THE BEKAA VALLEY

The Bekaa Valley
وادي البقاع

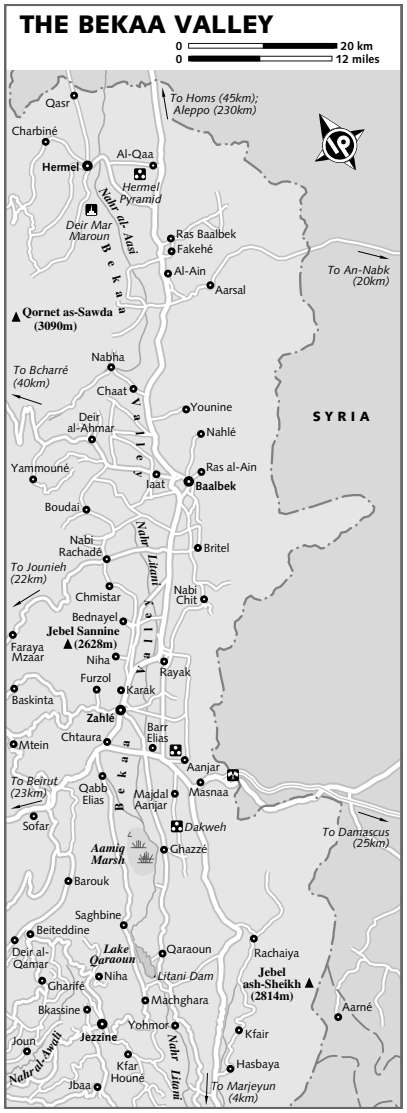
The beautiful, fertile Bekaa Valley has not had an easy time of it in recent years, with visitors to the region frequently discouraged by ominous press reports of Hezbollah activity and cannabis farming. Baalbek, infamous as Hezbollah's strategic headquarters, took a battering in the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War for this reason, with up to 20% of its buildings destroyed. Moreover, the region's most notorious crop – its high quality cannabis or 'Red Leb' – bloomed prolifically before and during the civil war, a draw-card for some and a deterrent for others. Though you'll doubtless see the yellow Hezbollah flag flying in towns and villages across the region, and while cannabis production is currently witnessing a comeback, there's much, much more to the Bekaa Valley than this. With a diverse and friendly population encompassing a high percentage of Christians alongside its Shiite majority, fabulous food and wines, and two stunning world-class ancient sites, don't let its erstwhile unsavoury image discourage you from travelling here.

Despite its name, the Bekaa Valley is actually a high plateau between the Mt Lebanon Range and Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range). For millennia the Bekaa Valley, dubbed 'hollow Syria' by the Greeks and Romans, was a corridor linking the Syrian interior with the coastal cities of Phoenicia. The many invading armies and trading caravans that passed through left traces of their presence, which can be seen in a host of small sites around the valley, but most magnificently at the Umayyad city of Aanjar and the gorgeous temples at Baalbek.

The Bekaa Valley has always been an agricultural region, fed by the Nahr al-Aasi (Orontes River) and the Nahr Litani. In Roman times, this grain-producing area was one of Rome's 'bread-baskets'. Today, deforestation and poor crop planning may have reduced the fertility of the land, but the valley's wines are famous throughout the region and are gaining global renown. Combining temple tours with wine tasting is the way to get the best of the Bekaa Valley.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel over the spectacular temple complex at **Baalbek** (p354)
- Learn to appreciate arak and mix your mezze at Lebanon's favourite **riverside restaurants** (p350) in Zahlé
- Wander the stunning stones of **Aanjar** (p351), the Middle East's only remaining Umayyad town
- Sip something warming in the bar of Baalbek's historic **Palmyra Hotel** (p360)
- Nose the bouquet and taste the wine at the **Ksara Winery** (p351), Lebanon's most famous vineyard



ZAHLÉ زحله

☎ 08 / pop 79,803

If you're arriving in Zahlé after some temple-gazing in quiet, conservative Baalbek, you'll probably find it a sharp and extremely pleasant contrast. Lively, bustling and even quite glitzy, this attractive resort town, enjoying a cool altitude of 945m, shares more in common with Beirut than with Baalbek. Known locally as Arousat al-Beqa'a (Bride of the Bekaa), it's set along the steep banks of the Birdawni River (locally known as 'Bardouni'), which tumbles through a gorge, cutting a burbling channel through the centre of town, down from Jebel Sannine to the north.

Zahlé is a predominantly Greek Catholic town, with the highest concentration of this denomination in the entire country, and its beautiful, ornate Ottoman-era houses, lining the riverside Rue Brazil, survived heavy bombardment during the civil war. The town is probably most famous for its open-air restaurants, known as the Cafés du Bardouni, that jostle along the river on the town's edge. During summer weekends and evenings, these are packed with locals and Beirutis enjoying some of the finest Lebanese mezze in the country, washed down with generous quantities of arak (see Arak, p350).

The town's merry modern aspect, however, belies a darker past. In the 19th century, Zahlé was hard hit by communal fighting between Druze and Christians and many of its inhabitants were killed in the 1860 massacre. Some 25 years later, the opening of a railway line between Beirut and Damascus (which is no longer in operation) brought some prosperity to the town. At around the same time, more than half the town migrated to Brazil (after which the main street is named), from where they sent remittances, further increasing the town's prosperity. Zahlé's gracious stone houses date from this time.

In 1981, Zahlé came under fire again, bombarded by Syria after the Phalangist party attempted to build a road linking the town to the ski resort of Faraya. Since, by that point, the Phalangists were closely aligned with Israel, the road represented a serious threat to Syria, whose troops were stationed in large numbers throughout the Bekaa Valley. Like the rest of Lebanon, however, Zahlé proved resilient to the damage, which was quickly repaired, and no traces are evident today.

Keep in mind when planning a visit that from November to April most of the restaurants are closed and the town is relatively quiet, except at weekends and Christmas. In summer, it makes a pleasant lunch stop en route from Beirut to Baalbek, and is an ideal place to stay if you intend to spend a few days exploring the valley.

Orientation & Information

Most of Zahlé's amenities are scattered along the main road, Rue Brazil, and Rue St Barbara running parallel. This is where the banks, bureaux de change and the **post office** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) can be found.

Ambulance (☎ 140)

Centre Culturel Français (Rue Brazil) Has a small library and organises cultural events.

Dataland Internet (Rue Brazil; per hr LL5000; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Khoury General Hospital (Rue Brazil) Towards the head of the valley.

Police (☎ 160)

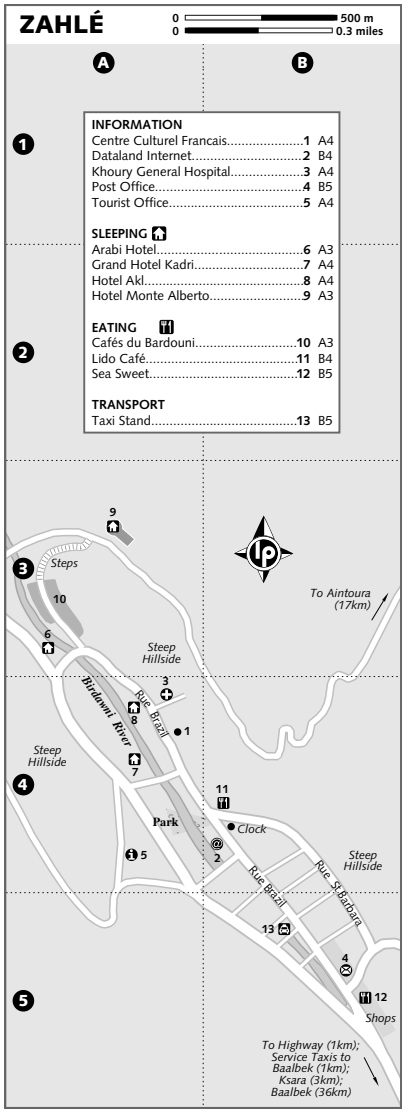
Tourist Office (☎ 8.30am-1.30pm Mon-Sat) On the 3rd floor of the Chamber of Commerce building, just off Rue Brazil, this tiny office isn't always open at its designated times, particularly in low season. Worth a try, but don't be surprised to find it looking deserted.

Sleeping

Hotel Akl (☎ 820 701; Rue Brazil; s/d/tr LL35,000/50,000/65,000, s/d without bathroom LL25,000/40,000) Without a doubt this is the best budget choice in town. In a dilapidated but character-filled old house, the hotel benefits from a good, central position and rooms have balconies and lots of natural light. The rooms at the rear overlook the river, and those with attached bathrooms are bigger and brighter, though all are clean and reasonably comfortable. Check, however, that cheaper rooms have some form of heating in the colder months. There's a large communal lounge with TV, piano and fireplace for the winter, and the friendly manager – along with her French-speaking mother – is very helpful and loves catering to international visitors.

Arabi Hotel (☎ 821 214; s/d US$55/66; ✖) Right at the heart of the outdoor eating scene on the Birdawni River, rooms at the front of the Arabi Hotel can get quite noisy in summer; in winter, doubles can be had for around US$40. There's also a restaurant and a small casino – in case you're in the mood for a flutter afterwards.

Hotel Monte Alberto (☎ 810 912-14; www.montealberto.com; d/tr US$60/70; ✖) Located high above town, this hotel commands amazing views. To make the trip between the town and the hotel there is a charmingly kitsch funicular, topped only by the hotel's revolving restaurant. The rooms are clean, cosy and comfortable. Rates include breakfast.



Grand Hotel Kadri (☎ 813 920; www.grandhotelkadri.com; Rue Brazil; s/d/ste US$105/125/160; ✖ 🖳 💂) The most sophisticated of Zahlé's hotels is located along the Rue Brazil strip in a beautiful, historic building that served as an Ottoman hospital during WWI, and as home to the chief of the French army during the French mandate. Rooms are nowadays

ARAK

If there is a national drink of Lebanon, or indeed the Middle East, then this is it. An acquired taste for some Westerners, this aniseed-flavoured drink has become a universal favourite in the eastern Mediterranean under several guises – ouzo in Greece, raki in Turkey – but all are fundamentally the same thing. Like a holiday romance, it doesn't feel the same when you get home: away from the sunny climes of the Mediterranean, you might crave the sunshine that really makes the drink.

Arak is also curiously classless – sipped at both the smartest dinner and the humblest café – and manages to be available at either end of the alcohol market (US$4 to US$20 per 1L bottle). Experts say the best way to tell the difference is by how you wake up the next morning: the better you feel, the better the arak the night before.

Surprisingly, since there's no hint of grape, arak is a by-product of the wine industry. It's actually a brandy, made from the bits the wine press leaves behind – the red grape skins and pips – much like the Italian grappa, but additionally flavoured with aniseed.

Diluted with ice and water, arak makes a good partner for Lebanese mezze, with the flavour helping to cleanse the palate between the different dishes – and if you're hooked enough to take a bottle home, try El Massaya arak, in its trademark tall elegant blue bottles.

looking rather worn and those on the street side can be noisy. Breakfast – included in room rates – isn't up to scratch, considering the prices.

Nevertheless, significant low-season discounts and a host of facilities including a health club, pool and tennis courts still make it a decent option. Unusually, for Lebanon's top-end hotels, wi-fi is available for free throughout the hotel.

Eating

The best and liveliest places to eat during the summer months are the collection of restaurants on the river – look for the sign directing you towards the 'Cafés du Bardouni'. Packed with visitors, especially at weekends, they're the place to head to for great mezze, arak and local wines, along with ice-cream parlours, fairground rides for children and a scattering of places to smoke a leisurely nargileh. Eat, drink and linger into the small hours, watching bats flit overhead and enjoying the cool respite provided by the river.

Lido Café (☎ 818 656; cnr Rue Brazil & Rue St Barbara; pasta LL7000, mains 14,000; 🕒 7am-late) Back in the centre of town, this is a solid all-day eating option. Not as expensive as the riverside places and open all year round, its pasta dishes and grills make a good change for those suffering mezze overload – though hummus is still on the menu, should you so desire it. There's often live music or a DJ at weekends, attracting Zahlé's younger residents.

Many hotels also have restaurants. The one attached to the **Arabi Hotel** (☎ 821 214; meal per person US$20-40) is one of the most famous in Zahlé: a mezze on its outdoor terrace is a wonderful way to spend a lazy evening, fuelled by decent quantities of arak. **Hotel Monte Alberto** (☎ 810 912-14; meal per person including drinks US$15-25) has summer and winter terrace restaurants, while its Al-Ourzal Café, with the best views in town, serves up mezze feasts.

For snacks, try **Sea Sweet** (Rue Brazil) – this branch of the popular countrywide bakery has delicious Lebanese pastries to take-away.

Scattered along Rue Brazil, in both directions from Sea Sweet, are a number of good juice bars and snack places that serve breakfast for a few dollars.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses from Beirut to Zahlé (LL3000, 90 minutes) leave from the southwest side of the roundabout at Beirut's Cola transport hub. Service taxis (LL6000) leave from the same spot. Both minibuses and service taxis will drop you off at the highway turn-off, which is just over 1km from the centre of Zahlé.

If you want to be dropped at the centre of town, you'll need to get off at nearby Chtaura (LL3000, one hour) and catch a service taxi (LL1500); specify that you want to be dropped in town and not at the highway turn-off.

To get to Baalbek from Zahlé, take a service taxi (LL3000, 30 minutes) from the main taxi stand on a square off Rue Brazil, or walk down to the roundabout at the southern end of town, where the highway begins, and from there take a microbus (LL1500, 45 minutes).

KSARA WINERY كساره

☎ 08

Lebanon's oldest and most famous **winery** (☎ 813 495; www.ksara.com.lb; Ksara; 9am-4pm) was originally the site of a medieval fortress (*ksar* in Arabic) and while the fortress may be long gone, the grapevines that were planted here in the early 18th century still flourish. The chalky soil and dry weather is perfect for growing grapes, and production here thrived. In 1857, Jesuit priests took over and expanded the vineyard until it was sold to its present owners in 1972. In recent years, both its red and white wine varieties have won a whole slew of international awards.

One unique aspect of the winery is its extremely spacious underground caves, where the wine matures.

The caves were first discovered in Roman times and were expanded during WWI. There are now nearly 2km of tunnels, where the temperature stays between 11°C and 13°C throughout the year – the ideal temperature for the wine.

The 45-minute vineyard tour takes you to the caves as well as through the various processes involved in wine production. Wine-tasting, along with yummy cheeses and cold cuts, finishes the tour and there's an opportunity to purchase your favourite vintages – along with the winery's own arak and brandy – from the shop. For an overview of Lebanon's wineries, see Lebanese Vineyards, p352.

Getting There & Away

A service taxi from Zahlé heading south will drop you in Ksara village (LL1500), a five-minute walk from the winery. Otherwise a taxi will take you there, wait for you and drive you back for US$15, though you may have to barter to get down to this price. If you're driving, head south from Zahlé towards Chtaura along the main highway; the winery should be signposted to your right.

AANJAR عنجر

☎ 08 / pop 2400

Also referred to as Haouch Moussa (Farm of Moses), Aanjar is a small, predominantly Armenian town founded by refugees who fled Turkey and the 'Great Calamity' genocide of 1915, which is said to have claimed the lives of well over a million Armenians. First housed in the eastern Karantina district of Beirut, Lebanon's Armenians gradually spread across the country, many coming to rest in the Bekaa Valley, and particularly in Aanjar, in the early years of the 1940s.

During the summer months Aanjar's population swells, as hundreds of members of the Armenian diaspora arrive to visit. Though for many years Aanjar was home to the Syrian army's military base in Lebanon – along with its much-feared intelligence unit – Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon has left the little town tranquil and it's a pleasant, leafy place to spend a day or two relaxing and relishing the quiet. In years when Lebanon's tourism is flourishing, the town also hosts a summer festival, with concerts performed – as at Baalbek – within its ancient site.

Aanjar's most remarkable feature is its impressive, and extensive, complex of Umayyad ruins, probably dating back to the rule of the sixth Umayyad Caliph Walid I in AD 705–715. Its discovery came about almost by accident when, in the late 1940s, archaeologists were digging here in the hope of discovering the ancient city of Chalcis, founded around 1000 BC. Instead, they uncovered a walled town with a Roman layout that dated from the first centuries of Islam. Almost all periods of Arab history have been preserved at other sites in Lebanon, but traces of the Umayyads are strangely absent, so Aanjar has great historical significance. Moreover, since the settlement only seems to have been inhabited for a brief 50 years – after which the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids – it serves as an atmospheric snapshot of a very specific period in the country's history.

Sights

UMAYYAD CITY المدينة الاموية

The 1300-year-old **city** (admission LL6000; 🕒 8am-7pm summer, 8am-5.30pm winter) is walled and fortified, cut into four equal quarters and separated by two 20m-wide avenues,

LEBANESE VINEYARDS

Lebanon is one of the oldest sites of wine production in the world, and the Bekaa Valley has always been its prime vine-growing region. Because of its favourable climate (some 240 days of unbroken sunshine each year) and chalky soil, the Bekaa Valley's vines need little treatment and the grapes generally have a high sugar content.

Here are a selection of Lebanon's main wineries (it's best to call in advance to make an appointment, especially out of summer), where you can taste and get tipsy amid rolling Lebanese countryside.

Ksara

Lebanon's oldest winery, Ksara is well worth a visit when you're in the Zahlé neighbourhood. See Ksara Winery p351 for details.

Kefraya

'A soul, A Vine, A Great Wine' is the motto of **Château Kefraya** (☎ 645 333/444; www.chateaukefraya.com; Chateau Kefraya, Zahlé), Lebanon's largest wine producer. Not far from Zahlé, the vineyard welcomes visitors to its award-winning winery, which has won dozens of prizes worldwide and many awards for its Lacrima d'Oro, a fortified white wine. If you're dropping in between 25 August and 1 September, you'll witness the annual grape harvest; if you're there at other times, stop for lunch at its sophisticated Dionysus restaurant, where fine French cuisine complements some of the winery's best labels.

Château Musar

The smallest of the commercial producers, the Musar name is also the one recognised by most wine buffs. It is also the only winery not working out of the Bekaa Valley (the winery is in Ghazir, above Jounieh), though its grapes are grown down in the valley and transported there by truck. Started as a hobby winery in 1930 in the basement of a 17th-century castle, it turned professional when Gaston Hochar, its original proprietor, encountered a British viticulturist, who was stationed in Lebanon during WWII. Gaston's son, Ronald, still runs the winery, which visitors are welcome to **tour** (☎ 01-201 828, 328 111, 328 211; www.chateaumusar.com.lb) by appointment. Call or email for directions.

Massaya & Co

A trendy winery run by two dynamic brothers, **Massaya** (☎ 03-735 795; www.massaya.com) is best known in Lebanon for its excellent arak served in distinctive, tall blue bottles (see also Arak, p350). Massaya's success story begins in 1992, when Sami Ghosn, then a successful LA architect, returned to his family's Bekaa Valley land following the drawn-out civil war and decided to put down roots. Soon joined by his brother Ramzi, a restaurateur in France, it wasn't long before they branched out beyond their popular arak and their wines are highly thought of today. Call to make an appointment, which can also involve a gastro-feast at the winery's Le Relais restaurant, and enjoy the tranquillity of a stroll amid the vines.

Domaine Wardy

Though less a winery to stroll around than the others, **Domaine Wardy** (☎ 930 141/2; www.domaine-wardy.com) is definitely one to look out for on restaurant wine lists; products include a deliciously spicy Christmas wine, a fruity rosé and a couple of good, strong araks. With no insecticides or weedkillers used in production, and a percentage from purchases donated to support the preservation of Lebanon's cedar forests, it's not even a guilty pleasure.

the cardo maximus and the decumanus maximus.

Built in the very early days of Muslim rule, the influence of previous cultures remains strong in the architecture of the city and the layout is typically Hellenistic–Roman. Much of the site's building materials appear to have been recycled from earlier Byzantine, Roman and Hellenistic structures in the same area: note the columns and capitals in the partially reconstructed colonnades lining the streets. The **tetrapylon**, a four-column structure placed where the two streets intersect, is another Roman element, although the stonework, with its alternating layers of large blocks and narrow bricks, is typically Byzantine.

The Roman effect can also be seen in the **public baths**, just inside the entrance. As with all Roman baths and many later hammams, these contain three main sections: a place to change; the bathing area (consisting of chambers with cold, warm and hot water); and an area to relax and chat. In the bathing area to the left of the entrance there are two faded but reasonably intact **mosaics**.

In the southwestern corner of the site is a warren of foundations, thought to be the remains of **residential quarters**. Across the cardo maximus is Aanjar's most striking building, the **great palace**, which has had one wall and several arcades rebuilt.

Also interesting is the **little palace**, where you can find Greek stone carvings of leaves, shells and birds. The remains of a **third palace**, possibly housing the great palace's harem, can also be made out, as can the traces of an early **mosque**.

Because it sits on a main east–west trade route, historians have speculated that Aanjar was a commercial centre: around 600 **shops** have been uncovered here (you can still see some of them lining the southern part of the cardo maximus). Other theories suggest that the presence of two palaces and public baths indicates that it may also have been an imperial residence or strategic outpost.

To get the very best from a trip to the ruins, consider employing the services of a registered guide, who'll usually be found sipping strong coffee at the café just to the left of the entrance, and who can bring the site to life better than any written description.

MAJDAL AANJAR مجدل عنجر

The village of Majdal Aanjar is several kilometres south of Aanjar. Above the village on a hill are some extremely weathered **Roman ruins**, including a temple whose cella (inner chamber) is still intact, a scattering of fortifications, and a couple of underground passageways. The temple is thought to date from the 1st century AD and in the 7th and 8th centuries it was converted to a fortress by the Abbasids.

The site is rarely visited, despite some half-hearted restoration efforts. To get there, pass through the village of Majdal Aanjar (note the 13th-century square minaret as you pass) and follow the road (and signs) to the top of the hill. While the last part is extremely steep and best undertaken on foot, the views are worth the effort.

Sleeping

Challalat Anjar Hotel (☎ 620 753; s/d/ste LL75,000/90,000/140,000; ⛶) Aanjar's only hotel, situated amid the restaurants at the end of town, is simple, bright and airy, with, the brochure proclaims, 'very considered prices'. It has a decent restaurant and live music outside on the terrace every night during the summer.

Eating

The area around Aanjar is famous for its Armenian food and, thanks to trout farms, its fresh fish. One of the best is the **Shams Restaurant** (☎ 620 567) on the right hand side of the road into Aanjar, about 500m from the main Damascus highway. In addition to the fresh fish, there's the usual selection of mezze and grills available. A meal without fish costs between US$8 and US$15; with fish it's considerably more.

Alternatively, follow the signs for 'Restaurants Aanjar' down the town's main street. There you'll find a whole series of nice Lebanese restaurants spread around gardens, many with water wheels, streams or children's playgrounds.

Getting There & Away

If you are taking a service taxi heading south or to the Syrian border from Zahlé, you will have to get out at Aanjar town and walk from the highway (about 2km) to the site. If you follow the signs you'll see the Shams Restaurant on your right. After this, take the first left, which takes you to the site entrance. If you don't have your own car, negotiate a return trip from Zahlé with a taxi driver who will wait for you (allow one hour for a visit – two if you are very thorough). The trip, if you opt for a one-hour stay, should cost about US$15.

LAKE QARAOUN & LITANI DAM بحيرة القرعون وسدّ الليطاني

☎ 08

Way down south in the Bekaa Valley is the Litani Dam (also known as Lake Qaraoun Dam). Built in 1959, the dam created a lake

of 11 sq km. The Litani is the longest river in Lebanon – it rises in the north of the Bekaa Valley, near Baalbek, and flows into the sea near Tyre. Although built for the practical reason of producing electricity and providing irrigation, it is an attractive spot to visit. Keep in mind that the waters are not safe for swimming. It's at its best in the spring and early summer, when the water level is highest.

There is a visitor centre at the southern end of the lake (the dam end) on the eastern side. A few kilometres further along the road north is the small town of **Saghbine**. From here the views of the lake are quite extraordinary and the **Macharef Saghbine Hotel** (☎ 671 200; s/d/ste US$35/45/60; 🅿 🚭) takes great advantage of it. It's a modern hotel with large rooms, a restaurant, a bar and a swimming pool. Open all year, it makes a great stopover if you're on a self-drive trip.

AAMIQ MARSH عميق

Halfway between Chtaura and Lake Qaraoun, at the foot of the eastern slopes of Jebel Barouk, lies Aamiq Marsh. Formed by the Nahr al-Riachi (Riachi River) and its underground source, this is Lebanon's last major wetland, covering some 270 hectares, and consisting of marshes, ponds, willows and mud flats. The area is a haven for migrating and aquatic birds, and more than 135 species have been observed here. The wetland was in an increasingly perilous state until recently, when a Christian nature-conservation organisation, **A Rocha** (http://en.arocha.org/lebanon/), headed by British couple Chris and Susanna Naylor, stepped in and began working with local landowners to improve the area. It now makes a popular destination for Lebanese school and college groups.

In September 2007, long-proposed plans for an eco-tourism facility at Aamiq finally came to fruition and work began on the project. Check A Rocha's website for up-to-date information on the status of the area for visitors.

It is difficult to get a service taxi to the far south of the Bekaa Valley, so you will have to negotiate hard with a taxi driver to take you. Hitching is possible, but the best thing is to rent a car for a day or two from Beirut.

BAALBEK بعلبك

☎ 08 / pop 31,692

Baalbek, the 'Sun City' of the ancient world, is home to the most impressive ancient site in Lebanon and arguably the most important Roman site in the Middle East. The ancient city has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the wonders of the world and mystics still attribute special powers to the courtyard complex. Its temples were built on an extravagant scale that outshone anything in Rome, and the town became a centre of worship well into the Christian era. Standing beneath the temple's colossal columns, watching the setting sun turn the stone a rich orange, is a highlight of any visit to Lebanon.

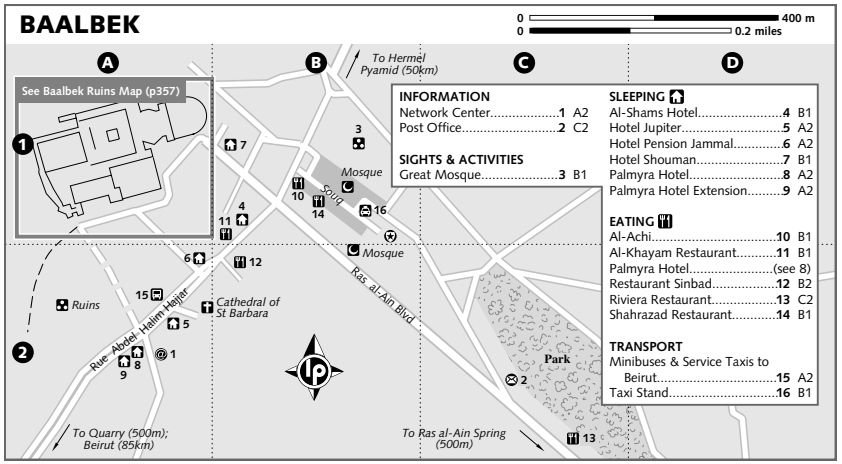
Modern Baalbek is the administrative centre of northern Bekaa Valley and is home to one of the most historic, atmospheric hotels in the whole Middle East. There are numerous reminders of Hezbollah's supremacy here (their yellow and green flags are everywhere), but the town's population is mixed Muslim/Christian, and you won't see masked militia men brandishing Kalashnikovs on the streets. According to locals, the armed wing is situated elsewhere; here, it's long-term policies, rather than long-range missiles, that concern its party members.

Since Baalbek is, nevertheless, a conservative region of Lebanon, it makes sense not to wander around in shorts – both men and women – or any other kind of revealing clothing, though you'll undoubtedly see a few Lebanese women from out of town strutting their stuff, and snagging their stilettos on Baalbek's pavestones.

An internationally famous arts event, **Baalbek Festival** (www.baalbeck.org.lb) takes place here every summer (July and August) and features opera, jazz, poetry and theatre. In 2006, it was cancelled due to the Israel–Hezbollah war, but most years it strides on regardless of the political or economic climate.

History

The site was originally Phoenician and settlement here is thought to have dated back as far as the end of the 3rd millennium BC. During the 1st millennium BC a temple was built here and dedicated to the god Baal (later Hadad), from which the city takes its name. The site was chosen for its nearby springs and ideal position between



the Litani and Al-Aasi Rivers. It was also located at the crossroads of the main east–west and north–south trade routes.

For all its outward serenity and grace, the site was, in its time, host to sacred prostitution, along with all manner of licentious and bloodthirsty forms of worship. According to ancient tablets from Ugarit, which describe the practices of the Phoenician gods, Anath, the sister and wife of Baal:

> …waded up to the knees, up to the neck in human blood. Human heads lay at her feet, human hands flew over her like locusts. She tied the heads of her victims as ornaments on her back, their hands she tied upon her belt… When she was satisfied she washed her hands in streams of blood before turning again to other things.

Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, Baalbek became known as Heliopolis (City of the Sun), a name that was retained by subsequent Roman conquerors. In 64 BC, Pompey the Great passed through Baalbek, and made it part of the Roman Empire, instigating an era that would see the city rise and flourish. A few years later, in 47 BC, Julius Caesar founded a Roman colony here because of its strategic position between Palmyra, in the Syrian desert, and the coastal cities, naming the new colony after his daughter Julia. The town soon became occupied by Roman soldiers and building works began; it wasn't long before Baalbek was recognised as the premier city in Roman Syria.

The construction of the temples was a massive undertaking. Work is thought to have begun in 60 BC and the great Temple of Jupiter was nearing completion only 120 years later, in AD 60, during the reign of Nero. Later, under Antonius Pius (AD 138–61), a series of elaborate enlargements was undertaken, including work on the Great Court complex and the Temple of Bacchus. His son, the hard-nosed and bloodthirsty Caracalla, completed them, but building work was still ongoing when Rome's rulers adopted Christianity. When you stroll freely around the site, bear in mind that it's estimated that some 100,000 slaves worked on the project over the centuries.

The building of such extravagant temples was a political act as much as one of piety. On one hand, the Romans were attempting to integrate the peoples of the Middle East by appearing to favour their gods; on the other, they set about building jaw-droppingly immense and beautiful structures to impress indelibly upon the worshippers the strength of Roman political rule and civilisation. Even so, the deciding factor in building on such a massive and expansive scale at Baalbek was probably the threat of Christianity, which was beginning to pose a real threat to the old order. So, up went the temples in an attempt to 'fix' the religious orientation of the people in favour of pagan worship. By this time there were no human sacrifices, but temple

THE PARTY OF GOD

Much is made of Hezbollah, or the 'Party of God', in the Western media, as onlookers attempt to ascertain the threat posed to Middle Eastern security by this offshoot of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. From its humble beginnings as one of the many militia operating during Lebanon's civil war, following a Shiite doctrine developed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, it has blossomed into what many consider a legitimate resistance party, with 14 seats in the Lebanese parliament, a television and radio station and an extensive network of countrywide social services.

The party's initial aims, on foundation, were to bring to justice those accused of war crimes during the civil war (particularly the Phalangist Christians), to eradicate the influence of 'Western colonialism' in Lebanon, and to create an Islamic government. Since its instigation, the third aim has been abandoned, replaced by a desire to destroy the 'unlawful entity' of Israel. Regular attacks on the north of Israel attest to its ongoing desire to see this carried out.

While Hezbollah has an undeniably bloody background, with direct and brutal links to kidnappings, murders and bombings, and though its armed capacity is often touted as a deadly threat against both Israel and its Lebanese opposition, the organisation has another side, which few outside get to glimpse. In areas of Lebanon where social services are few and far between, the organisation runs hospitals and schools, with outreach facilities far beyond the capacity of those provided by the national government. Its branches are responsible for activities as diverse as restoring infrastructure, aiding economic recovery, training and equipping farmers, collecting rubbish, dispensing drinking water and providing childcare for infants, as well as a 'Martyrs Institute,' which provides for the families of 'martyrs' killed in 'battle'. All this, says Hezbollah, is financed through 'donations by Muslims'; others argue that the money comes direct from high-level Iranian pockets.

Either way, for many impoverished people in the Bekaa Valley, southern Lebanon and south of Beirut, Hezbollah has proved a vital lifeline, offering health, security and education where there is none on offer through other channels.

prostitution remained, while Baalbek had become one of the most important places of worship in the entire Roman Empire.

When Constantine the Great became emperor in 324, pagan worship was finally suppressed by Rome in favour of Christianity, and building work on Baalbek was suspended. However, when Julian the Apostate became emperor in 361, he reverted to paganism and tried to reinstate it throughout the empire. There was a terrible backlash against Christians, which resulted in mass martyrdom. When the Christian emperor, Theodosius, took the throne in 379, Christianity was once again imposed upon Baalbek and its temples were converted to a basilica. Nevertheless, the town remained a centre of pagan worship and was enough of a threat to warrant a major crackdown by Emperor Justinian (527–65), who ordered that all Baalbek's pagans accept baptism. In an attempt to prevent any secret pagan rites, he ordered parts of the temple be destroyed, and had the biggest pillars shipped to Constantinople, where they were used in the Aya Sofya.

When the Muslim Arabs invaded Syria, they converted the Baalbek temples into a citadel and restored its original name. For several centuries it came under the rule of Damascus and went through a period of regular invasions, sackings, lootings and devastation. The city was sacked by the Arabs in 748 and by the Mongol chieftain Tamerlane in 1400.

In addition to the ravages caused by humans, there was also a succession of earthquakes (1158, 1203, 1664 and most spectacularly in 1759), which caused the fall of the ramparts and three of the huge pillars of the Temple of Jupiter, as well as the departure of most of the population. Most of what remains today lies within the area of the Arab fortifications; the Temple of Mercury, further out, is virtually gone. By erecting walls around some of the buildings, the Arabs unwittingly preserved the temples inside the sanctuary.

During the period of Ottoman rule, Baalbek was slowly forgotten and in the 16th and 17th centuries, few visitors stopped to admire what was left of the once magnificent ancient site. In 1751, eight years before Baalbek's biggest earthquake, English architects James Dawkins and Robert Wood rediscovered the ruins, at which point nine of the Temple of Jupiter's columns were still standing. But it wasn't until a century and a half later, when Kaiser Wilhelm II visited Baalbek in 1898 while on a tour of the Middle East, that a study of the ruins was seriously undertaken. The Kaiser immediately contacted the Sultan of Turkey for permission to excavate the site and for the next seven years a team of archaeologists recorded the site in detail. By this time Baalbek was once again frequented by visitors, who, instead of bowing in prayer, helped themselves to sculptures and inscriptions.

After the defeat of Turkey and Germany in WWI, Baalbek's German scholars were replaced by French ones who, in turn, were replaced by Lebanese. Over the next decades, all the later structures cluttering the site were removed and the temples were finally restored as close as possible to their 1st-century splendour. In some parts of the site, work is still ongoing.

Orientation & Information

The town of Baalbek is small and easily explored on foot. From Zahlé or Beirut, you enter the town via the main road, Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar, the street on which you'll find the town's two banks. It intersects with the other main road, Ras al-Ain Blvd.

Scattered down the main road from the Palmyra Hotel are a number of ATMs. Neither of the banks cash travellers cheques and none of the hotels or restaurants seem willing to accept credit cards.

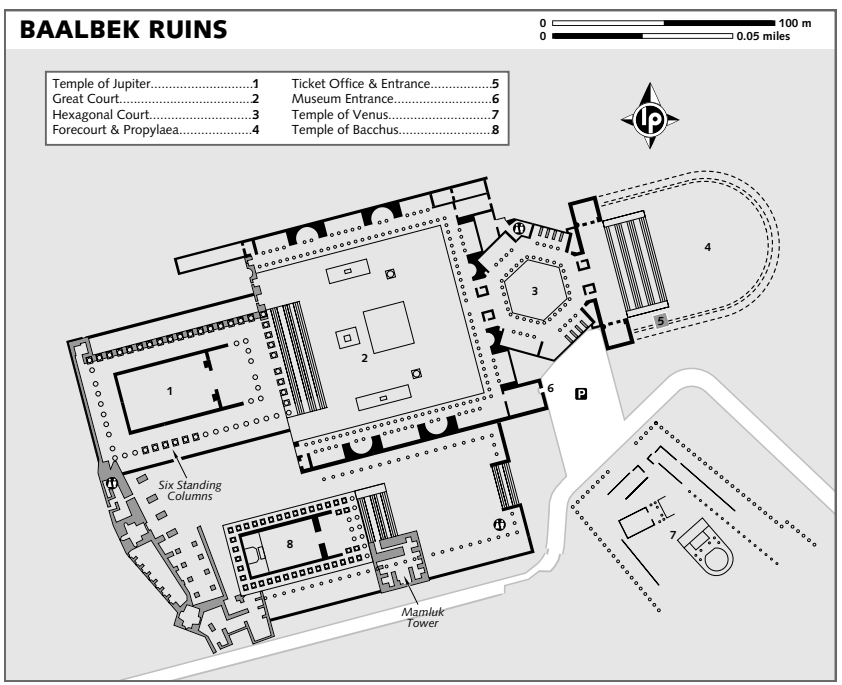
Network Center (Map p355; per hr LL3000; 9am-1am) It's up a side street between the Palmyra and Jupiter Hotels.

Post Office (Map p355; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Heading along Ras al-Ain Blvd, it's up a side street before the Riviera Restaurant.

Sights

BAALBEK RUINS

The **site** (Map p357; adult LL12,000, child under 8 free; 8.30am-30min before sunset) also houses a free **museum**. A good free map of the site, entitled *Heliopolis Baalbek 1898–1998: Rediscovering the Ruins*, is produced by the German



Archaeological Institute and is available all over town. Terrific multilingual guides can be found (or will find you) around the ticket office and charge around US$14 for one hour; see A Guide's Life, p57, for insights from one of Baalbek's accredited guides. The entrance to the main site is currently at the southeastern end of the temple complex. Note that at the time of writing, a new entrance to the museum complex was planned and under construction: the new entrance, when finally completed, will be opposite the Palmyra Hotel, behind an area designated as a new car park.

After passing the ticket office, you enter the ruins via the monumental staircase leading up to the **propylaea** that has a portico flanked by two towers and a colonnade along the façade. This would originally have been covered by a cedar roof and paved with mosaics. The column bases supporting the portico bear the inscription 'For the safety and victories of our lord, Caracalla'.

Through a central door you move into the **hexagonal court**. There is a raised threshold, which separates the propylaea from the sacred enclosure. This courtyard is about 50m deep. It used to be surrounded by a columned portico and to the north and south four exedrae opened symmetrically onto the portico, each with four columns. These rooms were decorated with niches that had either triangular or round pediments. To the north of the court is a famous bas-relief of Jupiter Heliopolitan that was found near the Lejuj Spring, 7km from Baalbek.

Beyond the hexagonal court is the **Great Court** (Sacrificial Courtyard). It was richly decorated on its north, east and south sides and had a double row of niches surmounted with pediments. There are a number of exedrae: four semicircular and eight rectangular. Between the exedrae there are niches, which also held statues. Covering all of these was an arcade supported by 84 granite columns. To either side of the courtyard were two pools, which still have some highly decorative carving on their sides showing Trions, Nereids, Medusas and Cupids riding sea creatures. In the centre of the courtyard there once stood a Byzantine basilica, which was dismantled by French archaeologists, revealing the foundations of a huge altar.

The **Temple of Jupiter** was built on an immense substructure over 90m long, and was approached by another monumental staircase that rose high above the surrounding buildings. It consisted of a cella in which the statue of the god was housed and a surrounding portico of 10 columns along the façade and 19 columns along the side, making for 54 columns in all. These columns are the largest in the world – 22.9m high with a girth of 2.2m. Today only six of these remain standing with the architrave still in position. It was thought in the old days that Baalbek had been constructed by giants and a quick look over the side of the temple to the foundation stones beneath reveals some of the largest building blocks to be found anywhere on earth. One of these megalithic blocks measures 19.5m by 4.3m and is estimated to weigh over 1000 tonnes – how it was moved and positioned so precisely remains a mystery.

From the south side of the temple is a wonderful view of the so-called **Temple of Bacchus**. This was in fact dedicated not to Bacchus but to Venus/Astarte, and is the most beautifully decorated temple in the Roman world. Completed around AD 150, it is also in a great state of preservation. While it wasn't built on the scale of the Temple of Jupiter, it more than makes up for this with style and decoration. Ironically it was called 'the small temple' in antiquity, although it is larger than the Parthenon in Athens. The entrance is up a flight of 30 stairs with three landings. It has a portico running around it with eight columns along the façade and 15 along the sides. They support a rich entablature; the frieze is decorated with lions and bulls. This supports a ceiling of curved stone, which is decorated with very vivid scenes: Mars; a winged Victory; Diana taking an arrow from her quiver; Tyche with a cornucopia; Vulcan with his hammer; Bacchus; and Ceres holding a sheaf of corn. The highlight of the temple is the doorway, which has been drawn and painted by many artists, its half-fallen keystone forever a symbol of Baalbek. Inside, the cella is richly decorated with fluted columns. The 'holy place' was at the back of the cella, which is reached by another staircase with two ramps. When the temple was in use, this would have been a dark and mysterious place, probably lit dramatically by oil lamps with piercing shafts of daylight falling on the image of the god or goddess.

In the southeastern corner of the Great Court is the **museum** (entered from the parking area, near the ticket office), housed in a large vaulted tunnel that may originally have been storerooms or housing for pilgrims. Note that this may also be moved during renovation works to the site: if it's no longer there, just ask a guide or ticket vendor for directions. As well as some beautiful artefacts from Baalbek, the well-lit exhibits give a thorough history of the temple under loosely grouped themes. One fascinating display explains Roman building techniques, showing how the massive stone blocks used in the Temple of Jupiter were manoeuvred into place.

In a side room is a foray into Baalbek's more recent history, with a description of Emperor Wilhelm II's visit. More interesting are photographs by the German photographer Herman Burckhardt, who visited Baalbek at the turn of the 20th century. His pictures are an invaluable record of daily life at the time.

OTHER SIGHTS

Near the main ruins, about 300m from the acropolis, is the tiny exquisite **Temple of Venus** (Map p357) – probably dedicated to Fortuna rather than Venus – a circular building with many fluted columns. Inside, it was decorated with tiers of tabernacles and covered with a cupola. During the early Christian era it was turned into a basilica and dedicated to St Barbara (who joined the saintly ranks when her pagan father tried to kill her for converting to Christianity – he got his comeuppance when a bolt of lightning reduced him to a smouldering heap). A copy of this gem of a temple was constructed in the 18th century in the grounds of Stourhead in Wiltshire, England.

To the east of the propylaea stands the ruined Umayyad or **Great Mosque** (Map p355), which was built from the stones of the temples using many styles of columns and capitals. Lebanon's only Umayyad ruin other than Aanjar, it was built between the 7th and 8th centuries. There is an ablution fountain surrounded by four columns in the centre of the courtyard. On the right, immediately after the entrance, are rows of arched colonnades with Roman columns and capitals, clearly taken from the temple complex. At the northwestern corner are the ruins of a great octagonal minaret on a square base.

To the southeast of Baalbek's centre is the source of the **Ras al-Ain spring**. The area has pleasant, shady parks along the spring and is the site of occasional festivities with horses and camels and side stalls. At the head of the spring is a ruined early **mosque**, which at some point was thought to be the Temple of Neptune.

About 1km south of the centre of Baalbek, to either side of the road on Sheikh Abdullah Hill, is the **quarry** where the massive stones used to build the temples originated.

THE LARGEST STONE IN THE WORLD

Stopping off to see the world's largest cut stone at the quarry on Sheikh Abdullah hill, you'll undoubtedly hear the tale of Baalbek native Abdul Nabi Al-Afi, who saved it from life at the bottom of a rubbish dump. Measuring 21.5m by 4m by 4.5m, lying on its side, locals call this stone Hajar al-Hubla (Stone of the Pregnant Woman), and local folklore has it that women can touch the stone to increase their fertility. Al-Afi, a retired army sergeant, single-handedly saved the site from obscurity, and his friendly young son, who runs the tiny gift shop at its edge, will be happy to provide information on his father's remarkable one-man litter-picking story. In case you're on the lookout for a Hezbollah souvenir, the shop itself is definitely also worth a browse.

Sleeping

Al-Shams Hotel (Map p355; ☎ 373 284; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar; d US$6) This hotel has only three very basic rooms with washbasins and a shared toilet and bath. Beds are uncomfortable and it's a musty and forgettable place to stay. All the same, with so few tourists currently making it as far as Baalbek, you're likely to get the whole room – if not the whole place – to yourself for that same princely US$6.

Hotel Shouman (Map p355; ☎ 03-796 077; Ras al-Ain Blvd; dm/d LL10,000/25,000) Close to the ruins, this hotel has the added advantage of great views from three of its five rooms. There are hard beds and a simple-but-clean shared toilet and shower. Enter via a stone staircase; the pension is on the 1st floor. Room 1 is a triple with a great view of the ruins.

Hotel Jupiter (Map p355; ☎ 376 715, 370 151; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar; s/d/tr US$10/20/25) This friendly place is a decent option. Entered via an arcade next to Restaurant Chich Kabab near the Palmyra Hotel, it has large rooms off a central courtyard. These are light and all have fans.

Hotel Pension Jammal (Map p355; ☎ 370 649, 03-716 072; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar; r per person US$15) Favoured by the German archaeologists working at the archaeological site, this is a good midrange option. Prices are per person whether you take a single, double or triple, and there are rooms available on both sides of the road. Breakfast is included. Those on the southern side, above an immense ballroom, are especially nice and fairly cosy even in winter months, since most have black pot-bellied boilers.

our pick **Palmyra Hotel** (Map p355; ☎ 370 011, 370 230; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar; s/d/tr US$38/53/63; ⊠) Just opposite the ruins, the Palmyra is one of the most wonderful colonial-era relics dotting the Middle East, its guest book an impressive testament to how glamorous travel in the region once was. Having said that, you'll either love it or find it hair-raising: 'faded grandeur' is putting it mildly, and on winter nights it's cold, draughty and downright spooky.

During WWI, the Palmyra was used by the German army, and in WWII it was the British-army headquarters in the area. Its guest list includes General de Gaulle, who slept in twin room No 30 in case you want to do the same; and Jean Cocteau, whose original drawings – many of which were done at the hotel itself – still adorn the walls.

For those more interested in a good night's sleep, the hotel has a newer, more comfortable extension a few doors down. The five rooms are more expensive (US$100), but are lavishly furnished and the salon has amazing views of the ruins. Guests can enjoy breakfast at the hotel's restaurant (p360) for US$5 per person.

Eating

The restaurant scene is not particularly noteworthy in Baalbek; your best bet is the cheap eateries on Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar.

Al-Khayam Restaurant (Map p355; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar) This small place is the best of the cheapies. It serves absolutely delicious felafels (LL1000) and shwarma (LL1500), and huge, filling hummus and felafel plates with salad go for LL2000.

Restaurant Sinbad (Map p355; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar) Directly opposite Al-Khayam, and in direct competition, Sinbad serves up the same sort of simple, tasty meals at similar prices.

Al-Achi (Map p355; 🕒 6am-8pm) A hole-in-the-wall bakery crammed with good pastries. Especially yummy are the custard-filled chocolate éclairs for LL2000.

Riviera Restaurant (Map p355; ☎ 370 296; Ras al-Ain Blvd; mezze around LL2000) On the way to the spring, this serves basic but tasty food in its outdoor eating area in the summer months.

Shahrazad Restaurant (Map p355; top fl, Centre Commercial de Yaghi & Simbole; shwarma from LL3500) While the food is your standard Lebanese fare (chicken shwarma sandwich/kebab LL3500/6000), the views of the ruins from this sixth floor restaurant are great. It is accessed via a lift at the rear of this small shopping centre in the souq.

Palmyra Hotel (Map p355; Rue Abdel Halim Hajjar; mains from US$8) The hotel's restaurant serves decent Lebanese food all day. The cardboard diorama near the restaurant entrance sports authentic bullet holes, created by a drunken army reveller one snowy New Year's night. The cute 1960s 'snug' bar is a great place for a stiff drink and a yarn or two about the Palmyra's glory days, late into the evening.

HASHISH HARDSHIP

The Bekaa Valley was once the centre of Lebanon's infamous hashish production. Throughout the civil war years, an estimated 10,000 tonnes of hashish were exported from Lebanon each year, a lucrative US$500 million annual trade controlled by a cartel of just 30 Lebanese families. When Syria arrived in Lebanon, it got in on the act too, and used its tanks and artillery to protect the marijuana fields.

In a bid for American respect around the time of the Gulf War, Syria attempted to put an end to the industry, encouraging farmers instead to cultivate tomatoes, tobacco, potatoes and grain. The new produce, however, could not compete with cheaper Syrian goods; farmers' incomes plunged and, unsurprisingly, some returned to their former, more lucrative trade. During the 1990s, Lebanese government clampdowns resulted in bulldozing hashish crops, further injuring the industry and leaving some farmers destitute.

As a result of recent instability and the 2006 war, however, Lebanon's government has turned its attention to other fields, and the Bekaa Valley's are flourishing once more. Currently, 10kg of hash can yield a farmer US$10,000, a sum unthinkable for any other crop. Most production is hidden away in the north of the Bekaa Valley, so you're unlikely to spot it while on the road. Though officially disapproved of by Hezbollah, the organisation turns a blind eye to an industry that supports one of the country's otherwise poorest regions, where farmers truly profit from being green-fingered.

Getting There & Away

The only public transport options to get from Beirut to Baalbek are the minibuses (LL4000, two hours) and an array of service taxis (LL6000) from the Cola transport hub. Be warned that the drive over the Mt Lebanon Range can be a white-knuckle experience, particularly in the winter months. Minibuses and service taxis both stop in Baalbek just down from the Palmyra Hotel.

For information about how to get to Baalbek from Zahlé, see p350. For information about how to get to Baalbek from Bcharré or Tripoli, see p336. Keep in mind that the road across the mountains to the Cedars and Bcharré is closed due to snow during winter.

AROUND BAALBEK

If you've got your own car, there are a number of sites to the north of Baalbek well worth exploring. Currently it's perfectly safe to explore the north Bekaa Valley, though unadvisable to drive in the dark due as much to your unpredictable fellow drivers as to the chance of being car-jacked. Still, before heading out it pays to check with a local or two in Baalbek, to ensure the security situation hasn't changed.

Hermel Pyramid هرم الهرمل

Around 50km north of Baalbek, in the middle of nowhere, is a lonely 27m-high monument sitting on the crest of a small hill, which can be seen for miles around. It is a solid square-base construction with a pyramid on top, large sections of which were restored in 1931.

Its north side depicts two deer standing on what appears to be a hunting trap; its south side is largely worn away, but shows what might have once been a bear. Its east side has reliefs of a speared boar being attacked by hunting dogs, and its west has a bull being attacked by two wolves. Nobody is quite sure what this strange monument is meant to be or why it is standing alone. It closely resembles some of the tower tombs at the Valley of the Tombs at Palmyra (p209), to the east in Syria, and some believe it's a prince's tomb dating from the first or second century BC.

Unfortunately the inscriptions are no longer there, so the pyramid may always remain an enigma.

Nahr al-Aasi نهر العاصي

☎ 08

Near a bridge that crosses the Nahr al-Aasi (Orontes River), about 10km southeast of Hermel Pyramid, is a scattering of restaurants specialising in trout; you'll spot the restaurants when driving the road from Baalbek to the Hermel Pyramid.

For some great rafting and kayaking in this area, contact **Assi Club Hermel** (☎ 03-445 051, 03-163 014; www.assirafting.com), which can arrange day trips and overnight accommodation. Be sure to ask for driving instructions, as starting points for rafting and kayaking differ depending on the sort of trip you choose.

Deir Mar Maroun دير مار مارون

Overlooking Nahr al-Aasi, about 200m from Ain ez-Zerqa, sits the ancient rock-cut monastery of Mar Maroun. To reach it you can either take a 3km hike or a 12km-long drive from Hermel. Inside the monastery are several tiers of cave-like cells connected with spiral staircases. The monastery was established in the 5th century by St Maron, the founder of the Maronite church, and was destroyed by Justinian II in the 7th century – hundreds were put to death as heretics. The survivors of this persecution fled up to the mountains and across to the Qadisha Valley (p337).