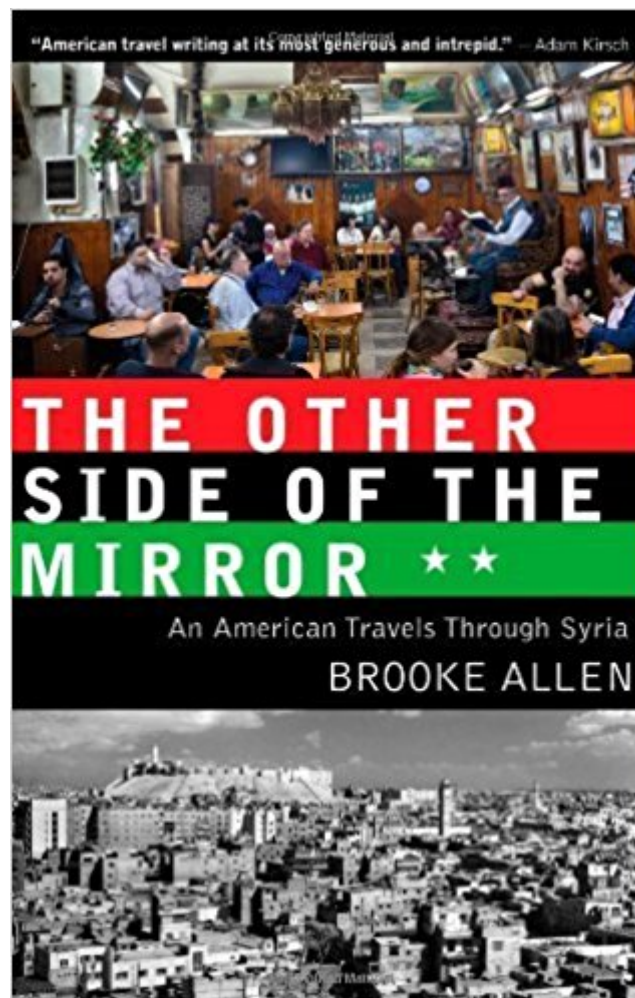




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# The Other Side Of The Mirror: An American Travels Through Syria By Brooke Allen (2011-04-05)



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## Customer Reviews

I discovered *The Other Side of the Mirror: An American Travels Through Syria* after reading Brooke Allen's balanced short biography of Benazir Bhutto for her icon series, and I'm really glad that I did. I admired Allen's ability to create a complex portrait against a tumultuous background in a short space in *Benazir Bhutto*. *The Other Side of the Mirror* allows her more freedom to let her thoughts flow but also features extensive research. This is a travel memoir, in the tradition of countless other travel memoirs. There is a bit of intrepidness to it, not because it is in any way difficult to travel in Syria, but because Americans usually don't. I was last in Syria as a child in the 1970s, when my family lived in Lebanon. Before the Lebanese Civil War, it was more common for American's to visit Syria, and I was curious to know what the country is like now. Or rather, I was curious to know what Syria was like before the Civil War that began in 2011, about the time this book was published. Brooke Allen made two trips to Syria in 2009, one in the spring with her husband and teenaged daughters and one in the fall with a female friend, who had a particular interest in St. Simeon Stylites, an ascetic monk from 5th century Aleppo. Syria is as rich in history as any country could be, and Allen and her companions trekked all over in search of the culture's ancient and modern history. There is quite a lot of it. Allen offers historical background, literary references, sometimes the accounts of travelers from other eras for comparison, and her own experiences and observations about the places she visits, people she meets, and culture that surrounds her as she visits markets, museums, hotels, ruins, churches, mosques, and restaurants. The book is organized loosely by topic: The Destination, Time, Ruins, Faith, Fighting, Leaders. Allen doesn't follow a chronological order. Her two trips are presented more or less as one, not sequentially. *Faith* is by far the longest chapter and includes some history of Syria's heterogeneous religious communities, from now-extinct pagan cults through Christianity, the Middle Ages, and the spread of Islam, visiting churches,

monasteries, mosques, and museums. The introductory chapter includes Allen's thoughts on the warm welcome she received and some of the obvious problems facing modern Syria, like suburban sprawl. The chapter entitled "Time" catches some topics that didn't fit elsewhere but are evidence of Syria's extraordinary history. Damascus and Aleppo have been inhabited for 8 millennia, after all, and Syria is a direct heir to Greco-Roman culture. "Ruins" is self-explanatory, though it doesn't confine itself to Roman ruins. Allen begins with the story of the Baron Hotel, in which she stayed, nice enough but past its heyday. She visits Palmyra, Mari, Dura Europos, Ugarit, Bosra. The chapter on "Fighting" begins with the Tishreen Panorama Museum "and its peculiar North Korean design- and moves on to sites from the Crusades: Krak des Chevaliers, Qalaat Saladin, Aleppo Citadel, Damascus Citadel, the mosaic museum at M'arrat al-Numan. In her final chapter, "Leaders", Allen addresses the origins of the ubiquitous presidential portraits, which seem at odds with the image Bashar al-Assad has tried to cultivate, at least before the war. She touches on the history of the first four Caliphs and the balance of the qualities of invincibility and humility that Muslim cultures still expect in their leaders. Brooke Allen didn't expect what she found in Syria, "a country whose reality confounded all my preconceived notions and inspired me to seek out many historical and literary sources for enlightenment." That makes this travel memoir all the more poignant "and, since Syria has been in the news, all the more relevant. In some instances, we see the seeds of discontent that turned to protest that opened the door to violence in the many over-educated but unemployed men forced to scrape together a living any way they can. They are the casualties of the rapid adoption of neo-liberal economic policies under Pres. Bashar al-Assad, which eroded social safety nets, sanctions against Syria since it refused to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and 1.5 million Iraqi refugees that subsequently poured in. A sad predicament for a country with so much potential.

Do read this written by an American Jew who took her family with rebellious looking teen age children to Syria and was welcome everywhere. She returned months later with a woman friend and traveled the whole country unmolested. After reading this you will understand that the so called civil war in Syria was instigated from forces outside the country that funnelled arms and foreign fighters into the country to create another so called Arab Spring.

In 1982, I saw beautiful land filled with a generous, industrious people. One could easily trace the history of numerous people of antiquity through its treasure trove of archaeological sites. At the

time, I felt many of its treasures had been looted. Seeing the destruction and chaos currently underway, It is comforting to know that many of those splendid artifacts are safely on display in museums and art galleries in other countries.

I'm really glad I read this book. I ordered it when I woke up to the fact that I had no knowledge at all about Syria except the current news about its role vis-a-vis Lebanon and Israel, and then the latest about the "Arab Spring." Well, I've seen Lawrence of Arabia numerous times, so I had some (wrong) impression of events in Damascus around the end of World War I.... I felt like U.S. news could tell me anything and I had no way to evaluate it. *The Other Side of the Mirror* gives a first hand account by an American visitor who made two trips there in the last 5-6 years and really got into the local vibe as a visitor can see it, and into the huge richness and complexity of the place and of its many ethnic/religious groups and their long histories. It gave me a sense of who the national leaders are right now and what a peculiar position they hold. It also enabled me to get beyond simplistic ideas of what they and Syria have now and what they want. In some places where the archeology got a bit too detailed for me, I skimmed, but in most chapters I read straight through. The author has a nice, humorous style and seems to have worked hard to find out objectively all she could. Her experiences there were basically very positive and stimulating, and she felt that Syrians generally treat western travelers very respectfully and helpfully. There are lots of photos. .

How ironic that I would run across this book portraying a secular country welcoming American travelers with typical Muslim hospitality when daily TV images are showing a country being torn apart by Civil War. As the title indicates, Allen's goal is to go beyond US media images which fail to provide a window looking out on the world but rather a mirror that reflects our own fears and obsessions. In this, she succeeds. She is bright, well read and well traveled, as well as an observant traveler eager to meet local citizens, enjoy their foods, and explore their history and culture. She first traveled to Syria in the spring of 2009 with her family and was so impressed that she went back with two friends for a much longer visit in the fall. It was a time when US troops were still fighting in neighboring Iraq and the US state department was warning US citizens against Syrian travel. Although Allen is an excellent writer and includes numerous personal photographs, the descriptions of archaeological ruins which abound in Syria become a bit much for the average reader. One of the book's strengths is the selected bibliography which would be a great benefit to US citizens whether they intend to visit Syria or not. The book however lacks any maps which would greatly help to orient readers. Allen seems overly impressed with the secular goals of Syria's

government and surprisingly unaware of deep ethnic and religious divisions and resentments that will explode in violence by the time her book is published. Despite this, her book is an excellent guide to understanding Syrian -- and broader Middle Eastern -- history and culture.

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