

# HISTORY & HERITAGE

A spectacular historical legacy is one of Lebanon's most alluring attractions and even those without a yen for history can't fail to be drawn to the country's mesmerising ancient sites.

Sandwiched between Israel and Syria, on a major trade route between Europe and the Middle East, this slim stretch of land was always going to feature significantly in power struggles. And in fact, the country's legacy of being passed between successive rulers has bedecked its cities and towns by the munificence of ages, with Roman temples, ancient monasteries and historic ports forming only a small part of its bounteous heritage.

Lebanon houses evidence of the oldest city settlement on earth at Baalbek, which is also home to the awesome remains of the Temple of Jupiter, alongside the Temple of Bacchus – commonly cited as the best preserved Roman temple in the Middle East.

Plentiful evidence of Roman occupation is joined by the work of a whole host of additional settlers. From ancient to modern day, Lebanon has been ruled and occupied by Phoenicians, Greeks, Muslims and

Ottomans, who have patched up or remodelled the work of their predecessors. The result of this mixed heritage has also been to foster a population duly proud of their 18 recognised religious denominations.

Lebanon's turbulent history has given the country an unusual opportunity to delve into its ancient sites, as buried treasures have been revealed with the reconstruction of the city. In Beirut, for example, a sphinx was uncovered when the city was modernised in the 1950s, and more recently a wealth of Phoenician relics were unearthed near the southern city of Tyre. An enormous collection of remains are housed in Beirut's small but excellent museum, but with Lebanon's compact size, many tourists prefer to make the easy foray to visit the country's vast array of historical landmarks in person.

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## HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS

▶ **THE TEMPLE OF BACCHUS AND THE TEMPLE OF JUPITER, BAALBEK:** Most visitors head to Baalbek as their first port of call after Beirut to witness these truly astounding Roman remains. Built centuries ago, the scale and intricacy of these incredible temples still overshadows many more recent famous sights and attractions.

▶ **THE GREAT PALACE AT ANJAR:** Built in 8th century AD, the Great Palace is a fascinating relic of a substantial Islamic dynasty, which was eventually defeated leaving the city abandoned and in ruins.

▶ **THE PORT OF TYRE:** Both the port and the remaining city make a fascinating visit. Tyre's origins date back to third millennium BC, where the port was established as a lucrative trade hub. Successive invasions layered a rich legacy of UNESCO remains.

▶ **SIDON:** Just North of Tyre, Sidon bears an interesting history as a centre of illustrious purple dye production. The royal hue ensured the settlement prospered, with evidence of a glass works and Roman coin mint.

▶ **BYBLOS:** One of Lebanon's key attractions and once one of the key trade centres for the entire Mediterranean. As its name suggests, many historians believe the settlement's traders developed an early style of alphabet.

Images from left: Baalbek ruins; casino du liban at dusk; ski resort

# NIGHTLIFE

The phrase 'Paris of the Middle East' has been well-worn in reference to Lebanon, but not without reason. This cultural milieu has earned a reputation for being the glamorous hub of the region, complete with café-bar style nightlife and relaxed attitudes to drinking.

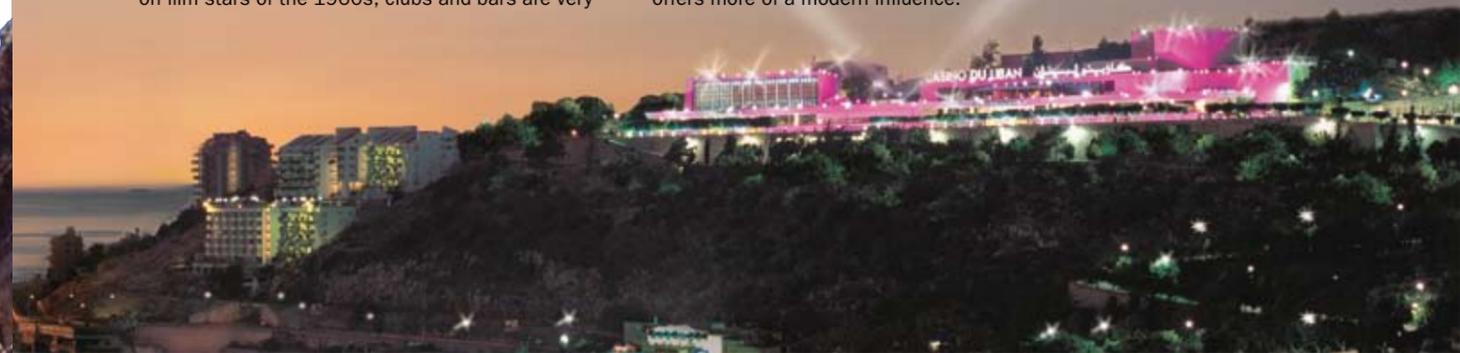
The Lebanese are undoubtedly a party people: evenings start around 9pm with a few aperitifs and a late dinner before heading out to clubs and bars, and Beirut is clearly the epicentre of the country's nightlife.

With Lebanese women modelling their appearance on film stars of the 1960s, clubs and bars are very

much the height of cool with dress codes smart. Crystal and Sky Bar are top stops for evening drinks, followed by legendary underground bunker club BO18.

While locals and visitors tend to favour bar-hopping, there's also a diverse scene of theatre and dance. The Caracalla Dance Theatre showcases a mix of modern and traditional dance while for folk-style dancing, a number of restaurants host shows for diners.

For performance-style theatre, the Al Madina runs shows in several languages, while the Beirut Theatre offers more of a modern influence.



# SPORTS & ACTIVITIES



IMAGES: LEBANON MINISTRY OF TOURISM

The Lebanese are keen on sports and fitness, and an average day in Beirut will see locals power-walking or jogging the Corniche — with women often in full make-up and coiffed hair. It's no surprise, then, that the country is well equipped for sports activities, featuring five sizeable golf courses and plenty of hiking and biking trails stretching out into the wilderness. The terrain also lends itself to horse riding, while angling and scuba diving along the coast are also popular.

As thrill seekers search for ever more deserted spots to try off-piste, skiing and snowboarding is big news on the activities front with huge appeal to the adventure traveller.

Most of the ski schools won't take children until they're six years old, so it's not necessarily suited to families with young children. But with an offering comparable with Austria, the slopes are great for more accomplished skiers who can easily hire a guide to go off-piste. For medium ability skiers there's certainly enough to keep them occupied for a week or more. Currently, visitors to the resorts tend to be local or expat travellers who book ski trips and packages within the country. ▶

Lebanon is justly famed for delicious food, which manages to showcase Middle Eastern greats while retaining its own signature classics.

Locals rave about their vast array of delectable fresh street food, from fresh thyme bread to falafel. Kebabs, or shawarma as they're more accurately known, hail from this region, and nowhere serves them better – hot from a spit, doused in piquant tahini and dished up in oven-fresh pitta bread.

Then, of course, comes the mezze, for which the Middle East as a whole is famous. The Lebanese will argue (with fair conviction) that theirs is not only different but the best on offer in the region. As mezze is often a meal in its own right, chefs go all out in the range of flavours on offer. Lamb features prominently in many dishes, but vegetarians will find plenty to keep them satisfied. For dessert, a wide range of fresh fruits, such as iced prickly pears, are accompanied by sugary hand-made sweets, for which the town of Tripoli is famous.

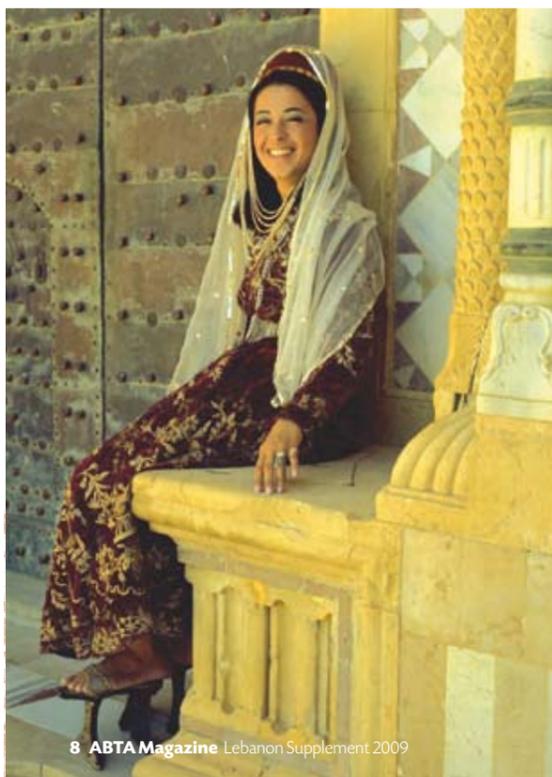
Not content with offering a mouth-watering array of meals, Lebanon is also famed for high quality and inexpensive wine. The fertile region produces many varieties, with full-flavoured reds holding the mainstay of quality offerings. Fresh juices and the region's ubiquitous mint tea are delicious alternatives.

▶▶ Lebanese will argue (with fair conviction) that their mezze is not only different but the best on offer in the Middle East

## FOOD & DRINK



Images from left: woman at the Baalbek festival; Lebanese mezze; Jeita Grotto



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## E V E N T S & F E S T I V A L S

The Lebanese are widely reputed to be party lovers, so it's no wonder that festivals and events are a key attraction for visitors. The country not only showcases a number of internationally acclaimed events and performances, but also offers a number of lesser-known festivals with local styles of entertainment.

Perhaps the most spectacular are the handful of events held amongst historic ruins — in particular the Blybos International Festival and the Baalbek Festival, held in June/July and July/August respectively. Both showcase a lively mix of arts, theatre, poetry and music.

While both of these festivals offer a joyous mixture of local and international talent, those seeking a more Lebanese line-up should try the Beiteddine Festival in July and August where Arab musicians, singers and dancers are in abundance.

In Beirut, the capital hosts its own International Film Festival in October, focusing on both worldwide small-scale releases and films which are the result of local Arab collaborations. The Beirut International Documentary Festival picks up the screen baton from November to December.

The November Beirut Marathon offers a platform to the country's many sports enthusiasts, but for a wonderful spread of the archetypal Lebanese shopping experience, the Souq el-Bargout in May-June and November-December is a fantastical celebration of the country's diverse flea markets.

IMAGES: LEBANON MINISTRY OF TOURISM; ISTOCKPHOTO



## NATURE

Lebanon is the stunning natural surprise in a region largely famous for sand dunes. This small landmass is stocked from east to west with mountain ranges, fertile vineyards, roaming cedar forests and pockets of fruit and olive trees. The geography of the region also renders it perfect for some truly distinct natural wonders, with cave formations and gorges among its most awe inspiring local treasures.

Not least is the superb Jeita Grotto – a magical underground lair of sparkling rock formations set amongst still fairy-green waters. This lengthy stretch of grotto is in pole position for the second round of voting in the New Seven Wonders of the World.

It's not surprising that the Lebanese are well aware of the importance of nature. Even those dwelling in the capital are only half an hour's drive from a spectacular forest or mountain vista, and the abundance of wildlife enjoys genuine local pride.

Lebanon's commitment to preserving its natural phenomena has led to a drive in eco tourism and protection of forested areas. Although fledging, the movement has led to several companies setting up camp in the protected cedar forest reserve of Al Shouf, offering mud hut and other eco accommodation alongside guided walks and organic meals.

This dedication to nature is aided by UNESCO's decision to award the valleys of Qannoubine World Heritage status. Beirut's mountain vistas, courtesy of Mount Lebanon, the scenic Chouf Mountains to the south, not to mention the stunning coastline, add to a natural portfolio deserving celebration. ■

## NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS

▶ **QANNOUBINE VALLEY:** An area famed for limestone crags, waterfalls, rich vegetation and charming ancient monasteries clustered among scenic vistas. The combination of natural beauty and ancient religious heritage have helped it gain UNESCO heritage status.

▶ **AL SHOUF RESERVE:** This picturesque cedar forest area is gaining headway in the country's eco tourism movement. Once a victim of deforestation, the area is now under government protection and lends its iconic leaves to the national symbol.

▶ **TYRE BEACH NATURE RESERVE:** A sanctuary for endangered birds and turtles, this reserve combines stretches of golden sand beaches with areas of wilderness.

▶ **JEITTA GROTTA:** One of Lebanon's 'must-sees', this spectacular underground cavern of stalactites and rock formations totals 9,000 metres in length.

▶ **HORSH BEIRUT:** Newly opened to the public, this forested area represents a reserve of 40,000 acres of pine forest, and is a key emblem in the country's dedication to its natural heritage as a whole. The fragrant forest encompasses walking trails and a children's play-park for a natural break on the doorstep of the capital.

▶▶ Jeita Grotto is one of Lebanon's 'must-sees' featuring a spectacular underground cavern of stalactites and rock formations

## SELLING TIPS

▶ **NATURE:** Many tourists assume Lebanon to be desert but the country features a vast array of natural attractions from spectacular mountains to lush valleys, with a burgeoning ecotourism market.

▶ **SNOWBOARDING:** The native enthusiasm for sports and affinity with the glamour of ski resorts ensures the country has an enviable offering.

▶ **FOOD:** Lebanon is celebrated as the best destination in the Middle East for food, particularly its signature take on mezze. Food served in restaurants and street stalls is of high quality, while native wines are rich and inexpensive.

▶ **HISTORY:** With a slew of historic sights worthy of a much larger country, visitors can easily view Lebanon's ancient attractions within the space of a short trip.

▶ **SUN:** While mountains and valleys comprise much of the landscape, attractive beaches are also very much in evidence. And sun-worshippers will find Beirut's five-star hotels have ample facilities for poolside relaxation.