

FEATURE | MARGO STILLEY

WHAT'S NEW PUSSYCAT?

Having tired of Ibiza's hedonism, actress Margot Stilley boarded a flight to Berlin and began a journey that would take in Don King, white lions and Japanese gypsies

Photographs by Kate Bellm & Marcus







“FUCK THIS.” Only halfway through my fortnight’s holiday in Ibiza, I was at the airport at 8am desperate to leave the island. Unfortunately, I had just been told that I’d been bumped off the flight that I had only booked a few hours before. There were no other flights back to London. “In fact,” the ticket desk clerk said in his lispish Spanish accent, “there are no flight available at all.” I put my head down on the counter and in a barely audible whisper pleaded, partly to the ticket desk clerk, and partly to God himself, “Please, please get me out of here... I’m so ready to

get off of this 4/4 thumping, pumping, pulsating island, I’ll go anywhere!” My voice was getting both higher and louder; I was verging on Telltale Heart insanity and he must have heard it because, over the rapid tapping of keys and without looking up, the sweet Spanish clerk said: “Well, dere ith one flight to Berlin...” I was off.

I don’t know why the trip to Ibiza last summer had gone so wrong. Having spent the previous month or so pottering around the civilised English countryside shooting Miss Marple, last August I found myself back in my London flat having my now

customary, celebratory bubble bath with a bottle of bubbly when my phone rang. I still don’t know if it was the champagne, the heat of the bath going to my head, or a vitamin D deficiency from lack of sunshine, but I immediately agreed to join my friends in their villa out in the Balearics.

After only a week, I was definitely feeling the worse for wear. I silently shuffled across the main room of our luxurious, cliff-top villa, stepping over people and party favours strewn across the floor, and rang for a cab. Three hours later, as I touched down in Berlin, I could feel

the tension, the late nights and the early sunrises fall away. I was wearing my short shorts, tanned legs on display, and was back in civilisation. Life felt good. After a midday nap, I called some friends and we organised a meal at one of Berlin's nicest restaurants. As we sat down to dinner later that evening and began assessing the city's Friday-night scene, I heard an extraordinarily loud voice bellowing across the restaurant. I looked around at all the straight-backed, bespectacled Berliners who were all also wondering where the racket was coming from. I leaned to the left, leaned to the right and, finally, on the other side of the column, spotted the perpetrator.

"And den do you know what he did? *Heh-heh... He killed his wife! Ha-heh!*" he guffawed, forcing all the air up and out of his diaphragm as he slammed his fist onto the table with delight, making all the cutlery, china and crystal clamour. There was no avoiding him and my mouth spread into an incredulous smile as I registered the 78-year-old's infamous hair and acid-washed denim jacket, adorned with his own face on the front and a life-sized likeness on the back. I also clocked the telltale American flag pendants, with matching tie, peaking out from behind what must have been 50lb worth of gold chains. Don King was in the house.

My eyes darted back and forth from each of my European friend's faces, who clearly didn't appreciate the man making all the racket, as I checked my red lipstick, smoothed my red leather skirt and said, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to excuse me, I just have to do this..." I grabbed my camera and my friend's hand and walked straight over to his table, clad in crisp, white linen except, of course, the section in front of the host: here, the linen was splattered with red wine, chicken grease and a few disparate string beans. I've never been so brazen before, maybe it was my Ibiza hangover lending me such bravado, but when I arrived at his table I put out my hand and said: "Hi Mr King, I'm sorry to interrupt, but my name is Margo Stilley and I was wondering if I could have a picture with you."

"Hell, yes! You can have a pictcha! *Ich liebe dich!*" he shouted as he stood up, nearly toppling the table and semi-hobbled over the other guests to get to my side. "*Ich liebe dich!*" SNAP! "You want a pictcha! You can have a pictcha! You want tickets to tha *fight!*? Somebody git her some tickets to tha *fight!*" And with that two tickets flew forward and were thrust into my



ICH LIEBE DICH: LEGENDARY BOXING PROMOTER DON KING (SPORTING HIS TRADEMARK DENIM JACKET) GAVE STILLEY A TASTE OF BOXING IN BERLIN

"Mr King, I'm sorry but could have a picture with you." "Hell, yes! You can have a pictcha! *Ich liebe dich!*"

hand and then, with a quick peck on the cheek, he and his friends went off into the night. I looked down at my newfound World Boxing Association heavyweight title fight ringside tickets alongside two VIP access cards and smiled.

The next evening, a Saturday, I put on a tight dress and tossed my hair into what I thought was the right fashion for a boxing match, and turned up with some friends who were able to get top-tier tickets in the nosebleed section just across the arena from me. I made my way through the bookies, pimps, drug dealers and fight enthusiasts — almost all men, bar the occasional female arm candy — on the ground floor to the side of the ring. I was in the corner of the soon-to-be world champion, a 7ft, 323lb wall of Russian muscle called Nikolai Valuev. (And by "in

the corner", I mean blood, sweat and tears splashed onto my foot in-between the fourth and fifth rounds.) I found myself sitting next to a good-looking, leathery, tan-faced man with pristine white hair and a white tuxedo who, when he got up and grabbed the microphone and declared to the full coliseum, "Lets get ready to rummmbbblle!!!" I recognised as Michael Buffer.

To my left was a quiet man with a sloping posture who sat with his fingers interlaced on his lap, and his lips pursed tightly together, looking as if at any moment he might lose control and burst into laughter. As the final seats were taken, and the media circus that follows Don King everywhere he goes started to make its way through the packed coliseum, I started to confide in the funny man sitting to my left: his name was Philippe Huber, and his company owns the television rights to sporting events. When I told him that I'd never been to a fight before Huber decided to take me through a Hello! version of the world of heavyweight boxing. With his thick Swiss accent he told me who boxes in which stables, who's married to whom, who doesn't get along, and why one of the fighters was better than the other fighter. He informed me of all the rules and just as I was starting to feel comfortable in the place where I was very out of place, he looked over to me, lowered his head as he looked up with his eyes, and said mischievously, "Do you know what else I have?" Unable to suppress the giggle this time, "I have *white lions*." Judging by his demeanor I couldn't tell if he was joking or if he was serious, so I sort of smiled and said, "OK". "No! Really! I really have white Lions!! I have many of them! I can show you!" he said, whipping out his BlackBerry and showing me pictures of him holding tiny white lion cubs. "I can take you dere if you vant," he continued, his eyes looking shifty. I had the distinct feeling of being offered candy and a puppy in the back of an unmarked white van, so I decided that I should introduce my new friend to the rest of my friends and take him out for a night on the town to suss him out.

After a few hours in Watergate, I decided I could trust him, so after a few days of waiting, a brand new silver Audi S4 pulled up to the flat I was borrowing in Berlin to take me to the Hollywood Safari Park, or what I later dubbed "The Lion Farm", for a party. After an hour or two, we turned off the motorway into Stukenbrock, a small, bleak village in



North Rhine-Westphalia. Dark grey clouds loomed and a cold wind whirled around us, and I began to imagine that I had been duped into a PT Barnum-style hoax of all talk and not much to show. How could anyone have lions, white ones at that, in a town as simple and bleak as this? We made our way to the other side of Stuckenbrück in a matter of moments, and once we passed a used car-parts store that was, peculiarly, flying a Confederate battle flag, we were on a straight road leading through a densely wooded area. And then, out of nowhere, a large, faded giraffe appeared, holding a sign that said “Hollywood Safari Park”. We drove in and I got out of the car.

I was greeted by the warm, smiling face of Fritz Wurm, the park's director, a jolly German man with grey hair, big eyes and a thick accent, who had been born in a showman's caravan in Düsseldorf's fairground in 1952, as the son of a travelling circus family. He took me over to a white Land Rover with black zebra stripes painted on it, opened the door and there inside was Huber.

Inside the car I was surrounded by whips and sticks as we drove down the park's private paths to make friends with a six-week-old white lion cub and a pack of untrained year-and-a-half-old lions — far too big for my comfort without steel bars between us. I looked at the park around us where men with faces that looked as if they had stories to tell were casually feeding elephants and camels. There was nothing showy about it; it felt more like a suburban Saturday afternoon with men

PARK LIFE: FRITZ WURM, DIRECTOR OF “THE LION FARM”, PROVES THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS TOO MUCH ANIMAL PRINT

They hypnotised a girl to believe that she was an actress called Margo Stilley. She nearly beat the shit out of me

washing their cars and cleaning out garages and cutting grass, except here they were carrying huge chunks of red, bloody beef and bails of hay. Because it was cold and dark, the permanent fairground looked like something out of a Eighties horror film where the kids who get laid get killed first. I looked down again at the whips and sticks that sat in the front of the SUV.

The party we had been invited to was the park's annual end-of-the-season closing party; everyone that worked there was invited to a big buffet dinner and a hypnotist's show — a personal thank you from Fritz. After meeting the lions, and having what I consider a near brush with death when a year-and-a-half-year-old female decided to test her luck by chomping down her teeth and taste-testing my knee, we entered the big circus tent where the festivities were about to begin.

Sitting down at one of the 30 or more large round tables, I was joined by two gypsies, a stark East German bodyguard who only spoke Russian and German, a Swiss business man with a constant fit of the giggles, a lion breeder, Fritz, his black-haired, blue-eyed wife and the hypnotist. I had somehow made it from the London set in Ibiza to the inner circle of where the circus comes to decamp.

Since the Hollywood Safari Park's opening around 30 years ago, it has become a beacon of hope to performers and animal caretakers from across Europe. Fritz's father had actually set it up because he missed the circus and wanted to keep his finger in the pot, so to speak. So here, in the middle of Germany, is an entire circus with shows and performing acts, a fairground with a log flume and roller coaster, and a safari park with exotic animals where families, and people who are too tired or unable to continue to travel, can still live their circus lives. It is kind of halfway house that helps former circus workers continue to live with their furry friends and extended families; a place where they can educate their children; somewhere they can finally park their caravans.

I listened, rapt with interest, to their life stories — one about an American circus gypsy woman who married a French circus gypsy and it didn't work out, so she had come to the safari park to live. I met Addy Enders, who had been born into the circus, later performing acrobatics and training elephants, and his wife, Hanna,



HEELS BY CHARLOTTE OLYMPIA. CLOTHES COURTESY OF QUARTIER 206, BERLIN

a beautiful dancer who ran away from Prague just before communism dropped the iron curtain, nearly forever separating her from her family. Addy and Hanna moved here with their herd of elephants and parked their caravan right beside them, so that they can hear them at night.

There were a hundred stories of torrid, and even sordid affairs, business deals gone right and deals gone wrong. I heard about a Japanese gypsy who wears a cowboy hat and boots, gold rings with rubies and drives a Cadillac with bullhorns tied to the front. He sells lions outside Tokyo.

I sat there soaking it all in: the giant gold rings, the studded belts and the

cowboy boots, the tinny German house music playing in the background, the children who could tightrope walk and be shot out of cannons, and I felt an unlikely sense of community folding around me; I felt like I was back with my biker friends in South Carolina. Finally, it was time for the hypnotist's performance; he ended the show by hypnotising a girl to believe that she was an actress called Margo Stilley. She nearly beat the shit out of me for arguing that I was the real Margo Stilley. Afterwards, Fritz's wife embraced me and said, "Welcome to the Lion Family."

I've been back to see them at the safari park again this summer; I caught up with

Fritz, admired once again his penchant for animal prints — everything in his house, on his clothes, even down to his Bic lighter, is embellished with either a zebra, tiger or leopard print. From time to time, Don King's assistant rings me when the posse are in Berlin and asks if I'd like to come and hang out with some of the boxers.

Fuck Ibiza this year — the beaten path, overpriced villas, stale house beats with everyone milling about pretending the credit crunch hasn't hit them. Hello, instead, to late summer nights in boxing arenas, tales of Cadillac-driving, ruby-infested Japanese gypsies, to walking white lions in short skirts and high heels. ❸