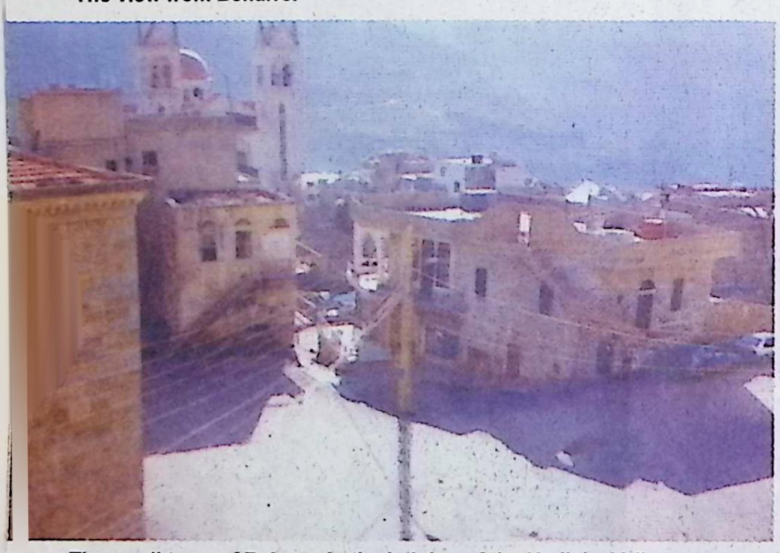


The view from Bcharre.



The small town of Bcharre in the heights of the Kadisha Valley.

By the end of the coffee Tony's wife made, Tony had suggested a walk around the village, in particular to see a church. Yes, Beirut was far but perhaps a village tour wouldn't hurt. Local insight: the traveller's treasure.

Of the village there's little to report apart from the striking valley views and that about every second home was boarded up. Why was that, I asked Tony. 'They all live in Sydney,' he said.

Of the church, it was remarkable. It was built into a cliff face with a round hole and a ladder that had to be climbed to get inside. The church was a narrow ledge walled up on the outside with some kind of bricks, compact and historical. It was built in a time of wars between Muslims and Christians, in centuries past, and the ladder entryway enabled the priests inside to protect themselves. They kept swords to use on any that might think to climb that ladder to attack them.

Tony said it was really rather better to stay the night and leave in the morning; and yes, Beirut was far. Perhaps a day later wouldn't hurt.

Tony's wife made kebab wrapped in flat bread for dinner and they put them on top of the heater to keep them warm. We played cards and spoke on many topics, including my travels and life. But I didn't mention Bangladesh.

'Before today,' Tony said, and I'll not forget it, 'you had one house in Sydney. But now you have two!' It's truer that I had many houses, if not on the deed exactly, but I was touched by the generosity of his words.

He spoke of St Charbel, who as a boy tended sheep and spent years as a Maronite priest recluse in the simplest of circumstances. Many miracles are attributed to him, including a partially paralysed woman who dreamt of him and awoke cured, with the ability to walk again. She had two wounds in her neck and St. Charbel said in her dream that he did surgery to heal her. 'If you pray to St Charbel,' Tony said, 'Your prayers will be answered.'

On the following day, down the mountain, I made Beirut: all with private transport. It's not a thing to do but I did.

It's interesting because within two months I'd be riding a Honda in the Rajasthani desert with a friend there telling me with equal sincerity, 'If you pray to Sai Baba, your prayers will be answered.' And in Bangladesh, for guests they make tea.

But it was in Sydney that my thoughts turned again to the Kadisha Valley. I penned a letter. There was no reply and it was at least two years later I knew he'd received it.

I was at home in the flat I was renting in a predominantly Muslim suburb of Sydney one evening when the phone rang. It was George. I can categorically say there's nothing wrong with receiving a call from George except that I didn't know any George. And this George, how did he get my number? 'I'm Tony's cousin,' he said, 'I live in Sydney but I've just been to Lebanon and he was talking a lot about you. I want to meet you.'

'Some guy called George rang for you,' my sister said later, 'I gave him your number.'

I visited George's house, how could I not, for coffee, baklava sweets and chat about the Kadisha Valley and Tony. And I couldn't help it. I should've known better. I told him what Tony said about having an extra home, the words stuck in my mind. 'Before today,' said George, 'you had two homes, but now you have three.' And in Bangladesh, I should've said, for guests they make tea.

'Spare me the political events and power struggles,' wrote Gibran, 'as the whole earth is my homeland and all men are my fellow countrymen.' It's what I learnt from the cedars: Lebanon, the heritage of half the world.