

# IT'S ALL ABOUT M.E.A.

By Nick Redmayne



The turbulence of war, escalating fuel costs and a merciless low-cost revolution has seen many once iconic airlines re-routed to the great holding pattern in the sky. However, there is one remarkable and enduring name that has skilfully and tenaciously navigated a course to clear skies – Middle East Airlines, (M.E.A.) the national carrier of Lebanon.

M.E.A. may be 60 years old but it's far from retiring. Along with its hub city Beirut, the airline is resurgent. Back in the nihilist depths of the 1975/89 Lebanese war when key equipment was wet-leased to other carriers and staff seconded, the only realistic success was measured in survival. The conflict led to the sporadic closure of Beirut's international airport, flights diverted to neighbouring countries and an inevitable flat

lining of passenger numbers.

Thankfully, in 1990 an agreement brokered by the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, brought peace to a country that was profoundly tired of war. Almost immediately, all M.E.A.'s former routes were re-established, though a dynamic feel-good factor couldn't negate huge operating losses. From 1998 a major re-structuring saw route rationalisation combined with the introduction of an all-new fleet of nine Airbus 330 and 321 aircraft – the airline broke even for the first time in decades and since 2002 has returned to profitability.

Losses of 87 million dollars recorded in 1997 have been transformed into net profits of 50 million dollars by 2004. Busy daily flights from London and Paris, are joined by arrivals

from Cyprus, UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt, bringing to Beirut both foreign travellers and members of a widely scattered 11 million diaspora – Lebanon's population is only 3.5 million.

The assassination of former Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri on Valentine's Day 2005, and the murder of prominent journalist Gibran Tuani and others may have temporarily stalled the progress of a broad Lebanese renaissance. Certainly at M.E.A. plans to purchase another three aircraft were put on hold.

Though leisure travellers from Europe remain in a minority there are tangible signs that the allure of Lebanon is growing.

A number of UK-based tour operators now offer week-long itineraries covering this compact country's main sites, both cultural and historic. In addition, Beirut is again fashionable amongst well-off middle class travellers seeking an exclusivity and cache that the profusion of low-cost carriers has now denied to many European cities.

Well placed to benefit from the country's renewed popularity, M.E.A. already has an aircraft utilisation level equivalent to that of a larger carrier and as long as confidence continues to build, it's unlikely to be long before the fleet expands again.

M.E.A.'s UK and Ireland Manager, Mrs Naima Kassir sums up the remarkable strides the carrier has made, "In a keenly competitive business we continue to be increasingly profitable.

The solidarity among employees, commitment and dedication and that feeling of belonging which helped the company survive years of civil unrest is at the heart of our operation and is matched only by the loyalty of our passengers." ■