

The Lebanon Mountain Trail Celebrating a Shared Heritage

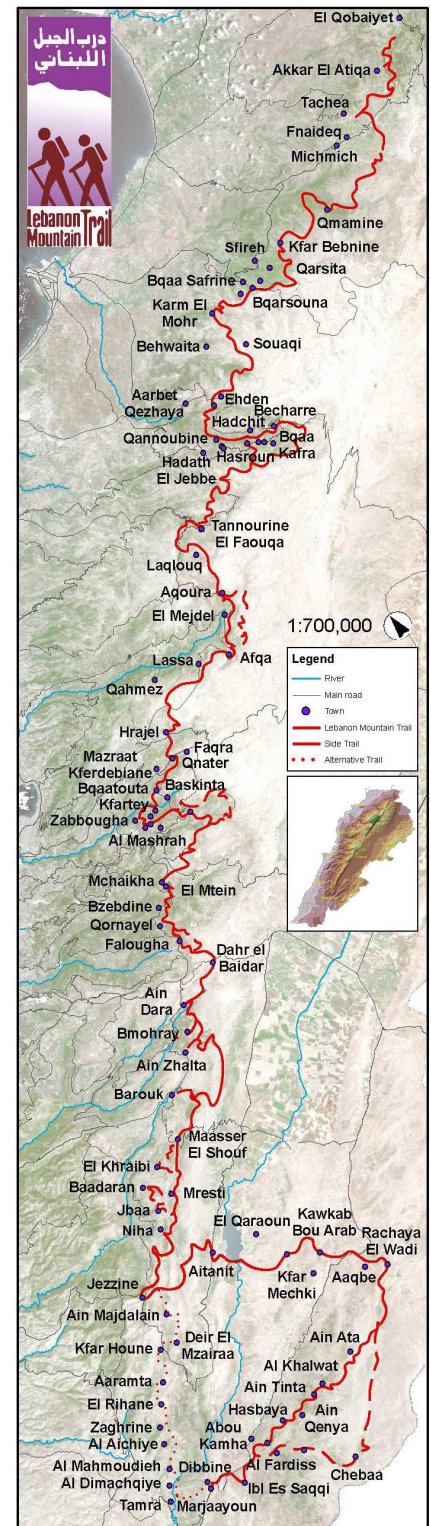
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1. What is the Lebanon Mountain Trail?

ECODIT is establishing the Lebanon Mountain Trail (LMT) under a two-year (2005-2007) Cooperative Agreement with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The LMT is an engaging 400-km national hiking trail running from north to south Lebanon. Through environmentally- and socially-responsible rural tourism, the trail helps to expand economic opportunities in rural areas; mobilize volunteers, youth and community groups for a worthwhile cause; and promote governance at all levels. The LMT demonstrates the determination of Lebanon's mountain communities to conserve their unique natural and cultural heritage.

2. What can visitors of the LMT expect to see and discover?

A journey on the trail will bring the Lebanese from around the world closer to their land, to their history, and to each other. Foreign visitors of the LMT can discover Lebanon's natural beauty, connect with her warm and friendly people, and experience age-old culture and culinary delights... On the LMT, one can see and discover:

- Towering snow-capped mountains and deep lush valleys
- Magnificent vistas overlooking the Mediterranean
- Three nature reserves and a World Heritage Site
- Medieval and Ottoman castles
- Roman roads/temples and Byzantine churches
- Rock inscriptions by order of Roman Emperor Hadrian
- Old red-tiled roof villages
- Fascinating legends
- Palaces of the Emirs
- Birthplaces of literary giants
- Hermitages, rock-cut monasteries, and heritage museums
- And more...

3. How was the path of the Lebanon Mountain Trail determined?

Although the LMT is young, most of the trails that make up the LMT are old and have been used for centuries. The LMT project team worked closely with local communities, seasoned trekkers and tour operators to determine the best route for the trail. These same individuals and groups will play key roles in the long-term management, development and maintenance of the trail. The project team also benefited from the expert advice of US organizations such as The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), and the US Forest Service (USFS).

4. Visiting and Walking on the LMT

The LMT is divided into 24 one day-sections, each between 10- and -20 km long, with possibilities for overnight stays in lodging facilities such as Bed & Breakfasts and campsites. Between April 20 and June 5, ECODIT organized four regional thru-walks covering the LMT in its entity. In each walk, around 10 people walked up to 9 day-sections and provided prominent

mark ups on the draft section-maps, guidebook and physical conditions of the LMT. ECODIT will build upon those mark ups to publish the first edition of the LMT section maps and guidebook.

The LMT Project is also implementing pilot activities to enhance rural attractions and lodging along the trail, including bed & breakfast facilities, campsites, and scenic overlooks. ECODIT has already selected 10 family houses and will bring them up to standards to operate as family run Bed and Breakfast along the LMT. ECODIT is helping to renovate two historic town squares, set up visitor information points, co-organize rural events and develop a literary trail in and around Baskinta, the home village of many renowned of Lebanese writers and poets.

During the summer of 2007, ECODIT will organize the first complete walk of the entire LMT. A core team of experienced long-distance trekkers will undertake this fabulous 25- to 30-day premiere trekking journey.

5. Looking Ahead

Developing and maintaining the LMT is a never-ending process. To ensure that the trail has a firm foundation and will become a hot destination for generations of nature and culture lovers, the LMT project is currently focusing on strengthening public support for the trail; mobilizing volunteers to upgrade important trail sections; installing trail markers and information panels; developing the LMT website; producing the LMT guidebook; setting up model lodging and resting places; training local guides and hospitality providers and handing over the management of the LMT to the LMT Association.

6. The LMT Association

While volunteers help build the trail, the LMT Association will build lasting connections among the people to help protect and promote the trail. The LMT Association will oversee the long-term management of the trail; its objectives are to:

- Develop, maintain and protect the Lebanon Mountain Trail;
- Protect the natural, cultural and architectural heritage and landmarks along the trail; and
- Enhance economic opportunities durably by promoting responsible tourism.

The LMT Association has developed its articles of incorporation and by-laws and is registered with the Lebanese Authorities. Its eleven founding members come from a diversity of backgrounds including development NGOs, urban planning, law, tour operation, etc. Most recently, they elected an executive board whose focus for the coming year is to recruit members, hand over from the LMT project and accept donations. Membership in the LMT Association is open to Lebanese and foreign nationals.

7. Benefits of the Lebanon Mountain Trail

The LMT project will affect economic, social and environmental conditions in the villages where it passes. The LMT also seeks to promote healthy living, outdoor recreation as well as fresh and healthy rural food.

7.1. Enhance rural economic opportunities in the villages

The LMT project will encourage local inhabitants of the villages passing along the trail to remain in their towns in pursuit of new income opportunities. In fact, by developing the trail, rural economic opportunities will be enhanced through the development and promotion of lodging facilities. Also new jobs will be created for local inhabitants of the villages, human resources will be needed to guide and lodge the hikers, maintain the trail, deliver information in specific centers, promote attractions and organize events. In addition to that, the flow of hikers in villages will encourage alternative forms of rural development by buying handicrafts and fresh cottage products.

7.2. Conserve biodiversity and natural resources

The project enhances the management of protected areas by pointing their importance to visitors and by encouraging them to protect them. Moreover, the LMT guidebook (forthcoming) will help hikers recognize and identify the most prominent plants along the trail as it will feature the most important plants in each section. Endemic, endangered, rare and threatened species will not be featured to minimize wild picking and over harvesting.

7.3. Promote eco-tourism and rural tourism in Lebanon

The LMT will enhance opportunities for ecotourism and encourage people to invest more in this sector. The LMT will offer regionally-balanced tourism services in the form of programs and packages for tour operators and individual hikers. This will attract eco-friendly visitors and foreign hikers and trekkers, especially Europeans, who will discover that a journey to Lebanon is easy (short flight) and equally interesting compared to other long-distance trails in other parts of the world.

Tour operators encourage hiking as a recreational activity and teach hikers about environmentally friendly habits. Thus, people are more aware about nature and the potential hazards that could be generated. The tour operators organizing this type of trips are micro-enterprises that are not recognized by the ministry of tourism. They usually operate with less than 10 employees and constitute the backbone of the ecotourism sector in Lebanon as they introduce and promote ecotourism activities in the country. Because of their distinctive makeup, they have not yet obtained a proper classification or designation from the ministry. They cannot be classified with the regular tour operators since they do not operate under the same standards and do offer the same type of services.

7.4. Advocate Local Governance

Passing through or near almost 75 towns and villages with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, the LMT will bring together very diverse communities and foster cultural dialogue between visitors and local inhabitants. By increasing and diversifying the source of revenues, the LMT will contribute to the development of civil society and local governance. In fact, the project will promote volunteerism from scout organizations, local communities and NGOs – all of who will play an important role in establishing and maintaining the trail in the long-run.

8. About ECODIT – www.ecodit.com

ECODIT is a US small business with a stellar reputation as a reliable, cost-effective and results-oriented international development firm with 13 years of experience in international development; a track record in promoting sound natural resource and environmental/water management, good governance, and sustainable economic growth; and proven ability to provide effective project/contract leadership drawing on diverse resources of several partners. ECODIT has worked with donor agencies, governments, local communities, NGOs and businesses in over 25 countries on four continents. ECODIT has delivered sustainable results on projects ranging in size from quick turnaround assessments and evaluations to multi-year, multi-million dollar projects. We have proven experience in designing, managing and implementing natural resource and environmental/water management projects that promote good governance and economic growth sustainably –e.g., The Lebanon Mountain Trail project, the Morocco Water Resource Sustainability and Watershed Protection Management activities, and the Jordan Wastewater Treatment and Reuse for Small Communities project.

Core funding for the LMT project was provided by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). ECODIT conceived and designed the LMT project, and is implementing it under a two-year (2005–2007) Cooperative Agreement with USAID.