

AN ARTISAN'S

BEIRUT

An enlightening new tour of local designers and couturiers is getting visitors to experience a different Beirut, says **Roger Norum**

Swim the length of the rooftop infinity pool at Le Gray, Beirut's heralded boutique five-star hotel, and you effectively get a full panorama of the history of Lebanon. At the pool's south-eastern corner, you'll tread water overlooking Martyrs' Square and the gorgeous copper-topped Oxford-esque sandstone UFA insurance building. From here, swim north towards the ruins of an old Ottoman serail, the cranes of the bustling industrial marina just beyond. Next, float west past a Phoenician city wall and the remains of the downtown during Canaanite times. Gaze south of here towards the medieval wall of the Beirut Souks, which retains a 2,500-year-old street grid, rebuilt Ottoman access gates and a Byzantine mosque. Paddle a few metres from here and you'll catch sight of a Roman bath's ruins alongside three mosques, two cathedrals, a church and a beautiful little chapel. All of this looks onto one of the largest urban ruins in the Middle East – a stretch of subterranean Hellenistic rubble currently being fashioned into a public space known as the Garden of Forgiveness.

It's no secret that Lebanon – a land mentioned some 70 times in the Bible – has thousands of years of fascinating and diverse history to its name. And yet, when you think of Beirut, you think of, what? War? Hezbollah? Hummus? Bling? The country's subpar tourism infrastructure hasn't exactly helped the city market its history or traditions – this is hardly Marrakech or Istanbul, after all. Still, while the terms handicraft or designer may never have figured prominently in the country's mythology – or into coffee table books about its capital, which tend to focus on war and destruction – Lebanon has been a home to thriving artisan traditions for centuries. Here one can find methods of production that have been passed down through generations inside the quiet homes of rural villages and the hidden courtyards of urban apartment blocks. They have been obscured and stunted for years by civil war, poverty and political instability, but they have never died.

Now, one tour is looking to put the roots back in Beirut. Creative Lebanon is a private journey through the heart of Beirut that gets you off the tourist boulevards into the ruelles and allées of cutting-edge local designers, artisans and couturiers who are shaping the identity of today's Lebanon.

Visitors begin the experience at Artisanat Mabrouk, where hundreds of embroiderers and needlework specialists produce linens that include tablecloths, lingerie, children's wear and traditional decorated Lebanese robes. In a restored old building on rue Omar Daouk, the non-profit institution was created amidst war in the mid-80s to help non-working mothers use their traditional handicraft skills in a worthy manner.

From here I venture several blocks away to Saifi Village's Quartier des Arts, where fashion designer Rabih Kayrouz and colleague Tala Hajjar have established the STARCH foundation. Each season, the duo picks a group of up-and-coming designers to showcase and promote, with the intention of grooming future stars of Lebanon's growing fashion and design industry. While browsing around STARCH's shop, I get talking to one of these next big things, Nadine Mneimneh (nadine-mneimneh.com). Svelte and 28, Nadine is in the middle of brainstorming for her winter collection. "I always like looseness, comfort, a hint of femininity," she tells me, "and an artisanal touch – along with menswear fabrics". When Nadine completes her tenure at STARCH this winter, she will venture off to her own atelier-showroom. Modern institutions such as STARCH that champion new creative talent are critical in the current political and economic climate of the Middle East.

I'm whisked a few blocks away to the much older district of Achrafieh – all over Beirut, brand new neighbourhoods are juxtaposed with ones holding hundreds of years of history. Rue Sursok takes its name from one of Lebanon's most prominent families, and accordingly holds a number of extremely ornate 18th and 19th century mansions. We weave down an alleyway towards a hidden

gem: a boutique known, quite simply, as Sarah's Bag. The shop began as a tiny operation that has blossomed into a coveted, worldwide fashion phenomenon of bags and accessories.

Founder Sarah Beydoun belongs to the generation of Beirut-based designers who came of age during the country's fifteen-year civil war and are now contributing to rebuilding the city's cultural life through their work in various creative industries. Sarah initially began her design group to teach imprisoned women valuable traditional embroidery, crochet and hand stitching skills as a means of rehabilitating them on their journey back to society. Now these women – along with a team of designers and artisans – conceive of and produce some of the most fabulous wallets and handbags you have ever seen.

Encounters with other masters of their craft follow: Nada Le Cavalier's unique, one-off jewellery pieces featuring miniature, hand-laid mosaic pieces; Sandra Sahyoun's beautiful paintings and furniture pieces; and American-born Alice Eddé, who makes elegant, feminine and luxurious leather products in nearby Byblos, an ancient town whose souk spans several millennia. It's a place you would never think to look for such spectacular modern design; as one of the designers explained to me, "Beirut is a place where you really need to know someone."

On my final day in Beirut, I head out to explore the city alone. The concierge at Le Gray recommends I visit several recently-opened, trendy new boutiques. As I amble towards the quiet-but-not-for-long arts district of Mar Mikhael, the testosterone of Beirut are just getting going: the 8,000rpm, pedal-to-the-metal thundering revs of nouveau-riche Lamborghinis waiting to be valet parked; the round-the-clock symphony of jackhammers that are terraforming the bedrock of the old city into a new cosmopolis; the call to prayer that resounds loud and clear from city mosques.

As a refuge from the babel of sound out on the streets, I step into Plan BEY, a small boutique that creates and sells a range of artistic goodies, many of them in limited quantities. The shop is run by Tony Sfeir, a man whose business card reads "Serial Entrepreneur" and who is about as friendly and welcoming as you could imagine a shopkeeper-musician-producer-illustrator to be. Enter into Tony's shop and you'll have a hard time pulling yourself away without hearing about the latest happenings in Arab music or about some interesting new printing method he's developed with his wife for silk-screening fanciful drawings on fabric or metal.

From a shelf at Tony's shop, I pick up a framed photograph of Beirut circa 1980. The poignant image, taken by local photographer Fouad Elkoury during the Lebanese civil war, depicts a man in jeans changing the tires on a shiny black Cadillac in front of a pock-marked, bombed-out building as two smiling besuited local dandies patiently look on in wait. The scene seemed appropriately emblematic of modern Beirut, a place where the physical and psychological impacts of war are still being dealt with today – but one whose citizens have always continued to find ways of surviving, coping and expressing themselves.

THE DETAILS

ARRIVING

bmi (flybmi.com); +44 (0)844 848 4888 fly twice daily from London Heathrow to Beirut from £412 return including taxes and charges.

STAYING

The **Creative Lebanon** tour (\$1,635 inclusive of taxes) includes three nights in an Executive Suite at Le Gray with breakfast for two, dinner at the Indigo roof terrace restaurant, plus champagne, wine, airport transfers and a private car during the tour. For details, contact **Le Gray** at legray.com or +961 196 28 28.