

David and Noel Coory
Middle East Trip

Singapore – Lebanon June 2005

**(Jordan, Israel and Egypt segments
still to be completed**

Singapore



OVERALL IMPRESSIONS OF SINGAPORE

- Muggy heat.
- Well dressed people.
- Crowds of chic young people walking the streets at night talking on cell phones.
- Shrines and temples to oriental gods.
- Tidy streets.
- Lots of trees.
- No houses only apartments.
- Rickshaws.
- Strange new tropical fruits.
- Super strict laws.

Wednesday 22nd June

Noisy bumpy flight from Tauranga to Auckland

Marie and Alec come with me in the car to Tauranga airport about 5-30am to catch the little link plane to Auckland.

My baggage check-in has to be done manually as the airport computers are down.

I'm soon on my way in the very noisy Beechcraft 19 seat airplane. I decide this would be a good time to test my \$120 PlaneQuiet noise-cancelling headphones.

They work well and cut the noise by about 60%. The headphones are battery operated and work by recording the surrounding noise and creating an opposite sound to cancel it out.

I've also copied my entire CD collection of 801 songs onto my little Ipod MP3 player, so I can enjoy my favourite songs on this trip.

This Middle East trip involves more than 60 hours flying time for Noel and I.

As we approach Auckland, the plane trip suddenly becomes extremely violent. In such a small plane like this it feels like riding a bucking horse. I find I have to hold on to the seat, and tense my tummy against the sudden drops.

What a relief when we land. Some of the passengers look pale. Probably I do as well.

I meet Noel and Andrew at Auckland domestic terminal

I find Noel and his tall son Andrew at the Auckland domestic terminal. Noel also had a rough trip up from Palmerston North.

Andrew lives in Auckland and looks well. Both he and Noel's daughter Lisa now have partners.

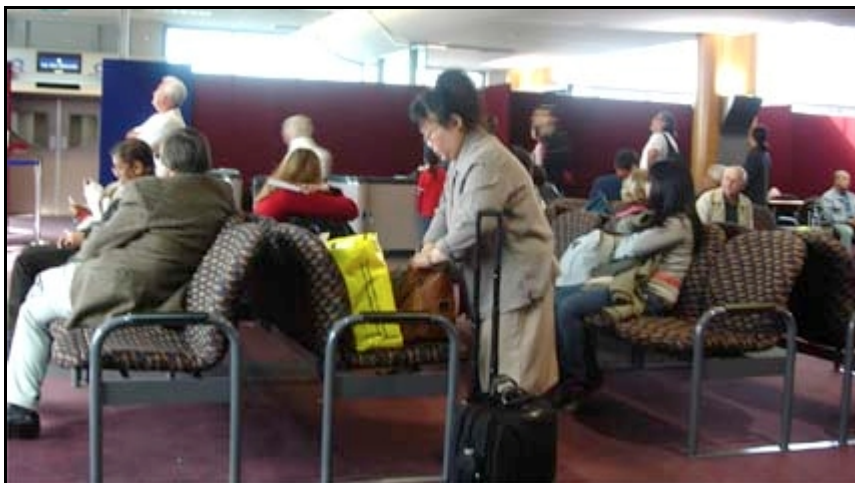


Noel's son Andrew

We all walk over to the International Terminal, following the blue lines on the footpaths and towing our wheeled suitcases. Takes us about ten minutes.

We've a long wait, about four hours, until 11.30am for our Air NZ flight to Singapore. Andrew stays and chats for a while then leaves us.

Noel and I will do a lot of waiting at airports on this overseas trip, usually at least two hours at a time, sometimes four hours, and on eleven different occasions – about two days worth of time altogether.



Waiting at the airport – we lost two days doing this

Both Noel and I've got identical little digital cameras, new Sony T7's. These are very small, and thin, only 17 mm, like little pocket calculators. The T in T7 stands for tiny. They easily slip into a pocket. I carry mine in a belt pouch.

A half empty jet plane

When we board the jet we find it half empty. Noel's never seen this before and he's travelled quite a lot.

Most of the passengers are Asians.

We're soon airborne and heading for Singapore, crossing over Australia.



The plane interior – half empty on this flight

This flight takes 11 hours, a huge drag of time when you're just sitting.

Later on, some of the passengers, including Noel, lie down across the three centre seats to sleep, but Noel doesn't find it comfortable.

This is rather an old plane. We've each been issued with a small pillow, a rug and a set of headphones. There's a TV attached to the ceiling every five or six seats. These TV's can only be heard through the headphones.

The TV screens occasionally show the progress of the plane against a background map of the countries we're flying over.

They also list our flying speed, usually about 950 kph, and other details in various languages, ie, flying 6 kms high with an icy cold outside temperature of minus – 60°C.

There's also piped music available through the standard issue headphones, but the sound quality is poor. My PlaneQuiet headphones improve it a lot.

The airline food

We have curried rice and veggies for lunch, also a bread roll, a cube of cheese, two dry biscuits, a soggy cake square and a drink choice of tomato, orange, apple juice or beer. Afterwards a choice of tea, coffee, water, Baileys liqueur or wine.



Photo of an airline meal, not our one

Our steward is a friendly, middle-aged man. Unusual as they're normally young men or women in their 20's.

Toilets in this plane are Teflon lined and only use about a litre of water to flush. When they do flush they do so with an almighty whoosh that gives the impression that everything's being sucked outside the plane at a 1000 kms an hour.

The outback of Australia – sand ripple hills and giant salt patches

After about 5 hours we begin flying across the vast outback of Australia. Mostly dry desert, but for about half an hour we notice low rippling brown hills, like the ripples on the sand of beach when the

tide goes out. These ripples are equally spaced apart and continue for hundreds of kms, mostly running North-South. We also see huge areas of white, that looks like salt.



Photo of ripple hills in the Australian outback



Huge white salt-like patches in the Australian outback

Ipod music

I enjoy several hours of random music from my Ipod and headphones. I set the play list to 'shuffle' as I find it more interesting not knowing which song is coming up next.

Noel tries my set-up too and seems most impressed. Although I don't think he was quite as impressed with my taste in music. He's a rhythm and blues man. I prefer livelier music.



PlaneQuiet headphones and Ipod

(I was twice able to empty my full 256 MB camera card onto the Ipod memory which is similar to a 4 GB computer USB drive)

We finally arrive at Singapore

After 11 hours we finally arrive at Singapore airport. It's about 7 pm their time and quite warm in this huge airport.

We pass through passport control and then walk into the new arrivals area. Among the crowd of people we see a small, dapperly dressed Singaporean man with poor teeth and slick black hair. He's holding up a notice with 'Noel and David Coory' written on it.

He then proceeds to efficiently take care of our luggage and customs clearance and leads us outside the airport.

Sauna-like Singapore heat

If we thought it was warm in the airport terminal building, as we walk outside into the twilight air we get a shock. It was like walking into a sauna, especially in our NZ winter clothes.

We feel an all-enveloping heat clinging to us from head to toe. I think, "If this is evening, what's it going to be like tomorrow in the middle of the afternoon?" Actually the tropical temperature does not vary much between day and night.

Being near the equator, Singapore has typical summer temperatures ranging from a low of 28°C at night to a high of 35°C in the afternoon. These don't sound extreme temperatures, but Singapore is a small island, so humidity is very high from the sea.

Later we were to find that 49°C in the shade in Egypt was more bearable than 35°C in Singapore with high humidity.

We stand waiting on the street for about 5 minutes, sweating and waiting for our man to bring the van. All the time we're getting warmer and warmer.

Fortunately the van is air conditioned. As we drive off I see a little altar and a shrine-like image of an oriental god set up on the driver's dashboard.

As we drive into the city at dusk, I'm impressed with the wide streets and many trees.

Our classier than expected hotel

After about a 30 minute drive we are dropped off outside our flashier than expected Carlton Hotel. This hotel was a \$35 a night each upgrade from our originally booked hotel, which was full.

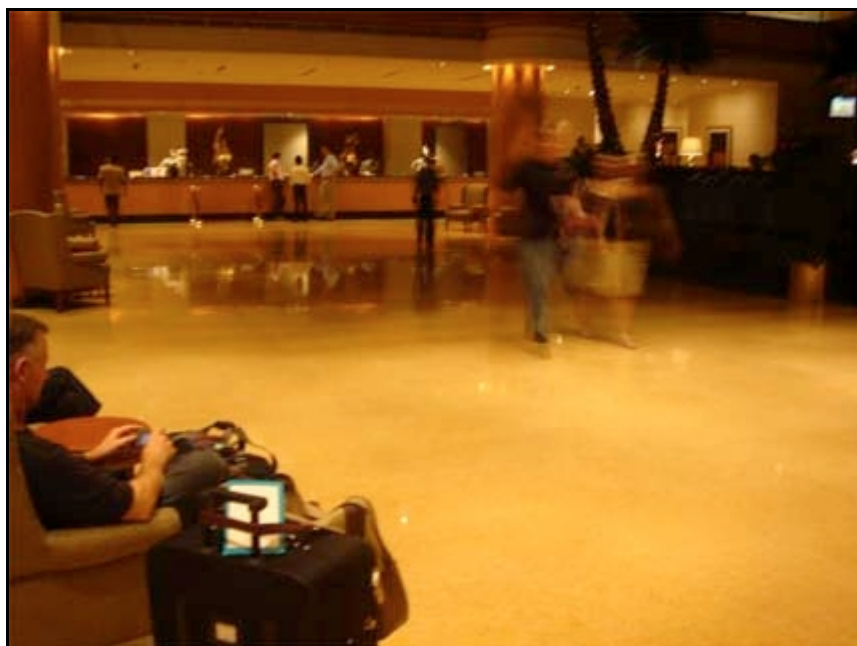
We clamber out of the van into the sauna-like heat again, and then into the welcome coolness of the hotel lobby.

Noel is handling our finances on this trip. We plan to split the costs 50-50 afterward. He's required to provide a photocopy of his credit card to the hotel.

Our room is up on the 19th floor. Quite small, but flash enough, and with a welcome air conditioner.



The outside entrance of our hotel



The hotel lobby



Noel in our hotel room on the 19th floor

Out for a two hour night walk

Traffic noise comes in when we open the double glazed window. When we've settled in, we put on cooler clothes and go out for a two hour walk around this bustling city.

The heat does not seem quite so oppressive now in cooler summer clothes, but it's still muggy hot.



Singapore street at night, not normally empty like this

These Asian cities are quite compact, as everybody lives in tall apartments. The population of Singapore is 4.2 million. They're highly literate and 91% of the people use a cell phone.

Some of the buildings are unusual, like the one on the next page. It reminds me of an old radio.

We see huge numbers of chatting young people walking the tree-lined streets in groups. They're mostly girls, clothed in designer clothes. About a third of them are chatting on cell phones as they walk. They remind me of my granddaughter Sheree – very chic.



Radio-like building

We come across a large, ornamental fish pool by the side of the footpath. I doubt this would be spared by young vandals, back in New Zealand. But Singapore is a law abiding city with strict laws. Death penalty for drug dealers. Heavy fines for spitting or dropping chewing gum.



Street-side fish pond downtown

No obese people and well polished cars

Unlike New Zealand streets, we don't see any obese people, apart from one young man swigging from a large soft drink bottle.

We come across a large Hare Krishna service in a huge tent.

Singaporeans seem to take a pride in their cars – nearly all of them are polished brightly. Only one person in ten owns a car, but yellow taxis are everywhere. There's also an efficient underground railway system. Hardly any buses.

We also come across a very smelly river canal, in sharp contrast to the cleanliness of the rest of the city.



Impressive mosque

We see an impressive looking mosque.

Also lots of bike-powered rickshaws. Many of their owners are middle aged and skinny.

We next come to a busy market and buy two attractive watches as possible gifts for our relatives in Lebanon. We don't have any Singapore dollars but are able to use American dollars.

A fruit stall with not one familiar fruit

We then see a fruit stall with not one familiar fruit. I can hardly believe my eyes. I thought I was familiar with most fruits in the world.



Hairy red fruit – didn't get to taste these



Still haven't found out what these are



These big spiky things are selling like hot cakes

One hugely popular item was a large, green, spiky fruit, about the size of a small person's head. There's a huge stack of them, selling like hot cakes.

We would like to buy some of these exotic fruits but don't have any local money – Singapore dollars. We'll come back tomorrow.

We've walked further than we think and it's a long way back to the hotel.

Thursday 26 June

We explore our hotel

We sleep OK despite my mattress being hard and Noel's having a noisy, crinkly, plastic sheet on it. No jet lag as yet.

The shower is a dial-a-temperature type.



Hotel bathroom with dial-a-temp shower

We want to visit a car exporter today as I'm trying to locate a Lexus with air-suspension. So we search the phonebook which is fortunately in English and find the address of the main one.

The day time views from our 19th floor window are quite striking.

We explore the hotel and find a swimming pool and small gym. I'm showing Noel how to use the weights in the gym when the attendant stops me for not having proper gym shoes.



View to the left from our 19th floor hotel window



View straight ahead, a new building is going up

They're very regulation conscious in Singapore. Quite the opposite in the Middle East, as we find out.

As we're flying out to Beirut tonight (via Frankfurt, Germany and Cairo in Egypt) we check out and ask the hotel porters to look after our bags for us, until we are picked up at 6:15 pm.

No breakfast included in this hotel.

Out to explore the city

Off now to explore the city in daylight.

Despite the dapper clothes standard of Singapore, I decide to wear my jandals because of the expected heat.

Actually it's quite comfortable at this time of the morning, about 8.30am. The sun is shining but the air is hazy.

We've not seen a house at all yet in Singapore, only apartments, office, hotels and shops.



No houses at all, only apartments

The lawn grass here is very coarse, about twice as coarse as the New Zealand Kikuyu grass.



Extra coarse grass

We manage after a little difficulty, to extract some local Singapore dollars from an ATM machine.

Then we go to try and locate the fruit stall we found last night. However the city looks totally different in the daytime and we can't locate it.

We enter a Hindu temple

We do however come across an impressive looking Hindu temple below, with multi-coloured statues of their many different gods arranged around the top.

An old barefoot Hindu priest is on guard outside. He motions us that we can go inside if we remove our footwear.

I feel a bit uneasy. I've read books by Christian exorcists who relate hair-raising stories about such places in Asia, and how they're full of evil spirits. One evangelist wrote, "You're on Satan's ground when you enter such places."



Noel outside the Hindu Temple



Close up of some of the Hindu gods

However, curiosity gets the better of me and I suggest to Noel that we do go inside for a look. So we leave our footwear outside and pad around inside the dark interior on the wooden floor.

There's a big shrine room in the centre of the floor with a statue of a god inside. In smaller alcoves around the inside walls of the temple we can see shrines set up to various gods, with candles burning and subdued red lights.

A barefoot monk, naked from the waist up is making offerings to one of the gods using incense. A few other Indians in robes are walking slowly around.

I feel very much out of place and Noel doesn't appear very interested, so we go back out into the daylight and put our footwear back on.



Typical street scene in Singapore – some of the people look malnourished

The people of Singapore

Next we decide to try and find a fruit shop and have a fruit breakfast. We walk a long way but can't find one.

We do find a one man, at a Chinese fruit stand, selling big platefuls of fruit. Noel asks him if we can buy a mixture of fruit on one plate, but he says, "No, no mix." So we walk on further.

Some Singapore people are thin and look malnourished, especially the elderly who don't look very healthy at all. However most of the young people look reasonably well fed, if somewhat short, although some of them are scrawny and thin.

Curse of the Hindu Temple

Noel starts to complain of a sore foot. He stops and takes a look and finds a small, blister-like wound on the sole of his foot. He thinks an insect may have bitten him in the temple.

At the same time, I notice that a pigeon has done a huge dropping down my white shirt, on the shoulder.

Must be our punishment for going into the temple I say jokingly.

But perhaps so – these are the only two mishaps that occur on our entire three week trip. I can't help seeing the symbolism. A foot injury through walking on unholy ground, and a big poop on a clean white shirt, defiling that which is clean.

A delicious exotic fruit lunch

We finally find a small fruit shop where we can eat on the premises. A very pleasant looking and smiling Singapore lady is serving.

We choose some of the exotic fruit on display and she starts to skin them and cut them up into small pieces on two plates for us.

While she's doing this, I ask if I can wash the very noticeable and embarrassing bird poop off my shirt. She doesn't understand, but her assistant who understood English better, cheerfully points me to the corner wash basin.

I'm able to clean the worse of it off, but a brown stain still remains. I join Noel at the cheap wooden table and then the smiling

lady brings us our fruit. It's one of the most delicious meals we have on our whole trip.

I loved the sweet orange fruit which I found out later was tropical mango.

Noel loved a refreshing pale fruit which is called star fruit. It's shaped like a star and tastes like sweet cucumber. The New Zealand name for star fruit is carambola. We also had banana and watermelon.

I'd like to try growing mango and star fruit in my home orchard in Tauranga but it's probably not warm enough.



Tropical mangos – I liked these very much



Star fruit – Noel's favourite

We taste the big spiky fruit

Feeling refreshed, we carry on exploring and finally find the fruit stall we discovered last night.

The big spiky fruit are selling as well as ever, so we decide to buy one and taste it.

We ask a friendly local customer who is shaking the fruit and seems to be an expert on them, to choose us a good one. He examines about six of them for us, shaking them close to his ear and finally hands us one. Noel pays the stall attendant. I think it cost him about NZ\$2. The attendant makes three evenly spaced machete chops in the sides.

Somebody mentions to Noel that these fruit are a good aphrodisiac.

Thick, sweet cloying, caramel-like yolks

We sit at an old table on the footpath and open it up. It's mostly puffy white flesh in three separate segments. But nestled within each segment is a bag of yellow caramel-like substance very much like an egg yolk.

I begin to eat it. It's sweet and sticky, but a bit cloying and very filling. Noel also eats one, but decides he doesn't like it very much.

I think they are quite palatable and would probably have enjoyed it more if I had not just finished a fruit breakfast.

I try and eat the last yolk, but it's so filling I can't finish it.

Our hands are now very sticky. We see a tank of water near the table with a tap on the side so we wash our hands.

Did it work as an aphrodisiac?

You're probably wondering if it worked as an aphrodisiac. Not that I noticed personally, but our trip is so stimulating that it tends to crowd out such emotions.

This fruit is possibly rich in the mineral zinc, as are oysters. And inasmuch as many men lack zinc, especially rice-eating peoples like Asians, such food items can have an aphrodisiac effect. However they will have no effect on a man who is obtaining sufficient zinc.



Me with the chosen spiky, caramel, egg-yolk fruit



Noel getting ready to taste the spiky fruit

Ripped off in a rickshaw

We decide now to visit the car exporter. I suggest we take a two-seater pedal rickshaw if it's not too far. Noel agrees.

They're everywhere when you don't want them, but we have a job to find one now. Finally we spot an empty one parked in a pedestrian mall. We find the small, older rickshaw driver near by but have some language problems at first. When the driver finally understands the address, he tells us that it's too far away and walks off. But then he comes back and tells Noel he can take us to another car exporter closer by.

I feel that we should negotiate a price first, but Noel who's handling the expenses seems happy enough, so we both climb in and the old man peddles us slowly out into the busy traffic.

I ask him his age and he replies, "I 58," which is also my age.

I feel very unsafe in the heavy traffic, and also a bit embarrassed having someone else pedal me around. However it's a new experience. He stops to cross a road and is painfully slow getting started again. I feel like getting out and pushing. I suppose Noel and I weigh three times his weight.



Singapore rickshaw

After about five minutes we arrive at the car dealers.

Noel asks the rickshaw pedaller, "How much?"

"Fifteen American dollar!"

"What? That's too much. We could have got a taxi for that."

"No, I have to pedal you. You pay fifteen dollar."

"I'm not paying you that. Ten dollar?"

"No, fifteen dollar. I got to go all way back."

I suggest we pay him five dollars and leave it at that, but Noel finally gives him ten (about NZ\$15) and we walk away, leaving him protesting. But he soon pedals off.

With all the fuss I didn't get a photo of us in the rickshaw.

Singapore 1970's style Toyota taxis

There were no vehicles to interest us at the dealers. Actually it was just a series of sheds belonging to small time car dealers with a few cars and trucks in each.

So we walk outside and hail a taxi. Taxis are just about everywhere in Singapore. Noel gives him the address of the car exporter. It turns out to be at the far western end of the city, so off we drive.

After about ten minutes driving I see that the meter still hasn't reached the amount we paid the rickshaw driver for a tiny fraction of the distance.

Nearly all Singapore taxis are specially designed, 1970 era boxy-style Toyota Comforts (Corona in New Zealand). These are a traditional proven design, just like the old London taxis. Toyota still make these cars new today especially for taxi work. The taxi we were in was only a few years old.

If you can't afford a car taxi or a rickshaw, you can climb on the back of a truck taxi. See the photo on the next page.

A New Zealand OSH official would probably have a heart attack.



1970's style Toyota Comfort taxi



Singapore truck taxi – you can see the speed limit and number of persons written on the back, 60 kph and 10 persons

We visit the car exporter

When we find the car exporter's address, we find that he's moved to another part of town. So off we go again. At least we're getting a good Tiki Tour of the city.

I don't see one Lexus among all the cars on the road however. So I don't raise my hopes too high. Quite a few Mercedes however.

We finally arrive at the car exporters – three huge sheds. In the first shed we find most of the cars covered in thick dust. They've obviously been there a long time. Not one Lexus, but loads of Mercedes. But all small engine models except one, an S500. However Mercedes from Singapore give a lot of trouble with their electric's because of the high humidity. Also the cooling systems play up because of poor maintenance.

The cars in the other two sheds were cleaner.



Cars in the second shed



Noel's red Volkswagen

Noel finds a nice red 2001 Volkswagen that he would like to export to New Zealand. He arranges to do so if it remains unsold after he arrives home, and he can buy it at a good price. It seems in nice condition and has just arrived. He starts it up but does not drive it. As we're leaving, we see some of the containers that they export the cars in. They manage to cram three cars into one 25 ft container by chaining one up at a 45° angle.



Three cars crammed inside one 25 ft shipping container

A walk in the tropical jungle

It's now afternoon and very hot as we walk out of the dealer's air-conditioned office. Just as well we bought a bottle of water earlier.

We hire another Toyota taxi to take us to Bukit Timah Forest Reserve. We plan to walk up Singapore's highest peak, amid tropical jungle.

On the way we pass some large, orange, coconut-like fruit growing on palm trees.

The taxi driver tells use that they are in fact coconuts, and that they go orange before turning brown.

We have just enough Singapore dollars to pay the taxi driver.

Noel decides to buy an ice cream, but the young girl serving won't accept American dollars, so he has to put it back in the fridge. Most disappointing for him.

We begin our walk up the hill path through the jungle. It's very muggy and hot, just as the Lonely Planet book said it would be. Noel finally removes his t-shirt. "To heck with the overdressed locals," he says.

Soon afterward, a local, fully-clothed runner comes down the path towards us, absolutely soaked wet in sweat. He's the only runner we see on our entire three week trip.

There are quite big trees growing in this tropical forest. Not unlike the New Zealand bush.

We see a family of monkeys. But they move so quickly across the ground and blend in so well with the brown of the jungle floor that we can't get a clear photo of them.

The same with several small squirrels that we see.

We eventually reach the peak of the hill which is only about three quarters the height of Mount Maunganui.

We're disappointed to find that large trees block any views of the island and surrounding sea.

We also come across a super thick supplejack, about as thick as a man's arm.



The jungle track – hot and humid



Rock at the summit of the hill



Large tropical tree, about three metres in diameter



Giant supplejack, thicker than a man's arm

We see more jungle creatures on way down

We decided to walk a different way down, through narrow jungle paths. This way is much longer, about 5 kms, but is more rewarding. We see numerous coloured tropical butterflies, but they won't stop flying to be photographed.

Noel also finds a large red-backed ant. I take a photo of it near my jandaed foot to show its large size.



Large tropical red ant

Soon after this we hear a rustling in the dry leaves and discover what looks like an anteater with a long thin tongue. The animal's nearly a metre long.

We then come across some large, peanut shaped fruit on a tree.



The anteater-like creature



Funny shaped tropical fruit like giant peanuts

Next we come to a series of dripping wet caves, going deep into the limestone hillside. One of them even goes right through the hill to the far side. You can see the distant daylight at the other end of the cave in the photo below.



Limestone cave going right through the hill

More Singapore dollars and a welcome milkshake

Finally we're out of the jungle, at the bottom of the hill again. We walk out over a motorway overpass footbridge to a shopping centre. There we find a moneychanger. He exchanges some of Noel's America dollars for Singapore dollars, so we sit down and have a welcome milkshake at a takeaway place.

We visit the holiday resort Santosa Island

We then hail another taxi to take us to the resort beach area on an offshore island called Santosa Island. There's a bridge from Singapore Island to Santosa Island.

Our taxi driver speaks good English. Most Singapore people speak some English, but not enough to hold a conversation. We found this applied throughout our whole trip.

It seems to be rare to find a person living in a non-English speaking country who is sufficiently fluent in English to hold an

extended conversation, even if they've previously lived for years in an English-speaking land.

A language skill is apparently quickly lost (although probably just temporarily) if we're not using it, or not around people using it.

After this trip, whenever I hear of a person described as being fluent in several languages, I'm inclined to disbelieve it.

Holiday atmosphere on Santosa Island

Santosa Island has a noisy, chattering, holiday-like atmosphere. (Singapore people are always chatting loudly) and is nicely landscaped. Transport is by free circuit buses. Private cars are not allowed.

Even here, cell phones are everywhere. If I had to paint a picture of a typical Singaporean, I'd have him or her speaking into a cell phone. They don't appear to text much however.

After the taxi drops us off, we queue up at the main entrance terminal for about ten minutes and then board the next circuit bus that comes along. It quickly fills up with noisy, chattering tourists.



In the noisy, crowded circuit bus



Typical Singaporean, talking into a cell phone

The so-called 'undersea' Aquarium

We get off at the so-called 'undersea Aquarium.

As we queue to buy a ticket we see an Indian man among the crowd with a big yellow snake around his neck. The snake looks like a yellow plastic one, but it's real.



Yellow, plastic-looking real snake

The Aquarium is quite expensive and is only so-so. The advertising gives the misleading impression that it's an undersea job, but it only has large underground tanks. If you've seen one Aquarium you've pretty much seen them all.

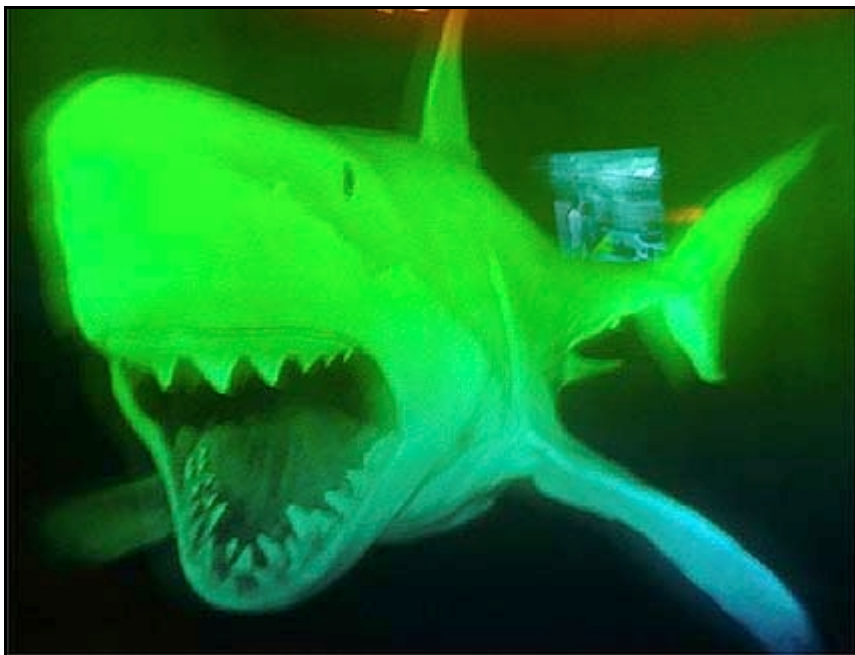
Noel and I were however impressed by a very colourful seahorse, and another seahorse that looked just like a clump of seaweed. Photo came out blurry. A 3D white shark also looked quite impressive.



Highly colourful seahorse – quite impressive



Seaweed seahorse



3D white shark

The pink Dolphin show

The admission cost to the Aquarium also includes a ticket to a Pink Dolphin show, so we catch another bus to see this.

Had a long wait for it to start. The show is similar to other dolphin shows I've seen, but this dolphin is definitely pink which was a novelty.

Very mixed race audience.

Santosa Island beach

After the show we go for a walk along the steeply sloping, brown sand beach. Looks to be man-made. We waded in the seawater. It's warm but rather murky.

The bite on the right ball of Noel's foot doesn't seem too bad, but has swollen a little.



A Babel of races in the audience at the dolphin show



A genuine pink dolphin – there are actually two



The brown sand beach at Santosa Island

We walk to the end of the beach and then across a narrow suspension bridge to another small island. We see two young Indian lovers, standing chest-deep in the water below the bridge, gazing into each others eyes.

Lookout tower to surrounding Malaysian and Indonesian islands

This small island contains a high wooden lookout tower. We climb the steps of the tower. From the top we can see hazy views of the surrounding Malaysian and Indonesian islands. (They don't show up in the photo.)

We also see ships at anchor and what looks like a huge natural gas burn-off flame from a tall chimney in the distance.



Suspension bridge to another small island

As we walk back over the bridge about a half hour later, the Indian lovers are still standing in the water below gazing into each others eyes.

Two buses and two trains back to the hotel

We queue for a long time and then catch a bus back to the Santosa Island terminal. Then another long queue to catch a second bus to the nearest underground rail station. I'm not over patient when it comes to public transport.



Looking out towards the Malaysian and Indonesian islands

We then wait some more and catch two underground trains to the vicinity of our city hotel. We had located the local station last night.

We could have taken a taxi from the island but wanted to experience the Singapore public transport systems.

Driven from the hotel to Singapore airport

A van is coming to pick us up this evening to take us to Singapore airport to fly out via Frankfurt in Germany and Cairo in Egypt to Beirut in Lebanon.

There are panic stations at the hotel for about ten minutes among the porters when they can't find our bags. Finally they locate them.

Then our van driver is late. So we ask the hotel to phone him. They're told that he came to the hotel half an hour ago. Evidently he had been given the wrong time.

The boss of the driver soon turns up instead and we're soon back again in the massive Singapore Airport.

Noel says there are about two square km of shops on three levels in this airport. Almost like a city in itself.



Riding the underground railway

We've a long wait for our plane. Noel decides to have an evening meal at the airport. However, I'm not hungry and want to try and sleep on the 12 hour overnight flight to Frankfurt, so I just have an apple.

Later we find a free internet computer and I send an email to my wife Marie.

A Jumbo jet full of sandy-haired or blonde Scandinavians

Well here we are at last, on board our plane. This time a big, four engined Lufthansa Jumbo jet.

Nevertheless, the seats are squashed up tight and there's little legroom to stretch out and sleep properly. We looked with envy at the spaced out seats as we walked through the Business Class section in the front of the plane.

The seats back here in Tourist Class are 3-4-3 across.

Noel has taken a sleeping pill this time for the long 11 hour flight.

In contrast to our last flight, this plane is jam packed. Lots of fair-haired Scandinavians – blonde women and sandy-haired men.

As we take off it's apparent that this plane is noisier than the last one. Four engines instead of two I suppose.

So I wear my noise-canceling headphones a lot of the time which cuts down the noise by about two thirds, and permits me to sleep on this overnight flight.

I also find the eyeshades I brought along help a lot. However the lack of legroom is a nuisance.



Sunset leaving Singapore

No sun burn

I've spent nearly all day in the sun today, and in a tropical mid-summer with no hat or sun block, and I'm not sunburnt.

New Zealand sun must be far more savage than is generally realised.

Lebanon segment next

Lebanon

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS OF LEBANON

- Warm, friendly people.
- Many men who look like me.
- Caring parents and quiet, well behaved children.
- All families seem intact.
- Absence of arthritic people and walking sticks.
- Christian Lebanese mostly fine looking people.
- Most Lebanese seem to have quick, alert minds.
- High proportion of men smoke.
- Pervading smell of stale cigarette smoke.
- Older male smokers look haggard and unhealthy.
- Exceptional clear skin of young people.
- Large attractive eyes of women.
- No threat of street violence or robbery.
- No drunkenness or swearing seen or heard.
- No arguments or angry talk.
- No yobbo youths.
- Beirut a mix of elegant and rundown buildings.
- Cars and taxis mostly battered and rusty old Mercedes.
- A country being rapidly rebuilt.
- Many street shrines to Virgin Mary.
- Constantly cruising taxis pulling up alongside you when walking in the streets.
- Non-stop tooting of car horns night and day.
- Reckless, pushy drivers.



**Typical houses in my grandfather's street
in Bcharre, Lebanon**

Friday 24th June

Boring four hours in clinical Frankfurt Airport

After flying all night, we wake up to dawn sunshine through the plane windows about an hour out from Frankfurt, Germany. Noel and I slept as well as we could with the lack of legroom, but I kept waking up.

The headrest in the tops of aircraft seats can tilt out at the edges to hold the small airline pillows issued and to stop your head lolling about from side to side, and the seats recline slightly. This helps somewhat with sleep, but is not ideal.

We're served a German breakfast – omelette with ham, fried pastry and spinach, a croissant bun, NZ butter, and Austrian strawberry jelly jam. Plus little squares of fruit, and apple juice to drink.

Finally, after 11 long hours long in the air, we land at Frankfurt Airport.

As we walk off the plane, down the passageways into the airport, Noel draws my attention to how quiet the mostly German passengers are. Not a word is being said, just a silent orderly walk through the vast airport. Quite the opposite of the noisy chattering Singaporeans.



Frankfurt airport



Sterile stainless steel of Frankfurt Airport terminal

We've a four hour wait here in the Frankfurt Airport, before flying on to Cairo, and then on to Beirut.

Frankfurt is rather a colourless, clinical airport, all stainless steel and tiles and little colour. Rather like a large commercial kitchen. Seems to match the somewhat austere but efficient, male German personality.

There are only a few shops in the stopover holding pen part of the airport. The staff seem rather unfriendly. We wander round the few shops and notice how the health-conscious Germans seldom do things by halves. Warning signs on their cigarette packets are loud and clear.



Loud and clear warnings on cigarette packets

This is a huge airport. It even has a 'driverless' monorail shuttle train from the outer part of the airport where we are, into the main terminal. Time drags, so to fill in time we test out the shuttle train. It is rather disconcerting to board the train, sit down and have the doors close and feel it move off with no driver.

Smoking is forbidden everywhere in the airport, except for certain small areas designated for smoking. You can see one of these areas in the next photo below. These areas are highly smelly for a non-smoker to walk past.



Smoking area in Frankfurt Airport

We also come across these green signs below. They seem a little odd. We suppose the one on the right is pointing to an emergency exit, but can't see one, and the first sign points down to the floor.



Odd signs

This next sign has flames, and again points to the floor. Nearby is a panel in the floor that looks like it could be a trapdoor, but we can't find a way to lift it up to see what's underneath.



Sign with flames

Most international airports now have a money container for departing passengers to leave their surplus local currency, which is then donated to charity.

We try and send an email to our families from a public computer, but the German language instructions, and probably our mental fog from too much broken sleep on the last flight, defeat us. So we sit patiently in a sunny spot and read some American newspapers we find lying there.

I'm surprised how weak the mid-summer noon-day sun is, pouring through the window. More like our NZ winter sun. Outside temperature is 30°C.



Airport charity money container

We fly over the spectacular Swiss Alps

At long last we're airborne again. Another Lufthanser flight, this time to Cairo, Egypt. Most of the passengers look decidedly Arabic. My sister Barbara and two of my sons, Michael and Alec would not look at all out of place among them. Nor do I for that matter. However, Noel's facial features, his tallness, blue eyes and sandy hair are quite different. More German looking.

These Arab passengers are talkative and outgoing and speak with many hand gestures.

On the way we fly over the Swiss Alps. Very spectacular. This trip takes about five hours.



The spectacular Swiss Alps

Egypt and the Nile river from the air

Egypt looks quite fascinating from the air. From what we can see it's all totally brown, even the apartment buildings, apart from an approx 10 km wide swath of green either side of the Nile. This is due to irrigation using canals from the Nile.



Irrigated Egypt and desert in the distance (Nile not shown in picture)



Cairo apartments from the air

Rainfall is virtually non-existent in Egypt. Cairo the capital has on average over 360 days each year without any rain. Further inland they never see rain at all.

Cairo's a teeming city of 17 million and is the principle city of the Middle East. Most of the people live in apartments. This is probably why the city looks to be only about the size of Auckland, despite its millions.

We land at Cairo airport and step out of the plane into blazing hot sun. The airport is huge and sprawled out as far as the eye can see in all directions.

The Cairo airport terminal uses buses to transport passengers to and from the planes that land. Probably due to no rain or cold temperatures whereas other airports require covered walkways.

'King Farouk' makes our Cairo airport stopover interesting

After being crammed into three buses, we passengers are driven to the military style airport terminal. But Noel and I are turned back at customs before we can collect our bags and directed into a holding area for in-transit passengers.

This large room is reminiscent of a third world, military dictator residence in a James Bond film. Faded, 'old world' elegance, high arched ceilings, marbled and concrete floor, a twirling fan, floral sofas and armed soldiers.

A self-important young male official, dressed immaculately in a white uniform and with an eye for the ladies, sits at a desk and guards the entrance to this, his domain. He demands our passports and orders us to go inside and sit and wait. We tell him that we hadn't yet collected our bags.

"Your bags will be brought here!" he states imperiously, then turns his full attention to a woman passenger and smiles and fawns all over her.

So we sit on one of the sofas and wait and wait.

We wonder how the baggage handlers will know which luggage is ours and where we are. So we approach the official a second

time and are again told imperiously that our bags will be brought here.

I have little trust in the man, but we sit and wait some more.

The time for our flight to Beirut is drawing near and our anxiety deepens. We call the official 'King Farouk.'



King Farouk at his desk (circled)

Middle East toilets

Noel goes to use the toilet, but sees there's no provision for toilet paper, just a water hose with a squirty tap on it. Fortunately he's not so desperate to go as to need to test this appliance. I went and had a look also. (I should have taken a photo but anxiety for our luggage and the next flight is overwhelming me.)

Evidently this toilet set up is the norm in the Middle East, due to lack of sewage systems and water to handle toilet paper. However most tourist hotels provide toilet paper, but some of the cheaper ones give you a lidded bucket to put it in.

An Egyptian bus driver comes to our rescue

Some suitcases eventually arrive in the room, but our two are not among them. King Farouk does not seem over concerned. He does at least give us back our passports. We suspect he is after a bribe.

Then our worst fears are confirmed. The bus driver comes in to take us to the main terminal to catch our plane. We go with him in the bus, hoping we can find our bags at the terminal, but the departure terminal turns out to be a totally different building about a km away from the arrival terminal.

I'm offering a silent prayer that this situation will resolve itself when I suddenly remember that we'd been given a baggage chit at Frankfurt airport. So I fish the chit out and show it to our bus driver, who is an alert, older and more capable-looking man.

He finally understands what our problem is and springs into action. He hustles us back on to his bus and we roar off back to King Farouk's domain. As we do so we hear the loud wailing Moslem call to prayer. It's very loud, and to me has a moving, haunting quality about it.

Egypt is almost entirely Moslem, so I wonder if our driver will stop to pray. He doesn't. We arrive and he quickly hurries us out of the bus and inside the arrival terminal, running as he goes. We surprise a lone Moslem airport worker praying alone on his knees on his rug in the hallway. Embarrassed he scrambles to his feet and hurries off.

King Farouk meets his match with our bus driver

Our driver runs us back to King Farouk and shows him our baggage chit. A hot argument arises between them with lots of shouting and gesticulating. Finally King Farouk picks up his green dial phone and slowly dials a number. He shouts and gesticulates down the phone, and just before hanging up, pauses and says 'salaam' (peace).

Another brief argument, then our bus driver hustles us on down to customs, running all the way. He walks through the barrier and Noel and I go to follow him. But a customs officer stops us. The bus driver barks at the customs officer and he stands aside.

There were our two suitcases, standing all by themselves, guarded by a girl. What a relief. The bus driver beams. We grab the wheeled suit cases and tow them along behind us as our driver runs us back to King Farouk.

No tip for King Farouk

Noel gives our bus driver a US dollar as a tip. He grizzles we are stingy. Noel then also gives King Farouk all his Singapore change. I didn't see Noel do this, and I probably would have objected, but it turns out OK.

We hurry back out to the bus with our suitcases and sit down. Just before we drive off, King Farouk comes charging out and tells Noel that his "Singaporee money no good."

Noel tells him, "That's all the money I've got. So finally he gets off the bus and goes back inside. Noel then gives the Singapore money to our driver. He was the one who deserved it. He seems happy and drives us quickly back to the departure terminal and tells the customs officers to hurry us through which they do.



Bus ride to the plane

Egyptian men at the airport

We then go into the crowded departure lounge which is full of Arab-looking people, rapidly chattering. Egyptians seem quite volatile, rather like Italians.

Most of the men have mine and my brother Raymond's balding pattern. But the men are rather short and stocky and most look confident, intelligent, tough, no-nonsense, businessman types.

We queue to have our passports and tickets inspected and are soon back on another bus, riding out to our Egypt Air plane, parked on the tarmac about a km away.

Our Egypt Air flight to Beirut in Lebanon

The plane is guarded by two Egyptian soldiers with guns. There seem to be about two or three times as many staff as is required at this airport.



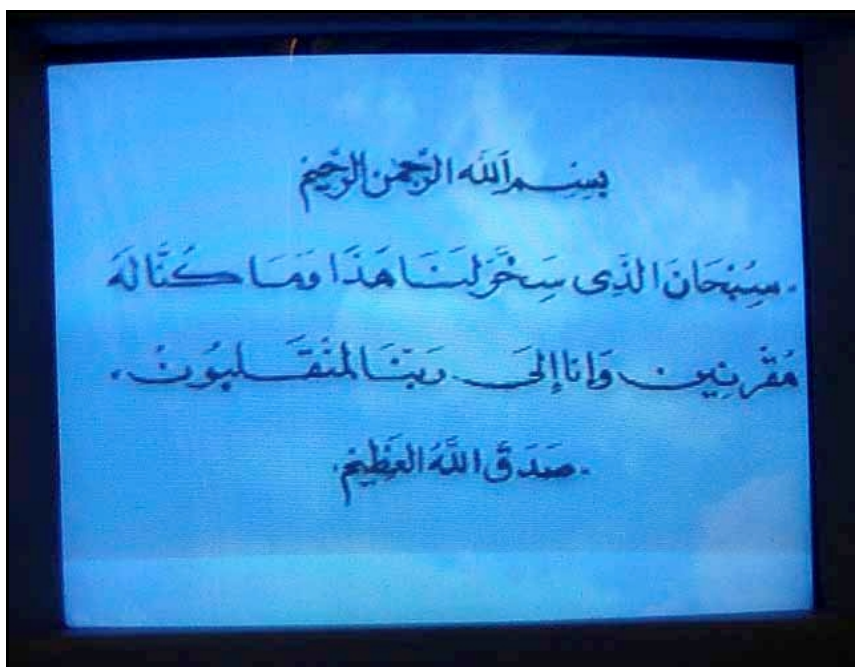
Our Egypt Air plane

It's very hot on board the plane, and not all that clean. Egypt Air does not have a high reputation among airlines.

Before we take off there's a reading from the Koran over the loudspeaker system. The words appear in Arabic on the TV screens.



The two pistol armed Egyptian guards



Words in Arabic from the Koran on the plane TV before take off

Soon after we take off, I go to fill our water bottle from the plane tap in the toilet. But I see a sign there saying that the water is undrinkable.

After about 35 minutes flying we're ready to land at Beirut airport in Lebanon. As we touch down in Beirut, the Egyptians in the plane cheer and clap loudly.

Our first few hours in the Middle East have so far been highly interesting, nerve-wracking and memorable.

Our Lebanese tour guide a familiar face to Noel

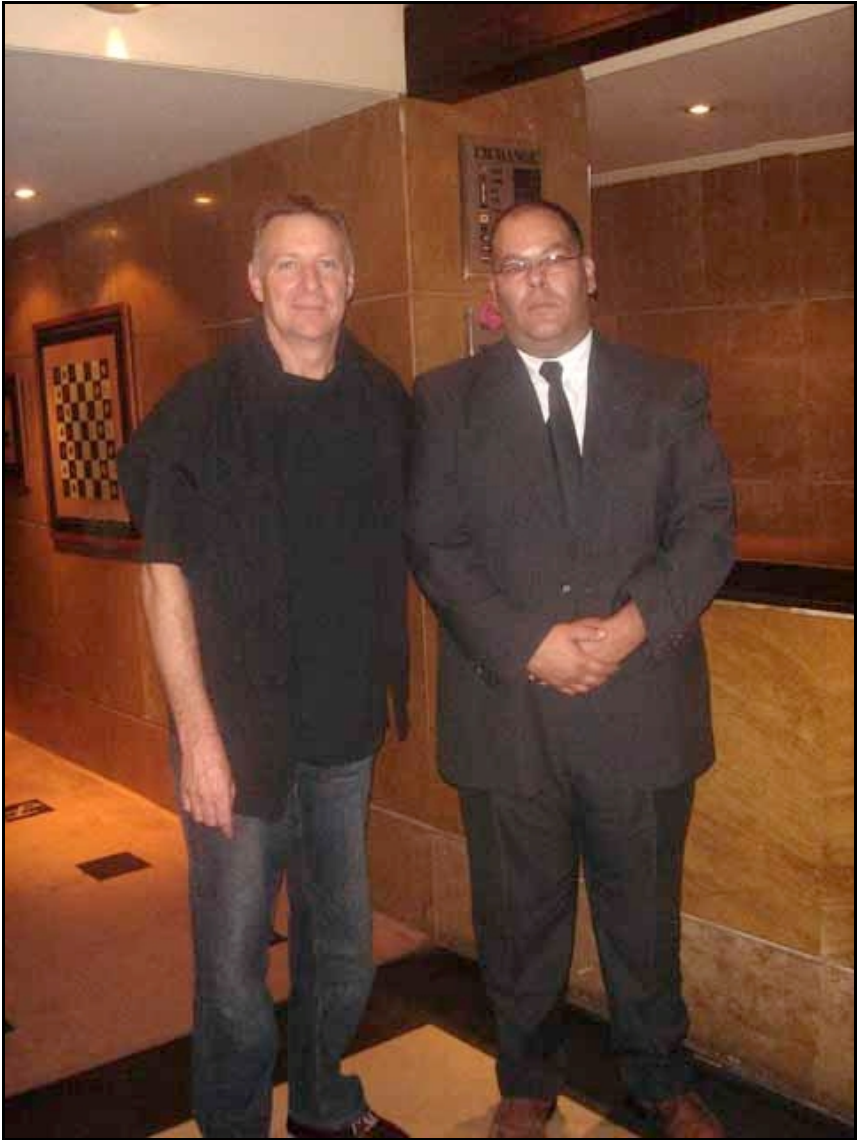
It's late afternoon in Beirut. The weather is clear, sunny and pleasantly warm.

As we go through customs we get our passports studied closely and we're quizzed intently as to why we've come to Lebanon. The customs man then goes out to find our guide.

He brings in a portly man and Noel can hardly believe his eyes. It's the same dentist-guide he and Rana had when they visited Lebanon about five years ago. His name is Joseph Latham. But he has however put on a lot of weight since then. Joseph does not at first remember Noel, until Noel mentions the greenstone gift he gave him, then he smiles and remembers.



Beirut airport in Lebanon



Noel with Joseph Latham our tour director

Joseph then drives us into Beirut to our hotel. His car is a comfortable black Nissan, although nearly all the other cars at the airport appear to be Mercedes.

As we drive he tells us a little about himself. He was born of Lebanese parents in Nigeria and later spent nine years in the USA.

He's a dentist but cannot earn enough money in that profession in Lebanon. We were later to notice that nearly all the Lebanese people seem to have well formed and excellent quality teeth. Probably due to the wholesome vegetarian food diet and low use of sugary foods. But lack of money generally would probably be the main reason.

Joseph's English is adequate rather than good.

The right pronunciation of Noel's name

Joseph calls Noel 'Nowell' and so does everybody else we meet in the Middle East from this point on. So I begin using this pronunciation myself when speaking to the locals.

Also Joseph is pronounced 'Yosseff' in the Middle East. Joseph is also my grandfather's name, my dad's Lebanese father. Noel's middle name is also Joseph.

The city of Beirut

As we drive through Beirut I find it quite exhilarating. Rather old, but full of character. Population is 1.9 million. The buildings are a 50-50 mix of spruced up and rundown. Lots of rebuilding going on. Also lots of traffic, mostly older cars, nearly all Mercedes. Some of the cars are total wrecks. Enough to give New Zealand WOF testing station mechanics, nightmares.

The drivers here honk their horns a lot. In fact the honking never stops. For 24 hours a day there's a continuous toot toot of car horns. Mostly as a warning. And it seems as if all road rules are replaced by horn toots. If you pass somebody you toot. If you see a pedestrian on the road you toot. If you come to a busy intersection you toot. If you are a taxi driver, (and there are thousands constantly cruising the streets) and pass a pedestrian, you toot and call out 'taxi!'

Most of the drivers are young and quite aggressive in their driving habits.

Elections have just been held here in Lebanon so there are candidate posters all over the place. Some of them are massive in size.



Old patched up rusty Mercedes, 1960's vintage

Our hotel in Beirut

Joseph drops us at the Plaza Hotel and informs us that a female guide and a driver will pick us up tomorrow morning at 8.30 am.

Our hotel room is a bit gloomy, but not too bad. We're on the third floor. Only one small window.

Our Plaza Hotel is on the corner of Hamra St and Mahatma Ghandi Street in the busy Hamra district. This area is popular with tourists as it's close to the city's main attractions. Quite narrow streets, mostly one way.



The streets of Beirut near our hotel



Our Plaza Hotel in Hamra, Beirut

Out for a night walk around Hamra

Noel and I are thirsty and Beirut tap water is not safe to drink. So we go out to buy some water and for a walk around the Hamra area. Also to buy some takeaway food for our evening meal.

It's Friday evening and beginning to get dark .

The Beirut night is pleasantly warm without any of the mugginess of Singapore.



Beirut at night in the Hamra area

The Lebanese people

The streets are quite crowded, mostly vigorous, clean cut, handsome young men. Many of them look like my sons Michael and Alec. Nearly all of them have skin which is clear and flawless, mostly slightly olive in complexion, although some are European white. Their clothing is tidy and without Western fashion extremes like low riding trousers. Nor do we see any shaven heads or skin piercing. They mostly seem cheerful, full of energy, talkative and alert. There appear to be no scruffy yobbos at all.

Many of the males smoke however and the smell of tobacco pervades the air everywhere. The elderly men who are smoking have a depressed, low energy look, with haggard skin. A striking contrast to the vigorous young men. However the older, non-smoking men look healthy and relaxed with their olive skin weathering age well.

The young people, both male and female are invariably slim. The middle aged men and women are mostly portly, but we don't see any obese persons at all.

Three Lebanese racial types

Later we were to notice that there seem to be three basic racial groups throughout Lebanon. First, the Maronite Christian Lebanese. These have a full, handsome, well shaped face, rather like the Maori people. The second are narrow-faced Arabs. These narrow-faced types appear to be mostly Moslem and have a more intense, serious look and darker eyebrows compared to the more relaxed looking Maronite Christian Lebanese. Later Noel and I were to refer to these as the 'Arab terrorist' type.

Then there's also a stocky, sturdy type of Lebanese, often heavy breasted in the women, with strong noses. We labeled these as the 'Peasant' type. We didn't give these names with any disrespect, they just seemed apt to us for descriptive purposes. There even appears to be some of each of these three types in our own family. I think I have a little of the 'Arab terrorist' in me and Dad's sisters have a bit of the 'Peasant' type in them.

Beirut traffic

The Beirut evening traffic is hectic to say the least. It's even difficult to cross the road. The cars are driven mostly by young men who don't stop for pedestrians, they just loudly toot their horns at them. You can hardly believe the noise. Have a watch and listen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVb9plChVt0>

Taxis are everywhere. They continually slow down and toot to us, calling out "Taxi! Taxi!" We must look like tourists.

Street scenes and food

The mostly three to four storey buildings are generally old, and many shops have closed for the night and have shutters up over their windows. But there are all kinds of eating places open.

After buying a welcome bottle of water each, we stop at a crowded takeaway and look at the food. One of the attendants gives us a free sample of a small spinach pastry roll. Very tasty indeed. So we buy some and sit at the table outside and eat them.

Then we walk on some more and pass a military-type palace with soldiers standing outside on guard.

Unbelievably cheap gas

We also find a closed gas station and take a photo of the gas prices. The price seems way too expensive, but we find out later that the prices are per 20 litres, rather than per one litre.

We were further amazed to calculate that the price of petrol was only NZ25 cents a litre. Obviously that's why thousands of empty taxis can cruise around Beirut all day and night.



Petrol is priced in 20 litre amounts, cheap at NZ25 cents a litre

The Moslem call to prayer

After about two hours walking and exploring, we walk back to our hotel. As we do so, about 9 pm we hear a very loud Moslem call to prayer.

This is a recording from loudspeakers in a minaret tower of a mosque somewhere nearby. It's so loud as to be almost deafening, but to me has the same haunting quality of the one we heard in Egypt this afternoon. It's both sung and chanted by the muezzin.

Click this link below to hear a Moslem prayer call

<https://www.islamcan.com/audio/adhan/azan2.mp3>

This call to prayer is called the 'Adhan' and is made four times a day, or five times in more devout Moslem areas. The fifth call is made at 4 am in the morning, but for obvious reasons this is not sounded in mixed religion cities.

The call is staggered by thirty minutes at different mosques. ie, some will be at 9 pm and others at 9-30 pm. This helps if a Moslem is efficiently doing something he cannot stop, like a taxi driver carrying non-Moslem passengers.

We will hear this recorded call about eight times a day over the next three weeks throughout the Middle East. It greatly enhances the exotic feeling of the Middle East, which is a totally different world from what Noel and I have been used to.

The traffic has died down a bit now but there's still non-stop tooting of horns.

Poor maintenance in our hotel

We return to our hotel and prepare for bed, and begin to find things that don't work properly. The room's electronic safe doesn't work. The shower is so clogged up with mineral deposits it only produces a single jet. The sink plug doesn't seal. The light stand has a black, foot operated floor button to switch it on and off (which works well), but the 2 pin plug easily falls out the wall.

The power plugs in the Middle East are 240 volt and use two round pins.

Even now, at 10 o'clock at night, the tooting horns outside in the city streets don't stop, not even for 10 seconds.



The sink plug doesn't seal and the shower is only a single jet

Saturday 25th June

Early hours street noise

We slept OK last night, but a lot of tooting and loud cheering out on the street awoke me in the early hours of the morning. I hoped we weren't going to have a revolution. But it quietened down again, so I went back to sleep.

We were awakened about 5 am by roosters crowing. However both of us felt refreshed.

Lebanese breakfast in the hotel

Another clear sunny day outside and pleasantly warm, as is every day during summer in this Mediterranean climate.

We enjoy a very nice, help-your-self continental breakfast in the hotel. Tomatoes, small cucumbers, eggs, thick yoghurt, a type of tasty cinnamon and turmeric bread with a smear of olive oil. We finish off with natural orange juice.

I feel really good afterward, although I don't normally have breakfast, just a mid-morning fruit.

Nadine our Lebanese tour guide

Our booked tour for today is from Beirut, southward down the coast, through ancient Sidon and Tyre to the closed border with Israel.

Our guide meets us in the lobby at 8-30 am. She's a single woman aged 34 and her name is Nadine. She's plumper than most of the local women, but has the flawless olive skin, black hair and a nice smile. Very few Lebanese women appear to dye their hair, and the ones that do so (usually to a light brown colour) seem to lose their exotic appeal and look like western women.)

Nadine also has the very even teeth and large attractive eyes which seem characteristic of most Maronite Christian Lebanese women.



Nadine our Lebanese guide

Bassem our driver

Nadine leads us out to our male driver Bassem Doue (pronounced Dow), also a Maronite Christian, probably in his late 30's. He's driving a 1998 Silver Mercedes C320 taxi, his own car.

Bassem is a portly, placid, smiling man with a refined voice and excellent driving skills. (You'd need to have excellent driving skills in these lunatic driving conditions.) Bassem speaks reasonably good English but does not understand it well when spoken to.

Nadine has good English skills, but even so, many times she did not understand at first what Noel or I were saying to her. She has a cheerful, pleasing feminine personality and a traditional view of male and female roles.



Bassem our driver (on footpath at right) and his Mercedes

Beirut a city of apartments and many old cars

We first of all drive through Beirut, past numerous apartments. We see no houses, lawns, or garages, just an occasional mansion. Old cars are parked everywhere, with not a parking meter in sight. A mix of both old and newer cars driving the streets, tooting their horns – a city of nearly two million on the move.

Lebanese Moslems have large families

Officially the city and whole country is 50-50 Christian–Moslem, but Nadine tells us, that because Moslems have much larger families (Moslems regard it as an honour to have a large number of children) in reality there are now many more Moslems. However, so as not to upset the balance of power, no census has been taken for decades. The American CIA estimates the population of Lebanon to be about 60% Muslim, 40% Christian.

Both Nadine and Bassem (who has three children) were critical of the large families of Moslems and said that they don't look after their children well.

I was later to observe that the Moslem parents I saw in our hotels, seemed to treat their children exceptionally well. The husbands also seemed to treat their wives with great consideration, and the wives mostly looked a picture of serenity.

You can tell Lebanese Moslem women from Christian women as they always cover their hair. We only saw Saudi Arabian women wearing a full face veils, and they were always dressed in black from head to toe.



The coast near Beirut

We soon leave noisy Beirut behind and drive on down the coast. We pass by brown, sandy beaches and fruit stalls, heading towards the ancient Biblical port town of Sidon (pronounced sy-din).

I'm in the front with Bassem and Noel in the back with Nadine. Noel doesn't trust the Lebanese drivers and always prefers to sit in the back.



Fruit stall near Sidon

We stand on the beach where Jonah was coughed up by the whale

On the way to Sidon, we stop at the beach where traditionally Jonah was deposited by the whale who had swallowed him. We needed to ask permission to pass through a private resort to reach the beach. Nadine asks Bassem to do this as it's evidently not a woman's role to do such things.



Beach where traditionally Jonah was coughed up by the whale

The ancient busy city of Sidon

We pass by a large power station that was sabotaged numerous times by the Israelites in the past when they occupied Southern Lebanon. No doubt part of the reason the Lebanese have no love for Israel.

We soon arrive in the ancient and busy port town of Sidon. We see old Roman ruins on the beach.



Roman ruins on the beach at Sidon

Bassem parks in the centre of the town. There are old dilapidated cars parked everywhere. Men are sitting out on the footpaths on seats, smoking hookah water pipes.



Men sitting smoking hookah water pipes



Sidon's main street, many cars are just wrecks

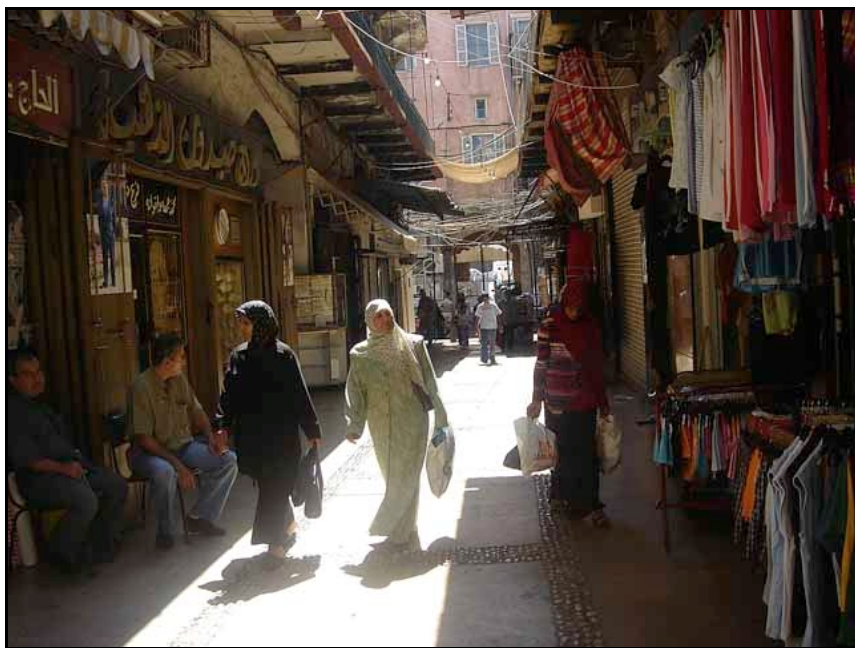
A walking tour of the old Souk Market

Pleasantly warm. No wind. Not a cloud in the blue sky. We get out of the car and Nadine takes Noel and I on a walking tour of the Sidon Souk Market. This is a winding labyrinth of stalls, small shops, narrow alleyways and tunnels under and among the ancient stone homes of Sidon. There are all kinds of goods, clothing, fabrics and foods for sale. Also nowadays, a lot of cheap imported Chinese trinkets.

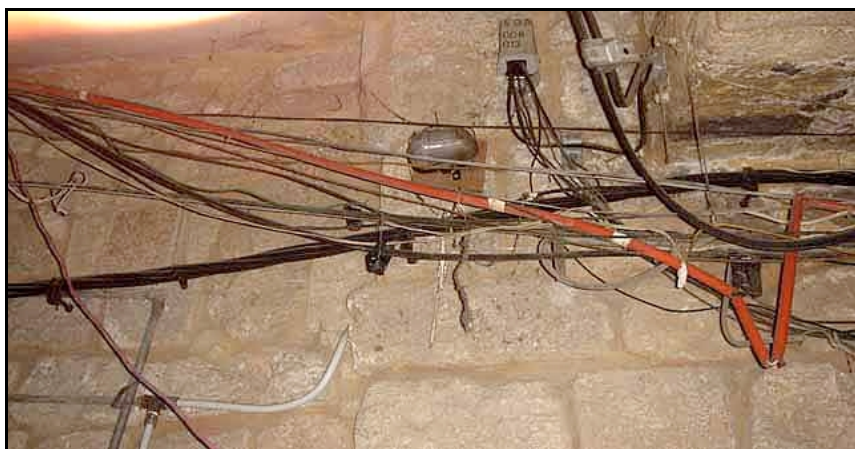
We visit a bread bakery that is a hot, dark, hellhole with a deafeningly noisy, smelly diesel compressor chugging and clanking away indoors. Noel can't get over the atrocious working conditions.

Nadine obtains for us some free samples of their bread. This is the same Cinnamon type loaf that we had for breakfast in the hotel. We eat it as we walk on further. Very nice.

Noel draws my attention to the appalling electrical wiring above. An OSH official would have a heart attack in this place.



The ancient Sidon Souk market



Appalling electrical wiring

We stop at a tiny bulk food shop and buy a bagful of almond nuts. This little shop is chocker-block to the ceiling with basic foods, beans, grains, nuts, etc. Like most of the other shops is only about

the size of a bathroom. There's not even room enough room for the shop keeper to sit down.

There seems to very little factory-processed food on sale in Lebanon.



Typical tiny food shop

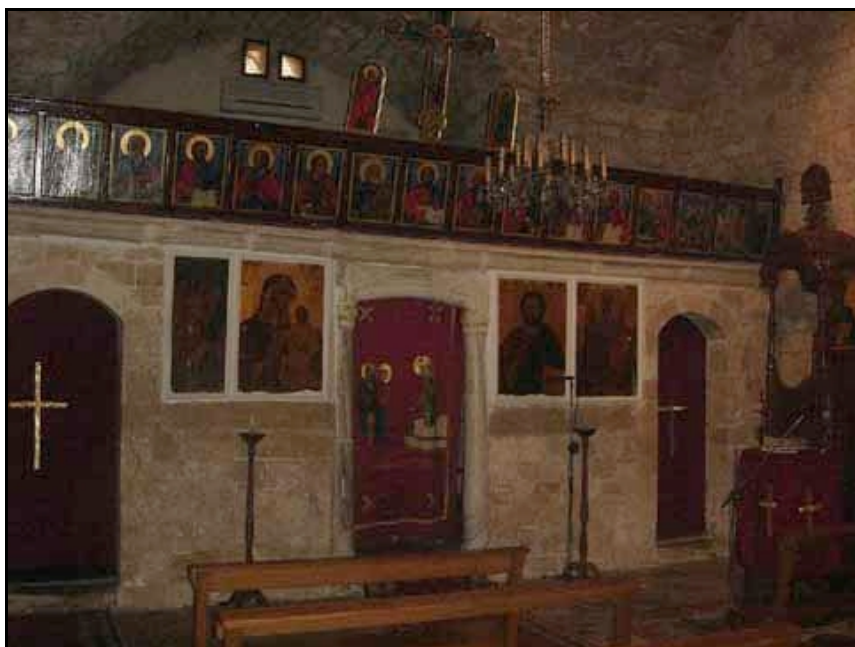
We also come across a Lebanese butcher shop. Very rare. The only obese person we see all day is this woman walking into the butcher shop.

Because there are no flies (probably due to there being no rain in the Mediterranean summers) the meat can be left out all day hanging.

Within the Souk we also visit an ancient church and monastery where Paul the Apostle is said to have preached. Reeked of atmosphere in the gloom inside.



Butcher shop (rare)



Ancient church where Paul is said to have preached



The old monastery

Interesting tour of an ancient soap factory

We next do a very interesting tour of an ancient soap factory. Quite an eye-opener. The pictures below show the steps to soap making.

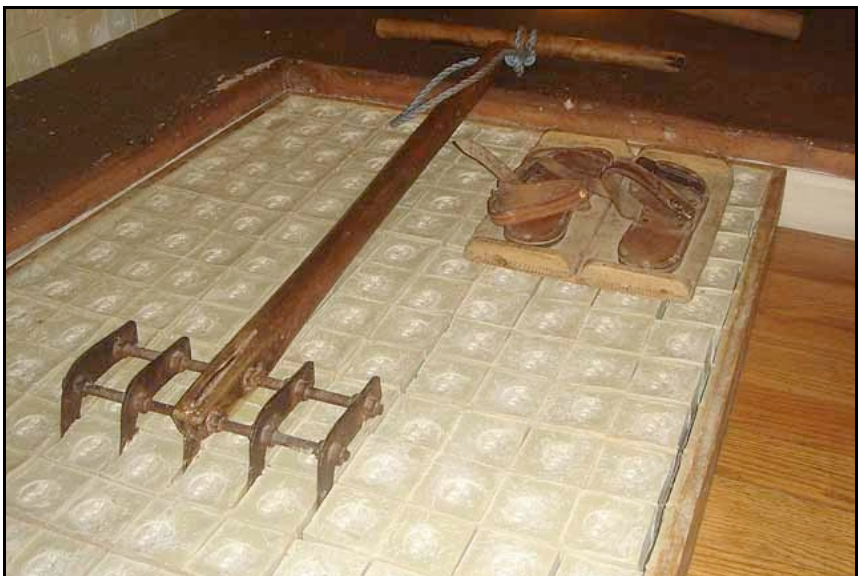
We also tour a small museum attached to the soap factory.

The thick twigs below are ancient toothbrushes and are still used in poorer parts of the world. They become stringy and fibrous with use.

Also on display are countless smoking pipes that have been excavated. The sign says that some of these pipes are 5000 years old. I didn't realise smoking went back that far. They were evidently used for smoking hashish.



Soap ingredient mixing chambers – oil and burnt plant ash



Poured out to set, tramped flat with the wooden clogs, and then cut into squares with the sharp rake



Soap cakes stacked to dry



Traditional stringy, fibrous toothbrushes

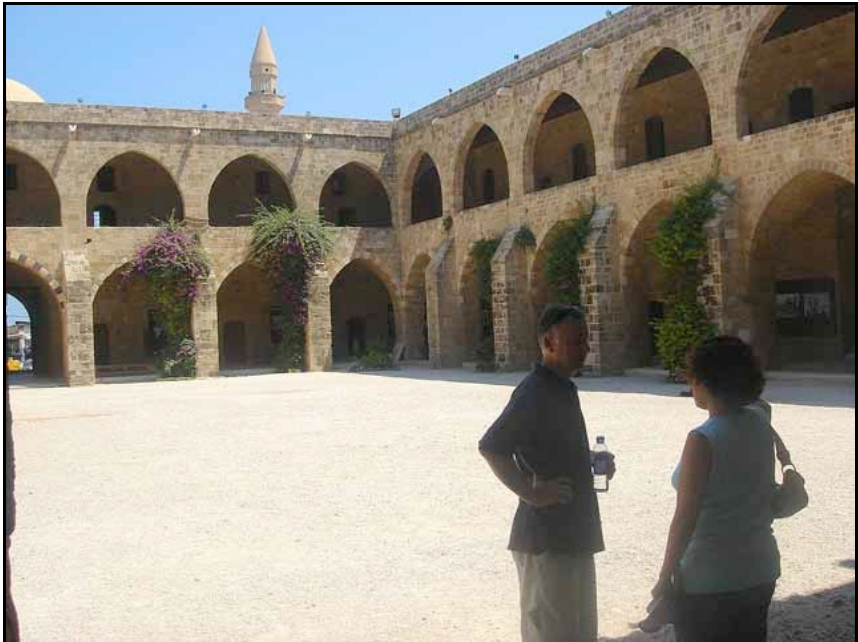


Old hashish smoking pipes

Hariri and his son

Next we enter a courtyard. This courtyard feels so typical of the Middle East. It's now a memorial to Hariri, the ex and well respected Prime Minister of Lebanon who was assassinated late last year (2004) by a car bomb in Beirut.

On the walls of the courtyard buildings are large colourful pictures of his life and the bombing.



The typical Middle East courtyard

Hariri was a popular man, a Moslem, and largely responsible for the current peace and renewal of Lebanon. Nadine, who is very anti-Israel, blames his bombing on the Jews. However, as we learn more about this much talked about event in the days ahead, it's obvious that Syria was the only nation who stood to gain from the act.

They evidently hoped to once more divide Lebanon and reclaim some of their lost power. In actual fact it had the entire opposite effect and has unified both Moslems and Christians.



Ex Prime Minister Hariri



Photo of Hariri's car bomb death

Hariri's son Saad is now Prime Minister. Nadine is rather scathing in her opinion of the 'dishonest character' of the son. On my further questioning as to the father Hariri's character, she says that Hariri himself wasn't as noble as most people now remember him, and that his martyrdom has glossed over some of his failings, but her people needed a hero.

When we come back out of the Souk market area, we see a Moslem mosque across the road.



Moslem mosque in Sidon

Then we walk down to the port area of Sidon with its numerous fishing boats.

Up on a building we see an election poster with a picture of Hariri and his son Saad. Saad has just been re-elected as Prime Minister of Lebanon. They also have a Christian President, Emile Lahou, to maintain the balance of power. He is however pro-Syria and is under pressure to resign since the assassination.



Fishing boats in the port of Sidon



Election poster of Hariri and his son Saad

We visit the ruins of an ancient city

Bassem then come and picks us up in his Mercedes and drives us a little further south down the coast, to the ruins of an ancient Phoenician and Roman city.

We first walk through the adjacent burial city. These burial cities were sometimes more lavish than the main cities nearby. This one covers a large area.

The 2000 year old Roman road that runs through both the burial and the main city is still in good condition.



The burial city with a Roman road leading through it

The burial city is full of thousands of stone tombs and stone burial coffins like these below.

We then walk further on and through where the main city once stood. It's now getting quite hot, especially out in the glaring sun, which is reflecting off the light coloured stone and ground.

We see the remains of an old Roman aqueduct that carried water to the main city.



Stone tombs



Stone burial coffins



Roman aqueduct

Chariot racing track

Next we come to the chariot racing track called by the Romans a Hippodrome. This looks just like a giant New Zealand stock car track, probably twice the diameter of the Palmerston North track. They even had a stone grandstand, with cool rooms inside. There are also remains of 'corporate boxes' on the top.

Noel and I sit up on the stand and Nadine takes our photo. It must have been quite a spectacle to see the chariot races held here.



The chariot racing track grandstand



Noel and I getting scorched in the sun



Roman Hippodrome chariot racing track

Haunting mid-day Moslem call to prayer

Then, just to add to the moment and the exotic atmosphere around us, we hear the haunting, mid-day Moslem call to prayer from a distant mosque through the trees.

This lasts for about five minutes. Very memorable moment for me as it created in me a sense of the timeless rhythm of life and religion in this part of the world.



The distant mosque through the trees – a haunting call

As we leave for the long walk back to Bassem and the car, we pass through a gang of unsmiling, silent, Arab ‘Terrorist type’ workmen. They are inside a ruin that they are renovating. They seem a little hostile toward us. Not one smile.

Perhaps we interrupted their prayers, but they don't look like praying types.

Nadine tells me that only about half of Lebanese Moslems heed the call to prayer, just as only about half of Lebanese Maronite Christians attend Mass.

I asked Nadine what the wording of the Moslem call was. She said, "They quote from the Koran saying 'Allah is Great. There is no greater prophet than Muhammad.' And repeat it over and over."

(I thought there was probably more to it than that, so I've since obtained the full wording in English, which is as follows:)

God is most great. God is most great. God is most great. God is most great.

I testify there is no god except God. I testify there is no god except God.

I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

Come to prayer! Come to prayer!

Come to salvation! Come to salvation!

God is most great. God is most great.

There is no god except God.

This prayer call is sounded five times a day.

1. At the first hint of dawn.
2. At mid-day.
3. Mid-way between noon and sunset.
4. At sunset.
5. Before bed (about 9:15 pm).

You can click on this link to hear the call again.

<https://www.islamcan.com/audio/adhan/azan2.mp3>

Bassem has parked his car in the shade under a small tree. Nadine seems weary after her long walk.

Nice to get back into the air-conditioned car.

We drive further south – a run down Moslem area

We now drive further south, towards the blocked off border with Israel.

This area is 100% Moslem. All the women have their hair covered and all the shop signs are in Arabic. I see an occasional woman dressed all in black and ask Nadine why this is so. She replies, "They are widows."

This is obviously a poor and run down part of Lebanon. There are many small car repair workshops, no doubt necessary to keep the old cars running. There's also more litter than normal on the roadsides.

We even pass through a town with a giant mountain of trash in the main street. Nadine explains that all the garbage in this region is brought here for dumping, but they have now run out of places to put it.

So the mountain just keeps growing bigger and bigger. I don't feel comfortable asking Bassem to stop so I can take a photo of the trash mountain. He and Nadine seem ashamed of it.

The purpose in coming this far south is to see a grotto cave to the Virgin Mary and some rock carvings. Probably also to buy some souvenirs off the bookseller there.

All of our guides on this trip take us to over-priced souvenir shops where they obviously receive a percentage of tourist sales. The same thing also happens in New Zealand. This is useful to see what is available to buy locally, as you can buy on the streets for a fraction of the price. But this is embarrassing for the guides, who are often under pressure to lie. It's also demeaning for the tourist who feels treated as naïve. Noel and I became fed up with this towards the end of our Middle East trip.

The case for the Biblical town of Cana

As we drive further South, Nadine speaks to me of the findings of a local religious researcher who places the Biblical town of Cana, where Jesus did his first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding feast, as being in Lebanon instead of Israel.

I'm skeptical, so when we get to the grotto she buys me a booklet copy of this researcher's paper and gives it to me. I thank her for it.

(When I studied the paper after I got back home, and also the traditional evidence for the Israel site, I realised that this researcher had a solid case and the proponents of the Israel Cana had a very weak case.

Both towns (the Lebanese one called Kana is now a ruin) are both within walking distance of Nazareth and there was no border in those days.

The grotto of the Virgin Mary

To get to the grotto we have to walk down into a barren valley. This whole area is very barren indeed.



Walking down into the barren valley to the grotto

The grotto turns out just to be a cave with a little Virgin Mary icon and some candles. The carved rocks are so crude, it's hard to discern what they were meant to be. Not very impressed at all.



**The grotto – just a little statue of the Virgin Mary
and some burning candles**

Lunch in the Biblical city of Tyre

We now turn back and drive back up north, the way we had come, to visit the ancient Biblical city of Tyre.

Nadine asks us to decide if we will have lunch first in Tyre before seeing the sights. She says that she knows of a good seaside restaurant in Tyre. We choose lunch first.

As we drive towards Tyre, I question Nadine about cultural attitudes in Lebanon. Her replies are very interesting. She's well educated on such matters and is confident and feminine as she speaks.

She also talks often on her cell phone (in Arabic) which rings a lot.

She tells Noel and I that her cell phone costs her US.50c (NZ.70c) a minute using a phone card.

American dollars are used as a second currency in Lebanon. The Lebanese pound LL is a joke. One American dollar buys 1500 Lebanese pounds due to incredible inflation.

We arrive in Tyre and drive to the large seaside restaurant. As we sit out on the breezy balcony overlooking the beach, Noel and I have a fruit lunch of cherries, plums, nectarines, watermelon and bottled water. Very relaxing and pleasant.

Nadine and Bassem both just have ice cream and won't touch any fruit, which is probably why they are both plumper than normal.



Lunch on the balcony of the Tyre seaside restaurant

The restaurant forget to charge Noel and I for our lunch, but Noel brings it to the waiter's attention. Both Nadine and Bassem think Noel is crazy. Bassem says, "Their mistake! Your good fortune! Just go!" But we pay for it.

We visit the ruins of the old Biblical city of Tyre

We next drive to the ruins of the old city of Tyre. In Biblical times, 3000 years ago Tyre was a famous and fabulously wealthy city. It was built on an off-shore island and noted for its shipping trade. The island ruins are now part of the mainland and cover a huge area.

We get out and do another walk around. There are numerous columns still standing (some have been re-erected) and lots of old mosaic floors. Also water tanks, spas and baths. Again hot and glary in the afternoon sun.



View of ancient Tyre

We are looking at a marble pillar lying on the ground when an elderly local man yells out to us from a house in the distance and runs over to us. He turns on a plastic hose and wets the pillar to show up the pattern in the Phoenician marble.

I think he's expecting a tip, but he goes away when he realises we have a guide. The two types of pillars are shown in the photo. Phoenician pillars are marble. The later Roman pillars are a more utilitarian granite.



Classy Phoenician marble pillar, hosed to show up the pattern



Granite Roman pillar



Fragments of mosaic floors



Temple or palace pillars still standing

Fake figurines

As we leave, a peddler comes up to Noel and tries to sell him tiny bronze figurines of the god Baal that he says have been excavated from the ruins. They look very old.

"Only 15 American dollar."
He says earnestly.

(If they were real, you would expect to pay 15,000 American dollars.)

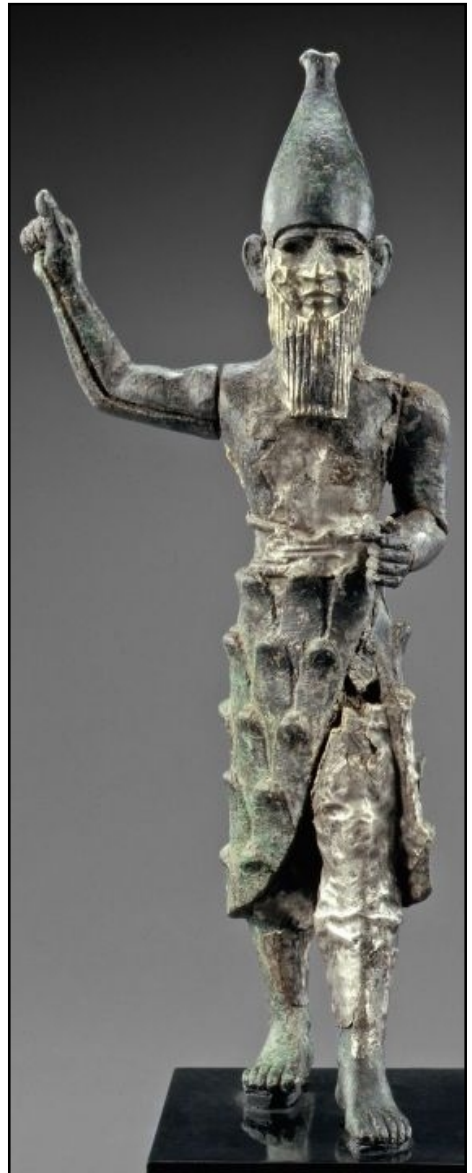
He's very persistent, and soon turns his attention to me. But finally after 5 minutes I manage to fend him off and we walk back to the car. Nadine who had not spoken during this incident, now said, "Genuine Tyre fake figurines."

Why there are so many Mercedes in Lebanon

As we drive off, heading back to Beirut. I comment to Bassem about how nearly all of the cars on the road are Mercedes.

"Yes, they good car." He says.
"They last well."

Evidently they import them cheap as used cars from Germany, just as we import used cars from Japan. Germany, like Japan has a very strict test after a car has been on the road for three years and thereafter every two years. It can cost a lot of money to bring



Genuine Baal figurine

them up to scratch, so they tend to sell them off cheap.

We drive past an impressive looking mosque on the way home and Noel takes a picture.



Impressive Lebanese mosque

We see the bomb blast site in Beirut

Noel asks Nadine if we could be dropped off in the city where the bomb blast of Hariri's car took place last year, and we will walk back to the hotel. She agrees.

When Bassem stops the car there, we're surprised to see that about 50 of the cars that were parked in the area during the bomb blast, back in Feb 2005, are still there. They are filthy with dust, or covered with tarpaulins. The whole area is cordoned off.

Central Beirut

Noel and I then walk around the city centre plaza which is nearby. Noel is impressed with the changes since he was here last and takes lots of photos to show Rana. There are numerous young people around, especially at the outside tables of the eateries



Where place where Hariri's car was bombed



Central plaza of downtown Beirut



The centre of the city

Some of the young people are smoking water pipes, even the young women. We also walk past several shops that sell them.



Water pipes for sale

Noel and I buy an ice cream. The cones seem almost twice as long as New Zealand cones.

We have an interesting walk home. We pass the Prime Minister's palace and rinse our sticky ice cream hands in his roadside fountain.

There's still quite a strong military presence in the city, with many Government buildings guarded by armed soldiers.



Lebanese extra long ice cream cones



The Prime Minister's palace



Fountain in street outside

The street below is typical of those we walk through in the Hamra area on our way back to the hotel.



Typical street of central Beirut

We also see a number of buildings that seem to have been half built and then abandoned. The photo following is typical.

Saturday night in Hamra

Tonight we go out for another walk. It's Saturday night and there are crowds out on the streets. It's very busy and the shops are open. It is also capping night at the nearby American University of Beirut. Soldiers and police are everywhere.

We check out a popular takeaway food shop. The attendant offers us a free spinach-filled pasty each to try. These seem very popular. So we buy some, plus a milkshake and a fruit cocktail.



One of several half finished buildings

We then try to locate a Latter Day Saint or Maronite Catholic church for me to attend in the morning, but we can't find one, only a Roman Catholic church in Hamra Rd, about a km from the hotel. I make a few enquires, but nobody seems very interested or can understand me sufficiently well.

The Hamra area of Beirut has a bustling, old, downtown narrow street atmosphere, a bit like Willis St in Wellington, more so than the city centre we visited today, which is more like the wider Manners St area in Wellington.

However it's very different from NZ. The buildings are an unusual blend of modern, very old, run down and spruced up. Hamra is full

of low rise apartments, shops, offices and a huge number of banks, about sixty. Evidently Beirut is a major world banking centre and obviously offers some attractive tax advantages.

There are also lots of small workshops, hotels and some small gas stations. All of this is combined with endless horn tooting, jostling traffic, many one way streets. It's hard to cross the road during busy times.

Famous Lebanese woman singer Fairouz

Everywhere we walk we hear the sound of the famous Lebanese woman singer Fairouz. She's played in restaurants and in cars as they drive past.

So I decide to buy a CD of her most popular songs. The young enthusiastic man who owns the tiny CD shop we enter is insistent that I buy one of his copies, rather than the official version. He says, "It just same! It just same! You not tell difference."

So I buy one off him for US\$3, complete with Arabic writing all over the case. (When I played it after I got home it brought all the exotic atmosphere of the trip flooding back.)

Much Lebanese music, especially the accompaniment, is similar to Indian music, but the lyrics are sung with a typical throaty Arabic accent.

We would also hear the songs of Fairouz in Israel and Egypt. Two of our tour drivers played her songs.

She has a pure, strong voice. Here's a sample of one of her songs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUbQcxSJwWQ>

Meaning of the Arab word 'habib'

The word 'habib' comes up a lot in her songs. Earlier today I asked Nadine what Habib meant as it's the first name of my great-grandfather. It's also my son Amron's second name.

She said it means 'love.' Bassem our driver added. "Habib a beautiful word." (Habib is pronounced *Har-beeb-e* in soft tones.)

Capping spectators

We walk back to the hotel through throngs of well dressed university capping spectators, most of them chatting loudly. Soldiers and military police are everywhere tonight and had earlier cordoned off some areas with rope.

When we get back to our hotel we find that the fridge hasn't been cooling, even though it runs. Ours is obviously not the finest hotel in Beirut but is well located.

We go to bed about 10:30 pm. Noel goes off to sleep instantly, just like I did last night.

The day after tomorrow we visit the ruins of Baalbek and then on to Bcharre, (pronounced *Bishar-ree*) the mountain birth town of my grandfather Joseph Habib Coory. There we'll meet the family that remain, and hopefully settle the land issues once and for all. I'm quite excited, but a little apprehensive.

Sunday 26 June 2005

Early morning walk to the Catholic church

Noel and I both wake up about 5 am to roosters crowing which is becoming the norm on this trip.

I write in my journal and then get dressed and study two pages of the scriptures, which I do every morning, as well as praying. I find this keeps me grounded in truth and helps me from becoming too worldly.

I then walk the 1 km down the main Hamra street to the Catholic church to see what time the masses are.

The main street looks totally different this morning, after the bustle and noise of last night. It's almost deserted, just a few old Mercedes cruising taxis (still tooting) and some magazine sellers setting up their stands. All the shops and restaurants are closed and shuttered with steel cages. A total contrast from last night.

One battered yellow Mercedes taxi has parked right across a side street corner, almost on the footpath blocking my way. The enterprising driver is standing outside smoking a cigarette. I have to walk around his car. "Taxi sir?"

I gesture 'no' with my hand.

I reach the church and find the wrought iron gates padlocked. But there's a side gate open, so I walk inside the grounds. A very old lady of the peasant type, dressed in black, is lighting candles in an outdoor Virgin Mary grotto. I speak to her but she doesn't even look up. She must be deaf.

So I enter the church by a side door and find myself in some side rooms. I make my way into the main church and see a refined looking woman setting up some choir music. I ask her what time the Masses are? She replies in an equally refined French accent, "Arabic at 8-30, French at 9-30 and English at 12 pm."

I thank her and leave. As I'm walking back out the side gate onto the main road footpath, I see a small, middle-aged man peering through the padlocked main gates and blessing himself with the sign of the cross.

I ask him if he wants to know what time the Masses are? He doesn't understand me, and thinks I want to know myself. So he holds up nine fingers, with his little finger bent. I don't catch on immediately, but then I realise he means 9-30.

Noel and I attend a spiritual French mass

I walk back to the hotel. It's about 7 am and Noel has slept about another two hours. We both feel good and alert. No jet lag. Noel agrees to come to Mass with me. We then plan to walk across the city to the renown Beirut Museum.

We have breakfast, same as yesterday. Lovely thick yoghurt. You can stand a spoon up in it. But hard to shake it off the spoon.

The inevitable smokers in the dining room spoil it a bit. About a third of Lebanese men smoke. There are Moslem families staying in the hotel, with their covered-hair wives and immaculately behaved children. The families all look wholesome and healthy.

We pack Noel's day shoulder bag and set off for the 8.30 am Mass at the church. I'm curious to make a comparison with the New Zealand Catholic Mass. We arrive a little late. The main gate is no longer padlocked and is partly open, but the big front doors to the church are locked. We have to again use the small side gate. We pass through the side rooms, and then enter the church through a small side door, down near the altar rail.

The church is about 20% full – about 50 people. Some of the women look like Auntie Elma. Many are very short. The priest is giving his sermon. He's old, white haired and almost bald, short and very stocky.

Noel soon picks up that the priest is speaking French, so it's not an Arabic service as the French lady had told me.

As the mass progresses, I become most impressed with the singing. Instead of the congregation chanting replies to the priest as in New Zealand, both the priest and the people sing the words back and forth. This is done in a haunting, moving cadence. Very spiritual. Gives me goose bumps.



The Catholic church where we attend Mass

The hymns too are unlike any I had heard before. The lilting melodies are tuneful, and yet highly spiritual. They move me close to tears. Truly beautiful singing, and led by a small choir.

During mass I sneak a photo with my little camera to show you what it looks like, but feel a bit guilty doing so.

Communion is still the old traditional round, white wafer. No wine is offered to the people.

There seems to be no agreement among the congregation as to whether to kneel, stand or sit. At any given time a third of the people could be kneeling, a third standing, and a third sitting. Noel and I are totally confused.

(We were to later find that the whole Middle East is like this. The people don't like to conform and be regulated. Our current Prime Minister Helen Clarke and her politically correct Labour party would be tossed out in a week here.)

The mass ends abruptly, but very few people leave immediately. As Noel and I walk out the door a fresh complexioned young nun, dressed in a traditional white habit, smiles at us and says, "Merci."



Sneaked a photo of the priest saying mass

Church bells very moving

As Noel and I walk up the hill next to the church, the church bells begin to ring. This is totally unlike normal church bell ringing with just one or two notes. These are sounding a tune. Again I find this quite moving, just like the hymns inside the church. In fact I feel quite affected by it. It seems to bring back to me vividly, a very secure period in my boyhood during the 1950's, when families were large and stable, mostly content, and divorce was rare, and church bells could be heard every Sunday.

A fascinating walk to the National Museum

We now set off diagonally across the city to the National Museum. What a fascinating walk. This city is so different from what we've been used to.

We soon come to an unusual modern building with a needle sharp pointed edge, built on a Y intersection.



Sharp, pointed edge building

As we walk we see apartments everywhere. No lawns, just pot plants on the hundreds of verandahs that overlook the urban streets. There are a huge variety of shapes and designs. Some are swish and elegant. Some are run down. Some are just bombed-out hovels. The office buildings follow the same pattern.



Attractive lawyer's offices



Maybe a cousin of ours – Fakhoury is our clan family name



Bombed out hovel with a squatter family

Men are everywhere out on the streets, sitting, talking in clusters of two, three or four. Always polite and courteous. No loud mouth yobbos or drunks.

I do a rough count. Men outnumber women on the streets by about 8 to 1. But this is Sunday morning and most women may be inside preparing the Sunday dinner. However it should be remembered that the city is mostly Moslem and the Moslem's holy day is Friday.

Nevertheless most of the city shops and offices are closed, so it's some sort of holiday.



Moslem mosque with election posters

It's starting to get hot again and we've drunk all our water. So we stop at a Moslem marketplace and buy two more bottles of water. It is cold and delicious.



Typical street scene. Election hoardings are everywhere

We also see on sale some huge pita breads, nearly half a metre across. I take a picture. That's a standard size garden sieve they are sitting on.



Huge pita breads

The Beirut National Museum

After about two hours of highly interesting walking we come to the museum. But it has no signs anywhere to say that it's a museum, just soldiers on guard outside.

I was disappointed to see signs and also to hear Noel be told as he bought the tickets, that no cameras are allowed in the museum. Noel is also asked point blank if he has a camera, so he hands it over. I keep mine hidden in my back pocket.

But then I see that we have to walk through a metal detector, manned by two soldiers before we can get in. I decide to try my luck anyway, but the machine beeps. One of the soldiers looks me in the eye and says, "You have camera?" I sheepishly take it to the desk and hand it over.

It would have been difficult to take pictures inside the open plan museum anyway. There are alert guards watching us continually.



The unmarked Beirut Museum

Fortunately just about everything we see in the museum we see elsewhere on our trip, and take pictures of anyway. Although there were some bullet holes in one interior wall of the museum that I would have liked a picture of.

One of the guards tells us in English, in a surprisingly refined and educated voice, that the museum was on the dividing line of the civil war battles in Beirut.

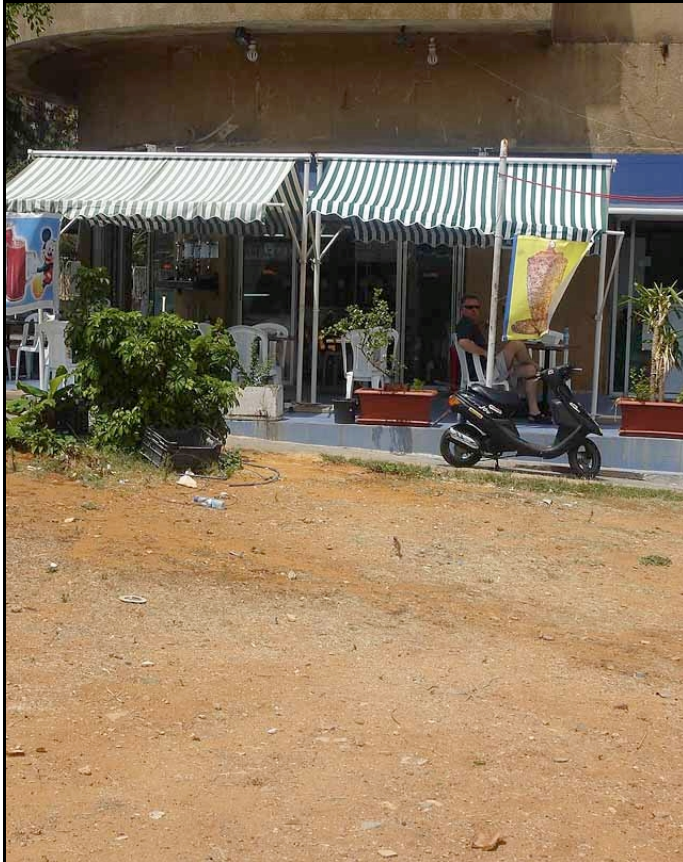
Like most of the Middle East museums we visit, this one is confined to a rather narrow range of local artifacts. In this case Phoenician and Roman stone and marble carvings, jewellery and coins. Some of the workmanship is very good.

Lunch at the café across the road

After about two hours we've seen it all. We're now feeling a bit leg weary from all our day's walking, so we go back out into the heat and sunshine and walk across the road to a small cafe for a fruit lunch.

I have a mango, a banana and a stringy orange. (Why we don't export our delicious New Zealand Navel oranges is a mystery to me. I've never tasted an overseas orange that begins to compare.)

We also buy another bottle of water each, having drank our earlier ones. We sit outside at the shaded tables and relax. The pleasant atmosphere is a little spoilt by the ever present litter of Lebanon all around us.



**The café across the road from the museum where we have lunch
– you can see the ever present litter**

The case of the missing Beirut river

I study our road map and then suggest to Noel that we walk to the Beirut river that we see on our map. It looks quite attractive, at least on the map, with a green belt either side. He agrees, so off we go. It's quite hot. The temperature would now have climbed into the mid 30's I would guess.

We walk down a busy new arterial road, past hillsides of ten storey high apartments, all clustered together. Most of them sprout multitudes of TV aerials from the roofs and have their washing hanging out the windows.



Clustered hillside apartments

We've passed several roadside grottos to the Virgin Mary today. These seem to be all over Beirut.

The sun has been blazing down on us all day. Had we been in New Zealand, we would both have been badly burned by now. However I am beginning to feel the effects. So I fish out my crumpled Kiwi tramping hat and slap it on. It no doubt looks pretty stupid over here. Hardly anybody wears a hat. You can see from the photo below I look a bit of a drip wearing it. (Probably look a drip without it too.) Noel looks more presentable in his peaked cap.



A typical roadside grotto to the Virgin Mary

The road seems to go on forever. I calculate that we should have come to the river or green belt by now. We've walked a good hour, perhaps two, but no sign of it.

Noel's beginning to doubt my navigational abilities. We stop under a new motorway in the shade for a drink and I recheck our map. It should be here, on our right. The sun is in the right place, but all we can see is a new, noisy, concrete, traffic-filled freeway. So we keep walking north towards the sea, with the imaginary river on our right.

We eventually come to an elevated road bridge crossing the freeway on our right. It has a footpath, so we walk up onto the bridge for a higher view of the area.

And suddenly, at last, we see the 'river.' It's right below us. Although it's more of an open sewer canal than a river. Little clumps of dark weed are flowing swiftly in the murky water and the smell is horrendous.

We've been walking alongside the canal all the time, looking for the non-existent green belt. We had assumed the concrete canal

wall was the side of a freeway. So much for the wide green belt on the map. It must be an old map.

In the photo below, we're looking back the way we've come (the road on the right). The sea coast toward which we are now walking is about a km behind us.



The Beirut 'river'

Walking back along the coast highway into the city centre

We walk on until we come to the coastal highway, then we turn left and follow the coast back to the Hamra area. We now have the late afternoon sun full in our face and I'm a bit concerned about sunburn.

Noel is keen to try out a real old 'dunga' taxi, so we keep an eye out for one, but there aren't that many way out here.

We pass some interesting narrow streets, and see our first lawn, in the front yard of a Audi car dealership. We've only seen about four car dealers so far, and none of them have any sticker prices on

the car windows. The Levant's love to haggle. (The people that live in Lebanon, Syria and Israel are called Levant's.)



Narrow streets in older part of Beirut

We also come across a heap of mysterious small green fruit about the size of feijoas. We think they could be miniature mangos.

Finally, when we get into the city centre, we take a photo of the beautiful mosque located there.



Mysterious small green fruit



The beautiful downtown Beirut mosque

Now that we're back in the downtown centre, taxis are everywhere, so we again look for an old 'dunga'. Noel finally waves down an old red 1960's Mercedes, like the one our dad used to own. Noel prepares to bargain and opens the door and says to the elderly driver, "500 pounds (NZ.70c) take us Hamra?" The old man shakes his head.

We think he's going to hold out for more money, but instead he says, "400 pounds."

We are astounded. However we climb in. I sit in the front. The dashboard is split and eaten away by the sun, so are the seats. The broken springs under the blanket on the front seat make it feel like sitting on a toilet.

The elderly taxi driver does not understand English, nor the name of our hotel. But he has a young boy in the back seat who helps somewhat. So off we go. The motor is not running on all cylinders and there's a bad driveshaft vibration. We can also smell exhaust fumes. The old Mercedes rides quite softly however, with its worn out shock absorbers.

The driver soon stops the car and the boy gets out. Again we start off, but then he stops again outside a group of young men on the footpath and beckons over one in his 20's whom he recognises. The driver grabs Noel's hotel card from his hand and thrusts it at the young man to read.

An animated conversation in Arabic, with much gesticulating follows. The driver still looks puzzled. Driving such an old wreck, he probably doesn't take many passengers to hotels.

We once more chug off up the road and soon we arrive in the main street of Hamra, near the church we attended this morning. But then the driver makes a wrong turn up a one-way street. He appears a bit flustered. So Noel pays him the fare and tells him we will get out here and walk the rest of the way.

A nightmare lift experience for Noel

It's about half a km to our hotel and we're grateful to see it.

We enter one of the two tiny wood-panelled lifts and press the button. The door closes, the lift begins to move upward, then

suddenly stops and the lights and everything inside go totally black. We cannot see a thing.

This is one of Noel's worst nightmares and he's quite shaken. I grope for the buttons and press every one, but nothing happens. Fortunately it must have just been a power cut, because the power comes back on after about a minute and the lift descends the few feet to the ground floor and the door opens.

Noel's reluctant to use the lift again. But when we go to walk up the stairs, we find the first floor blocked off temporarily. So we have to go back down and use a lift. Noel understandably chooses the other one.

Our troubles are not yet over. We find we cannot unlock the door to our hotel room. The door card (a type of electronic key) has stopped working.

So back we go down in the lift again to the reception desk. I think Noel held his breath all the way down. I offered a silent prayer that all would be well. The card just needed to be re-swiped by the lobby desk attendant.



The hotel lobby

Back up in the lift. This time the card unlocks the door. It's good to rest again. We're both a bit weary having walked about 20 kms today. Noel has a cold shower and I write up my journal.

Later a porter brings us each up another bottle of water, our third for the day. This is an expensive way of buying water, as he has to be tipped also, but we're so thirsty.



Bottled water, a familiar sight in the Middle East

Sunday night on the Corniche

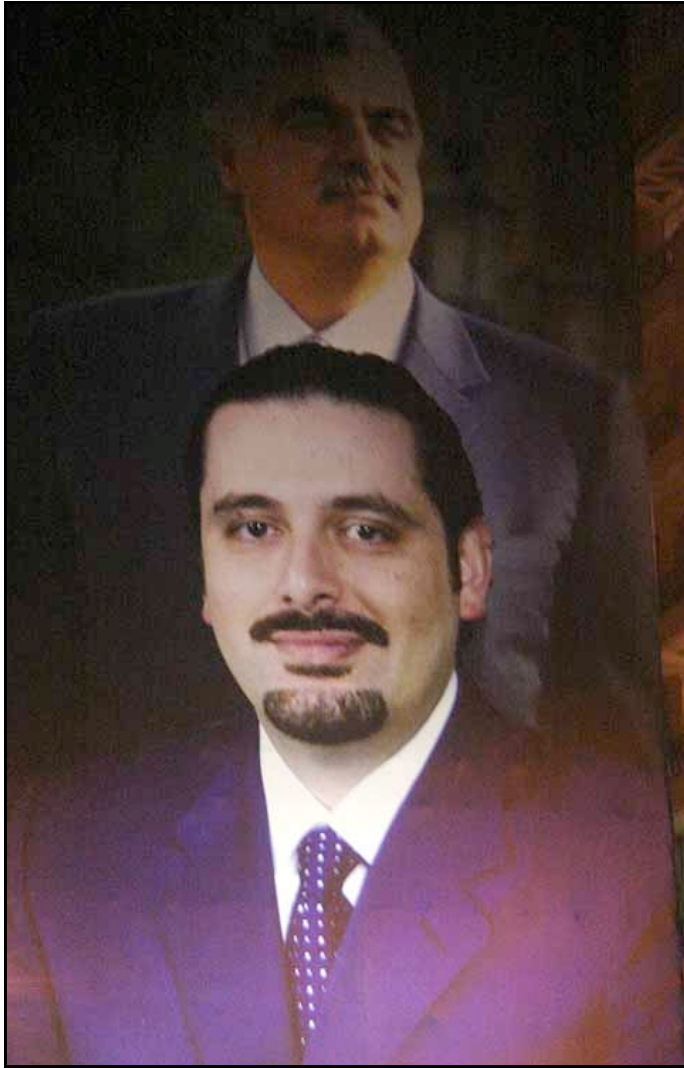
After we've restored our energy, we go out at dusk to get something to eat. We buy some more tasty spinach-filled pasties and an ice cream each.



Popular spinach pasties at a take-away bar, top right shelf

It's dark and we decide to walk along the popular, crowded Corniche. This is a cliff side road overlooking the sea. This part of Beirut is similar to the Mount Maunganui beach waterfront drive. It's regarded as the cool place to be. It attracts young people, families, and exuberant hoon drivers.

On our way, as Noel is taking a night picture of a poster of Saad, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, he notices in the LCD screen of his camera, a continuous, jagged lightning flash, running down from the sky to the road. My camera shows the same bizarre thing. But we can't see it with the naked eye. Nor does it show up in the picture when taken. I've never seen it before or since.



Hariri's son Saad, current Prime Minister of Lebanon

We also see a local cockroach on a wall and take a photo. These are not as ugly as the Gisborne cockroaches found in Tauranga.



Beirut cockroach

When we get to the Corniche we experience a real festival atmosphere. There's also a children's Beirut Luna Park complex with ferris wheel, etc, located here.

Extremely noisy inside with children chatting and shouting and machinery whirring. The traffic on the street is fast and continuous and again it's almost impossible to cross the road.

The teeming crowds are mostly groups of young people and whole families. No hats. Mine and my other brother Raymond's balding pattern is common among the older dads with their children. Everybody seems happy and well behaved. No one seems to have been drinking.



Beirut Luna Park



Inside the park – extremely noisy with children shouting and machinery whirring



View out to sea

We walk higher up the hill road and look out over the ocean. Some of the offshore rocks are lit up with lights. As we wait to cross the road to walk home to the hotel, a long procession of decorated wedding cars drives by. Lots of exuberant horn honking. It all seems entirely wholesome. I'm again reminded of my boyhood days in the 1950's. Just the ever present litter on the streets spoils it somewhat.

We walk in a giant loop back to our hotel. We see our first dog and a few cats under the parked cars.

This is our last night in Beirut. Tomorrow, all going well, we should be staying up in the mountains, at our grandfather's home town of Bcharre.

Monday 27 June 2005

We're driven over the Lebanon mountains to Baalbek

After another wholesome breakfast in our hotel this morning (the Lebanese eat well), we are picked up at 8-30 am by our driver for today, Farhad Daou (same last name as Bassem our previous driver, whom he knows) in his dark blue Mercedes.

He will first take us to the famous Baalbek Temple ruins on the other side of the Lebanon Mountains, then on to grandfather's mountain town of Bcharre.

Farhad is 57, balding with grey hair, olive skin, and speaks a reasonable amount of English.



Driver Farhad Daou in his dark blue Mercedes

Soon we're being driven at breakneck speed up the mountain road overlooking Beirut. I can see now why Noel prefers the safer back seat.

Although I don't say anything, Farhad seems to read my mind about slowing down and promptly does so. In fact all morning he

seems to read my mind and answer nearly all of my questions before I ask them.

He smokes, but has all the car windows open, so it isn't too bad.

We soon reached the top of the Lebanon mountain range and descend down into the hazy but greener inland Bekka Valley. This whole vast Bekka valley is flat with a patchwork of crop lands extending into the distance.



Looking down on the Bekka Valley



View from road down in the valley

We drive along the valley for about two hours in sunshine and warmth. Lots of traffic and rural buildings.

Soon we come to ancient Baalbek, the town where my grandmother was raised and home of the most impressive temple ruins in the world.

The driver Farhad turns off the road and begins to drive us along a rough track so we can see the ruins without paying to get in. He seems a little incredulous when we ask him to stop and go back as we are willing to pay to get in, and also pay for a guide. I don't think he's all that happy about having to wait for us either.

So he turns the car around and we bounce back along the track to the main road and drive to the nearby Baalbek ruins car park and get out and buy our tickets. There's a small, windowless museum nearby.

However there's been a power cut and the soldiers on guard won't let us inside. The tunnel leading in is delightfully cool but the museum is in pitch blackness.

So we walk through the main gates, into the ruins. A portly, older Lebanese guide, shielding himself with a sun umbrella comes towards us. Noel negotiates a guiding price with him.

I'm amazed at his appearance. He looks like a twin brother of an old Maori friend of mine in Tauranga who died about 15 years ago – Alfred Tarawa. He not only looks like him, but he speaks like him also and has a similar personality. He also reminds Noel of Uncle Lou Morris. His name is Gazi and his English is very good which is a relief to us.



**Our Baalbek guide Gazi, a dead ringer for my
old Maori friend Alfred Tarawa**

Gazi begins to show us over the vast Baalbek temple complex. There are three temples here and they cover about half a square km. The people would anciently go to them in succession.

First to the temple of the main god Jupiter – for sacrifice and worship,

Then to the temple of Baal (or Bacchus) – for gluttony and drunkenness.

Then finally to the temple of Venus – for immoral sexual gratification.

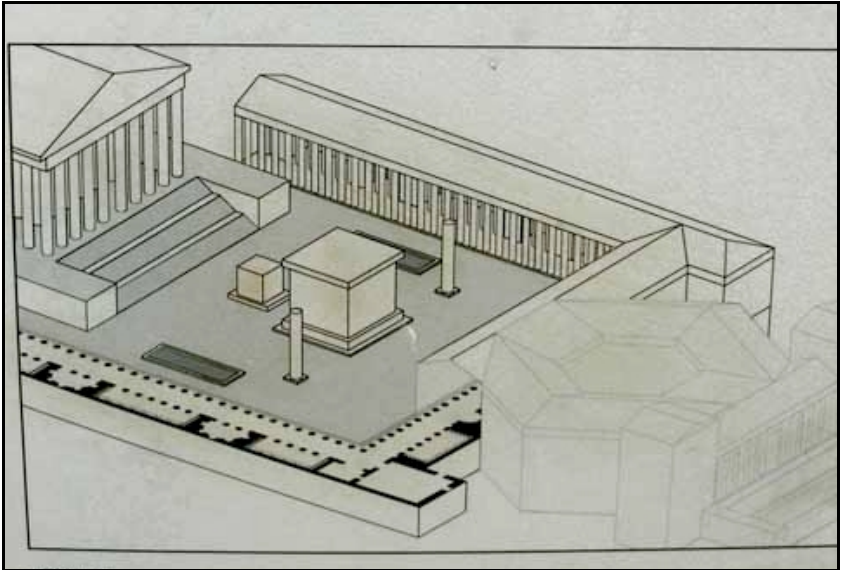
Only the first two temples are open to the public. The temple of Venus is still being restored.

These ruins are on a gigantic scale and very impressive. They date back to Roman times and earlier.

We spend about two hours walking around, admiring the skill of the builders and carvers and listening to Gazi's interesting stories of long ago days.



Some of the many pillars that have been re-erected



A drawing of the original Jupiter worship and sacrifice temple



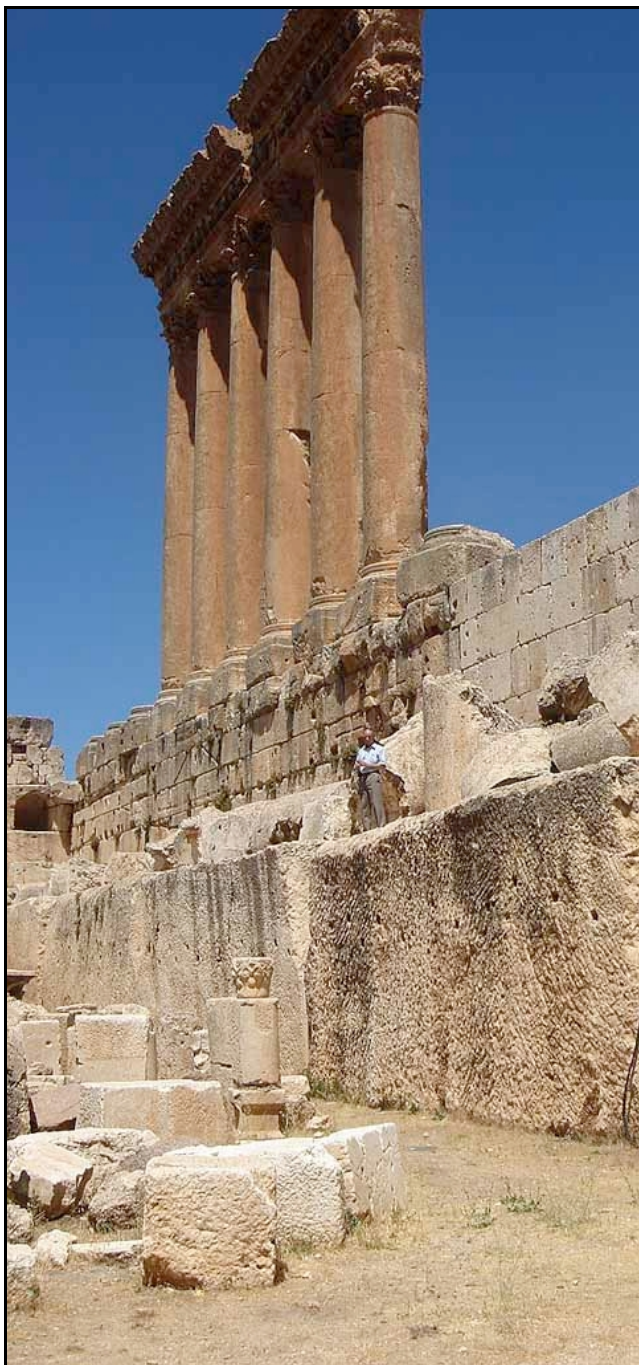
The walls came tumbling down (earthquakes)



Intricate stone carvings everywhere



Imagine the patience and skill required to carve this spiral in stone



These massive pillars have survived centuries of earthquakes



Look at the skilled workmanship that's gone into this lion's head



Now time for the gluttonous food orgy – into the temple of Baal



Even the ceilings are heavily carved



Look at the size of some of the pillars



Just incredible detail everywhere – decades of work

At the end of the temple complex tour Noel gives Gazi a tip as well as his fee. He was worth it.

As we drive away from the Baalbek temple ruins we see this magnificent Mosque and stop and take a photo.



Beautiful Baalbek mosque

The town of Baalbek

We drive through and out of the town of Baalbek. Like the rest of Lebanon it's full of old battered cars, mostly again Mercedes. Nice wide, spacious streets however and smooth road paving. No coarse chip, New Zealand road noise problems when driving on Middle East roads.

We're soon out in the plains and heading towards the higher snow-capped part of the Lebanon mountain range in the distance. We have to go over this as our Grandad's home town Bcharre is nestled in a valley on the other side.

We come across a head on car collision, but the damage doesn't look too severe and nobody seems hurt.



The Lebanon mountain range we have to cross

I see a low, orange coloured, mud brick fence outside a farm house. This looks so unusual I ask our driver to stop for a photo.



Mud brick fence in the Bekka valley

Noel seems surprised that Granddad courted and married a girl so far away from Bcharre in Baalbek. But our driver doesn't think it unusual.

We were later told by the family, that my great, great grandfather Elisha Habib Coory, circa 1820-1910 still owns land in Baalbek. This is part of the land claim they want us to action through Dad's rightful lineage. More about this later.

Driving over the mountain

We soon begin climbing the winding mountain range road. There's a considerable amount of new home building on the lower slopes.

We climb and climb and climb. This part of the Lebanon mountain range is 3½ kms high (3500 meters or 12,000 ft). By comparison, New Zealand's Mt Ruapehu is 2800 meters high.

We see a distinctive, circular patch of snow, high up the slopes.



Distinctive, circular snow patch

Two thirds of the way up the mountain the road dips down into a little valley. We see a family out in their ripe cherry orchard. The driver stops the car and we walk down to see them. The dark cherries look very nice.

The father and the elderly grandmother are wearing Muslim headdress, but the younger woman who appears to be the mother is not, but that could be what she's holding in her hand.

The father offers us some cherries to taste. They taste sweet and delicious, so the driver bargains for us and Noel pays the man about five American dollars for a huge heap of them. He wraps them in newspaper for us.

We put them on the back seat next to Noel and eat them as we drive on upward. Farhad obviously loves cherries as he eats about fifty of them.



Cherry growing mountain family



The delicious cherries

As we near the top of the mountain we pass through patches of snowy ice and it becomes quite cool, but there's no wind. We can see for hundreds of kms to the north, east and south.

Our driver stops near the top so I can get a picture of one of the spectacular ice sheets that over-hang the road.



You can see for hundreds of kms – that's a village far below



Spectacular ice formations

We reach the top and begin to descend. I feel excited and apprehensive. We'll soon be in Bcharre, the home town of our forbears.

Not far from the top of the mountain we see a shepherd boy and a his flock of black and fawn mountain goats. Not much grazing that we can see.

The mountain slopes are very steep on this seaward side of the mountain range.



Shepherd boy and flock of goats on the road leading down to Bcharre. Note the very steep mountain slopes

Into Bcharre

Soon we see the town of Bcharre in the distance. In the foreground (middle of the picture) is the famous grove of the Cedars of Lebanon.

The driver calls the town ‘Shari’ (with a rolled rrr, just like Maoris do) but it seems to be just an affectionate nickname, like Palmy for Palmerston North. Bcharre has about 9000 people.

As we drive down the steep, narrow road leading into the town, a road lined with old cars, I’m amazed at the extent of new building going on. Everywhere there seems to be cranes, concrete trucks and half-built houses.

This high mountain road into the town is rarely used because of the long climb over the mountain. Also it’s closed by snow during much of the winter.



Mountain road entrance into Bcharre



**Bcharre in the far distance with the famous cedar grove
in the middle of the photo**



Churches everywhere

There seem to be a lot of churches for a town of 9,000. There are actually about 35,000 people in the whole valley (or ravine), which stretches downhill for many kms and contains several towns. Bcharre is the largest.

Our Hotel Chbat and host Wittier Chbat

The driver finds our hotel which is called Hotel Chbat, named after the family who have run it for two generations. We meet our host Wittier Chbat, who appears to be a wise and sincere man. He's a large man, in his mid-60's I would think and about as tall as Noel but heavier. He speaks Arabic, French and reasonable English.

The hotel is rather old, but has character. It has a ski lodge type atmosphere about the place, with large rooms, dark stained timber interior walls and floors and red fabric furnishings. It seems well run and we would find the food to be exceptionally good.

It's almost empty of guests this time of the year. Evidently it fills up during the winter ski season.



Hotel Chbat in Bcharre

There's just Wittier and two quiet, humble, women staff members at present – Sohaad and Laura.

In our conversation with Wittier, I comment on the number of churches in Bcharre, and ask him what percentage of the people of Bcharre would go to church.

He gives me a look as if to say, "What a heathen" and then replies earnestly saying, "Everybody in Bcharre go to church." His sincerity makes me feel ashamed to have asked such a question.

I'm slowly beginning to realise just how Godless New Zealand and Australia are. Without the Polynesian people of New Zealand we would perhaps be the worst on earth.



Our bedroom in Hotel Chbat

We walk to Grandad's old home

After settling in our hotel room we decide to walk the approx 1 km distance to the family homestead. Noel is not 100% certain of the location, so Wittier our hotelier gives him directions. Wittier also says, "If you need to ask somebody, don't ask for Tony Fakhry, ask for the son of Nakhle Fakhry (Tony's deceased father). That the way it's done here."

So off we go. I find the walk totally fascinating. Bcharre is such a mixture of very old and very new. Some of the new buildings are 4 or 5 storey apartments. Some are single mansions, perhaps built by wealthy men as holiday homes.



The central road where our hotel is located, also the way to the Fakhry family house



New apartment building



New mansion

We come across an old snow mobile on the street, which reminds us that despite the 26°C summer warmth and sunshine, Bcharre is often snow bound during the winter. Noel remembers Tony saying in a letter, that when his father Nakhle died, Bcharre was covered in two metres of snow, above head level.



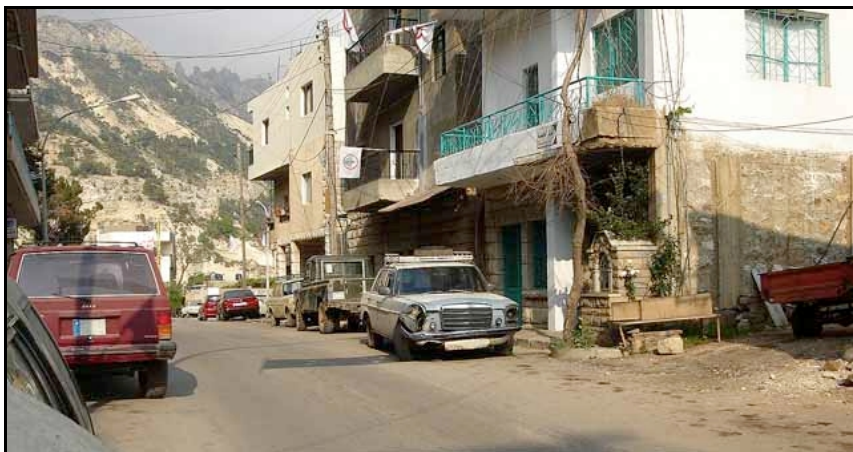
The snowmobile



**Nakhle Fakhry, Tony's deceased father
(old photo from Noel's previous visit)**

The old Fakhry (Coory) homestead and family

The Fakhry homestead and other Fakhry homes are through a short tunnel off the main road, beneath an old building. We walk through the tunnel and see some cheerful children playing.



Approaching the tunnel – entrance is to the right hand side of the old white Mercedes



Looking across the road to the tunnel



View down the tunnel

Norma, who is Tony's wife, is home with her young twins, her older girl and two of their childhood friends.

They recognise Noel who made a brief visit about eight years ago.

Her husband Tony is up at his apple orchard, about 15 kms away. He stays there for several days at a time during the busy season, as he doesn't drive and hasn't got a car.



View of granddad's house coming out of the tunnel (on the left with blue door)

The original small house that our Grandad lived in has had a living room added on to it by Tony. This new room is quite large, with a 9 ft stud and is somewhat stark by New Zealand standards. There are vinyl tiles on the floor and four long couches line each wall. On the walls are lots of pictures, mostly religious. There's a large screen TV in one corner.

It's hard to make ourselves understood. Only the older children understand a little English. They are happy and normal children, just like children everywhere.

Norma calls her husband Tony on the phone, and then phones her brother George, to bring his car and take us out to him.

Norma is a shy, quiet woman and does not seem robust in health. She's a little stooped and smokes.

Norma is the first woman I've seen smoking in Lebanon.



From L to R, Norma's twins, friend Raneen, friend Elinor, Norma's daughter Marie-Noel, Norma and Noel



Norma Fakhry, Tony's wife



This is an old photo taken in 1999 of Tony's eldest son (rear) who is away at University at present

A translator miraculously turns up

While we're waiting, Norma serves us red coloured drinks that taste like mango. Then comes an answer to a prayer. The older girls bring a woman Miriam in from the house next door to translate for us.

Miriam looks to be about 30 and is visiting Bcharre from Australia. She speaks fluent Arabic and English. She's the sister-in-

law of Milaad Fakhry, the artist and sculptor who also lives next door and is a relative of ours. More about him later.

Miriam is a cheerful and likable girl, very outgoing, and makes a tremendous difference to our awkward language situation.

We are driven out to Tony Fakhry in his apple orchard

Norma's brother George soon arrives in an old battered black Honda Accord. He's a soldier and unlike the rest of the family, looks the classic Arab terrorist type. He's quiet and intense with close knit eyebrows. Noel notices that he has 'born to kill' tattooed on his wrist in English, although he speaks no English.

So Norma and her three children, and Noel and I squeeze into George's black car. We drive up a steep side street leading out of the town and then up into the side hills. For about 40 minutes we bounce along narrow mountain tracks with apple orchards in the flatter areas.

Miriam follows us in a van driven by her brother-in-law Milaad Fakhry the artist, a personable handsome man of about 40.

We eventually arrive at Tony's orchard, which has an impressively heavy crop of young apples. We see Tony, a solidly built man in his early 50's, propping up the heavy laden apple branches with long forked poles to prevent breakage. We wait until he's finished what he's doing.

Then Tony comes over to Noel and I, hugs us, and gives us three bristly kisses each on our cheeks. First on one cheek, then the other, then the other side again.

He looks a bit grim and uncomfortable at first, but soon relaxes somewhat as Norma puts out some food and drinks for us. We then all sit outside the little house-shed on the orchard, around a table and talk. Miriam and Milaad translate for us. Milaad lived in Australia for a few years before coming back to Bcharre as an artist and speaks reasonably good English. It's a beautiful setting.



At the apple orchard.

L to R Miriam, Norma's brother George (the soldier), Milaad the artist, me David and Tony Fakhry

Notice the poles propping up the heavy crop of apples

The family name clarified

There are 13 of us altogether, and we speak directly about our Lebanese family links and the family land. I ask a lot of questions to try and clarify the situation. It turns out to be quite different from what I'd thought. Milaad was most helpful and seems a very nice person.

The first thing we clarified was that we are all Fakhry's. Although Coory sounds similar to Fakhry (Farcoory) it has a totally different meaning.

The name Coory (or Hoorie as they seem to pronounce it, rolling and trilling the 'r') means 'Priest' and is an honourable title that a family may use as an inheritance when they have a Maronite Catholic priest as a direct ancestor. A little like English royalty perhaps when they hand down titles such as the Duke of Edinburgh or Prince of Wales.

However the family name, or tribal name, still remains Fakhry, which means 'proud' in Arabic.

The Fakhry's, who are all Maronite Christians (named after Saint Maron) originally came from Cyrrhus in Syria (near Antioch) in 632 AD. Cyrrhus is now part of Turkey.

A brief history of the Maronites runs as follows, taken from a book on the subject written by a Catholic Priest:

Short history of the Maronite Christians

Saint Maron lived 350 AD to 423 AD. He was the disciple of the hermit Zebinas, who was known for his greatness in prayer, spending day and night at it. Under his influence, Maron also chose to follow the hermit's life. Finding a pagan temple on the mountain near Cyrrhus, Syria where he sought his solitude, Maron destroyed its idols and consecrated it as a church to the true God.

His spirituality made Maron an instrument through whom God worked numerous miracles and his fame spread throughout the area. He lived entirely in the open air, unsheltered from the elements. And as for cures, he cured not only infirmities of the body, but of the spirit as well. He put demons to flight, healed this man's greed and that man's anger, to other men he gave self-control, and corrected intemperance or sloth.

Many men and women became his followers. The village (no longer in existence) was near Cyrrhus, Syria (now Turkey) along the banks of the Orontes River. Cyrrhus was where his holy remains lay after his death, and the town built a church in his honour.

Not long afterwards a monastery was also established nearby and called the House of Maron. It grew quickly. In 445 AD it had over 400 monks and became the principal monastery in that province. The monks of the House of Maron were responsible for the education of the people in the surrounding areas. From this developed a close spiritual community, following the example and teachings of Saint Maron. Thus they came to be called Maronites.

(The name of this monastery community town was Ara according to Milaad Fakhry.)

However in 632 AD, as the result of the Moslem conquest of Syria, many of the Maronites fled south into the rugged mountain valleys of Lebanon for safety. (Seven families according to Milaad.)

450 years later, in 1098 AD with the coming of the Crusaders to Moslem-controlled Lebanon, the Crusaders were delighted to find fellow Christians willing to help in their fight against the Moslems. The Maronites supplied a fighting force of 40,000 men, described as being “astute and prone to fighting and battling. They are good archers, using the Italian style of cross-bow.”

As the centuries rolled by, there was continuous contention between Christians and Moslems in the Lebanon region, which was then still part of Syria.

In the mid 1800's, with Lebanon now under Turkish rule, the situation became extremely tense. Lebanon became a theatre of intrigues, revolts, and battles. In 1860 it came to a head and Moslem factions led a series of massacres. 12,000 Christians were killed, 360 villages destroyed. Also 500 churches were torn down, 23 schools demolished and 42 monasteries burned. Families were dispossessed of their lands and the mass immigration of Christian Lebanese began.



Photo of 12 of us present taken by George.

L to R Milaad's wife with her three children, her sister-in-law Miriam, Milaad, Tony's daughter, me David, Noel, Norma, Tony and his son.

Grandad's land situation clarified

Evidently our great, great grandfather Elisha Habib Coory (Fakhry), circa 1820-1910 also lost his land holdings in this uprising. His land holdings are believed to be located in Baalbek, Bcharre, and other parts of the Kadisha Valley in which Bcharre is located.

According to the family, these lands are currently 'squatted on' and can now, since the wresting of the country from Turkish rule after World War I, be legally reclaimed by a direct male descendant of Elisha Habib Coory (Fakhry) from exile. This is where my dad, Elias (Alex) Coory comes into the picture. He's a direct descendant of Elisha Habib Coory.

Whether he is the only, or oldest (currently aged 90) descendant is not clear.

It seems unlikely that dad would be the only one with the legal right, as dad's father Joseph Coory was the younger of the two sons of Habib Coory, and he was in turn the younger of the two sons of Elishah Coory. If you can follow all that.

However, the Fakhry family in Lebanon seem in no doubt that dad has the authority to give Tony Fakhry power of attorney to act on dad's behalf in reclaiming the lands.

I say to Tony, that if we are successful in reclaiming the land, we would not be happy to see families evicted off the land, but would have no objection to the family charging them rent. He seems to reluctantly assent to this.

Tony Fakhry

Tony is evidently not a direct descendant of Elishah Coory. He seems somehow linked with a female side of the family. The apple orchard we are now on was inherited through his mother.

We were to find throughout our stay in Bcharre, that Tony Fakhry is spoken of very highly by all concerned. His integrity seems beyond question. Although he looks a bit of a rough diamond, he's a traditionalist and is very proud of the way he has looked after grandad's home and possessions. He also seems very religious,

like all of the Fakhrys and his letters reflect this. Our ancestor Elisha Coory is also highly respected.

Tony tells us that he's happy for the land to remain in dad's name, or in my name, being the eldest son. All he wants is the land rightfully reclaimed.



Tony Fakhry

I sense a strong emotional attachment to the land, similar to that of the Maori spiritual attachment to ancestral land.

We're invited back to Tony and Norma's house for another visit tonight, and for an evening meal tomorrow night. We're then driven back to Bcharre and our hotel by George.

Sumptuous evening meal at the hotel

Noel has often talked to me about how good the food was at our Bcharre hotel when he last visited.

As we go in to the dining room and sit down for our evening meal, I see that he was not exaggerating. The food variety on our table is huge. Sohaad our food server has placed about 12 introductory food choices – egg plant, olives, tomatoes, hummus, salads, mini sausages, potato salad, yoghurt, rice and other dishes. This is called mezza.

Then she brings in the main courses, chicken casserole, meat balls in gravy and onion, and some other foods I have never seen before. It's not expected that you eat everything.

The Lebanese deserve their world famous reputation for cuisine. No sweets, apart from diced fruit and thick, unsweetened yoghurt.

Downtown Bcharre

After our meal it's dark outside but we decide to walk downhill to the town centre about 1 km away, to the internet café and send an email to our families back home. We come across another Virgin Mary grotto. They are all over Bcharre.



Virgin Mary grotto

The town centre turns out to be a street of shops, cafes and offices about half a km long. The traffic is busy for a small town on a Monday evening, mostly high spirited young hoons in old cars with the inevitable tooting of horns.



Downtown Bcharre

We find the internet café which has about 10 computers. It's half full of young people. Most of the girls look like sisters to my sister Barbara, and the young men like brothers to my son Michael.

We try and send an email home to Marie, Rana and my sister Mary who has also visited and stayed in Bcharre. Due to our ignorance, we lose the first email when we exceed our time allowance and have to start all over again.

Evet Fakhry

We then walk a different way back, uphill to Tony and Norma's house. We pass through scruffy, untidy back streets and past very old, run down buildings. I suppose these could be described as comfortable and homely in a sense, but both Noel and I would find it hard to live here permanently, having got used to the comparative cleanness and elegance of New Zealand cities.

It's all relative, I remember coming back from California and Utah in the 1980's and thinking that New Zealand looked comparatively scruffy.

We again visit the Fakhry family and find our third translator, another relative, Evet Fakhry, a widow about 60 who lives in the last house on the left hand side of the tunnel that leads through to Tony's house from the road.

Evet is a loud, somewhat bossy, but loving, gossipy Aunt Mary Morris type. Every inch a people person, who knows everybody and everything that goes on. I take an instant liking to her.

As soon as she sees me she says, "Now he's a Fakhry!" insinuating I suppose, that Noel does not quite look the part, which is correct. His tallness, sandy hair, and lack of any olive colouring in his complexion don't make him look like a local. Yet his natural personality, love of good food, dining out and socialising, is more Lebanese than mine.

I seem to take more after the mystical, hermit type Lebanese that this region is noted for.



Noel, Evet Fakhry, David and Tony Fakhry

We learn more about the land issue

Evet is quite a stropky woman and insists that we speak as much Arabic as possible. She teaches me the Arabic word for good night, which I remembered and used for weeks, but as I write this now, I've forgotten. How easy it is to lose language that we don't constantly hear or use.

We first look at some photos that Noel and I have brought with us, then Tony wants to run over the whole land question again. We spend a long time doing this, and with Evet's quite good command of English and her extensive local knowledge, we learn a great deal and obtain a clearer picture.

Evet also warns darkly of mafia-like influences in the region and indicates that the land will not be given up easily. I sense that she has a fondness for the melodramatic and is perhaps exaggerating.

Evet helps me write out the exact wording I will need to use if I get power of attorney from dad and in turn hand it over to Tony. My name on the document must include that of all my forefathers going back to Elisha; ie, David, Elias, Joseph, Habib, Elisha Fakhry of Bcharre, North Lebanon.

She also gives me Tony's full name, Antonious Nakhle Fakhry and his land registration number.

I take a photo of the old lounge of the house interior which has an unusual log ceiling.



Old lounge part of the house with the log ceiling

Tony gifts our dad a bottle of the famous Lebanese spirit drink Arak

Then we are taken down to see the large underground cellar of the house, where there's an old still. Tony gives me a large bottle of Arak for Dad. Arak is a triple-distilled spirit of grapes and is famous throughout the Middle East. It's colourless like water and tastes of aniseed which is introduced at the third distillation.

He also presents Noel a bottle of his home made wine.

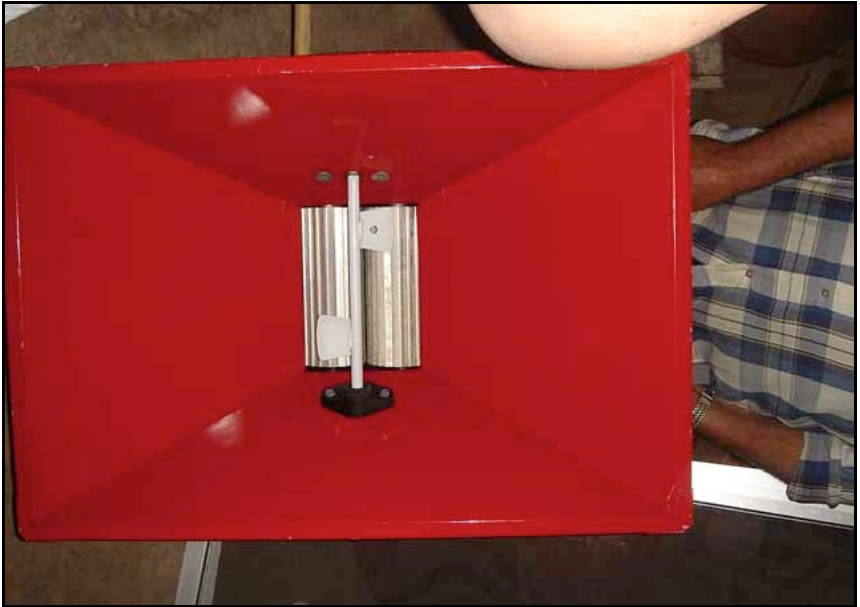
Tony also shows us other possessions of our grandfather which he proudly protects in the basement. We can look up at the roof of the basement and again see whole raw tree trunks supporting the floor of the old house above us. The house was built by Elisha during the 19th century.



The basement with wine and Arak making ingredients



Part of an ancient copper still, in the basement, Evet on the right



A machine to crush grapes



Granddad's old mesh wall food safe, common before refrigerators

Noel and I walk home at midnight. The streetlights are now off to save power. The stars are very clear.

We see an orangey-brown checkered frog outside our hotel back door.



The frog

Tuesday 28 June 2005

Impressive views from the hotel

We both had a good sleep last night but woke up hot. We have a lovely breakfast.

The morning view of the surrounding mountains from the hotel is quite impressive. It would probably be even more so in the early spring, when the mountains would still be snowclad.

In the photo below we're looking from our hotel across the deep Kadisha Valley ravine which has been scoured out over the centuries by the river below, to the village of St Charbel on the other side.



The view from our hotel window

We visit the Monastery of St Antonious

Wittier Chabat our hotelier has arranged a driver to take us around the local Kadisha Valley tourist sites today.

The driver soon arrives in the inevitable Mercedes, but does not understand English, only French and Arabic.

Our first visit is about 20 kms further down the Kadisha Valley, to the lonely Monastery of St Antonious, a famous local saint whom Tony Fakhry was named after. Antonious brought the first printing press to the Middle East in the early 1600's.

A narrow road leaves the main valley road and winds deep down into the bottom of the valley. It's greener and lusher down here than the higher Bcharre part of the valley. The rocky cliffs are impressive.

We stop the car on the way down to take a photo of the monastery and I get my foot snared by a vicious tough weed that looks and acts like barbed wire. I also see nearby some highly unusual beautiful wild flowers that have white petals and purple spikes.



Vicious barbed wire weed



**The wild flowers with white petals
and purple spikes**



**St Antonious Monastery located deep down
in a lonely valley**

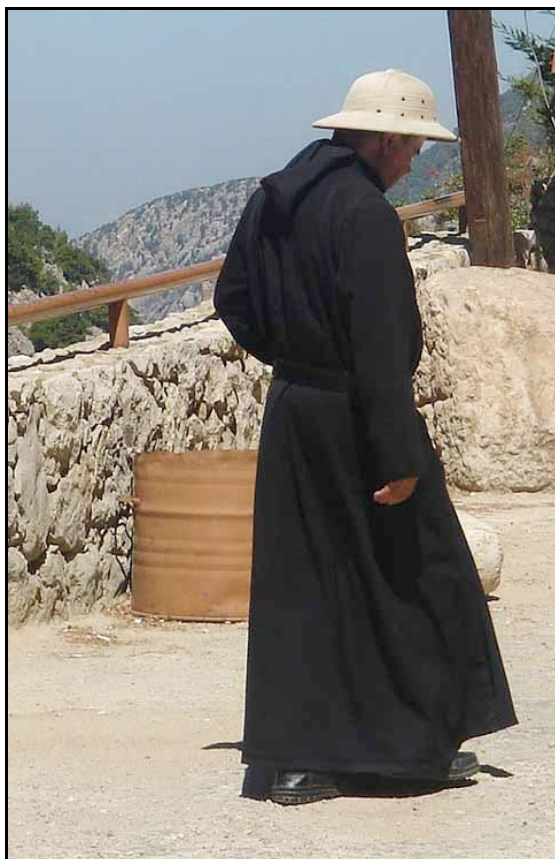
The monastery is built into the limestone mountainside and is quite impressive inside. There are still monks living there today. The two we see act a little oddly and wear safari-like hats.

We see the old printing press and an Arabic Bible that was printed on it. We also see a beautifully made priestly vestment called a chasuble.

The living area of the monastery looks surprisingly elegant.

The monastery chapel goes deep into the mountain rock. Some of the roof is still bare exposed rock.

There are three large bells outside which must sound strikingly loud down in this narrow, rocky, cliff-lined valley. I would have liked to have heard them sound.



One of the monks at St Antonious Monastery



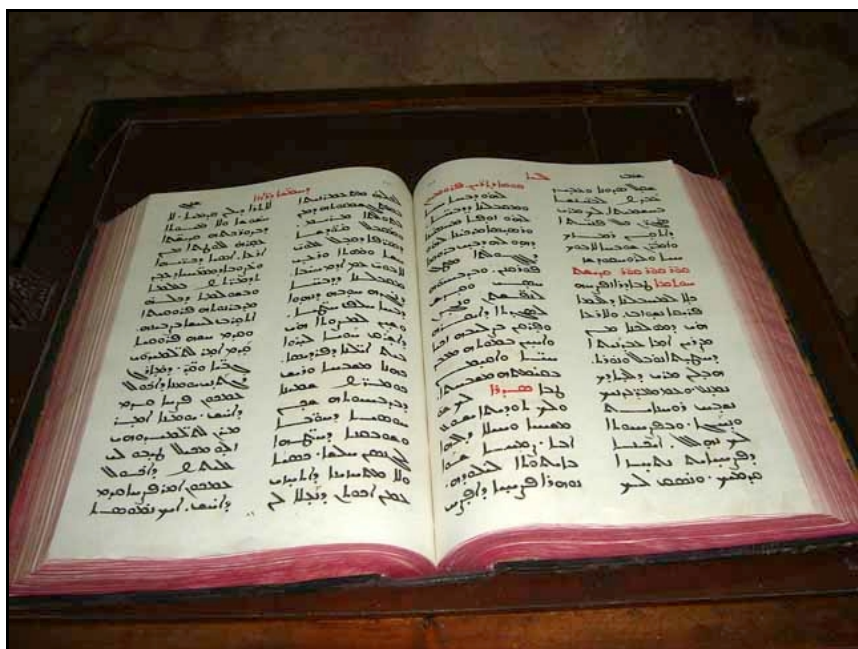
Another one of the monks



St Antonious



His 400 year old printing press



A Bible he printed on the press



A priest's chasuble, beautifully made



The monastery living area



The chapel, built into the rock of the mountain



The triple bells

Finally we tour the nearby cave where the monks used to carry out their exorcisms of devils. Noel and I gingerly climb up the jagged rocks into the steep, dark higher recesses of the rocky cave which is partially lit by dim electric bulbs. Suddenly there's a power cut and the cave is plunged into blackness.

Luckily for us there's a small table down below next to the altar, with seven candles burning. When our eyes adjust to the darkness we can just see enough to carefully climb down the jagged rocks again.



The exorcism cave



The candles that saved us during the power cut

On the way back up to the main road, we drive pass some unusual rock formations on the hillside.



Unusual rock formations

The famous Cedar Grove

Our next stop is to be the famous Cedar's of Lebanon Grove.

As we drive, our driver is listening to the famous Lebanese woman singer Fairouz whose CD I bought in Beirut.

Then he listens to a speaker in the Lebanese Parliament. This speaker sounds very dignified and I don't hear any interruptions or cat calls such as you get in the New Zealand Parliament. Our driver speaks a little English but can't understand us when we speak back to him.

We soon arrive at the Cedar Grove which is higher than Bcharre. I buy a souvenir Cedar plaque, bark and all, forgetting that I might have a problem with the New Zealand MAF in getting it into the country.

I'm not over-impressed with the Cedar Grove. Probably because I come from a country with many impressive trees. It has also been allowed to run down somewhat. The best example was a cedar out on the road by the souvenir shops. The cut Cedar has a very strong fragrance, not entirely pleasant. This smell evidently repels insects making the wood very durable and rot free.

There's a payment to walk around the Grove, but there was no one to collect it at the gate. We wait a while then decide to go in without paying. We haven't gone far, when the ticket man finally shows up and calls out to us. Noel goes back and pays him.



The finest looking Cedar of them all



The entrance to the Cedar Grove



The Cedar Grove from the road

As we walk along the path leading into the grove, I see Lavender plants lining the pathway and take a picture of it for my sweetheart Marie who loves the fragrance of Lavender. The fragrance in the air is very strong.

Many of the 375 mature Cedar trees in the Grove have had branches sawn off them, as branches break each year under the weight of snow. This also provides the tourist trade with plentiful supply of slices of wood for souvenirs.



Lavender plants, my wife Marie's favourite

Skillful carvings in dead Cedars

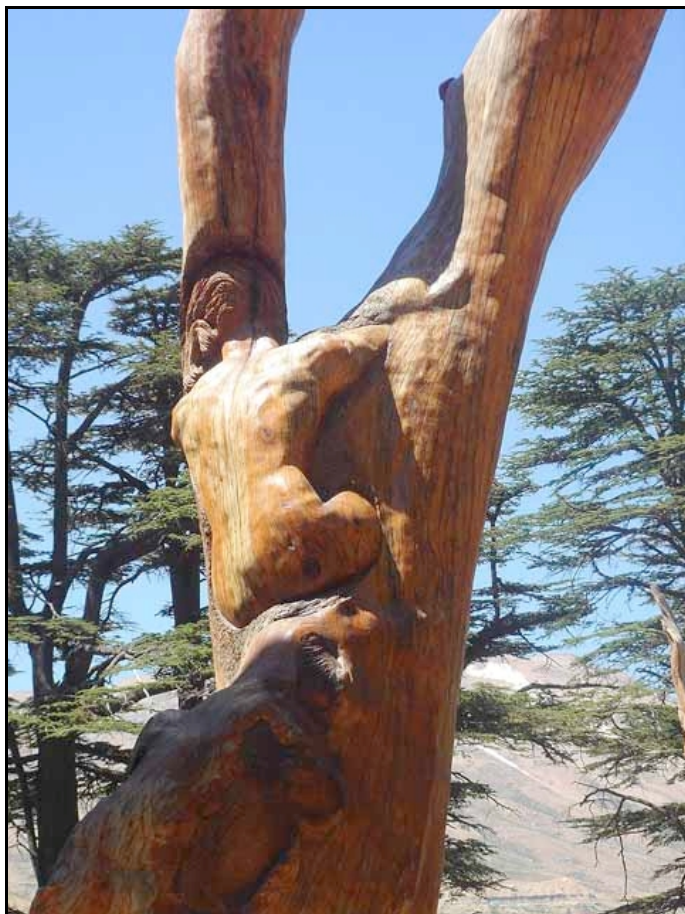
Probably the highlight of the Cedar Grove are the carved dead Cedars in the centre. As you can see below, the mostly Christian themed carvings are quite skillful.



A dead Cedar



Can you see a nose and mouth?



Human torso



Jesus on the cross



Jesus again

Some of the Cedars are extremely wide, and many hundreds of years old. There are also plantings of baby Cedars.



The widest Cedar we saw



New baby Cedars planted

The Grotto surprise

Our next tour stop is halfway down the steep winding road leading back to Bcharre. Our driver stops the car on the side of the winding road and motions us to get out of the car saying "Grotto."

So we get out and see a sign post pointing down a narrow mountainside track cut into a cliff face. The sign says the same thing, "Grotto."

We're not sure what the Grotto is, so we begin walking along the track.

The view out over the Kadisha Valley below is quite spectacular. We can see the town of Bcharre in the distance. There's just a steep limestone cliff face on our left side of the track and open space on the other. No guard rails here. It's a long walk. Sometimes the track winds in and out of tunnels inside the limestone cliff.



**View from the Grotto walking track,
Bcharre can be seen upper right**

After about a km or so of walking, we come to a cave opening. Nearby is a small house nestled in a tiny valley. A young man comes out of the small house to sell us tickets to tour the cave.

The cave does not look very interesting, but we buy tickets anyway. Then into the cave we walk. What a series of unexpected surprises await us.



Entrance to Grotto Cave

A short distance in we start to hear a roaring noise and soon come to a huge cavern full of deep water with a large waterfall roaring into it at one end. Mist hangs in the air. This surprises us, as there was no sign of a river outside the cave. (We find out later that the water is piped from the cave to a hydro-electric power station back on the road where we started.)



The huge deep underground pool.

From then on the cave produces surprise after surprise, as we come across ever more beautiful limestone formations. These are of world class standard. The cave would be about half a km deep into the mountain side.



Limestone rock formations



Stalactites



More stalactites

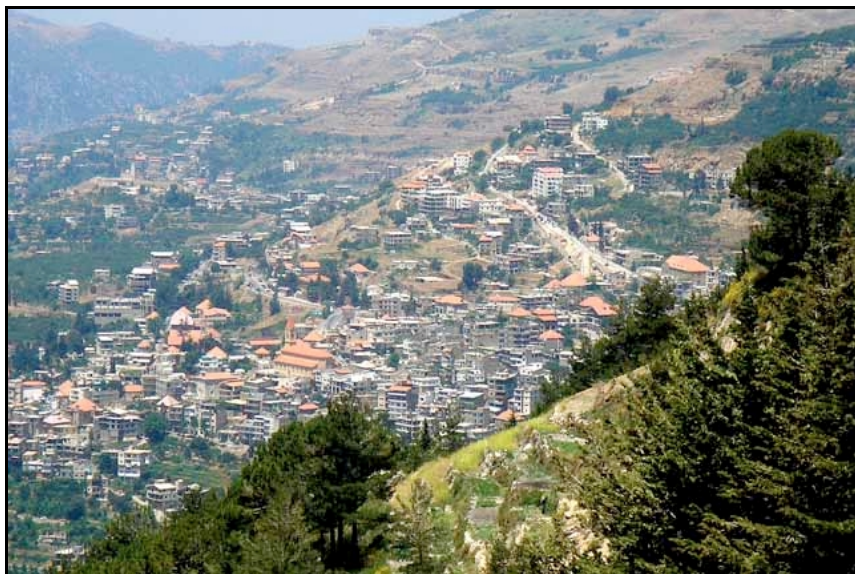


Close up of stalactites

When we exit the cave, back into the bright sunlight, and begin walking back along the cliff face path to the road, we can hear the water rushing through a pipe under the path on which we're walking, on its way to the power station. We didn't notice the sound on the way down.

The picturesque village of Charbel

Our next tour stop is the picturesque hillside village of Charbel, located across the Kadisha Valley ravine from Bcharre. This village is the highest in the valley at 1.6 km (1600 metres or 5300 feet above sea level). On the way we get a bird's eye view of Bcharre.



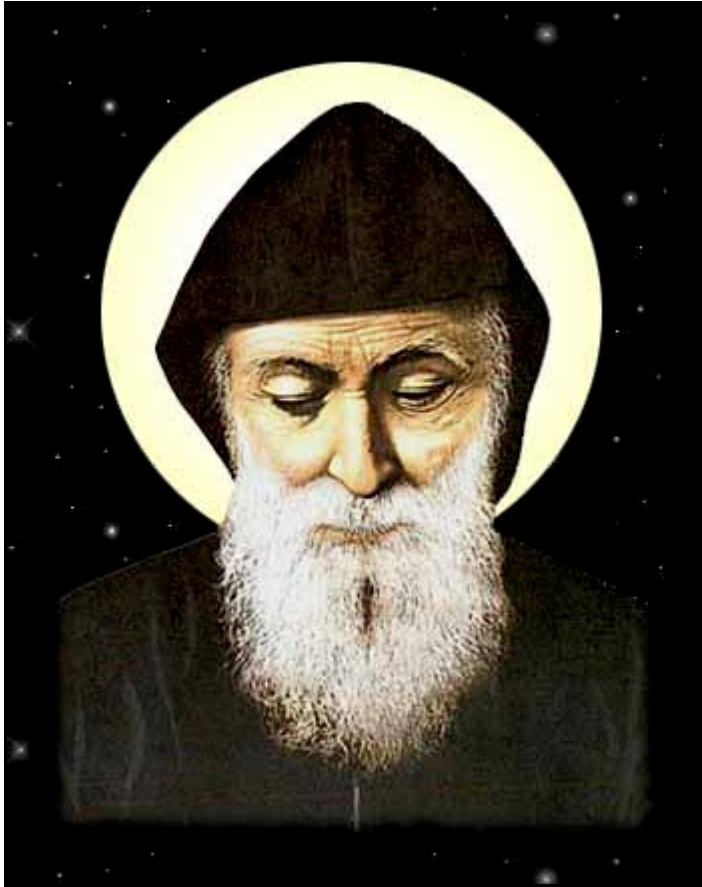
Bird's eye view of Bcharre

The village of Charbel is named after Saint Charbel, 1828 –1898. He was a monk who lived alone for 23 years on a cold hill near a monastery located here. He was a devout and very pious man.



Monument to St Charbel

After Charbel died and was buried in a crypt nearby, there began to be numerous reports of a brilliant light surrounding the crypt and cemetery. This attracted a never ending stream of visitors. Soon there began to be reports also of healings and Charbel was eventually canonised as a saint.



Painting of St Charbel

The winding Charbel village streets are quaint, and are all uphill or downhill, with courtyards here and there. Noel says it reminds him of an Italian village.

There are many French signs around the place. Lebanon was controlled by France during the period between the first and second World Wars.

We visit the Maronite church of Saint Charbel. Quite beautiful inside.



St Charbel Maronite church interior

We also come across a street water fountain, with a notice in English saying, donated by Walter Coury.

This Coury spelling is logical but unusual to see in Lebanon, or anywhere for that matter. Usually it's written Khoury. It was probably donated by a Coury living overseas.



Water fountain, donated by Walter Coury

We stop walking and buy some fruit for lunch – greengage plums and last season apples. We sit out on the street in the shade to eat them. There are two laughing, friendly ladies across the road in their craft shop having lunch also. They invite us over to try their lunch. Among other foods they are eating are small savoury mince rolls wrapped in cooked grape leaves. Very nice and tasty. They sell a lot of grape leaves for food in Lebanon.



The picturesque streets of St Charbel



Where we sat and had lunch

After lunch we walk higher up the hilly village. This is a very peaceful and timeless place.

We come across this donkey snoozing in the sun.



St Charbel donkey

Lebanese flags and power poles

We also notice two Lebanese flags flying. I later asked our hotelier why there are two, and he says that one (the bottom one) is a Christian Lebanese flag and sometimes has red crosses on it. He then shows us the same one on his hotel.



Lebanon's two flags



The Christian flag on our hotel with the crosses on

Lebanon is charming in many ways, but has ugly power poles. They are mostly steel girder types like this one in the next picture. They tend to spoil picturesque villages like St Charbel and Bcharre.



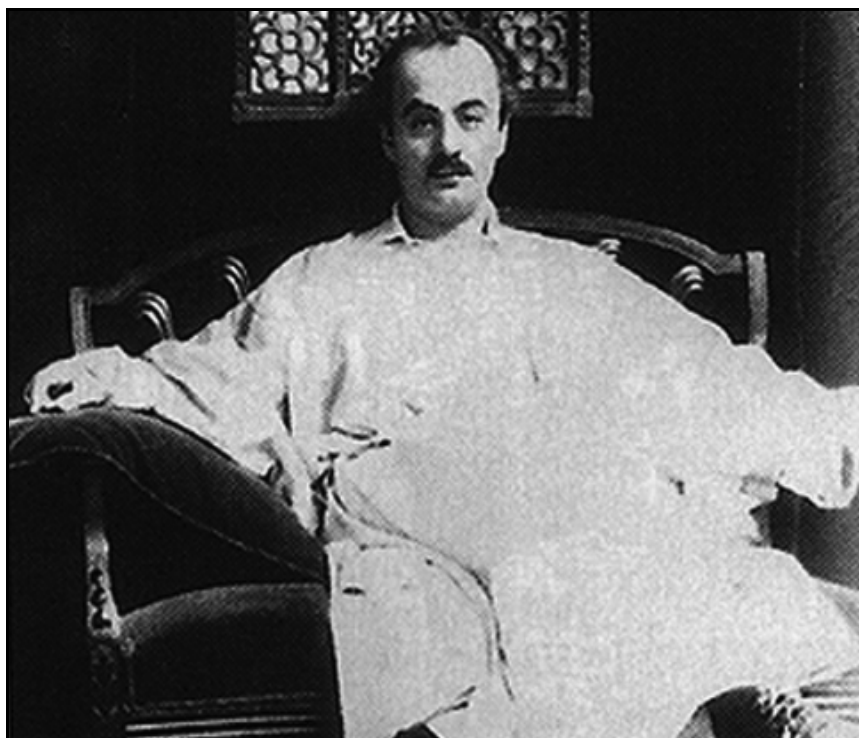
Ugly steel girder power poles



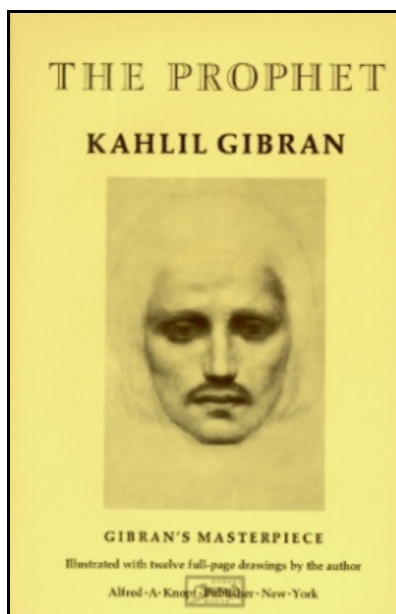
View across the ravine from St Charbel to the village of Bcharre

Kahlil Gibran

We walk back down to our driver who's been waiting patiently in his car. He's now going to drive us back across the ravine to Bcharre, to the tomb and museum of Kahlil Gibran, the world famous Bcharre writer and artist who wrote the little book called "The Prophet."



Kahlil Gibran and his famous book below



This well known book, which is especially popular with women, has sold millions of copies worldwide and been translated into over a hundred languages.

This book is a wise and eloquent farewell address to villagers, by a prophet who has lived alone up in the mountains for many years, and is about to depart to his homeland across the sea. (This fictitious prophet bears a strong resemblance to St Maron.)

In the book the villagers ask the prophet for advice on numerous everyday matters, and he replies to them with wise and beautiful eloquence. For example, this is his reply to a question about children.

On Children

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, "Speak to us of Children."

And he said: Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you, but not from you,

And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love, but not your thoughts.

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies, but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

The book would be in most public libraries and also on-line. You can download a copy free here.

<https://fb2bookfree.com/classic/82-the-prophet.html>

If you appreciate fine writing, you're sure to enjoy 'The Prophet.' It's a truly beautiful book.

We arrive at the Kahlil Gibran museum. This museum is filled with Kahlil Gibran's unusual original paintings.

We were not allowed to take photos. But below is a typical sample.



Kahlil Gibran painting



The tomb and museum of Kahlil Gibran

Noel recognises one of the paintings as a print he has in his bathroom at home.

The quality of the paintings varies tremendously, which I suppose is to be expected with a lifetime's work on display.

In particular, some of his charcoal sketches are highly skilled.

There are no faces on some of his paintings.

Some of his artwork can be seen by clicking on this link: <https://www.pinterest.nz/rogergibran/gibran-paintings/>

As we walk out of the museum we hear and see workmen outside building an extension to the museum. They're using jack hammers and spraying concrete, etc. Very noisy racket and as Noel points out, none of the workmen are wearing ear protection.

I take a picture of one of the Maronite Catholic churches nearby.



Maronite Catholic church in Bcharre

Milaad Fakhry the artist

Our driver then drops us off back at our hotel.

Tonight we're having an evening meal with Tony and Norma and the Fakhry clan at the old house. We walk there from our hotel, leaving about 4:30 pm.

As soon as we walk through the tunnel leading to Tony's house we see Evet there, sitting outside her modest home. She shows us through her little house. I ask her if she's eating with us tonight. She seems uncertain.

Our cousin Milaad Fakhry's house is next door to the right of Tony's house. Noel and I stop to admire his decorative pink concrete work. He comes out and invites us in. Milaad is the artist whom we met at the apple orchard yesterday.



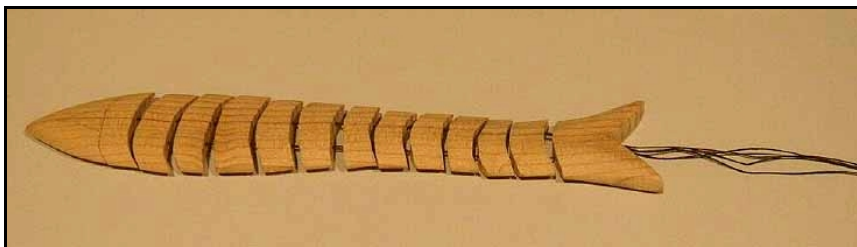
**Milaad's home. Noel is talking to him
over the fence, behind the tree**

Milaad first shows us his outside workshop and his artist's carving and carpentry tools. He also presents us with a wooden fish he's cut into many segments and held them together with a thread.

He then takes us inside his small but distinctive and attractive home. We meet his wife again, and also his obedient daughter and 16 year old son.

All of the Lebanese children we've met so far have been quiet, relaxed, well mannered and obedient to their parents. Probably due to a combination of family tradition and wholesome food.

Milaad shows us two excellent head sculptures in wood he's carved himself, and of which he seems quite proud. One is of Kahlil Gibran and the other is of Jesus. They are of world class standard in my opinion.



Segmented Cedar fish



Inside Milaad's distinctive home



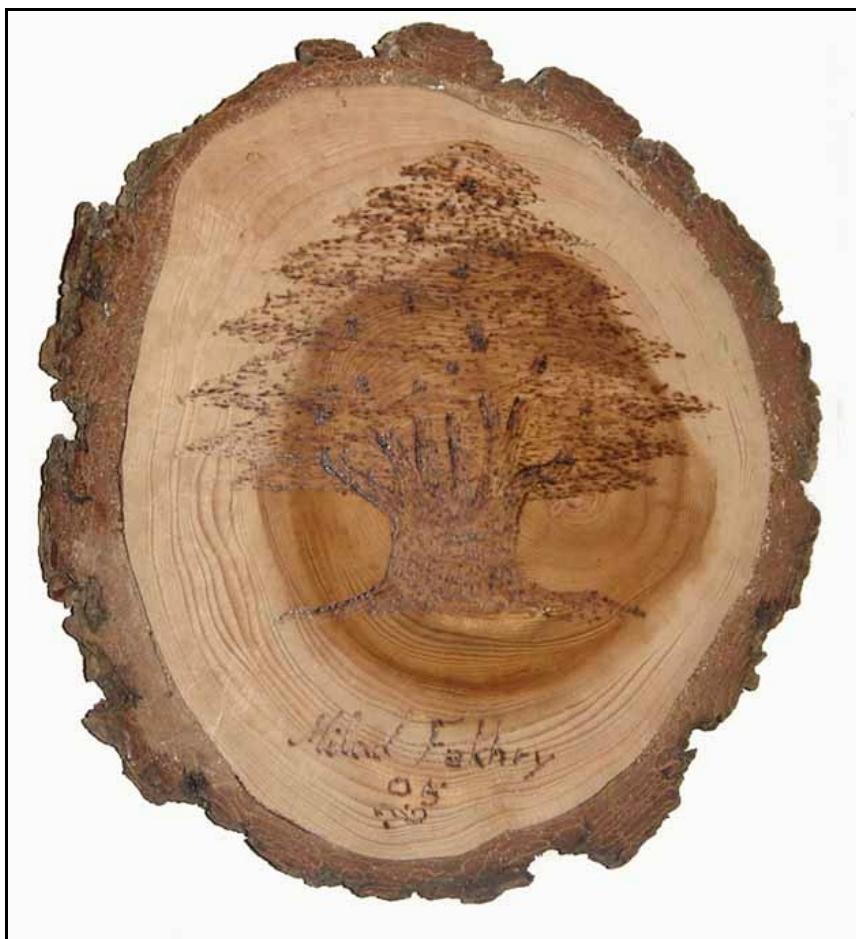
Milaad's carving of Kahlil Gibran



Milaad's carving of Jesus

Milaad then takes a slice of a strongly fragrant Cedar tree, originally from the grove we saw earlier to day, and while he talks to us of the Fakhry family and their origins, he sits on the couch and skillfully burns an engraving of a Cedar tree in the face of it. As he does so, his wife prepares cold drinks for us and his daughter serves them.

Milaad appears to be a very nice man with a fine family.



**Milaad's Cedar burnt engraving of a Cedar tree
which he gifted me**

Dawnyer a niece of Tony

We then leave Milaad and walk next door to Tony and Norma's for our evening meal. Evet is also there.

We are introduced to Tony's niece, an attractive young lady visiting Bcharre for today, with the impeccable and flawless skin of Lebanese youth. Her name is pronounced Dawnyer, but she tells me, that because it's hard for people to remember and pronounce her name, she asks her friends to call her Daide ('Daydee').

Dawnyer is studying at the University in Beirut and is the person who emailed us earlier this year in New Zealand identifying herself as Daide, Tony Fakhry's nephew.

She obviously meant, Tony Fakhry's niece. She's also the one who writes Tony's letters for him in English.



Dawnyer on the right and Tony's sister on the left

I remember that I've left the little greenstone carving that my Maori friend Tom Tata of Tauranga gave me. I want to gift it to Tony, as they seem to appreciate such things in Lebanon. I'm about to walk back to the hotel and get it, but Dawnyer offers to drive me back. So we walk out to the main road where her old Honda Civic is parked. But the car is reluctant to start, and when it does, she has a hard time keeping the engine running as it continually stalls, much to her embarrassment.

We finally make it to the hotel after numerous stops. Before returning, I have a look under the bonnet and check the rubber vacuum hoses for leaks, but I can't see any splits. Modern fuel injected engines are not as easy to fix as the old carburettor type engines.

A feast to even excel my aunt Mary Morris

We finally make it back to the house again and go in to a huge feast laid out on the table that would even put our Aunt Mary Morris (our dad's sister) to shame. There's an infinite variety of dishes on the table, just like at the hotel last night. There are even some whole fishes, cooked with their heads, eyes and tails.

Before we eat, I present the little greenstone carving to Tony. He gratefully accepts it with much dignity.



Our feast at Tony and Norma Fakhry's house

Tony's sister, who is also Dawnyer's mother is also present tonight. She's the woman in the previous page photo with the light brown hair.

Much of the discussion is quite animated, especially between Tony and Evet regarding the family history and land problems. Dawnyer is quite quiet.

Tony opens a bottle of Arak

Tony opens another bottle of Arak and pours it out into little glasses. It's highly diluted with about 4/5ths water. I did not drink a glassful due to its high alcohol content, but out of curiosity I taste some of Noel's. It's much milder than I expected and tastes strongly of aniseed.

We take some more family photos and then say "siede" goodnight (the Arabic word Evet taught me last night) and Noel and I leave about 10:45 pm. Some of the other Lebanese words we've learned are 'shukrun' (thank you) 'marhaba' (hello) although throughout the Middle East they more often say 'haalow' for hullo, 'naam' (yes) and 'la' (no).

As Noel and I walk home in the dark, we feel very satisfied. This is our last night in Lebanon and we feel that our visit has gone well. However, I would have liked an extra day – one, to attend a Maronite church service, and two, to walk the scenic track down through the ravine and see the catacomb caves where the people lived during the Moslem uprisings in the 19th century. I may come back, but it's such a long, long journey, even in this jet plane age.

A driver is to meet us in the early morning, at 5 am to take us back to Beirut airport to fly to Jordan. Noel tells me that Evet told him earlier tonight that the drive to the airport is longer than the driver has allowed. This is a bit of a concern to us.

Wednesday 29th June

Our airport driver a familiar face

We awake about 4:30 am to Noel's cell phone alarm and get ready to leave at 5 am in the dark. We trundle our two suitcases out into the lobby and there to our surprise is sitting our familiar driver Bassem. He was the one who drove us on our first tour down the Lebanon coast to Sidon and Tyre with our female guide Nadine.

He's smiling and unperturbed as always, even though he tells us he's been waiting an hour, since 4 am. Evidently we were given the wrong pick up time by our tour operator Joseph.

"No worry," he says. I mentally brace myself for a hair-raising drive down the mountain to the airport. But no, Bassem drives quickly, but as smoothly and professionally as ever.

We get to the airport on time, but only with about half an hour to spare.

Why we have to fly to Israel via Jordan

Our flight to Jordan takes about an hour. We have to fly to Jordan to enter Israel, as Lebanon and Syria have both closed their borders to Israel.

There's strong animosity towards Israel in Lebanon. In fact, if you have an Israel stamp on your passport, you cannot enter Lebanon. You have to wait, confined in the airport, until you can catch another plane out.

Our time in Jordan proves to be one of the most interesting of our whole trip, but more about that in the next segment **Jordan and Israel** which is still to be done. After that comes **Egypt**, another fascinating place.

Jordan and Israel segments next (but not yet completed)

Any comments or corrections – email David Coory
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