

GLOBAL FLAVOURS.

# BEIRUT

Colourful, confounding, chaotic – and thrillingly intoxicating. Throw yourself into the Lebanese capital's street life for guaranteed good times and downright delicious eating, as **Joanna Bates** found.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOANNA BATES



Beirut's Central District  
aglow in the sunlight.  
OPPOSITE: the  
Lebanese capital is a  
city of light and shade.



If you skim the surface of Beirut, you'll find its heart as elusive as the hints of rosewater in a sweet Levantine treat. One mouthful is just a taste, a tease of the tastebuds. This intriguing and often confounding city is one in which to immerse yourself, until you 'get it' and understand why the Beirutis are so passionate about their home. Throughout its complex history, Beirut has often been compromised to the point that, in the face of adversity, the locals hold it even closer, celebrate it even more intently and party even harder.

There's a lot to take in and plenty going on – from ritzy French restaurants with highly polished patrons in equally ritzy Downtown to food with heart and soul served in places as welcoming as if you were in the host's own home. There are cafes that offer succour from the city's intensity and falafel joints that thrust you right into it. Every neighbourhood reveals its unique character: posh Achrafieh, where the locals prefer to speak French; old-money Hamra, which borders the main university and has great cheap eats; Mar Mikhael, the go-to bar and dining destination with artsy shops and design studios slotted into former car workshops; and Badaro, a youthful neighbourhood full of laid-back bars and cafes.

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Famed as the 'Paris of the Middle East' in its heyday, Beirut's busy streets are a tangle of old and new. Sandwiched between the Mediterranean Sea and Mount Lebanon range, it's crammed full with modernist masterpieces, Deco delights, Ottoman mansions and relics from the French Mandate – all standing in various states of splendour or despair – set among shiny new residential towers. Food influences are drawn from the ancient Levant, the Ottoman Empire, France and immigrants who have come from near and far. In a nation of trilingual citizens, conversation fluidly flips from French to Arabic to English. Beirut is very much an international city of hybrid influences, yet with its own distinctive flavour.

A great way to get your bearings, both geographically and gastronomically, is to take a food tour with **Taste Lebanon** ([tastelebanon.co.uk](http://tastelebanon.co.uk)), a boutique company started by food writer Bethany Kehdy in 2009. It will not only get you walking the city, but take you well beyond familiar favourites such as falafel and baklava to new flavours of *knefeh*, *atayef*, *manti*, *lahmajoun* and so much more. A day out with Taste Lebanon should be started on an empty stomach – your tour will fill you with food and enrich you with a deeper understanding of Lebanese cuisine, local street food, boutique producers and the city itself. Perhaps most importantly, a day spent with a guide who is passionate about Beirut will be a whole lot of fun.

## WHERE TO EAT

At contemporary, art-filled lunchtime eatery **Tawlet** ([soukeltayeb.com/tawlet](http://soukeltayeb.com/tawlet)) in Mar Mikhael, a superb array of regional home cooking is prepared daily. Local food hero Kamal Mouzawak has won accolades around the world for his social enterprises that preserve traditions, break down cultural differences and bring people together over food. At Tawlet, which means table, regional home cuisine and the cooks themselves are celebrated.

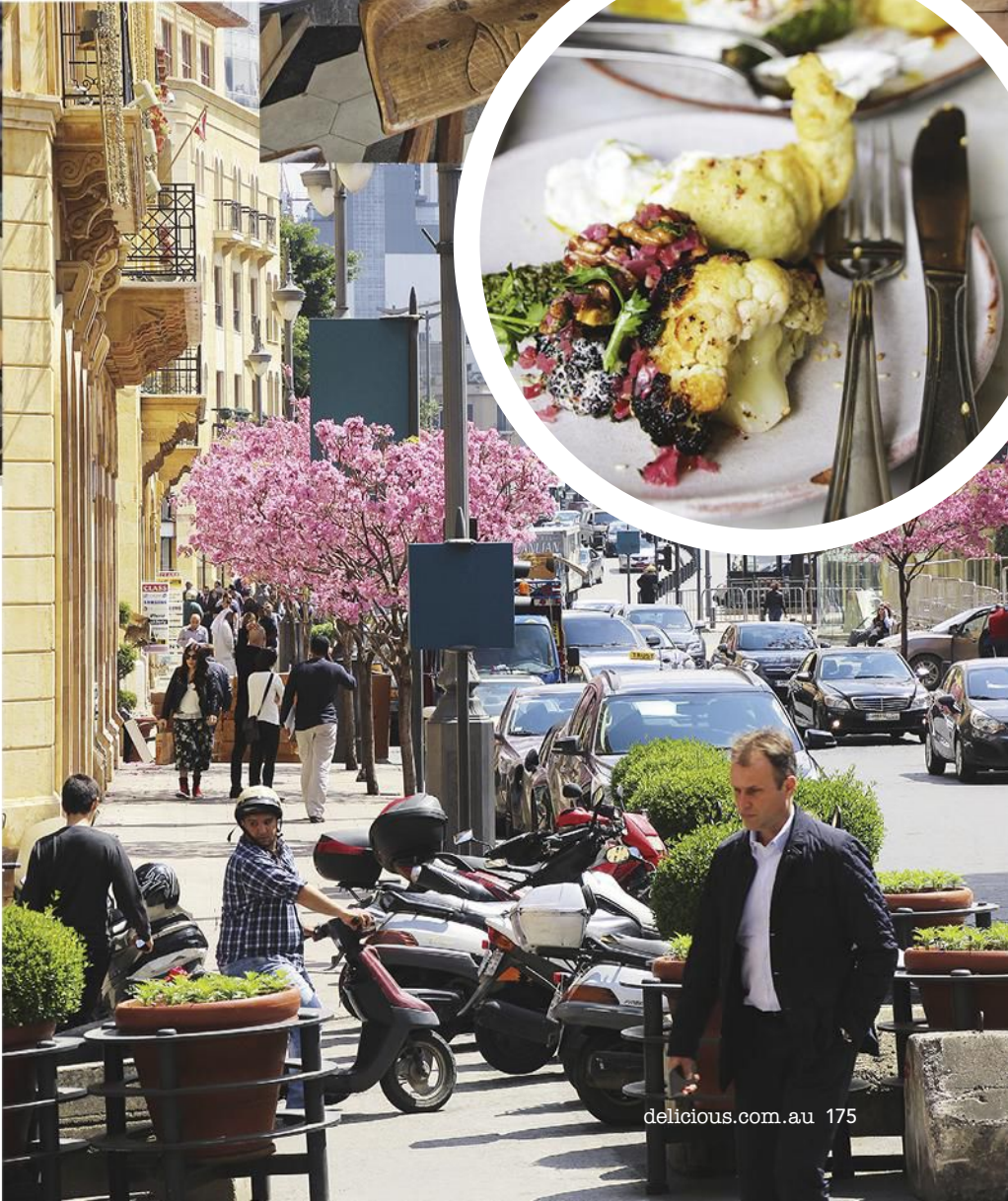
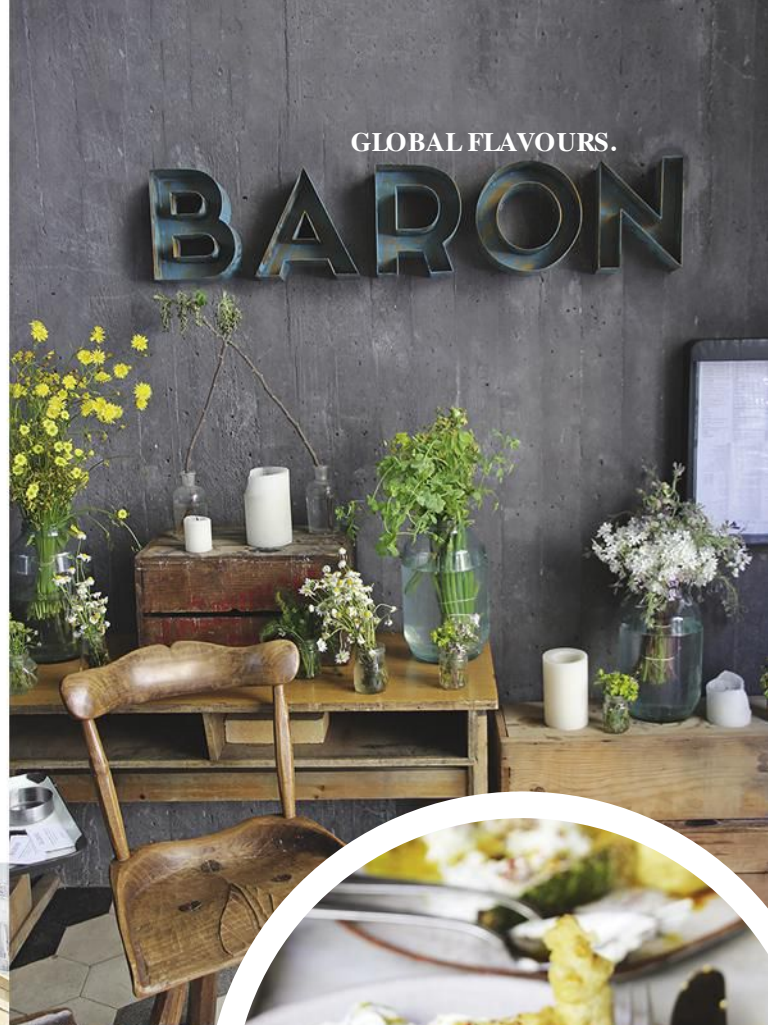
"There's a big difference between what I call public and private cuisine," says Mouzawak. "Public is street food or restaurant cuisine, but it's not what we eat at home – it's completely different. Every day at Tawlet, a different woman shares the best of her expression through her typical cuisine – it's her traditions and stories." Standing behind this stunning spread of diverse dishes are the cooks – you may find Samira from Syria, Zeina from the Chouf, Georgina from the north, or Zainab from the south – who will chat to you about their food and influences.

Mouzawak also launched **Souk el Tayeb** ([soukeltayeb.com](http://soukeltayeb.com)) in 2004, the city's first farmers' market, which runs every Saturday in Downtown, and Wednesday and Thursday in nearby locations. Depending on the season, you'll find stalls stacked with mulberries, figs, pomegranates and cherries, and you'll always see olives, nuts, just-picked vegetables, fresh artisan bread, gluten-free baking, preserves, traditional





**CLOCKWISE (from top left):** Kamal Mouzawak's contemporary restaurant, Tawlet, where home-cooked food is prepared daily; Baron's beautiful decor; (inset) the restaurant's famous baked whole cauliflower; Downtown Beirut's buzzing streets; the tucked-away Kalei Coffee Company; making *saj manousheh* at Souk el Tayeb farmers' market. **OPPOSITE:** the Beirut cityscape.





**CLOCKWISE** (from top left): one of the many prints at Plan Bey; Hotel Albergo's impressive facade; (inset, top right) the hotel's terrace; pickled veggies at Falafel Aboulziz; preserves at Souk el Tayeb; enjoy a pit stop at 24-hour cafe Al Falamanki; the fabulous falafels at Falafel Aboulziz; (inset, centre) Zen minimalism at homeware store Nada Debs.

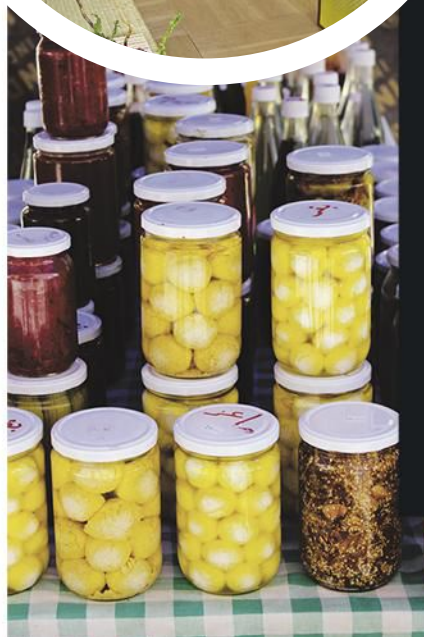


**WHERE TO SHOP**

**Plan Bey** Art, design, publishing and a garden cafe come together in an 1860s former home at Plan Bey in Mar Mikhael. Pick up a print, limited-edition art, postcards or a memento – all made locally. [plan-bey.com](http://plan-bey.com)

**Nada Debs** Born in Lebanon and raised in Japan, designer Nada Debs fuses Middle East and Far East to create Arabic influences with Zen minimalism. Her furniture and decorative pieces are all made in Lebanon by local artisans, helping keep the crafts alive. [nadadebs.com](http://nadadebs.com)

**Sarah's Bag** What started as a good cause is now a celebrity favourite. Until the likes of Amal Clooney and Catherine Deneuve got their hands on the exquisite bags, Sarah's Bag was a small social enterprise started by sociology student Sarah Beydoun in 2000 to employ at-risk women and former prisoners. [sarahsbag.com](http://sarahsbag.com)





sweets and just-cooked *manousheh* and *kibbeh*. A visit to the market gives you the chance to talk with producers and makers, from home cooks to farmers.

From a former car garage in Mar Mikhael, a traditionally Armenian neighbourhood, Etienne Sabbagh and Athanasios Kargatzidis have carved an urbane and inviting venue. They've cheekily given their restaurant, **Baron** ([baronbeirut.com](http://baronbeirut.com)), a "typically Armenian name", says chef Kargatzidis. "It's a piss-take, meaning boss – the main man on the street," he explains with a grin. It could also be taken as a reference to the two international restaurant consultants, who decided it was time to go out on their own. "We wanted to do what we wanted to do, and with a focus on vegetables," says Kargatzidis. The pair is renowned for taking typical local flavours and giving them an entirely fresh focus. As well as showing humble vegies a whole lot of love, they also pay respect to meat. Having seen so much of it arrive heavily packaged into the kitchens they've consulted on, the pair strips it back to basics with aged beef from the UK that comes wrapped in cloth, and there's a focus on sustainable seafood. Kargatzidis, who grew up in Canada and has worked all over the world, cites chefs such as Peter Gordon, the 'godfather' of fusion cuisine', as an influence. Gordon would be proud of one of their most popular dishes – baked whole cauliflower is packed with flavour and visual wow factor; they do 200-300 heads of it a week. With a touch of theatre added by the open kitchen, there's no such thing as a dull moment or neglected tastebud at Baron.

At **Mezyan** ([facebook.com/MezyanPub](https://www.facebook.com/MezyanPub)) in Hamra, much-loved Lebanese mezze plates are diversified with Armenian and Moroccan dishes served with a good selection of local wines. Located in a nondescript plaza on Hamra Street, there's a restaurant and bar area, and

a terrace out back – ideal on steamy Beirut evenings. With an artistic, intellectual vibe that's friendly and unpretentious, it's loved by students who work away for hours over a coffee and diners who are there for the excellent food, service and atmosphere. Loosely southern Mediterranean, Mezyan is a restaurant you'll want to go back to so you can further explore the menu.

For a refined start to a sophisticated night out, a blissful retreat from the noise of the city can be found at the top of **Hotel Albergo** ([albergobeirut.com](http://albergobeirut.com)) in upscale Achrafieh, where many locals stroll the streets chatting in French rather than Arabic. In the bar, lean into plush, plumped cushions on beautifully attired lounges and look out to the sparkly city lights below. Sip a perfectly poured cocktail served with nuts and carrot slivers doused in lemon juice – a snack that's delightful in its simplicity and elevates the ordinary into something special. Just around the corner is **Liza** ([lizabeirut.com](http://lizabeirut.com)), an offshoot of the Parisian restaurant of the same name. Opened in 2013 by Liza Soughayar and her husband, Ziad Asseily, the chic Beirut outpost serves contemporary Lebanese cuisine in a restored 19th-century Ottoman palace, with an interior fit-out by designer Maria Ousseimi.

The Lebanese are renowned for their warmth and hospitality, and it comes through in many cafes and restaurants, which feel like an extension of their owner's dining room. In a '40s stucco building, once a family home, Tony Sfeir takes the relaxed approach one step further at **Makan** ([facebook.com/makanbeirut](https://www.facebook.com/makanbeirut)). He felt that food in the city was overpriced, which is why he invites diners to pay what they think their meal is worth. In this quiet spot off Mar Mikhael's thrumming Armenia Street, the menu is set and circulates nightly between a range of cuisines, including Lebanese. The wines are predominantly natural, and many come from the Bekaa Valley northeast of the city. Upstairs, known as **Baffa House** ([baffahouse.com](http://baffahouse.com)), the traditional home has been converted into charming

accommodation. Nearby, Sfeir also runs the same dining concept at **Motto** ([mottorestaurant.wordpress.com](http://mottorestaurant.wordpress.com)).

If you actually want to eat in someone's home, you can do so at Sylvia Khoury and Charles Ghorayeb's. The former tour guides cook Lebanese and Mediterranean cuisine for guests and also have a food stall (**Foul Tayeb**) at Souk el Tayeb Farmers' Market, where you can sample their dishes and talk about what will feature on upcoming menus. Places at the table are limited, so get in quick (for a reservation, email [eathomeal@gmail.com](mailto:eathomeal@gmail.com)).

**Al Falamanki** ([alfalamanki.com](http://alfalamanki.com)) is a Beirut institution – open 24 hours, it's where party-loving locals go after the party that followed the after-party. As an any-time place, you'll find some patrons ending their night and others starting their day. Comfy chairs and sofas, a garden setting, sprawling interior, shisha pipes, backgammon sets and satisfying Lebanese food mean you can easily lose a few hours. While there, it's worth reading about 'Al Falamanki' himself and how he got to hang out with the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Kirk Douglas and Maria Callas. There's also an excellent shop selling local olives, olive oil, spices, preserves and wine.

When the chaos of the city becomes too much, seek out **Kalei Coffee Company** ([kaleicoffee.com](http://kaleicoffee.com)) in Mar Mikhael – this tucked-away oasis is spread across several levels, two of which are outdoor, lovely and leafy, and add to the far-from-the-madding-crowd feel. A roastery, cafe, bar and popular meeting spot for creatives, Kalei has plenty of appeal beyond its well-made, ethically sourced brews.

Before I left for Beirut to research this story, on a whim I decided to try a few falafels in my Auckland neighbourhood of Ponsonby. The food adventure ended badly – one falafel was doused in sweet chutney, the other had a couple of old chips thrown in. Faith was thoroughly restored in Beirut – in no time, I'd joined the heated debate of who does the best 'falafel sandwich' in town. Thanks to Taste Lebanon, I was introduced to **Falafel Aboulziz** ([facebook.com/FalafelAboulziz](https://www.facebook.com/FalafelAboulziz)) in Downtown (there's also one in Hamra)

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**INSET AND BELOW:** carefully curated antiques as well as more contemporary pieces adorn the entrance at Zanzoun.

where the ratio of chickpeas to fava beans achieves the lightest, fluffiest result. The sandwich is crammed full of all the right things – there's not a chip or offbeat accoutrement in sight – and the pickled chillies on the side have the perfect piquant balance of heat and salt. At 3000 Lebanese pounds a go (less than \$3), you can afford to deeply research this passionately discussed topic. Thrash it out with taxi drivers and whomever you meet along the way, because this is a city where people will strike up a conversation with

ease and warmth. Not only did I eat the best falafel in town – and a whole lot more – I left with faith restored in the kindness of strangers, those who so generously shared their love of this beguiling city.

## GETTING ABOUT

With no public transport to speak of and street names seemingly little more than a token gesture, finding your way can seem confusing at first. When locating an address, street numbers and names are not given; instead, landmarks are used. Don't be shy about asking for directions – anyone will take the time to help you.

While this car-obsessed city is not particularly pedestrian friendly, it's definitely walkable. In lieu of public transport, 'service' taxis are used. For around \$2, you share a ride when heading in the same direction as other passengers; it's more – about \$8-10 – for a single journey. There are also regular taxis, although these are often unmetered, so establish the price before you ride. Allo Taxi (allo.taxi) is considered the most reliable registered service. Uber also operates here.

## WHERE TO STAY

L'hote Libanaï is a family of carefully selected guesthouses and boutique hotels that enable travellers to experience Beirut in an authentic way, and in great style. Run by real people, there are four to choose from in Beirut, and more throughout Lebanon, in historic buildings, restored mansions and artsy apartments. I stayed at **Zanzoun** in Achrafieh. In the restored '40s home, the owners have curated a stunning collection of antiques from Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, as well as Deco and modernist pieces mixed with contemporary artwork. [hotellibonais.com](http://hotellibonais.com) 

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[delicious.com.au/travel](http://delicious.com.au/travel)

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**THIS IS A CITY WHERE PEOPLE WILL STRIKE UP CONVERSATION WITH NATURAL EASE AND WARMTH**