

Views of Beirut - #1

"On a sunny afternoon, stand on the Corniche, Beirut's seafront promenade, and you'll wonder how this country ever fell into civil war. This great city hugs the coast and stretches up into the hills. Newly built highways carry high-speed traffic. Building cranes are everywhere, and US-style shopping malls have sprouted up across the city.

On the Corniche, businessmen in Western suits, and teenage girls on roller blades share the wide walkway with women dressed in black dresses, robes, coats and scarves. A cheerful Syrian man sells thick Arabic coffee in tiny china cups, grabbing the attention of potential customers by clacking the cups together. He pours the thick, black liquid from an ancient-looking, charcoal-burning pot. Nearby, Western fast-food restaurants compete with Middle Eastern kebab joints.

I was born during the conflict. We don't talk about it at home because we've got over it and it's time the rest of the world did too. It upsets us when we watch an American movie and someone says, 'Oh God, this place looks like Beirut' as if it's somewhere terrible.

I am Muslim and my boyfriend is Christian. We were both raised to feel that the world should be a better place. That's what brought us together anyway. It's true, living here is hard. Since I left college, I've always had two jobs so I can look after myself, but I still love my city."

Views of Beirut # 2

"Beirut is one of the oldest cities in the world. It is a cultural melting pot - there are people with 17 different religions living together and sharing the same space, and we have three officially recognized languages - Arabic, French and English. The fact that the city is on the shores of the Mediterranean and close to Africa, Asia, and Europe has a lot to do with it.

Compared to every other city in the Middle East, living here is expensive. Food is quite cheap, but electricity and phone bills are amongst the highest anywhere. Beirut is also one of the top three cities in the world for the number of cars (and mobile phones!) per person so it's no surprise that there is a lot of traffic on the streets. Air pollution may be getting better with the ban on diesel engines, but it's still quite bad.

Beirut is well known for its nightlife. The younger crowd hang out in bars and clubs while the older people tend to prefer the restaurants. An evening on the seafront sounds like a party, especially on the weekends. During the day I work for my father in his silverware business, and at night I DJ in one of the clubs. It's a lively scene. The nightclub, BO18 is one of the best in the world. At sunrise the roof opens up and the dance floor elevates upwards so clubbers get the first rays of the day.

Beirut is also great for tourists. During the winter people ski on the snow-covered mountains to the north and during the summer they can enjoy the beach. The mountains and the beach are only twenty minutes from each other so around Easter you can do both - ski in the morning then head for the warmer weather on the beach in the afternoon! Come and visit and see for yourself!"

Views of Beirut #3

"Beirut has recovered from the civil war and once again it is one of the most modern cities in the Arab world.

I am very proud of my city, but I feel frustrated. Many of my friends have gone abroad, and I have few friends left here. Going overseas is part of our culture - did you know that there are something like 9 million people of Lebanese origin living in Brazil, and another 3 million in Australia??

But it's got out of control. In the last ten years, almost 300,000 young people have left. For us still here you can't build your own future. You can't have your own dreams and go for it. You must travel.

The government wants to turn Beirut into a global financial centre to rival New York, Tokyo and London. Money is pouring in from businessmen in the Gulf States like United Arab Emirates. But unemployment remains very high and too much of the money being made here is in the hands of a few. The government's invitation to foreigners to invest in the re-building of our city hasn't helped. Foreigners are taking over - the Syrians, the French, the Israelis and the Americans. The Syrian soldiers may have gone home now, but for so long the Syrians had a say on how to run the country. Lebanon is like an attractive, young woman and these outsiders are like men who all want a bit of her.

It's very different from the rest of the Arab world. We are considered 'European Arabs' and tourists from the Gulf and other Arabic countries just LOVE to spend time in Beirut. I am proud of my Arabic roots but if being an Arab is riding a camel in the desert, or being Muslim, or being a terrorist then I'm not an Arab. I'm quite happy to say I'm Lebanese."