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The tawdry and the traditional thrive in tiny Lebanon

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BEIRUT, Lebanon - The man dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around his dancing partner's skirt. Next to them, two women gyrated wildly to the beat, dancing on the gigantic loudspeaker. Couples swayed, smooched and sipped cocktails.

The scene at the nightclub was one face of Lebanon on a recent hot summer night. The flip side lay a few miles away, in the Shiite southern suburbs of Beirut, where the women went swaddled in black, stores sold rugs with portraits of Iranian leaders, and there wasn't a nightclub in sight.

Somehow, against the odds, through foreign rulers, civil war, and meddlesome, heavily armed neighbors, Lebanon has managed to survive as the most pluralist, tolerant society in the Middle East. Its democracy, however imperfect, could be a beacon for those dreaming of spreading it to the rest of the Arab world. Its freewheeling ways, however, also serve hard-line traditionalists who point to Lebanon as a sewer of Western decadence.

The contrasts are everywhere in this mountainous Mediterranean country half the size of New Jersey with its 3.5 million people and 17 religious denominations. Just turn on a TV set and channel-surf from beauty pageants to know-your-Quran contests, from MTV-style pop to the Hezbollah channel preaching jihad.

"In Lebanon, you move between different worlds. It's the charm of the Lebanese way of life," says Joseph Samaha, editor in chief of As-Safir newspaper.

Many think it's a miracle to find the country throbbing with life instead of shaking under cannon fire. It experienced a civil war that began between Christians and Muslims and drew in Palestinians, Syrians, Israelis and Iranians, raging for 15 years until 1990. It's squeezed between the Iraq war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Syria controls it with thousands of troops. Its economy is shackled with a \$32 billion debt.

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah's fighters sputters 65 miles south and largely out of mind in Beirut, except when Israeli jets fly over the capital, making window-shattering sonic

booms that send people running for cover. A couple of hours later the restaurants, bars and malls are full again.

Today, even as Islamic conservatism strengthens its hold on other Arab countries, Lebanon somehow manages to keep its poise.

One reason is that it's the only Arab country with a large non-Muslim community, so that every Lebanese knows -- or certainly learned in the civil war -- the price of head-on confrontation.

Under rules dating back to independence in 1943, the president has to be a Christian from the Maronite Catholic denomination, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the parliament speaker a Shiite Muslim. It may result in frequent deadlock, but it's also an effective system of checks and balances, says Chibli Mallat, a law professor. "This is the paradox of Lebanese democracy."

That democracy is the most advanced in the Arab world, and Lebanese media are the freest. The parliament, which chooses the president, is elected by universal suffrage and half the seats are allocated to Muslims, half to Christians. In Saudi Arabia women can't even drive. In Lebanon they've had the vote since the 1950s.

However, freedoms remain relative. Legislators' voting is influenced by Syria. Clashes between police and students opposed to Syria's presence have resulted in casualties and detentions without trial. Everyone complains about corruption, yet, little is done to stamp it out.

Before the civil war, when it was bursting with foreign banks and traders, Lebanon was known as the Switzerland of the Middle East. Those days are gone, but tourism has picked up some of the slack. It's up 30 percent this year. Lebanese emigres on home visits are one market. Another is Persian Gulf Arabs who come for the night life, the cool mountain air and the freewheeling, cosmopolitan atmosphere of liquor flowing, sexes mingling freely and bookstores selling almost everything, even illustrated sex manuals.

The coastal towns between Beirut and the southern city of Sidon, frequently bombed by Israel during and after the civil war, are now dotted with fancy beach resorts fringed with banana and orange groves.

"I'm here to check out the girls first and then for the beach," said Maher Jiha, a 28-year-old audio engineer who lives in Orange County and was back for the first time in 15 years.

His friend Elia, a mechanical engineer from Montreal, said he came to the Oceana resort to get a tan.

"People make fun of me because I'm so white," he said.

Blithely disregarding government health warnings, Lebanese take tanning seriously and are apt to ask virtual strangers why they haven't reached the right level of bronze.

On a recent Sunday afternoon at the O Cap resort, four young women were dancing on the bar counter. They were college students making pocket money by dancing to promote the alcoholic drink advertised on their skimpy tops.

Beaches and nightclubs, said bar owner Fady Saba, "is the national sport. People work on it a lot."

"Our national sport is part of our basics. It's not a luxury or an extra," he said. "If you don't go out, you feel you're not living, not eating. That's part of the national identity."

That identity is even making a bit of room for gays. Although nightclub bouncers keep alert for gay couples who get too intimate, the law that makes homosexuality punishable by jail is hardly ever enforced.

Not all Lebanese are happy about women in miniskirts dancing on tables.

"This is unbelievably indecent behavior," said Mohammed Birro, a 52-year-old shoe shop owner in the Shiite suburbs. "The whole country has become a big cabaret."

"Can't we import better things into the country?" he asked.

Persian Gulf Arabs usually prefer tamer hangouts. Mountain resort towns, especially Bhamdoun and Aley, are jammed with family restaurants and late-night cabaret with Arabic music. But even there, the distractions can be mind-boggling for a Saudi teenager on his first visit.

Mohammed Abdul-Rahman, 17, and three relatives couldn't keep their eyes off a car driving up and down the road in Aley packed with teenage Lebanese girls hanging out of the windows, dyed-blond hair flying in the wind, screaming to attract attention. Back in Saudi Arabia, women have to be totally covered in black cloaks.

"We see such sights in Saudi Arabia, but it's usually the boys who do it," said Ahmed Abdul-Latif, 16.

And many Persian Gulf women shed their black robes for tight jeans and thick makeup to stroll in shopping areas and mingle freely with men and even date them.

Sometimes, Lebanon's ways get so freewheeling that they unite Christian and Muslim clerics in protest. That has happened lately over roadside billboards featuring women in G-strings or racy underwear. Yacoub Sarraf, the governor of Beirut, had to intercede. He told ad agencies to consider "public and national decency" and "exercise discretion and not inflame sensitivities," or they would face unspecified consequences.

On a recent Friday, men in beards and women in drab robes headed to the mosque for the weekly sermon in the southern suburbs. The area is controlled by Hezbollah, venerated as an anti-Israeli resistance movement in the Arab world but labeled a terrorist group by Washington.

Yet here too, there were surprises. A couple on a motorcycle -- the woman dressed in jeans and tight sleeveless top -- roared past the modestly dressed women, and no one blinked. Even within families there can be tolerance for different lifestyles.

That's the case with Noman Hiriz and his nephew, Ibrahim Hiriz.

Noman Hiriz, a 27-year-old grocer with a beard, would never marry a woman who hasn't had a proper Islamic upbringing and doesn't robe herself. He doesn't even listen to music although he loves it.

"I feel upset when I hear of Lebanese leading the nightclub and beach life," said Noman Hiriz. "Perhaps if we had a Muslim president things would be different."

Ibrahim Hiriz, a tall, strikingly handsome 20-year-old, smiled. He enjoys what his uncle shuns - the beach, nightclubs and alcohol, which is banned by Islam.

Ibrahim Hiriz does odd jobs to support himself, and idolizes Amr Diab, an Egyptian singing heartthrob. "And like him," he said, "I want to do video clips and be surrounded by many, many women."