

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

CONDÉ NAST

VOLUME VI 2018

Traveler

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INSPIRATION

EDITION

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VOLUME VI 2018 — BAVARIA • CHILE • COLORADO • GUIZHOU

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Jacques Garcia is not personally in the business of seduction. The French maestro of hotel design is far too busy to bother about your love life himself. But step into any hotel around the world transfigured by his touch—notably the NoMad in New York, La Réserve in Paris, and L'Oscar, opening this month in London, with strokable velvet-and-leather walls and an onyx bar that casts a sultry glow over the lounge—and you'll get the sense that his aesthetic mission is to help you seal the deal.

“People go out to be seduced by people and to seduce people,” Garcia says. “I create places where people can meet. It starts by having the right chairs—comfy—and lighting. People look better in dim light, always. You need a convivial venue: a place where you can connect with people, where you feel attractive. Take Maison Souquet”—his 20-room Arab-meets-Gallic boîte in Paris’s ninth arrondissement that looks like what might have transpired if the Moors had conquered the Moulin Rouge. “Parisian couples go there to spice up their sex life.”

Garcia’s richly tactile, more-is-more approach has been his calling card for over 50 years. The red velvet club chairs that made 18th-century France feel daringly modern at Paris’s Hôtel Costes back in 1991 catapulted him to global fame. His hammam cocooned in zellige tiles at Marrakech’s La Mamounia and the giant brass rhinos that greet you at reception in Singapore’s Vagabond Club testify to Garcia’s stubborn lack of design restraint, even as the industry chased both sharp-edged minimalism and the

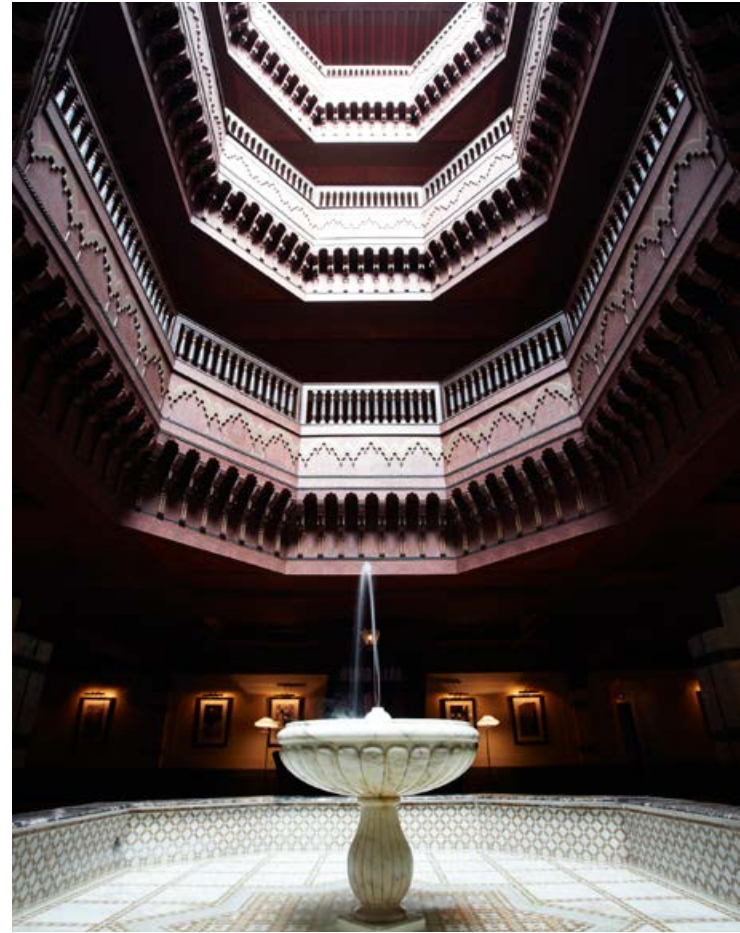
DREAM WEAVER

For more than 50 years, Jacques Garcia has made us fall in love with (and in) his hotels. L'Oscar, his new London opening, is no exception.

comfort-of-home look, with lived-in sofas, worn rugs, and piles of beat-up books everywhere. “We needed someone to bring out the mystical, sensual, and mysterious character of La Mamounia while preserving the spirit of the hotel,” says its general manager, Pierre Jochem, of Garcia’s three-year remodel of the 95-year-old icon in 2010. “Only Jacques could do that.” And yet, for all of his theatrics, the spaces he creates are miraculously free of gimmick, their designs intrinsic to the cities they inhabit.

With L’oscar, Garcia channels London through an unlikely venue: an early-20th-century Baptist church in Holborn, the heart of central London. Oscar Wilde plays muse for the 39-room, seven-story hideaway; it’s no surprise that the author, likewise known for his predilection to excess, is a kindred spirit. “In tribute to Wilde, I’m trying to evoke the tension between 21st-century modernity and Victorianism, which can often seem old-fashioned, full of fog and darkness,” he says. But for Garcia, it’s more about sensual strokes of scarlet, violet, and cobalt; wallpapers and bathtubs edged in gold; and an aviary of faux birds, from parakeets to peacocks.

This spread, from left: Garcia’s library at La Réserve has damask-upholstered armchairs and a grand piano; peacocks, a symbol of royalty, are painted above the original oak bookcases at L’oscar; the atrium, with a zellige-clad fountain and marble basin, at La Mamounia.



Literary influence has been a force in Garcia’s life for more than five decades. “My passion for travel comes from a very simple place: books. From the moment you start opening books at age 5, it gives you the impulse to discover and explore,” he says, citing nostalgia for picture and history books handed down to him at a young age from his father. “I’ve always sought, and will always seek till my final breath, knowledge. And you can’t acquire knowledge unless you go out.”

Garcia’s peripatetic urge has turned up inspiration in virtually every corner of the world: castle hopping across France as a child with his dad; breaking curfew in Communist-era St. Petersburg to bribe the owner of a “knackered, ancient” Riva boat into letting him take his friends for a spin on the Neva River; amassing reams of fabric in India to pitch a Jaipuresque tent in the garden of his beloved Normandy château. “I’ve traveled so much in my life that I know almost everything,” Garcia says. “Between you and me, I like to think that my hotels incite people to travel, too.” SARAH KHAN