

# What became of Beirut's 1960s jet-set playgrounds

This story, and several others on Beirut, complement the [CNNGo TV](#) series. See more of the show here: [www.cnn.com/gotravel](http://www.cnn.com/gotravel).

*Beirut (CNN)* For several decades the name "Beirut" has conjured images of devastation and danger.

But not so long ago, it enjoyed a reputation as a playground for the world's most affluent tourists.

In the 1950s, a sudden influx of foreign money led to the creation of the Middle East's very own piece of La Dolce Vita on the Mediterranean.

New five-star hotels sprang up on the Ain el Mreisse seafront, nightclubs moved into Rue de Phenicie (Les Caves du Roy was said to be a particularly infamous den of iniquity) and restaurants opened to serve the celebrities and royals that began arriving.

On nearby Hamra Street, intellectuals from the nearby American University of Beirut and leftist politicians and activists would argue and plan over countless cigarettes in the dozens of cafes established in the 50s and 60s.

The most popular ones -- Cafe Wimpy, the Horseshoe, Cafe de Paris -- have since been turned into multinational chains, but what is still one of Beirut's most vital thoroughfares remains lined with al fresco smokers and espresso drinkers.

It's still possible to visit some of the hotspots of 60s Beirut for a sunbathe and a cocktail, and imagine that really is Brigitte Bardot and Omar Sharif you're seeing at the corner table.

## Saint George Yacht Club & Marina

Saint George Hotel Beirut, back in the day.

The Saint George was the first beach club to open on the coast of Beirut in the 1930s, and its attached hotel was host to Beirut's most recognizable tourists, including Bardot, Peter O'Toole (on breaks from filming "Lawrence of Arabia" in Jordan), Egypt's King Farouk and many more.

The hotel restaurant and bar, with its semicircular terrace looking over the pool and beach below, were ground zero for the city's foreign correspondents, either resident or passing through, looking for scoops or a break from the ascetic lifestyle elsewhere in the still-developing Middle East.

Subsequently, the bar cultivated the reputation of being a nest of spies.

Kim Philby, the infamous British MI6 officer who spied for the Soviets for over 30 years, is said to have dropped by each afternoon for five or six cocktails before tottering home to his flat on nearby Rue Kantari.

Sadly though, its history is the most interesting thing about the Saint George today.

The hotel was gutted during the 1975-1990 civil war, and an ongoing legal dispute with government-backed development and construction giant Solidere has interfered with reconstruction efforts.

Its owner Fadi Khoury, whose father ran the hotel before him, admits that preserving the past is not a priority at present.

"I'm so wrapped up in the legal battle," he says, "it's hard for me to remember the history."

A five-story banner on the hotel reading "Stop Solidere" casts a shadow over the otherwise lovely pools and bar, where beefcake U.N. soldiers and private security contractors can be seen sunning themselves on days off.

Still, a drink overlooking what remains of the beach that helped kick off Beirut's glamorous and hedonistic 60s reputation is well worth the trip.

*The [Saint George Yacht Club & Marina](#) is located in Ain el Mreisse, at the end of Zeitouna Bay complex. Entrance is \$27 at the weekend; +961 01 370 741*

Pasta joint from the past: Spaghetteria Italiana.

## **Spaghetteria Italiana**

On a side street in Ain el Mreisse, away from the bustle of the Corniche, Spaghetteria is right in the middle of what was the most fashionable neighborhood in Beirut.

Hemmed in by luxury hotels and furnished apartments, the former French and American embassies and myriad nightclubs and pubs on the nearby Rue de Phenicie, the classic Italian eatery's tables would be filled with models, politicians, journalists and tourists night after night.

More important to proprietor Vittorio Placenti were the regular neighborhood customers, says lifelong Ain el Mreisse resident Mohammed Nsouli over an afternoon espresso looking out over the Corniche, its bullet-pocked palm trees and the Mediterranean beyond.

To serve the neighborhood, says current owner Sami Ghadban, the restaurant stayed open throughout the civil war.

It was here that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt was eating lunch in 1977 when he found out his father Kamal had been "martyred," a story he told in a series of lyrical tweets last month.

"Comrade Walid is still a regular," says Ghadban proudly, as is veteran Beirut correspondent Robert Fisk, who has lived in the neighborhood for decades.

[Spaghetteria Italiana](#) is located in Ain el Mreisse, on Ain el Mreisse Street behind the mosque; +961 01 363 487

Fit for purpose: Beirut's Sporting Club has changed little since it opened.

## **The Sporting Club**

Named after The Sporting Club in Monte Carlo, Beirut's version of the beach club was founded in 1952 when Georges Abou Nassar took over a "tiny shack with a small nargileh cafe and a small strip of rocks on the waterfront," says his son Walid.

Walid Abou Nassar gives CNN a tour of the sprawling grounds, comprising multiple restaurants, swimming pools and terraces dotted with yellow canopies and white sun loungers.

Where the austere concrete slabs end, the porous rock begins.

"This is the westernmost point in Lebanon," Abou Nassar says, looking at the waves crashing on the Pigeon Rocks, mere meters away.

It was also one of the first places to Westernize.

When water sports and the tanned aesthetic took Beirut by storm in the mid-1950s, businessmen would stop by "Sporting" during the day to have lunch and a swim before going back to work; the club is no more than 10 minutes from the major business districts of the time.

They weren't alone.

The club was also host to film crews, as well as airline pilots and flight attendants serving the huge international hub that Beirut's airport was at the time.

"Because of all the Nordic hostesses, more people were interested in joining the club," Abou Nassar chortles.

*The Sporting Club is located in Manara. Entrance is \$18 at the weekend. For directions or more information call +961 01 742 481.*

## **The Duke of Wellington pub**

Serving up old fashioned since it was fashionable: The Duke of Wellington Pub

The pub at the Mayflower Hotel rode a wave of Anglophilia sweeping Hamra in the late 1950s and 60s.

In addition to the Duke of Wellington, as founder Mounir Samaha named the once cramped bar in the lobby of his hotel, there were several other English-style pubs in Hamra at the time.

The Duke is the only one still standing.

Founded in 1957, the pub was almost immediately popular with the crowds of foreigners and tourists flocking to the area for a good time.

As business boomed, Samaha expanded the pub to the several rooms it now occupies.

With a U-shaped bar, wooden tables and chairs, chesterfield sofas and antique pistols and coats of arms on the walls (as well as mounted deer heads), the Duke of Wellington still feels like a traditional English pub.

"The decor is exactly the same as it was," Samaha's son Sherif tells CNN, although the pub now attracts a somewhat different crowd of nostalgic over 40s.

In its heyday prior to the civil war, journalists would revel alongside foreign engineers working in the city as well as -- once again -- flight attendants and pilots fresh from the bustling airport.

Samaha was a constant, Sherif says, greeting regulars and doling out ever more bottles of Whitbread beer specially imported from the UK.

"I don't want to say he was a womanizer," Sherif recalls, laughing, "but he used to be very chatty with the airline hostesses in particular."

*The Duke of Wellington pub is located in the Mayflower Hotel on Yafet Street in Hamra. For a reservation call +961 01 340 680.*

### **Pepe Abed Byblos Fishing Club**

Boozy origins: Pepe Abed Byblos Fishing Club.

Sitting with Roger Abed in the comfortable living room of the Ottoman-era fishing club in the historic port city of Byblos about 40 kilometers north of Beirut, the anecdotes come fast and furious as he thumbs through decades-old guest books, partially decayed from the damp sea air.

According to Abed, his father Pepe sailed into the ancient Phoenician harbor of Byblos in 1962 after having made a small fortune from a beach club south of Beirut.

Laying eyes on an old fishing shack, he was so enchanted that he bought it then and there.

A few months later, Pepe's friend Marlon Brando (the two had gotten acquainted while living in Acapulco, Mexico) gave him the idea to open a restaurant during a drunken night at the fishing club in the early 1960s, which ended in Brando sleeping it off on the couch under his jacket.

Based on the photographs of celebrity visitors lining the dining room, a terrace with tables in blue and white and flowers potted in ancient Phoenician amphorae overlooking the harbor, little has changed since the restaurant opened its doors.

Guests dine on fresh fish, mezze and Lebanese wine while enjoying the dappled sunlight and sea breezes.

In fact, it might even be better now, for visitors at least.

In its prime, there was a constant crush of visitors at Chez Pepe.

Now, on a weekday, if you're lucky it'll be just you and the ghosts.

*Pepe Abed Byblos Fishing Club is located on the Old Harbor in Byblos, 42 kilometers north of Beirut. Make a reservation at +961 09 540 213.*

Stephanie d'Arc Taylor is an American journalist who has lived in Beirut for three years working on subjects of politics, business and arts & culture. She tweets at [@SdArcT](https://twitter.com/SdArcT).