



# Parisian

# nights

Brits are set to overtake Americans as the most frequent visitors to Paris. **John Brunton** finds a host of new hotels on offer for trendy Channel-hoppers

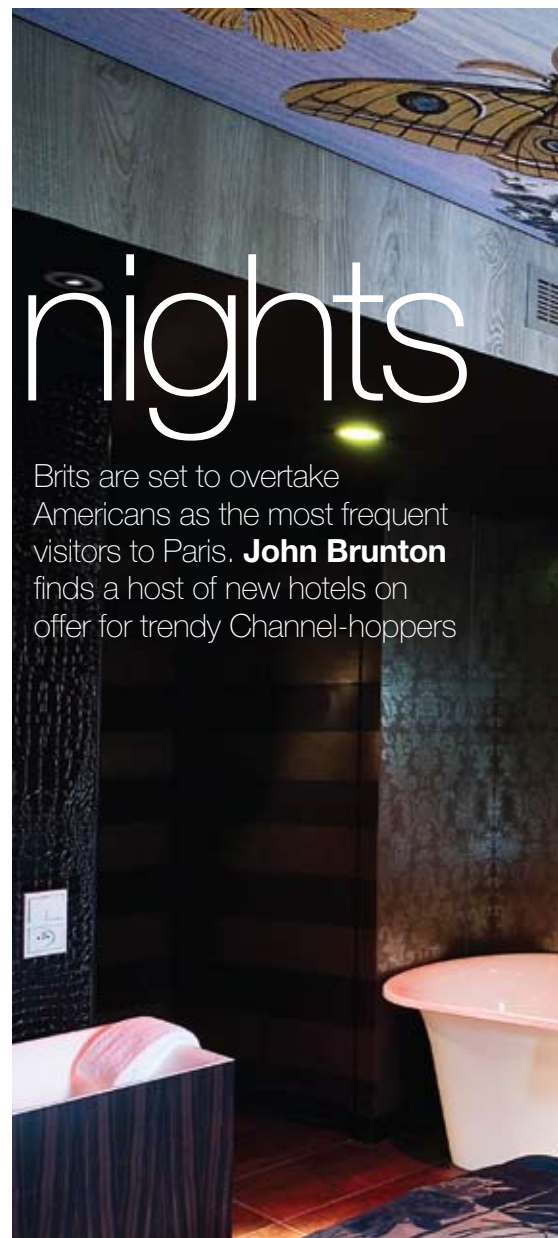
**W**hile France holds top position as the world's most visited country, Paris is the globe's most popular urban destination – around 16 million visitors stay in the French capital every year, generating around €3.6 billion and employing 150,000 people.

The Paris Tourism Office is anything but complacent about the economic importance of tourist and business travellers, especially in the face of the never-ending British and American tabloid clichés of grumpy waiters, rude taxi drivers, smelly toilets and dingy hotels. This summer it created a "Tourism Charter" of commitments to be helpful and polite to visitors, and distributed hundreds of thousands of brochures urging Parisians to "make use of any foreign-language skills to reply to visitors in their own language" and to "take the time to give information to visitors".

The hotel business can't be accused of complacency either. Ever since Four Seasons shook up the whole scene here ten years ago with its makeover of the George V, the market has seen a massive investment in new hotels and the renovation of the aged palaces. The business sector represents 44 per cent of overnights each year for the hotel industry and is growing more rapidly than tourist overnights. A related trend is that business

occupancy is also increasing during the habitually quiet winter months, when Paris is coming into its own as the world's leading destination for congresses and trade shows.

As far as the business traveller is concerned, the most important trend has seen multinational hotel groups making a big new investment in recent years by opening up new areas, renovating existing properties and buying up independent hotels to upgrade them to their own standards. By choosing to locate the **Hotel Novotel Paris Est** in the centre of the Bercy Village neighbourhood, in what was once an almost abandoned corner of the 11th arrondissement, the Accor group gave eastern Paris the premium hotel it needed. With 609 rooms and 2,500 sqm of meeting rooms, this opens up a new market as the first three-star congress and convention hotel in the city. Around the Champs-Élysées there is the brand new luxury **Hotel Fouquet's Barrière**, opened less than a year ago by the



## HEY, BIG SPENDER

American enthusiasm for Paris is as strong as ever, with visitors from the US accounting for 18 per cent of the hotel market. However, the British proportion of 16 per cent is rising faster, and the combination of a weakening dollar and the new faster Eurostar service is likely to see the UK becoming the top source of visitors in the near future. The American business traveller remains the biggest spender though, averaging €326 a day compared with €265 for business travellers in general and €208 for tourists.







Far left and main picture: Hotel Le Bellechasse  
Above and below: Murano Urban Resort  
Bottom: Hotel du Petit Moulin



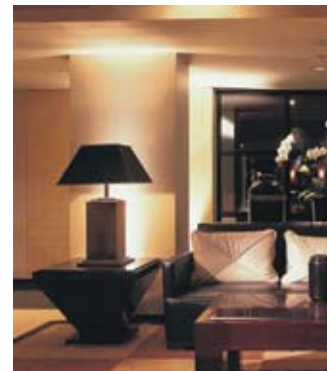
dynamic Lucien Barrière group, while for those looking for recognised international chains, both the Marriott and Park Hyatt now have a presence around here too. In fact, Marriott is very active all over the city – it has acquired the Paris Plaza Vendôme to introduce its Renaissance brand, taken over the Hotel Le Parc Trocadero right by the Eiffel Tower, which will be renovated and added to the Renaissance group too, and launched the **Paris Marriott Rive Gauche Hotel and Conference Centre** in a former Sofitel property in the heart of the Left Bank. Industry sources suspect that the next logical step for this American giant is to follow what they did in Milan, and open a luxury Bulgari Hotel here.

The Sultan of Brunei's Dorchester group continues its long-term strategy of upgrading its prestigious properties, and after renovations to the Plaza Athénée, it is

now the turn of the **Hotel Meurice**, whose restaurant has just won a coveted third Michelin star, and whose interiors will be restyled by France's favourite design guru, Philippe Starck.

The Opera quartier – only a ten-minute cab ride from the Gare du Nord – has developed into the de facto hub for Eurostar business travellers. This was boosted when Intercontinental invested more than €100 million to give a sparkling facelift to their flagship **Grand Hotel** on the Place de l'Opéra, and now businessmen are almost spoilt for choice between Sofitel's Scribe, the Millennium, the Holiday Inn and the Concorde Ambassador. It really is something of a mystery that the area around the Gare du Nord remains a run-down neighbourhood with not a decent hotel in sight – fortunately, there is still the reliable Art





From left: the lobby and restaurant at Hotel Fouquet's Barrière. Below: Novotel Paris Est

Nouveau Terminus Nord brasserie for an atmospheric business meeting.

And while the towering skyscrapers of La Défense may remain the prime meeting place for many businessmen, the great majority shun actually staying around there because of the lack of any life after office hours. As an IBM businessman, who regularly comes to Paris, told me: "I will always choose a hotel right in the centre of town to be able to really enjoy the city at night, because the Metro system here is excellent and can get me to my morning meeting at La Défense in around a half an hour. So there really is no need to get stuck out after work in such a concrete jungle"

### Design for living

In the last few months two new boutique hotels have opened up in the neighbourhoods surrounding the city's two prime museums, the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay. **Hotel Le Bellechasse** is the second property to be designed by Christian Lacroix, one of France's most famous haute-couture designers, and is small-luxury with just 34 rooms, while the **Hotel Lumen Paris Louvre** is a 32-room jewel created by interior designer Claudio Colucci.

These are just the latest examples of Paris going one step further than many world capitals by taking the boutique hotel concept to another level and creating the "designer hotel". The chic, trend-conscious French have taken their fashion designers and stylists and given them a free hand to develop a highly original kind of hotel. The experience is completely different from being cosseted in the luxury world of a Four Seasons or Ritz-Carlton.

Discerning travellers – businessmen as much as tourists – now have the chance to choose an highly original place to stay, from the fashionable Murano to elegant, privately-owned properties like **Hotel Marignan Champs-Élysées**. Nathalie Richard bought the Marignan four years ago and, with family investment, is carefully turning it into a prime 73-room design hotel, complete with an Alain Ducasse Spoon restaurant.

"Around 80 per cent of our clientele is from the business sector, but this is becoming an increasingly volatile market," she says. "We target independent businessmen rather than the corporate sector, who are usually locked into long-term deals with big international hotels anyway. But we're finding a new trend that many of our customers are making their own reservations through tourist promotions or offers on the net, rather than using the rates negotiated by their own office."

"Also, the business traveller seems to have less and less time to spare between meetings and transport, and wants to find everything in his hotel – restaurant, spa, wifi. Even though we are in the heart of Paris, many guests don't have a moment to experience the city – for example, we discovered that a chocolate Eiffel Tower we left in rooms as a present was being taken home by guests because they didn't even have time to shop for souvenirs for their kids."

The **Murano** is undoubtedly the most original hotel in Paris right now. It's creators have gone one step beyond all the newest trends of the city's designer hotels. On checking in, don't expect a key, as the receptionist will take a digital imprint of your finger, which magically opens your door, and once inside the futuristic bedrooms there are five different light colours to choose from. Then there is the location, opening an ultra-fashionable resort in the terminally unfashionable République neighbourhood (although fortunately the bars of Rue Oberkampf and the boutiques of Bastille are not too far away).

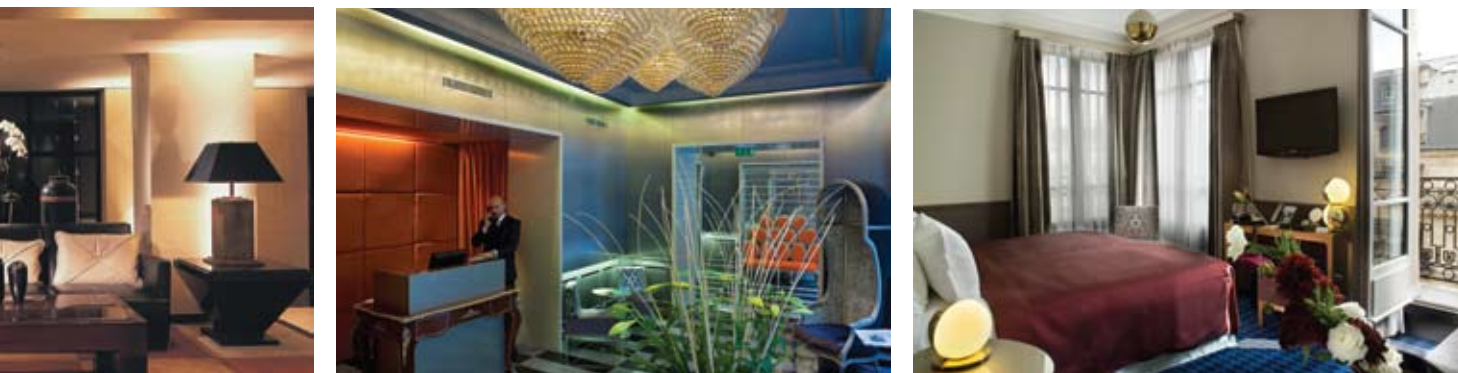
However, this part of Paris might be on the verge of being gentrified, as the Murano has already spawned a nearby clone, **Le General**, a hip hotel with less hype but far more attractive room rates. The General succeeds in mixing cutting-edge design with a friendly, down-to-earth service which makes the guest feel relaxed and at home, without any feeling of pretentiousness. Some of the rooms are seriously offbeat – imagine a small suite with a sliding window in the bedroom that guests climb through to enter the bathroom. This is not the only clever use of limited space, as the salon

used for serving breakfast is transformed each afternoon into a lounge bar with the obligatory in-house DJ playing jazzy music. There is also a well-equipped fitness, sauna and massage centre.

Over by the Champs-Élysées, the first designer hotels to arrive were the sleek Hotel de Sers and Hotel le A. Then **Pershing Hall** opened. This was originally the premises of the American Legion, and is named after the Second World War hero, General Pershing. The feel here is similar to Murano, with the emphasis on standing out from the crowd. Although the Pershing Hall is large – with a vast lounge bar and restaurant – there are only 26 rooms, and the person who has created a unique interior decor is another of France's style icons, Andrée Putman.

It is a long time since Putman shocked the world with her audacious transformations of the Musée d'Orsay here in Paris and the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, but with the Pershing it is clear that she has lost none of her cutting edge. The restaurant is simply stunning. Tables are set in an enclosed courtyard in the middle of the building, which rises up on all sides as far as the top floor and an open sky, with a retracting glass roof for winter. One wall is covered with lush jungle vegetation, giving the impression you are dining in the glass house of a botanical garden.





Above from centre: Le Méridien Etoile, reception and bedroom at Hotel Lumen Paris Louvre

The fashionable Marais is seeing a host of small but very smart hotels springing up all the time. Most people who pass by the **Hotel du Petit Moulin** don't even realise it is a hotel. The owners have cleverly left untouched the beautiful Belle Epoque facade of a "boulangerie", reputed to be the oldest bakery in the city, which has now been transformed into one of Paris's most sought-after addresses.

The reason everyone wants to stay here is quite simple: the décor and interior design have been created by Christian Lacroix. He has clearly enjoyed himself decorating this bijou hotel. Guests will discover all the Lacroix trademarks – voluptuous velvets and silks, whimsical sketches, surreal photos, operatic masks and costumes. The breakfast room/evening bar is especially fun, a contrast of an old-fashioned bistro with traditional zinc bar, and stark modern chairs in bright primary colours.

While Lacroix's hotel is very reasonably-priced, you have to be ready to splash out to stay at an even more exclusive newcomer, **5 Rue de Mussy**, a unique "bed and breakfast" in the 17th-century mansion owned by Azzedine Alaïa, the Marais's favourite fashion designer. Upstairs from his showroom, Alaïa has opened what he calls his "three rooms", which are actually three self-sufficient apartments in a loft-like space, whose cool, minimalist

decoration and furniture have been chosen by the designer himself. This is definitely more a home-from-home than a standard hotel: each unit has one or two bedrooms, bathroom, a spacious salon, dining room and kitchen.

### Back to business

Staying in this kind of small, intimate property will likely be a fun one-off experience for most seasoned travellers, and the biggest change for businessmen has to be the increased presence of the American Starwood Hotels group. With its takeover of Méridien, Starwood accounts for over 3,000 rooms, and is now second only to the French Accor group in the Paris market. **Le Méridien Montparnasse** is already one of Europe's largest conference centre hotels, with 953 rooms and over 4,000 sqm of meeting rooms, and an ambitious upgrading programme is starting this month.

Emmanuel Caux, regional director of Starwood, says: "Around €35 million will be spent on a restoration of the Westin Prince de Galles, almost four hundred rooms at Le Méridien Etoile will be refurbished, as well as all the public areas of Le Méridien Montparnasse. This is the biggest change that Starwood has brought to the hotels – a new branding and the investment to deliver this branding to the guest. Each of our properties will offer a different core set of lifestyle values, for example at the Etoile, it will be 'Chic, Culture and Discovery', with the aim of attracting creative guests."

Meanwhile, the separate Starwood Capital Group has also become a big player in Paris with its purchase of Louvre Hotels, including Le Crillon, Lutétia and Concorde Lafayette. And it will be much more in the news next year when it starts a much-needed renovation of the mythic Crillon, including not just modernising rooms and public areas, but adding new suites and a spa.

And what awaits in 2008 and beyond? In the spring, the venerable **Hotel Le Bristol** will unveil 22 additional new bedrooms and four suites, some with stunning views of the Eiffel Tower, along with a new restaurant and lounge bar, all housed in an

adjoining building which the owners have managed to purchase. After that, the next arrivals will be two long-awaited additions from the Asian market. At the beginning of 2009, if renovations go to plan, the a flagship Shangri-La hotel is due to open in the historic Palace d'Eena, while 2010 is expected to see the arrival of Mandarin Oriental, with a transformed 1930s art deco building, on a prime location between the Hotel Costes and the British Embassy on the Rue Saint Honoré.

It seems that fashions may come and go, but the City of Light never loses its appeal, or its ability to reinvent itself. ■

## PARIS HOTELS

### Novotel Paris Est

1 Avenue de la République, Bagnolet; tel +33 1 49 93 63 00; novotel.com. Rooms from €134.

### Hotel Fouquet's Barrière

46 Avenue George V; tel +33 1 40 69 60 00; fouquets-barriere.com. Rooms from €577.

### Hotel Le Bellechasse

8 Rue de Bellechasse; tel +33 1 45 50 22 31; lebelleshasse.com. Rooms from €240.

### Hotel Lumen Paris Louvre

15 Rue des Pyramides; tel +33 1 44 50 77 00; hotel-lumenparis.com. Rooms from €232.

### Murano Urban Resort

13 Boulevard du Temple; tel +33 1 42 71 20 00; muranoresort.com. Rooms from €300.

### Hotel Marignan Champs-Élysées

12 Rue Marignan; tel +33 1 40 76 34 56; hotelmarignan.fr. Rooms from €260.

### Le General Hotel

5/7 Rue Rampon; tel +33 1 47 00 41 57; legeneralhotel.com. Rooms from €143 (single).

### Pershing Hall

49 Rue Pierre Charron; tel +33 1 58 36 58 00; pershinghall.com. Rooms from €180.

### Hotel du Petit Moulin

29/31 Rue du Poitou; tel +33 1 42 74 10 10; paris-hotel-petitmoulin.com. Rooms from €180.

### Le Meridien Montparnasse

19 Rue du Commandant Mouchotte; tel +33 1 44 36 44 36; starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien. Rooms from €261.

Prices are for a midweek stay in early November

