



# Heart of light

Timeless elegance in the heart of Paris.



**An intimate five-star hotel in the very heart of Paris, Villa-des-Prés captures the rich history of this magical city while adhering to the very Parisian notion that one should never announce style too loudly – discretion, always.**

Story **Anabel Dean**  
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"We're in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés," says the Manager of Villa-des-Prés. He's seen it countless times but is enthralled again by the angular buildings with iconic zinc rooftops contrasted against tempestuous sky.

It feels as if we're wheeling slowly in a full circle close to the Seine, not far from the Louvre Museum, on the frontiers of the French Academy and the Latin Quarter. Towers, domes, chimneys rise above the sinuous suggestion of streets below, centuries layered one on top of the other with seemingly casual disregard for chronological order.

A hotchpotch of antique booksellers and chic designer boutiques jostle below at the epicentre of postwar Parisian intellectual life. This is where existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (and a generation of non-conformist writers like Ernest Hemingway) sipped, puffed and pontificated at Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots, just a few minutes' walk away from Villa-des-Prés.



It's raining now. People with umbrellas are scattering through narrow medieval laneways between stone buildings with hidden courtyards and shuttered windows. We close the balcony door and step inside.

My cosy corner of Paris reveals itself. Villa-des-Prés is a new five-star hotel located on Rue de Buci - one of the oldest streets in Paris that predates the city itself as part of the village of Saint-Germain - which evolved around the fortified abbey as early as the 12th century.

Villa-des-Prés opened in 2023, as the luxe younger sister of the beloved Hôtel d'Aubusson, letting the light into a former post-Haussmannian apartment block restyled by French interior architect Bruno Borriane.

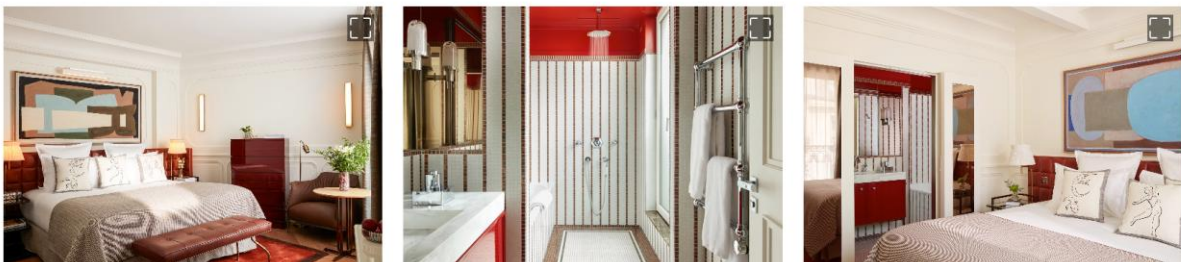
After years working alongside Philippe Starck on iconic hotels (New York's *Hudson* and Miami's *Delano*) Borriane has created something quieter here, perhaps more recognisably European. Restraint is key in 34 rooms and suites designed as if they've been here all along. Considering the site history, that was an engineering feat that required considerable sleight of hand, for the building was lifted entirely during its conversion from apartments to hotel in an expensive (and invisible) undertaking to eliminate vibration from the Metro passing beneath.



Art Deco sensibilities are threaded through so much of early 20th-century Paris, and there's a whisper of that here, with original features retained where possible in balconies, bay windows, ironwork and stonework expected of a building dating to 1911. Charmingly, preserved by requirement of the Commission de Paris, the original chambermaid staircase remains in situ, impossibly narrow but wonderful to behold as a museum piece, "part of the history of Paris," says Jérôme.

Striking modern interventions ensure that rooms offer exceptional soundproofing so guests need not be perturbed by street-level animation. Two top-floor apartments are adorned with gorgeous panoramic city views and there's a rich colour palette in every room with red-accented bathrooms featuring intricate mosaic tiles, marble sinks, Diptyque bath products. Beds are immense and comfortable. Lighting and curtains are controlled by small wall-mounted units.

Staff are attentive, creating a genuinely warm and personable atmosphere for discerning guests who appreciate extra touches, like the private minibars stocked with coffee for the illy espresso machines and a full array of good liquor; a subterranean wellbeing area with a well-lit indoor pool (available for sauna and spa treatments) and a fitness room.



Gallery owner Amélie du Chalard - who runs her own space nearby and has been shaking up the Parisian gallery scene since 2015 - curated works from 11 French artists for the hotel. Not prints, not reproductions, original pieces scattered through the rooms as casually as art books on a coffee table. Polaroid cameras are provided with little journals for storing more memories and that's the kind of analog detail that embraces a very Parisian notion that one should never announce style too loudly. Discretion, always.

On the ground floor, there's a bar with deep armchairs and intimate lighting that adapts its personality from morning coffee through to evening champagne. There's no restaurant on site, but that's no hardship since we're in Saint-Germain-de-Prés, where restaurants crowd every corner and the neighbourhood reveals itself to be an unbeatable mix of cafés and oyster bars, all very lively, harmonious in the coexistence of tourists and locals.

After lunch, a visit to an art gallery is always, for me at least, obligatory.

Galerie Amélie du Chalard is just minutes away. Contemporary art here is much more accessible and enticing than the usual white-cube experience of an art gallery. It's a lovely way to spend an hour before returning to the hotel for the evening. Will I, or won't I, buy? No pressure.



In the narrow second-story window of a building opposite, a woman dances in front of a mirror, testing her evening outfit with an infant on her hip. It's a lovely vignette and reminds me that I should dress for dinner or begin searching for that bar made famous by the French bartender who claimed to have invented the Bloody Mary in 1921. Harry's Bar is not far away. Then I have a better idea.

Villa-des-Prés is a brilliant base for exploring the city with three metro stations (Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Mabillon and Odéon) within a couple of hundred yards. The journey to century-old *Benoit* is a Left Bank to Right Bank pilgrimage, across the Seine, between Le Marais and Les Halles.

*Benoit* has been an institution in Paris since opening in 1912. There's little to see from the street in an heirloom wrapped between muslin curtains with velvety red banquettes straight out of the Belle Époque. Brass coat hooks; etched glass; newspapers hanging on wooden canes.



This is Alain Ducasse's love letter to bistro tradition. Napery is crisply ironed and silver service is just as it's always been with waiters in white aprons.

A crystal coupe is filled immediately with champagne upon arrival.

Famously, la langue de Lucullus is still on the menu (fine slices of smoked tongue interleaved with pâté de foie gras). Onion soup and escargots in garlic butter remain as monuments of Gallic gastronomy. Fillet of sea bass and seared truffle-infused Albufera chicken are calling for attention.

These are French bistro dishes increasingly difficult to find in Paris, but the tarte tatin, when it comes, is a familiar marvel of caramelized apples that collapses at the touch of a spoon. It wouldn't be right to leave without scrolling a folked profiterole into an oozing bath of chocolate.

I'm grateful that tradition endures at *Benoit*. It's a forgotten fantasy. Just like a thousand-year-old street, a century-old building, a hotel that feels as if it's home. This is the timeless and contemporary Parisian experience that's as recognizable as the silhouette of the Arc de Triomphe.

