



Dar Alma in the coastal city of Tyre in southern Lebanon.

(Courtesy of L'Hôte Libanais)

Guest houses offer a welcoming way of discovering Lebanon

Samar Kadi

Beirut

“Feeling at home” is the idea behind L'Hôte Libanais – the Lebanese Host – 15 guesthouses and boutique hotels carefully selected to give guests genuine insight into traditional Lebanese living.

Nestled in quiet village quarters, centuries-old buildings hidden in the mountains or artsy apartments tucked in the heart of Beirut, the guesthouses are scattered across Lebanon, with each having its own cachet and characteristics.

L'Hôte Libanais introduced guesthouses to Lebanon 15 years ago, guided by a belief that “the best way to experience a country is to share its food and to mingle with the local people,” said group founder Orphée Haddad.

The gist of the endeavour is to have the Lebanese people open their houses to foreigners.

“Although the Lebanese people are very hospitable, the tourism industry in Lebanon for years was mainly based on hotels in Beirut, from where tourists would go on day trips to visit historical sites,” Haddad said. “Those who did not know anyone in Lebanon were stuck in places mainly dedicated to tourists and did not have a chance to experience what real Lebanese life is.”

The gist of the endeavour is to have the Lebanese people open their houses to foreigners looking to better understand Lebanon and gain first-hand experience of Lebanese hospitality.

“This is how L'Hôte Libanais started. I went from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and from village to village knocking on doors and sharing my idea,” Haddad said. The first guest houses of L'Hôte Libanais started operating in 2005-06, receiving both foreign guests and the Lebanese who wanted to explore their country.

“This is how global travelling is moving now,” Haddad said. “Today people are looking for something more genuine. The old tourism with impersonal large hotels has probably changed into something that is more focused on the experience. It is an experience with the food and the area itself.”

L'Hôte Libanais members are carefully selected through strict criteria that combine the physical with the flavour and feel of the place.

“Architecture is one of them but the building should not necessarily be old,” Haddad said. “The place should have something to tell about Lebanese history, about the country and its traditions but the most important criterion is to show a different Lebanon than the Lebanon that was shown for years to tourists.”

Just walking distance from the Beirut nightlife hub of Gemayze, the Sursock Museum and downtown is Jamil Azar's guesthouse, Dar Al Achrafieh, in one of the Lebanese capital's mythical neighbourhoods.

“It is my family house where I was born. It has two rooms for guests and has been part of the L'Hôte Li-



Dar Al Achrafieh, an old guesthouse of L'Hôte Libanais tucked in the heart of Beirut's neighbourhood of Achrafieh.

(Courtesy of L'Hôte Libanais)

banais family since 2005,” Azar said of his 90-year-old house with its art deco furnishings and painted ceilings.

“It is special because, first of all, guests are staying in a traditional Lebanese house and with a Lebanese host. They feel that they are really in Lebanon. I welcome them personally, give them directions to places to visit, to museums and restaurants. These are small things that they appreciate and make them feel at home.”

For those who want to experience Lebanon's traditional village life, L'Hôte Libanais offers a selection of guesthouses nestled in high mountains or in the heart of olive groves, such as Rola Bazerji's Bouyouiti in the Chouf Mountains.

When Bazerji and her husband decided to build a summer home under the olive trees, they had no

intention of turning the place into a boutique hostel.

“There was a small stone house on the land, so we decided to build a bigger one for us. Then we built another small house for our friends and guests, then another and another. Now we have 12 houses scattered in the olive orchard, which we later turned into guesthouses,” Bazerji said.

The houses differ in size but they all have a small terrace and a kitchenette. Some have two bedrooms and a living area and the place is equipped with a swimming pool, a bar and a restaurant under the olive trees.

“The place has become our baby. In every house there is everything the guests need to make them feel at home,” Bazerji said. “The area is very popular with foreigners and Lebanese alike, with its touristic sites, like Deir el Qamar, Beiteddine Palace and the Cedars' Reserve of Barouk. We are located in the middle of an open museum.”

All guesthouses of L'Hôte Libanais operate on a bed-and-breakfast concept. Jacqueline Helwanji's breakfast at Dar Qadisha is an example of genuine traditional food.

Breakfast includes homemade jams from fruit that Helwanji grows in the garden of her 100-year-old house in the village of Hasroun overlooking the famous Qadisha Valley, mankoushe, known as the Lebanese pizza, with fresh zaatar (thyme), local goat cheeses, organic eggs and labneh (strained yoghurt).

With prices ranging \$80-\$250 for a double bedroom per night, L'Hôte Libanais offers individuals of all budgets the opportunity to discover and fall in love with Lebanon, Haddad said.

“L'Hôte Libanais's experience is about a coming together of people, place, aesthetics, and tastes,” he said.

<http://www.hotelibanais.com/bed-and-breakfast/hotels/>



A view from Bouyouiti, a boutique hotel in the heart of the Chouf Mountain.

(Courtesy of L'Hôte Libanais)



Agenda

Dubai:
Through May 25

“Mary Poppins,” a musical play, will be performed at the Dubai Opera. It is the story of a nanny who flies around with her umbrella and can find anything in her bag. The production involves the audience in adventures through fantastic effects and choreography.

Beirut:
Through June 1

Souk El Tayeb is a weekly market that hosts more than 60 producers from across Lebanon with food products as well as traditional and handmade crafts. Souk El Tayeb is open 10am-4pm each Thursday at the Village Dbayeh.

Algeria:
May 10-24

The 18th European Cultural Festival in Algeria brings together artists from more than a dozen countries to perform traditional rhythms, jazz and flamenco. It takes place in Algiers, Tlemcen and Constantine.

Rabat:
May 12-20

The 16th annual Mawazine Festival takes place in Rabat featuring international and local performers. This year international artists and bands including Charles Aznavour, Anoushka Shankar, Lauryn Hill, Najwa Karam, Nawal al-Zoghbi and Demi Lovato are on the programme.

Palestinian territories:
May 13-18

The tenth Palestine Festival of Literature – PalFest – takes place across historic Palestine. The annual travelling festival includes free public events, such as readings, workshops, music performances, debates, meetings with authors and artists and visits to historic sites.

Dubai:
May 17-20

The ninth Dubai Tango Festival is scheduled for the Meydan Hotel and includes tango workshops, milongas along with famous tango dancers and singers.

Amman:
During June

Starting on the third night of Ramadan, Amman each year celebrates traditional Arab culture with the Citadel Nights Festival. The city comes to life each night of Ramadan with concerts, recitals of classical Arab music, traditional dishes and authentic souks.

Marrakech:
July 1-31

The annual Marrakech Festival of Popular Arts and Folklore showcases Moroccan traditions, music, dance and costumes through the ages. Visitors attend concerts, exhibitions and Moroccan street troupe performances.

We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.

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