

# Lebanese dream



STORY AND ALL PHOTOGRAPHS J.M. FAVRE

# السنو بورد في لبنان



After 15 years of bloody civil war, Lebanon is slowly, but surely, returning to normality. During this time, the clouds from burning buildings have hidden a secret in the hills overlooking the Mediterranean. Snow, and

plenty of it. A video crew went in search of this secret, and found a Lebanese dream.

**FEBRUARY 1992.** A group of French riders decided to go and see what the snow was like in Lebanon. France has always been on good terms with this small country, jammed in between Israel and the Mediterranean which, after more than 15 years of civil war, has finally found a level of tranquility. The destination was unusual enough for there to be no question about taking up an invitation

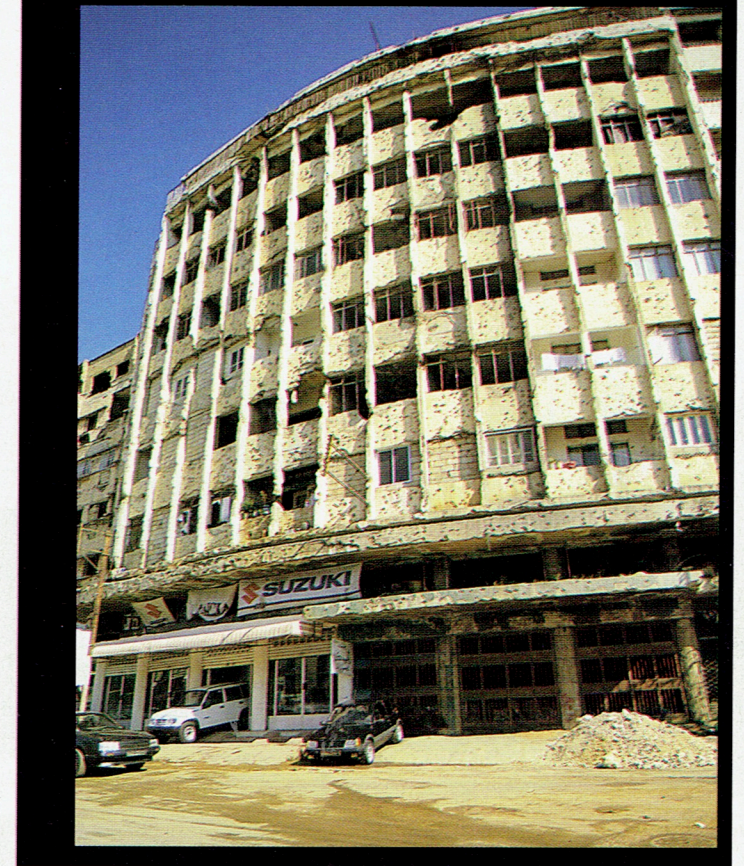
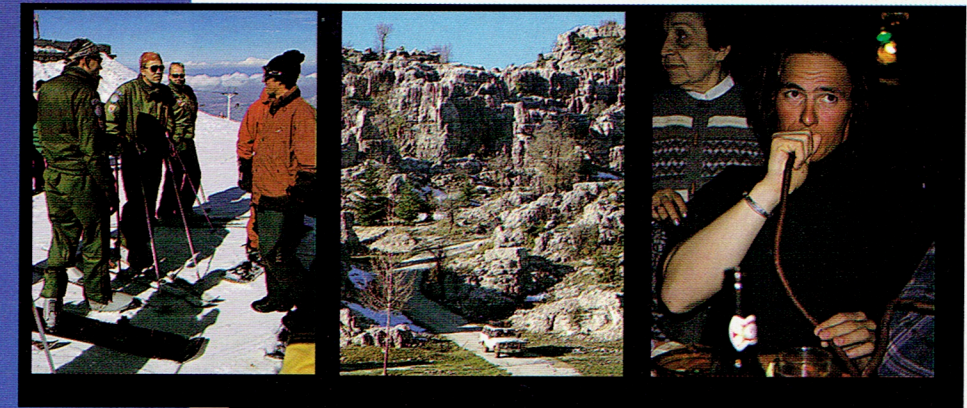
from a couple of Lebanese riders obsessed by snowboarding and wanting to get the sport going again in a place which had been filled only with war. Our only doubt was the depth of snow. We had difficulty imagining snow so far south (although we should have thought about the meaning of Lebanon which means white in the local dialect!)

We were not disappointed. After four days preparing a snow park for a demonstration arranged by our sponsors, a storm rolled in from the sea. We had to spend three weeks inside an inn at Faraya, the resort above the capital of Beirut. In between power cuts we followed the Albertsville games on Lebanese TV with commentary in Arabic. We had to leave without even knowing what the resort

looked like as it was hidden under eight meters of snow! A few days spent on the coast in precarious conditions allowed us, despite everything, to appreciate the people of this country who try in adverse conditions, to hold their heads high. I dreamt about coming back and promised to do so.

**NOVEMBER 94.** On the glacier at Les 2 Alps, Dédé Lepius from Yellow Cab, talked to me about making a video in Lebanon. It was to be financed by a Lebanese company which organises sporting holidays to their homeland. This organisation, the Deux Domaines, were to smooth out any difficulties our little filming team may come across in a country where things may not be quite back to normal. We left in February '95 with a mixed crew. Guillaume Chastagnol, '95

MICK MIDALI, LIBAN



Top: Left, giving the troops some snowboarding lessons. centre, on the road, right Mick Midali smokes a traditional hookah. Above: Apartment block showing the scars of troubled times, Beirut. Below: For those of you who never studied geography.



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Steven Scott cruises high above the Mediterranean sea.

halfpipe rookie; his girlfriend Titaua Ropiteau, French halfpipe champion; Kiwi, Stephen Scott; an Italian, Bernardino; two riders from Les 2 Alps, Xavier Michel and Fred Mauras; Dédé and his charming assistant Virginie; and to cap it off, three members of his technical team.

**BEIRUT** All the family of our host Raja were there to meet us on our arrival. His mother had made some local sweets for us after our long journey. I regained my bearings immediately. The airport was in the same state of disrepair as when I left in 1992, but at least the military checkpoints had gone. The atmosphere was far more relaxed, almost friendly even! We didn't waste any time because our schedule was going to be tight if we wanted to visit all of the Lebanese resorts. I noticed one thing straight away: when we were crossing Beirut and its northern suburb of Jouné, we were bombarded with roadside neon signs. Everything was so dark on my

first visit! Today, Mc Donalds, Pizza Hut, Coca-Cola and all the others glow in the Arabian sunset. The Lebanese people's natural flair for business is again becoming apparent.

**CEDRES.** A few military barriers later we arrived at Cèdres and settled in Tony's, the only hotel bar, sports shop, and seller of firewood in the area. I was familiar with this resort as one of my uncles taught here before the war. From the stories he told me I had conjured up an idyllic image of this place. I had imagined that the sky was azure and that the worry-free people drifted about in the shade of large cedar trees, the emblem of Lebanon. I was somewhat disappointed when I awoke. A grey sky (which brought back very bad memories) hung oppressively over a few concrete houses in ruins which are called 'Chalets' here. We discovered the last remaining cedars on our way up to the only two lifts still in operation, the most interesting ones had broken down, through being old, run down or

more or less abandoned. After two days of dullness we were fed up, boredom being broken only by giving beginner snowboarding lessons to the Lebanese military, and false Syrian spies. Finally the sun reappeared and with help from Virginie, who had somehow arranged two scooters, allowing us to see close up, wind lips sitting on some distant ridges. Under the watchful eye of our Syrio-Lebanese bodyguard, Guillaume and the other riders finally let it rip in the Middle-Eastern sky with the backdrop of Mt Cornet es-Saouda (3080m), the highest point in the country. The Batas and my Nikons smoked all day, and we finished in the sunset with a final jump session in the cedars to make the most of the fantastic light which bathed Mount Liban. In the evening, some Lebanese Parisians on holiday invited us to join them at their table. Tony gave us local delicacies to taste as requested by Fred and Xavier, (nicknamed "the Mouth" by the locals of Deux Domaines' team) and then haggled 10

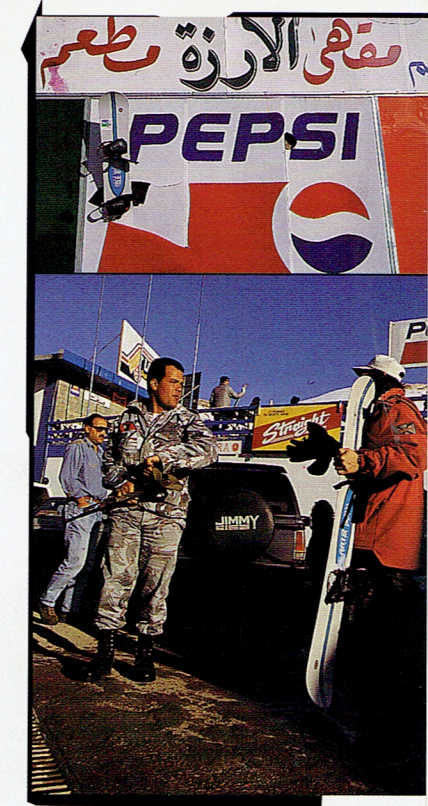
dollars for a few logs which helped us to forget the cold night.

**FAQRA.** In the early morning we threw off our covers to the biting cold and headed off towards Faraya M'Zeer and Faqra, above Beirut. The countryside we passed was fantastic, the precipice was frightening! We returned to traffic jams on the motorway which dragged along the coastal road. In spite of the chaotic traffic, everyone was driving on the right side of the road. I will never forget that in '92 our driver, wanting to avoid the same traffic jams, simply crossed over to the other side of the road! It was common practice at the time. We were heading for Faqra and Faraya at last. First a short stop to visit the new accomodation provided by Deux Domaines. Situated nicely on the edge of the mountain with a sea view.

We didn't try to hurry and took the opportunity to shoot a few frames with a naturally sculptured arch in the background, over 80m tall, before arriving at Faqra. If we were disappointed by the state of disrepair at Cédres, in Faqra we found ourselves in the middle of the 21st century: it's a private resort which is ultra modern. The boardable area is more 'bourgeois' in style and we had soon seen it all. We finished at sunset, in the Roman ruins above the resort for a cultural evening and a little session, while the sun went down over the Mediterranean.

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**FARAYA.** I finally had the chance to get to know this resort which was hidden from me on my previous visit. There was plenty of snow considering it was spring. It was beautiful in the dazzling sunlight. During interviews for T11, the Lebanese TV station, we messed about a bit to live up to the reputation of snowboarders. The resort reaches 2450m altitude and we had a 300° view of almost all of Lebanon; Beirut and the sea to the west, the 'Jurd' (a desert plateau) to the north, the plain of Baqsa then the Anti-Liban Mountains to the east, and Isreal to the south. The first obstacle was a stormy wind from the sea, the area was crammed with huge windlips on which the locals attempted to match the fat airs of Guilliam. Alain and Mathieu, the two best Lebanese, performed some sweet tricks as well. We were surprised by the large number of beginner snowboarders. We even came across the FINUL (UN force in Lebanon) soldiers on old Hot 160's. In the evening we ate at a traditional restaurant, invited there by Raja's family for a real Lebanese meal. Our hostess gave each of us a small present, a



Top: The choice of our generation?

Above: Don't forget your lift pass...



Lebanese custom, and we finished with a traditional hookah. Exhausted after a busy day and a large dose of sunshine, the whole team fell into bed; but I decided to go out and seek the nearest thing to nightlife I could find. Two of Raja's friends showed me the 'in' places to go and we finished up at Michel's with Beirut's 'in' crowd. The band played revamped traditional rock songs and the girls got up on the tables to strut their stuff. The temperature rose and it was getting a bit steamy, but the atmosphere was good. The Ouzo and Corona were flowing freely, and I returned home with my head spinning.

Luckily the next day was overcast and we seized the opportunity to visit Beirut barely two hours drive away. Ruins of buildings destroyed in the war have almost disappeared. The country is rebuilding itself, the will to forget and get life back to the way it was is strong. People everywhere are trying to erase all traces of fighting and the presence of military is more discrete. If you wished to be greedy, you could have a whale of a time in

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the numerous, pristine patisseries which are opening up all over town. You can find a few bargains with leather products, jewellery and marquetry, as there are virtually no taxes on local products. Xavier and Fred bought themselves a hookah, and the humid type of tobacco that goes with it. We found a backgammon set, in mother of pearl at a bargain price.

Our last day at Faraya was during the weekend and the resort was packed. The Lebanese think it's very 'chic' to be seen out and about in the snow. Even the French Ambassador came here skiing and the carparks were a nightmare. We quickly filmed the last images of our too short trip to Lebanon and exchanged addresses with Emile, Matthieu, Thomas, Alain and the others, who promised to come and see us this winter. Our hearts were heavy because although it wasn't always plain sailing, the Lebanese showed us that our return to their country was well worth it. I will come back... to enjoy it this time.

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