

Good times roll in city where fun was banned

BY RICHARD BEESTON IN KABUL

The Afghan capital is booming for people with money

DUSK is falling, and across Kabul the cocktails are being shaken, the delicacies prepared and the city, where fun was forbidden until recently, is about to enjoy another night of revelry and debauchery.

The giant SUVs of the international aid agencies prowl the muddy back streets of the elite Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood, crowding entrances to the bars, restaurants and nightclubs that have sprung up so quickly that most taxi drivers do not know they exist.

Today, in spite of regular power cuts, the odd terrorist attack and the haphazard nature of life, the city is booming. A typical evening for foreigners in Kabul begins with a debate about where to meet for drinks and then whether to eat Italian, Thai, Indian, French or Lebanese food. Afterwards there are bars and pool halls run by Russians from Tajikistan and, for some, brothels packed with Chinese prostitutes.

At the popular Taverna du Liban, American diplomats, South African bush pilots, British security guards and the eclectic mix of other foreigners drawn to Afghanistan over the past six years are greeted by Kamal Hamade, the Lebanese owner, whose restaurant is packed most nights.

“Business is good in Kabul,” he said. “Once you understand how the place works, and you sort out the security, there are great opportunities here.”

In contrast to post-war Baghdad, where social life has been destroyed by the violence gripping the city, Kabul’s renaissance after 30 years of civil war is striking. Much of the capital was destroyed during the Soviet occupation, the subsequent battle among the Mujahidin warlords and, finally, the Islamic rule of the Taleban, under which television, music and most features of Western culture were banned.

After the Taleban were driven out in 2001, Kabul made up for isolation with a vengeance. It now has a reputation in the region as a party town and is beginning to attract outside investors. At the Kabul City Centre, the country’s first shopping mall, women in burkas gape at the fashion boutiques, jewellers and mobile telephone shops. The biggest attractions in the mall are its escalators, the first in Afghanistan.

“We still get people coming in from the villages who stare at the escalators and are too frightened to ride on them,” Javad, a businessman, said.

Even more amazing are the goods available — and the prices. A jewellery shop reported roaring trade in Breitling wristwatches, which start at \$3,000 (£1,700) and are thought to be the favourites of the country’s drug barons. Across town the newly opened Serena Hotel, once the dingy Kabul Hotel, has been transformed into a stunning five-star establishment that is packed out for weekend brunch. Rooms start at \$250 a night.

Although foreigners and wealthy Kabulis welcome the dramatic changes, others are fearful that the brash new Kabul will provoke a backlash in a country in which the vast majority of people are far too poor to enjoy the pleasures on offer.

A round of golf on the newly reopened course at the Kabul Golf Club costs \$50. Dinner for two at L’Atmosphère, the trendiest French restaurant in town, is double that. A four-bedroom house that,

not long ago, could have been rented for a few hundred dollars a month, now fetches \$2,500. Some people are deeply offended by what they regard as the moral decline of the city. Drinking alcohol, drug taking and prostitution have always existed in Kabul, but rarely so visibly.

In response to the public outcry, the Interior Ministry recently raided a number of brothels that were posing as Chinese restaurants and deported 47 women.

But the problem has not gone away. At Escalades, a supposed private members' club in Kabul, a dozen Chinese prostitutes danced with little enthusiasm in front of leering middle-aged American and British contractors with money to spend. Residents said that the clubs were allowed to operate because the owners bribed the police.

"Foreigners must respect our culture and religion," Ahmad Shah, the leader of the Islamic Empowerment Party and a critic of the changes under way, said. "We need the help of the outside world, but we do not need to import problems like alcohol abuse and prostitution. This is not in the nature of the Afghans."

But Ali Khan, a young Afghan entrepreneur who has just returned after years in exile, said that Kabul had suffered enough under the religious zealots and that most young people welcomed their new freedoms. "I came here in the Taleban era," he said. "There were no cars, no businesses. Everyone lived in fear. Now we are free to enjoy ourselves. Maybe in ten years Kabul will be a normal city."