

# Beirut

بيروت

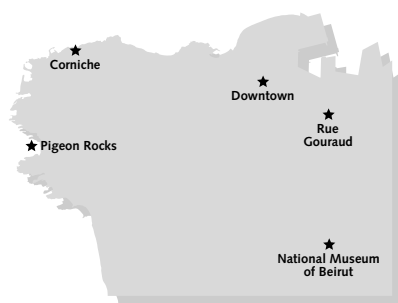


What Beirut is depends entirely on where you are. If you're gazing at the beautifully reconstructed colonial relics and mosques of central Beirut's Downtown, the city is a triumph of rejuvenation over disaster. If you're in the young, vibrant neighbourhoods of Gemmayzeh or Achrafiye, Beirut is about living for the moment: partying, eating and drinking as if there's no tomorrow. If you're standing in the shadow of buildings still peppered with bullet holes, or walking the Green Line with an elderly resident, it's a city of bitter memories and a dark past. If you're with Beirut's Armenians, Beirut is about salvation; if you're with its handful of Jews, it's about hiding your true identity. Here you'll find the freest gay scene in the Arab Middle East, yet homosexuality is still illegal. If you're in one of Beirut's southern refugee camps, Beirut is about sorrow and displacement; other southern districts are considered a base for paramilitary operations and south Beirut is home to infamous Hezbollah secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah. For some, it's a city of fear; for others, freedom.

Throw in maniacal drivers, air pollution from old, smoking Mercedes taxis, world-class universities, bars to rival Soho and coffee thicker than mud, political demonstrations, and swimming pools awash with more silicone than Miami. Add people so friendly you'll swear it can't be true, a political situation existing on a knife-edge, internationally renowned museums and gallery openings that continue in the face of explosions, assassinations and power cuts, and you'll find that you've never experienced a capital city quite so alive and kicking – despite its frequent volatility.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Take part in a Beirut ritual with a leisurely Saturday evening stroll along the **Corniche** (p273)
- Stop for a nargileh break at a café overlooking **Pigeon Rocks** (p274)
- Experience 6000 years of history at the **National Museum of Beirut** (p270)
- Follow Beirut's young and beautiful to **Rue Gouraud's** (p278) chic bars
- Eat your way through the city's eclectic selection of top **restaurants** (p283)
- Wander through Beirut's reconstructed **Downtown** (p274), marvelling at the contrast with many of the city's still bullet-riddled edifices
- Float it out in one of Beirut's **beach club** pools (p279), sipping on a killer cocktail



■ AREA CODE: 01

■ POPULATION: 1.3 MILLION

## HISTORY

For most outsiders, Beirut's history begins and ends with its bloody civil war, waged for 15 years along the infamous Green Line that cut the city in two, with Muslims to the west and Christians to the east. But its story stretches back much further than its modern strife, and the city's surface today conceals a fascinating, though often barely visible, ancient history.

The earliest traces of habitation in Beirut date from the Stone Age when the area now occupied by the city was in fact two islands in the delta of the Beirut River. Later, when the river silted up, the area became one land mass. Excavations in the Downtown area have revealed a Canaanite site dating from 1900 BC, with an entrance gate of dressed stone, and, nearby, the remains of Phoenician canals.

The city's name is probably a derivative of the Arabic for 'well' or 'spring' (modern Arabic still uses the word *bir* for well). The first historical reference to Beirut dates from the 14th century BC, when it is mentioned in cuneiform tablets discovered at Tell al-Amarna, Egypt, in the form of letters from the Canaanite king of Beirut begging the pharaoh Amenhotep IV for assistance in repelling Hittite invaders.

In Phoenician times, Beirut appears to have been overshadowed by Sidon, Tyre

and Byblos, but after Alexander the Great's conquest it starts to be mentioned in Hellenistic sources, and excavations have revealed an extensive Hellenistic city upon which the later Roman grid was based. It wasn't until the Roman period, however, that the city really came into its own, both as a commercial port and military base, with large public buildings and monuments swiftly erected, along with a series of baths, a theatre and a number of markets. Evidence of both the baths and the main public square, the *Cardo Maximus*, are still visible today in modern Beirut.

By the 3rd century AD, the city had found particular fame and prestige through its School of Law, one of the main Roman centres of jurisprudence, which rivalled those of Athens, Alexandria and Caesarea. It was actually here that the basis of the famous Justinian Code, upon which the Western legal system drew inspiration, was established. The city's importance as a trading hub and centre of learning continued as the Roman Empire gave way to the Byzantine; its commercial enterprises flourished around the silk trade, and Beirut became the seat of a bishopric. But then, in 551, a devastating earthquake, combined with a tidal wave, almost destroyed the city, killing a vast number of citizens. The School of Law was quickly evacuated and moved to

### SPIRITS AGAINST BULLDOZERS

While wandering Downtown Beirut, you'll doubtless come across the immense building site known as the Souqs Project, a vast new leisure complex now scheduled to open sometime in 2008, incorporating shops, restaurants and office units. Standing on the opposite side of the road to view construction work going on over the fence, you should spot one incongruous little old dome among the profusion of glass and steel. This is the remains of a *zawiya*, or hospice and religious school, built by 16th-century mystic and scholar, Mohammed ibn Iraq al-Dimashqi; it's the only Mamluk building still standing in Beirut, and one with a curious tale attached.

The Souqs Project stands on the site of Beirut's historic main souqs, destroyed during the civil war. In 1992, the rubble was first cleared by archaeologists who worked against the clock to investigate the area before it was built over by developers. A bulldozer clearing an area in what had been Souq Tawile was scooping up debris when it came up against a small, domed building. The machine suddenly stopped. The driver, wanting to finish his job, started the machine up again, but when he tried to move the controls, his hand was suddenly paralysed. Later, when he moved away from the site, the paralysis disappeared.

News quickly spread of the 'miracle' that saved the building and crowds visited the shrine, with reports circulating of miraculous healing among the ill who had prayed there. Muslim religious authorities erected a protective wall around the *zawiya*, announcing that it would not be demolished. Thus, when the Souqs Project finally opens its doors for business, you'll see the mystical *zawiya* standing proud amid yet another Beirut shrine to shopping.