



A picture shows the ancient basilica which dates back to the 5th century in Qalb Lozeh village in northwestern Syria. — AFP photos

# In war-torn Syria, an ancestor of Notre-Dame still stands

An arched entrance flanked by two towers, elaborate carvings and a broad-aisled nave: a 5th century limestone church in northwestern Syria is the architectural forerunner of France's famed Notre-Dame cathedral. Hemmed by the village of Qalb Lozeh (Arabic for Heart of the Almond), the cathedral which goes by the same name is widely hailed as Syria's finest example of Byzantine-era architecture. And it is believed to have been the source of inspiration for Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals in Europe, including the Paris landmark Notre-Dame.

"It is the earliest known example of the twin tower facade flanking a highly elaborate arched entrance, the precursor to what became known as the Romanesque style," says Middle East cultural expert Diana Darke. Romanesque architecture evolved into the Gothic style that defines Notre-Dame, she tells AFP. The layout of the church in northwestern Syria has many similarities with Notre-Dame, she says. "The specific similarities between Notre-Dame and Qalb Lozeh are first and foremost, the twin tower design flanking the elaborate arched portal," says Darke.

Inside Qalb Lozeh, "the similarities are in the pillars dividing the church into three broad aisles—the nave and side-aisles—a deliberate echoing of the Holy Trinity, with three sweeping arches resting on broad capitals to spread and distribute the weight which carried the clerestory windows and the original wooden roof over the nave," she adds.

The abandoned church is within a cluster of 40 so-called "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria" which UNESCO has included on its World Heritage List since 2011. Two years later as fighting ravaged Syria and its cul-



tural heritage the villages were placed on UNESCO's list of endangered sites. UNESCO says the villages including Qalb Lozeh—home to pagan temples and ancient churches—illustrate "the transition from the ancient pagan world of the Roman Empire to Byzantine Christianity".

### Crusaders export design

Qalb Lozeh was built by Syrian Christians whose wealth was based on wine and olive oil production, says Darke. The church was frequented by pilgrims and is thought to have been a key stop on the way to the nearby basilica of Saint Simeon the Stylite. "Merchants, pilgrims and monks moved constantly between this area and Europe over the

centuries," she says. "So it's not surprising that the design ideas found their way gradually back to Europe, even before the crusaders of the 12th century," she adds.

Syrian historian Fayez Kawsara said that crusaders brought Qalb Lozeh's architectural style to Europe in the 12th century. "Anyone who delves deep in the study of Gothic art and especially Gothic churches will find that this architectural style travelled to Europe (from Syria)" he says, pointing to the cathedral's soaring arches, its detailed sculpting and its squared towers. "The biggest proof of this is... Notre-Dame cathedral," adds Kawsara. Qalb Lozeh—which is much smaller in size than the Paris landmark, lies in the jihadist-held region of Idlib.

Children used the abandoned church as a playground and graffiti has been scrawled on the outside and inside walls of the cathedral. Caretakers who guarded the church quickly left after Syria's conflict erupted in 2011. Since then it has fallen into neglect, says villager Issam Ibrahim. "It was not being protected and as village residents, we took it upon ourselves to protect the site," he says. Wissam Mohammad, another resident, said the church holds important significance for the local community. "It is not just a pile of old stones. It is a symbol of Syria's culture," says Mohammad.—AFP

## Tourists follow 'Game of Thrones' trail in N Ireland

Wielding a replica broadsword, Indian tourist Akshay Mannur duels with friends—re-enacting scenes from "Game of Thrones" on the Northern Ireland pilgrimage trail for devotees of the blockbuster fantasy TV show. Since the blood and guts series began its rise to prominence in 2011, fans have started to flock to the coastal caves and ruined castles of the British province where much of the HBO television production was shot. "Every new step is like something new, it's more than my expectations," 23-year-old student Mannur marveled. "It's a beautiful country—Northern Ireland is just amazing."

### Multinational tour buses

Tourism Northern Ireland estimates the magical show—in its final season—drew 120,000 visitors to the province in 2016, generating £30 million. One in six visitors now comes to Northern Ireland to visit shooting locations, according to their estimates. Along the largely coastal trail, a short drive outside the capital of Belfast, that popularity is clear to see. A steady hum of buses and coaches are marshalled in and out of parking lots on strict schedules, and sleepy village shops throng with tourists. "The last week, I think on Saturday past, we had a bus with 24 nationalities on it," said tour guide Patrick Rogan at the mouth of the Cushendun Caves, the site of a pivotal plot point in the series. "We had people from Patagonia, from New Zealand, from Japan, from Russia, from South Korea and Europe, so I think that tells its own story." Since 2012 his employer—the "Stones and Thrones" tour—has offered daily outings out of Belfast, manned mainly by guides who have acted as extras on the show.

Today they run at least two full buses a day, he said, competing with at least four other companies offering a similar service. Other more bespoke tour services offer immersive experiences—axe-throwing, archery, and photo opportunities with a pair of wolves that starred in the epic series.

### The dark history

A popular comparison holds that "Game of Thrones" is to Northern Ireland tourism what "Lord of the Rings" has been

to New Zealand. But Northern Ireland's very recent bloody past during the so-called "Troubles"—when 3,500 were killed in 30 years of sectarian strife—makes the boom particularly welcome. "The dark history that was here is coming out," said Irish actor Liam Cunningham, a stalwart character in the series now feted as the most expensive to ever be filmed for the small screen. "The place is blooming, and for us to have this show here and be part of that transition is joyful."



People walk along the Dark Hedges tree tunnel, which was featured in the TV series Game of Thrones, near Ballymonee in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. — AFP photos

### This still has longevity

Cunningham was speaking at the opening of a touring exhibition of costume and scenery pieces in Belfast, the same week as the new season of the series premiered. Ranked displays of dragon skulls, intricately crafted weapons and interactive exhibits are preceded by a gallery of landscape prints, depicting the countryside shooting locations. A caption on one image reads "Views to die horribly for", whilst another reads "Sun, sea and savagery", referring to the show's reputation for bloodily killing off major characters.

They are testament to the canny local tourist board, making efforts to cement the link between their territory and the series. "I think our association with such a global success helps to transform the image of Northern Ireland across the globe," said John McGrillen, chief executive of Tourism Northern Ireland. "In many ways that gives you PR that you just simply couldn't buy." With the final season of "Game of Thrones" under way, the fever pitch devotion to the series may be about to end.

But with spin-off projects in the pipeline and a studio tour development due to open in Northern Ireland next year, the province still hopes for tourism revenues. "We think this still has longevity," said McGrillen.—AFP

## Beauty industry to witness massive increase of \$32.2bn by 2025

### Boutiqaat signs agreement with Huda Beauty

With a booming retail market and a taste for the latest fashion trends, Kuwaiti based brands are making their mark in the global fashion scene. The country's high spending power and taste for luxury goods has fueled entrepreneurs to establish local brands that cater to the high demand witnessed by both Kuwait and the region. In Kuwait's latest fashion news, Boutiqaat, an online beauty platform offering over 700 international, local and exclusive brands, signed an agreement to become the exclusive distributor of Huda Beauty products in the region.

The e-commerce platform has developed a reputation of signing exclusive partnerships with some of the region's most powerful celebrities and influencers. With its vision of becoming the go to one-stop beauty hub, Boutiqaat offers the trendiest selections in make-up and beauty products. By joining forces with Huda Beauty, Boutiqaat will now offer one of the world's fastest-growing beauty brands launched by the infamous beauty blogger and businesswoman, Huda Kattan. Since it was established in 2013, Huda Beauty has been expanding rapidly on a regional and international scale and has also become the top beauty Instagram account with over 26 million followers.

When asked about the exclusive agreement, Abdulwahab Al-Essa, co-founder of Boutiqaat, said, "At the core of our business model, we are keen to offer our customers with the latest fashion trends in exclusive and mainstream cosmetics in the region. Our goal is to develop an innovative platform offering the latest beauty brands while providing influencers with an e-commerce platform to offer their followers with their exclusive product lines."

Co-founder Al-Essa continued to say that the beauty hub has been progressively developing its

platform to meet and exceed customer demand, now offering a variety of over 25,000 products from all over the globe with delivery across the GCC. The platform also offers customers a full-fledged user experience with the option to catch up on the latest make-up tutorials, as well as provide an access point to connect customers with their favorite brands and celebrities through social media.

When asked about the platform's strategic direction, Al-Essa added, "Our goal is to only offer the latest in beauty and fashion products but also to provide our customers with an unrivaled user experience by anticipating their wants and needs when it comes to the cosmetics industry. This requires keeping our customers updated with the latest new, providing valuable research backed by a passionate team who is highly dedicated in providing access to the latest fashion trends, tips and expert advice. Our team at Boutiqaat has been successful in anticipating the need of our current customer base and will continue progressively to develop our platform while adding new beauty products as we continue to grow."

The beauty industry is expected to witness a massive increase through the support of social media and digital platforms. The expected increase is estimated to be around \$32.2 billion by 2025. In terms of the Middle East, the market has seen growth at a rapid pace in comparison to other regions around the world within the beauty and cosmetics industry. The retail sector is witnessing higher levels of consumer demands for beauty and personal care products and are contributing towards developing the market.