

Mt Lebanon & the Chouf Mountains

جبل لبنان وجبال الشوف



Mt Lebanon, the traditional stronghold of the Maronites, is the heartland of modern Lebanon, comprising several distinct areas that together stretch out to form a rough oval around Beirut, each home to a host of treasures easily accessible on day trips from the capital.

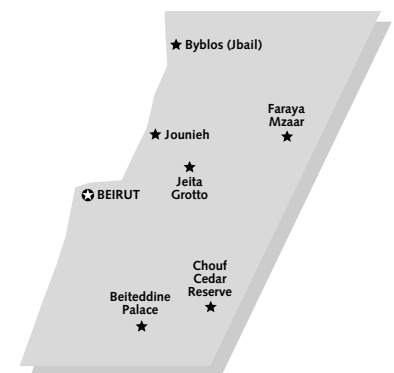
Directly to the east of Beirut, rising up into the mountains, are the Metn and Kesrouane districts. The Metn, closest to Beirut, is home to the relaxed, leafy summer-retreats of Brummana and Beit Mery, the latter host to a fabulous world-class winter festival. Further out, mountainous Kesrouane is a lunar landscape in summer and a skier's paradise, with four resorts to choose from, during the snowy winter months.

North from Beirut, the built-up coastal strip hides treasures sandwiched between concrete eyesores, from Jounieh's dubiously hedonistic 'super' nightclubs and gambling pleasures to the beautiful ancient port town of Byblos, from which the modern alphabet is believed to have derived. Inland you'll find the wild and rugged Adonis Valley and Jebel Tannourine, where the remote Afqa Grotto and Laklouk, yet another of Lebanon's ski resorts, beckon travellers.

To the south, the lush green Chouf Mountains, where springs and streams irrigate the region's plentiful crops of olives, apples and grapes, are the traditional home of Lebanon's Druze population. The mountains hold a cluster of delights, including one real and one not-so-real palace – Beiteddine and Moussa respectively – as well as the expansive Chouf Cedar Reserve and Deir al-Qamar, one of the prettiest small towns in Lebanon.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Absorb 7000 years of history at the ruins at **Byblos** (p306), followed by 40 years of history at the **Byblos Fishing Club** (p312)
- Remember how to tell your stalactites from your stalagmites at the spectacular **Jeita Grotto** (p303)
- Take a heart-stopping ride on Jounieh's **Téléférique** (p304)
- Hit the slopes and après-ski parties of wintertime **Faraya Mzaar** (p299)
- Gape at the incredible mosaics at **Beiteddine Palace** (p320)
- Get back to nature with a hike among the cedars at the **Chouf Cedar Reserve** (p323)





THE METN & KESROUANE

المتن وكسروان

The Metn, the mountainous area to the immediate east of Beirut, was the frontline between the Christians and the Druze during the civil war.

These days few traces of the fierce fighting remain and it has become a popular summer getaway for middle-class Beirutis escaping the stifling heat, pollution and humidity of the city.

Outside the summer months it can be very quiet – except at 4pm on weekdays when Brummana’s high school gets out and floods of teenagers overrun its cafés, and at 1pm on weekends when flocks of day-tripping families stop off here for lunch. Brummana is the main resort area with plenty of accommodation and restaurants, while Beit Mery has Roman and Byzantine ruins and the famous Al Bustan festival. Both can be visited as an easy day trip from Beirut, keeping in mind that on the trip up and down the mountain you’ll experience some of the most hair-raising driving in Lebanon.

The only thing that might slow your journey down, if you’re with a rental car, is actually locating the two towns in the first place since there are few road signs leading the way out of Beirut. If in doubt, point yourself as due east as possible and stop frequently to ask directions.

Beyond the Metn is the Kesrouane *caza* (district), known almost exclusively today for its wide range of ski resorts. Historically, Shiites inhabited the Kesrouane but in the 13th and 14th centuries the area’s Mamluk overlords settled Sunni Muslim Turkoman clans to police the territory.

It was from these Turkomans that the dominant Assaf dynasty emerged, and under the Ottomans the Assafs in turn encouraged Maronite emigration to the Kesrouane to keep the Shiites under control. This they did with such efficiency that by the 18th century most of the original Shiites had been driven out of the area and it became primarily Maronite. Nowadays, it’s famed for its spectacular vistas and the flashy après-ski scenes of its popular winter resorts.

BEIT MERY

04

بيت مري

This popular summer retreat, its name meaning ‘House of the Master’ in Aramaic, is 17km from Beirut centre and 800m above sea level with wonderful views down to the sea on the west side and to the mountains on the east.

The original village has grown into a small town: many of the villas have been built in strategic positions to take advantage of the views, with little concern for aesthetics. Eclipsed in popularity by Brummana just up the road, its main pulling-power lies in its various ruins and in its wintertime festival (see below).

Sights

The ruins that remain here date from the Roman and Byzantine periods. Worth seeing in particular are the fine mosaics on the floor of the 5th century Byzantine church. The remains of a number of small temples surround the mosaics, including one dedicated to Juno built in the reign of Trajan (AD 98–117). There is also a fairly well-preserved public bath, where you can see the original hypocaust tiles that acted as the heating system.

Nearby is the Maronite monastery of **Deir al-Qalaa**, built in the 18th century on the remains of a Roman temple, which in turn was probably built on an earlier Phoenician temple. As at Baalbek (p354), the Roman temple was dedicated to Baal, known here as Baal Marqod. Heavily damaged in the civil war and occupied until 2005 by Syrian soldiers, the monastery is worth a visit, although reconstruction work is ongoing. Other than visiting these sites, there is little to do in Beit Mery except enjoy the views and stroll to Brummana and back for lunch, which is a pleasant enough way to pass a quiet afternoon.

Festivals & Events

The **Al Bustan Festival** (www.albustanfestival.com), with a varied programme of chamber, choral and orchestral music along with theatre and dance performances, usually begins in mid-February and runs for about a month. Most performances take place in the town’s Emile Bustani auditorium and at the Hotel Al Bustan (p296). Check out the festival website for more information.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Al Bustan (☎ 972 980-82; www.albustanhotel.com; s/d/ste from US\$195/215/230; 🚶 🚶 🚶) This luxurious hotel is a lovely, comfortable place to stay with excellent views, though because of the price it's only really a worthwhile alternative to Beirut during the festival period, when it serves as a venue for events. Breakfast costs US\$12.

There are two well-regarded restaurants within the Hotel Al Bustan, **Il Giardino** (2-course meal per person US\$25-30), an Italian trattoria, and the popular French **Les Glycines** (3-course menu per person US\$37), as well as a good bar, the **Scottish Bar**, recommended for its great views.

Tigre (meals around US\$12) Near Deir al-Qalaa and serving hearty traditional Lebanese food, this place has breathtaking views without a breathtaking price.

Getting There & Away

From Beirut you can catch a service taxi to Beit Mery (LL2500) at Dawra bus station or at the National Museum of Beirut. Taxis

stop on the main roundabout in the town and you can easily walk around the whole town from there. Two buses, OCFTC bus 17 or LCC bus 7, also head up here from opposite the National Museum.

BRUMMANA

📍 04

Around 4km northeast of Beit Mery, though almost connected to the former by a constant string of shops and cafés, the resort town of Brummana has nothing as grand as ancient monuments to distract you from the serious pursuits of eating, drinking and partying.

During summer the place is crowded to bursting point and on weekends the traffic can be horrendous. Things are particularly busy during the national tennis tournament, held in August.

If visiting out of season, things are much quieter – and many of the hotels considerably better value, especially midweek – but it lacks the buzz of the busy summer months.

برمانا

NOSTRADAMUS OR NOT?

One of the Metn's most famous exports of recent years is celebrity psychic Michel Hayek. Famous throughout Lebanon and the Middle East for his yearly slew of predictions, usually doled out on New Year's Eve in front of LBC channel TV-cameras and a large component of the Lebanese general public, he spookily often seems to get it quite right.

Hayek, 40-year-old son of a butcher from a small Metn village, has been predicting the future not only to TV audiences but also to private commercial firms – including solicitors, accountants and stockbrokers – across the globe, whose payrolls he has been on for almost a decade. His first apparent glimpse into the future came in the '80s, when he successfully predicted the Challenger space shuttle disaster (allegedly trying in vain to warn the American authorities about the impending explosion) and realised he had a gift for sensing the signs and 'vibrations' foreshadowing future events.

In 1997, Hayek is said to have predicted the death of Princess Diana, and in 2005 predicted that a 'large explosion' would disrupt Downtown Beirut; five weeks later, former prime minister Rafiq Hariri was killed in the massive Downtown bomb blast outside the St. George Yacht Club. He also apparently forecasted the 2005 assassination of Gibran Tueni, warning his wife not to let him buy the car in which he was gunned down. He has, he says, for his troubles, been parodied and derided in the Lebanese media.

Hayek, however, doesn't think he's endowed with a unique gift, believing that everyone has the ability to sense the things that he does, if only they'd listen to their intuition. A sense of foresight, he says, is just like a regular sense of sight.

Though many people trust unquestioningly in Hayek's predictions, his critics claim that his predictions are often wrong, and sometimes so vague that they can't help be right in such a turbulent country. Hayek himself acknowledges that he's not right all the time, but this hasn't managed to dampen his phenomenal popularity. And his 'feelings' extend beyond the public and political sphere: in 2007 his personal predictions included marriage to his girlfriend, a child psychologist, to whom he proposed after just three dates, a sixth sense telling him that it was the right thing to do.

Nonetheless, the views down to Beirut and the Mediterranean are even better than at Beit Mery.

Information

Internet access is available in the centre of Brummana, but the addresses change every summer and your best bet is to walk along the main street or ask at a hotel. Credit Libanais has an ATM in the main street and there are a couple of moneychangers there as well. Other banks have ATM machines inside. The **post office** (📞 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) is on the main street.

Sleeping

Brummana is geared towards well-off Lebanese and Middle Eastern clients, with a distinct shortage of cheap and even midrange accommodation. Unless you fall in love with the town at first sight, it's probably better value to stay in Beirut and visit on a day trip.

Kanaan Hotel (☎ 960 025; fax 961 213; Rue Centrale; s/d low season US\$35/40, high season US\$40/60) One of the least pricey options in town, this place, located on the main road directly opposite Brummana High School, is small and open all year round. Its rooms are simple but all have attached bathrooms and balconies with views right down to the sea, while the lounge is decorated with old Lebanese objets d'art, oil paintings and chandeliers.

Garden Hotel (☎ 960 203; www.gardenhotellb.com; s/d/ste low season US\$45/50/75, high season US\$70/80/120; 🚶 🚶 🚶) A friendly family-run hotel near Printania Palace Hotel, it's especially good value in low season. The rooms are a little old-fashioned but are well appointed and the hotel has nice gardens and relaxing poolside setting.

Hotel Le Crillon (☎ 865 555; www.lecrillon.com; Rue Centrale; s/d/ste low season US\$45/50/60, high season US\$80/110/130; 🚶 🚶 🚶) This comfortable hotel has great views from most of its rooms, towards Jebel Sannine. Though the rooms aren't anywhere near as nice as the lobby or the grounds, it makes up for the shortfall with a pool, Jacuzzi and sauna and very friendly staff.

Printania Palace Hotel (☎ 862 000; www.printania.com; Chahine Adhkar St; s/d low season US\$80/90, high season US\$150/160; 🚶 🚶 🚶) A large, old-fashioned and charming four-star hotel, with all the accoutrements you would expect for the price

tag. The rooms are large and pleasant, and there's a well-known French restaurant, as well as a Lebanese/Mediterranean restaurant serving a hearty Sunday buffet lunch.

Grand Hills Hotel & Spa Hotel (☎ 862 888; www.grandhillsvillage.com; deluxe d/grand deluxe d/ste US\$247/297/345; 🚶 🚶 🚶) Part of Grand Hills Village, a swish residential compound set on a huge chunk of prime Brummana real-estate, this lavish place is owned by Robert Mouawad, a well-known international jeweller. The hotel exhibits the same attention to detail as one of his famous jewellery pieces, with the 118 rooms and suites exquisitely decorated in 25 different themes – all with great views. With a fabulous spa and its own botanical gardens, you'll find yourself wanting to sell your own jewellery to stay an extra night but before you do, it's worth checking the website for special multnight packages offering substantial discounts.

Eating & Drinking

Brummana has a great range of eating options in all price brackets. All those listed here are along the main road, where you'll also find the usual shwarma and felafel joints.

Crepaway (☎ 964 347; Rue Centrale; mains from LL5000; 📞 11am-midnight) This chain outlet serves up decent burgers and pizza along with French-style crepes.

Manhattan (☎ 961 967; Rue Centrale; mains around LL7000; 📞 8am-midnight) A popular American-style diner dishing up large plates of burgers, pizza and salads: look for the curiously familiar 'M' sign that will make you wonder how they haven't been sued yet.

Mounir (☎ 873 900; Rue Centrale; mezze LL4000-7000; 📞 11am-midnight) With fabulous views towards the Mediterranean, wonderful mezze, seafood and grills, and a relaxing garden and children's playground, this is perfect for settling in for a long late lunch. Bookings are essential, especially if you want a table with a view in summer.

Taboo Pub (☎ 528 104; Rue Centrale; 📞 6pm-late) On the corner just along from the police station, this is a popular place for a drink, with live music on weekend evenings.

Le Gargotier (☎ 960 952; Rue Centrale; meals per person US\$20; 📞 noon-3pm & 7pm-midnight, closed Fri) and its sister restaurant **La Gargotier** (☎ 960 096) further down the road past the high school, both serve good traditional French food in traditionally French surroundings.

Getting There & Away

Service taxis from the National Museum or Dawra charge LL2500 to Beit Mery or Brummana. Bus 7 LCC (LL750, 40 minutes) leaves from just east of the National Museum.

JEBEL SANNINE

جبل صنّين

This impressive mountain (2628m) is worth climbing in the summer for the unparalleled views of Lebanon from its summit. There are actually two summits: the higher one is less interesting and it is the slightly lower peak that affords the spectacular views.

To make the climb, head for the village of **Baskinta**, which is east of Bilkfaya. From there, continue 6km to the hamlet of **Nebaa Sannine**, where there is a spring that feeds **Wadi Sellet ash-Shakroub**, the starting point for the climb. It is best to make the climb from the most southerly slopes rather than tackling the slopes that overlook the hamlet. It is a moderately steep climb and should not take more than three hours. The last part of the climb is easier: there is a path that runs like a ledge around the top of the mountain.

From the top you can see Qornet as-Sawda, Lebanon's highest peak at 3090m, to the north, and Jebel ash-Sheikh (Mt Hermon; 2814m) to the south. The Bekaa Valley and the Anti-Lebanon Range are clearly visible to the east and in the foreground are Jebel Keniseh (880m) and Jebel Barouk (1980m).

To the west you can see the foothills of the Mt Lebanon Range slope all the way down to Beirut. Choose a clear, fine day to make this ascent; you'll need good strong shoes, plenty of water and to be reasonably fit.

Getting There & Away

Though difficult to do without your own transport, you could take a taxi to tiny Nebaa Sannine and arrange to be picked up there at a specific time and place. Failing that, you would have to make the walk back to the village of Baskinta, about 6km, and try your luck at picking up a service taxi from there.

It would be a wise idea to inform your hotel or friends of your plans and what time you expect to be back.

QANAT BAKICHE & ZAAROUR

قناة بكيش والزعرور

Qanat Bakiche and Zaarour sit on the slopes of Jebel Sannine and are Lebanon's two smallest ski-resorts. Historians think Qanat Bakiche was named after Bacchus, to whom there are lots of shrines in the area.

Both are set in spectacular locations and were severely damaged during the civil war – Zaarour was destroyed twice. Though they have both recovered well, they are far more low-key than Lebanon's other ski locations.

Zaarour operates as a private club, with a good safety record and excellent opportunities for cross-country skiing. The best way to find out whether you can wheedele

Qanat Bakiche has uncrowded slopes and just one hotel, the basic but comfortable **Snow Land Hotel** (☎ 03-340 300; d US\$75), which also offers equipment and lessons. More adventurous skiers and snowboarders will be happy to note that the resort has a snowcat for trips to the back country, as well as snowmobiles for hire.

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SKI FACTS: QANAT BAKICHE & ZAAROUR

- **Altitude** Qanat Bakiche: 1904m to 2250m; Zaarour: 1651m to 2000m
- **Lifts** Qanat Bakiche has one beginner and two medium/advanced; Zaarour has three beginner, two medium and two advanced
- **Adult Day Pass** Qanat Bakiche: US\$10 (Monday to Friday), US\$18 (Saturday and Sunday); Zaarour: US\$17 (Monday to Friday), US\$27 (Saturday and Sunday)
- ☎ 03-340 300 in Qanat Bakiche; 04-310 010 in Zaarour
- **Opening hours** 8am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm Saturday and Sunday

Since Zaarour operates as a private resort and Qanat Bakiche's slopes are fairly limited, these resorts don't seem the obvious choice for visitors compared to Faraya Mzaar or the Cedars. However, if you can gain access to Zaarour, or you don't mind the extra work to get the fresh stuff at Qanat Bakiche, both have awesome views and uncrowded slopes.

a day without a full club membership is to give the resort a call (☎ 04-310 010/1). Both resorts are difficult to reach without a car: the only practical way is to organise a taxi either from Beirut or from Faraya, though you'll probably have to bargain hard to make the trip worth your while.

FARAYA & FARAYA MZAAR (OUYOUN AL-SIMAAAN)

فارييا وفارييا المزار (عيون السيمان)

☎ 09

Better known for the ski resort, Faraya Mzaar, lying 6km above it, Faraya itself is a sleepy village that only truly comes alive from December to March with the annual invasion of ski-toting Beirutis. Most skis, however, spend more time facing skyward in front of the cafés than racing down the well-groomed slopes, and après-ski activities start early in the afternoon and end late in the evening. But Faraya Mzaar has more to offer than just partying; with the fastest and most extensive lift system, decent annual snowfall and the best variety of slopes for all abilities, it's the biggest – and many say the best – resort in Lebanon, though perhaps not as picturesque as the Cedars further north.

The slopes themselves consist of three separate areas, Refuge, Junction and Wardeh, and there are also a few cross-country skiing trails.

In the summer, Faraya Mzaar takes on a different character altogether, as the bleak mountainscapes become barren and lunar and the resort itself is devoid of almost all its trade. Unless you're using it as a base for hiking in the region, it's not the most exciting place to be and many of the bars and cafés are closed until the first snow flurries. For more information on the resort, see Ski Facts: Faraya Mzaar (this page).

Sights & Activities

The main attraction of the area, except for the snow, is its bleak natural beauty. On the road between Faraya and Faraya Mzaar it's worth stopping off at the famous **Faraya Natural Bridge** (Jisr al-Hajar). You'll spot it on the road between the village and the resort (marked the 'highway' route at the crossroads in the lower Faraya village). Otherwise look out for the restaurant **Au Pont Naturel** (☎ 341 134), which is open year

SKI FACTS: FARAYA MZAAR

- **Altitude** 1850m to 2465m
- **Lifts** 18
- **Adult Day Pass** US\$25 to US\$30 Monday to Friday, US\$25 to US\$50 Saturday and Sunday
- ☎ 09-341 501
- **Opening hours** 8am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm Saturday and Sunday

Faraya Mzaar is the best equipped and most popular ski resort in Lebanon and on a good weekend it looks like all of Beirut is on the slopes at once. Unfortunately, the Lebanese tend to ski like they drive – with the same disregard for the rules – so keep your eyes peeled for errant 'bipolar' traffic. Weekdays are far quieter (and less expensive) and after a good snowfall it can be a magical place to ski or snowboard.

Many coming to the resort take the après-ski activities far more seriously than the skiing and the resort has a hard-partying reputation, though it's also family-friendly, with children's lessons available at its five beginner slopes. Adult passes are available either at the office opposite the Mzaar Intercontinental Hotel entrance, or at the base of the slopes near the ski lifts. There's free access to the slopes for children under five: take your tiny people's passports and a passport photo of each to the office opposite the Mzaar Intercontinental for their free pass.

Ski and snowboard equipment can be rented from a number of places for between US\$15 and US\$20 per day, and there are rescue and Red Cross teams on hand.

round, with decent mezze, grills and great views of the bridge. You can take an interesting but steep walk down to the bridge itself, which, centuries ago, was thought to be a work of human construction, but it is in fact entirely a freak of nature.

If you're looking for ski equipment, you'll find plenty of shops on the road leading up to Faraya from the coast, while on the road from Faraya Mzaar to the slopes you'll see snowmobiles for hire. At the bottom of the slopes themselves are yet more ski equipment sales and rental points.

Sleeping

Most skiers stay in the purpose-built Faraya Mzaar ski village near the slopes, though there are also some good budget-conscious options in Faraya village, 6km below the ski resort. It's worthwhile checking, before choosing accommodation in Faraya village, whether your hotel offers free transport to the slopes, a handy way to avoid negotiating taxis if you haven't rented a car.

Much of Faraya Mzaar's accommodation consists of private apartments and chalets that are rented out for the entire ski season. Bookings are heaviest just before Christmas and it can be busy through to the end of March depending on snow conditions. Hotels are nearly always booked well in advance for the weekends but you can usually find somewhere to stay during the week. If you haven't booked months in advance, check with **Ski Leb** (www.skileb.com) for last-minute hotel vacancies.

FARAYA VILLAGE

Coin Vert Hotel (☎ /fax 720 812; s/d/tr US\$30/40/50) This friendly, family-run hotel is on the main road of Faraya village just before the roundabout. It's a small, simple but clean one-star hotel that's open all year. It has a restaurant serving European and Lebanese dishes (with an average cost of US\$10 for lunch or dinner) and a bar that's popular during the ski season. There's also a ski shop where you can rent equipment.

Tamer Land Hotel (☎ 321 268; s/d/ste US\$45/60/75) Another friendly family-run hotel in the centre of the village (up past the roundabout), with a choice from around 50 regular rooms or 20 suites suitable for families. It's clean, welcoming and all rooms have a private bathroom and satellite TV. The hotel also has two restaurants and a pub.

FARAYA MZAAR

Auberge Suisse (☎ 953 841; d US\$85; 🍷) One of the best places at the lower end of Faraya Mzaar's price scale, this place has been operating since the '70s, meaning the décor is just a little dated but perfectly fine for a place to lay a weary skier's head.

Merab (☎ 341 341; s & d from US\$95; 🍷 📺) A small three-star hotel right in the middle of the resort, it has snug but nicely furnished rooms with minibar, central heating and room service.

Intercontinental Mzaar Lebanon Mountain Resort

(☎ 340 100; s/d from US\$259/297; 🍷 📺 📺) This huge Intercontinental resort and spa is the most expensive hotel in Faraya. It has a superb location and all the usual five-star amenities, including equipment rental and Les Thermes du Mzaar, a luxury spa for serious pampering. With direct access to the slopes, excellent restaurants with everything from Argentinean steaks to Italian calzones and a scrumptious chocolate fondue at its Le Refuge restaurant, it offers the best winter experience in town.

Eating & Drinking

Faraya village's main street is lined with simple fast-food restaurants and seasonal cafés, all of which serve up decent food at reasonable prices. There are also a few small supermarkets where you can pick up basic provisions if you're self-catering in a chalet or visiting in summer and planning on picnicking.

Up at the resort itself are plenty of restaurants charging higher prices but serving more sophisticated food, with an emphasis on warming Alpine winter favourites such as fondue and raclette. The Intercontinental is especially noted for its wide range of up-scale dining options and is also the place to head for post-exertion drinks.

Chez Mansour (☎ 341 000; mains LL8000) This good-value restaurant underneath the Merab hotel (left) is at the heart of the Faraya Mzaar resort. Less glitzy than many of the other offerings around here, it has reasonably priced, unpretentious food that matches its atmosphere.

Jisir al-Qamar (☎ 03-877 993; mezze LL2500-4000) Its name meaning 'Bridge of the Moon', this is a good Lebanese restaurant in Faraya village near the Coin Vert Hotel. Friendly and cosy in winter, with a roaring log fire in the middle of the restaurant, it's good value with the standard selection of mezze and grills. Expect to pay LL8000 and upwards for generous portions of grilled meats. There's also a little children's play area up the front.

Though the coolest place in town – in terms of nightlife, rather than temperatures – changes each season, there are currently three places in which to see and be seen. There's **Igloo** (☎ 640 067), a Rue Monot style bar/restaurant/club that really gets going

towards midnight. You can't fail to spot the white igloo-shaped building in the heart of the resort.

Le Stars (☎ 340 100), housed in the Intercontinental Mzaar hotel (see opposite), is the second-best place to dance the snowy night away, attracting a wealthy but slightly less funky crowd.

L'Interdit (☎ 03-822 283) is another popular restaurant-nightclub with a dance floor surrounded by tables. The menu is mostly French and expensive (a drink will set you back US\$10), but if you want to dance there's everything from techno to funk and soul.

Getting There & Away

You should be able to pick up a service taxi all the way to Faraya from Beirut's Dawra bus station, but only in the busy winter season when there are plenty of people coming and going. Since Faraya is not on the main route to anywhere else, in low season it's best to go by service taxi to Jounieh and get a taxi from there. If you haggle, you will probably get a taxi to take you for US\$20 for the 30-minute ride from Jounieh. When you leave, you will either need to get the hotel to call a taxi for you or, if you are lucky, find one in the main street in the Faraya village on its way back to Jounieh or Beirut. The more expensive hotels offer transfers to and from Beirut.

FAQRA

☎ 09

Faqra, 6km before Faraya Mzaar on the main road up from Faraya to Faraya Mzaar, is one of the world's first private ski-resorts and you can only ski here if you stay at the swanky hotel, or are invited by a member who has one of the chalets within the grounds. The ski slopes are well run and maintained with good medical facilities; there are three lifts plus a baby lift and a reasonable ski area, though snow coverage is a little patchier than at Faraya Mzaar.

Like most of Lebanon's ski resorts, there's not much to recommend staying here in summer, though it makes an interesting day trip from Beirut or Byblos if you're touring the region for the scenery and ruins, and the resort itself runs a host of hiking, riding and adventure sport activities.

The main reason to come here, apart from skiing, is to see the **ruins** (🕒 8am-5pm)

set below a field of bizarre rock formations, a common sight in the area. Officially, there's an entrance charge of LL3000 but in practice there's often no-one there to collect payment, and the gates are open for you to wander around. For most of the year, you're likely to have the ruins entirely to yourself.

The ruins date from the Greek era, looking especially dramatic when covered with snow, and lie very picturesquely on the side of a hill overlooking the valley below. There is a heavily restored large temple with six Corinthian columns that feature widely on postcards of Lebanon. The temple is dedicated to Adonis, the 'very great god', and sits in the middle of a labyrinth of rocks. A rectangular court cut out of the rock precedes it and nearby are a couple of altars, one dedicated to Astarte (the great goddess of fertility), the other to Baal Qalach.

Just down the hill from here is another smaller temple that was originally dedicated to the Syrian goddess Atargatis, and later to Astarte. In the 4th century AD it was transformed into a church, and a Byzantine-style cross can still be seen on one of the fallen stones in what was the nave.

Surrounding the larger temple are some rock-cut tombs and to the north is a ruined cube-shaped base known as the **Claudius Tower**. According to an inscription above the entrance it was rebuilt by the Emperor Claudius in AD 43-44, but is likely to date back even further. It is thought to have been dedicated to Adonis. The base was originally covered with a step pyramid, perhaps like the one near Hermel (p361). Inside there are steps leading up to the roof and two altars, one of which has been restored with 12 tiny columns supporting its table top.

The only place to stay in Faqra is **L'Auberge de Faqra** (☎ 300 600; www.faqradclub.com; s/d from US\$187/231; 🍷 📺 📺), an ultrasmart hotel, which is part of the large sports and leisure development. Hotel guests can use facilities such as the swimming pool, and tennis and squash courts, although there is a small extra charge. The rooms and service are of a very high standard and there's a ski lift to the most challenging ski area right outside the door. The resort is open in the summer, with mountain biking, horse riding and a plethora of other outdoor activities on offer, but seems in comparison rather empty and forlorn, as if pining for the purr of chi-chi

Beirutis' Maseratis and the gentle clink of champagne flutes around its log fires.

On the main road to Faqra, around 1.5km past the ruins, **Chez Michel** (☎ 03-694 462; mezze around LL4000), an upmarket log-cabin style affair is on the left hand side just before Faqra Club. By far the most famous restaurant in the area, it serves great mezze and grills, and has an excellent Lebanese wine list. While it's officially open all year round, you may nevertheless find it closed during the nonskiing season; Saturday nights during the ski season usually end with some wild partying. If you can pull yourself away from the log fire, there are also fantastic views. Note that reservations are essential on winter weekends.

THE COAST

Heading north along Lebanon's coast, the division between Beirut and the coastal towns is almost completely blurred by concrete, billboards and breakneck traffic. But taking an exit from the motorway will reveal some great beach clubs, one of the world's most visually stunning sets of caves and one of Lebanon's most significant and picturesque ruins. Making the region even more tempting, the area's proximity to Beirut makes all its attractions a comfortable day trip from the capital.

NAHR AL-KALB

نهر الكلب

The mouth of Nahr al-Kalb (Dog River; the Lycus River of antiquity) is on the coast road, heading north between Beirut and Jounieh. Prior to the building of the huge highway that now crosses the river the steep-sided gorge was very difficult for armies to traverse, forcing them to cross in single file and leaving them vulnerable to attack. To give thanks for their successful crossing, conquering armies have historically left plaques or commemorative inscriptions (stelae) carved into the sides of the gorge, the oldest dating from Ramses II's reign of around 1298–1235 BC, along with some even earlier Assyrian carvings, and the most recent being those left by Christian militias during the civil war.

All of the stelae carved before 1920 are marked with Roman numerals, and except

for those of Nebuchadnezzar II, commemorating his 6th century BC campaigns in Mesopotamia and Lebanon, all run along the left bank, following the ancient courses of the steep roads carved along the slopes of the gorge.

Nebuchadnezzar's own (No I) are on the right (north) bank near the motorway junction, but are very eroded and not really worth the detour from the left bank. Listed below are the significant left bank inscriptions, which begin opposite the old, triple-arched Arab bridge.

Riverside Inscriptions

II A lengthy Arabic inscription lying almost at water level opposite the Arab bridge and commemorating its construction. It dates from the 14th century and was inscribed on behalf of Mamluk Sultan Seif ad-Din Barquq by the builder of the bridge, Saifi Itmish.

III A few metres downriver there is a Latin inscription from the Roman emperor Caracalla (Marcus Aurelius Antonius, AD 198–217) describing the achievements of the 3rd Gallic Legion. Just above the Roman inscription is a modern obelisk, which marks the French and Allied armies' arrival in Lebanon in 1942, while beyond it is another modern inscription commemorating the 1941 liberation of Lebanon and Syria from Vichy forces.

IV A French inscription marks the French invasion of Damascus on 25 July 1920 under General Gouraud. Not far from this is a plaque with Arabic script and the date 25/3/1979; next to this, another plaque with the engraving of a cedar tree and another Arabic inscription commemorates the withdrawal of French troops from Lebanon in 1946.

V The original stele showing an Egyptian pharaoh and the god Ptah has been covered by a later inscription by Emperor Napoleon III's army commemorating its 1860 expedition in the Chouf.

VI An Assyrian king, depicted wearing a crown with his right hand raised, is badly preserved.

VII Next to VI is another Assyrian figure, which is now almost impossible to make out.

VIII Further along, another Assyrian stele, which again is in a very bad state of preservation.

IX Above VI and VII, a commemoration of British-led 'Desert Mountain Corps' and its 1918 capture of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo.

X Right by the motorway, a British commemorative plaque dating from 1918 marks the achievements of the British 21st Battalion and the French Palestine Corps. Beside this, steps lead up the mountainside and over the motorway, leading to the other inscriptions.

XI A weathered Greek inscription.

XII Another very worn Greek inscription.

XIII About 30m further on, a stony path climbs sharply, just after some cedars carved into the rock by Phalange fighters. This next stele shows an Assyrian king in an attitude of prayer.

XIV Next to XIII is a rectangular tablet showing Pharaoh Ramses II of Egypt (1292–1225 BC) sacrificing a prisoner to the god Harmakhis.

XV A little higher and only a few metres away on a dead-end path is another inscription of an Assyrian king.

XVI About 25m further up the slope, you come to the road at the top. There you'll see a rectangular stele, which shows Ramses II again, this time sacrificing a prisoner to the sun god Amun by burning him to death.

XVII The last stele depicts, in cuneiform script, Assyrian king Esarhaddon's victory against Egypt in 671 BC.

Getting There & Away

Being so close to Beirut, Nahr al-Kalb is very easy to get to with a couple of hours to spare from either, or makes a great day trip combined with the Téléférique at Jounieh and the Jeita Grotto.

You can take a service taxi (LL2500) or a minibus heading to Jounieh from Beirut's Dawra or Charles Helou bus stations, and ask the driver to drop you off there. The river mouth is just to the right after exiting the long motorway tunnel on the highway and is easy to spot. When you leave, it's easy to flag down another service taxi or minibus going in either direction on the highway.

An alternative, if you're staying in Jounieh or Byblos, is to negotiate a return taxi fare for a day trip to both Nahr al-Kalb and Jeita Grotto. This should cost around LL25,000 from Jounieh, if you drive a hard bargain.

JEITA GROTTA

مغارة جعيتا

A stunning series of caverns, **Jeita Grotto** (☎ 09-220 840/3; www.jeitagrotto.com; adult/child under 12 LL18,150/10,075; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun summer, 9am-5pm Tue-Sun winter, closed Mon except in Jul & Aug & for 4 weeks Jan & Feb) contains one of the world's most impressive agglomerations of stalactites and stalagmites and is one of the country's biggest tourist attractions. Stretching some 6km back into the mountains, these caves are the source of the Nahr al-Kalb and in winter the water levels rise high enough to flood the lower caverns. During the civil war, the caves were used as an ammunition store, but they were cleared and reopened to the public in 1995.

The breathtaking upper cavern, home to some extraordinary stalactites and stalagmites, quickly opens up to reveal its astonishing size. The lower cavern, explored by a short boat ride, is beautifully lit, but is often closed in the winter because of high water levels. Regardless of what time of year you visit, however, the upper cavern is the highlight of the show.

Despite all sorts of unnecessary additions – including a toy train ride – the grotto is breathtaking for both adults and children. There is strictly no photography allowed inside the caves, and cameras must be placed in the lockers provided before you proceed into either cavern.

The road to the caves is the first turn on the right past Nahr al-Kalb, if you are heading north. You can catch a service taxi to Nahr al-Kalb and either walk from there (if you're fit – it's close to a one-hour uphill slog), or catch a taxi to take you up from the highway, since not many service taxis ply this road. It is about 5km from the highway to the grotto. A return trip to the caves from Nahr al-Kalb will set you back around US\$12 to US\$15. The turn-off to the grotto is, unusually, clearly signposted on the highway from both directions.

JOUNIEH

جونيه

☎ 09 / pop 103,227

Prior to the civil war, Jounieh, 21km north of Beirut, was a sleepy fishing village. But with Beirut sliced in half by the conflict, wealthy Christian Beirutis turned to Jounieh as a place to party their troubles away. The town now suffers from a split-personality: on the south side of town, the old Centre Ville clustered around the Rue Mina, retains its charm. But to the north, Rue Maameltein's weird, continuous strip of lurid bars and 'super' nightclubs with exotic dancers and prices as stiff as the drinks, have turned it into an imitation Middle Eastern Vegas in the worst possible way. Outside the centre, towards the mountainside, things get even worse, with gravity-defying high-rise buildings plonked up the steep mountainside.

Nowadays, Beirut is firmly back at the helm of nightclub action but Jounieh remains popular in summer with expat Lebanese returning for their holidays and visiting Gulf Arabs, particularly Saudis,

intent on dipping their toes in the Med. There's not much to detain a traveller unless you're heading for the dizzy heights of the Téléferique or the blackjack table, or you're particularly intent on being danced at by a bored Eastern European girl.

Orientation

The town is roughly divided into three parts; viewed from the south they are Kaslik, Centre Ville and Maameltein. Kaslik, near the motorway, is home to designer clothing outlets, cinema complexes, fast-food outlets and some clubs.

Heading north, about 20 minutes' walk downhill towards the sea is Centre Ville, concentrated on Rue Mina. Here you'll find a large supermarket, banks, cafés, some carpet shops and the taxi stand. North of the municipality building, Rue Mina becomes Rue Maameltein and is the start of the Maameltein area, lurid home to some hotels, most of the 'super' nightclubs, the Téléferique station and the casino.

Information

Cell CD Internet, next to the Téléferique, and Café Net on Rue Mina both have good internet facilities (per hr LL2000) and are open daily till late.

The **post office** (☎ 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) is opposite the municipality building.

Sights & Activities

There's really not much to do in Jounieh except have a meal, a stroll past the traditional houses on Rue Mina, a ride on the Téléferique and perhaps a flutter at the Casino du Liban.

If you fancy a swim, you can head to any of the resorts that surround the bay, where you'll pay between US\$5 and US\$10 depending on the facilities offered. Most also have windsurfing equipment and body boards for hire.

Once you have exhausted the above possibilities, it's time to take to the **Téléferique** (التلفريك) (☎ 936 075; www.teleferique.lb.com; adult/child aged 4-10 return ticket LL7500/3500; ☎ 10am-11pm Jun-Oct, 10am-7pm Nov-May, closed Mon, Christmas Day & Good Fri), a cable car travelling from the centre of town up to the dizzying heights of Harissa (opposite). This ride, dubbed the Terrorifique by some, takes about nine minutes with the second half of the trip living up

to its nickname as it climbs higher up the steep hillside. If *Vertigo* made you quiver, this is definitely one to avoid; if, on the other hand, you have *Rear Window* tendencies, you'll enjoy the bizarre views into people's living rooms as you ascend between huge apartment blocks.

Sleeping

Options are limited to only one hotel for those on a tight budget. Those looking for midrange accommodation should note that low-season rates are significantly lower, so it's worth asking for the best price.

Hotel St Joseph (☎ 931 189; Rue Mina; basic/large r US\$20/25, discounts for several nights stay) Located in the old part of town, about 70m north of the municipality building, this increasingly shabby pension housed in a 150-year-old building was once the mayor's residence and is well positioned. It's basic, to say the least, but very friendly and its Anglo manageress (or 'dogsboddy' as she prefers to call herself) will make it impossible not to feel at home. You're welcome to cook in the kitchen – or may be invited to join the feast if one of the owners are rustling something up. One American guest suggested they should use the hotel as a 'training centre for commandos' so you'll get the idea that there's not much luxury to be had.

La Medina Hotel (☎ 918 484, 03-274 011; www.lamedinahotel.com; Rue Maameltein; s/d US\$65/90; ☎ ☎) Opposite the Téléferique building, the hotel's rooms are clean – if decidedly pink – and its prices moderate compared to its neighbours, all year round.

Holiday Suites Hotel (☎ 933 907; www.holiday.suites.com; Rue Mina; s/d/ste US\$65/75/95; ☎ ☎ ☎) In a similar vein as La Medina, this hotel is friendly enough, with worn-looking but clean rooms overlooking the sea, pool and water sports facilities. Though it utilises a logo somewhat similar to a leading hotel chain, it's apparently unconnected.

Chateau Raphael (☎ 498 363; Rue Maameltein; ste from US\$250; ☎ ☎ ☎) At the very opposite end of the hotel spectrum, in every respect, from Hotel St Joseph is this ultracamp 'luxury boutique' suite hotel whose motto is 'Be a king in our kingdom'. Catering to spectacular Lebanese weddings and wealthy Gulf Arabs, its faux-palatial style is sure to please those with a big budget and a healthy penchant for all that glitters.

Eating

Jounieh has all the ubiquitous tiny felafel-type stalls, juice bars and cafés you'll require, while on Rue Mina there are a few swish bars serving up big plates of burgers and Tex-Mex along with good strong cocktails. If it's a bit of glitz you're looking for, then Rue Maameltein will satisfy with its abundance of steak and seafood restaurants, though Chez Sami stands out in a class of its own.

Sushi Bento (☎ 919 193; Rue Maameltein; noodle dishes from LL5500; ☎ 11am-11pm) Offers decent sushi (LL1500 to LL3000), sashimi and good-value set meals in the thick of the action.

Makhlouf (☎ 645 192; Rue Maameltein; mains LL11,000; ☎ 24hr) A branch of the immensely popular Lebanese chain, this is always packed with locals. It has a nice outdoor terrace overlooking the sea and is perfect for a sunset nargileh or a simple, inexpensive dinner: shwarma costs LL3500; a large fresh juice is LL3000.

Chez Sami (☎ 910 520; Rue Maameltein; mains around US\$35; ☎ noon-midnight) Considered one of the best fish restaurants in the country, Chez Sami is set in a wonderful old stone house. It sports a very stylish interior, but it's the two outdoor terraces overlooking the beach that are the focus of attention. Besides the fresh fish – which you pick direct from the day's catch (500g of fish from LL25,000) – and excellent service, it's also famous for its mezze. The restaurant is no secret though, so book ahead.

Patisserie Rafaat Hallab (☎ 635 531; Rue Maameltein; cakes & ice creams LL1000-1500; ☎ 7am-midnight May-Sep) Satisfy urges for the sweet and sticky at this branch of the famous Tripoli sweet-makers, located directly opposite Chez Sami.

Entertainment

Jounieh was once famed for its nightlife. But these days, especially on Rue Maameltein, it largely consists of hotel discos and 'super' nightclubs with tacky floorshows and overpriced drinks.

There are, however, a few decent bars and late-night cafés sprinkled along the more tranquil Rue Mina. Since they open and close with great speed in the current uncertain climate, it's best to wander until you find one that takes your fancy.

Casino du Liban (☎ 853 222; www.cdl.com.lb; ☎ slot-machine area noon-5am, gaming rooms 8pm-4am) This is Jounieh's most famous nightspot. Overlooking the northern end of Jounieh bay, it opened in 1959 and was the symbol of Beirut's decadence in the 1960s. The rich and famous flocked here to see extravagant floorshows, hang around the gaming tables à la James Bond, and patronise the restaurants and bars. Those heady days of the '60s are long gone, but if you're a hardened gambler or don't mind throwing away money for the sake of kitsch or curiosity, it could be worth a visit to one of the 60 gaming tables or five restaurants. You'll need to be over 21 and wearing smart casual gear (no jeans or sports shoes) for the slot-machine area, and a suit and tie (men) and evening dress (women) for access to the main gaming rooms.

Getting There & Away

You can get from Beirut to Jounieh by LCC and OCFC bus (see p291) for LL1500. Service taxis leave from Beirut's Dawra bus station and cost LL2000. If you catch a taxi that is going further north, you will be dropped off on the highway. Ask to be let out near the Téléferique, where there is a pedestrian bridge across the highway, which leads to the centre of town (about a five-minute walk). A private taxi from Jounieh to Hamra (Beirut) costs around LL22,000.

HARISSA

High above Jounieh bay is the gigantic white-painted bronze statue of the **Virgin of Lebanon** with her arms outstretched, as she has stood since the end of the 19th century. Around her are churches and cathedrals of various denominations, including the modernist Notre Dame du Liban cathedral, which was designed to be reminiscent of a bird in flight.

During religious festivals, such as Easter, there are often rather colourful **religious parades** that attract the crowds. At other times, pilgrims climb the spiral staircase around the statue's base. Others just enjoy the fantastic view from the top. The usual way to reach Harissa is by the terrifying Téléferique – see opposite. If you can't face that and would rather taxi from Jounieh, it should cost around LL7000 from the main taxi stand on Rue Mina.

حريصا

BYBLOS (JBAIL)

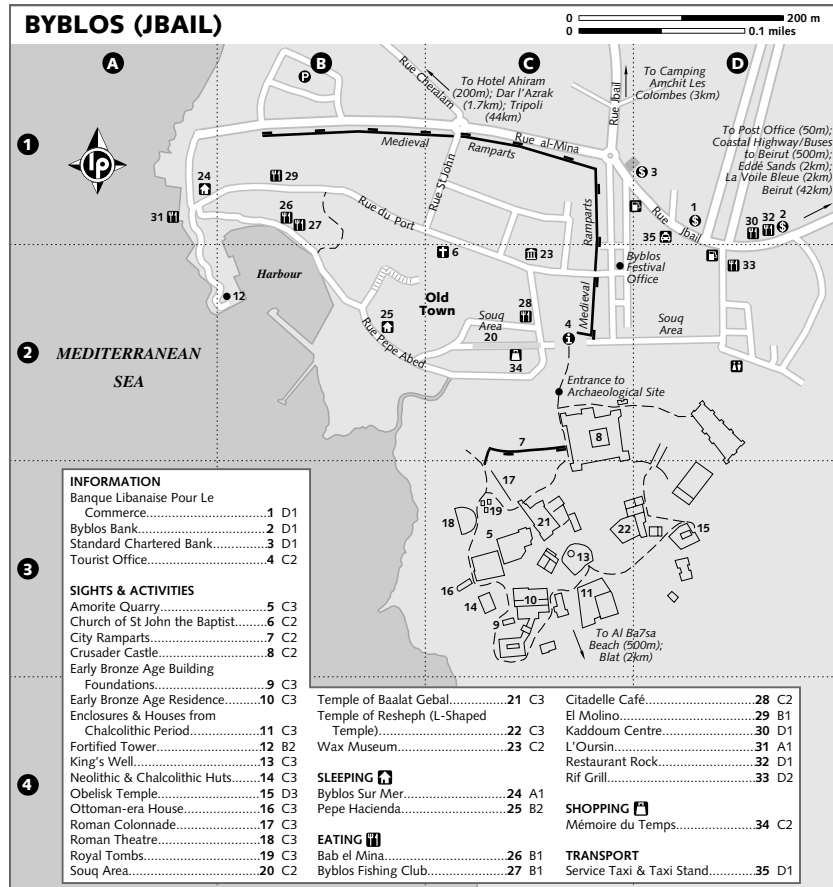
بيبلوس (جبيل)

☎ 09 / pop 21,600

With its picturesque ancient fishing harbour, Roman remains, Crusader castle and beautifully restored souq, many visitors fall in love at first sight with Byblos. In existence before the great civilisations of the Middle East were even thought of, Byblos – known as Gebal in the Bible and, less romantically, as Giblet by the Crusaders – lays claim to being one of the world's oldest continually inhabited towns. It's also known as the birthplace of the modern alphabet. Its ancient name is thought to derive from the Greek *bublos*, meaning papyrus, since the town was once a Phoenician stopping-off place for papyrus shipments en route to

Egypt. Although only around 40km from Beirut, the harbour, ruins and old town feel a world away and it's a must-see place on any visit to Lebanon, however long or short.

Back in the more glamorous days of the '60s, Byblos was a favourite watering hole for the crews of visiting private yachts, international celebrities, and the Mediterranean jet set. These days, however, visitors are lower-key and come for a wander around the ruins, a seaside seafood feast, and a lazy afternoon admiring the shimmering harbour. Don't miss, too, the amazing *Mémoire du Temps* fossil museum and shop (see *Gone Fishing* p310) in the heart of the old souqs.

**History**

The earliest known occupation of Byblos dates from the 5th millennium BC, when the first settlers fished and tended their animals here. This was the era of early agriculture and the remains of cultivated grains have been found at a partially excavated site on the promontory, whose tools and primitive weapons are now at Beirut's National Museum (p270). Also found at the site are chalcolithic terracotta storage jars, dating from around the 4th millennium BC, inside which inhabitants used to bury their dead.

By the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, the city-state of Byblos had been colonised by the Phoenicians and become a significant religious centre. The temple of Baalat Gebal, probably built on the site of a sacred grotto, was famous throughout antiquity. Close links with Egypt encouraged the city's cultural and religious development, with its temple receiving generous offerings from several pharaohs. As Byblos flourished, it evolved its own personal hybrid style of art and architecture – part Egyptian, part Mesopotamian, and later showing some Mycenaean influences.

Around 2150 BC, however, the Amorites, a hardened Semitic-speaking people, invaded the city and ruined much of its well-ordered layout and prosperity. This is the period from which the underground royal tombs, and the Obelisk Temple dedicated to Resheph, god of burning and destructive fire, date.

The Amorite occupation ended in 1725 BC with another invasion, this time by the warlike Hyksos from western Asia, who arrived with horses and chariots, hurling javelins and carrying lances, all new to the people of this region. The Egyptians, also suffering from a Hyksos invasion, soon retaliated and from 1580 BC claimed the Phoenician coast. A long period of trade and development followed, during which the kings of Byblos were subservient to their Egyptian masters. Many Egyptian customs were adopted, with temples and burial chambers decorated in the Egyptian style.

The linear alphabet, perhaps the most significant achievement of the Phoenicians, was also developed during this period. Thought to have originated in Byblos, it was invented as a more practical way of re-

coding trade transactions than the cuneiform script, and quickly spread throughout the civilised world.

The Egyptian-dominated period of prosperity, however, did not last and between 1100 and 725 BC Byblos was eclipsed by Tyre as the most important Phoenician city-state. It then became a pawn in the power struggle between the Greeks and Assyrians (725–612 BC), eventually being ruled by the Assyrians and then the Neo-Babylonians.

Following the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, Byblos was regenerated as a trading link to the east under the Persian Empire. During the Hellenistic period, unlike Tyre, the city voluntarily became an ally of Alexander and continued to flourish under its own royal dynasty.

When the Greek Empire waned and the Roman Empire waxed, Byblos concentrated its trading efforts to the west. From 63 BC onwards, the Roman Empire became a market for Phoenician goods and the city boasted lavish public architecture and suburban farming developments. Unfortunately, with an ironically modern twist, Byblos had sown the seeds of its own downfall by not regulating the pace of deforestation – and now the very resource that had made this boom town wealthy was suddenly in short supply. But when the Roman Empire split into east and west in AD 395, Byblos allied itself to Constantinople and became increasingly important as a religious centre. Pagan religion gradually gave way to Christianity and the city became the seat of a bishopric under Emperor Diocletian, protected by the Eastern Roman Empire until the Islamic invasion in 636.

Under the Muslims the focus turned eastward and Byblos' sea port dwindled into insignificance along with the city's defences. Byblos, by now known as Jbail, was left vulnerable. During the Crusader offensive, which began in 1098, Jbail fell to Raymond de Saint-Gilles, Count of Tripoli. Despite resuming trade with Europe, the city never regained its former power. Subsequent struggles between Crusader and Muslim forces continued until August 1266 when Emir Najibi, lieutenant of the Mamluk sultan, Beybars, laid siege to the town.

The next few centuries were relatively uneventful; the Turks took control of the

city in 1516 and Byblos passed into insignificance until Ernest Renan, a French historian and philosopher, began to excavate the site in 1860. Excavations came to a standstill during the civil war and are nowadays still slowly ongoing.

Orientation

Byblos is a compact city and it generally takes new arrivals just a few minutes to find their bearings. The medieval town, where most visitors spend their time, stretches north from the perimeter of the seaside ruins, flanked to the north by Rue al-Mina and to the west by the harbour, home to a string of good restaurants. The modern town, through which you'll arrive, is centred on Rue Jbail at the eastern end of Rue al-Mina, where the buses and taxis congregate and most of the fast-food outlets, money-changers and banks are located.

Information

Banque Libanaise pour le Commerce (Rue Jbail) Has an ATM.

Byblos Bank (Rue Jbail) Has an ATM.

Byblos Sur Mer (☎ 548 000; Byblos harbour) Money can be changed at this hotel.

Medical Emergency (☎ 140)

Police (☎ 112)

Post Office (☎ 540 003; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Turn into the street, off Rue Jbail, with Diab Brothers on the corner; it's 20m up the hill on your right, on the 2nd floor of the building.

Standard Chartered Bank (Rue Jbail) Has an ATM.

Tourist Office (☎ 540 325; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Mar-Nov, closed Sun Dec-Feb) Located near the archaeological site entrance in the souq area, it has maps of the architectural site, but no town map.

Sights

THE RUINS

This ancient **site** (adult/student & child LL6000/1500; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) is entered through the restored Crusader Castle and it's definitely worth taking a guide, who should cost between LL10,000 and LL20,000 depending on how many people are in your group. If you have time before visiting the ruins, scour the souvenir shops in the souq for a copy of Bruce Conde's *Byways of Byblos* (US\$3), published in the 1950s and a charming pocket guide to Byblos. Many of the artefacts originally located on the site are now housed at the National Museum of

Beirut (p270), so a visit there, either before or after visiting the ruins, is highly recommended to really complete the picture.

CRUSADER CASTLE

The most dominant monument at the archaeological site is the castle built by the Franks in the 12th century and constructed out of monumental blocks, mostly pillaged from the Roman ruins and some the largest used in any construction in the Middle East (apart from one or two immense stones at Baalbek – see p359). The castle, measuring 49.5m by 44m, is bordered by a deep moat and you can spot Phoenician ramparts on either side of the entrance. Unless you're passionate about Frankish architecture, though, the best part of a castle visit is the commanding view of Byblos from the top of the ramparts, which gives you a clear idea of the layout of the ancient city. It's worth noting that because of the many layers contained in the small site, later monuments were moved and reconstructed in order to gain access to those underneath.

CITY RAMPARTS

The 25-m thick city ramparts, dating from the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC, curve around from the castle to the shore and on the opposite side of the castle curve first west and then south, blocking access to the promontory where the original city was confined.

TEMPLE OF RESHEPH

This L-shaped 3rd-millennium-BC temple was burned and rebuilt during the Amorite occupation. The later temple, known as the Obelisk Temple, was moved to a nearby site so that Maurice Dunand, the resident archaeologist, could excavate the original structure beneath.

TEMPLE OF BAALAT GEBAL

This is the oldest temple at Byblos, dating back to the 4th millennium BC, and was once its largest and most important. Dedicated to Aphrodite/Astarte during the Roman period, the colonnade of six standing columns from around AD 300 are the vestiges of a colonnaded street that was built to approach it. Destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions, current excavated remains date from the 3rd millennium BC; numerous alabaster fragments of votive

vases, many inscribed with the names of Old Kingdom pharaohs, were discovered here dating from this period and can now be seen in Beirut's National Museum.

OBELISK TEMPLE

The temple, rebuilt on its current site, consists of a forecourt and courtyard housing the slightly raised sanctuary. The cube-shaped base of an obelisk stands in the middle of the sanctuary and is thought to have been a representation of Resheph. In the courtyard is a collection of standing obelisks, including one built at the command of Abichemou, king of Byblos, at the end of the 19th century BC. The obelisks were thought to have originally been 'God boxes', where the gods were believed to live and would have been worshipped. Several votive offerings have been found here, including the famous bronze figurines now housed at Beirut's National Museum.

KING'S WELL

In the centre of the promontory is a deep depression, which is the site of the King's Well (Bir al-Malik). According to legend, Isis sat weeping here when she came to Byblos to search for Osiris. Originally a natural spring, the well supplied the city with water until the end of the Hellenistic era. By Roman times it was used only for religious rituals since the city's water came from the surrounding mountains and was transported through a network of earthenware pipes.

ROMAN THEATRE

This charming reconstruction of the original theatre is only one-third its original size and has been sited near the cliff edge, offering marvellous views across the ocean. First built in AD 218, its orchestra had a fine mosaic floor depicting Bacchus, now at the National Museum.

ROYAL TOMBS

Nine royal tombs are cut, uniquely, in vertical shafts deep down into the rock, dating from the 2nd millennium BC. The most important is that of King Hiram (1200 BC), who was a contemporary of Ramses II of Egypt and whose grave shaft was inscribed with early Phoenician script that said 'Warning here. Thy death is below'.

Hiram's sarcophagus is now a highlight of the National Museum. There are steps leading down into one of the tombs, and a tunnel leads to another containing a stone sarcophagus of a 19th-century-BC prince, Yp-Shemu-Abi.

EARLY SETTLEMENTS

To the south of the site are Neolithic (5th millennium BC) and Chalcolithic (4th millennium BC) enclosures, houses and huts, of which only the crushed limestone floors and low retaining walls remain. Throughout this area, large burial jars were found in which bodies were curled up into foetal positions. Dominating the ruins here is an **Ottoman-era house**, along with a reasonably well-preserved Early Bronze Age residence and building foundations.

THE MEDIEVAL TOWN

Church of St John the Baptist

In the centre of this Crusader town is the Romanesque-style Church of St John the Baptist, which was begun in 1115 but badly damaged by an earthquake in 1170. Ancient columns were used in the doorways, and the heavy buttressing on the western side is thought to have been an effort to prevent further damage. One of its most unusual architectural features is the open-air baptistry, which sits against the north wall, its arches and four supporting pillars topped by a dome.

The church sports an unusual layout, with apses facing northeast, but a sharp change in direction brings the northern half of the church back into its more conventional east-west alignment. Apparently, this is because a mistake in orientation was only discovered after the apses had been built and was corrected halfway through construction. The south portal is purely Romanesque, but the north doorway consists of an 18th-century Arab design.

To the west of the church is a single standing column and an overgrown mosaic floor, which are remnants of an earlier Byzantine church.

Wax Museum

Almost opposite the Church of St John is the kitsch **Wax Museum** (☎ 540 463; admission LL6000; ☎ 9am-5pm) containing 125 wax figures in 22 different tableaux representing

the history of Byblos from earliest times. This place is only for real history buffs or true lovers of a waxen genre so popular throughout Lebanon that Madame Tussaud herself would feel quite at home.

Souq Area

Byblos's beautifully restored souq (market) houses a range of souvenir shops and small cafés. However, the highlight is without doubt **Mémoire Du Temps** (☎ 547 083; www.memoryoftime.com; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) where you can buy ancient fossilised fish remains, each with its own certificate of authenticity, for as little as US\$10.

See Gone Fishing, below, for details of the shop's own provenance.

The Harbour

It seems hard to believe that this peaceful little harbour was once a nerve centre of world commerce, but it was from this small port that the cedar and other wood, for which Byblos was famous, was shipped to the capitals of the ancient world. Much later the Crusaders left their mark here, building defensive towers on either side of the harbour mouth. A chain between the towers could be raised to prevent boats from entering. The northern tower was restored in Mamluk times and is still in fairly good condition.

From the top you can look down and see the remains of ancient quays in the clear water below.

GONE FISHING

Tucked away in a narrow Byblos alleyway lies the workshop of friendly local palaeontologist Pierre Abi-Saad, along with his hundred-million-year-old catch of fishy history. Discovered 800m above sea level in a quarry owned by his family for three generations, the thousands of fossils so far discovered by the Abi-Saads constitute the only fish fossils ever found in the Middle East and are displayed at virtually every important natural history museum worldwide. Step into Pierre's workshop-turned-museum and you'll have a unique opportunity to see how fossils are discovered – and perhaps even get to wield a chisel yourself.

'More than 80% of the fossils we find,' grins Pierre as he chips away slowly at a chunk of limestone, 'are of fish that are now extinct. Many have never even been studied or named. Look.' He points enthusiastically around the room, highlighting ancestors of stingrays, examples of the most primitive eels yet discovered, coelacanths (the earliest fish ever to exist on earth), octopi, shrimps, squid, ancestors of swordfish, and, entertainingly, a fossil of a fish that had swallowed another fish – all gleaming, perfect representations of creatures that lived a mind-blowingly long time ago. 'Through these,' he whispers, gazing fondly at his incredible collection, 'we can see the evolution of life itself.'

Abi-Saad's dream is to one day establish a real museum of fossils in Byblos, to showcase his massive quantity of finds, which includes an almost 4m-long shark, the largest complete specimen in the world. At present, he says, barely 5% of his total collection is crammed onto the workshop's shelves. Until then, however, he's content to continue with his favourite part of the job, the excavation digs at the quarry itself. 'Sometimes you can work for weeks and not find anything; other times, you come across these incredible discoveries. I'm happy to spend 14 or 15 hours alone, just digging and discovering in the quarry.'

The quarry itself, which came into his grandfather's possession during French occupation when he worked as a mountain guide for holidaying soldiers and came across a crop of fossils by chance, is accessible to visitors who can join digs for free, mostly during cooler spring and autumn months.

Abi-Saad taps again at the piece of limestone, shards flying across the room. 'You have to learn to read the stone,' he explains. 'You have to learn how to feel it. It's an art that's transmitted to you as a child.' Hunting fossils, he continues, is much the same as conventional fishing. 'There's no detector you can use. But a good fisherman knows where to find the fish, though not how many he'll catch.' Another hard tap and the limestone chunk splits in two. 'It's my hobby, it's my passion and it's my job,' he smiles. 'There.' Slowly, Pierre Abi-Saad prizes the pieces apart to reveal a small, perfect image of a fish. 'You're the first one to see this creature for a hundred million years,' he says. 'If you're not careful, pretty soon you'll be hooked.'

Activities

SWIMMING

Just a five-minute walk south of the ruins is **Al ba7sa**, a free public beach with great views back to the archaeological site. Byblos also has several beach clubs to rival Beirut, situated around 2km south of town on the coastal road, which runs parallel between the motorway and the sea. Currently, the two hippest options are open 9am until the wee hours:

Eddé Sands (☎ 546 666; www.eddesands.com) Open year round, this is a huge, fantastic, luxurious treat, with its five pools, six restaurants, sandy beach, boutique hotel, open-air spa and sandy beach.

La Voile Bleue (☎ 796 060) Just south of Byblos, La Voile Bleue is another highly popular local choice for lazing the days and dancing the nights away. The club charges US\$12 entry at weekends.

BOATING

A cluster of long motorboats in the harbour takes visitors on 15-minute rides (LL6000 per person) from spring until autumn.

Festivals & Events

The Byblos International Festival, held each summer since 2003 amid the spectacular archaeological site, is well worth attending if you're in town during July or August. It features music, theatre and dance acts, with both international names (Nouvelle Vague and Placebo have both played there) and local celebrated talent in attendance. For more information on the year's line-up, visit the festival website at www.byblosfestival.org.

Sleeping

Sadly, Byblos doesn't currently have much choice when it comes to hotels. In summer months, the Byblos Fishing Club (see p312) rents out small bungalows in its nearby Pepe Hacienda for US\$20: call the Fishing Club in advance, or drop into the hacienda to check its availability. If you don't mind staying a little out of town, the nearby **King George Hotel** (☎ 547 048; Mar Elias St, Blat; s/d/tr US\$30/40/50; ☎) in Blat is a good-value option, a short 10-minute taxi ride from town.

Camping Amchit Les Colombes (☎ 622 401/2; camp sites US\$3, 'tungalows' US\$20, 3-4-person chalets US\$30; ☎) About 3km north of town, to the left hand side off Rue Jbail and down a hill, this camp site isn't an easy place to spot

from the road. If you do make it here, the camping's cheap and adequate and it's a quiet spot with views of the sea, though it's not particularly well-kept and the bizarre, claustrophobic tent-shaped bungalows, or 'tungalows,' are best avoided. Nevertheless, it has all the necessary amenities, including showers, toilets, kitchen with gas burners, and electrical points for caravans (220V), along with fairly forlorn fully furnished chalets. The camping ground is set on a wooded cliff top, with steps down to its own rocky beach and the chalets and 'tungalows' have fabulous views. It's at least a brisk 30-minute walk from Byblos; a service taxi costs LL1500.

Hotel Ahiram (☎ 540 440; www.ahiramhotel.com; s/d/tr US\$50/65/75; ☎) Quite recently renovated, this hotel just off Rue Cheralam is a reasonable, though unexceptional, choice and all rooms have air-con, balcony with sea views and bathrooms including a small bath. It does, however, have direct access to a pebbly beach. Prices include breakfast and are lower outside the summer season.

Byblos Sur Mer (☎ 548 000; Byblos Harbour; s/d/ste US\$65/75/105; ☎) This long-established hotel has comfortable, smallish rooms with wonderful views over Byblos harbour and its seafront swimming-pool area. There's no denying that its position is sensational and the staff are friendly, but the rooms are a little tired and overpriced. The hotel has its own restaurant on the 1st floor and operates the restaurant **L'Oursin** (☎ Apr-Sep) across the road and by the sea.

Eating & Drinking

Citadelle Café (☎ 03-584 165; ☎ 7am-midnight) On a corner of the square just opposite the tourist office and the Notre Dame de la Porte gate (translated on street signs as the 'Gate's Lady'), this makes the perfect place for a big breakfast or cheap lunch. The hummus wraps are sensational, the coffee is strong, the beer cheap and there's live guitar music on Friday nights. André, the friendly owner, is knowledgeable and will be happy to answer all your questions on Byblos and around.

Bab El Mina (☎ 540 475; Byblos harbour; mezze from LL3500, mains around LL15,000; ☎ 11am-midnight) Next to the Fishing Club, this is a good option for fresh fish and mezze, with a 'fisherman's basket' for two for LL45,000.

PEPE THE PIRATE

Widely known as the Pirate of Byblos, Pepe Abed, who finally shuffled off this mortal coil in early 2007 aged 95, was for decades a Byblos tourist attraction in his own right. Born in Mexico to Lebanese parents, he worked as a jewellery designer and marine archaeologist, but was perhaps better known for his ability to throw a party, attracting the rich, famous and beautiful people of the pre-war jet set – including Marlon Brando, David Niven and Brigitte Bardot – to his bar, the Fishing Club, which opened in 1963.

Though the civil war saw Pepe back in Mexico while his local Lebanese businesses closed, he soon returned to Lebanon and once again worked designing jewellery, saving enough money to get the Fishing Club back on its feet. The beautiful people, however, never known for their long memories, didn't rematerialise, and while the Fishing Club remains an institution, it is now every bit as much museum as restaurant. Indeed the collection of artefacts (including Jacque Cousteau's hat) that Pepe collected over the years now forms the basis of the Pepe Abed Foundation.

These days, Pepe's son Roger – whose motto is 'Good things never end' – runs the joint, along with his own son, Pepe Junior, and Pepe's presence lives on, not only in his collection of artefacts but also in the mugs, stickers and ashtrays featuring his visage. Indeed, the Fishing Club restaurant remains as much an essential Byblos stop-off as ever.

El Molino (☎ 541 555; 2-course meal with 2 margaritas per person around LL35,000; ☒ noon-midnight Tue-Sun) For authentic Mexican food in a good, fun atmosphere, which possibly has something to do with the excellent margaritas, try El Molino. It gets very busy so you should book, especially for weekend nights when it's worth staying on late for yet more of those tequila-fuelled treats.

Byblos Fishing Club (☎ 540 213; Byblos harbour; 2-course meal per person US\$25; ☒ 11am-midnight) This place is famed for the stream of film stars, politicians and beauty queens, who have passed through over the decades, as well as for its owner Pepe (see above) who, though gone, is certainly not forgotten. Loved by locals for its fresh fish – the restaurant has its own dedicated fleet of four fishermen – it's a piece of Byblos heritage. On a busy weekend in front of a glistening harbour, with a strong arak firmly in hand, you can almost imagine it's still the 1960s, that your speedboat's out the front, and Bardot and Brando are holding court at the next table. Back up the harbour road towards the souq, you'll see signs for the Pepe Hacienda, a nice summer option for a leisurely drink in the garden.

There is no shortage of small places selling shwarma sandwiches and felafels along Rue Jbail – the best being Restaurant Rock and Kaddoum Centre – as well as the usual pizza and burger joints. **Rif Grill** (☎ 545 822; off Rue Jbail) is another good choice, serving salads for around LL4000 and burgers and pizza for LL6000 to LL8000.

Getting There & Around

The service-taxi stand in Byblos is near the Banque Libanaise pour le Commerce. A service taxi to/from Beirut (the hub in Beirut is Dawra) costs LL3000. You can also take an express bus heading for Tripoli from Charles Helou (LL1500, around 50 minutes) and ask the driver to stop at Jbail. The LCC bus No 6 (LL750, around one hour) and minibuses (LL1000) also leave from Dawra and travel regularly along the coast road between Beirut and Byblos, stopping on Rue Jbail. It's a scenic and pleasant trip – traffic permitting.

AMCHIT

☎ 09

The town of Amchit, 3km north of Byblos, is a well-preserved relic of Lebanon's past. Do not let your first impression of low-rise concrete chaos put you off: Amchit is famous for its collection of **traditional town houses**, which were built by wealthy silk merchants in the 19th century. They are now nearly all privately owned – some are fully restored, others are in need of work.

There are 88 old houses in total, which are now under a preservation order. The houses were constructed using the old stones of the area and you can often spot an ancient piece of carving being used as a lintel. The architecture is influenced by both the Oriental and Venetian styles, with double-arched mandolin windows and covered courtyards. This Italian influence was

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due to the trade agreement between Lebanon and the Duke of Tuscany.

A service taxi from Byblos costs LL1500. The highway dissects the town and the town houses are on the upper part of the town, away from the sea.

RACHANA

About 17km north of Amchit is the turn-off to Rachana, the 'Museum Village'. Situated high on a hill it's easily recognised by the wonderful **modern sculptures** lining the road. This is the work of the Basbous brothers, who have created an extraordinary artistic community in the village. Of the three brothers – Michel, Alfred and Yusuf – only Alfred is still alive, and he has a gallery in the village where you can purchase some of his works, starting at around US\$500.

One of the highlights of the village is Michel's house, which is built in organic shapes, reminiscent of the work of Gaudi. He used all manner of found materials, such as the curved windscreen window. There is also an outdoor sculpture park, where entries in the annual sculpture symposium (held annually during the last week in August and first week in September) are displayed.

To find the studios, turn left at the junction of the main street in Rachana, by a small shop selling cold drinks. A few hundred metres along the road you will come to a bend and Yusuf's house. Alfred's house is a short distance around the corner.

The turn-off to Rachana is about 5km south of Batroun at a Lebanese army post. The village is a further 3km to the north-east. If you don't have your own transport, you'll need to get a taxi from Byblos and arrange for it to wait for you while you visit the studios. The return trip will cost about US\$15 to US\$20.

BATROUN

☎ 06 / pop 11,082

Batroun is a sweet, lively Maronite town 22km from Byblos and 56km north of Beirut. It makes a nice place to stop, though with few tempting accommodation options, it's sadly at present not a great base for exploring the region.

Batroun was once the Graeco-Roman town of Botrys, but was founded much earlier, and is mentioned in the Tell al-Amarna

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tablets (Tell al-Amarna is the modern name of Akhetaten, an ancient Egyptian city) as a dependency of the king of Byblos. Called Butron in medieval times, it fell under the diocese of the County of Tripoli and was famous for its vineyards.

Today, the main road, Rue Principe, is a good place to find all necessary amenities, including an ATM, bars, restaurants, shops and pharmacies, as well as stalls and cafés selling Batroun's famous lemonade, a sweet blend of lemon juice, sugar and water that's a delicious summer cooler.

Sights & Activities

Batroun's various sights are well sign-posted; the best way to enjoy them is by wandering the tangle of old streets full of well-preserved Ottoman-era stone houses that run between Rue Principe and the sea. Just behind the harbour, **St George's Orthodox Church** was built in the late 18th century and has 21 fine, painted panels and carved wooden doves above the altar screen. Close by is the larger **St Estaphan (Stephen) Church**, also known as the fisherman's church. On the sea itself, the **old harbour** has a small section of an extraordinary natural sea wall, creating a pool on the land side. The Phoenicians reinforced this natural feature and the remains of their harbour are visible.

Around 5km south of Batroun is **White Beach**, with a string of pleasant beach cafés set against an impossibly turquoise sea. Although covered with fine white pebbles (hence the name) rather than sand, it is spotlessly clean and the water is crystal clear. This stretch of beach is also known as one of the best spots in Lebanon for **windsurfing and surfing**; see p383 for Batroun surfing details. On the way down towards White Beach, following the old coastal road that runs to the west of the highway, you'll spot a number of other beach club-style places for a dip and a seafood lunch, including trendy **Bonita Bay** (☎ 744 844) and **Pierre and Friends** (☎ 03-352 930); the latter is also a sailing club.

Sleeping & Eating

Unfortunately, there are no nice quaint options in Batroun's old town itself and accommodation is limited to dated, resort-style complexes at the southern end of Batroun's piece of coast.

Aqualand (☎ 742 741; d US\$90) Next door to San Stephano, this place offers pretty much the same sorts of facilities at slightly lower prices, though it's not quite as smart as its neighbour.

San Stephano Resort (☎ 740 366; www.sanstephano.com; studio/ste US\$125/170; 📍) This resort complex has a large swimming pool, a restaurant and a beach snack-bar. It also houses the popular Doppio nightclub. Well equipped as it is, it's a bit overpriced in high season, and in low season it's almost entirely deserted.

Le Marin (☎ 744 016, 03-328 628; mezze from LL4000, mains from LL9000; 🕒 11am-10pm) Just south of the harbour, this seafood restaurant is popular with locals and serves up tasty plates of mezze, too.

White Beach Restaurant (☎ 742 404; meal per person US\$15-20; 🕒 10am-late) Beside the sea south of Batroun on White Beach itself, (p313) this is a very pleasant place offering traditional mezze and seafood meals.

You can find Batroun's lemonade speciality at the several juice shops and cafés along the main street. Close to the souq area, **Chez Hilmi** (☎ 740 507; lemonade LL2000; 🕒 7am-9.30pm) sells the original and best, along with great sweets.

Getting There & Away

As Batroun is a coastal town just off the highway, you can easily take a service taxi from Beirut or Byblos that's heading for Tripoli to drop you at the turn-off and walk the short way into town. The cost from Beirut should be LL5000. Alternatively, take the Tripoli bus from Beirut and get the driver to drop you off. The price will be the full fare to Tripoli, LL2500.

MOUSSALAYHA CASTLE قلعة المسيلحة

About 3km beyond Batroun, in the narrow valley at Ras ech-Chekka, is the attractive Moussalayha Castle, which used to defend the only land route between Beirut and Tripoli. Sadly, nowadays, the castle is dwarfed by the motorway that runs right next to it, though standing with your back to the traffic and your fingers in your ears, you can still appreciate its magic. It stands on a rocky outcrop and is built on the summit in such a way as to look like part of the living rock, its entrance at the top of a steep, rock-cut stairway.

Although the site is very ancient (it is probably the ancient Gigarta mentioned by Pliny), the castle probably dates to the 16th century. It seems that the site was abandoned until the present Moussalayha Castle was constructed. Beneath the castle runs a small river with an ancient stone bridge crossing it.

If you are using a service taxi heading for Tripoli, simply get it to drop you off at Moussalayha and then flag down another service taxi when you want to continue your journey (there are plenty of service taxis serving this route). The castle is within easy walking distance from the highway.

ADONIS VALLEY & JEBEL TANNOURINE

جبل تئورين ووادي أدونيس

Famed for its romantic legends as much as for its dramatically bleak and beautiful scenery, the Adonis Valley is a deep, jagged slice forged in the coastal mountains by the Nahr Ibrahim (Adonis River) as it flows out to sea. The river's source, the Afqa Grotto, is at the head of the valley, and in ancient times its northern side was a pilgrimage route. Now the road is dotted with ancient remains as well as breathtaking views. To the north lie villages perched on the side of Jebel Tannourine and the ski resort of Laklouk. The entire area can be visited on a day trip from Beirut, but it's worth considering renting a car or a taxi for the day, since public transport to this region is virtually nonexistent.

AFQA GROTTA

This huge cavern, which in its isolation feels a little as though you've reached the ends of the earth, dominates the rocky mountainside at the head of the valley and is best seen after winter, when water roars down under a stone Roman bridge before snaking its way towards the sea. This is the sacred source of the Nahr Ibrahim where, mythology tells us, Adonis (or Tammuz or the Phoenicians) met his death, when gored by a wild boar while out hunting (see Lovers Forever, opposite). The grotto is also intertwined with the legendary love story

مغارة أفقا

LOVERS FOREVER

According to Greek mythology, Adonis was the most beautiful baby in the world, the fruit of an incestuous union between King Cinyras and his daughter Myrrha (who was turned into the myrrh tree for her sins). The goddess Aphrodite (Venus, to the Romans) took the baby and left him in the care of Persephone, goddess of the underworld, who, enchanted by Adonis' beauty, refused to return the child. Zeus mediated between the two goddesses, coming up with something akin to a modern divorce settlement, which decreed that Adonis was to spend half the year with Aphrodite, and the other half in the underworld with Persephone.

Eventually, and rather inevitably in Greek mythology, Aphrodite and Adonis became lovers, incurring the wrath of Aphrodite's husband, Ares, who turned himself into a boar to attack Adonis at Afqa. Though Aphrodite tried in vain to heal his wounds, her lover bled to death in her arms. In the places where his blood hit the ground, red anemones sprang up. Despite the vicious attack, however, the decree of almighty Zeus remained in force and Adonis was permitted to return to his lover every six months. Each spring those same red anemones (*naaman* or 'darling' in Arabic – also an epithet for Adonis) return, symbolising his return to the world.

Apart from being a rare tale of incest, true love, jealousy, sex and murder worthy of a modern Arabic soap opera, the Adonis and Aphrodite myth symbolises those most ancient of themes: fertility and rebirth. In the myth's earlier Semitic form, Aphrodite was Astarte, the great goddess of fertility; her lover was Tammuz (called 'Adon' by his followers, transformed into Adonis by the Greeks), a god associated with vegetation who journeyed to the underworld each year. Astarte would follow to retrieve him, and while she was gone the world would become barren, reproduction would stop and life itself would be threatened. Followers of Adonis would spend seven days lamenting his death; then on the eighth day, in a practice echoed in Christianity, his rebirth was celebrated.

of Adonis and the goddess Aphrodite, since legend has it that here is where they exchanged their first kiss, and the Greek word for kiss, *aphaca*, would appear to reinforce the romantic connection.

The area is rife with ancient shrines and grottos dedicated to this tragic tale. Adonis' story has come to symbolise life, death and rebirth, the theme echoed in the stories of Osiris and Christ. Each spring the river runs red, and in antiquity this was believed to be the blood of Adonis. In reality, the force of the water flowing down the valley picks up ferruginous minerals from the soil and stains the water the colour of red wine.

After winter a torrent rages down from the grotto 200m above. When the flow isn't too strong, you can enter the cave by walking up a set of steps on the right-hand side of the bank of the river (steep but not too difficult). Inside, the cave is enormous and the freezing water surges out of an unseen underground source. When the flow of water slows in the summer it is possible to explore the extensive tunnels and caverns further into the mountain.

At the foot of the main fall is a Roman bridge. If you walk down beneath the bridge,

there is a café on a terrace, with soothing views of the water as it crashes and tumbles over the rocks (or, in summer and autumn, slowly trickles) to the river below.

On a raised plateau nearby, above the left bank and just below the village of Khirbet Afqa, are the ruinous remains of a **Roman temple** dedicated to Astarte. Its broken columns are made of granite from the famous Pharaonic-era quarries at Aswan in Egypt. The cost involved in bringing the stone hundreds of kilometres down the Nile, shipping it to the Lebanese coast and then dragging it up the valley must have been astronomical, and is a testament to the temple's importance as a pilgrimage site. In the foundations, on the riverside, is the entrance to a sort of tunnel that is thought to have carried water into a sacred pool in the temple, into which offerings may have been thrown, or in which devotees carried out their ablutions. Constantine destroyed the temple because of its licentious rites, but the power of legend has stayed. Both Christians and Shiite Muslims attribute healing powers to the place, and strips of cloth are still tied to the nearby fig tree in a ritual that dates back to antiquity.

Sleeping & Eating

La Reserve (☎ 01-498 775; www.lareserve.com.lb) Just after the turn-off to Afqa is this well-appointed camping ground and outdoor activities resort. It organises a huge range of activities, including rafting, caving, hiking and mountain biking (check out its website for more information and the prices of individual activities). Accommodation in canvas tents, sleeping up to four people, costs LL15,000 per adult and LL10,000 for children over three; younger children stay for free. Mattresses and pillows are provided but you will need your own sleeping bag.

The **café-restaurant** (meals per person US\$6-8; ☎ spring-summer) beneath the bridge is the only place to eat. It serves tea, coffee and cold drinks, including beer. Light meals and snacks of the kebab-and-chips variety are available quite cheaply.

Getting There & Away

Without a private car, the only way to get to Afqa is by taxi. It's not on a service taxi route, so this will cost around US\$20 from Byblos. If you're driving, be aware that signposting to Afqa is particularly bad: if you get as far as Aaqoura on the road from the coast, you've gone too far and need to turn around and try again.

AAQOURA

العاقورة

Aaqoura is famous for its spectacular location, its devotion to Maronite Christianity and, in summer, its cherries. In autumn and winter, it becomes a strange and spooky place, as the mists and clouds descend all around and all that can be seen is the illuminated grotto at the top of the cliff. Although the town doesn't warrant a trip by itself, it's a nice stop on the road up to Laklout.

Reputed to be one of the first villages in the area to convert to Christianity, Aaqoura has some 42 churches within its confines. The most famous is **Mar Butros** (St Peter), which sits in a grotto in the towering cliffs that surround the village and can be reached by steps carved out of the rock. The hollowed-out tombs inside the grotto may originally have been part of a Roman necropolis, but what is particularly noteworthy here are the faint traces of writing at the back of the cave. These are thought to be rare extant examples of a Chinese-influenced vertical Syriac script brought

back by Christian missionaries to China in the 7th century. Down in the village there are also the remains of a Roman road, which was part of the pilgrimage route that would lead devotees of the Adonis cult over the mountains and into the Bekaa Valley. Note that the mountains around Aaqoura were heavily mined during the civil war, and hiking without a local guide is still not advised.

LAKLOUK

الملقوك

☎ 09

Laklout might seem lacklustre compared to Faraya, but it remains a popular ski resort set in an attractive rocky location, 1920m above sea level, 28km east of Byblos. Family-oriented, with gentle to medium slopes and good cross-country skiing opportunities, it's a relaxed and low-key alternative to Faraya Mzaar, albeit with few accommodation and eating options outside the main resort hotel. In low season, however, there's little to detain a visitor, when the village's buildings seem unloved and unkempt without a soothing layer of white stuff. Bear in mind, also, that the ski resort is around 2km further north from what's signposted as the centre of Laklout itself.

Sights & Activities

Further on from Laklout are a couple of places worth visiting. About 2km from the resort on the Chatin-Balaa road are the unusual **Balaa rock formations**, which consist

SKI FACTS: LAKLOUK

- **Altitude** 1650m-1920m
- **Lifts** Nine
- **Adult Day Pass** US\$12 (Monday to Friday), US\$20 (Saturday and Sunday)
- **Opening hours** 8am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm Saturday and Sunday
- ☎ 03-256 853

Laklout in winter is a relaxed, family-friendly resort, with three chairlifts, three ski lifts and three baby lifts. It's also possible to do cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, and makes a good base for visiting the natural wonders of Balaa Gorge and the Afqa grotto.

of several houses or chapels carved into the rock. They are known as the 'bishop's house' and the landscape here, with its otherworldly shapes, is reminiscent of Cappadocia in Turkey.

Further along the same road, about 6km from Laklout, is **Balaa Gorge**. There is a small turning on the left, if you are coming from Laklout, and, after about 400m, the road ends. This is the beginning of the descent on foot to the gorge. The walk down is easy and takes about 15 minutes. At the bottom is an extraordinary natural rock formation – a rock bridge spans the chasm and a waterfall crashes down into a deep hole behind. It is well worth the effort to visit, but be warned: there are no fences or barriers and the drops are sheer. The return walk takes approximately 25 minutes.

Sleeping & Eating

Shangrila Hotel (☎ 03-256 853; www.lakloutresort.com; s/d/tr US\$88/110/132; 🚶 🚶) This pleasant, traditional hotel built in the 1950s is right in the centre of the resort and close to the ski lifts. It is open all year and in summer has a nice pool and can arrange archery, rock climbing, biking and tennis. The price includes breakfast, and the restaurant serves a range of European and Lebanese dishes.

For cheap eats, there are a couple of simple snack places close to the slopes (only open in winter). Other than that you are limited to the hotel restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Laklout isn't on any bus or service-taxi route, so use your own transport or take a taxi from Byblos (around US\$30 one way).

DOUMA

دوما

☎ 09

If you're pottering about the Adonis Valley countryside, stop for a short walk around Douma, another traditional, very well-preserved red-roofed village, famous for being in the shape of a scorpion (seen from the hillside overlooking the village). About 22km northeast of Byblos, it is a quiet and peaceful place that is said to have been named after the wife of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, who came here to escape the summer heat on the coast. Under the Ottomans it was famous for the production of swords and guns, a lucrative

business in always-troubled Lebanon, and this paid for the grand houses that can be seen around the village.

The main square has a **Roman sarcophagus** and there are two churches, while above the village is a series of Roman inscriptions dating from the reign of Hadrian.

There are no buses to Douma and very few service taxis from Byblos. You can take a service taxi to Batroun on the coast and pick up a taxi from there (about US\$20), or from Byblos (around US\$30).

THE CHOUF MOUNTAINS

DEIR AL-QAMAR

دير القمر

☎ 05

Without doubt one of Lebanon's prettiest villages, Deir al-Qamar is a treat for visitors, with an interesting history that supports many Lebanese citizens' belief in their tolerant religious roots, since it once hosted an active church, synagogue, mosque and Druze meeting hall on the central square. Nowadays, it's a sweet, sleepy place, especially enchanting at sunset when the bats flit overhead and the old buildings on the square are most like a fairytale setting.

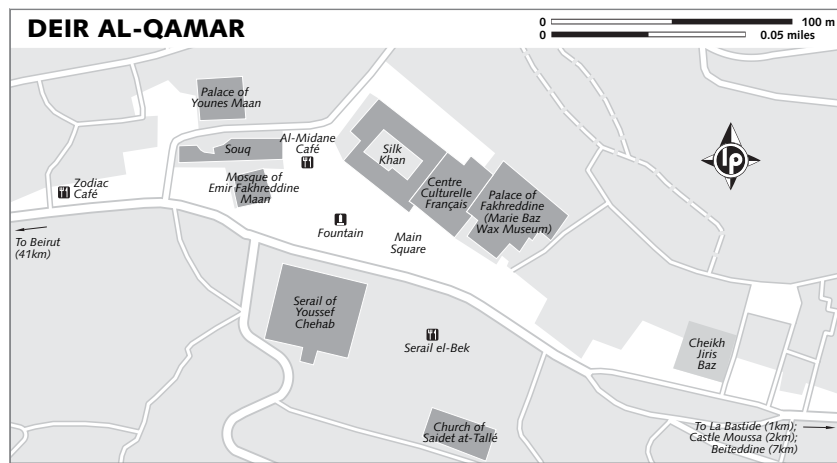
Deir al-Qamar's roots lie in the Middle Ages when Fakhreddine, the Druze governor of Lebanon, extended his power throughout the region to cover an area roughly equivalent to modern Lebanon, succeeding in uniting into one what before had been a number of small fiefdoms (see p319). Due to water shortages at his first capital, he moved to nearby Deir al-Qamar, which is fed year-round by numerous springs. Over three centuries later, the village remains one of the best-preserved examples of 17th- and 18th-century provincial architecture in the country.

Sights

MOSQUE OF EMIR FAKHREDDINE MAAN

جامع الامير فخرالدين المعني

To the west of the fountain is the mosque of Fakhreddine, with its distinctive octagonal-shaped minaret, the original building dating to 1493. Built in Mamluk style, the mosque consists of a large square room with high arches resting on a central pillar. Quranic verses, along with the date of construction, are carved into the western façade.



Steps behind the mosque lead up to what was once the town's **souq**, still housing a few shops and a café.

PALACE OF YOUNES MAAN قصر يونس معن
The palace of Younes Maan, governor of Deir al-Qamar while his brother, Fakhreddine, was in exile in Italy, dates to the 18th century, but is now a private house and closed to visitors. However, the elaborate entrance is particularly fine and definitely worth a look.

SILK KHAN
Dominating the main square is the huge silk khan and its warehouse. It dates to 1595 and takes the form of a huge rectangle, incorporating an open courtyard surrounded by arcaded galleries that were once used as stables and servant quarters. Part of the 1st floor, which originally housed the main part of the khan, is now the **Centre Culturelle Français** and can be visited.

PALACE OF FAKHREDDINE قصر فخر الدين
Next to the silk khan and warehouse is Fakhreddine's palace, dating to 1620. It is built on the site of an earlier palace that was destroyed during a battle with Youssef Sifa, Pasha of Tripoli, in 1614. According to local lore, Fakhreddine vowed his revenge and took Youssef's castle at Akkar near Tripoli, tearing it down and lugging the stones all the way back to Deir al-Qamar. He then brought in Italian architects, who rebuilt the palace in an Italian Renaissance style.

Nowadays the palace houses the **Marie Baz Wax Museum** (☎ 511 666; adult/child LL10,000/5000; 🕒 8.30am-6pm winter, until 7pm summer), owned by the once powerful and renowned Baz family. Inside is an eclectic jumble of figures relating to Lebanese history – some more loosely than others – including Lady Hester Stanhope in a strange Medieval princess-type get-up complete with conical hat, a jovial-looking George Bush (senior) and a Jumblatt (see p323) with no head. If you possibly can, try to get hold of the free services of the elderly museum attendant, who'll bark out – from memory – the names and dates of every single obscure figure in the entire place (though largely in French). The oil paintings and relics of the Baz family, an elderly member of whom still lives in one room of the premises, themselves make it poignant enough to warrant a visit. There's also a pleasant cafeteria in the courtyard.

On the corner of the square, the **Cheikh Jiris Baz** was once the Baz family's summer palace, but now stands empty and forlorn. There are plans afoot to turn it into a hotel once tourism picks up – worth checking as you go through – and if you're nice enough to that elderly attendant, he might unlock the palace and let you take a look inside. The owner also has plans to set up a pub/nightclub in an ancient cellar next door to the wax museum, with food and music: check if it's in operation as it's bound to be atmospheric.

SERAIL OF YOUSSEF CHEHAB

سراي يوسف شهاب

On the opposite side of the road from the square itself is the 18th-century Serail of Youssef Chehab, built into the hillside on several levels and hiding a grisly past. Not only did Emir Youssef Chehab assassinate several of his relatives here, but the central courtyard was also the site of a massacre during the anti-Christian violence in 1860. Nowadays the building is noteworthy for its beautiful stonework and houses **municipal offices** (☎ 8am-1pm Mon-Sat), parts of which you can wander through during office hours.

CHURCH OF SAIDET AT-TALLÉ

كنيسة سيدة التلة

The words *deir al-qamar* mean 'monastery of the moon', and the lunar motif can be seen carved in stone on a figure of the Madonna in the Church of Saidet at-Tallé, which sits on the lower slopes of the town. The crescent moon was a symbol of Phoenicia's pagan cult and the Madonna standing on it could be taken as a symbol of Christianity superseding

the pagan religion; on the other hand it could simply be incorporating the old religion into the new. The original church was built in the 7th century on a temple dedicated to Astarte, but was destroyed by an earthquake a century later. Fakhreddine reconstructed the building in the 16th century and it was enlarged again in the 17th century.

CASTLE MOUSSA

قلعة موسى

About 2km out of town in the direction of Beiteddine is the extraordinary **Castle Moussa** (☎ 041 144; www.moussacastle.com.lb; admission LL7500; 🕒 8am-8pm summer, 8am-6pm winter), another waxworks place, but this one definitely worth a visit. Popular with Lebanese tour groups, who visit by the bus load. It's filled with strange mechanical tableaux, a life-size recreation of the Last Supper and probably the biggest collection of guns and weaponry you'll ever see in your life. Don't miss this outsider art-type affair, testament to the love of a woman and the stubbornness of its creator (see The Things We'll Do for Love, p320).

FAKHREDDINE

Nationalist hero, brilliant administrator, connoisseur of fine architecture and all-round Ottoman-era gentleman, Fakhreddine (Fakhr ad-Din al Maan II) is credited with being the first to unify Mt Lebanon with the coastal cities, foreshadowing the modern state of Lebanon.

Appointed by the Ottomans in 1590 to pacify the unruly Druze of the Chouf Mountains (many of whose ringleaders were members of his own family, the Maans), he proved more than up to the job. Initially his fiefdom was confined to the district of Sidon and the Chouf, but he was soon granted Beirut and eventually extended his rule to include the Qadisha Valley and Tripoli. While it became clear that their governor was not the subservient puppet they had hoped for, the Ottomans were occupied with revolt in Anatolia and Persia and initially left him more or less to his own devices.

Fakhreddine did more than simply grab territory, and began an ambitious programme of development in Lebanon. He was exiled to Tuscany from 1613 to 1618, for entering into an alliance with one of the Medicis, but returned, inspired by his time abroad, and set about modernising his dominions, developing a silk industry and upgrading olive-oil production with the help of Italian engineers and agricultural experts. Their influence can still be seen in some of his buildings in Deir al-Qamar. Trading links with Europe were also strengthened and European religious missions were allowed to settle in the areas under his control.

Consolidating his power at home, Fakhreddine developed links with the Maronite Christians in the north and encouraged their migration to the south, where they provided labour for silk production. He modernised the ports of Sidon and Beirut, turning them into busy trading centres. In all, the economy flourished under his rule and his power grew to the extent that he controlled areas of what are now Jordan and Israel.

Alarmed at their vassal's growing independence, however, the Ottomans reacted, sending their Syrian and Egyptian governors to attack his territory and bring it back under Istanbul's control. After fleeing to a nearby cave, Fakhreddine was captured in 1633 and taken to Istanbul. Two years later he was executed, like so many historical figures a victim of his own success.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **La Bastide** (☎ 505 320, 03-643 010; d/family r US\$60/80) About 1km past the town on the left hand side, on the way down to Beiteddine, this is a nice place to stop over for a night if you're exploring by car and heading south or east, via Beiteddine, from Beirut. It's clean, friendly and comfortable with 20 lovely, airy, flower-patterned pleasant rooms, many with wonderful views across the valley, and the family-sized ones with kitchenette.

Al-Midane Café (☎ 03-763 768; salads & sandwiches from LL6000; ☎ 10am-10pm) A great choice for a drink, snack or nargileh on Deir al-Qamar's main square. Open later in summer if the clientele is in the mood, it serves up decent club sandwiches and salads, and on weekends and summer evenings has live music until the wee hours.

Further back towards the coast, the **Zodiac Café** is a decent place to grab a coffee or doughnut. There is also a series of snack bars and small grocery shops for picnic supplies along the main road.

Getting There & Away

Service taxis en route to Beiteddine go through Deir al-Qamar and can drop you off there. The fare from Beirut's Cola bus station is LL5000. If you're planning to visit both places in the same day, which makes a great

full-day excursion, you could continue to Beiteddine and then walk back (6km) to Deir al-Qamar, a pleasant, downhill walk. Keep in mind that service taxis are scarce after dark.

BEITEDDINE

بيت الدين

☎ 05

Some 50km southeast of Beirut, Beiteddine is the name of both a village and the magnificent palace complex that lies within it. The palace, former stronghold of the 18th-century governor Emir Bashir, can be seen from across the valley as you approach, a cross between traditional Arab and Italian baroque (the architects were, in fact, Italian) with its grounds descending over several terraces planted with poplars and flowering shrubs.

There were three other palaces in the vicinity, built for Emir Bashir's sons. Of these only one, Mir Amin Palace, is still standing and is now a luxury hotel just beyond the main part of the village (see p322).

Sights

BEITEDDINE PALACE

قصر بيت الدين

This magnificent early-19th-century **palace complex** (☎ 500 077; admission LL7500; 9am-5.30pm summer, 9am-3.30pm winter) was built over a period of 30 years, starting in 1788, and became the stronghold of Emir Bashir, the Ottoman-appointed governor and leading

member of the Shihab family. It is the greatest surviving achievement of 19th-century Lebanese architecture and an impressive symbol of Bashir's power and wealth. Most areas except the courtyards and old stables are kept locked, so it's hard to see anything for just the price of your ticket. A guide with an all-important key can be had for about LL10,000 unless you manage to tag along inconspicuously behind another group.

The name Beiteddine itself means 'house of faith' and the original site was a Druze hermitage, which was incorporated into the complex. The palace was built after the Shihab family took over from the Maan dynasty. Partly due to family disagreements, Emir Bashir decided to move from Deir al-Qamar and build his own palace, which would reflect the increasing power and glory of his reign. Architects from Italy, and the most highly skilled artisans from Damascus and Aleppo, were hired and given free rein to try out new ideas. The result was this huge edifice, more than 300m long, built high on a mountain overlooking the valley. The grounds below the palace are terraced into gardens and orchards.

During the French Mandate the palace was used for local administration, but after 1930 it was declared a historic monument and placed under the care of the Department of Antiquities, which set about restoring it. In 1943 Lebanon's first president after independence, Bishara al-Khuri, made it his official summer residence and brought back the remains of Emir Bashir from Istanbul, who had died there in 1850.

The palace suffered tremendous losses following the Israeli invasion, when as much as 90% of its original contents are reckoned to have been lost. But in 1984, the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt ordered its restoration and declared it a 'Palace of the People'. As such, it contains several museums housing various collections, most impressive being a magnificent collection of **mosaics**.

The palace consists of three main courts: **Dar al-Baraniyyeh** (the outer courtyard to which passing visitors were admitted freely), **Dar al-Wousta** (the central courtyard, which housed the palace guards and offices of the ministers) and **Dar al-Harim** (the inner court and private family quarters). Beneath Dar al-Wousta and Dar al-Harim are huge vaulted **stables**, which held 500 horses and

their riders, in addition to the 600 infantry that formed the emir's guard. Part of the stables now houses the mosaic collection.

From the ticket office at the entrance to the palace, you pass through a corridor and turn left into the 60m-long courtyard Dar al-Baraniyyeh, where public festivals and gatherings took place. It was from here that the emir would leave for his hunting expeditions or to fight wars. To your right, running along the northern side of this courtyard, are the guest apartments. It was the custom of noble houses to offer hospitality to visitors for three days, before asking their business or their identity.

The restored upper floor of this guest wing is now used to exhibit the **Rachid Karami Ethnographic Collection**. This large collection includes pottery from the Bronze and Iron Ages, Roman glass, Islamic pottery, lead sarcophagi and gold jewellery. There is also a scale model of the palace and, in other rooms, a collection of weapons and costumes. The cloistered ground floor is often used to house temporary photo exhibitions.

At the far end of the outer courtyard, directly ahead of you on entering the courtyard, is a double staircase leading up to the entrance to Dar al-Wousta, the central courtyard. It's known as the 'tumbling staircase' because of the tale of a sheep that escaped the butcher's knife and head-butted an eminent pasha down the stairs. Head this way and through an arched passageway and you'll reach the central courtyard. The entrance is decorated with an inscription of welcome and a decorative **marble portal**. Inside is a beautiful, fragrant and tranquil courtyard with a fountain; the southern side, to your left, overlooks part of the gardens and the valley beyond. The apartments and offices off the courtyard are set along graceful arcades, the palace rooms richly decorated with marble, mosaics and marquetry, and furnishings in traditional Oriental style. The walls and ceilings are of painted, carved cedar wood embellished with Arabic calligraphy. In one room, directly to your left as you enter the courtyard, an inlaid marble **water fountain** is built into the wall, which both cools the room and makes conversation inaudible to eavesdroppers. This is one of the rooms that you'll most likely need a guide with a key to access.

THE THINGS WE'LL DO FOR LOVE

The fulfilment of the life-long quest of one enterprising Mr Moussa, who as a child was beaten by his teacher for dreaming of living in a castle, Castle Moussa is also a tribute to his first love, a young lady named Saideh who refused to marry him unless he became wealthy enough to support her in style. After working for several years in archaeological and monument restoration (which included, his website declares, installing 'ancient colons' in front of the National Museum of Beirut), in 1962 he finally began work on his castle to realise his fantasy and to turn 'sand to gold' as his mother once predicted he would. The result was an entire castle from scratch, built largely by Mr Moussa's own two hands, complete with carp-stocked moat, drawbridge, crenellated turrets and all.

Once finished, the industrious Mr Moussa went about filling the castle's many rooms with wax models depicting scenes from traditional Lebanese life, along with excerpts from the Bible (don't miss the plastic toy animals heading on a conveyor belt to a shrinelike ark) and a tableau in which Mr Moussa, as a child, is being perpetually beaten by his teacher – all enhanced with mechanical movement. Sadly Mr Moussa's teacher died before he could witness the kitsch result.

These days, Mr Moussa is still often to be found greeting visitors at the entrance to his castle – ask if he's around and you'll find out whether his castle managed to win the hand of the fickle Saideh after all. But here's a hint: standing on his drawbridge, gazing up at his hard-won stones on a sunny September afternoon, he sighed and patted the hand of a young newlywed heading for the ticket desk. 'Behind every great, or crazy man,' he smiled, 'is a good woman.'

The **entrance to the third court** is a beautiful façade that leads through to the lower court (the kitchens and hammam) and the upper court (the reception rooms). Again, the rooms are lavishly decorated. On the ground floor, immediately beyond the entrance is the waiting room, known as the **room of the column**, named for the single column supporting the vaulted ceiling. Beyond this is a two-level **reception room** (*salaamlik*) with a mosaic floor and inlaid marble walls.

The huge **kitchens** are also well worth a look. In their heyday they catered for 500 people a day. Endless trays of food would have been carried out to set before the divans and sofas of the court and their visitors. To the north of the kitchen is the large **hammam**, a series of domed rooms luxuriously fitted out in marble with carved marble basins and fountains.

Bathers would move between the cold, warm and hot chambers before reclining to rest in the anteroom. In a small shaded garden, usually kept locked, to the north of the hammam is the **Tomb of Sitt Chams**, the emir's first wife. The ashes of Bashir are also reported to be in the tomb.

But the star of the Beiteddine show is housed in the lower part of the palace, which contains one of the most spectacular collections of **Byzantine mosaics** in the eastern Mediterranean, if not the world. These were largely excavated from a former church at Jiyeh, near Sidon, the ancient city of Porphyron, which was discovered by workers digging on the coast in early 1982. The area was then under the control of Walid Jumblatt, who had the well-preserved mosaics brought to him, so he could keep them safe from looters throughout the war. The magnificent collection includes some 30 room-sized mosaics and dozens upon dozens of smaller ones.

The designs are often geometric and stylised, reflecting the austere nature of early Christianity in the area. There are also graceful depictions of animals, including leopards, bulls, gazelles and birds, and a pair of fighting deer who almost leap from the mosaic. Set among the stone arches and vaulted ceilings of Beiteddine's former stables and along the walls of the palace's lower gardens, the mosaics are a stunning visual treat.

Festivals & Events

A **festival** is held in Beiteddine every summer in July and August, featuring a wonderfully eclectic mixture of international and Arab musicians, singers, dancers and actors. Check the festival website (www.beiteddine.org) for full details of the year's events.

Sleeping & Eating

There are no budget sleeping options in Beiteddine and if you're looking to stay nearby, the best bet is the lovely La Bastide (see p320) in Deir al-Qamar.

Mir Amin Palace (☎ 501 315-18; www.miraminpalace.com; s/d US\$123/155; ♿ ♿ ♿) The only hotel in Beiteddine itself is the luxurious Mir Amin, set on the hill overlooking Beiteddine Palace, the restored palace of Emir Bashir's eldest son. There are 24 individually and beautifully decorated rooms and even if you're not staying here, it's still well worth dropping by for a drink on the terrace, where views are spectacular. The hotel also has a couple of good restaurants with Lebanese and Continental cuisine where you can expect to spend at least US\$30 to US\$40 per person for a meal. Rates are cheaper during the low season.

In the town itself, there's a selection of snack places, though nothing of note. It's better either to bring a picnic to eat on the grass amid the mosaics, or head into Deir al-Qamar down the road for a bite on the square.

Getting There & Away

To get to Beiteddine with your own transport, take the coastal highway south from Beirut as far as Damour, then follow signs east. Service taxis from Beirut's Cola bus station serve the route and the fare to Beiteddine is LL5000.

The service-taxi stand in Beiteddine is close to the palace on the main square; keep in mind that you're unlikely to find service taxis running after dark.

MOUKHTARA

المختارة

About 9km south of Beiteddine is the town of Moukhtara, the seat of the Jumblatt family and de facto capital of the Chouf. The Jumblatts' 19th-century stone palace dominates the town. Consisting of three large buildings, it has its own hammam, a garden with a collection of Roman sarcophagi and

WHO ARE THE JUMBLATTS?

Travelling around Lebanon, you're bound to come across the name and face of Walid Jumblatt, leader of Lebanon's Druze, on numerous occasions. The family from which he hails, however, have been famous for far longer than his lifetime, rising to prominence and settling in the region in the 15th century, to escape persecution from an Ottoman governor.

Walid Jumblatt's grandmother, Nazira, was one of the first major notables of recent Jumblatt generations. In the 1920s, when the family's position was threatened due to the assassination of Walid's great-grandfather Fouad, Nazira came to the aid of the Druze community, both keeping the Jumblatt dynasty alive and assuming the leadership of the community until her son Kamal came of age. The unprecedented spectre of a woman leader was difficult for many to accept (particularly close male relatives), but eventually she won them over and remained in power until Kamal grew up.

Kamal Jumblatt, Walid's father, was a powerful figure in his own right, making his mark on Lebanon in cultural, philosophical and political spheres, and crucially by being the most prominent anti-government leader in Lebanon during the civil war. In 1949 he founded the Progressive Socialist Party, which, officially at least, was nonsectarian and opposed to the essentially sectarian nature of Lebanese politics. With mostly Druze followers, however, it was also a forum for this particular sect itself and during the civil war had one of the strongest private armies of any of the warring factions. In 1977, Kamal Jumblatt was assassinated, allegedly by pro-Syrian factions, and his only son Walid took the political helm.

Walid Jumblatt's political career has been characterised, say many observers, by his tendency towards being a 'political weathervane', changing allegiances, policies and alliances frequently and yet usually managing to come out on top. Though initially a supporter of Syria after the civil war, he has recently become more anti-Syrian in his standpoint, also joining the call for the disarmament of Hezbollah (through whom, he claims, Iran and Syria are attempting to take over Lebanon); he has often claimed that he fears for his life on this account. Walid Jumblatt frequently returns to his sleepy home town of Moukhtara (see opposite) where he holds public audiences to listen to the personal gripes of his loyal Druze followers, probably quite a break from his place in the rather more turbulent national and international political arenas.

a waterfall that tumbles into an ornamental pool. There are public reception rooms that are sometimes open to visitors.

Every weekend when he is in residence, Walid Jumblatt, head of the family and leader of the Druze, spends his mornings listening to the complaints of his mostly Druze followers. If you happen to be there then, you will see the long line of petitioners as they wait to see their leader.

Apart from the overwhelming Jumblatt presence, the town is picturesque and has a number of traditional red-tiled buildings that make for a pleasant wander.

Getting There & Away

Service taxis to Moukhtara leave from Beirut's Cola bus station and cost LL6000 each way, but the town only really warrants a trip if combined with Deir al-Qamar, Beiteddine or the Chouf Cedar Reserve. Keep in mind, especially when planning your return trip, that service taxis can be infrequent.

CHOUF CEDAR RESERVE

محمية ارز الشوف

The largest of Lebanon's three natural protectorates, the **Chouf Cedar Reserve** (☎ 05 502 230, 03-682 472; www.shoufcedar.org; admission LL5000; ☎ 9am-7pm) represents a quarter of the remaining cedar forests in the country and 5% of Lebanon's entire area. The reserve marks the southernmost limit of Lebanese cedar (*Cedrus libani*) growth, and incorporated within the protectorate are six cedar forests. Of these, the Barouk and Maaser ech-Chouf forests have the largest number of ancient trees – some are thought to date back 2000 years. Hunting and livestock-grazing bans are strictly enforced and a number of species of flora and fauna have returned to the area in recent years. More than 200 species of birds and 26 species of wild mammals (including wolves, gazelles and wild boar) either live in or pass through the area.

Also within or just outside the reserve's boundaries are a number of historical sites.

LEBANON'S CEDARS

There are three or four species of cedar tree (*Cedrus libani*) throughout North Africa and Asia, but the most famous of these is the Cedar of Lebanon, which was mentioned in the Old Testament. In antiquity the cedar forests covered great swathes of the Mt Lebanon Range and provided a source of wealth for the Phoenicians, who exported the fragrant and durable wood to Egypt and Palestine.

The original Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was built of this wood, as were many sarcophagi discovered in Egypt. Today, however, only a few of the original groves still exist, due to a slow-but-sure process of deforestation that has taken place over the last millennia, and although new trees are now being planted, it will be centuries before they mature.

Of the few remaining ancient trees, most are in the Chouf Cedar Reserve and there are some more in the grove at the Cedars, above Bcharré. Some of these trees are thought to be well over 1000 years old: their trunks have an immense girth and they can reach heights of 30m. Naturally, there are strict rules about taking any timber from these remaining trees and the souvenirs for sale nearby are made from fallen branches.

These include the remains of the rock-cut fortress of **Qab Elias** and **Qala'at Niha**, in addition to the **Shrine of Sit Sha'wane**, a woman saint venerated by the Druze and still a site of pilgrimage for local residents.

Since not all parts of the park are reliably open to visitors (the reserve is desperately in need of extra funds to finance the employment of 60 more rangers when currently there are only 10), the best way to explore Chouf Cedar is to head to the ranger hut at the Barouk entrance, relatively well signposted from the main road. Here you'll find incredibly helpful, friendly rangers just bursting with information on the reserve, its wildlife and hiking trails. There are about eight trails currently open to the public, ranging from 40 minutes to four hours in length. If you take (for an extra donation) a warden along with you on a hike, you'll gain an invaluable insight into some of its most beautiful features, and might get to see trees believed to be more than a millennium old.

Also at the ranger station is a small shop selling local produce, since one of its outreach projects involves aiding local communities and promoting cottage industries. The honey, preserves, olives and olive oil on sale are marvellous additions to a picnic in the mountains.

If you want to stay overnight in the area, contact the **Association for Forests, Development and Conservation** (www.afdc.org.lb), which runs an ecolodge in a forest just 7km from the reserve. It's also worth checking with eco-tour company **Esprit-Nomade** (www.esprit-nomade.com) to see if there's a day trip scheduled to the area, which usually includes lunch, a guide and transport to and from Beirut.

The only entrance open to the public at the time of research (due to understaffing caused by shortage of funds) was at the village of Barouk, which can be accessed without calling ahead. If you don't have your own vehicle, the best way to get here is to negotiate a taxi from Beiteddine, some 10km away.

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