

Let's play house

Rural villa, beach house or city apartment? We've found three places we'd happily check into for a month

A good hotel is all very well, but to truly sample daily life in another country nothing beats setting up home away from home in a private residence. It's not just the bliss of no untimely housekeeping knocks and, should you wish, being able to leave your bed unmade for the duration of the day, it's the total immersion of being able to "make home". People speak of the "stress" involved in stocking a fridge and having to cook when you have your own place. But there's no better way to get to the heart of a local culture than to browse the shelves of a local food store. And adding a dose of structure to holiday life can be far more rewarding than being waited on hand and foot.

Of course, key to this set-up is finding the perfect residence. We've defined "perfect" as places that strike a balance of indigenous spirit and individual character, designed and inhabited in a way that encourages living like a local. From a faithfully restored 19th-century former patrician's house on the Lebanese coast, via an untouched farmhouse on the Greek island of Patmos to a spacious apartment overlooking the Bosphorus in Istanbul, we've sampled the delights of three residences, each perfect in their own right. Whether it's rustic coastal charm, deserted island dwelling or a buzzing metropolitan break you're after, each of these properties offers the ideal living scenario for their respective situations. Take our lead and find your own version of all three. — (M)

01 Batroun, Lebanon

The beach house with a history

WORDS by Carole Corm
PHOTOGRAPHY by Martin Stöbich

Lebanon's insatiable appetite for renewal means traditional architecture is disappearing fast. Every day traditional houses – perfect stone cubes with red tile roofs and elegant arches – are torn down and replaced by generic glass towers. Thankfully, there are pockets of resistance across the country.

Tucked away in the port of Batroun, some 50km north of Beirut, is one such example. Dating back to the 19th century (with older foundations), this large patrician's house was built by the Akl family, a clan who dominated local politics for generations. Batroun is a vibrant little town, with just the right number of inhabitants and a surprisingly exciting nightlife. Its beach clubs, terrace cafés and ice cream parlours give it an unabashed retro charm. Standing proud between the Italianate St Stephen (Maronite Catholic) church and the majestic sea wall created by the Phoenicians more than 3,000 years ago is the Akl house, with its overgrown pink bougainvillea distinguishing it from afar.

In dire need of repair, the house and its leafy garden were rescued four years ago by a fashion designer and a food activist who offered the owner, a Lebanese émigré living in Colombia (no, not Shakira), the chance to restore it. Once the architects gave an estimate of the work involved, it was agreed the new tenants could live there for nine years rent free and in exchange pay for the restoration. "It was an original system that benefitted both parties," says one of the tenants, "and we hope other people will be inspired to do the same; it's a great way of preserving Lebanon's architecture."

With the spirit of the house in mind, the restoration was extremely faithful to the original design. The traditional Lebanese plan of a large *dar* or main living room in the centre with smaller rooms around it was kept. The *dar's* white marble floor was polished and the intricate wrought-ironwork on the three arched windows was repaired. Small mural paintings above the door were also uncovered.

Averse to clutter and home appliances, the tenants' simple wish was "to enjoy the luxury of the space and the light". Little furniture was added and the walls were painted white, forgoing the remains of the "faux marble" decoration except in the projection room. In the *dar*, alongside two custom-made elongated couches, is an Eero Saarinen table "that floats like a tray in space". The nearby bedroom is almost empty apart from a stencil painting of Oum Khalitum, the late Egyptian diva who transfixed the Arab world for decades.

On weekends, the Akl house receives an eclectic mix of guests from Beirut and beyond, sharing incredible meals – think stuffed squid and fried red mullet – in the garden. Later, over a glass of chilled arak, the guests might compose *zajal*, improvised Arabic poems, with each person taking up the sentence where someone else left off.

"This is not your typical Lebanese beach house, or 'chalet' as people call it here, that is closed up for most of the year," says one of the tenants. The house lives with the seasons. "Sure, you can put on your swimming trunks and dive in the sea in less than a minute. But when you come back, you come back to a real house." — (M)



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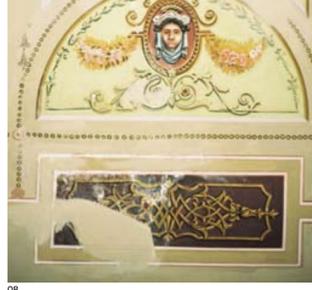
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- 01 Chests of drawers for plates and linen (labels reveal what is inside)
- 02 Bespoke elongated sofa
- 03 Wrought-iron windows in the central room with Eero Saarinen table
- 04 Chairs for a tête à tête and coffee-shop-style metal tables
- 05 Old and new bathroom details
- 06 View from kitchen to dining room
- 07 Long table in the garden for entertaining and 'zajal' sessions
- 08 One of the uncovered murals



01

02 Patmos, Greece

Island villa untouched by time

WORDS by Alicia Kirby
PHOTOGRAPHY by Yiorgos Kordakis

There aren't many places in the world where it's possible to experience life as it was 200 years ago (unless you're flying out of Gatwick), but this Greek dwelling on the island of Patmos is an exercise in preservation. The couple who own this rustic stone house were introduced to the property by Thessaloniki-based architect Katerina Tsigarida, who shares a similar passion for the remote, airport-free island of Patmos. They use it as a dacha-type bolthole – a place where they can escape to three times a year with their children, grandparents and friends and live at one with history and nature. "It's a very spiritual place where time stands still," says the tenant. "I feel I could spend my dying days here."

The house is on a former vineyard in Geranos – a remote northern region of the island. The couple enlisted the help of Tsigarida to preserve the original elements of the 200-year-old property. Her advice was unusual for an architect, though: "It was a conscious architectural decision to do absolutely nothing to the property," she says. "I wanted to keep the original fittings and furniture because they were steeped in history and were of the highest quality." No structural or decorative changes were made to the property and the owners decided not to add electricity.

"I cleaned and cleaned and rearranged the original fittings," says Tsigarida, so although spartan it feels immaculate. The walls were coated with *avestis*, a natural, locally produced whitewash used since ancient times for its antibacterial and insect-repelling properties. It is particularly effective as a preservative, filling damaged pores in walls. Tsigarida also restored the katrani wood windows and doors. "Katrani was imported from Asia Minor and used by the local carpenters from even before the 16th century. When we cut the window fittings to fix them, they smelt amazing, even after 200 years," she says.

The surrounding 55,000 sq m of land is tended to by a goat-herder who maintains the house for the owners when they are away and provides them with milk, cheese and locally produced groceries. He uses the fields to cultivate fig trees and wheat for his 200 goats to graze on. In August he collects the ripe figs with his mother, who then dries and prepares them with bay leaves and local myrtle as snacks that will see them through the winter.

Life here has followed the same pattern for centuries and history is felt in every inch of the house and landscape. The previous mistress of the house ran one of the island's biggest wineries from the property. Nicknamed Kazanou, after the process of making *souma* (local raki), she's still something of a legend on Patmos and though the vineyard no longer exists, her presence lives on. In honour of her memory and in keeping with the spirit of preservation, the new owners have replanted part of the vineyard, producing the same, almost extinct, Fokiano wine. — (M)



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- 01 All walls were white-washed
- 02 Almond tree outside the house
- 03 Simplicity continues in the kitchen
- 04 Original stonework
- 05 The beach is a short walk away
- 06 Simple furnishings in the house
- 07 The owners chose to keep the house free of electricity
- 08 Porcelain crockery and tin mugs



Five best places to build

When research is far from taxing

1. Arki Island, Greece
Buy a plot on this barren beauty and build a get-away-from-it-all bolthole. One of the least inhabited islands in the Greek archipelago, the terrain may be rocky but the views are dramatic. Keep it simple and craft your home from local stone.

2. Gharghur, Malta
Venture from Malta's busy coastline and come inland to scout for land around the pretty village of Gharghur. Tucked away between two valleys, Gharghur is perched on some of Malta's highest ground, surrounded by fields and farms. The perfect spot for a rural retreat.

3. Cala Luna, Sardinia
Renowned for some of the Mediterranean's most beautiful beaches, you're spoilt for choice along Sardinia's underdeveloped east coast. We'd suggest narrowing the search – Cala Luna bay is an exquisite half moon overlooking the Gulf of Orrosi. Make the most of the view with expansive decking.

4. Polis, Cyprus
Quaint and quiet, this coastal area in the northwest region of Paphos remains one of the island's most unspoilt spots. With gentle mountains and crystal-clear waters, we're holding out for a slice of land near the Akamas Peninsula, a Unesco-protected nature reserve – it's great for hiking, too.

5. Cadiz coast, Spain
For an uninterrupted stretch of white sand choose the surprisingly undiscovered Cadiz province. Home to one of the largest collections of Blue Flag beaches in any coastal province in Europe, the constant wind might not be to everyone's tastes but if sea sports are your thing this is the place to go. — SLB