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Having a Good Time On the Green Line

After decades of war and devastation, Lebanon stages a surprising comeback

By SCOTT MACLEOD

Beirut's beautiful people are crammed into B-018, a hot nightclub near the downtown waterfront. Muscle men in jeans and miniskirted femmes fatales are dancing hip to hip, tossing back glasses of Johnnie Walker. Everybody's relishing the moment, as the city boogies its way out of the ashes.

Lebanon is making a comeback following a quarter-century of war that left 150,000 people dead. The coming-out party is this week, as kings, princes and presidents from around the Middle East descend on its capital for an Arab summit meeting. There, they are set to endorse a new initiative aimed at achieving peace with Israel, but as Beirutis see it, the real event is the city's symbolic return to world prominence. "Lebanon is better than it was before the war," boasts Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

That's debatable, but plainly things are improving. Beirut was an unthinkable venue for a regional summit throughout Lebanon's 1975-90 Christian-Muslim civil war and, for 10 years after, as Israel battled the Lebanese militia Hizballah. With Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, the country was made whole again and Beirut relatively secure.

Thanks to a major government-driven effort, the capital's once gutted urban center has been turned into a new downtown that aspires to reclaim for Beirut its old title, "Paris of the Middle East." The streets are lined with new and restored office buildings, apartments, shops and cafes. There's a Virgin Megastore (selling DVDs like *Legally Blonde* alongside videotapes of Osama bin Laden speeches) and a Beirut branch of Paul, a famed Parisian boulangerie. Summer festivals in the mountains east of the city have featured attractions such as Sting and Elton John.

Arabs with a new aversion to vacationing in the West after Sept. 11 are rediscovering Beirut en masse, filling up hotels during Islamic holidays. This week the luxurious seafront Phoenicia Hotel will house the Arab leaders in suites that cost up to \$8,000 a night. Nearby, the site of the former U.S. embassy, bombed in 1983, is now a parking lot, while the American Marine barracks, hit by terrorists the same year, is part of a new airport complex.

Besides sprouting trendy nightclubs, restaurants and fitness centers, Beirut has a new stadium, as well as new highways and traffic tunnels. Since the civil war ended with the Taif accord, giving Christians and Muslims equal power in Lebanon, old antagonists are settling their differences in the restored parliament building--rather than with gunfire across the Green Line that once divided Beirut. The Islamic fundamentalists of Hizballah, committed to social harmony with Christians, are among those tasting the nightlife--if not the alcohol that goes with it.

Of course, Lebanon's old problems have not been completely exorcised. Just ask Bernard Khoury, the architect who designed B-018. Having spent his teenage years dodging bullets on the Green Line, he constructed the club in the form of an underground shelter. The bizarre interior--a slit in a wall recalls a sniper's nest, and tables are set with memorial photos of yesteryear's entertainers--echoes war and death. "Some people want a postcard version of our history, with no reference to the war," he says. "I don't agree. Amnesia can be dangerous."

Not that anyone who reads the papers could forget that Lebanon is still mired in conflict. In southern Lebanon, Hizballah guerrillas are fighting a diminished but lethal battle against Israel, focused on a disputed border patch that Israel occupies. Christian groups are agitating for withdrawal of the 25,000 forces Syria maintains in Lebanon to ensure hegemony over its weaker neighbor; the Lebanese government says the troops are necessary to deter Israeli aggression. Lebanon still plays host to 280,000 Palestinian refugees housed in 12 camps, which have served as springboards for attacks against Israel, prompting Israeli revenge raids into Lebanon.

All these tensions put the gains Lebanon has made in recent years at risk of reversal. But Khoury continues to invest in a brighter future. His newest venture will debut next week on the Green Line: Yabani, Beirut's chicest, weirdest Japanese restaurant, located amid still abandoned buildings ravaged by gunfire. Like the B-018 club, Yabani is entirely underground, with a glass ceiling enabling patrons to see the sky but not the unsightly neighborhood around them. For now it's enough to see blue overhead, unblemished by Muslim-Christian cross fire or by raiding Israeli jets.