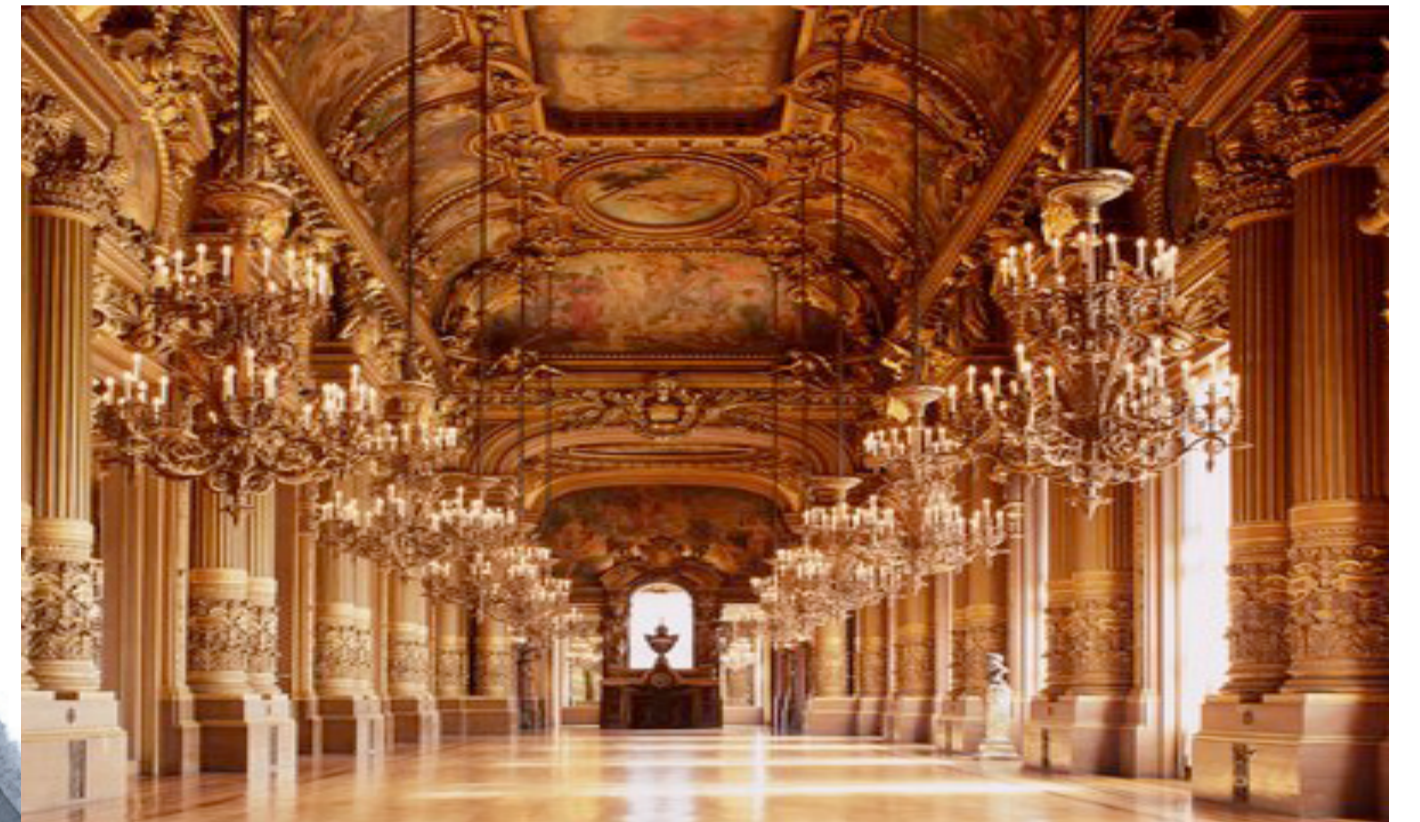


# The Haute Couture Guide to Paris

When, where, who and what... all you need to know about negotiating the capital of fashion during the wild and glamorous excesses of collection week. Words and illustrations by top fashion illustrator and longtime Paris insider **David Downton**



**C'est magnifique** Despite its transformation into a celebrity hangout and fashionists' favourite, L'Hotel (top) is still recognisably the raffish haunt of Oscar Wilde - who would no doubt had something droll to say about the excesses of couture and collections held in such grand settings as the Palais Garnier opera house (above).



## “You may know Paris, but you don't know Paree”

“You may know Paris, but you don't know Paree,” to quote Cole Porter. Or, at least, you may not know it in January and July, when the couture circus hits town. Once discreet, black-tie presentations just for clients (no paparazzi, no celebrities), in recent years the haute couture shows have evolved into unapologetic displays of ego and excess, underpinned by astonishing craftsmanship, reckless creativity and a celebration of beauty in extremis.

Of course, the current financial Armageddon means that it may be quite a while before we see anything to equal the flights of fantasy of a decade or so ago. No one who witnessed John Galliano's Marchesa Casati collection for Dior in 1997, for example, is likely to forget it. Commandeering the gloriously ornate Palais Garnier, Paris' Second Empire opera house, the show was a dazzling rebuke to a cynical, seen-it-all age.

An audience of 1,500 gathered in the grand foyer and snacked on Ladurée macarons while a tango orchestra played and 'maharajahs' sporting diamonds as big as the Ritz served Champagne at petal-strewn tables. All this before the show started.

Then, as lightning flashed and thunder rolled, model and house muse Suzanne von Aichinger ran up the marble staircase in a black crinoline so vast that as she sped through the foyer it swung to left and right, shattering Champagne glasses as she went. “I've just seen the Lion King on Broadway,” announced a breathless Dominic Dunne after the

show. “It has nothing on this!”

The use of the Opéra Garnier is significant. Unlike London and New York, where fashion shows are mostly staged in clusters of corporate tents, Paris plays a pivotal role in couture's magic lantern show. Its buildings - from the grandest (Versailles, the Grand Palais, the Jeu de Paume, the Rodin Museum and the Louvre) to the most utilitarian (Gare d'Austerlitz, the École Berthier, even a municipal swimming pool in the 16th) provide a magical extra dimension and, at times, a welcome distraction.

There are still echoes of a more genteel time. Karl Lagerfeld occasionally returns to the Chanel headquarters in the Rue Cambon, staging shows so intimate (not to say cramped) that exasperated photographers frantically signal to the front row to keep their footwear out of shot. The advantage, of course, is that you get to see the extraordinary workmanship that is couture's raison d'être. But there are disadvantages, too. I once watched in mute horror as a pen that had been balancing on my sketchbook disappeared into the rustling folds of a passing skirt.

Although not officially on the couture schedule (there are strict rules about these things) Alber Elbaz of Lanvin has upped the exclusivity ante recently by taking a salon at the Hôtel Crillon and personally talking a dozen or so members of the press corps through his collection. “I was thinking,” he mused, as a



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model appeared in a sparkling Stetson, “of Liza Minnelli, shopping in a supermarket.” A happier, calmer world it would be if Elbaz’ potent, po-faced charm were bottled and spritzed through airport lounges and onto city trading floors.

Over the last decade the schedules have thinned as Saint Laurent, Ungaro, Balmain and Mugler, among others, have closed their couture ateliers. But make no mistake, fashion is everywhere. The great museums stage blockbuster exhibitions to coincide with the couture calendar (Christian Lacroix, Valentino and Richard Avedon have all featured recently) and shops, from the ever-hip boutique Colette, to the discreetly elegant bookshop Calignani, are ‘dressed’ for the occasion.

Beyond the catwalk, the action is focused on the hotels, bars and cafes where deals are done, careers made and collections dissected. The grand old palaces, the Ritz, Crillon, Meurice, and to a lesser extent the Bristol, Plaza Athénée and Four Seasons (formerly the George V), attract the top fashion

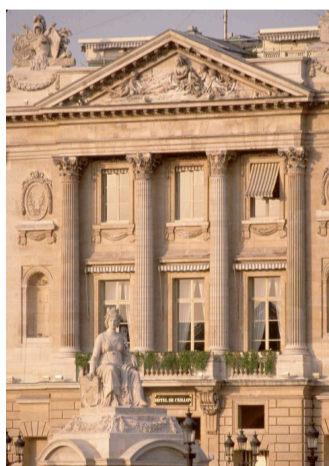
“Half the people live off fashion while the other half lives for it”

editors, visiting celebrities and those rare birds of fashion, clients. The Hôtel Costes hosts a younger, hipper crowd. Jacques Garcia designed this sumptuously theatrical boutique hotel seemingly as a crash-pad for Napoleon the Third. The superiority and surliness of the female waiting staff, supermodels manqués, however, is legendary. If you happen to be dining with a genuine supermodel - which is to be recommended- expect already grudging service to curdle into a battle of wills.

Flowers are everywhere in Paris and at couture time they become a form of currency. Vast bowers decorate shows and shop openings, special clients receive special arrangements from designers. (If you are not one of the favoured few receiving tributes from John, Karl and Giorgio, you can always fill your hotel room yourself and fake the cards - I know people who have done it). And Christian Lacroix’s shows climax with a blizzard of carnations thrown into the air as the music swells and the designer and his bride take their valedictory promenade.

“In Paris, half the population lives off fashion, while the other half lives for it,” noted the social commentator Emmeline Raymond almost a century ago. It is still true today.

Getting ‘onto the list’ and into one of the big six shows - Chanel, Dior, Lacroix, Armani, Givenchy and Valentino - can be a tricky proposition. Of course it helps if you are, to use a technical term, fabulous. Or at least fabulously famous, beautiful, wealthy or connected. If you are the editor of a fabulous magazine, or a model-size Oscar nominee planning a summer wedding, shows may be held or schedules reshuffled to suit. But whether you fit into any of the above categories or not, it is still possible to visit Paris this July, to enjoy one of the world’s most beautiful cities in the sunshine, and rejoice in fashion’s passing parade. Here’s how.



**C’est incroyable** For stars such as Naomi Campbell, Le Crillon is the place to stay, while the show to beat remains John Galliano’s extravaganza for Dior at Versailles in 2000 (left)

# HOW TO DO FASHION WEEK

Where to stay, eat, shop and sip a cocktail and who to know to air-kiss when the couture circus hits Paris this July.

## THE PLACES TO STAY

### L' HÔTEL.

One of the world's first hip hotels, according to Herbert Ypma, author of the Hip Hotel guides, who should know. This legendary 27-room Left Bank hangout (below) has, as they say, had some work done. The make-over, orchestrated by Jacques Garcia (the force behind the Hôtel Costes) has upped the luxe quotient, but this is still recognisably the haunt of Oscar Wilde and music-hall star Mistinguette, only now it has a sexy, starry lobby and a pool in the catacomb basement. 13 rue des Beaux Arts, 6th arr; (00 33 1 44 41 99 00; [www.lhotel.com](http://www.lhotel.com)).



### HÔTEL THÉRÈSE

A stylish three-star 'Hôtel de Charme' that actually lives up to its billing. Wonderfully located near the Palais Royal, the 43-room Thérèse is presided over with glamorous efficiency by Madame de Lattre (who also owns the bijou Left Bank hideaway Le Verneuil). No restaurant, and rooms can be on the small side (ask for an 02 or 08), but it has everything you need and more. 5 rue Thérèse, 1st (00 33 1 42 96 10 01; [www.hoteltherese.com](http://www.hoteltherese.com)).

### 3 ROOMS AT 5 RUE DE MOUSSY

This actually consists of three 100-square metre apartments in the Marais, designed by Azzedine Alaïa. Boasting up-to-the-minute stainless steel kitchens, poured concrete floors and mid-century modern furniture from the designer's own collections, it leaves you hard-pressed to find a more fashion-forward place to lay your head. Friends who stay there say Alaïa drops in from his atelier next door from time to time. 5 rue de Moussy, 4th (00 33 1 44 78 92 00; [Info@3rooms-5ruedemoussy.com](mailto:Info@3rooms-5ruedemoussy.com); [www.3rooms-10corsocomo.com](http://www.3rooms-10corsocomo.com)).

## THE PLACES TO EAT

### DAVÉ (pronounced Dar-vay)

Everyone comes to Davé. Arguably the world's most fashionable Chinese restaurant, Davé has been pulling in an A-list crowd for more than 25 years. There is no menu (though you might be asked if there is anything you don't like), prices vary, and its two red rooms are on

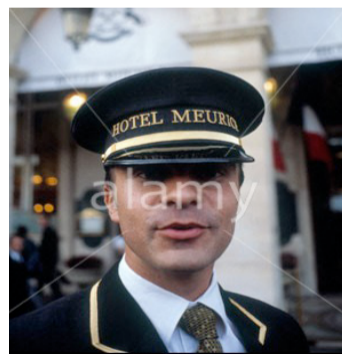


**C'est Davé** And when he knows your name, you're among the fashion fabulous.

the compact side. But then it is not the food (which is delicious) or the ambience that keeps Kate and Leo and Karl and Keanu coming back; it's the charismatic and blithely entertaining M. Davé himself. "My job is to make fabulous people feel fabulous," he says. "After all, anyone can serve a spring roll." 12 rue de Richelieu, 1st (00 1 33 08 99 69 06 27 2).

### CAFÉ RUC

Its location between the Louvre and the Comédie Française ensures a busy



tourist trade by day, but by night this becomes 'the canteen' for fashion journalists. The Ruc, with its glamorously gloomy dark green and red interior, is less of a scene than its sister hotel, the Costes, although it shares the same menu - delivered with considerably less attitude. Great for bistro food, club sandwiches, Blanc de poulet etc. 159 rue Saint-Honoré, 1st (00 33 1 42 60 97 54 3).

### VILLA LYS

The point here is the location as much as the food (again, very good: chicken

tagine, vegetable couscous etc). In summer you can eat out under the lime trees in one of Paris' most beautiful locations and luxuriate in the hush. The garden of the Palais Royal was laid out for Cardinal Richelieu in 1630. The lovely dim arcades were added a century or so later, and they now house galleries, restaurants and bars, fashion boutiques and fascinatingly opaque shops selling books, prints, and stamps (the area is a philatelists' Mecca). Villa Lys, 30, rue de Montpensier, 1st (00 33 1 42 61 85 99).

## KEY BARS & TEAROOMS

### LE BAR 228.

The bar at the Hôtel Le Meurice is a longstanding rendezvous for upscale Parisians (on my last visit I sat next to Juliette Greco). Revamped in 2007 by Philippe Starck, who was inspired by sometime guest Salvador Dali, the 228 is sexy, stylish and suitably surreal. Try

looking at your reflection in the mirrored cabinet and it is Dali's face that appears. 228 rue de Rivoli, 1st (00 33 01 44 58 10 10; [www.lemeurice.com](http://www.lemeurice.com)).

### ANGÉLINA

Alongside Ladurée, Angéline's is probably the most celebrated salon du thé in Paris. Famous for its rich Chocolat Africain (served with a pitcher of unsweetened whipped cream and iced water), its interior is just as you'd expect: a candy-coloured, marble and gilt confection. With a customer base that ranges from grand dames to coltish teenagers, Angéline's is an institution that has sensibly resisted change. 226 rue de Rivoli, 1st (0033 1 42 60 82 00; [no website](http://www.angelina.com)).

## AND WHERE YOU SHOP

### DIDIER LUDOT

Didier Ludot sets the bar for vintage clothing. Hordes of museum-quality treasures from Balenciaga, Chanel, Dior and YSL are strewn through the Palais Royal shop with artful abandon. At times it feels as though you have stumbled into a countless' attic. La Petite Robe Noir, a sister shop across the gardens, is a more rigorous affair. Black dresses from Ludot's own label and vintage finds



are set off by a glowing red interior and are presided over with magnificent disdain by a beehive-sporting vendeuse of the old school. Jardin du Palais Royal, 1st (0033 1 42 96 06 56; [www.didierludot.com](http://www.didierludot.com)).

### ASTIER DE VILLATTE

If you manage to get past the *cravats*



*rouges* (the languid "jeunes premiers" or would-be male leads who provide the lethal form of security peculiar to couture week) and into a show, a beautiful notebook will add immeasurably to your credibility - all fashion editors scribble notes and sketch silhouettes, unless they bring someone with them for the purpose. This wonderfully esoteric design store on the rue Saint-Honoré stocks my favourites. It's also great for beautiful but vaguely unsettling glassware, furniture and mirrors. If nothing else appeals, try their own-brand pepper, sage or ginger washing-up liquid (in a beautiful glass bottle, of course).

173 rue Saint-Honoré, 1st (00 33 1 42 60 74 13; [www.astierdevillatte.com](http://www.astierdevillatte.com)).

### COLETTE

A visit to this design/fashion Mecca is, I'm afraid, compulsory. At times off-puttingly hip and maddeningly self-regarding, Colette is nevertheless an object lesson in editing. A concept store with an unerring sense of its customer and of the zeitgeist, its fashion, books, magazines, gizmos and beauty products are brilliantly chosen. If (God forbid) water is your thing, indulge yourself in the basement where 90 varieties, including Cloud Juice (Tasmanian rainwater) are on offer. 213 rue Saint-Honoré, 1st (00 33 1 55 35 33 99; [www.colette.fr](http://www.colette.fr)).

### MONA LISAIT

A chain of bookstores (literal translation, "Mona was reading") dealing with art, fashion and photography titles at bargain prices, Mona Lisait is great for stocking up on the books you missed (or couldn't justify) the first time around, at a fraction of the original cost. Edmund White was a frequent visitor to the Marais branch during his time in the quarter. Locations include Place Joachim du Bellay, 1st (0033 1 40 26 83 66; [www.monalisait.fr](http://www.monalisait.fr)).

Details of the couture shows are posted at [www.modeaparis.com](http://www.modeaparis.com) and David Downton's journal of fashion illustration, *Pourquoi Pas*, can be seen at [www.pqpmagazine.com](http://www.pqpmagazine.com).



**C'est essential** A look around lifestyle store Colette: mandatory before you leave