



# The weight of history

For first time visitors to Lebanon iconic tourism sites are a must. Indian tourist **Shreekant Somany** discovers the country's ancient history still has a presence

Sometime in July last year, very dear friends of my wife and I asked if we would join them on a trip to Lebanon. We were excited, but the obvious question of safety crossed our thoughts. But then, with who we were going and staying with was more than a reassurance so we agreed, and had no regrets.

The next few weeks went by, researching on the sites we planned to visit and making notes. The research itself was an eye opener, as my only recollection was from my parents' description of Beirut as the Paris of the East with extravagant stage shows, the famous grotto and so on. Little did I realize that Lebanon was a treasure trove of 7,000 years of history, starting with the settling of the Neolithic fishing community along the coastline, and later occupied by Babylonians,

Phoenicians, Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, Byzantine and Ottomans.

Remnants of Lebanon's past as a trade hub for precious metals, stone, silk and biblical cedar wood can still be seen today, with cedars dating back over 1000 years in the protected Qadisha Valley. Every former empire that once ruled over the country left an indelible mark, which today stands as a testimony of their greatness.

Two important cities in Lebanon, Tyre and Sidon, are mentioned within the Old and New Testaments. Though now a shadow of their former selves, they maintain impressive ancient ruins. Sidon's coastal castle, originally built as a crusader fort, now stands in stark contrast to a modern harbor. It is believed the port of ancient Sidon was in this area and, against a

distant backdrop of modern Beirut, the castle is a beautiful sight.

Further down the coast, Tyre, once an island city of the Phoenicians, is today dominated by a bustling, colorful souk in the heart of the old city, and has an unprecedented splendor. Exquisite purple textiles, dyed from murex shells fished from the Mediterranean, caught the fancy of both Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great. The resilient city fell to the Romans in 64BC and they built colonnades, public baths, mosaic streets, an arena and a hippodrome. Remnants of these massive structures stand as a reminder of the glory of the Roman Empire that once ruled the region.

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In the North Bekaa there is another stunning example of one of the best preserved and largest Roman treasures in the world, Baalbeck's Roman temples. They are counted amongst the wonders of the ancient world. Towering above the Bekaa plains, the monumental proportions of the temples of Venus, Jupiter, and Bacchus established the wealth and power of Imperial Rome. Visiting Baalbeck, the enormity and engineering of their architectural accomplishment is overwhelming.

Amongst the many historical sites across Lebanon, must visits include Beiteddine Palace, Jeitta Grotto and Ksara winery, to taste some of Lebanon's finest wines and see its unique natural cave cellar.

Steeped in an array of ruins from an ancient past, Beirut's history beautifully blends with modernity. The country's capital city offers moderate to luxury hotels and a diverse fine dining scene to suit every pallet. The recently restored

Downtown district makes for a very beautiful stroll dotted with great shopping opportunities from famous clothing brands, jewelry, watches and locally made items.

At night, the Corniche, the seaside promenade, shimmers in the light of the city, as people, young and old, enjoy the fresh sea air. It's a treat to the eyes, and a reflection of the beautiful folk who make the city proud.

## VISIT LEBANON DIFFERENTLY

The **DHIAFEE Program** ([dhiafeeprogram.org](http://dhiafeeprogram.org)) offers the local experience with an extensive directory of guesthouses spread across the country and **L'Hote Libanais** ([hotelibanais.com](http://hotelibanais.com)) also focuses on the human experience with their accommodation network of B&Bs, guesthouses and family stays. For package tours **Live Love Lebanon's** website ([livelebanon.com](http://livelebanon.com)) is a must visit, offering a variety of experiences for everything from adventure and nature to wine and culture. For the latest destination tips, getaways and hidden gems log on to [lebanontraveler.com](http://lebanontraveler.com)