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Delights amid the dangers

“We Lebanese are excellent drivers,” says our guide for the night, 21-year-old student Adonis.



Revellers at a sidewalk café in Beirut's downtown area. The city's nightlife is vibrant, even though political and religious tensions still simmer. (HUSSEIN MALLA / AP FILE PHOTO)

By **ROWENA CARR-ALLINSON** Special to the Star
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BEIRUT—"We Lebanese are excellent drivers," says our guide for the night, 21-year-old student Adonis.

"If not, we'd be dead," adds her friend Diane, 20. "The only rule is not to hit the other cars."

Adonis is weaving her bulky, old-style Mercedes through Beirut's insane traffic. Dodging past both clapped-out cars and the latest Porsche Cayennes or even army jeeps, I feel at ease.

It's a long way from the apprehension and anxiety I felt while sitting on the incoming flight just a few days ago. Of course, I'd heard that Lebanon was the Switzerland of the Middle East, that its natural and historical assets were making it a new "must-do" for tourists, but you can't undo decades of news footage.

Tonight, Adonis and Diane are showing us their beloved Beirut, a buzzing city where extremes cohabit and party.

Having met for drinks at the lively Kahwat al ézez (the glass coffee shop), we chat for a while before setting out.

Have we tasted the food? the young women ask.

Of course. I proudly list everything I've tried, from *labnah*, the creamy white cheese, to the garlic-intense shawarma wraps. And, yes, I'm loving it.

My partner has embraced local fare enthusiastically, even the raw liver. I draw the line at *kibbeh naye* (raw lamb), which was rather like a beef tartare. My favourite has to be the baba ghanouche eggplant caviar, and I've become addicted to the deliciously sweet pastries: layers of phyllo laden with pistachio nuts, honey and other delights.

The two women order "Mexican" beer, a popular cocktail: beer with salt and lime.

Outside, the heat knocks you sideways, but it's the humidity that really gets you. Although it's still early and the street is quiet, I am assured that later the Gemayze area will be "crazy busy."

We hop into Adonis' car and she navigates around the Hezbollah's tented camp in the centre of town. It's unavoidable. The girls explain that Solidiere, the entirely renovated downtown Beirut area, has been stifled by the "strike," a euphemism used for the encampment. The protest has turned what was briefly home to the city's sleekest shops, banks and embassies into a ghost town. Today, it's just a congregation of checkpoints, barbed wire and concrete breeze blocks.

We carry on to Al Hamra, a Muslim area with bustling pavements, flashing neons and Starbucks. Adonis plunges into the hottest topic of all: religion.

"It's not just about Muslims and Christians," she says. "There are 17 separate confessions, all living side by side." As a Christian Maronite, she's happy to venture into majority Muslim areas, but knows people who won't. As they talk politics, the girls suddenly burst into Arabic, bickering, before apologizing profusely for switching languages and leaving us out.

We cruise down the Corniche on the coast, where the air is heavy with aromas from a corn-on-the-cob stall, exhausts and the sweet smoke from the narghile pipes.

On the way back, our guides want to show us the working-class neighbourhood of Basta. Sunnis and Shiites live side by side here, but tensions are constant. As the car slows, there's a commotion up ahead. The air is electric and dozens of young men swarm over the street rushing away from something. Although I'm not quite comfortable, having seen armed soldiers and tanks all day, I'm getting used to the edgy atmosphere.

Back in Achrafieh, we stop at our hotel. The four-storey Albergo town house is a beautiful mix of French, Lebanese, Italian and Ottoman styles, refurbished by interior designing legend Jacques Garcia.

The duty manager is adamant we must stop by Rue Monnot. With traffic getting increasingly chaotic, we venture out on foot. The tiny street in the old French Quarter is a hive of activity. Bars like Pacifico, Lila Brown and Aqua are all heaving. It's the ideal spot to people-watch and quench our raging thirst. The air is Beirut balmy: loaded with heat and chatter from locals and expats alike. Another 15 minutes' walk and we are back in Gemayze where the traffic is gridlocked and the crowds have materialized. Beirut's beautiful people are out in droves.

Diane accounts for the locals' lust for life by saying that when she hid throughout the bombings in 2006, she swore to herself that as soon as it was over she would go out and make the most of everything. And so they do.

The Lebanese nightlife is flashy, showy and in your face. The young women are done up to the nines: spray-on jeans, tiny tops, plenty of jewellery, makeup and heels.

At Bar Louie on Rue Gouraud, we enter a cryptlike restaurant where '80s favourites blare out so loudly that conversation is impossible. Tucking into seafood tapas, we are spoiled with huge grilled shrimps with a fantastic creamy sauce, fresh salmon ceviche and octopus.

The restaurant's clientele is young, sleek and into singing along with George Michael or Depeche Mode.

The atmosphere is euphoric and slightly surreal.

According to Adonis, growing up in a war zone means no incentive to live for tomorrow, or to save.

It's all about *carpe diem*: spend, party and live for today.

Although it's all said with a smile, the party-loving girls who act like they don't have a care in the world are deadly serious. Wise beyond their years, they are admirably pragmatic.

"People always worry about something," Adonis says. "For us it's whether we're going to live, whether there's another bombing. Maybe elsewhere you worry about getting a job, or about your personal life. Only here it's a little more serious."

Defiant Diane adds that nothing can break their spirit.

"This is like the calm before the storm or after the storm. First, you wait, then you get used to it, then you just don't care. It's almost like you are waiting for it to happen, like 'come on!' What's going to happen will happen." All said with a smile.

Walking through central Beirut, it's impossible to miss the city's scars, whether it's a rainbow of bullet holes in the ochre plaster, shattered windows or simply a gaping hole in a block where an entire building disappeared. Rebuild and forget? No way. Adonis insists: "We have to leave those buildings there so we don't forget what we did to our own country."

Next stop is the ultra-hip Central Bar. A round lift takes you up into the "tube bar," which appears to be an oversized air duct dropped on top of a building with retractable windows.

It's worth coming for the view alone, stretching across the city over the mosque and to the twinkling harbour. The margaritas are pretty good, too.

Another bar, more beautiful people, more loud music and more people living it up. This city has definitely got two distinct personalities: daytime, with its war-zone feel, and night, with its glamour easily putting New York or Paris to shame.

In the early hours, we call it a night and head back to the Albergo, a haven of peace in this supercharged city. Outside, Beirut is wide awake, a never-ending parade of snazzy cars honking bumper to bumper, their zealous owners singing and celebrating.

What was it Adonis had said? "I don't like boring places. Beirut's a bit crazy but this is really living."

As I fall asleep, I wonder if the girls' driving analysis applies to life here. "It's very chaotic," they said, laughing. "Sometimes, you just have to close your eyes."

Rowena Carr-Allinson is a freelance writer based in London, England. Her visit was subsidized by Czech Airlines (czechairlines.com).

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