

LEBANON



REGIONAL INFORMATION



General Info

Lebanon – Gateway to the Middle East

Lebanon is a fascinating mix of past and present, East and West. With an ancient history and monuments to match any country its racial diversity and enmity with Israel has brought many conflicts in the recent past. However Lebanon's ability to reinvent itself has come to the fore yet again and it is quickly developing itself into to the regional gateway once more.

People



Religion & Culture

Christians, Muslims and Druze

Lebanon has always had a mixed population and today you will find Maronite Christians, Catholics, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Druze as well as various other minorities. Historically these people lived together peacefully and harmoniously but ethnic tensions exploded in the mid 1970s and a civil war between the various groups lasted until 1990. Today the tensions have eased but the various groups continue to live primarily amongst their own communities.

Population

Young, educated and growing

Lebanon has a relatively young, educated population. The population stands at around 4m, though there are believed to be about 8-12m Lebanese who live outside the country, primarily in the US and Latin America. Perhaps 90% of these are believed to be Christian. The population growth rate is quite high at around 1.25% per annum. Average life expectancy is almost 73 years old and the literacy rate stands at about 87.4%.

Language

Arabic is the official language of Lebanon

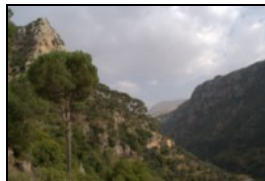
Arabic is the official language of Lebanon but many people speak French and/or English. French has a semi-official role in society and around 20% of the population speak it on a daily basis. This is a legacy of the post World War I mandate given to France by the League of Nations. Other languages that are commonly spoken are Greek, Armenian and Kurdish amongst people who descend from these cultural groups.

Food

Garlic, olive oil, lemon and herbs

Lebanese cuisine is rightly considered to be one of the best in the Middle East. With an abundance of starches, fruits, vegetables, fish and seafood there is something for every palate. Garlic, olive oil, herbs and lemon juice are often used in large quantities. Chicken and lamb are the main meats eaten, Mezze is a common way to eat, and consists of several small dishes which are often shared (similar to Spanish tapas). Lebanese wine is good, the ubiquitous Almaza beer pretty tasty and tea and Turkish coffee are also popular.

Environment



Geography

Roughly half the size of Wales

With a land mass of just 10,452 square kilometres Lebanon is roughly half the size of Wales. Despite its small size it packs in quite a bit of diversity with sandy beaches, mountains of up to 3000m and the Bekaa Valley - stretching about 180km between the Mt Lebanon range and the Anti-Lebanon range, and at an altitude of about 1000m. Lebanon's coast stretches 210km and it shares land borders with Syria and Israel. The Orontes and Litani are the country's two principal rivers.

Flora & Fauna

Subtropical to Alpine species

For such a small country Lebanon boasts over 3000 species of flora. Grapevines, olive and fig trees are common at lower altitudes while cedar, maple, juniper and fir are common on higher ground. Vegetation varies from alpine to subtropical and even desert. Fauna includes jackals, rabbits, gazelles, lizards and snakes. Common bird varieties include thrushes, nightingales, vultures and eagles.

Climate

A typical Mediterranean climate

Lebanon has a Mediterranean climate characterised by hot, dry summers and cool rainy winters. Along the coast summers are particularly hot and humid but heavy dews are very beneficial to agriculture. Winters are the rainy season though rain is usually limited to a small number of days with severe rainfall. The mountains see snow in the winter months and humidity is significantly lower in the summer though temperature variations are much wider.

History & Economy



History

An ancient trading centre

The location of Lebanon between the Asian hinterland and the Mediterranean has meant it has been at the crossroads of historic trading routes and this has conferred on it a multi-cultural legacy and cosmopolitan character. A trading centre since Phoenician times, this role has endured through multiple foreign occupations and even serious internal strife. The mid 70s saw the start of a bloody civil war that pitted each of the religions against one another and even within religious groups there was heavy fighting. Since the 2006 war with Israel Lebanon has returned to peace and has started to quickly rebuild its economy.

Economy

A regional gateway

A typical example of a small open economy (SOE) Lebanon's economy has fared better than most in the region by pursuing trade-friendly business policies and creating a relatively unregulated business environment which has drawn in much foreign investment. Banking in particular has been a success as many use it as a financial base for their dealings between the Middle East and the West. The tourist industry is only beginning to recover from the crippling blow that the 2006 war with Israel dealt it.