

## A Keychain Unlocks a Car-Racing Enthusiast's Memories of a Beirut Childhood

When Galal Mahmoud Drives His Vintage Jaguar, The Keys Evoke Memories of Youth



Galal Mahmoud and his limited edition 1963 Jaguar E-Type, in London. PHOTO: FRANTZESCO KANGARIS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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3 COMMENTS

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When Galal Mahmoud was 16, his parents gave him a set of house keys along with a silver Hermès key chain. The Franco-Lebanese architect left the Beirut of his childhood in 1975 shortly after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, and went to live in France, then in Miami, before returning to Beirut in 1996. All the while, the key holder has been a constant in his life.

“My father had a silver Hermès model that I liked and always mentioned to him, so my parents bought me a similar model,” says Mr. Mahmoud, now 55 and the founder of GM Architects, with offices in Beirut and Abu Dhabi specializing in luxury seafront hotels in the Middle East, Africa and Europe. “Getting the house keys was a big event for me at 16, as you’re supposed to be responsible and start becoming an adult.”

Mr. Mahmoud had always remained attached to the family’s Beirut home, which they had rented, and when he returned to the city he tried to purchase it. But the owner turned him down.

Now, the keychain connects Mr. Mahmoud to another childhood memory. He uses it now to hold the keys to a 1963 Jaguar E-Type sports car, which he purchased in 2008.



Galal Mahmoud's key ring PHOTO: FRANTZESCO  
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During a vacation in England in the early 1970s, Mr. Mahmoud's cousin took him for a ride in the countryside in a similar car. "It was a very nice experience that stayed in my mind," Mr. Mahmoud says. "I thought, 'One day, I will buy a car like this, so I can live this experience and the smell of the leather again.'"

Mr. Mahmoud keeps his Jaguar in a garage outside London along with classic cars belonging to other Lebanese collectors and members of a driving club called the [Cedar Racing Team](#). (A cedar tree is featured on the Lebanese flag.) "We're a bunch of childhood friends who were brought up together in the same neighborhood, reading the same magazines," Mr. Mahmoud says. "What kept us together was a strong interest in beautiful cars of the 1960s and 1970s."

Mr. Mahmoud, who received his architecture training in Paris, traces his interest in good-looking objects to his youth. "My mother was a painter and would take us to visit museums, art galleries and archaeological sites," he says. "I developed an interest in all types of beautiful things—architecture, fashion, anything that has beauty and quality and elegance." Among his best-known projects are the [Sofitel Tamuda Bay hotel](#) in Morocco, and the renovated [Le Bristol Hotel](#) in Beirut.

Four or five times a year, Mr. Mahmoud teams up with his friends at car-racing meets across Europe. He has raced the Jaguar at events including the [Le Mans Classic](#), a vintage car showcase in France, and the [Goodwood Revival](#), a period-themed racing festival that takes place in Chichester, England, in the fall.

"Each one of us lives in a different country, so it's a way of catching up without wives, family or children," he said. "It's purely friends, in an environment which has always been our passion."