



A Million Steps

Discovering

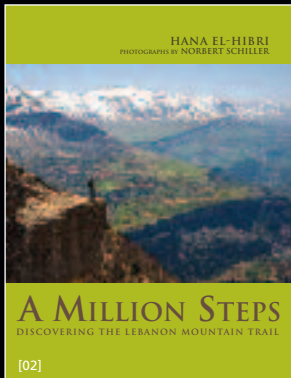
the Lebanon Mountain Trail

A NEW BOOK

BY HANA EL-HIBRI

Photos by Norbert Schiller

Text by Hania Jurdak



“We set off. Wow, I am actually doing this! Walking the length of Lebanon. All 440 km of it. I have no doubt I can do this. There can be no room for doubt when one undertakes a challenge like this. Doubt sets you up for discouragement and failure,” writes Lebanese author and hiker Hana El-Hibri, in her new book *A Million Steps: Discovering the Lebanon Mountain Trail* documenting her journey across the Lebanon Mountain Trail, spanning the country from north to south.





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El-Hibri's debut release, *A Million Steps* takes you on a journey to a little-before-seen world, a side of Lebanon that cannot be reached by car or plane but simply on foot. Self-published, with text accompanied by the stunning photography of Norbert Schiller, the book is a vibrant and touching journey that reveals the true beauty of Lebanon and its people, one step at a time. How did it all begin?

In April 2009, El-Hibri was among the first group of hikers to walk the entirety of the Lebanon Mountain Trail (LMT) from north to south, a 440km path winding through the Lebanese mountains. The hike was arranged by the Lebanon Mountain Trail Association, and the trail itself was created by Lebanese-owned ECODIT, an international environmental consulting firm.

The thru-walk's mission? To bring awareness to Lebanon's environmental and rural issues as well as push for legislation that protects the land and its species. The trek quickly gained international attention. El-Hibri decided to continue the call for ecological conservation, writing what became *A Million Steps*, a compilation of her daily impressions, which she documented every night of the voyage, sometimes by candlelight.

The core team of hikers consisted of six people, half of them Lebanese and half European, joined by others in different phases of the journey and hiking from 1-30 April 2009 with only four days of rest, on a trail ranging from 800-1900m of elevation. Throughout the journey, the group practiced responsible mountain hiking, avoiding leaving a trace

wherever they went and leaving as little impact as possible on nature and its species.

Having been abroad most of her youth and having returned to Lebanon in 2003, the hike for El-Hibri was a journey of discovery. Her vivid descriptions bring the splendor of the LMT to life. The trail holds a rich diversity she explores with a hiker's intimate perspective, appreciating each element of nature like an individual piece of art. With only a few words, she takes you there. For example, she writes: "A dusty footpath leads down into the valley and to a sunlit glade, where a babbling brook – the spring of Ain Douraya – empties into a series of placid pools of crystal clear water. We fill our water bottles amid a chorus of crickets and frogs."



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Several aspects of her journey left a lasting impression on her memory – as they do on readers. One aspect is the wide range of animal and plant species - from marigolds to poppies, junipers to cedars, storks to goats and much more. “Every single day of the 26 hiking days, I encountered new flowers. Relative to the size of our country, that’s really quite amazing,” she says.

Another aspect is the country’s rich topography: mountains, grassy plains, encountering valleys, forests, highlands, rivers, and lakes. She writes: “It never ceases to amaze me how frequently, and within such a short space of time, the scenery changes: the color of the soil, the trees and flowers, the rock, moving from soft hills to dramatic gorges”.

The vast history she encounters is also startling, with ancient ruins from many ancient civilizations dotting the trail. She says: “We were practically walking on history. Every day, we encountered a new layer of history, from Byzantine churches to Crusader forts and Ottoman bridges”.

But her journey is about the beauty not only in nature but also in the people along the LMT. Passing through 75 villages, El-Hibri and her team are treated to true Lebanese hospitality. The book offers intimate portraits of some of the villagers who welcome the hikers into their homes and share their food and stories. El-Hibri gains a deep sense of heritage, as she stays with families of all confessions, professions, political

affiliations and personalities. Regardless of their traditions, the villagers all share the true Lebanese trait of warmth and generosity, and they add an unexpected but poignant aspect to her story: “Along the way, we stayed in guesthouses, family-run hotels, and the homes of people of all different religions and backgrounds, gaining a very intimate glimpse of their lives and problems.” But what did these people have in common?

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 [02] . Front Cover of *A Million Steps: Discovering the Lebanon Mountain Trail*. Text by Hana El Hibri, Photography by Norbert Schiller. April 2010. Hardcover with jacket. 288 pp. \$60/90,000 LL
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“Despite their different traditions, they had one unifying unmistakable thing in common: hospitality, generosity, and friendliness. This thread running down the length of the country may well be the essence of Lebanon,” says El-Hibri, or as she puts it in one of her chapters: “The front door remains open as is customary in many village homes”.

Of course, no million-step journey is clear of setbacks. Her journey had its fair share, from minor illness to heavy

rain and lightning at high altitudes. Yet positivity, she notes, is part of the hiker’s spirit.

A Million Steps also abounds with reflection: “One day, toward the end of our journey, we were sitting having our mid-day bite, I looked at everybody’s faces, and they all looked so serene. Our daily problems were finding something to eat, somewhere to sleep, and reaching our daily destination on foot. Going back to basics is truly energizing and rejuvenating. There’s

a huge value in being away from everything manmade, in tune with the natural rhythm of life”.

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Clearly, there was more to her trek than the destination, as she notes in her introduction to the book: “The journey and what you learn and take from it is equally important. I have also found that many people don’t appreciate just how far determination can take you. It is usually far beyond what you perceive your limits to be... Being an Arab and a mother of three, I recognize that my ‘unconventional’ pursuits do arouse people’s interest and attention. In doing so, I hope that

they may also inspire others to dare to leave their comfort zones and seek new challenges, even if it’s just signing up for that exercise class they have been putting off”.

As for the book’s desired impact, she notes: “Even though it is supposed to make you feel good, the book has an underlying message: that our natural heritage is endangered. If people become aware of that precious heritage, they would make conscious effort to

help preserve it. It’s a duty we owe to our kids. It takes all types of people to achieve that goal. This is my contribution to that cause”.

Visit www.trekkinglebanon.com and www.lebanontrail.org for more information.

For information on purchasing the book contact www.tpbooksonline.com. Also sold at major bookstores.

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About the Author

Hana El-Hibri began her mountaineering career with a 30-day expedition in Wyoming, and her writing career on a 30-day trek in Lebanon. In the 30 years in between, she has had three children, lived in four countries, and hiked in five different mountain ranges (the American Rockies, the Alps, the Pyrenees, Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Lebanon).

About the Photographer

Norbert Schiller, an American-born Austrian, has been one of the most prolific news photographers in Middle East for the last three decades. His main work has been with AP, AFP, EPA, UPI, Getty Images, Der Spiegel and *The New York Times* (although he did work briefly as a goatherd in Greece). His books include *Arak* and *Mezze: The Taste of Lebanon, Wines of*

Lebanon, Spectacular Egypt, and Be Thou There, The Holy Family's Journey in Egypt. He lives in Minneapolis with his Lebanese wife and two children.

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