



UNZIPPED

So what's the sexual state of the nation? Here's our take on love and lust in Beirut

Beirut and Beirutis have never been more sexually open, more in lust with each other, than they are in 2017. From secret affairs to online hook-ups to swingers parties, across social and religious divides, across genders and ages, mostly in secret and sometimes not... it's all going on.

In part, this is due to the march of technology – smartphones, social media apps, encrypted messaging and, of course, the Internet, have all made secret hook-ups and not-so-secret hook-ups increasingly possible. But it's also because Beirutis are growing more laid-back, our sexual preferences similarly relaxed. Sex for the sake of sex is ok. Perhaps it's always been this way – during times of war (as nearly all of us have experienced) – lust is overpowering, the old Lebanese truth being if we may die tomorrow, we might as well live and shag (as Austin Powers would say) today.

Perhaps it's because more of us are traveling far and wide and are enjoying the increased open-mindedness and freedom that comes with that. Perhaps it's because of access to numerous western-made TV shows so popular today that feature plentiful nudity and lovemaking between same-sex couples and more than one partner – Netflix shows like *Orange is the New Black* set in a women's prison and *You Me Her* about a yuppie couple who hire an escort to spice up their sex life. It's probably a mixture of all of the above, coupled with the pressures of living in a traditional society.

On an external level, this openness is visible in the work of numerous Lebanese photographers and artists, fashion designers, musicians and writers. Just look at the nudes of artist Joe Kesrouani (featured on page 262 in this issue of *A Mag*), whose models are people you probably know and who are more than happy to strip off in the name of art. Lust is out there and everywhere. It's visible in what people wear and how they carry themselves. Countless creative people are, while they don't shout about it, openly LGBT. And no one, in general, minds. Getting it on in every permutation – boy with boy, girl with girl, threesomes, BDSM, group gatherings, partner swapping even (privately and openly) – is today par for the course. The stories I've gathered from speaking to many people in the course of researching this article – stories which for the purposes of confidentiality and in some cases explicitness, I cannot repeat here – point to one simple conclusion: Beirutis comprise one of the most sexually forward urban

populations in the world. We want electricity, we want tremors, we want to gasp in surprise and we want easy familiarity, not some childish attempt at sex from people too drunk to pay proper attention.

One friend described the sensation of a spontaneous group gathering at a private house like so: "You know the feeling of being underwater? The weightlessness. The floating. That sensation where every movement is slowed and meditative. Breath is held tight in your lungs and every inch of your skin seems to sit in the softness of water. Eventually, you come up to breathe. Your head crowns the surface and with a single inhale, the air penetrates your lungs bringing you back to reality. This is the best way I can describe it. It's mind-blowing."

Ten years ago, discretion was the operative word, and a site called *adultfriendfinder.com*, which guaranteed anonymity, was the go-to hook-up service. Eleven years later Tinder and Grindr are the apps everyone's using, Grindr if you're gay or bi, and Tinder if you're straight. Tinder is linked to Facebook, so it's arguably slightly less discreet. Point is, the revolutions in our heads have happened, and revelations in bed are what we're seeking. Many couples, both gay and straight, openly seek out threesomes using these apps. Like the storyline in *You Me Her*, when asked why, most argue it's to keep the sexual tension alive in their relationships, an urge to probe the sinister side of love, lust and infatuation, and their deepest and darkest desires. It's intimate, a little unsettling maybe, but it's happening.

Friends will often trade partners among their peer groups. It's not abnormal for a group of mates to have all slept with each other, at one time or another – and continue to do so. For one musician pal of mine it's practically a mission. "I can feel the heat, the thrill of the chase, and these instincts take over, the wild power of succumbing to the desires of our bodies, the intermingling relationship of pain and pleasure," he explains. "Often I also have partners half my age, and they are even more adventurous."

Tastes vary, but what's clear is that lust and (free) love in all forms are everywhere in this city. And truth be told that's a beautiful thing. Long may it continue.

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