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THE JERUSALEM POST

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Time for jamming

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weekend

Making the
most of your
leisure time

Old-world charm

The newly renovated Palm House in the American Colony Hotel was a reason to revisit this peaceful sanctuary in Jerusalem

■ By NERIA BARR

Photos: Mikaela Burstow Uziel

Having won Best Israeli Hotel for 2012 by reviewers of the Expedia travel website, the American Colony Hotel, located on the seam between east and west Jerusalem, is a world within itself, extending over large grounds and steeped in history that spans more than a century.

Considered one of the most famous boutique hotels in the world, the American Colony Hotel, originally built as a palace for the wives of a Turkish pasha, was turned into a Christian charitable community in 1881, becoming a center for a "colony" of American and Swedish Protestants. Later, it was turned into a hotel and has been operating under private ownership since 1902. The hotel compound, owned by the heirs of the founders, is run by Gauer Hotels Switzerland, Leading Hotels of the World.

The American Colony Hotel is a peaceful sanctuary hidden behind high stone walls.

Its luxurious interior features Oriental rugs, Armenian ceramics, polished stone floors, painted ceilings and antique furnishings mixed with modern comforts.

The beautiful courtyard garden, where T.E. Lawrence and Graham Greene are said to have sat, is a perfect spot to relax at the end of a busy day. The garden summer bar is another popular spot, as well as the Cellar Bar and the Arabesque restaurant.

The hotel's general manager, Thomas Brugnattelli, says the American Colony gets mostly good reviews but also bad ones. "Many times, the bad reviews say more about the person who wrote them than the hotel.

I often find that people who wrote bad reviews had the wrong expectations or had misunderstood our staff," he explains.

The hotel is not kosher, but Brugnattelli believes it is time for Israeli guests to return to what once was considered an attractive destination for Tel Avivians who went to Jerusalem for the weekend.

"Most of our guests are tourists, but more and more Israelis now feel that they can come here, especially on weekends," he says. "We need the local guests who can come for short breaks throughout the year."

The reason for our visit to the American Colony was the recent renovations to the three-story Palm House building.

The Palm House was renovated with strict attention to detail, preserving the authenticity and unique historical feel of the hotel. Architect Michael Schwartz spared no effort in renovating the building and its 20 rooms and suites.

The guest rooms in the Palm House are different from each other in structure and design. The balconies, windows and arched ceilings all influenced the interiors, down to the meticulous made-to-measure furniture and handmade window trimmings.

The rooms are large and elegant, offering old-world charm combined with modern comforts. We loved the hand-painted

ceiling, the comfortable bed and the high-quality linens. The bathroom is very spacious, featuring shower and bathtub and black-and-white ceramic tiles.

The corridors are adorned with photographs taken at the beginning of the 20th

century by residents of the colony, adding to the understanding of the history of the place.

Other parts of the hotel compound offer other types of rooms and suites. The East House, for example, has spacious modern suites with comforts such as sunken baths, sauna and state-of-the-art electronic equipment, while maintaining the Arab- and Imperial-influenced décor. There are also long-term suites that render a more relaxed European atmosphere.

The executive Pasha rooms and suites in the main building feature antiques juxtaposed with modern facilities. Some rooms have ornate gold-and-blue hand-painted ceilings and mother-of-pearl tables and

copper trays.

A new pool and spa were added recently to the hotel, providing a quiet place to cool off, exercise or get a massage.

Even if you are not staying at the hotel, you might want to treat yourself to the sumptuous Saturday luncheon buffet in the Arabesque room, a light meal or dessert at the charming garden cafe or a full-course

dinner at the summer bar.

There are special offers for Israeli guests now, so locals can step into history just around the corner. Within each room category there can be great variation, so ask to see several diverse rooms if possible.

www.americancolony.com

The writer was a guest of the hotel.