

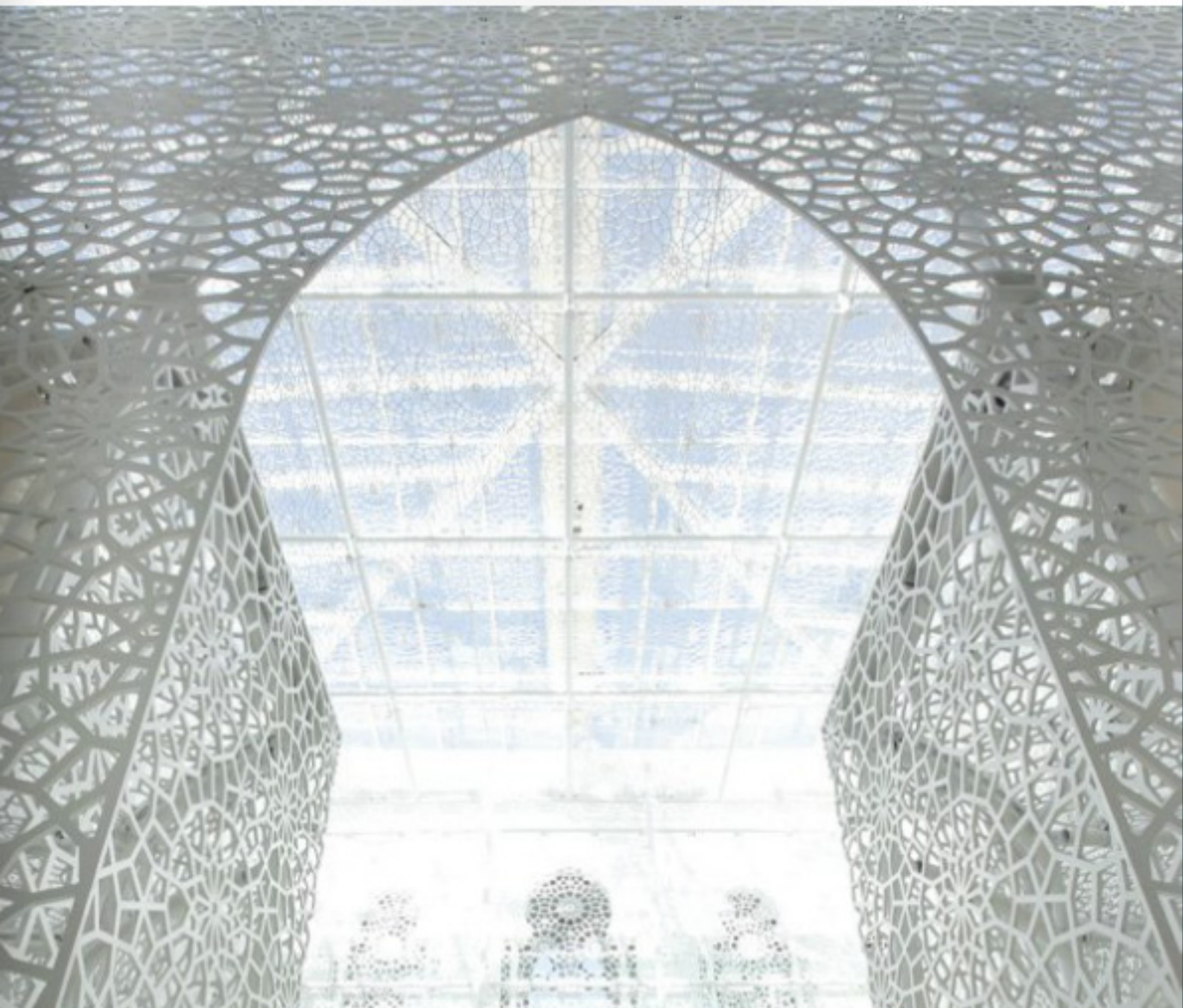
*KENSINGTON & CHELSEA*

# *REVIEW*

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## The Equinox Edition

A celebration of new beginnings, for the mind, body, house and garden.  
Featuring an extended travel section, and an interview with Helen Lederer.







# THE BRILLIANT BEIRUT

KCR Editor **COCO KHAN** visits Beirut to discover the brave new world of contemporary design in the hedonistic 'Paris of the Middle East'.

Beirut is a complicated, complex city. Conflict is as much a part of the landscape as the Mediterranean Sea that laps at its beaches, and the towering mountains behind it. Beirut has been blighted by decades of national wars and more recently by fringe, homegrown extremists wreaking havoc in the Lebanese capital city. Although the government have worked tirelessly to secure and redevelop the city into a luxury cosmopolitan haven (and for the most part have been successful), look close enough and the subtle reminders are there – the bullet holes in the walls; the occasional bit of barbed wire cordoning off a road to a yet-to-be-redeveloped bombed out building. It is this subtle, barely perceivable tension that makes Beirut the hedonistic and creative metropolis it is. It makes sense – if something terrible is only one moment away, then why not make this moment the best it can possibly be? Beirut is seizing the day, and now's the time to see it.

## STAY

We're staying at two hotels in Beirut: Le Vendome, and the Phoenicia. Though these sister hotels are run by the same company, they couldn't be more different. Phoenicia is a grand, historical behemoth right in the heart of the city and with its magnificent ballroom and red-carpet lined grand staircase feels a little bit like Wes Anderson's Grand Budapest Hotel (Grand Beirut

Hotel?) in its interiors. Le Vendome on the other hand, is a luxury boutique number with views out to sea. What's interesting is that guests are able to combine these two hotels' services in bespoke combinations – having your cake and eating it so to speak. Normally, if you want an intimate and boutique hotel experience you have to sacrifice certain things – a swimming pool, a functioning business centre – but here, you can just use the Phoenicia's services when you need them.

Indeed, you could spend several days eating in the various restaurants of the two hotels and never feel bored. There are eight distinct eating areas in the Phoenicia and two in Le Vendome (see the food and drink section for details). Together you can eat casually, upscale, enjoy cocktails with light nibbles, and have a child-friendly restaurant experience.

A little background on the Phoenicia – it opened in 1961 which by Beirut standards makes it a heritage hotel. It's actually made up of three towers, each with its own entrance. There's the Roman tower, which has a poolside and city view; the Phoenician tower, which has bay and poolside views; and the Residential Tower which is for longer stays of several months so is essentially private residence. I'm staying in the Phoenician tower, and my room has been designed by Martin Hulbert who you might know from The Dorchester. The rooms look contemporary while respectful of the French-influenced sixties Beirut style, and of course are impeccably luxurious by

anyone's standards.

Art and design is clearly a central part of the Phoenicia experience because it even has its own art shop. Viewing fine art in a hotel space was a first for Lebanon, and on display is a good mix of Lebanese and international artists. In fact, as of September last year, it started to feature in-room video art. Of course, if you don't want to buy art you can always buy high-end fashion, jewels, home deco and exceptionally rare cognacs. I did say it was grand...

## THINK

Beirut is having a boom period in terms of its design industry and it shows no signs of slowing. Take a stroll around the showroom of PSLab – a context-specific design and manufactory company specialising in light architecture – and you'll find some of the best in commercial light sculpture in the world. This is the point: Beirut's design scene isn't just the best it's best in context of Lebanon and its neighbours, but is a contender to the entire world. It'll come as no surprise to hear PSLab, though headquartered in Beirut, has offices in Germany, Italy, Singapore and Finland and recently completed some work with the Barbican.

Perhaps this is why, Beirut Design Week attracts both press and design fans year after year (incidentally, it's held in June which is a perfect time to visit). Nada Debs, a Beirut-based furniture designer combines the ornateness of Arabic





design with the simplicity of Japanese design to create conceptual furniture that is proving a hit across the world. Her shop is very much worth a visit.

For something different altogether, Beirut has a burgeoning street art scene, so take a wander through Gemmayze (the Bohemian quarter) to see stencils, tags and humour scrawled across the walls.

#### EAT AND DRINK

Most neighbourhoods in Beirut have a *furn* – a communal bread oven from which locals can grab a *mana'esh*, a flat bread with toppings a bit like a pizza, or more closely a Turkish *pide*. You can pick these up for mere pennies, freshly cooked to home-made recipes with liberal use of Za'atar. Street food is plentiful here, so keep an eye out for shawarma-like wraps from carts or inexpensive lounges, and grilled vegetable kebabs.

Lebanon also has very good climate for growing grapes and in recent years has begun to cultivate vineyards and produce wine. We visited IXSIR (Lebanese for 'elixir'), a wonderful winery located just a few hours from Beirut. IXSIR has even begun to win awards on an international level, a bottle of which you can pick up for less than a tenner.

For an upmarket eating experience we didn't need to leave our hotel. Eau de Vie in the Phoenicia is a decadent, extravagant venue serving wagyu beef, lobster, fine ports and dinner

cigars with a bay view that could only be rivalled by Sydney's – the restaurant in Le Vendome with views over the Corniche.

The Phoenicia's recently opened Amethyste is the embodiment of Beirut's uniquely laidback luxury – a cocktail bar by the pool, kitted out in beach lounge furniture (there's even a swaying bed sized hammock), guests can enjoy an evening cocktail and dishes until midnight.

For the group who can't decide what they want, Mosaic in the Phoenicia has live cooking stations from around the world so you can globetrot via your tastebuds, but if Italian or Japanese is what you're after then there's Caffe Mondo and Wok W.o.k respectively too.

#### NIGHTLIFE

Beirut is the party capital of North Africa and the Emirates, and can easily rival a number of European party capitals (Belgrade etc) in terms of who it attracts from the international clubbing scene. Party by the beach, or one of Beirut's many sky bars (we had a blast at White), catch some live music at O1NE or for something a bit hipper, with a generous dollop of techno, there's always a good time to be had at B018. For those of you into euphoria, it has a roof that opens up when the sun comes out.

[www.phoeniciabeirut.com](http://www.phoeniciabeirut.com)

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