



## elie saab's beirut

The Lebanese designer applauds the chic redevelopment of his home city. Words and portrait by Mark C O'Flaherty.

“Beirut is in its final stages of reconstruction. I always dreamt of this time, when the city would be fully rebuilt. It doesn't know weakness. Every 10 or 15 years there's conflict, but the strength of the city is in its people, and they have a lot of energy and courage.

I've always loved to be where there is a lot of life, so Beirut has been a kind of muse to me. When I think of the city, I think of the beauty of the natural scenery – the mountains around it and the richness of its colours. It's a city on the water, on the Mediterranean, and I always think that a city near the water has a distinct character – it gives a coolness and calmness to the people. And the sunshine here is a source of constant inspiration; I dedicated a collection to it once.

Saturday morning should be spent visiting the newly built Beirut Souks downtown, which have replaced the ones damaged by the fighting. All of the luxury international brands are here in these covered arcades. Next to the souks, it's all about Aishti, the department store that has the best labels, including Prada and Yves Saint Laurent.

The development company Solideré has really woken up the city, constructing the new souks and the downtown Central Beirut District, but also reconstructing a lot of the old buildings, which were destroyed, with exactly the same architecture as before. Take time to appreciate the modernity of the new downtown where all the high-rise steel and glass residential buildings are being constructed, close to my atelier. It's the city of the future. Of course, there are many buildings with bullet holes that show the past; there's still the old bombed-out and derelict shell of the Holiday Inn, facing the Phoenicia hotel. It's a building with a story, and maybe it would be good to leave it as it is, to show our children how their fathers and mothers lived. It might make them appreciate what we have.

The real, historic Beirut can be found on the roads of Gemmayze, which is the neighbourhood in which I live and the only place that was not touched during



Top: Elie Saab at Le Gray in Martyrs' Square. Above: modern Lebanese design at Nada Debs.

the war. All the buildings along Gouraud Street, for example, are just as they were and haven't been restored. I live in a very old house on that road. It's a district that has its own charm and style. I like things that are either very modern or incredibly old, like a listed building; no middle ground.

You should eat at Balthus, a French brasserie that's full of life, particularly at lunchtime. Beirut is such a small city that whenever I go to Balthus I know

half the people there – lots of my friends and neighbours are regulars. It has a classic brasserie interior and the meat dishes are amazing. I like the fact that the menu doesn't have 100 things on it, but what it does have is very good. The fish with olive oil is great, as is the crab salad with potato and green leaves. It's their speciality. Another great place for lunch is Al Halabi, which serves very traditional Lebanese food. There's nothing flash about the restaurant but they have excellent kibbeh and tabbouleh.

A drive down the coast takes you to one of my favourite restaurants: Chez Sami. The interior is all wood and bamboo, and it overlooks the sea. It's a simple place; they serve only fish, but in an Oriental and Lebanese style. And I don't know why – I think it's the dressing – but they have the best fattouche [salad] I've ever had anywhere, and in eight different varieties.

A lot of my French friends ask me for Lebanese wine, because it's so good. I don't drink it myself as I find the wine

from hot countries too strong, but in any case, all the restaurants have very good wine. And if you like French wine, be sure to dine at Burgundy, which has a spectacular contemporary interior. The restaurateur decided to open the place just because he had such a great wine cellar. If you want to try Lebanese wine, buy some to take home from the Enoteca – it is one of the biggest and best wine shops in the city.

When I do want to enjoy a drink, I very much like Bar ThreeSixty on the top floor of Le Gray, Gordon Campbell Gray's hotel. The service in the hotel is amazing, but what I like best is that the bar is circular, walled by glass, with a view over the new Al-Omari mosque, the old church and Martyrs' Square. If I have people who want to see the city by night, this is the best place to take them. For a completely different ambience, go to MyBar in Berytus Tower, a very new and highly designed nightlife space that's packed with people in the evening – cool and buzzing. I also always recommend the bar at the new Four Seasons hotel – in part because I like the service that you get at a Four Seasons anywhere in the world, and also because there

are spaces here that are curtained-off, so it's very private and intimate – far from flashy.

To stay in Beirut, I prefer the more homely, intimate hotels, such as the InterContinental Le Vendôme – which is far smaller than its sibling property, the Phoenicia – and the Relais & Château hotel, the Albergo, which has been open for years. At the Albergo they have a very nice terrace and the rooftop Restaurant Panoramique, reached by a tiny old central lift that leaves each floor visible through its bars as you slowly ascend. You really have the feeling that you are at an old, grand Lebanese family home.

The Lebanese take cars everywhere, and some of the new parts of the city



Clockwise from above: Place de l'Etoile, in Beirut's renovated centre. Bar ThreeSixty at Le Gray. Burgundy wine bar. Bottom: Paul Guiragossian's *Printemps*, 1989.



**“You can find a lot of wonderful handmade work here, from kaftans to furniture.”**

to explore – you can find a lot of wonderful handmade work here, from kaftans to furniture.

I've never bought art for myself because I've always preferred empty walls, but I'd very much like to start collecting the work of Paul Guiragossian, the Jerusalem-born painter who moved to Beirut in 1939; he captured the human condition so well. His paintings are hard to find and buy through galleries and at auction, but there's a museum dedicated to him in the city. It's housed within the Emmagoss Gallery – owned by his son – with many major works on show.

We only have one real museum here, the National Museum of Beirut. It suffered serious shelling during the civil war and reopened in 1999 after major renovation. The Phoenician and Roman-era art and relics are truly amazing. And then, of course, there are so many things better than a museum close

to us in Beirut, such as the ruins of the Roman temple in Baalbek.

In every city around the world, Friday and Saturday nights are extremely busy, and these days everyone talks of Beirut nightlife. The bars in Gemmayze are where to come for the best people-watching. It's not really my style to go out in my neighbourhood in the evening – it's more for the young, cool

people – but I like to see the crowds and feel the energy, and this is the major nightlife district.

All the women dress up. The women in Beirut are very elegant, very cosmopolitan and have something of the French style about them, but they're a bit more flash and glamorous. I've lived on both sides of Beirut – the war and the peace – and I am so happy to see people going out again; it makes me feel good about the country and its future. We will most probably always have some political problems, but that's the same everywhere in the world. I'm very optimistic. ✦

make you feel like there's no place to walk, apart from the souks. But there are newly fashionable areas to explore. The area of Mar Mikhael is very nice, and it's where the design store Liwan is. The owner, Lina Audi, sells unique fashion and furniture, and has another shop in Paris called L'Artisan du Liban. Since she opened her shop in Beirut, others have come to Mar Mikhael too, and now it's something of a new centre for development.

There are a lot of excellent designers and design stores in Beirut. Chakib

Richani is the architect who designed all my stores and residences. He has created a great, very modern product range of furniture pieces and has a showroom in Saifi Village, where many interior designers are based. Nada Debs is another, and her store there sells her “east and east” designs, mixing Middle Eastern and Far Eastern styles of furniture, as well as pieces that mix the traditional East and contemporary West. It's modern, but with a touch of the old Lebanon beneath the surface. The whole of Saifi Village is great

## THE HIT LIST

### HOTELS

Prices are for a double room per night with breakfast.

**The Four Seasons**, 1418 Professor Wafic Sinno Avenue, Minet El Hosn (+961-176 1000; www.fourseasons.com/beirut), from \$445. **Le Gray**, Martyrs' Square (+961-197 1111; www.campbellgrayhotels.com), from \$395. **Hotel Albergo**, 137 Abdel Wahab El Inglizi Street (+961-133 9797; www.albergobeirut.com), from \$350. **InterContinental Le Vendôme**, Ain Mreysseh (+961-136 9280; www.ichotelsgroup.com), from \$420.

### RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine.

**Al Halabi**, Antelia Square (+961-452 3555), \$35. **Balthus**, Ghandour Bldg, Minet el Hosn (+961-137 1077), \$55. **Bar ThreeSixty**, Le Gray, as before (+961-196 2828; www.campbellgrayhotels.com). **Burgundy**, 752 Gouraud Street (+961-199 9820; www.burgundybeirut.com), \$160. **Chez Sami**, Maameltein, Jounieh Old Road (+961-991 0520; www.chezsamirestaurant.com), \$60. **MyBar**, 1344 Park Avenue (+961-199 9608; www.mybar.me). **Le Restaurant Panoramique**, Hotel Albergo, as before (+961-133 9797; www.albergobeirut.com).

### SHOPS

**Aishti**, El Moutrane Street (+961-199 1111; www.aishti.com). **Chakib Richani Products**, Saifi Village, Bldg

123 (+961-197 3088; www.richani.com). **Enoteca**, Le Maison du Vin, Jal El-Dib Highway (+961-189 8597; www.enoteca.com.lb). **Liwan**, 56 Madrid Street (+961-144 4141; www.liwan.org). **Nada Debs**, Moukhalsieh Street, Bldg-E-1064 (+961-199 9002; www.nadadebs.com).

### SIGHTS

**The National Museum of Beirut**, Rue de Damas (+961-161 2295; www.beirutnationalmuseum.com); Tues-Sun 9am-5pm. **Paul Guiragossian Museum Emmagoss Gallery**, Centre Le Baron, Amaret Chalhoub Street (+961-188 8643; www.paulguiragossian.com); Mon-Fri 10am-7pm, Sat, 10am-4pm.

### LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

Founded in 5000BC, the seaside resort of **Byblos**, 40km north of Beirut, has new hotels and a warren of ancient souks. The medieval quarter is walled, and there are remains of Phoenician temples and caves within many restaurants. The most obvious landmark is the castle, built by the Crusaders between the 12th and 13th centuries, while St Charbel's tomb at the Saint Maron-Annaya Monastery has a small

restaurant and a shop selling wine made by the monks (www.saintcharbel-annaya.com).

### WHEN TO GO

Spring and late autumn are the most pleasant times to visit; both are clear and warm enough to make use of the outdoor and rooftop pools.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Mark C O'Flaherty travelled as a guest of **BMI** (0844-848 4888; www.flybmi.com), which flies twice daily from London Heathrow to Beirut, from £427. **Air France** (0871-663 3777; www.airfrance.co.uk) flies four times daily from London Heathrow to Beirut (via Paris CDG), from £329.



MARK C O'FLAHERTY, COURTESY OF THE PAUL GUIRAGOSSIAN FOUNDATION, EMMAGOSS GALLERY, AMARET CHALHOUB, ZALKAA, LEBANON.