

temples to caves

From rich cultural experiences to soft adventure, Lebanon delivers holidays to meet every requirement, says Mark Stratton

SEVERAL MILLENNIA OF invading empires couldn't have been wrong. To the Romans, Umayyad Arabs and Crusaders, who left a rich tapestry of grandiose dreams forever etched in the Lebanon, this jewel of the eastern Mediterranean was a prize worth having. So it's scarcely surprising the unique blend of sun-kissed cuisine, sparkling coastal waters, snow-capped mountains and fertile valleys continues to entice.

In short, Lebanon has everything that tourism rivals such as Turkey can offer. Perhaps the only missing ingredient has been long-term stability. Yet tourism remains upwardly mobile, driven by Beirut's ongoing success as a short break destination.

The capital's heady cocktail of mezze-tastic restaurants, pulsating nightlife, designer hotels and the fashionably transformed Solidere district appeals to seasoned travellers seeking something refreshingly new. The success of wine tourism in the Bekaa Valley has added extra spice for short break gourmet

travellers, while BMI's launch of a second daily flight to Beirut confirms this burgeoning demand.

Beirut effectively offers easy access to just about everywhere in this small country in a matter of hours. But new accommodation options outside Beirut are encouraging visitors to explore further afield without returning each night to the capital.

Travelling beyond Beirut appeals to Cox & Kings clients, says Mark Stacey, Middle East product manager. Tours take in Jeita Grotto, Baalbeck and Byblos, while including an overnight stay in Zahle. "We returned to Lebanon last year for the first time since 2007 and saw almost 200 people booking group and private tours," he says.

"Luxury short breaks appeal to our clients, but sales for the escorted group tours are very strong. Feedback from clients has been very positive and many clients are surprised how liberal and cosmopolitan Beirut is."

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Sculpted lion's head in the Baalbeck temple complex.
Right: The Baalbeck Festival features classical music

culture lovers

► First-timers: Baalbeck

► **Why:** There's a classic sketch in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* where John Cleese asks fellow conspirators: "What have the Romans ever done for us?" Well, in the case of Baalbeck they bestowed Lebanon with the crowning glory of its tourism industry.

Sixty miles north of Beirut, Baalbeck's temple complex is the greatest extant architectural achievement of the Roman era. It's a jaw-dropping moment, first encountering the gargantuan Temple of Jupiter-Baal that was a glint in Julius Caesar's eye around the first century BC. And although time and earthquakes have proved harsh, the six remaining Corinthian columns, standing 23 metres high, are the largest ever constructed. The fallen capitals and architraves hint at once epic dimensions.

The adjacent second-century Temple of Bacchus is almost Lilliputian by comparison, yet it possesses a completeness and exquisiteness unrivalled from Roman times. Dedicated to Bacchus, the god of wine, the stone friezes of poppies and grapes hint at the debauchery associated with this cult worship. Some of the temple's finer architectural treasures are located inside Baalbeck's excellent on-site museum.

Baalbeck rightly falls within most group tour itineraries, but for individual travellers it's also a very manageable half-day excursion and easily reached by taxi from the capital. Even better, stay the night. New hotel developments around Baalbeck have expanded accommodation options in recent years that before were limited to the legendary Hotel Palmyra, still swanning along in retro-Victorian splendour.

► **Wow factor:** Musical artists performing amid the lit backdrop of Roman columns is a sensorial highlight of the annual Baalbeck International Festival. Last year's festival featured an eclectic mixture of Mika and the Krakow Symphony Orchestra.

► **Repeat visitors:** Anjar's eighth-century Umayyad ruins are an essential add-on to any Bekaa Valley winery tour. It was built on a trading route between the Mediterranean and Damascus and highlights include graceful Moorish arches, colonnaded Roman boulevards — once lined with hundreds of shops — and Byzantine-inspired designs, knitting together the ebb-and-flow of transient civilisations into one particularly fascinating site. ►





sport addicts

► **First-timers: Skiing Mzaar**

► **Why:** There's an element of truth in calling Lebanon 'the Switzerland of the Middle East'. Yet even the Swiss can't offer skiers the unusual contrast of carving turns through powdery piste while admiring sweeping views out to the Mediterranean.

Skiing has become increasingly popular with a largely domestic and Middle Eastern market, with six top-class resorts in the Lebanese Alps within several hours of Beirut. Perhaps the best developed and accessible of them for first-time winter sports enthusiasts to Lebanon is Mzaar Ski Resort.

On the breathtakingly scenic slopes of Ouyoun el-Siman, Mzaar's 42 trails offer just about every winter sports activity. There are fast runs for downhill speedsters and snowboarders, plus challenging cross-country skiing.

Accommodation ranges from the InterContinental Mountain Resort & Spa to more humble chalets. The hire cost of equipment is good by West European standards and snow is guaranteed, with the resorts between 1,500 and 2,500 metres.

► **Wow factor:** Head up to Mzaar's highest reaches above 2,400 metres for sensational views on a clear day to virtually all corners of Lebanon.

► **Repeat visitors:** Wreck diving represents one of myriad watersports opportunities along Lebanon's 140 miles of Mediterranean coast. Wrecks include *HMS Victoria*, sunk in 1893 off Tripoli, and the torpedoed French submarine *Le Souffleur*.

nature buffs

► **First-timers: Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve**

► **Why:** Failing to see a cedar forest during a holiday in Lebanon is tantamount to travelling to Rome and ignoring the Coliseum. And there's nowhere better to encounter the national emblem than at Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve. Here Lebanese cedars, some dating from the time of Christ, form majestic forests within the Middle East's largest protected area, covering more than 200sq miles.

This UNESCO Biosphere Reserve provides a breath of fresh air and tranquility away from Beirut's demanding traffic, despite being just 30 miles east of the capital. Besides offering eye-watering views over the Mediterranean and the Bekaa Valley from Mount Lebanon's heights, the reserve is a focus for ecotourism.

Nature lovers will find stands of cedar, oak woodland and juniper forests ripe for exploring along trails well-defined for hiking and mountain biking. Keep eyes peeled for glimpses of red foxes, mountain goats or martens; look skywards to spot griffon vultures or golden eagles.

► **Wow factor:** In the winter, when snow falls on the cedars, Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve transforms into a winter wonderland that adventurous travellers might explore by the newly popular outlet of snowshoeing.

► **Repeat visitors:** Horsh Ehdan Nature Reserve is a little gem, spread over four steep-sided valleys in the northern Mount Lebanon region. The reserve's trails offer a collage of apple tree and juniper woodlands, and globally threatened birds such as corncrakes. Plants endemic to the reserve include the bushy golden-drop and Lebanon geranium. ►



Mzaar Ski Resort. Right: Golden eagle in Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve

adventure seekers

Spectacular stalactite scenery in Jeita Grotto

► **First-timers: Jeita Grotto**

► **Why:** Although very much a soft adventure option, a guided tour through Jeita's underground caverns will feel highly intrepid for those who haven't left Beirut before. From the moment a cable car delivers wannabe spelunkers into Jeita's fairytale grotto, a childlike sense of fantasy and adventure takes over.

Lebanon is riddled with underground caves courtesy of its widespread limestone karst scenery. Jeita was discovered by chance in the 1830s and has gone from strength to strength to become the focus of a hugely popular excursion less than 12 miles from Beirut. It has recently been gaining further international recognition with its inclusion on the current shortlist for the New 7 Wonders of Nature award.

Buried deep in the Nahr el-Kalb Valley (infinitely more romantic sounding in Arabic than its translation 'Dog River' Valley), Jeita's subterranean caverns form part of a six-mile labyrinth. Visitors are restricted to two chambers, yet both are sufficient enough to dazzle. The Upper Chamber is cathedral-sized, reaching up more than 100 metres into the dark void above.

The show starts when coloured lighting ethereally illuminates forests of stalactites and stalagmites to conjure up a sorcerer's kingdom of freakishly contorted lime-rich sculptures, from fluted organ pipes to supersized toadstools.

Some 60 metres below is the flooded Lower Chamber. During some winter months it can be closed due to excessive rainfall and it would be a shame to

miss the slow 500-metre cruise into the underworld by electric boat. Just as your eyes are adjusting to the dark, well-targeted lights pick-out freaky limestone formations in the velvety blackness.

► **Wow factor:** A moment of faultless silence drifting by boat in the lower cavern, when water droplets plopping from above send echoes ricocheting around the dark.

► **Repeat visitors:** History gurus will love the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Qadisha Valley's rugged cedar forested scenery and early Christian heritage.

Ancient monasteries, rock-cut hermitages and caves decorated with religious frescoes characterise a valley revered by Lebanon's Maronite community. ■

samples

► **COX & KINGS** offers a seven-day Land of the Phoenicians individual tour blending mountains, coast and historical sites. It includes Beirut, Jeita Grotto, the Cedars of Lebanon, Baalbeck and a winery visit. From £1,795 per person, based on two sharing. T: 020 7873 5000. www.coxandkings.co.uk

► **EXODUS** offers the five-day Lebanon Long Weekend from £979, including flights. The itinerary explores the capital Beirut, the ancient sites of Byblos and Baalbeck, Umayyad ruins at Anjar, the Bekaa Valley and the Jeita Grotto, with wine tasting at the Ksara winery. T: 0845 287 7643. www.exodus.co.uk