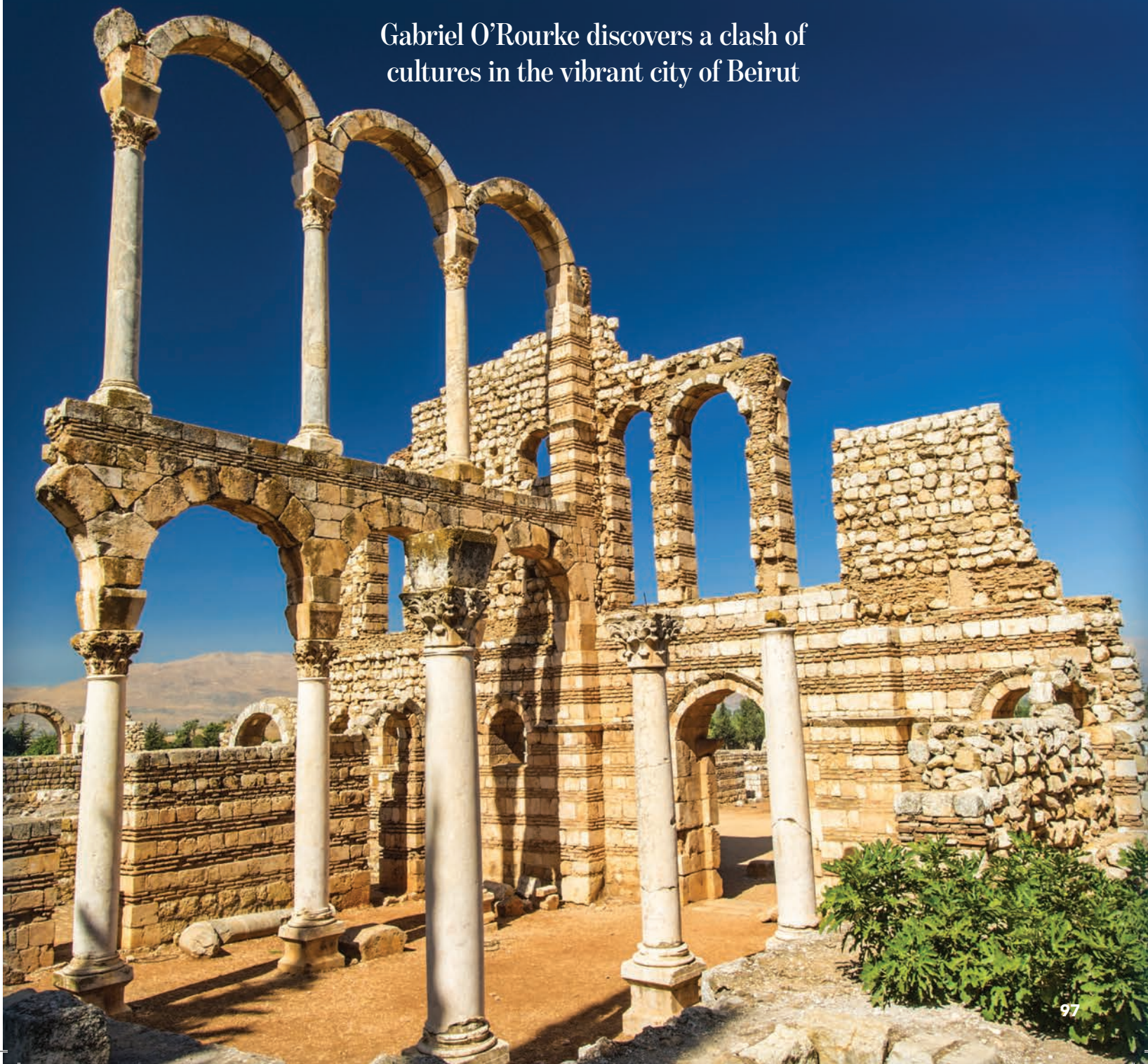


LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Gabriel O'Rourke discovers a clash of
cultures in the vibrant city of Beirut





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ear mention of Lebanon and you may think of clubs, bars and restaurants in the capital, Beirut. Or perhaps you picture Mediterranean beaches towered over by ancient ruins. Skiing may also come to mind, and looming behind it all you may think of buildings reduced to rubble from the civil war that gripped the country from 1975 to 1990.

The fact is that Lebanon is a melting pot of all the above, and much, much more. Thankfully times of turmoil are now fading into memory, and Beirut is booming – as Alain Feghaly, our tour guide, so aptly puts it, ‘buildings here are springing up like mushrooms’.

It’s a five-hour flight from London to Beirut and on arrival we are greeted in style. Forget a driver with your name on a placard, The Phoenicia greets its guests

before they have a chance to mingle with the masses, welcoming them after luggage collection with a red carpet and their name displayed on a TV screen.

The transfer (in a white Jaguar I might add) takes less than 15 minutes and within an hour of landing on Lebanese soil we are lounging by the pool bar, Amethyste, nibbling on meze and sipping cocktails.

The Phoenicia is not one of Alain’s ‘mushrooms’, rather it is a gem from Lebanon’s golden era, the Swinging Sixties, when the country became known as the ‘Switzerland of the Middle East’ and its capital the equivalent of Paris.

Royalty, world leaders and celebrities (from Brigitte Bardot in the sixties to Angelina and Brad more recently) have graced the pillows of its 446 rooms, some of which have an opulent oriental feel, others have lighter French décor.

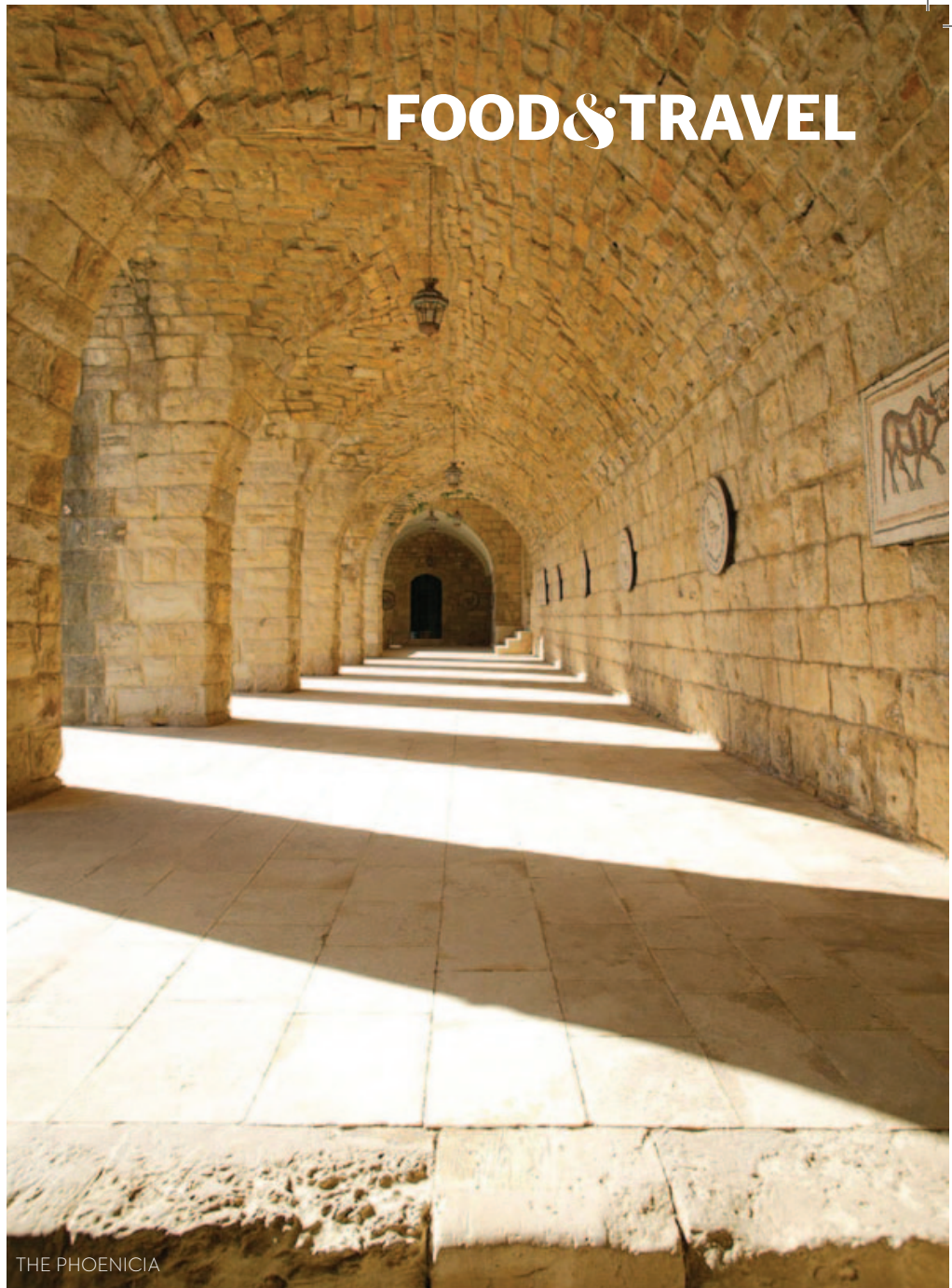
Columns line Amethyste, softened by white linen drapes creating a colonial-cum-Grecian feel. Super yachts line the marina below and a large projector screen hangs at one end of the swimming pool playing black-and-white classics.

Our first day starts as all good holidays should, with an enormous buffet breakfast. The Phoenicia’s Mosaic Restaurant does a breakfast from heaven with different chefs serving different food behind different counters. There’s everything from typical Lebanese pastries and breads, to eggs, fish, cheese, croissants, yoghurt and fresh fruit.

Wondering if we’ll ever feel the twinge of hunger again, we follow Alain down the grand marble staircase and out into the city. Our first stop is the National Museum, a spacious and airy building with just enough artifacts (the first mention of Beirut is in 14th century BC – yes, that’s BC – and the museum has wonderful relics from the Bronze, Iron and Roman ages) to give you a feel for the city’s history without overload.

Next we hit Downtown, grabbing a coffee in Martyrs’ Square, seeing the remains of a Roman bathhouse that was only discovered in 1968, and visiting the many churches and mosques which sit alongside one another reflecting the city’s multi-faith inhabitants.

I am amazed how liberal people are – you see far more burqas and hijabs in London



THE PHOENICIA

than Beirut. This is a Mediterranean city and most people wear shorts, skirts and airy clothes fitting to the warm climate.

'Sometimes I think we Lebanese only live to eat!' says Alain as we take a taxi to Gemayzeh for lunch. Stopped in our tracks by an unusual traffic jam, we wait as a beaming bride stops in the middle of the road, bouquet in hand, and strikes a pose for her photographer using us as a nice backdrop.

Tawlet is a restaurant with a difference; it is a non-profit organisation set up to bring people together (after years of conflict) with food and tradition. Literally, it means 'table' and the style is homely with an open kitchen mastered each day by one of 30 chefs from all over Lebanon.

Our chef is from Tripoli, and for US \$23 we pile high our plates with delicacies from the north including tabbouleh, baba ganoush and kibbeh (pounded raw lamb).

Stomachs full once again, we return to the hotel for spa treatments. The ILA treatments are especially good and I opt for the Manipura Massage which involves 90 minutes of blissful scrubbing, massaging

and poulticing. Relaxed and fully in the swing of things we head down to the marina for a drink before dinner at the hotel's 11th floor French restaurant, Eau De Vie.

'On a clear day you have eye contact,' says Alain as we set off up the coast the next morning, 'You can see Byblos from Beirut'.

It is 37 km to Byblos, but we stop off en-route at Jeita Grotto, a breath-taking pair of limestone caves. The upper cave is home to the world's largest stalactite, and the lower – inhabited since prehistoric times – bears an uncanny resemblance to the entrance to Hades. You even have to take a boat, although our vessel is steered Tony who, I must admit, isn't quite as formidable as Charon.

Byblos is one of the oldest constantly inhabited cities in the world – dating back to the Neolithic period in 5250BC, it makes the Romans seem modern. Originally a fishing village, the Phoenicians arrived in 4,000 BC, using their time in Byblos to come up with the alphabet.

Lebanon's geographic position means that since time immemorial it has served as a gateway to the Mediterranean from

the east, and to Asia from the west. Other big names who inhabited Byblos were the Babylonians, the Persians, Alexander the Great and the Romans who brought Christianity with them.

To compliment culture with glamour, Eddé Sands, Lebanon's most fashionable beach – 'where people behave like peacocks', says Alain – sits alongside Byblos' ancient ruins.

We have lunch overlooking the harbour before heading back to the hotel. After all, The Phoenicia is a landmark in its own right; locals and foreigners alike come to soak up the atmosphere, perhaps taking afternoon tea, sipping local beer or wine by the pool, or dining in one of the four restaurants which range from Lebanese to Italian, French and Asian. It's no surprise this bastion of Beirut has celebrated its 50th Anniversary and is still counting.

Phoenicia Beirut is from £226 per room/night. British Airways (ba.com) flies daily to Beirut from Heathrow. Tickets start from £432 return. +961 1 369 100; phoeniciabeirut.com. Tawlet Restaurant; tawlet.com. Jeita Grotto; jeitagrotto.com