

DEPARTURES

NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2009

The Bespoke generation

HOW

WE

SHOW

WOW

Istanbul / cool + Morocco REWIND

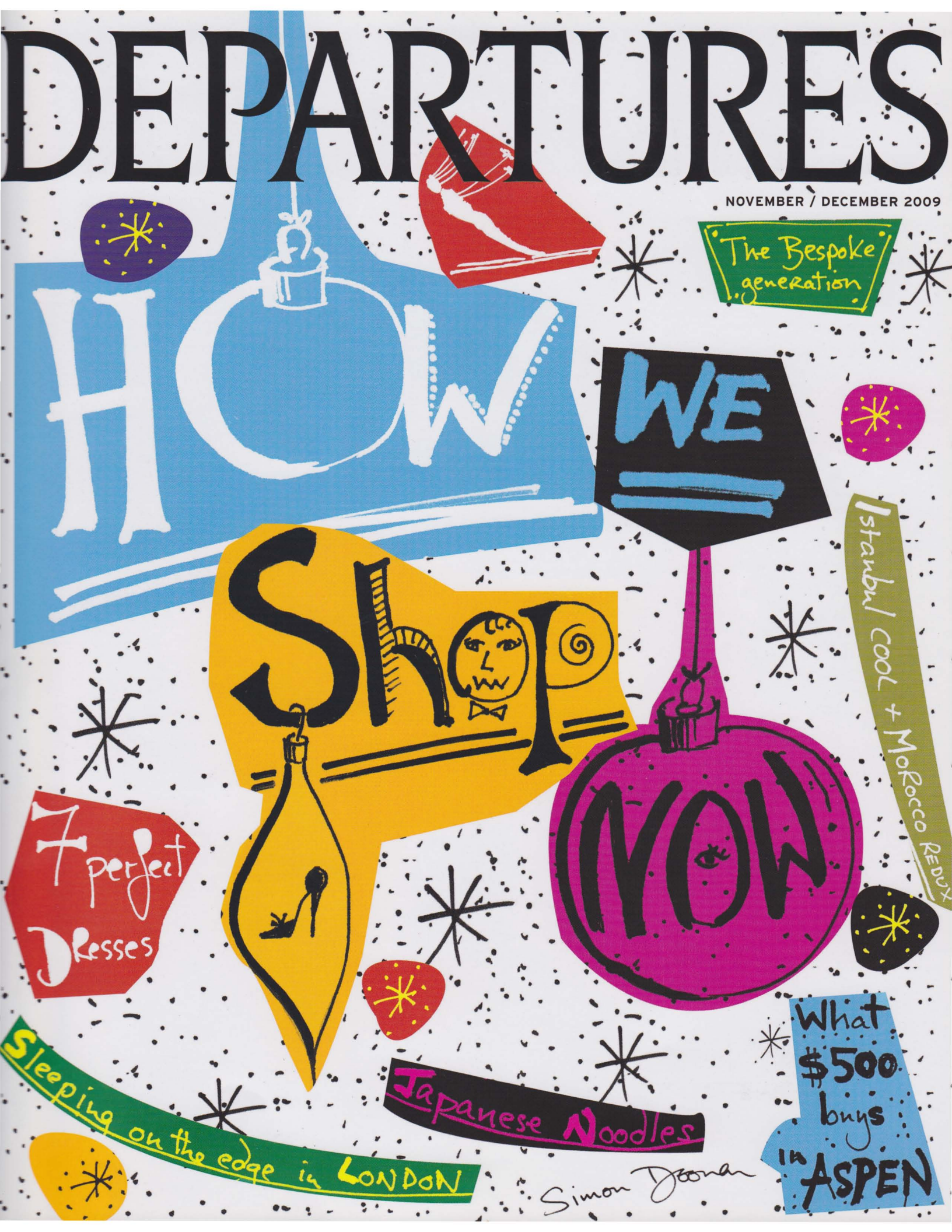
7 perfect Dresses

Sleeping on the edge in LONDON

Japanese Noodles

What \$500 buys in ASPEN

Simon Doonan



Postcard from Syria and Lebanon

Please go back to America and tell your friends we are not part of the axis of evil." I heard this from every Syrian I encountered, from doyenne to door-man, over the course of my 12 days in the country. Clearly, vibes of fear and alienation had moved in both directions, from the U.S. to Syria and back again. Virtually the only American I saw there was former president Jimmy Carter, whom I stumbled across in a Damascus souk prior to his visit to the West Bank.

That chance sighting was emblematic of the trip and the times—Obama in Cairo, elections in Lebanon and Iran, George Mitchell in Syria—and made absurd the warning I had received from individuals and guidebooks not to discuss politics. It was all anyone wanted to talk about, and reason enough to visit.

But the primary motivation for my trip was the area's unparalleled wealth of archaeological and architectural treasures. Guidebooks and the life of Gertrude Bell can provide the details of these visual feasts, but what is not described anywhere in the conflict-focused press is the elegance and

refinement of the infrastructure now available to visitors traveling to this part of the world.

During my sojourn I stayed in two of the best hotels I have ever experienced, satisfying in every sense, their ambiance and authenticity combined with excellent service and personalized attention to detail. One of them was **Al Mansouriya Palace** (from \$400; 963-21/363-2000; mansouriya.com), in Aleppo, Syria, a former private residence in the Old City comprising nine suites set around a courtyard. I also loved **Hotel Albergo** (from \$270; 961-1/339-797; albergoberuit.com), in Beirut, an adamant upholder of the long-standing but now mostly lost role of this town as the "Paris of the Middle East"—sublime, cozy, and with the aura of a great hostess's confident hand and eye behind every choice.

Another surprise: I ate three of the most memorable meals I've had in decades. At **Narenj** (dinner, \$20; Medhat Pasha; 963-11/541-3600), in Damascus, a church tower sits to the left of the restaurant's terrace and a mosque's minaret to the right—that's Syria in a nutshell. And at **Fadel** (dinner, \$50; Naas St.; 961-1/339-797), in the mountainous town of Bikfaya, outside Beirut, I dined under pine trees perched high above the sea. Finally there was Beirut's austere, urban, and urbane **Balthus** (dinner, \$40; Ghandour Bldg., Ave. des

Français; 961-1/371-077), the creation of Frida Nahas, who is as chic and sumptuous as her restaurant. There, French nouvelle cuisine meets the Lebanese devotion to pure, fresh flavors, with ingredients like crunchy purslane and dishes like rose sorbet.

Alice Agar, of the hip London tour operator **Black Tomato** (877-815-1497; blacktomato.co.uk), arranged my trip and connected me to May Mamarbachi, the woman behind the Damascus-based bespoke travel company **Beroia Travel & Tourism** (963-1/123-0042; beroiatravel.com). Mamarbachi proved to be a force of nature, whose taste and character pervaded every individual, location, and experience she recommended.

Between all the intoxicating beauty and the inspiring conversations with locals, I also found some world-class retail resources. In Damascus there's **Tony E. Stephan** for hand-loomed silk (149 Hamidiyeh Bazaar; 963-11/221-2198), while in Beirut, there's **Nada Debs** for contemporary home decor (Bldg. E-1064, Moukhalsieh St., Saïfi Village; 961-1/999-002; nadadebs.com), **Orient 499** for clothing and modern home items (499 Omar Daouk St., Hammoud Bldg., Mina el Hosn; 961-1/369-499; orient499.com), and **Milia M** for Jil Sander-esque women's clothes (1051 Bloc D, Saïfi Village; 961-1/990-336; miliam.com). —CATHRYN COLLINS