

# Beirut

Beirut is the vibrant, battered capital city of Lebanon. Once the Paris of the Middle East and a magnet for the jet set from both east and west, it is now in a recovery phase after the terrible damage inflicted during the long civil war.

During the war, the notorious 'Green Line' divided the east and the west of the city into the Christian and Muslim halves respectively, and even today, the division still unofficially stands. The center of the city-the Downtown district - was almost totally

destroyed, creating a further geographical division between east and west. Nearly all the tourist attractions, night life and cheaper hotels are in west Beirut, which is livelier than the east of the city. The overwhelming impression is one of traffic,

noise, bustle and more traffic. Everywhere you look, there are buildings going up or coming down and car horns honking. Beirut is definitely not the place to go for a quiet rest.

If you are a first time visitor to Beirut, be prepared for a shock at the extent of the war damage. Buildings near the Green Line are so peppered with bullet holes that they look like old lace. Even more shocking is that people are often still living in these perilous buildings having made their own makeshift repairs.

In the absence of state assistance, people are having to be resourceful and self-sufficient. Renovation is going on at such a pace, though, that you won't see an exclusive designer boutique or an expensive restaurant in a street of otherwise bombed-out buildings. The architectural style is diverse with beautiful traditional buildings jostling for space with the kind of breezeblock horrors that pass for architecture in the Mediterranean.

Beirut today has grown from a small, walled city in the mid-19th century with less than 100,000 people to a sprawling metropolis of about 1.5 million people. Despite its recent hardships, the people of Beirut are friendly and outgoing. After the cease-fire in 1991, the mood of caution has giving way to a spirit of enterprise and renewed optimism for the future. Tourism is very much seen as part of the recovery and foreign visitors are made to feel very welcome, although independent travelers are still a bit thin on the ground

## HISTORY

The earliest traces of habitation date from the Stone Age when the area, now occupied by the city, was in fact two islands in the delta of the Beirut River. Later, when the river silted up, the area became one landmass. It seems likely that the area has been continuously occupied throughout prehistory. Its location is favorable with fresh water and abundant fish from the sea.

According to tradition, the first city was founded by the people of Byblos. The first historical reference to Beirut dates from the 15th century BC, when it is mentioned in a tablet with cuneiform script discovered at tell al-Amarna in Egypt - but the city is older than that. Between Martyrs Square and the sea port, a Canaanite site has been uncovered dating from 1900 BC. This Bronze Age city has an entrance gate of dressed stone. Nearby are the remains of Phoenician canals with sloping sides. The Phoenicians had reused the Canaanite stones as well as smooth, round stones brought

from the Beirut River

New light on the obscure origins of this city may be shed by the excavations now underway in the Downtown district—the site of the original city. Large areas have had to be bulldozed in order to redevelop the center of the city, giving archaeologists a unique opportunity to dig beneath the accumulated strata. From finds already uncovered, it is clear that the city was larger and more significant than had been previously thought, but deep excavations may be hampered by the time limit set for the rebuilding of the area. The original name of the city seems to have been variously Beirut, Birrayyuna or Birrayat, which suggests that it was named after a well or wells (modern Arabic still uses the word bir for well). On the other hand, according to Philo in his History, Beirut was the first queen of the city &ndash; all of Beirut&rsquo;s records of this time are buried deep and may never see the light of day

Beirut was conquered by Agrippa in 64 BC and the city was renamed in honor of the emperor&rsquo;s daughter, Julia—its full name became Colonia Julia Augusta Felix Berytus. The veterans of two Roman legions were established in the city: the 5th Macedonian and the 3rd Gallic. The city quickly became &lsquo;Romanised&rsquo;; large public buildings and monuments were erected and Berytus enjoyed full status as a part of the empire.

In the 3rd century AD the city entered a period of fame and prestige founded on its School of law which rivaled those in Athens, Alexandria and Caesarea. This fame lasted for about 200 years and, up until the end of the 4th century, it was still one of the most important cities in Phoenicia. In the middle of the 5th century, there was a series of devastating earthquakes and tidal waves, the last of which, in 551 AD, almost totally destroyed the city. The death toll was high: 30,000 were people killed in Berytus alone and, along the Phoenician coast, the total number of casualties was close to 250,000. The school of Law was evacuated and moved to Sidon in the south. This calamity marked the decline of the city for centuries to come.

When the Arabs came in 635 AD, they took the city without much of a struggle. Their rule was uninterrupted until the Crusaders brought Beirut briefly back into the history books.

In 1110 AD, after a siege, the city fell into the hands of Baldwin I of Boulogne and a Latin bishopric was established. It remained in Crusader hands for 77 years during which time the Crusaders built the church of St John the Baptist of the Knights Hospitallers on the site of an ancient temple. In 1187 Saladin managed to wrest the city back into Muslim hands. This state of affairs lasted only six years before Amoury, King of Cyprus, besieged the city once again and the Muslim forces fled.

Under the rule of Jean I of Ibelin, the city&rsquo;s influence grew and spread throughout the Latin East, but the Crusaders lost the city again, this time for good, in July 1291 when the Muslim Mamelukes took possession.

There were periodic attempts to invade the city during the following centuries. In the 14th century, the Franks made a number of assaults but without result. In the 15th century the Franks returned, peacefully this time, as traders.

Beirut continued under the Mamelukes until they were ousted from the city by the Ottoman army in 1516. Now part of the powerful Ottoman Empire, the city was granted semiautonomy in return for taxes paid to the sultan. The local emirs had free rein, so long as the money flowed into the coffers of the Sublime Porte. One of the emirs, Fakhr ad &ndash;Din, established what was in effect an independent kingdom for himself and made Beirut his favorite residence.

Fakhr ad-Din&rsquo;s keen business sense led him to trade with the European powers, most notably the Venetians.

Beirut began to recover economically and regain some of its former prestige, although physically it remained a tiny city.

The sultan, meanwhile, became alarmed over Beirut&rsquo;s growing power and confronted Fakhr ad-Din&rsquo;s army, defeating him at Safed. Fakhr ad-Din was captured and taken to Constantinople, where he was executed in 1635.

The 18th century saw mixed fortunes for the city, depending on the whims and preferences of the local rulers. One Bashir II, injected new vigor into the city, renewing its prosperity and stability once again. These peaks and troughs formed the pattern of existence for Beirut until the mid-19th century brought about changes which led to dramatic growth. The civil war brought the whole growth process to a dramatic halt.

For a brief spell in the mid-19th century, Beirut came under the Egyptian domination of Mehmed Ali, but the city was bombarded and subsequently recaptured on 10 October 1840 by the combined Anglo-Austro-Turkish fleet. The population of Beirut at that time was only 45,000, but it doubled during the following 20 years. The booming silk trade attracted a lot of people to Beirut, and the massacres, which took place in Damascus and other parts of Lebanon in 1860, also brought thousands of Maronites fleeing from the mountains to the city. This was the start of the commercial boom which saw Beirut transformed from a backwater into a commercial powerhouse. It was in 1868 that Syrian and American missionaries founded the Syrian Protestant College (now known as the American University of Beirut), which has become one of the most prestigious universities in the Middle East, adding to the importance of the city.

During WWI, Beirut suffered a blockade by the Allies, which was intended to starve the Turks out. The effect was a famine, followed by plague, which killed more than a quarter of the population. A revolt against the Turks broke out which resulted in the mass hanging of the rebel leaders in what was renamed Place des Martyrs.

WWI brought an end to Turkish rule and on 8 October 1918, eight days after the capture of Damascus by the Allies, the British army (including a French detachment) arrived in Beirut. On 25 April 1920 the League of Nations granted a French mandate over Syria and Lebanon, and Beirut became the headquarters of the French High Commissioner as well as the

capital of the state of Greater Lebanon.

During WWII the city was occupied by the Allies and, thanks to its port, became an important supply center. In 1946 the French left the city, and subsequently Beirut became one of the main commercial and banking centers of the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli War of 1948 saw huge numbers of Palestinian refugees settle in the south of Beirut, where they still live today.

During the civil war from 1975 to 1991, anarchy reigned in Beirut. The city was ruled, area by area, by militias loyal to one or other factions. What with the continual inter-communal fighting and shelling from Israeli fighter planes, the city suffered significant damage. The human casualties were enormous and the effect on the economy catastrophic. Beirut is now in the process of recovery, but it will take many years to complete the rebuilding program and fully restore the infrastructure of the city. Certainly the Beirut dubbed as 'the Paris of the Middle East' is gone for the moment. What re-emerges in its place will remain to be seen.

#### ORIENTATION

Beirut is Promontory bound by the Mediterranean Sea on the north and west coast. The headland of the promontory has dramatic cliffs falling away into the sea, while to the south, the coast gives way to a sandy beach. In the west of the city, the land is very hilly, flattening out as you travel east. The city center is now a wasteland currently under redevelopment. Many of the shops, businesses and government offices have moved to the Hamra district in west Beirut. This is now the true heart of the city where people go for shopping and entertainment. It is also where you'll find the Ministry of Tourism, major banks, hotels, travel agents, airline offices and restaurants &ndash; all within walking distance of each other. For most tourists, it is the obvious place to stay and is convenient for traveling around the city.

North of Hamra is the large American University of Beirut (AUB) campus with lots of coffee bars and cheap restaurant catering for the students. Heading east from there, you come to the Downtown district which is being redeveloped and further on, the port and the Beirut River, which is disappointingly just a concrete canal surrounded by highways. To the south east of the port is the rather exclusive suburb of Achrafieh set on a hill. This area is one of designer clothes shops and exclusive restaurants, but has little in the way of ambience.

The Corniche (Ave de Paris and Ave General de Gaulle) runs around the coast from Raouche in the south west to the St George Yacht Club, just before you come to the Downtown district. This is the area where Beirutis come to promenade, jog, fish and generally hang out. There are many restaurants, cafes and snack stalls lining the Corniche, with some of the most popular overlooking the famous Pigeon Rocks.

To the south of the city are the southern suburbs which are much poorer districts and predominantly Shiite. This is also where the Palestinian camps of Sabra-Chatila and Bourj al-Barajnah can be found. The main roads through the southern suburbs are lined with shops, which sell all kinds of household goods alongside workshops and many food markets. Further south is the airport. There have been warning from some of the western embassies about the risk of wandering around this part of town &ndash; whether they are exaggerated or not is hard tell. There is, in any case, nothing really to interest the casual sightseer.

Navigating your way around town can initially seem tricky because, firstly, the city has quite a confusing layout and, secondly, the streets are often known locally by a different name than the one that appears on the signs. The street signs, when they exist, give the names in both Arabic and French. A few of the streets use house numbers, but the majority do not. Buildings are often known either by the name of their owner or by their function (eg the British bank building). When directing you, people refer to land-marks and the names of specific commercial institutions rather than street names. It is not as difficult as it first seems and you soon get used to the system.

The best way to familiarize yourself with the city is to travel around on foot. You can get to almost any point in west Beirut on foot within 30 minutes. Remember to take a street map with you.

#### Maps

The best map of Beirut is on the reverse of the GEO projects map of Lebanon, available from the major bookshops in Beirut. There is also a commercial map, published by All Prints of Beirut, which has a good city map of Beirut on the reverse. English and French versions are available. It is also stocked by Stanfords in London.

#### The rebuilding of Beirut

Beirut's Downtown district lies at the geographic and historical heart of the modern city. Before the civil war, Downtown Beirut was the commercial, financial and administrative center of Lebanon. So when faced with the huge task of rebuilding confidence in the country, the Downtown area was one of the first to be considered for reconstruction &ndash; a chance to recreate a city that could once again be the 'Paris of the Middle East'.

In 1992 the Lebanese Parliament formed the Lebanese company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, Known by its French acronym Solidere, to oversee the project. Much of the old Downtown district is to be totally redeveloped and decisions are being made about which buildings to save and which to demolish. In total about 1.8 million sq m of the Downtown district will be restored, including some 60 hectares of reclaimed sea land.

The approved Master plan aims to combine a range of land uses including government, commerce, residential, cultural and leisure facilities. The new city center will be much like the prewar city core and akin to the successful centers of many other historic cities. At least 40,000 people are expected to be housed in the new development.

Solidere is also working with teams of archaeologists who are excavating the cleared sites-a unique opportunity in an occupied city. Traces of all the historical periods-canaanite, Phoenician, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid, crusader, Mameluke, Ottoman, and French Mandate &ndash; have been revealed through the archaeological excavation of the district. Extensive finds, many of which have already been uncovered, are to be displayed in a special 'archaeological park'. The finds include Canaanite burial jars, ramparts from Phoenician Beirut, Roman lamps, evidence of silk and glass industries and many square metres of mosaics from the Byzantine ear. The archaeologists would like more time to uncover the remains of the ancient civilisations, but as with

any development the bulldozers are impatient to start the rebuilding process. With a project of this scale, there are bound to be conflicts of interests.

Rebuilding Beirut is more than just a practical problem; it also involves hugely complex legal problems. Solidere is a joint stock company with a majority shareholding of pre-existing land and property owners with cash assets of US\$650 million. Land ownership rights of the former occupants of Downtown Beirut mean that a system of reimbursement had to be thought out. Shares in Solidere were issued to property owners whose buildings will be redeveloped.

Money for the project is coming partly from the state (for basic infrastructure) and from private investors. Its capital comes from the value of the real estate (some 1650 real estate lots) which is worth around US\$1,170,000,000.

The new plans are not to everyone's taste, but there is a commitment to building a new city center for all Beirut's population. One thing is for sure—the rebuilding of Downtown Beirut is going ahead at a terrific pace. It could yet regain its reputation as the most sophisticated city in the Middle East.

## INFORMATION

### Tourist office

Beirut's tourist information office (TL (01)343073; fax 340945, 343279) is on the ground floor of the same building as the Ministry of Tourism, on the Rue Banque du Liban (an extension of Rue Hamra and Rue Rome). The entrance is through a covered arcade which runs underneath the block. This office has a series of up-to-date brochures on the main archaeological and tourist sites of Lebanon. It also has some country and city maps. The staff are helpful and friendly, and speak English and French. They have a comprehensive list of hotels and apartments and can advise you about accommodation options. The office is officially open from 8 am to 2 pm, although often there is no one there until after 9.30 am.

### Foreign Consulates

Beirut has a large number of foreign embassies and consulates. Some of the western embassies in west Beirut moved temporarily to east Beirut during the war. Some of them are relocating back to west Beirut, either to their original building or to new addresses. If you are planning to visit an embassy, it would be a wise idea to telephone first to double check the address. See under Embassies in the Facts for the Visitor chapter for a list of embassies in Beirut.

### Money

There seems to be a bank every 50m in the center of Beirut, so finding a place to change money is never a problem. There are also numerous moneychangers, but not all of them will deal with travellers' cheques. The Beirut Finance & Exchange Company (TL864280), in the Abdel Baki building on Rue Hamra, changes both cash and travellers' cheques. Failing that, you can usually change money or travellers' cheques at many of the larger hotels with no problem, although the commission charges are often higher. The banks are open from 8.30 am to 12.30 pm daily except Sunday. The private moneychangers have more liberal business hours and often stay open until the early evening.

The American Express Bank (TL360390) is on the 1st floor in the Gefinor Center on Rue Maamari, Hamra. It is open from 8.30 am to 12.30 pm. This is the place to come if you lose your travellers' cheques. There is also an Amex cards office on the same floor where you should go if you need to draw cash on your Amex card or if you need a replacement card. The office is open weekdays from 8 am to 6 pm and to 1.30 pm on Saturday.

### Post

The postal system is reviving after the war and a full range of services is more or less available. There are no public post boxes and you have to make a visit to the post office in order to mail letters or parcels. These are not very numerous, but the deliveries are pretty reliable. At the moment there is no post restante service available.

The main post office is on Rue Riad al-Solh in the Downtown district, but it's a bit out of the way. In Hamra the most convenient post office is on Rue Makdissi, almost opposite the Embassy Hotel. It is on the 1st floor above the Star Stationers, but the entrance is not clearly signposted at all—it is the door to the left of the shop as you face it. The opening hours are from 8 am to 2 pm daily, except Sunday and public holidays.

Also nearby is the on-campus post office at the AUB which can be used by visitors. If you use the main entrance to the campus on Rue Bliss, turn left and it is down a flight of stairs in the same building as the canteen. It is also open from 8 am to 2 pm daily, except Sunday. It does not sell stamps so you have to leave your letters to be franked.

In west Beirut there is a post office in Raouche, near the end of Rue Chatilia near the Protestant College, which keeps the same hours.

### Telephone

There are a few public telephone boxes in Beirut, in particular on Rue Bliss in Hamra. If you want to make a call, you will most probably have to use the government-run telephone offices or one of the private telephone offices.

There are a couple of government-run places in Beirut. One is in Hamra near the Ministry of Tourism building on the junction of Rue Banque du Liban and Rue de Rome just behind the Glass Gallery. It is open from Monday to Saturday from 8 am to 2 pm (to 11 am on Friday). The other one is on Blvd Saeb Salam, not far from the Cola taxi stand, and has the same opening hours. To make a call, you go to the counter and fill in a slip of paper with the country and number you want and wait to be directed to a booth. You pay when you have finished your call.

The private offices are often located in shops and operate on a similar system, although their rates are a bit more than the government places. Their opening hours are usually longer, and because there are more of them, the extra expense is probably worth it. If you are stuck in the evening and need to make a call, your best bet is to use one of the larger hotels, but be warned— their charges can be expensive for international calls. The telephone code for Beirut is 01.

### Fax

There are many private fax bureaux in Beirut (most double up as telephone offices as well). Many of these are on Rue Bliss, near to the AUB campus. An alternative is to use the larger hotels. Most have a business center which you can use

whether you are a guest or not. These Tend to be more expensive than the private bureaux.

#### Internet

There is one place where you can access the Internet in Beirut &ndash; the News Caf  (TL 602384) in the Weavers Center on Rue Clemenceau. You can&rsquo;t send or receive emails here, but you can get an inexpensive meal.

#### Travel Agencies

There are dozens of travel agencies all over Beirut. The following can provide all or most of these services: hotel bookings; car rental; tailor-made programs; daily tours of the city or other parts of Lebanon; ski and scuba diving programs; airport transfers; and ferry and flight bookings. You may need to shop around a bit to get the deal that best suits your budget.

##### Ghazi Travel Agency

Rue Bliss, Hamra (TL 348555, 602087)

##### Habbal Travel

Rue Makdissi, Hamra (TL 349213, 351237)

##### Jaber travel

Rue Verdun (near the Mandarine supermarket)

(TL 865695)

##### Nakhal & Cie

Ghorayeb Building, Rue Sami Al-Solh (TL389507/8;fax 422302)

##### Nawas International

Rue Sadat (TL 740275/6/7/9)

##### Pan Asiatic Travel

Gefinor Center, Hamra (TL 342708)

##### Rida Travel

4th floor, Amoudi Center, Babir Square, Mazraa

(TL 640903, 643341; fax 630537; email ridatour @bignet. Com.lb)

##### Saad Tours

Achrafieh (TL 423672)

Pavillion Building, Rue Hamra (TL 352194)

##### Skyways

Rahme Center, Sin El Fils (TL 496012/3)

Tajer Building, Clemenceau (TL 367315)

Bitar Building, Hazmteh (TL 429899)

##### Tania Travel

Rue Sidani, opposite the Geanne d&rsquo; Arc theatre,

Hamra (TL 739679, 739682/3/4;email taniatv@ dm. Net.lb; web site HYPERLINK "http://members" http://members . Aol.

Com/ Tania Travl/ main.html)

Rue Sodeco (TL (03) 812375/6)

#### Bookshops

Beirut is well supplied with bookshops both in the east and the west. The main area to find bookshops, though, is in Hamra and around the AUB (not surprisingly). Apart from academic and specialist books, you can also buy novels, general interest books and books about Lebanon. Although there are very few current guidebooks on Lebanon, there are some beautifully produced coffee-table books with sumptuous photographs, al-though they are a bit on the expensive side.

The largest and best-stocked bookshop is the Librairie Antoine on Rue Hamra. It has a good selection of books and international newspapers and an encyclopedic array of imported magazines in French, English and Arabic. Librairie Antoine also has a smaller branch in Achrafieh and four branches around the country.

Other recommended bookshops are Four Steps Down and Way In on Rue Hamra, both of which mainly stock English-language books. Another good bookshop is Librairie International on the ground floor of the Gefinor Center in Hamra.

#### Campuses

The main campus in Beirut is the AUB. This is a good place to hang out. Non-students can visit the campus and use the post office, visit the museum, get a cheap lunch at the canteen and generally find out about events. There is a free English-language weekly newspaper, Campus, which lists various events at AUB and other campuses in Lebanon.

#### Cultural Centers

There are several cultural centers in Beirut including:

##### British Council

Azzar Building, Rue Yamout (off Rue Sidani), Ras Beirut (TL 740123/4/5)

##### Centro Cultural Hispanico

Assaf Building, Rue Baalbeck (TL 347755)

##### Goethe Institut

Gideon Building, Rue Bliss, Manara (TL 740524,745058)

##### Institut Culturel Francais

Cite Bounnour, Rue de Damas (TL 644850/1/2)

##### Italian Cultural center

Najjar Building, Rue de Rome (TL 346509)

##### Russian Cultural Center

### Rue Verdun (TL 864534)

These centers often have art exhibitions and film festivals, showing work from their respective countries. They are also a good place to drop by and catch up on the news- papers-most of them have a small library which you can use for a quiet read. You can check for details in the press or by calling them to see what's on.

### Medical Services & Emergency

The following telephone numbers may be useful in case of emergency:

Civil Defence 125

Emergency Police 160

Fire Brigade 310105

Red Cross 145

Police 386440,425250

Please bear in mind that all medical services, including ambulances, have to be paid for there are no free medical services available. If you need an ambulance, call either the Red Cross or Civil Defense. If you have any sort of accident that is not serious and you do not need an ambulance, it is better to get a taxi to take you to one of the hospitals. The general consensus is that the American University of Beirut Hospital (TL34060) on Rue du Caire is the best choice. The AUB also has a separate private clinic on Rue Ahmed Abdul Aziz (TL 341898).

Other hospitals include:

Hotel-Dieu de France, Rue Hotel-Dieu (TL 387000)

Makassed, Rue Tariq al-jedide (646592)

Trad Hospital, Rue Mexique (361663)

There is a 24-hour/seven-day pharmacy, Mazen Pharmacy (TL 343779), on Blvd Saeb Salam, almost opposite the large post office, it offers a delivery service up until 8 pm. You simply telephone your order through and pay on delivery. The pharmacist speaks English and French and can advise you on what drugs you may need.

### Dangers & Annoyances

The most obvious hazard in Beirut is the traffic, especially when you are travelling on foot. Waiting for a gap in the traffic as you cross busy roads can take an age. Locals seem to take the fatalistic approach and saunter across the flow, trusting that cars will slow down. This technique is not recommended unless you have nerves of steel.

Another thing to watch out for when out walking, particularly at night, is potholes and uneven stones in the pavements. It is easy to twist your ankle or fall if you are not paying attention.

Theft is not a great problem, so don't be unduly paranoid, but it pays to be vigilant with your bags especially at busy places such as taxi stations. Keep your wallet or purse on your body-bum bags are a good idea. These also mean you can keep your passport handy for those on-the road checks.

### MUSEUMS

#### National Museum of Beirut

Lebanon's main archaeological museum couldn't have been in a worse position during the war-right on the Green Line, and on one of the main crossing points from east to west. There were times when the crossing was closed for days at a time due to heavy shelling and gunfire. The building was closed for the duration of the war and the exhibits bricked up to avoid damage, but the fabric of the building itself suffered from the shelling and periodic occupation by the militias. Following the cease-fire, work began in earnest to restore the building.

The museum dates from 1942 and its façade and interior have an Egyptian style. The windows have been overlaid with black wrought-iron work in a lotus-bud design. The four pillars which flank the entrance hall are copies of those at Luxor and have lotus-head capitals. At the time of writing, teams of workers were slaving away, practically round the clock, to get the museum ready for reopening. There was no specific timetable for the work to be finished, but it seems likely that by the time you read this, the museum will be at least partly open.

Formerly the museum was open daily, except Monday, with a small entrance fee. The hours in winter, from 1 October until 31 March, were 9 am to 12 noon and from 2 pm to 5 pm. In summer the hours were the same in the morning and 3pm to 6pm in the afternoon. It seems likely that once the museum reopens, these hours will resume. If you want to check if the museum is open, you can telephone the Department of Antiquities (TL 426704). If you want to take photographs inside the museum, you have to obtain a written permit -enquire on the same number.

It has been difficult for the curators to properly assess the damage done to the artifacts as many of them are still in crates and bricked up in the basement of the building. It was said that they expected at least 60% of the exhibits to be undamaged. As one of only two archaeological museums in Lebanon, most of the important finds, which represent the cream of the national heritage, are housed here.

Following is a brief description of the collection and the layout of the museum as it was before the war.

The galleries were arranged over three floors-the basement, ground floor and 1st floor. The ground floor entrance hall had a small collection of Phoenician pottery found at Tyre, dating from the 7th century BC. The first gallery on the left was the Gallery of the Alphabet Which had several early stelae (inscribed stone slabs) representing various stages in the development of writing. Some of the earliest dated from the 10th century BC. One, dating from the Persian period, described the building of the temple at Byblos, which was dedicated to the goddess Balaat Gebal.

Following the gallery around, you would come to the south alcove, which used to house a collection of stone figures and stelae from Byblos.

The Gallery of Rameses was the next room. The pieces in this gallery came from a monument at Byblos which was built or restored by the great pharaoh Rameses II, who paid many visits to Phoenicia during his campaign against the Hittites in the 13th century BC. The pieces included statues and a portal with the cartouche of Rameses II and various stelae from the same period.

If you continued past the staircase which led to the 1st floor, you would come to the Gallery of Echmoun which used to house a collection of objects found at Sidon, Tyre and of course Echmoun itself. The exhibits included a set of four mutilated statues of children used to invoke the healing spirit of Echmoun.

The Hygiea Gallery was next on the circuit around the ground floor. This gallery housed mainly statues and mosaics from the Roman and Byzantine periods. The most notable of the mosaics was the one that depicted the life of Alexander the Great, and included a mythical scene from Olympus announcing his future birth.

The next room was the Gallery of Jupiter which had a beautiful 5th-century Byzantine mosaic at the entrance and some statues from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, including part of a colossal statue of Jupiter (or possibly Neptune). The gallery was flanked by two 2nd-century altars. From here, you would return to the entrance hall and to the main central hall. This space contained reconstructions of the temples at Baalbek and a piece of the capital showing the upper half of a bull. Behind the staircase leading up to the 1st floor were some fresco fragments from a Frankish chapel in Beirut.

The galleries on the 1st floor held the smaller objects and those dating from prehistory. Most of these exhibits came from the Byblos site where extensive digs have taken place. Many of the objects had some religious significance, but others were personal objects from everyday life including some exquisite jewellery.

The first thing you used to see going up the stairs was a frieze of fossilized fish, or ichthyolites. These came from two principal limestone sites in Lebanon: Haqel and Sahel Alma. Radioactive dating shows that the Haqel fossils date from 85 million years ago and the Sahel Alma fossils from million years ago. The fish fossils are all the more remarkable when you consider that the sites from which they come are now 1000m above sea level on a mountain top.

Turning to the left at the top of the stairs, the exhibit began with a collection of old and new Stone Age weapons and tools found at the sites of the later Phoenician settlements. There were also cases containing early pottery from this period and a couple of very early clay idols.

The next cases displayed the earliest Phoenician artifacts dating from the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC. There was an outstanding figure of Astarte, made of terracotta, showing the goddess holding her breasts, and also some jewellery dating from the 2nd millennium BC.

The next section of the upper gallery was devoted to the treasures of Byblos and contained an impressive collection of figurines and jewellery. Further along the gallery there were many objects found in the tombs of the kings of Byblos dating from the 18th century BC, including mirrors, vases and incense caskets. One of the most dazzling objects was a magnificent gold breastplate from the mid-19th century BC.

The collection continued with some Greek pottery from the 5th century BC and later some fine Phoenician glassware from the 1st century BC onwards. The later part of the exhibits included some Byzantine jewellery and household artefacts and a collection of household objects from the Arab era.

The basement of the museum used to house a collection of sarcophagi and the hypogeum of Tyre, an underground vault whose walls were painted with mythological scenes. The Ford Gallery was on one side of the basement and contained a collection of sarcophagi in human shapes, mostly in white marble. Most of these had tops of the tombs carved into a likeness of their former occupants. The faces would have originally been painted and you could still see traces of pigment on some of them. They were discovered near Sidon in 1901 and were mainly the coffins of wealthy Phoenician merchants.

#### American University of Beirut Museum

The museum on the AUB campus is small but well worth a look, especially as this is the only other archaeological museum in the city apart from the National Museum. It is housed in an attractive 19th-century building near the Main Gate on Rue Bliss. If you tell the guard on the gate that you want to visit the museum (or the post office or whatever), he will direct you to the visitors' desk. Once inside the campus, turn right and the museum is a large castellated building on your right past the church. The museum has a guidebook available to borrow while you walk around &ndash; ask at the desk as you go in. There are versions in English and French.

There is a good collection of Phoenician glassware and ceramics and some earlier artefacts. Some of the figurines are particularly interesting. There is no photography allowed inside the museum, but you can buy some rather overpriced postcards of the star exhibits at the desk. Entry is free and the museum's opening hours are Monday to Thursday from 10 am to 4 pm.

#### Sursock Museum

Just about the best thing to visit in east Beirut is the Sursock Museum near Achrafieh. It is in a part of the city which still retains a fair amount of traditional architecture in the form of large 19th-century mansions. The Sursock Museum is the former home of the Sursock family and is a splendid example of 19th-century 'wedding cake' architecture &ndash; all &ndash; white, lacy stucco and sweeping staircases inspired by Italian villas.

The interior is suitably grand in style with heavy, wood paneling and marble floors. Some of the rooms are decorated in the oriental style and the main one has a collection of 19th-century Turkish silver. In the center of the room is a gigantic 7th-century Abbasid jar. On the same floor is a small but interesting library, which is open by arrangement if you fancy doing some research. The former study of Nicholas Sursock features his portrait by Van Dongen. The room also houses a small collection of icons.

The museum's main function these days is to provide a venue for contemporary Lebanese artists. These exhibitions change periodically, but there is a permanent exhibition of Japanese prints and Islamic art.

The official name of the museum is Musée Nicholas Ibrahim Sursock and it is at Rue de 'Archeveche Grec-Orthodoxe, Achrafieh (TL 334133, 201892). The museum is open only during exhibitions. It is a good idea to telephone before you visit as it is sometimes closed while new exhibitions are being installed.

#### THINGS TO SEE & DO

## Hamra

Rue Hamra has become the main shopping street since the war. Close to the university campus and many of the hotels, it is the magnetic center of the city with a huge selection of restaurants, fast-food joints, street vendors, bookshops, cinemas and so on. Other districts may be smarter, but Hamra has all the street life.

There are no important buildings or monuments in Hamra, but it is interesting to walk around the area, window-shopping and stopping occasionally in cafes to watch the world go by and soak up the atmosphere. The shops are mostly fashion boutiques (of the non designer variety), shoe shops and jewellers. Occasionally you come across household shops selling Lebanese coffee sets, felafel moulds and other esoteric items which make good souvenirs.

If you start walking from the western end of the street, you can make a few detours down the side streets where some interesting small shops lurk – some selling traditional handicrafts and not so traditional pirated music tapes. Further along on your right is the Café de Paris, a prewar survivor with a nice old fashioned feel. There are some tables outside which, if you can stand the constant honking of car horns, are a good vantage point. You can pick up a newspaper on the way at Librairie Antoine. Around this part of Hamra are some second-hand book vendors. One or two have a pitch on the corner of Rue du Caire. It is well worth having a browse here; apart from picking up a cheap novel, they often have some rare out-of-print books on Lebanon.

Past Rue du Caire, there is a Roman Catholic church which, unfortunately, is kept locked except during services. This stretch of Rue Hamra is not especially interesting. A lot of banks and airline offices have their offices here. Near the junction with Rue de Rome is the tourist information office and, past that, is the campus of the University of Lebanon with its 19th-century buildings and attractive grounds. If you turn right into Rue Justinien, you come to the main gates of the university and just past that is an attractive public garden in the middle of a large square. On the north-east corner of the square, you can see a single, rather sad, Roman column which is covered with advertising posters. The garden square is quite pleasant and makes a good spot to sit and eat your falafels and recharge your batteries.

## Downtown

The former heart of Beirut has seen some exceptionally hard times, especially during the war. This was the area where much of the fighting between rival militias took place. Before the war, this was the transport hub of the city and also the main shopping district with elegant arcades of shops and restaurants. The area also had many of the city's administrative and religious buildings. Some of these are now undergoing restoration, but others are simply burnt-out shells.

The redevelopment of the area is in the hands of a company called Solidere (see the Rebuilding of Beirut section earlier). They have spent the time since the war ended deciding which of the damaged buildings could be saved and drawing up an elaborate plan for the rebuilding of the city center. Many buildings were so damaged that whole blocks have gone under the bulldozer leaving behind a strange, end-of-the world landscape. It is quite disconcerting to walk around this bombed-out ghost town and suddenly come across a pocket of commercial activity or fully functioning building, but wherever people have been able to resume a normal life for themselves, they have.

The heart of the Downtown district is the Place des Martyrs (also known as the Place des Canons, but always called El Bourj by the locals). This huge, open space was named after the rebels who were executed by the Turks in 1915. The only feature of the Place des Martyrs still remaining is the bronze statue in the center, known as the Martyrs Statue. Riddled with bullet holes, the statue has become a symbol of all that was destroyed during the fighting; the holes are now filled with flowers. If you want to see what the Place des Martyrs looked like before the war, there are street vendors hanging around the statue selling posters of prewar Beirut. They are rather poignant views of a lost world.

Nowadays the land has been cleared between the Bourj and sea giving a fine view of, well, nothing at all. But in case your imagination needs some prompting, Solidere has erected an enormous billboard showing what the future development will be like, according to the architects. If you stand at the statue and squint, you will have a vision of the future. That vision may seem to your eyes a rather soulless version on what they are trying to replace, but bear in mind that what you are looking at is probably going to be one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in the Mediterranean. There are still several buildings worth seeing in the Downtown area, even in their dilapidated state and, to be fair to the developers, they are trying to save what they can of the historical heritage of the area. On Rue Weygand, to the north and west of the Place des Martyrs, is the Grand Mosque, more properly called the Omari Mosque, which was quite badly damaged during the war. The mosque was originally built as the Church of John the Baptist of the Knights Hospitallers during the Byzantine era over a site previously occupied by a Roman Temple of Jupiter. Some parts of the original temple were reused in the construction of the church. The conversion to mosque took place in the 1291 AD when Salah ad-Din retook Beirut. The building still contains traces of its former pagan and Christian origins, despite some quite drastic alterations. Many of the streets around the Place d'Etoile were closed off at the time of writing due to the renovation works, but if you can, continue past the Grand Mosque heading west and then along Bab Edriss. You come to a turning on the left, Rue des Capucins. On your left is St Louis church and a restored clock tower. Lower down to your left is an area being excavated in which some Roman baths have been uncovered. If you continue along Rue des Capucins, you come to a huge Ottoman building, the Grand Seraglio, whose structure has now been restored.

Following the road south, you come out in the Place Riad al-Solh, which is nothing more than a dusty space at a road junction. Turn left onto Rue Emir Bechir and you come to St George's Maronite Cathedral on the left. Despite its roofless state, the cathedral is still functioning on special occasions, such as Easter. The crypts of the church are being used as a store for archaeological finds. Behind the church a major dig, which has uncovered one of the main Roman streets, is underway. Archaeologists are hoping to discover the famous School of Law and the Cardo Maximus before time runs out and the site is built over.

Two further churches, St George and St Elie, lie to the north of the Maronite cathedral, but they are in totally ruinous state. Next door to the Maronite cathedral are just about the only Roman ruins still standing in Beirut, at least in their

original position. These consist of a few rather forlorn looking columns. But they have fared a lot better than many of the buildings of 20th-century Beirut.

Walking around this area, you cannot fail to be shocked by the extent of the destruction brought about by the war and the total disruption and chaos that such a conflict has brought about. What is even more shocking is that many of the wrecked buildings are still being lived in. A short walk away from the main area of reconstruction, you will see street of houses, shops and apartments, which defy any definition of the word 'safe' in which families are still patching things together and making do. Their circumstances are many years away from any sort of normality and it is a sobering experience for a visitor to witness.

#### Pigeon Rocks

This is the most famous (in fact the only) natural feature of Beirut. For a first time visitor, the dramatic cliffs are a bit of a surprise. The offshore natural rock arches of the Pigeon Rocks are fairly spectacular and a natural magnet for city dwellers craving something beautiful to look at. Sunset is the favorite time for a visit to the rocks, or the hour or so before. The stretch of Corniche directly in front of the rocks faces a sheer drop of about a hundred metres and this is a good vantage point. But far more interesting is to take one the tracks down to the lower cliffs. One such track starts from the southern side of the rocks. After a steep 100m, you find yourself down on the lower level of chalk cliffs. These stretch out some considerable way and make a fine walk, especially if you are sick of the incessant traffic noise. Almost immediately, you can forget you are in the city.

The way across the rocks is quite rugged and sensible shoes are a good idea, although you see local women teetering precariously across the cliffs in high heels. Down on the lower levels you get a good side view of the Pigeon Rock with the city behind. If you fancy sitting for a while to watch the waves crash through the rocks, there is probably the smallest café in the world (two chairs) overlooking the scene. Further down towards the open sea there is a larger café (four chairs), where you can sit and watch the sunset.

There are a number of inlets and caves in the cliffs. During the summer season small boats take people for a trip around the rocks and to the caves for a small fee.

#### Hamam

You can indulge yourself with a massage, sauna and bath at the Hamam an-Nuzha al-Jadid (TL 641298) on Rue Kasti, off Ave du General Fouad Chehab. It is open all week, 24 hours a day, but women can only go on Monday from 9 am to 2 pm. The hamam provides the soap and towels.

#### Racecourse

Just behind the National Museum, the racecourse, or Hippodrome, holds race meetings at the weekend and on public holidays. Horse racing has always been wildly popular with the Lebanese; in the old days the Hippodrome was the place to go at weekends. It is a great opportunity to soak up some local atmosphere and watch the thoroughbred Arabian horses go through their paces. There is betting at the track and if you are any judge of horses, you could end up with some winnings. The entrance to the grandstand is at the western end of the course, not far from Mazraa. See also Spectator in the Facts for the Visitor chapter.

#### East Beirut

It has to be said that there is generally little in east Beirut to interest the visitor, unless you are shopping for designer clothes or looking for lunch in an expensive restaurant. This part of the city seems to consist mainly of rather characterless, well-heeled suburbs. Apart from the Sursok Museum (see Museum earlier), the only buildings of interest are a handful of churches. The one with the most interesting history is the St George's church (now the Al-Khader Mosque) in the Khodr district. Everyone has heard the story about St George and the Dragon, well this is supposed to be where it all happened. The building itself is very small and tucked away near the junction of Ave Charles Helou and Rue Al-Khodr, just south of the highway. There is a supposed to be a healing power in the water from the nearby well, called the Dragon's Well.

A few Kilometres further south in the district of Getawi is the Armenian Catholic Archbishopric on Rue Hopital Libanais and nearby is the Armenian Orthodox Cathedral. Nearer the center of town you can visit the Maronite Cathedral at Mar Maroun.

#### ACTIVITIES

One of the most popular activities throughout the summer months is swimming. The only free place to swim in Beirut is the public beach south of Raouche. This is a long sweep of sand without any shade and could be a recipe for instant heatstroke in mid-summer. As for cleanliness, the beach itself is not too bad, although there is some rubbish strewn about. There seems to be two camps of opinion about the safety of the water: those who wouldn't dream of swimming in the sea near Beirut on account of the pollution; and those who swim regularly and claim never to have had a problem with it. Let's put it this way, if you are desperate for a swim and don't mind rather murky water, you probably won't come to much harm.

If you can't face the briny, the only alternative is to pay for the privilege of swimming in one of the many privately run pools. Some of these are attached to hotels, others are just run as 'beach' resorts (although the beach in question is concrete). In either case, this is going to set you back about US\$10 to US\$12 per person. This will get you a changing cabin, sun lounger and access to refreshments.

One of the most popular places to swim is Plage Long Beach, which is behind the Luna Park Funfair just north of the Pigeon Rocks. There is an access road leading down to the resort between the funfair and a large, open-air restaurant. Entrance to the pool is US\$10 and there are several cafes and restaurants, including a traditional Lebanon café with backgammon boards and nargileh pipes.

Many of the smarter places operate a members-only policy for people wanting to use their pool. The Riviera Hotel (TL

602273/4/5) is in this category. It has a good location, facing north from the Corniche on the Ave de Paris, and has tow pools and a snack bar on the sea side of the Corniche.

If you are going to be around Beirut for some time, it may be a good idea to ask about short-term membership. The same applies to the St Georges Yacht Club (TL 360222,365065) which has a lovely pool and bar alongside the marina. This is right next door to the old St Georges Hotel on Rue Minet al-Hosn, which has been closed since it was damaged during the war.

There are a few sports clubs opening up in Beirut and if you are missing your weekly game, there are tennis and squash courts at the Escape Club (TL 812349,806223) just along from the Hotel Mediterranee. They have three tennis and four squash courts, plus a gym. Nonmembers are welcome, but members are given priority when it comes to booking courts. From 7 am to 2 pm, a court costs US\$14 per hour, and during peak times, from 3.30 to 8.30pm, US\$30per hour. This includes free use of the gym and loan of racquets.

#### ORGANISED TOURS

Some of the local tour operators, such as Rida Travel, Nakhal & Cie and Saad Tours, have half-day tours of the city by coach. Depending on the number of people, the costs are about US\$25 to US\$30 per person. The itineraries are rather predictable: Pigeon Rocks, the Corniche, Hamra, the National Museum and the Downtown district to look at the excavations. Unless you really like being shepherded around, you would be better off just taking a taxi between these places and doing it at your own pace. See Travel Agencies earlier in this chapter and Organised Tours in the Getting Around chapter for details.

#### PLACES TO STAY

##### Places to Stay-bottom end

There are lean pickings at the cheap end of the hotel range in Beirut. Most of the real cheapies from the old days were around the Place des Martyrs and are now under the bulldozer. Until independent travelers return to Lebanon in significant numbers, there isn't much demand for them anyway. Consequently there are no pensions, no youth hostels and only a handful of places that could really be described as cheap in the capital.

More of a hostel than a hotel is the University Hotel (TL 347420) on Rue Bliss, opposite the main gate of the American University campus. The only snag is that you have to be a woman and have a letter of introduction from the university, but if you can manage it, then it is one of the cheapest places to stay in Beirut (about US\$15 a night).

One of the cheapest hotels still up and running is the Hotel Glayeul (TL 869690) on Rue Minet al-Hosn, near the St Georges Yacht Clup. This is a tiny hotel on the sea front with a terrace restaurant overlooking the sea. It has only 11 rooms and is often full. The cost of a double room here is US\$20. At the time of writing, the hotel was undergoing renovations, so it is likely that the price will change.

Nearby, down a small side street almost opposite the Hotel Glayeul is the Hotel Regis (TL 361845). This hotel is slightly more comfortable with 20 rooms, all with private bath. Singles/doubles cost US\$20/30, but no unmarried couples will be accommodated in the same room.

The San Lorenzo Hotel (TL 348604/5) on Rue Hamra, near the junction with Rue Mahatma Gandhi, is a popular choice with budget travelers. The rooms are very simple and the hotel a bit run-down, but the location is superb, right in the heart of west Beirut. A reader reported some very dodgy wiring in the shower, so be warned. The entrance is easy to miss &ndash; look out for some stairs just past the Station 2000 shop. Rooms, including a bath, cost US\$23 for a single, US\$20 per person for a double and US\$11 per person for a triple. An odd feature of the hotel is the Swiss restaurant, Taverne Suisse, on the 1st floor (see under Foreign Restaurants in the places to Eat section later in this chapter).

More highly recommended is the Hotel Moonlight (TL 352308). It is off Rue Hamra, tucked down a side street between Rue Ibrahim Abdel Ali and Rue Omar ben Abdel Aziz. Rooms here cost US\$20/25/30 for a single/double/triple. The Hotel Mushrek (TL 345773) also seems reasonable enough at US\$22/29/43 for singles/doubles/triples. It is also in Hamra on Rue Makdissi.

##### Places to Stay &ndash; middle

There is a bit more choice if you are prepared to pay a little more. One of the best in this range is the unfortunately named Hotel Mace (TL/fax 344626/7, 340720). It is just off Rue Hamra on the south side towards the western end of the street. This is an older hotel which has had some recent refurbishment. It has a friendly atmosphere and is very clean. The rooms all have bathrooms, TV and air-con. The hotel has a roof restaurant, which, at the moment, is only open for breakfast. This is an all-round good deal at US\$50/60 for singles/doubles (plus 16%service). You can pay a little more for a room with a Kitchen if you want to be self-catering. Ask for the 'special price' and you should be offered a discount.

A brand new place which has only one floor open at the time of writing is the Cedarland Hotel (TL 340234). It is just off Rue Hamra on Rue Omar ben Abdel-Azez. It is immaculately clean and all rooms have private bath, air-con and TV. Singles/doubles cost US\$30/45 and twin beds cost US\$40. Breakfast is an extra US\$5. They should be opening more rooms up shortly.

One of the most popular mid-range hotels, the Embassy Hotel (TL 340814/5), is right in the heart of Hamra on Rue Makdissi, almost opposite the post office. The hotel charges US\$34/47 for singles/doubles and lunch in their restaurant costs from US\$5to US\$10. Dinner seems a remarkable bargain at US\$3, although it is probably pretty basic stuff. The Embassy claims to be the only hotel in Hamra with a garden and it is certainly a welcome added attraction. In the same area is the Astra Hotel (TL 346600) on Rue Abdall Al-Tannoukhi. Singles/doubles cost US\$40/50 including the service tax.

The Mayflower Hotel (TL 340680; fax 342038), off Rue Hamra on Rue Nehme Yafet, is a popular watering hole for expats (no doubt due to the English-style pub). It used to offer economy rooms at US\$35/45 for singles/doubles. These may still be available, although the normal price is US\$65/75.

The only hotel in this price range with a sea view is Lord's Hotel (TL 740382/3) in Manara near the lighthouse. It was built in the 1950s. If you don't count the highway in between, this almost counts as a seaside hotel. It is across the Corniche from the Bain Militaire and very close to the Plage Long Beach and the Pigeon Rocks. The prices seem to be negotiable; the manager quoted US\$45/60 (plus 16% service) for singles/doubles, which is much lower than their published tariff. Breakfast is extra and costs US\$4. The hotel does a fixed-price lunch for US\$8 but a la carte is about US\$13 for lunch and dinner.

Places to Stay &dash; top end

Not surprisingly, there is no shortage of very expensive hotels in Beirut, and more are being built all the time. If you can afford it, you are spoilt for choice &dash; so this is just an edited highlight of the best of the best.

The two newest hotels are the Marriott (TL 840540) and Le Vendome Inter Continental (TL 369280). The 174-room Marriott, south of Beirut and not far from the airport, has singles/doubles for US\$155 plus 16% service. It has the usual Marriott facilities &dash; restaurants, pool, health club and shops. Le Vendome Inter Continental is a more boutique-style hotel on Rue Minet al-Hosn, near the Hard Rock Café. Singles/doubles with a city view cost US\$190/210 and with a sea view US\$230/250.

One Rue Makdissi, at the more modest end of the luxury class, is the Marble Tower Hotel (TL 354586, 346260; fax 346262). This is a very comfortable 60-room hotel and all rooms are air-conditioned. Singles/doubles cost US\$60/75 including the service tax. There is a rooftop lounge and restaurant with live piano music. In the same sort of price bracket on the other side of Rue Hamra is the Pavillion Hotel (TL 350160/1/2/3; fax 352300). Singles/doubles cost US\$65/90 plus 16% service. The hotel is clean and efficient but a bit lacking in style.

Trying to be smart is the Concorde Hotel (TL 740664) on Rue Bliss, diagonally opposite the former Saudi Arabian embassy. It has all the usual features including a pub. Rooms here cost US\$75/85 for singles/doubles. For the same money, you can stay at the Grand Hotel Versailles (TL 739860/8; fax 739866), which has a lot more glamour and atmosphere. It is at the western end of Rue Hamra. Singles/doubles/triples cost US\$65/75/105 plus 16% service. It has a restaurant serving Lebanese, Italian and Turkish food and a nightclub that seems pretty popular with the locals. The unique feature of this hotel is the full-size theatre which often holds performances of Lebanese folklore and music. The productions vary, so you have to check with the hotel about dates and times. Tickets for performances cost US\$10. Hotel Mediterranee (TL 603015, 862812; fax 603014) has the advantage of a residents-only swimming pool on the roof and one of the best Lebanese restaurants in the area. It is on the Corniche near the Bain Militaire. Singles/doubles cost US\$100/130 including breakfast and 16% service. The hotel does a good fixed-price lunch and dinner though for US\$10 or US\$ 15.

If you want to live in the lap of luxury, try the Bristol Hotel (TL 351400, 346390; fax 602451), which is all tinkly chandeliers and silver service. One of the oldest and poshest hotels in Beirut, it has the prices to match. A basic single/double room costs US\$110/115 plus 16% service. Needless to say your every whim is catered to. It is not far from Hamra on Rue Mme Curie, but of course your chauffeur will know the way.

Not quite as formal as the Bristol is the Riviera Hotel (TL (03) 305565/6; fax (01) 602272) on the Ave de Paris. With sea views and a pool on the coast, this hotel is still very luxurious with lots of extras like a health club and Japanese restaurant. Singles/doubles cost US\$125/145 plus 16% service.

A few kilometers south of Raouche are a couple of new and swanky beach resorts, Summerland and Coral Beach. These are really the only hotels designed as leisure resorts within the city limits. The better of the two is Summerland (TL 313030; fax 319213) which is a playground for the very well-off. The resort has an Olympic-size swimming pool and a sea-water rock pool. There are also sports facilities and a health club. It's very expensive at US\$175/190 for singles/doubles including service. The Coral Beach (TL 317200; fax 319500) has single/doubles rooms for US\$156/198, which includes breakfast and the service tax.

Places to Stay &dash; rented apartments

Beirut has a lot of seasonal visitors who come over for a few weeks or even months, and there is a good selection of serviced apartment buildings to cater for them. If you are staying some time, then it may be a good idea to consider a short-term rental. These places are really like hotels, but with studio flats instead of rooms. They vary from the so-so to the luxurious. You can often haggle and get a good price, especially if you are staying several weeks. It can often work out quite a bit cheaper than a hotel and you can save money on restaurant bills if you are not eating out every day. In the heart of Hamra the West House Residence (TL 351051/2/3; fax 352451) is recommended. It is near the junction of Rue Sourati and Rue Omar ben Abdel-Aziz. It has 24 self-contained studio apartments with a choice of double or twin beds, a small sitting room, coffee and tea-making equipment, TV, air-con and a bathroom with 24-hour hot water. It isn't luxurious, but it's OK. The nightly charge is around US\$35, but if you stay for a week it is about US\$200 or US\$350 for a fortnight. If you stay for a month, the price ranges from US\$500 to US\$950 depending on the size of the room. The same company owns a similar apartment hotel building on Rue Artois called West House Residence II (TL 350450).

At the same price is another apartment hotel, Residence Haddad (TL 342313), which has just opened up on Rue Sidani off Rue Hamra and has similar facilities.

Imperial Suites (TL 860986, 862781; fax 603687) on Rue de l'Australie in Raouche is a short walk from the Corniche and Pigeon Rocks and is very comfortable, friendly and well run. The clientele seems to be a mixture of business and holiday guests. It has its own supermarket on the ground floor and is convenient to local shops and takeaways. The daily rate for a small apartment with a small but well-equipped kitchen, luxury bathroom, TV and air-con is US\$120. Doubles/triples cost US\$165/200 including service tax-reductions are available for long-stay guests.

PLACES TO EAT

Beirut is a food paradise with all kinds of cuisine on offer. Eating out is a very important part of the social life of many

Beirutis who linger over very lengthy lunches and dinners. Not all the Lebanese restaurants are expensive and it is possible to eat well on the cheap if your budget is limited.

It is quite common to visit one restaurant for mezze, then move on to another for a main course and end up in a café for sweets and coffee, so don't feel obliged to order a three-course meal in a restaurant. The starters are often so delicious and filling that a main course is often unnecessary.

The number of restaurant in Beirut is so huge that this section is just a recommended few-some tested personally, some recommended by locals, but the Lebanese take such care with their food that I don't know of a bad restaurant &ndash; just some that are better value than others.

#### Cafes

There are many cafes dotted around Beirut which serve excellent Arabic coffee and sweet pastries. In some of the older establishments you can even smoke a nargileh pipe.

European-style cafes are also popular; the Café de Paris on Rue Hamra has a 'watch the world go by' feel to it. In most cafes Arabic coffee costs between LL1000 and 1500. Pastries and sweets vary in price between LL1000 and LL2000. If you are on a budget, avoid ordering Nescafe as it is invariably expensive.

#### Cheap Eats

Almost every street in the city has at least one fast-food takeaway. The usual system in these places is to order your food and pay at the till and then take your receipt to the food counter.

The fast-food joints tend to fall into a few distinct types. The most common type is the felafel and shawarma sandwich shop. These are pretty substantial and usually cost about LL2000 each. An alternative is the Lebanese pizza which is flat bread with either a za'atar (thyme and sumak) or cheese topping. They come rolled up in paper and are even cheaper than a felafel or shawarma at about LL750 to LL1200 depending on the topping. Also at these bakery shops you can get a flat triangular pastry that is stuffed with spinach and lemon &ndash; quite delicious &ndash; for about LL1000. Western chains such as Pizza Hut and burger joints are becoming increasingly popular.

In Hamra and around the American University there are many of these places plus some good cheap restaurant mostly catering for students. On Rue Hamra one of the best felafel/shawarma places is between Rue Jeanne d'Arc and Rue Antoine Gemayel near the Strand cinema, although the sign is in Arabic only. The place is very popular so the food is always fresh. Felafels cost LL1000 and a shawarma (chicken or lamb) costs LL1500. Another good felafel place is Malik al-Felafel (King of Felafel) on Rue Roosevelt.

The Corner Sandwich Bar at the intersection of Rue Makhoul and Rue Jeanne d'Arc makes chicken, meat, cheese and labneh sandwiches for LL2000. It also has a wide variety of fresh juices for LL1000 to LL2500, depending on the mix of fruit. Opposite the AUB main gate is Le Sam Snack, where you can get a hamburger for LL2500 and French fries for LL1000.

Snack Hamra on Rue de Rome, just off Rue Hamra, has Lebanese pizzas starting from LL750 for za'atar to LL1250 for cheese or meat. One block further, on Rue de Rome, is Maatouk takeaway, which has chicken and meat. Shawarma for LL2000 and a wide variety of Lebanese rice dishes.

In the same area, on the corner of Rue Hamra and Rue de Rome is a pizza Hut (TL 343640) set back from the road in a kind of precinct. Simple Italian-style pizzas here cost about LL 10,000. A bit cheaper is the popular Horseshoe Restaurant (TL 310664) on the corner of Rue Hamra and Rue du Caire. It is a fast-food joint selling chicken, fish, and meat burgers for around LL 2000.

A few meters down the opposite side of Rue Hamra, inside an arcade is Chez Andre (TL 345662), one of the nicer sandwich bars that survived the war. They have excellent lahm bi ajin and sandwiches for LL 1500 to LL 3000, plus draught beer (LL 3000) and wines or spirits (LL 5000). Don't be put off by the dingy arcade; Chez Andre is the third shop on the left-hand side. It is open from 8 am to midnight, Monday to Saturday.

Another cheap takeaway/restaurant is the Pizza Pino (TL 345005/6) near the Piccadilly cinema on Rue Omar ben Abdel-Aziz, where a pizza or steak costs LL 7500.

There are several cheap places down Rue Jeanne d'Arc and on Rue Bliss near the main gate of the university. If you are very hungry, a good choice is Universal Snack (TL 342209), near the junction of Rue Jeanne d'Arc and Rue Bliss which, apart from the usual Lebanese dishes, serves a variety of grills and breakfasts, including a full bacon and egg English breakfast (LL 7500). It serves a very filling hamburger, salad and chips (LL 5500) and traditional Lebanese breakfast (fuul, labneh, bread etc) for LL 6500. Other items worth trying are the chicken club sandwich (LL 7500) and a real bargain, an omelette sandwich (LL 2500).

Next door is a good felafel and shawarma place, Felafel Bakkar, where a felafel sandwich costs LL 1500 (LL 2000 for an extra felafel) and shawarma sandwiches are LL 3000. In Rue Sidani, on the same side as the Jeanne d'Arc theatre, is Marrouche, which has excellent chicken sandwiches with a special garlic sauce for LL 2000.

On Rue Bliss opposite the campus is Yum Yum, a grocery store-cum-sandwich bar. It has a variety of fillings ranging from LL 2000 (cheese, aubergine, labneh, potato) to LL 2500 (meat or chicken). It also sells mineral water LL 750 for a bottle (LL 500 for half a bottle), soft drinks (LL 750) and canned fruit juices (LL 500 to LL 1750). You can also use the phone in the shop for LL 500 per local call. It is open all week from 7 am to midnight.

If you prefer freshly squeezed juice, go to Bliss House a few doors further east. It charges LL 2000 for a small glass and LL 3500 for a large one.

Further west on Rue Bliss is Baron Sandwich which specializes in spicy Armenian sausages (soujouk and pasterma) for LL 2500 which goes down well ayran (a salty yoghurt drink) for LL 1000.

One very cheap eating option is to use the AUB campus dining room. You go through the main gate on Rue Bliss and turn left. The dining room is a few metres to the left, in the same building as the post office. It serves lunch from noon to 3 pm daily and coffee and sandwich all day. Lunch dishes cost about LL 3000 and look very fresh. It typically has a

selection of salad and maybe lasagne or some other hot savoury dishes, including vegetarian, plus fruit and pudding. On the Corniche there are many budget places worth checking out. A good Lebanese place is Al-Halwani (TL 869816, 812881), formerly the Al-Wali, near the Pigeon Rocks. A selection of fast food and mezze dishes will cost about US\$6. At Ras Beirut there are several fast-food places and there is little to choose between them. A new one, Delight, across the road from the funfair, has the novelty of English fish and chips (LL 9500) as well as the usual chicken and burgers. It's worth noting that right in front of the fair is a 24-hour pub called Lena's which has pool tables. In the same area is a reasonable Lebanese place overlooking the sea. It is between the Bain Militaire and the funfair and is called Arous al-Bahr. It has a pleasant open-air eating area with trees. A mixed mezze is LL 9000 (one dish is LL 3000) and various kebabs are LL 7500. Half a bottle of arak is LL 10,000, but a bottle of house wine will set you back LL 20,000. Round the Corniche at Raouche there are a few simple sandwich and snack places dotted here and there between the swankier places. Near Merryland on the other side of the street is a row of cafes and juice bars. Hakim is a cheap but good place which sells a variety of sandwiches and kebabs. The meat varieties (chicken, shawarma, liver etc) are LL 2000. Further south on the other side of the road is an excellent new chicken place called Poulco. It sells about a dozen varieties of chicken sandwiches plus whole roast chicken on a spit. Sandwiches cost about LL 2000 and a whole chicken is LL 9000. There are a couple of vegetarian alternatives such as cheese and spinach in filo pastry (LL 2000 for two pieces) and a selection of cold drinks. The best feature of this place is the terrace which overlooks the whole beach to the south.

#### Mid-Range

For US\$10 to US\$15 per head, you can enjoy quite a wide range of restaurants. You can stay within that price range so long as you street clear of fish and seafood dishes and take it easy on the wine. Many restaurant, even quite smart ones, offer a fixed-price lunch menu and these can be very good value.

Around the AUB campus there are several good but modest restaurant. Uncle Sam's (TL 353500, 354475), on the corner of Rue Jeanne d'Arc and Rue Bliss, is very popular with the campus crowd and has main courses for between US\$6 and US\$9 and you can have a beer at the bar for US\$2. There's a US\$1 cover charge and a 16% service charge as well. It is open 7 am to midnight from Monday to Friday and to 3 pm Saturday, closed Sunday.

Nearby on Rue Khalidi is the Flying Pizza (TL 353975), a reasonably priced pizzeria which also does takeaways. It charges LL 9750 for a small pizza, LL 19,000 for a large pizza, LL 2000 for a soft drink and LL 3000 for a beer. Wine is about LL 10,000 a bottle. There are no additional charges and it is open from 11 am to midnight, daily.

The Blue Note pub/restaurant (TL 743857) is on Rue Makhoul, a continuation of Rue Khalidi. It's a pleasant restaurant offering mezze dishes that start from LL 4000 for a hummus or aubergine dip and main courses that start at LL 8500. Or you can have a drink at the bar — LL 4000 for a local beer or LL 6000 for imported brands or spirits. Other drinks cost LL 6200. It has live jazz music on Friday and Saturday nights, but there is a cover charge of LL 6000. It is open all week, except Sunday, from noon until late.

Next door, offering international cuisine and live music, is the Smuggler's Inn (TL 354941). It's on the expensive side, but a plat de jour with salad, coffee and dessert will cost US\$8 plus US\$1 cover charge and 14% service charge. It is open all week, except Sunday, from noon to 4 pm and from 7 pm until late.

At the eastern end of the Hamra district is Charlie Brown pub. It is popular with British expats and has a traditional pub ambience. It has a full range of beers and serves bar snacks and light meals.

On Rue Emile Edde, near Hamra, is the Istambuli Restaurant (TL 352049,353029) which is a reasonable place serving Lebanese and Turkish food. It has the usual selection of mezze and salads starting from LL 3000 and grills of various kinds for LL 8000. Local beer costs LL 2000 and a bottle of wine is LL15,000. It is open from 11 am to 11.30 pm daily. On the coast side of the Corniche are two restaurants with the same owners, the Laterasse Dbaibo and the Bouzouki Dancing Club (TL 812893/4). They are superbly situated overlooking the Pigeon Rocks and have various outdoor and indoor eating areas. Because of the view, they are favorite spots for a 'sundowner'. A beer from the bar costs US\$2. If you are eating a full meal with a couple of drinks, it will cost you between US\$12 and US\$20.

#### Expensive

Near the Pigeon Rocks is the Al-Dar (TL 863173) which many Beirutis reckon is one of the best restaurants for mezze. It is all smoked glass and with linen and the clientele seems to be mainly business people, but if you want to sample the Lebanese food it may be worth a try. The average cost of dinner with drinks is about US\$30 to US\$40.

In Achrafieh there are number of fine, and expensive, restaurants. The Beirut Cellar (TL 216990, 338185) serves Lebanese and international cuisine. The average price of a meal and drinks is US\$30. On Rue Abdel Wahab al-Ingiliz Al Mijana (TL 328082, 333112) serves Lebanese food with a meal and drinks priced from about US\$40.

#### Foreign Restaurants

Beirut is a very cosmopolitan city and has many different foreign restaurants. Italian food is very popular and usually very reasonably priced. French cuisine is also popular, but tends to come with a high price tag. Far eastern food is fast gaining in popularity and there are several Chinese, Japanese, Thai and Indian places opening up. If you are fed up with Lebanese food, here is a selection of foreign restaurants.

One of the most well-known is the Hard Rock Café (TL 373023/4), on the northern coast of the Corniche in Ain al-Mreisse. Part of the American restaurant chain and popular with young people, it has meals for about US\$16 per person. Similar is the Lone Star Café on Rue Bliss, one of an international chain, which serves the standard Tex-Mex fare. It is popular with the young crowd and a meal costs about US\$15.

Also in Ain al-Mreisse is one of the most popular Italian restaurants, La Spaghetteria Italiana (TL 868298, 363487). It specializes in pasta dishes and is often very crowded. Open for lunch and dinner daily, a meal costs from US\$20 to US\$25 per person with drinks. It is worth visiting for the good views across the ocean.

Taverne Suisse on the 1st floor of the San Lorenzo Hotel (see Places to Stay-bottom end, earlier in this chapter) serves

both Swiss and Lebanese food. A full lunch or dinner will cost you about US\$10.

A good Japanese restaurant is Tokyo (TL 800303) on the Corniche a Manara. All the classic Japanese dishes are available here such as sushi, sashimi, fish tempura and a variety of yakitori (kebabs), the prices are not cheap but, compared to Japanese restaurants in Europe, are quite a bargain at US\$30 to US\$35 per head.

Also in Manara, on Rue Arditi, is Sirena (TL 804640/2), an Indian restaurant specializing in tandoori dishes. It has quite a smart décor and the food is good and not too expensive at US\$20 to US\$25 for a main course and a few side dishes with drinks. It is only open in the evenings.

In Achrafieh, east Beirut, there are a few places worth trying. A recommended French place is L'Entrecote (TL 334048) on Rue Fassouh. It has a fixed-price menu which is quite a bargain at LL 17,500. A typical menu features tender entrecote steak, walnut salad, French fries and dessert. This place can get very full so it is best to book.

A simpler and cheaper place is Le Chef (TL 445373, 446769) on Rue Gouraud. This place is small and not very expensive. Expect to pay from US\$10 to US\$15.

#### ENTERTAINMENT

There are quite a few nightclubs and discos catering for different tastes and pockets in Beirut. Many of the nightclubs are in hotels, but these tend to be quite pricey. Hamra and Achrafieh have a good selection of cinemas often showing recent films from the US and Europe, mostly with Arabic subtitles. There is a good serious Lebanese film industry and if you are a film buff, you should seek out some of the new wave Lebanese films. There are also music and comedy revue shows at the theatres as well as more serious contemporary drama. Unless you have a good understanding of Arabic, these are unlikely to be of great interest.

#### Cinemas

The best way to check what's on is to look in the French-language daily L'Orient-Le Jour. Failing that here is a list of the most convenient cinemas. Cinema tickets cost LL 10,000, except on Monday, when they cost LL 5000.

Broadway, Rue Hamra (TL 345294)

Clemenceau, Rue Hamra (TL 366540)

Colisee, Rue du Caire, Hamra (TL 342962)

Concord, Rue Dunant (TL 347144)

Eldorado, Rue Hamra (TL 341723)

Elysee, Rue Hamra (TL 861748)

Empire 2 & 3, Achrafieh (TL 328806)

Etoile, Rue Hamra (TL 342616)

Hamra, Rue Hamra (TL 342044)

Monte Carlo, Rue Omar ben Abdel-Azez, Hamra (TL 340520)

Piccadilly, Rue Omar ben Abdel-Azez, Hamra (TL 340078)

Sagesse, Rue Sagesse, Achrafieh (TL 201494)

Saroulla, Rue Hamra (TL 242867)

Vendome, Achrafieh (TL 443992)

In addition, the foreign cultural centers often have film seasons featuring work from their respective countries.

#### Theatres

Once again the listings for individual theatres can be found in L'Orient-Le Jour. Not all of the theatres have productions on all the time, but here is a list of the main theatres in Beirut.

Beirut theatre, Ain al-Mreisse (TL 343988)

Concorde, Rue Hamra (TL 352347)

Elysee, Achrafieh (TL 581970)

Estral, Rue Hamra (TL 349455)

Jeanne d'Arc, Rue Jeanne d'Arc, Hamra (TL 354932)

Piccadilly, Rue Hamra (TL 340078)

Versailles, Hamra (TL 862561)

#### Nightclubs

Clubs in Beirut can range from the cool and smart to the tacky. They are not all expensive and many of them offer live music.

One popular and very reasonable club is Jimmy's (TL 867240) on Rue Verdun, which also serves Middle Eastern food. Quieter but more expensive is Le Retro (TL 334667) on Rue Sursock, Achrafieh. You don't have to eat here and it is a good place to see and be seen.

Also on Rue Sursock is the Music Box (TL 216487, 446570) which has a young crowd and is very popular. Just down the road is another Le Retro (TL 202118). All of these clubs have a smart dress code.

If you like jazz, there is the Blue Note (TL 743857) on Rue Makhoul (see the Mid-Range Places to Eat section earlier in this chapter). It has live jazz on Friday and Saturday and you don't have to eat. In the same street is Fly High which is a popular place near the AUB campus. It has a happy hour between 5 and 7 pm, where you get two drinks for the price of one. It is open till very late, seven days a week.

Of the hotel clubs, one of the most popular is the Weiner Keller (TL 350050), which is in the Weiner House Hotel, a few blocks south of Rue Hamra. It has belly dancing and live Lebanese music. Also popular is Excalibur at the Grand Hotel Versailles at the western end of Rue Hamra. A bit more expensive is the Beachcomber (TL 317200/4) at the Coral Beach Resort in Jnah.

#### THINGS TO BUY

There are a few things to buy which are exclusive to Beirut, but some craft shops sell traditional Lebanese bits and pieces.

Blue glass is popular and you often see sellers of worry beads on the streets. Some of these beads are made from semiprecious stones and are quite expensive. The best places for local crafts in Beirut include the Artisans du Liban shop on Rue Clemenceau in Hamra, La Maison de l'Artisan on Rue Minet al-Hosn in Ain al-Mreisse and Artisanale near the Bristol Hotel.

Around Hamra there are some shops which sell items. Lebanese coffee sets are a good souvenir if you're not traveling light. The glass flasks which contain water in cafes are also a good buy. They have a narrow spout which you hold away from your mouth and pour the water in a narrow stream—hopefully not down your shirt.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Beirut international airport is served by the local carrier, Middle East Airlines (MEA), and several Arab, Asian and European airlines. For details of airlines and routes, see the Getting there & Away chapter.

Several airlines have their offices in the Gefinor Center in Hamra, including Aeroflot (TL 739596), Air Canada (TL 811690), British Airways (TL 3738794), Cathay Pacific Airways (TL 741391), Gulf Air (TL 353367), KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines (TL 483299), Malaysia Airlines (TL 741343/4), and MEA (TL 737000). Elsewhere are the following:

#### Air France

Rue Bliss (TL 200704/5/6)

#### Alitalia

Rue Hamra (TL 353051)

#### Austrian Airlines

Rue Hamra (TL 343620)

#### Balkan Airlines

Rue Hamra (TL 343260)

#### Cyprus Airways

Rue Sursock (TL 200886)

#### Emirates

(TL 739040/2/3)

#### Lufthansa Airlines

Rue Hamra (TL 347006/7)

#### MEA

Airport Office (TL 822780)

#### Royal Jordanian Airlines

Blvd Saeb Salam (TL 493320)

#### TAROM

Khayat, Martinez Building (TL 342898/776)

### Bus

There are regular bus services between Beirut and Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. From Beirut, the buses leave from the eastern side of the Cola taxi stand at roughly two hour intervals for Damascus (9 am, 11 am etc), except for the first bus which leaves at 7.30 am. The last bus leaves at 3.30 pm. The fare is LL 6500 for a one-way ticket. The journey takes about three hours. If you are going to Aleppo (ask for Halab), the buses are even more frequent, leaving at 1 ½ hour intervals from 8 am until 6 pm, then at 7 pm, 9 pm and a late bus leaves at 11 pm. The one-way fare is LL 12,000 and the journey takes about seven hours.

If you are coming from Syria, the main Karnak bus station is about a 15-minute walk to the west of Martyrs Square in Damascus, although not all the buses running this route are Karnak buses (the Syrian-owned government buses). See also Land in the Getting there & Away chapter for more details.

### Taxi & Service Taxi

To and from Syria, these all depart from the Cola taxi stand and operate on the usual system of waiting until the car fills up before leaving. They have an advantage over the buses in that you don't have to wait around too long to depart, but the disadvantages are that they can be a bit of a squash, especially on a long journey. If you want the taxi to yourself, you will have to pay for all five passenger seats. See under Land in the Getting there & Away chapter for more details.

### Car & Motorcycle

For information on the problems involved in bringing a private vehicle into Lebanon and a list of car rental agencies, see under Land in the Getting there & Away chapter and under Car & Motorcycle in the Getting Around chapter.

## GETTING AROUND

### The Airport

Beirut international airport is approximately 5km south of Beirut. Taxis to and from the airport are the biggest rip-off in Lebanon. It is not uncommon to be charged US\$25 for the 15-minute run into the center. One way round this is to walk about 200m to the main road when you leave the airport building and hail a service taxi heading north into Beirut. Ask to go Cola where you can pick up another service taxi to your destination. A service taxi from the airport highway to Cola shouldn't cost more than US\$5 and from there the local fare is a fixed rate of LL 1000.

There is now a bus service (No 5), operated by the Lebanese Commuting Company, to and from the airport into the port area. The fare is only LL 500 and from the port you can catch another bus (No 1) to Hamra for another LL 500.

### Bus

There are now several regular bus services operated by the new Lebanese Commuting Company. It operates a 'hail and ride' system. Short hops cost LL 250 and longer journeys LL 500. The No 2 runs from Hamra to

Dawra via the port and Achrafieh. The No 3 goes from Cola to Hamra and the No 4 goes from Dawra to Jounieh. There are also several buses which run along the Corniche starting at the junction of Ave de Paris and Rue Minet al-Hosn and running around to Blvd Saeb Salam.

#### Service Taxi

Service taxis are plentiful and cheap in Beirut. Most routes around the capital are covered and you can hail one at any point on the route. The only way to find out if the driver is going where you want is to hail him and ask. They will drop you off at any point along their route. Official taxis are usually Mercedes and have a taxi sign on the roof, but there are many pirate operators plying the routes. Mostly these are OK, but obviously you take a chance if you get into an unlicensed taxi. The fixed fare for all routes in central Beirut is LL 1000. You can pay the driver at any point in the journey. The fare to outlying suburbs is LL 2000.

#### Taxi

Taxis are not metered and it is a good idea to agree on the fare with the driver before you set off. Official taxis have red licence plates, but again there are pirate taxis touting for trade. These just have the regular black plates and can be anything from a full-time driver who hasn't got a licence, to private individuals on their way somewhere and looking for a paying fare. Women should be careful about using unlicensed taxi, especially at night and if there are no other passengers.

The fares within Beirut should be between LL 5000 and LL 10,000 to the outlying suburbs, which is basically five times the service taxi rate. If you think the taxi driver is asking too much, don't get in and wait for another taxi.

You can also telephone for a taxi from a number of private hire firms. They charge a bit more, but are safer at night.

Remember to ask the fare over the phone. Some of the better known companies include:

Beirut Taxi, Chourane (TL 805418)

City Taxi, Achrafieh (TL 397903)

Dora Taxi, Dawra (TL 888316)

Lebanon Taxi, Hamra (TL 865556)

Radio Taxi, Hamra (TL 804026, 352250)

Sultan Taxi, Hamra (TL 868432, 867021)

TV Taxi, Ras Beirut (TL 862489, 862490)

#### Around Beirut

The mountains rise steeply around Beirut to the east and this is where people come to escape the city heat and enjoy the dramatic scenery. Many families take apartments for the whole summer season, commuting only when necessary to the humid sauna of the city below. Many of the resorts have grown from simple mountain villages into smart and sophisticated playgrounds for the middle class. The distance to the most accessible of the mountain resorts is amazingly short – 20 minutes from the center of Beirut and you are in a different, almost alpine, country.

Also within a short drive north of Beirut, on the coast road, are some interesting places which make a good day trip.

#### BEIT MERI

This popular resort is 17km from Beirut center and 800m above sea level. The views from the town are very good in both directions: on one side, you see Ras Beirut jutting out into the sea and on the other, the deep valley of Nahr al-Jamani blocked to the east by the Sannine massif. The original village has grown into a small town, with many villas built in strategic positions to take advantage of the views. To cater for summer visitors there are also a few hotels, including the Al Bustan (one of the most luxurious in Lebanon), but most of the hotels are for long-term guests only.

Beit Meri has been occupied since Phoenician times and some ruins from the Roman and Byzantine periods still exist. At the time of writing the ruins were occupied as a look out post for the Syrian army and could not be visited. This situation will hopefully change in the future. The ruins are found at the end of the road leading to the right from the town's main roundabout junction, about 1km in the direction of the Hotel Al Bustan. Worth seeing in particular are the fine mosaics on the floor of the Byzantine church dating from the 5th century AD. There are also the remains of a number of small temples, including one dedicated to Juno which was built in the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD). Nearby is the Maronite monastery of Deir al-Qalaa, which was built in the 17th century on the remains of a Roman temple, which in turn was probably built on an earlier Phoenician temple. As at Baalbek, this was dedicated to Baal, known here as Baal Marqod. On this same road there is an old church, the Marsassine church, which is worth seeing. It is unlocked and there is an unusual open internal staircase leading up to the bell tower.

In the absence of ruins to visit, there is little to do in Beit Meri except walk around and enjoy the views, which is a pleasant enough way to pass a few hours. Every year, in February and March, there is an international music festival at the Hotel Al Bustan. The festival is a mixture of classical recitals and traditional Lebanese music and attracts major artists such as Maria Ewing and Evelyn Glennie. For more details, see under Arts in the Facts about Lebanon chapter.

#### Places to Stay & Eat

The only hotel, apart from long-stay apartments, is the ultra-posh Hotel Al Bustan (TL (04) 972980/1/2). It is the last word in luxury and set in a very attractive location. The rooms, service and food are first rate, but the place is as expensive as it looks.

Singles/doubles cost US\$ 10/230 per night and that doesn't include breakfast or the 16% service charge. Still, it's worth dropping into the Scottish bar for a drink; it has a rather British, clubby feel to it and a beer will set you back US\$3.

If you want something more simple, there is a good snack bar-cum-restaurant on the main roundabout called Hakim's Fast Food (TL (04) 971278). It has a wide range of drinks and simple meals which are fairly cheap.

#### Getting There & Away

You can get a service taxi from the Cola stand in Beirut for LL 4000 to Beit Meri. The taxis stop on the main roundabout

in the town and you can easily walk round the whole town from there. If you have difficulty getting a taxi direct from the center, take a service taxi to Mkalles, which is to the east of Beirut, and pick up another taxi from there. In the evening the number of taxis leaving from Beit Meri drops considerably, but even so, you should not have to wait more than 15 minutes to catch one back to Beirut. Either flag down a taxi on the road heading west to Beirut or wait at the roundabout.

{gallery}beirut{/gallery}