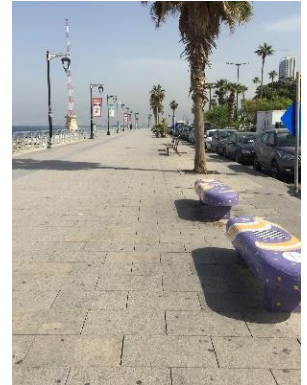


Writings from Lebanon

By D White

10/24

Cashews for breakfast. I'm certainly not the last person for breakfast at 10 am. The dining room is nearly full. I leave the hotel and find myself in another world. It is a hot day and I'm approached by a small woman dressed all in black, including a black scarf, selling gum. I pass a family sitting on a park bench with a young boy wearing a t-shirt with slogans in English. The men are wearing t-shirts and jeans and the women are covered with scarves and long-sleeved garments. I take my life in my hands to cross the street, so thankful to find a break in the relentless traffic. The view of the sea to the left is spectacular as I walk along. People are taking pictures of Pigeon Rocks, emerging from the water like rough gigantic teeth of a prehistoric being. The water sparkles like diamonds in its movement toward the shore. Bombed out and bullet ridden buildings stand next to modern structures – a grim reminder of the tumultuous past of this city that was once called “The Paris of the Middle East”. I continue on and men run past me shirtless, in running shorts, showing off their sweaty bodies and numerous tattoos. Park benches in the shade are mostly occupied. I find one that is tiled – a memorial to someone who died. It is a welcome stop to rest and to enjoy the smell of the sea as a cool breeze refreshes me. I pass men below me in bathing suits, cooling off in the natural deep pools of water. Some pray and kneel on beach towels toward Mecca. I find a restaurant for lunch where I can sit outside, under a roof, overlooking the Pigeon Rocks. I enjoy a Greek Salad, observing the locals eating here as I look forward to the cashews for breakfast tomorrow.



10/25

The dark overcast sky today reflects my mood as I look at the buildings we are passing. So many are half constructed, with gaping holes where windows should be. It is interesting to see some new buildings being built while the ones half finished are abandoned. We pass a forgotten grape arbor that seems to cry out for attention. Some buildings look like concrete skeletons with rebar pointed up at grotesque angles. Black flags adorn patios announcing the allegiance of the owners. All of a sudden a small garden appears giving the hope of sustenance in otherwise barren and rocky fields. We pass remnants of war, reminding us of all this area has suffered years ago but also in the very recent past. I feel sad, thinking of the loss of life, property and hope for the future. It starts to rain and that seems so welcome to cover the scene and to renew the earth.

10/25

We pass through many towns on our tour today. They all are similar – men sitting in molded plastic chairs watching the traffic pass by. School girls looking at our big bus with curiosity. Canvas drapes covering balconies in apartment buildings. Tall apartment buildings most in disrepair. Further on some roofs are covered in plastic with tires on top to keep the plastic in place. Trash on the sides of the road. So many repair shops – mainly auto repair, indicating the need to keep cars moving. Large posters of men at the entrance to neighborhoods. Some appear to be political ads, others show young men who are martyrs. Shops in town have names usually in English and Arabic. One I especially like is “Nice Price Bazar”. Few people are walking on the sidewalk although cars crowd into parking spaces along the street. We continue on to another similar town.

10/26

We arrive at the Beideddine Palace in a light drizzle. As we enter the main courtyard my first impression is that this palace seems much more like an austere limestone fort. It was built over a span of 30 years in the late 1700's. The first rooms we pass through are plain but marked by a simple elegance. The further we go in the palace the more dramatic and elegant the rooms become. The colors and wall décor give a feeling of richness and power. Each of the main rooms has a fountain – a source of ever flowing water used for cooling in the heat of the summer. As we enter one of the formal greeting rooms the music of Bruce and Arlene playing a Brahms Hungarian Dance duet on the piano fills the room. The music seems to make the marble walls soften in thanksgiving for such an unexpected delight. On the lower floor we see a collection of mosaics that were found during excavations and brought here to treasure. We walk outside to a beautiful garden and spectacular view of the countryside below. The beauty of all we have seen and experienced inside fills our hearts and memories. We walk back across the large austere courtyard knowing that there were unforgettable memories inside.



10/26

The 18th century Greek Orthodox Church of St. George is a beautiful building in the center of Beirut, by the famous Star Square. As we approach the church bullet holes in building walls are pointed out to us. It is so sad to think of warfare right here in the middle of this beautiful city. We enter the church and breathe in a feeling of peace and well-being. This is short lived as we look to the left of the altar at a large painting of Jesus "The Agony in the Garden." There are several bullet holes that pierced the painting, but miraculously none went through the figure of Jesus. What a depiction of agony to see the bullet holes! Later we continue our walk through the city and see a famous statue in market square again riddled with bullet holes. Man's inhumanity as a permanent reminder. When will we ever learn?

10/26

We entered St. Joseph Church soon before the concert of the Lebanese Philharmonic Orchestra was to begin. The church was filled with people. I wondered if I could find a place to sit and was lucky to find room on the last pew to the left. It was so thrilling to look around the audience and see so many young people here. The concert began and the music of Mozart filled the church. The high ceiling welcomed the music as if it had been waiting for this moment. It was evident the audience knew this music and were following along with smiles on their faces. The Tchaikovsky Symphony began and the dramatic war like parts seemed to shake the very walls of the church. These gave way to a sense of melancholy which stirred and touched us as we thought about the Lebanese history we have just experienced. The uplifting parts of the Symphony were reassuring to give us hope for the future. The universal language of music united us all in understanding and appreciation for the musical geniuses who lived so long ago and who still are speaking to us through their legacy.



10/27

How does one pay homage to a cedar tree that is over 2000 years old? A tree that has withstood war, fierce storms, hot sun and strong winds? Its

branches still reach out, adorned with green needles, shading those who walk beneath it. If only those strong branches could speak to tell us its story and to encourage us to stand firm and tall in the face of our own challenges and adversities. We need to be rooted firmly and aware of who we are and who we are called to be. The strong trunk of this tree is impressive in its size and the rough bark that protect the tree from all that might seek to do it harm. We pause in true admiration of the tree in front of us, not passing by quickly lost in other thoughts. We pause and give thanks for this magnificent tree and say a prayer that its presence will inspire us in our lives.

***“Behold I will liken you to a cedar in Lebanon with
Fair branches and forest shade.” Ezekiel 31:3***

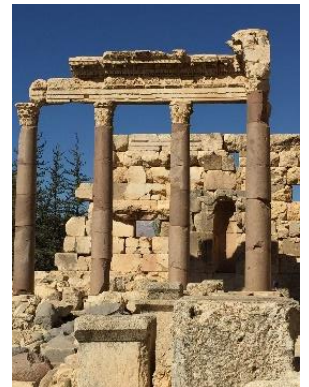
10/28

We enter the Jeita Grotto and are overwhelmed at the size and beauty of this cavern. The water that has dripped from above has formed and is still forming stalactites which resemble giant tears. The formations on either side of the path are impressive and some are quite translucent. One resembles the Tower of Pisa and another buffalo. It is awe inspiring to know we are in the presence of a natural phenomenon that has been evolving for thousands of years and that is continuing to change and to grow.



10/29

We arrive at Baalbek and can hardly believe our eyes as we gaze at the size and grandeur of this site. I can only imagine how impressed the people must have been who were part of caravans passing by in Roman times. The Temple of Venus was a curved structure that showed the brilliance of the architects. The remains of the Temple of Jupiter boggle the mind with the beauty and height of the columns – the granite transported here from Aswan in Egypt. The Bacchus Temple, larger than the Parthenon, is very well preserved. It is incredible to contemplate how they erected these structures and especially how they adorned the extremely high ceilings with intricately carved panels without the use of any mortar. We walk among these temples in awe and great admiration for these ancient builders. If only they could know how long their work has endured!



10/30

We enter the city of Tripoli by car and are engulfed in horrendous traffic. Everyone takes advantage of the smallest space between cars to force their way in. It is truly amazing we don't see accidents – one of the cars either gives up, moves to the side or claims the space and everyone moves on. To those of us unaccustomed to this “traffic dance” it seems like a nightmare.

We first enjoy a most welcome cup of coffee and a Lebanese pastry at The Castle of Sweets, a family run business since 1881. The cakes and cookies in the display cases inside are all truly works of art.

Then a short drive in the traffic again to the Taynal Mosque. As we walk inside the gate of the mosque we realize it is truly an oasis in the middle of the traffic nightmare. The portal in front of us is decorated in black and white with Arabic inscriptions. The whole



building, including the man who greeted us, is most welcoming. One of the quotations says “When you remember God, your heart becomes peaceful.”

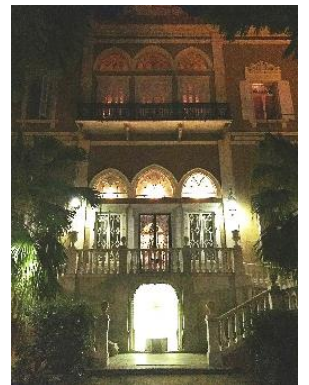
Next we visit the Castle of Tripoli that dates from 1102. This is a Crusader castle. We find several other ancient mosques and take pictures of the beautiful portals.

A visit to the large souk with its labyrinth of walkways gives us a true feeling of everyday life for the locals here. The coffee seller walking by us clinks together his cups to announce his presence and readiness to sell his special coffee. The smell of fresh fish makes it obvious what is for sale here. A much more pleasant aroma comes from the herb shops and nut and dried fruit vendors. Some stalls sell all kinds of pickled vegetables adding bright colors to the looks of most of the stalls. An old lady is trimming a type of greens outside a mosque, preparing them for sale. The majority of the women have their heads covered in scarves. Some look at us shyly and respond with a smile after our smiles. Many older women have no expression as we pass by. On some street corners men are calling out what they are selling, encouraging customers to buy. This is a normal slice of life in a city that has experienced so much violence in the past. We get back in the traffic again and are so relieved that that is the only challenging part of our day.



10/30

The highlight of the trip for 3 of us and Bruce was our visit on Tuesday afternoon to the palace of Lady Cochrane. We were so pleased when we heard that the invitation Bruce received for tea would also include us. We arrived in the late afternoon in the dark after a long circuitous drive (traffic congestion related) and located the impressive palace on the tree lined Sursock Street. At one point all the buildings on this street had belonged to parts of the family. Bruce spoke to a guard at the gate and it was opened for us to enter. Walking up the marble steps we knew we were in for an unbelievable treat. As we entered, we looked from side to side at the priceless antiques, huge paintings, inlaid furniture and oriental rugs. In many ways it felt like entering a most exclusive museum. But this was a



private home and was very much lived in. Lady Cochrane’s son, Roderick Sursock Cochrane, welcomed us and led us up two flights of marble steps to the upper floor where a sitting area was prepared for us. We were served tea and visited with Roderick while sneaking peeks at all around us. Roderick shared with us information on his family from the past. His wife is American and they have a 16 year old daughter who is growing up here in the Lebanese style speaking English, French and Arabic. We peek into her room on the way out – truly a room for a very fortunate princess. This visit gave us all a chance to see what life was like in the golden days of Beirut and also to appreciate what this family is doing to preserve and venerate its history.