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ESCAPING SLOW DEATH IN BEIRUT, LEBANESE EMBRACE FARM LIFE



Hasan Trad ploughs a field with his tractor as he prepares it to be planted in the town of Kfartebnit, south of Beirut. —AFP photos



Hasan Trad inspects his dragon fruit nursery at an agricultural field.



Hasan Trad plants thyme seeds at an agricultural field.



Thyme seeds are prepared to be planted in the Lebanese town of Kfartebnit.



Abed Trad (center) ploughs a field.



Lebanese Thurayya, 28, inspects her avocado trees in the village of Sinay, south of Beirut.

At 28, Thurayya left behind the Beirut neighborhood where she was born and moved to the family farm, not because of environmental concerns but forced there by Lebanon's bruising crises. "Living in the city has become very miserable," she told AFP from the lush south Lebanon farmland planted with avocado trees that is now her home. "The quiet violence of city life sucks you dry of energy, of money... It was just too much." Lebanon's unprecedented economic crisis, the coronavirus pandemic and last year's massive and deadly explosion of chemical fertilizer at Beirut's port have dimmed the cosmopolitan appeal of the capital.

Many are turning their backs on urban life and heading for their ancestral towns and villages, where they can cut down on living costs and forge new connections with a long-forgotten agricultural inheritance. In October, Thurayya moved to the two-story house built by her father in the south Lebanon village of Sinay. She took the step only weeks after her Beirut landlord said she would quadruple the rent at a time when electricity generator bills and transportation costs were already spiraling beyond reach for most. "It didn't make sense for me to stay in Beirut," Thurayya said. "It's pitch dark, there is garbage everywhere and you don't feel safe... it's hostile in its unfamiliarity."

YouTube farming tips

Now, when she's not working remotely for a non-profit group, Thurayya spends much of her time in her family's farmland, discovering how plants look when they need water and the feel of ripening fruit.

She has turned to YouTube to learn how to prune

trees and pestered local farmers for tips on how to best tend to a plot she hopes to one day take over. "We are about to plant the new season and that's what I'm really excited for," Thurayya said. "I want to follow the planting from seed to harvest and I want to be there for all of those steps."

In a country where no official census has been held since 1932, there is little data on the demographic shift to rural areas, which are largely underprivileged and



Lebanese Thurayya, 28, inspects her avocado trees in the village of Sinay.

underserved. But a long-standing trend towards rapid urbanization seems to be slowing partly due to diminishing job prospects in major cities, where the cost of living is 30 percent higher than in the countryside. A spike last year in the number of construction permits outside Beirut suggest such a movement, according to Lebanon's Blominvest bank. Information International,

James Rothschild, 36, - went on to claim that becoming a parent has been on the cards for Paris for some time. Speaking to Us Weekly, she added: "I think this is something that she's wanted for a while."

Hotel heiress Paris, 40, has previously opened up about her desire to start a family, noting that becoming a mother would put her on the path to "real life." Speaking on her 'This is Paris' podcast back in January 2021, she said: "We talk about [planning a wedding] all the time and planning our baby's names and all of that. So, I'm really excited to just move on for the next step of my life and finally just have, like, a real life. I really do believe that having a family and having children is the meaning of life. I haven't got to experience that yet because I don't feel that anyone really deserved that love from me and now I've finally found the person who does, so I cannot wait for that next step." —Bang Showbiz

a consultancy firm, estimates that more than 55,000 people have relocated to rural areas.

UN-Habitat Lebanon said that some mayors and heads of unions of municipalities had also reported an increase in the number of people moving, although it said it had no data to verify or quantify these claims. "The lack of rural development plans and the highly centralised nature of Lebanon are expected to ultimately deter a counter-urbanization in the long run,"



Hasan Trad prepares thyme seeds to be planted.

said Tala Kammourieh of the agency's Urban Analysis and Policy Unit.

'Suffocation' of city life

Another Beirut escapee, graphic designer Hassan Trad, was ploughing a craggy field near the southern village of Kfar Tibnit and said he now steers clear of

the "suffocation" of city life. "My return to the village is an escape from three crises," the 44-year-old said, scattering thyme seeds on a bed of soil. He pointed to the country's economic collapse, the pandemic, and the so-called trash crisis that has long left festering piles of garbage strewn across the city. Trad, a father-of-four who works remotely as a freelancer for a daily newspaper, started weaning away from the capital in 2016 but resettled full-time after Covid-19 and last year's portside blast.

Hassan said the cost of schooling his children is about half what it would be in the city but, more importantly, he can grow an agriculture business to supplement his salary. "I took advantage of the crisis and grew closer to farming and working the land," he told AFP from one of his many plots. "I now have a deeper attachment to my village." Writer and essayist Ibrahim Nehme, 35, who was severely wounded when the Beirut port blast ripped through his home, has sought solace in his family's north Lebanon village of Bechmizine. "An explosion that made me lose touch with my ground eventually led me to realize how much I am connected to my land," he wrote in a recent essay reflecting on the months he spent recovering there from his injuries.

In June, he left Beirut and rented a chalet by the sea, only a 20-minute drive away from his family's olive grove. He is not yet ready to commit fully to village life but Nehme said he is growing to realize his role in safeguarding an agricultural legacy left to him by his forefathers. "I am connected here, I am rooted," he said. "I have these olive trees, and one day I will have to take care of them." —AFP

Nicky Hilton thinks sister Paris will start a family 'pretty soon'

Nicky Hilton thinks her sister Paris will start a family 'pretty soon.' The 38-year-old businesswoman is confident that her socialite sister - who married entrepreneur Carter Reum, 38, in November - will soon be a mother, noting that she would be an "amazing" parent. She said: "I think she will have children] very soon. I think she'll be an amazing mom. If how she is with her dogs is any indication, they're going to be very, very loved." The fashion designer - who herself has children Lily, five and Theodora, four with financier husband



Nicky and Paris Hilton

Martha Stewart has started dating again

The 80-year-old businesswoman - who was married to publisher Andrew Stewart until 1990 and has previously been linked to Sir Anthony Hopkins - coyly revealed that she is dating someone, but refused to reveal who. Speaking on 'Watch What Happens Live', when host Andy Cohen asked her outright if she was dating, she said: "No. Well, I shouldn't say no. I mean yes, but I'm not going to tell you." Opening up on her dating history, the television star later went on to reveal about her surprise date with late TV host Larry King.

The former 'Martha Stewart Living' host joked about how her interview with the star turned into a surprise date, as she paid tribute to Larry, who died after a number of health complications in January 2021 aged 87. She said: "Well, I thought we were just talking about journalism and then he started to get a little amorous. Everybody was noticing I was out with Larry King and Larry King was not my type romantically - if you know what I mean. But he was a very nice man and by the way he was - other than you [Andy Cohen] - he was probably the nicest, kindest interviewer on TV. Kind and caring and interested. Yeah, that was Larry King." However, Martha was unable to vouch for claims that the late star was "well-endowed" as she revealed things never got to know. Andy Cohen said: "Someone told me that he was enormously endowed", to which Martha replied: "I never got to know. That would absolutely not [have changed my opinion]. Size always matters in almost everything but not necessarily in...it depends on the whole package." —Bang Showbiz



Martha Stewart

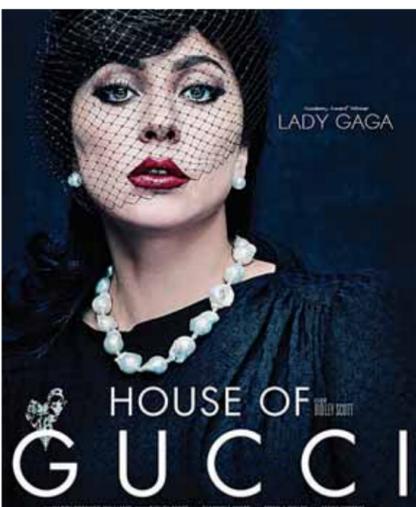
Lady Gaga says House of Gucci movie must be 'extremely painful' for Gucci family

Lady Gaga thinks 'House of Gucci' must be "extremely painful" for the real-life Gucci family. The 35-year-old popstar stars as convict Patrizia Reggiani in the movie, who was married to head of the fashion house Maurizio Gucci and arranged for him to be shot dead in 1995. She said: "This must be extremely painful to watch. A true life story come through in what is essentially our version of what we believe to be the truth and [director] Ridley Scott's version of the story."

The 'Poker Face' hitmaker went on "extend her love" to the Gucci family, as she claims she "did her best" to tell a story of survival. Speaking on NPR's 'Morning Edition', she explained: "I just - I extend my love to the family. And I did my best to make this performance about something more important than even the story itself, which is a story about women and survival." Gaga's com-

ments come after the heirs of former chairman Aldo Gucci released a statement blasting the "inaccurate" way their family had been portrayed on screen.

The statement read: "Although the film claims to tell the 'true story' of the family, the narrative is anything but accurate, depicting Aldo Gucci - president of the company for 30 years - and other members of the Gucci family who were the protagonists of well-documented events, as hooligans, ignorant and insensitive to the world around them. Even more censurable is the baffling reconstruction of events that advocate leniency toward a woman who was definitively convicted as the instigator of Maurizio Gucci's murder. To see her portrayed as a victim - not only in the film but also in statements by the cast - who is trying to survive in a male-dominated corporate culture, is an injustice and could not be further from the truth." —Bang Showbiz



Lady Gaga