

The House Hotel

JEDDAH CITY YARD

The House Hotels makes its debut in Saudi Arabia with an old-meets-new development designed by architect Ayman Al-Mehmadi and Studio Noor.

Words: Nicola Chilton • Photography: © Omar Shalhoub

Jeddah is different, so the city's motto says. With its location on the Red Sea and history as the gateway to the Holy City of Makkah, it has long been home to a multicultural population and a cosmopolitan feel that is palpably different from other cities in the region. But these days, the whole of Saudi Arabia is different, with changes that had previously been unthinkable coming at an unprecedented pace. And The House Hotel Jeddah City Yard, part of Kerten Hospitality and a member of Design Hotels, is riding the wave of this change.

Just a few years back, women were absent from front-of-house roles in Saudi hotels. Chatting in the lobby with Maria Bou Eid, one of the first female General Managers in the country, it's clear that she is proud of her team and what they are achieving. Currently about a quarter of staff are female, with more women being actively recruited, and around 35% are Saudi, the rest split over multiple nationalities. "Saudis are the main concentration of our staff because we want people to understand Saudi hospitality," says Bou Eid. "Our main mission is to share our culture."

While the overall design of the hotel may feel minimalist and contemporary, a closer

look reveals connections to the destination and its heritage. Befitting of Jeddah's history as a place where cultures mix, the architecture of the building is by native architect Ayman Al-Mehmadi, with interiors overseen by David Hodgkinson and Luc Lejeune of Saigon and Athens-based Studio Noor.

Al-Mehmadi's concept for the building was one of simplicity and minimalism, with a façade made from Saudi-sourced stone cladding. "We added a touch of teakwood representing the Hijazi architecture of Old Jeddah," he explains, referencing the traditional structures in the city's Al-Balad district.

Being located in the residential neighbourhood of Al Rawdar, as the anchor of the new City Yard lifestyle development, the building is purposefully low-rise. "It's on a more human scale, closer to people's eyes and merging with the surroundings," continues Al-Mehmadi. The structures have been oriented in a way that creates wide-open outdoor living spaces, with an interior street and central piazza home to cafés and restaurants, where guests can lounge on the Ethimo seating and sample local delights.

"One aspect of the design was inspired by the welcoming spirit of Saudi Arabia, providing a social experience that suits various preferences





In the lobby, a restrained colour and material palette provides a backdrop for individual pieces of furniture and works by Jeddawi artist Abdulrahman Al Maghrabi

and moods,” Al-Mehmadi confirms. A rooftop pool and soon-to-open co-working and events spaces will add to the multifunctionality.

Much of the inspiration for Studio Noor’s interiors pays homage to a particular period of history. “Jeddah had some of its golden days in the 1970s and 80s, and at this time a lot of public artworks were commissioned and installed throughout the city,” says Hodkinson. Furniture items that would have been on-trend in that era have been given an update with contemporary colours and materials, juxtaposed with traditional patterned fabrics on modern pieces.”

Entering the light-filled lobby, the first impression is one of space, with soaring travertine walls and large spatial volumes contrasting with low-slung seating arranged in intimate groupings. The colour and material palette is restrained, letting individual pieces of furniture and artworks by Jeddawi artist Abdulrahman Al Maghrabi stand out, with tactile elements – from unpolished stone to textured carpets, fabrics and smooth wood – providing counterpoints.

At the centre of the lobby is the vintage-chic Azha Café, where artisanal roasts and Arabic coffee are

served alongside zaatar croissants and choux puffs. The lobby also hides an unexpected secret. To the side of the café are wooden steps that lead up to a hidden majlis based on the seating areas found across the Arabian Peninsula for gatherings and conversation.

“Although the majlis is usually a public place to receive guests, it is not public enough to be set in the middle of the lobby,” explains Lejeune. “There is always a sense of privacy in Arabic culture. Our way to encompass all of this was to make it more private by positioning it at the top of the steps.”

From here, guestroom corridors pack a design punch with eyes drawn to the striking carpets. “It is directly inspired by Bedouin traditions and fabrics, with patterns and colours reproduced from materials collected on our intense scouting expeditions,” notes Hodkinson. While they may have their roots in historic patterns, the effect is contemporary, a blend of rich colour and geometric detail.

Another Arabic design touch in the corridors is the mashrabiya-style wall panels, found in houses throughout the region where they typically provide shade and screen indoor spaces from external view.



“These pieces were originally created on felt as divider panels or window screens by Cairo-based studio Encode,” says Lejeune. “We worked with them to research connections between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, of which there are many, and developed the panels on wood in order to make them stronger and sturdier for the high-traffic public areas.”

These contemporary takes on Arabian heritage continue into the bedrooms. Design elements feature subtle materials and colours, but with references to geometric patterns found in Islamic art as well as details found in wooden constructions around Al-Balad – the latter inspiring the statement wooden panel behind the bed. “The idea of the rooms was to design them as comfortable spaces, but in relation to the outside, which can be harsh in terms of temperature and glare,” Hodkinson confirms.

As the name suggests, The House Hotel aims to make people feel at home while showcasing Jeddawi culture and the people who bring it to life, whether it’s by arranging access to

the neighbouring Almohra Museum, a private collection of antiques from around the world, or forging connections with local artists and cooks. Come evening, live musical performances draw a crowd of young Jeddawi creatives, while the daily bakhour ceremony sees the air scented with traditional fragrant woodchips.

“There’s a reason behind every single experience here,” says Bou Eid. “We ask, why is the guest here? Are they coming just to sleep, or do they want more than that? This is where we make a difference, by understanding the guests and what they’re looking for.”

In a country where tourism is in its infancy, there’s a new generation of Saudis eager to take up roles in the industry. “Not everyone has a background in hospitality,” Bou Eid continues. “We select people for character and attitude.”

It’s an exciting time for young Saudis making their first foray into hospitality, as well as those visitors choosing to explore the country for the first time. Jeddah, as they say, is indeed different. And so is The House Hotel.



EXPRESS CHECK-OUT

Owner / Developer: Pure Houses

Operator: Kerten Hospitality

Architecture: Ayman Al-Mehmadi

Interior Design: Studio Noor

Visual Identity: Ghada Al-Mehmadi

Lighting Design: Abdulaziz Al-Azem

Landscaping: Francis Landscapes

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