

WHERE TO STAY

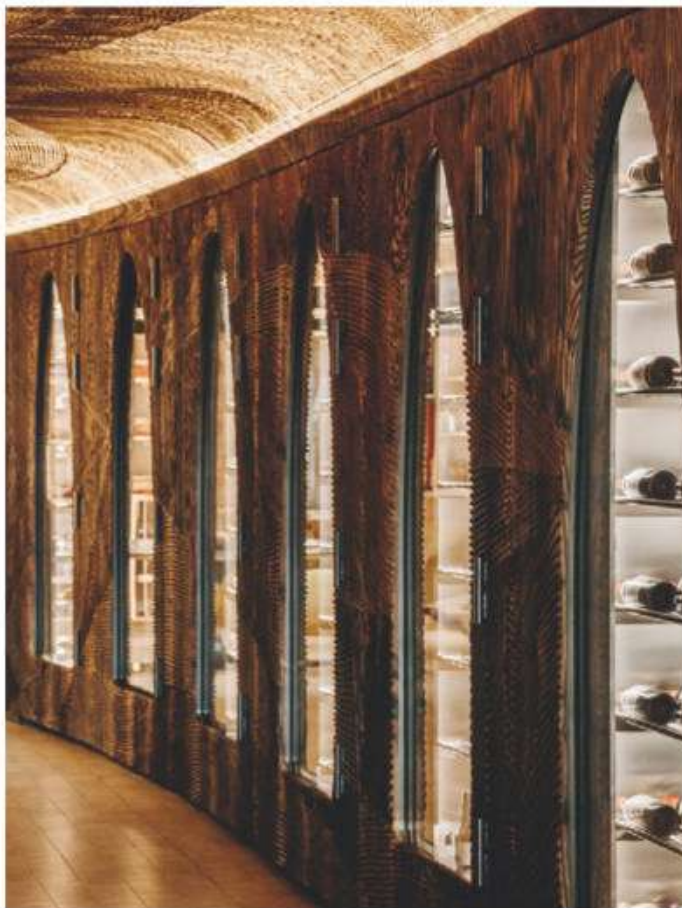
INSIDER REPORTS ON THE BEST PLACES TO BED DOWN. EDITED BY TOBY SKINNER

FIRST LOOK

THE EAGERLY AWAITED CHEVAL BLANC PARIS
SUCCEEDS IN SHIFTING THE HOTEL FOCUS EAST
ALONG THE SEINE. BY KASIA DIETZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHIEU SALVAING





COCOONED IN A SUN-LIT SUITE at the new Cheval Blanc, it feels like I can reach out and touch Paris. The skyline is dotted with souvenirs: the Eiffel Tower, the grand dome of Les Invalides and Notre Dame, still enclosed in scaffolding in a kind of soul-repair. I see slow promenades, and hear the faint hum of protest from somewhere. And there is the Pont Neuf below, its sturdy arches traversing the Seine, one of the great city arteries.

If this view seems obvious, it is unusual for Paris's stop addresses. The Cheval Blanc, the much-anticipated first city hotel from the LVMH-owned group best known for its revered St Tropez and St Barth's properties, is a maison apart in many ways. Its illustrious peers – Le Bristol, La Réserve, the Hôtel Plaza Athénée – form a sequestered cluster in the 8th arrondissement. That's where Parisians like me expect to find hotels; not here in the first, where *bateaux mouches* glide up the river and *bouquinistes* hawk battered copies of Proust.

Then there's the fact that the Cheval Blanc is in an Art Nouveau townhouse attached to a department store. Not any old department store, mind, but the great La Samaritaine – a Belle Epoque temple of commerce since 1869, which has been given a lushly marbled 11-year makeover by the LVMH group. The store opened this summer, while the hotel followed in September with a discreet lift linking the two. Curiously, the Cheval Blanc (though not La Samaritaine) was designed by Peter Marino, the flamboyant

There's a similar indulgence when it comes to the 'culinary arts', as they're described on the hotel website. Plénitude, on the first floor, has white bubbled walls and a certain Michelin-French starkness – leaving just enough attention to rest on the broths, creams, vinaigrettes and veloutés. These are the work of Arnaud Donckele, who earned three Michelin stars for La Vague d'Or at the Cheval Blanc St Tropez. A magnum of Dom Pérignon peers from a glass vitrine. The more masculine, wood-panelled Langosteria restaurant is Milanese, but with the emphasis on seafood, especially a plateau royal built around king crab, blue lobster, sea truffle and Sicilian langoustine.

If there's a certain coolness to much of the hotel, the seventh-floor Art Deco brasserie/cocktail bar Le Tout-Paris is altogether more convivial. With a terrace and primary-bright banquettes, it has already become a conspiratorial hub for Left Bank locals – a sign of a hotel bar that works. There's a similar sort of levity at Limbar, an upscale bistro with food by highly regarded young patissier Maxime Frédéric. But for all his swirling architectural creations, it's the Pont-Neuf croissant that got me: melted ham, Comté cheese and pear Douillon covered in a flaky crust. As the skyline starts to twinkle, the place is taken over by mixologist Florian Thireau, author of *The Cocktail Book*, who builds libations around black cardamom, bee pollen and Arabian jasmine.

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leather-clad New York architect best known for reimagining the experience of high-end shopping, from Barneys in the mid-1980s to the indoor-outdoor Louis Vuitton flagship on Rodeo Drive. He has become Chanel and Dior's go-to store designer, but is a relative newcomer to hotels.

This sort of creative cross-pollination is a feature of the Cheval Blanc, and Marino's influence made sense from the moment I stepped into the lobby, where staff in chic Patou uniforms glided across marble floors. There is the cream-scheme plushness of the best stores, with everything in its right place, including an immense canvas of dreamy swirls on blue by French artist Georges Mathieu, one of the founders of the so-called lyrical abstraction movement. Gold accents on the walls, like the gold buttons on the staff uniforms, are a reminder that this is an LVMH property, and not ashamed of a certain indulgence. Outside the lifts, a bucking Frank Gehry horse sculpture suggests unabashed ambition.

The Cheval Blanc is less than half the size of Le Bristol, with 72 suites and rooms, reached via hallways lined with bright abstracts by Paris avant-gardiste Sonia Delaunay. Rooms are thick-carpeted and neutral-toned, as if not to distract from the city outside. Most of the grand marble tubs, with products designed by Dior perfumer François Demachy, look south towards the Seine. The higher one goes, the more the extravagance winds up. On the top floor, the 7,000-square-foot Quintessence Suite has four bedrooms, a private pool and hammam, and is dotted with original sculptures by François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne, who were commissioned by everyone from Karl Lagerfeld to Marc Jacobs and Hubert de Givenchy.

While the Cheval Blanc represents a rare foray into hotel design for Marino, the subterranean Dior Spa – all creams, golds and rose motifs – is the first of its kind in the world. In the lobby, a glass display shows a toile by the fashion brand's creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri. Cinched-at-the-waist robes recall Dior's signature dresses, while silk twills and one-off scents by Demachy are displayed like *objets d'art*. Each of the six treatment rooms creates its own sensorial experience, from the star-studded ceiling of the Bonne Etoile Suite, where tiny lights form constellations, to the Bonheur Suite, where two massage beds rise from the floor. The 48 face and body treatments include Couture Dream and Precious Energy, the latter using semi-precious hot stones for their energetic properties.

This is a hotel that is built around water, so it makes sense that it has the longest hotel pool in the city – 30 metres of undulating blue and green mosaic tiles. There is no view of the Seine here, but Franco-Israeli projection artist Oyoram has created a vision of Paris that gives the sense of swimming along the river's edge, except accompanied by tweeting birds rather than tourist barges.

In many ways, this is the essence of the Cheval Blanc. Paris is right there, and yet a stay here feels like being enfolded in something altogether more frictionless. Luxury is such a rote term, but can be hard to define. This hotel – in the first arrondissement, of all places – is a hallowed expression of just what it can feel like. 

BOOK IT Doubles at Cheval Blanc Paris from about £975.
chevalblanc.com

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Le Tout-Paris terrace; pastry by Maxime Frédéric; Seine Suite; bedroom; Le Tout-Paris; wine cellar at Plénitude; Langosteria restaurant; staircase with Tony Cragg sculpture; Langosteria detail. Previous page, view from the cocktail bar. All at Cheval Blanc Paris