

## Deir El-Qamar and the Central Chouf

Situated in the historical heartland of Mount Lebanon, the Chouf is often referred to as the cradle of modern Lebanon.

As of 1516 under Ottoman domination, the Governors of Mount Lebanon ruled the areas, to which they had been assigned, from their successive residences in Baakline.

Deir el-Qamar and Beiteddine. Under their authority, intercommunal cooperation was established leading to independence in 1943. The most renowned of these governors was the Emir Fakhreddine II Maan who, as of 1623, managed to spread his influence beyond today's Lebanese boundaries.

When his grandfather Fakhreddine I came to power in 1518, he settled in Baakline. But because of water shortages, he decided to move to Deir el Qamar which became the capital of Mount Lebanon.

With the disappearance of the second dynasty of



Palace of Emir Younes Maan

the Chehab princes, who succeeded to the Maans in the middle of the 19th century, the importance of Deir el Qamar, declined gradually to be overtaken by Beiteddine and later by Beirut today's capital.

## A Day in Deir el Qamar and its surroundings

Leaving Beirut via the southern coastal highway, beyond the town of Damour, a right-hand junction takes you over the highway and up the hills of the Chouf. This area is very rich with a wide variety of greenery and vegetation and many natural beauty spots, historical sites and examples of Lebanese architecture. The high point of this excursion is a walking tour in Deir el Qamar through its ancient winding cobbled alleyways.

Apart from having a meal at one of the restaurants in Deir el Qamar, Ain Mershed or Beiteddine, there are

several cafés and restaurants along the **Damour** River, a short distance from the coastal highway once you start climbing into the hills.

Another stop which is particularly recommended on a hot day is **Jahiliya** where the cool waters of the Damour River run into natural pools surrounded by pink oleander groves.

On leaving the village, a small sign on the right-hand side of the road indicates this area which is especially popular with families as a Sunday outing.

*In 1945 the Lebanese Government declared the old area of Deir el Qamar a historic site and the palaces and old residences were included in the national inventory of historical monuments. In the sixties, work to restore certain monuments were undertaken. In 1971 an urban planning project divided Deir el Qamar into historic and residential zones. Construction, which contributed to disfigure the old palaces, was destroyed. In 1995 UNESCO began formalities to class Deir el Qamar's monuments as World Heritage sites.*

*Today Deir el Qamar counts about 10,000 inhabitants who intend to preserve not only its architecture, which dates back to feudal times, but also its cobbled streets, walled gardens and quaint and picturesque secluded corners.*

*For further information refer to the publication "Deir el Qamar, Cité des Emirs" Paris 1994.*

## Deir el Qamar

The visit should begin from the Dany Chamoun Square. This Square with its central fountain was formerly known as the Midane or jousting field where in the 16th Century jousts and equestrian competitions were held.

To the north of the Square are the Kaissariyye, the Kharij and the palace of the Emir Fakhreddine II. Here the ground level is made up of a series of attractive





*The Kaissariyye*

archers that used to house the stables. In the center of the Square is a 19th Century fountain, supplied with water from the Chalout source where the tired traveler can stop to quench his thirst.

*The Mosque* stands on the western side of the Square. It was the first to be built in Mount Lebanon. The Emir Fakhreddine I Maan constructed it in 1493 for his Sokman mercenaries. Inscriptions on the west facing façade bear the name of the Emir, the construction date as well as three verses from the Coran. The prayer hall of this vast square shaped edifice has a high vaulted stone ceiling where the central arch rests on a massive pillar. The beautiful octagonal minaret is slightly inclined following a violent earthquake in 1630.

*The Cobbler's Souk* : located directly behind the Mosque and the Midane. This is used to be the busiest part of town with 38 different stores and workshops. Today, restored but greatly reduced, it still house a few small shops.

*The Palace of The Emir Younes Maan* : it is located a little higher up, on the road leading to the Kaissariyye. The Prince Younes Maan was the commander in chief of the army during the self-imposed exile of his brother Fakhreddine II in Italy in 1613. This structure was originally three floors high, but the Emir Youssef Chehab (1770-1789) demolished the

third floor and used the stones to build his own Serail, which today houses the Municipality. The most remarkable aspect of this palace is the richness of the main portico decorated with pink stone carved in ripples, which contrasts sharply with the rather austere façade of the structure.

*The Kaissariyye* is a little further along built in 1595 under Fakhreddine II. The silk merchants originally used this public market place to sell their silk, which was a flourishing trade at the time. With its open courtyard, its central fountain and shaded areas beneath the surrounding arches, the building is in the classic "Khan" or caravansary style of Mamelouk and Ottoman eras. Nowadays, the town's Initiative Committee organizes cultural events within its walls.

*The Kharij* : At the far end of the Kaissariyye courtyard, destined originally as a barracks to house the mercenaries of Fakhreddine II, as well as an ammunition depot. Under the Emir Bechir III (1840- 1842), it became a food storehouse mainly for the soldiers. In 1992, the Town Council benevolently placed this palace at the disposal of the French Cultural Mission and today it houses the French Cultural and Linguistic Center of the region.

*The Synagogue* : Overlooking the courtyard of the Kaissariyye is an attractive building, which was once the home of an influential Jew who was a member of Fakhreddine II's immediate entourage. The ground floor used to house a small 16th century Synagogue. Unfortunately the façade of this construction has been slightly disfigured by some unorthodox restoration work.

*The Palace of the Emir Fakhreddine II* is accessible via a staircase on the eastern side of the square. The Khan-style construction is built around a tiled courtyard embellished with an octagonal fountain. This courtyard opens onto rooms, apartments and kitchens. Today the palace houses the **Marie Baz Wax Museum**. The museum houses more than 100 wax statues of Lebanese and international personalities that have contributed since 1512 to Lebanon's history.

*The Residence of Nicolas Turk*: Located directly behind, who was the renowned poet to the court of Emir Bechir II. Built in 1805, it now belongs to the Boustany family. Constructed on a slope, this Khan-type edifice comprises a courtyard onto which two attractive "Liwan" open linked by a triple arched gallery. In the entrance of one of the rooms you will see a "Mezuzah" confirming that the first owner was indeed a Jew.

*The Kobbah Mausoleum*: A little further along you come to this small square-shaped construction is the resting-place of the Emirs Ahmed Maan (1662-1697) and Haidar Chehab (1706-1729) together with his son Mansour (1770).

*The Palace of Gergis Baz*: Retracing one's steps, on the left overlooking the Midane is the palace of the Emir Ahmed Chehab (1754-1763), better known as the palace of Gergis Baz. It was built by the Emir Ahmed for his wife who later sold it to Gergis Baz a minister under the Emir Bechir II Chehab. This two-storey structure is built along the lines of the traditional oriental house with an open air central courtyard and an octagonal fountain in the middle. The rooms, apartments and kitchens open onto the courtyard. Its impressive portal is made of alternating stones of different colors.

*Serail Emir Youssef Chehab*: Crossing the Midane and the main road you reach the Serail, which today houses the municipality. The enormous structure constructed around a very large rectangular courtyard built over the palace of the first maan prince, Fakhreddine I within the 16th century. The Emir Melhem Chehab (1729-1754) brought the construction up to the level of the main square by adding a second storey. This palace became the residence of the Emir Youssef Chehab and his nephew Bechir II (1789-1840). Access is through a magnificent doorway decorated with two carved Lions, symbols of the Chehab dynasty. Do not miss visiting the main domed room and the recently restored polychrome wood paneled kiosk where the Emir conducted daily business and received dignitaries.



The Midan (Public Square)

The municipality of Deir el-Qamar is the oldest one in Lebanon. It is since August 1864 that Deir el Qamar is endowed with a municipality and a municipal council.

On leaving the Serail, to the right is a small shaded terrace leading to *the hall of the column*. This hall with its imposing arches resting on rectangular pillars has a unique column in its center-hence the name. Many openings and windows lighten the appearance of this massive construction.

**The Church of Saydet El Tallé:** Next, just beyond the maronite monk's monastery, a stairway on the right-hand side of the road leads down to the courtyard of Our Lady of the Hill Built in 451 AD on the site of a Phoenician temple dedicated to the Goddess Astarte, this church enclosed within the walls of the monastery, and destroyed by an earthquake of 859, was rebuilt in the 16th century. Since then it has been enlarged and restored several times. Dedicated to the miraculous virgin, this is one of the most popular pilgrimage destination in Lebanon and her feast day is celebrated on the first Sunday of the month of august. Above the original crude doorway on the southern façade of the

church, you will see a carved stone beam showing a cross over an inverted crescent enveloping a rosette.

This symbol is often found in excavations, and is proof that a temple dedicated to the goddess Astarte actually existed. This is where the town got its name, Deir el Qamar means Convent of the Moon.

**The Churches Quarter:** A narrow road leads down to what is commonly referred to as the "church quarter". Beyond the church of Our Lady of the Rosary built in the 17th century and since restored, a vaulted passage leads to the church of Saint Elie built in 1741. To enter this small Greek-Catholic church, you pass beneath a portal in the simple basilical style. The iconostasis as well as the frontal façade and main entrance are all in beautiful pink and white "bouzenar" stone. Against the inside wall of the courtyard you will find the tomb of Nicolas Turk, the Emir Bechir's favorite poet.

To complete this tour, you may enjoy taking a walk through the old picturesque quarters and admiring the walled gardens where delicately scented jasmine, hydrangea and fuchsia grow. You may also rest in the shade of the vines and admire the mandalounes with their planters overflowing with geraniums.

In good weather, it is pleasant to walk to the top of the surrounding hills and look down onto the town.



General view

## The Surroundings of Deir el Qamar

As you leave Deir el Qamar and gain height, you can enjoy a beautiful panoramic view over the palace of Beiteddine.

**Moussa's Castle:** On the northern outskirts of Deir el Qamar, on the road leading to Beiteddine you will notice a modern construction resembling a medieval castle. Moussa's Castle is named after its owner and constructor. The inside of this eccentric castle is a popular traditions museum.

**Palace of the Emir Amine:** A few kilometers further along is the Palace of the Emir Amine, who was the youngest son of the Emir Bechir II Chehab. This palace which looks down onto the palatial complex of Beiteddine was restored and converted into a deluxe 24-room hotel by the Ministry of Tourism.

**Baakline:** Which is about 4 kilometers southeast of Beiteddine, was the first capital of Maan dynasty that settled here around 1120. It has some beautiful old homes and the local handwork shop although their main craft is carpet weaving producing copies very similar to Persian rugs.

**Moukhtara:** Approximately 10 kilometers southeast of Beiteddine, has been the stronghold of the Druze Joumblat family since the start of the 17th century.

This important Chouf locality has had much of its rich heritage preserved the most prestigious being the 19th century seigniorial domain of the Druze leader Walid Joumblat. Built over an earlier structure, this palace combines a mix of Oriental and Italian influences. The most recent changes were made in the 19th century. The Palace was damaged in battles between





Marie Baz Wax Museum

the Jumblats and Emir Bechir II in 1825, but was rebuilt soon afterwards.

**Ain Merched:** A kilometer further along is delightful for its setting with a waterfall and pools that are the background for a large and pleasant restaurant. The temperature near the falls can be quite cool even during the hottest days of summer.

**Baadarane:** 7 kilometers south of Moukhtara, is another preserve of Lebanese feudal architecture. You will find the old palace of Ali Pasha Joublat allied to Fakhreddine II as well as well other residences in the style of Beiteddine still inhabited although in need of some restoration work.

**Amatour,** halfway between Moukhtara and Baadarane, is where you can see more houses built in the traditional style that characterizes the Lebanese

#### PRACTICAL INFORMATION.

Deir el-Qamar has small restaurant and souvenir and craft shops. For any information regarding the summer festival activities as well as other cultural and artistic events, contact the Initiative Committee at the Municipality which is open from 8.00 to 13.00 except on sundays and public holidays.

mountainside. Looking down over the village is the ancient "khalwa" or meeting place used by the Druze for prayer and meditation.

**Maaser el Chouf:** Site of one of Lebanon's beautiful cedar forests, is also a choice spot for walking enthusiasts. From the top of the mountain that dominates this village, at 1940 meters altitude there is a panoramic view over the Beqaa, the Litani dam and the Qaraoun Lake.

**Barouk village:** Situated at the base of Mount Barouk is covered with magnificent Cedar forest. This pleasant summer town at 1170 meters altitude is well known as an abundant source of waters, restaurants, and open-air cafes.

**The Natural Reserve:** This area covers 500 square kilometers of Cedar forests, with no less than 3 million trees, which extend from Ain Zhalta to Barouk and Maaser el Chouf.



The palace of Gergis Baz

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