



Welcome to Beirut.

Welcome to her beauty and her disgrace, her crazy people and her insanely crazy traffic. Welcome to her hospitality and the kindness of her people. Welcome to her magnificent kitchen and her sparkling sea. Welcome to the mix of high mountains and green valleys, to big cement-buildings and astonishing mosques and churches. It's a country full of opportunities and development mixed with a feeling of hopelessness that there is never going to be peace in the Middle East. I hear the same sense of despair from everyone I've talked to about the situation in the middle east: there's no solution, things will never change, maybe in a thousand years... but now... no.

Still, I feel that something is changing in the wind blowing through the soul of Lebanon. There are so many architects drawing and rebuilding the city of Beirut that I think that somehow, that energy is spreading to the people who will fight for a better world. It sounds cheesy, I know, but that's what I'm sensing while sitting in a coffee-place on a side street to Sourati Street in Hamra, drinking my tea and chewing on a delicious halloumi sandwich.

Cause the food here is absolutely fantastic. There is the Lebanese meze, which is several small dishes such as hummus, tabbouleh, labneh, halloumi, eggplant and melted cheese-sticks. There is also kebab, falafel, delicious barbecued lamb (which you have to try if you're eating at Kababji), manoush, tawouk and much, much more. There is a lot on the menu which content I have no idea about so what I do is that I, in my very much stumbling Arabic, order something from the menu in the right price-class for my wallet at the time, and see what is handed to me. And you know what: it has ALL been delicious!

But there's a lot more you can do in Lebanon apart from eating.

When staying in Beirut, Byblos is well worth a visit. This small village by the coast just a little bit north of Beirut makes you forget all about the constant noise in the city. Away from the honking of cars, the everlasting traffic and nightlife there is this beautiful, ancient town where you can go swimming in the Mediterranean, buy souvenirs in the medieval souks and look at Roman buildings heading back to B.C. In the evening you go to Pepes fish-restaurant and have one of the best dinners of your life (the fish is fresh of course, you even get to go into the fridge and pick it out yourself) after watching the sun slowly cross the horizon from one of the cliffs just next to the harbor.

Oh, yes, Byblos is a great way to let go of the big city life and just enjoy life. And only a few kilometers away (30 minutes- 2 hours by car/bus depending on the traffic...)!

On the way to Byblos you pass Jounieh, also a village by the sea with some really nice beaches (most beaches are only open in the summer, from May-September) and beautiful mountains where, if you want to and have time, you can visit a monastery for retreat during a couple of days in exchange of a small fee.



Following is a list with things I recommend for you to do in Lebanon:

- Go on a hike with Lebanese-adventures (www.lebanese-adventure.org.li). They organize different hikes around Lebanon every Sunday with local guides and stunning nature. This is also a good way to meet people; both foreigners and Lebanese people who wish to explore different sides of Lebanon.
- Taking a trip to Bekaa Valley is also a very good idea where you should make sure to visit a vineyard. This is also a good stop to make on your way to Damascus and I do recommend you to visit Bekaa Valley on your way to Damascus since the Syrian taxi drivers do not seem to know a whole lot about Lebanon's geography.
- Visit Byblos (Jbeil) and Jounieh. While you're in Jounieh, take a trip to Harissa which is a beautiful place where you can look out over Beirut. Harissa is also a Christian pilgrimage and a lot of people go there during the month of May, which is also the month of Virgin Mary.

So as I sit in my room on my very last night in Lebanon, looking out over the sea, I cannot help but feel nostalgic. I will definitely miss this place even though I know I will be back here one day. I will miss the Beirut, her people, her food, her high hills and low valleys, her many weird, high buildings and her sea. I will miss her sunshine, her name is Beirut.

/Sara Björneke, Sweden