

# Meet the hosts

"The Secret Haven", Rabih calls his home, and after ten minutes of directions on the cellphone and as many wrong turns, "secret" made sense.

Luckily, it delivered on the 'haven' too. A one-story stone dwelling opened out on to a paradise of vines, flowers of all colours and trees that cascade into the valley below. Rabih and his wife Lulu, who prefer not to give their second names, run a bed and breakfast of the strictly boutique variety in the pine-clad mountains of the Metn region, 35 kilometres from Beirut.

As partners in L'Hote Libanais, 'The Lebanese Host' an online company offering B&B accommodation, they rent out two unique double bedrooms blending traditional and modern features – Rabih is an architect.

"It's wonderful to share what you have with others," Rabih says. Crucial to the Lebanese Host, is the idea that guests become part of the household.

That evening, we sipped wine in the garden with our hosts and two other guests and put the world to rights, competing with a chorus of frogs, over a homemade dinner of Kibbeh bil-Saniyeh (baked lamb kibbeh).

L'Hote Libanais partners with 11 luxury B&Bs across Lebanon, each chosen as much for the genuine welcome given as for the high standard of accommodation.

"All our hosts see their cooperation with us as an opportunity to meet and share thoughts with people coming from all parts of the world," says L'Hote Libanais founder Orpheus Haddad. "I would even say that's the main reason for them to join the project."

That was certainly the case for Rabih, who first heard about the scheme from a friend who lets rooms in his traditional 19th-century Achrafieh home as a host.

"I always found it fun and nourishing when I visited him and sat and talked to his guests, so I wrote to Orpheus," Rabih says. It was the start of lengthy negotiations. "He's very choosy," he laughs.

As well as Rabih's mountain paradise, other Lebanese hosts include a fishing-themed home in the coastal village of Enfeh, ancient lodgings in a khan in Sidon, a red-roofed home in Bcharre run by an ace cook and a peasant village in the Bekaa, "L'HOTE LIBANAIS' objective is to provide visitors with a chance to leave the tourist bubble and experience Lebanese life as the locals live it," Haddad says.

Until recently, tourists were largely stuck with a poor range of mid-range hotels concentrated in main towns. Staying in a Lebanese home was the privilege of returning expats or the lucky few with local friends.

Now eco-lodges and guesthouses are stepping in to fill the void and most are easy on the wallet.

Visitors help support the rural economy. We found Faisal Al-Qontar's place through the Lebanon Mountain Trail website, since we were hiking the next day. For \$25 each, we got to stay in his 400-year-old courtyard home,

once the seat of local Abillama princes, in the historical Metn village of Mtain.

Al-Qontar has one six-bed dormitory, albeit a grand, vaulted room with walls a metre thick, and a second three-bed room should be finished this year.

Preserving this historic house and keeping it in the family prompted Al-Qontar to join forces with the hiking organisation, which gave training and support.

"Having tourists come to stay helps us to conserve the house and it helps my village, which I love," he said.

"Our visitors leave with a sense of the history of the house and of Mtain. I tell them my memories."

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## Useful websites

### L'Hote Libanais

[www.hotelibanais.com/lebanon](http://www.hotelibanais.com/lebanon)

### Dhiafee Programme

[www.dhiafeeprogram.org](http://www.dhiafeeprogram.org)

### Lebanon Mountain Trail

(see *On the Beaten Track*, p 16-17)

[www.lebanontrail.org](http://www.lebanontrail.org)

### Lebanese NGO Arcenciel

runs an eco-lodge in the Bekaa and two youth hostels

[arcenciel.org/fr/programmes/](http://arcenciel.org/fr/programmes/auberges.htm)  
[auberges.htm](http://auberges.htm)

**For Lebanese hostels, independent hotels and eco-lodges**

[hostelslebanon.com](http://hostelslebanon.com)

