

Lebanon's Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Like its neighbour Syria, hospitality in Lebanon is spelt with a capital 'H' and despite its multiple setbacks and political upheavals, Lebanon remains one of the friendliest places in the world to visit. Beirut, in particular, welcomes visitors with open arms. Instead of being intimidated by heavily armed soldiers perched atop tanks on street corners, you'll soon find that even a simple smile will generally get you a 'welcome' and an enthusiastic wave. Moreover, the Lebanese diaspora is so widespread that no matter where you come from, almost everyone you meet will likely have a sibling, cousin or uncle living in your country – a link that will win you instant friends.

Most Lebanese share three distinct characteristics: an immense pride in their country and its diversity (you'll probably hear the phrase 'Lebanon has 18 official religions' more times than you can count), a reluctance to talk about the civil war – which most people would simply prefer to forget – and an overriding optimism that 'everything's going to be all right', with the good times just around the corner. While each of these things may seem a little paradoxical to a first-time visitor, you'll soon realise that each is essential to keeping the troubled country soldiering on, no matter how bad life gets.

Though politics, unemployment and corruption are hot topics, guaranteed to ignite lengthy and animated discussion, the Lebanese certainly don't let these aspects of their culture get them down. The Lebanese like to savour life, and most important is enjoying the good times with family and friends.

Spend a little time getting to know some locals and they'll soon consider you both.

LIFESTYLE

It's hard to generalise about a country that has traditionally experienced – and continues to experience – sharply delineated differences in generation, income and religion. While party-central Beirut seems, on the surface at least, no different from any European capital city, venture just a few dozen miles north or south and you'll find people in traditional villages living and farming almost exactly as they did a century ago. Add to this a substantial Palestinian population almost entirely cut off from the mainstream – and rarely referred to in conversation by the Lebanese themselves – and a complex picture begins to emerge.

One lifestyle factor that cuts across all boundaries is the crucial importance of family life in Lebanon. Extended families often live in close proximity, their social lives tightly bound together, and many children live at home until married, either to save money for their own home or simply because they prefer it that way. Social life, too, is both close-knit and gregarious: everyone within a small community tends to know everyone else, usually knowing as much about others' lives and business as they do about their own.

Marriage is the second factor of utmost importance throughout Lebanon and members of all religions tend to marry young. For women to remain unmarried into their 30s is rare and often raises eyebrows, though a man still single at 30, like anywhere in the Middle East, is thought to be waiting for the right girl. There's generally an expectation that people

Emily Nasrallah's *Flight Against Time* touches the subject of emigration from a slightly different perspective, telling the tale of rural parents whose children have left for new lives overseas.

Lebanon's 18 official sects are Muslim (Shiite, Alawite, Ismaili and Sunni), Christian (Maronite, Greek Orthodox & Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Gregorian, Syrian Orthodox, Jacobite, Nestorian, Chaldean, Copt, Evangelical and Roman Catholic), Druze and Jewish.

will marry within their religion; however, like many social expectations, this is slowly changing. Since Lebanon currently only legally recognises civil marriages contracted overseas, many mixed-religion couples opt for marriage in Cyprus or Greece, if one half of the couple (usually the woman) doesn't choose to convert.

For young Lebanese, Christians – both male and female – usually have far greater social freedom than Muslims or members of other religions, evident in Beirut's profusion of largely Christian-populated bars and clubs. But while these freedoms may at first appear similar to their counterparts in the West, there is a limit to what is deemed acceptable behaviour.

Drinking heavily, sleeping around or taking drugs is frowned upon in Lebanese society – not that you'd necessarily know it on a night out on Beirut's Rue Monot.

Christian and Muslim women in Lebanon are nowadays increasingly accepted into most professions. Particularly in Beirut you'll see a profusion of Filipino, Thai and Indian housemaids – recognisable by their frilly pink gingham aprons – who work full-time to cook, clean and look after the children while the mother of the house is out at work.

A university education is highly valued in Lebanon and for those who are not from a wealthy family this usually involves juggling a part-time job of at least 20 hours a week alongside attending classes. Many study with a view to emigrating overseas, lured by the promise of higher salaries, a phenomenon commonly known as Lebanon's 'brain drain': see The Brain Drain, below.

THE BRAIN DRAIN

A favourite Lebanese topic, which you'll likely encounter several times on your travels, is the country's 'brain drain'. Current unofficial estimates suggest that one in three educated Lebanese citizens would like to live abroad, while a recent study by the Beirut Research and Development Centre (BRDC) found that 22% of the Lebanese population is actively working on ways to leave the country. Another survey of university students showed that as many as 60% are hoping to leave Lebanon following graduation, to work abroad.

There are a number of reasons why so many of Lebanon's bright young things are disappearing elsewhere, not the least the climate of fear that has lingered after the Israel-Hezbollah war of summer 2006. Terrorist attacks on Lebanese politicians, in which civilians are sometimes caught up, have also sent young Lebanese, especially those with dual nationality and thus an easy 'escape route', in pursuit of jobs overseas. Most popular tend to be the burgeoning Gulf states, which have the advantage of high salaries and being fairly close to home, with the USA, Canada and Europe all coming in close behind.

The second major reason for the mass exit is that salaries in Lebanon are often simply too low to make for a comfortable, viable living. 'I've got a great job, a car, a high salary,' explains Mirvat Melki, a software engineer originally from Beirut, on leave from a lucrative position in Ghana. 'All the things I could never dream of having here in Lebanon, even though I'm pretty highly qualified. I earn about 10 times as much, per month, there as I would do here – if I could get a job at all.' Melki says that those who have managed to acquire good jobs – often through family connections – hold tight to them and are reluctant to relinquish the security and move on. Many younger, educated people, he continues, are afraid for the country's future. 'Politics aren't safe; taxes are high; economics are bad. It cost me US\$100,000 to go to university. In Lebanon, I'd have to work for a million years to pay that back. I miss home, but under these conditions, what choice do I have?' Perhaps one day, he says, he'll come home – but until then, like so many young Lebanese professionals, he's enjoying the financial freedom of a life overseas too much to really consider it.