

FEATURE

Back to Roots familiarizes expats with their Lebanese heritage

By **Mazin Sidahmed**
The Daily Star

FARAYA, Lebanon: Wandering through the ruins in Faqra, George Naameh explained that he was excited to see what had changed in Lebanon since he was last here six years ago.

“Lebanon has always been the melting pot of the Middle East, but now it seems like the influx is happening at a more rapid rate,” he reflected. While many of 20-year-old Naameh’s travel partners haven’t been back to Lebanon in a long time, some of them have never visited the country at all.

Those in the group he is traveling with are all participants in Back to Roots, a two-week immersion program for American- and Canadian-Lebanese youth who want to learn more about Lebanon. Back to Roots takes the group around Lebanon for a range of activities that include cultural and touristic tours and meetings with NGOs and politicians.

Maya Gebeily, the assistant director and alumnus of Back to Roots, said the program aims to dispel the two simplified narratives about Lebanon: It’s either a fun-loving Mediterranean gem or a desolate war-torn place.

“These are the two ideas that we’re combatting, and really it’s somewhere in the middle,” Gebeily said. “There’s a lot of ugly stuff. There’s a lot of really beautiful stuff.”

The program hopes to highlight the country’s complex nature by showing the group Lebanon’s natural beauty and Beirut’s nightlife, but also holding meetings with advocacy organizations such as Kafa, a violence against women NGO, and the Migrant Community Center, which helps Lebanon’s under-pressure migrant community.

The participants’ experiences in Lebanon and motivations for joining the program vary. Elizabeth Naameh, George’s sister, who worked on migrant labor issues in California, is hoping to learn more about the questions facing Lebanon.

Aryel Vulcain, who is of Haitian-Lebanese descent and lives in Miami, has never stepped foot in Lebanon. Her Lebanese father and three siblings have also never been to Lebanon, and they were all wary of her decision.

“My mom was all for it but my

dad, he wasn’t sure. Just because of the news and stuff like that,” Vulcain said. “When [my sister] heard about the program she was like ‘No, I don’t want you to go! You’re not going!’”

Her father eventually warmed to the idea and gave her contacts with family members from his native Tripoli, where he owns land. Vulcain is hoping to connect with her relatives and look at ways to use the land, as she hopes it will foster a stronger connection to Lebanon for her family.

One of the most complicated things to learn about Lebanon is the political landscape.

It is difficult to find unbiased and objective explanations of the country’s political dynamics.

All of the participants seem politically engaged – many of them are graduates of international affairs and political science – so the political discussions are fervent.

As they clambered through the rubble of the Roman ruins in Faqra, they discussed a range of topics from the role of Hezbollah in the country to the treatment of Syrian refugees.

The two-week schedule also includes lectures on the 1975-90 Civil War and interreligious dialogue. Gebeily said the organizers recognize the sensitivity of these topics.

‘There are a lot of prickly topics that we have to deal with’

“There are a lot of prickly topics that we have to deal with, but the groups are always very dynamic and very willing to learn,” she explained. “They’re here because they recognize that their parents have given them a certain perspective and that’s

not the whole picture.”

Gebeily added that Back to Roots ensures it picks responsible and balanced lecturers to give talks on sensitive topics, such as Ayman Mhana, the executive director of the SKeys Center, who will give a talk on the Civil War.

The participants come to the program with varying degrees of political knowledge. Vulcain admits that she is a “blank slate,” and is eager to learn, while Anthony Aslou, who is from Washington and completing his master’s degree in Paris, is more knowledgeable on Lebanese politics and history, but is looking forward to having his views challenged.

The Back to Roots program draws an awkward similarity to Israel’s controversial Birthright program. The partly state-funded Birthright program takes young people of Jewish heritage from

around the world on a 10-day tour of Israel, and its activities include meetings with Israel soldiers.

Gebeily said she recognized the comparison and while she hoped that Back to Roots would become as well-known, she said that the organizers strived to ensure that the trip is not as politicized.

However, Back to Roots was partly founded by Gustave Cordahi, who was the president of the Lebanese Forces Student Association of North America during the program’s first year, and is still its director. The inaugural year also had a much larger political slant, with several meetings with March 14-aligned politicians.

Gebeily said that the program did begin with a clear political leaning but is now run by alumni who focus on ensuring that it is diverse and representative of Lebanon’s political and cultural spectrum.

Back to Roots is now in its sixth year. It takes only 14 students per year due to funding restrictions, but Gebeily said that interest is growing each year.

She hopes the program will help students come to terms with their often mixed heritage. She completed the program in its pilot year and it motivated her to move to Lebanon from the U.S. and work as a journalist. “People have described [Back to Roots] as life changing,” Gebeily said. “We have alumni that have described it as completely transformative at how they look at Lebanon, how they understand their own heritage, their own identity.”

This is an experience that resonates with Jamie Arabi, from London, Ontario, in Canada.

“Doing more and more research, I felt more and more attached to Lebanon. I felt like I belonged here more than Canada,” Arabi said of his research during university. “I felt more like an outsider, I guess, and then I had a weird existential identity crisis where I don’t know if I’m more Lebanese or more Canadian.”

He said that this trip gave him a chance to gauge how comfortable he felt being here and it has been positive. So much so, that he is planning to move back to Lebanon after he completes his law degree.

“I’m happy that I came and I felt the same thing that I was expecting to feel. It’s been something that I’ve been searching for, to be here and know that I’m Lebanese.”



Back To Roots participants explore the Faqra ruins.

AGENDA

Diplomats visit Aoun

Aoun’s residence, Rabieh
July 1, starting 10 a.m.

Head of the Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun will hold a series of separate meetings with diplomats, including the departing head of the EU Delegation in Lebanon Angelina Eichhorst at 10 a.m., followed by departing British Ambassador Tom Fletcher at 11 a.m. At noon he will meet German Ambassador Christian Clages.