

Jennie King (Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) - Lebanon, Easter 2011

This Easter I travelled to Lebanon with a group of fellow Arabic students, both to gain an insight into the vast cultural and history legacies behind the language, and also in an effort to colloquialize our embarrassingly formal *fus'ha* dialect, which makes us sound like the Middle Eastern equivalents of a Dickensian cad. I didn't know what to expect. One of our group is part-Lebanese, and having spent years visiting the country had only the most effusive praise for its food, scenery and general vibe; however, with the Arabic world on the brink of unprecedented and almost ubiquitous civil unrest, we were all slightly apprehensive. But our trepidation could not have been more unfounded.

From the moment we arrived, we were lovingly embraced (and kissed on both cheeks) by the sprawling capital that is Beirut, in all its quirky, complex and oft-confusing splendour. As well as visiting famous mosques, castles and museums (The National Museum of Beirut hosts a particularly impressive range of antiquities, from biblical times through to the present day), we also took the opportunity to wander aimlessly through the city's intricate tapestry of alleyways and promenades, which exposed, perhaps more than anything, the lasting remnants of war. Once referred to as 'The Paris of the Middle East', Beirut is definitely a city of extremes: on the one hand, there is the crippling poverty of inner-city districts (we visited a family friend who lived in one cracked, dusty room, barely protected from the damp), and the astonishing decadence of newly-developed areas like Downtown, a marble complex of designer shops and food halls which remains all-but abandoned until peak season, when wealthier Arabs travel from the Gulf to indulge. During the civil war much of the traditional architecture was destroyed, and in the subsequent years was hastily replaced by ugly highrises and apartment blocks. In a city that has expanded to the point where its borders bleed into most of the surrounding towns, it was strange to see so many derelict buildings, pockmarked from bomb fire and abandoned ever since. There are still beautiful areas, particularly the sea-front-boardwalk *Le Corniche*, but it's sad to think that much of Beirut's former glory will be impossible to reconstruct without pulling down new developments.

For a week of the trip we had tuition with a local lady named Nada, who lived just opposite our apartment. It was extremely useful to revise certain elements of grammar in a more intimate setting, where personal kinks and questions could be answered without holding up a class. That said, I think we could have done without the 8:30am starts – naps ended up becoming a pre-dinner must!

Above all, two things struck me most during our stay: with the American University of Beirut (AUB) drawing a large number of international students to the city, the locals are surprisingly patient with tourists, and overjoyed when you attempt to converse with them in Arabic (even if it's somewhat antiquated!). On the bus back from Biblos, a historical town near Beirut where we spent a happy afternoon enjoying forts and markets alike, we met a family who almost fainted with excitement when they heard us speak, and proceeded to chatter joyously in Levantine slang all the way home.

Also, you can never have too much *hummous*. Or *tabouleh*. Or lamb. They're all very good for the soul.