

## Modern Lebanon and Old Ruins

Lebanon instantly feels different than the rest of the Middle East. There are posters of women running for political office. There are posters of women in short miniskirts and bathing suits. There are ritzy clubs that serve alcohol where people have to make reservations up to a month in advance. There are people that run and blatantly exercise in public. But despite these striking differences, there is still some of the tradition of the Middle East.



Tripoli in the north is an average city but has spectacular countryside nearby. Tripoli has an old Crusader fortress but has a lack of labels so sometimes it is difficult to understand what one is looking at. There is an old part of the city with a Grand Mosque, small bazaar and clock tower. More impressive than Tripoli is a day trip to Bcharre' and the Qadisha Valley. The red-roofed villages in the valley harks of Germany not Lebanon. There are numerous hiking opportunities in the area and in the winter, snow skiing is quite common. About five miles from Bcharre' is the Qadisha Grotto which has some great limestone formations including ones that look like a crucified Jesus.

While walking to the cave, I met four Kuwaitis who were nice enough to give me a ride to the caves. They then gave me a ride all the way back to Tripoli. Then we went out to eat and they bought me some seafood. Then we went out for pastries and they paid for that as well. I exchanged contact information with one of the four and he paid all my expenses while I was in Kuwait as well. This was the type of hospitality I experienced throughout the Middle East.

Heading south, Beirut is clearly the main city in Lebanon. One of the primary buildings is the National Museum which has works from the Greeks, Roman, Phoenicians and the Hellenistic period. There are also glass figures from the Third Century BC, figures of Venus, an ancient God, Bes, and pan (the devil). Also present are terracotta funerary and items from the Iron Age, Bronze Age and animal statues from the middle Bronze Age. Downstairs, a movie illustrates the refurbishing of the museum after a recent war with Israel largely destroyed the building.

Near the National Museum is the Green Line which divided the city in a recent war. The city center is heavily populated and has heavy traffic. One good place to get away from the traffic is the Corniche along the Mediterranean Sea. Many people are here at night, running and

exercising which is a sign of wealth. Beirut was one of the few places in the Middle East where I saw a lot of people exercising and eating properly. Along the promenade is several beaches and Pigeon Rocks which a rock formation which has become something of an emblem of Beirut. There aren't that many other historical places but one area has Parliament, a shopping area, the Mohammed al-Amin Mosque and St. George's Cathedral. The American University in Beirut is a famous university with welcoming grounds near the Corniche.



Near Beirut is Byblos, which has one of many Roman ruins in the area. Some people come for the rocky beach which is free or the sand beaches which aren't. There is also an old church, St. John's, and an overpriced wax museum. However, most come for the ruins. There is an old moat, royal necropolis tombs, a small, rebuilt theater as the Crusaders took the real one, columns and a temple dedicated to the Lady of Byblos, but the temple has largely deteriorated. In the prehistoric quarter, there are rectangular buildings but not too much to see. Other places to visit are the obelisks, Persian Fortress, and Nymphaeum (feminine deities), so there is a fair amount to see in a small area.



The Roman ruins in Byblos are impressive but do not compare to Palmyra, in the eastern part of Syria. Amazingly, most of the ruins are free which means visitors can see the ruins at any time of the day or night, but sunset is especially striking. The main part of the free area is the Monumental Arch followed by the Colonnade. This was literally the center of the city in Roman times. There are smaller temples along the colonnade which are frequented by the tour groups. A good alternative is walking

to the towers surrounding the old city and getting away from the crowds. Quietly gazing at the ruins from a distance is better than getting elbowed by a tourist who wants one more picture.

The Bel Temple, dedicated to an ancient god, is the main part of the three areas which require paid admission. Upon entering the temple, one enters the courtyard area, where animals were sacrificed on an altar. The temple has many stone carvings with camels and animals. Locals had lived in the actual temple area until the Twentieth Century. Unfortunately, when the French took over, they destroyed all the houses except one.

How the Temple of Bel looked originally is illustrated in the Palmyra Museum which is located in the modern city of Palmyra. There are old coins and mummies in the museum. Modern Palmyra revolves around ancient Palmyra so most places near the ruins are restaurants, bars or tour agencies which cater to tourists and then residential areas as one moves away from ancient Palmyra. The main culinary delights are mensaf with baba ghanooj, which are eggplants with tahina and olive oil.

Also in Syria, is Apamea an old Roman ruin dominated by its cardo or main street. The street has over one mile of columns, mostly recreated with the reconstruction continuing to this day. Apamea has smaller temples, a theater and an agora all of which are in need of more reconstruction. Locals speed towards tourists on their motorcycles attempting to sell coins. They state that they are original, but they clearly are not. The bargaining starts at twenty Euros but quickly drop down to under one dollar when you tell them you know they are fake.

Lebanon, especially Beirut, feels very different than most of the rest of the Middle East. Beirut was once called "The Paris of the Middle East" and as the city continues to build, one can see why. Leaving Beirut for the northern valleys is a complete change from the modern, metropolitan feel. Moving further away from modern days are the Roman ruins in Lebanon and neighboring Syria.