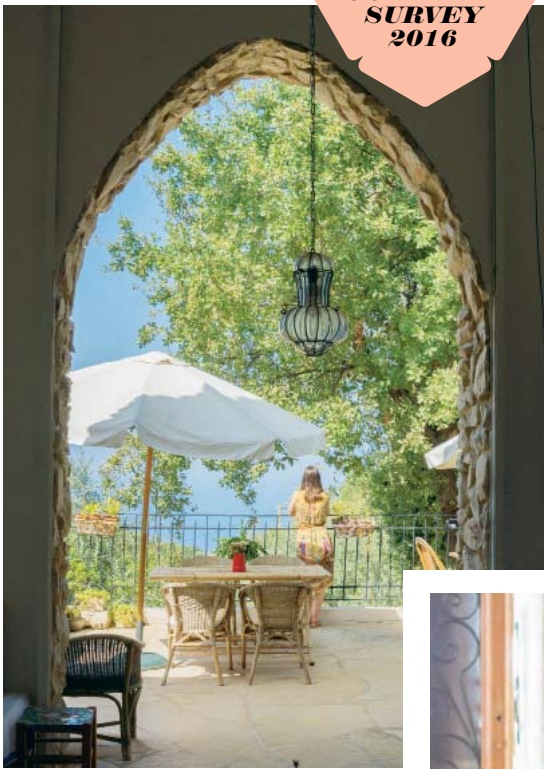




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- 01 Colette Kahil's daughter Rasha and their dog Kloe
- 02 Beit el Nessim's rooftop
- 03 Arched doorway at Beit al Batroun
- 04 Beit al Batroun patio
- 05 Asmahan works at Beit al Batroun



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REPORT
Lebanese hotels

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Family Fortunes *Lebanon*

Preface

As hotels strive to personalise premises, a wave of family-run inns is offering a homespun brand of Med hospitality.

Writer

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Sunlight pours through two soaring porticoes that illuminate ivory-white sofas in the lobby of Beit al Batroun in Lebanon. On the balcony guests read, doze and natter. Many lounge by the plunge pool or take in the view of the eastern Mediterranean.

"I want guests to feel at home," says the hotel's owner Colette Kahil as she strokes her French bulldog Kloe. "This is the important thing. I'm not here as a manager; in fact sometimes it feels like I'm a mother to my guests." Kahil built the place for her family and she lives in one of the four rooms; she is ever on hand to advise guests or share a bottle of wine and some conversation.

Beit al Batroun is part of a growing crop of smaller family-run hotels and guesthouses in Lebanon, places offering a glimpse of life in a real Lebanese *beit* (home), from the famed hospitality to the iconic architectural design. These hotels are tapping into a desire among travellers to stay somewhere that allows them to explore off-the-beaten-track countries within a homely setting. Previously a rarity in Lebanon, these businesses are now booming, particularly as the rest of the market is largely made up of similar-looking business-oriented establishments and five-star extravaganzas catering to the whims of wealthy Gulf tourists.

"I'm not going to pretend it's something other than my house," says Nabil Najjar, owner of the tranquil Beit el Nessim, who works here with his wife Maya Sourati. "This hospitality is definitely Lebanese; it's possibly the best in the world."



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Morning glory

A highlight of any stay in Lebanon is the traditional breakfast. Staples include *labneh* (Middle Eastern strained yoghurt), a bowl of olive oil and *za'atar* (a mixture of thyme, sumac and sesame seeds), and flatbread. Fig and apricot jams – and sheep and goat's cheese – may also feature and if you're lucky you might get some *manakeesh*: frisbee-sized discs of baked dough topped with *za'atar*, cheese or ground meat with spices.

Najjar and Sourati are yoga teachers and together converted the 150-year-old building into a home. After informally hosting friends they opened it up to strangers. The hotel features Lebanese *mandaloun* windows, as well as French-style shutters and Indian fabrics from Najjar's travels.

On top of yoga classes, Beit el Nessim hosts dinner parties that serve grilled fish from the nearby harbour and homemade banana tart, which Najjar prepares before joining his guests.

At the opposite end of the privacy scale is Bouyouti: 10 self-contained guesthouses, a pool and a summer restaurant nestled in a plot of forested terrain in the mountainous Chouf region. Yet this is also a family affair: Rafic Bazerji built the houses, his wife Roula decorated them and their daughter Rawan does the marketing and communication.

"It was difficult to tread the line between a private retreat and a commercial enterprise," says Rawan. "It's our family home so we didn't hire anyone to help." She believes this preserved the hotel's uniqueness: "You are in a place that has a soul, the soul of a family." With almost every weekend fully booked, it's clearly a recipe that works.



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- 01 Inside Bouyouti guest house Beit al Jal
- 02 Bouyouti pool and the Chouf mountains
- 03 Poolside cabana
- 04 Garden with a view
- 05 Poolside restaurant
- 06 Rustic details
- 07 Dar Alma overlooks the Mediterranean
- 08 Dar al Achrafieh's Jamil Azar prepares breakfast
- 09 Dar Alma is nestled in the historic city of Tyre
- 10 Dar al Achrafieh dining room
- 11 Quaint room at Dar Alma



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Real deal

The backbone of the boutique-hotel phenomenon is L'Hôte Libanais (The Lebanese Host), a project that was founded in 2003 to connect travellers with accommodation that supplied them with authentic experiences. "The way to get to know a country is to meet its people," says founder Orphée Haddad. "Especially in Lebanon where diversity in cultures, faiths and influences – and an unparalleled hospitality – are part of the fabric."



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Opened last year, Philippe Tabet's Dar Alma is the newest addition to the scene. Perched on a tiny beach next to the remains of a Crusader fortress in the southern city of Tyre, Dar Alma is a world away from the preened private beaches offered by the more luxurious hotel chains.

"I first bought it to be a house for me and my family," says Tabet, as he spoons prawn and octopus onto plates for his wife and two young daughters at the hotel's restaurant. "My parents' house is right next door. I was born here."

Although Tabet does not live in the new premises, the hotel – tucked away on a quiet street where old neighbours sit outside on stools and gossip – still feels like someone's home. The interior is mostly modern but the floors are a colourful mix of *cemento* tiles, a nod to traditional Lebanese decor.

Lovers of Lebanese nostalgia should head to Dar al Achrafieh, one of the first of this wave of B&Bs to open in Lebanon, in 2005. On the third floor of a 1920s building in east Beirut, Jamil Azar's flat is full of 1940s and 1950s pieces and oozes old-world glamour. "I wanted to show guests that Lebanon is not what they have been told," says Azar, who has lived here his whole life.

He aims to give visitors a personal holiday that would be impossible in big hotels. "They are coming to a traditional Lebanese house and at breakfast we sit together. It's as if they belong to this house while they are here, like one family," he says. "Everybody wants to come back." — (M)