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How a Parisian icon got its groove back. By Emilie McMeekan

BIG FUN BACK IN THE DAY AT LES BAINS. CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT, MARIE-LINE, THE LES BAINS DOUCHES BOUNCER; HELENA CHRISTENSEN, MICHAEL HUTCHENCE & CHRISTY TURLINGTON; DAVID BOWIE & IMAN; CLAUDIA SCHIFFER; HELENA CHRISTENSEN, CLAUDIA SCHIFFER, EVA HERZIGOVA & TICO TORRES; GUESCH PATTI & VANESSA PARADIS; CATHERINE DENEUVE & KARL LAGERFELD; A REVELLER; HUBERT BOUKOBZA & NAOMI CAMPBELL; KYLIE MINOGUE; JOHNNY DEPP & KATE MOSS; JACK NICHOLSON; EMMANUELLE SEIGNER, MARIE SEZNEC & ROMAN POLANSKI; HAVING A SPLASHING TIME, GRACE JONES

What if you were presented with a time machine – one that only went backwards? A chance to be who you were for one night only. To be 18, deranged and free in Paris one more time. Would you take that chance? It would be flirting with danger...

So, picture the scene. It's 1993. Autumnal Paris in all its arrogant glory. I am freshly released from St Paul's Girls' School, feverish with freedom, vodka, life. My best friend and I whizz home from our dispiriting internships (mine in a French packaging company – no *The Devil Wears Prada* here) and fling ourselves into bed from six until 10pm. We need energy. For dancing.

We go to huge clubs, small clubs, gay clubs, scary clubs: Vogue, VIP, Le Palace, L'Arc, Queen, Le Cirque, Le Cabaret. Towering above all these is Les Bains Douches in the Marais and its ringmaster, Marie-Line the bouncer, empowered to turn people away with the withering words, '*Ce soir ça ne va pas être possible.*' It's not going to be possible tonight. For three months this woman holds our nights hostage like a bouncering Boadicea in an Alice band. One veteran Bains Doucher remembers waltzing in, night after night, until one devastating moment – THE WORDS. And then, the following evening, he was allowed back in, a little humbler. Marie-Line does not need to explain; she is the gatekeeper. And what a crowd she guards: Roman Polanski, Mick Jagger, Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss... and Grace Jones. Goddess Grace Jones, swathed in Alaïa, who one night envelopes me in an intense embrace just because we happen to be standing next to each other by the bar.

In fact, Les Bains has always been a star magnet – celebrity is part of its DNA. To understand why we need to travel further back in time, to 1885. Picture the scene, again. François Auguste Guerbois is a hit among the chattering classes. His first venture, the eponymous Café Guerbois, is a mecca for the French Bohemians: Monet, Zola and Renoir are regulars. Manet once fought a duel there. The entrepreneurial Guerbois goes on to open a private bathhouse, Les Bains Douches, and establishes himself as Paris's premier player. Marcel Proust comes for regular sulphur soaks. The Bohemians and other artists and intellectuals frolic in the Turkish baths. It is, quite literally, a hot spot.

The baths don't last, but the atmosphere lingers. In 1978, two impresarios rent out the derelict building and hire a local lad, a certain Philippe Starck, to decorate it. BOOM! It's Les Bains Douches 2.0! Joy Division record a live album there. Keith Haring, Catherine Deneuve, Sean Penn and Bryan Ferry all groove there. It's Europe's Studio 54. There is a pool for models to fall into. Oops. There are foam parties. There is Marie-Line. There is me. And then it peters out. It just does. We could blame superstar DJ David Guetta, who took over sometime in the 2000s, but we won't. The place closes its doors in 2010.

Enter Jean-Pierre Marois, a man so keen to harness some of that Les Bains stardust that he decides to turn it into a hotel. He calls Marie-Line, who's pushing 70 but still terrifying, out of retirement to run Saturday night. Les Bains is back. And so are we. No longer 18. More like 40.

But Les Bains puts you in that hungry teenage mood: the corridors are dark and musky (literally – a wanton scent is pumped into them. It is as if a hot young man has been trailing around). The restaurant and bar are blood-red, the ceilings sculpted into huge water drops, in homage to Les Bains' history. Everything is sexy-gloomy, just asking for a knee-trembler. Except for the rooms, which are almost daydream-bright. The furniture is mid-century circular; nothing has corners, so you almost forget where you end and where Les Bains begins. In the bar, super-soignée women wearing challenging fashion

THE NINETIES & NOW

By *Natasha Edwards*

THE RESTAURANT

THEN LES AMBASSEDEURS

Grand dining from Christian Constant in the palatial splendour of the Crillon.

NOW CLAMATO

Bertrand Grébaut's new restaurant (sister to Septime) does superb little fish dishes.

THE SHOP

THEN YSL RIVE GAUCHE

The cult ready-to-wear boutique by the creator of the dinner jacket *pour elle*.

NOW THE BROKEN ARM

Streetwise concept store in the Marais, where haute labels meet weird trainers.

THE BAR

THEN CAFE COSTES

The café that put the Costes brothers, and Philippe Starck, on the map.

NOW BRASSERIE BARBES

New-generation eating and drinking. The rooftop is THE place for cocktails with a view.

THE SIGHT

THEN OPERA BASTILLE

The oil drum-like opera house was one of Mitterrand's *grands projets*.

NOW MONNAIE DE PARIS

The Baroque mint is now the place to catch the coolest art exhibitions.



order dirty martinis. Since it reopened in March, Les Bains has already hosted parties for Louis Vuitton, Givenchy, Dior and all the Victoria's Secret models. It's a scene again. I catch up with Marie-Line – part charm, part steel. It's 'sublime' to be back, she says. She is still looking for a 'bon look', she tells me, an 'original' crowd. When I ask her who she'd like to see from the old days, she doesn't hesitate: 'Jack Nicholson. I always adored Jack. I would love to see him again.'

We start the night tamely. No disco nap and shots but a different kind of fuel at Victoria 1836, a ridiculously handsome restaurant overlooking the Arc de Triomphe, where all the waiters look like Justin Bieber and there is a table in the middle of the room reserved for models. We go to the club downstairs, L'Arc, where we once thought about flirting with Mickey Rourke (we chickened out).

And then, as scared of being turned away as ever, we head back to Les Bains. Except this time, because we're staying in the hotel, there is no queuing, no worry – all we have to do is wave grandly at the doormen, leave our coats and bags in our bedroom and take the lift down to the club, where we dance for hours. And some Italians try to flirt with us. Which feels like a kind of personal victory. At 2.30am (yeah, baby) we take the lift back up to bed. And we just tuck ourselves in above the nightclub. It is GENIUS. It turns out that, after all these years, the really cool thing is comfort and convenience – Les Bains and I have both grown up.

Book it Les Bains (lesbains-paris.com; 00 33 1 42 77 07 07), double, from £355, including breakfast. Eurostar (eurostar.com) travels to Paris up to 21 times a day, from £75.



THE MARAIS AT NIGHT, RIGHT, EMILIE & HER FRIEND MARIE-ELISABETH RUMENS BALANZINO, 2015

