

•By ATIRA WINCHESTER

T For a hotel that's survived three wars, two Palestinian uprisings, four ruling nations, and 23 direct mortar hits, it's astonishing that what strikes you as you enter the American Colony Hotel is sense of serenity.

The perfectly landscaped gardens, replete with vines, arches, fountains, olive trees, lemon trees, and hundreds of crimson, magenta, and brick-red flowers, clearly work their magic. But topiary can only do so much.

"I can't put my finger on what it is," says Pierre Berclaz, the tall, softly-spoken Swiss manager of this 100-year-old hotel. "Everyone who comes here describes it as a magical oasis, but in the three years I've been here, I haven't been able to figure it out," adds Berclaz, sitting in the hotel's picturesque courtyard.

After years of hotel management in Switzerland and Singapore, Berclaz was offered the post at the American Colony hotel in May 2000. He came, fell in love with the hotel, and made the move in August.

"At that time things in Jerusalem were still very good, but a month later, when the

On the map

The American Colony Hotel in east Jerusalem has been voted the 2002-2003 winner of the best hotel in the Middle East by the 'Condé Nast Traveler' magazine

intifada broke out, everything changed," he says. "All the Israeli tourism left immediately - within 24 hours."

Such bad timing couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. Genteel, understated, and welcoming, Berclaz's pride and dedication to the hotel are consummate.

Berclaz can take some of the credit for the fact that in 2002 and 2003, the well-respected *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine voted the American Colony the best place to stay in the Middle East. A tour of the former palace gives you an idea of why.

Berclaz opens up spacious rooms that ooze olde-worlde elegance. High, ornately painted ceilings are teamed with luxurious fabrics. Elegant bathrooms boast scroll-top baths complete with claw iron feet.

The hotel recently renovated 42 of its 84 rooms and is about

to overhaul a further 12, known as the Pasha's Style rooms. Turning a four-inch-long heavy metal key, Berclaz reveals one of these Pasha's pads soon to be fitted with fast Internet access and beautiful handmade bathroom tiles. "The keys are about to be changed too," he says. "Guests come up from the cellar bar at 3 a.m., drunk, and they can't quite handle a difficult lock," Berclaz says, amused.

The hotel has certainly come a long way since the original Spafford family brought their Christian community to settle within its walls in 1896.

Pictures along the corridors of the hotel document the rise of the home from a Christian commune to a meeting place for Lawrence of Arabia, Graham Greene, and Marc Chagall.

General Allenby, who enjoyed tea at the Colony on a regular

basis, now has his wooden walking stick prominently on display.

But if an illustrious history, beautiful rooms, and heavenly gardens were all the American Colony had to offer, the hotel may not have secured that coveted first place with *Condé Nast* travelers. What makes journalists and diplomats faithful to the Colony, and what gives the American Colony Hotel that edge, is, according to Berclaz, something much more human.

"Guests become friends very quickly here," he says.

The truth of this statement resounds throughout the hotel. Guests stop to chat with Berclaz as they pass. Customers take a break from their Plats principaux to ask him about his newborn son. Others comment on the renovations to the log fire brasserie that is now furnished with welcoming red and blue

armchairs and Middle Eastern style rugs.

Even the staff are at ease. "One doorman worked here for 53 years, and we have a maid who has been here for 39 years," says Sonia Martin-Khoury, the assistant manager who has been at the American Colony for 15 years. As we talk, Martin-Khoury introduces me to Dawfi Habsch, responsible for all the printed material at the hotel.

"We used to work with his grandfather, now we're working with him," she says.

"When staff are happy, they stay and they pass good service on," adds Martin-Khoury.

Service is something that the 20-year-old Inbal hotel building in Talbiyeh, voted in second place on the *Condé Nast* list, knows all about.

"When you give service out of love, the guests feel it," says Ofra Bokobza, the Inbal's food and beverage manager.

It may come as something of a surprise that the Inbal was rated so highly among discerning *Condé Nast* travelers. A more obvious choice may have been the King David hotel, the Hyatt at the Dead Sea, or the Herod's Hotel in Eilat. But long-time customers of the hotel aren't surprised. "We used to go to the King David," says British Harry Klahr, who has been staying at the hotel once a month

for years. "But we got fed up with the service there, it was really snooty. They accommodate you at the Inbal. You come in and they say, 'How are you Mr. Klahr?'"

"It's like family," he says. The Klahr family has also held a *sheva brachot* and a *Shabbat hatan* at the hotel.

For Klahr's children, though, it's the food that keeps them coming back for more.

"They make the second-best milkshake in Israel," says Channa Klahr. "Their duck with orange is divine," adds her brother, Johnny.

"It all starts with the little things," says Bokobza. "The guest who gets his omelet the way he likes it at breakfast will order a wedding here years later," she claims.

Formerly known as the Laromme, the hotel switched names in 1999 when the international chain left. The new owners looked to the Liberty Bell Park situated next door for inspiration. They chose Inbal, meaning the clapper (of a bell) and hoped people would adjust to the change.

"I knew it had caught on when I got into a cab and the driver didn't say 'Where?' when I asked for the Inbal," says Bokobza who started life at the hotel as a waitress in 1983.

She and Rodney Sanders, the general manager of the hotel,

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- Ofra Bokobza, food and beverage manager, Inbal Hotel

are sitting in the Inbal's comfortable executive offices downstairs from the elegant, if slightly old-fashioned lobby.

In contrast with Bokobza, Sanders is relatively new to the Inbal scene. But since his arrival in February 2003, Sanders has also been trying to keep the standard high.

"We're giving the hotel a

face-lift in the next few months," he says. "There'll be a new front desk and renovations to the buffet lounge. We're also trying out a YFI (wireless Internet access) connection for the lobby."

The Inbal rooms that have in the past hosted members of the former US administration, including president Bill Clinton, secretary of state Madeleine Albright, and vice president Al Gore, will also be undergoing light refurbishment.

"Things are picking up and starting to turn around slowly," says Sanders. "We had a 98 percent occupancy over Succot this year and 70% of the people were second timers."

According to Sanders, unlike other hotels including the Hilton, where he previously worked, people don't simply check in and check out at the Inbal.

"Here it feels more like being the innkeeper," he says. "It's what I think hotel management is all about."

With voters showing their appreciation for hotels with character and warmth rather than those with the the latest swish designs, it seems that the Inbal, with its traditional Jerusalem stone walls, and the American Colony Hotel, with its courtyards and gazebos, will be in style for a while.



DAYS OF YORE at the American Colony. The hotel has survived three wars, two Palestinian uprisings, four ruling nations, and 23 direct mortar hits

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THE AMERICAN COLONY Hotel courtyard. 'Everyone who comes here describes it as a magical oasis' (BRIAN HENDLER)