

ARABIAN THE

LIGHTS

Cosmopolitan, glamorous and reputedly serving the best mezze in the region, **Catherine Quinn** discovers why diminutive Lebanon is a true tourist gem of the Middle East

VIBRANT, PROGRESSIVE, AND with a people for whom warm welcomes are second nature, Lebanon was made for tourism. From the hedonistic capital of Beirut to the deep forests and snow-capped mountains, it's a holiday in microcosm, stocked with the assets of a country four times its size in a handy diminutive landmass. And while attention might have previously centred on sophisticated Beirut, popularity is currently spreading to the country's attractive ski resorts and burgeoning ecotourism offering.

The Lebanese people appear keen to extend their legendary welcome to visitors as this is a country rising majestically to the challenge of millennial tourism. "It's a destination I wouldn't hesitate to recommend to people," says agent Susan Walker Munroe of North West Frontier Travel Consultants. "People do tend to associate the area with political conflict, but they're often unaware of how localised this was, and it certainly wasn't aimed at tourists."

Lebanon is officially at peace, and the sparkling new buildings in Beirut are testimony to how quickly the country aims to reaffirm its tourist offering. Only a few decades hence, Lebanon, in particular the coastal town of Byblos, was the epitome of 60s chic, drawing international stars to dip their toes in the waters and shop in boutiques.

Beirut's lively Corniche still bears its famed resemblance to the palm-lined roads of St Tropez, while the glamorous residents have not forgotten their country's legacy. Sun-bathing in Lebanon's more fashionable beaches is an affair conducted in full make-up and jewellery, while the popularity in skiing has created fashionable resorts 'to be seen' at.

Renewed tourist offerings are tentative, however, with much of the current influx coming from British expats or the surrounding areas. 2006 saw several major tour operators withdraw from Lebanon but Cox and Kings is one that plans to resume trips soon.

There's no doubt the country is making huge strides to ensure facilities for visitors are in keeping with the famed local hospitality: Beirut currently offers a slew of attractive four- and five-star hotels and further out, companies offering tours of the natural surrounds are found in abundance.

It's a country which will undoubtedly again see the impressive scope of its tourist offering rise to the fore. Here we give a rundown of some of Lebanon's top attractions and experiences...

FAST FACTS

- ▶ **POPULATION:** Almost four million, totalling Arabic residents at 95%, Armenian 4%, and other at 1%.
- ▶ **RELIGION:** Lebanon features no less than 18 different religious denominations, with the majority at 59% muslim.
- ▶ **EDUCATION:** High, with most residents speaking at least three languages, literacy is at 87%.
- ▶ **LANGUAGE:** Arabic is the official language, with French also commonly spoken. While English is a popular third choice, visitors should note that a knowledge of French is useful.
- ▶ **ECONOMY:** Largely service-sector dominated with 65% of the population accruing 67% of the nation's GDP through these means. Other significant incomes include agriculture at 11%.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK