



CLIMBING FOR PEACE

Earlier this year, **Donal** and **Nabihah Cotter** were involved in a climbing project that works with refugees in Lebanon, introducing them to the joy of climbing

The first time the power goes out in Lebanon, it is a bit of a shock. Immersed in darkness, you wonder what inexplicable chain of decisions led to this moment in your life; standing in a half-finished apartment building with only the sound of backfiring 1970s German cars piercing through the shroud of the darkness that has suddenly enveloped you.

By the fifth time, you just go about your routine activities as if everything was normal. Brown-outs – reductions in, or restrictions on, the availability of electrical power – like a lot of other minor inconveniences that might be cause for alarm in Ireland, are just everyday occurrences in Lebanon.

Cultures collide

My wife, **Nabihah**, and I landed in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, in the middle of August 2023, set to do a

Above:
A competitor in action during the Beqaa Bouldering Competition, which took place during Donal and Nabihah Cotter's visit to Lebanon

three-month stint working as volunteers with **ClimbAID**. Two years before, we had met an American climber in Turkey, who shared his plans with us. He was moving on to Lebanon, volunteering with ClimbAID, a Swiss non-profit that introduces the joy of climbing to the Syrian and Palestinian refugees and the Lebanese host community. That would be a cool project to work on, we thought, never expecting anything to come of it.

Fast-forward two years and here we were, in a Lebanese taxi, heading towards the **Beqaa Valley**, where ClimbAID's operations in Lebanon are focused.

For Nabihah and me, ClimbAID is the real deal. It was founded in 2016 by a Swiss climber, **Beat Baggenstos**, and is funded, in part, by the Swiss mountaineering and trekking brand, **Mammut**. Funding is also provided by Zürich-based bouldering gym **Minimum** and Rodellar-based **Refugio Kalandraka** (in Spain).

On top of this, the organisation relies heavily on donations from private individuals. ClimbAID also rubs elbows with global athletes including **Nina Caprez**, **Katherine Choong**, **Fred Nicole** and **Hazel Findlay**.

More important than all of that is the fact that ClimbAID's mission is **'Climbing for Peace.'**

After settling into our apartment, located in a half-finished multi-storey building (common in Lebanon), we set out to explore our surroundings. A few of the things we learned about Lebanese (and Syrian) culture in our first week here were:

► **Donal Cotter** is a 38-year-old climber from Cork and a member of Cork Climbing Club. He has been a rock climber for almost a decade and loves sport climbing, bouldering, trad climbing and shouting encouragement in many languages – his new favourite: *Yalla habibi!!!*

Nabihah Cotter is 31 years' old, from Malaysia, and has been living in Ireland since 2011. While she's learned to appreciate cams, nuts and Barry's Tea since she landed at Cork airport, Nabihah still wishes the food in Ireland was a little more spicy.





- Lebanese drivers are 'flexible' in their interpretation of the rules of the road.
- There is no limit to the amount of sugar you can put in a cup of tea. Almost every café, bar, restaurant, ice-cream shop, beach or park bench is home to shisha smokers (shisha smoking is a way of smoking tobacco through a bowl with a hose or tube joined on). Everyone here does it, from teenagers to grandmothers. I guess it's a lot cheaper than therapy!
- The Lebanese have a way with words. Levantine Arabic words that we love include *Yatik al-afiya* (May God give you health and all the good things), *Sabah el Nour* (Morning of Light), *Ala Rasi* (On my head; in other words, 'Anything for you').

We soon hailed a tuktuk and braved Lebanese traffic to visit the **Arcenciel Centre**, a Lebanese organisation that serves as host and partner to ClimbAID's activities in the Beqaa Valley.

We met **Wissam** and **Hassan**, two strong Syrian climbers who help run ClimbAID's programmes in

Above:
ClimbAID crew members at home in the Beqaa Valley

Below:
A ClimbAID participant receiving encouragement as he tackles a route on the bouldering wall

Lebanon. We were invited to train and climb together at the **ARC**, ClimbAID's purpose-built bouldering wall.

Wissam and Hassan are just two of over 1.5 million Syrian refugees currently living in Lebanon; this, on top of 300,000 refugees of Palestinian origin. The non-refugee population of Lebanon is just 4.6 million, giving this tiny country the highest number of refugees per capita in the world.

ClimbAID Academy

We had arrived just in time to participate in the **ClimbAID Academy**, a programme for the most dedicated athletes, male and female, from ClimbAID's roster of local Beqaa climbers. Honestly, they ran circles around us. Following a gauntlet of pull-ups, dead-hangs, front-levers, pistol squats and push-ups, I was ready to throw in the towel. Only then did the actual climbing start. My muscles, now jelly-like and uncooperative, barely managed a few simple boulders.

Suffice it to say, these young people are strong. They'd certainly give the best boulderers in Ireland a run for their money.

Each one of the Academy climbers had graduated from ClimbAID's core programme, known as **YouCLIMB**, before progressing to the sport-specific training session we attended. YouCLIMB is an 8-week programme that uses climbing to teach Psychosocial Support (PSS) to improve physical and mental wellbeing and to foster the development of social and life skills.

In areas like the Beqaa Valley, without comprehensive mental health services, organisations like ClimbAID help to fill the gap by trying to address the mental health needs of the community. Last year, ClimbAID partnered with **Universitätsklinikum Erlangen, UNSW Sydney** and **Antoine University** to research the effects of climbing therapy. The study demonstrated a positive impact on the psychological and psychosocial wellbeing of participants. This is great news for programmes like **Get Climbing** in Ireland. ➤





Levantine routine

Over the next few weeks, we settled into a routine. Nabihah, a native Malaysian, is a little bit obsessed with food, so it was only natural that we had to sample the local delicacies. Breakfast was *man'oushe* - flatbread with cheese, vegetables, olive oil and a herb mix called *za'atar*.

Lunch usually consisted of hummus, a herby salad called *fattoush* and, to satisfy my need for an essential prátaí supplement, *batata hara* (Lebanese spicy potatoes).

For dinner, we often splashed out on a bit of meat in the form of chicken skewers or *shawarma*. Meat is relatively expensive here, which incentivises protein substitutes like hummus, lentils, beans, cheese and eggs.

We spent most days at the ClimbiAID facility. We put in a few hours of computer work, then headed over to the bouldering wall and helped with lessons, photographing participants, route-setting or just climbing with the kids. Many participants spoke at least a little English and others were happy to teach us Arabic.

Bouldering to new heights

One of the highlights of our time in Lebanon was the **Beqaa Bouldering Competition**. Until recently, Lebanon

Above:
Donal and Nabihah route-setting

Below:
A group warms up on the basketball court, with the ARC bouldering wall visible in the background

didn't have a national organisation like **Mountaineering Ireland**. As a result, there was little opportunity for climbers to compete – especially climbers with minimal rights, like the Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

We were lucky to come along just in time to help with their sixth annual competition. We promoted the competition on social media, coordinated with local organisations for prizes and helped to set boulders for the qualification and final rounds. It was incredibly rewarding to see ClimbiAID athletes going toe-to-toe with climbers from Beirut and other parts of the country.

Many ClimbiAID participants came from traumatic backgrounds, forced to flee Syria to escape war and spend their lives in 'temporary' refugee settlements. Some we met had been living in such 'temporary' shelters their whole life. ClimbiAID gives them an opportunity to feel strong, capable and to become part of a community of climbers in a world that marginalises and minimises their existence. Being part of the climbing community, even placing on a winner's podium, can mean the world.

After the competition, a major event in ClimbiAID's calendar, the whole team took a week off to rest and recover. As proud members of the **Cork Climbing Club**, rest can only mean one thing for Nabihah and me – outdoor climbing.

Our marriage was on the rocks

Lebanon is a tiny country with a footprint only a bit larger than County Cork. Despite its small size, Lebanon has an incredibly diverse landscape: a beautiful Mediterranean coastline, vast swathes of banana plantations, strikingly well-preserved remnants of the ancient world, open plains devoted to vineyards and terraced olive groves.

In between it all, splitting Lebanon from north to south, are striking cliffs of untouched limestone rock, beckoning with highly featured tufas, gently arcing caves and – trad climbers look away for this part – a generous sprinkling of well-spaced bolts and fixed anchors.

We explored a few local crags in our time there, but the jewel in Lebanon's crown is undoubtedly **Tannourine el Tahta**. It boasts over five hundred bolted routes, spread across grades and climbing styles. There's an abundance of overhanging tufa routes with kneebars galore for aspiring Adam Ondras, but also plenty of slabby and technical climbing for those of a more sophisticated temperament (like myself).

Nabihah and I met through climbing, we got married at a climbing wall, our honeymoon was a climbing trip and even our wedding rings have mountains on them. We are kind of obsessed, and it's safe to say that we found a home away from home here in Lebanon, bringing climbing





to those who can benefit most from this amazing sport.

An unfortunate feature of Lebanon's geography is the ongoing conflict on its southern border with Israel. Sadly, we had to put an early end to our time in Lebanon and fly out in mid-October due to advice from the Irish and Malaysian embassies. There are real fears that the Israel-Gaza conflict may spread to Lebanon.

Remotely, we are still supporting the ClimbAID cause. ClimbAID's mission is a noble one, and I hope this article can inspire people to check out their website, read up on the activities they're involved with here in Lebanon, and maybe even become a donor and support the cause. ■

Above left:
Incredible
landscape of
Tannourine

Above right:
Donal and
Nabihah on the
day they were
leaving, with
members of the
ClimbAID crew

Below: The Roman
ruins at Baalbek

ClimbAID factfile

ClimbAID is a Swiss non-profit organisation committed to sport-for-development, utilising climbing to create positive changes in communities. ClimbAID's focus is on enhancing mental wellbeing, promoting inclusive communities, fostering personal development and addressing social issues, particularly among displaced youth in Switzerland and Lebanon. Founded in September 2016, ClimbAID reaches about 400 people in Lebanon and 600 in Switzerland each year. For more information see climbaid.org or follow ClimbAid on Instagram @climbaid.

