Dear George:

An early morning flight brought me from Karachi to Damascus where we arrived at 9:30 a.m. Due to the fact that there is a difference of three and one half hours in the time between the two cities, I recovered another part of that whole day I lost on my way to New Zealand and Australia. The Orient Palace Hotel, where I stopped, deserves special mention because it is really a modern place and relatively new in this ancient city. It is said that only Baalbek can compete with it in age.

It is true that an entirely new city with modern streets and business houses has sprung up alongside the old town, but outside of this modern section life in Damascus seems to have preserved the quiet and peaceful atmosphere of its earlier days. The city itself is in the plains but it is surrounded by mountains; much of the land has a desert-like appearance but wherever water is available you will find splendid orchards and gardens which are cultivated with great care and attention. Damascus people seem prosperous and contented and living very much to themselves. Seldom have I seen such a variety and abundance of fresh fruits which are exported all over the near east in their original state and all over the world in glacé form.

Damascus is said to be the oldest city in the world that is still inhabited today. While the date of its origin is not known its name reaches way back into the records of the Old Testament and Damascus is mentioned in the book of Genesis when Abraham, after the battle of the four kings against five, is reported to have pursued the routed kings to Hobat, just north of Damascus.

You know of course of the prominent mention of the city in the New Testament in connection with the conversion and baptism of St. Paul, his escape from the Governor by being lowered in a basket over the wall and his later return. As a matter of fact the Number One attraction for all visitors to Damascus is the "Street called Straight" located in the heart of the old Bazaar section and now called "Derb-el-Mistakim," and while your guide won't go so far as to point out to you just where the house of "Judas" stood, he does recommend to you that you look up again Chapter II of the Acts, which reads:

"And the Lord said unto him (the disciple Ananias), go into the street which is called Straight and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus".

Throughout the later life of St. Paul there are frequent references to the City of Damascus and his several visits there.

The religious history of Damascus is a curious one. For a time Christianity made much progress and the famous Church of St. John the Baptist was perhaps the most important building in that ancient city. Today, however, the population is predominantly Moslem. The best known Mosque is the Mosque Omayade and history states that on this site has been in turn a pagan temple first devoted to Haddad and then to Jupiter, a Jewish Synagogue, and a Christian Church.

When the Moslem Arabs finally defeated the Christian Byzantians, the conquerors promised to respect their properties and churches and apparently this agreement has always been carried out. In the centuries that followed, Damascus flourished and fell into decay several times and I doubt that there is any city now existing that so often was conquered and destroyed and rose again and again as did Damascus. After several hundred years of rule by the Ottoman Turks and a brief mandate under the French, Syria finally declared its independence and is now a free nation and a charter member of the United Nations. Since then there has been a good deal of political upheaval in the country but the trouble seems largely confined to the military, and the people themselves go their quiet and peaceful way.

A walk through the ancient city still discloses remnants of its glorious past even through the city was so often destroyed by sword and fire, so that there are few antiquities other than remnants of the old walls, Roman gateways, and a relatively small number of ruins of ancient buildings. The grand Mosque dating back to the 7th century was six times destroyed and as often restored.
To me the most interesting sights in Damascus were the bazaars and the people in them. These bazaars are formed by apparently endless rows of shops protected against sun and rain by high domed metallic roofs. In these shops you can find every conceivable form of merchandise and there is always intense traffic, much bargaining and great animation. Most of the merchants sit at one end of their small shops which are filled to capacity with merchandise and I never saw more calm and peaceful faces anywhere. I did not get a chance to do much shopping there because the first day I was there was a Friday on which day most of the shops were closed because of the holy week holiday, but I soon learned that one cannot afford to pay the price first asked, but must do a lot of bargaining.

The new town to which I referred at the beginning of this letter and in which the Orient Palace Hotel is located, boasts of many modern buildings, wide boulevards and fine bridges over the Barada river, which flows through it, but this part of the city contains little else that is worth writing about.

BEIRUT

The distance between Damascus and Beirut is only about sixty miles. An excellent automobile road connects the two ancient cities. The road was built through the intervening mountains and leads through several beautiful valleys covered with fruit orchards wherever water is available. Beirut's history also dates back to antiquity and on its side was one of the earliest settlements on the Phoenician coast. It is said the original city was founded by the King of Gebal who named it after his wife "Beirrot" and letters have been found which were written by the King of Gebal about 1330 B.C. appealing to the King of Egypt to give some help to Beirut, which had been conquered and occupied by the Amorites.

Poseidon, the God of the Sea, was the city's tutelary deity, as appears from the coins of those days on which he is represented as driving his chariot drawn by four sea horses. Alexander the Great came along on his way to Egypt and took all the Phoenician towns without contest and after his death the Egyptians took possession. Later the Romans made Beirut a colony and Agrippa became Governor. Other than that comparatively little is known of its story before the Christian era but frequent reference is made to the preaching of the gospel by several of the Apostles, who are reported to have stopped in Beirut on their journeys back and forth between Antioch and Jerusalem. In any event, Christianity became quite well established there about that time and unlike Damascus the population is even today predominantly Christian. In the intervening centuries the Romans, the Arabs, the Crusaders, and the Turks in turn dominated the city but during the last century the French controlled its trade and its government until after World War II when Lebanon, like Syria, declared its independence and Beirut became the capital of the New Lebanon.

The city has long been a well recognized seat of learning and there is an important American University located there which is well patronized and is doing excellent work.

Commercially, Beirut's importance is greatly enhanced by a harbor built by the French about fifty years ago and practically all exports and imports for the city of Damascus pass over its docks. As a consequence, its trade is flourishing and its population increasing.

In walking through the streets of the city one gains the impression that Beirut is much more European in atmosphere than any other city in this part of the world and accordingly it seemed particularly appropriate that I should spend the last day of my world tour before entering Europe in this ancient and historic gateway to the Near East.

The next morning I left Damascus airport for a nonstop flight to Brussels. It was a smooth passage - most of the time at great altitude - but I had a real thrill when the plane flew directly over Vesuvius, having come down to a much lower level to give us an excellent view of the enormous crater which fortunately at that time was quiescent. A little while later we passed over Rome and then heading straight north, arrived in Brussels late in the evening.

Thus endeth my long sight seeing tour around the world and this will be the last letter I shall have time to write except for one which I hope to compose on the homeward flight, giving you a summary of my impressions of today's conditions in the Western European countries which I expect to visit before I return.

Cordially yours,

R. S. Hecht