



356

BEIRUT

Villa Clara

Mar Mikael, villaclara.fr

The gate is locked when I get back to the classically beautiful, home-away-from-home boutique hotel that is Villa Clara. There's no one around. Admittedly it is 1am on a Monday. The first of two keys lets me into the front courtyard (no electronic swipe-cards here), all is quiet and I take the stairs on the side of the mandate period Beirut villa up to my room – No.6 of just seven. Inside, I pass out on the large, comfortable bed staring up at the antique Damascus chandelier and the stunning Joe Kesrouani framed photograph of Beirut. Bliss. Morning – well, 11am – sees me wander down to the terrace to find husband and wife owners Olivier Gougeon (who is also the chef) and Marie-Helene Mouawad, discussing preparations for a gathering in the restaurant later – to which they off-the-cuff and enthusiastically invite me; “It’s just a few good friends, it will be fun” – and I proceed to drink espresso after espresso, eat perfect fresh manoushie zaatar, a sweet yoghurt and cake for breakfast until I am ready to start my day. And yet, I end up not leaving at all... because Villa Clara (named after Olivier and Marie-Helene’s daughter) is that sort of place. On the edge of Mar Mikael, opposite a bullet-marked, run down building, Villa Clara, painted a deep blue on the outside and cluttered with original artworks and photographs inside, is one of the first and best boutique hotels in the city, and packed full of unique charm. Dining here is a must, Olivier’s kitchen a wealth of French cuisine mixed with a touch of Lebanese, fresh ingredients and bountiful tastes. In the evening I meet a French artist, a TV celebrity, the owner of a fine Lebanese vineyard and a couple of musicians, interior designers and writers... it feels as if I’ve known them all forever. Villa Clara is just that sort of place. – *Ramsay Short*