



## Lebanon Today: Land of Artists and Vagabonds

by Racha Mourtada

Bobbing off the coast of Byblos - an historic city just north of Beirut - a few weeks ago, I admired the twinkling lights of the quaint seaside town, the oldest in Lebanon, possibly in the world. It was my first fishing expedition and a tranquil one at that, until the insipid techno beats wafted over from what I assumed was a nightclub, luridly lit and grotesquely poised on the edge of a city famed for its cobblestoned streets, rich archaeological sites and old marketplace. The club was jarringly out of place, and more importantly, it was cramping my fishing style.

But then, Lebanon has always been a land of incongruous neighbours. A place where every time you break ground to put in a parking lot, there's a chance you may uncover the remains of a Roman bath; where mountaintops and beachfronts are only an hour's drive apart; and where in a certain week in April when the weather is just right, you can go for a ski run in the morning and a swim on the beach that same afternoon.

Beirut, specifically, has often been pigeonholed into one of two contrary categories. It has either been overshadowed by civil war, (and more recently the February 14th bombings that claimed the life of the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, among others) or else it has been touted as a party city; it was even voted the top weekend getaway spot in British *Vogue* last year. Beirut is definitely making a comeback, and not just as a happening social scene. Although new clubs and restaurants launch, fold and re-open with alarming frequency, other endeavours, along the cultural, artistic and ecological lines, are slowly coming to the forefront.

While trendy Monot Street, that of the prolific number of pubs, bars and restaurants has always been *the* place to be for the hip young Beirut crowd, more organic roots are spreading in Gemmayze, its laid-back counterpart. Bars and restaurants there have a darker, earthier feel, and the ambiance is more conspiratorial than aloof. There is an air of creative exploration, especially in places like *Backstage*, a recently opened "cultural lounge" comprising of an outdoor terrace and tiny stage, where performers and patrons alike can test drive their talent, be it stand-up comedy, singing, or poetry readings. The Beirut Street Festival was also another event that blurred the line between artist and audience, blending - among other things - conflict resolution, the seven deadly sins, and a lone ballerina waltzing down Hamra street.

The arts are not just the exclusive domain of Beirut, either. Byblos is host to a yearly festival alongside other more established festivals in Beitiddine and Baalbeck, both cities steeped in history and architectural relics. Combining local and international talent, these festivals bring a variety of music, dance and performance art, with the added perk of being set against a backdrop that often threatens to upstage the show.

Another collaboration between local and international talent this year was the Artists' International Workshop held in Aley (AIW:A), a city about half an hour's drive away from Beirut. Artists convened over a two-week workshop in September and October to create installations in residences previously ravaged by the civil war, a theme that has proven to be popular over the years. Occasionally, the results are ill-advised, like a pub called "1975", a throwback to the early days of the war complete with sandbags and dummy soldiers scaling the walls. Other times the end

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product is creatively therapeutic like *Atazakar (I Remember)*, local artist Nada Al-Sahnaoui's installation in downtown Beirut incorporating messages and texts people sent in of their pre-war memories.

Eco-tourism is also gaining popularity. Adventure groups in Lebanon abound with programs ranging from snowshoeing and cultural expeditions to moonlight hikes and night fishing that take you across the seasons and terrains that Lebanon has to offer. I've personally tried every one of the aforementioned activities with varying degrees of success. Snowshoeing was literally a blast; we nearly got blown off the Chouf Cedar Reserve by an angry gust of wind, and the moonlight hike consisted primarily of shivering on the side of a mountain while waiting for the moon to rise. What came through in these expeditions, though, was the burgeoning interest in preserving Lebanon's fragile eco-system and cultural landmarks. *Esprit Nomade*, the group with which I ventured out on my night-fishing trip, perfectly capture this spirit with their motto "adventures and vagabondage", a motto which can be applied to the entire cultural scene being forged by the unconventionally creative and socially aware in Lebanon. Whether this adventure group can help with my poor fishing performance remains to be seen; I apparently set a record for least number of fish ever caught (none).

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