

# The BOMB that's Beirut

FROM WAR CRIES TO BAUBLE ROUSING, BEIRUT ABSORBS IT ALL. THE STARS ARE SHINING ON THE PARIS OF THE MIDDLE EAST SAYS **CHUMKI BHARADWAJ**.

If Beirut were to be a matinee moment, it would be a chiaroscuro of Akira Kurosawa's feather touch of magical realism and Martin Scorsese's saga of machismo, violence and redemption. But after three decades of conflict, Beirut's road to Damascus is finally clear. The pockmarked buildings have expropriated catastrophe as cultural reference. And in a rise of the proverbial phoenix, Beirut's poli-

tics of resentment and revenge have made way for the commercial advantages of entertainment and extravagance. Combining the ethereal charm of old-world ways, incredible ruins and fantastical souls and swinging nightclubs, the city has become a living collision of history and glamour. Now, celebration is the play of life and a coffee meet provides enough reason to haute it up.





Indigo on the roof at Le Gray, set up for a lovely alfresco dining experience

#### PLAY THE GOURMET

As a hedonistic revel, Beirut is like having Dionysus and Apollo wrestling on a plate. And given the rich agricultural bounty, Lebanese chefs have an impressive array of raw materials to play with. Most Beirut dining experiences begin with the meze, a smorgasbord of appetisers that range from grilled chicken livers to exotic breads accompanied by dozens of cold and hot plates of hummus, tabbouleh and fat-

toush, grilled sausages, savoury filled pastries and assorted kibbees. Here's where to go.

#### Indigo on the Roof

Inventive food, cracking wine list. Le Gray's roof terrace, Martyrs' Square  
**Abdel Wahab**  
 Lebanese specialities, Abdel Wahab El Inglizi Street Monot  
**Varouj**

Armenian food; no English spoken; Alfred Nobel Street



Beef and cracked wheat kibbeh (left); the ubiquitous hummus



#### SLEEP OVER AT

**LE GRAY:** Modernist beacon with infinity pool, art-filled rooms and bar with 360° views. Martyrs' Square

**Hotel Albergio:** 33-suite mansion that's as much chic Ottoman as 18th-century French; personal valets. Abdel Wahab El Inglizi Street Ashrafieh

**Bella Riva Suite Hotel:** Overlooking the Med, it boasts Beirut's largest penthouse suite. Bella Riva, Caracas St, Manara

**Park Tower Suites:** Suites and service apartments on offer, in close proximity to the city centre and accompanying attractions. President Elias Sarkis Avenue, Ashrafieh.

## DESTINATION



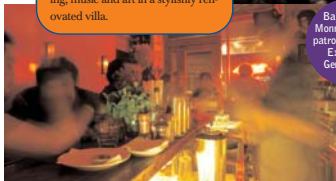
The Art Lounge hosts a gallery, bar, bookstore, concert hall and art store

### DRINK AND PARTY

If Beirut were Vegas, Gemmayzeh would be the strip.

A sleepy quarter until recently, its Ferraris, fashionable gentry and fancy nightclubs are now par for the course. This isn't just a night life district but a drink destination.

Centrale is a classic that offers exquisite dining on the ground level and an unusual bar on the first. Drop by Bar Louie for jazz and blues, Torino Express, Dragonfly, Godot and Layla for a coziness that spells exclusive if only for the familiarity they exude. Monnot is another nightlife area with watering holes like Element, District and Crystal that allow you to burn as much cash as calories. Thirty Seven Degrees, Lime and Ice Bar attract university students while Zinc combines dining, music and art in a stylishly renovated villa.



Bar 1975 in Monnot (above); patrons at Torino Express in Gemmayzeh



### CATCH THE MOOD

Sea walls built before Christ; mosques that outshine the sun; crenellated Crusader towers built on ancient Roman pillars; leafy town squares constructed by the French; tiny Roman esque-style churches with ancient icons hidden during the civil war; for culture vultures, Beirut is nesting ground.

**Sursock art museum** is the city's first contemporary art centre. *Rue de l'Archeveche Greco-Orthodoxe*;

**Art lounge** is a refurbished old factory in the Karantina region that morphed into a gallery, bar, bookstore, concert hall, art store and an Asian art gallery called the Lotus Loft. [www.artlounge.net](http://www.artlounge.net)

**Bojji**: more salon than store, it is a rendezvous spot for creative minds and retails haute bohemian wares. *Building 332, Moubhalacsiya St*;

**Steir-Semler Gallery**—cultural outpost that features many acclaimed Middle Eastern artists. *Tannous Building, St 56, Jisr Sector 77, Karantina*;

### SHOP TILL YOU DROP

The Central district is Beirut's ode to the Champs-Élysées. The renovated Beirut Souks is an outdoor mall that opened late last year with 200 luxury stores, including a Peter Marino-

designed Louis Vuitton store. ABC Mall at Achrafieh is more high street with quaint boutiques and mid-level shopping—great for a wander. Elsewhere in Achrafieh, discover quaint boutique finds—start at Rue Monnot and walk up Ave Elias Sarkis to Rue Abdel Wahab el Inglizi for interesting buys. The Virgin Megastore, housed in the 1930s Art Deco Opera Cinema building on Place des Martyrs, is trilingual—Arabic, French and English—reflecting the true spirit of Lebanese culture. Trundle down Marelis Street for trendy shoes, clothes and jewellery. Surround yourself with local flavours and perfumes at Rue Hamra. Visit Enoteca at Antelias for vintage Lebanese and imported wines. If shopping is in your DNA, prepare to be carpet bombed. 🇔

