



# BOUNCE BACK BEIRUT



PIGEONS' ROCK, A ROCK FORMATION RISING OUT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN IN FRONT OF THE WESTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD RAOUCHE, IS A POPULAR NATURAL LANDMARK FACING CLIFFSIDE CAFÉS AT THE CORNICHE, WHERE STROLLERS AND JOGGERS CROWD THE PAVEMENTS. IT ALSO HAPPENS TO BE A POPULAR CRUISING SPOT.

**BEIRUT'S WORLD FAME FOR WAR IS FINALLY BEING OVERSHADOWED BY ITS EMERGING REPUTATION AS THE (GAY) PARTY CAPITAL OF THE MIDDLE EAST. THIS IS NO NEWS TO THE LEBANESE. NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, BEIRUT ALWAYS BOUNCES BACK.**

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY: JURRIAN TEULINGS

"Why on earth would you want to go to Dahiyeh?" the woman asked. We met at a brand new, eco-fabulous lunch restaurant owned by a mutual friend, in what is traditionally the Christian side of town. The neighbourhood, Gemmayzeh, is Beirut's answer to London's Shoreditch and New York's Williamsburg; a quickly gentrified hipster haven, albeit with a heavy dose of Lebanese glam. In the past five years or so, it has developed from a quiet ramshackle neighbourhood into a place buzzing with designer bars, conveyor-belt sushi, chi-chi French bakeries and even a porn-themed night club.

In the previous days I had seen exclusive beach clubs, glamorous parties, flashy restaurants, luxury shopping malls and more scary face-lifts than I care to remember. Now, I was ready to see the other side of Beirut, notably the southern neighbourhood of Dahiyeh (simply meaning 'suburb' in Arabic). This part of town is under the control of the infamous Islamist paramilitary organisation Hezbollah. It was almost unfathomable that such a place could be part of the same city. But I had recently heard it wasn't as drab, conservative and humourless a place as I had expected it to be.

"I'm looking for Buns & Guns," I told the woman. "It's a sandwich bar in Dahiyeh where the staff wears military uniforms. They serve Kalashnikov sandwiches, Claimore pizzas, camouflage salads and terrorist bread." At least that's what I had read; when the bar opened in 2008, it had gotten quite a bit of media attention. I thought it made for an excellent example of Lebanese survival humour and it had aroused my curiosity about the neighbourhood, which is still quite a way off the tourist track.

The woman rolled her eyes. "Journalists. You always want to focus on war and Hezbollah. It's got

nothing to do with the Beirut I know." Of course, she had a point. There are a lot of misconceptions about Lebanon and the media certainly are to blame for a fair bit of one-sided reporting. It winds people up. That morning I had read an article in the *Lebanese Daily Star*, trashing Oprah Winfrey, who had called Lebanon a 'deeply conservative' country in a recent show, whilst showing stock footage of veiled women. "Dear Oprah," the headline read indignantly, "Lebanon is not Afghanistan."

On the other hand, no complaints about the international travel media – they're all abuzz with

positive stories about Beirut. *The New York Times*' travel section deemed the city the 'number one place to visit in 2009', and, in another article, raved about the city's thriving gay scene, dubbing it 'The Provincetown of the Middle East'. BBC news described Beirut as "the most liberal and diverse city in the Middle East", and recently *The Guardian* joined the chorus and called it 2010's most glamorous tourist destination.

Glamorous indeed, but also notoriously unstable. You may find a lot of glitzy Hummers and Ferraris

**IF YOU THINK INDULGING IN PARTIES AND LUXURY SHOPPING IN A SHORT FUSED POWDER KEG IS JUST A TAD TOO FRIVOLOUS FOR YOU, YOU'RE MISSING OUT**



FLASHY CARS AT THE ÜBER COOL RUE GOURAUD, A LIVELY STREET IN GEMMAYZEH OF DESIGNER BARS, CONVEYOR-BELT SUSHI, CHI-CHI FRENCH BAKERIES AND EVEN A PORN-THEMED NIGHT CLUB.



JOIN THE LOCALS AT AL FALAMANKI RESTAURANT, AN EXCELLENT PLACE ON DAMASCUS ROAD TO RELAX, NIBBLE ON MEZZE AND SMOKE SOME NARGUILEH.



EVENING FALLS ON THE LIVELY CORNICHE, BEIRUT'S SEASIDE PROMENADE.

on the streets, but the occasional muddy UN convoy reminds you that the situation can deteriorate very quickly and without warning. One reporter cleverly summarised this insane duality by calling Beirut 'the Elizabeth Taylor of the Mediterranean', just take her life story, and "replace the words 'alcohol' with 'Israel' and 'a string of unsuitable marriages' with '15 years of civil war'." Because of this, many countries' Ministries of Foreign Affairs have issued dire travel warnings, at the very least urging their citizens to avoid all non-essential travel to Lebanon.

Much of this is because the foreign embassies in Beirut are largely powerless and unable to evacuate their citizens when the highway to the airport gets closed off by Hezbollah militants, as happened in 2008, or a full-blown war with Israel starts without warning and deadly rockets rain down for a month, as in July 2006. Nobody will deny Lebanon is volatile territory. But it's also terribly attractive, and very, very sexy. If you think indulging in parties and luxury shopping in a short fused powder keg is just a tad too frivolous for you, you're missing out. Beirut is moving on.

Last summer, a record number of two million visitors found their way to the tiny country – mainly to party, wine, dine, and perhaps pay a visit to some of the finest Phoenician and Roman ruins in the world. As any proud young Beirutis will point out to you, Sky Bar, perched on a high rise above the Mediterranean coastline, with its thumping electro beats, big name acts and \$10,000 bottles of Cristal champagne, has been voted the best bar in the world. The hip-macabre BO18, an after hours club

on the site of a massacre, where a drug fuelled crowd dances on designer coffins past the break of dawn, came in third.

In spite of the travel advisories, nobody is afraid to come to Beirut anymore. World class DJs routinely make Beirut their next stop after Ibiza. Snoop Dogg shot a music video in town and drew big crowds at the Forum de Bayrouth (defiantly rhyming "That's right, I will be in the Middle East, bringing peace, like a beast!"), as did Akon, Deep Purple, Kelly Rowland, and the scantily dressed Pussycat Dolls. You get the picture: Afghanistan it ain't.

Even gay life is booming. The city's gay bars – even if most still prefer to be called 'gay friendly' – are thriving. They have made Beirut a visible focal point of gay tourism in the Middle East. According to Ghassan Makarem, executive director of Helem,

**SITE**  
Lebtour.com offers travel advice and an extensive gay guide of Beirut. The same people organise very popular Bear Arabia-events twice a year: check [www.beararabia.org](http://www.beararabia.org). They're very knowledgeable and fun and have big plans for Beirut: the owner Bertho Makso expressed his vision to organise a (gay) love pride parade in the near future.



**STAY**

The **Gefinor Rotana** is one of the most conveniently located hotels in Beirut, within walking distance from the Corniche (the seaside promenade) and its beach clubs, the shops and restaurants of Rue Hamra and Downtown Beirut, and some of the most popular gay-friendly places in town. The staff are very welcoming and knowledgeable – they'll get you into the best night-clubs before you know it. The rooftop pool is something else. It has one of the best views of the Mediterranean and the green campus grounds of the American University of Beirut.

[WWW.ROTANA.COM](http://WWW.ROTANA.COM)

**READ**

In addition to any guidebooks you might read (*A Hedonist's Guide to Beirut*, by Ramsay Short is a good start) pick up one of the novels by the Lebanese American writer **Rabih Alameddine**. His 1998 debut, *Koolhaas: The Art of War* takes place in the two 'war zones' he calls home; San Francisco and Beirut. One is ravaged by Aids, the other by civil war.

[WWW.RABIHALAMEDDINE.COM](http://WWW.RABIHALAMEDDINE.COM)



Lebanon's gay rights organisation (the first and only of its kind in the Arab world), the government doesn't object to this image. "It's something that is illegal in a sense but at the same time it is very much tolerated by the state," he said. "If the state knows a certain bar is a gay bar, they don't care. They don't even increase the policing – they used to do that, but that is no longer the case."

The last time a gay bar was harassed by the police, Makarem recalled, was in 2005. What remains today is the occasional raid of sex cinemas and hammams. "When you have a permissive summer, like this summer, it creates a backlash from the religious establishment," he said, "and then the backlash will be carried out by the state. So immediately after the tourist season was over, the police went around and shut down all the [sex] cinemas for a week. It was a way of saying, 'Summer's over, now you have to be careful.' With the clubs it becomes more difficult now, because they are owned by strong influential companies."

At the city's two main gay clubs, Milk and Acid, a mix of Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, Kuwaiti and even some Iraqi men disprove any remaining theory of cultural relativism. That is to say, once inside people don't behave differently from any other gay club in the world – with the possible exception of the occasional male belly dance. But this being the Middle East, most of the men are closeted. Unless you limit the definition of freedom to the availability sex and parties, it's quite a stretch to proclaim Beirut the 'Provincetown of the Middle East'.

But according to Bertho Makso of Lebtour, a Beirut-

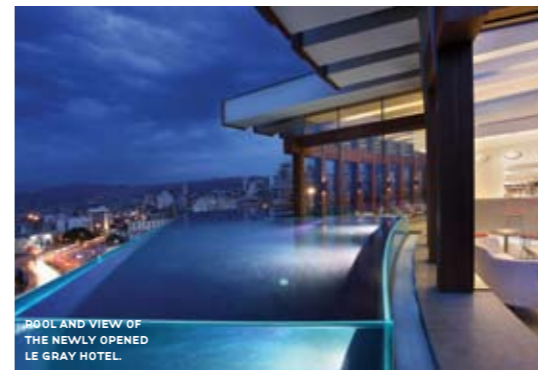
based travel agent that promotes gay tourism to Lebanon and organises very popular Bear Arabia events, that is exactly what his clients are looking for. Readily available sex with Lebanese men is his unique selling point. "Come on," he said, "What do you think? They're not here for the food or the architecture, they're here to have sex with Arab men. You can just call out at them from your balcony and they will come," he added, and related a recent personal experience in which he did just that.

Really? I wondered. Or was he merely stoking a lucrative fire of clichéd orientalism for the benefit of his business? The image of the irresistible hot brute from the Middle East, after all, is easier to market than say, a landmark mosque. But a few days later my cynicism was challenged when I was left rosy cheeked and dizzy with hormones after a wildly attractive construction worker – a real one, not the faux type that is actually a florist – chatted me up at Beirut's ocean front promenade and whispered a very indecent proposal in my ear. After him came another one. And another one. So maybe Mr Makso had a point. For one thing, there is certainly no shortage of lonely construction workers in Beirut. Still, I was loath to accept such a one-dimensional image of gay life in Lebanon.

The next day, a Lebanese friend abroad introduced me by email to Haig Papazian, the violinist of a band called Mashrou' Leila. "They are one of the biggest up-and-coming bands in the country and have a really original style, even France 2 [the French national television network] is featuring them on a prime time programme," he wrote. The main



DOWNTOWN BEIRUT, LEFT IN RUINS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR, HAS BEEN COMPLETELY REBUILT TO RECAPTURE THE SPIRIT OF ITS HEYDAY. TODAY IT IS ALIVE WITH ALL FRESCO DINING AND LUXURY SHOPPING.



POOL AND VIEW OF THE NEWLY OPENED LE GRAY HOTEL.

**STAY**

Gordon Campbell Gray, possibly the hottest hotelier of the world, is also one of the nicest people in the business – and his energy permeates his recently opened **hotel Le Gray**, smack in the middle of downtown Beirut. No more rushing for breakfast after a late night on the town: it's served all day. Having dinner alone? The staff will suggest some amazing books from its well-stocked library. The rooms are

spacious (that's an understatement) and luxurious without being kitschy or pretentious. Wifi is free, as it should be. Mr Campbell Gray's personally curated collection of 500 works of contemporary art fills all the spaces, most spectacularly the enormous, all-grey atrium. The only downside we can think of is that you might spend too much time inside the hotel, and miss out on Beirut, which Mr Campbell Gray rightfully calls "the sexiest place on earth."

reason he brought them up: one of their favourite songs was about unrequited love – from one man to another.

I met Haig at the campus of the American University of Beirut, where Mashrou' Leila started as a group of architecture and graphic design students. On a stroll across the university grounds he explained that the 'gay' song our mutual friend referred to, *Shem el Yasmine* (Smell the Jasmine), plays with a traditional property of Arabic poetry and lyrics: love is *always* directed to a man. That is to say, grammatically, the male tense is used to address the loved one. So a man sings to another man, who is generally understood to be a woman. But in *Shem el Yasmine*, that ambiguity is given a spin in the opposite direction when the man sings he wants to be the other man's wife.

That's rather transgressive stuff, and quite remarkable when you consider that there's a large Lebanese fanbase that happily sings along to it. Or maybe not. Haig tells me that everyone in the band has gay friends and it's really not an issue. Maybe the issue is the fact that I'm surprised. Hamed Sinno, the charismatic lead singer of the band, is of a rare species: a publicly out gay man in Lebanon. By most accounts, he is the first. Which seemed a big deal to me, but when I asked him about it when I met him and the rest of the band after a performance, he just shrugged and said, "Someone had to do it."

Ghassan Makarem of Helem points out that there is a strong secular current in Beirut. And even within the religious communities there are progressive people. Some priests are unhappy with the official stance of the Catholic Church and have invited Helem to talk about the issue of homosexuality to their congregations. No such thing has happened at mosques – their sermons are centrally controlled – but the 2006 rocket attacks offered a unique opportunity for Helem to meet some representatives of Hezbollah when their offices became the focal point of a communal relief effort. "Their attitude was very ambivalent. I think being part of a relief campaign with them acted a lot to normalise Helem as an organisation."



THE DJ IN THE WINDOW OF THE CRAMPED BUT VERY ATMOSPHERIC TORINO EXPRESS – THE FIRST HIP BAR TO SET THE TREND ON GEMMAYZEH'S BUZZING RUE GOURAUD.

Many preconceived, Western ideas about political and religious attitudes toward homosexuality prove rather useless in Lebanon. One refreshing surprise is that Al-Akhbar, a newspaper that is half owned by Hezbollah, has made homosexuality part of its reporting agenda and writes quite positively about the issue. Recently, they ran a big exposé on homosexuality in prisons. Another surprise reveals what is, according to Makarem, a serious mistake on the part of the Western media: the assumption that pro-Western political parties are pro-gay. They're not.

"The New York Times, which is supposed to be a serious newspaper, ran an article on gay nightlife that claimed some things that were absolutely ridiculous. For instance, it concluded that because a pro-Western majority was elected, that would be a good thing for gays in Lebanon. But we know that those people that got elected are exactly the people that are blocking our work," Makarem said.



BEHIND THIS DOOR: A DECOR OF TACKY PORN.



BEHIND THIS DOOR: GOD.



BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR: A VIP AND MISFITS' FAVORITE.



BARDO, A BUSY FOCAL POINT OF BEIRUT'S GAY SCENE ON ANY NIGHT OF THE WEEK – WITH GOOD FOOD AND STRONG COCKTAILS.

**PLACE**

If you visit only one gay-friendly place in Beirut, let it be **Bardo**, across from the Haigazian University in Hamra. A very decent restaurant in the early evening, an energetic bar full of beautiful people and strong cocktails after dinner, this is the welcoming place you might find yourself return to several nights of your stay – if only as a kick-off to a long night of debauchery.

Other places to check out: **Behind the Green Door** (porn inspired bar in Gemmayzeh); **Barometre** (very atmospheric, very intellectual leftist Arab bar near the American university in Hamra – great cheap food, too), and **Acid** (somewhat tacky, but still... you can't miss the biggest gay club in the Middle East).

"Also, it doesn't mean that when a religious current is very strong in a certain neighbourhood, everyone in the neighbourhood becomes very religious. There are different contradicting currents that happen. A good example of this is Dahiyeh. In terms of the image they project it is a conservative neighbourhood that is controlled by a religious fundamentalist organisation, but in reality, there is a constant battle between this type of attitude and a more progressive and liberal attitude."

This was consistent with stories of a large influx

**A LOT OF PEOPLE SEEMED TO AGREE THAT MUSLIMS IN LEBANON WERE MORE OPEN TO DISCUSSING HOMOSEXUALITY ON THE STREET THAN CHRISTIANS**

of gay men from Dahiyeh in the city's gay bars and clubs, and the experience of a woman who told me she got less flack for wearing a miniskirt in Dahiyeh than in the cosmopolitan shopping street of Hamra, where the men would 'accidentally' bump into her and stare at her chest.

What was even more remarkable to me – coming from a part of the world where Muslims are generally perceived as the most conservative and homophobic group in society – was that a lot of people seemed to agree that Muslims in Lebanon were more open to discussing homosexuality on the street (albeit never in the media) than Christians. Ghassan Makarem of Helem told me, "You could be part of an Islamic movement and be pro gay. It happens." The administrator of the Boys Of Lebanon Facebook page added, "My personal experience is that five out of ten Christians will react negatively to the subject, as opposed to only one out of ten Muslims. 'Kel wahad harr bitizo,'

they say, 'everybody is free with his arse'."

Having said that, when I contacted the administrators of the Facebook group called 'Gays of Dahiyeh', it took a quite a bit of persuasion to get them to talk to me. And when one of them finally agreed to a msn-chat (meeting offline had proved impossible) I took the misguided decision to ask him about Hezbollah. Within seconds, he was gone. His last message: "Not good to talk about them here."

The next day, the name of the group had been changed, all the administrators were gone and the content had been replaced by Islamic fundamentalist prose. Perhaps it was a trap to begin with, but it's not unlikely that someone got very spooked. Whoever it was I talked to, before he signed off he told me that the past few years things had changed a lot in Dahiyeh and that there had been an enormous increase in visible homosexuality in the neighbourhood – he claimed that some 30% of the men were now gay.

No neighbourhood is *that* gay. But in the end, I found the address of Guns & Buns, and I decided to see for myself. Unfortunately, upon arrival it quickly became clear that the sandwich bar had been sold and reopened under a new name: Shoot. Nothing to do with guns, as was immediately obvious from the logo that featured a football and a basket ball. It had been turned into a rather drab sports bar.

Sensing my disappointment, the new owner pointed out that the old advertisement was still there, covering two storeys on the side of a nearby building. It featured a hamburger with a gun in lieu of a beef patty, and read:

**THE SANDWICH THAT CAN KILL YOU**

"No pictures", warned the man, "This is a sensitive area. You need permission from Hezbollah." And before I fully realised it, I had said: "Well then, take me to Hezbollah." Which maybe wasn't such a bright idea.

The nearest Hezbollah post was just half a block



away, in an inconspicuous trailer next to a big mosque. I was introduced to a man sitting in a plastic chair, who appeared rather surprised to see me. He probably thought I was an idiot. Or a spy. He walked off to consult some unseen superiors in the trailer. When he came back, he sat down in front of me and subjected me to a cross examination for half an hour about my age (which didn't seem to correspond with my ID, incidentally the best menacing compliment I've ever had) and every single photo I'd taken that day.



KEEP YOUR EYES PEELLED FOR SOME POIGNANT STREET ART – THIS PIECE ON THE SIDE OF A DECRET, BULLET-RIDDEN BUILDING IN THE ACHRARIEN DISTRICT DEPICTS A MAN SWEEPING EMPTY CARTRIDGES FROM THE CIVIL WAR.

How do you explain to Hezbollah why you've taken so many pictures of smiling Syrian construction workers and a bunch of men in a car wash? (For the record, they volunteered.) Meanwhile, a few men in civilian dress behind my interrogator seemed to be pointing at me whilst casually handing over guns. In retrospect I'm sure it had nothing to do with me, but under interrogation you get crazy ideas.

Eventually, the man decided I was no threat, just an idiot, and sent me away. But not after offering coffee and imparting a special message of peace from Hezbollah to the people of Holland. Guess what, Hezbollah is very image-conscious. "Israel wants you to think we hate everyone, but we love everyone under God." Nice. But after all the fuss and sweaty palms, I didn't get the permission for photography. Shame, because Dahiyeh was like the stage of the Sound of Music.

No. Not really. There was nothing particularly gay about the place. It was buzzing and friendly. The

## HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN TO HEZBOLLAH WHY YOU'VE TAKEN SO MANY PICTURES OF SMILING SYRIAN CONSTRUCTION WORKERS?

only unusual thing was the prominent imagery of bearded mullahs and young martyrs along the main roads – alternated with heavily made-up fashion models.

If you think I'm a moron for inviting myself to Hezbollah, that's alright, but consider this: one insanely stupid Israeli guy sneaked into Lebanon *eleven times* just to have sex with guys in Dahiyeh. And we wouldn't know about it if he didn't get caught. He got caught on his last visit in 2008, because one of his alleged lovers was a Lebanese security agent, who lost his gun, which was then used in a murder, at the site of which somehow his passport photo was found.

Of course the media had a field day with this story, which caused severe diplomatic tensions between Israel and Lebanon to resurface. Many assumed that the guy was a Mossad agent, but no such proof was found, nor any ties to the murder, and a month later he was released. He was probably just a thrill-seeking idiot – no real spy would get himself in such an absurd mess. In the interviews after his release he suddenly denied he was gay. But whether he was just scrambling back into the closet or not; the gay sex he reportedly admitted to under interrogation had never been the issue. Being the citizen of an enemy country was a problem. Causing an embarrassment to the Lebanese police force certainly didn't help either. But breaking the Lebanese anti-sodomy law? Nah. ■

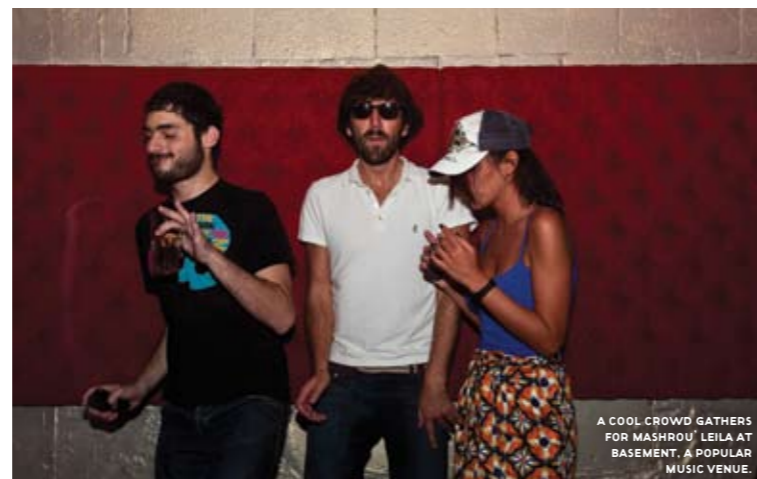
## FLY

Lufthansa offers **nine weekly flights to Beirut Rafik Hariri International Airport** – once a day from Monday to Friday and two flights on Saturdays and Sundays, connecting through Frankfurt Airport in 4 hours and 15 minutes. During the flight from Frankfurt, both Economy and Business Class passengers can enjoy complimentary catering

including a main course served along with a dessert and drinks. Lufthansa is one of the most gay friendly airlines on the planet. If you're lucky, you'll get one of those calendar-boy flight attendants the airline is famous for. The most convenient (afternoon) flights are on weekends. [WWW.LUFTHANSA.COM](http://WWW.LUFTHANSA.COM) OR 0900 – 1234 777 (24 HOURS, 0.15 EUR/MINUTE)



YOUR HOLIDAY STARTS HERE.



A COOL CROWD GATHERS FOR MASHROU' LEILA AT BASEMENT, A POPULAR MUSIC VENUE.

## THE LAW

Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal code echoes an old Victorian law that prohibits having sexual relations 'contradicting the laws of nature'. As elsewhere in the world, it is the product of good old imperialism, implemented by the French (who enjoyed a more liberal Napoleonic Code themselves) to appease religious folk when they left. India recently got rid of a very similar law, backed by the Ministry of Health, successfully arguing it hindered Aids prevention. The Lebanese gay rights organisation Helem is seeking out a similar route. In practice though, the law is rarely applied. Nowadays, anything related to 'criminal' sexual behaviour is generally resolved within the police station – the courts won't touch it.

HAMED SINNO, LEAD SINGER OF MASHROU' LEILA.



PHOTO: WAEEL MORCOS

## LISTEN

One of the most interesting bands to come out of Beirut lately is **Mashrou' Leila**. The seven members present an ideal model of what Beirut can be: a proud, liberal Arab place, transcending different backgrounds, religions and sexual preferences. In a city where most music is divisive or activist, their lyrics are refreshingly open-minded. And what doesn't hurt either: the attractive lead singer is openly gay. Highly recommended.

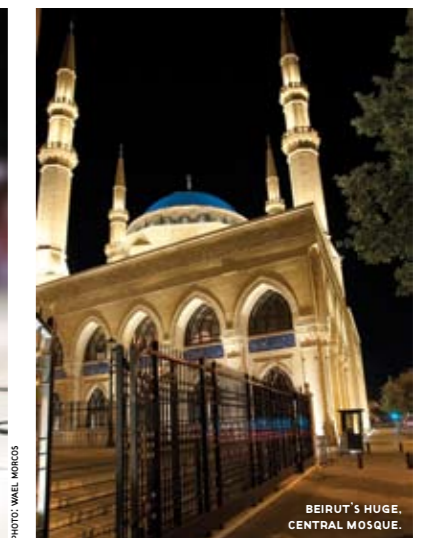
CHECK OUT THEIR FACEBOOK FANPAGE OR [WWW.MYSFACE.COM/MASHROU3LEILA](http://WWW.MYSFACE.COM/MASHROU3LEILA)



A RESTAURANT AT RUE HAMRA, ONCE NAMED THE CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES OF BEIRUT.



A SUBTLE SOCK MESSAGE.



BEIRUT'S HUGE, CENTRAL MOSQUE.



THE SEVEN MEMBERS OF MASHROU' LEILA.

PHOTO: WAEEL MORCOS