

WORLD TRAVEL MARKET 5-8 NOV 2012 ROUND-UP

Stand ME140 in the Middle East Section

PROFILE

Lebanon's diverse patchwork of Mediterranean-lapped coast, rugged alpine peaks and green fertile valleys is packed into a parcel of land some 225km long and 46km wide. An ancient land, Lebanon features in the writings of Homer and in the Old Testament. Its cities were major outposts and seaports in Phoenician and Roman times, just two of the great civilizations that touched this important Middle Eastern crossroads.

The cosmopolitan flair of modern-day Beirut, the gastronomic renown of the country's food and wine and an educated and outward-looking population complement a country that is both traditional and progressive in outlook. For all the flavours of its storied past and rugged natural beauty, Lebanon is a well-kept tourist secret that begs exploration.

There are four main geographic regions in Lebanon, differentiated by topography and climate. From west to east, they include: the coastal plain, the Mount Lebanon Range, the Békaa Valley and the Anti-Lebanon Range.

The Anti-Lebanon Range is a stretch of arid mountains that rise to the east of the Békaa Valley and form part of the country's eastern border with Syria.

The Békaa Valley, known in ancient times as "the breadbasket" or "granary" of the Roman Empire, is still the country's main agricultural region. Located on a high plateau between the country's two mountain ranges, the river-fed Békaa supports the production of tomatoes, potatoes, wheat, olives, and grapes, even despite summers that are hot and dry.

Besides some of Lebanon's best wineries (Ksara, Kefraya, Massaya), the Békaa's major attraction is the ruins of Baalbek. Some of the largest Roman temples ever constructed were erected at this site. The construction lasted over 200 years, and the well-preserved temples honour Jupiter, Bacchus, and Venus.

The lovely Lebanese coast is framed by the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Mount Lebanon Range to the east, its temperate climate brings in sunny, hot summers and cool, rainy winters. Daytime temperature in the summer, which averages 30°C (86°F), encourages people to head to the beach or to the higher, altitude-cooled mountain slopes. In the coastal cities of Saida (Sidon) and Jbeil (Byblos), tourists can enjoy the rare opportunity to snorkel amongst long-submerged Phoenician ruins, while excellent hiking is a mere hour away in the Chouf region of Mount Lebanon Range.

The Mount Lebanon Range includes numerous rivers that fizz with snowmelt, steep-walled gullies and also Lebanon's highest summit, Qornet Es-Saouda (3,090m). In winter, the high peaks are blanketed with snow, lending Lebanon its name, "Lubnan", the Arabic word for "white." Lebanon boasts a number of world-class ski resorts, one of only a couple of countries in the Middle East where you can ski. The ski season runs from December until April.

The Mount Lebanon Range is also the location of Lebanon's Cedar Reserves. The great cedar forests of Lebanon, now protected, are famous for their use in the construction of some of the holiest buildings in the region, indeed the world, including Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock and Solomon's Temple.

To visit Lebanon is to dispel preconceived notions that linger from a relatively short moment in a long, vivid, and fascinating history: drink in the energetic, urbane vibe of revitalized Beirut; explore a diverse and beautiful landscape that lends itself easily to an unforgettable (and largely untrammelled) multi-sport adventure; marvel at archaeological wonders that are windows into the cradle of civilization; and simply enjoy the welcome of a people who are naturally hospitable, friendly, and gregarious.

Beaches and Seaside

With 225km of Mediterranean coastline extending over the entire length of the country from north to south, you'll find plenty of sun and sand in Lebanon. Beach season in Lebanon stretches from April to October, with sunny, dry weather and warm temperatures (20-32°C / 68-90°F) for swimming, sunbathing, and water sports. However, even in winter, you will find plenty of activities to take advantage of along Lebanon's scenic shore.

The coastline in Lebanon alternates from sandy to rocky beaches, offering an interesting variety of terrain and seaside activities. Along the coast north of Beirut, the mountains descend sharply to the Mediterranean Sea, offering spectacular vistas of rocky coastline and colourful sunsets over the water. In the south, fragrant and colourful citrus groves and banana trees line the coast, giving way to some of the country's best-preserved and remote sandy beaches.

Lebanon's coastline is not just for sun worshippers. Nature enthusiasts can explore the unique Mediterranean ecosystem at the Palm Islands Reserve, located 5km off the coast near Tripoli. The reserve is a prime location for observing Lebanon's coastal flora and fauna, including sea turtles, seals, and over 300 species of migratory birds. The well-preserved beaches at the Tyre Coast Nature Reserve are also known for their rich marine and freshwater habitats.

Adventure enthusiasts will find diving, waterskiing, sailing, windsurfing, jet skiing, paragliding and much more along Lebanon's coast. Snorkelers can explore the magnificent submerged Phoenician and Roman ruins off the coast of the city of Sour (Tyre).

Bird Watching

Lebanon is an important stopping-off point for migratory birds along African-Eurasian migration paths, creating a wealth of bird watching opportunities, especially during spring and fall seasons. The peak bird watching seasons are mid-September through mid-October, and early March to mid-April.

Due to Lebanon's diverse landscape, bird watchers are rewarded with a wide variety of species (over 300), including the rare chance to see magnificent but threatened birds such as the Imperial Eagle and the Sociable Lapwing. In addition, there are plentiful opportunities to see more common birds such as raptors, harriers, water birds, and others, like the Syrian Serine and the Palestinian Songbird.

There are three key areas for bird watchers to visit. The coastal reserves, including the Palm Islands Nature Reserve and the Tyre Coast Nature Reserve, are home to numerous sea and water birds. The mountains, with sites such as Horsh Ehden Nature Reserve and the Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve, are known for eagles, vultures, and quails. Further inland, marshes and plains of the Békaa Valley, such as the Aammiq Wetland, also offer plentiful bird watching opportunities. The southern village of Ibl Es-Saqi is also home to a small bird sanctuary.

Caving

A mountainous and rocky country composed primarily of limestone; Lebanon offers exciting opportunities for caving. Over 400 caves, caverns, and sinkholes are scattered throughout the country, offering something for everyone, from the expert spelunker to the casual tourist.

Most caves are concentrated in the Mount Lebanon region, stretching from north to south in the centre of the country. The most popular and "touristy" of caves include "Jeita Grotto", with its huge caverns and underground lakes and the enormous and intricate "Afqa Grotto", source of the Adonis River where legend has it Adonis and Aphrodite exchanged their first kiss.

For the more adventurous tourists and experienced spelunkers, there are many other caving options that require guides and equipment. The "Roueiss Grotto", for example, is a 5km long labyrinthine cave with an underground lake, large halls and unique crystalline formations.

Lebanon is also home to stunning vertical caves – called "sinkholes" or "potholes" – that are some of the deepest in the Middle East (up to 602 meters). These sinkholes are explored using ropes and climbing equipment, rappelling down into the hole and then climbing back up. Lebanon's largest sinkholes are concentrated in the northern Mount Lebanon region, especially near Laqlouq and Tannourine.

Cycling

Lebanon's rugged mountains, hills and valleys, and its spectacular scenery immersed in history, make for some truly unique mountain biking opportunities. Cyclists can ride up “Qornet Es-Saouda” (Lebanon's highest peak) with views of the Békaa Valley to the east, Syria to the north and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. You can also ride through rugged mountainous terrain and Cedar groves in the Horsh Ehden and Al-Shouf Cedar Nature Reserves and at the Cedars ski resort. The high plateaus of the Mount Lebanon Range are covered with extensive trail networks, offering technically challenging terrain for seasoned cyclists.

For those looking for more relaxed cycling, the Békaa Valley and the coastal regions have many opportunities both on and off-road. Many small villages have small shops offering bike rentals for independent on-road biking.

Most mountain biking is done with a guided tour, as many mountain trails are not well marked.

Nature Reserves

Lebanon's climatic diversity and varied topography have bestowed the country with a unique ecological system that ranges from the subtropical coast to the alpine high mountains of the interior. The country is rich in its biodiversity and in the last decade special attention has been paid to protecting endangered species and conserving their habitats in specific parts of the country. More than 20 Nature Reserves and Protected Areas are a testament of Lebanon's focus on conservation and sustainable development. Some of the most popular Nature Reserves include:

Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve

The Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve, the largest nature reserve in Lebanon, is a mountain ecosystem at the southern part of the Mount Lebanon range, covering over 5 percent of the country's land area. Al-Shouf is home to six magnificent cedar forests, with the largest concentration of cedar trees remaining in the country. Some trees are over 2,000 years old. The Reserve is also home to 27 species of wild mammals (including wolves, hyenas, wild boars, gazelles, foxes, and lynxes), 104 species of birds and 124 species of plants. The Al-Shouf Cedar Reserve is a popular destination for hiking and trekking, with trails accessible for all fitness levels, as well as mountain biking and bird watching. From the summit of the rugged mountains, you will find a panoramic view of the countryside, eastward to the Békaa Valley and westward toward the Mediterranean. During your visit to the Al-Shouf Reserve, carefully observe the magical colours of the Mediterranean shrubs, grasses and herbs, or simply marvel at the majesty of the cedars and the gallery of distinctive flora and fauna that attracts a variety of mammals and migrating birds.

Bentael Reserve

Located in the foothills northeast of Jbeil (Byblos), Bentael Reserve is one of the smallest nature reserves in Lebanon. Bentael's pine forests are situated in the flight path of migratory hawks, eagles and other raptors and are especially enjoyed by bird enthusiasts.

Horsh Ehden Reserve

Another spectacular mountain reserve is the Horsh Ehden Reserve, located in the northern Mount Lebanon range above the Qadisha Valley. Thanks to a relatively high level of precipitation, a variety of plants, birds, insects, and rare mammals flourish in the “Horsh Ehden Reserve” - in fact, it is home to over 40 percent of the country's plant species. Hikers in Horsh Ehden are rewarded with glimpses of unique trees (including cedars, Cecilia firs, wild apples, and junipers), rare flora (including the Lebanese violet, the Ehden milk vetch, and wild orchids), endangered mammals (including martens, weasels, and badgers), as well as colourful butterflies, salamanders, and mushrooms.

Palm Islands Reserve

If you are enchanted by marine ecology, be sure to spend some time in the Palm Islands Reserve, comprising three uninhabited islands located approximately 5km northwest of Tripoli.

This Mediterranean marine ecosystem provides a perfect breeding ground for the endangered Green and Loggerhead Turtles, a nesting place for over 300 species of migratory birds (including many rare and endangered species) and a home for the endangered Mediterranean Monk Seal.

The islands are rich in wildflowers and medicinal plants and their coastal waters have an abundance of fish, sea sponges and other sea life. Visitors to the Palm Islands can hike along the many trails, swim and snorkel along the pristine beaches, view the unique flora and fauna and search for remains of former human inhabitants (including pottery shards and the remains of a Crusader church).

The reserve is only accessible during the summer months and can be reached by a boat trip from Tripoli.

Tannourine Cedars Forest Reserve

The Tannourine Cedars Forest Reserve is a beautiful, forested mountain environment located just south of the Qadisha Valley. Tannourine is home to over 60,000 ancient cedar trees, as well as a variety of pines, poplars and other tree species. The region is also rich in natural springs and lakes and has a high concentration of caves and sinkholes

Tyre Coast Reserve

Another destination for exploring Lebanon's coastal ecosystem is the Tyre Coast Reserve, located along a sandy stretch of beach south of Sour (Tyre). The Tyre Coast Reserve is home to several ancient artesian springs, creating a freshwater habitat and marshes that host frogs and other amphibians. The brackish coastal waters are rich in aquatic life and the beach is a nesting place for endangered sea turtles and migratory birds.

Skiing and Winter Sports

With six ski resorts catering to skiers and snowboarders of all skill levels and with kilometres of backcountry Nordic cross-country and snowshoe trails waiting to be explored, Lebanon has something for everyone.

Each of the ski resorts boasts its own local flavour. For example, The Cedars Ski Resort (2,000-3,086m), near Mount Makmel (2,800m), is located on the highest range and offers the most scenic landscapes. Mzaar-Kfardebian (1,830-2,465m) is the best resort in terms of world-class infrastructure and facilities. Other resorts, such as Laqlouq (1,650-1,920m) and Qanat Bakiche (1,910-2,050m), are known for their family-oriented, friendly atmosphere. Faqra- Kfardebian (1,735-1,980m) and Zaarour (1,700-2,000m) are private ski resorts, with special "peak" times reserved for members.

Water Sports

With 225km of Mediterranean coastline, as well as numerous rivers throughout the country, Lebanon offers many salt and fresh water sporting activities. Lebanon's rocky coastline and underwater terrain make it a unique destination for snorkelling and diving. A 600m deep underwater valley runs from Beirut to the Bay of Jounié, creating interesting rocky gorges and underwater cliffs and drop-offs for divers to explore. Another popular diving area is at Cheikka (near Tripoli), which offers some of the best marine landscapes as well as flora and fauna off the Lebanese coast.

Exploring the underwater ruins near Jbeil (Byblos), Saida (Sidon), and Sour (Tyre) is another popular activity for divers and snorkelers.; However, you are required to obtain a special permit to dive near archaeological sites. There are also several world-class shipwreck sites, including “le Souffleur” (a French submarine from World War II) near Khaldé, for underwater exploration.

While water sports in Lebanon are centred on the coast, there are also a number of freshwater activities, including rafting, kayaking, and canyoning. These are concentrated on the rivers “Nahr Litani” and “Nahr Ibrahim”, which typically swell as spring weather melts the mountain snows, creating great deep, fast water conditions.

Entertainment & Nightlife

Nightlife in Beirut merits a special note. The city is brimming with restaurants, beach clubs, arts centres, music venues, movie theatres, a casino and a number of discos, pubs and bars.

About Lebanon: A Heaven on Earth!

Landscapes that change with the seasons, but are always bathed in the warm sun. The daylight rising over Lebanon brings endless opportunities of fun, beach, nature and outdoor activities. You'll never know what to choose. Whatever it will be, an unforgettable time awaits you under the shiny Lebanese sun.