

New WCs
 La Tour d'Argent
 An Unlikely Empress
 Les Parfums de Rosine
 Ecole Alain Ducasse
 What a Hoot

PARIS

n o t e s

Euro June 29: .710
 Euro May 26: .715
 Rain Days: 12
 High Temp: 76°F/24°C
 Low Temp: 58°F/14°C
 Nat'l Holidays: July 14, Aug 15

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GRAND STANDING

By Amanda MacKenzie

The Grand Palais is once again flexing its muscles and reasserting itself as an icon for the city

For you and me, it's a Right-Bank icon, and Paris just wouldn't be Paris without it. For Yves Saint-Geours, President of the Etablissement Public du Grand Palais, it's an island. Rising above the swell of traffic along the Champs-Élysées, it has its inlets, coves and ports, all of them fascinating, some still a little uncharted and unfamiliar. And, Saint-Geours' job is to make sure that we drop anchor and explore.

Which, it seems, is precisely what we're doing. After an 11-year closure prompted by serious structural problems, the Grand Palais re-opened for good just over two years ago. Since then, the great glasshouse alone has drawn in well over a million people to exhibitions and events. Three hundred percent more people visited the Grand Palais during the last six months of 2008 than during those same months in 2007. As an innovative venue for the arts and technology, the Grand Palais is already flexing its muscles and reasserting itself as an icon for the city—and for France. Yet, in a remarkably un-French development, its new management structure now must pay its own way. It gets little help from state grants or patronage. "The Minister of Finance likes us quite a lot," observes Saint-Geours dryly (he and his 23-strong team are private-sector employees in all but name). Can this be the same Grand Palais that was once thought to be such a lost cause that it came within a hair of being demolished?

More on that sacrilege later. The question worth asking is this: Why did France build such a behemoth in the first place? Surely it was not just to astound those visiting the 1900 Exposition Universelle? It's true that the Grand Palais was a French riposte to the Crystal Palaces of London (1851) and New York (1858), both of which have long since vanished. It's also true that it took more metal to build the Grand Palais than the Eiffel Tower, which was meant to eventually be dismantled. But the Grand Palais was never intended to be a fly-by-night showcase—a half-mile stroll around its monu-

mental masonry should put that myth to bed. Along with the Petit Palais across the street and the Pont Alexandre III to the south, the Grand Palais connected Les Invalides with the Champs-Élysées along the so-called "Republican Axis" and opened up a completely new perspective within the city. It was the cornerstone of the "new" Paris, at the dawn of a new century. And,



as a hymn to the glory of the Republic, it was built to last—well, if not forever, at least until the sun set on the Colonial Empire. In this goal it has succeeded rather well.

The Grand Palais was astounding on every front. Bristling with columns and decorously draped statuary, the building's neo-classical exterior was calculated to stir the heart of every patriot. But it was the nave, that stupendous 656-foot-long hangar crowned with glass, whose technological prowess and stylistic daring really set pulses racing. Its sinuous steel pillars were at the cutting edge of modernity at a moment when art nouveau was just hitting its stride; some point out that the pillars even anticipated art deco. Undoubtedly, during the seven-month run of the World's Fair, it was the Grand Palais as much as any of the fair's attractions that brought 50 million people flocking to Paris.

From its inception, the Grand Palais had an ambitious dual mission. On the one hand, the contemporary art and design shows the Grand

Palais would host were to be "out there" at the forefront of modern trends; on the other, it was to provide the public with spectacle on an epic scale. Sometimes it managed both simultaneously. Barely had the lights gone out on the World's Fair before the Grand Palais was putting on the world's first motor show, the Salon de l'Auto, the first of many auto shows held under the great "coupole" of the Grand Palais. (This show is now the Mondiale de l'Automobile, or Paris Motor Show, currently held at Paris Expo.) When not sending shock waves through the art world (Matisse and the Fauvistes made their debut here in 1905), the Grand Palais was rolling out huge commercial crowd-magnet events, ranging from aviation and radio-telegraphy shows to equestrian and "ideal home" shows. In those early years, the Grand Palais dazzled, inspired and challenged with its many offerings, and Parisians couldn't get enough of it.

Requisitioned as a military hospital during World War I, the Grand Palais served with honor. But things were never quite the same after the Nazis rolled in and parked their trucks in the nave. After a couple of lackluster attempts at pushing propaganda shows on the public, they gave up and shelled it instead. There was serious damage, especially when the straw from a circus menagerie being sheltered inside the building caught fire.

By the early 60s, the Grand Palais' future looked increasingly doubtful. The building had lacked unity ever since its west wing was converted in 1938 into the Palais de la Découverte, a science museum. Thereafter, a sense of drift set in. Immense as it was, the Grand Palais' nave had become a tight squeeze for burgeoning modern motor shows, and fielding replacement events became a challenge. Its art-nouveau arabesques and curlicues became unfashionable, almost to the point of absurdity.

Who could blame Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux if he began to seriously consider demolishing the Grand Palais? (He even drafted the great (continued on page 7)

HOTEL UPDATE

It was only a short step from designer days to narrative nights

Once upon a time (and not all that long ago, either), there were toile de jony walls and Louis XV chairs. Then along came the enfants terribles of the hotel scene, with their open-plan rooms, startling color palettes and funky furniture. And now, just as it was all starting to feel—dare I say it?—a trifle familiar, a new twist has emerged. The latest batch of boutique hotels doesn't settle for "mere" drama or "mere" whimsy. They set out to create a narrative that places you, the guest, into the fabric of the story. Are you sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin...

And where better to start than with a story of love at first sight? Your own, in fact, if you check in at the **Hôtel One by the Five** (3 Rue Flatters, 5th; site: www.onebythefive.com; best price: about €760 per night for a three-night stay). The One is a one-off luxury apartment-suite hotel entirely devoted to each sensory phase of the courtship ritual. Behind a façade as discreet as you please, its chambers lead you from the first intensity of the visual encounter to the oh-là-là of the ultimate clinch. Along the way, there's an invitation to linger over cocktails and take a turn, cheek-to-cheek, on your own intimate dance floor. And so to bed—one that floats, suspended, somewhere in the stratosphere between Cloud Nine and Seventh Heaven. With a flick of a switch, the sea of clouds recedes to reveal a galaxy of fiber optics (a must-have in today's design universe).

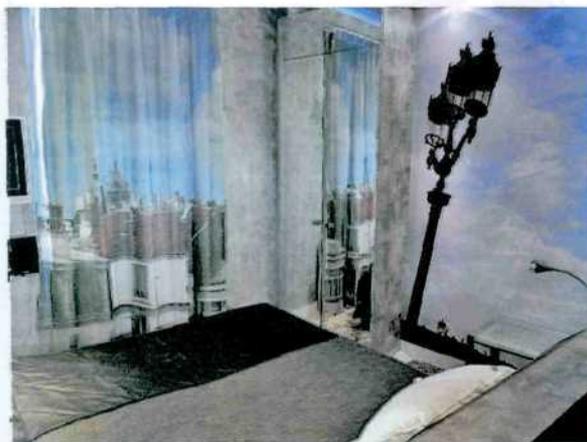
To anyone already familiar with the One's parent establishment, the Hôtel Five, many of the design features may not come as a huge surprise. What's new here is the playful narrative intent.

So far, so neat, not least in the One's use of space and light. To close the deal, the One doesn't stint on those high-tech details that are so essential to modern-day indulgence: the plasma screen for bath-time viewing, the surround-sound music, the iPod dock. Note, too, the thoughtful webcam arrangement in the bedroom (so you can make a video diary in honor of your splurge, one imagines). Could the One be the one for you? Yes, if your ardor burns bright, or even if your flame needs rekindling with a blowtorch, since all that ambient "lurve" is bound to produce some kind of effect. Just don't stay here by yourself. That would be unspeakably sad.

Then again, suppose your tastes tend more towards the travel yarn? If so, the **Hôtel Sublim Eiffel** (94 Blvd Garibaldi, 15th; site: www.sublimeiffel.com; best price: around €150 per night) may be just the ticket for you. Renovated and reopened last November,

this 19-room hotel sets out to enfold you in an urban adventure—one that is set in Paris, naturally. This time around, the hotel draws its inspiration directly from its unconventional setting. The Eiffel part speaks for itself; from the upper floors, there are privileged views of everyone's favorite folly. Watched from the lobby, somewhat uncompromising in silver, orange and black, the Métro is a permanent presence, trundling to and fro on the above-ground section of Line 6 across the street.

First impressions, then, are of the city's essence, which almost spills into the building. That perception has been very consciously carried through into the décor. Paris, you see, permeates the Sublim Eiffel. Against a vibrant backdrop of fuchsia, lime green or blue,



each room takes its character from striking photographic details of the city. Bedcovers are emblazoned with the soft, blurry lights of the boulevards at night. A cobblestone carpet lines the corridors, and you'll blush to ask your way to Avenue de Suffren after you've padded across your personal woven map of the 15th arrondissement. Crackle glass accents and a three-way rain shower bathed in color and light add finish to the fantasy.

Working with the architect, Vincent Bastie, Sandrine Alouf is the imaginative force behind both the One by the Five and the Sublim Eiffel. Alouf goes by the official job title of "atmospherist," a term she coined to reflect her unconventional position mid-way between interior designer and architect. A photographer by discipline, she specializes in capturing "the things people don't see." Armed with her ever-swelling archive of images, she explains how she uses them to create a visual lexicon, commissioning bespoke furnishings and then combining them to striking yet recognizable effect. Fluffy clouds, downtown bus shelters, even manhole covers (her offbeat rug designs currently retail at Galeries Lafayette)—it's

all grist to her creative mill. Airy yet deeply pragmatic in approach, she is a professional problem-solver, someone who clearly relishes the practical challenges of turning a former two-star dive into an utterly Parisian boutique address—with atmosphere to spare.

The **Hôtel Apostrophe** (shown, 3 Rue de Chevreuse, 6th; site: www.apostrophe-hotel.com; best price: €220-270), another Alouf creation, may well be her most ambitious project to date. Behind its subtle trompe l'œil façade, the hotel is not a story but more a self-styled "poem," an ode to Montparnasse's literary past. But don't look for anything as obvious as a "chambre Hemingway" or a "chambre Miller" here. Instead, the rooms are styled to reflect writing in a host of manifestations—prehistoric ochre tracings, urban graffiti, the musical score, the printing press. There are 16 rooms, all uniquely styled with more than a dash of digital wizardry and additional painted flourishes from a brace of artists. Whatever your literary leanings, chances are you'll find a setting to suit you. For my part, the travel journal room presses all the right buttons, with its scrapbook whimsy and watercolor hues. Until, that is, I clock the fabulous views, both real and virtual, of the top-floor "chambre paradis." Paris romantics should look no further.

As with the One by the Five and the Sublim Eiffel, you'd expect high-tech creature comforts to be generous here, and they are. But you may also appreciate the smaller attentions to detail, such as the rolling desk (handy for croissants and bedtime scribbles) and the pillow props (ditto, for bedtime reading). Such practical touches should come as no surprise given that owner and manager Isabelle Lozano is a third-generation hotelier. Keen to avoid design for design's sake, Lozano describes how she wanted to realize a cutting-edge hotel that would be tomorrow's classic.

No doubt this is just an opening chapter in the rise of the storybook hotel. On the other hand, not everyone wants to be cast as a character in someone else's fiction. Paris has plenty of room to accommodate diversity. Case in point, the revamped **Hôtel Champs-Elysées Plaza** (35 Rue de Berri, 8th; site: www.champselyseesplaza.com; best price: €240-410), a 35-room hotel within sauntering distance of the Champs. The chic lobby sets the tone. In its dark wood accents, muted colors and contemporary open hearth, the promise of old-world hospitality and modern indulgence is clear to see. The rooms take the same approach. They come with espresso machines, hi-fi gadgetry, jacuzzis in many rooms and—a luxury in Paris—lots of space. The styling is impeccable in soft stripes and textured chocolate hues, all the better to set off the handsome period details: icing-sugar ceilings, French windows, great pink marble fireplaces. "C'est design," observes the manager, "mais pas trop design." Just so. And there's not a shred of toile de jony in sight.

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