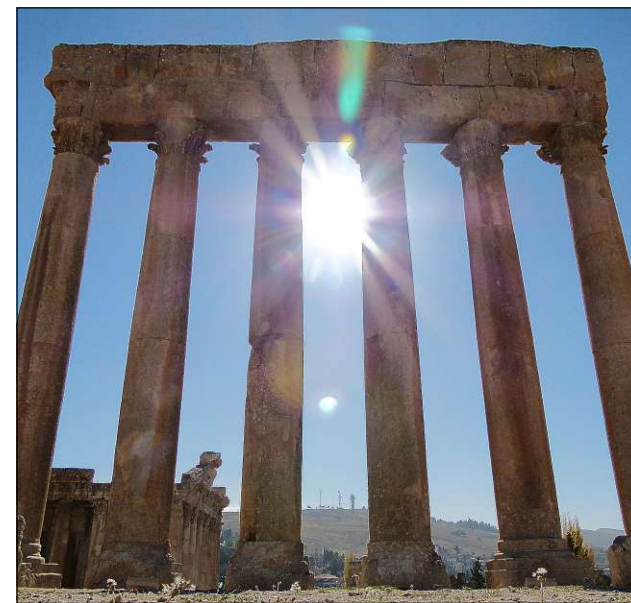


On the road to repair

It is often seen as a broken and dangerous land. But on a day trip to Lebanon, JENNA RICHARDS discovered a friendly and cosmopolitan, if slightly contradictory, vibe



Factfile

- Oasis Caravan Istanbul more information see to Cairo: Trip price from £695 with a local payment from £270. Start Location: Istanbul. End Location: Cairo. Duration: 37 Days.
- Phone: 01963 363 400
- Fax: 01963 363 200
- Skype: oasisoverland
- Email: info@oasisoverland.co.uk
- This trip also runs in reverse from Cairo to Istanbul. Trips depart on various dates throughout the year. If you would like Oasis Overland Ltd, The Marsh, Henstridge, Somerset, BA8 0TF

BEFORE arriving in Lebanon most of my knowledge came from reports of the 1975 to 1990 conflict and its resulting violent episodes stretching into the 2000s. The country has been on the fringes, and at times at the heart, of the Middle Eastern conflict surrounding the creation of Israel.

Today checkpoints manned by heavily armed guards and intimidating tanks still line the roads. Outside tourist attractions tout flog Hezbollah T-shirts – both are stark reminders that this stunning area was once a fierce battleground.

But, checkpoints aside, Lebanon's war-torn past is hardly visible (and very well hidden) amongst its ancient cities, world-class nightclubs, Mediterranean beaches, labyrinthine medieval souqs and stunning mountain landscapes. All within a few hours' drive of the capital Beirut.

I arrived in Lebanon on a day trip from neighbouring Syria. I was travelling with Oasis Overland, a company who specialise in overland travel. Our transport was a converted Scania lorry – home to 24 people who three weeks ago had been total strangers. But having shared tents, cooking duties, daily chores and many wondrous experiences we'd bonded into a mismatched family of intrepid explorers. Each one of us eager to soak up the plethora of sites and experiences thrust upon us as the truck made its six-week journey from Istanbul in Turkey to Cairo, Egypt.

We had just one day to discover one of the most complex and divided countries in the Middle East as an optional extra to our trip. The tour took in the awesome 9,000-year-old settlement of Baalbeck and the surprisingly cosmopolitan surroundings of Beirut.

As soon as our bus crossed the Syrian Lebanese border it was clear Lebanon was not what I expected. Almost instantly the litter-strewn roadsides of Syria had disappeared. I was seeing chain stores, fast food outlets and branded hotels – all things absent from the less affluent Syrian street scene.

Party-central Beirut feels, on the surface at least, little different from any European capital city. But belying the capital's extravagance venture a few dozen miles north or south and

you will find people living in traditional villages working and farming as they did centuries ago.

Parts of the country are still too dangerous to visit and any exploration near the Palestinian refugee camps is a no, no.

Tented communities dotted the roadside interspersed with large brick-built security-gated homes boasting lavish garden greenery. The scars of war are still evident but well camouflaged beneath a wealthy exterior.

En-route to Baalbeck we stopped briefly to witness the largest cut stone in the world. It is said this stone was destined for nearby Baalbeck, but was too large to be moved. Measuring a whopping 21.5 metres by four metres by four-and-a-half metres, locals call this stone Hajar al-Hubla – stone of the pregnant woman. Folk law says women can touch the edifice to increase their fertility.

Baalbeck has a reputation as one of the wonders of the world and it is easy to see why.

It is described in the guidebook as the most impressive ancient site in Lebanon, but for me it was unrivalled by anything else I saw during my Middle Eastern adventure. The vast ruins with massive columns and huge structures still in place invoke awe at their sheer scale and completeness.

The city is simply breathtaking. Vast temples and intricate stonework leave you agape at each turn. The brickwork radiated yellow against the clear blue sky, making the awesome columns rising into the deep-blue a sight to behold.

Settlement at Baalbeck is thought to date back to the end of the third millennium BC. In the first millennium BC a temple was built dedicated to the god Baal from which the city takes its name. Then in 64BC, Pompey the Great passed through Baalbeck and made it part of the Roman Empire instigating an era that saw the city flourish.

Baalbeck's temples were built on an extravagant scale that outshone anything in Rome. The town became a centre of religious devotion well into the Christian era and one of the most important places of worship in the Roman Empire.

The building of extravagant temples was a political act as well as one of religious devotion. Christianity was beginning to pose a threat to the old



order, so the temples were an attempt to fix the orientation of the people in favour of pagan worship.

The construction of Baalbeck's monumental temples was a massive undertaking, around 100,000 slaves worked on the project over centuries. It took 120 years for the great Temple of Jupiter to be near completion and according to the site's museum, parts of it were never finished.

The enormous ancient buildings worked upon by Roman slaves are a humbling site. It is a privilege to be able to explore today a city that centuries ago was arguably the most important Roman site in the Middle East.

Moving on from the ancient ruins, a couple of hours on the bus brought us to Beirut.

Beirut was once the focal point of the 15-year civil war. The city was divided along the infamous green line – Christians on one side and Muslims on the other.

We were dropped off in the West of the city. Tour guide Fajer told us the bullet-marked Holiday Inn the guidebook directed us to was no longer standing, so we opted for a leisurely stroll along the Corniche.

Locals meandered along chatting or sat taking in the sights. Men peppered the rocks fishing and a few brave lads showed off firm, bronzed bodies in tiny swimming trunks. The cosmopolitan surroundings could

have been plucked straight from LA. Although unlike its American counterpart, there wasn't a scantily clad woman in sight.

We turned a corner and headed along Rue Bliss. The street was bustling with people and traffic. The buildings were a mix of old and new with gun-wielding security guards permanently positioned outside the more affluent-looking apartment blocks.

Remarkably few buildings bore the scars of the civil war, but every second plot was a building site as the old crumbling battle-scarred edifices made way for the new.

Darkness fell on our wander around a city that defied expectations. In search of a coffee we rounded a corner and came across the haunting outline of the bullet-ridden Holiday Inn that was "no longer standing".

It seems the locals, especially tour guides, are keen to keep tourists away from the sites that tell the story of Lebanon's rocky history, instead showing them the sites they hope mark a bright future and a return to the countries affluent past.

We settled at the cafe belonging to the lavish InterContinental Phoenicia Hotel, the ravaged Holiday Inn rising like a tombstone behind. The InterContinental was Beirut's most prestigious pre-civil war hotel and has undergone a glitzy redevelopment with acres of marble and lavish



fittings. Security was tight. Our bags were X-rayed and we passed through a metal detector before being seated in the plush cafe area.

I chose a Beirut special, a Cafe Blanc or ahwa bayda – a few drops of rose water added to boiling water – that cost as much as a two-course meal in neighbouring Syria.

Three drinks in the luxury cafe set us back £16, but we were in Downtown Beirut – an area that was once the Paris of the Middle East. For years sniper fire echoed through the husks of once grand old buildings. It is said this area looked post-apocalyptic in the early Nineties, but it is now awash with expensive hotels, fancy restaurants and peppered with designer shops.

Lebanon is clearly a country on the up. The recovery from the war has been speedy and already much of the scars are hidden behind the cosmopolitan frontage of the new.

Beirut was once a playground for the rich and famous and it won't be long before it has shaken off its war-torn image and regained its crown.

So if, like me, you travel on a budget, get there while you still can.

■ **CHANGING TIMES:** Clockwise from main image, Baalbeck, Lebanon; the largest cut stone in the world near Baalbeck in Lebanon, Hajar al-Hubla; a Beirut street with swanky shops