

The South



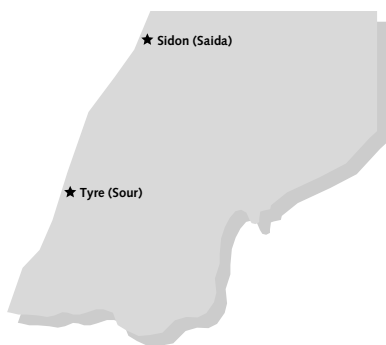
Less visited than other parts of Lebanon, the South is rich in history – both ancient and modern – making the currently accessible parts well worth exploring. The principal towns of Tyre and Sidon, known respectively in Arabic as Sour and Saida, are full of archaeological treasures, surrounded by lush plantations of bananas, dates and oranges and populated by welcoming locals.

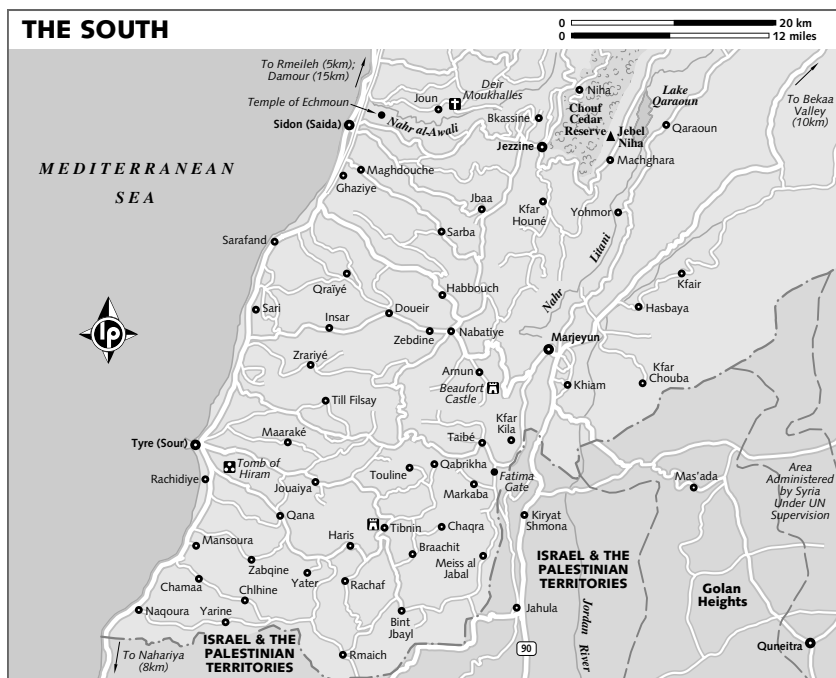
The picture, however, is far from rosy. Hardest hit by the civil war (not to mention a historic lack of interest by Beirut's powerbrokers) the South seems to encounter yet another hurdle every time it attempts to get back onto its feet. Following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 – before which much of the South was under Israeli or proxy South Lebanon Army (SLA) occupation – the South initially saw a resurgence in tourism as Lebanese and overseas visitors arrived, curious to see this isolated and previously out-of-bounds region. But the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah effectively put a stop to its tourist industry once again.

While visitors might initially be wary, those who do make it this far will be in for a treat. Both Sidon and Tyre remain fascinating places to visit, with locals more than willing to stop in the street to help a lost-looking tourist poring over a guidebook. While there are often limited accommodation and restaurant options available, with many businesses closing down or frequently changing hands, the lure of the region's beaches and souqs, along with the ancient treasures of Tyre, will quickly allay any qualms about visiting the area.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Get lost in the atmosphere of **Sidon's souqs** (p367), while snacking on fresh *sanioura* biscuits, the local delicacy
- Relax on the sand at a swanky **beach club** (p369) on the coastal strip between Sidon and Beirut
- Stop off at Tyre's splendid Roman remains and do a lap of its impressive **Roman hippodrome** (p376)
- Walk off a delicious seafood lunch enjoyed at Tyre's **Le Petit Phoenicien** (p377) with a stroll through the tranquil **Tyre Beach Nature Reserve** (p376)
- See how suds are made at the **Musée du Savon** (p367) in Sidon





SIDON (SAIDA)

☎ 07 / pop 170,516

صيدا

The port city of Sidon (Saida in Arabic), famous in modern times as the birthplace of assassinated former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, is approached from Beirut, 40km to its north, through thick citrus orchards and banana groves. Although not as well organised or commercial as Byblos – its closest equivalent in terms of harbourside charms – this once grand and wealthy Phoenician city exudes a strong feeling of ‘living history’ with its mosques, khans and vaulted souqs still very much in everyday use. There are few concessions made here to tourists, which means the selection of hotels and restaurants isn’t particularly extensive. But what it lacks in facilities it makes up for in workaday charm and mysterious medieval alleyways ripe for the exploring, along with the most tempting aromas wafting from the souq-based food stalls.

History

The ancient town of Sidon was settled as early as 4000 BC, or 6800 BC according to

some claims. In the Old Testament, Sidon is referred to as ‘the first born of Canaan’, which may have originated from the town’s possible founder, Saidoune ibn Canaan. The word for ‘fishing’ or ‘hunting’ is *sayd* in modern Arabic.

As early as the 14th and 15th centuries BC, Sidon had a reputation as a commercial centre with strong trade links with Egypt. The city rose in prominence from the 12th to 10th centuries BC, its wealth generated from trading murex, a mollusc that produced an expensive, highly prized purple dye that over time became known as the colour of royalty and was eventually exploited to the point of extinction. Geography helped, too: like many Phoenician cities, Sidon was built on a promontory with an offshore island, which sheltered the harbour from storms and provided a safe haven during times of war.

In common with the other Phoenician city-states, Sidon suffered from conquest and invasion numerous times. In 1200 BC the Philistines destroyed the city and its fleet of trading ships, allowing Tyre to