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**World News**



Hookah smokers share a pipe in Paris's Aladin café

Yves Traynard

## West Meets East

Once the preserve of old men in cafés, Arab hookah pipes are attracting a younger—and more diverse—clientele

By Tracy McNicoll  
 NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Oct. 2 — It's midnight in Paris, and the crowd is growing outside the Left Bank's Paradis de l'Orient café. "A half hour to get in?" complains one would-be patron.

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A CAFÉ EMPLOYEE shrugs apologetically. Sounds of clapping and singing—and the smell of fruity smoke—wafts into the street. Some decide to leave, but others choose to wait it out. The big attraction? The chance to smoke a bubbling Mideastern hookah pipe—and the glamour of being on the cusp of a trend.

Of course, the water pipes known as hookah, narghiles, *sheesha* or hubble-bubbles have been around for centuries. But the smoking experience that was once the domain of old men in Middle Eastern cafes—and sometimes women in the bathhouses known as *hammams*—is now attracting new and younger audiences in both East and West. Cafes from Kiev to San Diego are offering hookahs to their patrons; Paris alone has more than 50 sheesha cafés with evocative names like the Bagdad Café and Salon Egyptien.

And as more Westerners indulge in smoking the tobacco laced with molasses and fruit flavors, Arabs see the pipes assuming an unlikely new role: crossover cultural ambassador. “We can see very well that there is no clash of cultures,” says Tunisian-born cultural anthropologist Kamal Chaouachi, scanning the multicultural clientele in an Egyptian sheesha cafe in Paris. Chaouachi believes the narghile can introduce Western youth to Arab culture and “teach a lot in these troubled times.” “It’s really a bridge,” he says. “The narghile is the peace pipe of the Middle East.”

Keren Leiby agrees. A New York native, Leiby ran a popular Tel Aviv University program called Have-a Nargila—a play on the popular Hebrew folk song with a similar name. The monthly campus gathering attracted students to get together over hookahs, tea and hummus. “Israelis and Arabs had [the

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pipe] in common and would smoke together,” she says. “[They’d] shoot the breeze.”

Somewhat ironically, as hookahs firm up their foothold in the West they’re helping to fuel a resurgence in Muslim countries, too. In Beirut, young Lebanese men and women smoke the pipes on the rooftop terrace of a Virgin Megastore and on plastic chairs they have set up along the city’s seafront corniche. In Istanbul, the pipe Turks previously had mostly seen in museums is gaining popularity. And Baghdad boasts crowded narghile cafes where students experiment with new flavors. One favorite: cappuccino.

Not all Arab governments welcome the revival of the hookah. Jawad Al-Lawati, a section head in Oman’s Ministry of Health, told NEWSWEEK that narghile smoking was seen by some local officials as “an uncivilized habit” that risked denigrating the image of Omanis. Oman recently tried to ban narghile smoking in public places, but had to back down in at least one county after a lawsuit brought by café owners. Government spokesmen say the planned restriction was partly for health reasons. “[It’s a] visionary political commitment,” says Samer Jabbour, an epidemiologist and cardiologist at the American University of Beirut, of the antitobacco initiative.

Not surprisingly, smokers tend to disagree. “It’s smooth, it doesn’t irritate the throat,” Michel Moriniaux, 27, says of the pipe, which can have as many as six smoking tubes passing through an urn of water to cool the smoke. Like many sheesha users, Moriniaux cites the popular notion that hookah smoke is safer than regular tobacco smoke because it is water-cooled and filtered.

Some scientists, however, suggest the opposite. One is American University of Beirut researcher Alan Shihadeh, whose preliminary-study results suggest that sheesha users ingest about 100 times more lead from hookah smoke than from a cigarette. Doctors are also concerned that hookah smoking could raise the risk of lip cancer and that pipe sharing could spread infections like tuberculosis.

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Others, however, believe that the unhappy Arab governments could be concerned about more than health. “There is a certain cultural shame among researchers from [Middle East] countries [about hookahs],” says Chaouachi. The anthropologist believes that politicians share similar reservations because of the perception

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that the hours needed to smoke the pipes are associated with indolence.

Still, neither politics nor medical concerns are keeping Westerners away from the café experience. “It’s superfriendly, it’s convivial, it’s a little exotic,” explains Constance Floret, 17, a Paris student about why she has joined the crowd outside the Paradis de l’Orient. It’s an image builder too. When far-right leader Jean-Marie LePen wanted to show his cool during France’s heated

presidential campaign earlier this year, he agreed to meet a French magazine journalist near the once-risqué Moulin Rouge. The venue: the Aladin hookah café.

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