

Grand illusions

Edgy Paris fashion brand Maison Martin Margiela is moving into hospitality. Carola Long reports

For the fashion crowd, word of yet another hotel from a big designer brand might be expected to elicit the kind of withering yawn reserved for the criminally *passé*. Not so the new hotel project from Maison Martin Margiela in Paris. While the brand doesn't have the global fame of Versace or Armani, both of which have opened hotels, its niche position is part of its appeal. This is a fashion insider's fashion label, with the kind of stylistic trademarks that can leave those not in the know feeling baffled.

In more than 20 years since the label was founded, its creations have ranged from the wittily decorative to the deconstructed. It has made coats made from Christmas tinsel and paper towels, put shoulder pads on the outside of clothes and turned a leather butcher's apron into an evening dress.

Behind the label's unique vision was founder Martin Margiela, an elusive Belgian who avoided being interviewed or photographed and didn't bow after his shows. However, a few years ago he left his own label, which was bought by holding group Only The Brave in 2002, and it's now designed by a team. Since then the brand has become more commercial, branching out into fragrance and interior design. Purists say the clothes aren't the same without Margiela himself but a sense of surrealism, wit and the avant-garde remains.

A major difference between this project and, say, the new Moschino hotel in Milan or the colourful Missoni hotel in Edinburgh, is that Maison Martin Margiela hasn't opened its own dedicated hotel. Instead, appropriately for a fashion project, it's a collaboration: it has redesigned 17 of the 57 rooms in the Hotel La Maison Champs-Élysées. The hotel sits in a glamorous location behind Paris's famous luxury shopping street Avenue Montaigne, home to Dior and Chanel, which I found to be just far enough away from the mass-market clamour of the Champs-Élysées.

The defining decorative technique is *trompe l'oeil*. Nothing is what it seems and as my stay progresses, I find myself questioning every mirror, door handle or ornament, with an *Alice in Wonderland*-like curiosity or, perhaps, suspicion. "Maison Martin Margiela has created a dramatic world where reality and make-believe seem to blend," says the house, which issues its utterances namelessly, like the Wizard of Oz, since there is no one design figurehead. Several of the rooms feature wallpaper printed with black-and-white photos of walls and fittings in a late 19th-century style, which recalls the type of interiors synonymous with grand old Parisian hotels. In the lobby, brushed steel lamps illuminate the type of faded outlines left by paintings, rather than paintings themselves, giving a ghostly impression. Black, white and grey carpets printed with wood panelling or the patterns of classical French ceiling design also have a slightly eerie effect, modern yet with the nostalgic patina of an old black-and-white photo.



Witty From above: a salon off the reception area of Maison Martin Margiela's Paris hotel; the 'Golden Salon', and one of the deluxe suites

In addition to trickery, there's some downright weirdness, not least in the "Closet of Rarities" suite. One of seven suites, it has black walls and floorboards, the better to show off a giant glass cabinet full of bizarre *objets d'art* that look like they should belong to an eccentric Victorian inventor. There's a sculpture made from oyster shells, an oversized snow dome, playing card house, and a candle shaped like a hand, all of which are for sale.

This is the best suite, along with the "Golden Salon", which has wallpaper made from photos of the gilded reception room in the more traditional part of the hotel. But there's a big gap between the suites and the "Deluxe Couture" rooms. When I was shown to my *chambre* (one of the latter), I was baffled by how unremarkable it was, with its cream walls, plain cotton curtains and clinical, white-tiled bathroom. Was its plain (but not plain enough to be minimalist) quality an ironic joke, a pastiche of a standard room in a standard hotel? Gradually, I tuned into more visual tricks – what appeared to be a rug on the floor was actually printed on to the carpet, and the impression of light streaming into the room was, in fact, created by square patches of paler paint on the white wall – but I wasn't convinced that they transformed the room into something special, despite a Mac linked to a giant screen and very comfy bed. One wall was covered in plywood, hiding cupboards and the bath-

room door. "Plywood is fashionable," said my boyfriend. Fashion explains a lot.

The hotel's other motif is the white fabric in which sofas and chairs come wrapped. They resemble the cotton toiles that designers use to cut suit patterns, as well as dust covers, which adds to the sense that the hotel has been abandoned, left undisturbed by humans, let alone tourists. In the dining room, canvas-wrapped chairs are perched on invisible metal poles so that they seem to float above the floor, as if there's a poltergeist present.

In Margiela boutiques, instead of a glossy carrier bag, purchases are taken away in white canvas sacks, and the staff in the design studios wear white coats that resemble lab coats. Before arriving at the hotel I was hoping the staff would be similarly dressed, facilitating endless jokes about "the men in white coats" coming to take my plate/coat/luggage away but, alas, they wear typical porter's and concierge's uniforms.

Staff are helpful and polite, particularly in the restaurant that serves simple seasonal French cooking. There is a small bar but the hotel could benefit from a larger one if it wants to be a place for the city's *beau monde* to drink champagne while drinking in each other's impeccable appearances.

What the hotel does have is a cigar room, with black walls and leather club armchairs. These are a growing trend in Paris, allowed despite the smoking ban. The hotel just isn't allowed to publicise it. The smoking room will leave guests divided, no doubt, as will Margiela's quirky vision. This isn't a gold-taps, swagged curtains, *toile de jout* wallpaper vision of Parisian luxury. It's not for fashionistas who worship at the altar of logos, blow-dries and *Sex and the City*. It's a cool, conceptual play on illusion; which is what, at its heart, fashion is really all about.

Carola Long is the FT's deputy style editor

Details

Doubles cost from €350, suites from €1,250; www.lamaisoncm.com. Carola Long travelled from London to Paris with Eurostar (www.eurostar.com), which offers return fares from £69, or from £189 in "standard premier" class.

Short cuts

London In Ibiza and the Côte d'Azur, it is *de rigueur* to arrive for dinner by speedboat, but now it is possible in London too. A service being launched this week offers diners the chance to be picked up at any pier on the Thames, taken for a spin at speeds of up to 35 knots, then dropped off for dinner at one of a wide range of restaurants, from the Dove, a historic pub in Hammersmith, to Le Pont de la Tour, the restaurant by Tower Bridge where Tony Blair entertained Bill Clinton in 1997. London Rib Voyages, the company running the service, says it hopes it will be popular for birthdays and special occasions as well as for corporate entertainment. There's a flat fee of £365 per boat, per hour, which covers up to 12 passengers. www.londonribvoyages.com

New York Sales of guidebooks may be collapsing as tourists turn to online information sources but one group of travel writers has come up with a novel way of harnessing the internet to their advantage. The New York-based website www.fortnight.com uses a network of more than 60 writers to create personalised itineraries for travellers, who input their destination, length of trip and interests. Costs vary, but average \$150.

Edinburgh After a three-year, £46m refurbishment, the National Museum of Scotland reopens on 29 July, promising "the world under one roof". Sixteen new galleries have been added to the existing 20, covering nature, science and the remote cultures encountered by early Scottish explorers, merchants and missionaries. The 20,000 objects on display range from a Martian meteorite to the world's oldest colour television. www.nms.ac.uk



Château Les Carrasses in Languedoc

Hanoi Vietnam Airlines is to launch the first direct flights between Vietnam and the UK on December 8. It plans to operate four flights a week to London Gatwick, two from Hanoi and two from Ho Chi Minh City. The move is part of the airline's ambitious wider expansion plans, as it seeks to capitalise on the growing number of tourists visiting Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. www.vietnamair.co.uk

Languedoc A chateau left derelict for more than 20 years reopens next weekend as a holiday retreat promising the facilities and standards of a luxury hotel, combined with the space of a private villa and the character of a working winery. Château Les Carrasses, which was built in 1886, has been converted into 28 suites, ranging from one to three bedrooms, and the vineyards surrounding the chateau have been brought back into production by winemaker David Alcaraz. A range of wine-themed activities, from tutored tastings to meeting local winemakers, will be on offer throughout the summer. Suites sleeping up to four cost from €200 per night in August. www.lescarrasses.com

Bruneck A "mountain museum" created by the world's most celebrated living climber has opened at Bruneck castle in the Italian Dolomites. For the last two decades, Reinhold Messner (pictured) the Italian mountaineer who was the first to climb all the world's 14 peaks above 8,000m, has been developing a chain of museums throughout the

Dolomites. Each focuses on a different element of mountain culture, from the history of climbing to art from mountain regions. The Bruneck museum is the fifth and final Messner Mountain Museum, and concentrates on mountain peoples, from Himalayan sherpas to the Walsers of the Alps. www.messner-mountain-museum.it



Tom Robbins

BEAU MONDE

More chic retreats in Paris

Hôtel Costes A people-watching paradise, full of the artfully rock'n'roll hipsters who also frequent cool lifestyle boutique Colette nearby, the Costes heaves during fashion week. The lavish bordello-like decor features red walls and chandeliers, while sultry dim lighting helps all the guests look good. Doubles from €550; 239 rue St-Honoré, www.hotelcostes.com

3 Rooms Owned by designer Azzedine Alaïa, this hotel actually consists of three self-contained apartments. With

its uncluttered, airy rooms, white walls and furniture by the likes of Marc Newson and Arne Jacobsen, 3 Rooms is the perfect antidote to the lavish interiors that characterise so many Paris hotels. Doubles from €450; 5 rue de Moussy, no website, email: info@3rooms-fruedemoussy.com

Hôtel Le Bellechasse The rooms of this Left Bank hotel were created by French designer Christian Lacroix and reflect his love of exuberant colour and pattern by combining images of

dragonflies, top-hatted Victorian men with butterfly wings, metallics and geometric patterns, all over the walls and ceilings. Doubles from €220; 8 rue de Bellechasse, www.lebellechasse.com

Hôtel Particulier Montmartre With its leafy garden, complete with fountain, this tranquil hotel is more about relaxing than posing. It's still super-chic though, with an eclectic mix of modern and baroque-style touches. Doubles from €390, 23 avenue Junot, www.hotel-particulier-montmartre.com

A machine-gun minibreak

Forget paint-balling: a new company is offering weekends at a secret Swiss weapons training base. Daniel Metcalfe gives it a shot

Golf, squash and tennis are all very good for relieving tension at the end of hard working week but a new tour company has an altogether more high-octane alternative: firing machine guns in a secret military facility in Switzerland. "Smell the cordite" is aimed squarely at the City market, both as executive stress-release and corporate team-building (a sort of grown-up paintballing), but is open to anyone and no experience is needed. The point of flying to Switzerland is that this government-owned shooting range is one of the few places in the world where civilians can train alongside police and army units. I am warned that this necessitates a certain level of secrecy: "You haven't seen nothing, you haven't heard nothing, you don't know nothing about this facility," glares my instructor on day one. Writing a travel article under these conditions is rather tricky but I can reveal that we flew to Zurich and

the facility is off a slip-road near a service station, in a glade and surrounded by mountains.

The directions might be vague but the instruction we receive is top notch. There's Geordie, an ex-British army man with 20 years of experience in "special operations" and his right-hand man, a muscular figure with a soft Hungarian accent. Both have a distinctly reassuring manner, building up confidence in their students until handling a weapon becomes intuitive. Our first weapon is a Glock 9mm, a semi-automatic pistol used by the Austrian police, among others. We spend the morning doing drills, entering and releasing the magazine, learning shooting postures and gun-handling etiquette – all of which is vital when we start pumping rounds into an increasingly frayed cardboard cut-out of a human being in the afternoon. This is pleasingly accelerated learning. "Not at all like the army," one guest tells me. "There it takes three

weeks to fire anything. They shout and shout till you're so nervous with the weapon you can hardly shoot."

I feel I'm getting the hang of it when suddenly we're ordered to retreat. One of the professional teams in the range (a unit specialising in crowd control) has set off a CN gas grenade. We seek protection under the trees and wait until the noxious cloud has passed.

By day two (and after a night in the real world: a simple but comfortable local hotel) our drills have sunk in. We're ready for rapid-reaction exercises, firing first from 20, then 10, and then only five metres from the target.

The point of firing at such close range is to imagine that we are being attacked. It's less about aim now, and more about the instant disabling of our putative assailant. We reach for the weapon in our holster, tilt our wrists anti-clockwise (which relaxes the muscles in our forearm) and fire as soon as we point at the cut-out.

This pistol is an extension of the arm, we're repeatedly told, or a very much nastier version of a punch.

"What about the safety catch?" I ask. "The trigger ring is the safety mechanism, mate" says Geordie. "Ain't no time fiddlin' with complex safety mechs when someone's trying to kill you." Filmmic images of drug-store hold-ups and police gunfights flash before my eyes.



Trigger-happy Daniel Metcalfe takes aim

By the afternoon we're handling a Swiss Arms 553 Special Operations Weapon, a ferocious-looking semi-automatic rifle. It is, we're told in a salesman-like patter, "a favourite of anti-terrorism forces"; with its foldable stock and a translucent polymer magazine, "this new model consistently outperforms its rivals".

Following intensive drills, I click in the magazine and cock the weapon. I have to admit that even for someone like me, with no previous interest in guns, this deadly weapon – with its light recoil and elegant ease of use – makes shooting eerily enjoyable.

It's a feeling that many Swiss would recognise. Partly as a result of the system of national service, the country has one of the highest gun ownership rates in the world. A referendum pushing for tighter gun controls over home weapons was roundly rejected earlier this year.

By the end of the course my muscles are taut, my reflexes fast and I'm hun-

gry for more. The question is, what am I going to do with the knowledge? Geordie's dream is that his students will be able to defuse an emergency situation (such as an armed robbery) when no-one else knows how: to disable a gun, pull out a magazine, render it useless.

Most clients, I feel, won't be taking it this far and will be happy enough with the adrenalin rush, an array of unlikely new skills, and the sensation of release before flying back to work. "Forget 'who dares wins'," says Geordie, as we leave the range. "Being the best is about stealth and confidence. Keep low, move fast, trust no one. And don't forget: you haven't seen nothing."

The two-day course costs £690, not including airfares or accommodation www.smellthecordite.co.uk

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