

Tourism in Hezbollahland



ERIC LAFFORGUE

With the war in Syria, the entire Lebanese border has become a red area which Western governments warn against all travel to. But on the ground, only a few military checkpoints remind the rare traveler that tensions are running high in the region as life goes on.

Hezbollah (the Party of God) rules in the Beqaa Valley. It is a Shia Islamist political, military and social organisation which has become powerful in Lebanon and is represented in the government and the Parliament.

Hezbollah is called a terrorist organisation by Western states, Israel, Arab Gulf states and the Arab League. It now controls areas that are home to UNESCO World Heritage sites and has built a museum that glorifies the war against Israel.



In the Beqaa Valley, Machghara village greets you with portraits of Iranian leaders and Hezbollah martyrs. Hezbollah relies on the military and financial support of Shia Iran.



For those who don't follow geopolitics, it is easy to guess who Hezbollah's friends are just by looking at signs in the streets or the DVDs for sale in local shops: Syria's Bashar Al Assad and the Iranian leaders.



The UNESCO listed Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek is now deserted. For years, its festival saw the likes of international stars such as Miles Davis, Sting, Deep Purple, or Joan Baez...



During the Second Lebanon War, Israel dropped 70 bombs on Baalbek but the Roman ruins show only very little damage.



Nowadays, only a few foreign visitors roam the site. On the day of my visit, there were more guards than tourists.



In Baalbek, a World Bank project supports the conservation of the Temple of Bacchus. 70% of the jobs that were created have gone to Syrian refugees. More than one million refugees have crossed the border into Lebanon. 350,000 of them live in the Beqaa valley, according to UNHCR.



Outside the temple, you can buy souvenirs, like Hezbollah t-shirts. The vendor asked me why I refused to buy one. His business isn't doing so well these days. I tried to explain that back in my country, wearing such a t-shirt would be deemed very offensive. He could not understand that as for him, Hezbollah is a caring organisation that looks after people's daily lives...



1\$



Children are not forgotten. You can even buy a puzzle in the image of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for only one dollar.



Imam Ali sword, a Shia symbol that Hezbollah men like to get tattooed on their arm or



The Palmyra hotel in Baalbek is legendary. Except for its neon sign, everything has been kept in good condition since 1874, including the dust!

But in the morning, only two tables are occupied in the breakfast room.



The hotel used to welcome artists and politicians such as Haile Sellassié or Charles de Gaulle. But it is now totally empty because of the war-related tensions in the region. The decoration includes original pictures by Jean Cocteau and Picasso.



A suite with an incredible view on Baalbek temple can be booked for a cheap price.



People live normal lives in the Hezbollah-controlled areas like Baalbek, enjoying a BBQ in the park or dinner at the restaurant. The only strange thing that you can easily spot are the huge cars with black tinted windows and without a number plate driving around town.

They are Hezbollah members and they can cross any checkpoint without being controlled, resulting in all kinds of illegal businesses such as drug trafficking.



The flying distance between Damascus and Baalbek is only 56km, but life goes on as normal here.



It is hard to find the way to the "Tourist Landmark of the Resistance" (aka the Museum for Resistance Tourism) in Mleeta – the official name of this Hezbollah memorial-museum-theme park – as you have to make your way through small mountain roads devoid of any signs and a series of military checkpoints.



When you arrive at the theme park, one of the first things you see is a rusty Israeli trailer parked next to visitors' cars. The area used to be a Hezbollah strategic and military position against Israel.



The museum opened on May 25th, 2010, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000. Some of the art pieces on display are made from Israeli equipment used during the war. This display, the Wrath of Fire, was made using oil barrels thrown from Israeli helicopters on Hezbollah's positions.

لسان اللهب
من الحديد باستخدام برميل النفط التي كانت ترمى بمواقع المقاومة
سوق كسار وخط الكهول
The Wrath of Fire - "Lisan Al-Lahab"
A display using the oil barrels that were thrown by the Israeli army helicopters to burn down trees and reveal the Hezbollah fighters' positions.



This Israeli Merkava tank display is called "The Pride of the Enemy's Military Industry." The tank gun was tied in a knot by a Hezbollah artist to silence it, my guide told me.



Over one million Syrian refugees have crossed the border into Lebanon and work daily for low wages. 350,000 of them live in the Beqaa Valley. These men work on the site called "the Abyss."



Inside the museum, a huge area with a modern design includes an installation made with Israeli army rifles and gear. The complex has reportedly cost a total of over 4 million dollars.



The museum displays all kinds of equipment taken from the Israeli army. On the left, an Israeli protection suit against mines. The (free) guide kept saying that it was also a museum for peace.



«لم يخطر ببالي أن لنينا لهذا اليوم، الذي تركم فيه دولة إسرائيل، وديكتاتورها، وبيدها أسلحتنا، وبهاه الجيش الذي لا يقهر، على الدور أمام طرف عربي، ما الذي حدث؟ كيف تجري الأمور على هذا النحو، وضع مئات من مقاتلي حزب الله يجبرون الدولة الأثون في الشرق الأوسط على الظهور بخمنا الشكل الأنعزكي؟... لقد أبتنا للعرب بجملة أنه يجرهم أنهم لا يحافظوا إرثنا على تقديم تكافل نعمم بالقول، لأنهم في النهاية هم الطرف الذي سيسلم القتل، لكن حزب الله أثبت أن هناك مبراً من نوع آخر».

استاذ شعير راجين الشابة المسيحية السابق
التحقا على الاستعداد الثاني من ايمان عام 2006
مفتحة حورجيو المسيحيين، ديوان شويو

"I never thought I would live to see this day, when the state and army of Israel, described by its enemies and friends as the undefeatable army, is forced to flee in the face of an Arab party. What happened? How do things like this happen? A few hundred Hezbollah fighters force the strongest state in the Middle East to withdraw in this despondent way? We have always proven to the Arabs that they better not try to force us to offer concessions by force, because in the end they will be the ones who will offer concessions. Yet Hezbollah proved that there are Arabs of a different kind."

Yitzhak Rabin, former Israeli Prime Minister
On Israel's second withdrawal from Lebanon
in 2000 interview with Aljazeera Arab Spring

My guide said, "The museum wants to preserve the places where the Mujahideen lived and give visitors the chance to be acquainted with the unique experience of the Islamic resistance against the Israeli enemy."



Walking through the museum, you can see in the floor installations that look like graves containing Israeli uniforms, like tombs without a body.



A giant bullet used as a collection box to support Hezbollah. It is estimated that half a million people have visited the theme park in the first 10 weeks after it opened, resulting in a lot of donations. When I was here, on a weekday afternoon, I was the only visitor.



Outside, the Tourist Landmark of the Resistance has kept the trenches used by the Hezbollah fighters. Visitors can walk along a pathway carved among the rocks and the oak trees and leading to a strategic lookout over the valley.



The portraits of Hezbollah martyrs are displayed throughout the venue. The 2006 war in Lebanon caused 250 deaths in Hezbollah ranks over the 34 days of fighting, according to the organisation. The portraits can also be seen in the streets of local towns.



Abbas Al Musawi's former shelter. He was the co-founder and Secretary General of Hezbollah. In February 1992, Israeli helicopters fired missiles at Al Musawi's car in Southern Lebanon, killing him, his wife and their five-year-old son.

A loudspeaker broadcasts a recording of him praying.



Many souvenirs are sold at the shop of the Tourist Landmark of the Resistance, such as bullet keychains, snowballs containing miniature Israeli tanks, or stones adorned with Hezbollah's symbol.

Hezbollah has plans to expand the park by building swimming pools, playgrounds and a camping area, in order to turn it into a true holiday destination.



You are much more likely to see Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, on mugs in a souvenir shop than in real life. He lives in hiding as he has been hunted by Israeli special forces for years.



At the end of my visit, I saw a giant dove on one of the museum's walls. I told my guide that it was a nice sign of hope and peace.

He replied with a smile, *"It is not a dove but a falcon, a bird of prey that attacks."*



eric lafforgue

lafforgue@mac.com

<http://www.ericlafforgue.com>