

Tripoli & the North



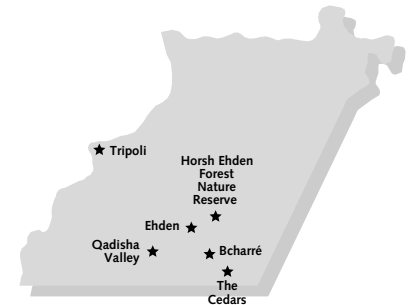
Northern Lebanon is considered by many people – locals and visitors alike – to be the country's greatest, greenest, cleanest natural asset.

The gorgeous World Heritage-listed Qadisha Valley, hidden deep beneath the mountains east of Tripoli, provides a tranquil escape for hikers from the fast-paced Lebanese development of the cities and the coastal strip. The valley snakes up to the pretty, sleepy town of Bcharré, birthplace of legendary Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran. Further east from Bcharré is the Cedars – where a few of the country's treasured trees remain – home to Lebanon's highest altitude ski resort and a good starting point for hiking in summer. Meanwhile, the small town of Ehdén, located on the valley's northern rim, provides quaint respite from the searing coastal heat, with a lovely central square that's the perfect place for sipping arak late into the night. The creation of the Lebanon Mountain Trail and a growing Lebanese interest in adventure sports, such as rafting and paragliding, sees the region becoming more enticing than ever to visitors. Still, it remains sparsely populated, and while you're enjoying the abundance of tracks and trails, you're unlikely to encounter more than a handful of other intrepid trekkers.

A dramatically different face of Lebanon's north lies in tightly-packed Tripoli, with its busy medieval souqs, historic fortress and the workaday port of Al-Mina. Lebanon's second city, Tripoli was once planned as its capital, but today has little in common with cosmopolitan Beirut, exuding a more provincial, and slightly bruised-and-battered feel. Tripoli's economy was hard hit by the 2007 crisis in the outlying Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared and is still recovering; nevertheless, the city makes a fascinating place to explore, preferably with one of its famous, sticky pastries in hand.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover the beauty of Khalil Gibran's poetry and painting at his **museum** (p340) in Bcharré
- Wind your way through Tripoli's **medieval souqs** (p331), stopping to sniff out some hand-made soaps
- Stroll the short but diverse trails of the serene **Horsh Ehdén Forest Nature Reserve** (p339)
- Stop for a hearty post-hike dinner at the tree-lined village square in **Ehdén** (p338)
- Marvel at the grottoes and rock-cut monasteries of the World Heritage-listed **Qadisha Valley** (p337)
- Whiz down the slopes of Lebanon's highest ski resort at **the Cedars** (p342)



TRIPOLI (TRABLOUS)

طرابلس

📞 06 / pop 237,909

Tripoli (Trablous in Arabic), 85km north of Beirut, is Lebanon's second-largest city and the north's main port. Famous for its medieval Mamluk architecture, old city souq, huge fortress and teeth-clenchingly sweet pastries, its charms were sadly overshadowed in 2007 by the deadly and drawn-out confrontation between Palestinian militants and the Lebanese army, centred on the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp around 16km from the city centre. On 20 May 2007, militants and Lebanese police began battling it out in Tripoli itself, before fighting moved to Nahr al-Bared; Lebanese soldiers finally took control of the camp in September 2007. Alleged ties between the militant group and Al-Qaeda lent events a particularly sinister and gloomy edge.

Its image tarnished as a result, Tripoli is currently struggling to entice tourists back to its markets and monuments. Certainly, there's plenty to keep a visitor entertained for a couple of days, and with one good budget hotel and one excellent top-end choice, there are accommodation options for every pocket. Since few tourists currently make it this far north, you'll have no problem finding an available room or restaurant table.

If you're arriving direct from Beirut, though, you may be in for something of a culture shock. Tripoli may be Lebanon's second-largest city, but in many ways it couldn't be more different. Where Beirut is glitzy, Tripoli is demure and down-to-earth. Though there is some nightlife to be had, it's low key and based in the port of Al-Mina rather than in Tripoli proper. It's wise, therefore, to dress down a little, leaving your best figure-hugging combinations for the streets and clubs of the capital.

HISTORY

While there is evidence of a settlement in Tripoli as far back as 1400 BC, its past is likely to go back even further. By the 8th century BC, what had been a small Phoenician seaside trading post had grown with the arrival of traders from Sidon, Tyre and Arwad (Aradus, which became Tartus in Syria). Each community settled within its own walled area, giving rise to the Greek name *Tripolis*, meaning 'three cities'.

During the rule of the Seleucids, and later the Romans, Tripoli prospered but a massive earthquake in AD 543 altered the geography of the port area completely and razed most of the town. It was quickly rebuilt but by AD 635 a general of Mu'awiyah, the governor of Syria and founder of the Umayyad dynasty (AD 661–750), besieged the city and attempted to starve it into submission. The inhabitants of Tripoli escaped by sea with Byzantine help and the town

was resettled by a military garrison and a Jewish colony.

Between 685 and 705 the Byzantines captured and resettled the city. It was then recaptured by the Muslims and incorporated into the Umayyad and, later, Abbasid caliphates. By the end of the 10th century, as the Abbasids were losing their grip on the region, the Shiite Fatimids took control of Tripoli. They held onto it until 1069, when one of the city's judges, from a family named Banu Ammar, declared Tripoli's independence. Under Ammar rule, the growing city became a centre of learning renowned for its school, Dar al-Ilm (literally 'Abode of Knowledge'), with a library containing some 100,000 volumes.

When the Crusaders, led by Raymond de Saint-Gilles of Toulouse, first arrived in 1099, the Ammars persuaded them to bypass Tripoli, bribing them with lavish gifts. However, Tripoli's agricultural wealth was too glittering a prize and Raymond returned some three years later. Tripoli's rulers brought in reinforcements from Damascus and Homs, but Raymond defeated the three armies with only 300 men. He then built a fortress, the Citadel of Raymond de Saint-Gilles, on a hill inland from the busy port area and controlled land trade coming into the city.

Tripoli's leaders launched repeated raids on the fortress, eventually mortally wounding Raymond. Just before he died he signed a truce guaranteeing safe passage in and out of the city for its inhabitants and this lasted only until his successor, Guillaume Jourdain, took over and once again imposed the blockade with the assistance of the Genoese fleet, which blocked the city from the sea. After four increasingly desperate years under siege, the city finally fell to the Crusaders in June 1109. The victors sacked the city and set fire to the magnificent library at Dar al-Ilm.

Tripoli became the capital of the County of Tripoli and the Crusaders managed to hang on to the city for 180 years, during which time the economy, based on silk-weaving and glass-making, prospered. Academic traditions were revived too, although this time it was Christian schools, rather than Islamic ones, that led the way.

The Mamluk sultan, Qalaun, took the city of Tripoli in 1289, massacring most of the population and razing the port city.

Qalaun built his new city around the Citadel of Raymond de Saint-Gilles and once again the area flourished: the souqs, mosques, madrasas (schools where Islamic law is taught) and khans that form the bulk of present-day Tripoli's monuments are testament to the city's economic and cultural prosperity in Mamluk times. The Turkish Ottomans, under the rule of sultan Selim I, took over the town in 1516. When the *mutassarifa* (administrative district) of Mt Lebanon was created in 1860, Tripoli was still ruled by the Ottomans; however, it fell within the boundaries of the French Mandate of Greater Lebanon in 1920.

Since independence in 1946, Tripoli has been the administrative capital of northern Lebanon. Conservative and predominantly Sunni Muslim, it was perhaps natural that the pro-Arab nationalist forces, led by Rachid Karami, based themselves here in the civil war of 1958. The labyrinthine old city was almost impossible for outsiders to penetrate and Karami's men held out for several weeks.

In the 1975–91 round of fighting, Tripoli suffered a lot of damage – especially during the inter-Palestinian battles of 1983 – but it still fared better than the south of the country. Both during and after the war, the city's population grew rapidly, swelled by refugees, including large numbers of Palestinians, most of whom today reside in the UNRWA-administered Beddawi and now-infamous Nahr el-Bared refugee camps on the outskirts of the city.

ORIENTATION

Tripoli comprises two main areas: the city proper, which includes the broad streets of modern Tripoli and the labyrinthine old city; and Al-Mina port, 3km to the west along the sea front. The geographical centre of town is Sahet et-Tall (at-tahl), a large square next to the clock tower where you'll find the service-taxi and bus stands. Most of the city's cheap hotels are clustered close to the square.

The old city sprawls east of Sahet et-Tall, while the modern centre is west of the square, along Rue Fouad Chehab. Between Rue Fouad Chehab and Al-Mina are broad avenues lined with shops, apartment buildings, internet cafés and restaurants. In Al-Mina you'll find a rather run-down waterfront promenade, which becomes at-

