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Fashionista Paris
By HENRY ALFORD

FIVE hours after I'd started visiting some of Jean Paul Gaultier's favorite places in Paris, a woman I did not know grabbed my manhood.

I'd gone up to Montmartre to buy a ticket for the following evening's show at the Moulin Rouge, the colorful if over-touristed cabaret whose gaudy charms have long held sway over the imagination of the designer we associate with Madonna's cone bra and the male skirt. Ticket purchased, I walked a block south and stumbled onto a rival establishment called Cabaret Frou Frou, whereupon a husky-voiced young woman hurriedly sat me down in front of a metal pole and offered me a dance.

Aha, it dawned on me. Not a cabaret, but something more intimate. I tried to make my apologies, but she cut me off. "I do a dance!" she said in heavily-accented English.

She then proceeded to "walk" her index and middle finger up my inner thigh and grab me. I stood abruptly and said, "Sorry — no. I'm ... Je suis homosexual."

She stared at me unmoved, as if I'd just told her that my hobbies include raising chinchillas.

Heretofore, my chief anxiety about traveling to France had always been that, at some point during my trip, I would be called upon to pronounce the name of the town Ypres. But my Frou Frou experience had now redrawn that map. The French: unexpectedly handsy.

A month earlier, I'd written to Monsieur Gaultier and asked him to send me a list of the places in Paris that are the most meaningful to him. I knew that the selections made by an avatar of louche glamour and subversive wit would provide a refreshing tonic to the City of Light's inherent sentimentality. Not only has Mr. Gaultier inspected many of the city's public and private spaces as possible sites on which to stage fashion shows, but he's an artist who's always looking for visual appeal, and often finding it in unlikely places.

The idea was that I would spend three days visiting some of these locales and then have dinner with him at a restaurant of his choice — Jules Verne, the Alain Ducasse 120-seater on the second platform of the Eiffel Tower — before visiting the rest. And so, one June night just two days after the incident Frou Frou, I found myself — accompanied by Mr. Gaultier and his director of communications, Jelka Music — zooming toward the Eiffel Tower in a black S.U.V. driven by the designer's driver and bodyguard. "We go to a cliché, but a fabulous cliché that I love," the blond and boyishly enthusiastic Mr. Gaultier told me with some merriment.

Talking to Mr. Gaultier is like being with your favorite eccentric uncle, the one who bought you liquor in high school — his crystal blue eyes glisten with warmth and pop with curiosity; when he's very excited, his left pinky twitches. He added, "I love postcard clichés. You have to be a genius to take a good picture of Paris. So many have already been taken."

Mr. Gaultier's admiration for the Eiffel Tower — over the years he has recreated the monument's iconic architecture in both clothing and jewelry — became palpable when we got in its elevator and stared at the structure's workings: "It's like lace," he said. "Like metallic lace." The messenger bag slung over Mr. Gaultier's shoulder only enhanced his affect of childlike animation. As the elevator eased upward, the recesses of my mind bodied forth the name Willy Wonka.

Once in the twinkly and glass-drenched dining room, Mr. Gaultier, all courtliness and je-vous-en-prie, insisted that I have the seat with the best view. To dine elegantly at a great height over Paris is to render yourself at once rooted but vulnerable — you feel like a jewel on a tiara, but you're glad that the city is not known for its earthquakes. As we sipped pink Champagne and gazed down at a doll-size Paris, I thought, I could get very used to being Jean Paul Gaultier.

I'll admit I hadn't expected to be at the Eiffel Tower with him. Weeks earlier, when I'd thought about the picks that I might get from the enfant terrible of French fashion and now the chief designer for Hermès, whose high-low aesthetic is a heady cocktail of exquisite tailoring and satiny, trusslike corseting, I imagined a smattering of after-hours S & M clubs, perhaps a to-the-trade-only boutique specializing in 18th-century military epaulets carved in sandalwood by a Formosan prince and his colony of lepers. But instead I received a list of 15 or so locations, some of which, like the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergère and the flea market at Clignancourt, could not accurately be described as recherché.

And so I made my way into Gaultier's Paris, hoping to be able to find the beating pulse behind the postcard cliché. The only hotel on Mr. Gaultier's list was the Pavillon de la Reine, where he had lived for two years during the 1990s. This vine-covered, 54-room mansion is separated from the lovely Place des Vosges in the Marais district by a hush-inducing private

courtyard. Though I had not been able to secure a room, Laure Pertusier, the hotel's elegant, young director of sales gave me a tour. As we took in the hotel's cozy blend of 17th-century wooden beams and Louis XIII-style fireplaces and antiques, Ms. Pertusier told me that Pavillon's clientele was "not the Champs-Élysées crowd. Not so bling-bling."

She added, "Famous people who don't want to be recognized like the hotel. Otherwise they go to the Ritz or the Crillon." She showed me a picture of the Victor Hugo suite in which Mr. Gaultier had lived — it featured a lovely, monochromatic, Laura Ashley-type floral wallpaper — and told me, "We had the idée to change the name of the room to Gaultier." I said, "You'd have to change the wallpaper."

The Gaultier spirit is more readily identifiable at Paris's wax museum, Musée Grévin. As a child, Mr. Gaultier loved its Palais des Mirages — a heavily mirrored formal parlor with elaborate chandeliers. You stand cheek-by-jowl with a busload of tourists, whereupon the lights dim and a whirlwind of elephant braying and blinking lights transforms the room into a bumptious, cloudy fantasyscape; it's as if you're trapped inside Marie Antoinette's hypothalamus, but Marie has a head cold.

Downstairs I found some 300 wax figures. These included Jeanne d'Arc at the stake; a bloodied heretic tied to a board by the Inquisition; Henri IV, stabbed in a carriage; a skeleton in armor; and Jean Paul Gaultier. I thought: the unstated theme of this museum is bondage.

The two Gaultier locales that I am the most eager to return to the next time I go to Paris are the Natural History Museum and, just across the street, the tearoom and the hammam of the mosque known as La Grande Mosquée de Paris. The former is divided into two huge, hangarlike buildings — the child-friendly Grande Galerie de l'Evolution, and the fabulously eerie Galeries de Paléontologie et d'Anatomie Comparée .

The evolution building is a soaring, 19th-century iron-framed, glass-roofed structure with dramatic pools of light; from these pools emerge taxidermied interlopers such as sharks and monkeys. But it's the stampede of fossils at the paleontology museum that most impressed; once you enter the main room, about 100 animal skeletons, including those of whales, yaks and hyenas, look as if they're about to flatten you. I loved it, and longed to lie down on the floor and have hyena hooves paillard me.

For 58 euros, I then had a massage and steam bath at the mosque's somewhat ramshackle and warrenlike hammam; those of my spirits that weren't lifted by this gentle regimen were done so by my subsequent inhalation of mint tea and baklava in the mosque's placid outdoor tearoom. While women in headdresses smoked a hookah next to me, and a flight of tiny birds pecked at my baklava crumbs, I sipped at my tea, and thought: In the future, I will acknowledge only things related to paleontology and baklava.

"ONE thing I don't like about Paris is Haussmann," Mr. Gaultier told me at Jules Verne, speaking of the city's master planner. "Which is sad because it is much of Paris. Galeries Lafayette: Non. I love the Île de la Cité, Montmartre. Voilà. I like places where it's like a little village. I'm very lucky because the place where I live — it's near Pigalle, it's called Rue Frochot — is an allée behind a gate. With a tree, like in the country."

Mr. Gaultier's candor about his home address had inspired me to tell him that I'd "seen" him at the wax museum. He had gasped: "Une catastrophe! We all look oar-ible! The only ones who look how they are in reality are the footballers."

I had opined that the unexpected legacy of a visit to the Grévin is that one is reminded how tiny the famous are. The 5-foot, 11-inch Mr. Gaultier had huffed, "That, too: totally wrong!"

Switching the topic to another venue of illusion — music halls — I'd asked Mr. Gaultier why he had included the Folies Bergère and the Moulin Rouge on his list. He'd reminded me that as a child, he got into trouble when his teacher found him sketching costumes from a televised performance of the Folies Bergère; but when the teacher taped one of the sketches to Mr. Gaultier's back, the punishment backfired, and Mr. Gaultier became a schoolyard celebrity.

"Then I did a revue with my teddy bear at home," he said. "I pretended he had breasts. The first cone bra I did was for my teddy bear, not for Madonna. I had a strawberry box for the stage, and I put a lot of feathers on my teddy bear for the headdress. I used feathers from my cleaning brush for the finale."

Mr. Gaultier's penchant for glitter, nurtured by trips to Théâtre du Châtelet with his grandmother, would later exhibit itself when the 17-year-old mailed Pierre Cardin some sketches in 1969. Much to Mr. Gaultier's later embarrassment — "I mean, it was so tacky," he has said — he had souped up his sketches with gold foil paper and sequins. Mr. Cardin, charmed, gave Mr. Gaultier his first job in fashion.

The Folies Bergère and the Moulin Rouge are not what they used to be; Mr. Gaultier suggests instead that one go to the chic and highly choreographed striptease that is Crazy Horse. There, 12 semiclad woman, all with the same delicious measurements, caper and vamp to songs amid futuristic light projections and scrim.

"I adore. Very modern. I brought Madonna there two times, she loved it. Ah, oui. Go, go, go. It is beautiful and phantasmatic. For me, it's not erotique. It's extraordinary, phantasmatic, fetishistic."

The cinema has been an even greater influence than the music hall on Mr. Gaultier over the years (and, indeed, Mr. Gaultier did the costumes for "Bad Education," "The Fifth Element" and "The City of Lost Children," among others). He had included the movie theaters La Pagode and Le Grand Rex on his list of favorite places. The former, in the Seventh Arrondissement, is an antique pagoda built for the wife of the owner of Le Bon Marché department store in 1896, and was saved from demolition in the 1970s by a group headed by Louis Malle; the latter, in the Second Arrondissement, is the largest theater in Europe (around 2,750 seats), and often the site of rock concerts.

Mr. Gaultier told me that as a child growing up in the suburb of Arcueil, he'd seen a billboard for "Cleopatra" starring Elizabeth Taylor, then at the Rex. "She looked enormous, and in gold. I thought, 'Oh my God, I need to go there.'"

Though the Ducasse meal was extravagantly sauced and beautifully presented, I'd felt I needed to ask Mr. Gaultier about the other restaurant he'd mentioned on his list, Casa Olympe. Saying that it's near his house and "almost my canteen," he'd said that the restaurant was very small and unpretentious.

"The first time I went there, I chose one beautiful mushroom — a girolle, with garlic," he said. "Olympe brought it out in a pan, with eggs broken on it, like in the countryside. Fabulous. The next day I went with friends and said, 'I would like to have four girolles like yesterday,' and she said, 'Non.' She said, 'I went to the market today and the girolles were not beautiful, so I did not take them.' I loved that."

"You like to be slapped," I suggested. "In some way, yes," he said.

After dinner, taking the elevator down the tower, Mr. Gaultier had looked slightly panicked for a minute and said, "We didn't talk about Angéline." I thought, Angelina Jolie? But Ms. Music, the communications director, had explained, "It's a dessert."

"I can't believe you're talking about food after that meal," I'd said, referring to the fact that each of our desserts had had two parts and had been supplemented by a tray of petits fours, as well as plates bearing two kinds of marshmallows, one of them passion fruit.

"No. This is different," said the man who wanted to be a baker before he wanted to be a designer, and who once dressed models in brioches. Mr. Gaultier, it turns out, is a fan of the super-rich, tennis ball-sized confection known as a Mont Blanc — a ball of meringue is topped with Chantilly and a lot of wormy strands (or vermicelles) of chestnut paste, that is served at the tearoom, Angéline, next door to the Meurice hotel near the Louvre.

Indeed, much too early the next day, I tucked into one of these atom bombs, and was immediately flooded with the sensation of having foie gras-ed my digestive system. Looking across the room filled with maiden aunts and the occasional family from Akron, I thought, I am now officially an 89-year-old woman. Upon realizing that the Mont Blanc had caused me literally to break out into a sweat, I headed off for the Hermès store near the Madeleine and thence to Mr. Gaultier's own store on Rue Vivienne, spritzing myself with free cologne at both locations. I was smelling beyond my means.

Eager to reassert my masculinity, I went to Crazy Horse that evening. If my experiences seeing a show at Moulin Rouge and visiting the lobby of the Folies Bergère had brought me in touch with a colorful, if slightly dusty, kind of camp, Crazy Horse was something altogether different. The room is all black and red lacquer; each table has a glass Champagne bucket lighted by an illuminated marble slab beneath it. The effect is highly chic. The show is by turns beguiling and slightly silly, but always bubbly.

During the break, I read an alphabetized list of people who've patronized the establishment over the years; on seeing the unlikely names Simone de Beauvoir, Patricia Hearst, Randolph Churchill, Seiji Ozawa and Georges Pompidou, my eyes flitted to the letter R's, hoping to find Eleanor Roosevelt.

On my last day in Paris, I headed for the flea market at Clignancourt. Though a longtime favorite of Mr. Gaultier's, he'd told me he now does most of his flea market-going in London or New York, because in Paris he is recognized and followed around by style mavens who want to see what he's buying.

The flea market is immense, and, unlike American fleas, has a section — the Marché Paul-Bert — with high-end antiques and gorgeous home furnishings. As I walked around, I remembered what Mr. Gaultier had told me at the Eiffel Tower about shopping at flea markets: “The old fabrics are sometimes nicer than the new ones. One time I bought the jacket of a fat man, and I put that jacket on a girl because I liked the fabric. I took it in, and I rolled up the sleeves. I made a new silhouette.”

Such, I thought, is the power of Mr. Gaultier’s Paris. It may present itself as one easily recognizable, if not clichéd, thing — a fat man’s jacket or a cabaret called Frou Frou — but, in fact, it’s something else entirely. Something less expected. We come for the choreography, but we are delivered something more brutal.

EXTRAORDINARY, PHANTASMATIC AND FETISHISTIC

HOW TO GET THERE

Many major carriers, including Delta, Air France and Continental, fly from New York-area airports to Charles du Gaulle airport in Paris. Round-trip fares for travel in October start at around \$775, according to a recent Web search.

WHERE TO STAY

The young fashion crowd, many of whom will be in Paris for the spring/summer Ready-to-Wear shows being held through Oct. 5, loves the 20-room Hôtel Amour (8, rue Navarin; Ninth Arrondissement; 33-1-4878-3180.) Each room is uniquely decorated on the theme of love by a different artist (e.g., Marc Newsom, Sophie Calle); the hotel’s brasserie is open late and has a garden. Doubles from 140 euros, around \$200 at \$1.46 to the euro.

The phrase “design hotel” finds its most literal embodiment at Hôtel du Petit Moulin (29-31 rue du Poitou; Third; 33-1-4274-1010; www.hoteldupetitmoulin.com), conceived by Christian Lacroix. He has had a field day in each of the hotel’s 17 rooms, with a pastiche of styles ranging from Baroque to pop. Rates are 190 to 350 euros. Breakfast, 15 euros.

Pavillon de la Reine is a 54-room hotel in the Marais (28, place des Vosges; Third; 33-1-4029-1919; www.pavillon-de-la-reine.com). Rooms start at 370 euros.

WHERE TO GO (THE GAULTIER TOUR)

Crazy Horse Paris, 12, avenue George V; Eighth; 33-1-4723-3232; www.lecrazyhorseparis.com; The show, including a half bottle of Champagne, or two drinks, starts at 70 euros a person.

Bal du Moulin Rouge, 82, boulevard de Clichy; 18th, 33-1-5309-8282; www.moulin-rouge.com. The show begins at 9 p.m. and costs 99 euros, including a half-bottle of Champagne. An 11 p.m. show costs 89 euros.

La Grande Mosquée de Paris, 2 bis, place du Puits de l’Ermite; Fifth; 33-1-4535-9733; tea room: 33-1-4331-1814; www.mosquee-de-paris.org.

Grande Galerie de l’Evolution, 36, rue Geoffroy Saint Hilaire; Fifth; 33-1-4079-5479 or 33-1-4079-5601

Galleries de Paléontologie et d’Anatomie Comparée, 2, rue Buffon; Fifth; 33-1-4079-5479; www.mnhn.fr. Admission is 8 euros.

Le Jules Verne, Eiffel Tower, second platform, Avenue Gustave Eiffel; Seventh; 33-1-4555-6144; www.lejulesverne-paris.com. Prix-fixe dinner 190 euros.

Casa Olympe, 48, rue St-Georges; Ninth; 33-1-4285-2601

Angéline, 226, rue de Rivoli; First; 33-1-4260-8200.

Hermès, 24, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré; Eighth; 33-1-4017-4717; wwwhermes.com.

Jean Paul Gaultier boutique, 6, rue Vivienne; Second; 33-1-4286-0505; www.jeanpaulgaultier.com.

La Pagode cinema, 57, bis rue de Babylone; Seventh, 33-1-4555-4848.

Théâtre du Châtelet, 1, place du Châtelet; First; 33-1-4028-2840; wwwchatelet-theatre.com.

Musée Grévin, 10, boulevard Montmartre; Ninth; 33-1-4770-8505; www.musee-grevin.com. 19.50 euros.

Le Grand Rex cinema, 1, boulevard Poissonnière; Second; 33-1-4236-8393; www.legrandrex.com.

Marché aux Puces de Clignancourt; Avenue de la Porte de Clignancourt; 18th. Located in the north of Paris, this is most easily reached by cab. Make sure to visit the Paul-Bert and the Serpette markets.

HENRY ALFORD is a contributing editor at Travel & Leisure and Vanity Fair.