

RASHANA

The Village of Sculptures

Elizabeth Abi-Aassi went to investigate Rashana, a village where traditional Lebanese hospitality and modern creativity exist in perfect harmony.

A modest sign on the main highway on the outskirts of Batroun, in North Lebanon, can easily be missed if you are not searching for it. After I had turned off the main route, a lonely, steep mountain road led me through a stretch of seemingly endless greenery. After the village of Tehoum, all road signs disappear, and the olive and almond trees become your guide. You might be mistaken for thinking that no villages existed here at all, were it not for some peculiar staccato sounds that disturb the singing of the birds and the silence of nature, hailing the presence of a small village at the top of the mountain.

A huge marble-like sculpture appeared at a tiny crossroads, capturing (as I was later told) a feeling of splendour and awe. Glittering under the summer sun, this spectacular piece of art looked as if it had tumbled down from nowhere onto this forgotten mountain. The staccato sounds that I heard while going up were suddenly louder and sharper as a few scattered terracotta roofs came into view, telling me that I had finally reached my destination, the village of Rashana.

In Aryan, Rashana or "Roch Oone" means "I, the top". Embraced by the famous Smar Castle of Byblos from the east, and the Madfoun river from the south, Rashana looks west over the open mountainside, providing a unique view of an azure Mediterranean sea and a lovely breeze which makes it a cool refuge during the hot summers.

Driving past the entrance, my vision settled on the narrow road that cut through Rashana, making me wonder if I were entering a different world. The sides of the path were lined by a series of sculptures that looked like petrified feelings in white stone: motherhood, pain,

moments of evasion, the human enigma. On the left, I saw a village house with its picturesque garden laden with sculptures of people, and a small cottage chiseled from stone. For an instant, the village looked as if it had been put under the spell of some wicked magician who had transformed everything and everyone in Rashana into stone, but the appearance of an old man signaling me from his balcony told me that real people did live in Rashana after all.

I went closer to the man's house, where he had already opened a small door at the side of the balcony and was standing on top of a long staircase ushering me up. He looked well over seventy but very sprightly. After introducing myself, I thanked him for the invitation and asked where the Mayor's residence was. The old man answered in a dismissive tone. "Our Mayor has been dead for close to a year and no one has been appointed yet, but I am Youssef Shlenk," he stated proudly, "I know everything there is about Rashana."

From Mr. Shlenk's balcony we had a beautiful and comprehensive view of the village. From there, I realised that the sculptures I had seen so far were only a fraction of what the village offered. Among the thirty-something houses and abundant forests that made up Rashana lay a hectic collection of stone and iron sculptures embodying different emotional subjects. The center of the village was dominated by a large area where a number of sculptors were working among large and rough pieces of stone. I realized that the peculiar sound that helped us find our way to Rashana was none other than the echo of the hammer and the chisel that reverberated so acutely in every part of the mountain.

A little girl with a doll in her hand

