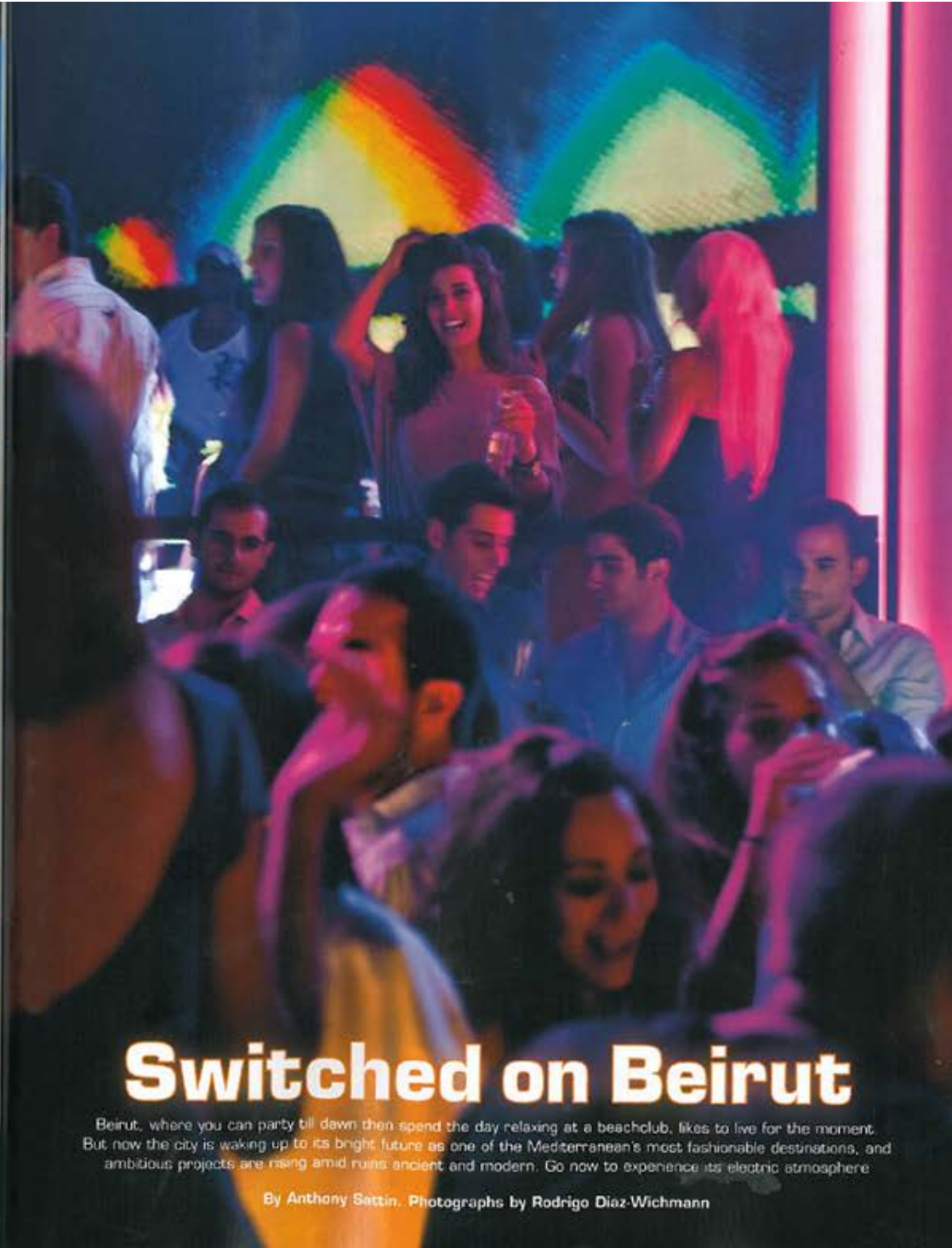




wise: Hotel Albergo;  
y on the Roof restaurant; at  
ay; Momo at the Souks  
urant and bar; eating in  
w Beirut Souks. Opposite  
ky Bar nightclub



# Switched on Beirut

Beirut, where you can party till dawn then spend the day relaxing at a beachclub, likes to live for the moment. But now the city is waking up to its bright future as one of the Mediterranean's most fashionable destinations, and ambitious projects are rising amid ruins ancient and modern. Go now to experience its electric atmosphere

By Anthony Sattin. Photographs by Rodrigo Diaz-Wichmann



Arcade in central Beirut. Left, fruit at Souk el Tayeb. Opposite, clockwise from top: Kamal Mouzawak (right) at his restaurant, Tawlet, and a few of its wines. Thai baked sea bass at Indigo on the Roof



**A** FLOCK OF GIANT, leggy fairies float out of the night and wait down Trablous Street. Corsets illuminated, nails fluorescent, eyes a flash and flare of glitter, they pass the edge of the new Beirut Souks shopping centre and then dance in front of the elaborate façade of a grand 19th-century mansion.

The fairies are not a by-product of sunstroke or too many aperitifs; they are stilt-walkers out to celebrate the latest opening in the city. The mansion, which appears to be stately and intact, turns out to be a smashed-up shell, just another trick of the light. But here's the thing: for as long as the lights are on and the fairies are dancing, the mansion seems both perfect and majestic, and everyone watching bursts into applause. Welcome to Beirut, the art of seductive illusion.

Beirutis are masters of this extraordinary art. How else to survive in a city with such a long and troubled history? Imagine the illusion required, during the civil war of the 1970s, to convince yourself that it was worth dodging bullets and ducking shells to watch horses race at the Hippodrome, or girls model Yves Saint Laurent on the catwalk. Running the gauntlet for a frock or a flutter suggests a different way of looking at life. The phrase 'like there's no tomorrow' has a special resonance here: for many years, no one could be sure that there would be a tomorrow. Living on

the edge, watching the apocalypse unfold, has supercharged the city and left its people wanting to make the most of today, every day.

No one epitomises this energy and enthusiasm more than Kamal Mouzawak. If the new Lebanese government had any sense, they would give this entrepreneur a portfolio to promote all things Lebanese. He already excels in the role. One of his great achievements to date is the Souk el Tayeb, literally 'the market of goodness,' also known as Beirut Farmers' Market, for which Mouzawak persuaded food producers from across the country – and the ethnic and religious divides – to come and trade side by side. 'Nothing brings people together so much as the land and the food they can produce on it.' And, if they're Lebanese, the desire to trade.

On Saturday morning I went to see the market, on a plot beside the shiny, new Beirut Souks area, intending just to look but ending up buying pine nuts, oak honey, dried apricots rolled thin into sheets that look like leather, bought from a man they called 'the sheikh', toasted soya beans, dried borlotti... The produce was so good that I would probably still be shopping had Mouzawak not dragged me off to lunch at Tawlet.

Tawlet is his second step as a food activist, a large, bright restaurant with an open-plan kitchen where a different food producer is invited to cook each lunchtime. On Saturdays, market day, Tawlet's own chefs prepare classic Lebanese dishes, laid out

### Go Beirut

#### Where to stay

**Hotel Alberg**, the only Relais & Châteaux hotel in the country, has grown out of an original Levantine house (with more rooms and a spa now under construction), but still manages to keep the air of a home. Doubles from US\$340. 00 961 1 339797. [www.albergobeirut.com](http://www.albergobeirut.com)

**Le Gray** has brought some glamour and life to Martyrs' Square. Modern, slick and central. Doubles from US\$380. 00 961 1 962828. [www.campbelgrayhotels.com](http://www.campbelgrayhotels.com)

**Byblos Sur Mer** is a small, waterfront hotel, an hour north of the city. It has recently had a complete refit, but two things that have not changed are the views over the Mediterranean, and the waterside fish restaurant. Doubles from US\$210. 00 961 9 548000. [www.byblossummer.com](http://www.byblossummer.com)



**WINES OF LEBANON**

@ TAWLET



Le Gray hotel, on Martyrs Square, overlooks the Al Amir Mansour Assaf Mosque. Opposite, from top: Momo at the Souks, and its dish of tuna with salsa and crab roll



**Where to eat & drink**

**Tablét** has fabulous, fresh and copious food. There is now also a selection of some 150 Lebanese wines at shop prices to drink here or take away. About US\$60 for two without wine. 00 961 1 481121. [www.tablet.com](http://www.tablet.com)

**Momo at the Souks** serves a clever mix of Moroccan and French food in an elegant room, with a lively bar. About US\$120 for two without wine. 00 961 1 999767. [www.momobeirut.com](http://www.momobeirut.com)

**Casablanca** brought fusion cooking to Beirut and has remained a city favourite. You need to book. About US\$140 for two without wine. 00 961 1 369234

**Chez Sami** is everyone's favourite fish restaurant (so, again, you'll need to book), a little way out of the centre at Jounieh. About US\$140 for two without wine. 00 961 9 910520. [chezsamirestaurant.com](http://chezsamirestaurant.com)

on the counter. Some you will know: hummus, the salads, wheat-and-honey desserts. Others, including raw liver and small-production Lebanese wines, may not be so familiar. But food is only one reason why Tablét works. Another is its location, of which more in a moment. And a third is the large communal table where you are likely to find yourself, as I did, hearing a mix of local gossip and political judgement, a few lines of poetry leavened by a touch of philosophy, the whole lot whisked together with much laughter. In some magical, Beirut way, this mix spices the Lebanese lust for life.

And this lust has led to an unexpected turn of events. While Egypt, Tunisia and neighbouring Syria have been in turmoil, the Lebanese now live in one of the quieter places in the region. They have also woken up to the fact that their capital has acquired a sparkle and a shine that hasn't been seen here since the glamorous 1960s. And there is money: Beirut is surfing on a huge wave of cash that washed in looking for safe investments after the crash of Western banks and the Dubai property market. The consequences are everywhere to be seen: buildings being topped off, hoardings going up, blocks being cleared of the wreckage of the civil war or the struggles with Syria and Israel.

As the city develops, fast, so do its fashionable areas. Hamra, up above the American University, was the epicentre of fun in the 1960s and again when the war ended. Five years ago, if you were



► **Al Halabi** serves some of the city's best mezze. About US\$80 for two without wine. 00 961 4 523555

**Indigo on the Roof** at Le Gray is wonderful for a rooftop dinner on a warm evening, with strains of jazz from the bar. About US\$160 for two without wine. 00 961 1 972000; www.campbellgrayhotels.com

**Chez Maguy** on the beach at Batroun is as laidback a food experience as you can have in Beirut. About US\$60 for two without wine. 00 961 3 439147

#### Where to play

**Music Hall** has live music, and food and drinks served at the table. Expect to get up and dance on one of them before the evening is out (00 961 1 361236; www.elefterades.com).

**Behind the Green Door** is a low-key lounge-y bar with good music (00 961 1 565656).

**Sky Bar** (www.sky-bar.com) and **Bois** (www.bois.com) are two classic Beirut clubs: loud, expensive and fun.

#### Where to shop

You can find just about every international brand in Beirut, many of them in the **Aishti** department store (www.aishti.com). But for something with a local or regional character try **Liwan** (00 961 1 446041; www.liwan.org). Lina Audi's wonderful emporium of objects and clothes from the region, including brightly coloured Syrian leather sandals. Go to **Souk el Tayeb** (00 961 1 442664; www.soukeltayeb.com), Saturday at the Beirut Souks, for exquisite foods. **L'Artisan du Liban** (00 961 1 580618) in Achrafieh is the place for some of the best regional souvenirs.

#### Where to laze about

**Sporting Club** (00 961 1 742481) on the Beirut Corniche. **Lazy B** (00 961 70 950010; www.lazyb.me), a beach club 30km south



taken around by a Beirut, you would have cruised around Monot Street, below the elegant area of Achrafieh. Last year, the only place to be seen was among the cafés and restaurants of Gouraud Street in Gemmayzeh. But Kamal Mouzawak knew what he was doing when he opened Tawlet 'beyond Gouraud', in the area of Mar Mikhael, and his prophecy has since been fulfilled: Tawlet is now in one of the newest happening places. There are still plenty of old-fashioned, long-established businesses here, but also Liwan, the Beirut emporium of cutting-edge designer Lina Audi where you can find Syrian-worked sandals, Egyptian salt and alabaster lamps, as well as beautifully made objects from around the region. Other designers have followed, as have the owners of a hip bar called Behind the Green Door, which is exactly that: there's no sign on the door, just green paint. But Beirut fashion moves fast, and no sooner have I written these words than I hear rumours that the city's movers and shakers are planning a return to Hamra.

And then there's the Beirut Souks, a huge swathe of previously bombed-out city centre. Some of this massive pedestrian zone is still being constructed by Solidere, the economic consortium



View from top left: rooftop restaurant at Hotel Albergo; a stone sphagnum from the Greek of Tyros (present-day Sidon) depicting the story of the Phoenicians; at the National Museum of Beirut; the Sporting Club; the St George Maronite Cathedral

**What to see**  
 The **National Museum of Beirut** (00 961 1 436 703; www.beirutnationalmuseum.com) for its antiquities. Arab art is flying high and you can find some of the best of it at the **Beirut Exhibition Center** (www.beirutexhibitioncenter.com) and the **Beirut Art Center** (www.beirutartcenter.org), and for sale at the **Ayyam Gallery** (www.ayyimgallery.com).

**Getting there**  
**IBMI** (0844 8484 888; www.flyibmi.com) flies twice daily from Heathrow to Beirut. **MEA** (00 961 1 629999; www.mea.com), the local carrier, also flies direct from Heathrow.  
**Journey time** Flights from London to Beirut take about five hours.

**Tour operators**  
**Steppes Travel** (01285 880580; www.steppes-travel.co.uk) offers four nights B&B at the Hotel Albergo, including flights and transfers, from £1,225 per person (based on two sharing). A similar stay at Le Gray costs from £1,345 per person. An extra two nights at Byblos Sur Mer costs from £195, including transfers. A guide and tour service is available. Other operators offering Beirut include **Absalom & Kevs** (0845 618 2200; www.absalomkevskent.co.uk), **Original Travel** (020 7978 7333; www.originaltravel.co.uk) and **Cox & Kings** (0845 004 2453; www.coxandkings.co.uk).

**More information**  
 In Beirut, look out for **A Complete Insider's Guide to Lebanon** (Souk el Tayeb Press, US\$20) and **Zawarib** (Zawarib Sarl, US\$12); the Beirut AVZ that's also full of interesting facts.

**Weather to go**  
 The best time to visit is spring or autumn, when it's warm and dry with just the occasional shower.



although I did overhear a conversation about a certain French jewellery house's half-price sale. ('Moi, je préfère Chanel,' was the response from the person who had missed it.)

Finished or not, the Souks is where Mourad Mazouz, the man who brought Momo and Sketch to London, has chosen to open his first Middle East venture. Momo at the Souks is a rooftop perch with a cool bar and a beautiful hand-painted restaurant serving slick Moroccan dishes. I ate a memorable *pastilla* (sweet pastry) of Bekaa Valley pigeon and a tagine of seafood and confit tomatoes. Just another outlet for Mourad? 'No,' he insists, watching his elegant manageress and award-winning sommelier at work (guests at the table next to me are drinking Château Lynch-Bages with their tagines), 'I am in Beirut because it is fun and exciting. This is where I want to be.' Not Istanbul, not Cairo, but Beirut. At 1.30am in the bar, after the DJ turns up the volume and just about everyone – skinny 20-somethings, broader businessmen, a slice of the Beirut beau monde, some of the yacht set, a few grande dames – gets to their feet and dances, it is easy to understand the attraction.

Mazouz and Muzawak are not alone in their enthusiasm and confidence. The British hotelier Gordon Campbell Gray, who created One Aldwych in London, opened Le Gray hotel in Martyrs' Square in 2009. It is already a city landmark. And you wait all those years for a new luxury hotel to launch, then others come along – among them the monolithic Four Seasons, on a prime waterfront plot overlooking Beirut Marina. Across the road stands the shell of the old St Georges Hotel, the

war correspondents' favourite hangout, every one of its bombed-out windows now hung with white curtains so that it looks as though it is occupied, another of those clever Beirut illusions.

**N**OT ALL OF THIS has made Beirut beautiful. Back in its 1960s heyday, the city's charm lay in the way it mixed a good waterside location with a scattering of Roman and Crusader ruins, some classic 19th-century Levantine architecture and some brash modern blocks. The waterside has been – or is still being – heavily developed and many of the older buildings, including the one the fairies used as a backdrop, have either been demolished or badly damaged. Most of what is rising in their place is bland at best. This makes the surviving pockets – the streets labelled as having a 'traditional character', the Hotel Albergo with its antique-packed rooms and fabulous old-fashioned service, local fashion icon Johnny Farah's organic Casablanca restaurant – even more desirable. In such an achingly modern context, surviving historic buildings become ever more extraordinary. I came to a standstill in front of what looked like a modest, Crusader-period dome in the middle of the brash Beirut Souks. It reminded me of the age of the city, which was already surrounded by walls more than 4,000 years ago; and that reminded me about the museum.

The National Museum of Beirut, south of the centre by the Hippodrome, was closed during the civil war, and the antiquities that couldn't be

Continued on page 174

PHOTO: MORGAN GRIFFITHS

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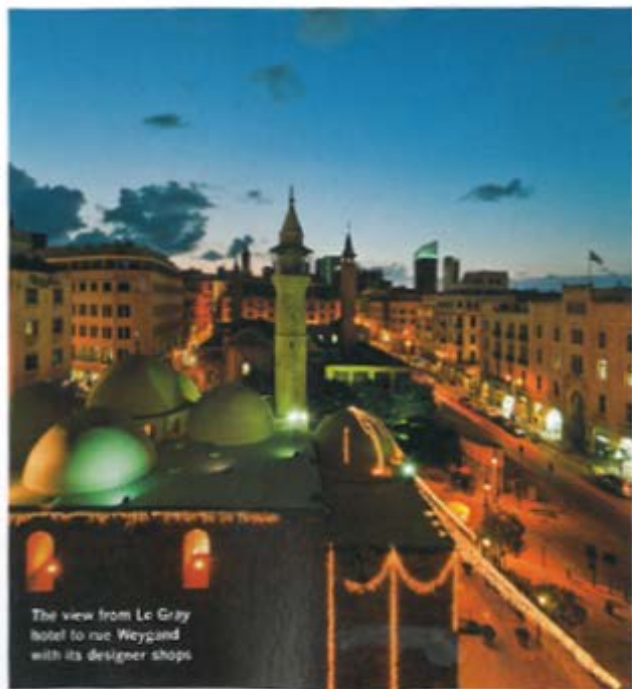


oved were encased in concrete for their otection. The building was completely restored hen the country settled down and now has one of e best-presented collections of antiquities in the ion. Bold Roman statues and torsos, delicate reek terracottas, strange stick-like figures with ded heads from Byblos, carved lions from the ioenicians, delicate boxes with hieroglyphs (e Egyptians were here) and strangely moving imitative votive figures. A carving of drunken vellers, arm in arm, following the piper, reminded e of the previous night at Momo, and the later oods at the Sky Bar and BOIS. But the thought ook with me from the museum was that nothing anges. Love and war, feast and famine, are a tern that has been endlessly repeated here in eirut, up the coast at the even more ancient yblos, and over the Lebanon Mountains in the kaa Valley, where the great ruins of Baalbek ntinue to inspire awe and the vineyards continue produce fabulous wines.

**B**EIRUT ENJOYS ON A sunny Sunday and anyone who can heads out of the city or to one of the many beaches. I was planning on driving north to Batroun, which has a good beach and a brilliant ertside restaurant, *Chez Maguy*. But a friend rsuaded me to stay in the city and go for a swim the Sporting Club. Remembering the pneumatic enen and gilded men I had seen many years back the Saint-George Yacht Club, I agreed. The Saint-George is still there, an elite imming pool with decking beside the marina. e Riviera Hotel's 'beach', another stretch of oncrete built over rocks, remains the most chic ind one of the noisiest, its DJs pumping lounge sic out into the clear blue. The Sporting Club something else entirely. Sitting in the shadows the ferris wheel of Luna Park, looking like it sn't been touched in several decades, the club hich you and I can access with a day ticket) is e of those great city institutions, where for less an \$20 you get a lounger, a salt-water pool, an erworked waiter bringing beers and, inevitably, od, and a glimpse of the family ties, religious nsistivities and shared pleasures that bind Beirut, at have always bound this place together and asionally driven it apart. I decided to walk back

to Achrafieh and the wonderful Hotel Albergo, a long stroll along the Corniche (impossible not to notice that of the very few women among the people taking time out on the rocks, none were in the water, all were veiled), around the marina, across the back of the Beirut Souks, past the parliament building and the old clock tower (now restored with a Rolex face), and past the Greek Orthodox church of St George and the Maronite church to the same saint. And from there into Martyrs' Square.

The square, a natural pivot between the predominantly Muslim west and Christian east, is once again becoming one of the city's focal points. It takes its name from a group of Lebanese nationalists who rebelled against Turkish rule and were hanged there on 6 May 1916. A bronze statue was raised in their memory in 1965. The statue lost one of its arms in the 1970s civil war, a fitting symbol of the wounds inflicted during those years. As I crossed the square, I remembered a saying they have in Lebanon, that one hand alone cannot clap. There had been clapping at Tawlet, at Momo, on the rooftop at Le Gray, at the Sporting Club. And now, as I crossed the square, I heard the sound of more clapping. Not just two hands, but dozens, and with it some cheering and a whistle. A late-afternoon celebration and a last, magical moment of Beirut.



The view from Le Gray hotel to rue Weygand with its designer shops