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WAR TOURISM
WITHOUT THE WAR

It used to be called Little Switzerland but can Lebanon once again argue a place on the itinerary of the international traveler ? **Parag Khanna** roves and reports.





Bewitched European Orientalists once considered Lebanon the Switzerland of the Levant, and Beirut the Paris of the Middle East. But if you've seen *Spy Games*, you know that the sectarian civil war which broke out in the 1970s devastated the country, reducing much of its capital to a smoldering ruin. While Israeli jets mercilessly pounded Beirut and Syria occupied the Bekaa Valley, militias of the country's Christian, Sunni, Shia and Druze factions razed monuments, factories, offices and homes. Almost 200,000 were killed.

Today, however, a visit to Lebanon is the ultimate in war tourism—without the war. Regal hotels and swank shops are a stark contrast with bullet hole-ridden hotels and half crumbling offices yet to be rebuilt. From the arid plains to the sandy Mediterranean shore, Lebanon's archaeological treasures reveal stories from millennia of imperial struggle. For an Arab country, Lebanon presents a unique and dangerous political experiment: democracy.

Crossing from Syria—where the Assad dynasty have assiduously carved out their cult of personality—Lebanon is a breath of fresh air. But as they are geographically just a narrow, mountainous sliver, the Lebanese have become accustomed to imperial occupation, and Syria is the last conqueror in long line. Beirut's National Museum presents artifacts from Lebanon's role at the crossroads of civilizations, all of which echo the famous line from Thucydides' Melian dialogue, in which Athenian envoys tell the magistrates of Melos that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." The Greeks gave the Levantine people, the ancient Phoenecians, their name, which means red or purple. Both the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great blockaded and invaded Beirut. Under Byzantine rule, Beirut grew to prominence, boasting the most famous law school in the Roman Empire. After an earthquake in 551 A.D., Arab invaders brought Islam and Arabic, only to relinquish control of the Levant briefly to the European crusaders in the 11th century. The powerful Mamluk sultans ejected the crusaders, and built Tripoli (Lebanon's second largest city) into a great center of Islamic architecture with elegant mosques, *madrassahs* and *hammams*. For every layer of occupation, there is a layer of history buried beneath Lebanon's rocky hills and cosmopolitan cities. Indeed, one cultural perk of being an imperial sandbox is that Lebanon is an archaeological iceberg tip, with perhaps eighty percent of its ruins still buried underground.

Over centuries of occupation, the Lebanese became the original globalized chic. An Arab saying tells that books were "written in Cairo, printed in Beirut, and read in Baghdad." Today, Sunnis, Shias, Maronites and Druze share the breezy coast in cosmopolitan Beirut, where on Sundays in the Muslim Hamra district, calls to prayer from tall minarets and church bells compete in a religious cacophony. Sandwiched between Hamra and the Mediterranean cliffs, the pristine campus of the American





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University of Beirut could easily be mistaken for a suburban American college campus, but with botanical gardens and an arresting view of the Mediterranean. The University attracts jet-set students from Arab North Africa and the Gulf, and boasts a liberal curriculum featuring "Novels of Globalization."

Elsewhere in Beirut, ancient columns are excavated as efforts to rebuild the shattered city accelerate. Instead of planning a memorial to commemorate the civil war's victims or even its conclusion, there is a civic race to erase all traces of the war. On the pedestrian al-Maraad street, the meeting point between Hamra and the affluent Christian Achrafiye district, an outdoor exhibit tracks the progress of the city's resurrection, which has advanced at a pace which rivals East Berlin. The Beirut of these gallery pictures resembles present day Grozny—a charred, abandoned void. Yet Beirut today features Ottoman council buildings restored to administrative glory, highlighting the aesthetic of the neo-Islamic architecture which defines the city's downtown. At the end of al-Maraad street lies Place d'Etoile, also known as Nijmeh Square. Once barricaded with sandbags and gutted by bombs, it now serves as the pedestrian hub of the Central district, with quaint, café-lined streets spinning off from the Al Abed clock-tower. Elderly women leisurely flirted with me while they smoked hookahs, musicians performed for sun-soaked tourists, and yuppies cruised in their Mercedes as gorgeous women shopped in European boutiques.

Beirut is the Middle East's hippest city, combining the elegance of Istanbul with the seediness of Tangiers. The Lebanese will do anything for a party. During the civil war, shelling and sniper fire made crossing certain streets impossible, inspiring the Lebanese to bore human-size holes through entire blocks of buildings, creating mole-like passageways which cut through bedrooms and living rooms. Persevering in this Arab version of Miami, the Lebanese frequented fancy soirees and upscale restaurants in spite of the crumbling infrastructure. The Lebanese flair for precarious fun continues today on Monot Street, which is packed with as many bars and cafes as a Barcelona alley, but where crime is common. At BO18, an underground nightclub high on a hill outside the city, a retractable roof opens to gyrating ravers, howling at the moonlight. With drugs and drink prices to rival Moscow, plush décor and celebrity DJs, it's an upthere in the list of the World's top night clubs.

The Lebanese national traits of vibrancy and self-reliance were necessary to cope with the destabilizing side-effects of war. Still they prevail in the absence of strong authority. A Druze friend whose family fled during the war explained to me how Palestinians occupied Lebanese families' homes and had to be bribed and violently coerced to move out. With the government fading into insignificance, no authorities arbitrated such disputes.

"If they were to impose rules, things would fall apart. Everything just works on its own," she said with a shrug. After a few conversations about Lebanese politics, it became clear that there were few rules there either.

In keeping with their risk-taking character, Lebanese see the violent liberation of Iraq as an investment opportunity. Even during the civil war, ironically, people were known to fly into Beirut with suitcases full of cash to deposit in Lebanese banks, which now hold over $46 billion in domestic assets. With the United Nation's regional operation headquartered in Beirut, the city could resume its place—now alongside Dubai—as the preeminent financial hub of the Middle East. However, no people could have a better understanding of the violent sectarian potential of Iraq as the Lebanese do. Their own sectarian trials as the Middle East's melting pot began over 150 years ago, but many Lebanese remember and recount it as if it were yesterday, with the bruises still fresh from the recently ended civil war. The Lebanese see their history repeating itself in Iraq. As a Lebanese friend commented, "Family-based differences determine our social structure, not religion. The West only sees religion in the East."

Many Lebanese, however, see their future in the West. The urban elite lives it up in a lifestyle with more in common with Paris than Persia. They host glamorous parties in chandeliered Achrafiye mansions spilling out onto quiet neighborhood streets. Wealthy Christians in particular take care to preserve their social status and advantage by, for example, ensuring that the president is always Christian. The reception after a wedding I attended at the charming, medieval Eglise Saint-Jean in Byblos featured a dance troupe, fireworks and a European DJ.

Lebanon could become the next Turkey or Morocco on the traveler's map. In addition to its sandy beaches and archaeological sites, it also boasts 3,000-meter Mountains, the highest in the Middle East, offering the unique experience of snow in the desert for European skiing buffs. Lebanon's interior offers both natural and cultural splendor. The Qadisha valley in the north has accessible hiking terrain and rich forests teeming with cedar trees, the emblem of Lebanon. Perched on a plateau below the forests is the village of Bscharré, where one can visit the home, of Khalil Gibran, whichhas now been turned into a museum. His *Prophet* is one of best-selling books of all time. In the Bekaa Valley near the Syrian border, Baalbeck remains Lebanon's second most visited city for its wonders of the ancient world, the ancient Greek temples of Heliopolis. Each sunset, the ruins of the 1st century AD Jupiter and Bacchus temples exude their aesthetic might over the neighboring fields. And on the Valley's western fringe,

FOR AN ARAB COUNTRY, LEBANON PRESENTS A UNIQUE AND DANGEROUS POLITICAL EXPERIMENT: DEMOCRACY.



Ksara is becoming the vintner's well kept secret for its steadily growing production of respected wines.

After a visit to the spectacular Roman columns on the beaches of Tyre, I drove south through the town of Bent Jbeil, smugly named the "Capital of Liberation". The May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon was celebrated with great festivity nationwide, and at the Bawab Fatmeh border checkpoint, Hezbollah's "death to Israel" music still blasts from loudspeakers. I arrived, a minibus pulled into the concrete square. A gaggle of young school girls descended, breaking into sing-along.

Now ten kilometers further south than its high-point, the U.N. certified "blue line"—a barbed-wire and concrete antecedent the current Israeli fence-building project in the West Bank—curves so frequently that it almost envelopes the hilly pocket of a precariously perched Israeli *kibbutzim*. Nearby, the al-Khiam camp and Ansar prison contain the notorious torture chambers into which hundreds of Hezbollah fighters disappeared. In the courtyard, two dozen widows gathered to tour the facility and spoke of their ongoing search for details about their husbands' fate. Half an hour away from the prison camps is Qana, where an arched memorial and a burned out Israeli tank mark the site of the infamous 1996 Israeli shelling of a UN compound where over 800 Lebanese had taken refuge. A man rushed from his shop to show me an album of gruesome photographs of charred bodies being pulled from the rubble. Cases of Katyusha rockets still litter zones from which Hezbollah frequently launched its resistance, tellingly also just a few hundred feet from the site of the Qana ruin.

WHEN IRANIAN PRESIDENT MOHAMED KHATAMI VISITED THE COUNTRY IN MARCH, HE SPOKE AT THE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY. RECENTLY, MANY OF THE MOST VOCAL CALLS FOR A "REFORMATION" WITHIN ISLAM HAVE COME FROM LEBANON

Because of Hezbollah, Lebanon continues to be seen as a client of Syria, but by default . Since April 2000, students from the Christian St. Joseph University and the American University of Beirut have conducted increasingly large sit-ins to protest the Syrian occupation. My driver, who had spent two weeks taking CNN news crews back and forth to Damascus to cover the Iraq invasion, complained that everyone talks about Syria's sponsorship of Hezbollah, but not its occupation of most of the country.

Right now, Western policy towards Lebanon amounts to little more than travel advisory. Yet with 400,000 Palestinians comprising almost ten percent of its population, and refugees scattered among a dozen camps, Lebanon is concerned about any negotiations about the region's future, from which it is usually excluded. After all, it's hard to admire the palm trees lining the highway south from Beirut through Sidon to Tyre without also noticing the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp. A reporter covering a murder in the camp said he dared not tread in certain areas, which he described as being run by gangs, much the same as in American inner cities.

Despite all the turmoil and uncertainty in the region, the Lebanese seem poised and eager to capitalize on their growing autonomy and restore their historical status as a geographic and cultural bridge between the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds. "Lebanon is in its fabric comfortable with European values," says one. "It can play an important cultural and economic role as a moderate society." With its trilingual, French-connected population, "no revolt against the West is possible." The Lebanese preference for pluralism is convincing. Indeed, it is not madrassahs which have risen from the rubble of Beirut's civil war, but French boutiques, and Mercedes far outnumber other automobiles. When Iranian president Mohamed Khatami visited the country in March, he spoke at the Christian university. Recently, many of the most vocal calls for a "Reformation" within Islam have come from Lebanon. If any people in the region know the perils of sectarian tension, it's the Lebanese.

Today, in the world's most turbulent region, Lebanon's greatest asset is that it is not a threat.

