

Lebanon sees tourism rebound despite upheaval in the region

Samar Kadi

Beirut

After years of downturn following the 2011 outbreak of the war in Syria, Beirut's tourist and entertainment hubs are bustling again. Hotel occupancy rates are rising and the number of properties listed on Airbnb, an online marketplace for lodging and rentals, has almost tripled in two years, signalling a rebound in Lebanon's tourism industry.

The bounce is due in no small part to the misfortunes of Lebanon's Middle East neighbours, engulfed by wars, chaos and political upheaval. While neighbouring Syria and Iraq burn, the Lebanese tourism industry is looking – cautiously but optimistically – at the promise of a new beginning.

Beirut has witnessed an Airbnb boom since 2015, with listed properties on the online hospitality service increasing from more than 300 to almost 900 listings, said a report by AirDNA, a website offering data on Airbnb services worldwide. Hamra, Ashrafieh and Mar Mikhael are among the main districts in Beirut for Airbnb properties.

■ Hotel occupancy is up 25% compared to the same period last year.

Sarah Berjaoui, director of Ouda w Dar, which manages several Airbnb properties, said demand for properties was increasing through the online platform.

"Airbnb is becoming a popular

trend everywhere in the world. It has been booming for the past three to four years and was bound to happen in Beirut for sure... Obviously, Lebanon is a country that always follows the trend," Berjaoui said.

Airbnb clientele in Lebanon are both Lebanese expatriates and foreign tourists. "It is for sure cheaper than hotels and very convenient for large families. Moreover, Airbnb properties are in the best locations," Berjaoui said.

Airbnb is an online community marketplace that connects locals with travellers and tourists wishing to rent short- or long-term lodging. With awareness of the online platform and demand increasing, properties listed on Airbnb are expected to rise, not only in Beirut, but elsewhere in Lebanon, Berjaoui said.

"We get people approaching us with properties all over Lebanon and we are very happy to manage them. There is a lot of motion happening," she said. "The occupancy rate for the summer is expected to reach up to 85% but Lebanon is unpredictable and if the situation turns bad, demand will inevitably drop."

The AirDNA study said empty apartments available for rent account for 55% of properties listed, private rooms within apartments another 42% and shared rooms 3%. The average daily price for a shared room is \$12, a private room \$31, a studio \$51, for one bedroom \$57 and for four bedrooms \$90.

Four years ago, Lebanon seemed to be losing its grip on its internal security, with the spectre of war spilling over from Syria a concern. However, with the country's security reinforced, tourism has risen. A series of suicide bombings has been contained and militants have



Bustling again. People sunbathe at the Printania Palace Hotel in Broummana, some 15km north-east of Beirut, on June 30 (AP)

been pushed back, to a large extent, across the border with Syria.

On the political level, Lebanon's divided politicians have come together for several important steps, including appointing a head of state after a two-year presidential vacuum, forming a government and agreeing to a law governing general elections, which have been delayed since 2013. Authorities also beat back popular unrest over corruption and a lack of accountability and restarted rubbish collection services in Beirut.

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Hotel occupancy in Lebanon is up 25% compared to the same period last year, said Pierre Ashkar, president of the national hotel owners' syndicate, reaching 65% this summer.

Passenger arrivals at Beirut's airport outnumbered departures by about 24,000 during the recent Eid al-Fitr holiday, compared to about 19,000 last year, statistics from the Civil Aviation Authority indicated.

Beirut's landmark Hamra Street is bustling with Arab and foreign holidaymakers.

"Really, we Iraqis, we thank you and we are always lucky to be among the Lebanese people," said veterinarian and Basra native Ali

Abdul Kareem, 24, who was spotted smoking a water pipe with three companions at a restaurant off Hamra Street.

He said it was his first time visiting Lebanon, breaking a string of successive vacations in Iran and the United Arab Emirates. "God willing, this won't be the only time we come to Beirut and Lebanon," he said.

Industry veterans know that profits are ephemeral, especially in an environment as uncertain as Lebanon's. There are daily reports of security operations in the country's lawless Bekaa Valley and of personal disputes around the country that escalate into shootings. The hardship that sparked the unrest of 2015 – nationwide shortages of water and electricity, a collapse in the rubbish collection services, a scarcity of good jobs – continue to fester.

"If we were to say, 'What do we aspire to and what are we capable of' in light of what's happening in Egypt, Turkey and Arab countries, and in France and Europe because of the terrorism we should be doing much better," said Ashkar.

Berjaoui said: "There is a capability to offer a huge Airbnb market in Lebanon but it all depends on the situation and the tourism movement."

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society sections editor. Information provided by the Associated Press was included in this article.

Briefs

Once tax-free, Saudi Arabia starts expat levy

Saudi Arabia said it had begun taxing foreigners working in the private sector as part of fiscal reforms aimed at coping with a drop in oil revenues.

Long a tax-free haven for expatriates, Saudi Arabia was dealt a serious blow in 2014 when global crude prices plummeted. The kingdom, the world's largest exporter of oil, has launched an economic diversification plan and slashed state spending to cope with a large deficit.

On July 1, foreigners working in the private sector began paying a family tax of 100 riyals (\$26.60) per month for every minor or unemployed relative living in the kingdom, the Saudi General Directorate of Passports said in a statement. The tax is expected to increase every year until 2020 when it is to cap at 4,800 riyals (\$1,280) per dependent annually.

(Agence France-Presse)

Energy giants court Qatar for gas expansion role despite crisis

The West's three biggest energy corporations are lobbying Qatar to take part in a huge expansion of its gas production, handing Doha an unintended but timely boost in its dispute with Gulf Arab neighbours.

The chief executives of Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell and France's Total met Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in Qatar before it announced a plan July 4 to raise output of liquefied natural gas (LNG) by 30%.

Company and industry sources said the CEOs had expressed interest in helping Qatar with its ambition to produce 100 million tonnes of LNG annually – equivalent to one-third of global supplies – in five to seven years.

(Reuters)

Egypt fuel price hikes fan inflation fears

The Egyptian government announced an increase in fuel prices of up to 55%, the second since November when it also floated the currency in an IMF-backed reform programme, which fuelled inflation.

Analysts said the fuel price rises will further increase inflation although inflation was announced to have decreased in May to an annual rate of 30.9% from 32.9% in April.

(Agence France-Presse)

Iran signs gas deal with France's Total, Chinese firm

Iran signed a \$5 billion agreement with France's Total SA and a Chinese oil company to develop its massive offshore natural gas field, the first such deal with foreign companies since the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Officials met in Tehran and signed the agreement, which will see the firms develop a portion of the South Pars offshore field that Iran shares with Qatar. Qatar calls the same area the North Field and it provides the small country, now in the middle of a diplomatic crisis with four other Arab states, with incredible wealth.

(The Associated Press)

West Bank's Taybeh boasts Palestine's first boutique winery

Lizzie Porter

Taybeh, West Bank

The undulating landscape of the Palestinian territories has a history of winemaking that stretches back thousands of years and the arms and legs of vines creep among the obstacles of illegal Israeli settlements and military outposts.

The vines' fruit, which fattens under a hot sun at more than 850 metres above sea level, is crushed and turned into wine at Taybeh, a small village north of Ramallah whose name means "good" or "kind" in Arabic.

Once most famous for a visit by Jesus and his disciples after the resurrection of Lazarus, Taybeh is known as the home of the Palestinian territories' first brewery, the Taybeh Brewing Company, established by the Khoury family in 1994.

■ Taybeh Winery produces some 30,000 bottles of wine a year, with capacity for 5,000 more.

In 2013, they opened the area's first boutique winery, capitalising on the fertile volcanic ash soil, benevolent climate and indigenous grape varieties to produce six high-quality wines. They range from a Sauvignon Blanc to a rich purple Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve.

"We have a history of making wine in Palestine," said Nadim Khoury, who co-founded the beer and wine businesses with his brother, David. "My father used to call this place al-enba'at – 'the vineyards'."

Taybeh Winery produces about 30,000 bottles of wine a year, with capacity for 5,000 more.

Maria Khoury, Nadim's sister-in-law, shows the wide tables where, during harvest in September, thousands of grapes are hand-sorted to ensure only the best make it into the wine, before they are fermented in Italian stainless-steel tanks.

Eight to 24 months later – the various ageing periods for different grapes – the wine is ready for bottling and drinking.

"This is a different face of Palestine," Maria Khoury said. "This is business-building and production of a high-quality product. David hopes that one day he will raise a toast to peace with Taybeh wine."

Winemaking in the Palestinian territories is often appropriated by Israel. Settlement wineries have opened as the occupation of the West Bank has expanded.

"We did a winery because we didn't want Palestinian grapes to be sold in the world as Israeli wines," Nadim Khoury said. "The settlements are taking advantage of the fact that we have good grapes and good land and good weather."

Winemaking under occupation is not without its struggles. Palestinians in Taybeh have running water only two days a week. The Khoury family has been practical about the problem rather than bitter and has

installed tanks and reservoirs so wine production is not stunted by water shortages.

"[The settlement wineries] are exporting as Israeli wines but keep in mind that this is Palestinian water, Palestinian land, Palestinian atmosphere, Palestinian everything," Nadim Khoury said.

■ Six high-quality wines ranging from a Sauvignon Blanc, to a rich purple Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve are produced.

Taybeh's Palestinian wines are good. The family has sold to upmarket outlets in Jerusalem, including the American Colony Hotel and the Legacy Hotel's bar, as well as in the Notre Dame wine and cheese restaurant, just outside the Old City.

Although the market is limited, Nadim Khoury said there is demand for high-quality Palestinian wines from local Arab Christian populations and foreigners.

"People are requesting good quality wines," he said, reaching for a bottle of the Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, with its smart black label bearing the Taybeh logo, a Palestinian vine.

"This is aged for 23 months in oak – it's an excellent wine," he said.

Visitors are encouraged to tour Taybeh Winery, where they are welcomed with a free wine-tasting session.

The Khoury family said they hope

their wine and beer-making businesses become the heart of efforts to attract tourists to Taybeh. Across the Palestinian territories, hotel occupancy rates languish at around 20%, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics said.

More tourism in Taybeh – with visitors attracted by wine- and beer-tastings more normally associated with rural France and Germany – would provide much-needed income for the area. The approach is multi-pronged. Alongside the alcohol, Taybeh Winery sells olive oil, za'atar (thyme) and attractive blocks of soap made by local women's co-operatives.

History is another draw: Taybeh is home to the ruins of the Byzantine St George Church, rebuilt by Crusaders in the 12th century. It is testimony to the centuries of Christianity in the area.

Nadim Khoury said Jesus turned water into wine in this region. In 2017 his family is still producing it. By doing so, they are showing Palestinians' capacity to produce high-quality goods in the face of obstacles imposed by the occupation. "We went all the way to make wine from Palestinian grapes," he said proudly.

Taybeh Winery is open for free tours and wine-tastings 9am-3.30pm Monday through Saturday. Reservations are not required but are appreciated. <http://taybehwinery.com/visit.html>

Lizzie Porter is a Beirut-based freelance journalist focusing on the Middle East.