

## Middle East meets West

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**Leisa Tyler is dazzled and exhausted by Beirut's frenetic pace as the war-ravaged city is rebuilt.**

Advertisement

It's dubbed the Middle East's sin city. Pretentious, volatile and cosmopolitan, Beirut has been ravaged by war and flooded with refugees but still it thrives.

Now, after 25 years of intermittent war between internal factions and neighbouring countries, Beirut is patching up its battle scars and trying to reclaim its old label as the Paris of the East. The city is in the middle of a construction boom, with whole neighbourhoods being rebuilt. Two slick new hotels - the long-anticipated Le Gray and the Four Seasons - have opened in the past year and a bevy of new bars and restaurants is injecting energy to the city's already hedonistic nightlife.

"When Gordon [Campbell Gray] first decided to open a hotel here, people thought he was totally crazy," says the Canadian general manager of Le Gray, Hector de Galard. We're sitting on the top floor of the hotel, with views across the central city and Martyrs Square, Beirut's Ground Zero. "At the time, Martyrs Square was filled with barricades and war tanks. But Gordon thought that Beirut had a spirit with such huge potential to reinvent itself, he wanted a hotel in this vision."

This latest addition to the CampbellGray Hotels group, which includes One Aldwych in London and Carlisle Bay in Antigua, is a boxy 87-room tower designed by Australian architect Kevin Dash and opened in October last year. It's been a long time coming; construction has paused intermittently, including in 2006 when neighbouring Israel started dropping bombs on southern Beirut.

From the top floor of Le Gray I look down upon Martyrs Square. I can see the northern end of the infamous Green Line, which just a few years ago cut the city in two, with Muslims in the west and Christians in the east. This part of the line is now a car park. On its far edge, lapped by the Mediterranean, are recent excavations that reveal ruins dating back to the Bronze Age, beneath ruins from the Roman era.

Some of these ruins are now disappearing under footings for a new apartment block, one of many changing the character of the downtown district. In the 1960s this bustling district, filled with graceful Ottoman-style buildings, was one of the most fashionable in the Mediterranean. Razed during the civil war, it is now being rebuilt according to the vision of the late prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, who was murdered in 2005. The grand cookie-cut buildings house designer-label shops and people-watching cafes, remarkably similar to faux-European districts appearing in Gulf cities, from where I'm told much of the funding for downtown is coming.

The streets fanning off downtown are a jumble of cranes and construction sites. A new marina and clubhouse flank the corniche. Half-built hotels compete for air space: a Grand Hyatt, a Kempinski, even a purported "10-star" hotel. The city's main Jewish synagogue, Maghen Abraham, is slowly being restored among surrounding construction sites. Built in the early 1900s by the then sizeable Jewish community, it was reportedly protected by the Palestine Liberation Organisation during the 1975-76 fighting and then, according to the Associated Press, all but razed by Israeli shelling.

Rising above it all is the war-ravaged shell of the Holiday Inn. Too big to be destroyed without taking down neighbouring buildings, the former hotel is a painful reminder of the past and a reminder of what to avoid in the future.

"There is a lot of expectation for the future at the moment," says Steve Chahwah, the down-to-earth German-Lebanese owner of Joe Pena's Cantina y Bar in Gemmayzeh, an inner-city neighbourhood containing a rare collection of intact 19th-century apartment buildings at the heart of Beirut's modish nightlife. "But Beirut is still quite a risky investment. The city has charisma. It is the Promised Land; people have been fighting over it for thousands of years. Today is peaceful but there is a chance war could break out again tomorrow."

On a Tuesday night, his Spanish-styled Mexican tapas bar and restaurant is almost bursting at the seams. "Beirutis like to live large and have fun," Chahwah says. "Even when the last spurt of fighting broke out, people just moved to a quieter neighbourhood to party. You can sit in a cave for a month but after a year you just think, f--- it, life must go on!"

Perhaps it's this air of uncertainty, teamed with the supercharged Lebanese character and love of excess, that makes Beirut so edgy and hip. Later that night I take a stroll through Gemmayzeh. The neighbourhood mood is jovial, full of bright young things drinking and flirting. It feels like a European city - until I get to the end of the neon-lit strip and see groups of soldiers with assault rifles.

Despite the obvious presence of the army, the city seems remarkably safe. Women walk the streets alone at night; many people leave their cars unlocked. In fact, the scariest thing is trying to cross the street. Lebanese drive like they spend money - recklessly.

"Lebanese people overdo everything," says Lama Matta, of Mayrig, an Armenian restaurant often named as one of the city's best places to eat. "This is the second-leading country in the world for plastic surgery. We go out every night. We drink every night. We spend, spend, spend. People say it's because of the war but really it's been like this forever."

Glamorous new bars and restaurants are everywhere and, I'm told, usually close just as fast as they open. The more pretentious, the longer the waiting list for a table. French bistro Couqley, which opened in November, flies its produce from France. An even newer 36-seat designer diner named Burgundy, housed in a faux-Provencal building in inner-city Saifi Village, matches minute portions of French-inspired cuisine (foie gras with quince terrine, confit duck and potato pearls) with extraordinarily priced Burgundy wine.

In contrast, the three best meals I have in my five-day city visit are also the cheapest: exceptionally fresh tabbouleh, hummus and lamb kebab at Le Chef, a scruffy little workers' cafe in Gemmayzeh; a smorgasbord of western Armenian delicacies at Mayrig; and Lebanese village food at Tawlet.

Beirut is a city of contrasts: of refugees and brazen snobbery, poverty beside ostentatious wealth, sectarian liberalism coexisting uneasily with fundamentalism. This is a city where you can swim in the morning and ski in afternoon. You can party non-stop from night until noon, then have brunch in Hezbollah territory.

Removed from the bars, nightclubs and restaurants, where bottles of champagne cost \$10,000 and are served with sparklers so everyone can eye the purchase, is the palm-fringed corniche. This is where a true cross-section of the city comes to promenade and relax: men smoking nargileh, women wearing hijabs, power-walkers in designer gear, grandfathers fishing with grandchildren and teenagers on bicycles. It inspires a feeling captured in the words of Beatle guitarist George Harrison, posted on the wall of the Hard Rock Cafe overlooking the corniche: "The time will come when you see we are all one."

### **A city's kitchen table**

WHILE a flurry of new bars and restaurants is reinventing Beirut's party scene, an organic farmers' market in a car park represents its culinary awakening. Every Saturday morning in Saifi Village the Souk el Tayeb, started six years ago by the charismatic Kamal Mouzawak, unites people from diverse regions and religions with a single purpose: to promote sustainably grown food.

The son of a farmer, Mouzawak searched Lebanon's fertile countryside for traditional produce and recipes that had fallen into obscurity. He started the souk with 10 producers — there are now more than 100 farmers selling olive oil, goat's cheeses, wild flowers, bread, wine, honey and more. "It's about building a national identity, bringing people from different backgrounds and religions together while supplementing incomes for small producers," he says.

The success of the souk spawned Mouzawak's tiny self-service diner named Tawlet. Behind a row of bullet-marked buildings and shops selling car parts, Tawlet, which means "kitchen table" in Arabic, seems an unlikely contender for Beirut's hottest table. Each day one of the producers from the souk runs Tawlet's kitchen, turning out a buffet of dishes

native to their region.

In the kitchen today is Suzanne Doveihi from the village of Zgharta, famed for its kibbe, a Levantine specialty of finely minced meat blended with buckwheat. She prepares kibbe labneh, a buckwheat cake stuffed with goat's cheese, a buttery raw lamb dish called kibbeneye and wild boar served with stewed apples, prunes and mash.

"There are so many amazing recipes and products in Lebanon that have almost disappeared," Mouzawak says.

"We didn't want to put them into a book or a museum but keep them alive in a kitchen where people can share. Food is the most important medium to perpetrate tradition and build a national identity."

Kamal Mouzawak takes part in the Middle East-Mediterranean program of the World Chef Showcase, part of Crave Sydney International Food Festival, on October 9-10. See [siff.com.au](http://siff.com.au).

*Leisa Tyler stayed courtesy of Le Gray Hotel.*

## **FAST FACTS**

### **Getting there**

Etihad flies to Beirut for about \$1450 to Abu Dhabi (14hr), then Beirut (4hr). Malaysia Airlines flies for about \$1690 to Kuala Lumpur (8hr), then Dubai (7hr) and then Beirut (4hr). Fares are low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney, including tax. Visas for Australians are free for stays of up to three months. If you're asked to pay a fee, politely ask the official to check again, or keep a copy of the visa conditions issued by the Lebanese embassy in Canberra. Rony Chattah runs walking tours of central Beirut, taking in the bright lights and the battle scars; see [bebeirut.org](http://bebeirut.org).

### **Staying and eating there**

Le Gray Hotel has two bars, a restaurant, two cafes, a spa, infinity pool and 87 spacious guest rooms in the heart of Downtown. Double rooms from \$US345 (\$370). See [www.legray.com](http://www.legray.com).

Four Seasons Beirut is a luxurious 230-room tower overlooking the corniche. Doubles from \$US375, see [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com).

**Burgundy serves French-inspired cuisine; dinner for two without wine costs about \$US155. At 752 Gouraud Street, Saifi Village; see [www.burgundybeirut.com](http://www.burgundybeirut.com).**

Mayrig serves dinner for two without wine for about £L80,000 (\$56), see [mayrigbeirut.com](http://mayrigbeirut.com).

Tawlet, Naher Street, Sector 79, has lunch for two with arak for about \$US50, see [tawlet.com](http://tawlet.com).

The farmers' market Souk el Tayeb is held every Saturday, 9am-2pm, Saifi Village, see [www.soukeltayeb.com](http://www.soukeltayeb.com).

At Le Chef, Rue Gouraud, Gemmayzeh, lunch for two is about £L15,000.

Joe Pena's Cantina y Bar. Boutros Dagher Street, Gemmayzeh.

### **Warning**

The Australian government advises travellers to reconsider their need to travel to Lebanon because of its "unpredictable security and political" situation; for updates see [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au).

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/travell/middle-east-meets-west-20100923-15nsj.html>*