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A Lebanon write-up

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Talk about fun, talk about feeling youthful. I recently spent a long time in Beirut. I was initially there as part of the book tour for my edited collection, *Gay Travels in the Muslim World*, which was published in Arabic by a Lebanese company, Arabic Diffusion. I had long heard of how fun and gay-friendly Beirut was, but seeing was believing. In total, I spent somewhere over 3 weeks visiting Lebanon.

Beirut is not a typical tourist destination. It still has a tattered war-torn feel to it, but that makes the place feel cutting edge as vacation spots go. What brings the whole place together is the sea – the Mediterranean Sea – always glistening behind new highrises from the downtown, the smell of its eternal tides sweeping over the fabled Beirut Corniche, busy day and night with families, young people and ubiquitous joggers. The culture of the body beautiful reigns within Beirut, and this is one of the best places to see it in action!

During my stay, Bertho Makso of LebTour, the gay travel company here in Beirut, was incredibly generous with his time, attention, and contacts, making my time in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon all the more pleasant, and helping to make my book events a success as well. He showed me much of what makes Beirut special for the gay traveler, and for the tourist in general. Beirut's intense gay nightlife is legendary, and unique within the region. Among the most famous dance clubs is the huge Acid, but I personally preferred the smaller Milk. Most bars use the term gay-friendly, rather than gay, and they include Life Bar popular with men and women, Wolf, whose name says it all, popular with bears, cubs and wolves, the moody Avant-Garde in the downtown, and Bertho's own The Bear Arabia Events. There are many others too. I also would spend a lot of time at Bardo, a favorite gathering spot for lunch, dinner and drinks. If you're not a late night person, Bardo will be your choice, as many of the other venues do not get happening until around 1am. I am a night owl, so that was fine by me.

I wasn't there during the summer, but I have heard beach life is fantastic, as well as the rooftop pool scene, something many hotels along the corniche have.

During my time, I had a chance to also visit the ancient city of Byblos on my own, as well as the sprawling ancient complex of Baalbek with one of Bertho's gay groups, and it was lots of fun, all while learning historical elements of the ruins. Modern Lebanon is a draw all its own, but the ancient cultures stretching back thousands of years give depth to a visit, from Phoenician to Greek to Roman to Byzantine and Ottoman ruins.

There are about 2 million tourists who came to this country of 4 million during 2009, yet it never felt over-touristy. I think that is part of the magic – it's always good to visit places just before they become overwhelmed by those pouring in. Economically, tourism is the country's most important sector, representing 25% of GNP. Gay tourism has always been important to the city, with the largest draw often from France and neighboring Arabic countries. It is technically illegal to be gay in Lebanon, but the country suffers cognitive dissonance on this issue. HELEM, the main gay rights group in Lebanon, is working on this issue.

In short, I loved Lebanon and never wanted to leave. The locals made sure I had a good time and I hope to return as often as possible.

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