

As time goes by



Hotel Albergo's Executive Suite is an elegant example of modern luxury combined with the old-world charm of a culture caught in the crossroads, writes Rebecca Haddad

There are two things the Lebanese do well: celebrate their rich culture with pride and consistently welcome visitors as if they were old friends. I experience both of these almost as soon as I pull up outside Hotel Albergo, a lovingly converted 1930s Levant mansion in the affluent suburb of Achrafieh in Beirut. The doorman greets me with a smile as wide as the moon and quickly ushers me into the cosy lobby, where I am welcomed as if I were here only last week.

The boutique nature of Hotel Albergo, a member of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux collection, adds to the homely feel of the place. There are just 33 charming rooms and suites, each celebrating aspects of Lebanon's rich heritage, which is a cultural cocktail of Oriental opulence, Arabic tradition and European sophistication.

I am checked into a 55-square-metre Executive Suite on the first floor. In this part of the world, decor isn't done by halves and this suite is no exception. Richly coloured Persian carpets cover the floor of the main living room, which is adorned with antique furnishings in clashing prints of ochre, rose and deep blue, sourced by interior designer Tarfa Salam from cities as far afield as Washington DC, Paris and London. Paintings and ceramic plates hang on

the room's mint-green walls, while an elaborate Ottoman-inspired chandelier completes the decorations. The scene before me wouldn't work in any other part of the world, and I am surprised by how settled it makes me feel.

It isn't until several minutes later that I realize the TV of modest size is tucked away in the corner of the living room. In fact, most of the mod cons are hidden away, with the minibar hidden in the dressing room and the iPod speaker dock balancing on one of the side tables in the bedroom. Located off to the immediate left of the main lounge is the bathroom, classically decorated with mosaic tiles, old-fashioned shower and tap fixtures, and a glass vase of Dead Sea salts should you wish to soak in the tub. So classic is the bathroom that the only hint of anything modern is the hairdryer and Molton Brown amenities — a contemporary bathroom would have simply looked out of place. Through French double doors at the end of the living room stands the four-poster bed dressed in soft, white sheets.

Almost immediately I am welcomed with fresh lemonade, fruit and Turkish delight, which I enjoy while leaning out over the small but chic balcony, which looks onto Abdel Wahab El Inglizi Street below. That at-home feel continues throughout the hotel, where

you can wander about doing whatever you please. Take the old-fashioned lift to the roof to sit by the pool, breathing in the scent of the surrounding orange blossoms; indulge in a spa treatment; or come home from a day exploring the local neighbourhood before heading to one of the two on-site restaurants for a late lunch.

The night is always young in Beirut and as the sun sets, the sound of honking cars fills the air as crowds head to the nearby hotspots of Downtown and Rue Monot. I opt for a quieter start to the evening on the hotel's rooftop terrace, an intimate space surrounded by ivy and bougainvillea, and furnished with cane tables — several of which are already occupied by other guests with the same idea. I order a glass of French red and a selection of Arabic mezze (a cultural crossroad of the culinary kind) and watch Beirut's night lights flicker on, selfishly wishing I could keep this charming Achrafieh hotel a secret. ■

The important bit

What: Executive Suite
Where: Hotel Albergo, Beirut
Price: from \$600 per night
Tel: +961 1 33 97 97
www.albergobeirut.com