



BY BERNHARD CIEPEN

"Castles of the Crusades: A View in Miniature" at National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall features a re-creation of a medieval Syrian fortress.

## 'Crusades': Storming the Castle

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It's not exactly art, and its history is a trifle tentative, but the "Castles of the Crusades: A View in Miniature" exhibit at the National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall is a model of medieval romance that any fan of "The Lord of the Rings" — or any fan of Orlando Bloom who braved "Kingdom of Heaven," for that matter — will adore.

Surrounded by photographs of towering fortress ruins and smaller re-creations of Turkish baths and a formidable bazaar-cum-palace, the 1/25th-scale re-creation of one of Syria's most important historical sites shows a vast crusader-held outpost in the final weeks of a siege by the forces of Sultan Baibars in 1271. Its seven massive towers are cracking — under cover of brick arches, the sultan's soldiers have been tunneling into the mountainside and carrying out rubble to undermine them — and the outer walls are being battered by siege engines and catapults and assaulted by men on ladders and ropes. The display involves thousands of figurines (knights and Mamluks, horsemen and archers, monks and lay brothers, peasants and pilgrims, patients and nurses) and shows a remarkable cutaway view of the storerooms, library, chapel, meeting rooms and ramparts of the castle.

Crak des Chevaliers, the fortress (*crak* in Arabic) of the knights, was constructed on a 2,100-foot-high cliff east of Tripoli (not the Libyan city of the Marine song) overlooking the only highway between Antioch and Beirut on the Mediterranean Sea. Built in 1030-31 by the emir of Aleppo, but greatly expanded and reinforced by the Knights Hospitaller, who received it in 1142 from Raymond II of Tripoli, it was to become the largest and strongest fortress in Christian hands.

It was the Hospitallers who dug the moat,

carved massive storage facilities out of the solid rock and reinforced the outer walls to nearly 100 feet thick. According to some sources, it was home to only about 50 knights and 2,000 foot soldiers at any one time (plus 500 horses), but they were able to withstand repeated sieges, some lasting five years, by Nûr ad-Din and Saladin (or Salah al-Din). It finally fell to Baibars, which was no indignity, since it was also Baibars who turned back the Mongol hordes who had swept down under the Khans, but some historians suggest that Baibars tricked the Hospitallers into believing they had been ordered to surrender.

The other large model portrays the market at Aleppo, one of the major trade centers and crossroads between the European and Asian markets. It has nearly as many figures and thousands more objects: inch-tall jars of olive oil, whole alleys of thumbnail-size plates and goblets, spices and fruits, freshly butchered meat, rugs and brocades being woven on miniature looms, live poultry, camels, cows, rearing horses and sheep for sale, trunks and carts, all arranged in neighborhoods of barter. Men loll in the labyrinthine Turkish bath, with its massage tables, body hair scrapers and hot and cold pools, while at the far end in the sill-lined apartments women dance for their sultan.

The exhibit was put together by the German-based International Castle Research Society, and the translated captions are occasionally a little convoluted (Nûr-ad-Din also appears as Nuredin, for instance, and the terr Outre Jordain, which is what the crusaders called the land beyond Palestine, is not explained), and in any case are probably too dense for younger visitors. The images of the Knights Hospitallers' uniforms are a useful key, although a more complete set of costumes identifying other orders and factions might have been nice.

The captions also reveal a slight bias toward the European view of medieval history. One in-

troductory passage refers to the fact that several of the leading figures of the First Crusade, ambitious younger sons and brothers and minor nobility such as Baldwin of Boulogne, Bohemund of Taranto and his nephew Tancred, were able to better themselves by taking control of the "newly founded Crusader States," Baldwin styling himself King of Jerusalem, Bohemund Prince of Antioch and Tancred, who reclaimed Crak des Chevaliers in 1110 after Raymond of Toulouse was forced to abandon it, called himself Prince of Galilee.

In fact, however, such territories were part of the Byzantine Empire, and most of the crusaders had sworn fealty to the reigning emperor Alexius and should have returned those cities to his control. Indeed, one of the supposed reasons for a united Christian offensive against the (equally squabbling) Muslim forces was to heal the Great Schism between the old Western (Roman Catholic) and Eastern (Greek Orthodox) halves of the Roman Empire. Instead, Constantinople became a prime target for the European armies; many historians consider the despoiling, raping and plundering of the city and its people by the Venetian and Frankish "Fourth Crusaders" in 1204 a greater blow to Western civilization than even the loss of the Alexandria library. So for "newly founded" one should perhaps read "stolen," or at least "squatted in state." (Nor is there any mention of the widespread debauchery and destruction the crusaders inflicted on the countryside or the massacre by German forces of thousands of Jews along the way, but it's the castles themselves that the research society cares about.)

Crak des Chevaliers still stands, remarkably intact — Baibars had it restored — and is a World Heritage Site.

**CASTLES OF THE CRUSADES: A VIEW IN MINIATURE** Through Sept. 4, National Geographic Museum at Explorers Hall, 1145 17th St. NW (Metro: Farragut North); 202-857-7588. Open Monday-Saturday 9 to 5, Sundays 10 to 5. Free.