Lebanon's Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Like its neighbour Syria, hospitality in Lebanon is spelt with a capital 'H' and despite its multiple setbacks and political upheavals, Lebanon remains one of the friendliest places in the world to visit. Beirut, in particular, welcomes visitors with open arms. Instead of being intimidated by heavily armed soldiers perched atop tanks on street corners, you'll soon find that even a simple smile will generally get you a 'welcome' and an enthusiastic wave. Moreover, the Lebanese diaspora is so widespread that no matter where you come from, almost everyone you meet will likely have a sibling, cousin or uncle living in your country – a link that will win you instant friends.

Emily Nasrallah's *Flight Against Time* touches the subject of emigration from a slightly different perspective, telling the tale of rural parents whose children have left for new lives overseas.

Most Lebanese share three distinct characteristics: an immense pride in their country and its diversity (you'll probably hear the phrase 'Lebanon has 18 official religions' more times than you can count), a reluctance to talk about the civil war – which most people would simply prefer to forget – and an overriding optimism that 'everything's going to be all right', with the good times just around the corner. While each of these things may seem a little paradoxical to a first-time visitor, you'll soon realise that each is essential to keeping the troubled country soldiering on, no matter how bad life gets.

Though politics, unemployment and corruption are hot topics, guaranteed to ignite lengthy and animated discussion, the Lebanese certainly don't let these aspects of their culture get them down. The Lebanese like to savour life, and most important is enjoying the good times with family and friends.

Spend a little time getting to know some locals and they'll soon consider you both.

LIFESTYLE

Lebanon's 18 official sects are Muslim (Shiite, Alawite, Ismaili and Sunni), Christian (Maronite, Greek Orthodox & Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Gregorian, Syrian Orthodox, Jacobite, Nestorian, Chaldean, Copt, Evangelical and Roman Catholic), Druze and Jewish.

It's hard to generalise about a country that has traditionally experienced – and continues to experience – sharply delineated differences in generation, income and religion. While party-central Beirut seems, on the surface at least, no different from any European capital city, venture just a few dozen miles north or south and you'll find people in traditional villages living and farming almost exactly as they did a century ago. Add to this a substantial Palestinian population almost entirely cut off from the mainstream – and rarely referred to in conversation by the Lebanese themselves – and a complex picture begins to emerge.

One lifestyle factor that cuts across all boundaries is the crucial importance of family life in Lebanon. Extended families often live in close proximity, their social lives tightly bound together, and many children live at home until married, either to save money for their own home or simply because they prefer it that way. Social life, too, is both close-knit and gregarious: everyone within a small community tends to know everyone else, usually knowing as much about others' lives and business as they do about their own.

Marriage is the second factor of utmost importance throughout Lebanon and members of all religions tend to marry young. For women to remain unmarried into their 30s is rare and often raises eyebrows, though a man still single at 30, like anywhere in the Middle East, is thought to be waiting for the right girl. There's generally an expectation that people will marry within their religion; however, like many social expectations, this is slowly changing. Since Lebanon currently only legally recognises civil marriages contracted overseas, many mixed-religion couples opt for marriage in Cyprus or Greece, if one half of the couple (usually the woman) doesn't choose to convert.

For young Lebanese, Christians – both male and female – usually have far greater social freedom than Muslims or members of other religions, evident in Beirut's profusion of largely Christian-populated bars and clubs. But while these freedoms may at first appear similar to their counterparts in the West, there is a limit to what is deemed acceptable behaviour.

Drinking heavily, sleeping around or taking drugs is frowned upon in Lebanese society – not that you'd necessarily know it on a night out on Beirut's Rue Monot.

Christian and Muslim women in Lebanon are nowadays increasingly accepted into most professions. Particularly in Beirut you'll see a profusion of Filipino, Thai and Indian housemaids – recognisable by their frilly pink gingham aprons – who work full-time to cook, clean and look after the children while the mother of the house is out at work.

A university education is highly valued in Lebanon and for those who are not from a wealthy family this usually involves juggling a part-time job of at least 20 hours a week alongside attending classes. Many study with a view to emigrating overseas, lured by the promise of higher salaries, a phenomenon commonly known as Lebanon's 'brain drain': see The Brain Drain, below.

THE BRAIN DRAIN

A favourite Lebanese topic, which you'll likely encounter several times on your travels, is the country's 'brain drain'. Current unofficial estimates suggest that one in three educated Lebanese citizens would like to live abroad, while a recent study by the Beirut Research and Development Centre (BRDC) found that 22% of the Lebanese population is actively working on ways to leave the country. Another survey of university students showed that as many as 60% are hoping to leave Lebanon following graduation, to work abroad.

There are a number of reasons why so many of Lebanon's bright young things are disappearing elsewhere, not the least the climate of fear that has lingered after the Israel–Hezbollah war of summer 2006. Terrorist attacks on Lebanese politicians, in which civilians are sometimes caught up, have also sent young Lebanese, especially those with dual nationality and thus an easy 'escape route', in pursuit of jobs overseas. Most popular tend to be the burgeoning Gulf states, which have the advantage of high salaries and being fairly close to home, with the USA, Canada and Europe all coming in close behind.

The second major reason for the mass exit is that salaries in Lebanon are often simply too low to make for a comfortable, viable living. 'I've got a great job, a car, a high salary,' explains Mirvat Melki, a software engineer originally from Beirut, on leave from a lucrative position in Ghana. 'All the things I could never dream of having here in Lebanon, even though I'm pretty highly qualified. I earn about 10 times as much, per month, there as I would do here – if I could get a job at all.' Melki says that those who have managed to acquire good jobs – often through family connections – hold tight to them and are reluctant to relinquish the security and move on. Many younger, educated people, he continues, are afraid for the country's future. 'Politics aren't safe; taxes are high; economics are bad. It cost me US$100,000 to go to university. In Lebanon, I'd have to work for a million years to pay that back. I miss home, but under these conditions, what choice do I have?' Perhaps one day, he says, he'll come home – but until then, like so many young Lebanese professionals, he's enjoying the financial freedom of a life overseas too much to really consider it.

POPULATION

Lebanon's population of just over four million people is boosted by its Palestinian refugees, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) putting the total registered refugees at 408,438.

The population is urban-based, with around 90% of people living in the main cities, and Beirut being the most populated (over 1.5 million), followed by Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre. The population growth rate is around 1.2%, with an average of 1.88 children per household, both figures very low for the Middle East. Lebanon has a youthful population, and more than a quarter is under 14 years of age.

An interesting *International Herald Tribune* article on sectarian strife within Lebanon's soccer community can be found at www.iht.com/articles/2007/10/24/sports/CUP.php.

Lebanon hosts 18 'official' religious groups, along with small populations of Baha'is, Mormons, Buddhists and Hindus; Muslims are estimated at around 60% of the population. Before the civil war, unofficial statistics put the ratio closer to 50:50, Muslim to Christian; the shift is attributed to the mass emigration of Christians during and after the civil war, and higher birth rates among Muslims.

SPORT

Though sport doesn't play as dominant a part on Lebanon's cultural scene as it does, for example, in many European countries, there's nevertheless a loyal football (soccer) following, which remains a male-dominated pastime for participants and fans alike. Basketball is also a popular spectator sport, and Lebanon has hosted several regional championships. The Asian Athletics Championships, scheduled for Lebanon in 2007, were moved at the last minute due to the unstable political climate, a factor which continues to hamper sports participation on an international level.

The most popular nonprofessional sports in Lebanon are probably skiing and hiking, with paragliding and potholing also becoming increasingly popular. During the summer months, the usual range of water sports is practised along the coast, though there's as much strutting and preening as serious swimming going on at most of Lebanon's beaches. See p381 if you're keen to participate in Lebanon's outdoor pursuits, or individual destination chapters for beach club and ski listings.

MULTICULTURALISM

Lebanon is made up of a patchwork of religious and cultural groups, many having settled in Lebanon to escape persecution in other countries. These include the Armenians, who arrived en masse in Lebanon in 1915 to escape massacre at the hands of the Ottomans; a large Armenian community today exists in the small town of Aanjar (p351) in the Bekaa Valley. While Armenians have largely managed to integrate into mainstream Lebanese society, one group still largely outside it is the Palestinian refugees, who have no real rights in Lebanon. Only a tiny proportion have been granted citizenship, possibly due to Lebanon's belief that granting citizenship to Palestinians gives the Israelis more justification for never allowing right of return, and unless you take a trip out to a refugee camp their presence as a cultural force in Lebanon is almost nonexistent. See The Displaced and the Dispossessed (p34) for more on the Palestinians of Lebanon.

WOMEN IN LEBANON

Lebanon's women today hold a complicated and contradictory place in a society which, though in many ways is more liberal than its Arab neighbours, is nevertheless far from gender-equal.

NAYLA MOAWAD

Though women may, in many spheres of Lebanese life, appear to be enjoying more freedom than ever before, one area in which they remain under-represented is politics. With only a handful of female MPs currently holding office – less, indeed, than in Syria or Jordan – one who has made it her business is Lebanon's first female minister, Nayla Moawad, Minister for Social Affairs, who in 2004 announced her candidacy for the since frequently postponed presidential elections.

Born in 1940 in the small mountain town of Bcharré, 13 years before Lebanese women were granted the vote, Moawad trained as a journalist, reading English at Cambridge University. It wasn't until the assassination in 1989 of her husband, René Moawad, just days after he became president of Lebanon, that she decided to continue his legacy by entering politics herself. In doing so, she became the first woman in post–civil war Lebanon to venture into the political arena, likening her mission to that of a soldier, passing the torch from comrade to comrade.

Having been a member of the Lebanese National Assembly since 1991, Moawad has served as an advocate for women's rights and democracy, setting up the René Moawad Foundation in 1990, dedicated to promoting social and rural development; she is also president of the Centre for Research and Education on Democracy. Inspiring a new generation of powerful female figures, including Sunni MP Bahia Hariri, sister of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Moawad believes that the participation of women in Lebanon's politics isn't a matter of religion, sect or background, but simply a matter of conviction, courage – and time.

One of the most crucial hurdles for women's equality in Lebanon lies in the sectarian judicial system. Religious, rather than civil, courts govern personal status matters including divorce, inheritance and marriage. This essentially means that women are not only not equal to men, but also not equal to each other: since 1959, for example, Christian women have been entitled to the same inheritance as male heirs, whereas Muslim women still usually only receive half. Amnesty International also points out that there is little protection under current civil law against female-targeted violence in the family; some religious courts may rule, for instance, that a physically abused woman is obliged to return to her spouse.

Nevertheless, with around 50% of university graduates nowadays being female and women comprising well over a quarter of the labour force, it's clear that the place of women in Lebanese society is changing – if all too slowly. Throw in a new generation of prominent and empowered female singers, actors, writers and journalists, and most Lebanese women would argue that such change has already successfully begun.

For more on the work of the René Moawad Foundation, go to the foundation's website at www.rmf.org.lb.

MEDIA

In its 2006 Press Freedom Index, **Reporters Without Borders** (www.rsf.org) ranked Lebanon 107th of 168 listings, with the highest level of press freedom being enjoyed by Finland and the lowest being North Korea. Lebanon came somewhere between Sierra Leone and Cambodia, having fallen substantially over the last five years from 56th place to its current ranking largely due to the volatile political climate. Reporters Without Borders asserts that Lebanon's media 'is some of the freest and most experienced in the Arab world', but recent factors have undermined such positive statements. Dangers exist to journalists, as they do the rest of the population, as an indirect result of everyday risks associated with living with political instability. In 2006 a 23-year-old photojournalist and a technician for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) were both killed by Israeli air strikes. Those in the media must also negotiate a landscape of potential consequences, including harassment or even assassination, for stating unpopular views. The murders of prominent anti-Syrian journalists Gibran Tueni and

TO BOLDLY GO…

Soon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on Valentine's Day 2005, a pair of Lebanese media professionals got together to discuss what they perceived as a gap in independent news coverage of the ensuing turmoil in Lebanon. One was 28 years old, an IT expert with a background in building innovative websites; the other, aged 60, a seasoned journalist in retirement, with the urge to fill that gap.

The result was *Ya Libnan* (www.yalibnan.com), an English-language Lebanese news site that now provides arguably the best, most diverse, and unquestionably the most exciting up-to-date account of Lebanon's fast-paced cultural, political and security situation. The site offers writers the option of anonymity, though many opt to nevertheless print their by-lines. The founders have no illusions about freedom of the press, aware that some writers are wary to express views or perspectives in a climate in which assassinations and harassment of journalists have both occurred. By allowing its writers the choice, the Ya Libnan team believe they're able to access the widest possible pool of writers, and the greatest cross-section of independent viewpoints.

'We were frustrated with the perspectives coming from the various Lebanese news outlets,' explains the younger of *Ya Libnan*'s cofounders, who himself prefers to remain anonymous. 'Most media organisations are owned or tied to politicians, so you end up with heavily weighted news. We couldn't get our hands on any independent news out of Lebanon, and decided to start a blog about it.'

The blog proved so successful that it quickly ballooned, harnessing the power of fellow bloggers to create what the founders call a 'mass collaboration portal, delivering news in a professional format'.

'All our writers are volunteers,' the younger cofounder explains, 'over 100 writers from many different countries, with some sort of connection to Lebanon. They come from all kinds of backgrounds and ages, providing a whole host of perspectives. That's why there's not really a consistent style on the site; it changes quite a lot. And since they're all volunteers, there are no agendas, either political or financial.'

And they don't seem to be afraid of telling it like it is – in any arena. When Cirque du Soleil came to town in the summer of 2006, *Ya Libnan* was at pains not to flatter what it deemed a lacklustre performance; the result was an icy review, in contrast to glowing praise in the mass media. The site's sole agenda, it appears, is to make the world aware of Lebanon and of the diversity it encompasses. Currently, its top readerships are the USA, Lebanon, Canada and Australia, with more than one million unique users in 2006 alone. 'Unfortunately,' grins the cofounder, 'when Lebanon hits its biggest crises, our news ratings pick up. When we have a nice quiet summer, our site doesn't get viewed so much.'

And if, after a few weeks glued to its coverage, you feel the need to support its worthy aims, you can either contribute, or purchase a few items from *Ya Libnan*'s own line in pro-Lebanon wares. Its bumper stickers, coffee mugs and badges all proclaim the message you'll hear time and again while on the road in Lebanon: 'Druze, Muslim, Christian: LEBANESE.'

Samir Kassir in 2005 have significantly fuelled these fears. The founders of online news site *Ya Libnan* (see To Boldly Go…, above) offer their writers the option of anonymity, therefore hopefully allowing freedom of speech and opinion while ensuring author safety.

Lebanon's TV fare is far from unbiased, with each of the most popular commercial stations – Future TV (a favourite of Sunni Muslims), LBC (largely targeting Maronite Christians), news channel NBN and New TV – having their own clear agenda and political allegiances. Lebanon also allows elected politicians to have active ownership of media outlets. Much of what's shown on each, though, is the standard televisual fare of sitcoms, American movies, local soap operas and Mexican telenovelas.

Similarly, many newspapers have one slant or another. But *An Nahar*, an Arabic daily, the *Daily Star* in English and *L'Orient-Le Jour* in French

are three titles that largely defy the party line and are well worth keeping an eye on for news, commentary and analysis. See p269 for more on Lebanon's print publications.

ARTS

Literature

Though Beirut was the publishing powerhouse of the Middle East for most of the 20th century, like most cultural activities it suffered during the war and much of its recent literary content has been shaped by this drawn-out and horrific event. Even today, a great deal of Lebanon's literary output remains concerned with themes drawn from these 15 years of hardship.

The Arab Book Fair in Beirut has been held every year since 1956 for around 10 days in spring.

Modern Lebanese writers fall into two distinct groups: those who stayed on to write about the conflict from personal 'frontline' experience, often known as the 'Beirut decentrists', and those who sought safety elsewhere or were born overseas of Lebanese parents. Of those who remained in Lebanon, Emily Nasrallah is a leading figure, and her novel *Flight Against Time* is highly regarded. Those who work overseas include the younger London-based Tony Hanania, born in 1964, whose book *Unreal City* is the story of a young scion from a feudal family who leaves for England, returns to war-torn Lebanon and falls in with Hezbollah fighters as he searches for meaning amid anarchy. Amin Maalouf, who relocated to Paris at the outbreak of the civil war, is another notable name. His most enchanting book, *The Rock of Tanios*, set in a Lebanese village where the sheikh's son disappears after rebelling against the system, is considered by many to be his masterpiece.

Of those authors most widely available in translation, Lebanon's two major figures are Elias Khoury, who lives in Lebanon, and feminist author Hanan al-Shaykh, who's based in London. Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* is a harrowing account of the civil war, while her *Beirut Blues* is a series of long, rambling letters that contrast Beirut's cosmopolitan past with its war-torn present. Elias Khoury has published 10 novels, many available in translation, and serves as editor for the weekly cultural supplement of *An Nahar*. His 1998 novel *Gate of the Sun* has achieved particular international acclaim. For some reading recommendations, see p246.

Poet Khalil Gibran (1883–1931; see p341) remains the celestial light in Lebanon's poetry scene, though modern poetry, too, has been thriving in Lebanon since the 1950s, with many poets from other Arab countries flocking to Beirut to take advantage of its thriving, and relatively liberal, scene. Interestingly, today many young poets are emerging from the largely Shiite south, a movement known as Shu'ara al-Janub (Poets from the South), for whom poetry seems to be a means to express the frustrations and despair of life in that particularly war-ravaged region.

An in-depth account of Lebanese literature, for the serious scholar, is provided by Elise Salem in *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives*.

Cinema

Though Lebanese cinema has never been able to compete with the Bollywood-scale production of Cairo's slush and schlock, it has nevertheless survived the raw years and is appearing back on the scene with vigour and verve. **Docudays** (www.docudays.com), Beirut's annual documentary festival, is highly regarded internationally, and attracts a global crowd and jury, while there are several film academies in the city churning out young hopefuls.

In 2007 two Lebanese directors, Nadine Labaki and Danielle Arbid, made it to the prestigious Cannes Film Festival with their respective

films *Caramel* and *Un Homme Perdu. Un Homme Perdu* tells the story of a French photographer who meets a mysterious, solitary figure who disappeared from Lebanon 17 years earlier. *Caramel,* meanwhile, is the tale of five Lebanese women, each from a different religious background and generation group, who meet at a Beirut beauty salon, using the caramel of the title to wax their legs. Labaki herself – a notable music video director – plays Layal, a salon worker having an affair with a married man. The film also deals with interreligious marriage and lesbianism, among other themes.

Arab Film Distribution (www.arabfilm.com) sells DVDs and VHS copies of new and remastered Lebanese movies and documentaries, and ship internationally.

The greatest of the past cinematic stars was undoubtedly Georges Nasser, whose tragic 1958 *Ila Ayn (Whither?)* is a classic of Lebanese cinema, and became the first film to represent Lebanon at Cannes. Later, in Lebanon's heady 1960s, state intervention in the Egyptian film industry drove many Egyptian moviemakers into exile, causing levels of production to increase dramatically in Lebanon from a handful per year in 1965 to about 200 films in 1975. This meant, however, that Lebanese cinema became an industry driven by expatriates, and it wasn't until the 1970s that a number of talented Lebanese directors emerged, including Maroun Baghdadi, whose 1975 movie *Beirut Oh Beirut* was one of several film responses to the outbreak of the civil war. Baghdadi died an untimely death in 1993, aged just 43, after falling down an elevator shaft.

The civil war temporarily brought Lebanon's film industry to a virtual halt, with most filmmakers forced to work outside the country, seldom having their films shown within its boundaries. Baghdadi continued to work (winning an award at Cannes) and, ironically, many critics believe that Lebanese cinema actually produced some of its best work under highly restricted circumstances in response to the tragic war.

By 1992 the film industry was once again finding its feet, with the controversial (and initially banned) *Tornado,* directed by Samir Habchi, again dealing with the civil war. It tells the story of a young Lebanese student on a visit home from the Soviet Union, who finds himself actively involved in the conflict. In 1998, *West Beirut,* directed by LA-based Ziad Doueiri (a former cameraman for Quentin Tarantino) won international critical acclaim. The lyrical, funny film tells the semiautobiographical story of a teenager living in West Beirut during the first year of the civil war. The same year, Palestinian filmmaker Mai Masri made a highly acclaimed award-winning documentary, *Children of Shatila,* which looks at the history of the notorious refugee camp as seen through the eyes of children. Look out for her new documentary, *33 Days,* filmed under Israeli bombardment in the summer of 2007, and, at the other end of the genre spectrum, for Michel Kammoun's first film *Falafel,* a romantic comedy involving a young man on his perilous way to a Beirut party.

The Beirut Film Foundation (www.beirutfilmfoundation.org) works on several projects to keep Lebanese cinema alive, including the restoration of old film prints.

Music

Much of the music popular in Lebanon is equally renowned in Syria; for more, see p71. In both countries, music is rarely far away wherever you are, with strains of both traditional songstresses and contemporary rap and lounge wafting from every passing car or bullet-riddled apartment building. Beirut's music production industry is flourishing – some say almost rivalling Cairo's – and, hand in hand, its music video industry is blossoming.

Lebanon's two most famous female vocalists are the living legend Fairouz and the younger Najwa Karam, known as the 'sun of Lebanese song'. Fairouz has enjoyed star status since her first recording in Damascus in the 1950s, and later became an icon for Lebanon during the civil war (which she sat out in Paris). Her concert in downtown Beirut following the end of the fighting attracted 40,000 people and provided a potent symbol of reunification.

Now in her 70s, she still performs several concerts annually, composing new songs with her son Ziad, a renowned experimental jazz performer.

Najwa Karam has created an international audience for traditional Lebanese music, rising to stardom during the 1990s and proving her worth with a sell-out world tour in 1996. With more than 16 albums under her belt, including the 2001 *Nedmaneh,* which sold four million copies worldwide, she remains a driving force on the Lebanese music scene.

Current hot names in mainstream pop include Nancy Ajram, whose brand of cute, sassy Lebanese pop sees albums frequently selling into the millions, as well as songstress Haifa, and all female outfit The 4 Cats with catchy tunes and raunchy videos along much the same lines. More good, solid pop is presented from a male perspective by Fadl Shakir.

A popular musician who marries classical Arabic music with contemporary sounds is Marcel Khalife, from Amchit, near Byblos. An *oud* (lute) player with a cult following, Khalife has many songs with a controversial political side, such as his composition for the dead of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

On the dance floors and in the laid-back bars of Beirut's Rue Monot and Rue Gouraud, contemporary fusions of oriental trip-hop, lounge, drum and bass, and traditional Arabic music, for both the dance floors and chilling out, have dominated sound systems for the last few years. Said Mrad's best-selling 2001 album *Orient Back Beats/2001 Nights* comprises techno and dance remixes of traditional Arab songs, while the Beirut-based REG Project – featuring Ralph Khoury, Elie Barbar and Guy Manoukian – specialises in Arab deep house and lounge. You'll hear these sounds, along with traditional belly-dancing tunes remixed to an electronic beat to enrapture a new generation of listeners, almost anywhere you stop off for a strong drink, and a dance, or two.

If you're looking for driving music, some radio channels to tune into are:

88.0 Nostalgie: Easy listening in French and English

99.9 Fame FM: Dance music

105.5 Radio One: Rock, pop and dance

LOOKING FOR LIVE MUSIC

Across Lebanon you'll be presented with plenty of opportunities to experience the country's many forms of live music, if you know where to look. In Beirut, your best points of reference are newspaper and magazine listings (p269) along with flyers and posters, which you'll find largely on the streets of Hamra (p271) and at the Virgin Megastore (p267) on the Place des Martyrs. Along with one-off concerts, several Beirut venues offer reliable live music options almost every night of the week. Try the Blue Note (p288) for live jazz, the Gemmayzeh Café (p288) for traditional Lebanese sounds and Bar Louie (p286) for funky small live outfits.

Outside the capital, it may be more difficult to track down live music, though during the summer months you're likely to stumble across small local festivals with great local music performances in a variety of shapes and sizes. Across the country, there are also a few notable places to head to for evening drinks and tunes. The Cafés du Bardouni in Zahlé (p350) usually have live performances in the summer months, while up north, the cafés in Ehden's central square or at the source of the Mar Sarkis Spring (p339) are good choices. Up the coast from Beirut, the Citadelle Café (p311) at Byblos has nice live performances on Friday nights, and down south the Al-Midane Café (p320) at Deir al-Qamar has great live music at the atmospheric town square on summer weekends.

On top of all this, there are, of course, Lebanon's many larger music festivals; see p246 for a list of the best.

Architecture

For information about Baalbek's spectacular remains, see p354; for traces of the Romans in Beirut, see p276; and for details on the Umayyad ruins at Aanjar, see p351.

For further information on B 018 and Bernard Khoury's more recent architectural projects, go to the projects section of www.bernardkhoury.com.

Much of Lebanon's less-ancient heritage architecture has been damaged over the last century by the combined effects of war and redevelopment, but there remain a substantial number of examples of the country's traditional architecture dotted about the country. Beirut's beautiful old Arabic-Italian crossbreed buildings can still be seen on the Ain al-Mreisse Corniche (p273), in the backstreets of Achrafiye (p276) and Gemmayzeh (p278) and near the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Hamra and Ras Beirut (p271).

In contrast, most buildings constructed since the 1960s are fairly miserable, weather-beaten concrete blocks ranging in design from spartan to '70s space-age, although there are some modernist gems, particularly in Achrafiye. In Downtown (Beirut Central District; p274) many of the buildings were too damaged by the war to be saved, and masterly reconstruction has been accomplished in the 'spirit' of the original.

In regional Lebanon, styles vary. To the north, Tripoli's old city (p329) contains a wealth of medieval and Islamic architecture, while a fine collection of 18th-century merchants' houses can be seen in the small town of Amchit (p312), north of Byblos. Deir al-Qamar (p317), in the southern Chouf Mountains, is a well-preserved village, with some beautiful 18th- and 19th-century villas and palaces. Beiteddine Palace (p320), also in the Chouf Mountains, is a melange of Italian and traditional Arab architecture, although it is more remarkable for its lavish interiors than any architectural innovation.

Interior designers are doing wonderful work in Lebanon today. For the most part thoughtful, playful and stylish, it's often a shame that many places are either private residences or clubs that don't last long enough for people to pay a visit. One notable exception is the nightclub B 018 (p289) designed by Bernard Khoury. Situated on the former Green Line, the club pays homage to the past at a site that was formerly a quarantine zone, a refugee camp and the site of an appalling massacre during the war – and is worth a visit as much for its appearance as its sizzling tunes and funky crowd.

Painting, Visual Arts & Photography

For a Beirut-based photographic archive of the Arab world, go to the Arab Image Foundation at www.fai.org.lb.

Lebanon's first art school, the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, was established in 1937, and 20 years later AUB established its Department of Fine Arts. The two institutions have nurtured a growing artistic community. In the 1950s and 1960s a number of galleries opened to showcase the country's art, while the private Sursock Museum (p276), in Achrafiye, also began to show new artists. By the 1960s a group of artists and scholars, headed by Janine Rubeiz, had formed Dar el-Fan (Place of Art), providing a vibrant forum for artists to gather and discuss their work.

Like most of Lebanon's cultural output, the visual arts suffered during the civil war, but the scene reestablished itself with vigour soon afterwards and today there's a thriving artistic community in Beirut. Apart from the earlier William Blake–style paintings of poet Khalil Gibran, famous 20th-century artists include the painters Hassan Jouni, Moustafa Farroukh and Mohammad Rawas. Better-known contemporary painters include Marwan Rechmaoui, Bassam Kahwaji, Amin al-Basha, Helen Khal and Etel Adnan (who, like Gibran, is also a writer).

Many galleries exhibit sculpture as well as painting. Contemporary figures to look out for include Rudy Rahmé, Camille Allam, and Catalan-born Ana Corbero who draws inspiration from her life in Lebanon, while a permanent sculpture display can be seen at the workshop and galleries at the home of the Basbous brothers in the village of Rachana (p313), to the north of Beirut. Their larger works line the streets nearby and attract many visitors, especially on weekends. Another contemporary famous name is abstract painter Salwa Zeidan, whose works are in many major private collections worldwide and whose exhibitions regularly travel the globe.

The photography and visual arts scene is the most vibrant and cutting-edge of all the arts in the region, and can be experienced at local galleries such as Espace SD (p278).

Beirut's Espace SD gallery website features info on the exhibitions and artists at www.espacesd.com.

The best other places to experience the current Lebanese visual arts scene in all its forms are the numerous small galleries around Hamra and Gemmayzeh and in the studios of Saifi Village (p289); we have also listed some of Beirut's current best galleries (p278). Check newspaper and magazine listings for upcoming gallery openings (see p269); Beirut's cultural centres (p268) also put on regular shows.

Theatre & Dance

Most theatre in Lebanon is based in Beirut, where prominent, established and esteemed Lebanese playwrights such as Roger Assaf, Jalal Khoury and the late Issam Mahfouz inspire and encourage younger artists – though lack of funding remains a perennial problem – and a revitalised Lebanese theatre scene is gradually emerging.

The Théâtre de Beyrouth (p289) in Ain al-Mreisse (Minet al-Hosn) puts on high-quality performances (often experimental works) by young actors and playwrights. It also hosts foreign productions and is a good place to find quality English- or French-language theatre. Al-Medina Theatre (p289) is a performance venue based in West Beirut, which shows plays, primarily in Arabic, while in Achrafiye, Monnot Theatre (p289) tends to show French-language productions. The AUB campus has a theatre, which sometimes performs plays in English, although the quality of the productions varies wildly.

For more on the dance troupe Caracalla, go to www.caracalladance.com.

As in Syria, both raqs sharki (belly dancing) and *dabke,* the traditional Levantine folk dance widely known as Lebanon's national dance, are popular. For more on these, see p73. Caracalla, meanwhile, is the closest thing Lebanon has to a national dance troupe. Founded by Abdel-Halim Caracalla, the choreographer of the Baalbek Festival in the 1960s, the group's performances are inspired by oriental dance, but combine opera, dance and theatre. With colourful costumes and musicals based on diverse sources, from Shakespeare to modern Lebanese literature, they can be seen at some of Lebanon's summer festivals, and at the Monnot Theatre in Achrafiye.

Lebanon's Environment

If you enter Lebanon via Beirut, the first thing you'll notice is that the country appears to pay its natural surroundings very little regard. Beirut's streets, though quite clean, are littered with recyclable material due to the city's lack of recycling facilities. The streets are rarely leafy and there is a dearth of city parks. With Beirutis driving close to 1.5 million cars within the compact city limits, you'll also notice the air pollution, especially in the summer months when the smog hanging over the city can seem to have the consistency of soup. Beirut's coastline, too, could do with some improvement. Empty water bottles, plastic bags and other nonbiodegradable refuse scatter its rock pools, and the public beaches to the south of Beirut aren't recommended for swimming due to water pollution and yet more rubbish floating in on the tide.

Drive north along the coast and the picture becomes even bleaker. Decades of unfettered building work have created an almost unbroken strip of unattractive development extending from Beirut at least as far as Byblos, with only a short break in the sprawl before building up again on the outskirts of Tripoli. This stretch of development teeters up the mountain slopes away from the coast, making for a welcome break for both eyes and lungs when it finally thins out towards Lebanon's central mountain ranges.

Historically, it's unsurprising that the environment hasn't been top of the country's agenda. A 15-year civil war, combined with social turbulence and economic woes before, during and after, has meant that energies and financial resources have, consequently, been channelled elsewhere.

The absence of basic services during the war also meant that solid waste was dumped throughout the country. Although the worst of these excesses were cleaned up with the creation of massive landfill sites, there continues to be a lack of general environmental awareness and adequate waste disposal. As late as the mid-1990s Lebanon still did not have a single functioning wastewater treatment plant, and raw sewage was pouring out to sea. A number of treatment plants have since been rehabilitated and new ones built, but offshore water quality remains a concern.

For updates on Lebanon's environmental situation, look at the UN Environment Programme reports at www.unep.org/Lebanon/.

The biggest recent environmental crisis to hit Lebanon, however, occurred during the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war, when Israeli aircraft bombed the coastal power plant at Jiyyeh, south of Beirut. An estimated 15,000 tonnes of fuel oil spilled into the sea, threatening wildlife, marine life and delicate ecosystems, as well as the livelihoods of local fishermen (see Oil Spill Lebanon opposite).

But despite this gloomy picture, there are plenty of signs that Lebanon's environment is becoming of greater concern on both a public and governmental level. Tapping into the country's ecotourism potential – since large areas of Lebanon thankfully remain unravaged by pollution or building work – government agencies are realising there's actually profit to be had in protecting Lebanon's greatest, most diverse resource. See The Lebanon Mountain Trail (p338) and Trekking (p382) for more information and listings of just a few of the many ecotrekking operations to choose from if you're planning on hiking around the country's scenic treasures. Paradoxically, one area that has suffered the least damage is the south of the country, since massive numbers of land mines, cluster bomblets and other unexploded ordnance have left the area largely undeveloped and unspoilt, though sadly as out-of-bounds to visitors as ever.

OIL SPILL LEBANON

The Jiyyeh oil spill of summer 2006, which saw thousands of tonnes of fuel oil pour into the sea, constitutes the biggest environmental crisis ever to hit the Eastern Mediterranean basin. The spill extended 120km along Lebanon's shoreline and reached as far north as the Syrian coast.

Within a week, volunteer groups and environmental agencies had flocked in to assess the damage and begin clean-up operations, with groups of volunteers working around the clock to contain and collect the oil. It was, however, too late for much of the oil, which had sunk to the seabed causing damage to marine ecosystems.

Environmentalists contend that the damage has not ended there. With beaches thick with residue, endangered green turtle hatchlings were in some places unable to make it from the beach to the sea. In other coastal locations, distress to the marine balance has led to a scarcity of the foods that rare migrating birds usually feed on along Lebanon's shores.

A year after the crisis, a report published by Greenline (www.greenline.org.lb), one of Lebanon's biggest volunteer-based environmental organisations, contended that the country's shores remained severely polluted. The report went on to say that international agencies differed in their opinion on the spill's long-term effects. While the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) stated that damage was moderate and the effects not long-lasting, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) assessed the damage as severe and long-term.

Either way, clean-up efforts and independent environmental assessments continue and are likely to do so for some time. For the latest on Lebanon's seas in the aftermath, visit Oil Spill Lebanon at www.oilspilllebanon.org.

It's promising that dozens of NGOs and volunteer groups have sprung up independently, to push for greater care of Lebanon's natural wonders. Some of the best and most widely known are listed throughout this chapter. There are also campaigns underway to promote awareness of the dangers of pesticide use. Some restaurants in Beirut are now trying to use organic produce (see p290 for Souq el-Tayeb, Beirut's first organic farmers market), and farmers are being taught about alternatives to chemical pesticides and fertilisers.

While there is undoubtedly a long way to go, ongoing improvements to existing nature reserves, such as the Tyre Beach Nature Reserve (p376) and Aamiq Marsh (p261), and the creation of new forest areas such as the recently opened Horsh Beirut (p280), show signs that all is not lost in Lebanon's battle to keep its countryside as green as its cedar-tree emblem, regardless of the political or social situation of the moment.

THE LAND

Roughly half the size of Wales, Lebanon is one of the world's smallest countries. Within its borders, though, lie several incredibly diverse geographical regions, and considerably more greenery than in any other country in the Middle East.

The Lebanese Ministry of the Environment has details of its activities and press releases available at www.moe.gov.lb.

First, there is the narrow coastal strip, alternating between sandy beaches and rocky outcrops forming natural ports, on which the major cities are situated. Inland, the 'backbone' formed by the Mt Lebanon Range rises steeply with a dramatic set of peaks and ridges; the highest peak, Qornet as-Sawda, reaches over 3000m, and is located southeast of Tripoli. South of Beirut are the beautiful Chouf Mountains, which become progressively lower in altitude as you head south. This is an area particularly abundant in waterfalls, due to a layer of nonporous rock that forces water to the surface in large enough quantities to produce large springs at elevations of up to 1500m. The result is that you'll spot crops being cultivated at unusually high altitudes when travelling in the area.

To the east the Mt Lebanon Range gives way steeply to the Bekaa Valley, 150km from end to end. Although low in comparison with the mountain peaks, it's still 1000m above sea level. Flanked by mountains, the Bekaa Valley lies in a rain shadow and is considerably more arid than the rest of the country; nevertheless, it is the major agricultural area, especially noted for its high-quality wines – along with its less visible crops of cannabis. Further east again, and forming a natural border with Syria, the Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyya (Anti-Lebanon Range) rises in a sheer arid massif from the plain.

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (www.spnlb.org) is a dynamic organisation, committed to conserving Lebanon's wildlife in all its forms.

WILDLIFE

Animals

Slowly, it seems, the Lebanese are being weaned off their addiction to hunting, shooting or spearing anything wild that dares step, swim or glide within its diminutive borders. Over the last few years, increasingly strict hunting bans have been put in place, resulting in once-prolific indigenous species beginning to repopulate the country's reserves. Wolves, wild boar, ibexes and gazelles may remain endangered species in Lebanon, but they have once again been sighted in the glorious Chouf Cedar Reserve (p323), along with wild cats, porcupines and badgers.

The Association for Forests, Development and Conservation (www.afdc.org.lb) runs reforestation, firefighting and ecotourism programmes, as well as an ecolodge 7km from the Chouf Cedar Reserve.

One group of creatures that has, in general, been less affected by Lebanon's troubled past are the vast numbers of migrating birds that pass through its airspace on paths between Africa and Europe or Asia. Some 135 species of bird have been observed off the Lebanese coast, while further out at the Palm Islands Reserve (p333), over 300 have been seen. A variety of nesting birds make their homes on the islands, including the mistle thrush, tern, broad-billed sandpiper, osprey and various types of finch, while endangered turtle species come ashore to lay their eggs. The Bekaa Valley is another extremely important migratory stop for millions of birds, including storks (which pass through every April), hoopoes, red-rumped swallows, buzzards, golden eagles and kestrels – so if birds are your thing, all you'll need is a pair of binoculars and a notebook to be in ornithological heaven.

Plants

In spite of widespread deforestation before, during and after the war, Lebanon remains the most densely wooded of all the Middle Eastern countries. Many varieties of pine, including Aleppo pine, flourish on the mountains, in addition to juniper, oak, beech and cypress. In spring there is an abundance of wildflowers on the hills and mountains, including the indigenous Lebanon violet.

A wealth of information on Chouf Cedar Reserve's work, programmes and visitor information can be found on their website at www.shoufcedar.org.

That said, the most famous flora of all in Lebanon – the cedar tree – is now found on only a few mountaintop sites, notably at Bcharré and near Barouk in the Chouf Mountains. These lonely groves are all that remain of the once-great cedar forests; however, there are some sites where new trees are being planted. It will take centuries before new forests look anything like their predecessors. For information on Lebanon's cedar trees, see p324.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Lebanon's national parks and reserves are well worth visiting and supporting. Home to diverse flora and fauna, most have a 'Friends Association', offering both environmental and practical information for visitors, and can organise a guide to accompany you on walks. Recently, several small new reserves have been created – albeit with tiny budgets and extremely long-term goals in mind – showing that signs bode well for Lebanon's natural future.

Chouf Cedar Reserve

Lebanon's largest nature reserve, Chouf Cedar Reserve (p323) covers over 50,000 hectares – an astonishing 5% of the country's entire area. Established in 1996, it's well managed and easy to visit, boasting six cedar forests, including three that contain old-growth cedars, and a huge variety of flora and fauna, including a number of endangered species.

Horsh Ehden's website can be found at www.horshehden.org.

Horsh Ehden Forest Nature Reserve

Just 3km from the summer resort of Ehden, this small reserve (p339) comprises a unique natural habitat supporting rare indigenous trees and plants, including the Cicilian fir, the Lebanon violet and the Ehden milk vetch along with dozens of rare birds and butterflies.

More information on the conservation of Aamiq Marsh can be found at http://en.arocha.org/lebanon/.

Palm Islands Reserve

A series of islands lying 5km off the coast of Tripoli, the Palm Islands Reserve (p333) covers 5 sq km of land and sea and form an important nesting place for marine birds as well as turtles and Mediterranean monk seals.

Aamiq Marsh

Aamiq Marsh (p354), halfway between Chtaura and Lake Qaraoun, is Lebanon's last major wetland. The area is a haven for migrating and aquatic birds, but was in a perilous state until a Christian nature conservation organisation began working with locals to improve the area.