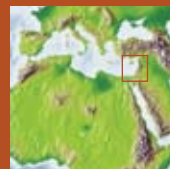




Beirut buzz
The locals in Place d'Etoile - and beyond - are enjoying their city being one of the Middle East's safer spots for once

FOR A SULTRY CITY STROLL, GO TO BEIRUT

The Lebanese capital is rich in history and justifiably famous for its nightlife, says **Jessica Lee**



Average October sunshine hours per day: 8
Average October temperature: 23°C



Ronnie Chatah is a man on a mission: to show visitors his city on foot. Most

Lebanese prefer to keep their evening promenading to Beirut's shoreline Corniche but Ronnie is more interested in the backstreets.

"There are whole chunks of this city that even local tourists

forget," he told me as we weaved our way down through the old Armenian quarter of Kantari and the start of the civil war's Green Line.

Looming over the skyline was the pockmarked shell of the Holiday Inn, looking like an overgrown weed. Behind it flashes of Mediterranean blue formed the backdrop to these

curving hill roads where derelict villas teetered slowly into the twilight of neo-Ottoman decay. By heading away from the city's hot-spots, Ronnie sews the stories that shaped Beirut's fabric long before the jaunty new high-rises rose. These tales, both tragic and funny, reveal the human side of the city, which many visitors miss.

Indeed, on arrival in the capital I'd been so awed by Beirut's cappuccino culture and aching hip outlook that I'd failed to register the bullet-scarred layers that lurked underneath - from the now-defunct Hamra cinema, where Yasser Arafat and co once paused to watch Hollywood blockbusters between bouts of >

Endless Summer

< fighting, to the unlucky street block in Bachoura where the various militias faced each other merely a few metres apart.

In Martyrs' Square at dusk we stood in front of the famous Liberty statue. Riddled with holes from sniper pot-shots – like Beirut itself – the statue has prevailed with phoenix-like flair. Just to our west the Downtown streets, with their restored French-colonial facades, were filling with families on a Saturday sundown stroll.

This year, much to the shock of Beirutis (more used to being fodder for frontline news), their cosmopolitan capital finds itself in the spotlight for being the more stable member of the Middle East neighbourhood. Not that instability has ever thrown the Lebanese off their love of having a good time.

FIVE MORE AUTUMNAL CITY BREAKS

● **Cairo, Egypt**

This sight-packed city cools a little by October (though highs are still 30°C), making for more pleasant exploring. Flight time from UK: 4.5hrs.

● **Fès, Morocco**

Get utterly lost in the labyrinthine medina of this medieval town, still a balmy 20-25°C. Flight time from UK: 3-3.5hrs.

● **Palma, Mallorca**

Ignore nearby resorts – this is a classy island capital, with October highs of 22°C. Flight time from UK: 2.5hrs.

● **Dubrovnik, Croatia**

This beautiful walled town is packed in peak season; visit now instead for quieter streets and highs of 19°C. Flight time from UK: 2.5-3hrs.

● **Dakar, Senegal**

Dakar cools and dries off come October, better for hitting the clubs of West Africa's liveliest capital. Flight time UK: 8-9hrs (with change in Brussels).

Even during the war the city's nightlife thrived.

We crossed the road and arrived in Monot district. This was the Beirut I already knew: funky bars and clubs and cold Almaza beer in the fridge. Ronnie sighed: "We Lebanese are good at two things. Fighting and partying." I ordered an Almaza and raised a toast to the Arab

world's capital of cool, hoping its future, just like its present, holds more of the latter.

Getting started: BMI (www.flybmi.com) flies daily from London Heathrow to Beirut in 4 hours 45 minutes; returns from £450. The boutique Hayete Guesthouse (www.hayete-guesthouse.com) offers retro-hip rooms with oodles of Lebanese style. Doubles from £75. Ronnie Chatah's Walk Beirut tours (www.bebeirut.org) run on Sat and Sundays, 4.30pm-8.30pm; US\$20 (£12).

Jessica Lee is author of the new Footprint guide to *Beirut* (£6.99). ■

Middle East marvel
Beirut's Al Amine
Mosque is just
one of the city's
architectural gems

