

LEBANON

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LEBANON

5.06.10 - 25.06.10 - **595 km - 20 days**

Lebanon is divided in two separated worlds - Muslim and Christian. Being in this country you can't miss and not feel the atmosphere of tension and war. If, however, you put aside political issues, you can really enjoy the beauty of this fairy-tale land, with magnificent mountains, wonderful sea, fabulous French towns and friendly, helpful people. We had a chance to spend time by the seaside, touch the snow in the middle of summer, go deep under the ground and get to know the lots of great people!! Our three week tour in Lebanon ended in Beirut, from where we flew to Cyprus.

CULTURE DIFFERENCES

In Christian areas, Western culture. In Muslim cities, we encountered similar situations as in Syria.

STEREOTYPES - FACTS AND MYTHS

"Lebanon is a reach, flourishing "Switzerland of Middle East."

We heard so before we came to Lebanon. We were expecting this country to be our asylum from Syrian overwhelming experiences. First Lebanese city on our way was Tripoli. We entered the town and we were in vain looking for any traces of promised Switzerland. It looked same or even worse than in Syria. It was same dirty, same loud and chaotic, drivers more crazy (real maniacs!!!), and constant presence of solders, road barriers and ubiquitous war damage made us feel really confused and unsafe. After two days, on the way to Beirut, we passed a tunnel between Tripoli and Batroun. Suddenly it became clean, reach and tidy. We felt like we've entered some French town. It emerged that by crossing the tunnel, we crossed also a magic line which separates a Christian world from Muslim world. We entered a Christian area, run by Maronites. Only there, in Batroun, we got to know that Lebanon is divided between Christians and Muslims. And in fact, in Christian areas it feels like in western Europe. People are very rich, drive fancy cars, live in luxury and have quite an easy life. Every household has a servant from Ethiopia or some other African country. In this part you can't see any traces of war. In our opinion term for Lebanon as "Switzerland of Middle East" is a stereotype and myth because it doesn't concern all country. The "Switzerland" might be called only Beirut with surrounding Christian territory. The rest of the country is damaged, poor and neglected.

"Hezbollah is a terrorist organization."

Like most Europeans, fed with American propaganda, we had a unilateral vision of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Only after we entered Lebanon, we noticed that all this is not that clear. We met many Lebanese who hate Hezbollah and blame the organization for Israeli raids. We met also

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many Lebanese who perceive Hezbollah as a redeemer and a defender against Israel. We don't know which opinion is right. We just want to highlight that the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon is not that obviously negative as we hear in European news. We got to know as well that most of European countries don't perceive Hezbollah as terroristic organization. Below we want to quote Wikipedia: "Hezbollah literally "Party of God" is a Shi'a Islamist political and paramilitary organisation based in Lebanon. Hezbollah is also a major provider of social services, operating schools, hospitals, and agricultural services for thousands of Lebanese Shi'a, and plays a significant role in Lebanese politics. It is regarded as a resistance movement throughout much of the Arab and Muslim world. Multiple countries, including Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, have condemned actions by Hezbollah, while Syria and Iran have generally been supportive of the organisation. Most European countries have refused to classify Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, but the United States, Egypt, Israel, Australia, and Canada regard it in whole or in part as such."

DANGERS

In Lebanon we experienced first act of violence in our entire trip so far. Once a small boy jumped on the road and started to beg: "One dollar, hello, one dollar!" When Adela passed him without reaction, his brother jumped out from the roadside and tried to hit her with a bat. That was our "welcome to Lebanon" just after we passed the border. We had some other similar situations with kids. We are really sorry to write that it always happened in Muslim areas. We are even not sure if they were Lebanese or some refugees. Sad.

We are not trying to prove that Muslim parts of Lebanon are worse or more dangerous. We just write how it was. It happened to us, it doesn't mean that it will happen to you!

Some problem for us at the beginning was an ubiquitous army. We felt very uncomfortable the first day when soldiers stopped us at the road check point, and started to search our panniers pointing cocked gun on us. After some time, we got used to it and we didn't mind it anymore.

War. Tension is in the air. When we approached Baalbek people warned us, that there is some shooting between two family gangs in the city. They said that is normal and that we just need to wait until next day to see what will happen. The next day the army managed to solve the problem so we enter to the town without any problems.

LANGUAGE

Arabic and French. In Arabic parts, don't expect people to speak French but in Christian parts both - French and English are widely known. Some people in Christian parts, even though they are Arabs, prefer to speak only French, to emphasize they predominance over less educated people from Muslim parts.

VISA

We entered Lebanon at the Talkalkh border crossing. We got our visas at the border for free and they were valid for 30 days. The only thing you need to provide is a destination address. So, you need an invitation from some Lebanese person or a hotel address. You don't even need to have a hotel booking confirmation. They just want you to write anything about accommodation. If you'll stay at friends, they might call them to check if it's true. Situation between Lebanon and Israel is tense. If you have any trace of evidence that you've been to Israel (stamps in your passport or even tickets or some souvenirs), they won't let you in.

OVERNIGHT/ CAMPING

No problems with wild camping in Lebanon. Just sometimes it was difficult to find a place out of military zone.

WATER

Tap water is not good. We were asking staff at petrol stations to give us drinking water from their dispensers.

ROADS/ TRAFFIC

Maniac drivers!!!!!! In big cities like Tripoli or Beirut, traffic is very dense. Everybody beeps and drives as he wants. On the highway, they drive against the traffic flow and buses stop in the middle of the road to let people out! Stay vigilant because they are really crazy! Roads are good and quite well signposted. We've never been cycling on an unpaved road. The good thing is that all signs are spelled also in Latin alphabet, so it's easy to find the right way.

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ROUTE

We entered to Lebanon from the north, through Talkalakh border crossing. Next, along the coast, we headed south. On our route were Tripoli, Bartoun, Byblos (Jbeil) and Jounie. From Jounie we turned to Harisa, where we decided to move to the mountains to see the famous Lebanese cedars and to try to conquer the highest peak - the as-Sauda Kurnat (3083 m above sea level). So from Harisa, we rode back by Jounie, Byblos and Batroun, heading to Chekka and then to Bcharre, from where we finally came up Kurnat as-Saud. Because of the snow on the road, we didn't attack the very peak, but anyway we still managed to get the pass for 2,680 meters above sea level, which for all three of us was the current record. After, we rode down to the ancient ruins of Baalbek. Then we rode to Zahleh, from where we went back to the mountains, to see the Jeita grotto. Our three-week tour in Lebanon ended in Beirut, from where we flew to Cyprus.

MAPS

In Tripoli, just after we entered Lebanon, we met a French guy. He was heading to Syria, so we exchanged with him our Syrian map for Lebanese one. Generally in Christian parts, you can find easily tourist info, and get maps from there. You can also obtain more detailed maps. No problem.

CURRENCY

The currency is Lebanese Pound (LBP). It's so small that we give you currency exchange rate for 1000 LBP.

1 EUR = 1850 LBP

1 US Dollar = 1 330 LBP

1 PLN = 474 LBP

(October 2010)

PRICES

- Falafel in Tripoli - 1500 LBP
- Manoushi with zaatar 1000-1500 LBP
- Manoushi with cheese and veg - 2000-2500 LBP
- Coca cola 1,5l - 1500 LBP
- Mineral water 2l - 1000 LBP
- Oranges 1kg - 500-750 LBP
- Bananas 1kg - 1000 LBP
- Shawarma in Beirut - 3500 LBP
- Postcard in Beirut - 750 LBP
- Post stamp to Europe - 1000LBP

In Muslim parts it might happen that you will have to bargain. Prices usually are displayed so it's useful to learn Arabic numbers.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE

In Christian parts absolutely no problems with money exchange. In Muslim parts, you can also find an exchange office. We exchanged some money on the black market with a guy at the border. The rate was O.K. You can also exchange money in hotels and banks.

BANKS/ CARDS/ CASH MACHINES

In Muslim parts it works more like in Syria - carry cash because it's possible to pay with a card only in upmarket hotels, restaurants and shops. In Christian parts, no problems with card payments. You can also pay in this part of Lebanon with US Dollars. From the cash machine you can also pay out US Dollars.

INTERNET

No problems with internet in Christian parts.

BIKE SHOPS

We saw one in Beirut.

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