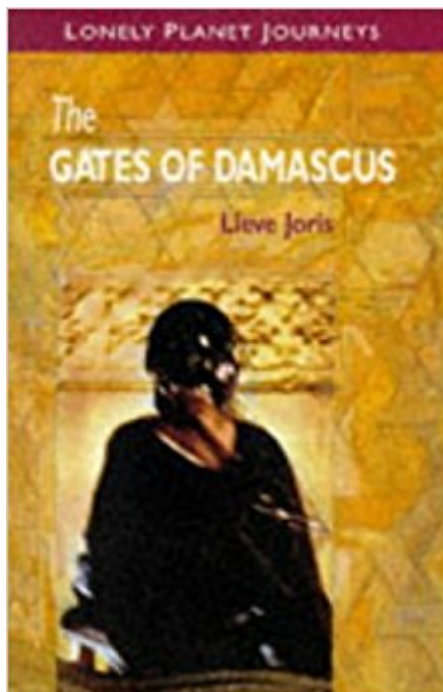


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# The Gates Of Damascus



## Synopsis

Through her friendship with a Syrian woman and her family, Lieve Joris leads readers into the fascinating world that lies beyond the gates of Damascus, presenting an intimate portrait of modern Syria.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *The Gates of Damascus* author Lieve Joris presents an intimate portrait of modern Syria. Joris went to Syria in the wake of the Gulf War and stayed with a Syrian woman, Hala, whom she'd met many years before at a conference in Baghdad. When she arrives in Damascus, she discovers that Hala's husband was taken by the secret police 11 years earlier and has still not returned. Sharing a tiny apartment with Hala and her daughter, Asma, Joris is introduced to the hidden world that modern Syrians occupy--a world of family and the day-to-day challenges of living with fear of betrayal--even by one's closest friends and relatives. And over all is the current situation in the Middle East. As Joris comes to know Hala's friends and family, the chasm between her own European assumptions and the reality of life in Damascus widens, bringing with it potential danger for her friend. *The Gates of Damascus* reads like a thriller at times as the subtle paranoia that defines Syria begins to infect Joris as well. Mostly, however, it is a penetrating, compassionate portrait of contemporary Arab society, and a rational sounding board for the many political and cultural viewpoints contained therein.

Lonely Planet has chosen to launch a new line of travel literature books with this well-written reminiscence of a stay in Syria. Belgium-born Joris visited her Muslim friend Hala and Hala's 11-year-old daughter in Damascus, and she recounts their life in a fundamentalist society. Hala's husband was jailed as a political prisoner when their child was an infant, and her fear of the dreaded mukhabarat or secret police is pervasive. The women spend evenings at home, where they relax in their nightgowns and endlessly discuss Hala's relationship with her husband. She is allowed to visit him, bring changes of clothing as the seasons change and take home trinkets he crafts in jail, but she has fallen in love with someone else and is unsure what she would do when and if he is released. Anxious to see more of Syria, the author goes on a desert walking trip with a group of Syrian Christians, whose sympathy for President Assad is markedly different from Hala's views. The author, who remains a shadowy presence, keeps her own politics largely hidden, although she objects to Hala's rabid anti-Semitism. More about Joris, how she met Hala, or even when this trip took place would have been helpful. As it is, the book offers an interesting portrait of women's daily life in modern Damascus, even if its appeal is limited by the author's personal reticence Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Lieve Joris is a Flemish (Belgian) travel-author living in Amsterdam with a particular interest in Africa and the Arab world. She wrote this book after the Gulf War after living for six months in Damascus. She stayed with Hala, a Syrian acquaintance, and her little daughter. Lieve shared the life of this Syrian family. She shared their happiness, daily problems but also more serious problems (Hala's husband was imprisoned on political grounds). Life in this family seemed also rather claustrophobic to Lieve : Hala shares a lot of time with her parents, sisters etc in a rather 'enclosed' culture. Lieve soon feels there are little means of contact with other people. Therefore she also started making some trips in the country, partly to more touristic places (like the Roman ruins in Palmyra, the town Aleppo). But she also has a talent to meet interesting people (intellectuals, artists etc) and so she finds out more about Syrian society after the Gulf War. "The Gates of Damascus" is also one of Joris' more personal accounts, the reader feels she's actually involved in what she experiences

For three years I've lived in Damascus, during the Gulf War. I've read "lonely planet gates of Damascus" in it's original state, in Dutch. Everything seemed so familiar to me it could have been my own diary. I really adore this book and I'd like to recommend this book to everyone who will be living in an Arabic country, because it will give you a realistic view of the present situation in an Arabic society. Please bear in mind that Syria is not the slightest like, for instance, Saoedi-Arabia.

Others who have been living in Syria might find it fascinating to know how the life in the Syrian ghetto actually is. You will find the conversations and communication problems very familiar! Further I'd like to read more books like these; so if anyone can help me, please mail...

Every book from Lieve Joris is an ultimate window in certain affairs of the current world, such as Hungaria, Zaire (yet known as the Republic of Congo), Mali, The Gulf States, Syria, Egypt etc. The words the writer chooses are dedicated to their subject. And Lieve Joris knows she is a subject too. This book about Damascus tells us about the innerlife of the innercity of Damascus. It is a story about the women in Damascus, the men, the politics, real life, the dreams of the past and the no-hopes of the future. This is how I see it. If you like newspapers and human interest in a journalistic way: try this book! (And all of her others aswell)

I am very interested in the material that Ms. Joris covers in her book. The most lasting impression however is how well she portrays the psychological weight of being a woman in the middle east. I sort of felt like I had spent 4 months in Syria after reading it. It rings true -- based on my travel experiences and lives of friends. If you liked this (or are interested in Middle Eastern women's issues) you'll probably like *Nine Parts of Desire*, *The Price of Honor*, and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (Saadawi). Generally more academic, Fatima Mernissi is a good writer.

This author is so sensitive towards her subjects. I really love this writer. She tackles difficult questions and situations. This is an inside story where Joris looks at situations (Syrian 'common' life) from her own perspective and she tries to do this from the country's/peoples perspective. Joris also examines herself along this perspective. Like a real journalist on one hand and like a real novelist on the other hand, in my opinion.

This is a lovely book on daily life in Syria, dated but still insightful. A pity it is out of print. Hopefully, it will be republished soon.

I haven't read the book, but I am a Damascene. If the author had lived in Damascus for few years and if one of the reviewers had lived there for 3, I am a person who lived there for 22 years. I do not think that life there is full of threats and betrayal. I am a christian and I never encountered a problem there. Damascus is a beautiful city and I carry it in my heart wherever I go. Next time when someone wants to write about a certain city or population, make sure they represent everyone and not just

concentrate on what serves their point of view best, hence the 1 star for this book.

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