

# Lebanon's New Breed of Hostages

There's no escaping it: Lebanon means variety. From the crumbling grandeur of Beirut to the majestic ruins at Baalbek, and from rugged Mount Lebanon to the graceful Bekaa valley, Lebanon packs a lot into its modest borders serving the foreign tourist with vistas and historical sites galore that are as varied as the extravagant cuisine.

It takes some effort to fall in love with modern Beirut. Most visitors never see further than the high-rise apartment blocks and bedeviling traffic jams. But beyond the off-putting veneer of concrete there is a kind of dilapidated charm. Beirut is a curious blend of east and west, and first and third worlds; its raucous street vendors are oriental while decaying neoclassical mansions hark back to the city's heyday as the 'Paris of the Middle East'.

Lebanon is trying hard to recapture the luster it lost with the war which, from 1975 to 1990, cost some 150,000 Lebanese lives and left the country in a ruinous state with an infrastructure bill in the tens of billions of US dollars. Today, after nearly a decade of peace, the country has maintained its steady course to recovery helped to a large degree by a competitive, open-market commercial orientation, and the most liberal banking regime in the Middle East. Lebanon has few restrictions on foreign investment and cheap labor is plentiful. Solidere, the corporation that is rebuilding Beirut's downtown, is optimistic that the medieval heart of the capital, all but obliterated by the street fighting, will be a fully functional city center in the first years of the new millennium.

Despite its modest size, the country has a number of completely different geographical regions. There's a very narrow coastal strip which contains all the major cities, with Tripoli and Tyre respectively north and south and roughly equidistant from Beirut. Inland, the Mount Lebanon range rises steeply to a dramatic set of peaks and ridges - the highest, Qornet as-Sawda, is over 3000m. Further inland, the range drops to the 150km long Bekaa valley.

Local folklore has it that the elfin inhabitants of the Bekaa emerge in spring to turn on the taps to countless freshwater springs and to thread a glorious multicoloured landscape: a persian carpet of orchards, vineyards, citrus groves, fields of wheat and barley. In some areas, the soil is golden brown as the sweet potato it yields; in other parts it is rich in iron where weighty tomatoes, rather than hanging from bushes, cluster on the ground like monsters' droppings. The valley is so fertile that almost everything can be cultivated, from the recently introduced avocado pears to the indigenous *ma2teh*, the wild cucumber.

The cedar tree, Lebanon's national symbol and most prized flora, is now found on only a few mountaintop sites. These lonely groves are all that remain of the great cedar forests which, in biblical times, covered much of the country. That said, Lebanon is still the most densely wooded of all the Middle Eastern countries: many varieties of pines flourish on the mountains and much of the coastal land is cultivated with fruit trees.

It is precisely the bounteous nature of Lebanon, the biblical 'land of milk and honey', that attracted waves of invaders and colonizers, whose detritus include Phoenician temples, Roman ruins, Crusader castles, and Arab and Byzantine domes.

Few historical sites match the variety and quiriness of the inscriptions on the limestone rock-face of Dog River, 20km north of Beirut. The first recorded large-scale invasion of the Levant was by Ramses II. The Egyptian conqueror had to ford the river at a treacherous pass where mountain used to collide abruptly with sea – the collision is less spectacular these days due to the new coastal motorway. When the Egyptian army crossed the river, it represented such a remarkable feat that Ramses had a stela erected to mark the event. Unwittingly, he started a trend.

The conquering road from the north to south or south to north involved marching across the narrow pass, and every invader would feel the irresistible urge to leave his mark on the imposing rock-face. Among the copy cat records by the Dog River are texts from Asserhaddoun the Assyrian, Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Umayyads, the Crusaders, Napoleon III, Australians sent halfway across the world to fight the Ottomans, and the British and Free French invading the French Vichyists. Historical interest aside, the rock-face resembles a wall in a public lavatory: I was here conjugated in a host of scripts and languages both living and dead.

But the jewel in Lebanon's rich crown of historical sites remains the awe-inspiring temples of Baalbek. Six of the original fifty four monumental columns of the Jupiter temple survived the turbulent centuries of the Levant, with the crowning entablature and frieze intact, appearing very much like a titanic six-stringed lyre which Venus might pluck for her husband, Jupiter Heliopolitan. Their hedonistic son, Bacchus, has his own temple called the Small Temple - a misnomer given that it is considerably larger than the Athenian Parthenon.

But the days of military conquests have been replaced by invasions of a culinary nature. While hummus and tabbouleh have conquered the world, Lebanon has succumbed to an invasion of foreign food with sushi bars, French bistros and Italian pasta parlors all vying for the palate and purse of the Lebanese jet set.

Even more spectacular for a nation that prides itself on its culinary tradition is the food boom of U.S. eateries with a comprehensive list of fast-food chains that include McDonalds, KFC, Thank God It's Friday, Baskin Robbins, Ben & Jerry's, Hardees, Dunkin Donuts, Pizza Hut and Subway. However the old Middle Eastern specialties are still popular: shish kebabs of all sorts, aubergine dip, stuffed vegetables, kibbe, baklava-type pastries are but a few of the flock of dishes that are typically served at a traditional mezze.

And if the food is crammed full of complexity and herbs, then culturally, too, Lebanon is positively overflowing. The full-on religious and social diversity that is so fascinating and enriching an experience has also - in the none-too-distant past - carried with it the seeds to social breakdown.

Lebanese women dress in everything from miniskirts to chadors while sophisticated groups converse in a dizzying mixture of Arabic, English and French. This faculty of tongues is manifested in an eclectic literature, where influences range from the traditional zajal, in which a gathering of poets sing a witty dialogue; to the Christian mysticism of the 19th-century poet, Khalil Gibran whose English works have been translated into Arabic; to the contemporary fiction of Amin Maalouf who won the prestigious French Goncourt prize.

There are times when Beirut feels like one big roaring party. On the night-clubbing arenas of the capital, both the jerky steps of techno as well as the flowing, seductive belly-dance of the Orient are hip. And whatever the flavour the impetus is always on having a good time for, above all, Lebanese have remained bon viveurs. To judge by a growing expatriate community, the exuberance is addictive - so irresistible in fact that those who have been smitten feel they are hostages in Lebanon, finding it almost impossible to escape.

\*\*\*

## Jbeil

The imposing citadel in Jbeil stands in magnificent melancholy. Crowning a hillock that overlooks both the sea and the southern approach into town, the view from the battlements is as inspiring as it is dramatic. Across the blue expanse, ever out of sight, lies Cyprus; closer in this line of vision is a Graeco-Roman portico – eight columns in a majestic row – a theatre and, surrounding the area, a trace of even older and grander former glory.

Take, for instance, the secret sarcophagus that lies buried under the remains of Ottoman railway tracks, which had once ferried weaponry to the crusader castle. Reached down a tight, claustrophobic burial shaft that twists under the earth, resting in a hollowed out space, the massive stone tomb has been left undisturbed. Too big to bring above ground, this Phoenician grave for Abibaal has remained where it was hewn from the rock, almost three thousand years ago, as hidden as any Egyptian tomb in the dry, inaccessible valleys of Luxor.

Therein lies the secret of Jbeil's appeal: with its layers of civilizations deposited chaotically, the earth is simply so full of archaeological treasures that they surface and scatter casually everywhere.

The true age of Jbeil has been contested, with many claiming its Neolithic settlements predate those in Damascus, which would make it the oldest continuously inhabited town. But you can tell it is profoundly ancient from the number of times the town has been renamed. Gebal to the Phoenicians became Byblos to the Greeks, which lent its name to the Bible on account of the papyrus (byblos in ancient Greek) – exported everywhere in

the Mediterranean Basin – that was used to write the first drafts of the New Testament. The crusaders captured the town in 1103 AD and called it Gibelet, but lost it to Saladin in 1189 AD at about the time King Richard the Lionheart was conquering Cyprus.

Of all the Phoenician towns, Jbeil was the true mother; Tyre and Sidon were founded many centuries later, in the second millennium BC; while Tripoli was initially purely an economic zone, the Jebel Ali of its day – its name still reflects the fact that it was established by three Phoenician towns.

Where Tyre was known for its military strength and Sidon for its mercantilism, Jbeil was the spiritual core of Phoenicia. Its priests and priestesses created the Adonis cult with its story of cyclical self-sacrifice, and worshipped El, Baal, Tammuz and all the lesser immortals in the Phoenician pantheon.

The old town retained this sense of spirituality over the millennia. Framed by bougainvillea, palms and pristine villas, Jbeil is a jumble of ancient mosques and churches, some so tiny as to fit only a few worshippers.

As one of Lebanon's best restored tourist attractions, the town has an easy, pleasing Mediterranean feel that belies her past importance. To be sure, there is a visceral thrill that comes from seeing Phoenician script – the forerunner of all modern alphabets – etched into the side of a colossal tomb. But this is merely scratching at the surface, and you cannot help but feel a sense of yearning for the grandeur that was Gebal.

\*\*\*

## Tyre

It takes more effort to fall in love with modern Tyre. Most first-time visitors never see further than the urban squalor at the northern approach, the solid line of high-rise apartment blocks and bedevilling traffic jams. But beyond the off-putting veneer of concrete there is real if dilapidated charm.

According to legend, Elissa, Queen of Tyre, fled the city with a hundred of her most faithful guards just as her brother, Pygmalion the Tyrant, prepared to assassinate her to seize the throne. They went to Jbeil where Queen Elissa bought a ship and on to North Africa, where she founded Kart-Haddash (the New-City or Carthage) in the ninth century BC.

If Carthage would eventually become the New York of its age, Tyre was the London of the sixth century BC: a bustling, cosmopolitan place at the very cutting edge of civilization. For a while, it was the global centre of commerce and at the heart of a trading empire thanks to its navigators who were the first to sail by Polaris.

It was also once an island, capable of withstanding all marauding invaders. All, that is, except for one. In 330 BC, after a siege that lasted two years, Alexander the Great gave up trying to capture Tyre by sea and built a wide ramp of rocks and soil in order to reach the city by land. The Macedonian general eventually succeeded, razing the city to the ground. Tyre never fully recovered, and has ever since been a peninsula, the tongue of land growing over time.

These days, only fishing boats and police patrols drop anchor in Tyre's once famous Byrsa, or port. The old harbour smells of tarred boats drying in the sun and is cluttered with fishermen and cats; a statue of the Virgin, candles burning in front of her, sits on a shrine in the sea, fishing nets and tackle of boats all around her.

The once grand Christian quarter that skirts the harbour is crumbling these days too. Dominated by grand Ottoman villas in various states of disrepair, people keep their doors open all day and history lies secreted in stones scratched with the faint outline of strange animals, mythological lions or fish. Its villas sit on the sea, their rooms perpetually ringing with the sound of the ocean and wind.

Although Tyre hides her former splendours well, some are still there: breathtaking surprises away from the gnarling traffic and hideous concrete.

The massive Roman hippodrome, inland from the Tyre Rest House, is one of the finest examples of its kind in the world. Leaving the oval vastness of the old chariot track, through the remarkably intact and imposing triumphal arch, one walks onto a Roman via, stepping on the same cobbles as the innumerable bare feet, sandals, shoes and boots over the millennia. Running almost two kilometres in a straight path, this via is all that's left of Rome's most ambitious road that once linked two equally distant cities of the empire: the Constantinople to Alexandria expressway.

Along the northern edge of the via are Graeco-Roman and Phoenician cemeteries, sarcophagi lying strewn and long vandalised, as are the remains of the Crusader cathedral by the coast that abuts a wonderfully secluded Roman colonnade.

Like Jbeil, time has not been kind to Tyre. But while it is a curious blend of old and decrepit, the ancient stones whisper of ingenuity and determination, and the air speaks of the ghosts who lived and fought behind the once mighty walls – all of them noble spirits from a buried age.

\*\*\*