

LEBANON



Getting Started in Lebanon

Lebanon is the perfect destination for experiencing a rich variety of sights, sounds, cuisines and cultural edifices within an incredibly compact area. It plays host to ancient cities, world-class nightclubs, Mediterranean beaches, labyrinthine medieval souqs and stunning mountain landscapes – all accessible, traffic permitting, in just a few hours from the capital, Beirut.

If you're visiting for more than a few days, or combining your visit with travel in Syria, see our suggested itineraries (p17). If truly off-the-beaten-track is what you require or you're short on time, it's a good idea to rent a car, since public transportation outside the main cities can be patchy and time consuming.

For such a small and generally built-up country, it's remarkably easy to get away from it all. Trekking parts of the burgeoning Lebanon Mountain Trail (p338), which takes you along the gorgeous Qadisha Valley floor, will ensure that the only buildings you'll see are ancient rock-cut churches, and the only people a sprinkling of hermit monks and goatherds.

Though Lebanon is not a particularly budget-friendly destination, with a little care it's easy to enjoy the country whatever the thickness of your wallet.

With youth hostelling and home-stays gradually gaining popularity, a tighter budget may actually help you to get beneath the skin of the country far better than two weeks of top-end hotels and glittering shopping malls. But, if you can stretch to it, a few killer cocktails at one of Beirut's glitziest clubs is a great way to start or end a Lebanese sojourn in the city's inimitable style.

WHEN TO GO

The best time of year to visit Lebanon depends entirely on what you're intending to do there. If you want to experience the most spectacular hiking, the perfect time to visit is during spring (March to May).

By May, the weather may already be warm enough for a dip in the Mediterranean, and you'll be able to live the Lebanese cliché of taking to the mountain slopes in the morning and swimming on the coast in the afternoon.

HOW MUCH?

Postcard LL700

Newspaper LL2000

Average museum admission LL5000

Bottle of local wine LL10,000

One-minute phone call to UK LL3000

LONELY PLANET INDEX

Litre of petrol LL1300

Litre of bottled water LL600

Bottle of beer in bar/restaurant LL3000

Souvenir T-shirt LL8000

Shwarma LL3000

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the latest travel advisory warnings (see *Staying Safe*, p244)
- Getting a new passport if your current one contains an Israeli stamp.
- Checking the current visa status for Lebanon (see p388).
- Packing something chic if you're planning a night out in Beirut.
- Throwing in your hiking boots if you intend to get off the beaten track into Lebanon's stunning wilderness.

STAYING SAFE

Though its recent history has included several lengthy periods of relative calm, Lebanon's chequered religious, political and social fabric has frequently caused tensions to flare suddenly and violently.

Many countries, including the UK, Australia and the USA, currently include Lebanon on their list of countries to which all but essential travel should be avoided. Most specifically, foreign offices advise against travel south of the Nahr Litani (Litani River) and into Palestinian refugee camps, and suggest avoiding all public demonstrations.

Despite the bleak warnings, however, if you opt to travel to Lebanon you'll find warm, welcoming people eager to help travellers, and you'll quickly feel safe and at home.

Nevertheless, it's important to take some precautions, since circumstances can change extremely rapidly: in summer 2006, for example, many travellers suddenly found themselves stranded after Israel's attacks on the country shut down the international airport and rendered the main highway to the Syrian border impassable. Most crucially, when in Lebanon, keep your eye on the news.

Furthermore, try to avoid driving at night (largely due to Lebanon's hair-raising, headlight-free driving) and take local advice when travelling in the south. If you're planning on visiting any Palestinian refugee camps, make sure you take a reliable local companion. Recent threats against UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (Unifil) troops have led some to warn against visiting restaurants or other establishments frequented by Unifil staff in Tyre.

Likewise, it makes sense to avoid public demonstrations, which can often become heated and unpredictable. It may pay to talk with your embassy in Lebanon if you're in any doubt as to your safety.

Finally, theft is a minor problem, but random crime is far lower than in most Western cities. There has been a spate of motor-scooter bag snatchings, particularly in Beirut, but, as in any large city, you only need exercise normal precautions.

Aside from these sensible measures, relax and enjoy all that Lebanon has to offer – before the tourist masses finally come pouring back.

The next best time for hiking is during autumn, though if it's action you're seeking, beware that it can be extremely quiet: many summer tourist spots will have wound down for the season, while the ski resorts are still oiling their ski lifts.

The onset of Ramadan probably won't affect your travel plans too dramatically in Lebanon, since most towns contain a mixture of Christians and Muslims.

Sun seekers will be happy any time between June and September, when the beach clubs of Beirut see almost 24-hour action and barely a cloud intrudes on a sweltering summer sky. Soaring temperatures, however, can make things a bit sticky, while interiors will be very hot and arid. For advice on avoiding sun stroke or dehydration, see the Health chapter (p409).

Summer is also prime festival season, a time to indulge in music performances beneath the stars. Prices rise quite steeply during these periods, when flocks of expat Lebanese descend on the country.

Winter is best to visit if you're intending on hitting the slopes, when trendy ski resorts like Faraya Mzaar (p299) and the Cedars (p342) gear up for business, the ski season usually stretching from early December to early April.

The Christmas period is festive countrywide, with Lebanon's Christians putting up their fairy lights and celebrating in churches. You should ensure, though, that your hotel room has some sort of heating and reliable hot water; otherwise, you could be in for some chilly mornings.

See Climate (p383) for more information.

To accompany your pre-departure research, pick up a copy of the groovy CD compilation *Music For An Arabian Night/Holiday In Beirut* by Ron Goodwin & his Orchestra.

COSTS & MONEY

Lebanon's restaurant and hotel prices are roughly equivalent to North America and large parts of Europe. Beirut is full of fine restaurants, where a meal for two will easily tally up to US\$100, and top-end hotel rooms go for over US\$250 per night.

It is, however, perfectly possible to travel the country on a tight budget. Beirut has several budget hotel options, with dorm rooms for US\$7 per person per night, and public transport is cheap and cheerful – if time-consuming – even to the more rural parts of Lebanon. Moreover, street food is good value and delicious, with a shwarma coming in at around US\$2 and a strong cup of coffee at less than US\$1.

For the most freedom on the road, it's probably best to aim for somewhere in between. Lebanon's midrange hotels represent good value, especially out of high season as rates drop dramatically. Renting a small car will mean you can see more of the country in much less time. Meals consisting of meze will rarely cost more than US\$10 per person, meaning you should still have change in your wallet for a cold local Almaza beer or two.

Ya Libnan (www.yalibnan.com) and the Daily Star (www.dailystar.com.lb) are both good online sources of up-to-date information on Lebanon.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There are few contemporary travel books dealing specifically with Lebanon; *The Hills of Adonis: A Journey in Lebanon* (1990) by Colin Thubron is one of the best. Also well worth reading are William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (1997)

TRAVELLING SUSTAINABLY IN LEBANON

In the summer of 2006, the war between Israel and Hezbollah saw a large-scale environmental crisis hit Lebanon (see *Oil Spill Lebanon*, p259), damaging the natural and human world alike. Add to this a prolonged civil war, during which little attention was paid to vanishing natural resources, the Lebanese penchant for huntin', shootin' and fishin', a rash of uncontrolled building countrywide and a propensity for driving gas-guzzling monsters, and a somewhat disheartening picture emerges of Lebanon's current situation. Moreover, recent travails have left much of the country's population struggling financially: as the rich in Beirut get richer, the poor in many other parts of the country get poorer.

There are, however, many simple ways to have a positive impact while visiting the country.

- When visiting nature reserves, engage the services of one of the park's guides where possible, whose fee goes towards preserving and enhancing the area.
- Share the wealth among the lesser-known businesses: limiting your use of international chains will ensure a better distribution of tourist income and guarantee you a more interesting experience.
- Don't stick solely to our Eating recommendations: this is only a selection of what's on offer, and you'll quickly discover your own favourites if you venture where your tastebuds take you.
- Consider hiking with one of Lebanon's many trekking groups (see p382) who have valuable insights into low-impact tourism and often strive to help disadvantaged local communities.
- If you're renting a car, try to team up with other travellers to split the cost: you're reducing the environmental impact substantially if you can cram four travellers into a Fiat Punto.
- Look for recycling points for your plastic mineral-water bottles, which bob with the tide in alarming numbers along the Beirut sea shore.
- Take a registered guide to show you around ancient historical sites. In recent years, work has been sporadic for these invaluable sources of local knowledge.
- Peruse the eco-friendly links included in Lebanon's Environment chapter (p258).

TOP PICKS



BEST OF THE FESTIVALS

Lebanon's festivals are among the country's highlights for visitors. See individual chapter listings for more information.

- Al Bustan Festival (www.albustanfestival.com) February-March (p295)
- Beirut International Platform of Dance Festival (www.maqamat.org) April-May (p281)
- Souq el-Bargout, Beirut; May/June & November/December (p290)
- Byblos International Festival (www.byblosfestival.org) June-July (p311)
- Baalbek Festival (www.baalbeck.org.lb) July & August (p354)
- Beiteddine Festival (www.beiteddine.org) July & August (p322)
- Beirut International Film Festival (www.beirutfilmfoundation.org) October (p281)
- Beirut Marathon (www.beirutmarathon.org) November (p281)
- Docudays: Beirut International Documentary Festival (www.docudays.net) November/December (p253)

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Lebanon's film industry, though small and frequently struggling, has turned out some treasures. Here's a selection to get you in the Middle Eastern mood. See p253 for more on Lebanese film.

- *Towards the Unknown* (1957) Director: Georges Nasser
- *The Broken Wings* (1962) Director: Yousef Malouf
- *Bint el-Haress* (1967) Director: Henry Barakat
- *The Little Wars* (1982) Director: Maroun Baghdadi
- *West Beirut* (1998) Director: Ziad Duweiri
- *In the Shadows of the City* (2000) Director: Jean Chamoun
- *Harab Libnan* (2001) Director: Omar al-Issawi
- *Bosta* (2005) Director: Philippe Aractingi
- *Giallo* (2005) Director: Antoine Waked
- *Caramel* (2007) Director: Nadine Labaki

TOP READS

A selection of stories – some fact, some fiction – together illustrate the many paradoxes that make up today's Lebanon. For more details on Lebanese literature, see p253.

- *The Prophet* (1923) Kahlil Gibran
- *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut 1982* (1982) Mahmoud Darwish
- *Death in Beirut* (1976) Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad
- *Sitt Marie Rose: A Novel* (1982) Etel Adnan
- *Beirut Blues* (1994) Hanan al-Shayk
- *The Rock of Tanios* (1994) Amin Maalouf
- *The Stone of Laughter* (1998) Hoda Barakat
- *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (2001) Robert Fisk
- *Bliss Street* (2004) Kristin Kenway
- *Lebanon: A House Divided* (2006) Sandra Mackey

and Robert D Kaplan's *Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus* (2000), both with chapters on travels in Lebanon.

A great vintage starting point is Mark Twain's wry *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) chronicling his journey across the Middle East in 1867.

Another good book depicting a Lebanon long-gone is the biography of colourful Lady Hester Stanhope (see also *The Antics of Lady Hester*, p371), *Lady Hester, Queen of the East* (2006) by Lorna Gibb.

Jean Said Makdisi's *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (1990) and *Teta, Mother and Me* (2004) illustrate the difficult and dangerous day-to-day life of one woman and her family during the civil war, chronicled by Edward Said's sister. Thomas Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (1995) also contains a grimly humorous account of life in Beirut during the difficult and dramatic war years.

For a lighter look at Lebanese life, get a hold of *Life's Like That! Your Guide to the Lebanese* (2004) and its sequel *Life's Even More Like That* (2006) by Michael Karam, Peter Grimsditch and Maya Fldawi, with painfully accurate caricatures of Lebanese characters, from dog-walking Filipino maids to Hummer drivers, ladies who lunch, and frazzled foreign correspondents. It's a must-have companion to people-watching at Beirut's cafés.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lebanon's Ministry of Tourism (www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb) An excellent resource from the Ministry, including maps, downloadable brochures, e-cards, and a themed trip planner.

Discover Lebanon (www.discoverlebanon.com) Photos, listings, maps and forums.

Lebanon Panorama (www.lebanonpanorama.com) Panoramic 360-degree views of Lebanon.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com.au) Succinct summaries on travelling to Lebanon, Thorn Tree bulletin board, accommodation listings and links to the most useful travel resources elsewhere on the web.

A good window into Lebanon's environmental issues is Green Line (www.greenline.org.lb), one of the country's most active environmental protection organisations.

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