A week in Beirut

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“This is Hizbollah country”, our guide reassured us as we approached the Roman temple complex of Baalbeck (Heliopolis), with the world’s largest standing columns back-lit by snow-covered mountains. Indeed there were checkpoints every few miles - Syrian and Lebanese, carefully separated - and posters of President Assad and Ayatollah Khomeini (also, incongruously, the Restaurant Lady Diana). By two days we missed a huge rally in Baalbeck, celebrating ‘Jerusalem day’.

Thence to the ruins of the early moslem town of Anjar, whose isolated pairs of arches resembled nothing so much as the sign of an ur-McDonald’s. Lunch that day was near Lebanon’s disused railway line. I was prevented from inspecting it by a lone Syrian soldier. According to our guide, keeping Lebanon stable is the main reason for the Syrian army’s presence there. It felt odd to be so powerful that with one glance at the rusty grassy rails I would risk destabilising the entire country.

We were in Lebanon for a conference to inaugurate the Center for Advanced Mathematical Sciences (CAMS) at the American University of

Beirut. The meeting was both a declaration and a hope that normality is returning to the country after so many years of war. The purpose of CAMS is to support research at the highest level and attract expatriate scientists back to Lebanon, thereby stimulating science throughout the country. Even before CAMS moves into new premises in the rebuilt main university building (replacing the previous one, destroyed by a bomb in 1991), a nucleus of several highly accomplished mathematical physicists is working there.

For most of the invited foreign speakers, it was our first visit to Lebanon. Many of us had to acquire a second, 'Israel-free', passport, so as not to be turned back at airport immigration control. But the 'inspection' was a cursory flip through the pages while the 'inspector' looked elsewhere. The meeting combined abundant and full-hearted hospitality with intellectual intensity covering a wide range of topics.

At the opening ceremony, soldiers were everywhere, bayonets gleaming. I was intimidated by the thought of being protected by them, then reassured to discover that their purpose was rather to guard the prime minister, and they left when he did. The president of the university surprised us with his frankness in quoting the mathematician André Weil's opinion that mathematics is better than sex because its pleasure persists

undiminished for hours; “If only Bill Clinton had studied mathematics…”, he mused.

The meeting, and CAMS, was generously supported by the owner of Beirut’s most luxurious hotel, on the mountain above the city, with splendid views over the city and the Mediterranean. Academics are not accustomed to sleeping in beds wider than their length (for a moment, I wondered if I was sleeping sideways). Each day, we were driven ten miles down to the University through the dense and reckless traffic. It was surprising (and, in the circumstances, ironic) to see how much Lebanon resembles Israel (especially Haifa), mainly in the uncontrolled proliferation of concrete brutality alongside elegant and expensive modern shops. Because of the war, though, downtown Beirut is more dilapidated than Israeli cities, with few buildings unmarked by bullets and many completely destroyed; but the suburbs are more elegant, with many splendid old houses preserved.

I reveal here my main nonscientific reason for travelling to exotic locations: food. In this, Lebanon surpassed all my expectations. As well as the familiar hummous and smoked aubergines (baba ganoush), I enjoyed kebabs with unexpected hot yogurt (whose stability seemed to defy gastrophysical laws until I learned that it was kept from separating by eggwhite), a tongue and brain sandwich, and kibbeh naye, the exquisite Lebanese equivalent of steak tartare: raw meat ground with spices and

served with a fluffy garlic sauce. It was sad to reflect how, through a nervousness and exaggerated response to tiny risks, we rarely enjoy such delights in this country. The delicious sweetness of jallab, a raisin syrup drizzled with nuts, was soured when I noticed that the café's most elaborate confection was called Hitler. The reason (which to my hosts' embarassment I insisted they translate) was "to show how much we appreciate what he did". I am sure the semitic boys in that café did not realise how prominent they themselves would be on Hitler's list of despised peoples.

I walked along the Corniche near the university to see the spectacular Pigeon Rock in the sea. Suddenly it began to rain. Mediterranean rain seems splashier than ours (because it hits dustier streets?). The shower turned thundery, then torrential, then to hail, then back to rain. I nursed like a baby the lecture I was carrying, that I had spent two days writing on transparencies with water-soluble pens. Desperate, I waded through the mud-flowing street into a taxi, discovering that I was sharing it with a young woman, glamorous but sinister because her full red lips were outlined in deepest black.

On the last day, a trip to Byblos (Jbaile), advertised as the world's oldest continuously inhabited city. I was proud to see hoardings advertising the BBC, before realising that this was the Byblos Beauty Centre. I preferred the unearthly beauty of the vast Jeite caverns, the upper dry and

the lower flooded, to be visited by boat in eerie silence, and with a greater variety of types of stalactites and stalagmites than I have seen (ears, leaves, sheets, spikes, knobbles…). We wondered how many parameters a mathematical model would need to generate all these forms (the square root of cauliflowers times mushrooms, perhaps).