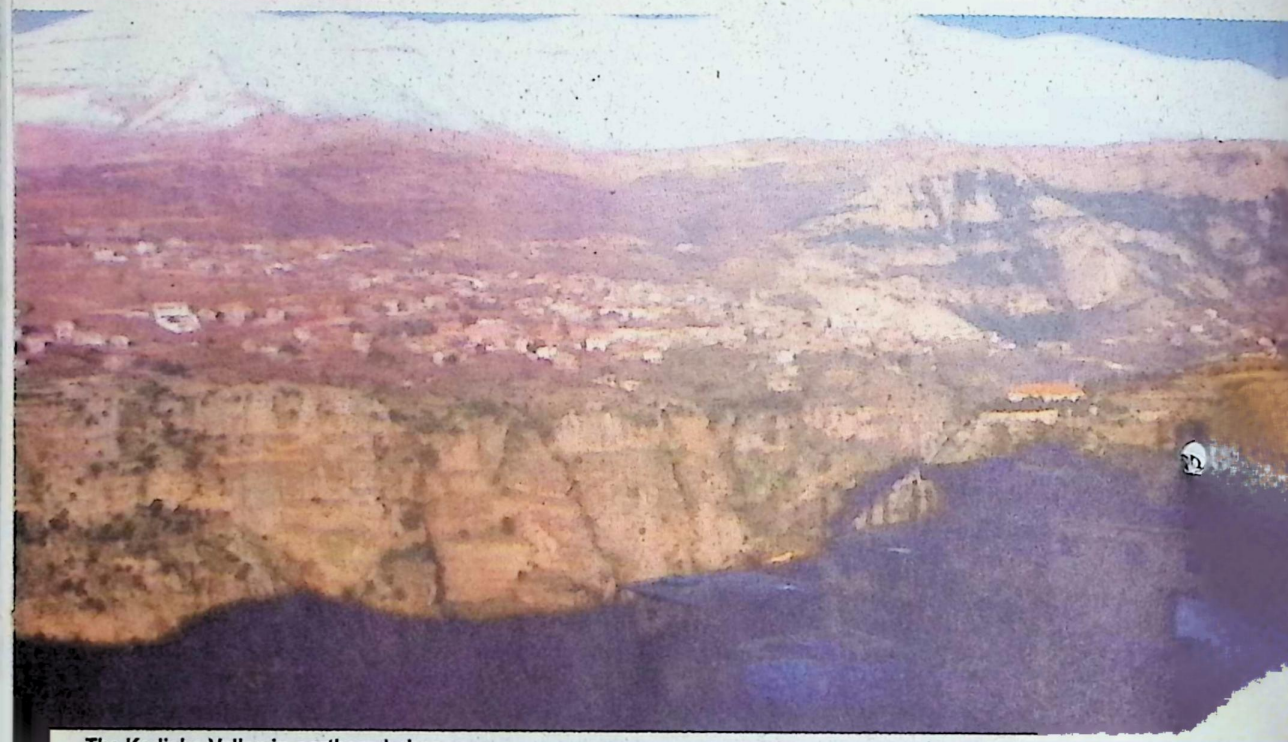


The Kadisha Valley in northern Lebanon.

Valley of Faith

ANDREW EAGLE

Perhaps it was wrong to assume. Perhaps I was wrong to think that because wars leave scars they mightn't want to hear about it. It can be that the fissures brought to human understanding by communalism are not easy to ford, but it's equally true that humans are adaptable. Perhaps I underestimated them and it was cowardly not to mention Bangladesh.

The Kadisha Valley in Lebanon's north is a traditional Maronite Christian stronghold and Lebanon's 1980s civil war cannot but have reaffirmed that. Opinions seemed ridged, or so I assumed, memories too fresh. But Bangladesh played no role in that war and neither had I, so could I not have mentioned the similarity between Bangladeshi Muslim hospitality and their hospitality-of-the-cedars?

They say that little Lebanon is a country where you can ski and swim in the same day. I'd taken the bus from Tripoli on Lebanon's Mediterranean to the heights of the valley, to stand at the base of a ski slope. I wasn't there to ski but to admire the trees. I wanted to see the cedars.

Those trees are not only Lebanon's national symbol, featured on the flag. Ancient Egyptians used their resin in mummification and with the boats the Phoenicians built from their timbers they spread their civilisation across the Mediterranean. In the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh the cedar forests were considered the dwelling of the Gods, while Moses, according to the Bible, used their bark in circumcisions and to cure leprosy. King Solomon's temple was built from their wood.

There aren't many of Lebanon's cedars left, and for the most part they are difficult to access; and all I got to see were a few specimens in the town of Bcharre. It's not that there haven't been attempts to preserve them: Roman Emperor Hadrian decreed a law to this effect as did the Mamluk Caliphs. In 1876 Queen Victoria financed a wall to protect their limbs from foraging goats.

There were trees, just a few, and they were just trees. But the cedars are Lebanon and the heritage of half the world.

Yet in the Kadisha Valley where names tend to echo it wasn't Ancient ones that seemed to predominate. Rather, there were two of more modern vintage: the early twentieth century Lebanese-