

# A walking tour of Beirut

Words by William Dobson

**LEBANON'S CAPITAL CITY IS RICH IN HISTORY AND CULTURE. WITH QATAR AIRWAYS FLYING TO BEIRUT THREE TIMES A DAY, WHAT BETTER WAY TO EXPERIENCE ITS COSMOPOLITAN PAST THAN A WALKING TOUR THROUGH THE CITY?**



→ Mount Lebanon is home to great skiing in the winter and flowering cherry trees in the summer.



## WALK ABOUT

## THE CORNICHE

Walking along this seaside promenade, almost five kilometres long, you can feel as if you've been transported back in time. People stroll nonchalantly past restaurants and cafés that look as though they've existed forever. Meanwhile, both the old and the young relax by casting fishing rods into the sea, while street traders, selling freshly squeezed juice or perhaps bread straight from the oven, hawk their wares from rickety bicycles. In the evening, the air is filled with *shisha* smoke and – in the neighbourhood of **Rauche** – the magnificent **Pigeon Rocks** are lit up against the sea.

## BY THE NUMBERS

5,000

Years ago, Beirut existed as a prosperous town.

1291

The date Al Omari Mosque was founded.

6.5bn

According to the MasterCard Index, Beirut enjoyed the second-highest visitor spending levels in the Middle East and Africa in 2011, a whopping US\$6.5bn.

## THE DAY STARTS ON BLISS STREET FOR A QUICK BREAKFAST ON THE MOVE.

In the heart of vibrant **Hamra**, buzzing with students, international journalists and Western tourists, the street offers a wonderful juxtaposition.

On the one side sits **The American University of Beirut**, founded back in 1866, looking like something straight out of southern California, with elegantly modern buildings, leafy passageways and views over the Mediterranean. Outside, chatter oscillates amongst young students to-ing and fro-ing between classes, Arabic, English, and French all confusingly mixed up in the same sentences.

On the other side, open shop fronts sell *mana'eesh*, cooked on a *saj* and topped with *za'atar*, *jibneh* or Nutella. Meanwhile, the exotic scents of flavoured tobacco, mixed with burning charcoal, coffee brewing, and jasmine, redolent of summer, waft down the street. Combined with the fresh, ozone fragrance from the sea, the smell of Beirut is both unique, and instantly evocative.

After finishing one of these Lebanese-style pizzas and a strong cup of Turkish coffee – thick, syrupy sweet, flavoured with earthy cardamom and blacker than black – we make our way through Hamra. Charmingly run down, potholes pepper the streets and large 1950s Mercedes used as taxis clutter up each corner, while their drivers stand gossiping and smoking nearby, shouting for business whenever a foreigner walks past. Just before the main street stands the **Mayflower**, the oldest privately owned hotel in town. Full of history and a reminder of bygone eras, former guests include Graham Greene, Kim Philby, and Graham Hill. It was here that most international reporters were based during the Civil War.

Onward, we walk along **Hamra Street**, filled with cafés, both local and international chains,

newsagents, bookshops and fashion boutiques, ranging from those selling standard fare to ones offering altogether more garish attire. We then make a beeline past the Central Bank of Lebanon and up through the traditional quarter of **Kantari**. Here, like nowhere else in Beirut, we're able to see the multitude of influences that have formed the city over the centuries. The architecture is a bizarre and eclectic mix of Arab, Ottoman, and Art Nouveau; ornamental columns adorn the outside of brightly coloured houses, their three large windows are intricately decorated. Elsewhere, the vast sectarian complexities are illustrated by different places of worship, ranging from Sunni and Shiite mosques to Maronite or Armenian Orthodox churches.

Wandering through the streets sloping towards **Downtown**, it's

→ Beirut is the perfect hub to discover Lebanon, no more than two hours away from anywhere else in the country.



© Elsa Buchanan

hard not to be reminded of the war, with bullet holes and run-down buildings telling reminders of violence. Yet, framing the iconic hollow structure of the **Holiday Inn**, the sky behind is full of cranes, pointing to the constant renovation of this mesmerising city. Nowhere is this better exemplified than by **Zaitunay Bay**, perched on the Mediterranean shoreline, the sun shimmering off the sea next to the famous **Hotel St George**. With sleek yachts moored in the marina and filled with Italian, Japanese and French restaurants, modern cafés and cool bars, this recent development represents the new Beirut, a city driving itself into the 21<sup>st</sup> century while embracing its cosmopolitan history.

After an espresso, take in the eerily quiet **Place D'Etoile**, fastidiously renovated, and home to Parisian-style boulevards, Roman ruins, and the magnificent Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque. From here, cut through the sombre atmosphere of **Martyr's Square**, location of the 2005 Cedar Revolutions, where two million people joined together in protest, then continue along **Gemmayze Street**, home to much of the city's lauded nightlife.

Then, back uphill this time, snake through to the residential area of **Achrafieh**, filled with the hustle and bustle of people going about their daily business. Stop for a late lunch at **Boubouffe**. This plain looking restaurant, which doesn't seem to have changed for generations, may have curt service but, in a city where there are hundreds of places to pick up a kebab, their *shawarmas* are very special. Using a secret family recipe of vinegar and a mix of more than 20 spices, the beef is cooked on charcoal rather than the more common gas, elevating it to something truly astonishing. To wash it down, typically Levantine ice cream is served a few doors down, flavoured with pistachio, all gooey and sticky from the mastic that gives it its unique texture. Perfectly refreshing.

As the evening draws in and the sun starts to set, painting the mountains in the distance a greyish pink, make your way to **Mar Mikhael**, a trendy neighbourhood filled with arty shops and studios. Breathe in the bohemian vibe, before finally sitting down for supper at **Seza Bistro**. At this quaint little Armenian restaurant, on a

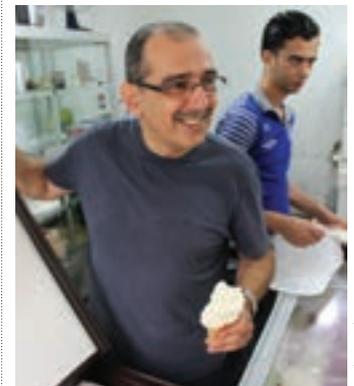


### SUSHI

Over the last few years the craze for this Japanese delicacy has swept over the city like a tsunami. In the past, for those craving a bit of raw fish **Yabani** was about the only place. Now the options are endless and very, very good. **WOK W.O.K** in the **Phoenicia Hotel** is a favourite, their Asian fusion menu supplemented by their sushi bar, offering the largest selection in the city. Along with the vibrant local food, and the French and Italian restaurants that have always thrived, this new phenomenon adds another string to the wonderful cuisine of Beirut.

quiet side street, the patio sits underneath the bougainvillea, romantically lit by tiny fairy lights. From the menu, the heavenly *su borek*, salty filo pastry filled with soft, creamy cheese, is perhaps the standout, while the *manti* is another particular favourite. These folded triangles of dough, similar to ravioli but with a crispier bite, are filled with spiced minced meat and topped with sumac and garlic yoghurt, giving a mellow sweetness.

Happy, sated, and exhausted, return to **Le Gray**, surely the best hotel in town, and cool down in their magnificent infinity pool, the city lights twinkling in the night sky, confident that sleep will be very sound, indeed. ☺



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**Beirut, Lebanon** → Distance: 1,818 km → Flight time: 3 hours, 15 minutes → Frequency: 3 flights a day

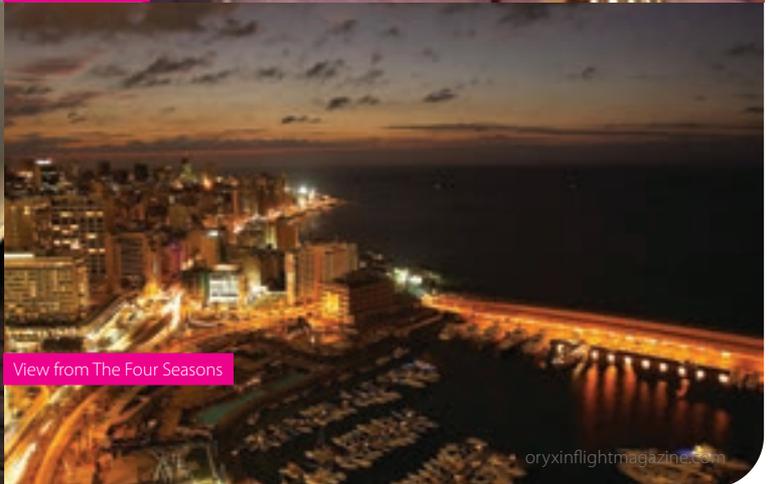
Bar 360°, Le Gray



WITH SLEEK YACHTS MOORED IN THE MARINA AND FILLED WITH ITALIAN, JAPANESE AND FRENCH RESTAURANTS, MODERN CAFÉS AND COOL BARS, THIS RECENT DEVELOPMENT REPRESENTS THE NEW BEIRUT, A CITY DRIVING ITSELF INTO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WHILE EMBRACING ITS COSMOPOLITAN HISTORY.



Phoenetia Hotel



View from The Four Seasons