

# The Bekaa Valley

## وادي البقاع



The beautiful, fertile Bekaa Valley has not had an easy time of it in recent years, with visitors to the region frequently discouraged by ominous press reports of Hezbollah activity and cannabis farming. Baalbek, infamous as Hezbollah's strategic headquarters, took a battering in the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War for this reason, with up to 20% of its buildings destroyed. Moreover, the region's most notorious crop – its high quality cannabis or 'Red Leb' – bloomed prolifically before and during the civil war, a draw-card for some and a deterrent for others. Though you'll doubtless see the yellow Hezbollah flag flying in towns and villages across the region, and while cannabis production is currently witnessing a comeback, there's much, much more to the Bekaa Valley than this. With a diverse and friendly population encompassing a high percentage of Christians alongside its Shiite majority, fabulous food and wines, and two stunning world-class ancient sites, don't let its erstwhile unsavoury image discourage you from travelling here.

Despite its name, the Bekaa Valley is actually a high plateau between the Mt Lebanon Range and Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range). For millennia the Bekaa Valley, dubbed 'hollow Syria' by the Greeks and Romans, was a corridor linking the Syrian interior with the coastal cities of Phoenicia. The many invading armies and trading caravans that passed through left traces of their presence, which can be seen in a host of small sites around the valley, but most magnificently at the Umayyad city of Aanjar and the gorgeous temples at Baalbek.

The Bekaa Valley has always been an agricultural region, fed by the Nahr al-Aasi (Orontes River) and the Nahr Litani. In Roman times, this grain-producing area was one of Rome's 'bread-baskets'. Today, deforestation and poor crop planning may have reduced the fertility of the land, but the valley's wines are famous throughout the region and are gaining global renown. Combining temple tours with wine tasting is the way to get the best of the Bekaa Valley.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel over the spectacular temple complex at **Baalbek** (p354)
- Learn to appreciate arak and mix your mezze at Lebanon's favourite **riverside restaurants** (p350) in Zahlé
- Wander the stunning stones of **Aanjar** (p351), the Middle East's only remaining Umayyad town
- Sip something warming in the bar of Baalbek's historic **Palmyra Hotel** (p360)
- Nose the bouquet and taste the wine at the **Ksara Winery** (p351), Lebanon's most famous vineyard





## Zahlé

☎ 08 / pop 79,803

If you're arriving in Zahlé after some temple-gazing in quiet, conservative Baalbek, you'll probably find it a sharp and extremely pleasant contrast. Lively, bustling and even quite glitzy, this attractive resort town, enjoying a cool altitude of 945m, shares more in com-

mon with Beirut than with Baalbek. Known locally as Arousat al-Beqa'a (Bride of the Bekaa), it's set along the steep banks of the Birdawni River (locally known as 'Bardouni'), which tumbles through a gorge, cutting a bubbling channel through the centre of town, down from Jebel Sannine to the north.

Zahlé is a predominantly Greek Catholic town, with the highest concentration of this denomination in the entire country, and its beautiful, ornate Ottoman-era houses, lining the riverside Rue Brazil, survived heavy bombardment during the civil war. The town is probably most famous for its open-air restaurants, known as the Cafés du Bardouni, that jostle along the river on the town's edge. During summer weekends and evenings, these are packed with locals and Beirutis enjoying some of the finest Lebanese mezze in the country, washed down with generous quantities of arak (see Arak, p350).

The town's merry modern aspect, however, belies a darker past. In the 19th century, Zahlé was hard hit by communal fighting between Druze and Christians and many of its inhabitants were killed in the 1860 massacre. Some 25 years later, the opening of a railway line between Beirut and Damascus (which is no longer in operation) brought some prosperity to the town. At around the same time, more than half the town migrated to Brazil (after which the main street is named), from where they sent remittances, further increasing the town's prosperity. Zahlé's gracious stone houses date from this time.

In 1981, Zahlé came under fire again, bombarded by Syria after the Phalangist party attempted to build a road linking the town to the ski resort of Faraya. Since, by that point, the Phalangists were closely aligned with Israel, the road represented a serious threat to Syria, whose troops were stationed in large numbers throughout the Bekaa Valley. Like the rest of Lebanon, however, Zahlé proved resilient to the damage, which was quickly repaired, and no traces are evident today.

Keep in mind when planning a visit that from November to April most of the restaurants are closed and the town is relatively quiet, except at weekends and Christmas. In summer, it makes a pleasant lunch stop en route from Beirut to Baalbek, and is an ideal place to stay if you intend to spend a few days exploring the valley.

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