

## Gaza Strip's middle class enjoys spin classes, fine dining, private beaches

By **William Booth** August 23

GAZA CITY — Alongside the Hamas training camps and bombed-out neighborhoods, there is a parallel reality where the wafer-thin Palestinian middle class here is wooed by massage therapists, spin classes and private beach resorts.

Media images beamed from the Gaza Strip rightly focus on the territory's abundant miseries. But rising from the rubble of last summer's [devastating war with Israel](#) are a handful of new luxury-car dealerships, boutiques selling designer jeans and, coming soon to a hip downtown restaurant, "Sushi Nights."

This is the Gaza outside [the war photographer's frame](#), where families of the small, tough, aspirational middle class will splurge on a \$140 seaside villa with generator power to give their kids a 20-hour staycation with a swimming pool and palm trees.

This is the sliver of Gaza, a coastal enclave with the highest unemployment rate in the world, with personal trainers, medium-rare steaks, law school degrees and decent salaries.

The surviving bureaucrats, doctors, factory managers and traders in the middle class who haven't abandoned Gaza often say they are squeezed between the Israeli blockade, with its tight restrictions on travel and trade, and the Palestinian leadership, including the Islamist movement Hamas, which has controlled the strip since 2007 and has fought three fruitless wars with Israel in six years.

"I like to get out a night or two a month. You have to, if you can afford it. You have to live life, just a little bit, even in Gaza," said Samia Hillis, 33, a counselor whose days are spent working with [children suffering](#) from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hillis was sitting with her niece at the new open-air rooftop restaurant called Level Up in the high-rise Zafer Tower. The tables were crowded with families celebrating children's birthday parties with balloons, beside shy young engaged couples whispering sweet nothings, and women — most in headscarves, some not — smoking flavored tobacco in water pipes.

Zafer Tower was hit by a half-dozen Israeli shells and missiles last summer. Israeli artillery took out a Hamas communications antenna on the roof. The restaurant kitchen was scorched by fire. An Israeli military spokesman [told the Associated Press that](#) the building had been a "hub of terror activity" but did not elaborate.

"I believe the people of Gaza deserve much better than they get," said Basil Eleiwa, the restaurant's general manager, who says he tries to keep his prices — for chicken salad sandwiches or sea bream with lemon — reasonable.

The restaurateur called the middle-class market in Gaza “limited, precious, almost endangered.” He described the Gazan economy as “driving off a cliff.” He recalled a conversation he had with a Hamas leader in 2007, after the Islamist movement took control of the coastal strip. The official wondered aloud if it would really matter if 100,000 people left?

Eleiwa pointed out that was the sum total of Gaza’s middle class.

The signs of revival, beside the ruins of war, can be jarring.

[Not a single one](#) of the 18,000 homes destroyed in last summer’s war is habitable. Reconstruction moves at a glacial pace. Black-market cement is the currency of the realm. Unemployment in Gaza, at 43 percent, is the highest in the world, according to the [World Bank](#), which declared that “blockades, war and poor governance” put Gaza’s economy on the brink of collapse. Nearly 80 percent of the strip’s 1.8 million people receive social assistance.

But the seaside corniche, restored with funds from Qatar, now boasts Grand Motors, a car dealership with a row of gleaming late-model Mercedes-Benz sedans on the lot.

“We’ve been open two months and sold two,” said Moemen Abu Ras, a partner. His family has been in the used-car parts business in Gaza for three generations. The market for luxury sedans is tiny, he said, but still, there is a niche to fill. “But slow,” he said.

There’s a black 2014 Mercedes E-class sedan with 20,000 kilometers on it for sale on the lot for \$80,000, give or take. “The taxes are the killer,” said Abu Ras, who pays cash for the cars in Germany, ships them through the Israeli port of Ashdod and then pays duties and taxes to Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

A mile away at the newly opened Techno Gym, Gazans pay about \$100 a month for an all-inclusive membership at the air-conditioned sports club, which offers cardio workouts, hydrotherapy, spin classes, swimming lessons and high-end weight machines, which were imported from China but delayed at Israeli customs in Tel Aviv for two months because of the war.

“This isn’t a business, this is a dream,” said co-owner Ammar Abu Karsh, who taught the cardio class under a sign that read in English, “No Pain No Gain.” The club boasts more than 500 members.

“Gaza has gyms but nothing like this,” said Mohammad Migdad, a competitive body builder with biceps the size of grapefruits.

Migdad helps train newbies and fellow competitors. “We expend our energies here in sport instead of sitting around depressed or becoming extremists,” he said. He confessed that the life of a Gazan bodybuilder is hard. “You can’t travel, and no sponsorship,” Migdad said. “Also, if you want big muscles, you have to have supplements, and the price is too much.”

At the gym, a tub of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Iron Whey protein costs \$130, almost triple the price in a California gym.

Gaza has had a lone five-star hotel, the Mashtal, since 2011. It was mothballed for some years but is open again. Across the street is the newest sensation, the [Blue Beach Resort](#), which has an Olympic-size swimming pool, cabana boys and a private beach.

After an Israeli TV news station did a snarky piece on the resort — wondering aloud how tourists would arrive, if not by smuggling tunnel? — the management decided to lower its profile. An employee at the hotel said Hamas security complained that journalists were giving the world the wrong impression about Gaza.

Omar Shaban, a respected economist here, said, “Always in every society, during war, famine, whatever, you will find some risk-takers, some entrepreneurs. Here the business people are hopeless the siege will end, so they look for other opportunities. There’s no export. No garments, no flowers, no trade. So they sell something to Gaza. Some cars, restaurants, resorts.”

Shaban shrugged. “It’s not much,” he said.

But for Gazans who can afford it, a little taste of middle-class pleasure keeps them going. At a beach villa last week, the Ammar family piled out of their cars, carrying plates of hummus, spicy olives, sandwich meats, mangoes and grapes, and cranked up the music. They rented the villa for 20 hours for \$140 to have a pool party.

Heba Ammar, 24, couldn’t wait. “If I could leave Gaza,” she said, “I would run!”

*Hazem Balousha and Heidi Levine contributed to this report.*

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