



Tyred Out

Joseph Dyke bemoans the fate of the beautiful city of Tyre, damaged both by ancient conquerors and now its government.

Photography by Sam Tarling

TWICE IN ITS history the ancient city of Tyre has been besieged. In the 6th century BC Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, bombarded the city for thirteen years, returning home without even a partial victory. Four hundred years later Alexander the Great was not to make the same mistake. He set out to conquer the strategic coastal base, surrounding the town for seven months before breaking through and ransacking it, killing citizens and burning houses in anger at the resistance.

Arriving at the site in southern Lebanon, Alexander might just have left. As I entered Al Bass, the first thing I stumbled upon was the remains of a bonfire from the night before, embers still flickering metres from the relics.

Elsewhere, the site is hardly pristine. Inside the ancient relics, rubbish piles up while tall, thorny weeds block the path. Heads of statues are missing, presumably taken by opportunist thieves. One part of the Hippodrome, Tyre's greatest historical asset and considered the best-preserved of its kind in the world, has become a dumping ground for trash, strewn with cans, bottles and Marlboro cigarette packets. The site itself is deserted; in two hours only three tourists arrive. The deterioration of some of the Middle East's most distinctive heritage is concerning more than the occasional visitor. A recent Unesco report condemned the lack of conservation of the protected site. It highlighted illegal urban development, a proposed highway near the sites and the lack of a coherent restoration plan as major concerns, adding that it is considering 'the possible inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger'.

If Tyre is added to the list, it is only one decision away from being stripped of its World Heritage status altogether. The town would suffer from a drop in funding and visitors that would cripple a tourism industry already damaged by wars. Yet the ruins are hardly beyond repair. While there is litter strewn across the site, it would only require regular cleaning



and planning to develop it into a real tourist trap, with unique heritage being matched by the beautiful climate and peaceful sandy beaches near the centre of the town.

This sorry state of affairs has not emerged overnight, and for once in southern Lebanon war is not the primary cause. While the town of Tyre was ravaged during the 2006 war the conservation sites were largely avoided by Israeli bombs. The main problem is largely one of governance.

Maha El Khalil Chalabi has been working to preserve Tyre's heritage for 40 years. Since 1980 she has been head of the International Association to Save Tyre (IAST), but she claims the town's conservation has been ignored since it became dominated by the Shia party Amal, which has close links with Hezbollah, after the civil war. She blames Amal leader and speaker in the Lebanese parliament Nabih Berri for ignoring Tyre's heritage in order to push through widespread redevelopment, including a controversial highway.

'The Lebanese authorities are not listening to us or Unesco, so perhaps [by being added to the endangered heritage list] they can be shocked and [take] consciousness about the mistake they are making,' she says. 'I went two or three times to Berri myself, praying him to stop these criminal [developments] in the city. He never listened. He said, "Let people live, they have to construct — this is their land and they have to do what they want with their land."''

Berri has a point — to some extent. In one of the country's poorest regions it seems harsh to ban people from building because of what may lie in the ground, and a new highway would improve trade links. Yet this approach suggests inevitable conflict between development and conservation.



An old lady sweeping a narrow street in Tyre's Old City

HASAN DBOUK, THE Amal mayor of Tyre, denies that he has neglected the city's heritage. He cites the fact that Lebanon went five months without a central government this year as evidence that conservation is hardly the country's top priority. 'We are doing more than our capacity,' he says.

‘There is a limit for everything. We need help from the central government, but for the central government to [be able to] enforce law it needs a lot of instruments and tools. They don’t have these instruments and tools. It is a general problem; it is a problem of governance. We are not in a normal situation.’

Dbouk believes the Unesco decision is counterproductive and claims his door is always open for discussion. ‘Let’s say in the worst case they will cancel Tyre from the list. Who will win? Of course the city will lose, but international heritage will lose more. This heritage does not belong to the Lebanese. You can see the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines.’

You can see all levels on top of each other... so the main loser will be international heritage.’

The Palestinians are often held responsible for the trouble. The Al Bass site borders a Palestinian refugee camp, which is expanding far faster than it has space for. Under Lebanese law Palestinians are unable to buy land outside the camps, so they’re building upwards. Their overflow ends up among the ancient ruins. The Unesco report ‘strongly’ encourages the government to establish ‘as soon as possible a buffer zone to protect the property from excessive development’.



The busy market town has a rare charm that attracts tourists

CHALABI IS QUICK to point out that she does not blame the Palestinians, but she claims that the decision to create camps in key parts of Tyre imperilled the region’s heritage: ‘It is the mistake of the Lebanese government. They gave them these spaces to live on because the Lebanese government was not conscious of the heritage of Tyre... The most important archaeological, historical sites of Tyre are under the [Palestinian] camps.’

Yet Aqel Jamal, a Palestinian who lives two doors down from a makeshift mosque on the border of Al Bass, denies that they use the camp as a dumping ground. He points out that the 10,000-strong camp has nowhere to expand but says he loves the beauty of the site. ‘Lots of people from this area of the camp go and spend time there. They just like walking and running around the area. I love the site, I don’t destroy it.’

More generally, what strikes you is a blasé attitude towards the history. As you arrive no one offers you a tour, four men sit idly smoking, and when you ask to buy a guidebook one man has to rattle through his drawers to locate one. With a sustained effort to remove the rubbish, engage the Palestinian community and improve facilities, you could have a booming tourism industry that employs thousands of people. Yet in Lebanon nothing is that simple.

Dbouk himself recognises that there needs to be a step-change in the attitude to conservation and tourism in the town. ‘In the short term we have to conserve what we have. I agree with Unesco. Then really we need to build a culture of tourism with the locals. They don’t have this culture; tourists don’t feel comfortable coming to Tyre.’

He sighs and looks for an explanation: ‘This generation lived during the civil war. They don’t like this culture [of tourism]; they say, “It is not our culture.” It is a very long process and being involved with heritage programmes helps.’ If they continue to ignore Unesco’s warnings, that long process will only get longer.



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<http://www.spearswms.com/good-life/travel/28367/tyres-heritage-under-threat.html>