

Baalbeck: how was it built?

Submitted by [Lyn](#) on July 29, 2012 – 6:00 am

Lyn heads to Lebanon – specifically the sun city of Baalbeck that's famed for its Roman ruins. Read Lyn's take on the temples only on CD-Traveller

85 kms from Beirut in Lebanon, lies the ancient city of Baalbeck. There were settlements there in Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, before the Romans came along and started their massive building programmes. The Greeks called the city Heliopolis: the city of the sun. Baalbeck was their sun god.



A few kilometres outside the town, is the Roman quarry. It was used as the local rubbish dump until Abdul Nabi al-Afi rescued it single-handed. The quarry has what is apparently the largest quarried stone in the world there, which was never finished. It's 45m wide and weighs 1,000 tons. Destined to be the unfinished Temple of Jupiter's podium, the massive stone was abandoned and left poking out of the ground.

It was hard for Afi to convince the local people how important the site was, and they continued to dump their rubbish there until Afi arranged a refuse collecting service for them. Now he runs a small souvenir shop on the site to support himself and his family, and so that he can keep an eye on the site to protect it.



Afi gets no aid or financial support and he worries about what will happen to the ancient site when he's gone. All visitors are offered a welcome coffee, and invited to sign his Golden Guest Book.

Baalbeck has the largest Roman temples ever built, dedicated to Jupiter, Venus and Mercury. They also worshipped Baal, the sun god. The temple platform stones are the largest known quarry-cut stones in prehistory, weighing from 800-1200 tons. They imported granite columns from Egypt. It's one of the most impressive man-made places that I've ever seen in my life. I sometimes found it very similar to Chichen Itza in Mexico; both the style of building and the decorations.



As I walked round, all I could think was, how? How did they build it? There are six Corinthian columns, 22m high on a podium 7m above the court. Originally there were eight more columns, but they were dismantled and shipped to Constantinople by Emperor Justinian.

The site has suffered from theft, war and earthquakes. Originally it must have made anyone who saw it gasp out loud and fall on their knees to obediently worship the powerful Gods represented by the massive edifices. As we toured the site, I realised that talking about it was like discussing an elderly, embarrassing relative. Every time I raised the subject of how it was built, someone changed the subject.



It would be impossible to build it nowadays. No modern machinery could cut those blocks and lift them into place! No way were they hauled along and lifted up by slaves pulling on ropes! There wouldn't be enough room for all the manpower necessary, and no ropes could pull them. And I don't believe that they would waste so much time, struggling to lever up a stone a fraction (and what poles could take the weight?) and then throwing some sand or dirt underneath to gradually raise it, then dragging it along for miles, and repeating the process.



Various theories have been suggested through the years, including help from aliens or a superior race. The Incas always insisted that their massive stones walked by themselves! Crazy? If so, why have the Americans and Russians been studying psychokinesis for years? Maybe the combined concentration of trained experts could move the huge blocks into place. And if not, why on earth did they bother to carve out and move such massive stones? Why not make them much smaller? After all, the Romans had the best cement 'recipe' that has ever been invented! However they managed to do it, their workmanship is absolutely mind-blowing. Baalbeck is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Why do I think they did it? Because they could!



For more on Lebanon, check out Kaye's article [Beirut Reborn](#) and [Lebanon: on the road to recovery](#)

Beirut reborn

Submitted by [kave](#) on June 22, 2010 – 7:29 am

Only a four hour and a half hour flight away, Beirut will seduce travellers in search of a city break with a difference.

Sure Dubai is exciting, Abu Dhabi offers an abundance of art and Muscat has a certain picturesque charm but when all is said and done, they are Middle East lite. If you're after somewhere that matches the Middle East of your imagination, you want Beirut – traditionally known as the 'Paris of the Middle East'.



Lebanon and its capital have been in the international headlines for all the wrong reasons and the perception still lingers that Lebanon is a closed society, off limits to outsiders. Happily the years of fear and loathing are (for now at least) over and the Middle East's most beautiful and cosmopolitan country is once again embracing tourism.

Beirut isn't a pretty city (the scars of its recent battles are still visible from the pock marked shell damaged buildings to the checkpoints patrolled by soldiers) and there are few 'can't miss, won't miss' sights but make no mistake: it is an exciting, intriguing destination unlike any Middle Eastern one you've been to before. The city's skyline is dominated by domes and minarets of mosques but also by Greek Orthodox churches, cathedrals and Turkish hammams (because of Beirut's location at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, Lebanon has been shaped by many civilisations).



There are many museums to explore but the best is the National Museum of Beirut (www.beirutnationalmuseum.com), packed as it is with ancient treasures. Every hour, the museum screens *Revival* – a fascinating short documentary on how staff saved the collection from the destruction of the Civil War and subsequently restored the museum to its former glory. Other sights to tick off include the Corniche promenade (from where you can watch the sunset over Pigeon Rocks – two natural arches jutting from the Mediterranean – or ride on the giant Ferris wheel at Luna Park), the spectacular Al-Amin mosque where Rafik Hariri (Lebanon’s former Prime Minister who was assassinated in 2005), is buried and the magnificently restored Roman baths.



Once you’ve got the sightseeing out the way, return to your hotel for a power nap and then to primp and preen: Beirut’s nightlife is legendary and never starts before 10pm. The choice of where to stay is wide and handsome but the

Movenpick is without a doubt one of the best in the region and the only five star city centre hotel with resort facilities – expect four pools, a private beach, onsite shopping arcade, tennis courts, health club, spa and so on.



When night falls, entertainment options abound – Beirut personifies *la dolce vita* – and it’s simply a matter of choosing your pleasure among the slew of trendy bars and live music venues (try underground bunker bar B018, Behind the Green Door, the rooftop bar at the Albergo Hotel and, in the summer, Sky Bar – regularly voted the world’s best bar) in fashionable areas such as Ashrafieh and Gemmayzeh. All are open until the wee hours of the morning: this is a city so fast and invigorating that boredom is not an option and sleep is a mere afterthought.



There’s also a thriving local gastronomic scene: food has always been a reason to head for Beirut and visiting gourmands are awed by the amazing array of restaurants, bars and cafes competing for their mealtime affections along with vendors peddling falafel and circular breads through which locals thread their arms in order to ‘wear’ them home like giant bangles. Take advantage of Beirut’s pleasant year round temperatures and linger at side street tables or on

rooftops over mouth-watering mezze (think fattoush, kebbeh, kofta, olives and vine leaves) with the sweet smell of shisha puffed from water pipes hanging in the air.



Shopping is another popular pastime for Beirutis – it’s striking how stylish the Lebanese are especially when compared to their western counterparts – and it’s fun to window shop arm in arm around the vibrant pedestrianised downtown district known as ‘Solidere’ where boutiques are unique and independently owned. Saifi Village is another essential shopping stop. Once the site of the so called ‘green line’ that divided Muslim west Beirut from the Christian east side during the 15 year civil war, this beautifully restored quarter is now home to chic stores stocking clothes and carpets as well as stalls selling spices, flatbreads, labneh and organic veg.



Yet Beirut isn't everything and tempting though it might be to stay within the city, it's worth venturing outside to see the contrast between the glitzy capital and the rest of this tiny – you can drive from the north to the south in just over three hours – but mountainous country. Taxis are readily available and an affordable way to travel – providing you agree a price prior to beginning your journey.

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