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Why It's a Good Time to Visit Beirut

by Lindsey Tramuta December 20, 2017



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"Being in Beirut means living in the moment intensely... and sometimes on the edge."

Lebanese architect Aline Asmar d'Amman tells us why we should feel at ease visiting her home city, and what to do once we're there.

With her Beirut- and Paris-based company [Culture in Architecture](#), Lebanese architect Aline Asmar d'Amman has led private residential projects across Europe and the Middle East since 2011. For her most ambitious project to date, she oversaw the artistic direction of the [Hôtel de Crillon's](#) four-year renovation and the interior design of some of the Paris hotel's historic spaces and suites. Though deeply inspired by travel, her affections lie squarely with Beirut, her first love and home until the start of her career, where she returns regularly. Following recent protests in Beirut in reaction to [President Trump's recent announcements](#), she spoke to us about why you should feel at ease visiting the city, where to eat and shop, and how to navigate once you're there.

Why is it a good time to visit Beirut?

Despite recent and ongoing political tensions, visiting Beirut is a must. It's a city of diversity and multiculturalism. Being in Beirut means living in the moment intensely... and sometimes on the edge. The Lebanese will do anything to make a tourist

On the ground, the city is buzzing with creativity. You can sense it from the proliferation of artistic, literary, and design fairs (like the [Beirut Design Fair](#)) in addition to many new and renovated museums. For example, the legendary [Sursock Museum](#) was renovated by Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Jacques Aboukhaled and hosts highly anticipated exhibitions alongside the founder Nicolas Sursock's personal collection.

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It's a city that upholds its authenticity; it is an anti-Dubai. A place where intensity has great resonance.

You've been going back and forth between Paris and Beirut for years. What do you look forward to most when you land in Beirut for another visit?

First and foremost, Beirut means coming home, so I look forward to the comfort food at my parent's house and sleeping in my bedroom filled with books. Beyond that, I mainly enjoy seeing the horizon. The Mediterranean Sea is the beginning of everything—the alphabet, knowledge, endless movement, and better tomorrows. There's nothing I miss more when I leave Beirut than to be able to look far and refuel with this enchanting view.

Courtesy Hotel Albergo

The Albergo Hotel, a Relais & Châteaux property, makes you feel like you're staying at the mansion of a well-to-do Lebanese friend.

Imagine you're a traveler looking to experience Beirut for the first time (and won't have family to crash with!). Where would you recommend staying?

I love the [Albergo Hotel](#) for its authentic feel of a Lebanese mansion. There's something poetic about it that you won't find in any other new large hotel. I also like [Villa Clara](#), which pioneered the ultra-local, boutique approach to hotels in the city. I also have a great affection for the [Warwick Palm Beach hotel](#), where the first Sky Bar was born. It's owned by close friends! Of course, many international hotels have opened in recent years, from the Four Seasons to Gray to Kempinski, which benefits from one of the rare sandy beaches a few kilometers from the city center, but there's still room to invent the perfect place with the right balance of local culture and modern living. After all, Beirut is about the past and the future.

One of my all-time favorite restaurants in Beirut is [Liza](#), kitted out like a traditional Lebanese house. With the help of Maria Ousseimi, another fantastic designer, the space was transformed into the most whimsical, contemporary interior that highlights different moods during the day and at night. I also love [Tawlet](#) from Kamal Mouzawak, which serves a menu of homemade, traditional food from various villages and rotates weekly. But it should be said that Beirut is also about nightlife—it's a city that never sleeps. [Capitole's](#) rooftop and the BO18 are musts, though each with very different vibes: The first overlooks the city and the second is industrial, buried in the ground with radical architecture by Bernard Khoury. But no one should leave Beirut without a day trip north to [Al Jammal](#). It's an authentic piece of heaven in a crystal-clear creek with a gorgeous pebble shore, exquisite fish, and a memorable view of the Mediterranean.

Courtesy Liza

The restaurant Liza is one of Aline's "all-time favorites."

And shop?

Stop by [Maison Rabih Kayrouz](#) for the designer's latest collections (the epitome of chic!). My all time favorite Lebanese jewelry designer is [Selim Mou-zannar](#), who is inspired by Phoenician stories. I also recently discovered [Karma el Khalil's](#) statement pieces and the very vibrant designs of [Nadine Ghosn](#); both designers elevate the Lebanese flag so high with wit and personality at the [Sylvie Saliba](#) fine jewelry store. Most of the local designers are located in downtown Beirut and on the Rue du Liban or in the Monot area: [Sarah's Bags](#), [Bokja](#) (home goods), [l'Artisan du Liban](#), and [Orient 499](#) are must-visit shopping destinations if you're looking for goods created with love and fine craftsmanship. I encourage everyone to visit [Starch](#), a foundation founded in part by Rabih Kayrouz, that supports emerging Lebanese designers. Since books are my obsession, I would be remiss not to mention [Librairie Antoine](#) and [Librairie Al Bourj](#), run by the incredibly knowledgeable and kind Chadia Tueni. Niche book editions and beautiful conversations make these visits very special.

How can travelers understand the city before going?

I recommend reading *Landscapes of Lebanon: Twenty Poems for One Love* by Nadia Tueni, which leads the reader from the sea to the mountains and opens the imagination about Beirut's culture. There's also the very historical work by Samir Kassir called [Beirut](#), by far one of the best books written on the city's origins, history, and memory. I'm always mesmerized by the power of words and their eternal echo beyond life and politics.

Do's and don'ts: How should travelers navigate the city?

Don't be in a rush! Unfortunately, our streets and buildings are not numbered but Beirut guides are now available and very helpful. If you ask locals along your way, addresses will sound like surreal descriptions à la "around the corner after the gas station, then you see a grocery shop, then it's third building on the right" but it's ultimately the best way to find your destination. It's a city in which chaos and order come together magically. You'll never get lost and you'll meet great characters along the way—just be open to it!

Any golden etiquette rules?

A "Bonjour" is a sufficient greeting when entering an establishment—most locals are bilingual if not trilingual (Arabic, French, English) so it's not unusual to hear, in one sentence: *Hi, Kifak, ça va? But choukran* ("thank you" in Arabic) remains the word to repeat as there will be many things to express your thanks for; best to commit it to memory.

What do you hope visitors will take away from their stay in Beirut?

That they leave with another perspective on the entire region. The future is about living together and building bridges between cultures and religions, just like Beirut has done for thousands of years.