In mid-April 2009, 12 friends, eight of them alumni of the University, met in the old city of Damascus. I had planned the journey to explore Syria and Lebanon, using books such as *Monuments of Syria*, a compendium of sites written by alumnus Ross Burns, as well as notes from a CCE course on Syria run by Ben Churcher, and booked through World Expeditions. Syria can sound like Ancient History I, with cities established by 3000 BC from trading wealth, with goods coming across deserts from the east, and west through Mediterranean seaports. What was unexpected is the beauty of the scenery, from barren deserts to high mountains, snowcapped in Lebanon, and in spring: green fields sprinkled with wildflowers.

In such surroundings the ruined ancient cities present gloriously. Graeco-Roman Apamea has a 2-kilometre long colonnaded street, with swirling stripes on grey columns; Nabatean-Roman Bosra has a complete Roman theatre for more than 15,000 built of black basalt, the stage outlined by white granite columns; Aramaic-Roman Palmyra has honeyed stone, glowing at dawn and sunset. In Lebanon is Baalbek, another golden city, dominated by six immense columns, with snowy peaks in the distance. It is also the Hezbollah administrative centre and we were offered yellow flags and T-shirts decorated with green rifles.

In the museums of Damascus and Aleppo we saw remains of more ancient cities, including a stone with the world’s first alphabet from Ugarit; carved figures of leaders with white staring eyes and feather skirts from Mari and brightly painted frescoes of Old Testament scenes from a third-century AD synagogue in Dura Europos on the Euphrates River. Sadly, the Syrian museums have limited resources and the displays could be improved. In comparison the National Museum in Beirut, rebuilt after its destruction in the civil war, now handsomely displays just the pick of its holdings, which had been preserved in cement. We saw some excellent ancient mosaics in smaller museums, the most impressive being Syria’s al-Maara in a Sassanid caravanserai, and Lebanon’s Beitidine in an Ottoman palace.

Everywhere visitors are aware of the history of religion in this region. Byzantine Christianity saw the building...
of Aleppo cathedral dedicated to St Helen, Constantine’s mother, with handsome capitals decorated with acanthus leaves that seem to wave in a wind. It became a medressa, an Islamic religious school. In the eastern desert is Rasafa, its huge limestone walls dotted with mica that shimmers in the harsh light, and churches commemorating the martyred legionary St Sergius. Even more splendid is the 6th century St Simeon Stylites monastery, an important pilgrimage centre in delightful countryside. It is dedicated to the saint who lived on an 18m high pillar, the shrunken remains of which are in the centre of four basilicas. Nearby are the “Dead Cities” – ruins of Byzantine towns. We visited two, Serjilla, with large stone houses in grey and russet stone, baths, public buildings, even an olive oil factory; and Ruweihah, on a barren rocky site, with once-magnificent large churches where peasant families and their goats, chooks and cows now live. It was extraordinary to have these sites to ourselves, to picnic among nettles, and to flee from a savage farm dog, just as William Dalrymple described in From the Holy Mountain.

Damascus became the first capital of the Muslim world in the 8th century. Its most impressive building is the Great Mosque, established by the Umayyad dynasty, which controlled trade routes and the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is a palimpsest, built on the remains of a Byzantine basilica of St John the Baptist, itself constructed on a temple of Jupiter, previously dedicated to the Hittite Haddad. In the square outside this stunning building are an arch and columns from the Roman temple and inside the gate, the handsome tomb of Saladin. On our first visit the great open courtyard of the mosque was quite empty of people, the floor tiles shimmering from recent rain and exquisite gold and green mosaics with designs of plants and cities gleaming from the walls. The entry to Damascus Museum is a reconstructed doorway of a desert palace and we saw the remote ruins of its partner driving through the desert between Palmyra and Aleppo. Aleppo’s massive fortress is built on the site of the Greek acropolis and had an important role in fighting the Crusaders.

The Crusaders arrived in Syria in the late 11th century ostensibly to reclaim holy sites. We visited three splendid castle-forts built by them, Qalaat Saladin, in beautiful mountains, has a deep man-made gorge to protect it from attack and a mosque and palace built by Saladin. Black basalt Qalaat Marquab is on a high spur with views of the Mediterranean. The most famous, Krak des Chevaliers, has walls in grey stone divided by a moat and a 12th century great hall. All are on high peaks with splendid views.

Despite our delightful rural explorations, our real pleasure was in Damascus and Aleppo, the oldest cities in the world, still visible in the midst of dreary modern cities. The dominance of trade has continued with vibrant souks in each city full of booty from the world, such as Chinese jade, Afghan lapis, embroideries from Uzbekistan, olive oil soaps and fragrant spices.
Port Lincoln, gateway to the Eyre Peninsula, is catching on to 21st-century with posh marinas, jugs instead of gravy and more millionaires per square Mc Mansion metre than anywhere else in Australia. But the vast expanse of Boston Bay is still the rambunctious place seen by 19-year-old windjammer apprentice Eric Newby in 1939 and recorded in his travel classic, The Last Grain Race.

Matthew Flinders (1774-1814), who named so much of coastal Australia, including Port Lincoln and Boston Bay (he was a native of Lincolnshire), would recognise it too, particularly the lack of fresh water; it caused the deaths of eight of his crewmen when they set out to find a source, and drowned. And it decided Colonel William Light against Port Lincoln as South Australia’s capital; he built Adelaide instead, less than an hour’s daily flight to the east.

This setback hasn’t stopped Port Lincoln from grabbing the spotlight from time to time. It’s the home of Melbourne Cup legend Makybe Diva, and her commemorative statue, as well as Australia’s only seahorse farm: a tin shed in the backblocks, where seahorses are bred for aquariums. It’s the most captivating and informative local attraction. Port Lincoln is also the home of the annual Tuna Toss, a competition which is exactly what it sounds like; current record: 37.23m by Commonwealth Games gold medal hammer thrower Sean Carlin.

The region may be especially famous for tuna but these days it’s easy to pick up salmon, King George whiting and Coffin Bay oysters and scallops, either from fishermen or your own rod. Most of the tiny towns and villages of the Eyre Peninsula have a long jetty. These are relics of coastal trader days, or part of the Australian Wheat Board’s celebrated export business. They’re ideal for fishing and dramatic silhouette-at-sunset photos.

The Eyre Peninsula is also blessed with two of the world’s great coastal wildernesses: Lincoln National Park and Coffin Bay National Park. To access the former, a key and temporary permit must be purchased and recorded at the visitors’ bureau. It ensures visitor numbers are controlled and the tranquility is priceless. This quality applies particularly to Donington Cottage, the sole surviving memento of agricultural enterprise and available for short stays. It’s located in the wuthering heights of the park and is an idyllic getaway into the essence of colonial Australia.

A similarly evocative experience is the secluded campsite beneath shady trees at Memory Bay – barely changed since Flinders and his men named it and camped there. You can almost see the Investigator riding at anchor in the cove. A half-day hike or a short four-wheel-drive journey across the coastal mallee to the southwest and it’s another story. Line upon line of breakers rear up and surge shoreward, while beyond the rollers the ocean’s cobalt deep is unhindered all the way to Antarctica. No wonder Flinders found naming his discoveries so simple: when he wasn’t honouring sponsors (Isaac Coffin’s bay) and shipmates (Tragic Lieutenant Thistle’s commemorative island) his own emotions provided such landmarks as Cape Catastrophe, Point Avoid and Anxious Bay.

For the venturesome, behind the endless beaches here and at Coffin Bay are the constantly shifting, dazzling white sand dunes. You need your wits about you however, maps can be contradictory and out of date, and getting bogged is easy. While mobile phones mean calling for help is relatively simple, the ignominy would be hard to bear.

Nevertheless, peace, parrots and the sound of oysters growing plump are Coffin Bay village’s main attributes, along with the peninsula’s best restaurant: The Oysterbeds. It’s where the finest local seafood and produce go to be eaten. Unshucked oysters may be bought from local suppliers too: they’ll never taste better.

Like much of the peninsula, legendary surf beaches and wetlands are close by so it’s heaven in a pair of binoculars for birdwatchers. Without trying too hard it’s possible to see, in a day, emus, mallee whipbirds, oystercatchers, rock parrots, scarlet-chested parrots, mollyhawks, stints, stilts, sandpipers, sea eagles, dotterels and even a swooping osprey or a hooded plover. It is quickly apparent why this vast coastal refuge draws discerning surfers, birds and twitchers from all over the world. Southern right whales are annual visitors, too while at various points along the coast, the Australian sea lion is making a determined comeback from the slaughter of the 19th century.

On the far northwest reach of the peninsula is Baird Bay, and a unique opportunity to swim with the resident sea lions. Under the watchful eye of Trish and Alan Payne of Baird Bay Eco Experience, visitors don wetsuit, snorkel and mask, then chug out in their big boat to Jones Island. This mundane-sounding blip is home to a colony of sea lions (Neophoca cinerea) that has decided, under the Paynes’ scrupulous 20-year guardianship, to allow humans to join them in their environment. It is a life-enhancing experience.

Great white sharks love to eat sea lions and nervous thoughts are inevitable on the trip to the open ocean’s edge. These are miraculously dispelled as the chilly Southern Ocean closes over one’s head and the first young sea lion appears. Meanwhile, their parents bask on the islet and ignore visitors, which is as well: bulls weigh up to 300kgs. Young sea lions are as playful as puppies, however, and as enchanting. If they take a liking to a swimmer they will play tag, gently biff your facemask with a whiskery nose and invite the clumsy human to imitate their aquabatics. The resident dolphins are less sociable; some liken it to the difference between cats and dogs, but an hour in the clear, cold ocean with young sea lions is never-to-be-forgotten. Non-swimmers, or those with a greater apprehension of
big biters, can observe sea lions from the safety of the Point Labatt colony, on the western side of the bay.)

The final stop, on a short (1200km) Eyre Peninsula safari is Ceduna (chedoona, or water hole, to its original inhabitants). After Ceduna, the Nullarbor and Western Australia beckon. While Ceduna’s 3000-plus population dramatically increases overnight in October for the oyster festival, for the rest of the year, there are grain silos, one set of traffic lights and a bewitching museum.

Settlers arrived in the 1800s, spreading across the inland and along the coast, and their endeavours are celebrated at the Old Schoolhouse National Trust Museum. Each room is given over to precious heirlooms donated by local families, all with hand-written labels or neatly typed explanations. Displayed are the minutiae of bygone rural life: clothes, toys, furniture, kitchen and household equipment, decorative art and crafts. A room is dedicated to nearby Maralinga’s atomic guinea-pig period. Another movingly commemorates the secular medical saints of the Bush Church Aid Society. Space junk brought in from the paddocks by farmers is astonishing. In the backyard: farm machinery, sulkies, carts and buggies of all kinds; and small wooden buildings such as telegraph offices, Bob Hawke’s mother’s schoolhouse (where she taught as a young woman) and Flossie Jones’ tiny cottage, lived in by the old lady until 1994, with three kinds of lino and no media or rumpus room.

The Eyre Peninsula is not for those whose demands run to five stars and hot-and-cold running entertainment, but it is one of the most rewarding, fascinating, under-appreciated and easily accessible of Australia’s hidden treasuries.