



Incentive inspiration: Dining in the dark at Dans le Noir



Charlotte Flach
Editor, C&IT

CONFERENCE &
INCENTIVE TRAVEL

—
MUU
177,498

—
AVE
£2,788

—
JUNE 2024

—
ONLINE

—
<https://www.cit-world.com/incentive-inspiration-dans-le-noir>



Delight delegates with a unique - and disarming - experience at a dinner where first impressions aren't always what they seem.

There's a scene in the 2013 Rom-Com 'About Time' which takes place in the famous Dans Le Noir. In it, two people meet for the first time in pitch black and immediately hit it off. The conversation flows effortlessly, even though they can't see each other and have never met. Noone spills a beverage or accidentally makes any faux pas physical contact.

This sense of ease and intimacy between people who can't even see each other's faces might seem far-fetched, but after a visit myself, I can vouch for its accuracy.



The experience

Guests will be taken to either the upstairs room with 80 covers, or the downstairs room with 50 covers. The waiter makes introductions to those dining around you, as well as explaining where your water, glass, cutlery and napkin are. At first there's a lot of tentative groping around as you gather your bearings. Initially, your eyes keep trying to adjust to the dark, but eventually your brain accepts that's not happening. And that's when the best bit begins.

A sense of disorientation and vulnerability creates an all-encompassing sense of trust and intimacy with those around you. Eventually we start to chat to the people around us: Mark and Graham who have been gifted the dinner by a niece; and Victoria and Alice, a mum and daughter from Australia, looking to try something unique.

Without anything except a voice and conversation to go on, you'd think things might be awkward or difficult, but it's the opposite. What begins as small talk, flows effortlessly into relaxed chats about travels, jobs, and past time passions. We have so much fun trying to guess ages and physical appearances, and even people's star signs.

The concept

Beginning in the downstairs bar, guests are briefed on what to expect over a cocktail. There's a chance to ask any questions - there are no stupid ones apparently - and time to savour still having the use of all your senses.

All belongings including phones are confiscated and locked away before the event begins, but even so, these wouldn't be much use for what's to follow. Being without your phone - often used as a social buffer - feels like having an integral safety blanket removed, but this turns out to be one of the things that makes the experience so powerful.

Aside from the dining in the dark concept, the other unique element is that all the serving staff are visually impaired. In this environment, the servers could be said to have the advantage, especially as many of them have been working there for many years and know the layout and dinner routines like the back of their hands. Our waiter tells me he's been working at Dans Le Noir since the first day it opened - 18 years ago.

Guests are then instructed to put their hands on the shoulder of the person in front of them, forming a human train which snakes its way behind two blackout curtains and across the dining room floor to find your seat. Despite the fact there is no light at all, the process of finding your chair and sitting down without ending up in someone's lap, or plate of food, is surprisingly successful.

Verdict

As it turns out, having a group dinner in the pitch black is an underrated opportunity for bonding. Without the usual visual cues such as facial expressions, or the judgements we make about people based on how they look, factors that can sometimes be massively inhibiting are removed.

Added to this, there is no phone to check during an awkward silence, no surroundings to inspire small talk, and no people watching if you feel bored. This all adds up to potentially one of the most immersive experiences imaginable, as all distractions and external stimuli fall away. This makes it ideal for team building, delegate bonding, or as a fun incentive with a difference.

But Dans Le Noir isn't about simply sitting down and eating a meal in the dark. Unlike most restaurant experiences, the central tenant here appears to be compelling people to meaningfully connect with those around them without distraction or preconceptions.

The food

Although the menu rotates in line with seasonal produce and to keep the experience fresh, the cuisine is always French. The menu is kept top secret, as part of the fun is guessing what you're eating by employing your other senses. All three courses can be served with paired wine, with a meat or a vegetarian menu option.

At first there's a lot of humorous stabbing at your plate, coming away with a perfectly clean fork. As time goes by, I start bringing my face very close to the food, so that I can shovel food almost directly from plate to mouth.

As the three courses come and go, there's a lot of debate about the ingredients and flavours, and even what type of meat is being served. What begins as chewing everything twice, turns into fingers being dunked into what's on the plate, and noses brought in very close to sniff.

Eventually table manners are abandoned completely, safe in the knowledge no one can see you. By this point I'm so familiar with the woman next to me, that she grabs my hand and sticks it in some cold mash potato, laughing hysterically at my dismay.

Everything is delicious, with a clear emphasis on textures and unusual flavours, for example an avocado ice cream paired with a crunchy chocolate crisp. And for those who don't like to be kept in suspense, they can rest assured that the full menu is revealed afterwards.