

LOOKING FOR LEISURE

A Selection of Images from The Fouad Debbas Collection and the Arab Image Foundation

Paid annual leave, introduced in France under the Blum government in June 1936, went hand in hand with vacations at the coast and in the mountains, exploration, hikes, and cycling. But it was also the symbol of a dramatic shift in class relations: now workers would sample the pleasures of free time. Long after the launch of the first camera for amateur use by Eastman Kodak in 1888, the still famous slogan, “you press the button, we do the rest,” came true. Photographic practice was democratized, entering into family circles for use by those who, with little technical know-how, dreamt of capturing moments from daily life, small details or memorable events of family life, friendships, and leisure activities that were henceforth part of social activity.

From the 1920s in Lebanon and across the region, this new kind of photography blossomed. Brought by soldiers and foreigners passing through, it became quickly and lastingly popular amongst a growing bourgeoisie.

So-called “amateur” photographs from the time reveal the advent of leisure activities – sea outings, tennis matches, alpine ski races – within bourgeois society, an acknowledged colonial inheritance. Leisure time took on various forms, enriching individual and collective experiences.

The selection of photographs presented here, taken between the 1920s and 1960s by three photographers, offer three distinct perspectives on a period in the history of leisure time in Lebanon. They come from The Fouad Debbas Collection, and the Alexandre Medawar collection, which is housed at the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut.



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Unidentified photographer
French soldiers' excursions to Baalbeck and the mountains, Circa 1928
Silver gelatin prints, 8.3×11.3 cm or 11.3×8.3 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum



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Leisure and modernity in Lebanon

The word “leisure” (from the Latin *licere*, “to be allowed”) has been in use since the mid-16th century to refer to the time at one’s disposal outside of regular activities, during which one is “allowed” to do as one wishes.¹

Free time, time for oneself, collective leisure, individual leisure, public space, private space: the task of defining leisure is not as simple as it might at first appear. Leisure firstly in the sense of free time exists in contrast to working time and was to accompany economic and industrial changes in France, Great Britain, and Italy in the 18th century. But though leisure time is a period in which to unwind, it is also one of recreation. Sehnaoui notes how in Beirut, in addition to bowling and billiards as described in the Baedeker and Isambert travel guides, notions of pleasure and leisure were closely linked to social spaces such as cafés, parks, and public baths.² Theaters, the Martyrs’ Square public garden inaugurated in 1884, and the hippodrome at Horsh Beirut were the preferred leisure activities for Beirut’s new bourgeoisie.

The 1930s witnessed the development of the Beirut neighborhoods of Minet el Hosn, with the arrival of hotels with bath clubs, and Zeitouneh, a popular nightspot. Soon after the inauguration of the St. Georges Hotel in 1934 and the opening of its bath club and bar, a French bath club opened right next door and, outfitted with a swimming pool, organized parties and competitions restricted to French and other foreigners, as well as some privileged Lebanese.³ As swimming gained rapidly in popularity, dress codes relaxed and the place of women in public space evolved. Swimming’s professionalism grew: modern equipment, entry restrictions, changing rooms, showers, diving boards and lifeguards became standard practice at the military club for French army officers and at the American University’s bath club, which was located below the corniche, bordering the campus. Further north, the Grande Bleue beach below the Medawar cliffs was converted to facilitate swimming. Ouzai, meanwhile, was transformed into a kind of French Riviera, flanked by the Saint-Simon, a sandy beach and cafe-restaurant complete with showers, changing cabins, and some sixty wooden bungalows,⁴ and the Saint-Michel further down the coast.

Between the months of June and October, the Lebanese would take their summer vacation, for which the preferred destinations were in the mountains, particularly the Sofar Grand Hotel and the Casino-Piscine in Aley, which opened in 1930.

During the same period, leisure pursuits other than swimming became more organized in Lebanon. There was, of course, horse racing at the Horsh Beirut hippodrome, which was *the* outing for a well-dressed crowd that paraded in their finest suits and dresses. Clubs and associations also developed significantly during this time, including the Levant section of the French Alpine Club, founded in 1932. The first cycling competitions were also held in 1934.⁵ The Lebanese Football Association was founded in 1934 and included a number of clubs that were mostly based in Beirut

and its suburbs. Football and cycling quickly grew into popular sports, appreciated and practiced by the less well-off. Tennis and water sports were also in fashion in the 1930s but were mainly restricted to an elite few.

Due to the growing number of clubs, leisure activities became, in the words of Robert Beck and Anna Madoeuf, “forums of conviviality.”⁶ But let it be clear: such conviviality was fully centered on its own community. Leisure acted as a marker of social status and reproduced existing societal divides visible in the public sphere. Mass recreational activities (cinema, cycling, football) and elite activities (skiing, water sports, tennis) were modelled on the activities of high society.



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Henri Charles (1900-1978)
Ski in Becharreh, Circa 1930s
Silver gelatin print, 8.5×13.3 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum



Henri Charles (1900-1978)
Ski training in the Cedars, Circa 1930s
Silver gelatin print, 8.6×13.6 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

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The Eastman Kodak revolution, or a domestic use of photography

In the 1880s, photography became accessible to all through improvements to gelatin-bromide procedures, the growing number of manufacturers of sensitive plates, and the upgrading of photographic material and services. In September 1888, following numerous attempts to mechanically sensitize gelatin-bromide plates, Eastman launched the Kodak, a pre-loaded, small, fairly lightweight and easy-to-use camera.⁷ The Kodak was a resounding success: some 13,000 units were sold in its first year on the market. The Kodak simplified picture taking, as its famous slogan suggests: “You press the button, we do the rest.” Amateur photographers were no longer the connoisseurs that the English had been at the turn of the 19th century, nurturing the sciences and arts; they became simply users of a capturing device, embodying the democratic ideal championed at the time.⁸

The amateur is the “one who loves.” Relieved of its unrewarding aspects, photography as promoted by Kodak became straight-forward and attractive, equated with the pleasures of recording and recreation.

Freed from the constraints of posed photography, and with the circulation of increasingly lighter and smaller cameras, a new range of potential photographic subjects opened up; the photographer could now capture movement, which had previously been considered unphotographable. Horse racing, hurdling, automobile racing, cycle rides, waves crashing against the rocks, swimming in the sea, and children in motion were among the subjects of a new iconographic repertoire.

Amateur photography of this kind was mainly practiced within the family circle. The family became one of the main social contexts for the mediation and circulation of photography;⁹ access was no longer restricted to the father who perhaps possessed some technical knowhow. It was now within the reach of women and children. Additionally, the family was the most common subject of photography.¹⁰ The camera as a recording device had become the essential witness to family moments and domestic life. Its photographs contributed to the writing of family history.

On opening an amateur photo album, one pries without consent into another’s story. As a stranger to the life depicted, one invites oneself into a realm of anonymous faces. These moments of daily life of varying dimensions, sometimes minuscule, are “laid out” by the author, arranged to form a precise narrative.

On the same double page of the album *TFDC_A188*, one observes a group of young soldiers at the office, then at the dovecote, then at the Grande Bleue beach; they visit Sidon, come across a caravan in the sand, and surf in the sea. The album *TFDC_A184* meanwhile, entitled “Rayak and its environs,” depicts two soldiers on their way up the snow-covered Sannine mountain, and later relaxing during their lunchbreak. Symmetry reigns supreme in the layout of these albums, and the author plays with the vertical and horizontal formats of the images. Another album, *TFDC_A195*, portrays a series of outings: bicycle rides in the countryside, automobile trips, sea outings, and swimming. These images fit into the album according to a pre-established configuration; the album is constructed like a series of boxes to be filled. In the absence of annotation or description, the context is sometimes lost, forever. The albums’ portraits intrigue us, and as they stare back at us, they fall into anonymity. These photos were taken as a memento of trips to the countryside or seaside, yet their enduring interest is rather found solely in the actions they depict.

Neither rare nor of a high standard, vernacular photography constituted a significant number of images produced without artistic intent or what Alois Riegl¹¹ refers to as *kunstwollen*. A memento of a life being lived, such *private* photography is “appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it... it nevertheless remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed.”¹² The contact sheet, as a memory of the photographic gesture, brings a succession of captured moments to life and reflects the compulsivity of the amateur photographer.

Source: *L'illustration, Journal universel*, Hebdomadaire, 61st year, Volume 122, Saturday 26 September 1903 The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

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TFDC_1036_SN_7067

TFDC_1036_SN_7051



TFDC_1036_SN_7069

Unidentified photographer
Group of French soldiers in Baalbek, late 1920s
Silver gelatin prints, 6.9×9 cm or 9×6.9 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum

Mario Malek Medawar (1938-2011)
Contact sheet of a 35mm film roll, Circa 1965
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print, 18x24 cm
Alexandre Medawar Collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation.
AIF_0284me00911-934





27A

→ 28



26A

→ 27



15A

→ 16



14A

→ 15



13A

→ 14



10A

→ 11



11A

→ 12



12A

→ 13



Le Monde Colonial illustré and leisure propaganda

Le Monde Colonial illustré (The Colonial World Illustrated) was a monthly journal dedicated to commercial, economic, and financial affairs, published between 1923 and 1948 with the purpose of protecting colonial interests. An observer of social and economic developments, issue 115 of its eleventh year, published in March 1933, gave special focus to skiing in Lebanon.

*The appeal of skiing in Lebanon is not only to provide for the French men and women obliged to remain in the country an admirable sport to remind them of the Alps, Vosges, or the Jura, but also to reveal to the foreigner one of the touristic activities on offer in this marvelous country, whose natural beauty stands equal to its archaeological riches. (...) Thus, there are ski devotees in Syria. One year ago, they founded there a section of the French Alpine Club, the Levant Section, which is presided over by a commander of the Chasseurs Alpains [mountain infantrymen] on duty in Beirut, Commander Regard, and which already boasts sixty members.*¹³

A tourist propaganda tool, skiing in Lebanon expanded and became institutionalized in 1934 with the founding of the Levant Section of the Club de Ski Alpin (Alpine Ski Club), and the construction of the first alpine refuge, under the aegis of the French High Commission in Beirut. From the inscriptions on the versos of certain photographs from The Fouad Debbas Collection, it is clear that many were produced for propaganda purposes. They include a parade of a Lebanese ski squad, the presentation of the flag, rope teams, the squad with General Huntziger, Commander of the Levantine troops, and also Mr. Lagarde. Several of these photos published in *Le Monde Colonial illustré* were taken by Philippe Bériel, a technical advisor for the High Commission and author of a collection of photographs on skiing in Lebanon.¹⁴



TFDC_1005-PA-0041 a

Henri Charles (1900-1978)
From Sannine, Beirut in the background, Circa 1930s
Silver gelatin print, 12.7 × 17.6 cm
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

Three photographers, three ways of seeing

French soldiers from the Levant army

Little is known of the French soldiers that were based in the Levant. Only a small number of photographs exist, without a story behind them, having been extracted from their context and surroundings. The scarce information available about these young men of mostly French nationality can be gleaned from the versos of certain postcards that they took the time to send to their loved ones and that were collected by Fouad César Debbas. Today, some are easier to decipher than others.

The notion of leisure among the French soldiers was one of free time, and of “permission.” Their institutionalized authorizations were supervised and not so “free,” after all. Armed with a camera, they would slip away from their official mission to visit the ruins of Baalbeck or spend time at the officers’ baths at Raz-Beirut or Sannine. Leisure for them was a group activity, whose main aim was to create memorable moments between friends that could then be recounted to their families on the backs of these postcards.

My dear Dédé,

I hereby send you a photograph of the officers’ baths. We go there every Saturday. I went there yesterday, Sunday, to swim with three friends. I’m sending the photo to father, because we had our photo taken; I’m a champion swimmer. My teeth are getting better, thankfully.

Your brother. Beirut, 5/9/27

The “sport week” begins tomorrow in Beirut. It’s a Levant army tradition: for a whole week, we take part in sporting competitions like hurdling, football, horse racing, tennis. Postcard dated 3rd May.

I am sending you this picture so that you see somewhere I regularly pass by. Came by here this morning on horseback through this large entrance gate to the Park. This is the Beirut racecourse.

I come here quite often for a gallop.

Kisses from your loving brother. 16-4-20¹⁵

Henri Charles, the Jesuit photographer

The reverend Father Henri Charles (1900-1978) was a Jesuit missionary and the founder of the Collège de Jamhour. A Frenchman from Grenoble, he was a frequent visitor to the Collège de Bollengo, an important center for Jesuit teaching in the Lyon region of France. After becoming a Jesuit in 1918, he was a missionary in Beirut from 1920-1923 and in Bikfaya from 1923-1925. A diligent student of the Arabic language, he wrote a brochure entitled *Jesuit Missionaries in Syria, Near East: The Hour of God at the frontline of a mission*, which was published anonymously. After becoming a priest in 1932, he moved to Damascus and became a senior contributor to the journal *En Terre d'Islam*. Henri Charles was one of the Jesuit photographers whose work was motivated by ethnographic and scientific concerns. Staying on numerous occasions with the nomads of the Syrian steppe and the fishermen of Tartous, he left behind some photographs of these Bedouins, which are conserved in the collections of the Bibliothèque Orientale in Beirut.

Leading a healthy lifestyle and following a strict diet, he was the model of an accomplished athlete, and one of a handful of pioneers who revealed to the Lebanese the joys of skiing and the wonders of "white gold."¹⁶ The photographs signed "H. Charles" on the verso, from The Fouad Debbas Collection, evoke the joys of skiing and the journey of the group he leads: the training sessions, the slaloms, a few falls, the achievements, climbing as a rope team, the refuge of 'Ain 'Ata, Lebanese children skiing at Bcharreh, the Lebanese Chasseurs Alpains, the Sannine summit and the view of the Beirut coastline, Eagle's Peak, the Qornet pass refuge, the Cedars cirque, some portraits of friends, and finally the well-deserved comfort of the igloo sheltering officials from the French High Commission.

The Medawar family

The Alexandre Medawar collection, housed at the Arab Image Foundation, gathers together family photographs taken over three generations, from the 1920s to the end of the 1960s. These images bear witness to the lives of some of the family members, and document the leisure activities of the well-off and westernized Levantine bourgeoisie of the time. The changing geography of the shots spans the network of Ottoman cities, from Alexandria to Beirut, Damascus, and Smyrna, as includes trips to Europe. The most frequently documented activities were dinners, family reunions, travel, automobile outings, hunting, visits to touristic sites such as Baalbeck, trips to the seaside, and tennis matches.

The first generation of photographs comes from the maternal side of the family: the Paoletti-Zalum, Italians from Livorno and of Levantine origin, who lived between Alexandria and Beirut. The author of the oldest images is unknown but was most probably a brother (Alberto or Giuseppe) of the great-grandmother Giulietta Zalum, née Paoletti (1896-1978). The family's first camera was a folding one that was made of wood. But others would follow, including Kodaks.

Later, it was one of Giulietta's daughters, Giovanna Medawar, née Paoletti-Zalum (1913-1985), that would most often carry a camera to capture family life. She particularly used her Leica II 35mm following her definitive move to Sad el-Bauchrieh in the Metn during the 1930s, accompanied by her twin sister Marinella. The sisters had married two brothers, Jean and Georges Medawar. Apart from numerous travel photos, Giovanna excelled in portraiture and often asked her sister Marinella to pose in pastoral settings.

Mario Malek Medawar (1938-2011), son of Georges and Marinella, assumed the role of "family photographer" for the third generation. An engineer and mechanic, he was a passionate, curious and dexterous man who was more interested in how things worked than the things themselves. Mario had several hobbies, including photography, scuba diving, model making, cars, mechanics, amateur radio, navigation, and weaponry. He held onto all the cameras that had accumulated over several generations. To begin with, his favorite was the Rolleiflex 6×6. He would later move onto a Pentax 35mm reflex camera, and an 8mm Bolex.

Mario stepped outside the confines of portraiture (family, friends, domestic animals) or family memories, turning the photographic act into a leisure activity that was often exploratory, poetic, or experimental in nature. Mario experimented with the photographed subject, capturing his loved ones' grimaces up close, varying the lighting and depth of field, and photographing himself in many self-portraits. He was audacious, transferring his way of seeing and releasing the shutter relentlessly

at the moment of action. There are contact sheets that illustrate this and enable us to visualize the sequence of shots. A case in point is his series documenting a tennis match in Broumana in 1958, in which his brother-in-law Salim Shoucair took part. Other series reflect more personal interests: flowers (macrophotography), electricity pylons, cars, and girlfriends.

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The Fouad Debbas Collection

The Fouad Debbas Collection is a photographic collection comprising over 30,000 images from the Middle East – namely Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey – from 1830 till the 1960s. It was built over the course of two decades by Fouad César Debbas (1930-2001), who was an ardent believer in the importance of collecting and preserving images as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Housed in the Sursock Museum, the Collection consists of photographs, postcards, and stereoscopic views, in addition to loose albumen prints, etchings, and books, all of which relate to the region. The Collection, Orientalist in character and replete with commercial clichés, forms an important part of the Sursock Museum's collection, highlighting photography's key role in the development of modern art in Lebanon.