



Elisa Sednaoui. Serge Najjar. Alessandro Michele. Johanne Issa. Juergen Teller. Karen Chekerdjian. Kamal Kassar





## 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*



## GOA Elsewhere

*Secret location, Goa, India, aseascape.com*

We get the Google map coordinates for our destination on the coast of India's once Portuguese colony of Goa only after we've booked and paid in full. From the airport we take a cab ride to the side of a dusty coastal road near Mandrem where, waiting for us there's a boy holding a sign that reads "Take Me Elsewhere". We jump out with our bags – we're not carrying much, beach clothes, some books, there's little or none internet connection here so we've left the laptops at home. We follow the boy over a bamboo bridge, through a creek, some coconut groves and there it is: acres of golden beach. Finally we've arrived at Elsewhere, an idyllic property made up of four secluded colonial buildings and three en-suite luxury tents. We stay at The Priest's House, built by one Padre Luis Gonzaga de Santana Sequeira, who lived there until the late 1950s, a man who used his own canoe to cross the creek and say mass in the Mandrem Church. It's beautiful, with four-poster beds, bathrooms open to the elements and plenty of open space. Our days are spent meditating, toes in the sand, or swimming in the perfect sea. Our nights spent dining alone or communally under a banyan tree, then dozing beneath the stars. Elsewhere is peace, romance, bliss wrapped up in one. And it is simply beautiful. – *Goufrane Mansour*

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## MYKONOS Kenshō Boutique Hotel & Suites

*Mykonos, Greece, kenshomykonos.com*

It's tough to find something more exclusive on the Greek isle of Mykonos than the new Kenshō, primarily because it's made up of just 10 suites and 25 rooms, all uniquely designed. Whitewashed stone walls, stripped-wood floorboards and minimalist white furniture from the likes of Kenneth Cobonpue and Patricia Urquiola inspired by the picturesque and stunning landscape of Ornos Bay over which it looks, Kenshō also features stunning individual private plunge pools, a luxury spa, hot tubs and a gourmet restaurant serving locally caught fish as a priority. Padding around in our junior suite feels as if you're alone in a James Bond villain's island hideaway, every aspect is so perfectly taken care of. Kenshō is the find of the summer, next level relaxation and once there, leaving just won't be an option – especially after you open the complimentary champagne on arrival. – *Felix El Hage*