



'Let's face the music and dance...'



Is Beirut still a regional night destination, and is it as rosy as it looks? **Nagi Morkos**, managing partner, **Hodema** reveals the trial and tribulations that face this fickle sector of the industry and offers an insight into how the current security situation in Lebanon may not have to steal your limelight

SKYBAR Lebanon

“ THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGE FOR THE INDUSTRY BY FAR IS THE SEVERE ECONOMIC CRISIS THAT HAS HIT THE COUNTRY ALONGSIDE THE VIOLENCE ”

Crowds queuing, strong cocktails, loud music, crazy nights out...: for decades Lebanon has been the party scene of the Middle East. It earned its nightlife stripes during the 1960s, when international artists, socialites and businessmen flocked to Beirut and the casino – first of its kind in the region – for evenings full of glitz and glamour. Today Lebanon still holds on tight to its title. After going ‘through the wringer’ during the civil war, the sector quickly picked up to reclaim its reputation.

A bustling and varied nightlife

There is something for every reveler: the country offers hundreds of cafes, bars, restaurants and clubs. Globally famous for its national cuisine, which is halfway between Mediterranean flavors and Arab recipes, Lebanon celebrates its food at the corner of every street; from snacks to high-end restaurants. A tradition fueled by the Lebanese themselves, who enjoy spending hours eating and listening to traditional music while putting the world to rights. Many cafes also serve food and water pipes to their customers, which keeps residential streets busy and lively, even at night.

When it comes to bars, the hip areas stand alongside more popular ones. Monot and Gemmayzeh have been Beirut’s hotspots for the last decade, with dozens of restaurants and bars attracting large crowds all year round. Hamra also has its share of aficionados. For those who can afford it, the Downtown district, around Uruguay Street, hosts posh places, serving cocktails and more sophisticated food.

An alternative, underground crowd is also appearing, and, along with it, new neighborhoods are emerging. The capital’s usually quiet Mar Mikhael and Badaro are now favored by young and ‘artsy’ people who socialize in cafe-restaurants with urban decors and lounge music.

Clubbin’ to the max

And there is obviously no self-respecting night scene without clubs. Lebanon is no exception to this rule: people can sway their hips to Arab pop music, international hits, R&B, and fewer mainstems electronic and techno beats. Many establishments offer themed nights and compete against each other to stand out with the latest light, sound technology and decor. Some also showcase live performances, such as Music Hall, which can be bands or dancers. Party animals can find crowded after parties lasting way after dawn. Some of Beirut’s clubs have even made it outside the country: the rooftop Sky Bar and the underground B018 have now gained an international reputation – both for their venues and popularity.



Central Station Lebanon

In the last three years they have been actively contributing to the ‘underground style’ shift of Beirut’s nightlife. More and more partygoers favor trendy, hip, casual, mid-end venues resembling the underground scenes of Berlin, Amsterdam, London or New York. This is due to the growing popularity of electro music that requires big dance floors, casual outfits and a more refined music culture. DJ nights have emerged, organized by club owners, production houses or even radio stations. Local and international DJs attract large crowds which party until dawn. These events create a buzz and help increase the popularity of the nightclubs amongst young Lebanese and foreigners.

Beirut and beyond

Outside Beirut, many areas try not to be outdone: the sea resort of Jounieh, which became popular with its Casino during the war, as a party safe haven, still attracts large crowds of all ages.

New concepts have emerged thanks to the country’s mild climate. In the spring and summer seasons, specific nightspots open

to enjoy the weather. Many bar-restaurants, lounges and nightclubs have set up their own rooftops and open spaces. Some even have separate winter and summer venues, such as Music Hall. One of the latest fad is The Garten, a club showcasing electro and house DJs, that is rapidly becoming a nightlife landmark on Beirut Waterfront.

Another new and successful project that came to life this summer, is “Trainstation”, which is a concept that re-invented the space of an abandoned railway station in the center of the trendy Mar Mikhael neighborhood, and to re-use it as an open-sky lounge/bar. The outlet is rapidly becoming the latest “place to be” in town, where people meet over food and drinks, and listen to music, in a typical retro train station setting.”

But the epitome of summer celebrations has to be beach parties. They can last all day and night, and try to wow people with specific entertainment such as foam parties, sunset parties or even fashion shows. >

So who are the crowds fueling Lebanon's busy nightlife? First and foremost locals, who have the habit of going out regularly, thus filling the country's establishments. Foreigners, both expatriates and visitors, also account for a large part of the clientele. Gulf tourists also make up a traditional clientele. Last but not least, Lebanese living abroad represent a big honey pot for the industry during the summer season.

Partying against the hurdles

The country's nightlife offering is thus significant and varied, definitely putting Lebanon ahead of its neighbors as a popular regional night destination. However, when you take off the rose-tinted party spectacles, the view is not as glamorous.

The deteriorating political and security situation, created by the spillover of the conflict in neighboring Syria and the rise of Islamist movements in the region, fed by Lebanon's divided political leaders, is deeply affecting the industry. Since 1975 and the civil war, the country has regularly been shaken by violent ups and downs, from which the economy and the people have always got back on their feet. The current crisis, which has brought more than a million Syrian refugees into the country, is having a rapid deteriorating effect on people's spending power and affecting their usual party mood. Tripoli's usually festive Mina area is now struggling to keep up. All over the country Lebanese tend to go out less and turn back to the places they are familiar with closer to home.

The spate of incidents and blasts has also triggered travel warnings from Western countries, who try to stop their citizens from visiting the country. Some Gulf States have even issued travel bans, which are a massive blow to the Lebanese hospitality industry. Gulf visitors usually account for about 10 percent of inbound tourists, but they represent up to 25 percent of the foreign spending with peak times during holidays. The overall decline in the tourism industry thus adds more pressure to the instability of the sector, and more specifically the nightlife side of it.

The business was also hard-hit by the smoking ban implemented in 2012, which forced many smokers out of indoor venues. Some cafes, eateries, bars and clubs managed to set up outside areas, but many suffered from the legislation and had to close down.

The most important challenge for the industry by far is the severe economic crisis that has hit the country alongside the violence. The job market quickly deteriorated, impoverishing the Lebanese, and bringing into the country Syrian refugees in a precarious financial situation. Nightlife professionals were instantly impacted, particularly as going out required a significant budget for party lovers. High costs, associated with fierce competition and a large offering forced many to close down, especially

cafes and restaurants. But despite all these impediments, Lebanon's nightlife continues to buzz, as a sign of defiance – to show that it is business as usual but also as an escape from concerns of what will happen in the future.

Knocked off its pedestal?

So what are the ways to save one's hide? The first thing is obviously to cut costs, but in the long run it might impact the quality and the service. The second thing would be to bank on innovation to attract new crowds – with new concepts, menus, decors, live shows or chefs. Top events, such as festivals, still attract a large audience. Besides the traditional Baalbeck, Beiteddine and Byblos festivals, the country sees new events every year.

Another trick is to leave the capital to open in a safer area, such as Jounieh, Jbeil or Batroun. Some go further than that; developing their business abroad whilst making the most of the Lebanese nightlife reputation. The club B018 is eyeing Berlin, while Music Hall, Iris and White are styling down in Dubai and Sky Management, Sky Bar's mother company, organizes glamorous and star-studded bashes in Abu Dhabi.

The Lebanese nightlife players are not eyeing the Gulf market randomly: on top of being the fastest-developing area in the region, Dubai is the only serious competition in the area, threatening to steal the show with its high-end party scene, and the former wants to be part of it. Although it seems less genuine, diverse and more expensive, Dubai's nightlife can count on a stable wealthy clientele and, therefore, enjoy a secure environment. But until now Beirut remains more attractive due to its alternative identity and its social open-mindedness – keeping more than one trick up its sleeve to secure its title.

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Music Hall Lebanon