

Outlook

SPLURGE

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LIVE THE GOOD LIFE.

SHIKHAR DHAWAN

*IS GEEK CHIC &
ON A WINNING
STREAK*

The Hottest
GADGETS

JORDAN'S
NATURAL
WONDERS

No Pumpkin!



A veritable Cinderella's ball. Debs take to the dance floor on opening night.

Couturier Hemant Sagar takes us to one of the world's most glamorous events, the annual Bal des Débutantes in Paris, that sees a smattering of debs from all over the world – from European aristocracy to business royalty – for a ringside view of a fairytale evening of haute couture and brilliant jewels.

This is a rare case of something priceless, literally. You cannot buy a ticket to this invitation-only, toast to glamour, held yearly in Paris, France.

This is the setting: Every year, 20 young girls between the ages of 16-22 are chosen from handpicked families worldwide to travel to the French capital with their parents to be officially introduced to society, which makes them a *débutante* or a 'deb'. This Bal is however a bit different, one could call it a 21st-century interpretation of the age-old English tradition of young ladies clad and gloved in white being presented to Her Majesty the Queen, thus called a *débutante*.

It is on the Saturday after Thanksgiving that Ophélie Renouard organizes the event that is known as Le Bal Crillon, in association with the Hôtel de Crillon, the world-famous, historic property on Place de la Concorde, belonging to

Rosewood Hotels. The Crillon, however, while undergoing its biggest renovation ever, is not the place where Le Bal happened this year; it is at the Palais de Chaillot opposite the Eiffel Tower, with its cinemascope view on the dazzling and glamorously lit monument towering over the event all evening. This year for the first time, the Official Jeweller and main sponsor of the event was Payal New York, represented by Payal Mehta, the bespoke jewellery designer from India.

Preparations begin earlier in the year, when each of the *débutantes* has made her final choice of dress that will be made especially for her by 'her' designer. Payal actually went to the extent of creating a sublime piece of jewellery to match the dress, and of course each deb.

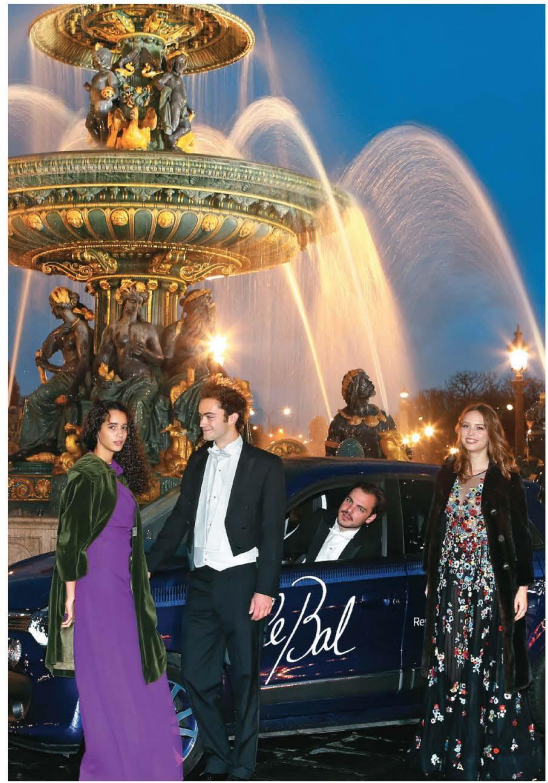
Fast forward to the night before the event: the 20 girls now having arrived in Paris, get together for their waltz les-

son given by Marc Reed, for the dance that will open the Ball an evening later. Watching the young couples holding on to each other and trying to watch their own feet to make sure they don't dance on each other's toes, or create a *faux pas*, is absolutely charming.

The evening of the Ball is here, and a black chauffeur-driven Renault with the logo of Le Bal drives up in front of the hotel to pick up each *débutante* to drive her to the Palais de Chailot. Each deb, bejewelled and fully attired in evening gown, is sashayed backstage. Nervousness and stage-fright accompany the last moments when parents and guests start pouring in, oohing and aahing about this historical and spectacular place with its unique view.

At each guest's nominated seat, with a handwritten card spelling out each name, one finds a printed menu announcing special creations by the Crillon's Michelin-starred chefs. The table service is exquisite; rosé champagne flows, and a live orchestra tantalizes you into a demi daydream. I was seated at a central table next to Payal Mehta with Rajni Malla, mother of Zara Fistolera, the Nepali-Italian *débutante*, and her grandmother Maharaj Kumari Rama Malla of Nepal.

Stéphane Bern, master of ceremonies, who



Left: New York-based jeweller Payal Mehta with Hemant Sagar; Right: Debs and cavaliers arrive at Le Bal in a chauffeur-driven Renault.

A printed menu announces creations by Crillon's Michelin-starred chefs. Rosé champagne flows, and a live orchestra tantalizes.

is himself media aristocracy in France, takes the mike and opens the Ball in French and English.

This is when the couples, *débutantes* and cavaliers, walk through the tables decked in Limoges porcelain and crystal, with Stéphane Bern giving a brief summary on each deb. This is where we hear that Olivia Hallisey, the 17-year-old American *débutante* was the winner of this year's Google science fair for having invented an inexpensive Ebola virus identification test apparatus. We also hear that Dominique Cojuangco from the Philippines has over 400,000 followers on Instagram. It is these tidbits that make the event come alive, as the audience goes into a frenzy of applause and enthusiasm to the sounds of the orchestra underlying each walk-through.

This is when we start looking at the exquisite hors d'oeuvres in our plates: an all-white composition of palm hearts and gold leaf, a welcome 'break' back to 'reality' before the debs prepare their solo walk-throughs. This is where you get the essence of the event: a 'fragile', young, beautiful girl dressed in haute couture and real jewels, hair done by Alexandre de Paris and wearing Christian Louboutins (official shoe supplier) on her feet, will walk through a grand hall of this stature to be declared a member of society in her own right.

As the evening continues, it is time for the ball to start: fathers and daughters line up opposite each other for the first waltz which quite quickly breaks into a raving party that continues until the wee hours of the morning.

Walking out of all this grandeur, one would expect a pumpkin next, no less... ■



This year's talented debs with Stéphane Bern and Payal Mehta, the official jeweller of Le Bal