DAYTIME highligh

Soak up the capital's culture, stroll along the Corniche or relax in its many bars and cafes, says Kieran Meeke

The Corniche

The Corniche is Beirut's living room, a promenade by the Mediterranean that's used by strolling couples and picnicking families, fishermen and bread sellers, cyclists and joggers, chess players and sunbathers. Take a walk along the seafront to watch children dodging the waves that come crashing in, or discover the hidden fishing cove whose harbour is bridged by the road. You see women in shorts and trainers jogging past other women wearing veils, and teens rollerblading through groups counting off their prayer beads. All the ages of life are here, from toddlers taking their first steps to ancient old men on benches enjoying a well-earned retirement. As you leave Downtown Beirut behind, you climb a steep section that rewards you with views of Pigeon Rocks, the perfect spot to enjoy an ice cream in the sun or a leisurely meal.



This small but fascinating museum has a unique collection of Phoenician artefacts and some interesting Roman and Byzantine items. The collection was begun after World War I, but the official opening was not until 1942. Extensively damaged during the 1975 civil war — it sits on the infamous green line that split what was then East and West Beirut — the museum tells a gripping story of its survival in a short video. Smaller objects were hidden in the basement, which was subject to flooding, while larger artefacts were encased in concrete while the building was used as a militia barracks. But massive investment has restored much of what was thought lost and delivered a world-class modern experience. There are more than 100,000 items in the collection, but only about 1,300 are on show at any one time — with the concentration on quality rather than quantity. www.beirutnationalmuseum.com



Beirut Art Center

Lebanon's troubled past was a hothouse for artists producing thought-provoking and exciting new art. Their work used to pop up in guerrilla installations in ruined buildings or obscure backstreet galleries, but the opening of the Beirut Art Center offers a mainstream showcase. This contemporary art museum has a regular schedule of solo and group exhibitions throughout the year in a diverse range of media. Besides the work of local artists, it welcomes regular showings by overseas guests. You can also see regular video shows, listen to talks with artists and critics or attend music performances by alternative artists. www.beirutartcenter.org

Saifi Village

Solidere, the company that has been reviving Beirut's former glory as the 'Paris of the Middle East', has developed Saifi Village as an area of upmarket apartments and shopping. Sandwiched between Place des Martyrs and Gemmayzeh, and completely destroyed during the civil war, the historic French colonial buildings and winding cobblestoned streets have been restored into a chic Arts Quarter. Painted in lovely Mediterranean pastel shades, the area is now home to luxury apartments, stylish boutiques, antique shops, art galleries and gardens. There are at least 70 restaurants and cafes in the area and some 150 retail outlets. www.solidere.com

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Gemmayzeh Street

Bordering Downtown Beirut's east side, Gemmayzeh is a narrow street that's a very short walk from the city centre. Reminiscent of the back streets of Naples, it has a similar buzz of tiny bars and cafes. In fact, locals will tell you it isn't what it used to be - which is the sort of thing locals say everywhere, of course. Still, it has become a victim of its own success, with a transformation from edgy new openings to more mainstream venues such as 'Irish' pubs as rents skyrocket and increasing numbers of visitors come to explore it. With traces of its former anarchic nature still remaining, it's a place to drink, eat or just talk late into the night before going elsewhere to find a club.

▶ PIGEON ROCKS: These two ragged rock islands feature heavily in Beirut postcards, with nearby shops and cafes catering for visitors who stop by to photo them. Visit in late afternoon to see the sunset and eniov the cool sea breeze

DOWNTOWN BEIRUT: Relax after the day's exertions at an open-air cafe in Downtown Beirut. The city's centre, destroyed during the civil war, has been rebuilt in the original French style and is now thriving with

high-end shops and restaurants. Beirut's fledgling organic farmers' market is held every Saturday at Souk el Tayeb square and is run by a non-profit co-operative metalwork, jewellery, icons, carpets and an array of uniting all Lebanon's regions, religions and sects.

• AMERICAN UNIVERSITY: Although the Corniche is the best place for strolling, the American University's tree-filled campus is a quieter haven. The university's archaeology museum is one of the region's finest. Take photo ID to get into the grounds. www.aub.edu.lb

▶ ROBERT MOUAWAD PRIVATE MUSEUM: An eclectic collection of Islamic pottery, Chinese porcelain, tiles, other precious objects united by one thing — beauty.

▶ EGLISE SAINT-LOUIS DES CAPUCINS: This Catholic church, restored in 2002, is one of the grandest and most beautiful. It's on Rue de France in the Downtown area. www.capucinsorient.org

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Rowena Carr-Allinson samples the city's flashy nightlife, where the girls are done up to the nines and life goes on into the wee hours

FINDING MYSELF IN Beirut with friends, I organised a night out with two local lasses. Adonis and her friend Diane made it their mission to show us their beloved Beirut, a buzzing city where extremes cohabit and party.

Having met up for drinks at the lively Kahwat al Ezez, we discuss the merits of Lebanese cuisine over a so-called Mexican beer, a popular cocktail of beer with salt and lime. Although it's still early and the street is quiet, the girls assure us that later, the Gemmayzeh area will be 'crazy busy'.

Skilfully negotiating the insane traffic and dodging past clapped-out cars, the latest Porsches and army Jeeps, Adonis takes us off the tourist track. We weave

Navee: Solov Place d´Etoi<u>le after dark</u>

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our way past Al Hamra, a Muslim area with bustling pavements, flashing neons and an overflowing Starbucks, on to the coastal Corniche, where the air is heavy with aromas from the corn on the cob stall, the exhausts, the litter and the omnipresent sweet smoke from the narguile pipes.

The Lebanese nightlife is flashy, showy and in your face. The girls are done up to the nines: spray on jeans, tiny tops, plenty of jewellery, make-up and heels that are out of this world.

At Bar Louie on Rue Gouraud, we enter a crypt-like restaurant where 1980s favourites blare out so loud that conversation is out of the question. We watch the young, sleek clientele singing along with George Michael. The atmosphere is euphoric, slightly surreal and the glamour factor puts Paris to shame.

Next stop is the ultra-hip Central bar, a 'tube bar' that appears to be an oversized air duct dropped on top of a building. It's worth coming just for the view across the city over the mosque to the twinkling harbour — the margaritas are pretty good, too.

Beirut parties on long into the night. In the wee hours, the city is still wide awake, a never ending parade of snazzy cars honking bumper to bumper.



SKY BARS

Ramy Salameh picks three of the latest additions to Beirut's already legendary nightlife scene

- ▶ WHITE: An established venue that attracts top DJs and a hedonistically inclined and beautiful crowd. From the top of An Nahar building, guests look out towards the Mediterranean or down on the bullet-ridden statues in Martyrs' Square. The decor is, of course, signature white throughout. www.whitebeirut.com
- ▶ SUNSET: Crowning the Palm Beach Hotel, the bar overlooks the Corniche. Set over two levels, it's divided into lounge areas with rich colours and aesthetics, leading to an upper roof terrace with summer furniture and a pool. www.palmbeachbeirut.com
- D HEMINGWAY'S BAR & CIGAR LOUNGE: Located at the Mövenpick Hotel & Resort, it's open 24/7. The uninterrupted vistas of the Mediterranean Sea, Olympic-size pool and private marina are best enjoyed from the VIP lounge hovering above the outdoor terrace. Cigar connoisseurs will enjoy the Cohiba Siglo VI, while the Hemingway's Special cocktail is tailor-made to exact requirements. www.moevenpick-beirut.com



