nice shot, shame about the lighting

week. We compared notes and found that we had lived in the same suburb of Glasgow whilst her husband had been doing his PhD at Glasgow University! We had actually lived within a few hundred yards of each other and eaten in the same restaurants.

The day started with a formal address and welcome to Syria by the Director of the training school, Dr Haidar Yaziji. The training facilities were first class and everything worked, from the white board to the video projector. And when we got to the studio, the 'red head' was to die for! Never had I gone from flood to spot with such silky smoothness. The joys of a training studio where lamps get minimum use and maximum maintenance instead of the other way round. (Am I beginning to sound like John Watt?)



One plus one and all that...

The training day finished more or less on time and on schedule. I was quite pleased that the guys all brought with them not only considerable experience of diverse lighting situations but were also keen to ask questions and interact in a way that would, I was sure, result in effective use of the time. When I invited each to give thumbnail sketches of their working life, Drama came up time and time again. On my way out I noticed some room flottage lurking in the scene dock.



At dinner, the 'shrimp' cocktail was an under statement. If *that* was a shrimp then it was time to lock the doors in case a lobster came out to play. That plus a rather nice piece of Syrian fish put paid to a large part of a bottle of 'Nectar'. That would have been all except your correspondent was involved in a small

skirmish just outside the hotel. The lights of the street and large hill behind the distant Embassy quarter of town made for an attractive picture for the ‘mag.’

It was not to be. A diligent guard/policeman spotted said amateur photographer setting up on mini tripod at edge of roundabout. Camera was seized and I was invited to follow it to a small roadside building, which was full of non-uniformed ‘guards’ keeping warm around an ancient central stove and a kettle boiling away on a totally exposed and dangerous red hot open ring plugged into a light socket. I would have loved to take pictures of said items, dear reader, but I was still without camera and judged that this was not the best time to ask for it back! The Syrian Stornos crackled to each other and I sat in a corner preparing my defence.

“Passport?” was the first word that I understood from my captor.

“In the Hotel.” I pointed to it, just 100 metres away. I showed them my pitifully unrepresentative badly lit BBC Freelance pass. I was ‘invited’ to sit down on a tired little bench close to the central and slightly non-perpendicular stove. This gave me time to look around and examine my captors. They were, dare I say, a motley bunch but friendly to a man. The dangerous kettle boiled and I was offered hot sweet tea, which I had no problem in accepting. After several sips, a leather jacketed dark haired man some ten years my junior came in and was clearly the ‘top man’.



We shook hands and in no time at all, he had told me of his English Literature Degree that he had been awarded without leaving his hometown of Damascus. A creditable qualification indeed, I assured him. He also demonstrated his mastery of the English

language and we talked of London, Oxford and Stratford on Avon. More tea was poured and I ascertained where the best place was to buy quality leather jackets in Damascus. The conversation was constantly littered with ‘Welcome to Damascus’, and ‘Welcome to Syria’ which I took as a sort of easing of the ‘situation’.

I was happy to demonstrate how easy it was to erase pictures taken on said photographic apparatus but rather messed up by erasing the picture that I wanted to keep rather than the fuzzy first attempt. Such is life. Much handshaking by all as I say my farewell to each and every man. No record remains of my attempt to capture Damascus by street and moonlight, sadly, nor those of my ‘interrogation’ by the light of a dangerous kettle and a wonky stove. C’est la Vie.

Sunday January 12<sup>th</sup>

Woken by sun, which is a nice change. Met Oussamah for our usual briefing session with a cup of coffee at 0830 Syrian time. Today our Iraqi friends should be joining us.

The day went very well with Lisa translating such words as tungsten, incandescence, barn doors, profile, gobo, magic arm, degrees Kelvin and more... The guys were not only interactive (not allowing me to get away with *any* generalities) but also provided much humour by taking the \*\*\*\* out of one of their own, Mouner from Sudan.

There's usually one who asks awkward questions and does things that bit differently on lighting training courses that I have run. On this occasion it was Mouner. He took all the fun in good part and just showed us all what I was continuously preaching: Lighting is individual and we are all different. As the session ended, I was told that the four delegates from Iraq would not be attending after all, they had been refused visas to enter Syria.



The road to Damascus, sponsored by Liptons.

Two hours of daylight remained, so I took a walk down to Damascus's shopping area, about 2K's away. A high-pressure area was giving warm weather, but was also causing a build up of pollution. I could taste it in my throat and see it in the air. Shades of Istanbul. Oussamah

told me that this is because most heating systems are still fuelled by coal or coke.

Damascus has many mini buses that all vie for passengers. Car ownership is low, Tamam, one of my trainees, confided in me that he earns less than \$200 per month as a lighting man. The Nias and Toyotas all try to gain attention by adopting subtle lighting techniques: I saw some with headlights that flashed alternately, side lamps that were coloured green or blue, long yellow fluorescents just above the bumper and always a driver beeping the horn to get attention from pedestrians who hadn't realised they needed a lift. One could minimise the horn 'hassle' by walking along the opposite side of the road to which the traffic flow was running. This brings me to my tip for crossing eight lane roundabouts: always make sure that at least two locals are between you and the oncoming traffic. This requires a speedy change of position in the middle of a dual carriageway. It can be done!

Back in the restaurant, I enjoyed second hand fruity Hookah smoke again from the card school nearby. The live singist sang to a largely unappreciative crowd, probably because nobody could see him as he was on his own alongside the bar. On a nearby table, the Weybridge (or possibly Colchester) History Society were enjoying a meal

with their Syrian Guide. They had clearly been everywhere and got every T shirt going as they exchanged experiences of their many travels. Having put the Middle East to rights, they went on to sort out Saddam Hussein and Northern Ireland. Time will tell if they were successful. I was also extremely pleased to note that the Christmas Carol CD had finally been put away until next year.

Perusing the map of Syria/Damascus later, I observed that the A.S.B.U centre and Carlton Hotel are actually at one edge of a 'greyed out' area. I certainly had no desire to spend any more time in the little hut with the dodgy heater so gave up the idea of the night time view from a certain mini roundabout. Besides, I found that I could take a similar picture to the previous nights encounter through the window in the lift lobby on my floor.

### Monday January 13<sup>th</sup>

The day began as usual, with a coffee and chat with Oussamah in his office. For homework, I had plotted the training studio into my laptop using Corel Draw, so I plugged into the office printer and printed out some blanks at a scale of 1:50 and some with that days practical exercises.

Part way through the morning, a knock at the door was followed by a TV cameraman, a producer, sound man and electrician with a hand basher filed in and took up positions around the room. Lisa whispered to me that they were from Syrian Television and were recording an item about our training for a programme called 'Sabah.' (Today) When we had a 'prayer/smoke/coffee' break, the Producer handed Lisa a microphone with a Syria TV logo and asked her to interview *me* for the telly! Well, that's another first small step for this tiny portion of mankind. The producer promised me a copy of the interview to take home, but it never materialised. Sorry, grandchildren.



Portrait Lighting a la committee

The day went really well although I was conscious that we were often departing from my agenda. What was important to me was the students were able to demonstrate to me that they understood the points that I was trying to and that I was giving them information that was *useful* to them. Interactivity was still high as was a good sense of humour and an atmosphere that was really focussed.

By mid afternoon, a wind had blown away much of the brown haze of pollution. Clouds and cooler weather were approaching from the north. CNN had told me that it was to be so.

At dinner, I was once again entertained by the very passé image of two youngish men smoking hookah pipes whilst playing backgammon. The oral bit looked rather as though each were playing a bagpipe. The clever bit was this cross between a standard lamp and a barbecue. A young man dressed very smartly stood in attendance some

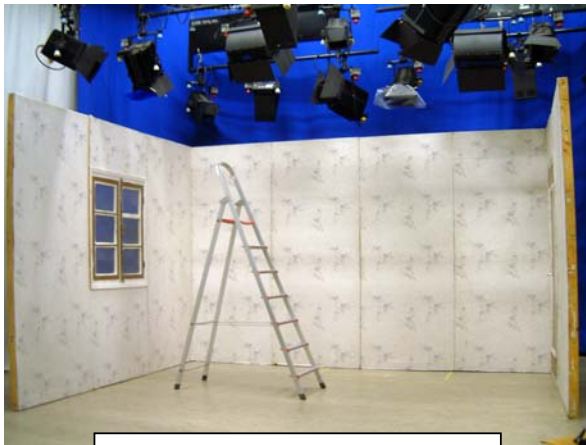


metres away with a suspended tray of hot pieces of charcoal which he periodically applied with tongs to an upside down pepper mill shaped device at the top of the mini standard lamp. Somewhere out of sight, pipes and tubes did the rest. All quite strange to western eyes, but as normal to them as sucking a sweet to you or I.

I later found out that tobacco sits in a small well at the top of a pipe leading down into a watery base. The tobacco is covered with perforated tinfoil and the hot embers sit on top of that. A small-bore pipe with a mouthpiece resembling a translucent Belling Lee TV aerial connector connects to the space above the water in the base. The rest is sheer hydraulics and gas flow.

### Tuesday January 14<sup>th</sup>

The cool breeze duly blew from the north as I lugged my kit round the corner from the hotel to ASBU. Today's 'goodie' was a homemade reflector on lightweight modellers board. One side has LEE 273 Soft silver, the other is plain white board. I figured that soft silver would be more appropriate for reflecting hard sources in a sunny country like Syria.



Found, one simple drama set.

Today's topic and practical was a whistle stop tour through Drama. Yes, just one day to cover all the salient points of the best practices that British L.D.'s use. It was only after spending some considerable time talking through the changes in lighting techniques over the last 25 years or so, that one of the guys chipped in that very little drama was actually made in studios in the 21 Arab States, it was almost all done on location.



A swift change of course and a mid morning recce with Lisa to find potential office for a location exercise. The ideal room did not exist, they all had huge windows and I knew that correction gels were very limited.

Oussamah caught me in the corridor and said that today we would have to finish at 1300 in order that we could be bussed to a restaurant high in the hills outside

Damascus near the border with Lebanon. The idea of completing the drama exercise that day went out of the window, so I mentally rewrote tomorrow's schedule.

The trip was, in fact, well worthwhile. ASBU were treating my lighting course and a non-linear editing course to lunch with a scenic tour of the nearby countryside. When we emerged from the coach at our lunch stop, we were met by a very cold wind. We were just below the snow line with views across to the mountains that formed the natural border with the Lebanon. A fantastic 'Meze' type meal ensued and we returned to the coach satiated and in very good humour. The final touch of the trip was from a high point above Damascus, just as the sky was darkening and the city lights were twinkling below. The natural panorama of the city at twilight was truly memorable.



Damascus at dusk

#### Wednesday January 15<sup>th</sup>

Was cold, certainly by Syrian standards. At least the air was clear of pollution for my 90 second walk to work. Drama was once again in studio, with the problem for me of training guys who had done most of their work on location. ASBU has just one daylight lamp, which does not a drama on location make! However, as there is only one lighting course each year, and there are no Lighting Hire Companies in or near Damascus, there is no justifiable alternative. Ali Sha-ar informed me that my return flight was going to be delayed somewhat. Instead of a civilised 0930 on Saturday, it was to be 0330 on Sunday. Shucks.

Oussamah is keen to improve the lot of his lighting training, however, and he asks me to make up a list of kit that I feel will be useful for the budget that he has at his disposal. A couple of phone calls to London later, and I have a rough shopping list that will fit his requirements, and mine if I am invited back next year. Small tungsten sources and grip and reflector gear feature strongly.

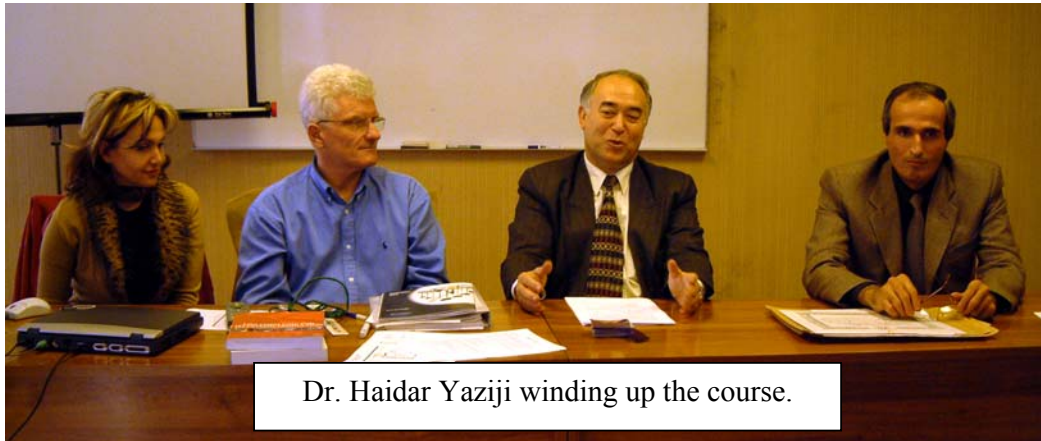
#### Thursday January 16<sup>th</sup>

Last day of the course, and we finish more or less on schedule. Doctor Haidar Yaziji rejoins us to give a speech in which he thanks all present for making the course a success. Not that my knowledge of Arabic had improved, just that Lisa was doing a live translation into my right ear. When she is not working with trainers



Photo opportunity for trainees and trainers

from the UK, she is also a TV presenter and used to have a chat show. Multi talented indeed.



Dr. Haidar Yaziji winding up the course.

Mr Ali Sha-Ar, ASBU's senior administrator came to tell me that he would meet me at the hotel the following morning to give me a conducted tour of some ancient sites near Damascus. Excellent news. I rarely had time for such 'jollies' on previous assignments.

Friday January 17<sup>th</sup>

Is the Muslim Holy Day, but Ali Sha-ar kindly arranged a sight seeing day to Malooula and Saydanaya to see two important religious shrines. The driver picked me up and we made a quiet journey across the city (mostly because my Arabic was as diminishingly small as his English) in the ASBU Volvo-with seat belts! His driving was fine, but I felt that the belt was re-assuring in the slightly scary 'Sunday driving' of Damascus. Ali joined us and it was off to the small and ancient settlement of Malooula to the Convent and shrine of Saint Takla. It was hollowed out of the limestone cliffs surrounding the town, which was a labyrinth of small houses where, as Ali put it, 'One mans floor is another mans ceiling.' Most of the people of the town speak Aramaic, the language of Christ's time.



Malooula with a 118 Cyclorama backdrop

At the entrance to the shrine, there was a small stone plinth with a tiny pool on its hollowed out top surface. "A drop of water falls every minute throughout the year and its level never changes," he told me. A short walk through a narrow limestone gorge where a small stream ran took us to a luxurious hotel atop the cliffs which gave us a good viewpoint, although hardly won any points for fitting in with it's surroundings. 100 metres away was a small church, which had miraculously survived for at least

2000 years without being destroyed or desecrated. Some of the wooden beams that we could see had been carbon tested and their age was verified.



Saydanya Shrine

At Saydanaya, we saw another shrine in the Convent of our lady of Saydanaya in which there were 1400-year-old icons. (Microsoft please note) Lunch was taken in a traditional Syrian restaurant way up in the mountains and continued until the sun went down. Tomorrow, Ali promises me more exploration.

### Saturday January 18<sup>th</sup>

Cool and quite cloudy. Walked round to ASBU and had a debrief chat with Oussamah followed by a chat and a 'chai' (tea) with the Director of Training. Mr Ali Sha-ar then took me on a whistle stop tour of old Damascus. I also managed to get some presents bought with expert help from my guides. And yes, my very own hookah for the princely sum of \$5 – complete with fruit flavoured tobacco.



Mr Ali Sha-ar and Mr Oussamah Cheikh of A.S.B.U.

### Sunday January 19<sup>th</sup>: 0330

I normally enjoy flying, but the journey back to the UK in what can best be described as a flying shed, was not my most memorable flight. I didn't know that 747's came that basic. Maybe it had been picked up in the aeronautical equivalent of a car boot sale. However, it flew on time and landed on time at Heathrow.

As I sat in a cold, draughty bus shelter waiting for my Flight Link coach to take me home, I would almost have preferred to be in that roadside hut with a dodgy stove and endless cups of sweet Syrian tea. Almost.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks are due to the Thomson Foundation for giving me permission to print this article, and, of course, for having given me the opportunity to experience my training road to Damascus. Thanks are also due to Mr. Oussamah Cheikh and Mr. Ali Sha-ar of A.S.B.U. who were not only the perfect hosts, but also extremely hospitable and helpful.