

# Joie de vivre

The Lebanese may have endured more than their share of civil conflict, but they have always weathered the discord with dignity and an undaunted party spirit. **Laura Collacott** visits the Paris of the East to uncover the highlights.





**Left to right:** The beginning of Gemayze; downtown Beirut.

**T**he Lebanese patch is hot property. It has, at various points in its history, been ruled by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans and French. The list reads like a roll call of history's biggest empires, and these varying influences are reflected to differing extent in the country's modern face.

The geopolitical situation the Levant has always been a peculiar advantage, bringing generous amounts of trade, hand-in-hand with corresponding power struggles.

Although it has now achieved relative stability, the Lebanese politic has been rocky since the very early days of civilisation. Mention Beirut and most will remember the Civil War. For good reason – it stretched over 16 years (1975 to 1990) and saw its residents leave in swarms for safer realms, with many settling in Canada, Australia and the Gulf. At this time, tensions between Christians and Muslims (and their respective allies in neighbouring countries) were sparked in a tinderbox religious and political environment that was not doused until the Taif Agreement of 1989/90 was agreed. This settlement – to oversimplify – outlined a new, expanded National Assembly, which agreed to divide power equally between the divisive groups.

Peace was restored to the country and most of the militias were disbanded but the fissures remained unresolved. When the former Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, was assassinated by a car bomb in 2005, issues between internal and regional factions resurged, culminating in the 2006 'Cedar Revolution'. But after more

political wrangling and rebalancing, a state of peace that looks robust enough to last has been achieved again in Lebanon.

Under this newfound stability, a renaissance is underway. Although Beirut remains fairly heavily fortified (especially to those visitors from the West) with hotels and key locations bedecked in security trimmings and bomb detectors, life carries on more or less as it always has. Strong business opportunities exist internally, especially in tourism, agro-food industries, health, telecoms, energy, transportation and IT, while the country's geographical footprint, liberal stance and free enterprise also lends it 'gateway' status to wider regional markets

It is a country with a strong identity and a zest for life and so is a honey pot for visitors. Ever resilient, the Lebanese do not dwell on the misfortune of conflict and nothing – nothing – stops the Lebanese party. Bars, art installations, restaurants, museums, and the café culture all flourish, making Lebanon – and Beirut in particular – a fantastically vibrant place to visit.

Here are our picks of where to sleep, feed, visit and party.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Despite the contemporary discord, Beirut has a generous allotment of hotels of varying styles. **Le Bristol ([lebristol-hotel.com](http://lebristol-hotel.com))** gives visitors a glimpse of what the city would have been like in its former heyday. Although its grandeur is now a little faded, it has hosted countless celebrities and royals in the past, and remains a popular venue among the local community. It sits conveniently between the glitz of Verdun and the bustle of Hamra Street, just ten minutes from Downtown.

# Buff up

History buffs should head up to the National Museum of Beirut in Ashrafiyeh. The beautifully restored Egyptian Revival-style building houses artefacts from throughout the ages, starting with the Bronze Age and tracing life through each of the eras. The ancient jewellery and mosaics are outstanding.

It is located on what was a demarcation line during the civil war and so was hit hard by the violence. Only the sharp thinking of the museum's curator saved the valuable collection from destruction – mosaics were protected with layers of concrete, small pieces were stashed in the basement and bricked in, larger objects were cased in wood and concrete. Soldiers garrisoned within the building daubed it in graffiti, while some wings were destroyed by fire during shellings.

Nonetheless, restoration began in 1995 and the museum reopened its doors to the public in 1999. Four years of hard work have paid off, leaving Beirut with an enviably modern and well presented monument to its past. [beirutnationalmuseum.com](http://beirutnationalmuseum.com); open Tuesday to Sunday, 9am-5pm.



Gulipics

Of similar stock but with a more modern, boutique emphasis is the **Hotel Albergo** ([albergobeirut.com](http://albergobeirut.com)). Housed in an old city mansion in the Ashrafiyeh district of the city, each of the 33 suites is individually designed with elegance and sophistication in mind. It's one of the most 'à la mode' choices in the capital.

For those that prefer a more modern style, there is a clutch of newly refreshed hotels to choose from. **The Mövenpick Beirut** ([moevenpick-hotels.com](http://moevenpick-hotels.com)) is located on the city's corniche overlooking the sea and easily accessible from both the airport and the city centre. It casts itself as more of a resort, with almost 300 rooms, plenty of sports facilities, a large spa and health club.

By turn, the **InterContinental's Le Vendome** Beirut ([levendomebeirut.com](http://levendomebeirut.com)) breaches the divide between boutique and chain. Also set on the corniche (great for an evening jog), it manages its luxurious rooms to the best international standards while retaining the service level of a stand-alone hotel. The convenient location and quality offering has made it a popular choice among celebrities and dignitaries over the years.

## WHERE TO EAT

Lebanese fare is traditional mezze and a variety of baked treats. To dine like a local, head for **Mounir** (Camille Chamoun Street, Broumana) near the waterfront, which has been given a near unanimous thumbs up by everyone we've ever spoken to. For a slightly more upmarket version, try **Café Blanc** (Alfred Naccache Street, Mar Mitre), which has added contemporary twists to standard dishes.

Beirut is one of the ultimate fusion cities, effortlessly meshing European and Arabic cultural influences. The same talent has been applied in culinary circles and food of all persuasions is available to tickle your taste buds. For a business lunch or dinner, café culture might not cut it. Head to **Balthus** (Ghandour Building, Minaa El Hosn) in Downtown for top notch French cuisine or to **Yabani** (Damascus Road) for Beirut's best and most delectable sushi.

Want seafood? Book into the **Sultan Ibrahim** (Weygand Street, Minet al Hosn), allegedly the best fish restaurant in town and a popular forum for the movers and shakers to chew over their latest deals with a shisha. Italian? **Da Giovanni** (Georges Haddad



Street, Saifi) is apparently the only place truly worth its salt.

## WHERE TO PARTY

The Lebanese are famed for their penchant for partying. Whether you want a drink to wind down after a long day or you're in for the duration, Beirut will have just the spot for you. Broadly speaking, the town is divided into four main haunts: **Gemayze, Monot, Downtown and Ashrafiyeh**.

The proximity of key political buildings meant that the evening scene shifted away from Downtown during the worst of the Lebanese conflict and into the surrounding districts. Bad for Downtown, good for Gemayze – it is now one of the most popular places to kick off a night out. Tiny bars line the little street, each with their own kooky take on the best decorative ambience. From slick, metal-clad bars to cosy, Latino-themed joints, the street caters to all tastes. Try **Gauche Caviar** (Gouraud Street), the bar that leads the frontrunners in the 'cool' pack.

Up the hill, Monot is another popular evening enclave and seems to stay open a little later than Gemayze. **Metis** (Faculte de Droit Street)



**Clockwise from far left:** Hummus and falafel; the Presidential Suite at LeBristol hotel; InterContinental Le Vendome; the Mövenpick; Lebanese mezze.

is a chic hangout frequented by the well-heeled in search of an evening martini, while **Canvas** (Monot Street) provides a modern, arty atmosphere for a relaxed sup.

For sundowners, the **Sky Bar** at Palm Beach hotel (Ain El Mreiseh) affords fabulous views over the Med, making this and **White** (Annahar Building, Downtown) – another rooftop venue with sea and city views – the ultimate places to see and be seen.

The place to party in town is **BO18** (Charles Helou Street, Karantina). Ask any local the best nightclub and this is where they'll send you – for good reason. Don't be spooked when the cabbie drops you in what looks like a derelict car park, the club is an underground warren of rooms, full of bright young things dancing to heavy beats. It's open until dawn (when it is the Lebanese custom to pile out and head to a bakery for breakfast). How do you know when it's dawn when you're in an underground bunker? Easy – the roof slides back.

## OUT OF TOWN

### Jeita Grotto

Even the most determined city slicker can't fail to be impressed by the natural wonder

of Jeita grotto. Two subterranean limestone caves are open to visitors, showcasing some of the most spectacular natural stalagmite/stalactite formations you're ever likely to see. Like melted candles on a basaltic scale, it is easy to draw connections with Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, but this was all the work of Mother Nature. The naff cable car and tourist train to move visitors around the site do little to detract from it. If you only do one excursion, make it this.

### Harissa

Twenty-five kilometres north of the city, perched on a hill overlooking the coast, is Harissa, a site that incorporates a 20 tonne bronze statue of the Virgin Mary and a small chapel. The best way to access the site is by cable car, which sneaks you through the tower blocks lining the hill (allowing you to gawp into people's homes along the way) while the view from the top – over the bay and the urban sprawl of Beirut – is unrivalled.

### Byblos

Further out of town is Byblos, known as **Jbeil** to Arabs. It is hailed as one of the most

beautiful tourist sites in Lebanon, thanks largely to its archaeological heritage. Its Mediterranean coastal location in the rich Arabic middle ground between the West and the East means that it has been cherished by many communities for hundreds of years. Some say that it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, but if you had a dollar for every city that claimed that... Today it is a prosperous little seaside town, stuffed to the gulleys with Crusader, Arabic, Medieval (and older) ruins. Well worth a day trip.

### Faraya Mzaar

There aren't many places in the world where you can be on the beach in the morning and the ski slopes in the afternoon (or vice versa). Lebanon is one of them. If you fancy perfecting your slaloms, nip to **Faraya Mzaar** just an hour's drive from Beirut. There are plenty of wide nursery slopes for beginners, a good selection of intermediate runs and a good two-days of exploration for the advanced skier. The season extends from late December to April and, as you'd expect, the après-ski is commendable. Check [skileb.com](http://skileb.com) for more information. ■■■