

Beirut

بيروت

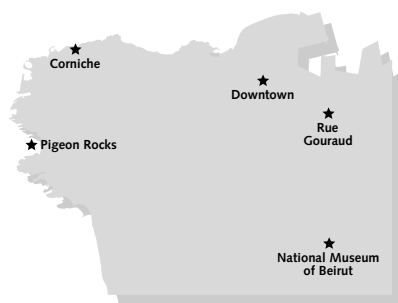


What Beirut is depends entirely on where you are. If you're gazing at the beautifully reconstructed colonial relics and mosques of central Beirut's Downtown, the city is a triumph of rejuvenation over disaster. If you're in the young, vibrant neighbourhoods of Gemmayzeh or Achrafiye, Beirut is about living for the moment: partying, eating and drinking as if there's no tomorrow. If you're standing in the shadow of buildings still peppered with bullet holes, or walking the Green Line with an elderly resident, it's a city of bitter memories and a dark past. If you're with Beirut's Armenians, Beirut is about salvation; if you're with its handful of Jews, it's about hiding your true identity. Here you'll find the freest gay scene in the Arab Middle East, yet homosexuality is still illegal. If you're in one of Beirut's southern refugee camps, Beirut is about sorrow and displacement; other southern districts are considered a base for paramilitary operations and south Beirut is home to infamous Hezbollah secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah. For some, it's a city of fear; for others, freedom.

Throw in maniacal drivers, air pollution from old, smoking Mercedes taxis, world-class universities, bars to rival Soho and coffee thicker than mud, political demonstrations, and swimming pools awash with more silicone than Miami. Add people so friendly you'll swear it can't be true, a political situation existing on a knife-edge, internationally renowned museums and gallery openings that continue in the face of explosions, assassinations and power cuts, and you'll find that you've never experienced a capital city quite so alive and kicking – despite its frequent volatility.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take part in a Beirut ritual with a leisurely Saturday evening stroll along the **Corniche** (p273)
- Stop for a nargileh break at a café overlooking **Pigeon Rocks** (p274)
- Experience 6000 years of history at the **National Museum of Beirut** (p270)
- Follow Beirut's young and beautiful to **Rue Gouraud's** (p278) chic bars
- Eat your way through the city's eclectic selection of top **restaurants** (p283)
- Wander through Beirut's reconstructed **Downtown** (p274), marvelling at the contrast with many of the city's still bullet-riddled edifices
- Float it out in one of Beirut's **beach club** pools (p279), sipping on a killer cocktail



■ AREA CODE: 01

■ POPULATION: 1.3 MILLION

HISTORY

For most outsiders, Beirut's history begins and ends with its bloody civil war, waged for 15 years along the infamous Green Line that cut the city in two, with Muslims to the west and Christians to the east. But its story stretches back much further than its modern strife, and the city's surface today conceals a fascinating, though often barely visible, ancient history.

The earliest traces of habitation in Beirut date from the Stone Age when the area now occupied by the city was in fact two islands in the delta of the Beirut River. Later, when the river silted up, the area became one land mass. Excavations in the Downtown area have revealed a Canaanite site dating from 1900 BC, with an entrance gate of dressed stone, and, nearby, the remains of Phoenician canals.

The city's name is probably a derivative of the Arabic for 'well' or 'spring' (modern Arabic still uses the word *bir* for well). The first historical reference to Beirut dates from the 14th century BC, when it is mentioned in cuneiform tablets discovered at Tell al-Amarna, Egypt, in the form of letters from the Canaanite king of Beirut begging the pharaoh Amenhotep IV for assistance in repelling Hittite invaders.

In Phoenician times, Beirut appears to have been overshadowed by Sidon, Tyre

and Byblos, but after Alexander the Great's conquest it starts to be mentioned in Hellenistic sources, and excavations have revealed an extensive Hellenistic city upon which the later Roman grid was based. It wasn't until the Roman period, however, that the city really came into its own, both as a commercial port and military base, with large public buildings and monuments swiftly erected, along with a series of baths, a theatre and a number of markets. Evidence of both the baths and the main public square, the Cardo Maximus, are still visible today in modern Beirut.

By the 3rd century AD, the city had found particular fame and prestige through its School of Law, one of the main Roman centres of jurisprudence, which rivalled those of Athens, Alexandria and Caesarea. It was actually here that the basis of the famous Justinian Code, upon which the Western legal system drew inspiration, was established. The city's importance as a trading hub and centre of learning continued as the Roman Empire gave way to the Byzantine; its commercial enterprises flourished around the silk trade, and Beirut became the seat of a bishopric. But then, in 551, a devastating earthquake, combined with a tidal wave, almost destroyed the city, killing a vast number of citizens. The School of Law was quickly evacuated and moved to

SPIRITS AGAINST BULLDOZERS

While wandering Downtown Beirut, you'll doubtless come across the immense building site known as the Souqs Project, a vast new leisure complex now scheduled to open sometime in 2008, incorporating shops, restaurants and office units. Standing on the opposite side of the road to view construction work going on over the fence, you should spot one incongruous little old dome among the profusion of glass and steel. This is the remains of a *zawiya*, or hospice and religious school, built by 16th-century mystic and scholar, Mohammed ibn Iraq al-Dimashqi; it's the only Mamluk building still standing in Beirut, and one with a curious tale attached.

The Souqs Project stands on the site of Beirut's historic main souqs, destroyed during the civil war. In 1992, the rubble was first cleared by archaeologists who worked against the clock to investigate the area before it was built over by developers. A bulldozer clearing an area in what had been Souq Tawile was scooping up debris when it came up against a small, domed building. The machine suddenly stopped. The driver, wanting to finish his job, started the machine up again, but when he tried to move the controls, his hand was suddenly paralysed. Later, when he moved away from the site, the paralysis disappeared.

News quickly spread of the 'miracle' that saved the building and crowds visited the shrine, with reports circulating of miraculous healing among the ill who had prayed there. Muslim religious authorities erected a protective wall around the *zawiya*, announcing that it would not be demolished. Thus, when the Souqs Project finally opens its doors for business, you'll see the mystical *zawiya* standing proud amid yet another Beirut shrine to shopping.

Sidon, and the calamity marked a decline of the city that was to last for centuries.

In 635, the city fell to Muslim Arab conquerors, who seized it without much effort, and their rule went uninterrupted until 1110 when, after a long siege, the city fell into the Crusader hands of Baldwin I of Boulogne, and a Latin bishopric was established.

Beirut remained in Crusader hands for 77 years, during which time the Crusaders built the succinctly titled Church of St John the Baptist of the Knights Hospitallers, on the site of an ancient temple (now the Al-Omari Mosque). In 1187 Saladin (Salah ad-Din) managed to wrest the city back into Muslim hands, but was only able to hold on to it for six years before Amoury, King of Cyprus, besieged the city and Muslim forces fled. Next, under the rule of Jean I of Ibelin, the city's influence grew and spread throughout the Latin East, but the Crusaders lost the city again, this time for good, in July 1291, when the Muslim Mamluks took possession.

The Mamluks remained in control of Beirut until they were ousted from the city by the Ottoman army in 1516. Once part of the powerful Ottoman Empire, the city was granted semiautonomy in return for taxes paid to the sultan. One of its emirs, Fakhreddine (Fakhr ad-Din al-Maan II), established what was in effect an independent kingdom for himself and made Beirut his favourite residence, becoming the first ruler to unite most of the territory encompassed by modern Lebanon under one authority. Fakhreddine's keen business sense led him to trade with the European powers, most notably the Venetians, basing his trading empire around silk, and Beirut began to recover economically and regain some of its former prestige.

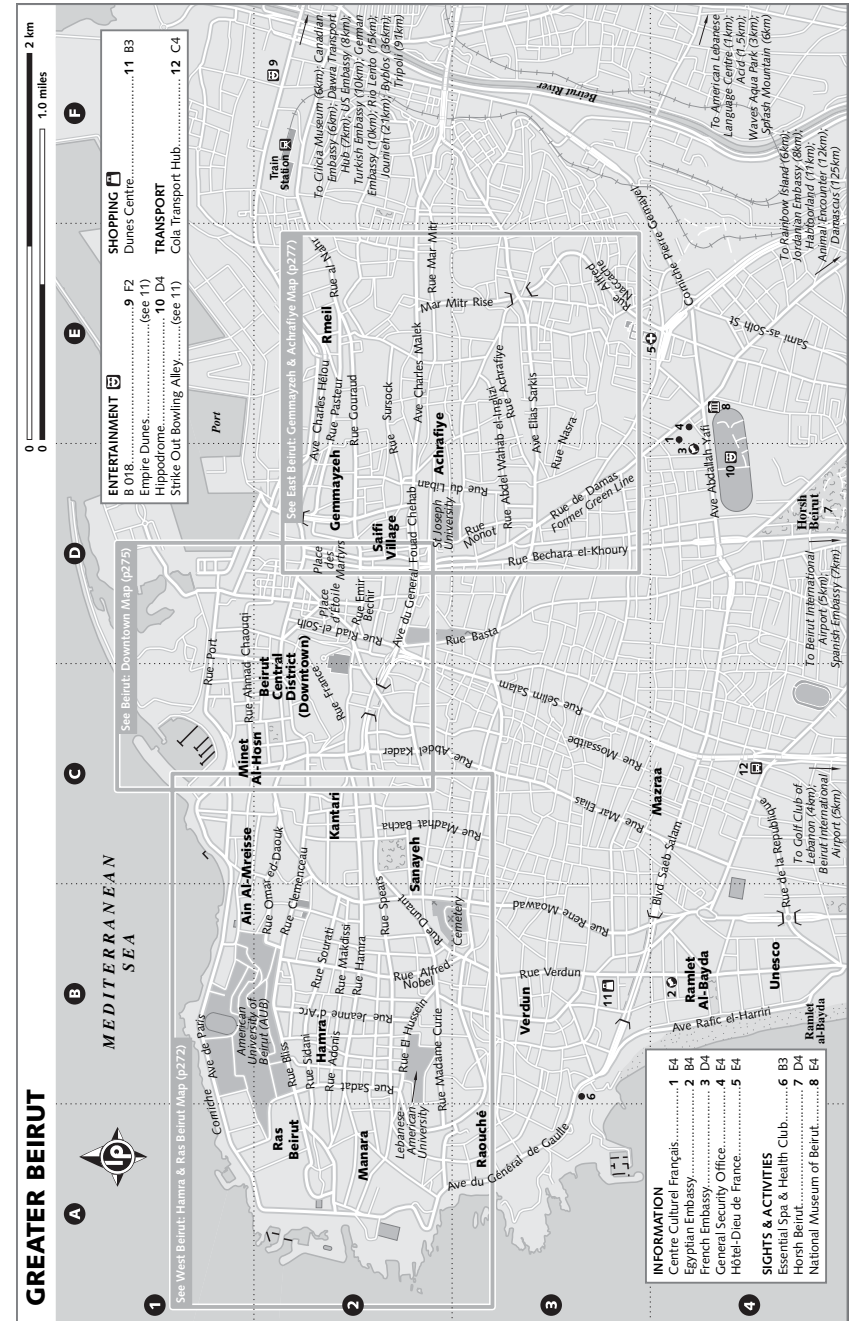
The 18th century, though, would present mixed fortunes for the city. Emir Bashir Shihab II (1788–1840) injected it with new vigour, renewing prosperity and stability, but in 1832 entered into an alliance with Ibrahim Pasha, son of the rebellious Mohammed Ali of Egypt. Mohammed Ali's threat to the Ottoman Empire, and by extension, alarmed the British and in 1840 the city was bombarded and subsequently recaptured for the Ottomans, and Emir Bashir was sent into exile.

The population of Beirut at that time was only 45,000, but a booming silk trade and the influx of Maronites fleeing massacres in the Chouf Mountains and Damascus led numbers to double during the following 20 years. This was the start of the commercial boom that transformed Beirut from a backwater into a commercial powerhouse, and also marked the beginning of European meddling in Lebanon. The massacres of the Maronites resulted in the arrival of French troops in Beirut, while ties with Europe steadily grew in the coming decades. In 1866 Syrian and American missionaries founded the Syrian Protestant College, now known as the American University of Beirut (AUB; see p271), which soon became – and remains today – one of the most prestigious universities in the Middle East.

During WWI, Beirut suffered a blockade by the Allies, which was intended to starve out the Turks. This, combined with a series of natural disasters, resulted in widespread famine, followed by plague, which killed more than a quarter of the population. A revolt broke out against the Turks and resulted in the mass hanging of the rebel leaders in what became known as the Place des Martyrs (Martyrs' Sq).

WWI ended Turkish rule and on 8 October 1918 the British army, including a French detachment, arrived in Beirut; on 25 April 1920 the League of Nations granted a French mandate over Lebanon (and Syria), and Beirut became the capital of the state of Greater Beirut.

During WWII Beirut was occupied by the Allies and, thanks to its port, became an important supply centre. In 1946 the French left the city and, following Lebanon's first civil war in 1958, Beirut managed to reinvent itself as one of the main commercial and banking centres of the Middle East. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War and then the 1967 Six Day War saw huge numbers of Palestinian refugees settle in refugee camps south of Beirut, where, despite massacres and intense poverty, they remain today. Nevertheless, the 1960s were truly swinging in Beirut, with international superstars arriving to putter on its waters on private yachts and party the night away in its seafront hotels. This would be short-lived, though, and all hopes of a glorious Beirut 'Paris of the East' effectively died with the coming of the civil war in 1975.



The civil war saw Beirut transformed into a bloody, terrifying epicentre of anarchy. The city was ruled, area by area, by militias loyal to one of various factions; the infamous Green Line tore the city into Christian and Muslim halves, while massacres, hostage-takings and suicide bombings soon became commonplace.

Continual intercommunal fighting between militias, combined with shelling from Israeli fighter planes, soon devastated the city, leaving tens of thousands of human casualties and a shattered economy. By 1991, the end of the civil war saw the Green Line dismantled and the arduous task of rebuilding began, but the scars are still evident in the old bullet holes that pockmark many buildings.

The post-war government faced a daunting task in repairing the country's destroyed infrastructure, but did so with spirit and panache, the jewel in the crown being the reconstruction of the Beirut Central District, or Downtown (see *Solidere's Struggles*, p276).

Recent events have cast a dark shadow over the city's troubled modern history. The Israel-Hezbollah offensive of 2006, though causing little damage to the centre of Beirut, devastated some southern suburbs, and deflated the hopes of many Beirutis for a prosperous, forward-looking future. Meanwhile, the resulting economic downturn, combined with a spate of killings of anti-Syrian MPs (most notably former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005) and the erection of a Hezbollah 'tent city' in the city centre, have led many Beirutis to believe that plenty of storms are still to be weathered.

ORIENTATION

Geographically, Beirut is an easy city to get about. It's manageable, for the most part, on foot, with enough landmarks to keep you orientated on jaunts between its distinct neighbourhoods.

Most midrange accommodation, cheap eats and internet cafés are located around the university district of Hamra, to the northwest of the city. Hamra's main streets – Rue Hamra and Rue Bliss – run roughly parallel and from east to west, Rue Bliss bordering the vast campus of the AUB. Directly to the north of Hamra runs the

seafront Corniche, or Ave de Paris, along which are some of Beirut's top-end hotels and best beach clubs. To the south, the affluent district of Verdun comprises one of Beirut's wealthiest neighbourhoods, with designer clothes shops lining its central Rue Verdun. East from Hamra, you'll reach the busy Rue Fakh ed-Dine, which marks the eastern boundary of the immaculately restored Beirut Central District, also known as Downtown. An unmistakable landmark on Rue Fakh ed-Dine, useful for navigating, is the shell of the Holiday Inn (see p282), which stands beside the swanky InterContinental Phoenicia.

At the centre of the immaculately restored Downtown is the circular Place d'Étoile, also known as Nejme Sq, which is lined with pavement cafés. Just east again is Place des Martyrs. A good landmark by which to get your bearings here is the immense Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque, which looks very much like Istanbul's Blue Mosque, especially at night.

The eastern edge of Place des Martyrs is marked by the broad, chaotic Rue de Damas, once the path of the Green Line that sliced Beirut in two during the civil war years. This road marks the border between traditionally Muslim West Beirut and the Christian East, and forms the western edge of the trendy, atmospheric Gemmayzeh neighbourhood that is centred on Rue Gouraud. South from Gemmayzeh, with a rough boundary marked by the busy Ave Charles Malek, is another young and popular area, Achrafiye, whose action focuses on clubbers' paradise, Rue Monot.

To the south of Achrafiye, further down Rue de Damas, you'll find the Cola transport hub, the National Museum of Beirut and the hippodrome race course, and, further on, the infamous Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra, Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh.

Something important to bear in mind before you take to Beirut's streets is that street signs aren't easy to navigate by. The blue street signs, located on corner buildings, rarely show the street name itself, showing only the sector (suburb) name, sector number and rue (street) number. Compounding this, numbered buildings are rare and some streets are entirely unnamed, while others are often locally known by different names than those given on a map.

BEIRUT IN...

Two Days

Start your day with a strong coffee and a pastry on **Rue Bliss** (p271) with the AUB students. Then head for the must-see **National Museum of Beirut** (p270) before working your way back along the former Green Line to **Gemmayzeh** (p278) for lunch at **Le Chef** (p283).

Late afternoon, take a stroll along the **Corniche** (p273), timing it for a sunset drink and a nargileh overlooking **Pigeon Rocks** (p274), then take to the night sky on the Ferris wheel at **Lunapark** (p273). Next, return to your hotel room to primp and preen in time for dinner in **Achrafiye** (p284), then wander over to **Rue Monot** (p276) for some serious clubbing action.

Clothes shoppers should start day two by heading to the **ABC Mall** (p290) or **Rue Verdun** (p271) to browse the designer rails, or check out the high-street names on Rue Hamra. For more unusual shopping, stroll around **Saifi Village** (p289), before checking out the gorgeous, though controversial, reconstructed **Downtown** (p274). For a night of live tunes, head either to the **Blue Note** (p288) or **Bar Louis** (p286) for smooth jazz, or the **Gemmayzeh Café** (p288) to hear live *oud* (lute) music.

Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, then on day three head to **Baalbek** (p354) for the superlative Roman ruins, stopping for lunch at Zahlé's picturesque **Cafés de Bardouni** (p350) and visiting the **Ksara Winery** (p351) on the way back. On day four, take a trip to the ancient site of **Byblos** (p306) for the ruins, the fossils (p310) or just for lunch at the **Byblos Fishing Club** (p312). Stop off on the way back at the **Jeita grotto** (p303) or Jounieh's soaring **téléférique** (p304) for under- or over-ground thrills.

Buildings themselves are frequently only identified by their function (eg the British Bank Building).

The best thing to do, therefore, is take a decent map with you (see Maps below) and check every few streets that you're heading the right way, aided by the landmarks you spot en route.

Maps

If you're planning on doing a lot of wandering in Beirut, an invaluable aid is the English-language *Zawarib Beirut*, Beirut's equivalent to a UK A-Z street map, which covers 100 sq km of the city and its suburbs. It's available at most bookshops and hotels and costs LL15,000 or US\$10, after which you're more-or-less guaranteed not to put a foot wrong in Beirut ever again. Just remember that names here are listed in their English, rather than their French form (eg Damascus Blvd instead of Rue de Damas).

Another decent city map, albeit in a more unwieldy fold-out form, is provided on the reverse of the countrywide road map *Lebanon Tourist Map* published by **Paravision** (www.paravision.org), again widely available at Beirut bookshops for LL12,000.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Beirut has a good selection of foreign language bookshops. The best place to browse is Rue Bliss in Hamra, where lovely, dusty shops stock new and used titles, as well as maps, postcards and the innovative 'postcardigital' series. These are CD-rom postcards containing glorious photos and enough interesting tidbits to assuage the fears of even the most worried relative back home.

Books & Pens (Map p272; ☎ 741 975; Rue Jeanne d'Arc, Hamra; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat) This bookshop stocks extensive art supplies and stationery, as well as international newspapers and magazines.

Librairie Antoine Hamra (Map p272; ☎ 341 470; Rue Hamra); Achrafiye (Map p277; ☎ 331 811; Ave Elias Sarkis) A reliable chain with travel titles, a broad selection of nonfiction and illustrated tomes and a wide range of books for children.

Naufal Booksellers (Map p272; ☎ 354 898; Rue Sourati, Hamra) Stockist of all things Lebanese, from maps to cookery books; a great place with helpful staff, to spend an hour or two browsing and planning your onward journey.

Virgin Megastore (Map p275; ☎ 999 666; Opera Bldg, Place des Martyrs, Downtown; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat) A failsafe option for fiction, new releases, maps and coffee-table titles. Also a good place to browse for Lebanese music, and pick up tickets to the slew of Lebanese summer festivals.

Cultural Centres

The cultural centres listed below are very active in Beirut, often staging art and photography exhibitions, film festivals, plays and musical events highlighting work from their respective countries. Check the press, the relevant websites or phone them to find out what's on.

British Council (Map p272; ☎ 428 900; www.britishcouncil.org/lebanon; Berytech Bldg, opp French Embassy) Events include exhibitions, theatre productions and film screenings.

Centre Culturel Français (Map p265; ☎ 420 230; Espace Des Lettres, Rue de Damas) Near the National Museum of Beirut.

Goethe Institut (Map p272; ☎ 740 524; www.goethe.de/beirut; Gideon Bldg, Rue Bliss, Manara)

Instituto Cervantes (Map p275; ☎ 970 253; www.cervantes.es; Rue al-Maarad, Downtown)

Italian Cultural Institute (Map p272; ☎ 749 801; www.icibeirut.org; 2nd fl, Najjar Bldg, Rue de Rome)

Emergency

Ambulance (Red Cross) (☎ 140)

Civil Defense (☎ 125)

Doctors at Home (☎ 444 400/401) A medical call-out service for emergencies, it charges LL50,000 for a daytime visit and LL60,000 at night. It's open 24 hours.

Fire Brigade (☎ 175)

Internal Security Forces (☎ 112)

Police (☎ 160)

Tourist Police (☎ 350 901, 343 286, 343 209)

Immigration Office

Visa extensions can be obtained from the **General Security Office** (Map p265; ☎ 1717 for visa, work permit & residency permit information in English, Arabic & French; www.general-security.gov.lb; Rue de Damas; ☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Thu, 8-10am Fri, 8am-noon Sat), just north of the National Museum. For more information, see Visa Extensions (p389) in the Lebanon Directory.

Internet Access

You'll have no problem finding reliable internet access in Beirut, though many internet cafés are as noisy and smoke-filled as the city's bars. The biggest concentration is in the vicinity of the AUB campus (p271) and, just like the bars, opening times are flexible, with many staying open beyond midnight.

If you have a wireless-enabled laptop, you'll find there are many 'hotspots' throughout the city, though most require a prepaid card. One of the most popular services is **IDM** (www.

idm.net.lb/wifi), which offers access via pre-paid scratch cards. Costs range from \$US5 for one hour to \$US40 for one week unlimited use, and cards are available in bookshops, cafés, hotels and computer equipment shops. Some cafés also have their own individual paid wireless services; Starbucks, on Rue Hamra, sells its own cards for prices equivalent to those of IDM.

All the internet cafés listed below have roughly equivalent prices – around LL3000 per hour – and all are open early in the morning until midnight, if not substantially later.

Momento Internet Café (Map p272; ☎ 811 815; Rue Labban, Hamra)

PC Club (Map p272; ☎ 745 338; Rue Sidani, Hamra) A popular student hangout that rarely shuts its doors.

Santa Computer (Map p277; ☎ 446 275; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh) Handy to the Gouraud restaurant area.

Virgin Café (Map p275; ☎ 999 777; Opera Bldg, Downtown) Situated on the 4th floor of the Virgin Megastore, this is one of the only internet cafés currently operating in Downtown.

Web Café (Map p272; ☎ 348 881; Rue Makhoul, Hamra) Surf the internet with chilled musical accompaniment and an ice-cold beer.

Internet Resources

Beirut Spring (www.beirutspring.com) A popular blog dealing with Lebanese society, written by 29-year-old Lebanese Mustapha, now living abroad.

Blogging Beirut (www.bloggingbeirut.com) Featured by many newspapers across the world, this blog is also home to the famous 'I Heart Beirut' bumper stickers.

Cyberia (www.thisisCyberia.com) One of Lebanon's main internet service providers (ISPs) and its 'portal' website is a good resource for an up-to-date weather check, and movie listings across Beirut; it also has a useful telephone directory listing everything from art galleries to universities.

Daleel (www.thedaleel.com) A useful internet directory with links to a vast range of services, groups and activities in Beirut and beyond.

Terranet (www.terra.net.lb) Another good ISP site offering movie listings, news and a travel booking service for onward flights.

Buy Lebanese (www.buylebanese.com) Really a resource for when you get back home, this popular shopping site will send those sweets, nargilehs, Beirut T-shirts or pickled cucumbers you forgot to buy, direct to over 50 countries.

Laundry

Self-service laundrettes aren't exactly two-a-penny in Beirut, so most travellers either have their laundry cleaned at the hotel, or

pack the travel wash and do it, in the time-honoured fashion, in the shower. Beirut's budget hotels can usually arrange for a load to be done for about US\$3 per 4-5kg; the more expensive hotels charge this just for one shirt or pair of jeans.

The best exception to the rule is the cheerful **Laundromatic** (Map p272; ☎ 03-376 187; Rue Sidani; load under/over 4.5kg incl detergent LL4000/5500, dryer per 10 min LL2000; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat), which proclaims itself to be the 'first coin-operated laundrette in Lebanon' and where washing and ironing services are also available.

Media

Beirut's two foreign-language newspaper options are the *Daily Star* (www.dailystar.com; LL2000) in English and *L'Orient-Le Jour* (www.lorientlejour.com; LL2000) in French. Online, the best source of up-to-date independent journalism is **Ya Libnan** (www.yalibnan.com). See the Media section in the Culture chapter (p251) for an overview of Lebanon's press.

Though its publishing run is often interrupted, the monthly *Time Out Beirut* (www.timeoutbeirut.com) is another great source of up-to-date 'what's on' listings. The *Guide* (LL5000) is a glossy monthly that reviews the latest hotspots, as well as detailing events, concerts, exhibitions and activities for kids. It can be quite hard to find, and only the larger bookshops seem to stock it. Librairie Antoine (see Bookshops, p267) is a good bet. *Agenda Culturel* (LL3000) offers the same information, in French, but is published every two weeks and covers the whole country.

Medical Services

Beirut boasts several good hospitals, with facilities to rival any major European city.

American University of Beirut Hospital (Map p272; ☎ 350 000, 354 911; Rue Sourati) Considered one of the best hospitals in the Middle East, with English and French spoken.

Clemenceau Medical Center (Map p272; ☎ 372 888; Rue Clemenceau) Affiliated with John Hopkins International.

Hôtel-Dieu de France (Map p265; ☎ 615 300; www.hdf.usj.edu.lb; Rue Alfred Naccache, Achrafie)

Rizk (Map p277; ☎ 200 800; Rue Zahar, Achrafie)

St George's Greek Hospital (Map p277; ☎ 585 700; Rue Rmeil, Achrafie) Known locally as 'Roum'.

Money

You'll barely be able to walk 10 yards without spotting an ATM in Beirut, most of which

dispense both US dollars and Lebanese lira. If you're looking for moneychangers, there are plenty dotted all along Rue Hamra.

Amex (☎ 977 800) If your Amex card is lost, stolen or damaged while in Lebanon, call the American Express representative office who'll give you details of how to replace it.

Amir Exchange (Map p272; ☎ 341 265; Rue Hamra, Hamra; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) One of the few places you can change travellers' cheques, preferably in US\$, it charges US\$2 to US\$3 per US\$100. Bring your passport and original purchaser's receipt.

Sogetour (Map p272; ☎ 747 111; Ground fl, Block A, Gefinor Center, Rue Maamari, Hamra; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat) The best place in Beirut to exchange Amex travellers cheques in US dollars. It charges a 2% commission.

Pharmacies

Berty Pharmacy (Map p277 ☎ 200 767, 322 266; Nazlet el-Salameh, Sassine Sq, Achrafie; ☎ to 11.30pm Mon-Sat, to 10pm Sun) A well stocked pharmacy.

Mazen Pharmacy (☎ 313 362; Blvd Saeb Salam, Mazraa; ☎ 24hr) It offers a free delivery service between 8am and midnight; you simply telephone your order through and pay on delivery. The pharmacist speaks English and French and can advise you on what drugs you may need.

Wardieh Pharmacy (Map p272; ☎ 343 679, 751 345; Wardieh Sq, Rue Sourati, Hamra) Another pharmacy offering free 24-hour home delivery.

Post

Though there are plenty of yellow tin post boxes scattered about Beirut, it's best to send letters direct from the post office to make sure you get the postage cost correct. Most of Beirut's post offices are open 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 1.30pm Saturday. For details of courier services, see Post (p387) in the Lebanon Directory.

Handy post office branches:

Libanpost Achrafie (Map p277; ☎ 321 657; Ogero Bldg, Sassine Sq, Achrafie); Gemmayzeh (Map p277; ☎ 442 902; Zighbi Bldg, Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh); Hamra (Map p272; ☎ 344 706; Matta Bldg, Rue Makkdissi, Hamra)

Telephone & Fax

For details of how to make phone calls or send faxes, see Telephone & Fax (p387) in the Lebanon Directory.

Tourist Information

Tourist Information Office (Map p272; ☎ 343 073; www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb; Ground fl, Ministry of Tourism Bldg, 550 Rue Banque du Liban, Hamra; ☎ 8am-

1.30pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-3pm Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Though it may look closed when you pass its big windows on Rue Hamra, it probably isn't: enter by the back door, accessible through the covered car park. Staff are extremely helpful, with a range of free brochures available in different languages and a selection of larger, illustrated books to sit down and browse through. The office may also have LCC bus route maps available for free: just ask at the counter.

Tourist Police Office (Map p272; ☎ 752 428; fax 343 504; Rue Banque du Liban, Hamra; ☎ 24hr) Located on the opposite side of the covered arcade from the Tourist Information Office, head here for complaints, problems or if you've been robbed.

Travel Agencies

There are travel agents all over Beirut but two reliable options are listed below.

Campus Travel (Map p272; ☎ 744 588; www.campus-travel.net; Maktabi Bldg, Rue Makhoul, Hamra) Travel agency focusing on student travel. Arranges skiing trips, tours in Lebanon and to neighbouring countries, such as Syria and Jordan.

Tania Travel (Map p272; ☎ 739 682; www.tania-travel.com; 1st fl, Shames Bldg, Rue Sidani, Hamra) Located opposite Jeanne d'Arc theatre, this agency offers tours to Aanjjar, Baalbek, Bcharre, Beiteddine, Byblos, the Cedars, Deir al-Qamar, Sidon, Tyre and day trips to Damascus.

Visa Extensions

See Visa Extensions (p389) for details of how to extend your one-month visa and make it valid for three months.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The most obvious hazard in Beirut is the traffic, especially for pedestrians: parents with children may balk at the sight of a dual carriageway turned six-lane highway with no pedestrian crossing in sight. Moreover, look out for potholes, broken paving stones and loose electrical wiring on Beirut's pavements. This is especially problematic at night as some areas of the city have poor or no street lighting.

Theft in Beirut is not a great problem, but it pays to be vigilant with your bags at busy places. It is also advisable to keep your bag on your non-curb-side shoulder when walking the streets, since there have been reports of handbag robberies by thieves riding motor scooters.

At the time of writing, much of Downtown was heavily guarded by armed police, along with tanks, machine guns and rolls of

barbed wire. While this shouldn't discourage you from wandering its pristine streets, prepare to have your bag checked at many Downtown intersections and carry your passport, in case you're asked for ID.

Despite a strong police presence and no tangible threat to visitors, it's a good idea to stay away from the Hezbollah 'tent city', which currently extends from the south of Place des Martyrs to the northern end of Rue Monot.

For more on safety information, see Staying Safe, p244.

SIGHTS National Museum of Beirut

المتحف الوطني

Once situated on a strategically important intersection of the former Green Line, this must-see **museum** (Map p265; ☎ 612 295/7; www.beirutnationalmuseum.com; cnr Rue de Damas & Ave Abdallah Yafi; adult/student & child LL5000/1000; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun except some public holidays) has an impressive collection of archaeological artefacts, statuettes and sarcophagi. Every hour, between 9am and 4pm, the museum screens *Revival*, a fascinating short documentary on how staff saved the collection from the destruction of the civil war and subsequently restored the museum to its former glory.

The easiest way to get to the museum is to either take a 15-minute walk from Sodeco Sq along Rue de Damas (part of the former Green Line), or hail a service taxi and ask for Musée or the Hippodrome.

Inside, the exhibits are organised from prehistory to the Mamluk period, and it takes a couple of hours to view them at a leisurely pace. Nearly all exhibits are labelled in English, Arabic and French. A floor plan is included in the admission fee, but for more detailed information, invest in a museum guide (LL15,000) from the gift shop.

Highlights of the museum's collection include a Neolithic pebble idol from Byblos, possibly dating back as far as 9000 BC, one of the earliest representations of the human form found in Lebanon; the famous gilded bronze Phoenician statuettes, also from Byblos; a series of beautiful, cute white marble baby boy statues from Echmoun, offered to the gods in thanks for healing children; and a collection of Byzantine gold jewellery, found in a jar beneath a Beirut house.

Hamra & Ras Beirut

During the dark days of Lebanon's civil war, the adjacent districts of Hamra and Ras Beirut (Map p272) – home to Beirut's three universities – were the hub of the city's intellectual activity, the intelligentia clustering around cafés such as the Wimpy whose names live on in Beirut's history, though not their physical presences. Nowadays, these districts are less cool than Achrafiye or Gemmayzeh, but both Hamra and Ras Beirut nevertheless host a handful of good hotels and a plethora of cheap eateries, filled with students. Hamra in particular is a great hub for shopping, particularly for books, and has a lively but down-to-earth 24-hour vibe centred on **Rue Bliss**, courtesy of its student population.

Slightly further south from Hamra and Ras Beirut is the affluent, largely Muslim, district of Verdun, where lunching ladies flit all day between the glittering storefronts of Gucci, Armani and Hugo Boss. If label shopping's your thing, join them trailing along the **Rue Verdun** – preferably with a little handbag-sized dog if you can borrow one – and salivate at the temptations on display.

Just off the eastern end of Rue Hamra is the **University of Lebanon campus**, with its 19th-century buildings and very attractive grounds. This is also the location of the

Sanayeh Public Garden, one of the city's few public parks and a nice place for a stroll beneath the mature, leafy trees.

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The American University of Beirut (AUB; Map p272) is one of the Middle East's most prestigious educational institutes, and its campus and the surrounding Ras Beirut and Hamra areas are a hive of activity during semesters. The university is privately owned, nonsectarian and teaches all classes in English – hence the local students wandering around the Hamra district conversing in English as often as Arabic. Both the museum and the campus grounds are open to the public and are definitely worth a look.

Spread over 28 hectares, the beautiful, tree-shaded campus runs from Rue Bliss down to the sea and even has its own beach club for the summer months (see p279). But the stately charms of the campus did not save it from the ugliness of the civil war, with various kidnappings and murders of university staff, including the ninth president of the university, Dr Malcolm Kerr, who was assassinated outside his College Hall office in 1984. Today it's tranquil, green and filled with milling students; check out the What's On section of the university's website (www.aub.edu) to sample a taste of campus life.

THE LOOTING OF LEBANON

Amid the chaos of Lebanon's civil war, it wasn't only banks that robbers targeted to drain their coffers. The country's archaeological treasures, too, were subject to a degree of pillage not seen since waves of 18th- and 19th-century European colonists hauled off the region's treasures to stock their museums.

Militias stole from Department of Antiquities storerooms, ransacked archaeological sites and bulldozed entire cemeteries and ancient settlements in their search for treasure, destroying layer upon layer of historical evidence that can never be replaced. Even sarcophagi at the National Museum of Beirut were smashed in the hope of finding treasure inside. The thieves were frequently aided by unscrupulous middlemen and Western art dealers, who turned a blind eye to the provenance of the artefacts.

Many of the museum's treasures, however, were saved from looters by the diligence of its staff and it retains an impressive collection, frequently bolstered by new finds under the auspices of the Directorate General of Antiquities. It seems, though, that less attention is being paid to the city's open-air relics, as new condos and office blocks rise around them. Wander to the Cardo Maximus and you'll see rubbish, upturned plastic chairs and boxes of unlabelled remnants scattered about the majestic pillars.

A collection of articles, including an excellent piece by Robert Fisk chronicling the looting of Lebanon, can be found at <http://phoenicia.org/feature.html>.



INFORMATION

American University of Beirut	1	E2
Hospital	2	D3
Amir Exchange	3	D2
Books & Pens	4	C2
British Council	5	D2
Campus Travel	6	E2
Clemeceau Medical Centre	7	E2
Gefinor Center	8	B2
Goethe Institut	9	E3
Italian Cultural Institute	10	C2
Laundromatic	11	D3
LibanPost	12	D3
Librairie Antoine	13	C3
Momento Internet Cafe	14	E2
Naufal Booksellers	15	C2
PC Club	16	E2
Sogetour	17	D2
Tania Travel	18	E3
Tourist Information Office	19	E3
Tourist Police Office	20	E3
Wardieh Pharmacy	21	D2
Web Cafe	22	D2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Agial Art Gallery	22	D2
American Language Center	23	D2

American University of Beirut	24	C1
AUB Beach	25	D1
AUB Museum	26	D2
Gym 20	27	C3
La Plage	28	F1
Lebanese-American University	29	C4
Lunapark	30	A3
Pigeon Rocks	31	A4
Riviera Beach Club	32	B1
Sanayeh Public Garden	33	F3

SLEEPING

Al-Raouda	34	D3
Cedarland Hotel	35	D2
Marble Tower Hotel	36	D2
Mayflower Hotel	37	D2
Palm Beach Hotel	38	F1
Regis Hotel	39	F1
Riviera Hotel	40	B2

EATING

Barbar	41	D3
Bliss House	42	D2
Blue Elephant	43	B4
Charcuterie Bayoud	(see 44)	
Consumers Co-op	44	D3

Japanese Please!	45	D2
Kabab-ji	46	E3
La Tabkha	47	C3
Marouche	48	C2
Mino	49	D2
Pasta di Casa	50	F2
Smith's	51	C3
Taj Al-Moulouk	52	C2
Walimat Wardah	53	D3
Zaatar w Zeit	54	D2

DRINKING

Al-Kahwa	55	D2
Al-Raouda	56	A3
Bay Rock Cafe	57	B4
Lina's	58	C3
Ristretto	59	C2
Uncle Deek	60	E1

ENTERTAINMENT

Al-Medina Theatre	61	F2
Blue Note	62	D2
Théâtre de Beyrouth	63	E1

SHOPPING

Artisans du Liban et d'Orient	64	F1
Oriental Art Centre	65	D2

AUB Museum

This museum (Map p272; ☎ 340 549; <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/museum/>; AUB campus; admission free; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri except university & public holidays) was founded in 1868 and is one of the oldest in the Middle East. On permanent display is its collection of Lebanese and Middle Eastern artefacts including weapons, tools, flints, figurines, pottery and jewellery, along with a fine collection of Phoenician glass and Arab coins dating from as early as the 5th century BC.

The AUB Museum runs monthly lectures throughout the year, hosts temporary exhibitions and children's activities, and is involved in ongoing excavations in Lebanon and Syria.

Corniche

The Corniche (seafont; Map p272) is a favourite promenade spot, especially late in the afternoon and on weekends. Families, couples and groups of dressed-up young people saunter along its length, stopping to greet friends or to have a coffee-and-nargileh break at one of the cafés along the route. While many locals say the Corniche starts at Ras Beirut on Ave de Paris in the east and ends at the St George Yacht Motor Club (p279) in Ain al-Mreisse to the west, others say it encompasses the entire waterfront area around to Pigeon Rocks (p274) to the south.

You'll see a great cross-section of Beirut life on your walk, from backgammon-playing old men to teenagers dressed to impress, particularly on a Saturday night, when people bring their own plastic chairs and set up temporary camp to watch the world go by. Just north of Pigeon Rocks, you'll spot the sparkling, squealing attractions of the **Lunapark** amusement park, whose Ferris wheel is a favourite with adults and kids alike.

Pole fishing from the Corniche is a popular pastime, especially near the steps that lead down to the front of the Corniche wall, though you'll probably wonder whether they ever catch anything big enough to be worth the effort. You'll probably also be tempted by vendors with their handcars of hot nuts, corn and *ka'ik*, the handbag-shaped circular bread that's hooped around their carts. You'll also hear the clinking of coffee cups from wandering coffee vendors.

You are sure to encounter the BYO nargileh culture, which entails parking your car near a bench on the Corniche, cranking the music up and lighting up your own hookah pipe to share among your closest friends. If you're visiting during the summer months, just before you reach the **AUB Beach** (p279) you will also see the teenagers risking life and limb diving off the Corniche and landing in the sea between the rock formations.

GETTING INVOLVED

For those visitors to Lebanon keen to contribute their time and skills to volunteering with a Lebanese charitable organisation or NGO, or visiting or volunteering on projects specifically at a Palestinian refugee camp, it can be very hard to find initial information.

A few good web-based starting points for investigating these possibilities are the following:

- **Association for Volunteer Services Lebanon** (www.av.s.org.lb) A good first point of contact for those interested in volunteering in any capacity in Lebanon
- **Caritas Liban** (www.caritas.org.lb) A church-based aid organisation, running social and healthcare projects across Lebanon
- **Canadian-Palestinian Educational Exchange** (CEPAL; www.cepal.ca) Sends Canadian volunteers to work on various summer projects in the Burj al-Barajnah and Shatila refugee camps near Beirut, and in Wavel camp near Baalbek
- **Daleel** (www.thedaleel.com) Internet guide with many links to charities and other organisations
- **Lebanese Association of SOS Children's Villages** (www.sos.org.lb) Part of the SOS global network
- **LebCare** (www.lebcare.org) A charity founded in 2006 in response to the Israel-Hezbollah War, helping refugees and others in need
- **Palestinian Human Rights Organisation** (PHRO; www.palhumanrights.org) Offers information on all aspects of Palestinian refugee life in Lebanon

Pigeon Rocks

These natural offshore rock arches (Map p265) are the most famous, and indeed one of the only, natural features of Beirut. The stretch of the Corniche directly in front of the rocks is an excellent vantage point, but far more interesting is to take one of the tracks down to the lower cliffs. One track starts from the southern side of the rocks and, after a steep 100m, you find yourself down on the lower level of chalk cliffs. Almost immediately, you can completely forget you are in the city. The way across the rocks is quite rugged and sensible shoes are a good idea, although you see local women teetering precariously across the cliffs in high heels.

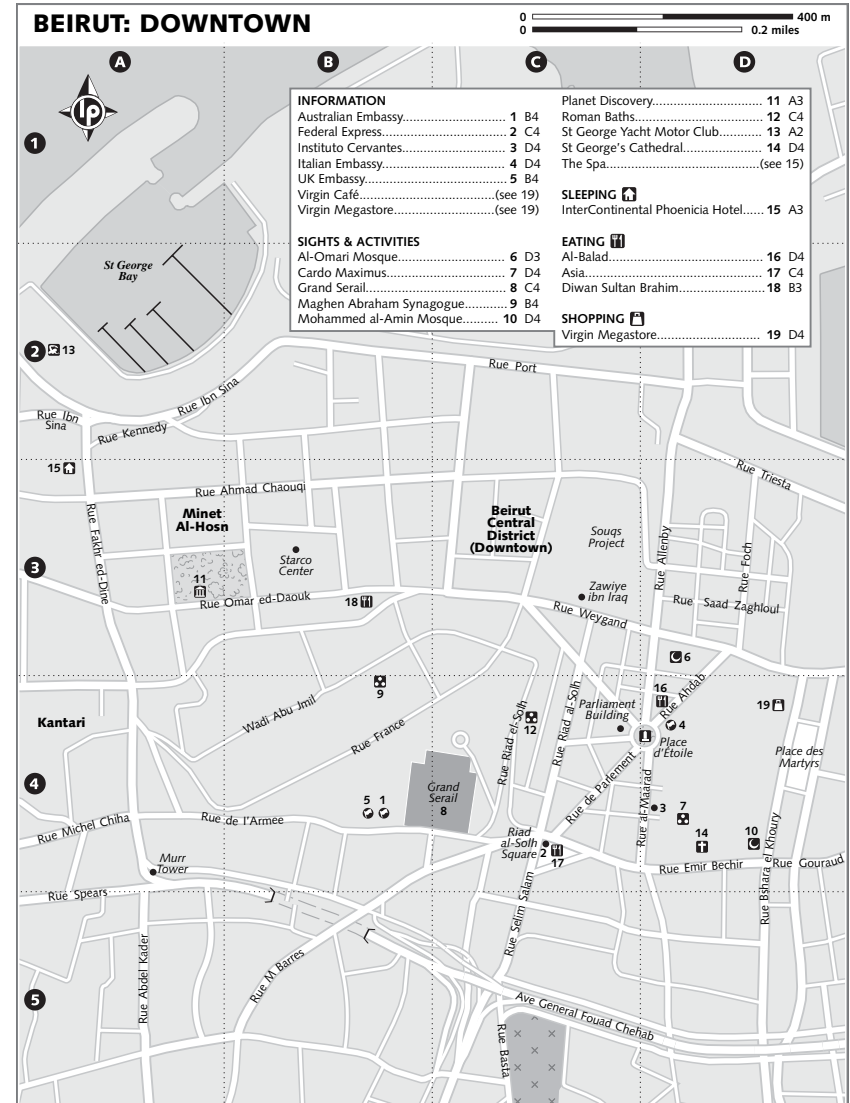
There are a number of inlets and caves in the cliffs. During summer, small boats take people around the rocks and to the caves for a small fee.

Downtown

Beirut's glittering centrepiece, once the original Paris of the Middle East, was an area where, for many years, the rattle of sniper fire echoed through husks of once grand old buildings centred around the **Place d'Étoile**. Think Paris, post-apocalypse, and you'll have a good idea of how

Downtown (Map p275) – also known as the Beirut Central District or Solidere – looked in the early 1990s, after a decade and a half of civil war. Now, in better years, you could almost say it's touristy. It's the cleanest, most pedestrianised and least congested part of the city, but does, as most Beirutis will tell you, lack just a little soul. One major criticism of this area is that no provision was made for a festival hall, world class museum or opera building – it's comprised largely of offices, government buildings, investment banks and pricey boutiques. To make up for this creative dearth, the **Saifi Village** (p289) has sprung up in the residential district just behind Place des Martyrs. It is filled with a burgeoning selection of small galleries, boutiques and one-off designer craft shops.

Downtown is also the site of the impressive **Mohammed al-Amin mosque** (Map p275), in which former prime minister Rafiq Hariri is buried – it looks like a younger sibling of Istanbul's Blue Mosque. To its north, **Place des Martyrs** (Map p275) has been the location of some of the largest ever Lebanese public gatherings, notably the 14 March demonstration held on the one-month anniversary of the murder of Hariri, which



brought 1 million Lebanese – a quarter of the country's population – to the streets, resulting in the final withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon (see p40).

To the northeast of Place des Martyrs, don't miss the **Al-Omari Mosque** (Map p275), originally built in the 12th century by the Crusaders as the Church of St John the

Baptist of the Knights Hospitallers, and converted by the Mamluks into a mosque in 1291. **St George's Cathedral** (Map p275; ☎ 561 980; services 7.15am & 6.30pm Mon–Thu & Sat, 9am & 11am Sun), beside the Mohammed al-Amin Mosque, is also worth a visit, being a Maronite church dating back to the Crusades. Other important sites not to miss are the mag-

nificantly restored **Roman baths** (Map p275); the **cardo maximus** (Map p275), evocative remains of a Roman-era market area; and the **Grand Serail** (Map p275), a majestic Ottoman-era building that has been restored to its former grandeur and now houses government offices. The roads around the Grand Serail, however, are largely blocked off at present in a tangle of tanks and razor-wire, so you may not be able to get as close as you'd like. Just to the north of the Grand Serail, between Rue France and Wadi Abou Jmil, is the remains of the **Maghen Abraham Synagogue** (see The Jews of Beirut, p278).

Achrafiye

An attractive district of former East Beirut, Achrafiye (Map p277) is lined with beautiful old stately buildings and built upon the site of a Roman City of the Dead; it's

still largely a Christian preserve, characterised by its small, winding streets that make their way up the hill that springs from Downtown and Gemmayzeh. Though slowly being eclipsed in funkiness by Gemmayzeh, it remains one of the coolest spots for nightlife, packed in around the famous **Rue Monot**, which continues to dominate the clubbing scene. But aside from the booze and the bling, Achrafiye is tree-lined and tranquil (during daylight hours, at any rate) and boasts cute galleries, a theatre, antique shops, churches, the **ABC Mall** (p290) and the fabulous Sursock Museum.

SURSOCK MUSEUM

Lit up at night, so that the full glory of its colourful stained glass is on show, the **museum** (Musée Nicholas Ibrahim Sursock; Map p277; ☎ 334 133; Rue Sursock, Achrafiye; ☞ call for opening hrs) is truly an extraordinary sight.

SOLIDERE'S STRUGGLES

Repairing the catastrophic damage to Beirut's Downtown, or Beirut Central District (BCD), was one of the greatest challenges facing the government in the aftermath of the civil war. Redevelopment had a symbolic as well as a practical purpose: by re-creating the area associated with Lebanon's past prosperity the country was signalling that it was once again open for business.

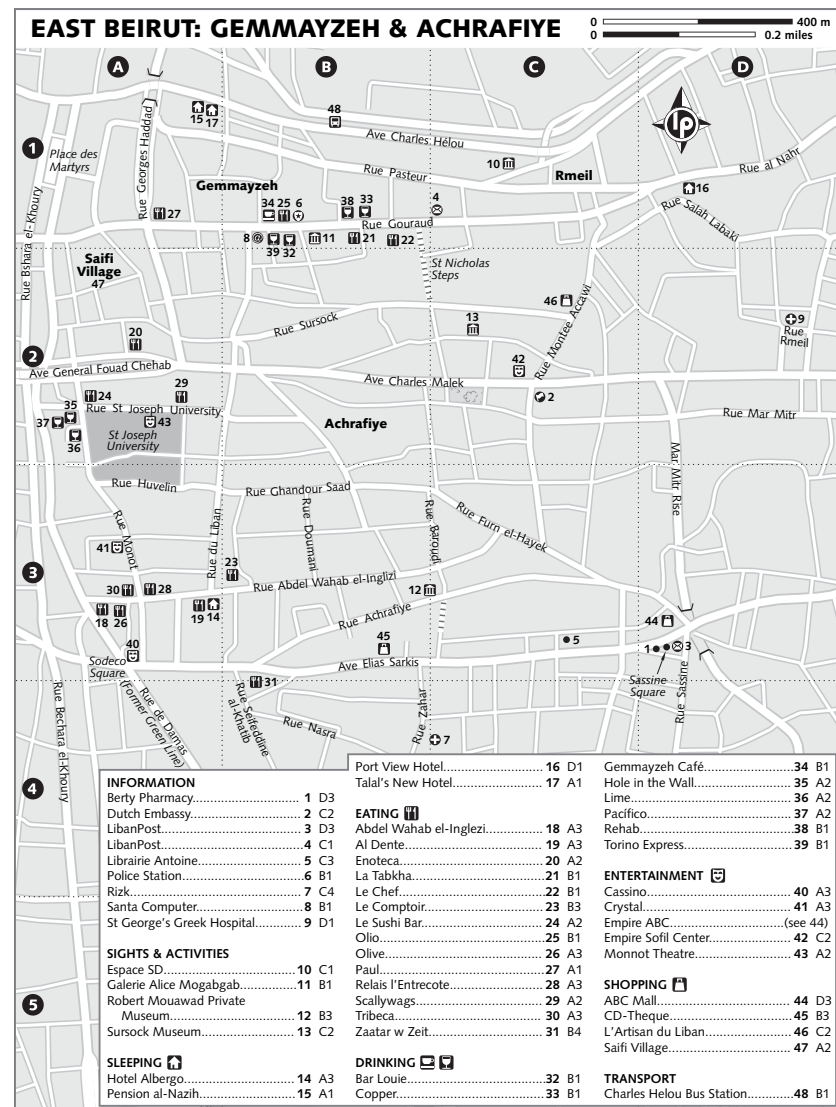
In 1994 the Lebanese parliament, headed by Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, formed the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the BCD, known as Solidere (www.solidere.com.lb), a joint stock company in which pre-existing property owners were majority shareholders and whose shares traded on the Beirut stock exchange.

But though widely credited as having made the most important mark on Beirut's renewal – with the flawless Downtown district a testament to its efforts – Solidere has not been without its share of troubles and controversy. First came the problems establishing to whom preexisting property belonged. In one case, there were 4700 claimants to a single plot of land in the souq area. The solution was to give everyone with some sort of legal claim shares in Solidere equal to the value of their property holding. Altogether the value of the claimants' shares was some US\$1.7 billion.

Next, Solidere had to cooperate with archaeologists, handing over the excavation of archaeological sites as they were uncovered; many archaeologists feel, however, that Solidere failed to give proper weight to historical concerns.

In exchange for restoring infrastructure and more than 200 buildings from the Ottoman and French Mandate periods, Solidere itself received 1650 real-estate lots, worth around US\$1.17 billion, in addition to investment from the state and private investors. Many say that the company grossly underestimated land values when distributing shares to property owners, pulling off a massive land grab, as well as generating a huge profit, at their expense. Others criticised the project's largest stakeholder, Prime Minister Hariri, as having had a conflict of interest between the project and his political position.

Most recently, the St George Hotel and Yacht Motor Club launched a campaign known as 'STOP Solidere' (you'll see the massive banner on the side of the derelict St George Hotel). The hotel's owners claim that long-awaited rebuilding of their landmark hotel is in dispute, following Solidere's claims to the entire waterfront of St George Bay. See the hotel's protest page, www.stgeorges-hotel.com, for more on the hotel's side of the story.



Owned by the Sursock family, one of the country's most illustrious dynasties, the extraordinary and magnificent Lebanese-Italian architectural style of the building itself often overshadows the temporary exhibitions. The location of the museum, in a wonderful street of luxurious modern apartment blocks and beautiful Ottoman-

and French Mandate-era mansions, makes a walk around the neighbourhood mandatory. The interior of the museum is equally grand with vast marble floors and wood panelling. Some of the rooms are decorated in the oriental style and the main hall has a collection of 19th-century Turkish silver as well as a gigantic 7th-century Abbasid jar. The former

THE JEWS OF BEIRUT

Tucked away to the north of the Grand Serail are the remains of the once grand **Maghen Abraham synagogue** (Map p275), which in the early 20th century served a thriving Jewish Beirut community. Though desperately in need of rebuilding, you can still make out the stars of David and Hebrew inscriptions adorning the synagogue's surviving walls.

This is not the only evidence of Lebanon's once open and active Jewish community. In Deir al-Qamar, the now disused synagogue remains intact; in Beirut and elsewhere there are several overgrown Jewish cemeteries. But today, most of Lebanon's Jews prefer to keep their religious identity closely guarded and no accurate figures on exactly how many Jews remain in Beirut, or elsewhere in the country, are available. Some sources say there are as few as 40; others, as many as 1500. Either way, for a city that once contained 16 synagogues, Beirut displays little evidence that the once 14,000-strong Jewish community of Lebanon, whose roots can be traced back in the area as far as 1000 BC, ever existed at all.

One man, however, is attempting to redress this balance. Aaron-Micael Beydoun, a 21-year-old Muslim Lebanese American, is the founder of the website/blog/research project **The Jews of Lebanon** (www.thejewsoflebanon.org). His aim, he says, is to remind the Lebanese public that coexistence between religious groups has been, and should continue to be, one of Lebanon's strongest features. With plans to launch an appeal to renovate the Maghen Abraham synagogue, and a commitment to bring the story of Lebanon's Jews to the attention of the world, Beydoun is determined to give a face and voice to this forgotten and maligned Lebanese community.

study of Nicholas Ibrahim Sursock features his portrait by Kees Van Dongen and houses a small collection of icons. Call or check the press to find out if exhibitions are scheduled during your visit.

ROBERT MOUAWAD PRIVATE MUSEUM

This **museum** (Map p277; ☎ 980 970; www.rmpm.info; cnr Rue Achrafiye & Rue Baroudi; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in Pharaon Palace, once the home of Robert Mouawad, a jeweller and collector of gorgeous objets d'art, including clocks, porcelain, jewellery, icons and watches.

Like the Sursock Museum just down the road, it makes a beautiful respite from the city, with the palace itself every bit as sumptuous as the items on display.

Gemmayzeh

Fast rivalling Achrafiye for its nightlife, dynamism and pulling power, Gemmayzeh (Map p277) still has a rough-and-ready edge, making it fun to hang out in its numerous hole-in-the-wall bars, though, like everywhere in Beirut, it's developing fast. Saved from suffering as much damage as Downtown or Achrafiye during the civil war, it's got a satisfyingly authentic feel, with streets filled with lovely old buildings, boutiques and plenty of artists in residence.

From Gemmayzeh's main street **Rue Gouraud**, where most of the bars and cafés are congregated, a pleasant walk up to Achrafiye takes you up the steep **St Nicholas Steps** to Sursock St. Just beyond the steps on the opposite side of Rue Gouraud, should the urge suddenly take you, is a pet shop offering photos of customers, draped lavishly with its giant python, for LL10,000.

Galleries

Beirut's vibrant art scene ensures that there are many galleries. Check local listings for exhibitions.

Agial Art Gallery (Map p272; ☎ 345 213; www.agialart.com; 63 Rue Omar ben-Abdel Aziz, Hamra) Close to the AUB, this is a shopfront gallery that specialises in showcasing the work of local artists.

Space SD (Map p277; ☎ 563 114; www.espacesd.com; Ave Charles Hélow, Achrafiye) Set over three levels, it exhibits contemporary Lebanese and international artists, in addition to furniture design, fashion and accessories.

Galerie Alice Mogabgab (Map p277; ☎ 210 424; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh) Specialises in modern art, including works by artists from abroad.

Cilicia Museum

The gorgeous collection of Armenian religious and cultural artefacts at this **museum** (off Map p265; ☎ 04-410 001; www.cathcil.org; Antelias; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is one of Beirut's best-kept secrets. And secrets play a

major role in the history of this museum, as most of the collection was smuggled out of what was known as Turkish Armenia in 1915, by monks from the Monastery of Sis in Cilicia. Given just several days to flee the genocide by the Turks, the monks removed as much of their treasure as they could and began their dangerous overland journey, eventually arriving in Aleppo (Syria). In 1930 they finally settled in Antelias, just north of Beirut.

To get to the museum, take the LCC bus 6, or any minibus going north to Jounieh and Byblos via the highway, and get off near the green-coloured footbridge over the southbound highway at Antelias. From here you should be able to spot the spires of the cathedral. You can also take the LCC bus 2 that finishes its route at Antelias. Get off at the last stop and walk towards the water from where you'll spot the entrance. The museum is at the left rear of the courtyard. Call in advance to arrange an extremely worthwhile guided tour, during which you'll learn not only about the items on display, but also about the often tragic history of the Armenian diaspora.

ACTIVITIES

Beach Clubs

Swimming is one of the most popular activities for Beirutis in summer. Shun the poorly maintained public beach at Ramlet al-Bayda, south of Raouché, and splash out on a day at one of Beirut's excellent beach clubs. While they're 'beach' clubs in the loosest sense of the word – there's no sand – there are pools, loungers, good food and cocktails galore, usually enveloped in a thick aura of exclusivity. Designer bikinis, mobile phones and unnaturally sculpted bodies are the norm and the experience is as much about seeing and being seen as it is about taking a dip. Most are open from 8am to 8pm, or later for drinks and dancing; only the Riviera and the St George are open all year round (though it's not much fun to swim outdoors in December anyway).

AUB Beach (Map p272; Corniche; admission AUB students LL3500, guests LL10,000) Though scruffier than the rest, this university beach has a great atmosphere in the summer, and admits nonstudents.

Riviera Beach Club (Map p272; ☎ 373 210; Ras Beirut; admission LL20,000) Belonging to the upmarket Riviera Beirut Hotel and therefore free to guests, you'll officially

need to take out membership if you're not staying at the hotel – but if it's a quiet day, you'll probably be allowed in for the regular admission fee. Facilities include a marina, a good lap pool and a nice fish restaurant.

St George Yacht Motor Club (Map p275; ☎ 356 350; Ain el-Mreiseh; admission Mon Fri LL15,000, Sat & Sun LL20,000) The swishest of the beach clubs in the centre of town, the St George is a recently renovated version of what was the club of the 1960s. It has a marina, a nice pool, jet skis, restaurants and grass on which to stretch out, along with a pleasant children's playground.

La Plage (Map p272; ☎ 366 222; Ain el-Mreiseh; admission LL20,000; 9am-7pm May-Oct) A small, cool beach bar with great seafood and typically bronzed and beautiful bodies arranged around the pool, hidden at the eastern end of the Corniche.

Golf

The **Golf Club of Lebanon** (off Map p265; ☎ 822 470; www.golfclub.org.lb; in Ouzai, just north of the international airport), set in 50 picturesque hectares, is Lebanon's only championship level 18-hole course. The club also has tennis and squash courts, swimming pool and billiard tables on offer, and allows visitors onto its greens for US\$35 on weekdays and US\$50 on weekends, plus optional equipment rental and caddy fee.

Health Clubs & Spas

Beirutis are buff, and keep themselves so by submitting themselves to a whole host of pumping and perking procedures. Most gyms only admit members for one month or more, but hotel health clubs are an exception to the rule. Try the **Essential Spa & Health Club** (Map p265; ☎ 869 666; Mövenpick Hotel & Resort, Ave Général de Gaulle), **Gym 20** (Map p272; ☎ 745 755; Crowne Plaza Hotel, Rue Hamra) or, for pampering, the best of the bunch, **The Spa** (Map p275; ☎ 369 100; InterContinental Phoenicia Hotel, Rue Fakhr ed-Dine, Minet al-Hosn).

COURSES

American Language Center (Map p272; ☎ 366 002, 03-602 871; 1st fl, Choueiri Bldg, Rue Bliss, Hamra) Offers monthly, colloquial (spoken) Arabic courses for beginners, intermediates and advanced students over a period of a month (25 hours).

American Lebanese Language Center (off Map p265; ☎ 489 166/500 978; www.allcs.edu.lb; Confidence Center Bldg, Sin el-Fih) Provides two- to three-month courses in spoken Lebanese Arabic, along with modern standard Arabic, Chinese and European languages. Courses operate around four or five times per year.

Lebanese-American University Continuing Education Program (Map p272; ☎ 867 618-20; www.lau.edu.lb; LAU Campus, Beirut) Offers tailor-made Arabic courses for beginners, intermediate and advanced learners, in small groups.

BEIRUT FOR CHILDREN

Though Beirut may not strike you as a child-friendly city at first sight – with its suicidal traffic, lack of pushchair-navigable footpaths and open potholes – there's actually a lot to keep younger visitors happily entertained for a couple of days. Beirutis coddle their kids, so you'll find they'll be made a fuss of in restaurants, taxis or even just out on the street.

Some great activities for children include the flashing rides and Ferris wheel at **Lunapark** (p273), on Beirut's Corniche, while older children will appreciate the wonders of the **National Museum of Beirut** (p270). The **St George Yacht Club** (p279) and **Riviera beach club** (p279) have children's pools in operation during the summer months.

To let off steam somewhere a little greener, the **Sanayeh Public Garden** (Map p272) has bike hire and paved paths perfect for in-line skating, while the 40,000-sq-metre pine forest on the edge of Beirut at **Horsh Beirut** (Map p265), newly opened to the public, is a cool, deliciously green respite from the city with a playground for children.

If you and your kids are feeling intrepid, you can hire bikes from **Beirut-by-Bike** (☎ 03-435 534; per hour/day LL4000/15,000). Downtown is officially a cyclist-friendly no-car zone on Sundays, but in practice is currently safe to cycle throughout the week, since military roadblocks have rendered it largely out of bounds to cars. Meanwhile, the pavement along the Corniche makes a good place to cycle if you're adept at dodging pedestrians. Nearby, there's the **Strike Out Bowling Alley** (Map p265; ☎ 785 310-2; Dunes Centre, Rue Verdun, Verdun; ☎ 1-11.30pm) for hitting the lanes.

One of the more educationally stimulating activities on offer is at **Planet Discovery** (Map p275; ☎ 980 650/660; Rue Omar ed-Daouk, near Starco bldg; adult & child LL5000; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Thu, 10am-7.30pm Fri & Sat, closed Sun), an interactive science museum especially designed for three- to 15-year-olds. Adults will be unable to resist the soap bubble display, where bubbles big enough to encase their young

charges can be blown. Puppet shows are also held at 4pm and 5pm most Fridays and Saturdays, which cost an additional LL5000 on top of the entry fee. Six-month-olds to 12-year-olds, meanwhile, will be in seventh heaven at **Rainbow Island** (off Map p265; ☎ 05-956 444/5; www.rainbowislandjunior.com; Faubourg St Jean, cnr Damascus Hwy & Presidential Palace Rd, Hazmieh; toddlers LL8000, older children LL11,000-17,000; ☎ 10am-8pm), a vast indoor playground with learning activities, computer games and arts and crafts.

Lebanon's water parks do brisk trade throughout the summer months: try **Waves Aqua Park** (off Map p265; ☎ 04-533 555, 03-727 571/9; Mar Roukos, Metn); **Splash Mountain** (off Map p265; ☎ 04-531 166-8; www.splashmountainlb.com; Beit Mery; ☎ 10am-6pm), which also incorporates Putt Putt mini-golf course; or **Rio Lento** (☎ 04-915 656; www.riolento.com; Nahr al-Kalb; adult/child US\$11/13.50; 9am-6pm, early Jun-end Sep) home to some particularly scary water slides including the near-vertical 'Kamikaze.'

Lebanon's largest theme park is **Habtoorland** (off Map p265; ☎ 05-768 888; www.habtoorland.com; adult/child US\$15/10) at Jamhour, 15 minutes drive from Beirut just off the Beirut-Damascus Hwy, including scream-inducing rides and roller coasters with a loose Phoenician theme. All of these parks are within an hour of Beirut, traffic permitting.

If you or your kids are animal-lovers, don't miss **Animal Encounter** (off Map p265; ☎ 05-558 724, 03-667 355; www.animalencounter.org; Ras el-Jabal Rd, Aley; ☎ 11am-6pm Sat & Sun) 17km from Beirut, a well-known and respected refuge for unwanted, impounded or abandoned domestic and wild animals.

TOURS

Beirut is easily managed without taking an organised tour, particularly if you follow the suggestions in Beirut In... (p267). If time is important, contact the travel agencies listed (p270) for more information about tours around Beirut and further afield.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Given the size of the country, any festival in Lebanon is easily accessible from Beirut. Bookings are advisable and tickets for most concerts can be purchased at the Virgin Megastore (p267) and often online from the festival site. For a list of Lebanon's festivals and event highlights, see p246.

Beirut International Film Festival (www.beirutfilmfoundation.org) Held in October, this festival showcases films from Lebanon and the Middle East, and aims to encourage coproductions between Arab and international communities.

Beirut International Marathon (www.beirutmarathon.org) Held each autumn, this is an incredibly popular event attracting international athletes. Only over-17s can run the full marathon itself, but there's a 5km mini-marathon for nine- to 17-year-olds, a wheelchair full- and mini-marathon, and a 10km fun run for anyone over nine.

Beirut International Platform of Dance (www.maqamat.org) The festival, which runs annually between April and May, showcases the region's best contemporary dance ensembles, along with a scattering of international names, and is organised and run by Maqamat, a contemporary dance troupe based in Beirut.

Docudays (www.docudays.net) The Beirut International Documentary Festival, held each November or December, enjoys a world-class reputation, with filmmakers from across the globe flocking in to attend.

Souq el-Bargout A fun, twice-yearly, citywide flea market. See p290 for more details.

SLEEPING Budget

Cheap accommodation isn't plentiful in Beirut and the places listed here are currently the best on offer. Each year, however, Lonely Planet receives dozens of emails from disgruntled and dismayed travellers who have booked rooms or airport transfers, only to find no preordered taxi or even no room awaiting them when they arrive. To prevent this, try to reconfirm your booking by phone 48 to 24 hours before arrival, and take with you a print-out of any email correspondence regarding arrival dates and room or airport transfer prices.

Talal's New Hotel (Map p277; ☎ 562 567; ZSAL72 TNH@yahoo.com; Ave Charles Hélou, Gemmayzeh; dm/s/d/tr with air-con & TV US\$77/16/20/24; ☎ ☑) A popular, friendly place not far from Place des Martyrs and Gemmayzeh, offering comfortable beds at bargain-basement prices. The rooms are basic but clean, the atmosphere livelier than nearby Pension al-Nazih, and drinks from the fridge are signed for using the 'honesty system'. There's a communal kitchen, laundry facilities (US\$3 for 5kg) and internet access (first 15 minutes free, LL1000 per hour after that). If it's full in summer, the obliging owner/manager will try to find you some space on the roof. There's a reliable airport pick-up service available for US\$15.

Pension al-Nazih (Map p277; ☎ 564 868, 03-475 136; www.pensionalnazih.com; Ave Charles Hélou; d US\$25, s/d without bathroom US\$10/15; ☎ ☑) A few steps away from Talal's, Pension al-Nazih is a clean, quiet budget option. On our most recent visit, the hotel's 10 rooms were occupied with satisfied travellers, though the owner appeared to be a compulsive spray-can user: fly spray, air freshener – you name it, he'll try to blast it so keep your expensive perfume well away. Breakfast costs US\$3 extra; airport pick-up can be arranged for US\$20.

Regis Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 361 845; Rue Razi, Ain al-Mreisse; s/d US\$28/34; ☎ ☑) Though the street on which it stands might seem a bit bleak, the Regis is a fine, basic hotel for those looking for more privacy than a dorm room, and with great proximity to the Corniche and its beach clubs. Its 20 large, reasonably clean rooms have air-con or fan, plus a fridge and TV, and five (rooms 101, 201, 301, 401 and 402) have a decent sea view. Triple rooms cost the same as a double; decent discounts can be had on stays of several nights and for stays from October to May. Airport pick-up is available for \$15 and staff can arrange laundry services for a small sum.

Midrange

Beirut's midrange accommodation options are generally located in the Hamra and Ras Beirut areas. Many of these hotels can be noisy, so opt for a back room wherever possible. Prices can drop significantly out of season (up to 40% for some hotels) and the rates quoted here are standard rack rates – it's always worth asking about discounts for stays longer than a couple of nights.

Port View Hotel (Map p277; ☎ 567 500; www.portviewhotel.com; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh; s/d US\$40/50; ☎ ☑) A better option than the budget offerings, this small, relaxed place has basic, good-value rooms within easy walking distance of Rue Gouraud's bars and restaurants. But the Port View's most attractive feature is its manager, whose extensive knowledge of the city can make your stay extra special.

ourpick! L'Hote Libanais (☎ 03-513 766; www.hotelibanais.com; Zico House, 174 Rue Spears; s/d US\$40/60) A cause for celebration on the Beirut accommodation front, this is a new and exciting

THE HOLIDAY INN

Probably the most visible and painful monument to the civil war is the Holiday Inn, rising like a massive tombstone behind the swish InterContinental Phoenicia.

Opened only shortly before the war, the hotel quickly became a prime sniper position. In turn, it attracted firepower of all calibres, which left it in its current bullet-riddled state. Designed to withstand an earthquake, the building is apparently still structurally sound but remains derelict, with shreds of curtain still flapping at its windows and pigeons its only long-term guests.

way to explore Beirut and beyond. Lebanese families, famed for their hospitality, invite you into their homes, where you'll sleep, eat and generally be made to feel like part of the family. It's an absolutely unique way to experience the country, and get a glimpse into the life of the real Beirut. The company also offers similar B&B accommodation the length and breadth of the country, from Tripoli to Tyre, with discounts available for multiple-night stays. It's best to email or telephone the company's extremely helpful staff to discuss your requirements and arrange your stay.

Cedarland Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 340 233/4; www.cedarlandhotel.com; Rue Omar ben Abdel Aziz, Hamra; s/d/ste US\$42/49/53; 🏠 📺 📶) While it's adjacent to a particularly bustling Hamra intersection, it's spotlessly clean, if a little tired-looking and beige. Breakfast is US\$5 extra per person, but with Hamra's numerous cafés just a short walk away, it's easy enough to pick up breakfast elsewhere. It offers good discounts for long-term stays.

Casa d'Or (Map p272; ☎ 746 400; www.casadorhotel.com; Rue Jeanne d'Arc, Hamra; s/d/ste US\$60/70/90; 🏠 📺 📶) One of Beirut's best midrange hotels, the Casa d'Or is a modern addition to the Hamra sleeping scene. Warm and welcoming, with a wide variety of bright, clean rooms and suites, it comes highly recommended by Lonely Planet travellers. Wireless internet is available in the lobby and restaurant and there are good low-season discounts.

Mayflower Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 340 680; www.mayflowerbeirut.com; Rue Neamé Yafet, Hamra; s/d/ste US\$80/94/150; 🏠 📺 📶) A comfortable, old-fashioned Hamra institution, with spot-

lessly clean rooms and the added bonus of a small pool, the Mayflower recently hit the headlines by filing a lawsuit against UK newspaper the *Independent*, after journalist Robert Fisk suggested that some hotel guests were involved with armed Lebanese militias. Militant or not, to really soak up some civil war history, imbibe a few beers at the hotel's Duke of Wellington bar. Prices drop by 40% during the low season.

Marble Tower Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 354 586, 346 260; marble@marbletower.com.lb; Rue Makdissi, Hamra; s/d/ste LL130,000/149,000/290,000; 🏠 📺 📶) Located smack-bang in the centre of Hamra this is a long-standing favourite for many travellers familiar with Beirut. Its well-worn though spotlessly clean rooms can be a bit noisy but the service is excellent, the price includes breakfast, the beds are comfortable and the suites are great value.

Top End

If you're going to splash out on accommodation somewhere in Lebanon, Beirut is the place to do it. The normal slew of quality, though quite bland, five-star hotels compete for action around the Corniche, but there are also a few notable exceptions worth exploring if you've just come up trumps at the Casino de Liban.

Riviera Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 373 210; www.riviera hotel.com.lb; Ave de Paris, Ras Beirut; s/d/ste with sea views US\$130/150/200; 🏠 📺 📶) Though its rooms are looking a little dated, the Riviera is a friendly, comfortable hotel with great sea views. Its biggest draw-card is one of the best (and most lively) beach clubs (p279) in Beirut, reachable by a tunnel under the road so that you don't have to risk life and limb to Corniche traffic. Breakfast can get a little repetitive if you're staying for a few days, and you might consider skipping it and heading instead for a café in Hamra, just up the hill.

Palm Beach Hotel (Map p272; ☎ 372 000; www.palmbeachbeirut.com; cnr Place Rafic al-Hariri & Rue Phoenicia; d/ste US\$160/280; 🏠 📺 📶) The Palm Beach is a great choice, with plush, comfortable rooms, friendly desk staff and a good central location. With a sumptuous rooftop bar and pool commanding panoramic views over the city, the Palm Beach manages to be luxurious and individual, without the hefty price tag attached to Beirut's topmost hotels.

Hotel Albergo (Map p277; ☎ 339 797; www.albergo beirut.com; 137 Rue Abdel Wahab el-Ingilzi, Achrafiye; d US\$255, ste US\$325-1400; 🏠 📺 📶) This hotel is a sybaritic dream, with 33 rooms of individual and effortless opulence, themed in Oriental, European, Colonial and Mediterranean styles. Located on a terrific Achrafiye street, close to some of Beirut's most stylish eating establishments, it's also home to exquisite Italian gastronomic delights at its restaurant Al Dente (p284) just next door. The rooftop pool and bar complete the picture, with service so attentive your request will have been met before you've had time to utter it.

InterContinental Phoenicia Hotel (Map p275; ☎ 369 100; www.ichotelsgroup.com; Rue Fakhr ed-Dine, Minet al-Hosn; d US\$275-540, ste from US\$990; 🏠 📺 📶) Beirut's most prestigious pre-civil war hotel has been redeveloped in a rather glitzy style with acres of marble and plenty of swags and tails. It has the best amenities in town and has once again become the favourite of Beirut's moneyed set. At the time of writing, however, around 30 MPs were cloistered in its topmost floors under heavy security in advance of the presidential elections, making it less pleasant for other guests, who had to undergo rigorous security checks just to get to their highly pricey rooms.

EATING

Beirutis love their food in all its forms – fast, filling or fancy. Wherever you turn in the city, you'll be just footsteps away from something delicious. Currently, the unstable economic climate means, sadly, that restaurants open and close with alarming alacrity. We recommend that rather than sticking rigidly to our suggestions below, you pick an area of the city and simply wander. It won't be long before you'll discover your own culinary gems, since Beirut's restaurants rarely disappoint.

Restaurants

HAMRA & AROUND

Pasta di Casa (Map p272; ☎ 366 909, 363 368; Ashkar Bldg, just off Rue Clemenceau, Hamra; mains around LL9000; 🍷 noon-midnight) An unpretentious local Italian place, just a short walk from most Hamra and Corniche accommodation options. Friendly staff and huge bowls of home-made pasta – one portion alongside a starter or salad is big enough to share unless you're ravenous – make it a wel-

coming place to which it's easy to return again...and again...and again. It only has 10 tables, doesn't accept credit cards and gets very busy after about 9pm.

Walimat Wardeh (Map p272; ☎ 752 320; Rue Makdissi; mains around LL10,000; 🍷 midday-3pm, 8pm-midnight) This simple, stylish place hidden away in Hamra is well worth seeking out. It's reasonably priced, with good brunches, Lebanese specialities on a changing chalked-up menu, tango music on Thursday nights and an unpretentious, laid-back local crowd.

Blue Elephant (Map p272; ☎ 788 488; Searock Hotel, Rue Salah Eddine el-Ayoubi, Raouche; mains from LL15,000; 🍷 7pm-2am) OK, so it's a little overdone with its profusion of bamboo, screechy Thai soundtrack and indoor waterfalls, but the Blue Elephant, housed in the Searock Hotel on a road just above Lunapark, is nevertheless an excellent place to go for an upscale Thai fix. The sweet corn cookies and green curries are particularly tasty, and there's a decent vegetarian menu – but watch out for the over-attentive waiters who will replenish your every sip and spoonful, no matter how much you protest.

GEMMAYZEH

Gemmayzeh's fast-developing culinary scene revolves around Rue Gouraud, particularly the section between Ave de Damas and the St Nicholas steps. Busiest after 9pm, when scores of well-heeled and well-groomed 20- and 30-somethings take to the streets, it's a fab place to stroll and sample multiple cuisines at chic small eateries.

Olio (Map p277; ☎ 563 939; Rue Gouraud; pizza LL9000-15,000; 🍷 noon-midnight Mon-Sat) Like many of the street's gems, this tiny place with a handful of tables fills up rapidly after 9pm. Locals flock for wood-fired pizzas, generous portions of pasta and hearty red wines. Try the fabulous bruschetta pomodoro to start and grab a table near the window to watch sleek new Ferraris roll by outside.

our pick Le Chef (Map p277; ☎ 445 373, 446 769; Rue Gouraud; 2-course meals around LL10,000; 🍷 6am-6.30pm Mon-Sat) A Beirut institution that's a must for its low prices, charismatic head waiter and great old-world atmosphere. As the Rue Gouraud eating scene develops around it, this daytime 'workers' café' keeps faithfully dishing out huge platefuls of cheap and cheerful Arabic food, with a menu that changes daily and has unusual regional

specials thrown in. If they have it, don't miss the allegedly aphrodisiac *moolookhiye* (fragrant rice with chicken, lamb and mal-low; see also p47). Vegetarians will also find themselves well catered for, with tasty spinach pâté, soups and melt-in-the-mouth aubergine stew, served with rice.

La Tabkha (Map p277; ☎ 579 000; Rue Gouraud; mains around LL8000; ☎ lunch & dinner) A trendy Beirut chain serving contemporary versions of traditional French and Lebanese dishes in minimalist surroundings. The daily specials, chalked up on the board, are a great lunchtime option, as is the Lebanese mezza buffet. There's a second, equally yummy, branch on Rue Mahatma Gandhi in Hamra (Map p272).

ACHRAFIYE

Achrafiye does trendy dining largely at the high end of the price scale, with a slightly older and more sedate crowd than on Rue Gouraud in Gemmayzeh. For a simpler lunch, see Cheap Eats (below).

Abdel Wahab el-Ingilizi (Map p277; ☎ 200 550; Rue Abdel Wahab el-Ingilizi; mezza around LL6500; ☎ noon-4pm, 7pm-1am) Set in a nice old Ottoman house, this place is a favourite with locals for its table-bending buffets. It is a great choice if you're hungry for high quality mezza and are a particular fan of hummus, of which there are numerous varieties – it won't leave you much room for dessert.

Scallywags (Map p277; ☎ 03-046 289; Rue St Joseph University; mains around \$US10; ☎ 7pm-1am) A lovely, friendly fusion restaurant in a quaint and quiet Achrafiye street, this place is great for an intimate dinner, with a Mediterranean-ish menu that changes daily depending on what takes the chef's fancy. It's worth calling ahead to book, as there's only a handful of tables.

Olive (Map p277; ☎ 211 711; Rue Abdel Wahab el-Ingilizi; mains around \$10; ☎ 1pm-11pm) One of Beirut's few vegetarian restaurants, this great, laid-back place offers all-organic food in a beautiful French mandate-era building. With your meal, try the organic juices; afterwards, linger over a slice of home baked cake.

Relais l'Entrecote (Map p277; ☎ 332 087/8; Rue Abdel Wahab el-Ingilizi; mains around LL18,000; ☎ midday-3pm, 7pm-midnight) If you're craving a piece of Paris, this is the place. Unbeatable for its steak-frites, it's a fab spot for a hearty lunch washed down with a robust bottle of red wine. If you have any room left

afterwards, the chocolate fondant is highly recommended.

Al Dente (Map p277; ☎ 202 440; Rue Abdel Wahab el-Ingilizi, Achrafiye; mains around LL28,000; ☎ 12.30-3pm & 8.30-11pm Mon-Fri, 8.30-11pm Sat) Attached to the Hotel Albergo (p282), this formal Italian restaurant's suitably lavish décor and lengthy wine list make it a favourite with Beirut businessmen and a fabulous place for a special occasion. The melt-in-the-mouth risottos are Italian cuisine at its very best, and well worth the high prices. Bookings are essential.

Le Sushi Bar (Map p277; ☎ 338 555; Abdel Wahab el-Ingilizi; sushi around LL6000 per portion; ☎ noon-midnight) A highly chic, minimalist destination for sushi connoisseurs: if you like your sashimi extra special, served on ice, and accompanied by a glass of perfectly chilled champagne, this is a splash-out must.

DOWNTOWN

Aside from al-Balad, Downtown's dining options are largely top end, both in terms of price and dress code. Great for lavish nights out, they offer fabulous food and a glittering atmosphere.

Al-Balad (Map p275; ☎ 985 375; Rue Ahdab, Downtown; mezza around LL5000; ☎ noon-midnight) This place offers the tastiest, best-value Lebanese mezza in Downtown, and is especially popular with lunching business people. The spicy red hummus, in particular, is well worth a dip.

Diwan Sultan Brahim (Map p275; ☎ 989 989; near Starco Center, Minet el Hosn; mezza around LL5500, fish market price; ☎ noon-2pm & 7pm-midnight) If you're looking for fine fish, it's hard to beat the freshest catch in town. Select your own; the red mullet and deep-fried sardines (known as *bizri*) are house specialities. The excellent mezza are well known in Beirut, and it's a busy place, particularly on weekends, so be sure to book.

Asia (Map p275; ☎ 991 919; Capitol Bldg, Riad al-Solh Sq; mains from US\$15; ☎ 7pm-1am) Beirutis love Asia as much for its expansive rooftop views across the city as for its pricey, but perfect, Asian fusion cuisine. Dress up, since the crowd's predictably glam, and book ahead for a decent table.

Cheap Eats

Every suburb has a multitude of stalls offering felafel, *manaesh bi-zaatar* (a thyme and sesame-flavoured bread), kebabs, *foul* (fava beans), fresh juices, *fatayer bi-sbanikh*

(spinach parcels) and shwarma; the best way to get a feel for where to eat is to wander around and choose the busy ones, as they are likely to be offering the freshest food. Prices are on a par: a felafel will cost around LL2500, a *manaesh* (flat bread) LL2000, a kebab LL3000, a large fresh juice LL3000 and a shwarma LL3000.

Bliss House (Map p272; ☎ 756 555; Rue Bliss, Hamra; ☎ 7am-5am) This is one of the most popular takeaways in Beirut and is always packed with AUB students grabbing a quick snack. Its three shop fronts offer cheap and filling shwarma, kebabs, fresh juice and fruit cocktails topped with honey and nuts.

Japanese Please! (Map p272; ☎ 361 047; Rue Bliss, Hamra; sushi from LL2000 per portion; ☎ 11am-4pm & 7-11pm Mon-Sat) This tiny sushi bar is a welcome oddity among the fast-food franchises of Rue Bliss. Customers can take-away, eat at the bar, or take advantage of the free delivery service. Reasonable prices, with great teriyaki and tempura.

Marrouche (Map p272; ☎ 743 185/6; Rue Sidani, Hamra; ☎ 24hr) Specialises in very tasty *shish tawouq* (marinated grilled chicken on skewers) and chicken shwarma.

Kabab-ji (Map p272; ☎ 351 346; Rue Hamra, Hamra; ☎ 8am-2am) A long-standing branch of the Lebanon-wide chain. It's a little more stylish than most kebab shops and an extremely popular place to sit and sample fresh and delicious kebabs and grills.

HUBBLE, BUBBLE, TOIL & TROUBLE

Step into a Rue Bliss café after 9pm and you'll likely enter the sweet-smelling, hazy world of the nargileh. Nargileh smoking has never been so popular with the city's teenagers and it's estimated that 80% of 13- to 15-year-old smokers smoke nargilehs rather than cigarettes, since their parents are less likely to disapprove.

The nargileh (or hubble-bubble, hookah or water pipe), which passes the smoke through cooling liquid, first emerged in Turkey in the 16th century, with *objet d'art* pipes bearing coloured glass bases and heavily decorated beaten shafts of silver or gold.

Though it might feel less abrasive than cigarette smoking, there's growing concern that Lebanon's nargilehs may be damaging its youthful population. A study undertaken by the AUB and World Health Organisation showed that 60% of Lebanese teenagers are smokers. Most think that the nargileh is less addictive than cigarettes, but nargileh smoke can actually be more harmful since a pipe takes on average eight times longer to smoke than a cigarette. One seasoned nargileh smoker may, in one session, therefore be inhaling the equivalent of 100 cigarettes.

Still, it's worth a try at least once while in Beirut. The nargileh's tobacco and molasses mix (called *sheesha* or *shisha* in Arabic) is commonly flavoured with apple, strawberry, melon, cherry or mixed fruit: when you order your first, just choose your flavour and the waiter will help you get started, periodically checking that the coals are still burning. And however bad it might be for your health, it's important to take a puff every now and then, just to keep the coals hot.

Barbar (Map p272; ☎ 379 778/9; Rue Spears, Hamra; ☎ 24hr) The granddaddy of them all, this phenomenally popular chain sells *manaesh*, shwarma, pastries, mezza, kebabs, ice cream and fresh juice. Join the hordes of people gobbling their snacks on the street in front, or organise to have food delivered to your hotel or apartment.

Zaatar w Zeit (Map p277; ☎ 614 302; Rue Nasra, Sodeco, Achrafiye; ☎ 24hr) This branch is busiest late at night when patrons from the nearby clubs flock here to re-energise over cheap and delicious *manaesh* with a multitude of toppings. There is another branch on Rue Bliss (Map p272) that is equally popular, with AUB students there at all hours.

Mino (Map p272; ☎ 365 632; Rue Bliss, Hamra; ☎ 11am-late) This tiny shwarma stand really sells only four things – meat and chicken shwarma in two sizes. But what it does, it does well, and it beats waiting at Bliss House when it's packed with students.

Paul (Map p277; ☎ 570 170; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh; ☎ 8am-11pm) A chain café but a good one nonetheless, this bakery stocks excellent breakfast pastries for around LL3000, generous sandwiches, quiches and *café au lait* so good you'd swear you were in Paris.

Taj al-Moulouk (Map p272; ☎ 370 096; Rue Bliss, Ras Beirut; ☎ 5.30am-1.30am) Great Turkish coffee and an amazing array of glistening pastries, for around LL1500 per portion, make this old-fashioned patisserie an essential pit

stop. It's take-away only, unless you transport your sticky purchases to its ice cream parlour two doors away.

Self-Catering

Beirut is packed with small neighbourhood grocery shops selling the basics, usually alongside a local greengrocer, with tempting piles of fruit and vegetables on display. If you're day-tripping outside Beirut you'll also often find fresh fruit and vegetables available at roadside stalls, along with jars of gorgeous olives and sometimes homemade cheese or bread. It's well worth slowing down to sample and support local rural economies by shopping at these smaller stores and stands.

But if a supermarket's what you need, the best Hamra has to offer are the **Consumers Co-op** (Map p272; Rue Makdissi, Hamra; ☎ 7am-11pm) and **Smith's** (Map p272; Rue Sadat; ☎ 6.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat) which stocks many American brands. Look out for Charcuterie Bayoud (Map p272) a few doors up from the Co-op, which is as popular for its beer, wine and spirits as its meats. Excellent vintage Lebanese and imported wines can be sourced at Enoteca (Map p277) and **Le Comptoir** (Map p277) in Achrafiye. Gourmet picnic ingredients can be sourced at Souq el-Tayeb (see p290), the tantalising weekly Saturday Saifi Village organic farmers' market.

DRINKING

Bars

Beirut has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to bars. While this is great for patrons, for bar owners the competition is fierce and bars open, close, change names, venues, décor and style regularly.

With dinners booked from 9.30pm onwards, bar-hopping is a late-night pastime. Beirutis don't like waiting in line or being turned away from a bar or club, so generally they book a table or space at their favourite bar for straight after dinner. If you arrive early at one of the hottest bars, you'll probably get a space (and get to check out the ultrahip interior), but check that you won't be asked to move just as the night starts hotting up. Weekends are by far the most popular and many bars and clubs simply stay open until the patrons start to go home. For a drink in the afternoon or early evening, head to the cafés on the Corniche or in Hamra; at night, wander Achrafiye and Gemmayzeh.

Pacífico (Map p277; ☎ 204 446; Rue Monot, Achrafiye; local beers LL6000; ☎ 7pm-late) This Latin-themed bar is the long-standing number one with the local 30-something crowd. Happy hour is between 7pm and 8pm and it serves good Mexican food throughout the evening.

Lime (Map p277; ☎ 03-348 273; Rue Monot, Achrafiye; local beers LL5000; ☎ 7.30pm-late) A popular drinking spot with an outdoor terrace, it's another Rue Monot stalwart.

Hole in the Wall (Map p277; Rue Monot, Achrafiye; ☎ 7pm-late) For those wanting a break from cool interiors and guest DJs and needing a beer poured into a glass with a handle, this one's for you. It's a great little pub smack bang in the centre of Rue Monot, and it's a regular stop for expats.

Bar Louie (Map p277; ☎ 03-477 336; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh; ☎ 11am-late) More laid-back than the majority of Beirut's bars, Bar Louie sports a friendly crowd and live music almost nightly. A couple of doors away, its equally diminutive 'shots bar' deals out some potent creations to get you in the partying mood, with welcoming barmen filled with tips on the current nightlife scene.

Torino Express (Map p277; ☎ 03-611 101; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh; ☎ 8am-2am) One of the coolest, smallest bars in Beirut, it's a café by day, with great paninis and espressos, which transforms into a bar by night, with a DJ, glorious cocktails and a very cheerful crowd.

Also on Rue Gouraud, Copper and Rehab are two other good choices, both small, atmospheric and currently unbearably hip.

Cafés & Coffeehouses

If you really want to do as the locals do, you'll drink your coffee short, strong and at every available opportunity. On the Corniche on a Friday or Saturday night, it's almost obligatory to take a stroll to Uncle Deek (Map p272), where green T-shirted bus boys ferry tiny cups to drivers and pedestrians alike.

Al-Kahwa (Map p272; ☎ 362 232; Al-Kanater Bldg, Rue Bliss, Hamra; ☎ 10am-1am) Usually lost in a thick haze of nargileh smoke (apple nargilehs go for LL10,000), this is a popular hang-out with students from the AUB. Its friendly atmosphere and reasonably priced menu make it a reliable choice for breakfast, lunch or for dinner. An Arabic or cooked English breakfast comes in at LL6000, and there are also tasty jacket potatoes and quesadilla appetisers to munch on.

COFFEE, COFFEE EVERYWHERE

Coffee should be black as hell, strong as death, and sweet as love.

Turkish Proverb

Café culture in Beirut has changed dramatically in recent years, as Costa and Starbucks chains have put in an appearance, luring the young and hip away from the more traditional coffee haunts of old. But the oldies still remain, where you can sip strong black coffee from a tiny china cup, rather than a low-fat soya double iced mocchacino from a pint jug. Either way, though, coffee retains its pull over the Lebanese population, whose lives might grind to a halt if you took away their grindable beans.

The region's obsession with coffee is said to stem from 1526 when Ali, son of pious mystic Mohammed ibn Iraq al-Dimashqi, learned that his father had died in Mecca. The distraught son departed for Arabia immediately and spent almost 15 years in the holy city, where he adopted some of the local customs, including the drinking of coffee, then unheard of in Beirut. Unable to kick the habit, he returned to his home town with sacks of beans and is credited with single-handedly creating generations of caffeine addicts.

In old-fashioned Beirut coffeehouses today, the *café* on the menu is generally Turkish coffee brewed in a pot with a handle (generally called an *ibrik*). Sometimes this coffee is mistakenly called 'Arabic coffee', which has far more cardamom than its Turkish cousin. Sugar is added during the time of brewing, so tell the waiter how you'd like it: without sugar (*bidoon sukkar*), a little sugar (*sukkar qaleel*), medium (*maDbooTah*) or very sweet (*sukkar katheer*). Remember not to gulp down the last mouthful or you'll be drinking mud, with that half-inch of coffee grounds still sitting in the bottom of the cup.

Whether it's from a street vendor clinking cups to attract customers, a roadside van with an espresso machine perched on the back, or a stylish café offering 10 different coffee blends, coffee is an integral part of Beirut life. But beware that if you order a 'white coffee' (*ahweh baida*) it won't be a *café au lait*: in Lebanon, this means a cup of boiling water scented with orange-blossom water – nice, but not exactly the caffeine fix you might be craving.

Lina's (Map p272; ☎ 751 244; Rue Mahatma Gandhi, Hamra; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat) A large, laid-back corner spot for people-watching, Lina's is a comfy and reliable option for coffee and a light lunch, attracting young and old Beirutis alike. Good salads go for around LL8000; sandwiches are LL5000 to LL7000.

Al-Raouda (El Rawda; Map p272; ☎ 743 348; the Corniche, Manara; ☎ 8am-midnight) A waterfront favourite with local families (it has a small playground), this place is worth a stop for its good, strong coffee (LL1000) and nargilehs, and is packed on weekends. It's a little hard to find – walk down the lane right next to the Lunapark entrance and you'll spot the misspelt 'El Rawda' sign.

Bay Rock Café (Map p272; ☎ 796 700; Ave du Général de Gaulle, Raouché; ☎ 7am-2.30am) A fabulously situated café overlooking Pigeon Rocks. Meals, snacks, coffee and drinks are a bit pricey, but the outdoor terrace is a particularly attractive place to watch the sunset with a beer or a nargileh.

Tribeca (Map p277; ☎ 336 388; Rue Abdel Wahab el-Ingiliz, Achrafiye; bagels LL5000-10,000; ☎ 8am-1am) A

relaxed and friendly New York-style place to chow down on a bagel or big slice of chocolate fudge cake.

Ristretto (Map p272; ☎ 739 475; Rue Mahatma Gandhi, Hamra; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat) As its name implies, this small café serves good strong espresso shots. It also serves some of the best breakfast eggs and pancakes in town, and is an excellent place to cure that Rue Monot-induced hangover. Its lunch menu changes every day: if you're a homesick Brit, check if their Friday special is fish and chips with tartare sauce.

ENTERTAINMENT

Currently the best sources of 'what's on' information, including cinema listings, are the *Daily Star* newspaper and the monthly *Guide*; check out Media (p269) for more information.

Cinemas

Cinemas in Beirut tend to screen the same Hollywood movies that play worldwide, but Beirut's cultural centres (p268) frequently

GAY & LESBIAN BEIRUT

Homosexuality is illegal in Lebanon, but there's a clandestine gay scene in Beirut – and it's clandestine for a very good reason. Any openly gay establishment is likely to be frequently raided and its patrons harassed. While Lebanon prides itself as one of the most liberal of Middle Eastern countries, its attitude towards sexuality (at least in law and on the surface of society) is decidedly heterocentric. All men and women in Lebanese society are expected to get married and have children and there is enormous pressure to comply. Being openly gay is rare – having an openly gay relationship even rarer – and you will be arrested if caught having sexual relations that are 'contradicting the laws of nature'.

There are signs, though, that there may be more acceptance forthcoming. Both Acid (opposite) and B 018 (opposite) nightclubs are very gay-friendly establishments, while Beirut's hammams and a number of cafés provide opportunities to meet. At clubs pay careful attention to the behaviour of other patrons and if people start dancing 'apart' suddenly, there's probably a very good reason – raids do occur.

Given this, as a gay visitor to Beirut, your best option is to make some contacts before you arrive. Your first point of contact could be **Helem** (☎ 745 092; www.helem.net; 1st fl, Yamout Bldg, 174 Rue Spears, Beirut), whose name stems from the Arabic acronym for Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders. The website offers a wealth of information and articles on gay and lesbian issues in Lebanon and further afield, while its offshoot, www.beirut.helem.net, offers a range of listings of gay-friendly cafés, restaurants, beach clubs, hammams and cruising areas. Helem also publishes a ground-breaking quarterly magazine, *Barra* (Arabic for 'Out'). Other useful gay and lesbian resources include the following sites:

- <http://legal.20m.com>
- www.bintelnas.org
- www.gaymiddleeast.com
- www.travelandtranscendence.com

organise screenings that showcase current independent, foreign, art house and classic films. There are also film festivals during the year, in particular the Mid East Film Festival Beirut and Docudays (p280). Three of the most convenient mainstream cinemas, all part of the Empire chain, are listed below.

Empire ABC (Map p265; ☎ 209 208; ABC Mall, Achrafiye)

Empire Dunes (Map p265; ☎ 792 123; Dunes Centre, Verdun)

Empire Sofil Center (Map p277; ☎ 328 806; Sofil Center, Ave Charles Malek, Achrafiye)

Live Music

Beirut isn't really filled with dedicated live-music venues, but the cultural centres (p268) and the Monnot Theatre (opposite) make up for this shortfall with programmes of local and visiting musicians. Festivals during the summer months (see p246) also offer extensive opportunities to see live performances; some cafés have musical guests, and posters advertising them often go up around

Hamra and Gemmayzeh. Bar Louie (p286) also has a wide variety of live music, usually with a performance every night some time around 10pm.

Blue Note (Map p272; ☎ 743 857; www.bluenote.cafe.com; Rue Makhoul, Hamra; admission LL8000-20,000 depending on artist; ☎ 11am-2am) This is the place to hear live jazz. Generally Thursday, Friday and Saturday are the only nights when the music is live, and these are definitely the best nights to visit. There's a very good food menu if you want to dine first, but live jazz is the main course here. Aficionados should phone or check the website to see who's playing before booking as it sometimes books non-jazz acts.

Gemmayzeh Café (Map p277; ☎ 580 817; Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh; ☎ 8am-3am) This vast and beautiful Beirut institution, dating back to Ottoman times, is one of the best places to hear live Arabic music in Beirut. It generally consists of an *oud* (lute) player and singer, and you should make a booking for the live music and dinner – the café has a great mezze menu, but it's worth popping

in here any time of day for a strong coffee and a quick round of backgammon. Note that there's no name on the outside of the café but, bigger and more imposing than all the other places on Rue Gouraud, it's hard to miss.

Nightclubs

A stay in Beirut is incomplete without devoting at least one evening to the art of Beirut nightclubbing. Keep in mind that visiting one of the nightclubs listed is usually preceded by dinner generally finishing no earlier than 11pm, followed by a spot of bar-hopping; most clubs don't really get going until at least 1am.

Acid (off Map p265; ☎ 03-714 678; Sin el-Fil, south of the Sin el-Fil roundabout, next to Futuroscope Exhibition Hall; women free, men around US\$20 incl open bar; ☎ 9pm-6am Fri-Sat) Loud and brash with pounding techno and a very gay-friendly scene, Acid is vast, friendly and the place to really let loose on the dance floor beneath an impressive laser display. Make sure you're ready for quite a night of it, as chances are you'll be dragged along to an after party when the club's doors finally close.

B 018 (☎ 03-800 018; Lot 317, La Quarantine; ☎ 9pm-7am) This venerable club is easily the most famous in town. Known for its particular décor as much as its music, it's situated underground in a car park a couple of kilometres east of Downtown. With its mock-horror baroque interior, complete with coffins for seats, B 018 is certainly memorable. Those suffering from claustrophobia needn't worry – the roof is always opened at some stage during the night. Its liberal reputation means that gays and lesbians will feel comfortable here. To get there, ask a taxi driver for the club or for the Forum de Beyrouth.

Cassino (Map p277; ☎ 656 777; cnr Sodoco Sq & Rue de Damas; admission free; ☎ 9pm-5am Thu-Sun) For something other than house, techno or commercial classics, head to Cassino, where the music's Arabic pop and, at least for part of the night, live. It's champagne and cigars all the way, so dress to the nines and book a table in advance if you want to make sure you'll make it past the doormen.

Crystal (Map p277; ☎ 332 523; Rue Monot, Achrafiye; admission free; ☎ 10pm-4am) Crystal is, without a doubt, Beirut's glitziest, glammest club. It's a great space with a good, fun atmosphere,

where the well-heeled clientele generally book a large table with friends (for dinner) and settle in for a night of dollar-flashing. If you want to join in, consider ordering the US\$3000 salmazar of champagne and have it carried, spotlit, to your table – which it pays to book in advance.

Spectator Sports

Football (soccer) is by far the most popular spectator sport and Beirut's most popular teams are Beirut Nejmeh, Beirut Ansar and Olympic Beirut. If you want to catch a match, check the *Daily Star* for listings.

If you're into horseracing, the **Hippodrome** (Map p265; ☎ 632 515; admission LL5000-15,000; ☎ 11am-4pm Sun), just behind the National Museum of Beirut, is one of the only places in the Middle East where you can legally place a bet. Horse racing has always been wildly popular with the Lebanese; built by the Surssock family just after WWI, the Hippodrome was the place to go in the good old days. Go quickly, however, as the municipality, which owns the race track, is threatening to sell off the land to commercial concerns.

Theatre

There are several excellent theatres in Beirut that sometimes stage non-Arabic productions. Listings for what's on at individual theatres can be found in the local daily newspapers and in the *Guide* (see p269).

Al-Medina Theatre (Map p272; ☎ 371 962; cnr Rue Justinien & Rue Clemenceau, Kantari) Shows modern Lebanese plays in Arabic, French and sometimes English.

Monnot Theatre (Map p277; ☎ 320 762-4; next to St Joseph's Church, Rue St Joseph University, Achrafiye) Regular programme of French-language theatre, along with live music performances. Don't be fooled by the name. It's not on Monot St, but on the street next to the church.

Théâtre de Beyrouth (Map p272; ☎ 366 085; Rue Graham, Ain al-Mreisse) Small theatre hosting cutting-edge productions and performances from Lebanon and abroad, in Arabic, English and French.

SHOPPING

The key to good shopping in Beirut is to pick your district. If you're looking for one-off clothes, carpets, jewellery, antiques or other special bits and bobs, head to **Saifi Village** (Map p277; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, late night shopping Thu), a beautifully restored arts quarter just off Place des Martyrs. Highlights include **Plum** (☎ 976 565; Rue Ariss Kanafani), which stocks young

designers' creations; and **Ceramic Lounge** (☎ 03-129 781; Rue Mkhallissiye), a café where you can create your own customised painted pots, plates and mugs. On Saturdays, **Souq el-Tayeb** (☎ 03-340 198; www.soukeltayeb.com; Saifi Village car park; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat) sets up in the Saifi Village car park; it's Lebanon's first farmers market and a great place to pick up ingredients for a picnic or a home-cooked meal.

For High Street shopping and bookshop browsing, the university district of Hamra, where bookshops dot Rue Bliss and the small streets leading off it, is your best bet. If you're in the mood for a wander around a mall, the **ABC Mall** (Map p265; www.abc.com.lb; ☎ 212 888; Mar Mitr Rise; ☎ 10am-10pm) stocks brand names, a wide range of children's clothes and hosts several cafés and a cinema.

If you're heading to a particularly swanky nightclub, a stroll along Rue Verdun (Map p265) could be the perfect thing, lined with designer clothes shops and well-dressed locals sipping espressos, while Downtown, too, has its share of high-end boutiques. Scheduled to open in 2008, Downtown's Souqs Project promises to bring yet more high-end fashion and interior design stores into the city centre. For junk shops, Gemmayzeh's the place to explore; for antiques and souvenirs, Achrafiye.

Good quality Middle Eastern souvenirs – satin slippers, wooden boxes, backgammon sets and ceramics – can be found at **Artisans du Liban et d'Orient** (Map p272; ☎ 362 610; the Corniche, Ain al-Mreisse; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) and at the worthy **L'Artisan du Liban** (Map p277; ☎ 580 618; Rue Montee Accawi, Achrafiye; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), which supports Lebanese craftsmen in need.

Another great place to seek out original souvenirs is the **Oriental Art Centre** (Map p272; ☎ 349 942; Rue Makhoul, Hamra; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3.30pm-6pm Mon-Sat). Owned by the same old gentleman, in the same location, since 1955, it sells hand-tinted lithographs and vintage postcards, offering nostalgic, David Roberts-like visions of a long lost Middle East.

Cool books on Middle Eastern visual culture, photography and cultural studies can be found at **CD-Théque** (Map p277; ☎ 746 078; Ave Elias Sarkis, Achrafiye) and at **Virgin Megastore** (Map p275; ☎ 999 666; Opera Bldg, Place des Martyrs, Downtown; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat), both of which stock an enormous range of excellent DVDs, videos and CDs from the region, in all genres and styles.

Finally, twice a year – usually in November or December and in May or June – Beirut hosts the **Souq el-Bargout**, a massive informal flea market, which consumes the city centre's streets each evening for about a fortnight. An evening of browsing and stopping to nibble snacks from its vendors is an unmissable experience if you're in town at this time.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information about getting to Syria from Beirut, see **Travel Between Syria & Lebanon** (p396). Buses, minibuses and service taxis to destinations north of Beirut leave from Charles Helou bus station (Map p277) and the Dawra (aka Dora) transport hub (7km northeast of town). To the south and south-east they leave from the Cola transport hub (Map p265) on the opposite side of town, south of Blvd Saeb Salam. See the relevant town and city sections for further details.

Air

Beirut has the only airport in the country, **Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport** (BEY; ☎ 628 000; www.beirutairport.gov.lb). See p391.

AIRLINE OFFICES

Most airlines have their offices in the **Gefinor Center** (Map p272; Rue Maamari, Hamra). For details of major airlines flying to and from Beirut, see p391.

Bus & Microbus

Buses and microbuses travel between Beirut and Lebanon's major towns. There are three main bus hubs in Beirut:

Charles Helou bus station (Map p277) Just east of Downtown, for destinations north of Beirut (including Syria).

Cola transport hub (Map p265) This is in fact a confused intersection that is sometimes called Mazraa. It is generally for destinations south of Beirut.

Dawra transport hub Northeast of Beirut, and covering the same destinations as Charles Helou, it is usually a port of call on the way in and out of the city.

Charles Helou is the only formal bus station and is systematically divided into three signposted zones:

Zone A For buses to Syria.

Zone B For buses servicing Beirut (where the route starts or finishes at Charles Helou).

Zone C For express buses to Jounieh, Byblos and Tripoli.

Zones A and C have ticket offices where you can buy tickets for your journey.

Cola is not as well organised as Charles Helou, but if someone doesn't find you first (which is what usually happens) ask any driver where the next bus to your destination is leaving from. Buses usually have the destination displayed on the front window or above it in Arabic only. There are also a growing number of microbuses covering the same routes, which are slightly more expensive than regular buses, but a lot cheaper than service taxis. Microbuses are operated by individuals. The advantage is that they are small, comfortable and frequent, but you'd be taking your chances regarding the driver's ability. You pay for your ticket on the microbus, at either the start or the end of your journey.

Service Taxi & Taxi

Taxis to Syria depart from the Charles Helou and Cola bus stations and operate on the usual system of waiting until the vehicle fills up before leaving. They have an advantage over the buses in that you don't have to wait around too long to depart, but the disadvantage is that they can be a bit of a squash, especially on a long journey. If you want the taxi to yourself, you will have to pay for all five passenger seats. See **Service Taxi & Taxi** (p292) for more information.

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport (off Map p265; ☎ 628 000; www.beirutairport.gov.lb) is approximately 5km south of Beirut city centre. It's possible to catch a bus into the city, but the airport isn't fantastically set up for such an arrangement. The airport bus stop, from which buses leave, is a 1km walk from the terminal – a hot walk, if you happen to arrive at midday in August.

The red-and-white LCC bus 1 will take you from the airport roundabout to Rue Sadat in Hamra, useful if you're staying in one of Hamra's numerous midrange hotels, or at one of the swankier places – including the Riviera and the Palm Beach – along the Corniche. Bus 5 will take you to the Charles Helou bus station hub. Fares are LL700.

The blue-and-white OCFTC buses 7 and 10 also stop at the airport roundabout; bus 10 goes to the Charles Helou bus station, and

bus 7 goes to Raouché, from where you can take bus 9 to Hamra. Fares are LL700. The buses operate between 5.30am and 6pm and all being well, the maximum wait should be 10 minutes. Service taxis can also be hailed from the highway – further on from the roundabout – and cost LL2000 per person.

If you can stretch to it, the best way to avoid hassle is to pre-arrange an airport pick-up with your hotel. Even Beirut's budget hostels offer this service, and will charge you substantially less than a normal taxi might, usually around US\$15. If you don't have a pick-up arranged, most yellow taxi drivers will attempt to charge around US\$25 for the trip, though with hard bargaining you may be able to drive them down to as little as US\$10. Make sure you agree clearly on the price before you get into the cab.

Car & Motorcycle

For general information on hiring a car or motorcycle, see p403. Here's a selection of car-rental companies.

Advanced Car Rental (☎ 999 884/5; www.advancedcarrent.com) This friendly local company offers substantial discounts on its published prices and comes highly recommended over some of the larger, more international firms. Extra services include free drop-off to any hotel in Beirut, and a free Advanced Car Rental CD, providing an in-car version of Arabic elevator music.

Avis (☎ 367 124; www.avis.com.lb)

Budget (☎ 740 741; www.budget-rental.com)

Lenacar-Europcar (☎ 480 480; www.lenacar.com)

Sixt (☎ 301 226; www.sixt.com.lb)

Thrifty Car Rental (☎ 510 100; www.thrifty.com.lb)

Public Transport

Beirut is well serviced by its network of buses. The red-and-white buses are run by the privately owned **Lebanese Commuting Company** (LCC; ☎ 744 174; www.lccworld.com) and the large blue-and-white OCFTC buses are government owned. Sometimes the tourist information office (see p269) has free LCC route maps available.

Buses operate on a 'hail-and-ride' system: wave to the driver and the bus will stop. The only official bus stops are where the bus starts and finishes. There are no timetables, but both companies run buses from roughly 5.30am to 9pm, with services departing roughly every 15 minutes.

Buses can be excruciatingly slow but are handy if you're on a time-rich, cash-poor

stay. They're especially good value for trips to places such as Brummana (p296) and Beit Mery (p295).

The bus routes most useful to travellers are listed here. A short trip will almost always cost LL750, a longer trip LL1000.

LCC BUSES

1 Hamra–Khalde Rue Sadat (Hamra), Rue Emile Eddé, Hotel Bristol, Rue Verdun, Cola roundabout, Airport roundabout, Kafaat, Khalde

2 Hamra–Antelias Rue Sadat (Hamra), Rue Emile Eddé, Radio Lebanon, Sassine Sq, Borj Hammoud, Dawra, Antelias

5 Ain al-Mreisse–Hay as-Saloum Manara, Verdun, Yessoueiye, Airport roundabout, Hay as-Saloum

6 Cola–Byblos Antelias, Jounieh, Byblos (Jbail)

7 Museum–Bharssaf Museum, Beit Mery, Brummana, Baabdat, Bharssaf

15 Cola–Aley-Qmatiye Airport Bridge, Galerie Semaan, Hazmieh, Aleh, Qmatiye

OCFTC BUSES

1 Bain Militaire–Khalde Bain Militaire, Unesco, Summerland, Khalde

4 Dawra–Jounieh Dawra, Dbayé, Kaslik, Jounieh

5 Ministry of Information–Seraïl Jdeideh Ministry of Information, Sodeco, Borj Hammoud, Seraïl Jdeideh

7 Bain Militaire–Airport Bain Militaire, Summerland, Borj Brajné, Airport

8 Ain al-Mreisse–Seraïl Jdeideh Ain al-Mreisse, Charles Helou, Dawra, Seraïl Jdeideh

9 Bain Militaire–Seraïl Jdeideh Bain Militaire, Rue Bliss, Rue Adbel Aziz, Rue Clemenceau, Rue Weygand, Tabaris Sq, Sassine Sq, Hayek roundabout, Seraïl Jdeideh

10 Charles Helou–Airport Charles Helou, Shatila, Airport roundabout

15 Ain al-Mreisse–Nahr al-Mott Ain al-Mreisse, Raouché, Museum, Nahr al-Mott

16 Charles Helou–Cola Charles Helou, Downtown, Cola

23 Bain Militaire–Dawra Bain Militaire, Ain al-Mreisse, Charles Helou, Dawra

24 Museum–Hamra Museum, Barbir, Hamra

Service Taxi & Taxi

Service taxis are plentiful and cheap in Beirut. Most routes around the capital are

covered and you can hail one at any point on the route. The only way to find out if the driver is going where you want is to hail him and ask. If the driver is not going where you want he'll (and it's nearly always a 'he') respond by driving off. If he's going in your direction the acknowledgment to get in may be as imperceptible as a head gesture.

You can get out at any point along their route by saying '*anzil huun*' (I get out here), to the driver. Occasionally when the drivers have an empty car they will try and charge you a private taxi fare. To let him know that you want to take the taxi as a service taxi, be sure to ask him '*servees?*' Taxis are usually an elderly Mercedes with red licence plates, generally with a taxi sign on the roof and smoke belching from both the interior and the exhaust. The fare for all routes in central Beirut is either LL1000 or LL1500, seemingly depending on the taxi. The fare to outlying suburbs is LL2000. Try and pay at the earliest opportunity during your trip. It's a good idea to keep a few LL1000 notes handy for these trips.

If you do wish to take a service taxi as a private taxi, make sure the driver understands exactly where you are going and negotiate a price before you get in. Most destinations in the centre of Beirut cost LL5000 to LL8000; however, it's not uncommon for drivers to ask for LL10,000, and grudgingly settle for LL7000. If you think the driver is asking too much, just wave him on and wait for another one.

You can also telephone for a taxi from a number of private hire firms. They charge a bit more, but are safer at night. Remember to ask the fare over the phone.

The following companies are considered most reliable:

Allo Taxi (☎ 366 661)

Lebanon Taxi (☎ 340 717-19)

Taxi Premiere (☎ 389 222) Based in Verdun, offers airport service and services to Syria and Jordan.

TV Taxi (☎ 862 489, 860 890)

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