

baris

I am waiting for my connecting flight to Beirut. The boarding has started at 10:30 pm in Istanbul. The heat is getting to my head, and I am waving with my boarding card to get some fresh air. At the gate, I see Lebanese women and men standing impatiently trying to be the first in line.

»baris«

– because there is no P in Arabic. Beirut is the Paris of the Arab world, at least this is what my Syrian friends had told me, and slowly, I understand. I see women around me with head scarves, short pants and dresses. Modern, sporty, traditional, liberal and conservative dress codes – and all at the same time.

yalla, yalla

At 02:30 I arrive at the airport in Beirut and the taxi driver has been waiting for me for an hour. The line at the passport control doesn't get shorter, and nervously, I am pushing myself forward. Finally, I reach the luggage belt and I see my backpack and the red leather bag of my Syrian friends – who gave me their bag for their family in Lebanon. I pull the bags over my shoulder and try to find the exit. A glass door opens, in front of me, irritated, I see many people waiting and holding badges and signs with Arabic spelling. Soon, I see Hassan, my taxi driver, holding a sign with my name, luckily in English. We shake hands and I apologize for my delay. He smiles at me and says

»yalla, yalla«

– fast, fast. We continue our way to Beirut, my new home for the next five weeks.

7abibi

Five women are living in my new apartment in Karakol El-Druze, a neighborhood in the middle of Beirut. On my first morning, Leila makes Arabic coffee for me, adding a lot of cardamom. Leila says, Arabic coffee is special and I have to try it. My other roommate, Hiba, drinks instant coffee, sitting next to us on the carpet. Both girls are from Syria and came to Beirut a few years ago. Leila works in a NGO for refugees and Hiba studies Radio & TV, now. After introducing, I tell them about my Arabic Course and that I am studying how language can change the perception on society and culture. Hiba gives an example, people use the word

»7abibi«!

– darling, at all times independent of how close you are to the person – family, friends or strangers.

a morning full of flowers

So far, I only know Beirut from my window up the eighth floor. The city I can see well from above and I feel good in my safe space. I don't dare to leave the house all morning but the midday heat is going down and I have no excuses left. I carry my camera around my neck taking the elevator down. The air is hot and the streets are empty this Sunday. I see two men near my house drinking coffee on their plastic chairs, two sellers of a fruit store joking around and people looking at me. I am lost in the streets and the people around me can tell. A shopkeeper greets me

»saba7 L kheir.«

– wishing someone a morning full of wellness. I mumble something, to respond anything. What did he actually say? He offers me his help in broken English. I am looking for a notebook, is what I try to say, but instead, the daughter brings me a packaging box from the upper floor. Thankfully, I smile and leave. The way of saying good morning back to the other, I learn later, is infinite. Sabaa7 n nuur, Sabaa7 el ward, Sabaa7 el yasmin. Good morning full of light, flowers

–
»Saba7 n nuur«

»Saba7 el ward«

or in short you can only say

»Saba7ho«.

god is the greatest

In the north, Beirut borders the Mediterranean Sea. The coast is only a view minutes away from my apartment. As I walk, I see many buildings on my way are run down. The closer I get to the waterfront, called »Corniche«, I observe huge villas and modern skyscrapers and how the sun reflects in the windows. I continue walking down the »Corniche« and I come across private beaches, bars and pools. Public beaches are rare and families, young and old women and men are lying under umbrellas fighting for space. The public beaches are made of rocks and people claim their space smoking shisha, having barbecue or to fish. At the top of a wall, a group of boys are waiting to jump into the sea. It seems to be a test of courage and a boy starts screaming

»allahu akbar«

– God is the greatest. He jumps into the water with his arms and legs spread. Proudly, the boy looks up the wall where his friends are cheering and applauding loudly.

thank you!

All day, I am getting to know Beirut with my camera. Sometimes, I rest in the shade, then I pick up words or I just watch the scenario around me – a man taking Polaroids, kids trying to break dance and Syrian kids selling roses. After a while, I get up and start taking pictures again not getting enough of the new impressions – but slowly I am exhausted. Finding my way back home, there is a lot of noise and cars only honking for the sake of honking. My energy continues to go down when an old taxi stops next to me. I do not think too long and the car seems trustworthy with a taxi sign on the roof. I get inside and he tells me about his nephew who lives in Germany. Constantly, he tries to call him while driving and ignoring every red traffic light. When I ask for the price, he replies, up to you.

»shukran«

– thank you, I say. At the end, I still pay too much.

tamam

In the Whatsapp group of my house, a message of Leila pops up early in the morning. »Please do not pop the doors.« On tiptoe, I walk into the kitchen, and quietly, for breakfast, I roll two Lebanese flat bread with Labbaneh and Hummus. Later I learn, that Lebanese people never mix Labbaneh and Hummus. Either you eat Labbaneh or Hummus inside your bread – but never together.

»tamam«?

– did you get it, my teacher asks. But »tamam« can also be used for alright, or to give something the feeling that you are listening.

here, here

Quietly, I close the front door of my apartment, making sure Leila does not get bothered. It is my first day of school, and I have a twenty minute walk ahead of me. The streets are much busier than the Sunday before but even in the early morning the heat is standing in the streets. I pass by small shops, cafés and grocery stores selling guns, flowers, chicken, eggs, cleaning material. I am feeling the vibe and dynamics of the neighborhood and I am getting excited for the next months. Reaching Hamra, I face a total different neighborhood, richer and with high class shops and cafés. I can't find the door to my language school. Suddenly, the guard calls after me and points to the sign of the language school

»hayda, hayda«

– here, here.

let's go

In the backyard of the language school, I take the elevator to the fifth floor and reach a small office. I am the last of my class with six international students and our teacher welcomes me. Zehra is her name. Zehra speaks very loud and knows what she wants.

»Taiib«

– fine, she says, let's get this started.

a u i , ba bu bi, ta tu ti

The air conditioner is buzzing, and nervously, I am sitting in my chair. From the window, I stare into the empty backyards of the language school. From now on, I will sit here for three hours every day. The language course is divided into two parts: learning the alphabet and practicing conversations, explains Zehra. First, we sing and repeat the alphabet.

»a u i, ba bu bi, ta tu ti, sa su si,
ja ju ji, ha hu hi, cha chu chi, ...«

– 28 letters, with vocals. One song, and all have to sing along. My friend Ahmed, later, tells me that the song reminds him of his childhood.

language of dahd

Arabic is the only language with the deep letter »Dahd«. The alphabet is also called the language of the »Dahd« – »Lougha L Dahd.«

People have different synonyms for the Arabic language. Some call the language the »Koran language« or the »Sami language«. The language includes million of words and every detail can be exactly described – especially love, adds Zehra and smiles.

man2aish

In the morning break of the Arabic lessons my colleagues and I are looking for coffee to wake up. On the opposite side of the school there is a small »Man2aish« bakery, little Lebanese pastries with cheese, meat, vegetables or herbs. I climb the steps to the counter and order four coffees, which are served in tiny cups. We stand on the street and talk about the Arabic course. Our teacher is confusing us with her dominant teaching method. The teacher is the authority and you have to obey. During our talk a Syrian boy comes barefoot towards us. Selin, a classmate says she can not stand it and gives the boy 1000 LIB. She says, here take it and order something, what's that?

»man2aish«

– the little boy orders the pastry with meat and cheese and runs away quickly.

double bon appetite

In the prosperous neighborhood of Hamra restaurants are very western and I order a red beet salad with goat cheese and walnuts for lunch. My colleagues and I sit around a large table and the English menu explains the visitor more about their events and their sharing bookshop. Selin, my Turkish colleague, sits with her boyfriend Mohammed at the head of the table. His teeth are as white as paper sheets and his hairline is too straight to be natural. He has a bar in Downtown of Beirut, the most wealthy neighborhood here. Mohammed explains some rules that exist in Lebanon. When everything is set at the table, you start eating and say

»Sa7teyn«

– the doubling of health, or bon appetite. Almost everything can be doubled in Arabic.

lots of traffic

Paris is the name of the café and shisha bar located in the middle of Hamra Street. I order a coffee Latte – for too much money – and enjoy being part of the city life. In the afternoon the streets are getting full, everyone honks and stands still.

»3aj2ah«

– the traffic is getting more and more. It is prestige here to have a own a car and drive through the city instead of doing things on foot, at least it is what people told me. Another reason might is the lack of public transport in town.

please

The neighborhood, Karakol El-Druze, I like to discover from our balcony. It gives me a new perspective not getting lost in details of the active street life but seeing the whole street with its system and structures from a distance. Leila, my roommate, and I stand on tiptoes on the balcony and she is pointing to a small shop with a seller who always gives her well-intentioned advice. When I walk down, I see countless small stores ahead of me – but can not find the one Leila has showed me. I am randomly stepping into a small place which looks welcoming to me. Most of the food, brands and companies as I am looking in the shelves are different from the products I buy back home. Instead of sliced cheese and cold cuts, they would have, labbaneh, goat spread cheese, olives, feta, flat bread, yogurt, big pieces of sausage, tahina, sesame past, hummus as well as a lot of vegetables and fruits. Though, the candy they share all the European and American sweets. First, I decide to buy Hummus, Labbaneh and flat bread. At the cash register I day dream and the

cashier interrupts me, go right ahead –

»tfadaleh«.

photo, photo

Before Clara, my Swedish roommate, will go back home she wants to say goodbye to everyone tonight. Leila, Nadja and I plan to walk to the city center by foot, the rest is joining us later. I put on a dress, the prettiest one I have in my backpack, wait in the living room for the rest of the girls and eat my halal Haribos – without gelatin. Leila comes into the living room, she wears a pink, strapless dress and looks gorgeous. On the way there, she is apologizing for being late and tells us that we should not be so strict with her, that she has just started therapy and is suffering from depression. We walk down a hill towards the coast. Motorcycles are coming towards us and some boys scream

»Suurah, Suurah.«

– photo, photo. Leila says at night we should not be alone here and silence the men quick-witted.

no night is long enough

Nadja, Leila and I continue walking through Beirut at night and the street lights are reflecting in the windows around us. Only now, do I notice the many military checkpoints we have to pass. Leila says you never know how, where and when the city is monitored. In one day there are soldiers everywhere and on the other day they are gone again. Taking pictures is strictly prohibited at the checkpoints. We hide and sneak when Leila discovered a graffiti that I might like to photograph written on the wall of a checkpoint

»La layla yakfina lina7lum maratayn«

– No night is long enough to dream twice.

faith and hope

Today we are learning the long vowels and I am starring outside of the window not staying focused at all. On the balcony outside I face a family, the mother hanging up their laundry and the blue sky is almost without any clouds. Tilda, the Swedish colleague, asks the teacher to stop screaming that it does not make her learn anything. I slide deeply into my chair but unexpectedly the teacher takes it easy and slows down. She continues to explain the vowels to us on the example of different words.

»iiman«

– meaning faith. Names are given by their meaning in Arabic, Zehra explains. The same as

»aamal«

– with the meaning of hope.

our names

One day later, Zehra continuous to be very hectic and I find it difficult to follow her lessons. shu ismak? shu ismik? shu ismo? What is your name? What is his name? We are conjugating for the first time today but Zehra does not explain us in what general structure one conjugates but makes us memorize all the forms on the example of one verb. As a last tip for today, she says we should hear Fairouz. A Lebanese singer who is loved by all the Arab world especially in the mornings. The song is

»assmauna«

– our names.

nice to meet you

After the Arabic course some colleagues and I stop a taxi for some sight seeing inside the city. An old man smiles at us, we want to go to the biggest mosque in Beirut called Mohammed al-Amin. He does not understand a word of what we are saying, so we show him a photo of the mosque with the glowing blue dome on our phones. Laughing the taxi driver repeats the name of the mosque and tells us to enter the car. At least the first few phrases we can practice and we start a little conversation. shu ismak? kifak? mniha. shukran. The newest word we have learned is

»tsharafna«

– nice to meet you. After we arrived at the mosque, the taxi driver says goodbye honking loudly.

bonjour

Living in Beirut for five weeks is quiet some time and next to my adventures, I need to find some routine in my everyday life. First, I start looking for a gym that could suit me and which is affordable. Prices here go from 20 up to 140 Dollar. Taking care of your body is obviously a thing that people care about here. I put on my sportswear and walk with my map on the phone around the neighborhood. The first one that looks trustworthy has closed and I keep on going. The owner of the next gym is greeting me from the entrance

»bounjour«

– good morning, how can I help you? Later I learn, you can also personalize the greeting in

»bounjourik/bounjourak?«

– mixing the French word with the Arabic declination for the female and male. French mixes with Arabic a lot in Beirut. Despite, people tell me that it is mostly used for and within the group of posh people.

one, two, three

The gym costs 50 Dollar a month and the owner seems to be nice and friendly. Before, I sign up I need to go to the ATM for cash but after I arrived machine ejects my card even after the fourth attempt. I quickly run back to the apartment to test my emergency card – but it does not work either, no dollars. Besides, with time I am unsure if my sports outfit is roadworthy. Leila said, short pants and shirts are ok in the neighborhood but I am starting to feel uncomfortable. My last attempt is to withdraw LIB instead of Dollars and finally something is happening. For the language course I need 600 Dollar plus 50 Dollar for the gym. How much is that in LIB? I have 120 million LIB in my pocket heading to the gym and I am confused, nervous and stressed. The owner calms me and counts my bills slowly

»wahad«

»tnen«

»tlete«

»arbaha«

»khamse«

»sitta«

»sabha«

»temenya«

»tis3a«

»3ashra«

something like oha

Maia is the daughter of the owner of my gym. She grew up in France and moved to Lebanon with her family eight years ago. She asks me where I'm from and what I'm doing here. In a few words, I tell her that I am learning Arabic but that I do not know how to ever learn this language.

»ei wa«!

– oha. Maia helps me from now with questions and tells me not to give up. The following days at the gym she asks over and over again how I am progressing and what I have learned new in Arabic. Maia trains every day and we discuss our fitness programs and plans. She loves her body, she says. Diet is not that important to her, training always comes first.

you beautiful

Zehra is in a good mood today and waves her hands through the air. Looking around the class room, I am reading *God is the greatest* written on the window. Yesterday it has not been there and I ask her who wrote the phrase. She herself, she answers, yesterday after her evening class. For now she would sometimes take up to twelve hours of lessons per day. I look at her and ask if we can do anything good to her. She laughs and says, we already do because we are smart and happy. Let us start, you beautiful
»7elwiin«.

no excuses

In the afternoon, I look constantly on my watch and – all those new Arabic words are exhausting to me. While everyone else is still eager to keep going I can not listen anymore, neither write nor think. Zehra, however, has her eyes everywhere and asks, why I do not write the punctuation. She leans over my table and complements the points. I joke and say that I have heard the letters used to be written without punctuation. Zehra looks at me and says, no excuses
»beduun 7ajaj«.

on your heart

The last few days I spent some time in modern, trendy cafés and restaurants in Hamra. Today, I feel like Hummus, Labbaneh and Turkish coffee or tea. On recommendation, Selin, Tilda and I go to a restaurant called Al Sharif after class. The restaurant is located in a small side street and the meat is grilled on a spit outside. We climb the stairs to a small cozy dining room. We are warmly received and get assigned to a table in the middle of the room. Before we receive our order as a starter they serve onions, mint leaves, pickles, olives and bread. A view minutes later small bowls of all different Arabian food is served in all its variety. Good Appetite.

»3la albik«

– on your heart.

i see you later

Instead of having a semester break I wake up with a headache with no desire to learn Arabic in the morning. I jump into the shower, it's freezing cold and I do not understand what's the problem again. Did someone turn off the boiler? Next to my instant coffee is my vocabulary book and I force myself to remember the words of yesterday. Shortly before class, I visit the small copy and book shop on the ground floor of my language school to buy some candy for class. The two female shop owner already know me and smile at me. They cheer me up and say that one day I'll understand their language. They wish me a nice day, see you later

»bshufak ba3dein«.

what do you do in life?

After entering the language school, I see my colleagues sitting in the waiting room looking at their phones. Zehra opens the door, we are her second class in the morning. She seems to be in a good mood today and it makes her sympathetic, you always know where you are with her. We repeat conjugating possessive pronouns and learn a new verb: to do. What is the most common question in Lebanon, Zehra asks.

»shu bta3meli bil 7ayat?«

– What do you do in life?

beggar

Syrian women with children are sitting on the street and run through Hamra begging for money or selling roses. The longer I'm here, the stronger I notice them. Someone in the language course asks our teacher, whether to give them food or money.

»shahad«

– beggar. Zehra replies that she always gives children something to eat as the money goes directly to the mothers or fathers. She knows a story of a woman from Beirut who begged for years on the street. Recently, she died and it came out that she had 1 million dollar in her account. Tilda sitting next to me gets annoyed and whispers that there is always that story of a rich homeless in every country.

hijab

In Arabic one distinguishes linguistically between the functional scarf and the religious scarf

»hijab aw sheil«.

sorry with guilt

Classes are over for today and I breathe in the cold air of the air conditioning before I leave in the heat outside. Aurelie comes out of the office and asks if we need help. I explain to her that I do not understand how to say sorry. Aurelie explains that in Arabic there are two forms. If you're not guilty and just asks someone to step side, you would say

»afwan«

but if you have done something wrong and you apologize, you use

»ba3tezer«.

friends as family

In the past, when roads used to be broken people who were traveling were invited to enter homes in order to be safe, Aurelie explains.

»ahla w sahla«

– welcome. Aurelie gives us details of the origin of the welcome proverb. While ahlan stands for the family, sahan stands for the straight roads. You welcome your friends like your own family and invite them metaphorically on secure ground inside your home.

peace

Nadja, my German roommate, and I are looking for a restaurant later at night. We ask the owner of a shop next door for recommendation. He explains that usually his family and him drive far away, there is not much in the area but then he remembers a restaurant called Somar. On the phone he shows us a photo, whether that is something we are looking for, he asks. It is a Syrian restaurant with many small specialties. We learn that there is a dispute between Lebanese and Syrian cuisine about which is the better one. While eating dinner, I realize that the food is actually prepared differently with more details and the taste is stronger. Additional to the food, romantic Arabic songs are played in the background. Next to our table, I see a young couple flirting with each other, a family who dressed up for the dinner and behind them a group of men smoking shisha while eating. They serve us a black tea for goodbye.

»salam«

– go in peace.

for the good of your eyes

Hassan's parents were born in Lebanon. They belong to a minority who had to leave the country during the civil war. We know each other from Germany, now and then we talk on the phone since I am in Lebanon. Hassan tells me about the neighborhoods in Beirut, the cultural and religious diversity and how the city was divided in a Muslim and Christian area during the civil war. Even today, many quarters are strongly differentiated from the others. I like the conversations with Hassan. He helps me to get a better understanding for cultural differences.

»tikram 3younak«

– for the good of your eyes, he says.

b bt bti bto mn by bt byo

After a lot of frustration recently, I am having a good time in my arabic course today. The structures of conjugating verbs are more and more opening up to me. Although my progress is really slow I feel the language as a whole gets clearer to me.

»b, bt, bt ... i, bt ... o, mn, by, bt, by ... o«.

sunday is monday

In Arabic the days of the week are related to the numbers and it is easy for me to memorize them. Furthermore, in Muslim countries the week starts on Sundays

»sabit«.

This is because the important Muslim prayer takes place Fridays which makes it a holy day for Muslims. While Saturday is free, the work will continue on Sunday. Only in Lebanon it doesn't work like that, explains Zehra, the country is culturally and religiously shaped differently and the week begins as in other Christian countries on Monday.

weekend sa3iid

Zehra has her last lesson with us today. From Monday, Aya will be our teacher. Zehra says, we will not sing songs with her anymore. Nobody in class looks actually sad about the goodbye and the last words are

»weekend sa3iid«

– have a nice Weekend.

girlsein

The bus station Charle Helou is located in the north of Beirut but I can not find any official information about bus schedules. Later, I find out why – after the Civil War they could not finish constructing the place and it became more or less an informal bus station. Nadja and I are on the way to Byblos and in the middle of the highway the taxi driver drops us. Coincidentally, the bus to Byblos is right in front of us and the driver looks at us confused pointing to the sign. Beirut –Tripoli. Nadja speaks a little Arabic and explains something to him that I do not understand. I only listen

»bintein«

Nadja translates to me that it means two women. I ask, whether that is the general plural because I remember another word. No, that's the dual, she says,

»binät«

would be the plural.

3 equals the sound of ayn

The bus driver stops a short time later and gets us water bottles before collecting the other passengers heading to Byblos. I am not asking myself why trying to trust in his kindness. After the bus leaves us out safe in Byblos, two colleagues from my language school text me that they are hangover and not joining us as planned

»3aZiim«

– well, I read at the end of the message, they wish us a fun time. The phonetic letters sometimes confuse me more than they help me. 3 stands for the Letters »3ayn«, 7 for the letter »ha« and 2 for a long vowel. Later, Nadja and I visit the ruins of Byblos and get lost in the old Romanian walls, buildings and construction.

hayda and hada

An American action movie with Arabic subtitles runs on TV back home in our apartment. In the evening, I join Leila and Rana sitting with them on the carpet in the living room. They ask me how I am, how the language course is going. I tell them as both of them are from Syria that I learned that the Syrian dialect is different from the Lebanese. People told me the Syrian accent is a bit harder, if it is true. For example, the word

»hayda«

in Syria one says

»hada«.

The women laugh and agree. Both of them speak a mix of both dialects and sometimes people can not tell where they come from. Out of protection and racism, Rana says, she even trained herself to lose the Syrian dialect.

rest well at night

Leila points to a man on TV who is exactly her type: bald head, tall and masculine. Her father is in the military, she says, this is why she likes guys like that. Lebanese men are not for her though, they care too much about their appearance – a big car, but debts in the account. Syrian men are different, different problematic, too traditional, she laughs. Rana is Druze and her family only allows her to get a married with someone from the same religion. Leila, however, does not care what her family thinks, though since she is independent, she has almost no contact with them. Slowly, it's getting late and I say goodbye in my newly learned words

»tiSbu7 L kheir«

– good night, literally translated, rest well, Leila and Rana tell me the same.

4 thou

The diverse encounters living, learning and researching in Beirut strain me. I am experiencing more than I am able to process and on Sundays at 12 pm I found myself still in bed. The screen of my phone is full of news. Leila has sent a photo to our group, and says, get up, donuts for everyone. I drag myself into the living room. The women are sitting at the table and in the middle next to the mountain of donuts with chocolate overdrawn, I see a big box with small mini pizzas.

»four thou«

– four thousand would have only cost the pizzas coming with the donuts, they could not have resisted, enjoy, they tell me.

mnii7ah

At Café Réve, I start spending my Sundays, it is a coffee place next door. I come here to study on my laptop but slowly my hands and feet are freezing today. The air conditioner buzzes and stops to 16 degrees. I have to warm myself and say goodbye looking for something to eat before going home. On the other side of the street, at AM / PM, a supermarket opening for 24 hours, I see a familiar face. The young man with long hair smiles at me and asks me how I am and if he can help me.

»mnii7ah«

– I am good, I answer, only that I am looking for something to eat and if he knows a place where I can find fresh Hummus. In Arabic, he asks his colleagues where to find Hummus in our neighborhood. I should follow him, he tells me, and I do until we are at a small food store load land with fresh hummus.

mountain or sea

On the ground floor of my language school, the copy shop becomes my first stop every morning buying drinks, books or candy. The owners, two very open-minded women make each of my mornings brighter. Today is Monday and they ask me where I went for the weekend.

»jabal aw ba7ir«.

– to the mountains or to the beach? After my daily walk to class, I've gotten used to stop by and get into small conversations with them. Every morning, they teach me new Arabic words and motivate in my studies.

so and so

Aya our new teacher is younger, more attentive and understands better our individual needs. She will be our new teacher for the next four weeks. Confident she stands with her black, strapless top in front of us and smiles at us. Even though I started getting used to Zehras conventional way of teaching, I'm glad that Aya teaches us from now on. While she is talking and thinking, she puts ya3ni into every other sentence and gap of talk. Someone asks her what ya3nii actually means.

»ya3nii«

– mostly meaning something such as like, she explains, can be used in different contexts. Do you like pizza? ya3ni. What's that again? ya3ni.

facebooki

Aya has pragmatic solutions to all linguistic problems. Today, we are learning the possessive pronouns. Aya says, it's very simple, for the first person you add an *i* at every end.
»facebooki«.

shut up

Today is the day I hand over the red bag to my Syrian friends family living in Lebanon. They live in a village outside Beirut, in Qob Elias. I am happy being outside of Beirut seeing the surrounding of the city. I am waiting for Ismail, the brother-in-law of my Syrian friend, to pick me up. With my phone I try to navigate Ismail to my place and my friend tries simultaneous to help out from Germany. Surprisingly, only a short time later Ismail stands in front of me. He does not speak any English and my Arabic for beginners does not make it better. With his hands he tells me to follow him. Behind him I see a blue car stopping by the road, his friend is sitting behind the wheel. Because Ismail does not have a car, his friend drives us to Qob Elias. Without air conditioning we are stuck in the middle of the rush hour and continue driving up the mountain towards Bekaa. The heat and the honking cars are all over.

»saker timek«

– shut up, I hear the driver yelling.

you donkey

The landscape is changing and the air is getting cooler the further we drive towards the mountains. I love the view from up above on the villages and the barren landscape. The Muezzin of the mosques and the church towers reach out of the villages. I am getting enthusiastic about the nature and finally I can breathe fresh air again. But then the next car comes to us and the driver yells

»inta hamar«

– you donkey.

olive tree

The apartment of Ismail's family is behind a garage door and I remember my friends words not to be surprised of their living conditions. In the middle of the small courtyard I see a little olive tree coming out of the concrete floor

»zeytun«.

Next to the tree I see a small bike and Ismail's scooter. The children come running and greet me curiously. They tell me their names and I try to remember all the words I have learned in Arabic. I take off my shoes and enter a dark room. The room is a bedroom, dining and living room at the same time. On the right is a picture of Mecca, next to it a TV and the floor is covered with a large carpet with benches on the wall around it. The boy sits down on the floor and starts to play on his father's phone.

coffee or tea

Ismail's wife and the sister of my friend, Shavin, comes inside the room with coffee and warmly welcomes me. She kisses me four times and looks very much like my friend. Their life situation makes me thoughtful trying not to think for now to enjoy spending time with them. We sit together on the floor and drink

»2ahweh w shai«.

– coffee, but please without sugar. The qaf in coffee is not pronounced in the Syrian and Lebanese dialect.

ana mabsutah

The Syrian family and me communicate with my best Arabic vocabulary, hands and feet and Avin's video call in the background. After the call I count with the children from 1 to 10 and ask them simple questions in Arabic. Avin tells me later that her sister's family is suffering from a lot of racism in Lebanon. People are opposed to Syrians and their children have to wait a long time to get to school. Shavin is in the kitchen cooking for us. Chili peppers, lemonade, bread, salad is the side dish and in the middle is a large plate of rice and chicken. I am happy about the warmheartedness of the family.

»ana mabsuTah«

I'm happy, I say.

up and down

I hold myself nervous in the back of Ismail's scooter clasping the handles. Ismail proudly shows me his village and drives me up and down the roads. At the top of the village we have a great view on Qob Elias. I am impressed by the green valley and the colorful village surrounded by a dry landscape. Ismail is pointing to different buildings up and down the village

»fo2 w ta7et«.

mosques and churches

Ismail shows me the mosques down and the churches up in the village of Qob Elias

»jama3 w knits«.

Ismail's friend explains later in broken English that the Christians live up the mountain and the Muslims down in the valley. He drives Ismail and me to his house and I can see a decisive difference. Instead of a one room apartment Ismail's friend lives in a house with several floors and modern furniture. He talks about his business and how he tries to find a job for Ismail to support his family. I feel bad for Ismail standing next to us getting degraded. And I am thankful for his family being so generous to me.

do you like it here or there?

Back in the small apartment of Ismail and Shavin the little daughter asks me

»hon walla heneek a7llah?«

– do you like it more here or there, in Beirut? I try to explain to her that I love the mountains very much and that here the air is better. All day, the family is making my day great and I am comfortable with them enjoying my time. The only problem is the language which is not necessary needed but which would make things easier in a lot of situation. Later, they invite me to come back for barbecue with them at the riverside.

crazy muslim

The sun will go down soon and Ismail's friend comes to drive me back to Beirut. Avin is on video call to translate our conversation. The moment Ismail enters the house I turn around with my camera and Avin is facing the driver at the door. Quickly Avin hides from the camera – she has no headscarf on and I am ashamed for not thinking. I apologize and explain the driver the situation. He only laughs and looks at Shavin

»muslim majnun«

– crazy Muslims.

too hot

The next day, back at school the heat gives me a bad mood. I am the first in class but soon Anna, the youngest, enters with sweat drops on her forehead. She waves her hand

»shob ktir«

– very hot. My German wardrobe is just not suitable for the heat and I decide to find some light clothes in my area, later after class. I remember, when I first came here, how I was making fun of the people not walking but drive everywhere with their air conditioning. Slowly, I think, I can relate to them more and more.

five commandments of islam

Near my neighborhood on Algeria Street, a woman is smiling at me from the doorway of her clothing store. In the window of the shop I can see a mix of traditional and modern clothes. The woman asks if she can help me and I'll describe her what I'm looking for – something long, airy and classic without details for the summer. After the fourth dress, the woman understand what I am looking for and finds two long dresses for me. They are buttoned at the front, one striped and one dark green. I have to get used to my new look but I found they suit me. If I can go also walk through conservative neighborhoods like that, I ask her. She laughs and says, if she does not know who else. She herself wears a Hijab and tells me that she is very faithful and follows the five commandments of Islam

1. »shahada«
2. »Salad«
3. »zakat«
4. »hem«
5. »7aj«

medina and mecca

The woman inside the store raises her arms and says she gets still goose bumps when she thinks about arriving at Medina and Mecca –

»meddina w mekka«.

Three years ago, she visited the holy places, when she was finally ready to take the journey. Once you have been there you come back in order to be more wise and calm, she says. This is why she waited until she really felt she was ready for a new chapter in her life. The feeling she describes as magical and unforgettable – peace, pure peace.

downtown

Before leaving for the city tour through Beirut, I take a short nap in the afternoon. Soon, I hurry up wearing my new dress and I run through the streets towards the city center. At the starting point of the tour I unhappily see many people waiting and I am almost about to go back home. The sun is burning and to walk with a big group of people through the city brings my excitement down. The moment the tour guide starts talking I am surprised and convinced to stay – he is young, political and self-confident wanting to explain downtown from various perspectives. Without any insecurity, he faces the 40 people and starts showing us

»downtown«.

Lebanese people also call the area »Downtown«, many different languages have been integrated into the Lebanese dialect, the tour guide starts to explain.

solidere

Eighteen different civilizations have passed Lebanon such as the Phoenicians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs or Frenchmen. The old town was supposed to be a monument of the past with buildings from different centuries, the tour guide continues.

»solidere«

– the company of a private investor, bought, destroyed and modernized the area around the center after the Civil War. No one of the civic society can afford a living here and the owner themselves live in Saudi Arabia. I look around and see one high-rise building after another and many empty apartments. In total, Solidere destroyed more than 80% of the buildings of the old town. The tour guide says, the city did not do anything, for money reasons or for reasons we do not know.

you melon

At Mainstreet in Hamra, the girls of the house meet up for cocktails because Leila and Rana are going on vacation for a week to Cyprus. We are celebrating their holiday, their visa and their joy – it is the first time for Rana going abroad. Both are afraid that something gets in their way because of their Syrian passport. They say when they made it to Cypress, first thing they will do is to sleep at the beach to recover from stress at work. Leila works at an NGO and Rana at an electrical engineering – they often sit at their computers at night and on weekends. However, tonight they do not want to think about their fears nor work. Leila and Rana are perfectly styled and the bar we are at is packed with loud people, romantic couples and bartenders hitting on us. Accidentally, the waiter served us too much

»inta baTikh«

– you melon. Rana laughs and I ask for the translation. He is stupid, like a melon.

you bury me

The bar keeper is Druze and Leila wants to pair up Rana with him. Rana keeps on looking for Druze men because of her family expectations. But Rana struggles with this idea, being in love with someone else. Tonight she invited her Christian friend Sam. Even though they can never marry because he is a Christian, they can't get enough from of each other. He stands at the entrance of the bar and wears blue shorts with tiny, printed palm trees – right away I like him and I find them cute together. Rana whispers in my ear that he always makes her laugh, no matter how bad she feels.

»ya2bourni«

– may your beauty bury me, Rana translates.

dual vs. plural

The friend of Rana talks in Arabic with me and advises me to speak more in order to learn. He is right but a lot of times I would be embarrassed for my pronunciation. How long I have I been in Lebanon, he asks.

»isbu3ain«

– two weeks. The dual of week. Singular, dual and plural, I try to remember.

bigger blessings

The city is becoming more familiar to me over time. While walking I pass familiar stores, cafés, workshops and restaurants and people are greeting me. With a huge bag of peaches, bananas and apples which I bought at my favorite fruit place I'm on my way to school. In class, we continue learning the alphabet and we stop at the letter f. The next page in the book gives different examples such as

»fara7tak«

– you say thank you for an invitation and you wish the host, that he will soon experience greater blessing, such as a wedding in the family.

mashalla

Melissa, the girl from my class, has canceled the engagement with Mohammed. Both met last year when Melissa came for a vacation to Lebanon. Two weeks ago Melissa had arrived from Turkey to see if they have a future. The families already met and nothing was in their way for the wedding. But Melissa explains to me, Mohammed did not behave like a man during the two weeks – not taking any responsibility and apart from that she believes in a communication problem. Her grandmother, mother and daughter still arrive today from Turkey for a visit and stay with her for a week in Lebanon. Our language teacher wishes her

»mashalla«

– what God wishes and in this context, God protects the family.

take it or leave it

My new summer dress reaches to the ground and it still feels unfamiliar. Today, I meet Tilda north of the city and from there we take a »Service« to Bourj Hammoud. The neighborhood Bourj Hammoud is known as the heart of the Armenians and I'm looking forward meeting new people and a new environment. But the day today is especially hot and I'm already running down of sweat. Tilda and me are trying to figure out a way to get there but the sun is going down and I'm unsure if we really arrive. I still don't understand the logic of public transport in Beirut and the feeling of being helpless makes me angry. We stand at a crossroad and three »Services« stop next to us – but everyone refuses to take us and shake their heads. The owner of a kiosk behind us, says, it is too late and the traffic too much. Out of sympathy, he invites us for a coffee

»khadia w atrikia«

– take it or leave it. My mood is on the ground and I'm disappointed at myself. For one thing, it is up to the heat, and the lack of public transportation.

wallah

Raousche is located in the north of the city. Tilda encourages me to watch the sun set and to go to Bourj Hammoud another time. The old kiosk owner interrupts us and says that we are two beautiful women. It makes me annoyed and frustrated being a white tourist in this city. As we continue discussing not finding a way out of the situation two young men from the side offer us a ride to the Corniche. For a moment, I am doubting the idea and if it's worth it to go. Tilda, however, already jumps in the car,

»wallah«

– literally translated, by the living God.

your mother's pussy

The men explain us, in broken English, that their job is to bring people from Bangladesh to Lebanon. Out of nervousness, I ask too many questions until Tilda puts her finger on the mouth and makes me stop talking. The men start shouting in Arabic.

»SharmuTha«

»kis imak«

– You whore and the pussy of your mother. I just want to get out of the car and lie down in my bed. Finally, we arrive at Raousche and they ask us for our number. They want to call us later to have a beer together – I'll quickly type in the number and smack the door.

jibril

Jibril tries to calm me down on the phone. In short, I explain to him the situation that I do not know where I am – somewhere at the Corniche. He tells me not to move, to accept his help and to forget about my stubborn head. I can't think clearly and do what I have been told. Jibril gets closer with his Vespa and shakes his head – it's the third time we meet, we know each other from Tinder. I look at him laughing and I ask him if I might have a culture shock. At Starbucks, Jibril invites me for a coffee and I am starting to feel better. He does not eat meat, supports women in at a NGO. On paper, I found him perfect but in reality we constantly clash. And again, he starts talking about drugs, freedom, knives, card games and clubbing.

»jibril«

– his name Jibril, he explains, is a Christian name. For a goodbye he tries to kiss me but I can not imagine a more inappropriate moment than this. If he can see me again, he asks me.

7alaS

The next day, I cancel the date with Jibril. I am confused about us, him and the things between us. We understand and we don't understand each other. The only comment from my roommate, Hiba, is

»7alaS«.

– stop this, it is enough. Jibril would act like all Lebanese men, she says, a lot of words but nothing behind them. I am not a fan of generalizing and I disagree with Hiba but one thing I know, if I do not finish it now, it gets complicated.

maksuur

The classroom feels like a sauna today – the electricity went down and the air conditioning stopped working. Nonetheless, our teacher Aya says, without power cuts, Lebanon would not be Lebanon. The power is cut several times a day and every morning from 9 to 12 am. In the village its cut up to 6 hours sometimes. Soon, the generator of our class turns on but the air conditioning is not longer working,

»maksuur«

– broken.

because, because

After the break we change the classroom – a room in our school where the air conditioning works. Finally, my body cools down and I sit straight under the cold air. Aya does not like the room because she feels like being in prison, she says. I do not care, the main thing is that it feels cooler. We reach the letter »l« and we learn the following words to use.

»leysh«

– means why, Aya explains. The answer could be

»li2anno«

– because, while it is also used as a filling word – because, because, because.

like this or like that

»heik«

»heik«

»heik aw heik«

is Aya's favorite word – it is written like this or the letter looks like this, Aya repeats.

the father of the apple

In the Arab world, the father is named after the first son – for example »The father of Ibrahim«. Leo, my classmate, constantly eats apples. Aya likes to tease him by calling him »abu tisfa7«.

– Leo is from now on »The father of the apples«.

shut the door!

The second attempt to drive to Bourj Hammoud I start very early at noon. I join the two guys from my language course – they are heading in the same direction after class. Our driver comes from the mountains where he has a great view of nature, he says in Arabic. He lives alone, his two children are studying in America and every day, he drinks five small bottles of water. I understand all of this in Arabic and I am proud to finally get into a conversation. A short time later we arrive at my colleagues hostel to drop them. They give the taxi driver not as much money as the driver expected – but the boys do not let go. The driver gets angry and screams

»sakar L beib!«

– shut the door! I stay calm and wait until he is relaxed again. We continue our way towards Bourj Hammoud.

virgin mary

In Bourj Hammoud I find a variety of different Armenian churches – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox. And between the houses and narrow streets there are little shrines with the Virgin Mary everywhere. Here she is called –
»maryam bint 3imran«.

drinking shisha

The people of Bourj Hammoud are welcoming and I enjoy every minute talking to them. Some tell me about their Armenian roots and how they got here – they call themselves Armenian-Lebanese. Walking through the neighborhood and taking pictures, two boys invite me for food and we sit inside their shop with Lebanese pastries drinking coke from straws. I observe all kind of items hanging from the roof and people coming in and out. As it is getting later I feel my energy is going down I thank them for their hospitality – and of course I am not allowed to leave any money. On my way back home, a woman runs into my way and offers me a coffee in her house before I leave. We enter the house and the sun only shines through a tiny crack – the rest of the staircase disappears in the dark. In front of her door, her mother is sitting smoking a cigarette, inside the living room a goldfish swims in the aquarium, the TV is running and her daughter stares at her smart phone. As soon as I enter everyone is curious and comes together. The daughter starts speaking about her everyday life – how much she loves music, goes to concerts and likes to smoke shisha. Drinking shisha in Arabic –

»bishrab argileh«.

The shisha can also be ordered home on scooters, she tells me, the next day they will pick up the shisha again.

black as the fish

The grandmother is still smoking and sitting next to me. She looks at me seriously and says that I'm not allowed to take any pictures of her. The mother interrupts and asks me what I want to drink.

»la7sah«

– one moment. She brings coffee and water and apologizes that the water is not cold. The TV is showing music videos in the background and Arabic music accompanies our talks. While the neighbors are coming in and out, the mother explains to me, that they all know each other in the house – like a big family. She herself is Lebanese and her husband is Armenian-Lebanese. Pointing at the black goldfish, she says, her husband is black as the fish but she is white.

r and gh

Practicing my broken Arabic combined with English, the family helps me to overcome my language barrier. I start naming objects in the room chair, table, door, picture, cup, mug or bed. I ask what pot is called –

»ghaz«

I look confused, I thought it is the meaning for head but head means –

»raas«.

I laugh in despair and ask myself how I can ever speak this language. Many letters have a similar sound and only differ in detail from each other.

maffi massari

The family invites me for dinner for another time. The mother looks up and says that God wanted me to come here and made me ran into her arms. We say goodbye, hug each other and I tell them how much I appreciate those welcoming, warm moments. Along the streets back home, everywhere I see power cable hanging in the air and the neighborhood is full of shops for shoes and clothes. Towards the main road a »Service«, an old black Mercedes almost falling apart, stops next to me. On the way we pick up two more women, one of them is from Colombia. She has been here for two months and is learning Arabic

»maffi maSari«

– no money. She likes it here but everything is too expensive and she is planning to leave Lebanon, soon.

take care of you

Nadja, Hiba and I are sitting on our white, plastic chairs in the kitchen. As always I am eating hummus and labneh with Lebanese bread, Nadja is cooking vegetables and Hiba tells us about her work as a freelance journalist. Her last post was about a Palestinian singer who had performed in several camps in Lebanon. In addition to her studies, she also works as a project manager earning her own money – her family in Syria does not support her. Her smart phone rings, her boyfriend calls from Greece, who has been waiting for his return visa for two months. She is about to leave the room and I ask her how to say goodbye to a friend

»intehbeh 3a7alek«

– take care of yourself.

port mina

The alarm clock is ringing early this Saturday. I check if my roommate Nadja is already awake. Together we are going to Tripoli and I have booked a tour with Mira. Mira is a tour guide presenting her country from new perspectives by showing places like old train stations and abandoned fair grounds being stopped during the Civil War. The tour bus is driving along the coast from Beirut to Tripoli and the view of the sea gives me a good feeling. While to my other side, the coast line is heavily populated and one place follows the next. In Tripoli we first visit the port –

»mina«.

Centuries ago, the city of Tripoli was settled by three different populations of Sidons, Arados and Tyros, says Mina. The city with its narrow lanes and historic buildings make the long history visible – mosques, churches and old walls define the old town. Mira describes her beloved city with every detail.

the bay of the lovers

The port is located north of the city in Tripoli. With boats you can go to little islands and escape the city. Families play with their children at the beach and hidden in the rocks there is a bay called the bay of the lovers –

»khali L 3usha2a«.

The teenagers are secretly snuggling there, Mira says laughing.

my cream

Walid and I are sneaking through the city behind the group. The tour guide assistant has kept an eye on me. While we eat Lebanese food, I ask him a bit about the city and as we go side by side I point out some words in Arabic that I can say. The language gives me a different approach to the things surrounding me and I am happily wandering around. The group is waiting for us and we arrive last at the ice cream place. I order »ashta« with pistachio. Walid comes from behind and hands me a napkin

»ashta«

– my cream. It is a pet name and a way to call your girlfriend, he says.

the sun and the moon

As we continue walking through Tripoli with ice cream in my hand, I am pointing with the other hand above me and say

»shamis«

– the sun. Walid nods and says that's a maiden name as well, just drop the »i«. Just like

»2amar«

– the moon, you can use the moon as well for a woman's name. Before I get off the bus, he gives me his number. If I get lost in the city, I should text to him. Walid reminds me of a person from a summer romance – with his short, colorful shorts and his long, light brown hair.

to love, the love and lovers

Café Réve is located next door and usually very quiet. Nadja and I had come to study Arabic together and we are sitting inside the café alone today. I brought a sweater because of the strong air conditioning the last time. As well as today the AC is blowing in my face and I already start freezing. Our laptops are standing in front of us and sometimes we sip on our coffee lattes. In between, we talk about different methods of learning language. Nadja studied Islamic Studies and speaks High Arabic. She explains to me the different roots of the word groups and how you can derive new words from them – there is always a root for adjectives, nouns, verbs or adverbs. Such as to love, the love and lovers –

»7ob«

»be7eb«

»7bib«

As we are spending our whole afternoon at the café chatting and studying, finally, I observe five male guests entering the restaurant. The waitress comes to the door, adjusts the table and hangs up the tablecloth. The shisha coal is heated up by the staff, the men get comfortable on their chairs and start mixing their cards.

pronunciation of the koran

The room of my roommate looks a bit chaotic – Hiba and I are sitting cross-legged on her bed. She has a small table in front of us with prepared instant coffee and wants to help me improving my Arabic today. Hiba notices that I have difficulties pronouncing certain letters. There are videos Online which maybe could help, these are called

»tajwiid«

– the pronunciation of the Koran. The videos illustrate how the tongue and lips are moving while speaking. I like how Hiba explains things with practical examples that really help me to understand.

seven melodies

While we pause practicing Arabic I see some books lying next to Hiba – how to make friends and improve relationships to humans. I ask Hiba why she is reading those book about emotional intelligence. With seventeen, Hiba left her family in Syria, she tells me, because of family problems she couldn't stay there longer. The last five years she has fought for her life in Beirut by herself. With the consequence that she finds it hard to open up and to trust people. She looks at me and asks, why she should spend time with people, who are only hurting her. We return to study Arabic, when Hiba explains to me how the sound influences the Arabic Language. In Arabic there is something called

»ma2am«

– seven different melodies, that are repeated again and again and found in many Arabic songs. Depending on the pitch, they trigger positive or negative feelings. When Hiba plays the seven melodies on her computer, I am reminded back to the music of my Syrian friends living in Germany.

talking around it

Hiba met her boyfriend, Elias, four months ago, at a time when she no longer believed in trust and love. Elias is just as direct and straight forward as she is, says Hiba, this is why she appreciates him the most. Many Arab men are not expressing straight what they think. Nobody tells you the truth, always talking around the issue itself –

»biilif u biduur«.

The same as in the Arabic language, says Hiba. Before you speak a word, you first describe it with a hundred other words.

being a foreigner

Cultural and religious rules and regulations often make me stop knowing how to behave. I would like to find a way of respect religion and culture but remaining true to myself. I describe Hiba a situation being with a friend at the market that day – out of exhaustion I had been laughing a lot and behaving a bit silly joking around. A couple of sellers had told me to stop, that it was not appropriate behavior in public and that people might think I am crazy or even a maniac. Hiba answers, I should not care about them and that it was an exceptional situation. In most cases, people would see me as

»ajanib«

– a foreigner. Being not from here would people make understand my behavior, Hiba tries to calm me down. I think to myself if I am feeling better, now. If that would mean that I get their full respect but I still don't find answers to myself.

walaw

Aya enters the classroom wearing a shirt with the big imprint »I love Weekend«. I do not want to talk to anyone, today, but her shirt makes me smile. I sit down at my school desk and organize my books for class. Aya leaves me alone today – she is very attentive and knows when its better not to call on me. Today we learn the letter »w«

»walaw«

– please, nothing to mention, is literally the meaning for it. For example when someone asks you to carry a bag and apologizes, therefore, you would say »walaw«, making sure that you help with pleasure and that there is nothing to mention for.

sun and moon letters

The little daughter of Selin, my school colleague, had come to class today and is sitting with her mother in the front. Tomorrow, they fly back together to Turkey. The daughter copies proudly, like her mother, the Arabic letters from the blackboard on her notebook. Our teacher is excited about the girl and gives her a kiss on her cheeks. The next letter »y« follows and the alphabet is completed – 28 letters in two weeks. Concluding, we learn the difference between sun and moon letters, depending on which of the two letters is following, the article is pronounced or remains silent –

»a-shams«

»al-2amar«

forever a girl

Later in the Arabic course, Tilda asks the language teacher how to translate »woman« – she knows so far only the term »Girl«. Aya explains, no matter how old you are, in Lebanon you always call a woman a girl. You never want to point on the older age of a woman, instead you stay forever a girl –

»bint llabed«.

service

Ashrafieh is a rich area with a majority of Christians. I'm standing at the crossroads leading to Ashrafieh, waiting for a car with a red license plate. If a car stops I scream inside the window

»service ashrafieh«.

– it is the call for a shared taxi. I still haven't gotten used to the system and it takes a lot of energy if you do not know how to pronounce your destination neither if the spot where you are waiting is leading towards your destination. All drivers refuse to take me and shake their heads until finally a small white bus with an old man stops. Too late, I realize that I had forgotten to pay attention to the license plate but I don't care anymore. At least I am sitting in a car, a private car and I realize that we don't let in anyone from the next intersections. We change a few words in Arabic – at the end he wants to give me his number and I quickly jump out of the car.

the bridge in-between

A giant holy cross is just right in front of me arriving in Ashrafieh. The district is built on a hill and I see many villas, cozy houses and winding stairs. The buildings are yellow painted and between them grow trees and flowers. The further I go inside the neighborhood, the closer I come to the bridge and new high risings.

»jisr L wati«.

– the bridge, between two valleys, separates the rich and poorer district Sin El Fil. From above, I see many priceless skyscrapers that are starting to displace the quarter of Sin El Fil.

carpenter is my last name

Nabila Najjar accompanies me on my walk in Ashrafieh. I know Nabila from my language school, she had asked me if she could join me with her camera. On the way I am interested in the origin of her surname

»najar«

– it is the meaning of »carpenter«, a typical Arabic surname. Her grandfather comes from Lebanon, Nabila says, she visits her family in Beirut through the summer.

white skin

A woman runs into Nabila and me while taking pictures of a catholic church in Ashrafieh. The woman seems excited and tells us, in half Arabic and half English, something about her car, the road and the parking lots. She asks us where we come from and points to our skin

»sum3ar«.

– light skin, we have light skin in Germany, she says.

do you need anything?

There is a body pump course at Hiba's gym today. Hiba asks me to join her and on our way she tells me more about the complex situation with her boyfriend. After two months, Elias is still in Greece waiting for his return visa to Lebanon and sometimes, Hiba says, she loses patience and hope. The gym is three floors up and I'm speechless when we arrive. There is sufficient air conditioning, towels for free and everywhere I see personal coaches around. Hiba and I work out together, then we go to the sauna and on our way back we talk about healthy food. In the fruit and vegetable shop next door we stop and buy fruits. The seller asks before I leave

»baddak shi?«

– do you need anything else? In many situations in Lebanon you would hear people asking if you need anything else. Mainly, before leaving the house – if it's your parents, friends or families, and also before shutting the phone. Hiba says I can always answer

»salem tak«

– literally meaning, no thank you, go in peace. For me, it is a good example for the politeness of the society which becomes visible a lot in the Lebanese-Arabic language.

madineh

During my lunch break at the Arabic school I often walk through Hamra. As a tourist people do not recognize me as such in the diverse neighborhood – I like the fact of becoming a small part of the city. After the break, we have a test to recreate the alphabet. The unfamiliar letters seem wide, long and high, sometimes they open to the right, sometimes to the left. Besides the spoken language, I like the visual approach that I get on the new word images. Next, I open a new page and pick up a word that seems familiar

»madineh«.

– the word city, »madineh«, comes from Medina, the city Mohammed grew up. Again, I found it interesting how many phrases, words and sayings in Arabic are related or have roots to the religion.

god may protect your daughter

Tuesday, is Selin's last day at school – her flight back to Turkey is tonight. The dream of a wedding with Muhammad has come to an end. Both, Selin and her daughter, are here to say goodbye, they have sweets for the whole group. Aya hugs Selin and her daughter.

»allah ya7mi bintak«.

– God may protect your daughter. That's for farewells and goodbyes a usual thing to say in Lebanon, Aya says, you would always address the children.

pool d'état

The swimming pool with palm trees and deck chairs located in the middle of the city, in Hamra, is called –

»pool d'état«.

On a rooftop, Tilda and I are up sun bathing and learning Arabic. Next to us, someone rubs himself with baby oil and puts his shorts higher. Observing the crowd I see that one after another is hitting on each other. It seems like a place where you just meet to get someone to bed. I try to focus on my books and as best I can, avoid eye contact with all men surrounding me.

the teacher

On the phone, I am listing my first Arabic words to a Syrian friend. Even if I see the words with the letters in front of me, my pronunciation is so bad that it is hard to understand me.

»ma3alem«

– teacher, I repeat saying, after the fifth time my friend gets it. He tells me that also craftsman who do their job really well are called teacher in Syria. For example, if you want to fix your car, you could say, go there to the teacher, he will repair your car safely.

like the moon

The only male Arabic teacher, under six female teachers, is standing in the doorway greeting me this Morning. He looks up from my colleague asking in Arabic if I am as smart as her. I look at him with questioning eyes

»meteL«

– like, he explains to me, one also says

»metel L 2amar«,

– like the moon. Then he starts laughing and says that I'm not supposed tell any Lebanese man. Beautiful men like that would not exist here in Lebanon. The teacher himself likes men and I guess he knows what he's talking about.

the first hundred years

Anna, the youngest in class, has no desire to study Arabic in the mornings. Yawning, she says that she prefers to watch series at home but she doesn't have any choice while her mother works for a NGO and moved to Beirut with her. Aya teases her, she should be patient. In Arabic, there is a saying

»awal miiye sinne 7ayakunu S3abin

b3adyn 7ayakunu sahel«.

– The first 100 years are difficult, but from then on it will be easy. The saying sounds wise and gives me motivation in those hopeless hours.

poor thing

Unwashed fruit and vegetables I should not eat in Lebanon. Sometimes, in the north you forget about the different standards. Jibril and I are having dinner and I decided to give us a second chance. I'm sitting on the back of his Vespa and I have less fear driving through the honking cars. The restaurant, he chose, is very chic and cool. In the middle of the table is a bell to order – Jibril wants to drink a wine and starts to turn on his cigarette. I give him to understand that I do not like that he drinks when I drive with him, besides, we have 16 clock. After a short grim look, he orders water and two salads for us. The vibe is already gone when the next moment I start feeling bad – I get up rushing to the toilet. My stomach hurts, my hands are turning blue and I feel dizzy. Jibril drives me home buying some juice on the way so I have some sugar again. For the next days, I feel weak and dizzy. Dania is sitting in the living room and I tell her about my infection

»7aram, 7aram«

– I am so sorry, Dania repeats. If she can help me, she asks, and starts cooking rice for me. 7aram is used to feel sorry, or if you do something forbidden.

wise woman

Dania comes from a small village in the South of Lebanon. For her studies she moved to Beirut and with a scholarship she has completed her Bachelor in Diet and Nutrition. At the moment, she is looking for a job but she says, it is not easy to find something. Also, because she wears a headscarf and many offices, NGOs and hospitals are Christian. In general, there are lots of graduates in Lebanon, who can not find jobs, she says – it is a structural problem in her country. Later, we talk about her, she herself belongs to the religious group of the Shia and she is standing somewhere between tradition and modernity. Certain rules are important to her, for example, she does not shake hands with men but likes to go out with her friends in the evenings. Next week, the holiday »3id« is the time to visit Mecca – but Dania is not ready yet. You only go to Mecca when you are old, she says, when you want to clean your heart forever. The way to Mecca is »al haj« and old people who are wise are called

»7ajeh«

– wise woman, to respect them.

delicious girl

Marrying someone with the same religion is a must for Dania. I tell her about Jibril and the things I like about him. She says, I should not trust him and he will certainly exploit me – that are Lebanese men. If she can tell me something dirty,

»taybeh«

– delicious, the men call women here, when they show too much skin.

qaf

Rana and Leila are back from Cyprus – all the girls from the house are sitting in the living room waiting for their stories. They show us pictures of them diving in the sea, para-gliding in nature, sun bathing at the pool and some close ups of the buffet at the hotel. I am very happy that they had a good time and I can feel their positive energy. Both are tanned, proud about their bikini print and look relaxed. Dania tells them that we practiced Arabic before they came and if Rana could pronounce the »qaf« sound for me because it is too heavy for her. Only the Druze can pronounce it correctly, Rana agrees, and keeps on repeating the sound –

»qaf«

»qaf«

»qaf«.

mate-tee

The pictures of Rana and Leila's vacation don't take an end – we are sitting in a circle around their smart phones. In between, pictures of Sam appear on Rana's phone. Rana's Christian friend, who has kept her updated with photos. It seems like they can't get away from each other and that Rana is giving up on finding a Druze. One of the pictures show him with Mate tea –

»mati«.

In the picture, we see Sam and a small gas cooker for his Mate tea at the office. Rana also has a small gas cooker in her room. I like the idea that they can cook their tea wherever they want.

madame aurelie

Aya, my teacher, asks me if I feel better. Yesterday, I couldn't come to class because of my sick stomach. She looks worried and says, it happens everywhere and she also had poisoned food, recently. If I have all the medicine I need, she asks, thankfully I decline. The lesson today feels especially hard and Aya wants us to keep on writing in Arabic letters. I have to think twice – first translating the letters and then translating the word. Finally, it is 12 o'clock and weekend. Since next week is »3id«, Aya explains, we have a day off.

»madam aurelie«

– the head of the language school, determines the exact days off not following all the national holidays, Aya says.

coffee or tea

Ninurta is the name of the organization Jibril, my Tinder-Date, works at. They support and empower Syrian and Lebanese women and open up a room for them to learn various craftsmanhips. During the week they offer workshops for women while their children can stay in the next room. Jibril had invited me to the office to visit the NGO, today, because there is a small party for the holiday 3id. I have my camera with me and throw myself in the crowd.

»mar7aba«

– hello, I tell Jibrils co-workers, in a formal way.

wanting the forbidden

Exhausted from the Arabic lessons, I arrive at my apartment in the evening. I still haven't recovered from my stomach infection. At least, I have learned from Dania yesterday how to use the gas stove and I prepare myself some light food. Dania is sitting in the living room and I am fascinated by her charisma. As always, she brings me to laugh and I enjoy her cheerful attitude. Even if she is a bit conservative and both of us are having different perspectives on life, we accept each other. We are practicing my pronunciation on some Arabic words again and we laugh a lot about my inability to speak Arabic. I can not pronounce certain letters – even if the »rrr« sounds much better today. She asks me if I'm going to meet Jibril again. I reply that I do not feel like seeing him anymore. She shakes her head and tells me to be careful because anything that is forbidden, is what Lebanese men want –

»kil shi mamnu3a marghub«.

nobody is worth it

Dania talks about her relationship with her first boyfriend from the village – sometimes he is still in her head. They were together for two years, she says. Dania was in love with him very much but she did not like about him that he was always controlling her. As soon as she was unreachable, he started arguing – but if he was unreachable it was always okay. In retrospect, Dania believes that he tried to suppress her because she was more educated than he was. Through his power games, he always felt he was the man in the relationship. Finally, they agreed on being friends but then he called her at 3 o'clock at night again and she has decided

»ma7ada 3imund kaman hada«

– Nobody is worth dying for him.

you belong to me

Hiba, Nadja and I sit in the taxi towards a private beach called »Oceana«. I overcame my doubts and thoughts on private beaches – because should not all beaches be public that day? Anyway, today I want to stop over thinking and enjoy the time with the girls, it is a long way to go and we drive south for a while. The radio plays a song

»inta eli«

– you are mine. The words sound familiar. I listen to the song again and in fact I understand the lyrics. I look at Hiba and translate the lyrics with expectant eyes, she surprisingly confirms. A short time later, the taxi gets lost in banana plantations. For half an hour we turn in circles around the private beach and miss the free entry for women.

no water!

The private beach looks giant and luxurious – the paved entrance area is followed by a large pool. Blue, small tiles decorate the pool, white curtains blow in the wind and a bar is embedded in the water. Everywhere, there are women with operated bodies and most of the guests are drunk at noon time. We lie down on three chairs with a sea view and order some drinks. I close my eyes but the loud music makes it impossible to relax. Later, I go down the stairs to the actual beach. I step in the water and take a deep breath. Nobody is here, the majority is up at the pool wanting to be seen by others, I guess. As I climb back up the stairs, I want to shower off my feet with water. A woman screams

»mafi mai«.

I scream back that I don't understand her.

»mafi mai«.

– she repeats it one more time and it clicks, there is no water, I have learned those words. Sometimes, it takes time, to connect the learned Arabic words from school to real life situations.

(sekkar)

On Sundays, I started studying at Café Réve next door on regular basis. I like the café – it is nothing special but the waitress is very friendly and I feel more comfortable than in Hamra where the Lebanese High Society spends their time. Today, I order a coffee without sugar –

»sekkar«.

I remember my research before I came to Lebanon and how many words in German come from the Arabic Language – »Sekkar« was one of those words. Later that day, Jibril comes to visit me at the café. He says he wants to help me with Arabic. Instead, we talk about our repetitive misunderstandings. Jibril believes that I do not understand the Lebanese humor that we have a cultural problem. A short time later, he is driving home again because he does not want to disturb me. The waitress asks me why I look so sad.

mashi L hal

While I'm working on my project at the café I let my mind wander – I think of Dania and how she is doing. She had a tooth surgery these days and I write her a message.

»mashi L hal«

– it's going okay meaning in this context she is okay, and not okay, at the same time. I text her that I am waiting for her to come back and that I miss her laugh.

3aiid mubarak

At »3aiid«, a Muslim holiday, the streets are totally empty and for the first time there is no traffic. The day is cloudy and I wander around the streets before I go to school. I am observing the new atmosphere of the city and behind a car I see a pile of fur and first think of a dog. Next to it, there are two men sitting on their plastic chairs smoking Shisha. I look back and recognize a slaughtered sheep. Happy »3aiid« – »3aiid mubarak«.

Muslims are honoring the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son and slaughter a sheep to celebrate the day.

the poor and the rich

»f2air w ghani«

– rich/poor, expensive/cheap. Aya teaches us adjectives and describes the situation between the poor and the rich. In Lebanon the rich own everything and for the poor it's hard to make a living because the prices for apartments are high and salaries are low. The majority of people her age, around thirty, can not afford to live alone and stay with their families, Aya explains.

may your hands be safe

The gym of Hiba costs 200 Dollar which I can't afford. I don't want to go back to my old gym either and so I find a new one in Hamra for 10 Dollar each time I go. Two escalators of a shopping mall lead up to the studio – but they do not move and the doors are closed. Outside a girl and two men are sitting on chairs and tell me that the gym opens again tomorrow morning

»yislamo ideek«

– another way of saying thank you, literally meaning may your hands be safe shortened to yislamo.

kifak, ça va

Badaro Street is known for its nightlife. Jibril and I are sitting in-between a crowd of young and alternative people. We are drinking some beer watching the people around us. A man works on his laptop, a gay couple sits on the opposite side and an international group sips their Margaritas. A friend of Jibril comes over

»kifak, ça va«

– how are you? Jibril speaks fluently French, he loves the language, he tells me. With pleasure, he mixes Arabic and French. Finally, the friend gives him three kisses on his cheeks.

mahlabieh

Leila is before her period and in a very bad mood. With six women in one apartment I understand that there is often tension but this time it's enough. I'm annoyed by Leila and without solving the issue I'm getting back to my room. Hiba tries to settle the situation by telling me that Leila has a good heart and I should not be too strict with her. Finally, on Monday, Leila is better again and says sorry by preparing a classic Lebanese dessert for all women in the house –

»mahlabieh«.

my eyes

The tension and bad mood at the apartment affect me – everyone in the house has problems at the moment. Leila constantly talks about her family, who is not accepting her, Rana is always in her room, not forgetting Sam, and Hiba is waiting for her boyfriend to come back from Greece. Leila tells me before I had come they used to sit together in the living room every evening – but since the problems became bigger everyone got back to their own rooms. Today, I feel like I can't stand the negative energy any longer and I only want to leave. My Syrian friend from home calms me down

»a3yuni«

– my eyes.

the head of the mountain

The mountain is under the clouds.

»ras L metn«

– »ras« means head, literally translated the are is called »The head of the mountain Metn«. Jibril and I drive on his vespa towards the peak of the mountain. My legs and arms are numb from holding myself on Jibril and the vespa but we are getting closer to the top. Later, Jibril tells me that he was unsure if the vespa will make it. After the adventurous way up, I see pine trees everywhere. The trees look surreal and I enjoy the air, nature and freedom up here. We continue another way down, it feels like the serpentine, and we pass villages and towns with the majority of Druze. I recognize the women because of their long and white veils. The men wear white hats and loose trousers. Both have in common that everything from head to toe is white and black.

do you speak arabic?

Jibril's house is located near the Green Line – during the war he had to move to the country side. The house was bombed and Jibril apologizes that the house is still destroyed. Today, I'm meeting his father and mother – it makes me happy to get to know how he lives. The father is sitting on the couch watching TV and smoking a cigarette. He wears socks with slippers and looks at me with friendly eyes –

»bt7aki 3arabi«?

The father speaks too fast and I don't understand a word of what he says – if I speak Arabic, Jibril repeats. How can I not understand a simple question like that after learning Arabic for three weeks? I'm mad at myself. Finally, we go to their roof top and Jibril hugs me from behind. We look at the skyline of Beirut, a huge skyscraper shoots out from behind and I get upset over the ugly building. Jibril looks at me and asks if there is anything I like about him apart from his anti-capitalist attitude.

slowly, slowly

As always I have a hard time trusting people like the women in the house or Jibril – last night I hardly slept and I kept on thinking. Today, is Thursday and exhausted I am sitting down on my place in class. Aya, my teacher, enters with a good mood and rushes through the door. I admire her positive energy, she is spreading every day. I ask her for advice because my Arabic doesn't seem to improve. Aya says, first, I should not listen to people and second, I should be patient. Outside, people talk faster and swallow a lot of letters – not like in the class. And we already have made great progress for three weeks, she says.

»shway, shway«

– slowly, slowly.

b2alawah, knafeh, 2atayef

The cafés scene in Hamra is very popular and you find places with French, international or traditional vibes. It says a lot about the diversity of Hamra and I want to capture the cafés by photographing the people who work there and the interior design. In the afternoon, I walk with my camera in a small alley and pass a window with thousands of small sweets made with love. The café is pastel colored and behind the counter I see a little old man. I open the door and after he welcomes me I ask if I can take pictures. He nods to me kindly and invites me to try

»b2alawah«

»knafeh«

and

»2atayef«

He prepares three different Lebanese sweets for me and serves them on a small napkin. My favorite sweet looks like a small pancake with cream, pistachio and something little red and fruity on top. I promise him, it tastes incredibly delicious.

martyr

At the independent cinema, in Ashrafieh, Nadja and I watch a Lebanese film tonight. I stand at the intersection and try to stop a »Service« because we meet there – taking a »Service« keeps being adventurous and stressful. A young girl stands next to me driving in the same direction. She wants to help me and a short time later we sit together in the back seat of a bus. Before I find the money in my pocket, she already paid for me – she refuses to take money from me and I thank her very much. These small encounters mean a lot to me and I feel welcome in a city that I don't know. Nadja is waiting for me at the entrance at the cinema. The cinema is totally empty and we choose the best seats in one of the front rows. The movie is about a boy from Beirut who dies by jumping into the sea from the Corniche in Beirut. »Martyr«, someone who dies for God – »shahid«.

The film shows the processes of society with the dealing with the death of a young man.

God knows

Dissatisfaction haunts the actor's life – he complains about life and the economic situation in Beirut. If he has work, he is afraid to lose it, and if he does not have work, he is afraid to find it. The parents put pressure on him and he can not find a way out of his misery. Some of his friends come from the poorer class of Beirut. The actor thinks they are happier than he is. His best friend encourages him and says that he is not right and that he is better than the others. But he doesn't agree because he is not and at least the others are not afraid

»allah by3aref«
– only God knows.

you, you

The movie has English subtitles and I only understand few Arabic words. Just before the main actor jumps from the wall, I hear

»wleh«

»wleh«.

– it's a colloquially way of saying »you«, Aya explains to me the next morning, but I'm not supposed to say it to someone I do not know.

lebanese and more

An Arabic TV show is running in the background of the living room while I am doing my homework on the couch. Yesterday, we have learned prepositions in class and like everything in Arabic you can conjugate them. For example the tree is behind me. You would conjugate »behind« with the »first person«. All the conjugations are confusing but I feel I am getting there. Rana, my roommate, comes inside the living room and sees the title of my Arabic book and smiles

»lebneini w aktar«.

– Lebanese and more. Rana sits down on the couch and tells me about her makeup tutorials she's been watching in her room. A short time later, she brings me her makeup box, gives me tips and as a reminder of my time in Beirut I should take her eyebrow pencil.

every kind of man

In our Arabic class we are only four women left. The last week the rest of the group already flew back home. As soon as the men are gone, girls topic are getting discussed in class. Aya asks me, if I prefer German or Lebanese men. I laugh and answer, German men are too boring, of course Lebanese men – but not the stereotypical type. In Lebanon, I would be exactly right then, Aya says, here I can find everything –

»kil shi«,
men of every type and attitude.

3aib

Since women in Lebanon earn as much money as men, the man can no longer dominate over the woman, Aya says. She adds that she is self-determined and independent herself but if the man does not pay on the first date, it is still

»3aib«

– a shame. Those things don't work out in Lebanon, that man would never see her again, Aya says. It is a matter of respect.

inshallah

It's finally weekend – my teacher tells us that she is going to the village like every weekend in the summer. On her phone, she shows us pictures of the mountains, the forest and the great view from her house. She needs the time with her family and in the nature – as well as many other people from Beirut, she explains. If someone does not have a family in the village, he would have a holiday house instead.

»inshallah«

– God willing, see you next week, she says.

to cancel in the last second

Rana, my roommate, was planning to travel north – to visit her boyfriend/friend Sam who is on vacation with his family. Sam's family believes that she is a good friend. Surprisingly, when I come back from my language school, Rana is still in the living room watching TV. Rana loves Sam's family, she says, but the family will never accept that they marry – he as a Christian and she as a Druze. I tell her that she must be a good actress in such a difficult situation. Rana replies that they have no choice because they do not want to disappoint the families neither to lose them. Anyway, this weekend Rana is not going to meet them, the friend who wanted to take her by car canceled in the last second –

»bylghy bialththaniah L akhirah«.

i lost my voice and prayed

Someone is knocking on my door and slowly the door opens. Let's go, Hiba screams, it is Friday night and time to party. It's Hiba's first night in a long time – she has not gone out since her boyfriend is stuck in Greece. I put on my short skirt and Hiba wears a mackerel top. In the elevator, we look at each other laughing. We take a taxi to Hiba's favorite place and enter a club with loud Arabic music, people dancing on tables and chairs, arms waving in the air and shoulders moving in time. I feel uncomfortable with swinging my hips as I used to dance and I am not sure what to do. A little later, we have to dance in the middle of the crowd and my dance mates encourage me to dance however I like.

»baTalat Sawt w Sali«,

– I lost my voice and prayed, is the name of a song by Najwa Karam from 1986, playing in the background. Hiba knows the lyrics of almost every song that is running tonight. Many of them are an old time and I am surprised by the timeliness of the music and that the youth still dances to them.

kifek 7alweh

Leila's American friend from her NGO joins us to the beach. I don't like her from the beginning and in general I am a bit down today but it is Saturday and we were planning to relax by the sea. We are on our way to »Oceana«, the private beach, we have went before. As soon as we get there, I take my lounge and some time for myself. With a towel over my head I start learning Arabic and every now and then I snap some Arabic words in conversations next to me. In the evening, I still feel down and I run to my small supermarket to buy sweets

»kifek, 7alweh«

»bishufik bukra«

– How are you, pretty? See you tomorrow!

syrian-lebanese

There is no time to feel down and the next day I take a taxi to the bus station »Cola« – from there I want to catch a bus to Baalbek to visit the Roman ruins. Immediately, I find the bus towards Baalbek and I sit down near a window to take pictures on my way. I try to move the window but it is stuck and two men behind me offer me their seats. I move next to them while a woman with a child comes to the windows and begs for money. One of the men says, that she obviously not Lebanese.

»suriat libnania«

– Syrian-Lebanese. He recognizes her by the look and the smell, he says.

air shots

As soon as all the seats of the bus to Baalbek are occupied, we start heading up East. The steeper the mountains, the slower the bus is driving. Suddenly, I hear honking cars overtaking us and I ask, if a wedding is celebrated. No, the men say, it's a funeral because when someone dies young, you stuck his portrait to the windows of the cars. Then I see all of the cars passing us with a photo from the deceased on their windows. When the cars arrive at the deceased's home have arrived in the air at the end shot –

»2awaaS«.

be7eb L fard

If I am a fan of weapons, the two men ask me from the back seat. I love weapons, I joke.

»be7eb L fard«

– I love weapons, they translate. A short time later, one of the men holds a gun in front of my face. He tells me to take a selfie. I refuse and thank him nervously, and change the topic.

married?

In the village Zahlé, I change the bus to Baalkbek. My tickets are paid by the men from the back seat – they help me to find the next bus and leave. This time, we are only three in the bus, three men and me, and nobody speaks English. In Baalbek, the men get off and give me to understand that I should go forward with the driver to the ruins. Right after they left, the driver tells me that it is very hot, he repeats the sentence over again and pushes his hand under my dress. If I was married, he knows a beautiful river that he wants to show me

»mjawwazeh?«

– married? I look at the driver and try to stay calm. He didn't not do anything wrong, I try to make him understand, but that I have a boyfriend in Germany. I look at the map and see that we are several kilometers out of town. I now insist still smiling and calm that I want to go back to the ruins and take a deep breath as he finally lets me out of the bus. Later, he will pick me up he says – as soon as my feet touch the ground I run as fast as I can.

sfiha

The Roman ruins of Baalbek are giant and surreal – I feel like being in another world. The walls are up to twenty meters high and the landscape of the ruins seems to be endless. But the whole day my thoughts wander back to the bus ride and I can not switch off my thoughts. I call Jibril, in the middle of the ruins, and he brings me down that nothing has happened and that everything is fine. After the talk, I start feeling better and I take a walk through the city. Exhausted, I end up eating at a nice little restaurant serving Lebanese food. A family runs the place and I am warmly welcomed by everyone – the father, the son, the cousin, the brother-in-law, the sister-in-law, the grandmother. All show up and greet me while I am standing near the counter with my Lemonade and eating the delicious specialty of the region called

»sfiha«

– the Arabic dish, it looks like little boats out of dough, optionally filled with cheese, spinach or meat. I can not get enough and I get a full plastic bag with more »Sfiha« for my way back home.

neither government, nor police

When I walk along the road figuring out how to get home from Baalbek to Beirut, a bus honks and stops next me. I look at the driver asking if he drive towards the direction of Beirut. I get inside the bus and I take the next free seat in front. On our way, we pick up another woman from the road. She is waiting in front of a car with her sister and her mother, they are hugging each other and handing the bus driver bags full of food. The woman takes the seat next to me and we start speaking in Arabic. Her family lives in Baalbek, then she got married and lives with her husband in Beirut, now. There is no work in Baalbek, she says but in Beirut, her husband manages a café and she is a dentist – soon she wants to start her own business. The government –

»dowleh«

does not care about the region of Baalbek. There is no water, no electricity and a lot of crime.

»shurta«

– the police is not interested as well and only the army trues to control –

»jeish«.

They stand at the side of the road every hundred meters waiting at checkpoints.

grape fields

The bus suddenly turns right into a dirt road. We drive over bumpy roads through endless grape fields –
»3anab«.

The woman next to me explains, because of all the checkpoints around Baalbek, we are taking a detour. As soon as the checkpoints become less, we will get back to the main road.

dried yogurt

During the trip to Beirut, the woman next to me tells me about the Lebanese society, culture and traditions. Under the bus seats our feet are surrounded by the bags her mother gave her on the way

»kishk«.

– a Lebanese soup. Real »Kishk« can only cook her grandmother, she says. Over several months she dries eggs and yogurt until she makes powder out of the mass. This powder is the base of this delicious soup that her husband and she love.

strong woman

As every morning we have to tell our teacher in Arabic about our previous weekend. I speak half Arabic, half English about my adventurous trip to Baalbek.

»2awihe«

– strong woman, says Aya. Even a Lebanese woman would never go to Baalbek by bus alone. How many adventures I am still planning to do.

please give me

We arrive at lesson six in our Arabic book and learn about politeness in the Lebanese culture. There are many ways to ask for something,

»3mul maruf«

– could you do me a favor,

»aza betide 3Tini«,

– if you want, please give me,

»allah yukhlak 3aTini«,

– God suffice you, please give me ... and many more phrases. It is difficult for me to understand, I am telling Aya, if someone has something to say, why can he not ask straight forward. Aya says, my attitude wouldn't work in Lebanon and wouldn't take me anywhere.

peace to your hands

On the next page of our Arabic book we learn different ways to thank someone, for example

»salam idek«

– peace to your hands but you could also replace hands with head or eyes. Later, I talk to my Lebanese friends, I find them even surprised thinking about the actual meaning, those phrases were empty words for them, used in the every day life.

god be with you

Aya says, we should always remember the following saying,

»allah m3aik«

– God is with you. People always use it, in taxis, in shops, for their family and friends or to people they meet in the street.

god give you health

Other expressions that we need to remember, Aya says, are every day wishes, for example, you can wish the workers on the street,

»y3aTik la3afieh«

– God give you health. In the case of the workers you wish them health to work – but you would also use the phrase to thank someone in every day situations.

political hope

Take care, my Lebanese friends say, when I go to the southern district of Dahye. Being used of people telling me to take care on my travels, I don't think about it any further and take a »Service« to Dahye. A short time later, I walk through the streets of Dahye and people are starting to stare at me. As always, I take pictures of flags, shops, cars, people until I am stopped by an older man. From one second to the other, I feel unsafe and understand what people wanted to warn me of. Some seconds later, some men are yelling after me, I do not understand much, but I have to follow them. My heart is beating and we stand in front of a gateway with hundreds of green flags

»amal«

– a conservative and populist Lebanese political party of the Shia community. The men lead me to their office and three men are standing around me. What is your name? What is your last name? What is your father's name? What are you doing here? What is the name of your school? Why are you taking photos? I have to show them all photos individually until all are deleted. Finally, they release me and I find out that »Amal« controls the district I have been walking through where you are not allowed to take any pictures – some German tourists even got jailed recently.

alif

After leaving the »Amal« office, I panic and call Jibril. I send him my location asking him where I am and telling him how stupid I feel not having any idea of anything. Jibril calms me down and says I'm not to blame, everything is fine. I should breathe and see how to get home, now. Shortly after, I find a bus that will take me back north of Beirut. The Bus driver says annoyed

»alif«

– 1000 LBP costs the ride. I feel ashamed and like a little kid for not taking respect of what people have been told me and for not informing me well enough instead figuring everything out by myself – without thinking about any consequences. When I arrive home I throw myself on the bed and simply want to go back to Germany.

100 % purely religious

When I get up, Rana is cooking tea in the kitchen telling me about her dream of last night. Sometimes, she thinks it's a mistake not trying to have a relationship with her Christian boyfriend. But how can she not take care of her family? Offending the family and marrying a Christian? Recently, she really took the effort trying to find a Druze man on the Internet – but they were all 100%

»safi«

– purely religious. Rana is fed up and loses hope of finding a Druze that suits her.

god forgives

»allah bighfir«

– God forgives. God wins, God is bigger – always. The woman and the relationship always comes next. You should better get away from strictly believing men, Rana advices.

do not laugh at yourself

»ma tuD7aki 3a7alik«

Do not laugh at yourself and think that people change, Rana says and leaves the kitchen.

cold river

In the neighborhood of Mar Mikhael, I have a job interview for a design project. The meeting point are some stairs that people claim for themselves. I see Doreen sitting at a café up the stairs – surrounded by alternative people, art, bars and restaurants. We start talking about her upcoming projects. In October she will be working in a Palestinian camp in the north

»nahr L barid«

– cold river, the name of the camp. There, her team will provide various design tools to the children living there giving them the opportunity to communicate their needs, desires and challenges. At the end of talk, she offers me a job and says, that I can work with them in October. Even if I don't want to put my expectations to high I am walking home happily and excited for the new adventure.

I 7amdullah

In the evening, I meet Jibril's friends at a bar called Vyvyan's. On a round table, outside of the bar, his friends are playing cards. At first, they are a bit shy and need time to open up. Where Jibril and me know each other from, they ask. Jibril and I are joking around and trying to distract from the Tinder topic. And what I'm doing here, they continue asking. I am telling them that I study Arabic and of course, they want me to speak. Under pressure I can't speak at all, I respond, and generally, Jibril would be a bad teacher because of being very impatient. We talk about the Arabic language and one of his friend explains how in Arabic you can lead to indefinitely conversation. How are you?

»L 7amdullah«

– Praise to God. How are you?

»L 7amdullah«

– Praise to God. How are you and your family?

»L 7amdullah«

– Praise to God.

with pleasure, with lot's of pleasure

As a farewell, I buy flowers for my teacher Aya and I thank her for her patience and constant motivation during class. She is the perfect teacher to me and I am grateful for all the hours with her

»ahlan«

– welcome , she says, and smiles over the flowers showing them to her colleges. I remember the blue box in our Arabic Book and the hundred other terms of saying welcome or with pleasure,

»ahlan wasahlan«

»ahlein«

»tikram«

»bi tmuun«

or

»3azeibak raa7a«.

come back in peace

The two shopkeepers down the language school made my day brighter, each and every day – whether if it was with a coke, a candy or a short conversation. They always had loving words for me and helped me to translate words, phrases and situations. Today, I buy my last coke saying goodbye. A question that was always on my mind, whether they are sisters or friends, I ask them. They say from the heart, yes, they are sisters, but in real life they are best friends.

»tru7i u tirj3ai bil salameh«

– May I travel safe and come back in peace.

shu fi ma fi

As a gift, I want to buy olive oil for my family back home. For the last time, I go to the grocery shop next door. The owner knows me well after five weeks .

»shu fi ma fi«

– what is new, he asks me. I tell him that it is my last day in Beirut and I tell him goodbye. God be with you, he says.

mabruuuuk

My phone is vibrating while I'm exercising at the gym. Hiba texts me that her boyfriend finally got the return visa. After two months of uncertainty and waiting, he can travel back to Lebanon. I get goose bumps and answer immediately telling her how much I am happy for them. At home, the girls and I sit in the living room when Hiba comes in

»mabruuk«

– congratulations, everyone is calling. For this moment she has been waiting for so long. With »mabruuk« you wish congratulations, for any succeeded work, later I figure out, even if you bought a new dress or shoes.

fresh to paradise

Hiba can't wait to see her boyfriend again. The next day, when she comes home, she has a new her hair cut and make up getting prepared for the arrival of her boyfriend. She looks at me with a big smile,

»na3iman«

– a saying without direct translation. If someone comes out of shower or from the barber, it's something that you wish that person. It means something like congratulations on being so fresh. Back to my room, I am packing and organizing everything – I'll fly back to Germany tonight. Hiba stands in the door giving me a little gift and apologize for not being at my goodbye party. She drives to her boyfriend's parents, now, and, tomorrow, they travel early to the airport. We'll meet again, I assure her. She asks me, how sure I am and I promise her, »inshalla«, I will come back.

keep smiling

For my last night out, in Beirut, my roommates and I get ready and dress up. Leila wears red lipstick and a blouse with colorful flowers, Rana wears her hair wavy and white short pants and my outfit is as always mixed up from the things I have found in my backpack. We arrive at a Lebanese bar with loud live music and order all kinds of Lebanese food, shisha and beer. Leila dances in between, we laugh a lot and I am just happy. The louder the live music gets – Leila and Rana are starting to sing and clap their hands. Leila leans forward and translates

»dalli D7aki«

– keep on smiling. I ask her to write it in my little book. Soon, the women are getting tired and we go up the stairs back to the street. Rana hugs me and starts to cry, she hugs me harder, and says, I should stay strong. Leila gives me a kiss on my cheeks, from the beginning I would have been something special to them – they will wait for me to come back.

the prophet

Jibril, his friends and I meet at the same bar as the night before. My last hours in Beirut have started and we are drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and talking about everything and nothing. Jibril moves closer to me and says, it's up to me how things will continue with us. I don't know what to answer. I enjoyed the time with him but at the same time I am very tired of hopeless love stories abroad. He drives me home with his Vespa and has a gift for me in his backpack.

»L nabi«

– The Prophet, a book of Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese writer. I will definitely love it, he says, and gives me one last kiss.

take care

The night before my flight, I only sleep one hour – at 3:30 my alarm rings. Shortly after, Jibril calls to see if I am awake. In the kitchen, I find a waffle from yesterday and drink coffee to wake up. I am too tired to realize that I won't see this house and the girls again and that I am actually leaving. When I pick up my backpack it feels twice as heavy as when I came here and I need to drag myself with all the weight to the elevator. Arriving downstairs, I see the taxi driver waiting for me – it's the same driver who had picked me from the airport five weeks ago. He is also the one who taught me the first Arabic words five weeks ago. Back then they were only empty words. It's weird, that now, the words are charged with so much meaning and I connect stories, ideas and thoughts with them.

»intibhi«

– be careful, he gives me my heavy backpack and says goodbye.

the paradise

Tired, I am waiting in line at the passport control of the airport. I am flying back to Germany and five weeks of living in Beirut are behind me now. At the passport control, the employee asks if I have Arab roots. I say no. He asks if I know that my name means »Paradise« in Arabic – »al jannah«.

الجنة

أنتبهى

النبي

أضْحِكِي
ضَلِي

نَعِيمًا

مَبْرُوك

شُو فَي
مَا فَي

تروحي
وترجعي
بالسلامة

أهلاً
أهلاً وسهلاً
اهلين تكرم
بتمون
عزائبك راحة

الحمد لله

نهر
البارد

ما تضحكي
عمالك

الله يغفر

صافِي

ألف

أمل

يعطيك
العافية

الله
معك

يسلم
أيديك

عمول معروف
اذا بتريد
عطيني
الله يخليك
عطيني

قوية

كشك

عنب

دولة
شُرطة
جيش

صفحة

مجوزة

فرد

قَوَاصِ

سُورِيَّة
لِبْنَانِيَّة

كيفك
حلوة
بشوفك بكرا

بطلت صوم
و صلي

بيلغى
بالتانيه
الأخيره

ان شاء الله

عيب

كل شي

لبناني
وأكثر

وليه

الله
بيعرف

شهيد

بِقِلَاوَةٍ
كِنَافَةٍ
قَطَايِفٍ

شَوِيٍّ
شَوِيٍّ

بتحكي
عربي

رأس
المتن

عيونني

مهلبيه

سا فا

يسلامو
ايديك

فقير
وغني

عيد
مبارك

مَشِي الحَل

سَكَر

مافي
مي

انت
الي

ما حدا
بيموت
كرمال حدا

كل شيء
ممنوع
مرغوب

مرحبا

مدام
جويل

مَتَّة

قَف

طَيِّبَةٌ

حَجَّةٌ

حرام

اول مية
سنة حيكونو
صعبين
بعدين
حيكون سهل

مثل
القمر

معلم

ببول
دئات

الله يحمي
بنتك

مدِينَة

بداك شي
سلا متاك

سمر

نجار

جسر
الوطني

سرفيس

بنت
للأيد

الشمس
القمر

ولو

أجانب

بييلف و
بييدور

مقام

تَجْوِيد

حَب

حَبَب

حَبِيب

شَمْسٌ وَ
قَمَرٌ

قَسَطَةٌ

خليج
العشاق

ميناء

انتبه
عحالك

مافي
مصاري

رأس
غاز

لحظة

بِشْرَابِ
أَرْكِيْلَةَ

مَرْيَمُ بِنْتُ
عِمْرَانَ

سكر
الباب

أبو
تفاح

هيك

ليش
لأنو

مکسور

خلاص

جبريل

شرموطة
كس أمك

والله

خديا او
اتركيا

ما شاء الله

فرحتك

أسبوعين

يقبرني

أنت
بطيخ

سوليدير

داون تاون

مدینة

و
مكة

أركان الإسلام

شوب كتير

مسلم
مجنون

هون ولا هنيك
أحلى

جامع
و
كنيسة

فوق
و
تحت

أنا
مبسوطة

قهوة أو
شاي

زَيْتُون

أَنْتِ
حَمَار

سڪر
ٽمڪ

فيسبوكي

يعنبي

جبل
أو
بحر

مَنِيحَةٌ

فُورٌ ثَاوٌ

تصبح
على خير

هيدا
هدا

عظيم

بنت
بنتين
بنات

ويكند

سعيد

السبت

ب ب بت بت...ي
بت...و من بي
بت بي...و

تكرم
عيونك

سلام

أهلاً وسهلاً

عَفْوَاً
بِعْتَذِر

حِجَاب
سؤال

شَٰحَاد

شُؤو بِتَعْمَل
بِالْحَيَاة

بِسُّوفِكَ بَعْدَيْنِ

عَلَى قَلْبِكَ

بدون حجيج

طويين

أَيُّوا

واحد اثنان

ثلاثة أربعة

خمسة ستة

سبعة ثمانية

تسعة عشر

بُونْجُور

تَشْرَافْنَا

أَسْمَاؤُنَا

إِيمَان
أَمَل
أَكْرَم

لا ليل يكفيننا
لنحلم مرتين

صورة
صورة

تَقْضِي

عِجَّة

صحّة
صحّتين

مناقّيش

لغة الضاد

أ ا ء
ب ب ب
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طَيِّب

هَيِّدَا
هَيِّدَا

تَمَام

شُكْرًا

الله أكبر

صباح الخير
صباح النور
صباح الورد
صباحو

شوو
حبيبي

يالا
يالا

باريس