

Hay Festival: Beirut was built on miracles

The Lebanese capital has had its fair share of hard times, but it has survived. Benjamin Secher visits the vibrant city as it prepares for next month's Hay Festival.



Dining out in Beirut's rebuilt downtown area Photo: Alamy

By Benjamin Secher

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Early last summer, on the day a UN official first characterised the escalating sectarian violence in Syria as “civil war”, I was in neighbouring Lebanon, sitting across a desk from that country’s indefatigable minister for tourism. Fady Abboud, a former businessman and British citizen whose office in central Beirut is 2,000 miles from his family home in Hampstead, was wearing an expensive suit and – despite facing an estimated fall of 300,000 in the number of visitors who would normally travel to his country by road through Syria – a look of undaunted optimism.

“Suppose you have two girlfriends,” he said. “One of them is very reliable: she doesn’t smoke, she parks where she should park, blah, blah, blah. And the other one is half-crazy: she smokes and she drinks and she goes berserk sometimes. She has her charm, no? That is the way that I look at this country.”

From a distance, it is easy to underestimate Beirut, which next month is hosting, for the second consecutive year, an international edition of the Hay Festival. This beguiling metropolis finds itself all too often reduced to the “berserk” moments that have marked its recent past, during the Lebanese

civil war, which flared and faded between 1975 and 1990, or the later outbursts of violence in 2005 and 2006.



Beirut's beach coast

Yet, even a short trip to the Lebanese capital complicates that picture.

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Trouble is woven into the fabric of this city: bullet holes still stare, like unblinking eyes, from facades throughout the centre. But so too is the spirit of resilience, creativity and hospitality that has seen Beirut repeatedly emerge from periods of conflict, dust itself down and move on, only half-erasing what came before.

Today, both extremes are on view from the rooftop terrace of the fabulous Le Gray hotel, established on Martyrs' Square in 2009 by the pioneering Scottish hotelier Gordon Campbell Gray. To one side are the shimmering ziggurats of Zaitunay Bay – a luxurious waterfront development where Arab millionaires moor their yachts, and the women lolling by the pool with their iPad-toting toddlers are as likely to be wearing bikinis as burkas. To the other side is the ghostly carcass of the Holiday Inn, a hulk of burnt-out concrete, untouched since it was gutted by mortar fire more than 30 years ago. In which other Middle Eastern city could a 10-minute stroll take you from the well-preserved remains of a Roman baths, past a mosque hung with lanterns encrusted with Swarovski crystals, a Maronite cathedral built above Ottoman vaults, and a designer handbag emporium, to a boozy karaoke bar named, with admirable bluntness, Drink and Sing? You may still occasionally see a tank on the streets of Beirut – a show of security designed to reassure – but these days you're more likely to spot a Lotus with its hood down.

Cristina Fuentes La Roche, director of Hay Beirut, says Hay alighted on the city because it has “a rich cultural scene and one of the most diverse populations in the Middle East”. The line-up at this year's festival certainly captures that diversity.

Novelists of international standing such as Britain's Hanif Kureishi (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*), Norway's Karl Ove Knausgård (*A Death in the Family*) and Beirut's own Hanan al-Shaykh (*The Story of Zahra*) will be among the speakers during the three-day event.



Martyrs' Square

But so too will the ground-breaking Maltese-American graphic journalist, Joe Sacco; Shereen El Feki, whose book on changing attitudes to sex in the Arabic-speaking world, *Sex and the Citadel*,

was applauded by the Telegraph's critic last month as "eye-popping and invaluable"; and Kamal Mouzawak, the founder of Beirut's first farmers' market and proprietor of Tawlet, the irresistibly hip restaurant which provided the most memorable culinary experience of my trip.

Throw in a series of heavyweight debates and lectures organised in conjunction with PEN Lebanon about such knotty issues as freedom of expression and the role of women in the Arab uprisings and you have the makings of a feast for the mind.

Before leaving Beirut, I ducked out of the midday sun and into the cool gloom of a small stone sanctuary behind the Greek Orthodox church of Saint George. I was followed inside by the custodian, a world-weary figure clutching a bag of glistening cherries, who flicked a switch to shed light on the ancient religious icons that lined the walls. The edges of these beautiful gilded artworks had been all but destroyed by fire and were pocked with bullet-holes but, without exception, the benign painted faces of their holy subjects were unscathed.



Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque

The custodian caught my eye and smiled. “In Beirut, we believe in miracles,” he said, a pristine cherry stone flashing between his teeth, “because Beirut was built on miracles.”

- Hay Festival Beirut runs from May 8-10 in venues across the Lebanese capital. For tickets and further details, see hayfestival.org

Essentials

GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies direct from London Heathrow to Beirut, with return fares starting at £420 at the time of the Hay Festival. Indirect flights are slightly cheaper. Turkish Airlines (0844 800 6666; turkishairlines.com) flies from Gatwick and Heathrow to Beirut via Istanbul from £386 return.

WHERE TO STAY

Le Gray

Martyrs' Square, Beirut Central District (00961 1 971111; campbellgrayhotels.com); rooms from £350.

This oasis of chic minimalism, right in the heart of the city, is Beirut's “it-place” to stay. Every room oozes sophistication and comfort, and the swish rooftop terrace, with pool, offers panoramic city views.



Le Gray hotel

Hotel Albergo

Rue Abdel Wahab El Ingilizi , Achrafieh (1 339797; albergobeirut.com); suites from £190.

Mixing contemporary design with Ottoman-era opulence, the Albergo is the height of old-school glamour. The 33 suites showcase the best of intricate Middle Eastern craftsmanship and eclectic art, balanced by a palette of sugary pastel colours.

Hayete Guesthouse

Rue Furn el-Hayek, Achrafieh (70 271530; hayete-guesthouse.com); rooms from £80.

An intimate hideaway with lashings of artistic flair. There are just four rooms, all with a generous helping of funky retro styling, and a friendly parrot in the lounge, which keeps everyone in line.

Saifi Urban Gardens

Rue Pasteur, Gemmayze (1 562509 ; saifigardens.com); rooms from £32 per night, dorm bed from £12 per night.

Enthusiastic management, bright, light-filled rooms and a location just a stumble away from the Gemmayze nightlife strip make Saifi the top budget choice in Beirut.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Abou Hassan

Rue Salah ud-Din, Manara (1 741725); from £40 for two people.

This long-standing local favourite is the city's top choice for first-timer forays into classic Levantine cuisine. Pick from a mezze (appetiser) menu that romps through the entire gamut of Middle Eastern staples, from familiar dishes such as hummus and falafel to the Lebanese delicacy of kibbe nayeh (raw lamb meatballs, eaten like steak tartare).

Tawlet

Chalhoub Building, rue Naher (1 442664; tawlet.com); £17 per person, lunchtime buffet, Mon-Fri 1pm-4pm, Sat 1pm-4pm.

Tawlet's feast of ever-changing flavours and offerings from all the regions of Lebanon is foodie-heaven.

Ginette

Rue Gouraud, Gemmayze (1 570440); from £20 for two people, daily 8am-10pm.

The courtyard bistro at this bold fashion boutique is a stylish lunchtime stop if you want to rub shoulders with up-and-coming designers and artists. Early birds shouldn't miss its traditional Lebanese breakfast featuring halloumi, labneh (strained yogurt) and zaatar (a spice mix made from thyme, oregano and sumac).

Barometer

Rue Makhoul, Hamra (1 678 998); daily 7pm-1.30am.

Artists, writers and university students hang out at Hamra's hippest bar, where the music merges seamlessly from soulful Middle Eastern tunes to salsa. Late at night it's common for customers to join in a spontaneous dabke (Lebanon's national dance).

Dany's

Off rue Makdissi, Hamra (1 740231); daily 10am-2.30am.

Decently priced drinks, a kicking soundtrack and a friendly, laid-back atmosphere have cemented Dany's reputation as one of Beirut's top pubs for a relaxed night out. It's tiny, so get there early for a table.

BEYOND THE FESTIVAL

National Museum

Avenue Abdallah el-Yafi (1 612295; beirutnationalmuseum.com); £2, Tue-Sun 9am-5pm.

The collection on display is a tribute to the staff who saved these relics of Lebanon's heritage when the museum found itself on the front line during the war. Of particular note are the intricately carved marble sarcophagi from Tyre and the delicate bronze figurines from excavations in Byblos. Don't miss the audio-visual presentation, which demonstrates how artefacts were protected from the worst of the civil war's fighting.

Walk Beirut tour

Tours depart from Gefinor Center Plaza, rue Clemenceau, Hamra (bebeirut.org/walk); £13, tours run every Sun from 4.30pm. If you want to discover the layered history of Beirut, Ronnie Chatah guides visitors on a poignant, funny and eye-opening four-hour tour of Lebanon's capital, focusing on its architecture, its writers and champions, and the civil war that nearly destroyed it all. If you're spending a few extra days in the city before or after the Hay Festival, there are scheduled walking tours on May 5 and 12.

Souk el Tayeb

Beirut Souks, rue Trablous, Downtown (soukeltayeb.com); Sat 9am-2pm.

Beirut's famed farmers' market is prime gift-shopping territory if you want to bring some of that Levantine flavour back home.

An evening stroll

Before diving into Beirut's party scene, wander the backstreets of Hamra and Achrafieh, districts where you can find remnants of grand, neo-Ottoman architecture. As dusk approaches, sample Beirut's soul by heading to the waterfront Corniche. Sunset brings the entire city out to the seafront to strut their stuff. After watching the sky turn pink over Pigeon Rocks, swap your walking shoes for pumps and discover the vivacious nightlife for which Lebanon's capital is justly famed.

Baalbek

This enormous temple complex, two hours from Beirut, near the Syrian border, is a marvel of engineering and a reminder of Rome's once mighty stranglehold on this region. Currently, however, the Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to this part of the country ([see gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice](http://gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice)).

JESSICA LEE

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YOUR SAY

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