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By Paul Clammer

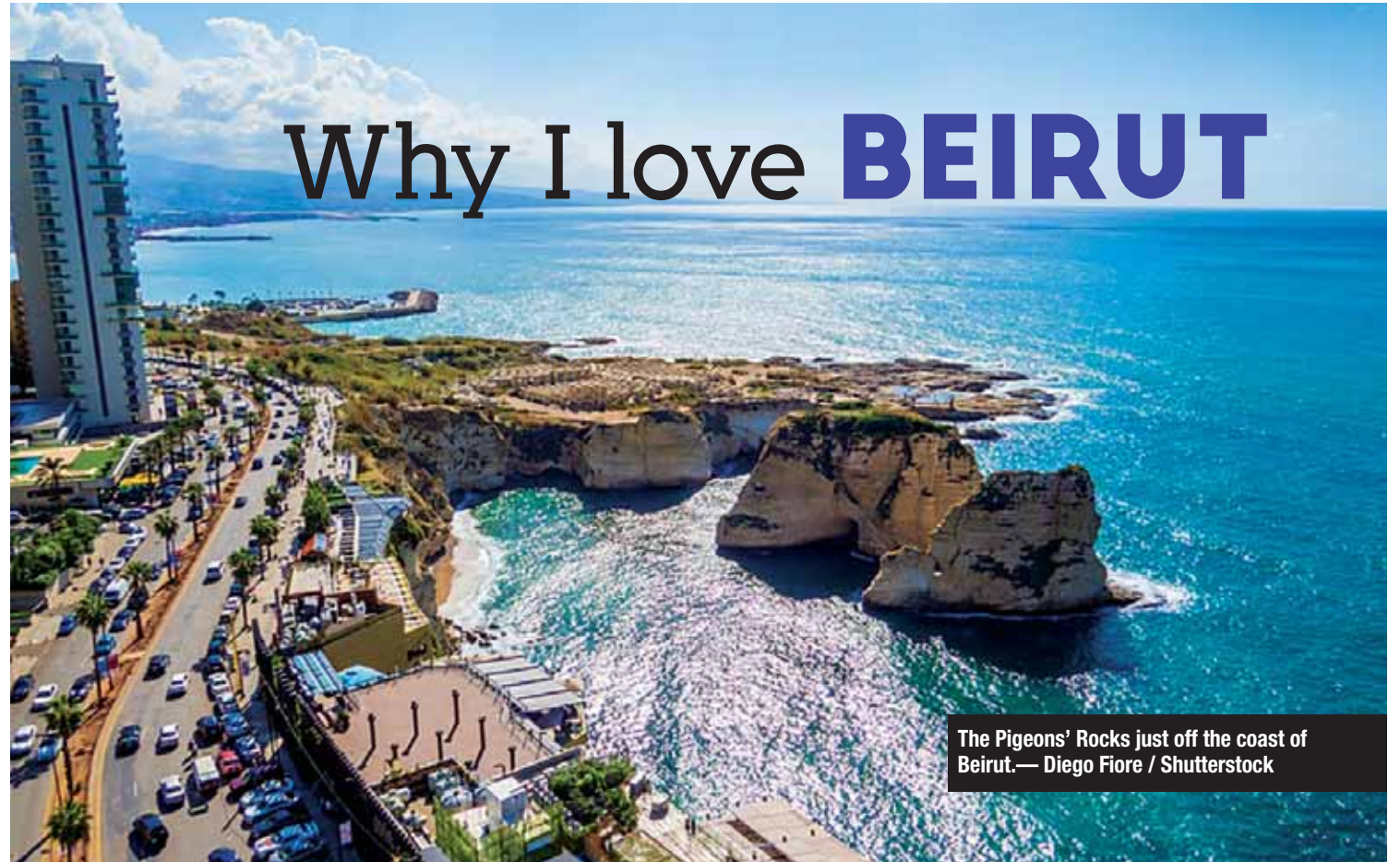
My first visit to Beirut was something of an unplanned detour. Twenty years ago in Damascus I took an impromptu shared taxi between the two capitals, armed with little more than a flyer for a cheap hotel in the Hamra district that a fellow backpacker had given me.

That trip was the start of an immediate and long-lasting love affair. I joined the promenading crowds on the Corniche that runs alongside the Mediterranean, and browsed for books in the beautiful campus of the American University of Beirut. Best of all was the food - thick creamy bowls of hummus topped with pine nuts, greasy shawarma kebabs and green, parsley-capped mountains of tabbouleh that seemed to cost pennies.

Still, I could never have imagined that I would move to Beirut two decades later, or - by improbable coincidence - that I would do so with a partner who had been living in the city during my first visit, working as a reporter on the city's only English-language newspaper. Our home is a five-minute walk from her old apartment in Gemmayzeh, and when she walked back into her old local restaurant after a break of 18 years, the manager still remembered her favorite dish. Beirut is like that.

As a guidebook writer for Lonely Planet, it's my job to capture the essence of a destination as well as its sights. I can wax lyrical about the beautiful coastal view over Pigeon Rocks at Raouche, ideally while enjoying a mezze and a chilled glass of local drink at Al Falamanki restaurant. Or I can enthuse about the extraordinary collection of 20th century Lebanese art at the jewel-box-like Sursock Museum, or the incredible restaurants tucked away in Monot, Clemenceau or Badaro.

But as the city comes to grip with the tragedy of the August 4 explosions, I'd like to



The Pigeons' Rocks just off the coast of Beirut.— Diego Fiore / Shutterstock

the Basta district. An otherwise unremarkable corner of the city tucked between a busy raised highway and a cemetery, it's the perfect place for treasure hunters. The best shop owners ply you with tiny cups of bitter coffee while you browse, then offer you tinsplate advertising placards for long-defunct brands of beer, colored lithographs from 19th century Parisian newspapers, and lurid posters for old Omar Sharif movies.

the perfect aromatic rose water ice, and then eat the most eye-watering lemon sorbet.

The lost optimism

I'd then take you to Mar Mikhael, where many of the signs are still written in Armenian. There's a picture framer here where you can nose through what other people are hanging on their walls, and it might take you a moment to work out why the owners welcome you with

mism of the early 1970s. But in October 2019 it was taken over as part of the thawra (revolution) street protests against government corruption. Used for activism teach-ins, it now stands covered with bright graffiti, echoing the brilliant potential of Lebanon's youth.

Indeed, Beirut has some of the most vibrant street artists in the region, and if we had time I'd take you on a walking tour to tell you the stories behind some of the best. We'll look out for pieces by Yazan Halwani, whose giant portraits of Lebanese icons are surrounded by soft clouds of Arabic calligraphy. My favorite, however, is the enormous mural of an astronaut planting the Lebanese flag on the moon while eating a slice of manakeesh (a baked flatbread with olive oil and a spice mixture called za'atar) - a cheeky nod to the urban myth that Neil Armstrong was secretly Lebanese himself.

Finally, as we look out across Martyr's Square, and its twin monuments to both Lebanese independence from the Ottomans and the thawra movement a hundred years later, I'd tell you about the joyful sea of flags that flooded the city that October month last year, and the streams of families walking below our apartment's balcony to be part of the great unifying Lebanese spirit. I'd point out the site of the community kitchens, the DJ sound systems, and the stand where kids could get their faces painted with the Lebanese flag. I'd tell you about the great coming together of all of Lebanon's diverse communities - and remember that that strong sense of national identity is the foundation on which Beirut's recovery will be built.

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The Egg, in downtown Beirut. — Paul Clammer / Lonely Planet



Mural of Lebanese astronaut, created by @TDurdenStudio.—Paul Clammer / Lonely Planet

take you on a tour of one of the oldest cities in the world and explain not only my love affair with Beirut, but why this ancient, diverse, eternally charming metropolis will surely rebuild.

Treasure hunters

In this personal guidebook, I'd put pride of place to the antique shops and junk stores of

For refreshments we'd take in the home-made ice cream at Hana Mitri, a tiny shop in an old stone building that's been a family business for decades, and claims to have closed only for one day during the 15 years of civil war. While we're queuing - there's always a queue - you might notice the bullet holes on the outside walls, nod at their dedication to

smudged gray on their foreheads, until you realize they've just returned from an Ash Wednesday service.

Perhaps later we'd head to downtown Beirut. We'd go to The Egg, a derelict cinema on the fringes of the area that just missed out on the rebuilding. Named for its concrete Brutalist shape, it symbolized the lost opti-