

TIMELESS Travels

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THE BARON, ALEPPO

FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART

THE BARON, ALEPPO

REMEMBERING SYRIA'S LEGENDARY HOTEL

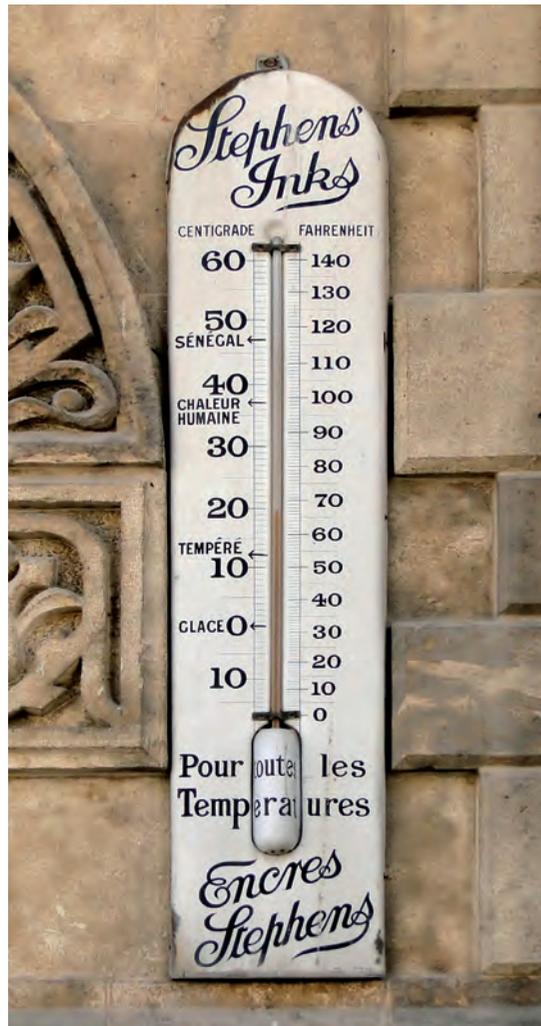
By Duncan J. D. Smith

*“Confort parfait, situation unique,
le seul recommande par les Agences de Tourisme.”*

So reads an old glass advertisement extolling the virtues of the Hotel Baron in the Syrian city of Aleppo. It hung in the hotel's foyer but like the oversized Stephens' Ink thermometer on the wall outside, it's probably been hidden for safekeeping, stolen or destroyed. Fortunately the storied hotel has survived the worst of the country's recent and vicious civil war, but it's uncertain whether paying guests will ever return. Even had the Baron been destroyed, its legend would live on, thanks to the important part it's played in Aleppo's eventful history.

ARMENIAN ORIGINS

The Baron's beginnings go back to the late 19th century, when European tourism in the Middle East was in its infancy. The story goes that sometime around 1870 an Armenian landowner and devout Christian, one Krikor Mazloumian, undertook a pilgrimage from Turkey to Jerusalem. Whilst there he noticed how well visitors were accommodated in purpose-built guest houses. The impression was compounded on his way home when he passed through Aleppo, where by comparison Europeans were obliged to stay in traditional urban caravanserais known as khans, with communal rooms and none of their usual home comforts. The canny Krikor spotted a business opportunity, and it was one he was happy to take given the persecution faced by Armenians in Turkey. So it was that the Mazloumian family relocated to Aleppo in the 1880s and built the city's



Left: Baron Hotel Stephens thermometer (Image: Bernard Gagnon CC BY-SA 3.0)

Right: A vintage glass advertisement extolling the virtues of the Baron (Images © Duncan J.D. Smith)

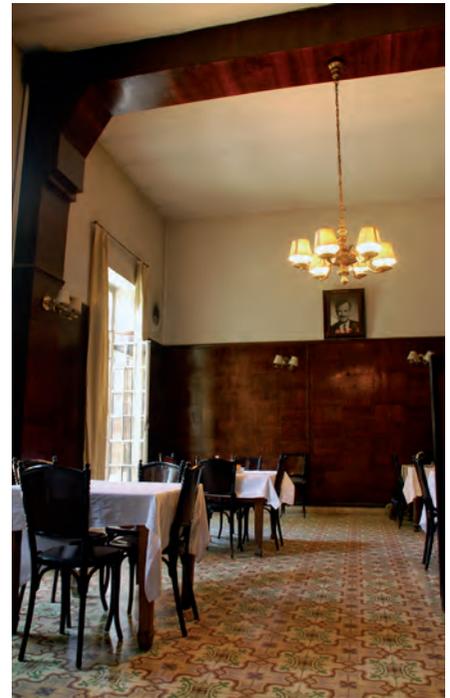
ALEP



HOTEL BARON

L'UNIQUE HOTEL DE 1^{ERE} CLASSE A ALEP
CHAUFFAGE CENTRAL PARTOUT
CONFORT PARFAIT SITUATION UNIOUE
LE SEUL RECOMMANDE PAR
LES AGENCES DE TOURISME

MOUHITAR
DAMES



Clockwise from top left: The Baron Hotel still stands in Aleppo's Aziziyeh district, the Baron's dining room, the bar at the Baron, reception area and hall and stairs. Images © Duncan J.D. Smith

Right: The fortified entrance to Aleppo's citadel (Image: Bernard Gagnon CC BY-SA 3.0)



first guest house for foreigners, the Ararat, named after the mountain revered by Armenians. Although it, too, occupied a khan it offered individual rooms, with their own water jugs, basins and towels, which were a significant novelty at the time.

Success came quickly and Krikor soon relocated the Ararat to the upgraded Hotel du Parc. Then his sons, Armenak and Onnig, enlarged the family business by opening their own hotels, the Azizieh Palace and the Aleppo Palace. Both were located in what at the time were the outskirts of Old Aleppo, at the edge of a marsh teeming with wildfowl. Today a part of the city's built-up Aziziyeh district, it was there that Krikor and his sons eventually pooled their resources and set about building the Hotel Baron, Syria's first great hotel.

Construction of the ground floor, with its breezy terrace, wood-panelled dining room, lofty bar and smoking lounge, was commenced in 1909. By the time the hotel opened in 1911, the first storey bedrooms had been added, reached by a grand stone staircase (a second storey was added in the late 1930s). It is remarkable to think that the hotel's first guests would have had the opportunity to shoot wild duck in the neighbourhood.

When the first guests arrived, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire, which continued to control this part of the world until after the First World War. The country then became a French protectorate mandated by the League of Nations. This explains why the street on which the hotel stands was originally named after a French General, Henri Gouraud (1867–1946). As commander of French forces during the Franco-Turkish War (1918–1921), he presided over the creation of the French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon. Only after Syria gained independence in 1946 was the street renamed Baron Street, which has stuck to this day.

The hotel's distinctive name is easy to explain. The Mazloumian brothers were both known affectionately by the Armenian name 'Baron' meaning 'mister'. With the hotel quickly established as a centre for Aleppo's expatriate community, its guests inevitably picked up on the name and began using it themselves. To this day the hotel is still referred to as 'Barons' in deference to the two brothers despite its 'official' name being Hotel Baron.

BAGHDAD RAILWAY

The opening of the Baron was a small but significant milestone in Aleppo's long and tumultuous history. Unlike the capital, Damascus, which was always Syria's holy city, Aleppo had been a trading centre since Roman times, with traces of human settlement stretching back a further 6,000 years. It was the Romans who made the city into a major staging post on the desert trade routes, notably the Silk Road connecting China to the Middle East and Europe.

Aleppo's fortunes waxed and waned over the years. The city was sacked by the Persians in 611 CE, taken in the late 10th century by the Byzantines, shaken by earthquakes and rebuilt by the Seljuks, besieged by the Crusaders in 1124, and raided by the Mongols in 1260 and 1401. Through it all, though, Aleppo survived thanks to its strategic position between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean. Eventually in 1516 it came under the sway of the Ottomans, where it would remain for the next four centuries.

Syria prospered under the Turks well into the 19th century, with Aleppo attracting European merchants, especially from France and England. Latterly the country benefitted from Turkey's good strategic relations with Germany, notably in 1903, when the Germans commenced construction of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway (Baghdad in those days being an Ottoman city). Trains called in at Aleppo, where in 1912 an attractive station known as the Gare de Baghdad was opened not far from the Baron (it is still there today). The railway brought with it a new class of European traveller – from aristocrats and adventurers to soldiers and spies – and inevitably they chose the Hotel Baron as the place to stay.

By the turn of the century, however, an increasingly harsh Turkish government had begun prompting the growth of Arab nationalism and thoughts of independence. One of the key players in the events that followed was Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888–1935), better known as Lawrence of Arabia. He first walked into the Baron in 1914, whilst working as an archaeologist at the Hittite city of Carchemish. He slept in Room 202 and his bar bill is proudly displayed in a glass-fronted



Top: T.E. Lawrence and archaeologist Leonard Woolley at the excavations at Carchemish

Above: Agatha Christie with archaeologist husband Max Mallowan at their Winterbrook House, 1950



curiosity cabinet in the hotel's smoking lounge. It was Lawrence who managed to unite the region's disparate tribes after the Emir of Mecca had taken up arms against the Turks in 1917. At the head of the so-called Arab Revolt, he encouraged Arab forces to take Damascus, where in March 1920 King Faisal I (1883–1933) proclaimed Syrian independence. Faisal famously gave a speech on the subject from the hotel's main balcony.

FAMOUS GUESTS

The Berlin–Baghdad Railway was not completed until 1940. Until then parts of the journey had to be made by motor coach, and this also went for the fabled Simplon–Orient Express, which from 1930 used the railway for its Eastern extension

between Istanbul and Baghdad. Known as the Taurus Express and also run by the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, it brought more customers to the Baron, which by now had established itself as one of the best hotels in the region – and the only one recommended by Thomas Cook.

The most famous visitor was writer Agatha Christie (1890–1976). Already known for her detective novels based around super sleuth Hercule Poirot, she began frequenting the hotel in 1930. That was the year she married her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan (1904–1978), whom she met two years earlier, when he was an assistant to Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) at Ur in Iraq (Christie's *Murder in Mesopotamia*

Above: Guests could plan their sightseeing on this archaeological map of Syria found in the foyer of the hotel. Image: © Duncan J.D. Smith



was inspired by the royal tombs found at the site). Mallowan was now digging his own sites at Chagar Bazar and Tell Brak in north-eastern Syria, and Christie used Aleppo as a convenient stopover en route to visit him.

Considering how long and arduous the journey from England was in those days, Christie's excitement at stopping off in Aleppo was understandable: "Alep! Shops! A bath! My hair shampooed! Friends to see!" She was no softie though and with one failed marriage under her belt, she was determined to make this one work. Resilient, hardworking and genuinely interested in her husband's work, she embraced expedition life and eventually wound up as dig photographer, as recounted in her charming book *Come, Tell Me How You Live*.

The colourful roster of passengers travelling on the Orient Express in the 1930s provided Christie with the dramatic personae for one of her most popular books, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). She stayed in Room 203 at the Baron and wrote parts of the book on the hotel's main balcony, whilst sipping tea. Although the bulk of the story is set on the Simplon-Orient Express, the book opens in Aleppo with Hercule Poirot boarding the Istanbul-bound Taurus Express.

Agatha and Max frequented the Baron numerous times thereafter, and later befriended Armenak's son, Krikor 'Koko' Mazloumian. He managed the hotel with his English wife, Sally, who had arrived in Aleppo in 1947 to take up the position of matron at the nearby Altounyan hospital. Dr. Assadour



Altounyan, who introduced the X-Ray machine to Syria, founded the hospital around the same time as the Baron was built, the two families being great friends and key members of Aleppo society. It's also worth noting here that Assadour Altounyan's grandchildren eventually found their way into the pages of Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* – but that's another story.

Koko and Sally continued to accommodate celebrities, as Armenak had done before them. Their names are preserved in the hotel's leather-bound visitors' book. A veritable *Who's Who* of the age, it includes French leader Charles de Gaulle, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, the Swedish King Gustaf VI Adolf, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and founder of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, all of whom used the hotel's so-called Presidential Suite. Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, who stayed before the suite's inauguration, used Room 201 instead. Other notable guests included seasoned travel writer Dame Freya Stark, enigmatic diplomat-turned-archaeologist Baron Max von Oppenheim, the aviators Amy Johnson and Charles Lindbergh, American billionaire David Rockefeller, and even the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin.

Famous faces at the Baron, left, clockwise: Freya Stark, Gamal Nassar, David Rockefeller, Yuri Gagarin and Amy Johnson.

Right: Charles de Gaulle



CLOSED DOORS

By the time of Koko Mazlounian's death in 1993 times had changed, with his son, Armen, now in charge and Syria a different place politically. Moreover there were fewer celebrities at the hotel and instead more tourists, who after flying into Damascus were moving on to Aleppo, with its ancient Citadel and labyrinthine souk, as part of a packaged circular tour of Syria's cultural treasures.

Syria had finally taken control of its own affairs in 1946 after British and Free French troops ousted pro-German Vichy forces. Any dreams of civilian rule were short-lived though, with a series of coups bringing to power military men with nationalist and socialist interests. By 1954, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party had secured support from Syria's Alawite and Druze minorities and had no rivals. It was an Alawite air force lieutenant-general, Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000), who in 1971 seized power and became President. Again the Baron was a witness to history with Hafez staying at the hotel shortly afterwards.

Hafez ruled Syria for thirty years with an iron fist before his son, Bashar al-Assad (b. 1965) reluctantly took over. His father's shadow loomed large though and, despite a promising start,

Syrian intellectuals and Western observers were disappointed when Bashar began curtailing political and press freedoms, and suppressing any protests against the regime. He also continued the cult of personality started by his father ensuring that large photos of both men adorned the Baron's public rooms.

It was the violent suppression of one such protest in March 2011 that triggered the Syrian Civil War. Part of the broader Arab Spring, the incident was quickly hijacked and exploited not only by various competing rebel factions inside Syria but also by the burgeoning Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the West. The war reached Aleppo a year later and the Baron found itself in the regime-controlled western part of the city. In November 2014, with the front line just metres from the hotel and mortars whizzing overhead, Armen Mazlounian reluctantly closed his doors.

He vowed not to leave the city though and instead began offering his empty bedrooms to homeless refugees. Not for the first time was the Baron used in this way. A century earlier, Armen's grandfather Armenak and his brother Onnig had taken in Armenian refugees deported from Turkey. With international aid for Armenians forbidden, the brothers used their contacts and courage to protect many refugees in Aleppo or else secure safe passage for them to Beirut. It was a risky business though and in 1915, when the Ottomans set about massacring many Armenians, the Mazlounians were exiled for a year to Zahlé in Lebanon. Even then they were able to take a trainload of refugees with them on the pretext they were family members.

Sadly Armen Mazlounian died in 2016 and didn't live to see the gradual winding down of hostilities in Aleppo. The Baron, its age-old windows broken and walls cracked, is currently being watched over by his widow, Rubina Tashjian, on behalf of Armen's three sisters, the last of the Mazlounians, who own the building but live elsewhere. Having survived wars, deportations and coups, and all the while acting as a mirror on Syrian life, it would be a great shame if the Baron was not able to rise one more time, phoenix-like from the ashes. **TT**

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