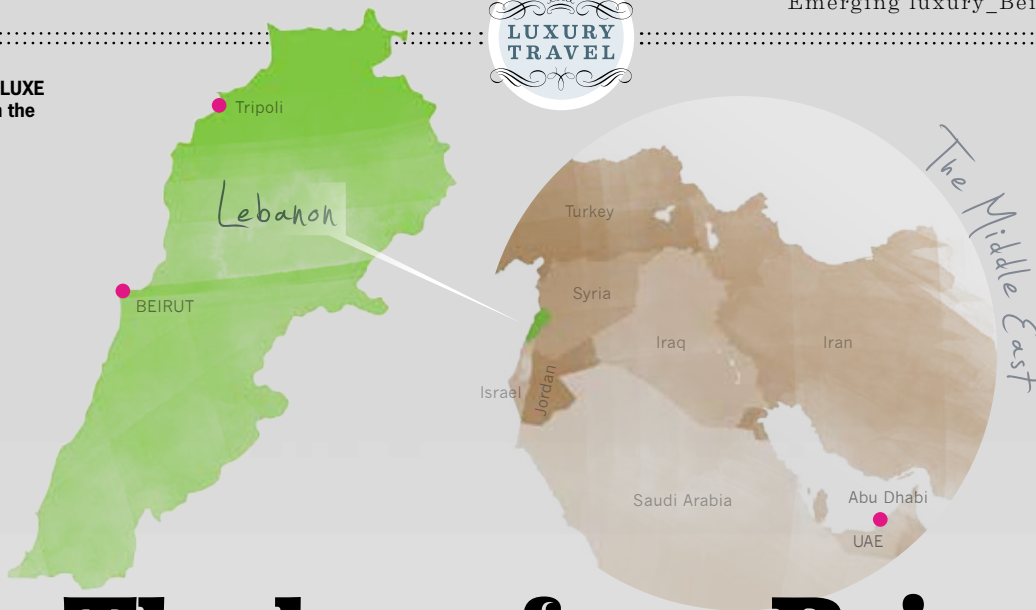




LEBANON GOES LUXE
New meets old in the
Beirut skyline.



The buzz from Beirut

LEBANON'S COSMOPOLITAN CAPITAL IS GOING ALL OUT TO WOO
ADVENTUROUS LUXURY LOVERS, WRITES *Lara Brunt*.





STROLLING ALONG THE CRESCENT-shaped esplanade of Zaitunay Bay in Beirut's Downtown area, it's hard to imagine that this was once a rubbish dump – and the heartland of the country's 15-year civil war. The aquamarine water of the Mediterranean laps languidly at the hulls of multi-million dollar yachts, while Beirut's beautiful people eat al fresco at the high-end restaurants that line the teak promenade.

Zaitunay Bay's shiny new marina is the city's latest effort to shake off its war-tainted reputation. And with a yacht club due to open next year, the city is going all out to recapture the glamour of its 1950s and 60s heyday when it was a playground for the international jet set. That was until 1975, when the city was divided into predominantly Christian and Mus-

lim halves by the infamous Green Line.

The relative calm of recent years has helped Beirut regain its cosmopolitan feel. "Beirut is very peculiar in the Arab world," says Raphael Sabbagha chairman of Zaitunay Bay's development company. "It's quite different and mixed, with western and Oriental influences." The country may be roughly 60 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent Christian, but, in the capital, you're more likely to see vertiginous heels than hijabs, while the nightlife is legendary. Rooftop super club SKYBAR reigns supreme in summer, and the party is set to continue when sister club The One opens next winter in the new waterfront district.

This rapid regeneration means the skyline is a mix of minarets and cranes. Downtown's Ottoman and French man-

STREET SCENES
Below, clockwise from top right: Reconstructed Ottoman and French mandate era buildings in Downtown; Mohammed al-Amin mosque in Martyrs' Square; Intricately detailed incense pots for sale; SKYBAR, one of Beirut's hottest nightspots.

date-era buildings have been beautifully reconstructed and now house luxury boutiques, while the historic souks, destroyed during the conflict, have been replaced with a thoroughly modern shopping mecca featuring over 200 high-end stores.

A raft of five-star hotels have followed, including Le Gray, overlooking the blue-domed Mohammad al-Amin mosque in Martyrs' Square, and Grand Hyatt, which was set to open by the end of 2012. Michelin-starred chefs have also been lured to the city. Yannick Alléno, from Le Meurice in Paris, has opened two ventures in the souks precinct: Sweet Tea, a charming tearoom and patisserie, and STAY, with communal tables and a contemporary French menu.

But it's not all high-end hotels and modern bling. The city's history stretch-



IMAGE COURTESY OF SKYBAR



GLEN PEARSON



GLEN PEARSON



GLEN PEARSON



es back more than 5,000 years with the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans and the French all leaving their mark. Downtown is home to the wonderfully restored Roman Baths, while the ancient city of Baalbek, around 85 kilometres northeast of the capital, has some of best preserved Roman ruins in the world.

Authentic Lebanese food can be found in the city, too. Tawlet, in the newly hip neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael, is "a farmer's kitchen, not a restaurant", says founder Kamal Mouzawak. Village cooks prepare fresh and rustic regional specialties like *kibbeh*, torpedo-shaped croquettes of bulgur, ground meat and spices. "It's private cuisine which you can't access unless you are invited into a home, all cooked by the

women themselves," Mouzawak says.

Beirut has also blossomed into the creative hub of the Middle East, with young designers working with traditional artisans to create innovative art, fashion and furniture. Boutiques such as Starch, in the trendy arts quarter of Saifi Village, are evidence of a thriving scene. Co-founded by couture designer Rabih Kayrouz, Starch mentors up-and-coming Lebanese designers and is a great place to pick up one-off pieces.

Despite its luxury leanings, ongoing political upheavals mean the city hasn't lost its edge. Indeed, the bullet-riddled shell of the old Holiday Inn, scene of some of the fiercest fighting during the 70s, stands incongruously among gleaming new high-rises. But no matter what, you can't hold Beirut back.



IMAGE COURTESY OF LE GRAY

WHERE TO STAY
Le Gray (pictured above)
Rooms from US\$405 (about A\$389) per night and suites from US\$540 (about A\$519) per night plus taxes.
campbellgrayhotels.com/le-gray-beirut.html

GETTING THERE
Etihad flies to Beirut via Abu Dhabi daily from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Return economy fares start from A\$1,750 and business class fares from A\$7,073. Total flight time is around 20 hours.
etihadairways.com



THE RUINS OF ROME
The Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek, 85 kilometres northeast of Beirut, was built around 150AD.

GLEN PEARSON