

Zahle

The capital and "the Bride of the Beqaa" – the city of Wine and Poetry", Zahle is 945 meters above sea level on the eastern foothills of Mount Sannine, at the edge of the Beqaa valley which represents 42.27% of Lebanon's territory and is 54km from Beirut (45 min by car). It is built along the banks of the Bardawni River which flows down from Mount Sannine and slips through a wild and wooded gorge surrounded by high rocks before crossing the town with oaks, cypress, plane and walnut-trees along its banks. It is the country's third largest city (population 120,000) and has clear and dry weather. It can be reached from Beirut, Sofar, Chtaura or from Dhour –Choucier, Aintoura, Tarshish.

The city center spreads along both banks of the Bardawni River: the older town is located on the upper elevations of the west bank whereas the shopping district is located on the east bank. At the northern end of the town is the Bardawni river valley known as Wadi el Aarayesh (Grape Vine Valley) housing the famous shaded outdoor restaurants of Bardouni.



The Beqaa valley



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|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Bardawni | 7. Tourism Office |
| 2. Monastery of St. Elias at Tuuwak | 8. Our Lady of Zahle & the Bekaa |
| 3. Monastery of our Lady of Najat | 9. Tell Chiba Hospital |
| 4. Souk al-Blatt | 10. New Serail (Administration) |
| 5. Saydet El Zalzaly church | 11. Ksara Winery |
| 6. Old Serail (Municipality) | 12. Karak (Noah) |



General view of Zahle

I. Zahle in History

Zahle was founded about 300 years ago in an area dating back some five millennia. The first emigrant settlement which grew into a sizeable town dates back to the beginning of the 18th century. Early in the 18th century, the new town was divided into three separate quarters, each of which had its own governor. In the 19th century the city became the region's first independent state with its own flag and anthem.

Zahle was burned in 1777 and 1791, then again burned and plundered in 1860. The opening in 1885 of the railway line, connected it to Beirut, Damascus, Mosul, and Baghdad making it the internal "port" of the Beqaa and Syria, and a main agricultural and trade center. It is considered the birthplace of the Lebanese army and has played a major role in the political life of the country.

The fame of the city has attracted many notables: the poet and diplomat Alphonse de Lamartine in 1833, the prince of Belgium in 1885, the sons of the Czar of Russia in 1888, the Emperor of Germany with his wife and retinue in 1898, General Gouraud who announced in 1920 the birth of the Greater Lebanon, General Charles De Gaulles in 1942, the Egyptian poet Ahmad Chawki and the great Egyptian musician

Mohammad Abd-el- Wahab. Zahle is also the native town of the actor Omar el Sharif and of the grand parents of Shakira the now worldwide famous singer.

Features: Zahle is famous for its red-roofed houses with intertwined arcades, ornamental façades and a large main hall.

Culture: Zahle “the City of Wine and Poetry” has a reputation as a center of cultural and intellectual activity. A number of poets and writers, among them the poet Saïd Akl, have been born here in the last 100 years. A yearly poetic event is organized with poets participating from all over the Arab world.

II. What to see in Zahle

- The Serail: is the municipal seat. It dates back to 1885; the distinctive architecture of the building, reflects the European and Arab influences of the Ottoman period.

- Kadri Hotel: at the start of the 20th century and the growth of tourism, Zahle began building hotels of which the most famous is the Kadri hotel built in 1906. It was taken over by the Turkish army in 1914 and used as headquarters and a hospital during World War I. It was from here that General Gouraud announced in 1920 the annexation of some areas to Mount Lebanon which gave birth to the “Greater Lebanon”.



Kadri Hotel



Monastery of our Lady of Najat

- The Old Souks:

Souk al-Blatt or the “paved market” is a trading street frequented in former times by travelers from Syria, Irak and Palestine.

Haoush El-Zaraani: In the past centuries this haoush, was a conglomerate of khans (caravansaries), craft centers and shops. Here shoemakers, woodworkers, weavers, copper workers and saddle makers plied their trades and vendors sold agricultural and industrial products. It still boasts old buildings with decorated façades, vaulted interiors, carved ceilings and a main hall.

- Places of Cult:

Zahlé, the main center of the Melkite denomination, houses a large number of sanctuaries, 4 mosques and 40 churches including:

Saydet Zalzalay built in 1700 is the oldest church in Zahle.

The Church of **St. Elias** is the second oldest church and was built in 1720. This impressive structure is also known as **Al-Monkhallasiah**.

The Monastery of **Saydet-el-Najat** built in 1720 and known for housing a beautiful icon of the Virgin Mary offered by the King of Prussia and for having the highest bell tower.

The Monastery of **Saint Elias at-Tuwak**, which dates back to 1755, was renovated in 1880 after a fire.



The Shrine of Our Lady Of Zahle

It remains one of Zahle’s most venerable monuments.

The Shrine of **Our Lady Of Zahle**, which lies to the town’s east, was built in 1968; it is a 54-meter-high hill-top tower topped by a 9m high bronze statue of Our Lady of Zahle, the work of the Italian artist Pierroti. A lift takes you up to the summit from where there is a spectacular views over the Beqaa valley. The base houses a small chapel and a large underground basilica.

Zahle is a very lively place and all amenities are available.

III. Wine And Arak

Zahle has since antiquity been associated with wine production and famous wine grapes.

At the city’s southern entrance stands the statue of a graceful female personifying wine and poetry. The northern hills towns which as Wadi-Hadi, Harqat, Bir Ghazour and Tell Zeina are covered with neat rows of vineyards supply Zahle’s wineries and arak industries. Much of the wine produced here has won international acclaim and can compete with the best in Europe.

Ksara winery, known since Roman times, is of special interest with an extensive underground cellar.

Arak is a clear, colourless, aniseed flavoured, dis-



The Vinegrapes statue



Ksara Winery

tilled alcoholic drink, made out of grapes. Arak is drunk mixed with water. Ice is then added. This dilution causes the liquor to turn an opaque milky white colour - a "lion's milk" say the people of Zahle -

Arak is the best drink to suit the delicious Lebanese "mezzés" food.

The epic of Gilgamesh (the mythical Mesopotamian hero) says that he came to Mount Lebanon in order to defeat Houwawa, the guardian of the cedar forest and marveled at the color of the wine grapes; his mate the savage Enkidu, was tamed by a virgin who gave him wine to drink.

IV. Local Celebrations

Each year between the 10th and 20th of September Zahle organizes its week-long

Vine Festival together with a **Flower Festival**. In a carnival-like atmosphere "Miss Vine" is elected and cars are decorated with flowers.

Zahle is also famous for its Corpus-Christi festival

which dates back to 1825 when the town was spared the ravages of the plague with the townspeople walking procession carrying the "Holy Sacrament" through the streets of the town. **Corpus-Christi** is celebrated on the first Thursday of June with a torch-lit parade held on the eve of the festival.



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V. Zahle's Bardawni Restaurants

The Bardawni river is associated with Lebanese gastronomy, and is synonymous with outdoor eating and Lebanon's famous mezze. The cliff and riverside restaurants known locally as casinos for which Zahle is famous began over a hundred years ago as simple riverside cafes. Today it is a beautiful tree-shaded eating place with fountains, pools, and cool arcades.

VI. Other Amenities

The Swimming Resorts: highly classified, have winter and summer swimming pools, tennis courts, playgrounds, sports, health and fitness facilities, restaurants, snack bars, cabins and chalets.

The Night Clubs: there is a good selection of all categories for dancing and shows as well as for private

occasions.

Rifle Range: skeet shooting, with an annual competition.

The Horse Riding Club: there is riding course and a yearly competition.

The Remote Controlled Planes Club: with its own private field hosting a yearly amateurs competition.

The Speleological Club: which is very well equipped.

The Friends of Nature Club: for amateur hikers located away from the city and pollution.

The Camps: scouts and youth camps are yearly and held in the surrounding green areas.

The Public Gardens: flowers and trees and wood benches where one can enjoy the tranquility.

The Municipal Park: consists of a footpath for joggers, a luna park for the children, tennis courts, a restaurant and a pool.

The Skiing Resorts: the proximity of Zahle to the ski resorts of Zorour (25min by car) and Bakich (both on the Mount Sannine Slopes) provide accessible ski slopes.



Geha Residence



VII. In the Area

The Zahle area has scattered ancient remains some of which date back to the Bronze Age (3000-1200BC) such as the Canaanite graves cut in the cliffs of **Wadi el-Aarayesh** as well as Roman and Byzantine sarcophagi.

Zahle is located about 30 min from **Baalbeck** which has the most grandiose Roman temples; 10 km from **Niha** which houses 2 temples dedicated to Syro-Phoenician gods, Hadaranes and Atargatis; 1 km from **Karak Nouh** or **Karak Noah**, where according to local tradition, the 42 m long stone structure, near a mosque which is apparently built of reused Roman stones, is the tomb of Noah buried – tradition tells – with bent knees. In nearby Furzol you can see the scant remains of a Roman temple; beyond the upper end of the town is the **Wadi el-Habis** (Valley of the Hermit) with tombs and rock-cut sanctuaries from Canaanite Roman and Byzantine times; 14 km from Zahle is **Temnine-el-Faouqa** housing a nymphaeum-temple known as Ain el Joubb or Joub el Habich, built in honor of the local god of flowing water; and **Qsarnaba** where stands monumental remains of a prostyle temple which stones come from a nearby quarry; 14 km from **Kfar Zabad** on the slopes of Anti-Lebanon are the ruins of two roman temples with relief's of the goddess Venus known locally as Bint el Malek or the King's Daughter, and a 125 m cave with stalactites and stalagmites. Special caving equipment is needed to explore it. Anjar the famous Umayyad site is 15 minutes from Zahle by car and Tannayel's orchard 10 minutes. Taanayel which has been owned by the Jesuit fathers since 1860, with a teaching facility for the Faculty of Agriculture at the Saint Joseph University, has vineyards, an artificial lake and fresh dairy products.



Wadi el Habis, Furzol

Zahle is the administrative and commercial capital of the Beqaa valley. There are also banks, commercial centers, insurance and currency exchange companies. The office of the Ministry of Tourism, is located in the third floor of the building of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture. Telephone: (08) 803595 and (08) 802566.

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