

TRAVEL

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BEIRUT IS BACK...
and it's beautiful

▲ A crowd of people watches the sunset on the seaside near Beirut.
▼ Downtown Beirut.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

“It’s a traffic light,” I say although it’s somewhat self-explanatory. “You’re not stopping, are you?” says Anna. “Oh don’t be so ridiculous! As if anyone’s going to pay any attention to that!”

She has a point. We lived in Beirut for eight months back in 1995, a time when there were not only no traffic lights, there were also no road signs, no speed limits, no traffic police, and, indeed no apparent traffic laws. None.

Our friend Khaled’s means of negotiating jams was to take his gun out of his glove compartment, strap it to his under-arm, and if the traffic was really bad, wave it around a bit.

As it turns out, the lights are a mixed success: some people stop, some people don’t. A very Lebanese solution. You can do what you want, but you may have a super-charged Lebanese yuppie ram you in the back. Ah, yes, the memories come flooding back. It’s that signature Beirut cocktail of adventure and excitement — with just a hint of sudden death.

Fourteen years ago, Anna and I wrote the first post-civil-war guidebook to Lebanon. I don’t think either of us have felt the same about anywhere since: Beirut looms over our lives like ... well, like the kind of psychotic ex-lover who you worry might strangle you in your sleep.

But it’s thrilling to be back. We cruise along the seafloor Corniche, and around the reconstructed downtown. On Martyrs’ Square, Beirut’s ground zero, the southernmost point of the old Green Line that divided Muslim West Beirut from Christian East Beirut, we reel at the sight of a Virgin Megastore and practically faint when we see a Dunkin’ Donuts. Although — thank God! — the hulking Holiday Inn with its bullet holes and bomb craters is still there, as derelict and abandoned as ever.

It’s beautiful, Beirut, beautiful and ugly and pock-marked and damaged and glamorous and unstable and exciting and just a bit mentally unhinged. It’s the Elizabeth Taylor of the Mediterranean. Or it would be if you replaced the words “alcohol” with “Israel” and “a string of unsuitable marriages” with “15 years of civil war.”

And like a hardened celebrity hack, I’ve learned the hard way not to be taken in by its appearance. Because Beirut is back. Again. It’s having a moment. Another one. There are two spanking new hotels — Le Gray, a sister hotel to the feted One Aldwych in London and Carlisle Bay in Antigua, has just opened; and a Four Seasons, is opening soon. What’s more, this year the *New York Times* nominated it its number one destination in the world.

Yadda, yadda yadda. Talk to the hand ... I’ve spent the past 14 years telling people how great Lebanon is. How vast the mountains and sublime the food and empty the ruins and friendly the people and cool the bars. And periodically they’ve even believed me. And then news breaks out. There’s always too much news in Lebanon: 2005 when prime minister Rafik Hariri got blown up by a car bomb; 2006 when Israel subjected the country to a month-long bombardment, blowing up the airport, highways, bridges, electricity sub-stations, and

killing some 1,000 or so people; winter 2008, when Hezbollah gunmen took to the streets.

Could reports of a new dawn really be true this time? I hope so, I really do, but I worry that I’ll jinx it somehow. I said the same when our guide came out in 1996, when we did a new edition in 1998, and when I returned to see the south after the Israelis pulled out in 2000.

And I’m not the only one. When I talk to Nehme Abouzeid, the publisher of *Time Out Beirut*, he starts telling me about the record-breaking forecasts for next summer, and then has to interrupt himself: “I mean, if everything stays the same ... We always have to say that in Lebanon, because you never know. God willing ...”

He speaks from experience: he started publishing *Time Out* in the spring of 2006, with a brand new office, a new editor, new staff. And then the Israeli bombardment began. “It just came out of nowhere. No one was expecting it. I was in Switzerland at a meeting where I’d just been telling people how, even at the height of the war, the airport never closed. And then came the news: the airport was closed. It was so shocking. Particularly for the youngsters, I think. The war was just something that their parents talked about. They’d never had any experience of it.”

The magazine closed for two years, but it’s back now, presiding over a nightlife scene that the recent unpleasantness seems only to have enhanced.

We wander through Gemmayzeh — which in our time had been an atmospheric but entirely ramshackle quarter, and has now become fashionable, stuffed full of trendy bars and huge 4x4s disgorging chic young things — and then head up the hill to a bar called Centrale.

To get to it, we go down a jasmine-lined, floodlit walkway into a bombed-out building encased in wire, up inside an industrial wood-paneled lift, and out into a long, narrow, metal tube, one of whose walls had been removed to give a view over the Beirut skyline. Maybe I’ve caught a touch of Lebanese hyperbole but it just seems to be the most amazing bar in the world.

“Do bars like this exist in London and it’s just that we don’t go to them?” asks Anna as we sip our perfect cocktails and gaze on the perfect people. It seems unlikely, and, anyway, in London they’d be stuffed with trendies with annoying haircuts, whereas the Lebanese are beguiling, fluent in three languages, English, French and Arabic, often in the same sentence. “Bonsoir habibi, how’s it going?” is their version of “Hello.”

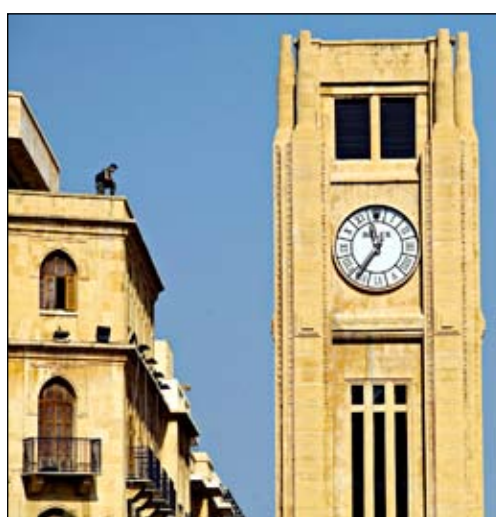
It’s so impossibly glamorous, Beirut. The people so cosmopolitan. The nightlife so sophisticated. There’s nowhere else like it in the Middle East, invigorated as it is by its sizeable diaspora, who fly back from London and Paris and Sydney and LA, with a thriving gay scene (although homosexuality is officially illegal), a free press, and an urban fashion code that encompasses everything from micro skirts to full-length abaya and veil.

Khaled shows up in his latest 4x4, which has the size and maneuverability of a tank, and whisks us around the city.

“That’s the Skybar,” he says. “Where a bottle of Cristal champagne costs US\$10,000 and they deliver it to your table with fireworks to make

On the terraces of its fabulous bars and in the lobbies of its stunning new hotels, residents of the Lebanese capital are daring to believe the good times are back

BY CAROLE CADWALLADR
THE OBSERVER, LONDON



sure that everyone knows. People don’t bother to drink it usually.

“That’s White’s — probably the most exclusive nightclub. See the cars outside. Look at those Ferraris. You know the popular thing right now? Plastic surgery loans. My secretary got a pair of new breasts with one. You know there are 10 million plastic surgery procedures a year in Lebanon? And we have only four million people!”

But then showing off is in the Lebanese DNA. Khaled wears the biggest Rolex you’ll ever see or “Lebanese travel insurance” as he used to call it. “You can cash it in anywhere in the world.”

He’s probably right. Khaled always seemed to us to be Lebanon personified, enterprising, clever, brilliant at business. Like most of the Lebanese he’s a “businessman” — something involving mobiles phones, possibly, I’ve never quite caught the details. Anna and I once watched him try to negotiate a 20 percent discount off a suit in Selfridges in central London. “Khaled,” I said, “in England, we have what is known as a price.” Needless to say, he got the discount.

It’s so flashy, so very un-PC. In a shop in the chi-chi suburb of Achrafieh, I spot a stuffed polar bear for sale. A stuffed baby polar bear. And Gordon Campbell Gray, the hotelier behind Le Gray, tells me about going out for dinner and being offered bluefin tuna. “I said, ‘Isn’t that an endangered species?’ And the host leaned over and whispered, ‘Not here.’”

But, oh God, the food! It’s the food of your dreams, the apotheosis of all Middle Eastern cuisine, made from only the freshest ingredients, beautifully presented, and served

in the kind of abundance that suggests it might be your last meal on earth. At the end of dinner with Khaled there seems to be more food left on the table than when we started (including a platter of little birds, roasted in pomegranate molasses, complete with their heads and little beaks, and a plate of raw liver so fresh it’s practically quivering).

“In Lebanon,” says Khaled, leaning back and spreading his arms out in an expansive fashion, “we have everything. We have the Mediterranean. We have classical ruins. We have ...”

“Religious extremists,” I say. “Armed militiamen.”

“Exactly. If you want religious extremists, we have religious extremists. If you want mountains, we have mountains. If you want lingerie shows on the ski slopes of Mount Lebanon, we have lingerie shows. We have everything. Everything.”

It’s true. They do. Even Beirut manages to be all things to all people. We leave the flashy bars of downtown and head south, but we get lost and end up in Haret Hreik, the suburb where Hezbollah had its headquarters, flattened in 2006. We drive down an avenue that’s strung with the portraits of “martyrs” — the unmistakable “heroic”-style photographs of dreamy-looking young men and women who’ve gone to their maker.

The old boast about Lebanon used to be that you could swim and ski in the same day. But even more astounding is that you can swim and tour Hezbollah country in the same day. We spend a day driving to Baalbeck to see, again, the amazing Roman ruins (“How many visitors today?” I ask. “Ten,” the guardian replies. And these, bear in mind, are some of the finest Roman ruins anywhere in the world). And then through the hot, dry Bekaa, not so much a valley as a high-altitude plain, with its Hezbollah flags and roadside effigies of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, waving his machine gun in the direction of Israel. And then through the military checkpoints and over Mount Lebanon, on a high and lonely pass where Bedouin graze their sheep.

In one direction, there’s the Mediterranean, in the other Syria. And then it’s down through lush, cloudy orchards, the villages of the Christian heartlands, with shrines to the Virgin Mary on every corner until, finally, we reach the tiny port of Batroun, where there are women in bikinis lounging on the beach.

It seems impossible that this is the same continent, let alone the same country, just an hour or so apart. The mystery isn’t why the Lebanese tried to kill each other for 15 bloodthirsty, murderous years; it’s why they finally stopped.

I meet Gordon Campbell Gray on the roof terrace of his hotel, Le Gray, and it seems sure to be a huge international hotel hit, a *Wallpaper** sensation ... if everything stays the same. God willing, etc. Elections were held in Lebanon in spring, and it still hasn’t got a government. Squashed up against Syria and Israel, its constitution delicately balancing the rights of 17 different religions, its destiny has always been at the mercy of greater Middle Eastern politics. “How many years are you behind schedule?” I ask Campbell Gray.

“Oh God, years. We were very close to opening when the Israelis started bombing. It was very difficult to crank it back up after that.”

“Everybody assumed he’d pull out,” Nehme Abouzeid tells me. “It’s quite amazing that he hasn’t.” And when I repeat his comments to Campbell Gray, he says, “I know! I’m quite the accidental hero. Of course, I was just too stupid to think about pulling out. It didn’t even occur to me.”

But then Campbell Gray has been through the same sort of Lebanese love affair that Anna and I have. Rapt adoration, mostly; interspersed with moments of appalled horror. “The social snobbery is just something else, isn’t it? I mean even the nationality of your help is a status thing.” He came out for a weekend in the mid-1990s and just fell in love with the place. “Oh it was just wonderful. It was so beautiful but such a mess. There were all those security checkpoints yet it felt quite safe. And the people were incredible.”

And he has persevered with the project against all odds. “You know every week we get asked to open a hotel somewhere but this is where I wanted to do it. It really is just the most exciting city on earth. It’s not perfect. That’s what makes it, I think. You can wander around at two in the morning, quite safe, and I leave my car unlocked, but there’s still an edge, isn’t there?”

There is. Even with Dunkin’ Donuts and TGI Fridays. In 1995, they’d just started bulldozing the ruins of the old downtown. Solidere, a private company owned by former prime minister Hariri, bought the entire area and was hell-bent on total transformation. We watched ancient, decrepit, bullet-riddled Mandate-era mansions being pulled down, and worried that they were going to turn the place into a new Dubai. But the restoration work is impressive. Street after street of hand-carved stonework, beautifully restored mosques and churches, and floodlit Roman ruins and new fountains and designer boutiques bursting forth all over.

And if the new “souks” are just another shopping mall, and there are too many luxury apartment blocks for my taste, at least the people have come back. In the evening, promenading families eating ice creams come out, and women in the streetside cafes smoke nargilehs.

It’s outside the Solidere zone that the real horrors are happening: the last surviving seafloor mansions are being torn down to make way for marble skyscrapers. And in lovely Jbeil — or Byblos — just up the coast, with its Crusader castle and Phoenician fishing port, they’ve bulldozed the beach! A flashy private “beach club” has been built right on top of it.

But then this — backhanders, corruption, uncontrolled development — is as much a part of the Lebanese way as roasting songbirds and driving backwards at speed the wrong way down the hard shoulder. It’s a beautiful country, blessed by the gods, yet cursed by them too. As I write this, a week after I return, it still doesn’t have a government. But Beirut is back. And the *New York Times* is right: it should be your number one destination. All things being well. God willing, etc etc. Or as we say, touch wood.