

Lebanon 24/7

adventure stories & travel guide

*You shall be free indeed when your days are not
without a care nor your nights without a want and a grief,
But rather when these things girdle your life and you
rise above them naked and unbound.*

Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*

For my grandmother, a devoted traveller, Edith Giel-Van Hengel

(1932-2014)

For my dear parents Irma and Hans

First edition (2018), adapted and translated from the author's Dutch book 'Alle Dagen Libanon, van tricky Tripoli tot bruisend Beiroet', published in 2016.

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Editor: Ayesha de Sousa

Publisher: Donald Suidman, BigBusinessPublishers, Utrecht

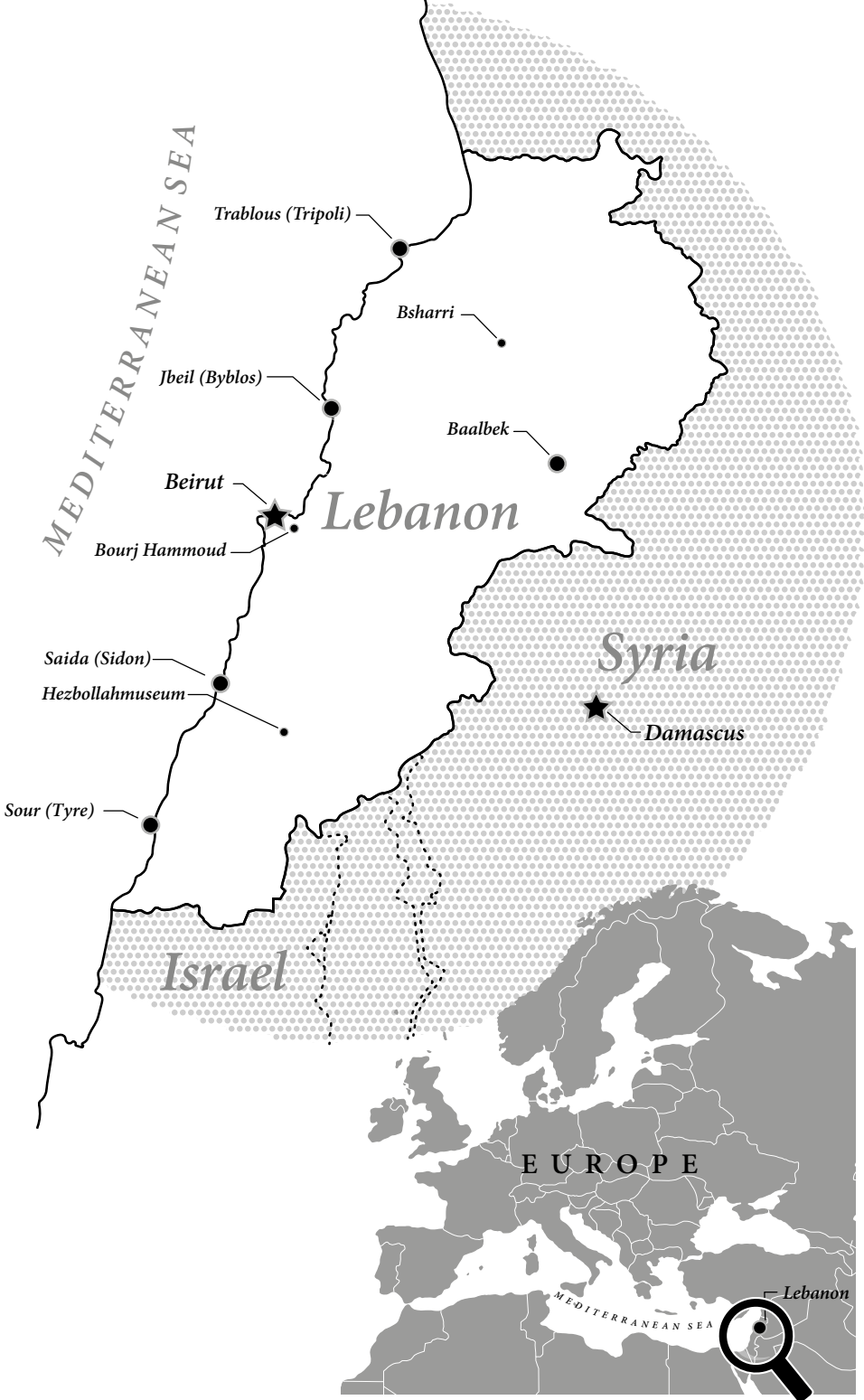
www.bbpublishers/lebanon

Cover design and map of Lebanon: Vincent Schenk

Cover photo: Ahmed Mouissaoui (Flickr)

Design: Studio Patrick, Rotterdam

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Introduction

When I first set foot in Lebanon, there were many things I could never have imagined. At that time, I had hardly ever written about the Middle East as a Dutch reporter. As far as I remember, my story about ‘things to do in Egypt’, following a holiday in the Nile-country, was the closest I had come to it. When I arrived in Beirut in December 2012, an entirely new city to me, I didn’t suspect that I would return countless times, even less that I would record my adventures in a book. And how could I have guessed that, in March 2017, I would practically move to Lebanon in order to write my books from a balcony overlooking the capital?

In September 2016, my stories about Lebanon were published in my Dutch book, ‘*Alle Dagen Libanon*’. My publisher had been sceptical about this project, thinking that this religiously diverse country would not spark much interest among the Dutch. Only its Civil War was still fresh in the minds of many of my compatriots, and ever since then, all the news coming out of Lebanon has been tragic: bombs exploding and politicians being murdered. Most people will remember the car bomb that killed Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, in 2005 and the heavy bombing by Israel a year later (in retaliation for the rockets fired by Hezbollah). Because of Lebanon’s negative image, my

publisher didn't expect much interest in my adventure story book and travel guide.

He was proved wrong! The media were immediately drawn to the 'other side' of Lebanon, something with very different accounts from those that existed already. The book was well received, sold well (in its own niche market, admittedly) and for me, it resulted in many encounters in Lebanon with Dutch people who first read the book and then contacted me. Some of them even told me that it was my descriptions that had actually convinced them to buy a ticket. This made me embarrassed and proud at the same time.

I decided to not bring an exact translation of my Dutch book onto the international market. Readers had been requesting more photos and more tourist information, so that was the first change I made. I also included an epilogue, detailing how the main characters in this book have continued with their lives three years on. And finally, I decided to rewrite my introduction on Lebanon. I wanted it to be more thorough and more informative. But I didn't want to take any sides. My introduction had to be strictly objective, free of my personal opinions.

And this is where my problem began. Because how can you produce a brief and neutral introduction to this tiny, but extremely complex country on the Mediterranean Sea? Lebanon has everything in one place: rich and poor, Christian and Muslim, Phoenician and Arab, modern and conservative.

Let me start by giving an example. Ask any Lebanese person *who* was responsible for starting the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), *what* happened during those years and *who* finally won. You will get a wide range of answers. There is no single national narrative. History teachers at Lebanese schools do not even embark on this sensitive subject. Remember that many of the key players of the

War and their offspring are still active in today's Lebanese politics (the current President, Michel Aoun, for example, was a General in the Lebanese army).

What people know about this dark episode in Lebanon's history is what they have been told first-hand by their parents and grandparents. And *their* perspective, most of the time, depends on their own religious or ethnic background.

I won't go too much into the detail of this great scar on Lebanese society, but what I have learned from reading eyewitness accounts like those of journalists Robert Fisk and Thomas E. Friedman, is that the war was essentially a power struggle. Not the kind I know from my country: power in the Netherlands is about shared decision-making and compromises. In the Middle East it's about winning and leaving your enemy empty-handed. The present war in Syria is the best example of that. Friedman uses the image of the egg and its shell. In the Middle East, you 'eat the egg with the shell', he wrote. You do not leave anything behind for your enemy: it's a game of 'all or nothing'.

The 18 sects of Lebanon

Lebanon is like a tapestry woven from different faiths. It counts 18 official religions that are recognised by the State and are known as 'sects'. The three major monotheistic world religions are represented in the country, though the number of Jews in Lebanon has become insignificant. Those who did not emigrate after the creation of Israel or after the Civil War, which destroyed the Jewish Quarter, live a clandestine life. I once met a man wearing the portrait of Saint Charbel around his neck. When my friend spoke to him in Arabic and made some reference to this Christian saint, (of whom my friend too, although Muslim, was an admirer), to our surprise our new acquaintance confided that he was actually Jewish and wore the medallion to protect his identity. Perhaps

his ability to be so honest with us was helped by the fact that we were in an LGBTQI setting at the time. I was flabbergasted, even though he was not the first Jew I met in Lebanon, as you will read in my stories. It's common for Lebanese Jews to hide their identity out of fear of being seen by the outside world as a spy for Israel, a country that is still officially at war with Lebanon. According to the chairman of the Lebanese Jewish Community Council, Isaac Arazi, the community comprises around two thousand souls. The Council has an active Facebook account which gives Judaism a face in Lebanon.

Officially, Christianity is the biggest sect in terms of the number of adherents. However, this figure comes from the last census that was taken back in 1932 (!) while Lebanon was under a French mandate (1923-1946). The outcome – 51 percent Christian – might have been correct, but it is dubious. While on Mount Lebanon, Christians no doubt had an overwhelming majority (this is still true today), Lebanon had just got bigger after its independence from France. Areas with a large Islamic population, such as Tripoli and Beirut, became part of what the French called 'Greater Lebanon'. The Maronites, the biggest group among the Christians, had lobbied for this enlargement. According to them, Greater Lebanon needed a fertile hinterland like the Beqaa valley. They pointed to recent famines to give weight to their arguments. And so, parts of what used to be Syria became Lebanese.

The diversity among Lebanese Christians reflects the nature of the country. Almost all the Christian denominations are represented. The Maronites, an eastern branch that falls under the authority of the Vatican, constitute the largest group. Second, is the Eastern-Orthodox Church, whose followers are generally known to be wealthy. This Church adheres to the Greek-Orthodox patriarch in Antioch. The Melkite Christians (close to

the Catholic Church) are in third place, followed by many smaller groups, including Protestants, Syrian-Orthodox and the Assyrian Church of the East.

Islam was brought to Lebanon in the 7th century by Arab tribes. Without a doubt, Lebanese Muslims form a majority of the population these days, but far from a unit. To understand the difference between the two main groups, Sunni and Shia, it is important to know the position of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mohamed. The Shiite Muslims claim that Ali was the rightful successor to Mohamed, thus leader (imam) of the Muslim community. However, Ali was assassinated in 661, two years before Mohamed died. His sons, Hassan and Hussein, were not allowed to rule the caliphate. Another difference with the Sunni is that most Shiite Muslims are awaiting the return of the 'hidden imam', Al Mahdi. He is said to never have died and will appear again just before the end of time.

Sunni Islam has a strong base in Saudi-Arabia, while Iran is the biggest Shia country. Backed by these two oil giants, the two religious groups have fought many wars against each other. As I write this introduction, Sunni and Shiite Muslims are slaughtering one another on the battlefields of Syria and Yemen. Though Lebanon as a country has mainly stayed out of these conflicts, the Lebanese Shiite militia and political party, Hezbollah (literally 'the Party of God'), sends its fighters to assist Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. His regime has its base in the Alawi (a Shia sect) region of Latakia. Since March 2011, when the uprising in Syria began, the Sunni-Shia rivalry was a major source of tension within Lebanese society. The Sunni party, Future Movement, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, strongly opposes Hezbollah's actions in Syria. The Christian political movements are split into two blocs:

those for Syria/ Hezbollah, and those against it. Didn't I warn you that Lebanon is a complex country?

The Civil War

If the Lebanese cannot agree on one unanimous version of what happened during the Civil War, how can you expect one from a foreigner? Let me give you an idea of the ingredients that ignited the war in 1975, knowing of course that this is by no means the complete picture. It is important to know that at the time of the Ottoman Empire, Christians in Mount Lebanon had an autonomous semi-position most of the time. I looked into the official document that created the French Mandate, to see if the Maronites had been promised this position again after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This was not the case. 'Respect for the personal status of the various peoples and for their religious interest shall be fully guaranteed', says the League of Nations document. However, remember that according to the last census in 1932, Christians formed the majority.

An agreement, the National Pact, was signed by the various religious groups in 1943, setting out the balance of power in the newly-independent Lebanese State. Since fifty-one percent of the population was (supposedly) Christian, the National Pact stipulated that the presidency would be in the hands of this group. However, being Christian was not the only requirement for the post; the President needed to be a Maronite as well. It was further agreed that the Prime Minister should be a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament, Shia. This situation is still in effect today. The Prime Minister back then was appointed by the President, which gave the latter even more power. In the Parliament Christians formed a majority, allowing them to veto any decision. After the Civil War, the power of the President was decreased and Christians lost their parliamen-

tary majority, but still fifty percent of all parliamentary seats are allocated to this sect. However, due to a lot of division internally, there is no big Christian bloc in the parliament.

On 22 November 1943 Lebanon became independent. Soon after, in 1948, the country faced its first crisis. Palestinian refugees fleeing their homes from present day Israel arrived in Lebanon and Jordan. Their number increased with the Arab-Israeli Six Day War in 1967. Around 400.000 people in total took refuge in Lebanon. They were not entitled to Lebanese citizenship – still the case today – and lived in special camps. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) became militarily and politically active in these camps from the 1960s onwards. In 1970, the PLO established its headquarters in Beirut, having been expelled from Jordan. The goal of the organisation was to destroy the Jewish State, but since the PLO was based in Beirut, according to Friedman, its focus shifted increasingly to Lebanon, the (dire) situation in the Palestinian camps and the rights and interests of Palestinians in general.

In the time between Lebanese independence in 1943 and the start of the Civil War in 1975, the Lebanese government, dominated by Christians, was pro-Western while many leftists groups (such as the PLO) sympathised with the communist Soviet Union and the Pan-Arab movement. Sunnis in general were unhappy with their secondary position on the political battlefield, since it was widely known that they outnumbered the Christians (especially considering that Palestinians are primarily Sunni). The Shiite parties did not wield much power at all.

These and many more religious and political tensions built up and eventually culminated in the outbreak of the Civil War on 13 April 1975, when unidentified gunmen in a car attacked a church, killing four people. Later that day, Christian gunmen opened fire on a busload of Palestinians, in the same Orthodox Christian

district of Ain al-Rameneh (Beirut). Thirty bus passengers were killed. During a bus ride, my Lebanese friend, Tofik, once pointed out the site of the ‘bus massacre’, as the incident is referred to these days. It made me take a deep breath and swallow, as I thought about the seemingly endless sectarian violence that would follow, with 120.000 casualties and at least 750.000 people displaced. It’s still an open wound in Lebanese society.

The rise of Hezbollah

The French Mandate had little consideration for the Shia population, the third largest religious denomination. After Lebanon’s independence they were given breadcrumbs in the power sharing set-up. In 1985, the appearance on the national stage of Hezbollah changed all of this. The ‘Party of God’ started as a mainly Shiite resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. It played an important role in chasing Israeli troops off Lebanese soil. Iranian money, excellent training and zealous faith made Hezbollah a fearless guerrilla force.

It’s a misconception that Hezbollah is just a militia. In Shiite regions in Lebanon (Baalbek, villages in the Beqaa Valley and in South-Lebanon), it is also a social movement, which administrates schools and hospitals. This is how the group won its popularity mostly amongst the poor and neglected people in these regions. Last but not least, Hezbollah is a religious movement with Hassan Nasrallah as its leader.

If you follow international media you might be made to believe that all of Lebanon stands squarely behind Hezbollah, which the US has labelled a terrorist organisation. In reality, it occupies 12 seats (out of 128) since the parliamentary elections of 6 May 2018. Another 10 independent members of parliament are allied with the Shiite movement. Hezbollah has been enjoying a more comfortable position since the last elections, because a majority of the parties

Who are the Druze?

You can find this minority group in mountainous areas to the east and south of Beirut. The Druze, who make up around five percent of the Lebanese population (250.000 people), also live in Syria and northern Israel. It's well-known that you should not antagonise a Druze. In this book I mention one of the many stories that illustrates this adage (see chapter IV).

Although the Druze religion is secret, we know that they believe in a single deity and in reincarnation. A Druze will be reborn as a Druze. They do not fast during Ramadan, have no mosques and women are not obliged to wear a *hijab* (headscarf). The Druze religion is regarded in Lebanon as a part of Islam.

Long-time Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, now succeeded by his son, Taymur, is a free spirit. He has lobbied many times for the decriminalisation of cannabis and is a great lover of animals, especially dogs (which are considered '*haram*' – forbidden – in Islam). His Twitter account is witty and draws lots of attention.

If you come across men wearing oversized trousers, a small white hat on their head and a thick moustache, you are probably in the presence of a Druze man. He may be accompanied by a woman in a white *hijab* that covers her chin, neck and hair. But it's not very common to see this, as only the initiated Druze (less than ten percent) are allowed to dress in this manner. The Druze people protect themselves by only giving a small minority access to knowledge of their secret religion. You cannot convert to become a Druze and Druze are not allowed to marry non-Druze.

supports the main points of their political agenda. Their most powerful ally is the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, the country's biggest political party. Thus, the American, Saudi and Israeli ambition of disarming the military wing of Hezbollah seems to be an unlikely scenario in the coming years.

Hezbollah has widened its support base in recent years due to its operations in Syria against (Sunni) Islamic extremists groups. Many Lebanese people have told me that it is thanks to Hezbollah operations in cooperation with the Syrian regime and the Russians that Lebanon has never come under serious threat of being invaded by ISIS and Al-Nusra. Shia and Christian villages on the border have also benefitted from the protection of Hezbollah against invasions by extremists.

After the Civil War it was agreed that Hezbollah was the only militia that would be allowed to retain its weapons. The idea was that the Shiite 'resistance group' would free Lebanon from the last remnants of Israeli occupation (Israel denies this). Also it was considered prudent at that time to keep Hezbollah in arms in case Israel invaded Lebanon once more. The country's own army was extremely weak then, so from a national security point of view, this was a logical step. However, after much reinforcement by the US, France, Saudi Arabia and other countries (including the Netherlands), the Lebanese national army has regained strength in the last decade, and is considered to be the best functioning State institution in the country. The US has declared that, despite Hezbollah's growing political domination, it will continue its support of the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Who are the Lebanese?

'We are Phoenicians, not Arabs'. It's a claim you will hear often if you spend time in Beirut. In this way the Lebanese have drawn a line between themselves and the surrounding Arab world. After

all, aren't they descended from the ancient Phoenicians, a civilisation that created one of the first alphabets and left its traces in the old town of Byblos? It's a widely-held belief, particularly among Christians. At Beirut airport, notably, the distinction is made. Before the customs and immigration desk, a sign instructs 'Arabs' to use the right lane and 'Lebanese', the left. This strikes me every time I enter the country.

The Lebanese also differentiate themselves from their Arab neighbours by their language. A common greeting is illustrative of this: '*Hi, kifak, ça va?*' '*Kifak*' is Lebanese for 'how are you?' And there is much more. *Bonjour* and *bonsoir* are often used and have even been altered to '*bonjoureen*' and '*bonsoireen*', where the Arabic plural 'een' is added to wish somebody more than one good day or evening. French visitors are often tickled by this distortion of their language the first time they hear it.

As complex as the country is, the Lebanese seem to live a simple life, not one run by a schedule filled with carefully-made appointments, like many people in the northern hemisphere. In this way, the Lebanese are similar to southern Europeans. They do not like to plan things far ahead of time. Many social gatherings are spontaneously arranged the same day. A lot of free time is spent with family. Especially on Sundays, when most people are off work, family lunches are held in the parental home.

Divorce was a big taboo in Lebanese society, but this has changed in the last decade. Still today, there is no civil marriage, so those who require a non-religious ceremony get married in nearby Cyprus and register the marriage in Lebanon afterwards. For many, this happens out of necessity, because Lebanese religious authorities do not accept mixed marriages.

Party life

Beirut's nightlife is world famous as the Lebanese are fond of partying. And this does not include only young people. In restaurants with live Arab music, you can find a mixed crowd and at the end of the night, everyone takes to the dance floor. Lebanon is famous in the Arab world for its musicians. Fayrouz, the 'Cedar of Lebanon' is the pride of the nation. She made her breakthrough in 1957 at the Baalbeck International Music Festival and has been the most successful Lebanese singer ever since.

Also unique in the region is the high level of education in Lebanon. This is a vestige of the pre-war time. There is a wide variety of private schools and universities, and State education also provides a good basis for students. Most well-known is the American University of Beirut (founded in 1866), whose buildings on the shore of Beirut are worth a visit in themselves. Because of the excellent level of education, many Lebanese graduates find work in the Gulf (Dubai, Kuwait, Qatar, etc.) or in Africa. This contributes to the growing number of expats. Currently 13 million people of Lebanese origin are living outside the country, while Lebanon only has 4.5 million citizens.

Not a typical place in the Middle East

If you have specific wishes, you will not be disappointed in Beirut and its surroundings. If you are gay, you will find plenty of places that attract an LGBTQI crowd. Do you love gambling? Drive out of Beirut to the north and after twenty minutes, on your left, you will see the famous 'Casino du Liban'. Besides this luxurious venue, it is not difficult to find a gambling hall in Lebanon. And let's not forget one of the biggest Arab attractions in Lebanon before Dubai was developed: these men-only clubs feature dancing girls from Eastern European countries. In

Lebanon they are known as ‘super night clubs’, but a better word would be brothels.

This brings me to what many people have in mind when they refer to Beirut as the ‘Paris of the Middle East’. There are still traces of a city that might have resembled Paris. Vibrant and fresh, Beirut has retained some of its splendour. However, since the fifties, when the term ‘Paris of the Middle East’ was coined and Lebanon was regularly flooded with European tourists, many things have changed. The camps constructed by Palestinian refugees have grown into shantytowns. The Civil War destroyed cultural heritage all over the country and there has been a massive exodus of Lebanese people to safer places. The 2006 war with Israel was short-lived but caused most of its damage on the Lebanese side: bridges, roads and power stations were destroyed. And since 2011 more than one million Syrian people have found refuge in Lebanon. The country has almost collapsed under this weight: so many new mouths to feed, children to educate and even more strain on employment levels. Added to all of this, the country suffers from a severe electricity shortage and an excess of (household) waste.

The spirit of Lebanon

Astonishingly, despite all of its problems, ‘the spirit of Lebanon’ has always survived. It is what makes Lebanon special. It’s not southern Italy or Greece, even though it bears strong resemblances to these countries, and it is also very different from all other Arab countries. Lebanese people enjoy life to the fullest, tend to take the law with a pinch of salt and, while still attached to family and tradition, are more open-minded and progressive than neighbouring Arab States.

Sadly enough, it is also the only country in the Middle East where religious diversity still exists on this scale. Where else can eighteen

religious groups (in practice even more, because the eighteen only includes those that are recognised by the government) live together? Where in the Arab world would you find Armenian people holding a mass celebration in a football stadium in honour of Armenian Independence Day (with alcohol, fireworks and shows), while at the same time many Muslims are fasting for Ramadan? And which other city has a Sunni mosque standing next to a Maronite cathedral, both within walking distance of a synagogue? Muslims pay visit to the Virgin Mary on the Harissa hilltop and Sunni members of parliament support the Shiite Hezbollah. These are some of the surprising facets of this diverse nation.

Is it safe?

Oh, you still have one important question? The one everybody asks me? Whether Lebanon is a safe place to visit. ‘No, it isn’t’, is my standard answer. ‘The traffic over there is like a killing machine. Very dangerous.’ People usually laugh at this, but they understand my point. Have I ever felt unsafe? Yes, I have. In 2013, a year when Lebanon was on the brink of destabilisation: bombs exploded in the Shiite neighbourhood of Dahieh, prominent politicians were assassinated and the portraits, on Sassine Square, of Lebanese bishops who had gone missing in Syria, reminded me of how close the war was. I considered leaving the country – but I didn’t. And in the years that followed, I kept coming back. The situation was getting steadily better just as, ironically, ISIS-led terror attacks were becoming more frequent in Europe. With my dark Dutch sense of humour I sometimes told people that I was happy to be safe in Lebanon rather than in Paris or London. Bad jokes aside, the truth is that Lebanon is in calmer waters.

With all of this said, I can only urge you to see Lebanon for yourself. Taste the best food in the Middle East, drink excellent domestically-produced wine, visit the ancient souq of Saida (Sidon) and

enjoy the beautiful shores of Sour (Tyre). The Baalbek temples will be among the most magnificent constructions you have ever seen and the Lebanese will welcome you warmly to their country: *Ahla wa sahla bi Loubnen* (welcome to Lebanon)!

Facts about Lebanon

POPULATION

Lebanese: 4.5 - 5 million people

Palestinians: 174.000 people*

Syrians: 1 million people**

GDP: 47.54 billion USD (2016)***

GDP per capita: 6983 USD***

Area: 10.425 km²

Highest mountain: Qurnat as Sawda (3088 metres)

President: Michel Aoun (Free Patriotic Movement, Christian)

Prime Minister: Saad Hariri (Future Movement, Sunni)

Speaker of the House: Nabih Berri (Amal, Shia)

National food: hummus (white chickpea dip), kibbe (meat-balls), falafel (deep-fried chickpea balls), fattoush (fresh salad with mint, lemon, sumac berries), tabouleh (parsley and bulgur wheat salad), moutabal (aubergine dip) and much more!

Currency: Lebanese Pound (Lira in Arabic) 1500 LBP = 1 USD, fixed rate. US Dollars are welcome everywhere