

BEIRUT



# RETURN TO *la belle époque*



A vibrant, modern city immersed in a difficult yet illustrious history, Beirut is more than ready to look to the future — with a nod to the past. **Words by Don Duncan**

**B** EIRUT IS A CITY being pulled in two directions. Back to the nostalgia and fondness of Lebanon's Arabic traditions, be it music, food or architecture. And forward to the continual experiment that is reconstructed Lebanon — at peace, prospering and making it up as it goes along.

The Lebanese civil war, which raged in fits and lulls from 1975 to 1990, was a defining period in the short modern history of this religiously diverse state. With the war vanished a *belle époque* of fine living and religious coexistence — a golden period the country has been trying to recapture ever since.

Beirut, the capital, has been physically defined by war. Signs of the war are visible everywhere, from shelled buildings that still stand to the bullet pockmarked edifices of houses. But side-by-side with these accidental memorials of the country's past decline and violence are testaments to its rising from the ashes. Brand new buildings, towers of glass and entire areas that were once piles of rubble are now sleekly redesigned in an expression of what the new Lebanon is: resilient, forward-looking and stylish.

The new face of the country may immediately catch the eye, but it's

worth remembering its old face, and seeking it out: the vintage shop fronts, the stylish old ladies, the wonderful old-world eateries that haven't changed in decades. This forgotten world of fine Lebanese living exists in the nooks and crannies between the shining new surfaces and towers of an emboldened, reawakening Beirut.

#### SIGHTS & SHOPPING

The best way to make sure you get your sightseeing and shopping done is to do both at the same time. One of the more novel, and comprehensive, ways to see the sights is to take the Walk Beirut tour. Set up by Ronnie Chatah as a way of offering history with tourism, he guides small groups of people on foot all over the city, explaining the significance of various places: the bombed-out former Holiday Inn that still stands, the vintage cinemas of Hamra, the sparkling new downtown area that has been reconstructed and Martyrs' Square, where so much popular protest happens.

Along the way you'll also pass some great shopping spots which, once again, represent the old and new faces of Lebanon. Beirut Souks, a sprawling, brand new shopping complex that's been built as a key element in the rejuvenation of

downtown, is a one-stop shop for luxury goods, clothing, jewellery and high-end cafes. It is also an interesting statement about the new Lebanon and the balance it is trying to strike between renovation and commemoration in its post-war reconstruction. Beirut Souks stands on the site where there was once a vibrant market before the war. This sold all necessary goods and was magnet to all Beirutis, drawing them into the centre of town from surrounding areas. The new shopping complex, which is very tastefully designed, is a nod to that heritage but is far more upscale, and exclusive, than previous markets.

If you want shopping with a bit more local colour, Gemmayzeh, an area in east Beirut, is a good spot. Gouraud Street is lined with cafes and bars, but among them are some real shopping gems. Michel Sfeir runs a treasure trove of an antiques shop. He buys from people selling their houses or who have inherited old properties whose contents they don't want; in his store you can find some exquisite furniture, lighting, trinkets, musical instruments and crystal from French Colonial times and the Ottoman era. Down the street is Gem, where jewellery designer Antoine Oueiss sells a range of his rings, bracelets, necklaces and cufflinks in gold,

silver and some unusual materials like compounded coffee. He uses rough, unpolished metals and asymmetrical lines with prices ranging from \$60 (£38) right up to \$3,000 (£1,875).

Finally, a recent edition to Gemmayzeh's retail spread, Ginette is a store at the cutting edge of where retail is going in Beirut. A minimalist, high-end concept store in the vein of Colette in Paris, Ginette offers beautiful design objects — Leica cameras, Tombow pens, Illy coffee machines and collectible trainers — sparsely distributed amid the store's sleek surfaces and sharp lines. The restaurant also serves tasty salads and locally produced desserts.

#### EATS

As the sun sets, Beirutis' minds turn to dinner and dancing. Lebanon is famous for its food and hospitality, and both come together in the wide range of restaurants dotted across the capital. Like Lebanon itself, Beirut's restaurant offering has one foot firmly planted in the Arab world and the other testing the waters of numerous world cuisines. There are trends — sushi is all the rage these days — but one old reliable that never changes is Lebanese *mezze*, or traditional entrées. >>



It is at Baromètre that you can find perhaps the best *mezze* in Beirut at a reasonable price. The traditional eatery is in the Hamra district, a stone's throw from the American University of Beirut, and its dark, atmospheric bar and dining area have been the home to students and revolutionaries for decades. During the Lebanese civil war, it was the meeting point of leftist intellectuals. The late leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, conducted meetings there when the organisation was headquartered here in Beirut.

You can still find Beirut's leftists at Baromètre, along with a gamut of others, all after a good *mezze* and Al Mazaa beer, Lebanon's local brew. The best way to enjoy *mezze* is with a bunch of people. Like Spanish tapas, you order a table of plates and Arabic bread to share. Among other delights, *mezze* includes hummous, *mouttabal* (aubergine dip), *soujuk* (spicy Armenian sausage in sweet pomegranate sauce), parsley-fried potatoes and salads like *tabbouleh* and *fattoush* — all for about \$3 (£1.90) a plate.

Baromètre represents the old, traditional and unchanged Beirut. It's cosy, vibrant and after midnight on the weekends, the tables are cleared and it becomes one of the best Arabic dance spots in the city.

Frida, a Lebanese-Mexican fusion restaurant in the Achrafieh district, is an example of Lebanon's

gastronomic new guard: a self-consciously international take on Lebanese food. Located in a converted Arabic house, famous Mexican artist Frida Khalo is its central theme, with reproductions of elements of her work dotted around the walls. Meals typically cost \$25-35 (£16-22) each with wine. Try the *makaneh* (Lebanese sausage) in jalapeños for a good example. The restaurant also houses an impressive tequila bar with a range of Mexican tipples you won't find elsewhere in Beirut.

### NIGHTLIFE

For dancing and nightlife, Beirut is best taken in a staggered approach. The night can be as long as you want it to be, so it's best to pace yourself. After dinner, head to Dany's in Hamra, the closest thing Beirut has to a rock'n'roll dive bar. Couched off of Hamra Street in an alley with a handful of other fine bars and restaurants, Dany's has become an institution for Beirut's night owls and music lovers. In the basement is a live music venue where many of Lebanon's bands play but most of the action happens on the ground floor, with walls covered with graffiti and half-baked philosophies scrawled in various colours. It's a great meeting point and an ideal place to get the night started. House parties are announced here at Dany's, where information on what's happening

in the city that night is also easy to come by.

Once the bars begin to shut around zam it's time to hit the clubs, and a visit to Beirut wouldn't be complete without a trip to Bo18. The former bunker, converted into a nightclub by Lebanese architect Bernard Houry, is an icon in the city, not least for its retractable roof which enables clubbers to dance under the stars. The tomb-like club is infused with a morbid flavour, with coffins used for seating. If you still have energy after the club, make your way to the Corniche, or seaside promenade, to see the sun rise over the Mediterranean and enjoy a coffee or water pipe with the locals.

### STAYS

When it comes to finally hitting the hay, there's a dearth of choice when it comes to hotels. Again, like most other things in Beirut, there are two main categories: the traditional and nostalgic and the internationalised and aspirational. The Albergo in the Achrafieh district is a restored Arabic family home which has been converted into a five-star 'heritage' hotel, drawing on all the comforts and crafts in the Middle East to create its unique Old World interior. Prepare yourself for four-poster beds, extravagant Arabic glass chandeliers, thick Persian shag carpets and the *pièce de résistance* — a wonderful, verdant rooftop

**Previous page from top:** Cityscape of East Beirut from the rooftop at Le Gray Hotel; old apartment building, Gouraud Street, Gemmayzeh

**This page:** Patrons at Dany's, Hamra  
**Opposite, clockwise from top-left:** Le Gray rooftop glass infinity pool overlooking Beirut; *mezze* selection; classic car in Gemmayzeh, Gouraud Street; locals outside bar, Gouraud Street, Gemmayzeh

cafe overlooking Beirut. Suites are \$310 (£194) a night and executive suites cost \$520 (£325) a night.

The small Hotel Moonlight in Hamra is more an exercise in preservation than nostalgia. Almost nothing in the hotel has been changed since the 1950s, which makes for an incredible sense of time travel. The lobby is like something from a film noir and the elevators, fixtures and fittings are very romantic. This is definitely the budget option, but for \$30 (£19) a night for a single and \$40 (£25) for a double, you get what you pay for. The rooms themselves have a motel shabbiness to them and are a little on the depressing side.

If you are looking to stay somewhere less traditional, try Le Gray, one of Beirut's newest modern, luxury hotels, located in the renovated downtown area. The hotel is a sleek, high-design affair with much Lebanese contemporary and avant garde art scattered throughout its lobbies, cafes and bars. Rooms start from \$440 (£275) a night in low season and \$550 (£344) in high season. The hotel has five bar/restaurant spaces, including a cigar bar and beautiful roof bar, next to a 55ft infinity pool overlooking the Mediterranean.

Sitting back on the wicker furniture cradling a drink here may indeed be the ideal way to relax and unwind after a day spent criss-crossing Beirut. >>



essentials  
BEIRUT

## GETTING THERE

» BMI ([www.flybmi.com](http://www.flybmi.com)) and Middle East Airways ([www.me.com.lb](http://www.me.com.lb)) fly daily, directly from Heathrow to Beirut International Airport, 10 miles from downtown Beirut.

» Indirect flights are available through most major European cities.

## GETTING AROUND

Getting from A to B in Beirut usually means hailing a shared taxi. Ask for 'service' (pronounced 'serveece'); the shared taxi ride should cost 2,000LL (85p) per person. When travelling to other Lebanese cities, get on a bus at either Cola or Charles Helou bus stations. Car hire prices start at £20 a vehicle per day.

## WHEN TO GO

Beirut is at its most vibrant, and its most hot and humid, in the July to September period. Temperatures can reach 40C and the humidity can climb to 100% at times. Throughout the rest of the year, however, the weather is very pleasant, with heavy rains occurring in the months of December and January.

## NEED TO KNOW

» **Time difference:** GMT +2.

» **Visas:** UK visitors with a valid passport can obtain a one-month visa for free on arrival at Beirut International Airport

» **Currency:** Lebanon operates a dual-currency system and both Lebanese Lira and US dollars are accepted everywhere. The Lebanese Lira is pegged at a rate of 1,500 Lira to the dollar. (£1: \$1.60 or £1: 2,405 LBP).

» **Vaccinations:** The Foreign Office recommends vaccinations for hepatitis A, typhoid, tetanus-diphtheria and measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) at least four to eight weeks before departure.

» **International dial code:** 00 961.

## EATS

» Baromètre, Hamra. T: 00 961 136 7229.

» Frida, Achrafieh. T: 00 961 708 01841.

» Mayrig, Gemmayzeh. [www.mayrigbeirut.com](http://www.mayrigbeirut.com)

» Barbar, Hamra. T: 00 961 134 8814.

## SHOPPING

» The Wine Library, Beirut Souks, Downtown. T: 00 961 199 3109.

» Aizone, Beirut Souks, Downtown. T: 00 961 198 9040.

» Sfeir Antiquités et Brocante, Gouraud street, Gemmayzeh. T: 00 961 144 3777.

» Gem, Gouraud Street, Gemmayzeh. T: 00 961 370 7108.

» Ginette, Gouraud Street, Gemmayzeh. [www.ginette-beirut.com](http://www.ginette-beirut.com)

## SIGHTS

» Walk Beirut. [www.bebeirut.org](http://www.bebeirut.org)

## SLEEP

» Albergo Hotel. [www.albergobeirut.com](http://www.albergobeirut.com)

» Le Gray Hotel. [www.campbellgrayhotels.com](http://www.campbellgrayhotels.com)

» Hotel Moonlight, Hamra. T: 00 961 135 2308.

» Four Seasons. [www.fourseasons.com/beirut](http://www.fourseasons.com/beirut)

## NIGHTLIFE

» Dany's, Hamra. T: 00 961 390 4547.

» Ferdinand, Hamra. T: 00 961 135 5955.

» Demo, Gemmayzeh. T: 00 961 395 8504.

» Behind the Green Door, Mar Mikhael. T: 00 961 7085 6866.

» B018, Karantina (open midnight to dawn). [www.b018.com](http://www.b018.com)

## HOW TO DO IT?

» Ebookers.com offers a flights (with BMI) and hotel (Intercontinental) package to Beirut from Heathrow for seven nights from £930 per person.

## MORE INFO

» Lebanese Ministry of Tourism. [www.lebanon-tourism.gov.lb](http://www.lebanon-tourism.gov.lb)

» Downtown Beirut, an online guide to the city. [www.downtownbeirut.com/lb](http://www.downtownbeirut.com/lb)

» Nakhal Tours: Lebanese company offering tours of Beirut and the country. [www.nakhal.com.lb](http://www.nakhal.com.lb)

» An excellent primer on the modern history of Lebanon and the geopolitics of the region is the book *Beware of Small States* by David Hirst (published: 2010).

» Watch the feature-length *West Beirut* (1998) by Ziad Doueiri to get a sense of Beirut during its civil war. □