

# Tripoli & the North



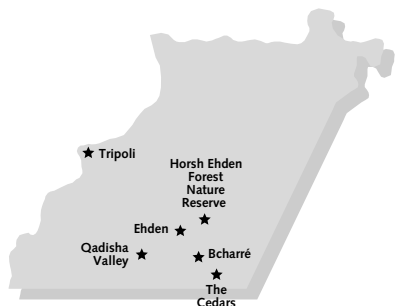
Northern Lebanon is considered by many people – locals and visitors alike – to be the country's greatest, greenest, cleanest natural asset.

The gorgeous World Heritage-listed Qadisha Valley, hidden deep beneath the mountains east of Tripoli, provides a tranquil escape for hikers from the fast-paced Lebanese development of the cities and the coastal strip. The valley snakes up to the pretty, sleepy town of Bcharré, birthplace of legendary Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran. Further east from Bcharré is the Cedars – where a few of the country's treasured trees remain – home to Lebanon's highest altitude ski resort and a good starting point for hiking in summer. Meanwhile, the small town of Ehden, located on the valley's northern rim, provides quaint respite from the searing coastal heat, with a lovely central square that's the perfect place for sipping arak late into the night. The creation of the Lebanon Mountain Trail and a growing Lebanese interest in adventure sports, such as rafting and paragliding, sees the region becoming more enticing than ever to visitors. Still, it remains sparsely populated, and while you're enjoying the abundance of tracks and trails, you're unlikely to encounter more than a handful of other intrepid trekkers.

A dramatically different face of Lebanon's north lies in tightly-packed Tripoli, with its busy medieval souqs, historic fortress and the workaday port of Al-Mina. Lebanon's second city, Tripoli was once planned as its capital, but today has little in common with cosmopolitan Beirut, exuding a more provincial, and slightly bruised-and-battered feel. Tripoli's economy was hard hit by the 2007 crisis in the outlying Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared and is still recovering; nevertheless, the city makes a fascinating place to explore, preferably with one of its famous, sticky pastries in hand.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover the beauty of Khalil Gibran's poetry and painting at his **museum** (p340) in Bcharré
- Wind your way through Tripoli's **medieval souqs** (p331), stopping to sniff out some hand-made soaps
- Stroll the short but diverse trails of the serene **Horsh Ehden Forest Nature Reserve** (p339)
- Stop for a hearty post-hike dinner at the tree-lined village square in **Ehden** (p338)
- Marvel at the grottoes and rock-cut monasteries of the World Heritage-listed **Qadisha Valley** (p337)
- Whiz down the slopes of Lebanon's highest ski resort at **the Cedars** (p342)



# TRIPOLI (TRABLOUS)

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☎ 06 / pop 237,909

Tripoli (Trablous in Arabic), 85km north of Beirut, is Lebanon's second-largest city and the north's main port. Famous for its medieval Mamluk architecture, old city souq, huge fortress and teeth-clenchingly sweet pastries, its charms were sadly overshadowed in 2007 by the deadly and drawn-out confrontation between Palestinian militants and the Lebanese army, centred on the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp around 16km from the city centre. On 20 May 2007, militants and Lebanese police began battling it out in Tripoli itself, before fighting moved to Nahr al-Bared; Lebanese soldiers finally took control of the camp in September 2007. Alleged ties between the militant group and Al-Qaeda lent events a particularly sinister and gloomy edge.

Its image tarnished as a result, Tripoli is currently struggling to entice tourists back to its markets and monuments. Certainly, there's plenty to keep a visitor entertained for a couple of days, and with one good budget hotel and one excellent top-end choice, there are accommodation options for every pocket. Since few tourists currently make it this far north, you'll have no problem finding an available room or restaurant table.

If you're arriving direct from Beirut, though, you may be in for something of a culture shock. Tripoli may be Lebanon's second-largest city, but in many ways it couldn't be more different. Where Beirut is glitzy, Tripoli is demure and down-to-earth. Though there is some nightlife to be had, it's low key and based in the port of Al-Mina rather than in Tripoli proper. It's wise, therefore, to dress down a little, leaving your best figure-hugging combinations for the streets and clubs of the capital.

## HISTORY

While there is evidence of a settlement in Tripoli as far back as 1400 BC, its past is likely to go back even further. By the 8th century BC, what had been a small Phoenician seaside trading post had grown with the arrival of traders from Sidon, Tyre and Arwad (Aradus, which became Tartus in Syria). Each community settled within its own walled area, giving rise to the Greek name Tripolis, meaning 'three cities'.

During the rule of the Seleucids, and later the Romans, Tripoli prospered but a massive earthquake in AD 543 altered the geography of the port area completely and razed most of the town. It was quickly rebuilt but by AD 635 a general of Mu'awiyah, the governor of Syria and founder of the Umayyad dynasty (AD 661–750), besieged the city and attempted to starve it into submission. The inhabitants of Tripoli escaped by sea with Byzantine help and the town

