

VISIT BEIRUT!

Postcards and Travel Guides from The Fouad Debbas Collection

As early as 1865, seven passenger lines began to regularly service Beirut. The modest lodgings hitherto available to travelers, the *locandas*, were to evolve.

In just a few years, hotels proliferated, along with travel agencies set up on the quays.

Hôtel Gassman, Victoria, Royal, Beyrouth Palace, Métropole, Hôtel Bassoul d'Orient, Saint-Georges, Palm Beach... Travel writing from the 1850s and guidebooks published by the likes of Joanne, Baedeker, Cook, and Bleu, helped to boost the profile of Beirut's hotel establishments, and make the city a sought-after destination, and no longer the mere stopover it had long been.

Through postcards, guides, and other publications from The Fouad Debbas Collection*, picture yourself as a tourist in early 20th century Beirut, and begin by choosing your hotel!

** Available for consultation at the Sursock Museum library*

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Beirut: Arrival from the sea

In the 1860s and 1870s, most landings in Beirut were by boat. And what an arrival it was! Beirut is situated on a vast promontory, on whose slopes the city's dwellings were gathered; at its foot, the houses of the old city, packed in one against the other, and higher up, the more luxurious lodgings, set further apart.

In the distance, the many villages stood out against the dark green backdrop of the Lebanese mountain and the rounded crests of Sannine, white with snow for most of the year, which dominated the view of Lebanon as seen from the harbor. It was the favored panorama for photographers of the time.

In most cases, ships did not dock; as soon as they cast their anchor, they would be surrounded by rowing boats that had come to collect the travelers and their baggage. Hotels and travel agencies sent their representatives on board to solicit custom. The tourists gravitated towards the one who called his hotel's name first, or loudest. A visit to the customs office near the landing stage was mandatory, however brief: passports and baggage were inspected. Those possessing a special decree, a firman, were exempted from the check.



Grand Hôtel d'Orient or Bassoul's Hotel, Beirut
Postcard, 8.8×13.6 cm
Publisher: Richter & C. Naples, Circa 1932
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

Booking.com, or how to choose a hotel abroad

Travel writing, such as M.J. Bottu de Limas' *Six Mois en Orient en 1851 et 1852* (Six months in the Orient in 1851-52), published in 1861, makes mention of Beirut's *locandas*, guesthouses, and hotels. Among those featured are the Hôtel de l'Univers, and the Hôtel d'Europe, the first to be built on the port in 1849 by an Italian named Battista, and whose guests included Gustave Flaubert and Maxime du Camp.

For its part, the 1861 Joanne travel guide, *L'Itinéraire de l'Orient* (Itinerary of the Orient), recommends the Hôtel d'Orient owned by Nicolas Bassoul, a first-rate establishment offering maximum comfort. The Baedeker guides, Cook's Traveller's Handbooks, and even the later Guides Bleus in the 1930s continued to rank it among Beirut's first class hotels.



From left to right

Palestine and Syria, Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, Publisher, 1906

Cook's Traveller's Handbook: Palestine and Syria, London: Thomas Cook & Son, Ludgate Circus, 1924

Les Guides Bleus, Syrie, Palestine, Librairie Hachette, 1932
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Hôtel and Restaurant d'Europe
Postcard, 14×9 cm
Publisher unknown, Circa 1900
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

Beirut, late 1930s, over 60 hotels

In 1889, Beirut's port was overhauled, and with it, many more hotel establishments and travel agencies sprung up, along with restaurants, cafés, and cinemas. The *al-Jami'a* guidebook from 1889 made an inventory of the seventeen hotels spread between the Burj esplanade (later Martyrs' Square) and the seafront at Minet el Hosn.

By the end of the 1930s, over sixty hotels punctuated the Beirut landscape. Construction of the city's first luxury hotel, the Saint Georges, managed by the Société des Grands Hôtels du Levant, was completed in 1934. A major Beirut landmark and a popular postcard image, the Saint Georges marked the beginning of a golden age for imposing concrete structures, and was followed by the Normandy, Capitole, and Palm Beach hotels.



Excelsior Hotel and Palm Beach Hotel, Beirut
Postcard, 9×14 cm
Publisher unknown, 1940s
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Sursock Museum



Top
Saint Georges Hotel, Beirut
Postcard, 9×14 cm
Publisher: Photo Sport, Circa 1934-40
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

Bottom
Beirut at night, Saint Georges Hotel
Postcard, 9×14 cm
Publisher: Photo Sport, Circa 1934-40
The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum

The Fouad Debbas Collection

The Fouad Debbas Collection is a photographic collection comprising over 30,000 images from the Middle East – namely Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey – from 1830 till the 1960s. It was built over the course of two decades by Fouad César Debbas (1930-2001), who was an ardent believer in the importance of collecting and preserving images as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Housed in the Sursock Museum, the Collection consists of photographs, postcards, and stereoscopic views, in addition to loose albumen prints, etchings, and books, all of which relate to the region. The Collection, Orientalist in character and replete with commercial clichés, forms an important part of the Sursock Museum's collection, highlighting photography's key role in the development of modern art in Lebanon.

Sursock Museum

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www.sursock.museum