

Business As Usual For Lebanon's Tourist Industry

> By Nick Redmayne

On 7th September 2006 the roar of jet engines was heard long and low over Beirut's downtown. However, with a UN ceasefire finally implemented and the Israeli blockade partially lifted, the sound of MEA's first post war flight arriving from Europe was a welcome signal announcing that in spite of everything Beirut was back. And, after a polite period of reflection I also returned to report on what remained of the much-heralded Lebanese tourism renaissance.

The traffic grew steadily till it could grow no more and in a characteristically good natured piece Lebanese roadcraft the taxi-driver turned 180 degrees across the carriageway and joined Beirut's Corniche at Raouche's landmark Pigeon Rocks. Checking into the reassuringly Swiss-owned Mövenpick, I discovered most of the world's foreign press had just checked out – with due respect to their profession, this was good news indeed.

Over breakfast, Mira Hawa the hotel's refreshingly straightforward marketing director offered her insight on the preceding 34 days of rage. 'Yes, there has been damage

but already the French have erected temporary bridges and elsewhere there's always another way round – the tourist sights have not been damaged. Most of all we're really grateful that foreign tour operators have not pulled Lebanon from their brochures. All we need is calm for confidence to return and government travel advice be amended.'

I asked whether perceptions of UK foreign policy affect the way British travellers would be welcomed. 'No, more than ever visitors are welcome. People are happy to see foreigners. The Lebanese are proud of their country and it makes them feel good that ▶'





people come to visit, especially now.'

What about Beirut's famed indigenous nightlife? Mira reported it to be 'really rocking' – this I had to see. That evening, accompanied by two Scots colleagues, I negotiated the Levantine passeggiata crowds of the Corniche and headed downtown. Here, the reality remained one of smart honey-coloured stone facades, upmarket boutiques, restaurants and cafes. Solidaire's grand post-civil war reconstruction of the city centre continues to be strikingly at odds with unreconstructed news footage that focuses exclusively on more recent destruction. Around Place de l'Etoile wide boulevards thronged with dangerously 'beautiful people'. As if to make a point, a bright yellow Lamborghini parked ostentatiously at the head of Al Maarat Street, an affluent measure of the neighbourhood. The meagre contents of my wallet suggested looking for more modest surroundings to spend the remaining evening.

In neighbouring Ashrafieh, Monnot Street's cafes spilled their amiable party crowd out onto the street. Pacifico, not alone in being an establishment overtaken by its own success, was too full to enter. However, its wooden terrace made for a fine overview of

the night-time crowd. Without exception the scene was one of genial good nature, something one would be hard pressed to so easily identify in a British city centre any day at any hour let alone a weekend late night. Later I met the Lebanese Dani Nader, founder of CIFA (Centre pour l'Insertion par la Formation et l'Activite) a non-profit organisation training young people to become tour guides, and owner of tour operator TLB-Destinations (www.tlb-destinations.com).

Through intermittent power cuts Nader described how with government support, CIFA's guiding courses had been scheduled to be rolled out through Beirut's Universite St Joseph. Earlier in the year he had confidently expected that of 15 to 20 CIFA graduates, half would find guiding work at his company. However, with the aftermath of the recent 'challenge' he'd been able to offer only occasional freelance to one or two newly qualified guides. Being realistic and not pessimistic Nada predicted at least three years for tourism confidence to return and business to reach early 2006 levels. A recent CIFA 'solidarity tour', a bold attempt to rebuild tourism confidence through a subsidised familiarisation tour, had provided mixed

results. Nader had high hopes that a Peace Walk to the summit of Qornett el Sawda would fair better. Wishing him, his colleagues and their endeavours well, I took my leave.

One of CIFA's instructors and a TLB-Destinations guide, Ziad Abu Jaoudeh gives me a ride back to my hotel. I ask him about his political and religious allegiances, he states simply and deliberately 'I am Lebanese, that's what I always say'. For all those Lebanese like Ziad, dependent on tourism dollars, aid agencies and all other NGOs can't leave quickly enough. The most beneficial reconstruction that the international community can build is a solid foundation for peace – if they build it, we will come.

