

Boomtown Beirut:

Two Days in the Lebanese Capital

She's back.

Beirut has shaken off the cement dust after a long and vicious civil war and is slowly regaining her title as party capital of the Middle East. True to their long-standing reputation, Beirutis are doing their utmost to put the recent past behind them by eating well and partying hard, giving the place a buzz that is absent from almost every other city in the region. So leap right in – follow our two-day itinerary to get a taste of this unique city before all of Europe's pleasure-seekers return.

CROSSING THE GREEN LINE

Start your day by picking up a copy of local rag the *Daily Star* and joining the local university students on the terrace of **Taj Al Moulouk** (Rue Bliss). After a shot of Turkish coffee, you should be suitably alert to enjoy 600 years of history in a couple of hours at the **National Museum of Beirut** (corner Rue de Damas & Avenue Abdallah Yafi; www.beirutnationalmuseum.com). Set in a wonderful 1930s-era building, it houses an impressive collection of archaeological artefacts, statuettes and sarcophagi.

Head Downtown via the infamous **Green Line**, the demarcation line that tore the city into Christian and Muslim halves during the civil war. In other countries the former Green Line would be a solemn reminder of those who lost their lives in the war. True to form, Beirutis have turned a section of it into the hottest clubbing street in the Middle East.

For the best Lebanese *mezze* in the Downtown area settle into **Al Balad** (Rue Ahdab), and make sure the red hummus and deep-fried potatoes are included in your order.

Spend the afternoon strolling down the **Corniche**. Families, couples and groups of young people dressed up to the nines saunter along its length, stopping to greet friends or to have a coffee-and-*nargileh* break at one of the cafés along the route. You'll see a great cross-section of Beirut life on your walk, from backgammon-playing old men to teenagers dressed to impress. To pass yourself off as a local, dodge the traffic, slip across to **Uncle Deek's** coffeehouse and grab a takeaway coffee to sip along the way.

End your walk at the **Bay Rock Café** (Ave du Général de Gaulle), a fabulously situated spot with an outdoor terrace that makes a particularly attractive spot to watch the sunset with a beer or a *nargileh* (sheesha pipe). The café overlooks **Pigeon Rocks**, the most famous (in fact the only) natural feature of Beirut. The spectacular offshore rock arches are a magnet for city-dwellers craving something beautiful to look at. Put your feet up for a while – you'll need plenty of energy for the night ahead.

Have a late dinner in Gemmayzeh. You won't go far wrong at either **Adam** (Rue Gouraud; ☎ 560 353), with its retro-funky interior and well-prepared dishes, or **Food Yard** (Rue Gouraud; ☎ 03-477 336), a deliberately casual neighbourhood eatery serving accomplished food. Bookings are advisable at both.

After dinner, have a warm-up drink at **Bar Louie**, a relaxed bar brought to you by the folks who own Food Yard. Then it's time to get your drinking shoes on and head to Rue Monot, Beirut's party street. Places open and close here faster than you can say the word 'hedonist' but bars to try at the time of writing include: small and stylish **Mint Lounge-Bar** (☎ 339 637); Latin-

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themed **Pacifico** (☎ 204 446); laidback Lime (☎ 03-348 273); cool-as **Lila Braun** (☎ 331 662) and plush Red (☎ 326 484). It's wise to phone ahead and book a table, such is the popularity of the bars along this strip. If your appetite for Beirut's social scene hasn't waned, grab a taxi to **B 018** (Karantina; www.b018.com), the city's most famous club. With its mock-horror baroque interior and retractable roof, it's a place for a memorable night.

UPMARKET, DOWNTOWN

Start day two with international food overlooking the Corniche, at the renovated Ottoman villa of **Casablanca** (Rue Ain al-Mreisse) or, if you overspent at the bars, grab a hangover-curing *manaesh* (flatbread) from **Zaatar w Zeit** (Rue Nasra).

If retail recovery is in order, you'll find Beirut's upmarket malls south of the city in Verdun. Try the **Dunes Centre** and the designer shops along Rue Verdun. For more traditional buys, head to **Artisans du Liban et d'Orient** (155 Ave Elias Sarkis) and the **Princesse and Sultan Artisanat** (155 Ave Elias Sarkis). The latter has a unique gift in its sets of arabesque drink coasters inspired by the floor tiles in Lebanese houses.

Alternatively, opt for a walk around reconstructed **Achrafie** and the symbolic heart of the city, **Downtown**. In the latter, don't miss the Al-Omari Mosque. Make your last stop the Holiday Inn in West Beirut. It became a prime sniper position during the war and in turn attracted firepower of all calibres. There are plans to restore the hotel but for the time being it remains in its bullet-riddled state.

As night falls, book a table at the **Gemmayzeh Café** (Rue Gourard; ☎ 580 817) for dinner and live *oud* (lute)

music or make like a mole and head to subterranean **Marrakech** (Rue de Damas; ☎ 03-502 444). There's no better place to end your trip than with local wine and nargileh on the rooftop terrace at **Virgin Café** (Opera Building). The conversation? Working out how you're going to come back – one trip is never enough.

SLEEPING

Budget:

Talal's New Hotel (www.talal-new-hotel.4t.com) Clean, friendly place near Charles Helou bus station.

Midrange:

Marble Tower Hotel (www.marbletower.com.lb) Spotlessly clean hotel located smack-bang in the centre of Hamra.

Top End:

Hotel Albergo (www.albergobeirut.com) In pretty Achrafie, with opulent and individually styled rooms and a rooftop pool.

By Amanda Canning

For the complete guide to Lebanon, including Beirut, grab a copy of Lonely Planet's *Syria & Lebanon* guide, available online at shop.lonelyplanet.com.

