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A Ramble Through Lebanon

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I visited Lebanon in the fall of '84, which turned out to be pretty much the last time an American could travel in that country with only a risk (rather than a certainty) of being kidnapped. I was just taking a vacation. Somehow I had convinced Vanity Fair *magazine to let me do a piece on the holiday pleasures of Beirut and its environs. What follows is, with a few parenthetical addenda, the article I wrote for* Vanity Fair, *an article that they—wisely, I think—decided was much too weird to publish.*

"Bassboat." "Bizport." "Passboot." "Pisspot." It's the one English word every Lebanese understands and no Lebanese can say. The first, deepest and most enduring impression from a visit to Lebanon is an endless series of faces, with gun barrels, poking through the car window and mispronouncing your travel documents.

Some of these faces belong to the Lebanese Army, some to the Christian Phalange, some to angry Shiites or blustering Druse or grumpy Syrian draftees or Scarsdale-looking Israeli reservists. And

who knows what the rest of them belong to. Everybody with a gun has a checkpoint in Lebanon. And in Lebanon you'd be crazy not to have a gun. Though, I assure you, all the crazy people have guns, too.

You fumble for passes and credentials thinking, "Is this Progressive Socialist or Syrian Socialist National Party territory? Will the Amal militia kill me if I give them a Lebanese Army press card? And what's Arabic, anyway, for '*Me? American?* Don't make me laugh'?"

The gun barrels all have the bluing worn off the ends as though from being rubbed against people's noses. The interesting thing about staring down a gun barrel is how small the hole is where the bullet comes out, yet what a big difference it would make in your social schedule. Not that people shoot you very often, but the way they flip those weapons around and bang them on the pavement and poke them in the dirt and scratch their ears with the muzzle sights . . . Gun safety merit badges must go begging in the Lebanese Boy Scouts.

On the other hand, Lebanon is notably free of tour groups and Nikon-toting Japanese. The beaches, though shell-pocked and occasionally mined, are not crowded. Ruins of historical interest abound, in fact, block most streets. Hotel rooms are plentiful. No reservation is necessary at even the most popular restaurant (though it is advisable to ask around and find out if the place is likely to be bombed later). And what could be more unvarnished and authentic than a native culture armed to the teeth and bent on murder, pillage and rape?

One minor difficulty with travel to Lebanon is you can't. There's no such thing as a tourist visa. Unless you're a journalist, diplomat or arms salesman, they won't let you in. And if you believe that, you'll never understand the Orient. Type a letter saying you're an American economist studying stabilization of the Lebanese pound or something. (Sound currency is one thing all factions agree on. The Central Bank is the best guarded and least shelled building in Beirut.) I had a letter saying I was studying the tourism industry in Lebanon.

"The *tourism* industry?" said the pretty young woman at the Lebanese Consulate.

"Yes," I said.

"Tourism?"

I nodded.

She shrugged. "Well, be sure to go see my village of Beit Mery. It's very beautiful. If you make it."

Middle East Airlines is the principal carrier to Beirut. They fly from London, Paris, Frankfurt and Rome—sometimes. When the airport's being shelled, you can take a boat from Larnaca, Cyprus.

There are a number of Beirut hotels still operating. The best is the Commodore in West Beirut's El Hamra district. This is the headquarters for the international press corps. There are plenty of rooms available during lulls in the fighting. If combat is intense, telex Beirut 20595 for reservations. The Commodore's basement is an excellent bomb shelter. The staff is cheerful, efficient and will try to get you back if you're kidnapped.

There's a parrot in the bar at the Commodore that does an imitation of an in-coming howitzer shell and also whistles the Marseillaise. Only once in ten years of civil war has this bar been shot up by any of the pro-temperance Shiite militias. Even then the management was forewarned so only some Pepsi bottles and maybe a stray BBC stringer were damaged. Get a room away from the pool. It's harder to hit that side of the building with artillery. Rates are about fifty dollars per night. They'll convert your bar bill to laundry charges if you're on an expense account.

Beirut, at a glance, lacks charm. The garbage has not been picked up since 1975. The ocean is thick with raw sewage, and trash dots the surf. Do not drink the water. Leeches have been known to pop out the tap. Electricity is intermittent.

It is a noisy town. Most shops have portable gasoline generators set out on the sidewalk. The racket from these combines with incessant horn-honking, scattered gunfire, loud Arab music from pushcart cassette vendors, much yelling among the natives and occasional car bombs. Israeli jets also come in from the sea most afternoons, breaking the sound barrier on their way to targets in the Bekáa Valley. A dense brown haze from dump fires and car exhaust covers the city. Air pollution probably approaches a million parts per million. This, however, dulls the sense of smell.

There are taxis always available outside the Commodore. I asked one of the drivers, Najib, to show me the sights. I wanted to see the National Museum, the Great Mosque, the Place des Martyrs, the Bois de Pins, the Corniche and Hotel Row. Perhaps Najib misunderstood or maybe he had his own ideas about sight-seeing. He took me to the Green Line. The Green Line's four crossings were occupied by the Lebanese Army—the Moslem Sixth Brigade on one side, the Christian Fifth Brigade on the other. Though under unified command, their guns were pointed at each other. This probably augurs ill for political stability in the region.

The wise traveler will pack shirts or blouses with ample breast pockets. Reaching inside a jacket for your passport looks too much like going for the draw and puts armed men out of continence.

At the Port Crossing, on the street where all the best whorehouses were, the destruction is perfectly theatrical. Just enough remains of the old buildings to give an impression of erstwhile grandeur. Mortars, howitzers and rocket-propelled grenades have not left a superfluous brush stroke on the scrim. Turn the corner into the old marketplace, the Souk, however, and the set is a Hollywood back lot. Small arms and sniper fire have left perfectly detailed havoc. Every square inch is painstakingly bullet-nibbled. Rubble spills artfully out of doorways. Roofs and cornices have been deftly crenulated by explosion. Everything is ready for Ernest Borgnine, John Cassavetes and Lee Marvin in a remake of *The Dirty Dozen,* except the Lebanese can't figure out how to remove the land mines.

We went back and forth across the Green Line six times, then drove into Beirut's south suburbs. This area was once filled with apartment buildings housing the Moslem middle class. The buildings were destroyed by Israeli air strikes during the invasion of 1982. Modern construction techniques and modern war planes create a different kind of ruin. Balconies, windows and curtain walls disintegrate completely. Reinforced concrete floors fold like Venetian-blind slats and hang by their steel rebars from the buildings' utility cores. Or they land in a giant card-house tumble. Shiite squatter families are living in the triangles and trapezoids formed by the fallen slabs. There's a terrible lack of unreality to this part of the city.

Outside the areas controlled by the Lebanese Army the checkpoints are more numerous, less organized and manned by teenagers in jeans, T-shirts and Adidas running shoes. They carry Russian instead of U.S. weapons. Some belong to the Shiite Amal militia, others to the even more radical Hezbullah. All have strong feelings about America. Fortunately, they can't read. One even held my Arabic press credentials upside down, picture and all, and tipped his head like a parakeet to see if I matched my inverted photo. At the most dangerous-looking checkpoints, Najib said something that made the guards laugh and wave us through.

"Najib," I said, "what are you telling them?"

He said, "I tell them you travel for pleasure."

Finally, we got to a place where we could go no further. Down the street the Sunni Moslem Mourabitoun militia was having it out with the Shiite Amal militia—part of the long-standing Sunni/Shiite dispute about whether Muhammad's uncle Abbas or Muhammad's son-in-law Ali should have succeeded the Prophet and, also, about who gets the take from the south-side gambling joints.

West Beirut can also be toured on foot. You'll find the city is full of surprises—a sacking of the Saudi embassy because of long lines for visas to Mecca, for instance, or shelling of the lower town by an unidentified gunboat or car bombs several times a day. Renaults are the favored vehicles. Avoid double-parked Le Cars. Do not, however, expect the population to be moping around glassy-eyed. There's lots of jewelry and make-up and the silliest Italian designer jeans on earth. The streets are jammed. Everyone's very busy, though not exactly working. They're rushing from one place to another in order to sit around drinking hundreds of tiny cups of Turkish coffee and chat at the top of their lungs. The entire economy is fueled, as far as I could see, by everyone selling cartons of smuggled Marlboros to each other.

It turns out I didn't miss much on Najib's style of guided tour. The Bois de Pins, planted in the 1600s by Emir Fakhr ed Din to protect Beirut from encroaching sand dunes, had all its foliage blown off by Israeli jets and looks like a phone-pole farm. The Place des Martyrs, so-called because eleven nationalists were hanged there by the Turks in 1915, is right on the Green line and now all that much more aptly named. Most of the buildings on the Corniche have literally been face-lifted. The old American Embassy is here, in the same state as U.S. Middle East policy. The British Embassy down the street is completely draped in anti-bomb nets imported from Belfast. Hotel Row was ravaged at the beginning of the civil war in 1975. The high-rise Holiday Inn is a delight to the eye. Who, when traveling around the earth faced with endless Holiday Inns, has not fantasized blowing one to flinders? The National Museum is bricked up and surrounded with tanks—no nagging sense of cultural obligation to tour this historical treasure trove. I couldn't find the Great Mosque at all.

A surprising lot of Beirut stands, however. A building with a missing story here, a lot with a missing building there, shattered this next to untouched that—all the usual ironies of war except with great restaurants.

The Summerland Hotel, on the beach in the ruined south suburbs, has good hamburgers. The wealthy Moslems, including Shiites, go here. All Shiites are not stern zealots. Some have string bikinis. And, like an American ethnic group with origins nearby, they wear their jewelry in the pool. (It was at the Summerland where the Amal militia feted its American captives during the 1985 TWA hostage crisis.)

Downtown on the Corniche you can lunch at the St. Georges Hotel, once Beirut's best. The hotel building is now a burned shell, but the pool club is still open. You can go waterskiing here, even during the worst fighting.

I asked the bartender at the pool club, "Don't the waterskiers worry about sniper fire?"

"Oh, no, no, no," he said, "the snipers are mostly armed with automatic weapons—these are not very accurate."

Down the quay, pristine among the ruins, Chez Temporal serves excellent food. A short but careful walk through a heavily armed Druse neighborhood brings you to Le Grenier, once a jet-set mob scene, now a quiet hideaway with splendid native dishes. Next door there's first-rate Italian fare at Quo Vadis. Be sure to tip the man who insists, at gunpoint, on guarding your car.

Spaghetteria is a favorite with the foreign press. The Italian specials are good, and there's a spectacular view of military patrols and nighttime skirmishing along the beachfront. Sit near the window if you feel lucky.

Addresses are unnecessary. Taxi drivers know the way and

when it's safe to go there. Service at all these establishments is good, more than good. You may find ten or a dozen waiters hovering at your side. If trouble breaks out, the management will have one or two employees escort you home. When ordering, avoid most native wines, particularly the whites. Mousar '75, however, is an excellent red. Do not let the waiters serve you Cypriot brandy after the meal. It's vile.

The Commodore also has restaurants. These are recommended during fighting. The Commodore always manages to get food delivered no matter what the situation outdoors.

Nightlife begins late in Beirut. Cocktail hour at the Commodore is eight P.M., when U.S. editors and network executives are safely at lunch (there's a seven-hour time difference). The Commodore is strictly neutral territory with only one rule. No guns at the bar. All sorts of raffish characters hang about, expatriates from Palestine, Libya and Iran, officers in mufti from both sides of the Lebanese Army, and combatants of other stripes. I overheard one black Vietnam veteran loudly describe to two British girls how he teaches orthodox Moslem women to fight with knives. And there are diplomats, spooks and dealers in gold, arms and other things. At least that's what they seem to be. No one exactly announces his occupation—except the journalists, of course.

I met one young lady from Atlanta who worked on a CNN camera crew. She was twenty-six, cute, slightly plump and looked like she should have been head of the Georgia State pep squad. I sat next to her at the Commodore bar and watched her drink twenty-five gin and tonics in a row. She never got drunk, never slurred a word, but along about G&T number twenty-two out came the stories about dismembered babies and dead bodies flying all over the place and the Red Cross picking up hands and feet and heads from bomb blasts and putting them all in a trash dumpster. "So I asked the Red Cross people," she said, in the same sweet Dixie accent, "like, what's this? Save 'em, collect 'em, trade 'em with your friends?"

Everyone in Beirut can hold his or her liquor. If you get queasy, Muhammad, the Commodore bartender, has a remedy rivaling Jeeves's in P.G. Wodehouse's novels. It will steady your stomach so you can drink more. You'll want to. No one in this part

of the world is without a horror story, and, at the Commodore bar, you'll hear most of them.

Dinner, if anyone remembers to have it, is at ten or so. People go out in groups. It's not a good idea to be alone and blonde after dark. Kidnapping is the one great innovation of the Lebanese civil war. And a Reuters correspondent, Johnathan Wright, had disappeared thus on his way to the Bekáa Valley a few days before I arrived.

If nabbed, make as much noise as possible. Do not get in anyone's car. If forced in, attack the driver. At least this is what I'm told.

Be circumspect when driving at night. Other cars should be given a wide berth. Flick headlights off and on to indicate friendly approach. Turn on the dome light when arriving at checkpoints. Militiamen will fire a couple of bursts in your direction if they want you to slow down.

Clubs, such as the Backstreet near the Australian Embassy, keep going as late as you can stand it. There's some dancing, much drinking and, if you yell at the management, they'll keep the Arab music off the tape deck. Cocaine is available at about fifty dollars a gram and is no worse than what you get in New York.

Beirut nightlife is not elaborate, but it is amusing. When danger waits the tables and death is the busboy, it adds zest to the simple pleasures of life. There's poignant satisfaction in every puff of a cigarette or sip of a martini. The jokes are funnier, the drinks are stronger, the bonds of affection more powerfully felt than they'll ever be at Club Med.

East Beirut is said to also have good restaurants and nightclubs. But the visitor staying on the West side probably won't see them. No one likes to cross the Green Line at night. And, frankly, the East isn't popular with the West-side crowd. All the window glass is taped, and the storefronts are sandbagged over there. It gives the place a gloomy look. No one would think of doing this in the West. It would be an insult to the tradition of Oriental fatalism, and nobody would be able to see all the cartons of smuggled Marlboros stacked in the window. Anyway, the East-side Christians are too smug, too pseudo-French and haven't been shelled enough to turn them into party reptiles.

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To travel to the rest of Lebanon you just hail a taxi. The country is only one hundred and twenty miles long and forty miles wide, and no Lebanese cab driver has to call home to ask his wife if he can take off for a couple days. Settle the price first. This won't be easy. It's not the way of the Levant to come to the point. I asked Akbar, one of the Commodore's taximen, how much he'd charge to take me through the Israeli lines and into South Lebanon.

"I have been in this business twenty-seven years," he said.

"Yes," I said, "but how much is it going to cost me?"

"I will tell you later."

"Give me a rough idea."

"Would you like a coffee?"

"What's your hourly rate?"

"Across the street—fine rugs at the best price. I will get you a discount."

"What do you charge by the mile?"

"I have a cousin in Detroit."

"Akbar," I shouted, "what's it going to cost?!"

"If you do not like my price, I tell you what," Akbar gestured grandly, "you do not hire me anymore again."

Make sure your driver knows English well enough to translate. Lebanese English is often a triumph of memorization over understanding. "I come from the village of Baabdat," the driver will say in quite an acceptable accent, "it is very beautiful there in the mountains."

"Right," you'll say, "but you'd better pull over, that guy behind the sandbags is leveling an anti-tank gun at us."

"You do?" the driver will say, "Is that in Texas? I have a nephew in Houston."

Wherever you go, it's important to leave early in the morning. Those who think the war is dangerous have not seen the traffic in

Beirut. It's a city of a million people with three stoplights and these aren't working. There are some traffic cops, but they are on no account to be minded as they tend to wave you into the path of dump trucks going sixty miles an hour. All driving is at top speed, much of it on the sidewalks since most parking is done in the middle of the streets. The only firm rule is: Armored personnel carriers have the right of way.

Once outside Beirut there are, of course, other difficulties. The only land route into the Israeli-occupied South goes through the Chouf mountains to a crossing point in the town of Bater, which is separated from Beirut by forty miles of armed Druse. You can also take a boat to Sidon from the Phalange-controlled docks in East Beirut if you're a Christian. I am, but there seemed to be some difficulty anyway. First they said they would have to ask Israeli permission because I was a journalist. Next they told me they didn't speak English. Then they quit speaking French.

On the way to Bater my driver took me past "Green Beach," the former U.S. Marine emplacement and very interesting to students of military history. It's as defensible a position as the bottom of the air shaft in the Plaza Hotel. There's hardly a spot in Lebanon from which you can't fire a gun and hit it. Don't get out of the car. The beach is now an Amal military base under heavy guard because it's next to the orthodox Shiite women's bathing area. They wear ankle-length chadors in the water, which may explain the lack of a world-class Shiite women's swim team.

In the Chouf mountains, the land is green and exquisite, cut through with precipitous gorges. Even the steepest slopes have been terraced and planted with fruit trees, vineyards, olive groves and gun emplacements. The road is narrow with no railings or shoulders, and traffic is slow because the Druse are usually moving artillery around preparing to blast the Phalangists on the coast. Be sure to keep a mental note of such things. It's considered good manners to convey information about military movements to the next faction down the road. This takes the place of celebrity gossip in Lebanese small talk.

The Druse militiamen were good-natured. "Do you speak Arabic?" asked one. I shook my head, and he said something to another soldier who poked face and gun into the car and shouted,

"He just said he wants to fuck your mother!" At least, I assume this was good-natured.

The Druse villages are built in the Ottoman style, graceful, foursquare sandstone buildings with balconies, arched windows and fifteen-foot ceilings. The low-pitched hip roofs are covered in red tile. Tidy gardens surround each house. Peasants in white skull caps and baggy-crotched jodhpurs ride donkeys along the road. Herds of goats meander in the streets. It's all quite timeless except for the video-cassette rental stores, unisex hair salons and Mercedes-Benz sedans all over the place.

The Bater crossing was another matter. A couple hundred Lebanese, mostly old people, women and children, were jammed into line behind barbed wire, waiting for the crossing to open. Several hundred more squatted in the dirt or milled about disconsolate. These, apparently, did not have their papers in order. Some had been there for days. A few tents had been provided but no toilets. There was no running water and no food other than what people had brought with them. Soldiers from the Israeli-hired South Lebanon Army were yelling, pointing guns and threatening everyone. The sun was hot. A few of the women and all of the babies were crying. The smell was horrendous.

There seemed to be no way to tell when the crossing would open. My driver, Akbar, didn't have any ideas. I was not about to get in line behind the barbed wire. It looked too much like Bergen-Belsen. No one in sight, as far as I could tell, was in charge of anything but pistol waving.

On top of an embankment about a hundred yards on the other side of the crossing was a machine gun nest with the star of David flying over it. I took my passport out and, holding it shoulder high, walked through the barbed wire and tank traps. I fixed the South Lebanon Army guards with a stare I hoped would remind them of Grenada. *"American,"* I said. They backed away, and I headed as coolly as I could for the muzzle of the Israeli .50-caliber machine gun now being pointed at my chest.

Israelis are not well-liked in West Beirut. During 1982 the Israelis besieged the Moslem part of town. There was no electricity and little food or water. The shelling and air strikes sometimes went on for twelve hours at a stretch. Beirut's journalists call the Israelis

"Schlomos" and consider them war criminals and also real squares.

Personally, I was glad to confront the only armed maniacs in the Middle East who aren't allowed to shoot U.S. citizens. I hoped they remembered.

"That's *my* helmet you're wearing," I was thinking. "Those are *my* boots, and *I* paid for that gun so you can just go point it at someone else." Not that I said this aloud. The hole a .50-caliber bullet comes out of is *not* small. It looks as if you could put your whole foot in there.

The Israelis motioned for me to come up, and I climbed the embankment. They held the machine gun on me until it became clear I was not a peroxided Iranian. "You must speak to the captain," they said.

He proved to be a boy of twenty-five. "Do you speak English?" I said.

"Gee, sure," said the captain. The Lebanese kept a respectful distance until they saw him talking to me. Then they descended in a horde waving unlikely-looking slips of paper and shouting the interminable explanations of the east. The captain's escort chased them away with shoves and curses. The women, children and old folks pressed back with no apparent fear. Finally, they pushed the officer and me under a guard tower. "Welcome to Lebanon" is the phrase everyone uses whenever anything untoward or chaotic breaks loose.

"Welcome to Lebanon," said the Israeli captain. He read my credentials and smiled. *"Tourism?"*

"Yes," I said, "I'm the only tourist in Lebanon."

The captain laughed. "Oh no, you're not. I'm a reservist, you know, and this is my vacation, too."

The Israelis wouldn't, however, allow my car through. I told Akbar to meet me there in two days and then hiked across no-man's-land to a line of taxis on the other side.

There were three stages in crossing the Israeli lines. Once through the checkpoint at Bater, I had to go by taxi to an interrogation center a few miles up the road. From the interrogation center I took a bus eight or ten miles to another checkpoint in Jezzine.

At the interrogation stop I was searched and questioned by Shin Bet, the Israeli F.B.I. An enlisted man apologized for the

inconvenience. Less auspicious-looking travelers were being led off to be grilled in windowless huts.

In Jezzine I was questioned again by the South Lebanon Army, an interesting process since we had no language in common.

I hired another taxi to take me the fifteen miles from Jezzine to Sidon. It took five hours to get through the Bater–Jezzine crossing and a total of eight hours to make it from Beirut to Sidon. Before the war it was an hour drive on the coast road.

Sidon and Tyre, the two coastal cities of southern Lebanon, were once the principal towns of ancient Phoenicia and spawned a mercantile empire from Turkey to Spain. Important archaeological work has been done in both places, exposing six millennia of human misbehavior. Lebanon has been overrun in turn by Canaanites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Arabs again, Turks, French, more Arabs, Israelis and occasional U.S. Marines. Perhaps by means of the past one can begin to comprehend the present. Or learn which way to run from the future.

I hired a Palestinian Christian driver named Simon and had him take me twenty-five miles down the lush coast littoral to Tyre. We passed through ten or a dozen Israeli guard posts. These are heaps of sandbags with anxious eyes and many gun barrels sticking over the top. They look down upon a series of "Khomeini gates," cement barriers that jut into the road like meshing-gear teeth and force vehicles to zig-zag slowly between them in single file. If you stall in the middle of these, you die.

The roadsides all over Lebanon are piled with trash, the coast road especially so. Beaches and parks are even worse. There's something about a civil war that brings out the litterbug in people.

Tyre is an awful mess of dirty modern architecture, offal and the detritus of battle. The Elissa Beach Club hotel, on the south shore of the Tyre peninsula, may be one of the few oceanside hotels anyplace where none of the rooms face the sea. But it's clean, the hot water is not actually cold and the food's passable. Also, there's nowhere else to stay.

Simon went home for the night, and I was left on the hotel's roof terrace about a thousand miles from the nearest example of the Four Freedoms. "I have a cousin in Cincinnati" was the only

English anyone could speak. I watched the sun go down behind the ruins of some previous attempt to bring the rule of law to these climes.

I'd hoped at least for a good night's sleep. There'd been quite a few bombs going off in Beirut. I'd heard five the night before, starting with one at midnight in a bar a few blocks from the Commodore and winding up with a spectacular attempt on the life of the minister of education at six A.M. This took windows out for three blocks around and shook the furniture in my room. The minister survived but my repose did not. But this night, it turned out, was the beginning of the Hajj, the Moslem holiday marking the return of the Mecca pilgrims, and the urchins next door celebrated with a six-hour firecracker fight in the street. Then at two A.M. there was a truly horrendous explosion.

No use looking around the next day to see what's been blasted. Everything has been already.

Later I read in the Beirut newspapers that while I was in the south there were four sniping attacks on Israeli patrols, the South Lebanon Army had stormed a section of Sidon, there was a riot at a Palestinian refugee camp near Jezzine, and the coast road was heavily shelled. I noticed none of this. On the other hand, no explosion in Tyre was reported. This illustrates the difficulty, in Lebanon, of knowing what's happening, even to yourself.

In the morning I visited the principal archaeological digs. These are all decorated with small blue and white signs saying the ruins are national treasures protected by the convention of the Hague of 12 May 1954, and in case of armed conflict notify UNESCO. I suppose I should have phoned.

The oldest and most extensive excavation, near the ancient port, has revealed Phoenician house foundations, a Hellenistic theater, a long, colonnaded walk from Roman times and parts of a Crusader wall. Some pretense is made of keeping these in order. They are guarded by one desultory fellow in a fez. After I'd wandered beyond the palings for an hour, he whistled at me to get out. Nearby a newer dig has uncovered a Roman temple now being used as a garbage dump.

Half a mile or so inland is a much larger site, which I couldn't find mentioned in any guidebooks. Not that there are many

Lebanon guidebooks. I couldn't find any in U.S. bookstores. And the Hachette guide I purchased in Beirut was twenty years old. Other than this I was relying on a 1876 Baedeker I found in a New England thrift shop. It was not without useful advice:

> The transaction of business in the East always involves an immense waste of time, and as Orientals attach no value whatsoever to their time, the European will often find his patience sorely tried.
>
> Many travelers rejoice in displaying a stock of revolvers and other arms, which add greatly to their importance in the eyes of the natives, but are not often brought into actual use.

The larger excavation contains what looks to be an aqueduct, another theater and a vast Roman necropolis. Simon had come back to get me at the hotel, and I had him drive me into the middle of these ruins. Garbage was being dumped here, too, and burned automobile seats, Pepsi cans and lots of spent ordnance was mingled on the ground with ancient pot shards and mosaic tile chips. Simon picked up an amphora handle. "How old you think?" I told him about two thousand years. He nodded, "Two thousand-years-old garbage."

Antiquity hunters have been at work in Tyre. All the Roman tombs are broken open, and many of the fracture marks in the marble are fresh. I peeked inside one grave, and there was a muddle of antique bones. It was, by sheer chance, the only dead body I saw in Lebanon.

I'd been given the name of a Lebanese-American, Billy Hadad, who has a farm on the coast near Sidon. We drove around looking for him. It's hard to know what your driver is doing when he talks to the natives. He'll pull up somewhere and make a preliminary oration, which draws five or six people to the car window. Then each of them speaks in turn. There will be a period of gesturing, some laughter, much arm clasping and handshaking, and a long speech by the eldest or most prominent bystander. Then your driver will deliver an impassioned soliloquy. This will be answered at length by each member of the audience and anybody

else who happens by. Another flurry of arm grabbing, shoulder slapping and handshakes follows, then a series of protracted and emotional good-byes.

"What did you ask them?" you'll say to your driver.

"Do they know of your friend?"

"What did they tell you?"

"No."

Eventually, we were directed to an old fortresslike farmhouse near the shore. There on the terrace was a big American preppie kid in chino pants and a button-down shirt. He looked at me and said, "Awesome. Man, I haven't heard English in months!"

The farm near Sidon has been owned by the Hadads since the time of the Ottoman Turks. Its two hundred and thirty acres are irrigated by springs and planted in avocados, bananas and other fruit. The house dates from 600 A.D., with Arab and Turkish additions. It stands on a rock outcrop above a pool in use since Phoenician days. Centuries-old Ficus trees grow over the walls, and flowers bloom all around it.

Billy's father was Druse, his mother from Oregon. They met at college in California. In the middle of the civil war Mr. Hadad was killed in, of all things, a skiing accident on Mt. Lebanon. Mrs. Hadad took the younger children back to America, and Billy, just graduated from a Connecticut boarding school, came out to Lebanon to manage the property. He has five families, some thirty-five people, working for him.

We had lunch with one of his tenants and sat around a low table under a loggia indulging in Arab table manners. These are the best in the world or, anyway, the most fun. For the midday meal there are a dozen large bowls of things—salad; hot peppers; yogurt; a chick-pea paste called hummus; kubbeh, which is a kind of meatball; and things I have no idea the names for. You get a flat loaf of pita bread and make flaps to grab the food. The bread is your napkin, also your plate. We had too much Arak, the regional version of absinthe, and drank endless tiny cups of drug-strength

coffee. You can smoke in the middle of the meal, and no one considers it impolite.

The tenant brought out his guns. It's like an Englishwoman showing you her roses. There was a Soviet AK-47, a Spanish Astra 9mm automatic pistol, a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver, an old British military rifle and a very nice Beretta over-and-under shotgun. This is a modest collection. More militant people have mortars and the like. Serious gunmen favor the rocket-propelled grenade, or RPG, which is something like a bazooka. It's inaccurate and tremendously noisy, a perfect Lebanese weapon.

After lunch we went for a swim. This far south of Beirut the ocean is clean. From out in the water distant rumblings could be heard. I thought it was artillery in the Chouf. "Dynamite fishing," said Billy. (Dynamite is one bait fish always rise to.)

There was a wedding party in a nearby village that night. Lebanese wedding parties are held on the eve of the marriage. Thus the groom is given an excuse for looking green at the altar. A hundred or more chairs had been placed in a circle behind the bride's house. A few light bulbs were strung in the grapevines and a huge table had been laid with food, Scotch and Arak. Parties in Lebanon start slow. Everyone sits primly in the chairs, neither eating nor drinking, and talking only in low voices. Or they would usually. In this case the men and boys must all discuss politics with the American. Every one of them has cousins in Texas.

"Just tell them what you think," said Billy. I couldn't very well do that. After a week in Lebanon what I thought would hardly make fit conversation at a wedding feast.

This was a Christian village. "If the Moslems take over," said a young man (Billy translating), "They'll close the bars during Ramadan. But we won't make them drink at Christmas if they really don't want to." A lather of self-justification followed. Justifying the self is the principal form of exercise in Lebanon. The principal form of exercise for a visitor in Lebanon is justifying American foreign policy. The Marine incursion was the question of the hour. Moslems wanted to know why the Marines were sent here. Christians wanted to know why they left. And Druse wanted to know why, during the Marines' brief stay, they felt compelled to shell the crap out of the Chouf.

My answer to everyone was that President Reagan wasn't sure why he sent the Marines to Lebanon. However, he was determined to keep them here until he figured it out, but then he forgot.

Nobody held it against me personally. The Lebanese never hold anything against anyone personally. And it's not considered rude to root for the home team. There were a number of Moslem guests at the party. The villagers had nothing but affection for the Druse Billy Hadad, who towered over most of them. One teenager, summoning all the English at his command, told me, "Billy, il es . . . le homme vert, tu connais, 'Credible Hulk!'" Billy said the only real trouble he's had with his neighbors and tenants was when he tried to convince them that professional wrestling is fake. It's the most popular program on Lebanese TV.

About ten o'clock there was a change in the festivities. Acting on some signal I couldn't perceive everyone suddenly began to drink and shout. A little later the bridegroom was carried in on the shoulders of his friends accompanied by drums, flutes and the eerie ululation Arab women use to mark every emotional occasion. Awful tapes were put on a large Rasta box. There was bad Arab music, worse French rock and roll, and Israeli disco music, which is the most abominable-sounding thing I've ever heard in my life. A sister of the bride got in the middle of the circled chairs and did quite a shocking traditional dance.

There was something of the freshman mixer to the party. The young men and women held to opposite sides of the crowd, eyeing each other furtively and being shoved out to dance only after prolonged giggling and conspiracy among their fellows.

"I haven't been laid since I was in Beirut last June," said Billy. "Out in the country it's marriage or death."

Good-fellowship in the Middle East can be a bit unnerving. You'd best get used to being gripped, hugged and even nuzzled. I was taken aback the first time I saw two fully armed militiamen walking down the street holding hands. Large amounts of Arak aid in acclimitization. The sense of affection and solidarity is comforting, actually, when you realize how many of the men throwing their arms around you have pistols in the waistbands of their pants. A Mercedesful of gunmen kept watch on the road.

Eventually I was thrust onto the dance floor and matched with

a hefty girl who had me do Arab dances. This was, justly, thought hilarious. But my discotheque dancing made an impression. I gather the locals are not familiar with the Watusi, the Jerk and the Mashed Potatoes.

The whole celebration was being videotaped, and every now and then one of the revelers would use the Sony's quartz-halogen light to dry the skin on a snareless Arab drum.

Sometime in the early morning Billy and I returned to his farm. There was protracted questioning from his housekeeper on the floor above. She wanted to make sure we were us before she threw down the door keys. We locked ourselves in with five deadbolts.

I never did get to see the historical points of interest in Sidon.

The overland crossing going north was a horror. The Israelis run Betar and the midpoint interrogation center, and conditions there are ugly but organized. However, the clumsy and violent South Lebanon Army has control of the Jezzine checkpoint.

There were about a thousand angry and panicked people in the small town square when I arrived. Most of them were poor Shiites, and all of them seemed to have screaming children and every earthly possession with them. One group of two or three hundred were fighting with fists to get on a bus. Soldiers ran through the crowd screaming and firing Uzis in the air. It was only ten in the morning but already 90 degrees. I looked for Israeli officers. There were none. I sent Simon into the crowd. He returned in a few minutes.

"No ways but bus across," he said.

"How do I get on it?"

"You can not."

I paid him off and sent him home. I was sick with the dysentery every foreigner in Lebanon suffers. My head ached from the wedding party Arak. There was, it appeared, a man with a gun selling bus tickets. But every time he tried to sell one a crowd of three hundred would rush him like a rugby scrum. The man fired his pistol directly over the people's heads. Bullets smacked into nearby masonry. The crowd quailed and ran backward, trampling each other. Then they gathered themselves and rushed the ticket seller again. He grew purple with shouting, reloaded, fired again.

The crowd moved away and back like surf. Then with one great surge they chased him on top of a truck.

Most of these people had been camping at Jezzine, if that's the word for sleeping in the streets for days with your children and no food. They were desperate and fully insane. The crowd began running against itself, into walls, up the sides of buildings.

I was at a loss. I might be at Jezzine still if my arm hadn't been grabbed by someone who said, "I ken you're new here." It was a magnificent Scotswoman, tall, thin and ramrod straight. With her was a gentle-looking Lebanese girl. The woman was Leslie Phillips, head of the nursing school at a medical center near Sidon. She was on her way to get textbooks in Beirut. The girl was named Amal, the same as the militia. It means "hope." She was headed to America for college.

Miss Phillips placed us in a protected corner and said, "I'm going to speak to the man with the gun. I always go straight for the man with the gun. It's the only way you get anywhere in this country." She vanished into the melee. The crowd went into a frenzy again and made right for Amal and me. I suppose I would have been filled with pity if I'd been in a second-story window. As it was I was filled with desire to kick people and I gave in to it.

Miss Phillips was gone for two hours. She emerged from the donnybrook perfectly composed and holding three bus tickets. I asked her what all the shooting was about. "Oh," she said, "that's just Lebanese for 'please queue up.'" An ancient horrible Mexican-looking bus pulled into the crowd smacking people and punting them aside. Amal was carrying a co-ed's full complement of baggage in two immense suitcases. I handed my kit bag to Miss Phillips, grabbed these and made for the bus. Or tried to. Three steps put me at the bottom of a clawing, screeching pile-up, a pyramid of human frenzy. I heard Miss Phillips's voice behind me. "Don't be shy," she said, "it's not rude to give a wee shove to the Lebanese." I took a breath, tightened my grip on the suitcases and began lashing with Samsonite bludgeons at the crowd of women, old men and children. If you ask me, it *was* pretty rude, but it was that or winter in South Lebanon. I fought my way to the side of the bus. There was a man on top loading luggage and kicking would-be roof rack stowaways in the head, knocking them back on top of the

crowd. I hoisted one of Amal's fifty-pound suitcases onto my head, waved a fistful of Lebanese money at the loader, kept hold of Amal with my other hand and fended off the mob with both feet. This doesn't sound physiologically possible, but it was an extreme situation.

I got both suitcases on top at last. Then we had to scrimmage our way to the bus door in a flying wedge, Miss Phillips leading the way. Just as we were getting aboard, a worse brawl yet broke loose in the throng. One of the South Lebanon Army guards leapt into the middle of it and began beating people in the face with the butt of his pistol. The crowd exploded. Miss Phillips was heaved inside. I was squashed against the bus door and lost hold of Amal, who was sucked into the maw of the Lebanese. Miss Phillips reached out the bus window and tapped the pistol-whipping soldier on the arm. "Pardon me, lad," she said, "but those two are with me."

The soldier left off his beating for a moment, pushed me into the bus and fished Amal out of the crowd. I pulled her inside, and the soldier went back to hitting people. Everyone in the crowd was yelling. I asked Amal what they said. "They're all claiming to be someone's cousin," she sighed.

About two hundred people were packed inside the bus, which was built to carry fifty. More kept wiggling in through the windows. It was well over 100 degrees in there. Every now and then a soldier would get in and climb across the top of people to beat one of the illegal passengers. There was more shooting outside. I found myself in a full body press with a Shiite girl. She was rather nicely built but over the top from claustrophobia and shrieking like a ruptured cow. "What's Arabic for 'calm down'?" I yelled.

"As far as I can tell," said Miss Phillips, "there's no such word."

We did eventually get under way, the bus backing over people then swaying horribly in blinding dust on the half-lane-wide mountain road. We were only stopped, unloaded, searched, interrogated and held at gunpoint several times.

Fortunately, the Lebanese are a clean people, even the very poor ones. It wasn't like being packed into a bus on a sweltering day with a bunch of French or anything.

Akbar was waiting at Bater. I found out later he'd also come

up from the city the day before and waited all afternoon in case I got thrown out or evacuated or tried to get back to Beirut on foot.

Travel to the North is less arduous. George Moll, the video editor at ABC-TV's Beirut bureau, and I went on a trip to the Bsherri Cedars. Traffic on the coast road north of the city is stalled by checkpoints. Amazing what a few guys standing around with guns can do to create gridlock. "I ♡ Lebanon" bumper stickers are popular with the motorists. "Kill them all—Let God sort them out" T-shirts are popular with the militias.

It's important to remember, when dealing with these militias, that the gunmen are mostly just kids and they're getting a big kick out of the whole thing. I suppose this is only natural when young people lack proper recreational facilities and well-supervised activities to keep them out of mischief. They need sympathy and understanding. Or a sixteen-inch shell from the battleship New Jersey.

I wanted to visit the gorge of the Nahr el Kelb, the River of the Dog, a strategic point on the Lebanese coast just north of Beirut where for more than three thousand years invading armies have carved stelae commemorating their passage. A tunnel for the coast highway now cuts through the gorge wall, and the carvings are reached via a ramp above the traffic. The cuneiform characters of Nebuchadnezzar II, the stela of the Pharaoh Ramses, the Assyrian bas reliefs, a Latin inscription from the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Greek carvings from the Seleucid empire—they've all been completely effaced by air pollution.

Don't go to the famous Jeita Grottoes at the source of the Dog River, either. These have been turned into a military training base. Although what kind of military training goes on among a bunch of stalactites lit by colored spotlamps, I can't tell you.

A few miles north of Nahr el Kleb is the Casino de Liban on Juniye Bay. This was pre-war Lebanon's attempt at Monte Carlo and used to have elaborate floor shows featuring plump blondes who were out of work in Europe. You can still gamble there, though just being in this part of the world is a gamble enough for most people. The blondes are gone.

On up the coast road, twenty-four miles from Beirut, is Byblos. Since the Christians were run out of the Beirut airport, the Phalange has taken to landing planes on the highway here. Expect another traffic jam. Byblos was considered by the ancients to be the oldest city in the world. In fact, it has been an established metropolis for at least six thousand years. Main Street, however, looks most like the oldest part of Fort Lauderdale.

By the seaport, however, is an Arab fortification atop a Frankish castle constructed with chunks of Roman temples which had been built over a Phoenician town that was established on the foundations of a Neolithic village—quite a pile of historic vandalism.

The war has not touched Byblos except to keep anyone from coming here. We found one consumptive tour guide playing solitaire in a shack by the entrance to the ruins. He took us through the deserted remains spieling, with pauses only to cough, a litany of emperors, catastrophes and dimensions.

The Lebanese are chock-full of knowledge about their past. Those who *do* learn history apparently get to repeat it of their own free will. The whole business filled me with inchoate emotions and a desire for lunch.

The Byblos Fishing Club at the base of the Crusader seawall has wonderful food and no other customers. They don't speak English anymore so I went back to the kitchen and picked out what I wanted. Seafood got with dynamite fishing is very tender, it seems. On the wall of the Fishing Club are dusty photos of better days—Ray Milland, Ann-Margret, David Niven, Jean-Paul Belmondo. "Now *this*," said George, "is archaeology."

There's a very good hotel in Byblos, the Byblos-Sur-Mer, whose owner hadn't seen anyone in so long he bought us drinks when we stopped to use the pay phone.

You can proceed to Tripoli on the coast road, but shouldn't. The Arab Democratic Party, which supports Islamic unification, is having a big fight there with the Islamic Unification Party, which is in favor of Arab democracy. And the Syrians are shooting at both of them.

We turned east toward the mountains at the Syrian lines near Batrun. There's a medieval Arab castle here that's worth seeing. It sits in the middle of a cement plant.

Once into Syrian-controlled territory the checkpoint scrutiny becomes severe. Ahmed, our driver, began making long explanations to the glowering soldiers. He wouldn't quite confess what he was saying, but I have an idea it went something like: "I have the brother of an important American strongman here and the president of England's cousin. They are traveling in secret as journalists so they may see the justice and resolve of the great Syrian army in its struggle against Zionist oppressors everywhere. Soon they will return to their homeland and tell rich men there to drop a bomb on Tel Aviv."

The Syrian army has dozens of silly hats, mostly berets in yellow, orange and shocking pink, but also tiny pillbox chapeaux, peaked officer's caps with half a foot of gold braid up the front and lumpy Russian helmets three sizes too large. The paratroopers wear shiny gold jumpsuits, and crack commando units have skintight fatigues in a camouflage pattern of violet, peach, flesh tone and vermilion on a background of vivid purple. This must give excellent protective coloration in, say, a room full of Palm Beach divorcees in Lily Pulitzer dresses.

The rest of the scenery is also spectacular—Californian, but as though the Sierras had been moved down to Santa Barbara. The mountains of Lebanon rise ten thousand feet only twenty miles from the sea. You can ski in the morning and swim in the afternoon. Actually, of course, it's raining on the beach that time of year, and the skiing is mediocre at best. But it's the kind of thing that made for great Lebanese travel-brochure writing in the old days.

We drove to Bsherri on the lip of the dramatic Qadisha Valley, 650 feet deep and only a half-mile wide. This is the heartland of the Maronites, seventh century A.D. Christian schismatics who sought refuge among these dangerous hairpin turns lacking guard rails and speed limits.

Bsherri was the home of Kahlil Gibran and also where Danny Thomas's family comes from. Thus, the two great cultural figures of modern Lebanon, though in many ways opposites (Danny Thomas does not write poetry. Kahlil Gibran never did "spit-takes."), are linked. Or so I was told. I wouldn't spoil that piece of information with research.

We visited Gibran's house above the town. It's probably the world's only example of the California bungalow style carved out of

living rock. Interesting but damp. The place is decorated with a hundred or so of Gibran's artworks. He was a dreadful painter—the gentle insouciance of Rodin and the technical abilities of Blake, all done in muddy earth tones. Gibran's coffin is bricked into the wall of his bedroom if that says anything about the man.

While we were asking directions in Bsherri, a young man named Antoine attached himself to us. He got us into the Gibran house, which was supposedly closed for repairs, then took us home for a Lebanese sit-around with his mother, aunts, sisters, cousins, etc. Hospitality is a must in the Middle East whether anyone wants to have it or not. Pomegranate juice is served, lots of cigarettes are smoked and tiny cups of coffee are drunk while everyone smiles and stares because you can't speak Arabic and they can't speak English, and Lebanese are the only people in the world who pronounce French worse than Americans.

Antoine's house was extraordinary. Like Gibran's it was carved into the side of a hill. The main room was windowless, floored with layers of Persian carpets and hung wall and ceiling with ornate cloths. There were stuffed falcons, brass things, photographs and religious statuettes all over the place and a dozen Mafia-Mediterranean-style dining room chairs. Antoine let us know he thought Kahlil Gibran's house was underdecorated. Antoine's mother told us that she'd lost five sons in the war so far, though that may have been the usual polite exaggeration of the Levantine.

Ahmed, though Moslem, was a great hit with Antoine's family. He brought them up-to-date on Beirut politics and then told Syrian checkpoint stories. Syrian checkpoint stories are the Polish jokes of Lebanon.

A Syrian soldier stops a Volkswagen Beetle and demands that the driver open the trunk. The driver begins to open the luggage compartment at the front of the car. "No!" says the Syrian, "I said the *trunk*."

"This *is* the trunk," says the driver.

"I am not a donkey," says the Syrian, pointing to the back of the car. "Open the trunk!" So the driver does as he's told, exposing the VW's engine. "Aha!" says the Syrian, "You have stolen a motor. Furthermore, you have just done it because it's still running."

Another of Ahmed's stories—and he swears this one is true—is about a checkpoint on a hill where the Syrian soldier wanted to inspect a car trunk. "I can't get out," said the driver, "I have no emergency brake, and I must keep my foot on the brake pedal or the car will roll away."

"Don't worry," said the Syrian, "I will sit in the car and hold the brake pedal." So they changed places. "Now open the trunk," said the Syrian. The driver opened it. "All right," yelled the Syrian from inside the car, "is there any contraband in there?"

What the Syrians are looking for in your trunk, by the way, is *Playboy* magazines. Be sure to carry some.

We sat and smoked more cigarettes. Lebanon is not the place to go if you're trying to give that up. Everyone over the age of six chain-smokes. Long-term health effects are not, these days, a major concern, and it's the worst sort of rudeness not to offer cigarettes at every turn. George fell in love with Carmen, Antoine's sister, a beauty of about fifteen. George could talk of nothing else for the rest of the trip but getting married and becoming Maronite. Maybe the feeling was mutual. Antoine took me aside later and asked me if George was a Christian. I assured him most blond, blue-eyed Americans over six feet tall are not Druse. He then nicked me, instead of George, for the two hundred Lebanese pounds it allegedly cost to get in the Gibran house.

We went on up into the mountains to the Cedars, one of only three small groves of these trees left. Once the country was forested with them, a hundred feet high at full growth and forty feet in circumference. It was from these the tall masts of the Phoenician galleys were made and the roof beams of Solomon's temple and so forth. The trees in the Bsherri grove look like they need flea collars, and the grounds are a mess.

We found a good hotel, the La Mairie, about ten miles west of Bsherri in Ehdene. Ehdene is notable for the country's best-looking martyr pictures. There are martyr pictures everywhere in Lebanon. The Phalangists put up photographs of the ox-faced Bashir Gemayel, who got elected president in '82 and blown to bits within the month. The Shiites plaster walls with the face of some dumpy Ayatollah who went MIA in Libya. The Druse have Kamal Jumblatt, who looked dead even before the hitmen ventilated his

limo. Ehdene, however, is the headquarters of the Giants militia, led by the very photogenic Franjieh family. In 1978 the Phalangists attacked the Franjieh home and killed a handsome son, his pretty wife, and their little daughter too. If you have to look at pictures of dead people all day, they might as well be cute.

From Ehden, with light traffic and no mood swings at the checkpoints, it's only two hours back to Beirut.

The remaining great thing to see in Lebanon is Baalbek, site of three immense Roman temples, among the largest in the ancient world. Baalbek, however, is in the Bekáa Valley, where Israeli and Syrian forces are faced off and where Israel has been making periodic airstrikes on Syrian missile emplacements. Take sturdy and practical clothing.

Baalbek itself is controlled by an extremely radical pro-Khomeini Shiite group called Islamic Amal. The leader of Islamic Amal is Hussein Mussawi. He has close ties to Iran, and many people believe he personally ordered the suicide attacks on the American Embassy and the U.S. Marine base at Green Beach.

The Islamic Amal people are so far out there that they think *Syria* is a puppet of international Zionism. When I first arrived in Beirut, the Syrian army had Baalbek surrounded with tanks and was shelling downtown.

I went to Baalbek with ABC's chief Beirut correspondent, Charles Glass, and two drivers, one Syrian and one Lebanese Shiite. (Glass was later kidnapped by radical Shiites, possibly this same Islamic Amal; after two months in captivity, he made a harrowing escape.) The ride over the crest of the Lebanese range is breathtaking. The arid reaches of the Anti-Lebanese mountains rise in the distance. Below is the flat, green trough of the Bekáa, where Syrian and Israeli lines are lost in verdant splendor. The thin neck of the fertile crescent is spread out before you, cradle of the civilization that has made air strikes possible. It's overwhelming.

At the foot of the descent is the large Christian town of Zahle, a Phalange outpost surrounded by Moslems. The Syrians shell this sometimes, too. Zahle has a good hotel, the Kadri, and an arcade of outdoor restaurants built along a stream in the Wadi Arayesh, or "Valley of Vines."

The road north to Baalbek runs up the middle of the Bekáa. Marijuana fields stretch for miles on either side. This is the source of Lebanon's renowned hashish. Don't try to export any yourself, however. The airport customs officials won't search you when you arrive, but they're very thorough when you leave. Taking hashish out of the country without payoffs is one of the few crimes they still prosecute in Lebanon.

Bedouins from the Syrian desert camp beside the hemp fields. They're not very romantic up close. Their tents are made from old grain sacks, and everything around them stinks of goat.

The ruins of the Roman temples at the Baalbek are, words fail me, big. The amount of mashed thumbs and noses full of stone dust that went into chiseling these is too awesome to contemplate. The largest, the Temple of Jupiter, is 310 feet long, 175 feet wide, and was originally enclosed by fifty-four Corinthian pillars, each sixty-six feet high and seven and a half feet thick. Only six are left standing now. The temple complex was three centuries in building and never finished. The Christian Emperor Theodosius ordered the work stopped in hope of suppressing paganism and bringing a halt to a very lively-sounding cult of temple prostitution.

Once again we found a lonely tour gide who took us around, spouting names and numbers and pointing out things that are extra odd or large.

The ruins are policed by the Syrians, who are doing a better job than the Israelis at Tyre. The captain in charge came up and introduced himself. His English consisted of "Hello." "Hello," he said and shook hands. "Hello," he said and waved goodbye.

Outside the ruins, Baalbek is a tense and spooky place. All the Christians, Sunnis and Druse have fled. Giant posters of Khomeini are hanging everywhere. There are few women on the streets, and they are carefully scarved and dressed down to the feet. The men gave us hard looks and fingered their weapons. The streets were dirty and grim. Syrian soldiers stayed bunched together. The tanks are still dug in around the city. You cannot get a drink or listen to Western music or dance or gamble, and you'd better not whistle the "Star Spangled Banner."

The tour guide led us directly from the temples to a souvenir store. There was something about risking my life to visit a pest hole

full of armed lunatics and then going shopping that appealed to me. The store looked like it hadn't been visited since the Crusades, except all the ancient artifacts were new, made this month and buried in the yard for a week.

The nonsense you hear about bargaining in the Orient is, like most nonsense about the Orient, perfectly true. I had not been in the shop three seconds before the owner was quoting prices that would do justice to a Pentagon parts supplier and flopping greasy, ill-made rugs in every direction—like somebody house-training a puppy with the Sunday *New York Times*. There's a charming banter that goes with all this. I mean, I suppose there is. Some of the verbal flourishes of the Levant are lost in a minimal English vocabulary. "Good, huh? Real good, huh? Good rug! Very good!"

"He has a cousin in St. Louis," added the tour guide, helpfully.

It seemed I had to hold up both ends in this legendary duel of wit in the Bazaar. "Tell him," I said to the guide, "his goods are of the greatest magnificence and pleasure flows into my eyes at their splendor. Yes, and I am astonished at the justice of his prices. And yet I must abase myself into the dust at the humbleness of my means. I, a poor traveler, come many miles over great distances . . ." And so forth. Out came bogus Egyptian dog-head statues, phony Roman coins, counterfeit Phoenician do-dads, and more and worse and bigger rugs. After an hour and a half I felt I had to pay for my fun. I settled on a small bronze "Babylonian" cow with some decidedly un-Babylonian rasp marks on the casting. I bargained the shopkeeper down from $200 to $30. Good work if the cow hadn't been worth $0.

Charles Glass has spent years in the Middle East and was completely bored by this, however. He said we should go meet Hussein Mussawi.

Our Shiite driver was sent to negotiate. After the customary amount of temporizing and dawdle, Hussein consented to see us. We were taken to a shabby and partly destroyed section of town, where we were surrounded by nervous young gunmen. Though whether they were nervous about us or nervous that they might get a sudden invite to make like a human Fourth of July, I don't know. We were marched into a tiny and dirty office and told to sit down.

We waited. Then we were marched to a larger office furnished Arab-style with couches around the sides of the room. Khomeini pictures abounded. We were served tea, and Charles and I, though not our Moslem drivers, were very thoroughly searched. Charles's tape recorder was taken apart with special care. Our guards were pleasant, but small talk did not seem the order of the day. We waited some more. Finally, another group of armed young men came and took us through a warren of narrow filthy alleys to a modest and well-protected house. We were put into a small study lined with Arabic books and decorated with more pictures of Khomeini. There were two young men who spoke English waiting for us. They asked in an affable way what was going on with U.S. foreign policy. "After all," said one, "this part of the world has a Moslem majority. Is your government crazy or what?"

Half an hour later Hussein came in and shook hands with everyone. He's a thin man of middle size, about forty-five. He was dressed in a sort of semi-military leisure suit and was very calm and dignified in his bearing but had, I swear it, a twinkle in his eye.

Hussein ordered a gunman to bring us coffee and cigarettes. The young man who spoke English less well acted as translator. "Were you responsible for the bombing of the Marine base?" asked Charles. I nearly lit my nose instead of the Marlboro. Hussein answered with equanimity, pointing out that any number of people, including the American Democratic Party, stood to benefit from the attack on the Marines.

"How long will this peace last in Lebanon?" asked Charles.

"This is not peace."

"When will there be peace?"

"When there is Islamic justice everywhere," came the answer.

"Everywhere?" asked Charles. "Will there be a place for Christians and Jews under Islamic justice?"

"Islam allows a place for everyone," said Hussein. The translator paused and added on his own, "Except, you know, Zionists and imperialists and other types."

"The Zionists will have to be driven out?"

"Yes."

"That may take a long time," said Charles.

Hussein fixed him with a smile. "Long for you. Short for us."

Hussein expounded upon the destiny of Islam and a believing man's place therein. The translator got himself tangled up with "Allah's great wishes . . . I mean, large would-be's . . . That is . . ."

"The will of God," I suggested.

Hussein turned to me and spoke in English. "Do you understand Arabic?"

"No," I said, "I just recognized the concept."

He said something to the translator, who said to me, "He wants to know if you believe in God."

I didn't think I should quibble. "Of course," I said. Hussein nodded. There was intensity in his look and no little human concern. He continued on subjects theological.

"To get back down to earth for a moment . . ." said Charles.

Hussein laughed. "Oh," said the translator, "all this is *very much* down to earth."

Charles continued to ask questions. I continued to ponder Hussein. He was practically the first Lebanese I'd met who didn't tell me he had a cousin in Oklahoma City. Although, as it turns out, his brother is a petroleum engineer who used to work in Dallas.

Charles asked Hussein about Johnathan Wright, the missing Reuters correspondent. "I hadn't heard about this," was the reply. "Also he wasn't headed this way."

Hussein told Charles he should study the Koran.

At length we took our leave. As we were being escorted back to our car I noticed a woman on a nearby roof wearing a chador and hanging out lacy black lingerie on the clothes line.

Less than a week after our visit, the U.S. embassy annex in East Beirut got blown up. I hope it wasn't anything we said.

The hotel at Baalbek is the Palmyra, built in the 1870s. It's a massive Ottoman structure furnished with antique carpets and

heavy mahogany Victorian furniture. The leather-bound guest register bears the signatures of Louis Napoleon, the Duc D'Orleans, the Empress of Abyssinia and Kaiser Wilhelm II. There's an air of twilight and deliquescence to the place. Only the owner and a couple old servants are left. No room had been occupied for months, and only an occasional Syrian military officer comes to dinner.

Charles and I sat alone that night in the vast dining room. Pilgrims were still returning from Mecca, and celebratory gunshots sounded outside. "Happy fire" it's called. The electricity guttered in the bulbs and cast the long tables and tall ceiling into gloom. The forces of darkness and barbarism seemed to gather around. It was as though we were the last two white men in Asia. We sat up past midnight drinking the bottle of Arak a grizzled waiter had smuggled to us, talking politics and literature and citing apt quotations:

> *Turning and turning in the widening gyre*
> *The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*
> *Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;*
> *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*
> *The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and . . .*

. . . and you just can't find travel like this anymore.