

Welcome to Beirut

With its troubles behind it, the Lebanese capital of Beirut, the 'pearl' of the Middle East, is glistening once again and enjoying a renaissance, as Bethany Kehdy discovered

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RODERICK FIELD







PREVIOUS PAGES: THE VIEW FROM TIGER IN BEIT MERY; TAKEAWAYS AT ICHKHANIAN BAKERY. THIS PAGE: HALAWA (HALVA) DESSERT MADE FROM TAHINI AND SUGAR. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE NATIONAL DRINK ARAK; WINDOWS IN SAYEDAT MARIA CHURCH IN BATROUT; GRILLED *AKAKAT* OR CHEESE STICKS; COSY WINDOW TABLE AT SEZA'S BISTRO; VIEW FROM TIGER RESTAURANT AND A WAITER SETTING UP

Lebanon is undergoing a renaissance, with many Lebanese working to rekindle the distinctive soul of their beloved city. While Beirut rebuilds its reputation in fashion and art, food remains the main focus

Beirut sits by the Mediterranean; a hidden jewel sparkling, longing to be rediscovered. This vibrant city is blessed with a wonderfully exotic cuisine, landscape that can rival that of Italy or France and fun-loving people who embody the rich influence of the Eastern and Western cultures that have passed through the city over the centuries. 'Welcome!', 'Eat!', and 'Are you sure you don't want more?' are words and phrases you will soon get used to hearing in Beirut. Walking in some of the more historic city districts you shouldn't be surprised if an old couple smile and invite you into their house with '*tfadalo*' or 'welcome!' They mean it. And if you do join them for a cup of dark, syrupy *ahweh* or Arabic coffee – and all the sweets that accompany it – then be assured that you will be asked to stay for dinner. This is typical Lebanese hospitality.

Only a few decades ago, Beirut was regarded as the 'pearl' of the Middle East; its temperate climate and avant-garde culture attracted

the likes of Brigitte Bardot and Charles Aznavour who stayed at the infamous St George hotel, which still stands as a symbol of a bygone era. But then, in 1975, came the devastation of a 16-year-long civil war; a 34-day military offensive by Israel followed in 2006.

These days Lebanon is undergoing a renaissance, with many Lebanese working to rekindle the distinctive soul of their beloved city. While Beirut rebuilds its reputation in fashion and art, food remains the main focus – and the one thing the Lebanese have always agreed on. The downtown area buzzes with life; cafés, restaurants, clubs and bars drawing people from across Lebanon; professionals and locals alike, as they mingle with tourists and expats from around the world. Chic hotels are sprouting up, with Le Gray hotel being the most recent of note, while Michelin-starred chefs such as Davide Bisetto and Antoine Westernmann are getting ready to fire up their stoves, opening new restaurants in the new year.

Church and mosque stand wall to wall, only a couple of metres away from what was once the Green Line separating East Beirut from West Beirut, Christian from Muslim. 'Hi, *keefak? ça va?*' – a common greeting spanning three languages – captures the Lebanese identity crisis. Treasures of the past still stand, some being recently brought back to life, others hoping for the same fate as shiny new buildings rise between them, misplaced beside awkward concrete blocks, plastered with layers of flyers depicting famous entertainers and dead politicians. Beirut has a unique soundtrack; a symphony of obnoxious honks coming from battle-scarred Mercedes taxis, chiming church bells, construction drilling and the soothing sound of calls to prayer. Tired vendors holler relentlessly about their produce as they push their carts brimming with corn on the cob and fava beans, their voices quickly drowned out by the thumping sounds of Western pop and belly-shaking beats blasting from car windows.

The Lebanese party hard, and a night out painting the town red is customary, any day of the week. The Lebanese love to dance until the small hours, tirelessly exhibiting the glamour and flashiness of Hollywood, platinum credit cards included. Over the last couple of years, the nightlife in Beirut has rivalled that of Ibiza, with summer events hosting international artists from David Guetta to Gorillaz. Rooftop bars are heaving with scantily clad ladies, cigar-smoking men with half-buttoned shirts, and tables displaying near-empty, super-magnum vodka bottles. It's a hedonistic lifestyle that requires stamina, so take your lead from the locals and —————>>

Travel information

Currency is the Lebanese pound (£1 = 2,380 LBP). Beirut is two hours ahead of GMT. Beirut has a Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers and cooler, wetter winters. The best time to visit is summer when rainfall is scarce, from May to October.

GETTING THERE

MEA (020 7467 8010, mea.com.lb) flies daily from Heathrow to Beirut.

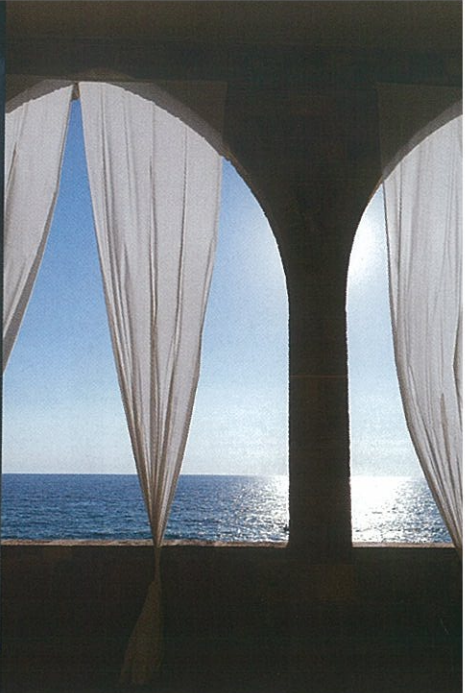
BMI (0844 8484 888, flybmi.co.uk) flies daily from Heathrow to Beirut.

RESOURCES

Lebanese Ministry of Tourism (lebanon-tourism.gov.lb) Provides useful information on local attractions and sightseeing, with relevant links to help make the most of your trip. There is an English-speaking office in the airport arrivals hall.

FURTHER READING

Saha: A Chef's Journey Through Lebanon and Syria by Greg and Lucy Malouf. A beautifully created travelogue documenting the rich traditions of Lebanese cuisine and culture, and showcasing a wide range of traditional and modern recipes. (Quadrille £18.99)





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chiming church bells, construction drilling and the soothing sound of calls to prayer. Vendors holler relentlessly



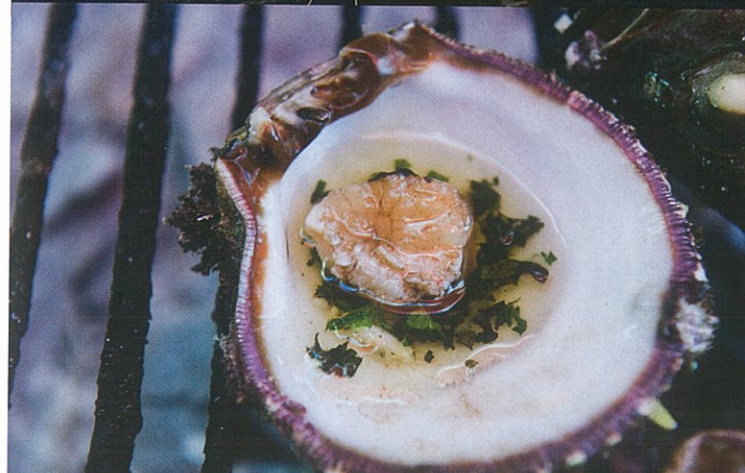
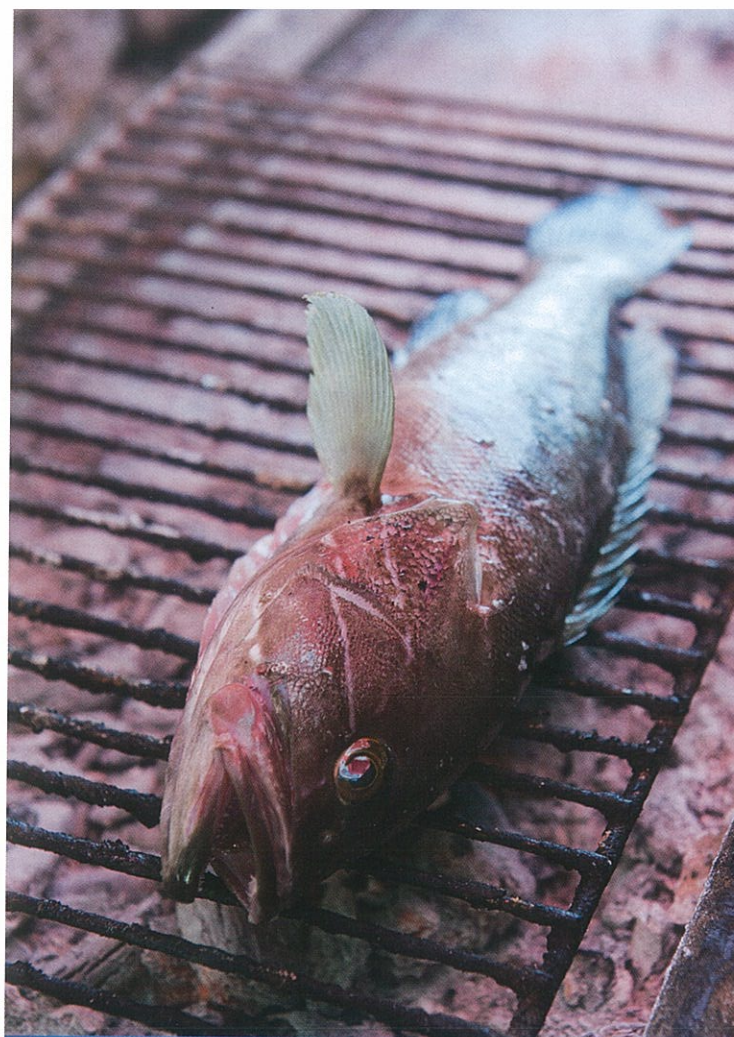
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT: SIGN FOR
FURN EL-SABAYA (THE
LADIES' BAKERY); WAITERS
AT LE CHEF; MAKING A
SHAWARMA SANDWICH
AT BOUBOUFFE; SEAFOOD
MEZZE AT CHEZ MAGUY
IN BATROUN; MOHAMMAD
AL-AMIN MOSQUE,
DOWNTOWN BEIRUT;
SWIMMING IN BATROUN;
INSIDE LE CHEF. THIS
PAGE, FROM TOP:
GRILLED FISH AT CHEZ
MAGUY; THE ANCIENT
PORT OF BYBLOS;
FRESH SCALLOPS WITH
OLIVE OIL, LEMON AND
CORIANDER

ensure a low-impact hangover by following their day-after ritual of chowing down on *mana'eesh* – a variety of different breakfast pizzas. Places specialising in the *man'oushe* are packed tight in the early hours with party-goers tucking into crispy dough oozing with olive oil and *za'atar*, a mixture of wild thyme, sumac and toasted sesame seeds. Varieties of *mana'eesh* are endless: cheese, meat, Nutella – your wish is their command.

Passing through the narrow, dusty streets of Gemmayze, a charming quarter of Beirut draped in a web of electric cables, one notices the diverse influence of the recent past – from the beautifully drawn arches of the Ottoman Empire to the French who left an architectural aftertaste 'de Paris'. Le Chef, a shabby canteen on Rue Gouraud, beckons visitors with exotic aromas. 'Welcome! Welcome!' bellows Charbel, the head waiter and son of the owner. Here, the menu changes daily, and is not one of the typical mezze – which has become insufficiently synonymous with Lebanese cuisine – but, rather, incorporates good, old-fashioned home cooking. At Le Chef you'll find dishes such as hearty stews and one-pot dishes from *m'jaddarah* (lentils and rice with fried onions) to *kebbeh b'laban* (minced-meat torpedoes in yoghurt). A must-try dish here is *mloukhiyah*, made of Jew's mallow that has been slowly stewed in a cardamom broth. It's served with chicken and/or lamb, heaped on top of a steaming bowl of rice and sprinkled with crispy Arabic bread pieces and onion vinaigrette. These are the foods that the Lebanese grow up eating, made by their mothers and grandmothers, following recipes that have been passed down through generations.

Lebanon is renowned for lavish mezze spreads, but these are traditionally reserved for weekends when families come together for long, lazy afternoons at institutions such as Al Halabi or places like Chez Maguy in Batroun, a quaint coastal town an hour's drive north of Beirut. Batroun, believed to be one of the oldest cities in the world, thrived on trade during its Phoenician days and today is a draw for its beautiful white pebble beaches, fishing and fresh lemonade. A popular destination among Lebanese on summer weekends, it is a great place to experience their traditional seafood mezze.

The word mezze derives from the Persian word *maza* – to taste, or nibble. Mezze can be simple nuts and crudités, or an elaborate procession of vegetarian, meat or seafood spreads. A typical meat mezze begins with cold dishes, such as refreshing *tabouleh* (parsley, tomato, onion and bulgur wheat salad), velvet-smooth hummus and tahini dip and tender *asbeh nayeh* (raw sheep's liver). This is followed by hot servings of crunchy, sweet-and-sour larks (the little birds are cooked in pomegranate molasses) and finally mixed grills such as *kafta* (minced lamb, parsley and onions on the skewer) and *shish tawouk* (skewered cubes of chicken marinated in garlic-infused yoghurt sauce). Desserts, such as *rahet* (Turkish delight) with biscuits and seasonal fruits, are served with *ahweh* or tea. Dipping into the different mezze dishes with your hands, using the Arabic bread as a scoop, is customary and while individual plates are placed for each diner, they are not meant to be piled up high, —————>>





THIS PAGE: MANTE (LEFT) AND NUTS AT SEZA'S BISTRO; A JAR OF ZA'ATAR AND BREAD (RIGHT) FROM SOUK EL TAYEB. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARZIPAN ROSES; CHEF KNAR MANOUGIAN AT SEZA'S BISTRO, AND DINERS; PRESERVING LABNEH (STRAINED YOGHURT) IN OLIVE OIL; INSIDE TAWLET RESTAURANT; THE INTERIOR OF ABDEL AL WAHAB

Lebanon is renowned for lavish mezze spreads that are all about the experience of sharing. These are traditionally reserved for weekends when families come together for long, lazy afternoons

Where to stay

Le Gray New five-star hotel in downtown Beirut that boasts a very swish pool. Doubles start at £245, room only. *Martyrs' Square, Central Beirut, 00 961 1 962 828, legray.com*

Albergo Hotel Quirky five-star boutique hotel in a historic district. Well located, with views over the Mediterranean. Doubles from £200 with breakfast. *137 Abdel Wahab El Inglizi Street, Ashrafieh, 00 961 1 339 797, albergobeirut.com*

The Parisian Friendly hotel only minutes away from the corniche and famous Raouche Grotto (Pigeons' Rock). Doubles from £100, including breakfast. *Rustom Basha Street, Ein el Mreissy, 00 961 1 361 999, theparisianhotel.com*

Hayete Guest House Quaint little B&B flat in the charming district of Ashrafieh. Doubles from £75, including breakfast. *Furn el Hayek Street, Ashrafieh, 00 961 70 271 530, hayete-guesthouse.com*



buffet-style. Mezze is the experience of sharing, in a leisurely way, taking time out to savour your food and company. *Arak*, a clear, distilled, aniseed-flavoured alcoholic drink is the beverage of choice and is a great accompaniment to *shisha* smoking – pick your flavour from apple or strawberry to mint, lemon and so on.

Addresses are for the most part non-existent in Beirut and locations are gauged by their distance from landmarks and well-known family homes. Thankfully, people are always happy to give directions, and with the help of a few signs and a good explanation, we finally reach Chez Maguy. A pink picket fence leads the way to a little rustic terrace, an extension of Maguy's kitchen, boasting views of the Mediterranean and the old Phoenician Wall. This idyllic spot is worth the visit if only to meet the spirited Maguy herself and take pleasure in tasting the chargrilled squid – her speciality, caught fresh every night. Here, everything is served in season and is best described as no-fuss food. There is no written menu; just ask Maguy and she'll list the catch of the day and serving options, whether baked, grilled or fried. 'Ingredients are kept simple, everything is fresh, there is no need to overpower anything to cover it up. Lemon, olive oil and herbs come together only to enhance the flavours,' says Maguy, a single mother to daughter Cristelle and passionate scuba diver in her spare time. Maguy started serving meals not long after being widowed and the story of how this restaurant came to be is an intriguing one; it sits just behind her parents' home and was, in fact, built without a license. No one here cares though, because everyone is a happy customer.

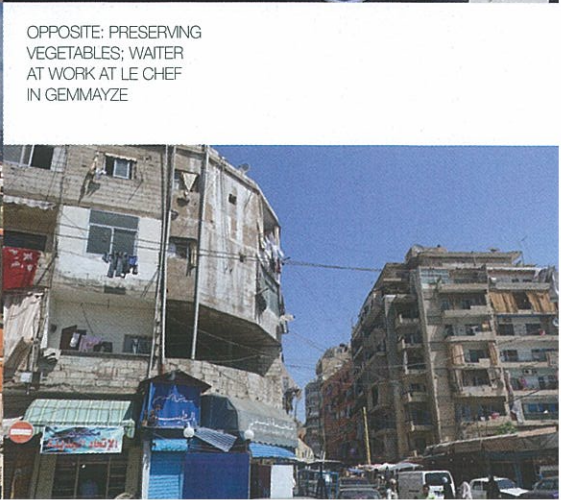
On a warm early morning we visit the sleepy coastal town of Amchit, about 30 minutes north of Beirut, where we are told of a special treat still being prepared at Furn Al-Sabaya – 'The Ladies' Bakery'. *Mouwaraka* is an age-old Amchit speciality that has almost been lost in time and this is perhaps the only bakery in Lebanon still making it. Think Lebanese cinnamon rolls; bread dough that has been rolled very thin, then trimmed to a perfect







THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A CITY BUTCHER; MILK AND SPICED RICE PUDDING, AND PASTRIES STUFFED WITH NUTS AT SEZA'S BISTRO; PINK PICKET FENCE LEADING THE WAY TO CHEZ MAGUY, BATROUN; A STREET VENDOR SETS UP SHOP ON HIS MERCEDES; VIEW OF DOWNTOWN BEIRUT FROM LE CAPITOLE ROOFTOP LOUNGE; A STREET IN DOWNTOWN BEIRUT



OPPOSITE: PRESERVING VEGETABLES; WAITER AT WORK AT LE CHEF IN GEMMAYZE

In the streets of Gemmayze, a charming quarter of Beirut, we notice the diverse influences of the recent past – from the beautifully drawn arches of the Ottoman Empire to the architectural aftertaste of the French



circle before being spread with a mixture of finely chopped walnuts, almonds, sugar, cinnamon, orange blossom water and rose water. The secret? 'The way it's made,' says Lorenza, one of the three sisters running this bakery, which is located in their front yard. She makes it look easy but I'm not so sure, as I watch her roll it up from the inside out before wiggling it around like a slithering serpent. A brushing of oil for browning and into the oven it goes. Eight minutes later, warm, golden pastry is placed in front of me and I break a little piece off; it's the perfect combination of sweetness and nuttiness with a little crunch, not sickly in the least, which is often the pay-back that follows such indulgence.

On the outskirts of the capital, in the Bourj Hammoud district, one can discover the splendid Armenian influence on Lebanese cuisine. The area is home to the majority of the 150,000 Armenians in Lebanon whose ancestors came to the country in the early 20th century after fleeing Turkey. Today, they have settled and encouraged Lebanon's appetite for cured meats such as *basturma* – air-dried raw beef that packs a full punch of spices, and *sujuk* – semi-dried, highly spiced sausage.

On arrival, I take an immediate liking to Seza's Bistro, with a warm decor that personifies the owner herself, Seza Hablian, who in 2006 decided to trade in a successful shoe factory to open up her kitchen to the public. What were normally feasts reserved for family and friends are now available to all in a beautiful little corner house that retains its old French Mandate charm. A highlight of the menu is *mante*: baked ravioli parcels filled with spiced meat with a small but important twist; they are quickly blanched in a warm, home-made tomato sauce before being dished out and drizzled with cold, garlic-infused yoghurt. 'My grandmother made it this way,' Seza says with —————>

Where to eat

Prices are per person for three courses (without wine) unless stated.

Abdel al Wahab Well-known for its high-quality mezze. From £40 for a lavish mezze spread. 51 Abdel Wahab el Inglizi Street, Ashrafieh, 00 961 1 200 550

Al Halabi A local institution serving mezze prepared the traditional way. From £40. Antelias Square, Beirut outskirts, 00 961 4 523 555

Boubouffe A rare place grilling *shawarma* on charcoal rather than gas. £4. Ashrafieh, Mar Mitr Street, next to Spinneys, 00 961 1 200 408

Chez Maguy Fresh seafood mezze an hour's drive north. From £25. Makaan el Mir, south of Bahsa Bay, Batroun, 00 961 3 439 147

Furn Al-Sabaya Bakes some of the only *mouwaraka* still being made in Lebanon. From £3. Amchit Sea Road, 00 961 9 624 466

Ichkhanian Bakery Getting to this bakery will require a few stops to ask for directions but don't leave without visiting. Hussein Beyhum Street, Zokak el Blat, near downtown, 00 961 3 216 012

Lala Chicken Prides itself on selling the most expensive chargrilled spatchcock chicken in Lebanon at £9. Sandwiches from £3. Ashrafieh, St Louis Street, behind Spinneys, 00 961 3 589 569

Le Chef A warm welcome and home-style meals. From £7. Gouraud Street, Gemmayze, 00 961 1 445 373

Rashidi This little shop makes a variety of sweet confections. From £2. Monot Street, Ashrafieh, 00 961 1 790 648

Seza's Bistro This family-run Armenian bistro serves up traditional Armenian fare in a beautiful and cosy setting. £25 Rue Patriarch Arida, Mar Mikhael, 00 961 1 570 711

Tawlet Open kitchen co-op with a different buffet menu each day prepared by a new chef/cook. Also offers cooking classes. £14. 79 Naher Street 12, near Jisr el Hadid, 00 961 1 448 129

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:
SAYEDAT MARIA CHURCH
IN BATROUN; FALAFEL;
SWEET CONFECTIONS
FROM RASHIDI. OPPOSITE,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
LEFT: STREET VENDOR
SELLING ONIONS FROM
HIS CART, CHICKEN WRAP
WITH GARLIC SAUCE FROM
LALA CHICKEN; A NARROW
STREET IN BATROUN;
SLICING SHAWARMA AT
BOUBOUFFE; A LEMONADE
SHOP IN BATROUN

a proud smile. Having tasted *mante* before, I am taken aback by how wonderful this new flavour is – a triumph indeed, I tell her, making a mental note to return for a romantic dinner with my husband.

On Saturday morning we savour the produce and specialities of rural villagers from all around Lebanon in a Beirut car park. At Souk el Tayeb, we find them all proudly displaying their hard-earned harvests of organic, seasonal fruits and vegetables and pantry preserves, such as *kishk* (a dried, fermented mixture of yoghurt and bulgur wheat). We also get to sample a variety of unforgettably fresh juices – pomegranate and apple, pressed on request by the charming Abou Brahim who comes from Rashaya in the south of Lebanon, as well as witness the making of the *khebz markouk* or 'handkerchief': paper-thin bread baked on the traditional *saj* (dome oven). Souk el Tayeb is more than just a farmers' market; it's an extraordinary movement empowering small farmers from across Lebanon's communities. Christian and Muslim from around Lebanon's rural areas are given a place to showcase their produce while the city-dwelling Lebanese are afforded a golden opportunity to become reacquainted with their country's culinary roots. Kamal Mouzawak is the dynamic founder and culinary reformist, who since 2004 has worked with his team to consistently build upon this concept. It is such a success that, as Kamal tells me, 'the souk has been moved to a bigger space in the Biel Exhibition parking lot and we've recently launched Tawlet, a co-op restaurant in the Mar Mikhael district where different producers and guest chefs come together to prepare typical food from their region.' Tawlet is indeed an impressive, forward-looking space; a modern restaurant where we are greeted with a colourful buffet that varies daily, depending on the cook and their region. The speciality here is home-cooked food and they pride themselves on bringing lost recipes back to life – such as smoky *freekeh* (green hulled wheat) and comforting *hrisseh* (chicken, lamb and hulled-wheat porridge). A long communal table sprawled in the centre of this co-op's cool interior represents Lebanon's endearing hospitality and encourages the country's most important message: make food, not war. □

Bethany Kehdy and Roderick Field travelled courtesy of the Lebanon Ministry of Tourism (lebanon-tourism.gov.lb) and Middle East Airlines (mea.com.lb)

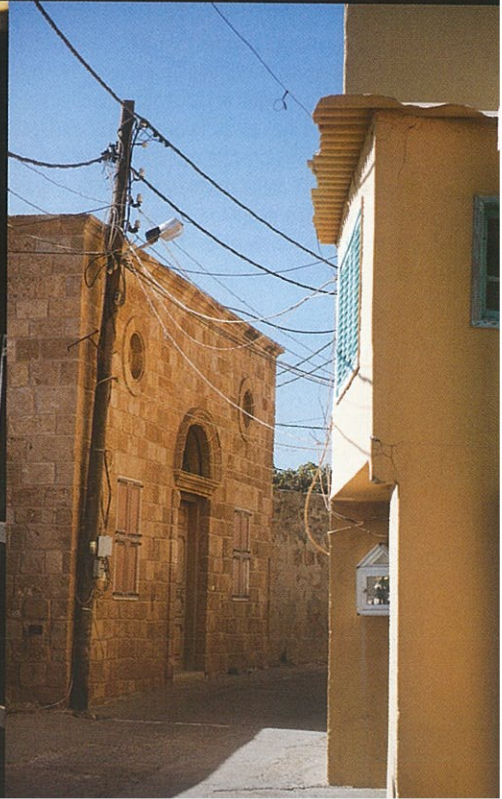
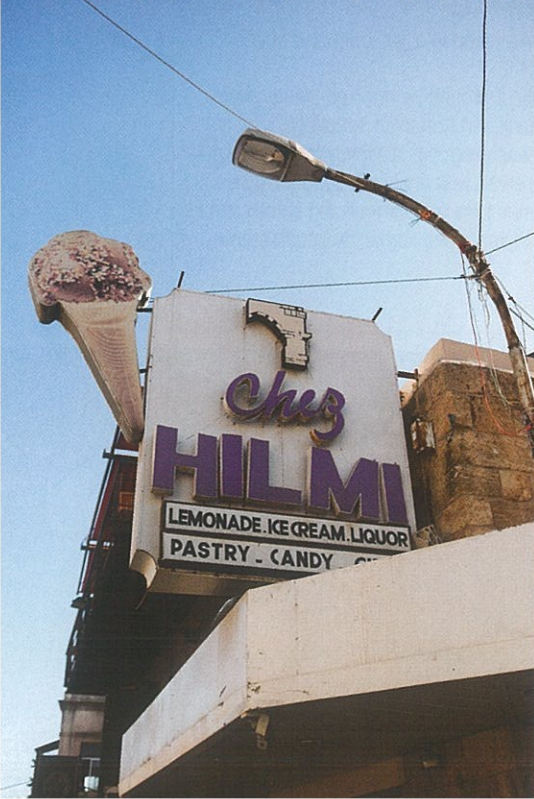
Where to drink

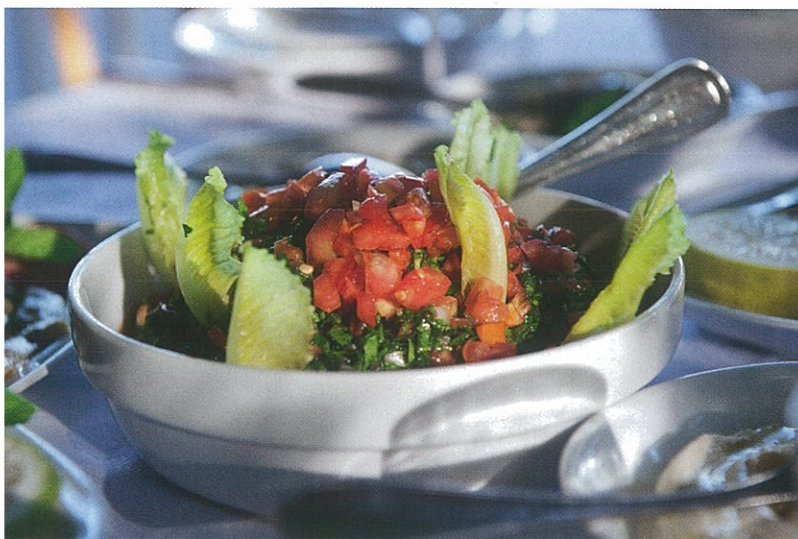
Gemmayze Street This street is home to a variety of bars, pubs and clubs to suit many musical tastes.

Le Capitole Classy rooftop lounge/restaurant is a hotspot among chic Beirutis. *Downtown Beirut, Riad el Sol Square*
00 961 70 302 402

Music Hall Old cinema converted to cabaret presents live entertainment with a mix of local and foreign acts.
Starco Centre, 00 961 3 807 555

Tiger Great views – the perfect place for a pre-dinner drink.
Deir el Alaa, Beit Mery, 00 961 4 870 564





Food glossary

Ahweh Dark, syrupy Arabic coffee that is served in small cups.

Arak Clear, distilled, aniseed spirit traditionally served with mezze.

Asbeh nayeh (Raw liver) Freshly slaughtered raw sheep's liver is typical to a mezze spread. It is served chopped into small cubes with natural fat (called *leeyeh*) salt, pepper, fresh mint and onions. Best enjoyed with *arak*.

Basturma Spicy, air-dried cured beef introduced by the Armenians.

Bulgur Crushed wheat used for seasoning dishes or the prime ingredient of many traditional dishes replacing rice.

Freekeh Green, hulled wheat with a smoky flavour created by roasting.

Hrisseh Wheat-based porridge containing chicken and/or lamb.

Jew's mallow A green leaf vegetable with a slimy texture when cooked.

Kafta Minced lamb mixed with parsley, onions and allspice then skewered.

Kebbeh b'laban Small torpedos of minced meat, crushed bulgur and onions, cooked in yogurt. Kebbeh is Lebanon's national dish.

Kishk Milk, yoghurt and bulgur wheat are mixed and fermented to create this powdery *mouneh* preserve most often served as a soup.

Khebz markouk Paper-thin ('handkerchief') bread (khebz) traditional to the mountain regions that is baked on the concave *saj* oven.

Larks These small birds, known locally as 'fig birds', are served grilled or fried and in pomegranate molasses or lemon vinaigrette.

Man'oushe (Plural is *mana'eesh*). A very thin pizza. Traditionally it is a breakfast item and served slathered with a *za'atar* and olive oil.

Mante Minced lamb or beef and onions, seasoned with spices, wrapped in dough, then drizzled with yoghurt and served hot with a sprinkle of sumac.

M'jaddarah A lentil-based dish consisting of rice and then crushed into a fine purée then topped with fried onion slices.

Mloukchieh Jew's mallow stewed in a cardamom broth, served with chicken and/or lamb atop a bowl of rice sprinkled with crispy bread.

Mouneh translates as 'pantry' and is a selection of dried, canned and pickled food that Lebanese preserve for autumn, winter, and spring. Such examples of mouneh are *awarma* (preserved meat) and *kishk*.

Mouwaraka A flaky pastry topped with a mixture of crushed walnuts, sugar and orange blossom water band shaped like a serpent.

Rahet Widely known as Turkish delight, this jelly-like sweet is flavoured with mastic, lemon or rosewater before being cut into cubes and covered in powdered sugar. Rahet is enjoyed between two biscuits.

Shisha or **argileh** A water pipe used for smoking moist tobacco.

Saj A metal dome with a gas burner placed in the hollow bottom, used to bake bread and sometimes *mana'eesh*.

Shish tawouk Chicken cubes marinated in a garlic-infused yoghurt sauce before being skewered.

Sujuk Dry, spicy sausage usually of ground beef mixed spices such as cumin, sumac, red pepper, garlic. An Armenian speciality.

Sumac A dried fruit used as a seasoning; has a slightly lemony flavour.

Tabouleh Parsley-based salad served with finely chopped tomatoes, onions and bulgur mixed with lemon juice and olive oil and served chilled.

Za'atar A mixture of dried wild thyme, dried sumac, toasted sesame seeds and salt.

