

Tripoli & the North



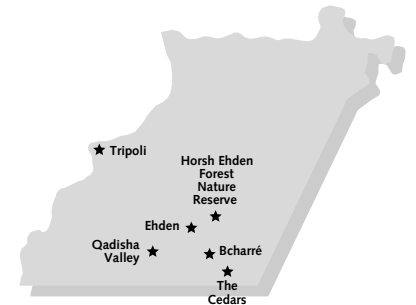
Northern Lebanon is considered by many people – locals and visitors alike – to be the country's greatest, greenest, cleanest natural asset.

The gorgeous World Heritage-listed Qadisha Valley, hidden deep beneath the mountains east of Tripoli, provides a tranquil escape for hikers from the fast-paced Lebanese development of the cities and the coastal strip. The valley snakes up to the pretty, sleepy town of Bcharré, birthplace of legendary Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran. Further east from Bcharré is the Cedars – where a few of the country's treasured trees remain – home to Lebanon's highest altitude ski resort and a good starting point for hiking in summer. Meanwhile, the small town of Ehdén, located on the valley's northern rim, provides quaint respite from the searing coastal heat, with a lovely central square that's the perfect place for sipping arak late into the night. The creation of the Lebanon Mountain Trail and a growing Lebanese interest in adventure sports, such as rafting and paragliding, sees the region becoming more enticing than ever to visitors. Still, it remains sparsely populated, and while you're enjoying the abundance of tracks and trails, you're unlikely to encounter more than a handful of other intrepid trekkers.

A dramatically different face of Lebanon's north lies in tightly-packed Tripoli, with its busy medieval souqs, historic fortress and the workaday port of Al-Mina. Lebanon's second city, Tripoli was once planned as its capital, but today has little in common with cosmopolitan Beirut, exuding a more provincial, and slightly bruised-and-battered feel. Tripoli's economy was hard hit by the 2007 crisis in the outlying Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared and is still recovering; nevertheless, the city makes a fascinating place to explore, preferably with one of its famous, sticky pastries in hand.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover the beauty of Khalil Gibran's poetry and painting at his **museum** (p340) in Bcharré
- Wind your way through Tripoli's **medieval souqs** (p331), stopping to sniff out some hand-made soaps
- Stroll the short but diverse trails of the serene **Horsh Ehdén Forest Nature Reserve** (p339)
- Stop for a hearty post-hike dinner at the tree-lined village square in **Ehdén** (p338)
- Marvel at the grottoes and rock-cut monasteries of the World Heritage-listed **Qadisha Valley** (p337)
- Whiz down the slopes of Lebanon's highest ski resort at **the Cedars** (p342)



TRIPOLI (TRABLOUS)

طرابلس

📞 06 / pop 237,909

Tripoli (Trablous in Arabic), 85km north of Beirut, is Lebanon's second-largest city and the north's main port. Famous for its medieval Mamluk architecture, old city souq, huge fortress and teeth-clenchingly sweet pastries, its charms were sadly overshadowed in 2007 by the deadly and drawn-out confrontation between Palestinian militants and the Lebanese army, centred on the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp around 16km from the city centre. On 20 May 2007, militants and Lebanese police began battling it out in Tripoli itself, before fighting moved to Nahr al-Bared; Lebanese soldiers finally took control of the camp in September 2007. Alleged ties between the militant group and Al-Qaeda lent events a particularly sinister and gloomy edge.

Its image tarnished as a result, Tripoli is currently struggling to entice tourists back to its markets and monuments. Certainly, there's plenty to keep a visitor entertained for a couple of days, and with one good budget hotel and one excellent top-end choice, there are accommodation options for every pocket. Since few tourists currently make it this far north, you'll have no problem finding an available room or restaurant table.

If you're arriving direct from Beirut, though, you may be in for something of a culture shock. Tripoli may be Lebanon's second-largest city, but in many ways it couldn't be more different. Where Beirut is glitzy, Tripoli is demure and down-to-earth. Though there is some nightlife to be had, it's low key and based in the port of Al-Mina rather than in Tripoli proper. It's wise, therefore, to dress down a little, leaving your best figure-hugging combinations for the streets and clubs of the capital.

HISTORY

While there is evidence of a settlement in Tripoli as far back as 1400 BC, its past is likely to go back even further. By the 8th century BC, what had been a small Phoenician seaside trading post had grown with the arrival of traders from Sidon, Tyre and Arwad (Aradus, which became Tartus in Syria). Each community settled within its own walled area, giving rise to the Greek name *Tripolis*, meaning 'three cities'.

During the rule of the Seleucids, and later the Romans, Tripoli prospered but a massive earthquake in AD 543 altered the geography of the port area completely and razed most of the town. It was quickly rebuilt but by AD 635 a general of Mu'awiyah, the governor of Syria and founder of the Umayyad dynasty (AD 661–750), besieged the city and attempted to starve it into submission. The inhabitants of Tripoli escaped by sea with Byzantine help and the town

was resettled by a military garrison and a Jewish colony.

Between 685 and 705 the Byzantines captured and resettled the city. It was then recaptured by the Muslims and incorporated into the Umayyad and, later, Abbasid caliphates. By the end of the 10th century, as the Abbasids were losing their grip on the region, the Shiite Fatimids took control of Tripoli. They held onto it until 1069, when one of the city's judges, from a family named Banu Ammar, declared Tripoli's independence. Under Ammar rule, the growing city became a centre of learning renowned for its school, Dar al-Ilm (literally 'Abode of Knowledge'), with a library containing some 100,000 volumes.

When the Crusaders, led by Raymond de Saint-Gilles of Toulouse, first arrived in 1099, the Ammars persuaded them to bypass Tripoli, bribing them with lavish gifts. However, Tripoli's agricultural wealth was too glittering a prize and Raymond returned some three years later. Tripoli's rulers brought in reinforcements from Damascus and Homs, but Raymond defeated the three armies with only 300 men. He then built a fortress, the Citadel of Raymond de Saint-Gilles, on a hill inland from the busy port area and controlled land trade coming into the city.

Tripoli's leaders launched repeated raids on the fortress, eventually mortally wounding Raymond. Just before he died he signed a truce guaranteeing safe passage in and out of the city for its inhabitants and this lasted only until his successor, Guillaume Jourdain, took over and once again imposed the blockade with the assistance of the Genoese fleet, which blocked the city from the sea. After four increasingly desperate years under siege, the city finally fell to the Crusaders in June 1109. The victors sacked the city and set fire to the magnificent library at Dar al-Ilm.

Tripoli became the capital of the County of Tripoli and the Crusaders managed to hang on to the city for 180 years, during which time the economy, based on silk-weaving and glass-making, prospered. Academic traditions were revived too, although this time it was Christian schools, rather than Islamic ones, that led the way.

The Mamluk sultan, Qalaun, took the city of Tripoli in 1289, massacring most of the population and razing the port city.

Qalaun built his new city around the Citadel of Raymond de Saint-Gilles and once again the area flourished: the souqs, mosques, madrasas (schools where Islamic law is taught) and khans that form the bulk of present-day Tripoli's monuments are testament to the city's economic and cultural prosperity in Mamluk times. The Turkish Ottomans, under the rule of sultan Selim I, took over the town in 1516. When the *mutasarrifa* (administrative district) of Mt Lebanon was created in 1860, Tripoli was still ruled by the Ottomans; however, it fell within the boundaries of the French Mandate of Greater Lebanon in 1920.

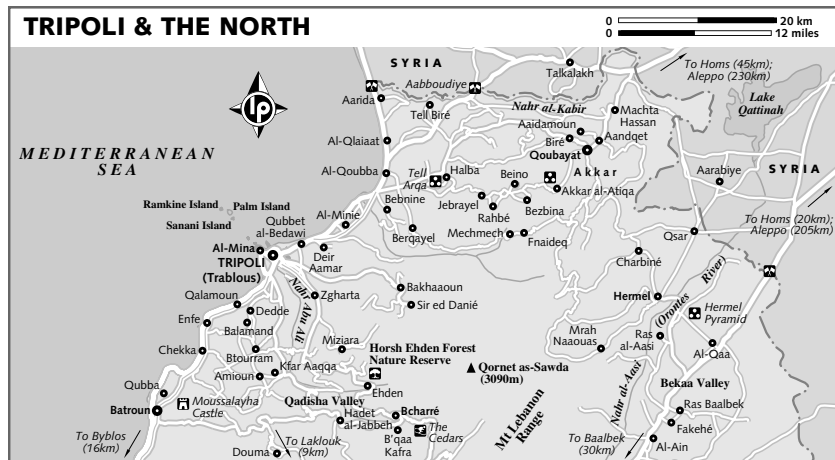
Since independence in 1946, Tripoli has been the administrative capital of northern Lebanon. Conservative and predominantly Sunni Muslim, it was perhaps natural that the pro-Arab nationalist forces, led by Rachid Karami, based themselves here in the civil war of 1958. The labyrinthine old city was almost impossible for outsiders to penetrate and Karami's men held out for several weeks.

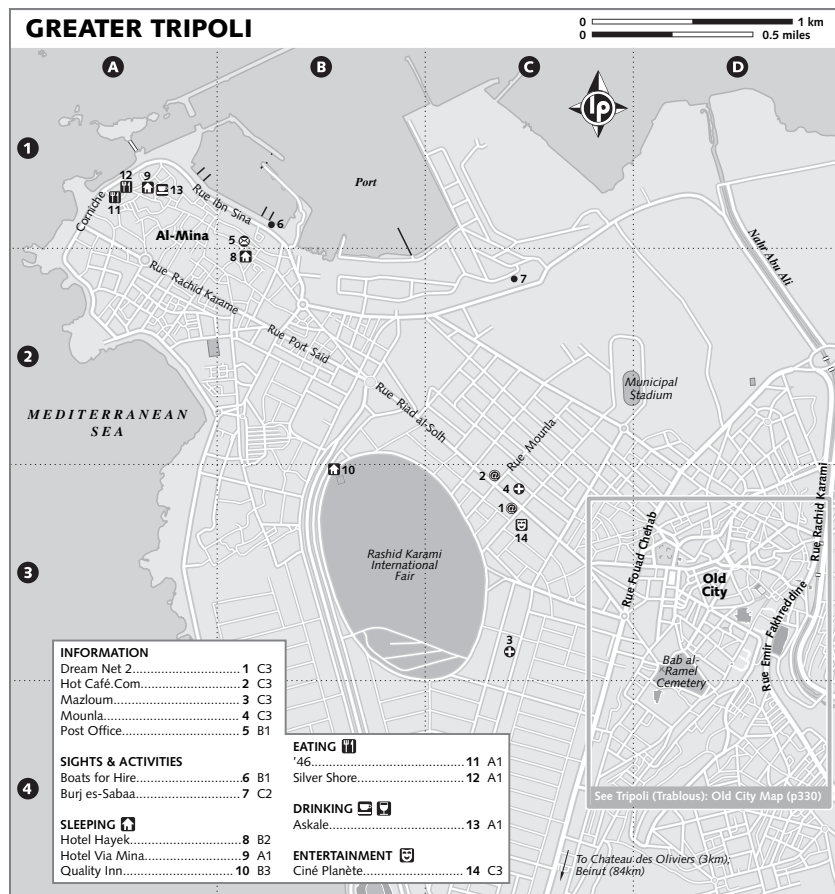
In the 1975–91 round of fighting, Tripoli suffered a lot of damage – especially during the inter-Palestinian battles of 1983 – but it still fared better than the south of the country. Both during and after the war, the city's population grew rapidly, swelled by refugees, including large numbers of Palestinians, most of whom today reside in the UNRWA-administered Beddawi and now-infamous Nahr el-Bared refugee camps on the outskirts of the city.

ORIENTATION

Tripoli comprises two main areas: the city proper, which includes the broad streets of modern Tripoli and the labyrinthine old city; and Al-Mina port, 3km to the west along the sea front. The geographical centre of town is Sahet et-Tall (at-tahl), a large square next to the clock tower where you'll find the service-taxi and bus stands. Most of the city's cheap hotels are clustered close to the square.

The old city sprawls east of Sahet et-Tall, while the modern centre is west of the square, along Rue Fouad Chehab. Between Rue Fouad Chehab and Al-Mina are broad avenues lined with shops, apartment buildings, internet cafés and restaurants. In Al-Mina you'll find a rather run-down waterfront promenade, which becomes at-





mospheric towards nightfall when locals stroll beside the big ships of the port, the city's main concentration of bars, the fabulous Hotel Via Mina, and boats taking visitors out to the Palm Islands reserve.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 140)

Fire (☎ 145)

Police (☎ 112)

Internet Access

Most of Tripoli's internet cafés are congregated along the main roads leading towards Al-Mina. The following listings are a couple of the most pleasant:

Hot Café.Com (Map p328; ☎ 622 888; Rue Riad al-Solh; wireless connection per hr with own laptop LL1500, with café laptop LL2500; ☎ 9am-midnight) A large, airy place owned by a friendly Australian expat, this is a great place to check your mail while munching on breakfast, lunch, dinner or a huge slab of chocolate cake.

Dream Net 2 (☎ 03-858 821; Rue Riad al-Solh; per hr LL1000; ☎ 8am-midnight) On the opposite side of the road from Hot Café.Com, a little closer to the cinema complex, this doesn't have the atmosphere of the first but is a fine place to get things done.

Medical Services

Mazloum (Map p328; ☎ 628 303) and **Mounla** (Map p328; ☎ 210 848) are good private hospitals. There are plenty of pharmacies dotted along

Rue Riad al-Solh, further along on Rue Port Said and on Rue Tall in the old city.

Money

There are ATMs all over town, many on Rue Riad al-Solh. US-dollar travellers cheques can be exchanged into any denomination at the **Walid M el-Masri Co Exchange** (Map p330; Rue Tall) for US\$2 per cheque.

Post

There are two post offices in Tripoli. The **main post office** (Map p330; Rue Fouad Chehab; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) is near the Bank of Lebanon building, just south of Abdel Hamid Karami Sq, and the other **branch** (Map p328; Rue Ibn Sina) is in Al-Mina.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (Map p330; Abdel Hamid Karami Sq; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Friendly, helpful staff who'll try hard to help you with general enquiries and permits to visit the Palm Islands Reserve (p333). Recently, the office's opening hours have become sporadic outside high summer, so persevere if you find it closed.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Old City

The compact old city dates largely from the 14th and 15th centuries (the Mamluk era) and is a maze of narrow alleyways, colourful souqs, hammams, khans, mosques and madrassas. Though many of the monuments are poorly maintained, some still displaying damage from the civil war, it's an atmospheric and lively place to take in the sights, sounds and frequently the smells, as locals come to pick over stalls laden with fruits and vegetables, butchers take the hatchet to swaying sides of beef, and tailors and jewellers ply their trades as they have done for generations.

Almost all of Tripoli's 40-or-so listed monuments are contained within the old city, each with its own numbered plaque. These plaques are often extremely well hidden and you might have to search around a bit to find them. Some monuments are completely ruined. Others are locked, but a key is usually kept in a nearby shop or house – ask around and a key will usually appear, often attached to a grinning old man.

CITADEL OF RAYMOND DE SAINT-GILLES

The city is dominated by the vast **citadel** (Map p330; Plaque 1; admission LL7500; ☎ 8am-6pm, closes ear-

lier in winter), known as Qala'at Sanjil in Arabic. In AD 1102 Raymond de Saint-Gilles occupied the hill that overlooks the valley, the town and the coast. He decided to transform this position, which he called Mont Pelerin (Mt Pilgrim), into a fortress. The original castle was burnt down in 1289, and again on several subsequent occasions. It was rebuilt (1307-08) by Emir Essendemir Kurgi, and had additions right up until the 19th century. As a result, only the foundation stones remain of the original construction.

The first entrance is a huge Ottoman gateway, over which is an engraving from Süleyman the Magnificent, who ordered the restoration (yet again) of 'this blessed tower, that it may serve as a fortified position until the end of time'. After this there is a bridge across a moat dug by the Crusaders. Inside the castle is a muddle of architectural styles and features, reflecting the different occupants and stormy history of the city. Though it's fun to explore independently, take a guide from near the entrance if you really want to know more about the citadel's history. There's no fixed fee for a guided tour, but expect to pay somewhere in the region of LL20,000.

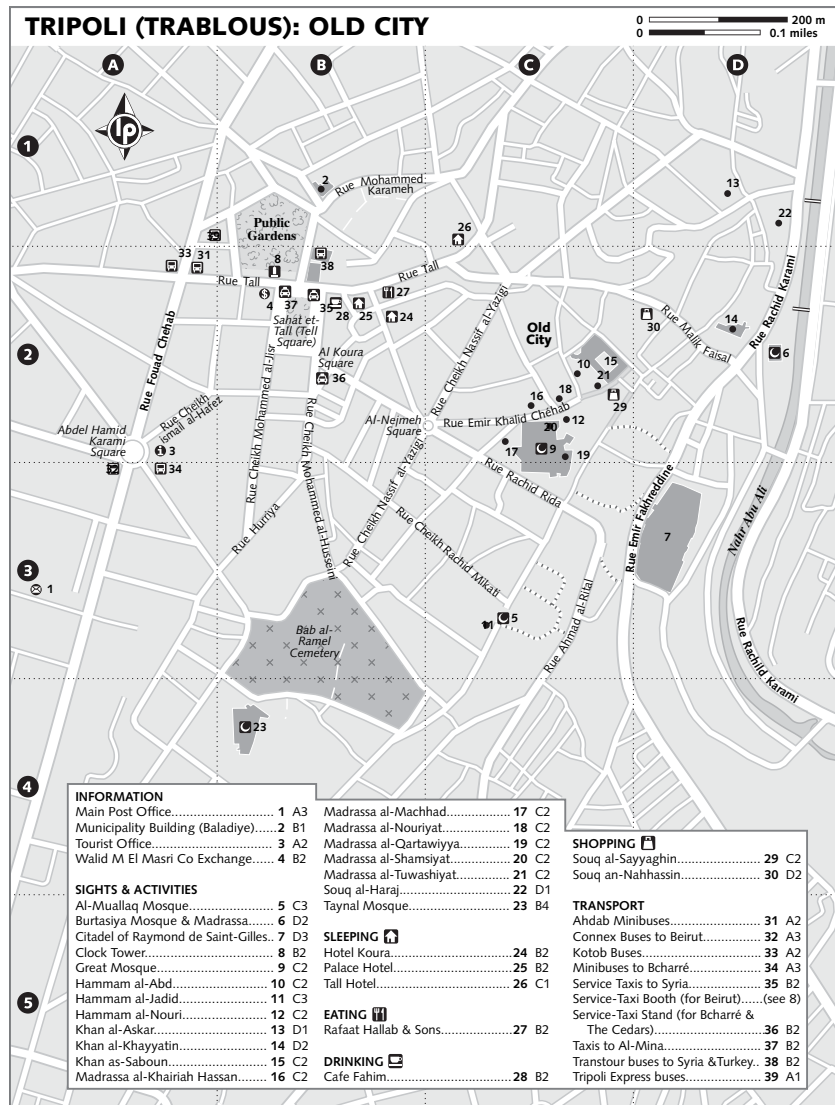
The best exterior view of the castle can be had from the east bank of the Nahr Abu Ali, perfect if you're able to ignore the cascades of rubbish floating by in winter, and the pungent aroma of muddy river bed during the summer months.

MADRASSAS

From the top of the citadel, walk down the set of steps directly in front of you. When you reach the street, turn left then take the first right and walk along Rue Rachid Rida. Take the first right and soon you'll see the 14th-century **madrassas of Al-Machhad and Al-Sham-siyat** (Map p330), adjacent to the entrance of the Great Mosque. Opposite the entrance are two more 14th-century madrassas, **Al-Khairiah Hassan** and **Al-Nouriyat**. The latter is still in use and has distinctive black-and-white stonework around its doors and windows, and a beautiful inlaid mihrab.

HAMMAM AL-NOURI

Opposite the Al-Khairiah Hassan and Al-Nouriyat madrassas, look right and you should see the entrance to the now derelict Hammam al-Nouri (Map p330), a large public bath built around 1333. If you ask



politely, the owner of the juice stand in front of the entrance should let you past to have a wander around the remains of the hammam beyond.

GREAT MOSQUE

الجامع الكبير

Built on the remains of a 12th-century Crusader cathedral dedicated to St Mary of the

Tower, construction of the Great Mosque (Map p330; Plaque 2), known as Jami al-Kabir in Arabic, began in 1294 after the cathedral was destroyed by the Mamluks. It was completed in 1315, and probable traces of the 700-year-old structure can still be seen in the mosque's attractive northern entrance, while the distinctive square minaret may once

have been the original cathedral's bell tower. Inside, a large courtyard is surrounded by porticos on three sides, and a domed and vaulted prayer hall on the fourth.

Women are expected to don one of the gowns provided and cover their heads before entering the Great Mosque.

MADRASSA AL-QARTAWIYYA

المدرسة القرطوية

Attached to the east side of the Great Mosque is Madrassa al-Qartawiyya (Map p330; Plaque 3), which was built by a Mamluk governor of the same name in the early 1300s, over the baptistery of the old cathedral. Famed for its fine workmanship, the madrassa has an elegant façade of black-and-white stone facings, topped by a honeycomb-patterned half-dome above the portal. The back wall is also made with black-and-white stone and has some beautiful Arabic inscriptions. Inside, the prayer hall is topped by Tripoli's only oval dome and has a finely decorated south-facing wall and *minbar* (pulpit).

MADRASSA AL-TUWASHIYAT

المدرسة الطوشية

Back out on the street, Madrassa al-Tuwashiyat (Map p330; Plaque 9), a law school with an attached mausoleum that dates back to around 1471, is on the main street of the gold souq (Souq al-Sayyaghin). Built of sandstone in alternating black-and-white patterns, it has an unusual, finely decorated portal that towers above the building's ornate façade.

HAMMAM AL-ABD

حمام العبد

Close by the Madrassa al-Tuwashiyat is Tripoli's only functioning bathhouse, **Hammam al-Abd** (Map p330; basic bath LL12,000; ☎ 8am-10pm), built in the late 17th century and situated at the end of a narrow alleyway. Sadly, it's only for men (unless you're travelling with a group of women and can arrange to reserve the entire bathhouse in advance). Expect to negotiate an extra fee if you'd like a massage thrown in.

KHAN AS-SABOUN

خان الصابون

Virtually next door to the hammam is Khan as-Saboun (Map p330; Plaque 10), meaning 'Soap Khan', which was built in the 16th century and began life as an army barracks. Abandoned for many years, it was later re-

incarnated as a market where local farmers sold their olives and olive-based products – soap in particular – from the small shops surrounding the courtyard. By the 18th century, when Tripoli's soap industry took off, the khan became famous for its high quality soaps and formed the centre of the soap industry. In recent years, the khan has been brought back to life by the Hassoun family; see A Slippery Business, p332.

KHAN AL-KHAYYATIN

خان الخياطين

Beside Hammam Izz ed-Dine is the beautifully restored stretch of tailors' shops known as Khan al-Khayyat (Tailors' Market; Map p330; Plaque 12). Built in the first half of the 14th century, it is one of the city's oldest khans.

SOUQ AL-HARAJ

سوق الحرج

At the northern end of the old town is **Souq al-Haraj** (Map p330; Plaque 21), which is thought to have been built on the site of a Crusader church. Its high, vaulted ceiling is supported by 14 granite columns, two at the centre and 12 ranged around the sides, which are probably a leftover from the earlier structure. Today the souq specialises in mats, pillows and mattresses.

KHAN AL-ASKAR

خان العسكر

Just around the corner from Souq al-Haraj is Khan al-Askar (Soldiers' Khan; Map p330; Plaque 33), which consists of two buildings joined by a vaulted passage. It is thought to have been built in the late 13th or early 14th century, and was restored in the 18th century.

Other Sights & Activities

AL-MUALLAQ MOSQUE

جامع المعلق

To the south of the Great Mosque is **Al-Muallaq Mosque** (Hanging Mosque; Map p330; Plaque 29). It's a small, 14th-century mosque that gets its name from its unusual position upstairs on the second floor of the building. It has a simple interior and leads down to a courtyard garden.

HAMMAM AL-JADID

حمام الجديد

Almost opposite Al-Muallaq Mosque is Hammam al-Jadid (New Baths; Map p330; Plaque 30). While certainly not new – it was built around 1740 – it was in use until the

A SLIPPERY BUSINESS

The city may only have a handful of traditional soap-makers today but historically soap played an important role in Tripoli's economy. Some locals go so far as to claim that soap was actually invented here, and though this is something of a stretch – soap production probably dates back to at least the ancient Egyptians, if not earlier – it's undeniable that, by the 18th century, Tripoli soap was a highly prized product in Europe.

Tripoli's soap was traditionally made with olive oil, honey, glycerine and other natural ingredients, which were melted together in a huge vat, coloured with saffron and other natural dyes, and scented with essential oils. The soap supplied the local hammams as well as households and a collection of soaps of various sizes, symbolising purity, would be given to brides as part of their trousseau.

Towards the middle of the last century, increasingly cheap mass-production of soap almost killed traditional soap-making in Tripoli. In recent years, however, in line with the world's growing interest in natural, 'boutique' cosmetics, its handmade soaps have made a comeback. The Hassoun family is largely responsible for bringing Tripoli's soaps to the attention of the world. If you wander into their shop, **Khan al-Saboun** (☎ 874 483; www.khanalsaboun.com; 🕒 10am-5pm Sun-Thu), which dominates Tripoli's traditional soap khan, Khan as-Saboun, you're sure to find someone happy to explain the various soap-making processes as well as to take you on a tour of their vast collection of soaps for sale. There are 400 kinds on offer, including soaps in the shape of letters of the alphabet and a soap whose scent remains on your skin for two days. A bar of laurel soap costs US\$2 and a bar of clay soap, US\$4. Look out, also, for the huge soap carved into the shape of an open volume of the Quran.

Outside Tripoli, be sure to look in on the Musée de Savon (p367) in Sidon, which beautifully illustrates traditional soap making practices.

1970s and is the city's best-preserved and largest hammam (with the exception of the still-functioning Hammam al-Abd). It was donated as a gift to the city by As'ad Pasha al-Azem, governor of Damascus, and no expense was spared in its construction. Draped over the portal is a representation of a 14-link chain carved from a single block of stone.

A huge, glass-pierced dome dominates the main chamber and brings a dim light to the pool and fountain below. The floor and fountain are laid with slabs of marble in contrasting colours. Several smaller chambers, also with glass-pierced domes, lead off the main room.

BURTASIYA MOSQUE & MADRASSA

جامع ومدرسة البرطاسية

By the river, across the street from the eastern entrance to the Khan al-Khayyatin, is Burtasiya Mosque and Madrassa (Map p330; Plaque 19). Built by the Kurdish prince Sharafeddin Issa ben Omar al-Burtasi in 1315, its square, towerlike minaret and black-and-white stonework are particularly fine. Inside, the intricately decorated and inlaid mihrab makes the visit worthwhile. Look for the mosaic in its half-dome.

TAYNAL MOSQUE

جامع تينال

Standing on its own to the southeast of the cemetery, but well worth the few minutes' walk it takes to get there, Taynal Mosque (Map p330; Plaque 31) is one of the most outstanding examples of Islamic religious architecture in Tripoli. Built in 1336 by Sayf ed-Din Taynal on the ruins of an earlier Carmelite church, it still has a partially preserved Carmelite nave in the first prayer hall. Other recycled elements, including two rows of Egyptian granite columns topped with late-Roman capitals, were taken from an earlier monument. The simplicity of the bare stone walls contrasts beautifully with some of the Mamluk decorative elements, in particular the entrance to the second prayer hall, a masterpiece of alternating black-and-white bands of stone with Arabic inscriptions, marble panels with geometric designs and a honeycomb-patterned half-dome.

Al-Mina

الميناء

The port district of Al-Mina ranges along the coast to the northwest of modern Tripoli. Until a few decades ago the avenues linking Al-Mina to Tripoli's Old City ran between orange groves; in recent years, as Tripoli

expanded, concrete became the order of the day. Although the history of the port stretches back far further than the medieval city, there are barely any traces of an ancient past left standing today. Instead, the area has a run-down seaside air, with families strolling along its Corniche and flocking to its ice cream parlours during summer weekend evenings.

BURJ ES-SABAA

برج السبع

The only monument of any interest in Al-Mina is Burj es-Sabaa (Lion Tower; Map p328), a miniature fortress at the far eastern end of the harbour. Named after the bas-relief decorations of lions that used to line the façade, the building dates from the end of the 15th century and was probably built by the Mamluk sultan, Qaitbey. It is an exceptional example of Mamluk military architecture with a striking black-and-white striped portico, and older Roman columns used to reinforce the walls horizontally. The entire ground floor is one vast chamber that was once decorated with paintings and armorial carvings, traces of which can still be seen.

BOAT RIDES

Along the seafront there are lots of **boats for hire** (Map p328), waiting to take visitors to the small islands just offshore. A return trip takes about two hours (with enough time for a swim) and costs LL7000. If you're part of a group, you can negotiate to hire the entire boat (between 10 and 12 people) for LL70,000. A trip to the Palm Islands Reserve should be negotiated separately.

PALM ISLANDS RESERVE

Six nautical miles northwest of Tripoli lies the Palm Islands Reserve, which consists of three islands and covers a rough area of 5 sq km of land and sea. Declared a protected site by Unesco in 1992 and dedicated as a nature reserve in 1993, the islands are a haven for endangered loggerhead turtles, rabbits, rare monk seals and over 300 species of migratory birds that stop here to rest and nest. Of these, seven are considered threatened worldwide, while 11 are rare in Europe.

The largest of the islands, Nakheel (Palm Island), supports most of the turtles and contains some 2500 palm trees, with paths laid out for visitors. There are beaches from which you can swim between the islands, or

picnic while watching the wildlife – though barbeques are forbidden.

Tragically, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah disturbed the delicate ecosystem maintained on the islands. A large-scale oil spill in Beirut, caused by the Israeli bombing of the Jiyeh power plant, blackened the coast's beaches. Oil coated the Palm Islands' rocky shorelines, killing bacteria and algae, which are crucial food for marine life and turtles. Oil also spread across the surface of the water, presenting a danger to both turtles and migrating birds. Large quantities of oil, having sunk down to the sea bed, endangered bottom-living aquatic life. For more on the oil spill, see Oil Spill Lebanon (p259).

Clean-up and monitoring programmes undertaken by a World Conservation Union mission to Lebanon have sought to minimise the damage to the Palm Islands, but the long-term impact is still hard to assess and efforts to restore the reserve's shores to their former pristine condition are still ongoing.

Currently the islands are only open to the public between July and September, though they may be closed during this period if environmental work or studies are being undertaken. You can pick up a free permit at the tourist office, and will need to negotiate a fare from one of the boat owners at Al-Mina port. Expect to pay somewhere around LL30,000 per person return.

SLEEPING

In the fallout from the events in Tripoli in 2007, some of the best and longest-established of Tripoli's budget accommodation options have closed down. Moreover, with no decent midrange options and only one really worthwhile top-end choice within easy reach, it's currently not an ideal base for exploring the north beyond the city itself.

Budget

Hotel Koura (Map p330; ☎ 03-371 041, 03-326 803; off Rue Tall; s/d/tr US\$15/30/45, dm/d without bathroom US\$10/15; 🕒) Without doubt the very best of the budget bunch, this small hotel is run by a charming family whose grandmother can often be found reclining on the couch in the living room. The nice, simple rooms with stone walls are available in different configurations, depending on how many guests they

have staying. There's a central shared lounge area, breakfast is included in the price and the owners can organise day trips.

Hotel Hayek (Map p328; ☎ 601 311; Rue ibn Sina; dm/s/d/tr US\$15/20/30/35) A friendly, family-run business in Al-Mina, offering clean, basic rooms with sea views. The hotel is above a billiard parlour-café on a street running parallel to and behind the Corniche. The entrance is at the back of the building. Rates include breakfast.

Tall Hotel (Map p330; ☎ 628 407; Rue Tall; s/d LL30,000/35,000; 🍷) Not particularly welcoming and even downright weird if few guests are in residence, this is a place to be considered if everything else is full. It's difficult to spot the entrance – look for the red, misspelled 'Tell hotel' stencilled high on the building – and, if you do make it this far, minimal lights illuminate spaces inside, making it fairly hard to find your room.

Palace Hotel (Map p330; ☎ 429 993; Rue Tall; s/d/tr US\$20/40/50; 🍷) Located in what appears to be, from the street, a well-kept and freshly painted old building, the interior hardly lives up to its promise. Still, it does retain some sort of charm, with high ceilings and stained glass windows, and is adequate as long as you're not planning on hanging around longer than to sleep and shower. Though the eerie reception room is straight from the vaults of Hammer Horror and management take a while to warm to you, it's safe and clean and rates can

probably be negotiated down a little – though you may find the US\$5 charge for turning on the air-conditioning a bit steep.

Top End

Quality Inn (Map p328; ☎ 211 255; www.qualityinntripoli.com; Rashid Karami International Fair; s/d/ste US\$88/100/150; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Unless you're desperate to stay in a large, desolate and fairly pricey hotel, this is really one to avoid in favour of the other two top-end choices. Rooms are standard and rather dated, the two huge pools – one indoor and one outdoor – are often drained if the hotel is quiet, and eating options are limited. Standing near the derelict Rashid Karami International Fair (see All the Fun of the Fair, below), the biggest benefit is a surfeit of parking spaces.

our pick **Hotel Via Mina** (☎ 222 227; www.viamina.com; Al-Mina; d from US\$100; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The place to splash out in style in Tripoli, this hotel is a hidden gem tucked away in a pretty, quaint backstreet of Al-Mina. With cool, minimalist rooms, a beautiful Arabic-tiled lap pool, courteous staff, an impressive iron spiral staircase, wireless internet throughout, and a bar and library in which to relax downstairs, it's a perfect little boutique hotel to retreat to after the rigours of Tripoli's souqs. To get there, turn off the Corniche at Tasty café and take a left onto the small street running parallel to the rear of the '46 restaurant.

ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR

If you're heading from the old city towards Al-Mina, it's hard to miss the vast, oval-shaped derelict grounds with the Quality Inn sitting on its edge. This overgrown and unkempt open space comprises the grandly titled Rashid Karami International Fair, commissioned in 1963 and designed by world-famous modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer, who is most famous for his public structures in modernist masterpiece-or-monstrosity Brasília.

Abandoned midconstruction at the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, the fairground comprises huge, geometric concrete forms, a massive open-air pavilion, and exhibits many similarities in overall design to its Brazilian cousin. Sadly, it has never been used as anything other than a military post and now lies neglected and forlorn.

Recently a call has been mounting for the demolition of the site, one proposition involving building a theme park in its place. In response, the Association for the Safeguarding of the International Fairgrounds of Tripoli has been formed to press for the site's preservation as a modern architectural monument.

Meanwhile in Brazil, Oscar Niemeyer, aged 100 in 2007 and himself a living monument, actively continues his modernist work. In 1996, aged 89, he completed the startling Niterói Contemporary Art Museum in Brazil, which many consider his best ever work, and in 2003 he designed the Serpentine Gallery Summer Pavilion in London. In 2006 he married Vera Lucia Cabreira, his long-time love, and is currently busy updating old projects and instigating new ones.

Chateau des Oliviers (Villa Nadia; ☎ 411 170, 03-634 546; www.chateau-des-oliviers.com; d from US\$110; 🍷 🍷) This modern mansion makes an eccentric stay for a night or two. Converted into a hotel by its owner Nadia Dibo, former guests, including Greg Dobbs of ABC News, rave about their wonderful experiences on the chateau's website. Set high on a hill a few kilometres south of the city in the Haykalieh region, it's imbued with the charming host's own unique sense of taste, and a stay here, listening to tales of her former incarnation as a couturière in Paris, is an experience to be remembered forever.

Getting to the hotel is the only snag, with few road signs to guide the way: from the Beirut-Tripoli highway, turn into the Haykal road when you reach the Hypermarket a few kilometres before Tripoli. The hotel is up past the Haykal hospital.

EATING

Tripoli's eating options aren't especially illustrious and it's best to wander the areas detailed below, then pick out something that takes your fancy.

Around the clock tower and branching out into the old city are plenty of fast-food vendors, selling boiled sweet corn from pushcarts and felafel from street stalls. If you're planning on taking a picnic out of town, the souqs are the place to pick up fresh fruit, bread, cheese and olives.

Tucked away in tiny alleyways there are also a few small hole-in-the-wall canteens serving up cheap shwarma and other simple dishes.

On Rue Riad Al-Solh, in the area around the cinema, there are plenty of national and international chain restaurants, including Pizza Hut, Pain d'Or and the like, intermingled with local concerns offering up cheap grills and mezze.

Along the Corniche in Al-Mina are a number of ice cream parlours, heaving with locals on weekend evenings, while a straggle of floating coffeehouses dispense hot drinks and snacks on the water itself. In the small streets behind the '46 restaurant are a number of nice bars that offer probably the most fun evening dining in town, all with the same sorts of mezze menus, along with pizzas, pastas and grills.

Rafaat Hallab & Sons (Map p330; Rue Tall) This is the place to sample Tripoli's famous sweets.

You're sure to come across a number of other branches all over town, dispensing, among other delights, gooey, sticky baklava, pistachio-topped *asmaleyye*, crunchy filo *aash el-bulbul* (nightingale's nests), and tea or coffee with which to wash them down. Prices start at around LL1500 per portion.

'46 (Map p328; ☎ 212 223; Corniche, Al-Mina; ☎ 7am-1am) Named after the year the owner's father opened the restaurant, '46 has a solid Italian/international menu. The friendly waiters, relaxed atmosphere and large windows overlooking the Corniche make it a cut above Tripoli's other dining choices. A rich, spicy pasta Arrabbiata goes for LL9000; the 'Rockford filet' – allegedly involving steak and blue cheese – is LL16,000. The entrance is at the back of the building; you won't miss the restaurant when cruising the Corniche.

Silver Shore (Map p328; ☎ 601 384/5; Corniche, Al-Mina; meals around US\$35; ☎ 11am-8pm) Easily the best seafood restaurant in town and right next door to '46, this place specialises in dishes accompanied by its own secret-recipe hot sauce. Strangely, it closes fairly early in the evening, but makes a great choice for a long lunch.

DRINKING

A conservative town by Beirut's standards, Tripoli is certainly not the place for bar hopping. But the cobbled backstreets of Al-Mina, focusing on the small square just beyond the Hotel Via Mina, will have your best choice.

With cafés spilling out along the pavement until late into the evening and crowds of young guys congregating on corners with their scooters, it has a livelier vibe than anywhere else in town.

Café Fahim (Map p330; Rue Tall) This cavernous old café on the square echoes atmospherically with the clack of backgammon pieces from groups of old men perched on plastic chairs and often ensconced in a cloud of nargileh smoke. The outdoor terrace is the best place in town for a nice cup of tea (LL1500) and some serious people-watching.

Askale (Map p328; ☎ 4pm-1am daily) With a pub and restaurant, this is a great place to enjoy the laid-back atmosphere over a beer, a nargileh and a tasty snack: wonderful Greek salads go for LL7000.

ENTERTAINMENT

If people-watching doesn't appeal, you can always check out the latest-release English-language movies at **Ciné Planète** (Map p328; ☎ 442 471; City Complex, Rue Riad al-Solh; tickets LL10,000)

SHOPPING

Exploring the old souqs is the best way to shop in Tripoli. If you are looking for jewelry, there is a whole souq devoted to gold, Souq as-Sayyaghin (Map p330) or, for a more modest souvenir, the Souq an-Nahassin (Map p330) has an array of brass goods. Even if you don't want to buy, it is well worth a visit just to see the metalworkers making pieces by hand in the same way that they have done for centuries. For traditional handmade soap, head to Khan as-Saboun (Map p330; see also A Slippery Business, p332). Note that many shops in the souqs close on Friday.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The timings, availability and costs of bus services may vary depending on the security situation. For services running from Tripoli, it's a good idea to check a day or so in advance of travel. If you have a hire car, Tripoli is an easy two-hour motorway drive north from Beirut.

To/From Beirut

Three companies – Connex, Kotob and Tripoli Express – run coach services between Beirut and Tripoli. Smaller Ahdab minibuses shuttle back and forth regularly throughout the day. All these services leave from Zone C of Charles Helou bus station in Beirut, where there's a dedicated ticket booth for the buses. There's no need to book ahead.

Ahdab Runs minibuses between Tripoli and Beirut (LL1500, around two hours, every 15 minutes from 6am to 8pm). They depart from Rue Fouad Chehab and Rue Tall.

Connex Runs 20 daily express 'luxury coaches' from Beirut to Tripoli, via Jounieh and Byblos (LL2500, 90 minutes, every 30 minutes from 7am to 8.30pm); and from Tripoli to Beirut (every 30 minutes 5.30am to 6pm).

Kotob Runs 10 older buses (it takes longer but is cheapest) from Beirut (LL1500, up to two hours, every 15 minutes 6am to 6.30pm), stopping to let passengers off and on at Jounieh (LL1500, 30 minutes), Byblos (LL1500, one hour) and Batroun (LL1500, 90 minutes); and from Tripoli (every 15 minutes from 5am to 5.30pm) it makes the same stops.

Tripoli Express Runs smaller buses between Beirut and Tripoli (LL2000, 90 minutes, every 10 to 15 minutes from 5am to 6pm).

Service taxis heading to Beirut (LL5000) leave from near the service-taxi booth, just in front of the clock tower.

To Bcharré, the Cedars & Baalbek

Minibuses from Tripoli to Bcharré leave from outside the Marco Polo travel agency, just along from the tourist office (LL2500, 80 minutes, three to four buses daily between 9am and 5pm); and there are services from Bcharré (hourly 6am to 2pm). Those wanting to travel on to the Cedars will need to organise a taxi at Bcharré (LL20,000).

Service taxis heading to Bcharré (LL6000) and the Cedars (LL10,000) leave from Al-Koura Sq.

When there's no snow or ice and the spectacular mountain road is open (usually early April to mid-December) it's possible to take a taxi from Bcharré to Baalbek (around US\$50, 90 minutes).

To Syria, Turkey & Jordan

Kotob runs buses for Aleppo in Syria (LL8000, almost five hours, every hour from 9am to 1pm), and to Damascus via Beirut (LL10,000, three hours) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. It also runs a bus to Amman in Jordan (LL37,500, five to seven hours).

Transtour runs buses to Aleppo in Syria (LL8000, almost five hours, hourly 9am to midnight daily); to Homs (LL5000, two hours, every 30 minutes from 8.30am to 11pm); to Damascus (LL8000, four to five hours, twice daily at 5am and 3pm), and to Istanbul in Turkey (US\$45, once daily).

Service taxis to Homs (LL7700), Hama (LL9000) and Aleppo (LL15,000) leave when full from Sahet et-Tall. Service taxis from Tripoli don't go to Damascus.

Around Town

Service taxis travel within the old and new parts of Tripoli (LL2000) and to Al-Mina (LL2500).

AROUND TRIPOLI

ENFE

☎ 06 / pop 13,964

A sleepy seaside town on the coast 15km south of Tripoli (look for road signs to 'Anfeh' if you're driving the highway from

انفة

Beirut or Tripoli), Enfe's name – which means nose – recalls the shape of its coastline. Unless you're really looking for somewhere quiet and local to wind down, there's not much to detain you for long.

Today a largely Greek Orthodox town, during the Crusades this was the town of Nephim, a fiefdom of the County of Tripoli. The lords of Nephim played an important role here and later moved to Cyprus in the 13th century.

Today there is very little left of the Crusader castle, which stood on the thin peninsula jutting out into the sea, except for a few ruined stone walls. The castle is still remembered, however, for its sadistic history: the lord of Nephim, Count Bohemond VII, walled up his rivals, the Embiaci, in the castle.

Several vaults carved into the rock remain, and the most interesting relics are two **Crusader moats**, one of which is more than 40m long.

Enfe is also home to four **churches**, one of which, Our Lady of the Wind, is Byzantine and has the remains of painted murals. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre dates from the time of Bohemond in the 12th century and is still very much in use.

Since the coast is clean and attractive in this part of Lebanon, it hasn't escaped the concrete coastal sprawl that dominates the coastline. Up beyond the salt pans – shallow pools where seawater is left to evaporate – you'll find the big resort of **Marina del Sol** (☎ 541 301; apt per night US\$125), with apartments that are rented or leased, usually by the season. Nearby is **Las Salinas** (☎ 540 970) with the same resort facilities at similar prices. Both are quite soulless, and set away from the village on the northern end of town. Of the two, Las Salinas is the best equipped, with a cinema, internet café and scuba diving facilities. The best overnight option, however, can be arranged through **L'Hotel Libanais** (☎ 03-513 766; www.hotelibanaï.com) which offers bed and breakfast in a private home for around US\$60 per double.

Enfe is on the service-taxi route between Tripoli, Byblos and Beirut, so it is easy to get to; simply ask the driver to drop you at the turn-off.

You will probably be charged the full service-taxi fare to Tripoli (LL5500). A taxi from Tripoli will cost about LL8000.

QADISHA VALLEY

وادي قاديشا

Widely regarded as one of the most beautiful spots in the whole country, the Qadisha Valley is the place to go for long days of solitary hiking amid waterfalls, rock-cut tombs and monasteries, with barely another wanderer in sight.

A long, deep gorge that begins near Batroun in the west, the valley rises dramatically to its head just beyond the lovely, quiet mountain town of Bcharré. Villages with red-tiled roofs perch atop hills, or cling precariously to the mountain sides; the Qadisha River (Nahr Abu Ali), with its source just below the Cedars, runs along the valley bottom, while Lebanon's highest peak, Qornet as-Sawda, towers above.

The word 'qadisha' stems from the Semitic word for 'holy' and the valley's steep, rocky sides have made it a natural fortress for persecuted religious minorities for millennia. From the 5th century onwards, Maronites made this area their refuge and the valley is scattered with beautiful rock-cut monasteries, hermitages and cave churches to explore as you hike through the region. Today, most of the villages perched atop the cliffs surrounding the valley remain almost exclusively Maronite.

Because of its natural beauty and rich heritage the Qadisha Valley was recognised as a World Heritage site by Unesco in 1998, one of six World Heritage areas in Lebanon. Recently, the Lebanon Mountain Trail (see p338) has awakened renewed interest in the area, opening up to visitors exciting possibilities for long-distance trekking through the region.

If you're in the mood for a shorter walk, however, **Esprit Nomade** (www.esprit-nomade.com) offers regular eco-treks, frequently along the most remote and stunning parts of the valley.

Although the valley is nearly 50km long, the main area of interest is the higher 20km section from Tourza to the Qadisha Grotto, which contains four monasteries and numerous natural delights.

To learn more, a good source of information on the valley and its treasures can be found at www.qadishavalley.com.

THE LEBANON MOUNTAIN TRAIL

The Lebanon Mountain Trail, an ambitious project financed by a US\$3.3million grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), plans to link the walking trails of the Qadisha Valley to those of both the north and the very south of Lebanon. The country's first long-distance hiking path will stretch some 400km along Lebanon's mountain ranges, from Al-Qbaiyat in the north of Lebanon to Marjayoun in the south.

Currently under the supervision of ECODIT, a US-based consultancy company, the burgeoning trail aims to connect many of Lebanon's best ancient and natural features – its nature reserves, archaeological remains and most picturesque villages – rather like a giant dot-to-dot puzzle, its deputy manager Karim El-Jisr explains, and all at an altitude of 1000m and above.

Recognising the importance of both environmental and cultural sensitivity, ECODIT has teamed up with a whole host of notable Lebanese ecologically minded organisations, to ensure that the trail only enhances Lebanon's mountain landscapes. Along with offering advice on culturally sensitive behaviour, safety and hiking ethics while on the move, it also gives full details of the numerous eco-trekking outfits that run guided hikes along its portions, many of them in the Qadisha Valley area, along with the telephone numbers of independent guides who can truly take you off the beaten track.

Undaunted by the 2006 war, which saw the temporary suspension of the project, ECODIT plans to have the entire route up and running – or walking – by 2009, allowing hikers to see a unique side of Lebanon, with bird's-eye views most of the way.

For more information, visit the trail's website at www.lebanontrail.org.

EHDEN

☎ 06 / pop 20,888

On the northern rim of the Qadisha Valley, around 30km from Tripoli, this popular summer resort has a picturesque old centre dominated by a lively tree-lined main square fringed with cafés, bars and restaurants – though beware that outside of the summer season you're likely to find almost everything locked up and packed away. The whole town advertises itself, quite curiously, as a wi-fi zone, so if you're hiking with your laptop for company, it's a good place to stop and reconnect with the world.

Sights & Activities

If you're approaching Ehden from the Tripoli direction, one of the first indications that you're in town is the sight of the tiny Our Lady of the Castle chapel on a hill northwest of the village. Thought to have originally been a Roman look-out post, the unmistakable modern addition has an immense Our Lady balanced on a construction that looks like it could be a Raëlian space ship docking on earth. Some might also speculate that Our Lady herself is actually a giant, cleverly disguised antenna, responsible for providing the town with its wireless services.

Back in town, a small street opposite the square leads up to St George's Church,

اهدن

where there is an equestrian statue of **Youssef Bey Karam**, a 19th-century nationalist hero who led rebellions against Ottoman rule with the support of other religious communities, as well as his fellow Maronites. He was killed by the Turks near Ehden and his mummified body, dressed in a traditional gold-braided costume, lies in a glass-topped sarcophagus against the southern wall of St George's Church. His descendants remain prominent in the area.

Just beyond the main square you'll find the **Church of Sts Peter & Paul**, parts of which date back to the 13th century, and which contains the grave of Lebanese painter Salibael Douaihy. Next door is the **Friends of Horsh Ehden Nature Reserve office**, which, when open during the summer months, can provide maps and information on the Horsh Ehden Forest Nature Reserve (see p339).

Sleeping & Eating

Most people who visit the Qadisha Valley stay in either Bcharré or the Cedars, but there are alternatives in Ehden – keep in mind that it's very quiet outside summer. During summer, some of the cafés on the square have rooms to rent above them; ask inside the cafés for details. They're usually cheap and cheerful, with a great – if a little noisy – location in the thick of the fun.

Belmont (☎ 560 102; d \$50-60) This reasonable old-style hotel close to the entrance to town offers a variety of clean, decent rooms, some with views and balconies. It may be closed outside high season.

Grand Hotel Abchi (☎ 561 101; d/ste US\$60/85) This large, quite modern hotel offers solid value in a central location and continues Ehden's spaceship theme with its odd 1970s-built, flying-saucer-shaped restaurant.

Ehden is well known for its restaurants overlooking Nebaa Mar Sarkis (Mar Sarkis Spring) where it emerges from the hillside to the northeast of the village. A host of places cluster around the source, all serving traditional Lebanese food with huge mezze spreads and, on balmy evenings, live music and dancing. Most are open in summer only. For Italian dishes, steaks and seafood, browse the numerous cafés lining the square.

Outside summer, the only place in town reliably open is the **Eden Café** (☎ 03-116 780; ☎ 9am-9pm) behind the square – you'll spot the yellow awnings. Hearty bowls of onion soup go for LL5000, and decent salads range from LL5000 to LL8000. The café also has nice rooms to rent above it in the summer.

Getting There & Away

If you're not trekking with an eco-minded trekking operation (see p382 or the Lebanon Mountain Trail website, www.lebanon-trail.org for details) by far the quickest and easiest way to explore this part of Lebanon is with your own transport, even just for a day or two.

Otherwise, if you are taking a service taxi from Tripoli to Bcharré, ask the driver to drop you at Ehden or any point you fancy en route along the north side of the valley. If you want to get to the south side of the valley, it's best to go to Bcharré and get a taxi from there. A service taxi from Tripoli to any point from Ehden to Bcharré will cost LL6000. There are also minibuses that ply the rim of the valley; they pass Ehden around five or six times a day and cost LL3000.

HORSH EHDEN FOREST NATURE RESERVE

محمية حرش اهدن
Just over 3km from Ehden, well signposted with brown road signs, is the nature reserve of Horsh Ehden, a 17-sq-km mountainous ecosystem. You can arrange a guided visit by contacting the **Friends of Horsh Ehden** (☎ 560

950 in summer, 660 249 in winter; www.horsheden.com) or guide yourself around one of the nine short marked hiking trails, the longest of which is just over 2km and should take 45 minutes to complete.

There's a map of trails online, at the entrance to the reserve and also outside the Friends office, next door to the Church of Sts Peter & Paul in Ehden.

Although the reserve covers less than 1% of Lebanon's total area, some 40% of the country's plant species have been found within its borders. There are 1058 species of plants, 12% of which are considered threatened. The reserve has one of Lebanon's largest stands of native cedar, mixed with varieties of juniper, conifer, wild apple and others.

The area is a nesting place for birds and provides a refuge for some of Lebanon's endangered mammals. Wolves and hyenas have also been spotted here, as have wild boars.

Though you can't stay in the park itself, **La Reserve** (☎ 561 092, 03-751 292) at its entrance has chalets and a restaurant, and arranges guided walks, all during summer months only.

KFAR SGHAB

كفر صغاب
The cute village of Kfar Sghab, 4km south of Ehden on the road to Bcharré, might seem unremarkable except for its profusion of well tended flower beds and road-side shrines.

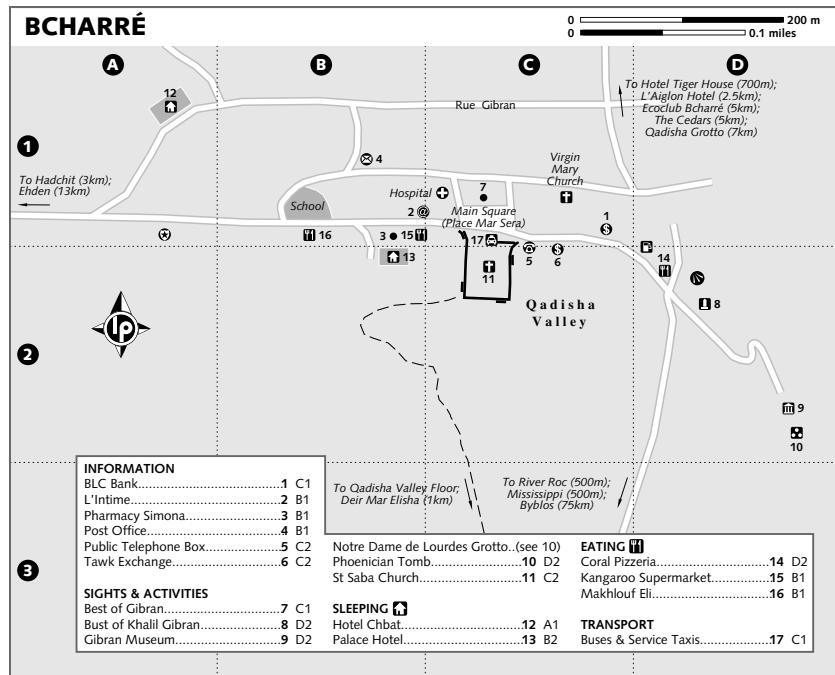
Australians, however, particularly Sydneysiders, passing through here might be surprised to see a sign announcing 'Paramatta Rd' on the main street. More surprising still, if you say hello to almost any of the 750 inhabitants of the village you're likely to hear 'g'day mate' thrown back at you. There's even a Para Cafe just off the main road in the centre of the village. The reason for this surreal connection between the village and a used-car strip in Sydney? A staggering 15,000 Australian Lebanese trace their roots back to this area.

Many returned to Lebanon when the civil war ended and built smart new summer homes here, which you'll see lining the road and the hillside.

BCHARRÉ

☎ 06 / pop 13,756

A pretty, welcoming town in the heart of the Qadisha Valley, Bcharré is a terrific place for stopping off en-route to the Cedars or to base yourself for a few days while



exploring the wild valley below. Famous as the birthplace of Khalil (or Kahlil, as some locals insist) Gibran and the stronghold of the right-wing Maronite Christian Phalange party, the town makes a pleasant stroll and a good place to stock up on picnic provisions to fill your rucksack.

Orientation & Information

Dominated by the St Saba Church on Place Mar Sera, the main square, the town is small and easy to wander around. Both east and west along the main road are small supermarkets and pharmacies. **Pharmacy Simona** (☎ 672 2727; ☒ 8am-8pm) is a well-stocked, English-speaking option. To the east of the square is moneychanger **Tawk Exchange** (☎ 671 305), which also does Western Union transfers; just after it is the BLC bank which has an ATM machine. A block north of the main road is the **post office** (☒ 8am-1pm).

L'Intime (LL2000 per hr; ☒ 11am-11pm daily) is the town's main internet café. For telephone calls, there's a public telephone box on the square and many of the supermarkets sell prepaid cards.

Sights & Activities

GIBRAN MUSEUM

Fans of the famous poet and artist Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) will love this **museum** (☎ 671 137; www.kahlilgibran.com.lb; adult/student LL3000/2000; ☒ 9am-5pm Mar-Nov, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar, closed Mon). In keeping with his wishes, Gibran, who emigrated to the USA in the 19th century and published his most famous work, *The Prophet*, in 1923, was buried in a 19th-century monastery built into the rocky slopes overlooking Bcharré. The museum, which has been set up in this monastery, houses a large collection of Gibran's paintings, drawings and gouaches, and also some of his manuscripts. His coffin is in the monastery's former chapel, which is cut straight into the rock. The views of the valley from the museum's terrace are quite amazing. There's also a good gift shop, selling a number of collections of Gibran's work in translation.

NOTRE DAME DE LOURDES GROTTA

مغارة سيدة لورد

Part way up a small path near the museum is a small cave with a spring. The site is

dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Local legend has it that she took pity on a Carmelite gardener-monk, who had to carry water up to the monastery each day to water his vegetable patch. Small candles and statuettes sit on an altar that has been built around the spring.

PHOENICIAN TOMB

Just up the hill from the grotto is a large stone obelisk thought to date back to 750 BC. At the base of the obelisk is a burial chamber and ledges for four coffins.

QADISHA GROTTA

مغارة قاديشا

This small **grotto** (admission LL4000; ☒ 8am-5pm, Jun until first snow) extends about 500m into the mountain and has great limestone formations. Not as extraordinary as Jeita Grotto (p303), but it's still spectacular. The grotto is a 4km walk from Bcharré; follow the signs to the L'Aiglon Hotel and then take the footpath opposite. It's then a very picturesque 1.5km walk to the grotto.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Tiger House (☎ 03-378 138; tigerhousepension@hotmail.com; Rue Cedre; dm US\$10 incl breakfast) On the high road out of town towards the Cedars, this is a comfortable option with very friendly owners. Outside summer, you're

likely to have a room to yourself for the bargain price of a dorm bed.

Ecoclub Bcharré (☎ 03-832 060; www.ecoclub-bcharré.org) Also situated near town is the Ecoclub, which has dorm beds for around US\$20 in a hostel near the Cedars ski lifts (see p342) and organises eco-minded activities from Bcharré all year. See also the website for the **Lebanese Youth Hostel Federation** (www.lyhf.org) for more details.

Palace Hotel (☎ 671 460; s/d/tr US\$30/40/48; ☒) In the centre of town, this is a clean, decent option, open all year round. Breakfast is an extra US\$4.50.

Hotel Chbat (☎ 671 270; s/d/tr US\$45/70/85; ☒) Built in 1955 on the side of a hill in the upper part of Bcharré, this homely, welcoming hotel has lovely views across the Qadisha Valley from its rooms, many of which have a sitting room attached. It has two restaurants, both serving hearty Lebanese food, and is a comfy place for a drink beside a roaring fire in winter. Breakfast is included in the room rates. The hotel also has a couple of dormitories, which are popular with school skiing groups.

There aren't many restaurants in town, but there are a couple of options for a decent lunch. **Makhlouf Eli** (☎ 672 585), on the western side, is a small restaurant with a rooftop terrace and fantastic views. It serves

KHALIL GIBRAN (1883-1931)

The short-lived Khalil Gibran remains today Lebanon's most famous and celebrated literary figure, though much of his life was spent in the USA, to which he emigrated with his mother and siblings when he was aged 12. Though from a family originally too poor to afford schooling, the young boy blossomed into a philosophical essayist, novelist, mystical poet and painter, whose influences included the Bible, Nietzsche and William Blake. He is mostly remembered in the West today as author of the visionary *The Prophet*, which consists of 26 poem-essays.

During his teenage years in Boston, Gibran was spotted as an artistic talent and introduced to avant-garde artist Fred Holland Day, who championed his work. In 1904, he held his first public exhibition, having published his first literary essays the year before, and met Mary Haskell, his benefactor for the remainder of his life.

In 1908, Gibran began a two-year period of study under Auguste Rodin in Paris, while continuing to write literary essays and short stories. Though his early writings were largely in Arabic and Syriac, works published after 1918 were mostly written in English. His work was rediscovered in the 1960s in the USA: lines from *Sand and Foam* of 1926 - 'Half of what I say is meaningless, but I say it so that the other half may reach you' - are said to have inspired John Lennon's lyrics for the Beatles song 'Julia'.

When Gibran died of TB and cirrhosis of the liver in 1931, his body was returned to Lebanon according to his last wishes and he now lies in a casket at the Gibran Museum (opposite) in Bcharré. Some of his personal possessions are with him in the former monastery building, including an ancient Armenian tapestry that portrays a crucifixion scene in which Christ is smiling.

mezze and sandwiches for about US\$5. Coral Pizzeria is an outdoor cafeteria almost directly beneath the waterfall at the eastern edge of town and has pizza and snacks (summer only).

Along the road at the head of the valley, just outside Bcharré, are several restaurants that take advantage of the views along the gorge. River Roc is a restaurant-nightclub with Lebanese food for about US\$20. Mississippi, next door, has similar prices and also sells snacks.

The Australian connection (see Kfar Sghab, p339) continues with the well-stocked Kangaroo Supermarket, where the owner, a returnee from Sydney, stocks a few Australian specialities.

Getting There & Away

The bus and service-taxi stop is outside the St Saba Church in the centre of town. For details about getting to Bcharré from Tripoli, and from Bcharré to Baalbek, see Getting There & Around, p336.

THE CEDARS

☎ 06

The Cedars is Lebanon's oldest ski resort and to most visitors will feel the most akin to European ski destinations. With its chalet

style hotels and string of wooden-hut souvenir shops lining the main road up to the slopes, it has more charm out of the winter season than the country's other ski resorts.

The village takes its name from the small but famous grove of trees that stands at an altitude of more than 2000m on the slopes of Jebel Makmel, about 4km from Bcharré. The grove represents a tiny remnant of a vast cedar forest that once covered the mountains of Lebanon (see Lebanon's Cedars, p324). A few of these slow-growing trees are very old and it's thought that some may reach an age of 1500 years. Known locally as Arz ar-Rab (Cedars of the Lord), they are under the protection of the Patriarch of Lebanon, who built a chapel in the cedar grove in 1848; each year in August there is a festival here presided over by the patriarch.

A fence protects the grove but you can visit all year round, although the cedars look particularly dramatic in winter when they stand against a backdrop of snow. Occasionally access to the grove is restricted, especially when the snow is melting and the ground is soft, so that roots are not damaged by people walking on them.

About 2km further up the road is the ski station, where there is a cluster of

equipment-hire shops and snack places around the ski lifts.

The road continuing beyond this point leads out into the wilds of the Bekaa Valley and eventually on to Baalbek, and makes for a gorgeous drive during the summer months when you might spot paragliders, along with eagles, surfing the thermals high over the bleak landscape. From roughly December to April, the road is closed due to snow.

Hiking

During the summer months you can hike to Lebanon's highest peak, Qornet as-Sawda (3090m), starting from the ski-fields entrance. To get to the top and back should take around five hours, and you'll need to be relatively fit. The ascent is usually possible between April and October, though in spring you may need to rent snow-shoes for parts of the hike if the snow hasn't completely cleared.

The first part of the trip to the top of the ski lift takes about two hours; from here hike north along the path for another hour to reach the peak. The views are spectacular and the hiking isn't too difficult, although sometimes the path is not as clear as it should be. Also, the signs for each peak have blown off and only the posts remain. Remember to dress warmly – the peaks are windy and there can be snow up here as late as May. For those who think this sounds like far too much effort, take a vehicle along the road out of the Cedars towards Baalbek, then when the road splits off for Baalbek, continue to the left up the mountain. The road leads over Dahr el-Qadib and the view is quite magnificent.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of the hotels situated further away from the slopes offer a free drop-off and pick-up service, so you won't have to trudge the few kilometres up the hill with skis over your shoulder.

Hotel Mon Refuge (☎ 671 397; s/d/apt US\$15/30/120; 🛏) This hotel has pleasant rooms, and apartments that sleep 12 (the apartments have a fireplace). Breakfast is US\$5 extra. Downstairs is an inviting restaurant-bar (meals US\$8 to US\$15) that serves a mixture of Lebanese and Western food.

Alpine Hotel (☎ 671 517; d US\$30) On the road between Bcharré and the Cedars, this is cosy

and quite simple. If you are staying for a few days, the Alpine offers half board for US\$40 per day. In summer, the hotel touts good discounts and you can get a good room for around US\$10 per person per night.

St Bernard Hotel (☎ 03-289 600; s/d/ste US\$70/90/150; 🛏) An old lodge near the forest grove, it offers warm rooms, a good restaurant and the advantage of only being a couple of minutes from the slopes.

Centre Tony Arida (☎ 678 195, 03-321 998; 🛏) Next door to Mon Refuge, this place has everything from chalets that sleep up to eight people for US\$300 per night (half price in spring and autumn) to a nightclub, restaurant and a large selection of ski equipment for hire. Tony is a former ski champion-turned-jovial host, and he presides over his empire with good-natured gusto.

L'Auberge des Cédres (☎ 678 888; www.smresorts.net; s from US\$110, d from US\$145, luxury tents sleeping 2 from US\$205, chalets sleeping 6 from US\$435) At the top end of the village's accommodation options is definitely L'Auberge, which offers year-round respite for weary city dwellers in its collection of rooms and self-contained chalets, log cabins and luxury tents, known respectively as La Grande Ourse, La Petite Ourse and La Belle Etoile. With fabulous food, roaring fires and inviting touches such as fresh croissants delivered to your chalet each morning, it's a place for year-round entertainment. In summer, the resort can arrange balloon flights over the mountains, along with riding, hiking and quad biking. In winter, when you tire of skiing, snowmobiles are available.

Cedrus Hotel (☎ 677 777; www.cedrushotel.com; d/ste US\$180/306; 🛏) One of the smartest and most luxurious places to return to after a day out on the piste, this is new and conveniently situated, with a highly regarded French restaurant called Le Pichet, a piano bar, and facilities to arrange snowmobile trips across the mountains.

Getting There & Away

There are service taxis to Bcharré (LL7500) and the Cedars (LL12,000) from the Rue Tall taxi stand in Tripoli. Outside the ski season there are only a few service taxis to Bcharré and you will have to take a regular taxi from there to the Cedars. The fare is about LL18,000 but you may be able to haggle the price down. In Bcharré, the taxis

SKI FACTS: THE CEDARS

- **Altitude** 1950m to 2700m
- **No of Lifts** Eight (five beginner, one medium, two advanced)
- **Adult Day Pass** US\$20 Monday to Friday, US\$27 Saturday and Sunday; after noon: US\$10 Monday to Friday, US\$17 Saturday and Sunday
- ☎ 03-399 133
- **Opening hours** 8.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, until 4pm Saturday and Sunday

People first started coming to ski at the Cedars in the 1920s and the first lift was installed in 1953, making it Lebanon's oldest ski resort. While it is less developed than many of the other resorts, it is the second-most popular, particularly for those who actually ski, rather than spend their time flashing designer outfits in village bars. The season usually starts earlier (mid-December) and finishes later (April) than the other resorts. The runs are more challenging, with numerous off-piste opportunities for more adventurous types. Equipment can be rented from a number of locations including Ski Total and Al-Inshirah Ski Shop, both at the base of the lifts, and a full set should cost US\$5 to US\$12 per day. There are Red Cross teams on hand at weekends.

A new gondola, planned for the end of 2008, will take skiers up to an altitude of 2870m – the highest accessible summit – with a refuge and viewing platform at the top. At the same time, the building of a new road is underway between Bcharré and the Cedars to reduce driving time up the twisting mountain road; it's due for completion in time for the Lebanon-hosted 2009 Asian Ski Championships.

congregate by St Saba Church and charge US\$20 for a half-day tour around the Qadisha. There is a minibus at 7am to Beirut's Dawra bus station for LL5000 (double-check that it's running beforehand). When the road is open you can also get a taxi to take you to Baalbek (US\$60) across the incredibly scenic mountains.

THE QADISHA VALLEY FLOOR

The best way to hike into the valley is to take one of the steep goat tracks that leads out of Bcharré and down to the valley below. If that's too strenuous, you can drive a car to Deir Mar Elisha and park it there while you walk along the valley floor. A hike from Bcharré to Deir as-Salib takes about six hours, there and back. A steep return hike from Bcharré to Deir Mar Antonios Qozhaya, around 12km in total, will take the whole day, counting stops for photographs, breathers, exploration and a picnic lunch.

Remember to bring plenty of water; the river water is not clean enough to drink. Navigational directions for the following points of interest are given for walking the valley floor from roughly east to west, beginning at Bcharré and heading towards Deir Mar Antonios.

Deir Mar Elisha

دير مار شعييا

Dramatic and beautiful, the monastery of Mar Elisha (St Eliseus) is built into the side of the cliffs below Bcharré. The Lebanese

Maronite Order, the first order to be officially recognised by the Roman Catholic Church, was founded here in 1695. The building goes back much further – by the 14th century it was already the seat of a Maronite bishopric. It was restored in 1991 and turned into a museum, where there are displays of books and other artefacts relating to the monastery's history. The museum is on two storeys; to the right of it is a chapel containing the tomb of the Anchorite of Lebanon, François de Chasteuil (1588–1644).

You can get to the monastery from one of the tracks below Bcharré or take the main road heading east from Bcharré and, after 3km, turn off at the small blue sign for the Qadisha Valley. A narrow road winds down to the monastery.

Chapel of Mar Chmouni

كنيسة مار شموني

Built under a rocky ledge in the Middle Ages, this chapel has two constructed naves, one in a natural rock formation. Sadly, the 13th-century paintings that adorn the walls have been covered with a layer of plaster.

The chapel is at the eastern end of the valley at the point where Wadi Houla (Houla Valley) and Wadi Qannoubin meet. You can follow a steep path down from Hadchit or you can get there along a path on the valley floor or, from Bcharré, take a track down to the valley floor and from there follow the path east for around 1km.

Deir as-Salib

دير الصليب

This rock-cut monastery can be reached by a steep path to the right from the valley floor or from the village of Hadchit. As well as a chapel, there are a number of caves that were used as hermits' cells. Derelict and increasingly ruined, there are nevertheless still traces of Byzantine-era frescoes inside these.

Deir Qannoubin

دير قنوبين

Continuing along the valley bottom, you will eventually come to a track to the left with a signpost to Deir Qannoubin. The name Qannoubin is derived from the Greek *kenobion*, which means 'monastery'. This is a very ancient site. Some sources say that it was founded by Theodosius the Great in the late 4th century.

Local legend has it that at the end of the 14th century, the Mamluk sultan, Barquq (who was briefly overthrown in 1389), escaped from imprisonment in Karak Castle (now in Jordan) and sought refuge in the Qadisha before returning to Egypt to reclaim his throne. Such was the hospitality shown him that he paid for the restoration of the monastery. From 1440 through to the end of the 18th century, Deir Qannoubin was the Maronite patriarchal seat. Nowadays it is a working convent.

The church is half-built into the rock face and is decorated with frescoes dating from the 18th century. Near the entrance is a vault containing a naturally mummified body, thought to be that of Patriarch Yousef Tyan. Deir Qannoubin can also be reached by a path leading from the village of Blawza, on the valley's northern rim; the walk takes about an hour each way.

Chapel of Mar Marina

كنيسة مار مارينا

Just to the west of the monastery is the chapel-cave of Mar Marina, where the remains of 17 Maronite patriarchs are buried. The chapel is dedicated to St Marina, born in Qalamoun, who lived her life at Deir Qannoubin.

Deir Saydet Hawka

كنيسة سيدة حوفا

Continuing on the main track past the signpost for Deir Qannoubin, and bearing right at the fork, you will eventually see Deir Saydet Hawka (Chapel of Saydet Hawka) on the right. This is a small mon-

astery, thought to date from the 13th century, which consists of a chapel and a few monks' cells within a cave. It is associated with an attack by armed Mamluks against the natural fortress of Aassi Hawka, which is in a cave high above the monastery. The cave is only accessible to experienced rock climbers.

The monastery is deserted for most of the year but is used to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin with a high mass on the evening of 14 August. You can get there via a path from Hawka (about 30 minutes one way) or via the valley-floor path.

Deir Mar Antonios Qozhaya

دير مار انطونيوس قزحيا

Continuing on the main track, you will eventually come to Deir Mar Antonios Qozhaya. This hermitage is the largest in the valley and has been continually in use since it was founded in the 11th century. It is famous for establishing, in the 16th century, the first-known printing press in the Middle East.

The museum houses a collection of religious and ethnographic objects as well as an old printing press that was used to publish the Psalms in Syriac, a language still used by the Maronites in their services. A popular place of pilgrimage, the hermitage also has a souvenir shop that sells all manner of kitsch religious knick-knacks. To see the museum you need to knock at the main building and get one of the monks to open it up for you.

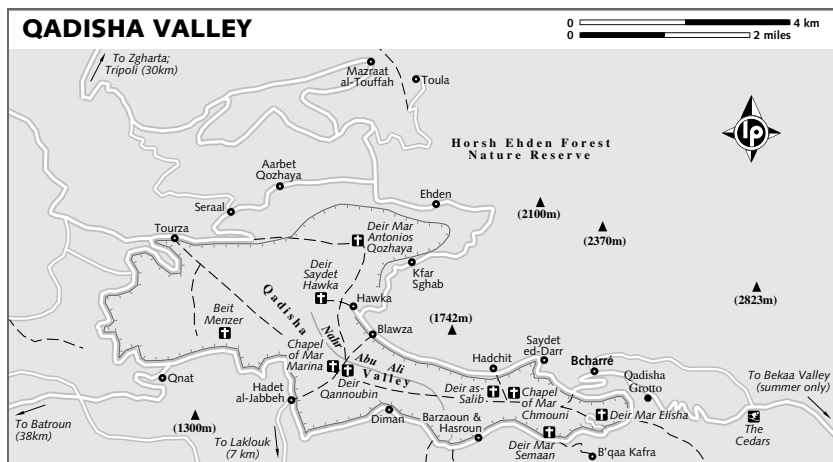
Near the entrance to the monastery is the **Grotto of St Anthony**, known locally as the 'Cave of the Mad', where you can see the chains used to constrain the insane or possessed, who were left at the monastery in the hope that the saint would cure them.

If you're not hiking, you can reach the monastery by car from Aarbet Qozhaya on the northern-valley rim. The road is small, unsignposted and tricky to locate, so it's best to stop off at the village and ask a local for precise directions.

B'QAA KAFRA

بقاع كفر

Back up above the valley, just off the road between Bcharré and Hasroun, is B'qaa Kafra, the highest village in Lebanon (elevation 1750m) and the birthplace of St Charbel. The saint's house has been turned



THE HERMIT OF QADISHA

As you explore the delights of the valley, you might begin to think that hermits and ascetics are the stuff of Qadisha legend. However, at least one modern-day hermit has made his home in the Qadisha Valley, hailing originally from another mountain region thousands of miles away. Father Dario Escobar, who inhabits a hidden cave cell near one rock-cut chapel, is a 72-year-old Colombian monk who is happy nowadays to call the Qadisha his home. Though he'll hospitably open the door to passers-by, he values the tranquillity and opportunity for a simple existence afforded by life on the valley floor – and, unlike others who have high hopes for the tourism generated by the Lebanon Mountain Trail, hopes it won't become too popular.

So if, as dusk draws in over the craggy mountains towering overhead, you see a grey-bearded, black-hooded figure tramping the ancient goat trails of the Qadisha Valley, do not fear. Chances are it's not an apparition of a long-dead medieval monk, but rather Father Escobar, on his way back home to his well-appointed cave for a cosy ascetic supper.

into a **museum**, which commemorates the saint's life in paintings. It is open daily, except Monday, and there is a shop and café at the entrance. The village now has a new convent named after St Charbel and there is a church, Notre Dame, across the way from the museum. St Charbel's Feast is celebrated on the third Sunday of July.

DEIR MAR SEMAAN دير مار سمعان
Just past the turn-off for B'qaa Kafra, as you head east, is a small path leading to Deir Mar Semaan, a hermitage founded in 1112 by Takla, the daughter of a local priest called Basil. Concrete paths lead down to the spartan four-room hermitage carved into the rocks, where Mar Samaan (St Simon) supposedly lived. Access to the caves involves squeezing through doorways. Inside there are votive candles and offerings. There are also traces of frescoes, and remains of water cisterns. The walk takes about 15 minutes.

DIMAN ديمان
In Diman, on the south side of the valley, is the summer residence of the Maronite Patriarchy, which moved here from Deir Qannoubin in the 19th century. You can't miss it – it is a large modern building on the valley side of the road. The church is not old but is well worth a look for its pano-

ramic paintings of the Qadisha Valley and religious scenes by the Lebanese painter, Saliba Doueihy. These date from the 1930s or '40s, when the spire of the church was built. The grounds behind the building lead to the edge of the gorge and have views across the valley.

AMIOUN

Back down towards the coast, Amioun stands above the highway to/from Chekka. It is easily noticeable from the road because of the rock-cut tombs that have been hewn out of its southern cliffs. These are either Phoenician or Roman burial vaults. Perched atop these cliffs is the old part of the village, a beautiful mixture of Ottoman stone buildings and narrow winding streets.

High up in the centre of the village is the 15th-century Cathedral of St George, which was built on the ruins of a Roman temple (itself built on Neolithic remains). The site was an important place of worship under the Romans, and pagan rites were reputedly practised well into the Christian era. An earthquake destroyed the temple in the 4th or 5th century AD but elements, including a couple of columns, have been incorporated into the church. A stone iconostasis (screen), with fine painted icons, contrasts with the plain vaulted interior of the church.

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