BACKPACKING LEBANON

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Beyond an expanse of Mediterranean darkness, like a constellation shone the myriad lights of Beirut. They clustered into a dazzling contour that delineated the coastline and gradually thinned out to obscurity over the slopes in the background.

The plane roared and rocked as it began to decelerate and descend, causing several of my co-passengers to stir in brief wakefulness before reburying their heads in their comfy neck pillows. For most, being locals, this was a routine flight. For me, the destination was novel. I'd been awake all along, staring in earnest out of the window, brimming with excited anticipation of a new epic adventure.

Despite its geographical and cultural proximity to my home country, I admit I knew little about Lebanon prior to this trip… I knew the names of its major coastal cities and that a great mountain range and desert occupy its hinterland. I was familiar with its elemental history: the many empires and disparate civilizations that flourished in the region since deep prehistory; the bloody, Christians-versus-Muslims civil war and the conflicts between Israel and Hezbollah that have afflicted the modern Lebanese state since its foundation. I was aware of its unique demographic composition of mostly Arabic-speaking people who adhere to a hodgepodge of religions, and that other Arabs consider it a haven of liberalism and progressiveness. I had also observed the recent financial crisis that turned the country into a case study of corruption… But overall, upon hearing of Lebanon, my first thought would always be *hummus and kebab*.

Although the Lebanese people are particularly diasporic, I hadn't met many of them before. I'd often stumble upon them owning Levantine restaurants and grocery stores in places all over the world, but rarely under circumstances that facilitated increased intimacy. There was

only one Lebanese man with whom I had ever had a close interaction…

He was born and raised in Lebanon, but he had spent most of his adult life abroad and wasn't even a de jure Lebanese citizen anymore. Because of failed business ventures, aggravated by cocaine problems, he had accrued substantial debts in various European countries. His solution was to retreat to Senegal for some years and amass funds, not to repay his debts, but to buy a genuine new passport with the identity of his choice from the Senegalese police for €10,000 and use it to return to Europe as a Senegalese immigrant with a clean record.

We were flatmates in a northern European city during a brief period when I worked there in my early twenties. He was in his late fifties but remained remarkably spry. He worked in a restaurant seven days a week, twelve to sixteen hours a day. Even though he spent a considerable part of each shift sleeping away in hiding, his stamina was impressive, especially given that he never returned home with a desire to go to bed.

Every evening, before finishing work, he'd call me and—in his peculiar dialect that combined in almost equal parts English, French, Swedish, Cypriot Greek, and Arabic; which I used to wonder how others, who weren't like me familiar with all but the last component, understood—speak along the lines of: "Are you hungry, Dimitraki? What do you fancy today? Burger? Double? With chips? Ok. The last cook is leaving now. I'm going to prepare. I will bring some chicken wings too. And what will we drink tonight? Whiskey? Of the expensive one, eh? But of course. See you soon."

Having emptied all the takeout containers and the filched liquor

bottle, we'd then go out to the neighborhood's live music bar to become the last ones to leave at closing time. Back home, he'd crash for a couple of hours on his floor mattress and rise anew to repeat his daily routine…

Anyway, this was pretty much all that made up my perception of Lebanon up to this night. Now, just as the aircraft had touched on the runway of Beirut International Airport, I was about to immerse myself in experiencing this country and its rich culture firsthand over the next month I would spend exploring it.

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It was bang on midnight, and the airport corridors weren't that busy. Still, given the insufficient number of clerks, a long queue had formed before the foreign-passports immigration control booths. Peeping around at people and their documents to while away the wait, I noticed the queue principally consisted of whom I call *party Gulfers*: affluent Gulf Arabs in Western garments visiting Lebanon to savor forbidden pleasures. The girls flaunted lustrous, unveiled hairdos and excessive maquillage. The guys were already online scrolling through profiles of Lebanese gals on dating apps.

Half an hour of zigzagging later, I was handing my passport to that frisky-looking officer through the slot of the service window. He glanced up and down a few times between the current, well-groomed version of myself and the earlier, shaggy one depicted on my passport. "You must shave this picture," he concluded in broken English and with a slight grin.

Next, he asked for my (in reality, nonexistent) profession. I hesitated for a jiffy. In the past, I had been saying *freelancer*. But during a

recent trip to a notorious dictatorship, this answer had caused significant confusion and delay. So I had figured that I must revise it to something simpler. Now I dithered as I tried to remember what that was. “Cook,” came soon the spontaneous reply.

Last, he wanted my address in Lebanon. This time, I told him the truth: “I don’t know.” I explained that my girlfriend had booked an Airbnb; I don’t have the details on my phone; she’s outside waiting for me, arrived earlier on a separate flight; and I don’t have internet to contact her. “Alright, remember next time,” he said in resignation and let me enter the territory of Lebanon.

In the arrivals hall, I bumped straight into Sophie—my aforementioned girlfriend, who would join me for the first half of this trip—and we began looking for a taxi.

Of course, the drivers were looking for us more actively and found us first. After a minute of parallel negotiations with the gang of them that rallied around us, we lowered the initial ripoff to an acceptable fare. And we followed the guy who offered it away from the airport to his jalopy of a pirate taxi.

Thanks to the late hour, Beirut’s freeways were free of congestion. It took little longer than smoking a cigarette to reach our destination. Incidentally, I asked the driver if I could smoke in his car; although I could have guessed it, I didn’t yet know that it’s customary for the Lebanese to smoke in all kinds of public transport and buildings.

According to the instructions, we walked into an unlit alley, climbed five flights of winding stairs to the top floor of an elevator-less condo, and knocked on the wooden door. Seconds later, our host, Tarek,

appeared at the threshold wearing a warm welcoming smile.

With his long, black, curly hair and beard, as well as his prominent nose, he reminded me of the sort of character who would play a Babylonian king in a period film. His English was excellent and his disposition friendly. Alongside him, a young French girl, another Airbnb guest, was present. Having finished showing us around the apartment, he said: “We are going out now to a techno party. Are you guys tired?”

We were tired; awake and on the move since dawn. Until a moment earlier, we were longing for nothing but bed. But then he mentioned that such a party happens only once per month. Coincidences have a purpose. We asked them to wait for a minute while we got ready.

We drove around a few blocks and parked in front of an unassuming, multi-story building on a narrow bystreet. I was expecting a club, but to my pleasant surprise, it looked like a squat. Tarek explained it wasn’t occupied, but his friends’ group had somehow gotten legal hold of it and used it as an alternative culture and activism center.

The bar and stage were on the first floor. Before the party began, we grabbed beers and went on a tour of the upper floors. They comprised a library, an art studio, and a collective kitchen. After a quick nosh at the latter, we sat in a room together with several of Tarek’s mates and smoked a couple of joints over interesting conversations. Although a techno party was held, the only other available substance was ketamine, which I was never fond of. So we stuck to booze and pot.

We headed back downstairs when the first notes reverberated through the floor. There we saw three dudes sound-checking a drum set, an electric guitar, and a flute. There would be a live gig before the DJ

took over. Nice. We found a suitable spot and settled in to enjoy.

As the *soundcheck* continued without them tweaking anything, I assumed they were doing a somewhat over-protracted, dissonant sonic prelude for an intro before kicking off the actual performance. But as it dragged on and on, I realized that this very dissonance *was* the actual performance. It wasn't only lacking rhythm and harmony, but even tempo. Each one played by himself and at complete random. Honestly, I don't want to be mean, but the result couldn't be any worse if you replaced them with a randomness generator program.

An hour of headache later, they left the stage to the DJ. It was an improvement. The machine could at least keep a consistent tempo. Still, that was the sole musical element involved in that booming cacophony of horrendous mixing. The headache intensified into a migraine and the accumulated tiredness kicked in like a sweeping avalanche. It was time to find Tarek to help us call a taxi home.

The taxi stopped across the street, and we got straight in. The apathetic man in the driver's seat confirmed it was we who had placed the order and asked: "Where?"

With a tinge of confounded frustration, I pointed at the address on the screen of the mobile phone that was attached to the windshield right before his eyes and answered: "There."

"Far," he remarked. "Seven hundred."

"No," I said and now pointed at the price that read 240.

"Okay, how much you give?" he persisted.

“Two-forty,” I asserted with finality.

He shook his head in refusal, and we exited the car. This was the first of many similar experiences going forward.

Once more, we located Tarek in the crowd. He called another taxi and followed us out to ensure they wouldn’t try to scam us again.

In the wee hours, we collapsed on our floor mattress for a sound sleep.

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We got up not long before noon. The harsh heat enveloped me like a fiery embrace as soon as I stepped out onto the balcony for my morning coffee.

For lack of view other than of the adjacent blocks, the first thing I noticed was that bullet marks and mortar holes riddled virtually all walls within sight. I would soon discover that such urban scars were rife throughout the city, a testament to the intensity of warfare it had endured.

We didn’t have big plans for our first day in Lebanon, except for chilling and a bit of sightseeing. Our only chores were to exchange some money and get a SIM card.

The first one was easy. Tarek directed us to an electronics shop around the corner for the most favorable rate. If this sounds like an improbable place to convert currency, here’s the background:

As a desperate measure to stabilize the economy during the crisis, the government imposed an artificially inflated rate for the Lebanese

pound. At the time of our trip, this was about six times higher than the informal, realistic rate adopted by the organic economy. This meant that by buying local currency at an official exchange bureau or by using a foreign card to either withdraw cash from an ATM or make purchases denominated in Lebanese pounds, we'd end up paying six times more for everything.

We later figured out that there wasn't a point to exchange money in the first place, since everyone, even in the remotest villages, happily accepted dollars. The rate at the electronics shop was a tad better, but factoring in the storage and transport hassle—$500 gave us a pack of 100,000-pound notes the size of two bricks that occupied a considerable part of my precious backpack space—it wasn't worth it. Anyhow, in a frivolous, vainglorious way, it felt nice being a millionaire for a while.

As for the SIM card, it should be a matter of time until we come across some mobile network operator's shop; these are ubiquitous in all cities worldwide. With that in mind, we began walking and exploring Beirut.

We stayed in Rmeil: a Greek Orthodox Christian district of eastern Beirut, renowned as an artistic hub. Meandering along its narrow, sloping, quiet streets, we saw churches and quaint old houses. Little effigies of the Virgin Mary and contemporary murals often adorned the latter's yards and walls. Down a charming stair street, we stopped for lunch at a nice cafe Sophie had found in advance. We settled at a typical-of-Arabic-cafes, petite table, in the relieving shade of a tree, and enjoyed a delicious, cold vegetarian meal so befitting to the heat.

Resuming our walk, we followed Gouraud Street toward the center.

This is one of Beirut's principal nightlife streets. Even though it was early afternoon, many of the bars were already open and hosted companies of young locals sipping at pints.

It led us straight to the heart of the city, where we glanced at various interesting sights: the impressive Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque with its turquoise dome and towering minarets; the Martyrs' Square with its power-inspiring Martyrs' Monument in its middle; Medieval churches and Roman ruins.

Most appealing, I found the Beirut Central District, with its broad cobbled streets radiating outward from the prominent clock tower in the center of Nejmeh Square. This part of the city was obliterated during the Civil War and reconstructed. Upon our visit, all entrances were guarded by stringent military checkpoints, all shops shut, and the streets vacant save us, a couple more tourists, and patrolling soldiers. The parliament, situated within the district, might have been meeting; hence the increased security measures.

As the sun lowered, and the need for shade diminished, we paced toward the sea. We reached it at a posh waterfront known as Zaitunay Bay. It felt like a different city there—a wealthy enclave oblivious to the troubles of the surrounding millions. Ritzy apartment towers, swimming pool resorts, and swanky restaurants lined the continental side of the neat, crescentic boardwalk. Yachts and sailboats docked along the many wharves on the littoral side. Evidently disappointing the waiter with the size of our order, we had an overpriced, refreshing lemonade at the least-swanky of the restaurants and carried on along the coast.

A 5-km-long promenade, called the Corniche, defined the entirety of

central Beirut's northern coastline. With the sun approaching the marine horizon, warm tints saturated the scenery. Retro street lamps and svelte, often bullet-marked palm trees arrayed the whole seafront, and people crowded it.

Big families strolled, guffawing kids racing ahead on bicycles and toy cars. Push cart vendors meandered through the mass, touting anything from balloons to falafel. Companies of young men occupied every bench, chattering and passing around wafting mouthpieces of shishas, while others dove into the sea from the rocks below the embankment. Solitary fishermen waited over their lined-up-along-the-railing rods.

Identified by our cameras as overt tourists, we attracted a lot of attention. People greeted us with cordial gestures and smiles. Many stopped us for an affable chat or a picture request.

It was golden hour when we made it to that lighthouse on the rugged westernmost tip of Beirut, where we intended to find a secluded spot to smoke the last spliff from yesterday's party and marvel at the sunset in peace. However, this plan proved unfeasible because military facilities and private resorts occupied the whole cape area. Alternatively, we settled on a filthy stairway across the main road, in the company of a clowder of cats, where we smoked and watched the sun setting over the trees and the traffic instead of the horizon.

As night fell, we headed back to the center, intent on dining on Hamra Street. This was presumably one of the city's liveliest streets. But—perhaps because we wound up in the wrong part along its great length—we found it deserted and dreary. We only spotted a half-lit, rundown shawarma joint for a quick grab before taking a cab home.

Meanwhile, after some 30–40 km we walked all over the city

throughout the day, we didn't see any mobile operator's shop. They sold SIM cards in different shops, but for a 500% markup compared to the original source. So we had to postpone this task for the next day.

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The next day was a Sunday. As my tracking of the calendar isn't in general much more regular than my tracking of Pluto's position, I only realized the fact upon checking Google Maps for the SIM card shops to find out they were closed. So was the camping gear shop, where we needed to buy some stuff for our imminent outdoor adventure.

Our original plan was to leave Beirut early tomorrow morning. Our new plan became to go shopping early tomorrow morning and hopefully be gone before noon. As for the current Sunday, it could be our uneventful day off.

We didn't leave the neighborhood for the whole day and we only left the apartment for food. For lunch, we went to a quirky, hipstery garden cafe where we had a delicious though downscaled shakshouka and nursed coffee a trickle at a time to lengthen our indolence in its pleasant ambiance. For dinner, we went to an upscale, traditional Lebanese restaurant on Gouraud Street where we paid the equivalent of a week's ordinary alimentation but had the feast of the year. That I had to walk an extra route home and back because the money bundle I had with me turned out half an inch thinner than the bill was annoying, but it aided my digestion.

We were out before 8 am, motivated to complete our preparations swiftly and leave the city. But the city did not cooperate. To start, the

nearby mall wouldn’t open until 10 o’clock.

After a wait over coffee, we were the first ones to enter and quick to locate the outdoors shop on the top level. We bought everything we needed—most essentially, a pair of long trekking pants for myself and a 10-liter, foldable water pouch—except some spare carabiners that, among quite a variety of climbing gear, they strangely didn’t have. Fortunately, on this trip, we’d need these only for hanging stuff from ourselves and not ourselves from cliffs. So we made do with the two we already had—and later with the one left after the other broke—without fatal complications. Only the bloody SIM was pending now.

We had expected there would be a cellular service provider’s store in the mall. Wrongly. For some reason, such stores were rare in this city. The nearest one was a half hour’s drive away in the Monday morning traffic.

Exiting the non-air-conditioned mobile oven of a taxi yielded no relief. An enormous queue—common to public-sector offices but outright aberrant for a non-monopolistic private enterprise—had formed between the direct, relentless solar radiation and the glass storefront. The constant flux of slicksters, who often successfully pestered the security guard to let them skip the line, aggravated the situation and my nerves. I must have sweated a jug during the two hours it took till we got in.

Another hour of seated and cooled-down waiting passed comfortably inside. And one more hour of procedure at the desk later, at last, we had internet. The taxi fares had doubled the cost of the card, but that was still better than the quintuple offer of the unofficial shops.

The downside was that we’d wasted the day. It was late afternoon

when we wrapped up, behind time to go anywhere today, but at least completely ready to set off on our yearned-for journey first thing in the morning.

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Our immediate destination was a village called Baskinta, at an elevation of 1200 meters on the western slope of Mount Lebanon, a 45 km drive northeast of Beirut. With Tarek's help, we found a direct bus that was scheduled to depart at 10:50 from a roundabout in the city's eastern suburbs. Two hours ahead, we had our heavy backpacks strapped-on and were striding along the still-quiet and relatively cool streets of the big city.

We started that earlier because we needed an hour to walk there and we could do with a spare hour for contingencies and breakfast. As soon as we reached the broad, busy roundabout, we set about locating the bus. The first person we asked pointed to the opposite side. There lay a minivan and two men idling beside it.

"Baskinta?" I asked them.

"Yes," the one replied and, without delay, attempted to all but physically steer us into the vehicle.

It felt a bit too easy. After all, we were talking about a random mountain village; not some major hub along the coast.

I double-checked: "Baskinta, direct, sure?"

"Baskinta, yes," he affirmed.

"Vous allez directement à Baskinta, n'est-ce pas?" I triple-checked in

a more widely understood tongue.

“Baskinta, Baskinta, oui, oui,” he reaffirmed and prompted me to board with a tap on the shoulder.

“Alright. What time do you leave?”

“Now,” he said and walked around to the driver’s door.

We were an hour early, but he hadn’t left any room for doubt. There seemingly were more buses than the one Tarek had found. Breakfast could wait for an hour or two until we arrive. I only requested that he give me a minute to at least buy some water. He met my request by dispatching the other guy to fetch some for us. We got in, waited for a short bit until the man returned with two small bottles, passed him the money from the window, and hit the road.

We were the only passengers, but after some half hour of tormentingly slow progress and incessant honking at every human standing or walking on the roadside, he filled it to the last seat. Baskinta was quite popular after all, it seemed… But when we reached the turn to Baskinta, he barrelled on straight past it.

“*Yo! Baskinta!*” I yelled, cocking my thumb back toward the missed junction.

“Baskinta, yes,” he said, continuing with an unintelligible-to-me but explanatory-sounding spurt of Arabic and reassuring gestures.

We could only wait. Perhaps he’d take some other, less direct route…

After some 50 km of letting passengers on and off along the coast, he turned around and headed back the same way. Perhaps he’d *now* take

the normal route to our destination…

“Baskinta, yes,” he once more placated my protests after we drove past our turn for the second time.

A little later, on Beirut’s outskirts, a short distance from where we’d started three hours earlier, he pulled over and pointed to a vacant private parking lot across the frontage road.

“Baskinta,” he announced with an expression suggestive of praise expectation and motioned us to get off.

I tried to argue, but there was no use, not least because we didn’t comprehend a single one of each other’s words. Defeatedly, we pulled out to figure out what to do next.

No sooner than I completed my first step away from the van, he screamed for me to halt. I turned around.

“Money!” he demanded. After all, *yes* wasn’t the only English word he knew.

“What for?” I asked, dismissed his complaints, and resumed my steps. He skidded away, screeching tires expressing his vexation.

My theory is that he tried to scam us in cold blood. He might have assumed we were so stupid as to not understand that we drove back and forth the same way and instead think that we’d come a long way closer to our destination. It’s also possible that he prevented us from going to buy water ourselves afraid that we’d spot the correct bus. In retrospect, I should have asked him what we owed for the ride out of curiosity.

Anyway, he didn't rob us of money but of the entire morning. Now it was scorching midday, and we were standing in the middle of the highway, sticky, hungry, and planless.

We clambered over the concrete median barrier and crossed the frontage road to the parking lot he had indicated: not because there was any clue of a bus stop over there, but because the two guards standing at its entrance were the only people in sight.

They spoke good English but weren't experts on their country's public transport operations. They suggested we walk to the turn and see if any buses come.

That's what we did. Beaded with sweat, we reached the turn and sat down on the low, fetid pavement, waiting amid the traffic buzz and diesel fumes that permeated the hustling intersection. Countless buses zoomed past along the main road until one slowed down with indicators blinking.

I sprang up and almost jumped in front of it to make sure it'd stop. A woman passenger interpreted in French that a bus to Baskinta would pass later, but he could take us now to Bteghrine—another mountain village en route—if we wanted. Of course we wanted: better wait in peaceful environs over a traditional meal.

Refreshing breezes blew through the van's windows as the urban drabness gave way to delightful views of verdant slopes and the faint azure of the now-faraway Mediterranean. Traversing steep, sinuous roads and bypassing various cute settlements, we arrived in Bteghrine. My mouth watered in view of the restaurants and bakeries whizzing behind as we progressed through the village. I was about to race to the nearest one when the driver stopped to drop off the other passengers,

but he gestured us to wait to… instead drop us off at a desolate junction a good way out of the village, where the bus to Baskinta would pass through.

There was a lone motorcycle repair shop a few steps down the road and a shaded ledge opposite it where we settled waiting. The lads who worked there and the infrequent passers-by glanced at us curiously, but no one spoke to us. A calm while later, the firecracker turned up.

He came revving and swerving up the road in his big, rugged jeep. Then, noticing us, he braked to a sudden halt and bounced out, chortling and bantering. He invited us to sit at the makeshift patio lounge on the plank deck overlooking the gorge behind our previous position. Within minutes, the workshop lads had abandoned their jobs to join us, and a couple more of his friends had arrived with hookahs.

We chatted in rudimentary English and French aided by pantomime and digital translation. He proudly claimed to have become rich by playing online poker and boasted about his hunting and off-road driving achievements. They were all impressed to hear about our upcoming expedition. Meanwhile, the bus was coming in ten minutes every time we asked him. A few hours later, he shot up to stop a passing truck for us.

Although he said he was going to Baskinta, the driver dropped us off at another village in between. The traffic was denser there, and we hitched a follow-up ride before long. Late afternoon, we had at last made it to our destination.

Baskinta was a picturesque, amphitheatrical Christian village surrounded by spectacular views. We'd have allotted more time to explore it. But given the tardiness, we walked straight into the first

food place and got a pizza for a too-belated-breakfast/dinner. And after a quick stop for groceries, we took the uphill road out of the village.

A pickup stopped soon and offered us an enjoyable, open-air ride on its bed. Having saved all the ascent, we hopped off where our intended route forked off down the next valley. A bit later, concurrently with the sundown, we were pitching our tent in a terraced apple orchard and were about to sack out for the night.

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An owl's persistent, mellow and melodious hooting preceded the alarm and aroused us before the crack of dawn. We snoozed on while the twilight infiltrated the tent and replaced the absolute darkness. When we could see enough, we got up and began preparing for the first day of our trekking adventure.

The aptly named Lebanon Mountain Trail is a 470 km long-distance hiking trail that spans the entire territory of Lebanon from north to south. Divided into 27 sections, it proceeds through some of the country's most stunning landscapes and notable cultural sites. We had just met its midpoint, and our plan was to follow it northward for as long as we felt like.

We were in no rush and lingered over coffee before packing. The handsome green apples were a tempting, moist complement to our typical bush breakfast consisting of dry fruit, nuts, and dark chocolate, but we chose not to touch them because that would technically be stealing. As the first direct sunlight began penetrating the foliages, we shouldered our bags and left the orchard.

Walking down the dirt road, we noticed that we'd camped near a bunch of Syrian refugee families. We'd be encountering them regularly from now on, dwelling in make-do, UN-logoed tents and drudging in the locals' farms. Across a gully, we began ascending through the grounds of a hydroelectric station and toward the unpronounceable, hill-top village of Bqaatouta.

There was nothing too special over there. We only stopped for provisions at the village's sole grocery store, exchanged some friendly words and glances with the scanty locals, and carried on down the other side of the hill.

After a stretch of asphalt, we found ourselves on a lovely path ascending the next hill. It was steep but shaded by soaring, gnarled pines. It led us to Qalaat Faqra: a remote archeological site featuring Roman and Byzantine ruins.

The heat was peaking then. It was time to settle under some tree for lunch and rest until it receded. There was an idyllic spot on turfy ground under a thick oak umbrage beside an imposing ancient colonnade. But as we made for it jibber-jabbering, we drew the attention of the custodian. He informed us we had to pay an entry fee. It wasn't expensive, but since the site wasn't extensive and was visible from all around, we opted out.

Instead, we sat together with him outside of his cabin/ticket booth/ honey shop by the entrance. We appreciated each other's company and had an interesting chat in our limited French. He was keen to sell us some of his homemade honey, which he claimed worked miracles on health and longevity.

He further advanced his point when a man looking forty-five stopped

by with a woman looking thirty and bought four honey jars. After they left, our beekeeper/custodian friend told us that the man was sixty and visited him biweekly to procure his life elixir of honey, each time with a new young female companion. I don't know to what extent the honey contributed to the chap's vitality, but I corroborated the other part of the allegation when, some weeks later, I bumped into him again, strolling in a beach resort town together with a new escort. Anyhow, I'd love to buy some—it'd be delicious if nothing else—but I know from experience that, no matter how tightly I seal it, honey will always seep all over my backpack.

In the less sweltering afternoon, we resumed our way. Round the first hill, bathed in sweet late light appeared the town of Faraya, stretched thin across the broad valley below. A gigantic statue of a local saint adjoined by a 3D lettering of its name atop the dominant hill testified to the town's importance.

The trail pushed through nose-tall grasses and thorny thickets, over a falling-apart concrete irrigation bridge, and brought us to the main road between Faraya and Kfardebian: Faraya's upslope extension. Where the road spanned the ravine, there was a spring.

This is where we had intended to camp, but the location differed somewhat from my idealized imagination of it. For one, the spring seemed the principal source of potable water for both towns, with an endless flow of cars stopping and people queuing to fill containers. Worse, the only even and unfenced ground around was the road.

After our turn to fill our bottles came, and as we were perching on the ledge hydrating and contemplating whether to jump the fence into the yard of the adjacent abandoned building, Emilio showed up: a young

man on a tiny scooter with a huge canister between his legs.

He spoke excellent English, and we had an easy chat while he waited for his turn at the spring. His family owned a hotel some way up the road, and he proposed to show us to a better camping spot near there. We followed him on foot as his overloaded bike struggled uphill at a speed slightly greater than ours.

He led us through the bush to a dry, smooth-rock stream bed above a vertical cliff where a waterfall would be dropping in the winter. The only downside was that we couldn't peg the tent on the solid ground —having to fasten and stretch it with heavy stones instead—but it offered privacy and a fantastic view. It became our home for this night.

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We were up at dawn. Before the sun crested the ridge, we were packed and gone.

As agreed last evening, we stopped by Emilio's hotel to have breakfast together. The place seemed forsaken. The open door led us past a vacant reception desk and a lobby in-the-works out to a backyard. A man was there, meditating over a running hose rather than watering the flowers. After we found a common language in Italian, he answered that they make no food, in a tone so bemused as if I'd asked him whether he sells exotic pets. I enquired about Emilio. He said he was sleeping upstairs and he could go wake him up, but we decided not to disturb and walked away unfed.

We had viands, but it'd be a hassle to unpack and prepare something. The town was of a certain size; there were plenty of restaurants

marked on the map along the main road that our route followed.

Even though it was past 10 am, they were all shut and forlorn. Only at the last one, way out of the town, two men were present, one in construction workwear. I walked to them and, words failing, made a gesture for food. Consulting with each other for some seconds, they nodded yes with a hint of reluctance.

We sat in the beautiful lawned garden, in the shade of a massive cedar, and they brought us a QR code to an English menu. Upgrading the order to include lunch on top of breakfast, I walked to them again to place it. They couldn't understand the items, either spoken in any European language or pointed to on the screen. In the end, they called someone who, still with great effort, interpreted over the phone. The working guy threw an apron over his paint-smudged boiler suit and made for the kitchen.

Glutted, we went back to striding in the cruel heat. A dirt road led us to a hamlet at the head of a secluded valley, where a few hovels with Christian sculptures by their doors lay scattered amid patchy farms. We sat on the berm under an apple tree for a few breaths. Two curious, adorable little boys, one carrying a pipe wrench as big as himself, joined us. Then we left civilization.

Following an arduous, ambiguous path through dense thistles, we surmounted the pass above the hamlet and began descending the other side. A new, vast valley appeared below, filled with low-lying, billowing clouds, resembling a colossal bathtub shuffled in slow motion.

Sporadic houses, orchards, and irrigation ponds lay high up the slope, between us and the fog below, but no human was in view. We carried

on east for hours along the mountain contour and only saw a lone shepherd—who was luckily around to restrain his vicious dogs just as they seemed about to maul us.

By evening, we took a steep path into a gorge and the village of Afqa that lay at its headwaters. This was the first and only Muslim village we encountered during our trek in the Lebanese mountains. Although diminutive, it is renowned for the impressive cave and waterfall to which it owes its existence and name (Aramaic for *source*). People have celebrated this natural wonder for numberless generations, ranging from ancient Greeks as the birthplace of their demigod Adonis to modern tourists as a scenic attraction.

Despite the late hour, quite a crowd of native visitors was assembled before the cave. A restaurant also stood there, on a terrace constructed right above the final tier of the fall, on the rim of a 20-meter drop to the limpid pool at the base. We were starving and tired and low on supplies. So we walked in and occupied one of the few available tables.

The waiter had a fine grasp of sale-pitching English. He proposed a barbecue meal at $20 per person. We bargained for a vegetarian meal at $20 in total. While we were dining, he popped by to offer a room for $50. After we declined, he shortly returned with a better price. We weren't feeling rich enough for a room, however discounted, but level ground was scarce and it was dark already. Since he was so eager, I thought I'd ask him whether he'd lease a chuck of the terrace to put our tent on for… say… $5? He considered the idea but not a fee lower than $20. We thanked for the delectable dinner and, torches on, went out searching.

It turned out much easier than my daunted self had feared. The area before the cave was people-free now. We ruled to start with a look inside it. Up a flight of stairs, at the cave's mouth, beside the bank of the gurgling, cavernous river, overlooking the jagged mountain silhouettes between the dimly lit village and the sparkling sky, we found a flat piece of ground that made for an idyllic camping spot.

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The daybreak was approaching, warming the nightly frigid interior of the cave and encouraging me to quit the sleeping bag. I went out to witness a wonderful view of the now-visible gorge. The bats had gone to sleep, and gobs of little birds, who nested in the speckling of holes on the cave's ceiling that was a trypophobic's nightmare, were now fluttering all around, producing a chirrup loud enough to overlay the rumbling cascade.

The cave was looking west, which meant it wouldn't receive direct sunlight before the afternoon. Considering the charming ambience, too, we were in no rush to go. We even had the river next to our tent: the perfect opportunity for a proper wash.

At about nine, the first visitors arrived on a school trip. The bus pulled over timely, just as I was finishing burying my poop. The kids scampered up and began exploring the grotto gazingly and noisily. It was time we started packing.

We headed down to the pool. Along the path, a couple of locals stationed themselves at a desk under a tree to cash in a $1 entry fee from every arrivant. On the shore beside the pool, they had constructed a little embankment laid with synthetic turf, on which stood tables and parasols. Two people were present: a lad running

errands, and a reclined senior in a keffiyeh assigning and supervising the errands.

We sat at a table and called the lad to ask for breakfast. He didn't understand any foreign, so he had to discommode the senior, who at least understood as much as what *breakfast* meant. He sent me back to the entrance desk to place the order. They knew enough words to negotiate the cost of the breakfast, but not its contents. It'd have to be a surprise, and they did not disappoint. The lad came twice to unload a huge tray of delicacies, including salad, hummus, beans, eggs, cheeses, yogurt, a jug of coffee, and whatnot.

While we, bit by bit, stretched our appetites to not waste any food, the sun emerged over the ridge, soaking the gorge with heat, and a crowd of picnicking families gathered. Children splashed about and floated on rubber rings all over the pool. Half-naked men and fully veiled women lounged by fuming shishas all around the shore. Two chaps stood on a high ledge beside the waterfall, pondering it for maybe an hour until they braved the jump.

Having finished our copious breakfast to the last morsel, it was our turn for a dip. The water was outright freezing. Sophie went waist-deep; I went all in. My whole body went numb and my chest twinged forthwith as I submerged. As if an act of divine mockery, an unlikely cloud appeared out of nowhere and hid the sunlight the moment I stepped out.

We dried off, dressed up, thawed out, and lazed on a little longer, until the arrival of a rabble of youngsters, whose clamor was even louder than their portable loudspeaker, prompted us to move on.

Back on the road, a kindly old lady waved us to her stall. She sold

various appetizing goods of her own produce, from which we bought a bag of fresh plums and an assortment of dried fruits. We tucked them in our backpacks for later consumption and set off walking.

The next section of the trail went through a steep ravine and over a bleak plateau, where civilization was absent and the presence of water doubtful for at least a full day's hike. If we didn't want to carry several liters of water for an overnight up there, we'd have to spend another night here and start early to make it to the next village before sundown tomorrow. Alternatively, we decided to skip this section and take a detour.

We walked about a mile uphill the main road until a driver responded to our extended, raised thumbs. He gave us a ride to Aaqoura village. We rounded out our provisions at the grocer's, had an ice cream sitting on two dilapidated chairs on the sidewalk, and continued on foot out of the village.

It was late, and our plan was to camp wherever we found water. Failing to find running water, we ascended 300 meters to the lowest of a cluster of irrigation ponds up the slope. To avoid boiling stagnant water, I pulled the conducting pipe to the shore and filled our pouch straight out of it.

We made a cup of tea and enjoyed the gentle terminal light suffusing the successive orchards and the unfathomable valley below. Then we cooked dinner in the twilight and retreated to the coziness of our tent.

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Human chatter awoke us at dawn. I went out to inspect. Its source unseeable, it came from within the bordering orchard upslope. White

spurts of pesticide jetted above the treeline. We got ready and were off before the fierce morning sunlight reached us.

Now we had to climb 400 steep meters until the ridge to rejoin our trail. We started early to avoid doing this in the extreme ulterior heat. But we ran into complications…

In place of the dirt road that the map showed, there was a narrow gully choked with thick, thistly, impassable chaparral. Our sole alternative was to push through the orchards, feet sinking in quaggy soil, scrambling over stone walls that formed the terraces, traversing overgrown ditches, worrying about potential paranoid-of-intruders, shotgun-bearing farmers. Sweaty, sludgy, scratched, we reached another road and soon made it to the ridge.

We sat under a lone little tree to rest and take in a last glimpse of the south view before proceeding down north. All of Aaqoura's artificial lakes were now visible, reflecting the sky's immaculate blue from amid the pale grassy slope. A small party from a local hiking club passed and stopped for a chat. They seemed impressed by our intrepid venture and proud of our interest in their region.

Civilization and plantations were scarcer on the other side of the mountain. The trail was smooth but barely discernible through thick weeds and man-tall wild oats. Two foreign hikers—the first of their kind that we encountered during the trek—were the only humans we saw. Save some solitary houses and an odd, monumental church out in the boonies, we neither saw many man-made structures.

After these few hours of solitude, the tourist crowd at the next valley's bottom came as a surprise. Preferring the joy of discovery over prior research, we just then became aware that we'd arrived at

one of Lebanon's most awe-inspiring natural attractions.

A sweet little outdoor cafe lay by the entrance to the site. We sank into the cushioned seats under a reed canopy to refresh and stimulate ourselves with juice and coffee. A company of French and German tourists sat at the next table. As I went to the bar to order, and I replied to the owner's question about the country of my origin, one of the German guys came to speak with me in Greek. He had studied classics and his grasp of the language was decent. He must have been famous because people took selfies with him and a burly, bald dude with polarized sunglasses and a spiral-cable earpiece escorted him.

We then paid a $5 ticket, and while folks glided shrieking along a zipline above, we followed a precipitous path ever deeper into the abysmal gorge of Baatara. The path ended on a natural bridge over a seemingly bottomless sinkhole. Above the sinkhole was a rock shelf with a hole through which a waterfall plunged into the chasm. Mosses covered the dull cliffs and embellished the scene with color. This was one of the most extraordinary geological formations I have ever witnessed.

In this fabulous setting, we perched on a ledge beside the void for lunch: flatbread with hummus and a salad made from the fresh vegetables we bought last afternoon. We were going to beef it up with a wild garlic Sophie had plucked earlier on our way, but we providentially thought of double-checking online and discovered that it was a poisonous look-alike in advance instead of during a harrowing antemortem agony.

It'd be great to camp there. However, with the waterfall far out of reach, there was no accessible water. An idea was to walk up and

around to approach the fall's source, but since the day had several hours left, we opted to proceed on our route until the next spring.

It was a lovely afternoon hike along the shaded, sylvan slope parallel to the spectacular gorge of Baatara. When we found ourselves above the intersection of it with another gorge, it was getting late, we had found no water, had run out of any we had, and were very thirsty. We could only continue down the steep trail to the bottom where—*surely*—water would be flowing.

Shrouded in lush woods, bordered by towering cliffs, the gorge junction was the backdrop of a blissful dream. The white shingle of the riverbed, however, was dry as cinder.

My lips had parched by the time we completed the ascent to the other side. Hanging over the cliff, a village called Chatine lay there. It was small but prosperous, comprising luxuriant villas hemmed in elaborate gardens with fancy cars parked in them. The cobbled streets were rather dead, though. Besides a company of playing kids and a few toiling Syrian gardeners, we encountered but one woman who spoke English and confirmed that the village had neither a shop nor potable tap water. She kindly changed course to go home and give us a big bottle. We'd have to do with that. It wouldn't suffice for cooking, but it would keep us hydrated.

Accompanied by a gang of Syrian refugee children, who spotted us from atop a rock and bolted to us whooping as if they'd seen Dumbo the Flying Elephant in flesh and blood, we walked out of the village. They turned back when the distance exceeded their wandering-allowance radius, and we carried on, still looking for flat ground.

At dusk, we finally settled on a narrow, stony, uncultivated terraced

plot. We dined on plain cherries to save bodily fluids and hit the hay.

***

The lack of shade and water compelled us to set out very early. Natch, five minutes into our course, we met a wide stream rushing beside turfy flatland and under a dense forest canopy. The trail soon veered onto the road that entered the region's principal town.

Tannourine consisted of age-old, gracious stone houses and narrow, declivitous stair pathways winding among them. A voluminous, elegant church stood in its midst. Faint chants echoed out of its wide entrance. And from its lofty steeples, intermittent rhythmic chimes summoned the devout Maronites to Sunday mass.

Thankfully, the grocer across the street disregarded the fourth commandment. The store was large and stocked an ample variety of comestibles. We shopped, sat on the ledge opposite the church, and had the breakfast we had skipped in our dehydrated morning haste while watching the dressed-to-impress flock pouring into their god's house and a company of ragged Muslim Syrian refugees sitting beside us together with their belongings, apparently waiting for a bus to a new home.

Resuming our way and striving towards the upper end of the town, we encountered a senior couple. They had just locked their house door and were leaving for the church, but, genially, they reopened it to invite us in for a quick homemade lemonade and a spoon sweet. They lived and worked as doctors in Paris, where they had raised several kids and grandkids. This was the first time they were visiting their hometown and relatives in many years. The husband's father turned

out to be the owner of the shop by the church, still working at 92.

Past the last houses of Tannourine, we proceeded through a confined plateau dotted with scanty farms and a single irrigation pond at its head. Forward, there was only wilderness for a considerable distance.

The only humans we saw were a pair of North American hikers. They were doing the entire Lebanon Trail in the opposite direction from us. We asked them about water along the way, and they described a nifty location with a shaded picnic table by a broken irrigation pipe coming up. It sounded like the perfect place for lunch.

Passing over a wind-battered col, we entered a broad, sequestered valley encompassed by mighty, craggy peaks. We kept walking into the afternoon without meeting the spot those guys had talked about. But we discovered a better one.

At the head of a tributary gorge that branched off the valley, a pellucid stream ran through a grove, forming a series of little waterfalls and pools. It was quite early, and we were planning to carry on further. But the place was too appealing to resist.

We pitched the tent, took advantage of the abundant water to wash ourselves and our clothes, and spent the rest of the day enjoying the serenity and the allure of the evening mists.

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Waking in such a heavenly setting, we ought to loll for the better part of the morning. Then, a contingency during prep delayed our start even longer. While cleaning them, Sophie dropped her transparent teeth aligners in the stream. Since she feels for them particularly

strongly, we made an effort to search. There was a chance, however slim, they got stuck someplace downstream. We even used twigs to simulate their course along the water's surface. But it was futile. At last, we set out at 10 am.

The trail led us back to the main valley and up toward its head, where the Tannourine Cedar Reserve luxuriated. One of the entire trip's most memorable highlights, this forest comprises the largest concentration of Lebanon's national tree and flag emblem. Towering rigidly through space and time, green amid an arid desolation, rustling whispery tales of eternal mysteries, fragrant with primeval life essence, crooked by the gales of centuries, these majestic trees are among the oldest living organisms on the planet. The age of some surpasses 2,000 years!

In profound wonderment, we unhurriedly climbed our way through the mesmerizing forest. A magnificent panorama of successive mountains appeared beyond the treetop canopy as we gained height. A small viewpoint kiosk was on the top, where we paused to savor a last sighting of this astonishing landscape. The quietude was interrupted by a military helicopter. It thundered its way above the forest at an altitude so low that, had it passed a few minutes later, it would have been on a collision course with our drone.

A short way down the other side, we reached the forest's eastern verge where stood a ticket booth. As far as I recall, this was my first time paying an entry fee upon exiting a site. Then we proceeded along the dirt road that led there until it converged with the main road.

Meanwhile, the puffy cumuli that were accumulating since the morning had—for the first time since we came to Lebanon—fused

into an overcast sky. This made the deserted resort and the lone food corner at the junction look all the more forsaken. The latter was open, and we walked in for lunch.

The interior was much homelier than the exterior suggested. There was a petite seating area with a cushioned banquette and a couple of tables bedecked with elaborate napery. Conveniently, it even had several power outlets all over the wall. While a soft drizzle broke out but never quite took off—just enough to add to the atmosphere—the gentle and blithe lady owner prepared us an exquisite and inexpensive meal which, among the typical Lebanese delicacies, included her specialty goat-cheese pie. With full stomachs and my thumb hurting after spilling hot coffee on it, we resumed our way.

A bit later, as we had just left the main road and were starting up a trail, a car pulled up behind us, and the couple inside called us to come back down to them in urgency. We did, and the man asked us to go around and open the trunk… This has got to be when a gory corpse lies inside in a horror story; or when a berserk, naked Chinese man jumps out in a raunchy Holywood comedy; but in this travelogue, it was full of cherries. He passed us a bag and requested we fill it up. Lacking sufficient backpack space, we had to carry it in hand.

Pleased by the clouds, we began ascending the arduous trail. It led to a dirt road that circumvented the mountain along its contour. Around the edge, the great Qadisha Valley came into view.

Defined by near-vertical cliffs often taller than 1,000 meters, this massive canyon stretches for 35 km between the foot of the country's tallest summit and the coast. We stood high above its deepest part and stared at the opposite side, where we'd arrive after a three-day circuit

via the valley's head. Scattered throughout the smooth slopes above the cliffs on both sides, towns and villages glowed in the golden afternoon sunlight that reached them but not the cloud-laden mountain of our whereabouts. More brilliantly glowed a distant, narrow patch of the Mediterranean Sea that we could now discern for the first time during our trek.

We continued until we found a proper camping spot beside a clump of cherry trees and near an open-ended irrigation pipe. The only botheration was the hardy, thorny weeds that infested every bit of the flat ground. Lest they pierced our tent's floor, it was necessary to eradicate them. It took me a good hour of laboring with the knife on my knees to clear a sufficient area. I earned the cup of tea Sophie made for me, which I now sipped while sitting on a rock and admiring the vista, unaware that we were not alone…

A loud footfall and slobbery panting sounded suddenly from behind. In the two seconds it took me to react, I envisaged a rogue shepherd dog and got mentally prepared to find out what a pair of canine jaws tearing your flesh feels like. When my reaction transpired in turning around and starting to stand, instead of a dog, I faced a charging boar a mere meter away. At the same moment, perhaps figuring that it had misjudged my size, it pivoted and scooted off at a similar pace to my racing heart. Satisfied with all my ribs and vertebrae intact, I went back to my tea until night fell.

***

The sun reached our tent early and forced us to pack and go quickly. This morning, for the first time on this trip, we saw snakes, not one, but two. The first was a water one. We disturbed its basking as we

passed along the concrete rim of an artificial pond, and it spryly retreated to the invisible depths of its aquatic habitat. The second was a big, black, terrestrial one that also disappeared in the growth as soon as it noticed us.

The trail followed an irrigation trough amid apple and cherry orchards. At times, there was no space to walk beside it, and we had to balance-tread along its narrow wall. Then it wound to a dirt road and continued through a succession of hamlets.

At some point, a farmer splashed us with a hose by mistake when he spun around without knowing we were there. He apologized and tried to dissuade us from going straight. I understood that much from his gestures, but nothing about the reason we shouldn't, which he was verbalizing in Arabic. We carried on straight to find out with our eyes. It was just a part of the road missing, washed away by a torrent. We had to bum-slide down a drop and clamber up the other side.

At around noon, we made it to the Lake House. This was an organized campsite near the valley head at the foot of Qurnat as Sawda: the country's highest peak. We had intended to settle there for some days, leave our stuff, and go on a side expedition to the mountaintop. By then, however, we had called this plan off because of the sniper…

From Beirut already, and all along the route since, everyone we spoke to about our aim to climb the mountain would widen their eyes and start: "No! You can't! The sniper!" It was about a localized conflict that was ongoing in the area. Inhabitants of two villages, a Christian and a Muslim one on opposite sides of the mountain, had taken up arms against each other over a disputed water source. I couldn't determine to which faction that particular sniper belonged, but he had

attained a distinct, almost mythical notoriety.

Now that this plan was canceled, we wanted to stop at the Lake House for lunch only. But there was no one to open the house, let alone cook. There was a telephone number on a signboard. The answerer knew just enough English to spell out another number. I noted it but decided not to call because… who would want to come now from the village to make us food? It turned out somebody wanted, anxiously. But I found that out much later when I reactivated my phone—which during hikes is by default in airplane mode to conserve battery—to see many missed calls from the number.

Anyhow, we detoured to go to the village ourselves and eat there. And then we also backtracked to look for Sophie's camera lens cover, which she dropped on the way. Fortunately, we found it by the Lake House. Unfortunately, she lost it a few months later, just days before writing this paragraph.

El Arz was a winter resort village. Aside from old, weeds-consumed, derelict stone houses, the only inhabitable buildings were a few posh chalets. The poshest one, a sizeable edifice with ivies covering its entire facade, maintained the sole restaurant open for summer, and we became its only customers. We eased onto a comfy couch and ordered a pizza and a baked potato. The staff were nice but had the bad habit of fine-dining servers: standing above the table and staring at us blankly while we ate. Besides being frustrating, combined with that poor buck's taxidermied head watching us from the wall, that was also a little spooky in this case.

The village was livelier near its upper end, where the so-called Cedars of God Reserve was situated. It was a popular destination with an

influx of local and foreign tourists second only to Baatara Gorge out of all the places we visited during this trek. The road beside the forest teemed with gift shops selling religious artifacts cut out of cedar wood. Their owners touted to us ardently along our passage but remained sincerely amiable after accepting the impossibility of turning us into customers. One even invited us to camp in his garden, and another hinted to us the location where we later ended up camping.

The entire perimeter of the forest was walled. Looking for a way in, we walked to its uppermost verge where the walls were barbed. This part hosted a military base. A soldier sent us back to the reserve entrance we had missed.

Paying a donation-based entry fee, we entered the wooded area. This one was smaller but even more ravishing than the one in Tannourine. These gargantuan, Methuselan cedars seemed as if taken out of a fairytale. The forest floor was carpeted with colorful flowers and laced with scores of paths. It would be an oneiric camping spot, but overnighting was prohibited.

So we headed back out and made for the place the shop owner had recommended before. After a strenuous up-and-down over rock and thistles, we reached a smaller, isolated cedar grove further up the mountain and settled for a sweet sylvan sleep.

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A large animal, likely a boar, that hung around our tent at dawn was gone by sunrise, leaving the grove in perfect stillness. In the cedars' generous shade and at a 2,000-meter elevation, which was the highest we'd reached on this trip, the morning was cool. With a dose of

reluctance, we packed and started our descent.

This time we took another route back to El Arz through the cedar reserve. Not only was it easier, but it also presented us with the opportunity to explore more of the forest and see parts we had missed yesterday. Hidden amid the trees, we spotted a proto-Christian chapel and other manmade structures, as well as several reliefs on dead trunks that depicted subjects like human faces, a woman's back, and Mary.

Past the village, we got on a dirt road heading west and down into the valley. Sophie made a delightful discovery when we stopped at a spring. Turning around after I filled my bottle, I saw her face beaming with affection and her raised palm cupping a teeny newborn creature.

It was blind and bald, barely capable of crawling, its inchoate feet and underside a tender pink. I took it for a ferret at first, but subsequent investigation revealed it was a baby squirrel. It was alone in the sun beside the spring, looking so vulnerable and forlorn. We trickled some water on it to cool it down and placed it in the shade near its original position, hoping its mom would return with food and that the myth of her not recognizing her offspring if contaminated by human odor is indeed a myth.

We then found ourselves on the edge of a cliff overlooking a tight cluster of red-roofed, white houses perched on the edge of the next cliff. It was Bsharri, the principal town in the Qadisha Valley. Following a loose, steep path, we arrived at its center.

While we loitered outside one of the town's many splendid churches, an African woman approached us. She was from Cameroon and worked as a maid in a house beside the church. She invited us to her

boss's for a coffee.

Past a solid iron gate, we entered a broad cobbled yard bestrewn with trees and flower pots. The open south side faced the town cathedral and the mountains in the background. The other sides bordered two stately stone houses and a couple of outbuildings.

Her boss was a bearded man in his thirties. She woke him up with news of our visit, and he emerged from the door of the newer house, pajamaed and sleep-eyed, to shuffle his way across the garden and sprawl on a swing couch. While he remained there clearing the morning haze, she gave us a tour of the older house. It was grand in both size and appearance. The ceiling was so high that fixed ladders accessed upper shelves. The antique furniture, carpets, and artworks must have been worth a fortune.

Then we sat outside and had our coffee together with the boss. He insisted we keep a distance because he was ill and didn't want to infect us, but I suspected he was paranoid about being infected himself with Covid or whatever. He was the scion of a 600-year lineage of a noble local family, inheritor of this 350-year-old property where he dwelled alone with the maid.

We spoke a lot about various topics such as Lebanon, Israel, Hezbollah, Islam, and above all the local water conflict—I just then realized Bsharri was the one side of the confrontation we'd been hearing about all this time; the sniper was from the other side. He was resolutely unfond of Muslims and claimed he and his fellow townsmen were getting ready for a survival battle. He was a nice and knowledgeable dude, but a bit overly conspiratorial and pessimistic. We finished our coffee, let him get ready for his friend's dad's funeral

where he'd rather not go but had to, and resumed our way.

After stopping at a cozy cafe for lunch and at the grocer's for provisions, we left Bsharri and took the trail down the cliff and into the gorge. The view was breathtaking. What from far above had looked like a thin crack on the valley's surface turned out a tremendous canyon on the inside. Towns, villages, lakes, mountain ranges… all the wide scenery that had dominated our view over the past two days vanished in an instant as we descended into a new, cloistered world. A cliffside monastery—one of several founded centuries ago in Qadisha Valley to become one of the world's oldest Christian monastic communities—was the only hint of human activity in sight. As for the rest, there was nothing but rock, woods, and sky.

The sky all but disappeared behind the green orgy that deluged the gorge bottom. Unseen by sunlight, a swollen river and a sketchy dirt road ran parallel through it. Pleased with the shade, we followed the latter. A couple of pickup trucks loaded with tourists were the only vehicles we encountered. And a desolate restaurant maintained by a father-and-son pair, where we sat at a table covered with a week's worth of fallen leaves for a lemonade, was the only structure.

A little further, we located an ideal clearing by the riverside and pitched our tent. Aside from a passing fox couple, who paused to briefly regard us in puzzlement, and a swarm of mosquitoes that ceaselessly raided us in defiance of multiple repellent coils, we had the place to ourselves and enjoyed the serenity until the nightfall put us to sleep.

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Following a calm morning, we continued through the gorge. The river

and the road gradually deviated until the former receded into an invisible abyss off the brink of the latter.

Then we stopped for coffee and brunch at a lone restaurant we happened upon. It comprised a shaded concrete terrace over the cliff and an outdoor kitchen. Unlike yesterday's one, it had set tables and a full crew of staff on standby. They had a big feast reserved for later, but now we were the only customers.

A little further, we took a detour to visit a monastery situated partway up the cliff. Established at an uncertain, remote date, the Qannoubine Monastery is one of the most important centers of Lebanon's monastic tradition. A timeworn church with faded frescoes and the cells were cramped within a recess on the cliff's face, and a narrow platform in front of them upheld a few more structures overlooking the wilderness. The only people on the scene were a tourist group who arrived on a pickup truck and one monk who managed the monastery's gift shop.

We got back down to the road and followed it until it gave way to a coarse trail. A bunch of ruins inside the gorge, possibly a former monastery or fort, were the only artificial feature we saw for some time.

Early afternoon, we reached a rudimentary village called Fradis, by the intersection of the Qadisha gorge with another gorge coming from the east. Before heading that way, we settled in a shade to wait out the peak heat. One thing I observed in this village was that, despite its negligible size, it hosted many livestock animals; their broad absence, in such a rustic environment, was something that had puzzled me throughout this trip.

When the sun's angle became tolerable, we proceeded along a trail that rounded the protrusion of the mountain to usher us into the new gorge. Our plan was to camp at the first opportune spot by the river. Upon reaching the bottom, however, instead of a river, we found a bone-dry riverbed. And once again, we had to carry on walking, thirsty and fatigued, into the late afternoon.

We progressed through the gorge until we stood below another monastery nestled on the cliff. There was a bridge crossing to the other side, a smooth path starting from the bridge and continuing along the opposite bank, and a sign prohibiting the use of the path. There was nothing like a fence that could physically hinder us from taking it. But to err on the side of caution, we complied and stayed on the craggy trail that ascended the cliff on the bank we were at.

We soon went past an enclosed reservoir that collected the gorge's water and distributed it to irrigation pipes, which was the culprit for the downstream dryness. Upstream, the river gurgled mellowly but was too far down the perpendicular cliffs to access. We had to endure a little longer until the next crossing.

As we began to reapproach the river, we realized we couldn't drink from it. We could smell it from afar. It stank and frothed like a sewer because it actually served as the sewage of Ehden town above. Barring water poisoning, our only option was to continue up the acutely steep trail until the town.

The sunset found us at the edge of the cliff, walking through the town's outskirts. Some more climbing along winding paths and stairways later, we reached the main road at dusk. A wide sidewalk ran alongside it and held a single bench, looking out on a marvelous

mountainous vista that covered the entire distance we'd traveled over the past four days. Sophie waited there with our bags as I dragged my aching feet to the nearest shop.

I returned with several bottles of water, juice, and ice-cream. We enjoyed them while gazing at a myriad twinkles switching on throughout the firmament and the wide scenery.

The question of where to sleep remained. There was a suitable flat patch on the slope in front of the bench, but great though the view was, it came with its downsides. For one, the place was full of rubbish. Yet worse, the sidewalk was bustling with pedestrians, and we'd make a spectacle.

Whatever, considering our exhaustion and the darkness, we went for it. While dining inside the tent, we kept hearing the curious chattering of halting passers-by. And later in the night—as Sophie said in the morning—there was a rambunctious group of drunk or too-merry people sitting on the bench for hours, but I was dead asleep then.

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The road was empty, and the quiet reinstated when I got up at dawn and settled on the bench for my coffee. The sublime landscape of the Lebanese mountains looked different today. It bore the transcendent quality of an exhilarating experience the moment before it wanes into a memory. I regarded it with a tad of anticipatory wistfulness as I mulled that this thrilling trekking adventure had just finished.

Sophie had a flight to Istanbul to catch tomorrow in Beirut. She was going back to work and needed to settle somewhere. I had a couple more weeks to keep exploring Lebanon. One option I'd been

pondering was to carry on hiking alone until the trail's end in the far north. By then, however, I had decided to instead return to civilization and travel to other parts of the country by public transport. So the immediate plan was to somehow get to Tripoli city.

When the morning traffic commenced, we took post on the roadside —Sophie showcased in the front and me lurking in the background: the couple's optimal hitchhiking practice—and waited for a willing driver. Given the generally accommodating disposition of the Lebanese people, I had expected it to be faster. Still, twenty minutes wasn't to be complained about.

The Good Samaritan was a young, chummy, intelligent man from a nearby village. An agronomist, he was commuting to the company he worked for in the city. His English was proficient, and we had an interesting chat while we rolled down the mountains toward the coast. He dropped us off in the parking lot of his office block, next to a hectic thoroughfare in the heart of Lebanon's second-largest metropolitan area.

No sooner did we open the door of the air-conditioned car than a sweep of insane torridity struck us like a fire blast. Amid an exceptional heatwave that during those days engulfed the entire northern hemisphere, if the mountains had felt hot, the Lebanese coast felt like hell. Dripping sweat before even taking a step, we began walking the four kilometers to our accommodation.

Besides the temperature, everything about our new environment felt more oppressive. Gone were the beautiful sceneries, the stillness mixed with bird songs and soft breeze swish, and the rich aromas of nature. So abruptly, they got replaced by dilapidated, bullet-ridden

jumbles of cement, the throbbing buzz of urban commotion, and the nauseous fetor of trash heaps.

Our Airbnb was in Mina: the predominantly Christian, oldest district of Tripoli. Our host—a Switzerland-based, English-speaking member of the family that owned the building—didn't answer our calls and messages upon our arrival at the pre-arranged check-in time because, as we found out three hours later, he was out partying last night and overslept.

The African maid he dispatched downstairs to open the door guided us five floors up and showed us to our flat. It was spacious, bright, neatly furnished with vintage pieces, and had a balcony looking down to a park, the port, and a horizon half occupied by mountains and half by the Earth's curvature. Most critically, it had AC. All that, combined with its bargain price and the family's affable demeanor, duly compensated the wait.

After long longing, we experienced this magical moment of a shower that felt as satisfying as hosing down a muddy tile floor. It was followed by an equally satisfying spell of lying below the wheezing AC, postponing the time we ventured out for our skin to feel analogous to a window cleaned during a sandstorm.

We hastened along the sun-baked main road and took the first turn into the shady backstreets. They were a maze of narrow paths meandering through a mishmash of crumbling houses. Colorful clotheslines, in contrast to weeds on the walls, were the only clue to tell the inhabited apart from the uninhabited ones. Their structural condition was practically the same. The combined smell of untreated waste and decayed building materials gave the place a tang of extreme

poverty.

The bounded quarter of downtown Mina was in decent shape. Its small traditional houses were well-preserved and its cobbled streets were clean. The main street featured several youth-inundated, hipstery bars and coffee shops. We sat in one's shaded and fanned garden for lunch before retreating to our flat to wait out the sun.

We went out again to enjoy the sunset over a stroll along the wide promenade that skirted Mina's coastline. A great share of the city's population was doing the same. Like in Beirut, there were street vendors of anything imaginable, hookah-smoking companies of young males, and adult family members pursuing kids that raced ahead on bicycles and ride-ons. In addition—something I didn't observe in Beirut—here there also were teenage boys rocketing wheelied motorbikes through the crowd and endangering the public safety.

After nightfall, we had a drink in the lively pub street and a seafood wrap in the little restaurant on the ground floor of our building. And then we cherished the rejuvenating experience of sleeping in a bed for the first time in ten days.

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Then broke the day of Sophie's departure. We spent a restful morning at home, and after she finished packing, we headed out to the scorched city.

On our way to the main road through Mina's ramshackle neighborhoods, we got accosted by a gang of a dozen gamins. They had a whale of a time practicing their English with us. For my part, I

didn’t find the situation as amusing because they knew and echoed only three English words: money, dollar, euro. That was the most intense begging bout I’ve ever been subjected to outside of Africa. It took the combined scolding of several grown bystanders for them to heed and leave us in peace.

Stopping for an exquisite meal at a traditional Levantine restaurant, we reached the main road. I helped Sophie catch a tuk-tuk to the bus station, and I remained alone with a tinge of renewed loneliness.

I spent most of the day at home, planning my trip’s solitary continuation, and went out late in the afternoon. Being solo felt different not only inward but also with regard to the locals’ attitude toward me. As long as my camera didn’t hang from my shoulder, I blended well into the population and went by unnoticed. Agreeable as it is to attract everyone’s positive attention, I relished the respite from it and the ability to observe from the obscurity of indifference.

A long walk around Mina led me to the pub street by sundown. I drank a beer and went for dinner in a poky restaurant on whose window I had yesterday noticed a Greek flag. As expected, the owner was Greek. Although third generation, he retained a good grasp of the Greek language and seemed exhilarated to receive one of his compatriots. We had a pleasant chat while I was all over the two chicken-liver sandwiches he prepared for me.

Sleeping and waking early, I was out by sunrise for a little sightseeing excursion to uptown Tripoli. The streets were still vacant. I had to walk a few blocks to spot the first tuk-tuk. The driver was ebullient and very talkative. He said he was an army officer and drove the tricycle as a side hustle. Not that I had a reason to doubt him, anyway

—he was beefy, buzz-cut, and mustached—but his claim got all the more corroborated when we reached my destination and he seemed to know all the many soldiers manning an entire column of armored vehicles stationed there.

My destination was the Citadel of Tripoli: a massive, conspicuous fortress built by the Crusaders atop a hill overlooking the Qadisha River. It now remained a lone testimony to a distant past, enveloped by one of the densest population centers in the Middle East. The river below was reduced to a waste-ridden sewer, and the surrounding hills were covered by derelict concrete condos from foot to peak.

The historical site was just opening. I was the day's first visitor. A single worker was present before the fort's entrance, sweeping rubbish and watering the rarity of a grass patch. A handful more staff loafed at the shaded arcade past the gate, sat on wooden stools and drinking coffee.

One of them, a middle-aged woman, turned out to be Greek: a third-generation descendant of Alexandrian Greeks who immigrated to Lebanon after Nasser kicked them out from Egypt. Although this wasn't part of her duties, she volunteered to give me a tour around the castle. Filling up with French wherever she missed the Greek words, she chronicled the citadel's history. It boiled down to a long succession of new masters constructing additions after killing the previous masters.

She guided me everywhere, including a little museum that was presently inaccessible to the public, except for the lower dungeons where she wouldn't go for her fear of snakes. She advised me against going on my own either, but she showed me the way since I insisted.

It was a steep spiral staircase that led me to a maze of passages, rooms, doors, and stairs beneath the castle. I saw no snakes. To be fair, I saw nothing but the ground under each of my landing steps that my phone torch could illuminate.

The day's second visitors arrived just as I was leaving. I descended the hill on foot to continue with a wider exploration of Tripoli. I visited some of the city's old mosques and souks. The latter were unusually quiet for what you expect across the Arab world. Most shops were closed, and there were so few people that you could walk in a straight line. I don't know if that was due to the early hour or the economic crisis.

When the heat mounted above tolerable levels, I quit my walk at a traditional cafe. I then grabbed a kebab and bought some tobacco, took a tuk-tuk back home, and spent there the rest of the day, ready to depart in the morning for my next destination.

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The tuk-tuk dropped me off right in front of the van's door. I hopped onto the latter after making one step on the intervening ground between the two vehicles. And no sooner than I was in, we began driving south along the scenic coastal highway.

A short while later, just before entering the town of Batroun, I requested a stop at a random spot on the roadside. It was the closest point to the accommodation I had booked last evening, to which I now had to walk for 4 km. The first half of the way was downhill, breezy, and quiet. The second half was uphill, breezeless, and irritatingly noisy because a convoy of military helicopters flew low to

the coast and back for no apparent reason.

My Airbnb was in an outlying residential district atop a hill surrounded by fields. The owner, who was still at work, had sent me directions with pictures. But that helped little because the area was a cluster of all but identical houses.

In the end, I found the correct one with the aid of Captain the Pit Bull, whom the listing's description mentioned. A pure-black, robust beauty of a dog, as soon as he noticed me looking around, he poked his head over the fence and burst out in an uproarious barking spree. All it took was approaching and giving him a pat on the head to make our acquaintance and become friends. He shut up, gave my hand a lick, and retreated to his shady corner.

Granted Captain's permission, I pushed the yard door open and entered. The house was spacious and cozy. The yard looked out to the sea and had a comfy hanging egg chair. To my joy, there even was a guitar. While I waited for the owner to return and prepare my bedroom, I hung out in the living room with a Jordanian dude who was my co-tenant. We had some interesting conversations while smoking pot. Since graduating from a business school, he had lived in Saudi Arabia and devoted all his time to developing a booking platform. He recently sold it for a good sum of money and was now traveling at whim and enjoying freedom.

In the afternoon, showered and rested, I called a tuk-tuk and headed to town. Batroun was Lebanon's holiday capital. Most of its picturesque stone houses hosted either a hotel, bar, restaurant, or tour agency. People jammed the narrow cobbled streets: tanned vacationers in swimwear, tourism workers in white shirts, and the odd veiled

Muslim lady. As if walking among the crowd wasn't already hard enough, vehicles, too, were allowed to cut through. Most of them were tuk-tuks and tourist carts resembling elongated golf carts. The latter were available for rental all over the place and were mainly rented by groups of drunk teenagers. Older, teenage-brained men also inched through in huge American jeeps for the sole purpose of showing off.

After a long walk and a drink at an appealing garden cafe, I ended up at a small historical church on the settlement's westernmost point. The little terrace that adjoined it offered the best sunset view in town. A broad rock shelf below ended at the Phoenician Wall: an actual thick wall the Phoenicians erected millennia ago to protect their city from storms and marauders. Eroded by centuries' worth of weather, it nowadays resembles a bizarre geological formation more than a manmade structure. Beyond it, the wide Mediterranean Sea extended toward the horizon, wherein a tangerine sun was about to plunge. A lot of other people had assembled on the terrace, staring at either the magnificent scene or their phone cameras for endless selfies. Meanwhile, a newlywed couple was having a photoshoot down by the wall. Passengers of consecutive tour boats cheered them upon their passage.

When the twilight took over, Karelle arrived on the spot for our appointment. She was a local girl who had replied to a Couchsurfing post I made before starting this trip. We arranged to meet for a walk now that I was visiting her hometown. She was a painter and got by freelancing as a graphic designer. We talked a lot about religion and theology. She had attended a Maronite girls' school run by nuns. She regarded that as an abhorrent, traumatic experience. Regardless, it had

ingrained in her a radical faith that no reason could shake off.

Batroun was getting livelier the darker it became. The holiday-makers had changed their casual beach attires for gaudy night costumes and dresses, and the clubs were overfilling with partyers. To satisfy my request for getting some food without blowing a fortune in the center's fancy restaurants, Karelle led us to a peripheral road lined-up with food trucks for a quick kebab. The money I saved on food I spent on dessert. There was that waffle place I had earlier set sight on. Their looks tantalized me so much that I didn't even bother to ask about the price before ordering one with three ice-cream scoops. A little poorer but satiated, I caught a tuk-tuk home and crashed.

Next day, I had big exploration plans. But they went to shambles because of my morning mishap… As I got up, put on my shorts, and went to the toilet, a draft blew through the house and pushed my room door shut. Even though the bang wasn't that strong, the lock broke, and I couldn't get back in to all my stuff. To make matters worse, as I was trying to force it open, the metallic handle snapped inside my hand, and the sharp edge cut a good few millimeters through my flesh. It took a copious amount of kitchen roll to stop the bleeding.

There was no one around, but I fortunately had my phone in my pocket with a couple percent battery. It just sufficed to call the host and ask for help. He was far away, but he dispatched a dude who showed up with a toolbox. I don't know what he needed that for, since the only thing he used was a common plastic card he kept driving through the gap, attempting to release the latchbolt.

I left him sweating in the now-draftless corridor, made a coffee, and pulled out to the airy living room to busy myself with the guitar.

Hours passed to no avail. I had little faith in his method and just kept postponing the moment I go tell him it's about time we kick it in. But then he appeared around the corner, bathed in perspiration, crumpled card in hand, and heralded the good news with a grin of relief.

The day was wasted by then. Anyhow, I got dressed, packed my bag, and headed to town for an afternoon stroll. A bit later, I met Karelle again for a beer at a beach bar and a grab in the food-truck street. The kebabeur refused at first to accept my dollar bill because it was too old for his liking. Since I didn't carry another one with me, I offered to pay in local currency. He wasn't fond of that either and accepted only at a very unfavorable to me conversion rate for his dollar-denominated prices. After I told him that "no problem, I'll go to someone else," he snatched the original bill eagerly and made my kebab. Skipping my dessert for tonight, I returned home and got ready to leave in the morning.

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Seduced by the comfort of the egg chair and the serenity of the sea view, I dallied over my coffee and set off in the later, hotter morning. Thankfully, the tuk-tuk dropped me off under a bridge to wait for the bus, which took longer than usual to pass. A while later, some ten miles south along the coast, I got off in the center of Jbeil city, also known by its ancient name of Byblos.

I dashed across several lanes of motorway, meandering among honking cars and clearing the median barrier, and started toiling uphill toward the higher parts of the city. At some point, sympathizing with my patent exhaustion, a driver pulled over to offer me a ride. It would have been a salvation had he happened a little earlier, but now I

forwent since I was already around the corner from my hostel.

It was on the ground floor of a casual apartment building on a quiet suburban street. I was alone in the dorm, and it effectively became my private room. There were two more occupants in private rooms of their own. One was a Lebanese-American old chap. His son had moved to Lebanon to study and discover his roots, and he seized the opportunity to come along for a holiday. He appeared in the hostel's common area for brief intervals, before going to and after returning—redder every time—from the beach. The other was a French lad who was there on an internship. From early afternoon till late night, he was in the lounge, nestled in a chair squeezed between a TV and a loudspeaker, listening to French hip-hop and playing a video game that involved little else than shooting and killing while crooning along with the lyrics and mumbling out his exasperation every time he was the one shot and killed.

In the cooler afternoon, I headed out for a first walk in the old town of Byblos. It was as touristy as Batroun but less party- and more family-oriented, as well as much larger. Here too, tourism businesses occupied most of the traditional stone houses. The quaint cobbled streets bustled with pedestrians but, appropriately, were off-limits to vehicles. The freed space accommodated close-set tables of outdoor bars and restaurants which were often shaded by dense bougainvilleas, jasmines, and various vibrant vines.

Having checked out a few churches, mosques, and other historical buildings, I made my way to the town's port, which is one of the major contenders for the title of the world's oldest port. Rather than fishing or trading vessels, now it harbored a fleet of tour boats. A battered fortification, on the tip of the breakwater that enclosed the

dock, alone betokened the port's astounding historic duration. I settled below it, beside a mixture of tourists and local fishermen, to marvel at yet another soul-stimulating Mediterranean sunset.

After a quick lahmajun—the oriental version of pizza—at a cheap fast-food place far out from the center, I retraced my steps to the hostel for a sound sleep.

I egressed again with the first light and became the day's first visitor at Byblos's acclaimed archeological site. To my chagrin, as soon as I paid the ticket and advanced past the gate, I retrieved my camera from my bag to find its battery dead. In one of the most photogenic places I happened during this trip, I had to make do with my phone.

One of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, settled since at least the 6th millennium BC, Byblos is an antiquarian's treasure trove. Believed to be where the Phoenician alphabet was first invented, it also contends for being the birthplace of Western writing. Its very name—the city having been the Ancient Greeks' primary supplier of papyrus—is related to the Greek words for paper, book, and hence the Bible.

The site was extensive and opulent with monuments. Several of the many cultures and empires that ruled the city throughout the ages left their marks. A bunch of Neolithic dwellings and a proto-urban settlement; an Egyptian obelisk; a Phoenician temple, a necropolis, and a fortification wall; a Persian fortress; a Roman amphitheater, a colonnade, and a nymphaeum; all the way to a 19th-century traditional Lebanese mansion… these were only some of the complex's most remarkable structures. The most prominent one by far was the crusaders' castle, towering atop the highest ground and

dominating the landscape. Visitors could access its upper levels and cherish a wondrous view of the entire archeological site, the sea, and the wider modern city before the soaring mountains.

The sun was hammering from mid-sky by the time I was done exploring this resplendent tribute to human history. Feeling like a candle in a furnace, I retreated to one of the town's cafes and replenished my fluids with a big bottle of water and a jar of fresh lemonade. Then I braved the upslope back home and lunched on noodles and canned mackerel with chickpeas. After a last evening excursion for a kebab in town, I was ready to rest before the next stage of my trip.

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A week had gone by on the searing and crowded coast. Now I would return to the cooler and uncongested hinterland. Between Mount Lebanon and the Syrian Anti-Lebanon Mountains, marking the north end of the Great Rift Valley that extends all the way to southeast Africa, lies the Beqaa Valley. In contrast to my previous short transfers, today I had a long journey to the country's northeast.

I was up before daybreak because my forgetting to close the window screen didn't go unnoticed by the mosquitoes. I descended to the highway and boarded the first minivan bound for the capital. No sooner than I disembarked at Beirut's northern bus station, whence we had departed a couple of weeks earlier, an erratic codger almost dragged me by the elbow to his pirate taxi. After bargaining down his initial offer, I entered his rattletrap.

A long-burnt-out cigarette hanging from his lips, babbling gibberish to himself whenever he wasn't busy cussing other drivers, he drove

me through Beirut's anarchic thoroughfares. Worse than his prolixity was his dumb habit of accelerating behind decelerating cars, narrowly dodging a collision at least once per minute.

On the way, we drove past the site of the infamous 2020 chemical warehouse blast: one of the most catastrophic man-caused non-nuclear explosions in history. The sea had claimed the massive crater left behind amid an apocalyptic setting of debris and devastated port facilities. The spectacle was terrifying.

Glad to be in one piece, I got off at Beirut's southern bus station of Kola. Out of an immense fleet of vans, amid a throng of touting drivers, I spotted the one bound for my direction. I was the first passenger and seized the waiting to grab a spinach pastry from the pop-up street-side bakery.

The passengers gathered fast. Crammed in the cramped vehicle, we hit the road away from the coast. The trip was long and uncomfortable, but it became more bearable as we gained height to lower temperatures and prettier sceneries. Past the ridge and far below, a whole new scene came into sight: wedged between the parched mountain ranges of the Levant, a secluded oasis of green farms, scattered towns, and meandering rivers. Early afternoon, we finished up at a transport nexus on the outskirts of Zahle, the principal city in the Beqaa Valley.

I hopped straight onto the next bus for my final destination further north through the valley. It was full upon departure, but all the other passengers, one after another, got off along the city's suburbs until I was the only one left. Then the driver stopped to tell me he'd have to turn around unless I paid him a taxi fare. We entered an intense

argument. In combined English, French, and Greek (it didn't make a difference), I was trying to explain to him that he shouldn't have picked me if he wasn't bound for where I was going. He was countering in Arabic, in essence stating that he would only budge for a ten-dollar bill. I weighed the hitchhiking option, but daunted by the extreme heat and utter lack of shade, I gave in and swallowed the ripoff. Before long, we were crossing the first military checkpoint at the approach to Baalbek.

Once called Heliopolis, this noble city stood among antiquity's most sacred sites. Pilgrims from all corners of the known world flocked to its revered temples from the dawn of history until the downfall of paganism. Nowadays, besides an esteemed archeological hub, Baalbek constitutes Hezbollah's northern stronghold.

The long, straight road leading to the city center was festooned with oversized Hezbollah flags spaced about ten meters apart. These were interspersed by big quote posters of dead Shias like Qasem Soleimani, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Ali. Outside of the mosques stood black, stern campaign booths where Hezbollah's headbanded PR specialists handed pamphlets accompanied with free drinks to passers-by.

I got off in the center and walked to the hotel I'd reserved yesterday over the phone. It was in a ramshackle, but charming in its wistful way, century-old building. A nearly as old, benign man ran it by himself and showed me to my room that had a balcony looking out to the ancient ruins. I would visit them when they opened again in the morning. This afternoon, I set out to explore the wider city.

I first walked along the fence of the archeological site, and souvenir peddlers were quick to accost me. Out of various knickknacks they

hawked, the highlight was the Hezbollah T-shirts. I should be like: "Yes, of course, just as I was wondering what to wear at the airport." Curious were also the collections of bogus ancient coins. They were mangled and patinaed and depicted figures such as Alexander the Great and Octavianus Augustus. I mulled over their provenance. Somebody must have launched a quite elaborate counterfeiting enterprise. Believing the vendors' claim—that they found the coins in the ruins—was obviously out of the question because, if that was ever true, even for once, they wouldn't be peddling them in the streets together with trinkets and Kalashnikov tops.

By the site's entrance, there was a short lineup of touristic cafes and restaurants. I sat for a coffee in the shade and was joined by a bunch of Syrian lads. One had, before returning to Lebanon for whatever reason, carried off the complete refugee trail to Germany and picked up a lot of English, Greek, and Italian along the way. We had an interesting chat, and he gave me some good tips about Baalbek.

Besides its temples, Baalbek is renowned among archeology lovers for the six massive megaliths left in its ancient Roman quarry. The largest one, called the *forgotten stone*, with an estimated weight of 1,600 tonnes (about as much as a fully outfitted and fueled space shuttle), is the heaviest discovered monolith ever quarried in history. I reached them in a brief walk from the city center and found them lying unguarded and unfenced. Above the quarry, there was a Christian cemetery atop a hill where I climbed for a panoramic view of the city. Weathered colonnades and gilded minarets dominated the skyline.

Back in the center, I took a main street heading west along a contaminated river. It led into a more modern part of the city where

prayer-echoing mosques and Hezbollah recruitment kiosks coexisted with fancy restaurants and boutiques. The street finished at a large, neat park packed with families picnicking around redolent hookahs. After a juice on the spot and a kebab on the way back, I went home to rest before tomorrow's visit to the archeological site.

Having grown up in Greece and traveled to half of the world's countries, I have visited not a few ancient sites in my life. Still, I would unhesitatingly rank Ancient Heliopolis very high in the list of the ones that impressed me the most; perhaps sharing the top podium with Pompei. But whereas Pompei impressed me for its integrity, Heliopolis impressed me for its elegant grandeur.

Wandering around the extensive site, amid broad courts and colossal temples, I couldn't help but plunge into the rapture of abstract divinity. The sense of solitude enhanced the experience. Unlike most major archeological sites, which flood with tourists to the point of resembling funfairs, here there were only a handful of dispersed visitors. I spent the better part of the morning exploring the site and indulging in historical reveries. And when the temperature soared enough to bring me back to the reality of the 2023 summer wave, I retreated to my room and chilled until tomorrow's departure.

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Reflecting the area's perennial prominence at the core of civilization, another distinguished archeological site in the Beqaa Valley is the city of Anjar: one of the most notable assets of cultural heritage bequeathed to humanity by the Umayyad Caliphate. Since its foundation in the early 8th century AD, at the dawn of the Islamic Golden Age, the city gradually lost its significance and faded to

oblivion. It got resettled in the 20th century by Armenian refugees fleeing the genocide further north and regrew to become one of the most important centers of the Armenian diaspora in Lebanon… It sounded like an interesting next destination for my trip.

That morning's bus driver was quite a character. A beefy, boorish, boisterous man, he was bickering with every passenger about the fare. And after everyone, in contempt of his persistence, gave him what they knew they should, he was letting them go with a radiant smile and affectionate words. Since he had no qualms about trying to overcharge his fellow townspeople, I expected nothing less than an ambitious fleecing attempt at me.

The last passengers got off at the same junction where I'd changed buses two days ago. When I started to follow them out, the driver requested me to wait. I thought he might fill the car up again and continue to Anjar, or drop me off at the right bus. But he only drove around the corner, pulled over, and pitched a private-taxi fare to drive me to Anjar alone. I declined and, out of mere curiosity, I asked him what I owed for the ride thus far. As expected, he asked for something like twenty times over the normal fee. I handed him the same amount I had providently noticed the others paying and stepped off, side-glancing for his reaction. Momentary bafflement gave way to a fond grin and an adieu.

I stopped the first van heading in my desired direction. This driver also tried to rip me off, despite that he didn't even enter Anjar but unloaded me in its purlieu, along the main road on his way to the nearby Syrian border. I figured out the fair rate with the help of a co-passenger, got off, and began walking. A couple of uphill kilometers

later, I arrived at my accommodation.

It was a casual local family house. The adolescent, English-speaking son showed me to the outbuilding that housed my apartment. I dropped my luggage and went out straight away to explore.

Anjar was a quiet and well-planned little town. Its layout resembled a crescent grandstand with wide but vacant, straight streets dividing it in rectangular and rhombic sections. It contained a few neat parks, several Armenian churches, and a memorial to Musa Dagh: the ancestral homeland of its inhabitants.

The only nuance that differentiated Anjar from Armenia proper, in my experience, was that people here were a bit more reserved and less outgoing. Whereas in Armenia they greeted me with a fanfare wherever I passed through, here people hardly even looked at me. Throughout the whole day, I only exchanged a few words with two teenage boys. They inquired whether I needed help after noticing me combing the streets for a shop. They directed me to the nearest one and then asked me where I come from. “Greece” brought about the same jubilant reaction it invariably did in Armenia: “We are brothers! We must get together and take on Turkey!”

After a thorough stroll around town and a kebab in a poky eatery run by a grandad with his grandson, I visited the archeological site. That wasn’t anywhere nearly as impressive as Baalbek, but it had its charm, too. The ancient city was of a square shape surrounded by bulky, largely intact stone walls. That was divided into quadrants by two intersecting central avenues. I had expected the architecture to exhibit some more exotic, oriental qualities, but it didn’t look any different from a Roman or Byzantine city. The several surviving

arches were of the boring, rounded Roman style instead of the elaborate, horseshoe or multifoil Arabic kinds. The columns bore Greek Corinthian capitals.

By late afternoon, I continued my walk on the town's outskirts. Far-reaching views opened up to the softly lit mountains beyond farmland expanses with laboring Syrian refugees. I then had a pizza at a restaurant by the town's main entrance, which enjoyed a practical monopoly of the local catering business. And I concluded my day with a bottle of cold juice on the swing couch in the peaceful garden of my place.

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Now I had five days left before my flight out from Lebanon. Having done the mountains, the north coast, and Beqaa Valley, my original idea was to spend these days between Tyre and Sidon on the south coast. However, the lack of affordable lodging in either of these cities compelled me to revise this plan. My solution was to base myself in Beirut and visit the south on day trips. With that intention in mind, I booked an Airbnb near the Cola roundabout, from where the southbound buses leave the capital. And at daybreak, I bid farewell to Anjar.

Walking to the main road and changing two buses along the same route that had brought me there, I arrived in torrid Beirut while it was still morning. I killed the time between a kebab place and a coffee shop, and at the agreed check-in hour, I was at the address where my flat was supposed to be but wasn't.

Crouched on a marginally shaded corner of a squalid curb, I texted and called the host repeatedly for two hours until I got an answer. He

apologized and gave me another—as it turned out after a twenty-minute walk—wrong address. This time, at least, there were some not-too-dirty and well-shaded steps to sit during the next two hours it took to reach him anew.

He got his address right the third time. His son met me at the entrance and ushered me in. I wasn't very pleased. What was described as a *common-area bar with a view* was a shelf before a ground-floor window looking out on an overflowing dumpster across the street. The bedroom was a strip of floor broad enough to fit a bedside table and a passage beside the bed, above which loomed a wall-wide window facing pedestrians' heads and the blistering sun for the better part of the day. What was listed as AC was a toy table fan that only worked during the few daily hours the building had electricity. So did the electrically pumped water. When the power was on, there was sufficient pressure for the shower head to trickle as long as I held it below knee-level. Since the toilet wasn't only unflushable but also unventilated, I had to take daily shitting trips to the closest cafe some ten blocks away. Meanwhile, the owner's response time was lengthened from two hours to two days after I moved in. Anyway, I still had a place to sleep.

The destination of my first southward excursion was Tyre: another of Lebanon's plentiful historic gems and its current fourth-largest city. Changing a bus in Sidon, we rolled into Hezbollah's territory in the Lebanese deep south. Like in Baalbek, the militant organization's omnipresent flags left no doubt as to who's in charge. At the approach to the city, a company of black-clad, green-headbanded representatives pulled us over to hand out free water and pastry. We soon thereafter came to a halt by Tyre's central square.

The square was readied for some big event. Hundreds of plastic chairs, surrounded by tens of megaphones and bombastic banners, were laid out facing a stage that would probably accommodate speeches of influential imams. What must have been a Christian statue was cloaked with multiple layers of black sheet and affixed with a poster of Ali.

Due to lack of time and the excruciating heat, I visited only one of Tyre's two major archeological sites: the more conveniently located site of Al-Mina instead of the outlying site of Al-Bass that contains the city's famous hippodrome. The site of my choice comprised a variety of ruins, ranging from the Phoenician to the Byzantine. The rows of elegant columns overlooking the deep-blue Mediterranean were especially pleasant to behold.

By noon, the intensifying heat chased me away to the well-shaded lanes of Old Tyre. Like Mina in Tripoli, this was a poorer Christian neighborhood developed around the picturesque fishing port. It had plenty of appealing seafood taverns, in one of which I gobbled a plate of fresh calamari and prawns together with a refreshing salad before taking the afternoon bus back to Beirut.

My second southward day trip was to Sidon: Lebanon's third-largest city. As usual, I wasn't aware of the day, but it must have been a public holiday because the whole place was deserted. I only went on a long stroll along the city's coastal promenade, where I saw a graceful medieval sea fort, and a shorter stroll through its forlorn backstreets before returning to the capital.

As for the rest, I spent my concluding time in Lebanon wandering at random around Beirut, seeking shade and breeze and air-conditioned

cafes to escape the kiln that my room was, and ruminating on my revitalizing experiences of this latest adventure.

In the last morning, I boarded a southbound bus and asked the driver, to his great bewilderment, to drop me off at the closest junction to the airport, whence I walked a couple of kilometers to the departure hall. I was soon staring at the dazzling midday Mediterranean out of the plane window, bidding farewell to this fascinating land and musing about upcoming adventures.

THE END

Since you're now reading this sentence, I assume you found this story compelling enough to read it through to the end. With sincere gratitude, I dare ask for your contribution by reviewing it on Good Reads and/or the online retailer you obtained it from. Cheers!

Photos & videos

You may view all the photos I took during this trip here:
https://theblogofdimi.com/lebanon-travel-photos/

And the videos here:
https://theblogofdimi.com/videos/#videos-lebanon

About the author

Dimitrios is a random dude who doesn't like writing about himself in the third person. I have neither formal education nor a profession. I quit school at 15 and have since lived nomadically and adventurously, been in about half of the world's countries, and done countless different jobs. I justify my existence by experiencing, learning, and creating the most I can. Besides writing, I express myself through photography and music composition.

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Real Stories of Real People: a collection of thirty creative short stories of some of the most bizarre, inspiring, funny, or anyhow remarkable characters I've chanced to encounter throughout my extensive wanderings around the world.
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