

# DOWNTIME

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## JOURNEY INTO HAMRA

Beirut's bustling enclave blends chaos, culture and a desire for artistic revival, writes **Iain Aikerman**.

**R**OUGHLY HALF WAY along Beirut's Hamra Street lies Metro Al Madina. Set back from the main road and down two flights of stairs, it is easier to miss than it is to find, tucked away as it is beneath the Al Madina Theatre.

It is early evening when we arrive, and outside Hamra is in full swing. The main drag, gridlocked and impatient, bustles with shoppers and café dwellers, whilst tiny bars lining a handful of the district's side streets are showing the first signs of life.

Inside, the Metro Al Madina is subdued but intimate. Although shabby in places, there is a small bar masquerading as an

underground station, whilst just beyond, the theatre is laid out for cabaret, its multi-platform auditorium playing host to tables, couches and the occasional chairs.

Pre-show chatter is of a heightened sense of anticipation. The Hishik Bishik Show is the theatre's most popular production and, although it has been running since March to critical acclaim, its allure remains potent.

Musically, it is a curiosity. It has taken its cue from the weddings and cabaret shows of early 20th century Egypt and re-imagined what is an Egyptian pop cultural experience via a Lebanese lens. When the stage curtains are opened,

they reveal a wheelchair-bound general playing the violin, a whirling Sufi who frequents bars, and Roaring Twenties flapper girls intent on having a good time. It is a sometimes-mesmerising spectacle, weaving together exquisite musicianship with song and dance, although its comic word play and numerous visual gags may well be lost on those who do not speak Arabic.

In the show's final sequence, the soaring vocals of Ziad El Ahmadiye drive the show towards a hypnotic and deeply rewarding conclusion. At centre stage, Wissam Dalati whirls ceaselessly, flanked by singer Yasmina Fayed and dancer



Liza, a remarkable new restaurant serving contemporary Lebanese cuisine opened in November 2013.

Randa Makhoul. Both gracefully revolve. It is pure theatrical beauty.

In the bar afterwards, Randa is vision of effortless sensuality, but as we emerge into the crisp night air, Hamra's faded grandeur is there for all to see. A few streets away, The Piccadilly Theatre remains bordered up and desolate. The Eldorado and The Strand, once cinemas when Hamra was a centre of intellectual pre-war activity, now house cheap shops selling cheap clothes. On the pavements and curbs, Syrian refugees beg for small change.

Nevertheless, Metro Al Madina plays a small yet integral part in Hamra's determined, if stuttering, cultural revival. Located beneath the Al Madina Theatre – itself the culmination of renovation work that has restored the old Saroulla cinema under the guidance of actress Nidal Al Achkar – it offers a window on Beirut's artistic ambition.

Hamra at large, however, remains addictive. Chaotic and unashamedly commercial, it is the antithesis of Beirut's pristine Downtown, with its restored French and Ottoman façades, high-end designer stores and pedestrianised cobbled streets. Hamra's roads and alleyways are lined with hotels, shops, cafes and food vendors, all jostling for your attention, while bars filled with students echo to the sounds of Fairuz and Umm Kulthum.

If you walk around for long enough, you'll eventually stumble across Chico. At the intersection of Sidani and Sadat streets, it owned by Diran Mardirian, and is, at first glance at least, simply a

video store. It is, however, one of Beirut's musical gold mines. Up a short spiral staircase lies arguably the city's most impressive vinyl collection. Over coffee, we discuss and listen to music for hours, before heading back across town to Achrafieh and the Hotel Albergo.

The Hotel Albergo is what all great hotels should be: lovingly and beautifully crafted. The only Relais & Châteaux hotel in the country, it is a renovated and converted 1930s gem, replete with a rooftop terrace commanding impressive views of the city. Much of the former mansion's beauty lies in its attention to detail. There's Ottoman copper and crystal chandeliers, Oriental rugs, inlaid Damascus wooden furniture, intricate and colourful cushions, handpicked paintings and various other curios. If



#### Where to stay

Hotel Albergo is located at 137 Abdel Wahab El Inglizi Street, Achrafieh.  
[www.albergobeirut.com](http://www.albergobeirut.com)

#### How to get there

Beirut is the first destination flydubai launched and has been flying there since June 2009. It operates two daily flights, with return fares starting at AED1,022 AED. During high season, the airline increases the frequency to three or four flights daily. A business class service on select Beirut flights was introduced in November. For flight timings and fares, visit [www.flydubai.com](http://www.flydubai.com)

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you're minimalist by nature, don't go. The Hotel Albergo luxuriates in its remarkably tasteful opulence.

Outside, you're a stone's throw from Liza, a remarkable new restaurant serving contemporary Lebanese cuisine. Opened in November this year, it is an interior design and culinary masterpiece. Breathtaking in its mix of avant-garde photography, exotic Middle Eastern patterns, woodcarvings and decorative custom-made wallpaper, if Liza doesn't entice you back to Beirut, nothing will. ☑

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