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Beirut
Lebanon

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Preface

On paper it shouldn't really work. But despite everything, the allure of the Lebanese capital remains, thanks to its cosmopolitan buzz, dazzling Mediterranean setting and the irrepressibly positive spirit of the locals.

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If Beirut were to be measured on metrics alone it wouldn't stand a chance. Infrastructure is less than adequate, political instability is chronic and inflation is a problem. But Beirut is not the kind of city that likes statistics. Aided by a cosmopolitan population all too happy to show off its city, Levantine charm still operates in the Lebanese capital. Its patina, refined over centuries of tumultuous history, has given it a unique cachet. The Romans, Arabs, Ottomans and French: they all stopped by Beirut to admire the snow-capped Mount Sanine and partake in the *dolce vita*.

Add to all of this the remarkable topography, the sparkling Mediterranean sea, the glorious weather and the succulent food and you can understand why so many have fallen for Beirut.

Meanwhile, shortcomings are almost always turned into opportunities and the can-do attitude is palpable. The gap left by a weak government has led entrepreneurs to provide basic services, while artists and designers have come up with creative solutions to everyday difficulties.

There's also an unmistakable whiff of freedom in a place where no political force really dominates. This gives a freer rein to the sexy pop singer recording her new video clip, the printer bypassing censorship or the young activist lobbying for gay and lesbian rights. In an increasingly conservative region, Beirut is decidedly on the tolerant side.

The city also has its everyday perks. You can keep an open tab at the grocer's, leave your car to be parked with the valet working for the restaurant nearby or call the hairdresser to come and fix your hair at home. If the Middle East was a gentler neighbourhood and Beirutis had a slightly stronger civic sense, this could be the *best* city to live in. — (M)

Why it works:

- 01 Locals are well travelled and at ease in English and French.
- 02 The Lebanese take pride in their service industry. Opening a bank account, printing a brochure or producing a prototype furniture piece can all be done in record time.
- 03 The city offers a buzzing cultural scene with year-round music festivals, film premieres, art shows and book fairs that put other Middle East cities to shame.
- 04 Ski slopes and beaches are less than an hour's drive away.
- 05 The airport is 15 minutes' drive from downtown Beirut, with Paris and Dubai subsequently fewer than five hours away.



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