

# LEBANON OPPORTUNITIES

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- **Luxury retailers are multiplying**
- **Private equity: Success stories**
- **Product change in real estate**
- **Ecotourism is on the rise**

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# Responsible hospitality

## The grass is actually greener for eco-tourism



Photo by Norbert Schiller

**E**cological tourism, or responsible tourism, is a new and fast-growing trend that is in great demand, especially from visiting Europeans and expatriate Lebanese keen to explore Lebanon's natural wonders and leave cities behind. Ecotourism facilities have emerged to cater to this growing demand, in the Chouf, in the North, and in the Bekaa. An eco-resort or lodging must be sustainable both ecologically and financially. Ecotourism not only safeguards precious natural resources, it also supports local economies in remote rural areas. It helps keep people in the villages, off the roads, and out of the congested coastal cities. Such projects can preserve local heritage, culinary traditions, and give employment to local craftsmen and farmers. They also serve as vital educational tools while also making money for their owners. Rural inns, guest houses and lodges unclassified under the

Ministry of Tourism's 'star' system and often run by owners as a small side business, have had a helping hand from the Dhiafee Program (Developing the Hospitality Industry's Abilities, Fostering Economic Expansion). The program was conceived by ANERA (American Near East Refugee Aid) and funded by USAID and since its inception has helped many rural lodgings upgrade their facilities and services to attract the discerning eco-tourist.

### DHIAFEE NETWORK

The Dhiafee network currently includes 47 rural inns and lodges around the country, including two eco-lodges: The Taanayel Eco Lodge in the Bekaa and Eco Village in the Chouf. The network was created to support the economies of rural areas by helping individual owners upgrade their facilities, improve their business model and the quality of their services. "There is a huge demand

from tourists who do not want to spend their money on big five-star hotels, but who are looking for an authentic experience," said *Martine Btaich*, development projects manager at ANERA. "Many existing rural lodging facilities were unaware of the potential of responsible tourism to generate income for them." Dhiafee aims to set up a membership-based association for other rural lodging facilities not part of the network that wish to join. Btaich said that through its work with these rural inns, Dhiafee encourages environmentally friendly behavior, such as utilizing solar energy and serving organic food, even if the vast majority of the lodgings are not actually classified as eco-lodges. Some lodgings within the network were established to support eco-tourism activities. "The Boustany guest house, for instance, was set up because it was needed for hikers hiking the Lebanon Mountain Trail in a section of the Chouf Mountains," said Btaich. "If people

don't like hiking they can still go there and explore the Chouf nature reserve near by." Dhafee supports activities that benefit the local community, such as encouraging local craftsmen or local producers of traditional food stuffs. The program's funding officially ended in 2008. "Despite the fact that funding ended, the network is already sustainable, it's working very well," said Btaich. "Tourists are either booking online through our website or contacting the individual lodges directly."

### **NATURE'S BOUNTY**

Eco-village in the Chouf's Dmtit Valley was among the first eco-resorts in the country. Established initially as an organic 'teaching' farm overlooking the Damour River, Eco-village soon drew curious tourists to its door. Today, demand is so high that booking in advance is advisable, especially on weekends. Founded by Greenpeace activist *Karim el Khatib*, Eco-village has proven both ecologically and financially sustainable. "Every time GDP goes up, the forests come down, except with our project," Khatib said. While he admits the project does not generate as much income as his family's retail clothing business, the real pay back is a healthier lifestyle. "It pays for itself and makes a little money, but I put it all back in to the business, I don't keep anything myself. At the end of the day it has taught us so much and given us so much more back." Khatib leased the land for 25 years for \$1,500 in annual rent and in 2004 took out a loan for \$200,000 through the Kafalat program to begin his project. "The land is a forest so we had to work our way around it, clear some parts, and do terracing," said Khatib. Still, Eco-village looks more like a jungle camp than a typical tourist resort, and perhaps that's the attraction. The model has been so successful Khatib is developing another project in an adjacent plot: Long-term eco-residential units that people can lease annually. The duplex units are built out of recycled wood and use bamboo and mud bricks as insulators. "Even the little cement we use is better for the environment, as we increased the amount of calcium in the mix and reduced the amount of cement powder, which just means it takes longer to dry," said Khatib.

### **TRENDY AND EXCLUSIVE**

A primary tenant of ecological tourism is not to overtax the natural environment. There has to be a limit on the number of tourists that can visit or trek through a nature reserve at any one time. "Ecotourism has

## **Ecotourism has become a trendy thing to do, especially among young people**

become a trendy thing to do especially among young people, but also among people who see they have done harm to nature and would like to do something to fix it by moving away from standard mass tourism that harms nature," Btaich said. Both local and foreign visitors want to discover parts of the country seldom seen in tourist brochures but want to do so in an ecologically sustainable way. "This demand is starting up and I think there is very big potential for those who would like to invest in this model," said Btaich. Eco-village receives on average 100

visitors over the weekend, with some staying overnight, others coming for a day trip. An overnight stay with breakfast costs \$30 per person and weekends are fully booked. Volunteers are welcome and can stay for free provided they work a minimum of six hours a day. Khatib relies on word of mouth and the Internet to get the right kind of tourists to come. "We don't advertise. If I advertise I get the wrong people," he said. Eco-village can accommodate up to 60 overnight guests, more than enough as far as Khatib is concerned.

### **TAKING THE HIGH GROUND**

It may look like a collection of Bedouin tents along the side of a mountain, but Al Jourd is a camp site with a difference. The camel hair tents are elegantly furnished in traditional Bedouin style, using only natural materials. Hot running water and electricity are provided by solar panels. Al Jourd eco-resort

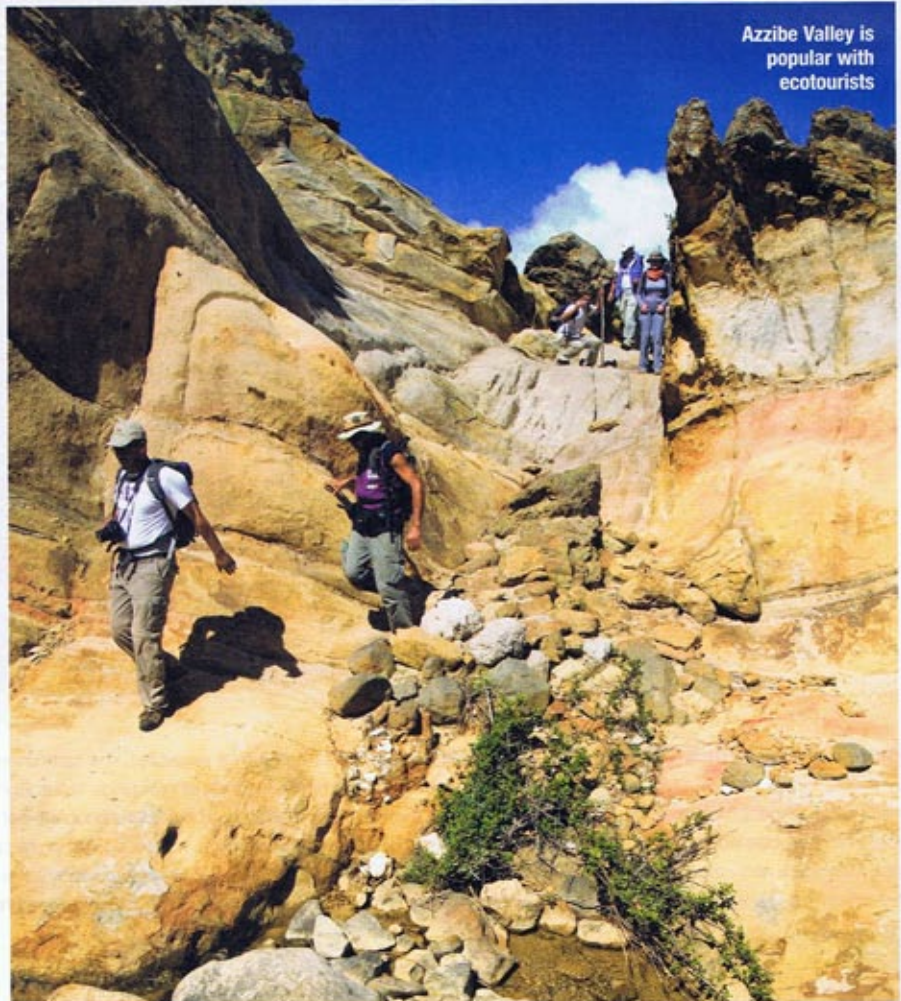


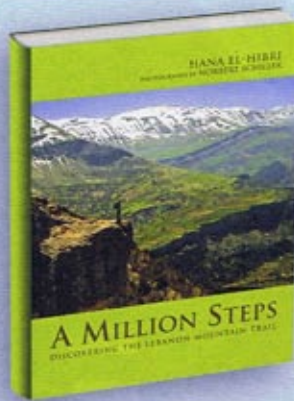
Photo by Norbert Schaller

# A Million Steps

## Discovering the Lebanon Mountain Trail

Language: English  
 Publisher: Turning point  
 Pages: 285  
 Price: \$60

This book is a vivid record of a 29-day thru-walk *Hana El Hibri* undertook of the entire trail along with a small band of like-minded nature-loving, hiking enthusiasts. She has since returned to the trail for a small 17-day hike while she was writing her book. The book is also an inside look of the many quaint inns, guest houses, and youth hostels spread across the length of the trail. As the author puts it in her own words in the book, trekking the length of the Mount Lebanon range (440km) is "a journey of discovery and surprising diversity." It would be hard to read Hibri's book 'A Million Steps: Discovering the Lebanon Mountain Trail (LMT)', let alone write about it, without feeling the desire to pick up the hiker's 'stick' and head ever upward leaving the city stresses behind. The book is a watershed in the efforts to promote Eco-tourism to a mass audience. The book unfurls the country's peacock-feather-like natural wonders. It is the



perfect antidote to cynicism. Pictures, in this instance at least, are truly worth a thousand words. But Hibri also takes us along for the adventure, keeping a meticulous written record of the trek, from Qbaiyet in the North all the way to Marjayoun in the South. Her crisp prose transmits to the reader the sounds of babbling brooks and gushing waterfalls, the sound of virgin snow crunching under boots and the rustling of leaves, as well as the heartfelt welcoming smiles of simple village folk. We rediscover our mountain heritage and its rich multilayered history, little stories like morsels of mezza for us to feast on. From Roman and Canaanite temples to Byzantine Chapels, crusader fortresses to still inhabited hermitages hewn from the solid rock, it is hard to fall

upon a single outcrop of rock along the mountain trail that does not tell an ancient story. The book is a guide and an inspiration to take up the cause of nature and help shed a few pounds in the process. "That is the wonder of the mountain trail, it is so varied, there is something for everyone," said Hibri, a consummate mountain climber who climbed Kilimanjaro with her family. "Some parts of the trail are very demanding, others less so and anyone who walks around the city can handle it." Some experiences were not very pleasant, like walking in the fog and rain unsure where the next step will take you, or sharing a room with the local wildlife, but Hibri is ever armed with a sense of humor and uses these experiences to add color. On the journey we learn of the legend of St. Marina and the Hermits of Qadisha, of a 'mad conservationist' who bought up land solely to reforest it. We also learn of a pristine green mountain preserved that way not by villagers' conservationist instincts but rather by a ring of landmines! We learn of the legend of Adonis and the river that runs red with his blood every year. We visit Job's shrine in Niha, the spot of his miraculous biblical healing. We sing along with the hikers, popular Zajal and Italian ballads. The journey and the book are guaranteed to leave a smile on readers' faces and a resolve in their hearts.



River rafting is possible on the orontes river

is located to the north of the Cedars and Qornet el Sawda and west of Hermel, amid a pristine ever-changing environment with unique flora and fauna. "The main activities are hiking, sightseeing, and discovering nature," said *Nadine Farah*, marketing manager for Al Jour. "We have donkey rides and mountain biking, there is a large cedar forest just 15 minutes away, and we can go down to Hermel to do rafting on the (Orontes) river." The resort is open from May through to October. This unusual eco-resort can accommodate between 50 and 60 overnight guests at one time, with some guests choosing to bring their own tents. The resort, originally established ten years ago, reopened in its present form in 2004. "This is the first year we might be breaking even, the main reason for this is this is the first year we advertised," Farah said. "This helped people to get to know about us." A night's stay in a fully furnished tent, with