

Lebanon



Beirut and the Beqaa valley

May 2013



Beirut, Lebanon

After having debated back-an-forth, we eventually agreed on the famous Le Commodore Hotel, located just a street off the Hamra street in the Muslim part of western Beirut. This hotel was where many war-correspondents stayed and reported from back in the 70ies and 80ies. I also stayed at this very hotel on my first visit to the city back in 1984 (almost 30 years ago now). The hotel is today completely renovated and is not to be recognized from the earlier times. I do remember back then, when no electricity was working in the city. You had to walk the stairs, where there were candle lights on the stairs guiding the few tourists at the time. The hotel is OK, but only just www.lecommodorehotel.com, but I would probably choose another one on my next visit (this happened in 2018 when I came back for a third time, this time with my wife). We are five friends visiting the city – at the same time there is a lot of escalation in the neighboring Syria. Otherwise, a lot has changed since my first visit some 30 years ago.

The Mohammed Al-Amin mosque

The view from the neighbouring hotel is magnificent over the Mohammed Al-Amin mosque. They have a really nice open-air restaurant and a cigar and drinks bar on the top floor.



Beirut, Paris of the middle east

A city with high pulse and a lot of adrenalin

After the old demarcation line between eastern and western Beirut the old milis and check-points are all gone of course. From our hotel, which is conveniently located, there is walking distance to many bars and shops around the Hamra district. The Mohammed Al-Amin mosque, the Pigeon rocks and the Corniche is also within walking distance. A few houses have been renovated, while many more still bear marks from all the wars. A lot of new buildings have also sprung up since my last visit. A 5-day (long-weekend) with friends seems a good time to do the city and also visit the Beqaa valley this time around.

We have been searching the internet for which restaurants and pubs to visit, not an easy task as there are so many to choose from, but all in all I believe we did well. Two out of four really stood out. I can especially recommend La Parilla (Argentinian) with a reputation of having the best meat in town. The other hit was Leila with a Lebanese kitchen (mezze). Excellent food at very good value. They also had some live entertainment and the place was packed. We were also treated with the customary water-pipe (Hookah-Shisha) so the experience was complete.

...There are many cool bars to try out, especially around Gourade street (Gemmayzeh district). Always lots of people mingling around here, as if it was their last day on earth. Also, you will find milis and military stationed at regular intervals fully equipped with AK rifles – a very surreal feeling to say the least.





Fashion show down by the waterfront



We overheard someone talking about a fashion show down by the water-front, sponsored by Martini. The question was now not to choose between a sightseeing in Beirut or the cat-walk, but rather – how could we get into this event. We managed to get in, having put on our best clothes.

We posed as representatives of some Swedish fashion magazines, and voila – we were in. Free drinks, mingle and the beautiful people of Beirut was the setting for the evening. We really enjoyed ourselves and stayed all evening.

Oh, by the way, we managed to cover the sightseeing we cancelled the following day.





Byblos (Jbeil)

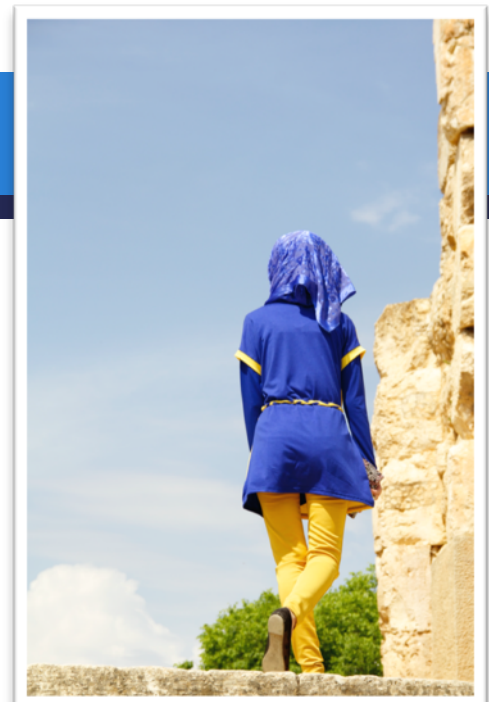
Beautifully located just north of Beirut

Byblos is a protected UNESCO world heritage and is said to be the world's oldest city dating back to 8800 – 7000 years B.C. This, slightly over-marketed, ruin also claims to be the birthplace of the world's first real alphabet (not counting Egypt's hieroglyphs). The Amphi-theater is built in a half-circle facing the Mediterranean Sea. As this was not enough, Byblos also takes claim for being the word from where the word "Bible" comes from. In the marina there are numerous seafood restaurants and bars scattered around the waterfront. Some, good and some less so. Make sure to check-up on internet for ratings and recommendations beforehand.

The place can be a bit crowded with all the tourists flocking. Many people from Beirut also comes out here on the weekends for a break, so be careful on which day to visit. It is however very beautiful and a must to visit.



Make sure to visit beautiful Byblos





Beqaa valley and Baalbek!

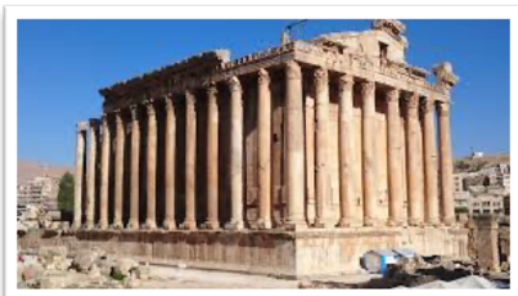
We travel through Hezbollah controlled areas in the valley

We travel up the mountain upon leaving Beirut in order to get to the Beqaa valley on the other side separating Lebanon and Syria to the east behind the mountain ridge called Antilibanon. It is a very beautiful and green landscape which is opening up to us. Our driver says he was born in one of the smaller villages which we pass on our way. He also tells us that one village might belong to the Hezbollah group whereas the next is Christian or druis controlled. We pass a number of military check-points on our way.

Today more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees are staying in Lebanon due to the ongoing war in Syria. We pass only 16 km from the Syrian border and see all the refugee camps along the way. Today there are also many black Hezbollah flags up honoring one of the Hezbollah leaders recently killed. We stop half way to Baalbek to have lunch at Anjar, where they serve an excellent mezze. It seems we are not the only ones today, as it is weekend. Many Lebanese families have come here to enjoy the food and the valley.



A visit to Baalbek and the Vinery Ksara



Baalbek is about 2 hours' drive northeast of Beirut. These roman temple ruins are also UNESCO world heritage protected, and are really incredible.

This place shows habitation continuously for 8-9000 years. Alexander the great annexed this to the Roman empire during the eastern wars.

