

Essay

CALL ME WHEN YOU land. Angry demonstrations. Airport highway interrupted. Rocks and stunt grenades being thrown at flash point. Road blocks of burning tyres everywhere. Massive military presence in the streets. Contact me urgently.' Nic, my friend from CNN Beirut, was clearly worried. I had come to ski Lebanon but, alas, the country had got out of hand again, and I was in the middle of it. 'Welcome in Lebanon,' the driver from my hotel, Le Gray, greeted me, unmoved and with a welcoming smile. 'Did you have a good flight?' He steered his limousine swiftly through checkpoints, barricades and angry demonstrators to the hotel downtown. Through the tinted windows of his luxury car, the mayhem on the streets outside was dimmed to the mere flicker of a news programme, and deposed prime minister Hariri's 'day of rage' just another Levantine comic opera.

The hotel receptionist was unperturbed by the mob on her doorstep, and seemed rather pleased to take care of my skis. 'We've had a lot of snow recently – I'm sure you will enjoy your stay.'

Raja Saade, my Lebanese mountain guide, on the other hand, was stressed out; not so much by the foreboding of another bloody civil war, but by the tight schedule imposed by an ad director who wanted him to land a hot-air balloon full of children on the harbourfront that evening. Life is a cabaret in Beirut, and war a boring affair – as long as your business doesn't suffer. 'When the shelling got louder,' says Michel Elefteriades, owner of the legendary nightclub Music Hall who was a young DJ during the civil war, 'I just turned the music up.' I left the club in the early hours with thousands of party-goers still singing along. On my way back to the hotel I read an advert for an amusement park, which stretched the length of an apartment block: 'Boys and girls: have serious fun with a laser gun.'

For the moneyed in the Middle East, Lebanon is where to spend it. As in ➤

Israeli mountain infantrymen take part in an exercise on Mount Hermon, Lebanon

'You want to ski Mount Hermon?'

Unfazed by warnings from UN peacekeepers and the threat of arrest by Hezbollah, **Andreas Hofer** sets out on a clandestine skiing trip in Lebanon's perilous borderlands



PHOTOGRAPH: ANTOINE GYORI/SYGMA/CORBIS

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► the 1960s, when the country drew Europe's party crowd from the Côte d'Azur and Marbella, Lebanon remains a synonym for hedonism and sophistication, attracting 20 million Lebanese émigrés who live all over the world, rich Arabs and Beirut billionaires, and tourists with a taste for decadence. Yet skiing is mainly the domain of the local upper class; foreigners rarely venture into the mountains here, even though resorts such as Faraya Mzaar offer comfort unheard of in Val d'Isère or Hintertux and decent snowfall is guaranteed. Lebanon's geography – responsible for the country's ethnic patchwork and fiendishly complex religious and political landscape – makes it a skier's playground.

The two highest massifs in the Lebanon mountain range can be accessed from the ski resort of Cedars (Qurnat as Sawda, 3,088 metres) and the more luxurious Faraya Mzaar (Mzaar, 2,465 metres). The



Above, the descent at Faraya Mzaar ski resort. Top, an Israeli army convoy on Mount Hermon

highest summit in the Anti-Lebanon Range, Mount Hermon (2,814 metres) cannot officially be skied as the summit is in Syrian territory, patrolled by UN peacekeepers – hardy skiers recruited from Austria's mountain infantry. The mountain is a conflict area, sloping down to the occupied Golan Heights, with Syrian and Israeli artillery trained on each other.

'You want to ski Mount Hermon?' asked Christian, a German cameraman and devoted skier who has lived in Beirut for 13 years. 'Easy – either Hezbollah arrest you as an Israeli spy, or the Israelis shoot you because they think you are Hezbollah on the move.' The Austrian peacekeepers – my proud countrymen heroically defying boredom and idleness in these mountains for months on end – did not sound very encouraging either: 'Permission can only be given by the secretary-general of UN forces in New York. Sorry. And it is never given to civilians who want to spend a nice day in the mountains. Besides, there are mines all over the place; if you don't know your way around, you might have to ski rather fast to keep your skis – let alone your legs.'

The valley we drove through smelled of spring. Damp hills covered in shingle and maquis seemed to stretch dozily as the day began, as if awoken from sleep by the throngs of sheep tinkling along the slopes. We were optimistic; before us, 1,000sq km of snow rose imposingly into the blue, glistening and full of promise in the first rays of dawn. Mount Hermon was ours for the taking. We had just passed the last checkpoint into no man's land, our skis and rucksacks hidden under old rugs and me crouching on the floor behind the driver's seat. Mahdi proffered an easygoing wave to the sleepy sentry and smiled as if to say, 'I told you so.' Raja gave him a high five, chuckling contentedly.

We had stayed overnight in Mahdi's farmhouse in the village of Shafraya, a Druze and Christian settlement nestling beneath an old French fort close to the border. At supper, Raja had explained his Levantine strategy: 'If you ask for a permit, it takes ages to be processed and in the end the lieutenant will find something wrong with the papers. Nobody wants to take responsibility. Our host has sheep and goats in the neutral zone, and quite a few beehives. It is natural for him to look after his animals first thing in the morning. He is well known at the border post; nobody will make the effort to ask where he ►



Ascending Mount Hermon, on the border between Lebanon, Israel and Syria, from the Bekaa valley

➤ is going. I have taken quite a few skiers up. No problems. You will see.'

Our host let us out of the car in a hidden ravine at the foot of the mountain so that we could not be seen from the military lookout in the fort. Although the temperature was well below zero, and a hoar frost encrusted the tussocks of wild thyme and dandelion, the snowline was high. We had to carry our skis for more than an hour in the early-morning darkness until, with relief, we reached the first patches of snow; hiking with skins on your skis is much easier than walking in ski boots. Steadily, we climbed along the westerly ridge of the mountain, with Raja telling me about his former life as a soldier and his near death in the 'war' – Lebanese shorthand for 15 years of bloody civil strife. 'I am happy when I come to this village. Mahdi and I are best friends. Can you believe it, that we could have shot each other when we Maronites and the Druze tried to annihilate each other?'

Clouds forming over the Mediterranean turned the sunny cords of silver on the snow's surface to a sullen lead. 'Once we pass Devil's Rock we will make it to the summit. No problem,' said Raja. Three hours later we saw the frozen hangars and the radar sphere of the UN barracks rising on the far side of the plateau summit, with views opening wide into Syria and Israel.

Alarmed soldiers approached us but were quickly put at ease when I hailed

them in the Austrian vernacular. We were only the second group of civilians they had seen since they came up here; they spent their long winter nights moulding souvenirs from spent shrapnel, and they were pleased to have us for a change. We enjoyed hot tea and sandwiches, and after a while the military installation – adorned with a large, painted edelweiss emblem – looked more like a ski hut than an army outpost, its true nature betrayed only by the ceaseless rumble from the hills sloping down to the south. What sounded initially like a series of avalanches, or King Kong

profitable it would be to abduct you!' They were both roaring with laughter, Raja rolling on the floor. My laughter was hollow, as I thought of the Associated Press journalist Terry Anderson who spent almost seven years as a hostage before he was released, and the British journalist Alec Collett, who never came home.

Lebanon's flag looks like the flag of Austria except for the green image of Lebanon's oldest symbol, the cedar tree. For millennia, Phoenician city states such as Tyre and Byblos grew rich on the export of their treasured timber all over the

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beating his chest, was in fact, the daily showing-off of the Israeli artillery.

Later, back at Mahdi's farmhouse, squatting on the rug-covered floor with a fire crackling in the stove and our skins drying on racks in the middle of the room, we were all in celebratory mood. Our host and his wife wheeled in homemade cheese, pickles, steaming lentil soup, herb salads, fig jam, olives and square metres of blanket-thin bread, toasted crisp on the oven. 'What is your job exactly?' asked Mahdi with a sly grin. 'Journalist? Sounds good to me! We were just thinking how

then-known world: to the Pharaohs of Egypt, to Assyrian warrior kings, to King Solomon for his temple, and to the trading houses of Carthage. The Greeks, and later the Romans, used it to build their fleets; the Ottomans to build their railway tracks. Today, only a few hundred are left in the steep valleys of the Chouf Mountains and in Cedars, a once-famous ski resort, now crumbling away in memory of better days when the Shah came skiing here and Europe's jet-set still relished *la dolce vita*.

We drove up to Cedars in a mighty blizzard, and when the first dark, ➤



► terraced branches of the dome-like trees appeared in our headlights it felt like a rendezvous with Olympians; they seemed to have waited thousands of years for us. Raja's phone rang ceaselessly. Friends were worried; a skier had perished in these mountains the day before, and the news was just coming in on the radio and TV.

In any case, skiing in Cedars proved quite impossible. The lifts were closed, and dense fog and heavy snowfall continued for the whole of the next day; we couldn't even see the fabled cedars anymore. My friend and mountain guide Peter – our 'safety manager' – was due to arrive in two days, and we decided to throw in the towel and do some long-overdue sightseeing.

Lebanon is half the size of Wales. Whether you want to visit the wine châteaux in the Western Bekaa or a hashish farmer; to hear the pigeon callers of Tripoli or roam the bazaars of Sidon; to visit soap-boilers or a hammam; to smoke a nagileh with a Hezbollah fighter or ang around with fishermen in the harbour of Tyre; everything is within easy reach.

We opted for the Greek, later Umayyad, city ruins of Anjar and the temples of Baalbek – with an obligatory visit to the famous Palmyra Hotel. The Palmyra, founded in 1874 by the Alouf family, has a guest book redolent of the Orient Express. It was the headquarters of the Germans in World War I and of the British in World War II; in between, and after 1945, it hosted opera stars, musicians, heiresses, divas and gamblers. Charles de Gaulle slept here in a bed extended specially for him, and the walls are still adorned with thank-you notes and drawings from Jean

Cocteau, who came here to work and to attend the Baalbek International Festival. It is full of archaeological treasures: Greek amphorae, Roman capitals, Phoenician glass. Be warned, however: since it was sold by the founding family in 1987 its fading grandeur has turned outright shabby, with leaking radiators, falling plaster and no heating or electricity. Ahmed Kassab, the old bellman who has manned the doors here since the early 1950s, had tears in his eyes when remembering 'good, old Mr Alouf' and the hotel's erstwhile glory.

Faraya Mzaar, a 40-minute drive from Beirut, must be the oldest ski resort in

The run seemed, blissfully, to continue forever: after two hundred turns, I lost count of our meticulously plaited tracks

the world – and one of the most stylish in the Mediterranean. The Phoenicians, and later the Romans, built a temple district and spa here – complete with souvenir shops and lavish 'chalets' with underfloor heating. Located on the coast road to Damascus, it was – at an altitude of 1,550 metres – one of the highest settlements in the Roman Empire. Today, every billionaire in Lebanon has a villa here; Hariri's reputedly stretches over many thousands of square metres, complete with Olympic-size outdoor and indoor pools.

Designer hotels such as the Eleven and the Alpine-inspired pinewood palace of Le Montagnou are attracting the in crowd. The latter is exquisitely comfortable and hi-tech, with breathtaking

Snowmobile training for Israeli soldiers where Mount Hermon meets the Golan Heights

views of snow-capped mountains and the Mediterranean below, and a wine list that would be the pride of The Ivy or Le Caprice. Reservations are notoriously difficult to make: politicians, business tsars, the rich and the famous scramble to get one, even on weekdays. I was told that once, even the Lebanese president didn't manage to get a table, and had to try his luck another day. Ziad – restaurant manager and celebrity agony aunt – employs the skills of a Middle East envoy to avoid calamities.

Some 20 ski lifts service an open terrain with extensive off-piste possibilities, but Peter and I made our ascent to the Dome du Mzaar (2,465 metres) without their help. We wanted to get away from the crowds and enjoy a day of sunshine and crisp air in peace. Starting, less romantically than we had planned, from a bullet-riddled chalet on the western slope of the mountain, we skinned up our touring skis and progressed through 20cm of fresh powder, overlooking Beirut, the sea, and the terraces of apple and cherry orchards in the valleys below. On one of the ridges we could see the so-called 'village of the officers', built in World War I by Austrian soldiers for their families. It is still unclear who owns these houses – the owner of the land, or the descendants of the soldiers who died here.

We had to cover 700 metres to reach the first summit, continuing along level ridges to reach, after another 200 metres, the Grand Coulée, a majestic, comfortably wide couloir which sweeps down from an imposing rock crest to a group of farmhouses more than a thousand vertical metres below. The run seemed, blissfully, to continue forever: after two hundred turns, I lost count of our meticulously plaited tracks. Raja was waiting at the bottom of the slopes in his battered Land Rover Defender, greeting us with a big smile. Of course, we had to do it a second time. But we had to be quick, before the bad weather set in and these elegant mountains, groomed in bridal white, became shrouded in dense fog, obscuring the sea, the city and our tracks.