

# Lebanon

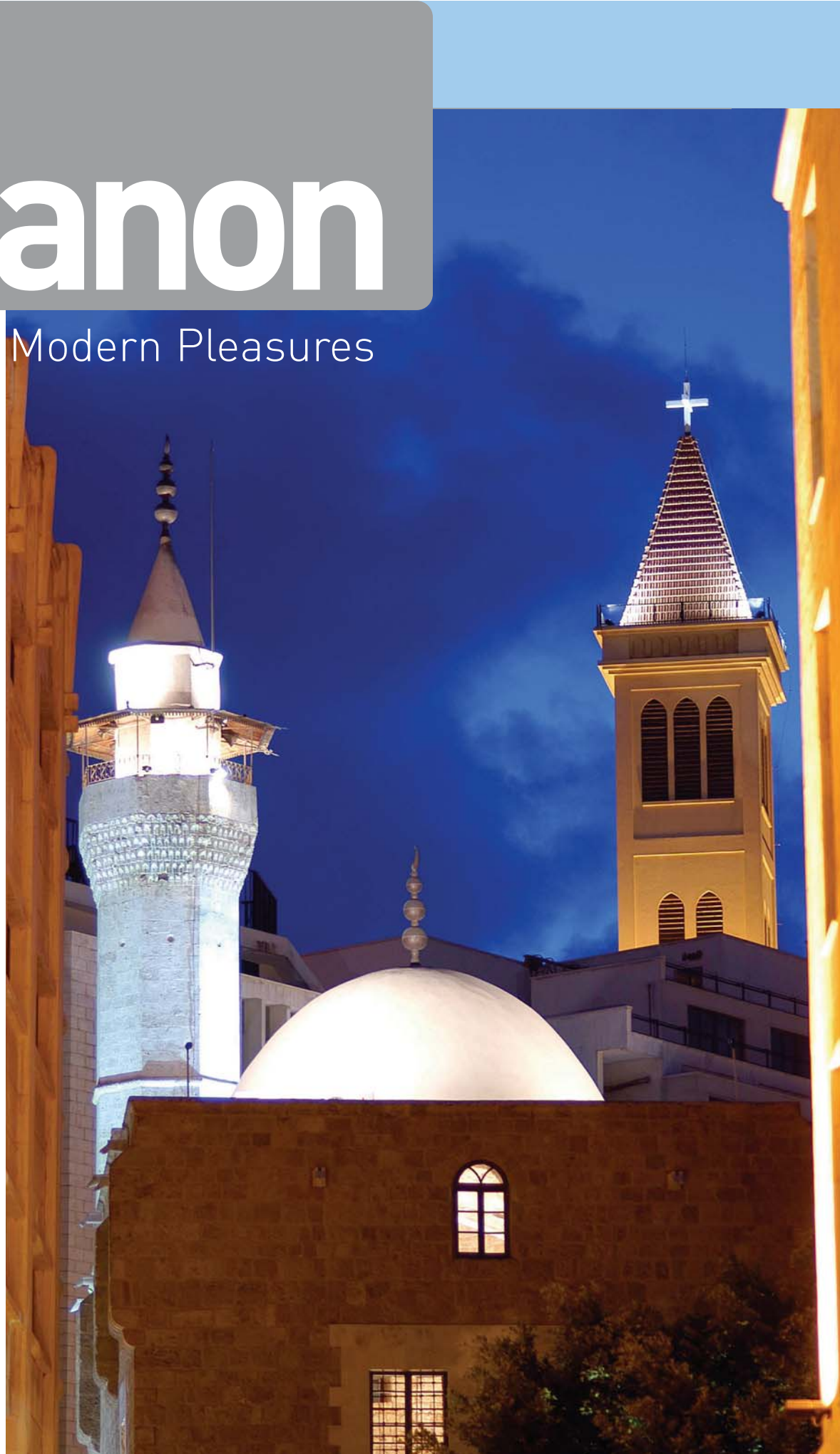
## Ancient Cities, Modern Pleasures

Perched on the eastern edge of Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon stands at the crossroads of three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. It is a country of variety and diversity whose origins go back to the beginning of history.

**D**ominated by two mountain ranges on either side of the Bekaa Valley, the Lebanon Mountains and the Anti-Lebanon range, this small country is a land of diversity and contrasts, from the white-capped blue sea to the arid hills and lush forests; from bare rocky mountains to luxuriant valleys watered by rivers and waterfalls.

Views change from pine-covered hills to rocky landscapes, then to fertile plains; from mountain-dwelling villages, with traditional red tile houses, to the bustling towns and cities with high-rise buildings, hotels, large resort complexes, excellent restaurants, luxurious boutiques and big shopping malls which attract visitors from all over the world.

The Lebanese population is estimated around 4 million. It is a



young and dynamic population with a very high educational level. The official language is Arabic, but most Lebanese speak either French or English or both languages, thus facilitating business relations and assuring a rich and diversified cultural heritage.

The weather in Lebanon is fantastic, with a Mediterranean climate, providing cool, wet winters with heavy snow in the mountains, while hot summers provide ample opportunity to enjoy the country's many beaches. In March and April it is often possible to ski in the mountains in the morning and then to drive down to the beaches in the afternoon to bask in the sunshine.

Lebanon's Archaeological Heritage Shaped by 10,000 years of history, the legacy of the past is clear in Lebanon from the variety of archaeological sites in every corner of the country. From Phoenician sarcophagi, to Roman temples, to Crusade castles and Mamluk mosques, everywhere you go, evidence of the country's rich and varied past comes to light. Cities like Byblos, Baalbeck and Tyre are treasures of human history and civilisation.

The country's archaeological past can be discovered in the National Museum, which holds items from various archaeological sites all over the country (sarcophagi, mosaics, jewellery, coins, ceramics, woodwork, weapons, etc.). It covers the Prehistoric Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, as well as the Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine and Arab conquests and the Mamluk period. One highlight not to be missed is the sarcophagus of Ahiram, King of Byblos, which is inscribed with the earliest known example of the Phoenician alphabet.

Lebanon's main historical and archaeological sites are at Tripoli, Byblos, Baalbeck, Sidon, Tyre, Beiteddine and Jeita Grotto.

**Tripoli**

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largest city in Lebanon, Tripoli has preserved its past more beautifully than any other of the country's ancient towns. Tripoli is Lebanon's most Arabian city and retains much of its provincial charm. It is known for its old souks, khans, tailor shops, soap makers, potters and other traditional crafts.

The oriental atmosphere of old Tripoli is also seen in its mosques. Tripoli is dominated by an imposing castle, the Saint Gilles Citadel, built by Raymond de Saint-Gilles, founder of the County of Tripoli during the Crusader period.

**Byblos**

Byblos is reputed to be the oldest town in the world. Its archaeological sites include several Canaanite and Phoenician temples, the foundations of Stone Age houses, the Crusaders' Castle, ancient city walls and several Roman remains. Byblos is also known for its picturesque medieval port. Today Byblos is a thriving modern town, with the old town centre being the most interesting part for the visitor to explore.

**Baalbeck**

One of the world's most amazing archaeological sites can be found in the Bekaa plain, a very ancient site which came into its glory after the invasion of Alexander the Great, who

elevated it to the rank of Heliopolis, city of the Sun. With the Roman conquest and the construction of major temples the town developed into an important religious site. The Acropolis of Baalbeck is among the largest and best preserved Roman architecture in

the world. This monumental sanctuary is made up of three main temples: the temple of Jupiter, the Bacchus temple and the temple of Venus.

**Sidon**

Sidon is an ancient city, mentioned in the famous El-Amarna letters of the 14th century BC. Like



other Phoenician cities, Sidon was subjected to the domination of many conquerors, Greek, Roman and Arab, then by the Crusaders. Its Sea Castle dates from the time of the Crusaders, when Sidon was elevated to the rank of Seignior of Sagette. On a tour round Sidon, you will see its medieval souks, its old mosques, and its quranic schools and bath houses, in addition to fascinating old shops.

**Tyre**

Tyre, south of Sidon, was declared a World Heritage Site in 1979, and it has some of the world's most fascinating archaeological ruins, mostly from Roman times, but also from the Phoenician, Greek and Byzantine eras. There are two main areas to visit in Tyre: the inland hippodrome area and the old city on the peninsula. The seaside southern town of Tyre also has a colourful souk, an Ottoman inn and a Mamluk house.

**Beiteddine**

Beiteddine, in the Chouf mountains, is the site of the Palace built by the Amir Basheer, a masterpiece of 19th century architecture. The palace, with its vast courtyard and beautiful

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fountains, ochre stone and perfectly geometrical arcades, is a wonderful sight to behold.

### Jeita Grotto

Fashioned by years of erosion, the Jeita Grotto is a spectacle that defies description. Jeita is composed of a dry upper gallery and a lower gallery with an underground lake that is seen by boat. Stalagmites and stalactites meet together in a fantastic decor.

### Other Tourist Attractions and Activities

Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, known as 'the lady of the world', 'the city that wouldn't die', 'the ancient city of the future', remains the most fascinating city in the Middle East. A tour of Beirut might include a parade through Place de l'Etoile (Downtown area), a stroll along the Corniche coast, and a bar-hop from club to club along Monot Street.

Downtown Beirut, known as Solidere, has emerged from the ashes as Beirut's most fashionable and desirable neighbourhood, with gloriously restored French Mandate era buildings, European and Lebanese cafes, and world-class restaurants, luxurious boutiques and pubs.

One of the main cultural hotspots of the Middle East, Lebanon is known for its many international and national universities, schools and cultural centres. Throughout the summer months Lebanon hosts an important cultural event, the summer international festivals, which extend from July to the end of September, where concerts, ballets, operas and modern dance troupes bring life back to the ancient stones of Baalbeck, the Crusader castle in Byblos, the Roman Hippodrome in Tyre or Khan El Franj in Sidon.

Lebanon's fertile Bekaa valley is its breadbasket, with vast agricultural lands, where varied fruits, vegetables, spices and other crops grow. The slope of the terrain, its fertile soil and its climate all make the Bekaa valley an ideal place for grape cultivation and winemaking. Vineyards cover a large area of the valley, known for its famous wineries, such as



Ksara, Kefraya and Muzar.

Opportunities for outdoor activities abound in Lebanon. It usually takes a little more than an hour to reach the snow-covered mountains, where ideal skiing conditions are present on most days, accompanied by bright sunny skies. Skiing is a feature that singles out Lebanon among its neighbouring Arab countries. The months of December through to April are when skiing is at its best, and the slopes are full to capacity with skiers, snowboarders and people simply enjoying the snow.

There are many resorts to choose from in the Lebanese mountains, for example, the Cedars (an ancient forest of majestic cedars dating back to the days of King Salomon), Faraya, Laqlouq, Faqra, Qanat Bakish and Zaarour, which offer excellent accommodation and facilities.

From north to the south, Lebanon offers more than 200 km of golden coastline, and enjoys 300 days of Mediterranean sunshine a year. For secluded sands, family fun or lively beach parties, Lebanon is the ideal destination for summer holidays. Swimming is popular in Lebanon. Water sports of all kinds are available most of the year, such as waterskiing, sailing and scuba-diving.

Lebanon enjoys a wonderful nightlife. Nightclubs spice up the evenings in Beirut and in the mountain resorts. Entertainment ranges from solo guitarists to orchestras and floor shows. In Maameltein, 24 km north of Beirut, stands the Casino du Liban, which is

famous for its international shows and luxurious gaming rooms, as well as for its sumptuous restaurants. All kinds of dancing are enjoyed, from the traditional dabke to oriental (or 'belly dancing') and disco dancing.

Lebanese cuisine is immensely popular, and surprising in its diversity. It is among the most varied and savoury in the world. Restaurants specialising in Lebanese food are found everywhere and in all of them you will be invited to try the famous hors d'oeuvre known as mezze, a spread of innumerable small dishes that form the traditional opener to a meal. Carefully decorated, wisely seasoned, these delicacies are a pleasure to the eye as well as to the palate.

The meal is traditionally accompanied by arak, the national drink of distilled grape juice flavoured with anis, but Lebanon also produces some excellent beers and wines that go just as well.

Some British-style pubs can be found in Beirut. You can dine in elegance on fine European cuisine, or at rustic seaside cafes.

As for shopping, most international brands are available in Lebanon, but visitors might be more interested in the local products, especially handicrafts, embroidery, cutlery, brass, caftans, pottery, etc.

All in all, Lebanon is one of the most attractive destinations in the Middle East, offering a moderate climate, archaeological wealth, impressive nature and cultural and artistic activities to suit all different kinds of people, ages and families.

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