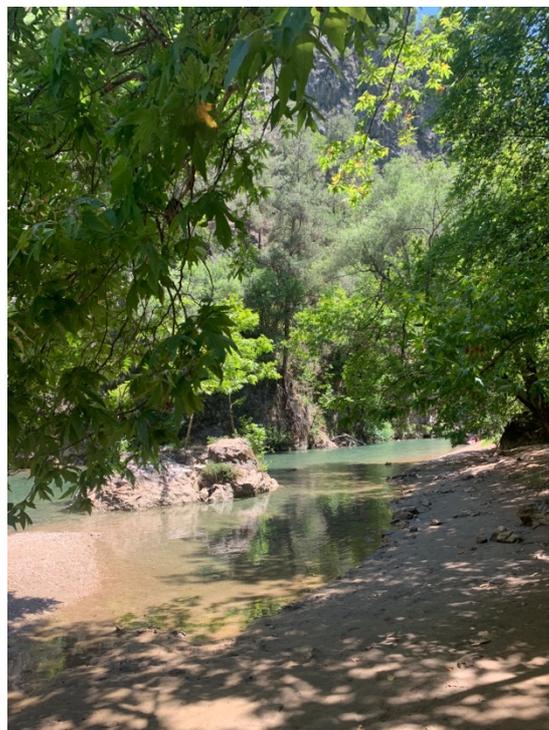




Beirut Chronicles: A Memorable Journey of Crises, Cultures, and Adventures



Before departure

Prior to my MFS studies, I had the incredible opportunity to spend a semester on an exchange program in Tokyo, Japan. During that time, I immersed myself in the culture and found a genuine passion for exploring different countries. Therefore, I became eager to continue that journey by applying for an MFS program to conduct my master's thesis abroad.

Initially, our group, comprising me and two classmates, had planned to conduct our research in the Maldives. However, due to time constraints, we had to reconsider our destination. Through a contact, we were fortunate to get in touch with a prominent urban planning company in Beirut, Lebanon, which presented several intriguing and ongoing projects that we could actively participate in. This became the deciding factor for choosing Lebanon as our destination.

As someone who had previously traveled to the Middle East, Lebanon proved to be as expected. The bustling traffic, the transformation of cities as the sun sets (a cultural phenomenon in many Middle Eastern countries, where social activities pick up once the heat recedes), and the diversity of food were all part of the experience. However, I was aware that the language barrier might pose a challenge. Fortunately, one member of our group was fluent in Arabic, which eased our communication, although we found that many people we encountered with could speak English as well.

In terms of preparations, it did not require any specific vaccinations for our trip. As for visas, we opted for an on-arrival visa, which covered the entire duration of our stay in Lebanon.

Upon arrival

Before reaching Beirut, we engaged in multiple Zoom meetings with our contact person. During these sessions, we planned our timeline and solidified the direction of our respective thesis projects, as each of us was conducting individual research. Originally, our departure was scheduled for the beginning of April. However, considering the unstable situation in Beirut at the time, we decided to postpone our trip by a couple of weeks. This delay afforded us the extra time to fully immerse ourselves in our projects and arrive even more prepared for the experience that awaited us.



Financials

Initially, we held a shared belief that Beirut would be a more budget-friendly destination compared to Stockholm. However, our assumption proved to be incorrect. The value of the currency didn't stretch far, making the expenses feel higher. As for food, traditional Lebanese cuisine turned out to be slightly more affordable.

A significant challenge we faced in Beirut was the lack of a functioning public transportation system, with only minibuses and taxis available. Relying on Uber for our transportation became costly and impractical, despite splitting the expenses among ourselves. Given the ongoing economic crisis in Beirut, the city did not offer the affordability we had hoped for.

Accommodation

Before embarking on our journey to Beirut, we made arrangements through Airbnb.com to rent a three-bedroom apartment in an area called Achrafieh. Initially, we decided on a one-week rental, uncertain about the standards and what to expect. The building complex promised 24-hour electricity and Wi-Fi, though we discovered that the reality was slightly different, with power and internet available for approximately 20 hours per day. Even though it was considered a modern building with amenities, it fell short of our initial expectations. Ps: Throughout Lebanon, it's a common occurrence for power to vanish for extended periods.

During the first week, we actively searched for alternative accommodation options, but the high season made it challenging. Many apartments were already occupied, and the ones we did find didn't meet our standards. So, we made the decision to extend our stay in the same apartment for an additional four weeks, resulting in a total of five weeks in Achrafieh.

As our time in Beirut progressed, we gained a deeper understanding of the city and realized that we wanted to explore other neighborhoods. After weeks of searching, we finally found a two-bedroom apartment in the area of Hamra. This neighborhood had an inviting student-friendly atmosphere, right in front of the Lebanese American University (LAU), where we encountered numerous students daily. The coffee shops were suitable for studying and the overall vibe of Hamra made us feel like active participants in the local culture. It was quite the change from our experience in Achrafieh.



Project

Prior to my departure, my intention was to study the profound impact of Beirut's recent crises—the economic downturn in August 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic that struck in February 2020, and the catastrophic port explosion in August 2020. My initial focus revolved around understanding how these crises had affected the city's resources. However, upon my arrival in Beirut and the start of preliminary interviews, I found out that the most significant factor hindering the country's recovery was the massive influx of refugees in 2011 and the mismanagement of the situation.

Out of the approximately 6 million people living in Beirut, 1.8 million are refugees. This substantial refugee population has led to tensions among different groups, between different nationalities, religious affiliations, or political parties. The country's history of civil war also contributed to these underlying tensions. It became clear that the challenges caused by the refugee crisis were deeply intertwined with the city's struggle to overcome the other recent crises.

Moreover, the presence of numerous NGOs, both international and national, added complexity to the situation. These organizations are actively involved in addressing the needs of the refugee population, which, in turn, affects the social dynamics and resources within the city.

In short, my research took a new direction, centering on the interconnections between these two factors—the refugee influx and its implications of NGOs.

City and country

During our two-month stay in Lebanon, we discovered that Beirut, though a small city, had an incredible array of restaurants, stores, and vibrant nightlife. Throughout our time there, we never felt unsafe, especially when we utilized Uber for transportation after sunset. Beirut's charm lies in its captivating blend of traditional, old buildings next to soaring skyscrapers, a reflection of the city's rich history and progressive development.

The cultural diversity within Beirut was fascinating. Lebanon has a mix of cuisines from various Middle Eastern countries, creating a culinary experience. The influence of French culture is also evident, as Beirut was once referred to as the "Paris of the Middle East." The western influence in Beirut contributed to making the cultural adjustment a bit smoother for us.



Leisure and social activities

During our free time, we tried to take part of as many activities as possible. Exploring nearby cities, as it allowed us to discover new areas. However, if planning on arriving to Beirut or Lebanon in general, keep track of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' advice, as the allowed areas may change unexpectedly over time.

Hiking became an activity that we engaged in twice during our stay. Through Instagram, we found several hiking groups that regularly organized excursions to diverse locations. The breathtaking views we encountered during these hikes were truly inspiring, and I cannot recommend this experience enough. For a reasonable price of around 15 USD per person, we were provided with transportation, light snacks, and a knowledgeable guide, making it a full day of unforgettable adventure.



Sustainability

Lebanon, unfortunately, faces significant challenges in achieving sustainability. The country struggles with critical issues like inadequate waste management, leading to both air and water pollution. Plastic waste is compelling, and the horrible traffic exacerbates the already poor air quality. Moreover, institutional corruption is in every sector, stopping the country from progress.

As for my research, it touches on several SDGs. For example, it is closely related to SDG 10, which focuses on reducing inequalities. By examining the tensions and dynamics arising from the refugee influx among different groups as well as SDG 16, as it highlights the crucial role of NGOs in supporting the goal by promoting access to justice.

Other recommendations and observations

Obtaining a sim card in Lebanon is challenging and be expensive. Having someone skilled in bargaining for a good price would be beneficial. Since communication is primarily on WhatsApp, having a sim card with data becomes a necessity.

If you are thinking of going on MFS – just do it! It will be so worth it. The journey will be challenging but fun. You'll not only gain insights into a new culture, but you'll also experience personal growth like never before. Take the opportunity!



Enjoy!