



Finding Beauty in Beirut



The moment I stepped foot onto the Middle East Airlines flight from Istanbul to Beirut, Lebanon, I knew this trip was going to be exceptionally magical. As I glanced around at the rows of empty (not to mention extremely spacious) first class seats, I turned to the flight attendant and said, "So, when am I getting my upgrade?"

The young attendant nervously laughed and turned back towards the pilots who were also chuckling. As I settled into my bulkhead middle seat, I stare mindlessly into first class imagining what my first trip to the Middle East would've been like if I was fully reclined and sipping champagne. The daydream of flight attendants showering me with trays of fabulous food was abruptly interrupted by the stern voice of a man in a white uniform.

"Umm, Ms. Kraemer?"

I looked up in shock and could think of no other response than sheepishly nodding. "Come with me please."

I look over at a friend sitting next to me, awkwardly shrug and proceed to follow the man down the aisle towards the exit of the plane. Panicking, I am suddenly sure I'm getting kicked off the plane and that some other knowing security guard is already gathering my belongings from the overhead bin. He stops me as we get to the front of the plane and then says to me as he opens the door to the cockpit.

"We have your upgrade."

So from takeoff to touchdown I am strapped into the middle seat - of the cockpit! It was the most amazing way to start my journey to not only a new country but an entirely new continent.

Beirut was one of the most mystical places I've ever been. The combination of a huge city stretching across the Mediterranean Sea, that backs up to a beautiful mountain range was truly breathtaking.

Of course there are risks and uncertainties when traveling to a country in the precarious Middle East but if done the right way, Beirut has a lot to offer a savvy traveler. Whether you're shopping in the beautiful open air souks, browsing a cutting edge art gallery, eating a five course meal and smoking hooka on a mountain-

top restaurant or just relaxing and soaking up the Lebanese sun at one of the many ocean-side pool lounges, there is certainly something for everyone.

Accommodations:

There are a handful of lovely places to call home during your trip to Beirut. They range in price, location, style and amenities. It is best to tailor your decision based on what's most important to you as a traveler. These are the top two recommendations based first and foremost on their location, customer service and atmosphere.

Le Gray Hotel: This is a modern luxury hotel created by the infamous hotelier Gordon Campbell Gray. The hotel is located in the historical city center and has all the five star amenities you can dream of. At Le

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Gray hotel, you are surrounded by world-class extravagance. This hotel comes with a futuristic gym outfitted with personal trainers, an infinity pool, a 360-degree rooftop bar and a holistic spa delivering both Eastern and Western services. This forward-thinking customer service driven hotel was seen by the hospitality industry as high risk for the battle-scarred city; however, this modern gem seems to be exactly what both local tourists and international travelers were looking for.

Price: \$290 avg/night

Albergo Hotel: This whimsically chic boutique hotel offers a completely different style of accommodations from that of a more mainstream hotel. Thirty-three stylishly outfitted suites make up the intimate quarters of this quaint mansion from the 1930's. Located in the lavish Achrafieh district, known for its charming winding

streets and prestigious apartment buildings, this hotel offers charm and sophistication with contemporary amenities. This area is also known for its strong gastronomic options and the Albergo hotel offers its visitors and guests a fabulous option for French cuisine on a luxurious ninth floor terrace with outstanding views. This quieter neighborhood is conveniently close to all the attractions in Beirut yet becomes the perfect "estate escape" from the bustling city life.

Price: \$375 avg/night

Restaurants:

Balthus- Easily one of the most famous French restaurants in Beirut, this brasserie offers the highest quality foods, along with an impressive French wine list for my sommeliers out there. The menu is filled with politically incorrect must-try dishes like the foie-gras as well as the lamb with gratin dauphinoise.

Iris Rooftop- This amazing rooftop cocktail bar and restaurant is located in the infamous An Nahar building and creates an urban oasis as well as a perfect vantage point to start the night off right. With jaw-dropping views of the Mediterranean Sea and soft amber lighting, grab a table for dinner, watch the sunset and order a drink while the party shifts from day to night. Prices are good and the music keeps you well entertained before heading out for a night on the town.

La Posta- If you're looking for your Italian food fix, La Posta offers wonderful Italian cuisine with an enchanting garden and rooftop terrace. The service is very friendly and upbeat with the ambiance of warm yellows and candlelight to serenade you as you gawk at the beautiful views of the Mediterranean Sea. There is a wide range of dishes including pastas as well as a variety of mixed salads. The seafood is also extremely fresh with my personal favorite being the salmon carpaccio. This warm and inviting atmosphere is great for a date night or just relaxing by the sea and eating to your hearts content.



Nightlife:

The nightlife is also extremely wild in Beirut. The place to be all depends on the experience you are looking to have. There are a few of the big clubs and parties to know of. Each vary in size and status but all are sure to be an amazing time.

BO18 (Bunker)- This club is easily one of the coolest spaces/concepts in all of Beirut. Located in an area where refugee camps held over 20,000 evacuees during the Lebanese civil war, this underground space provides an environment that is completely out of the box. When the retractable roof on this savvy bunker opens to cool the club down your ceiling becomes the backdrop of the night sky (stars and all). And the massive mirror on the retractable roof, which is perfectly angled at 50 degrees once opened, then reflects the soft glow from the lights in the city around you. It is an extremely magical experience that perfectly explains the delicate balance this city has. A balance of appreciating the turbulent times they're currently living in, while also constantly choosing to live in the moment and live life to the fullest.

SKYBAR- This is a huge open-air club that is oozing with status and wealth. Loud top 40 music blares over their immense sound system. When this mixes with their light, fog and fire shows, it offers an experience like nothing else. However, the people aren't typically dancing the night away and getting down. It is more about the bottles you order, who you are with and what you are wearing unfortunately. Because of this, it can come off a bit like some of the big pretentious clubs in NYC or Vegas. With SKYBAR you get the club scene on a grand scale with everything you would expect from a nightclub with the added flare of the Lebanese mindset. Go big or go home.

Decks on the Beach- This is a low maintenance party on a dock overlooking the water. The lights are low and the music played is typically minimal house. The crowd is a bit of a mixed bag and ranges from the local devoted fans to the doe-eyed tourists scoping out the place. There is only one main bar that tends to get a little crowded towards the middle of the night. There is also a light up dance floor in the middle for the dancing enthusiasts. This is a good party if you are looking for something more laid back. Decks on the Beach is the blend between a nightclub and a beach lounge.

It was at Deck on the Beach that I overheard a Lebanese man explaining that because the women to men ratio is 7:1, every night's a party. This also explains why the women won't leave the house until they've had their hair, nails and makeup done. Talk about glamorous.

So whether you are traveling there to explore the terrain or just lounge by the pool, I see the reason Beirut was once called the Paris of the Middle East. With enough attractions, restaurants, clubs and shops to keep you on your toes and exploring during your stay, you will leave Beirut a little wiser, more cultured and beautifully tanned.

I take my (sun)hat off to a city that, during troubled times, can still wine, dine and get down with the best of them.

Wishing Beirut sincere HBH: Health, Beauty and Happiness.

