

Beirut My Kind Of Town

By Nick Redmayne

An affluent, beautiful and vibrant Beirut, inhabited by intelligent and educated people spent much of the latter 20th century tearing itself apart from within, plumbing the depths of human misery and remaining a city ruptured along jagged sectarian seams until the end of the conflict 1990.

Continuing city centre reconstruction has set the scene for a resurgent cultural life together with an equally chic and well-heeled clientele in up market restaurants. The Commodore Hotel has been refurbished as an Italian restaurant! (Yes, they deliver pizzas too!)

Amongst those cognoscenti in the business communities of neighbouring Arab countries, the word is undoubtedly out. Though other destinations may continue to compete through ever more grandiose headline-grabbing projects to attract high-spending visitors, Lebanon has a different approach. Though replete with a preponderance of 5-star hotels, visitors are drawn as much by expansive state-of-the-art facilities as they are by world class cuisine. However, above all this, the country's unique selling point remains its people, possessed of genuine ages-old and now redoubled joie de vivre – a characteristic that cannot be bought, sold or created by even the most costly foreign consultants and largest army of poorly paid guest workers.

Around three and a half million populate Lebanon leaving a diaspora of over 11 million around the world.

On the flight from Heathrow I chatted with a charismatic Lebanese, now based in the US, who was possessed of enough feel-good factor to keep the whole aircraft at 35,000ft. He was visiting family for the first time in over 6 years having given just 4 hours notice for arrival. The rationale being that even his mother's powers of persuasion would be unable to effect the muster of an overbearing 250 well wishers in the time available. After so long, keeping their heads down, most Beirutis see 4 hours as more of a challenge than an obstacle in the way of a party. ■

