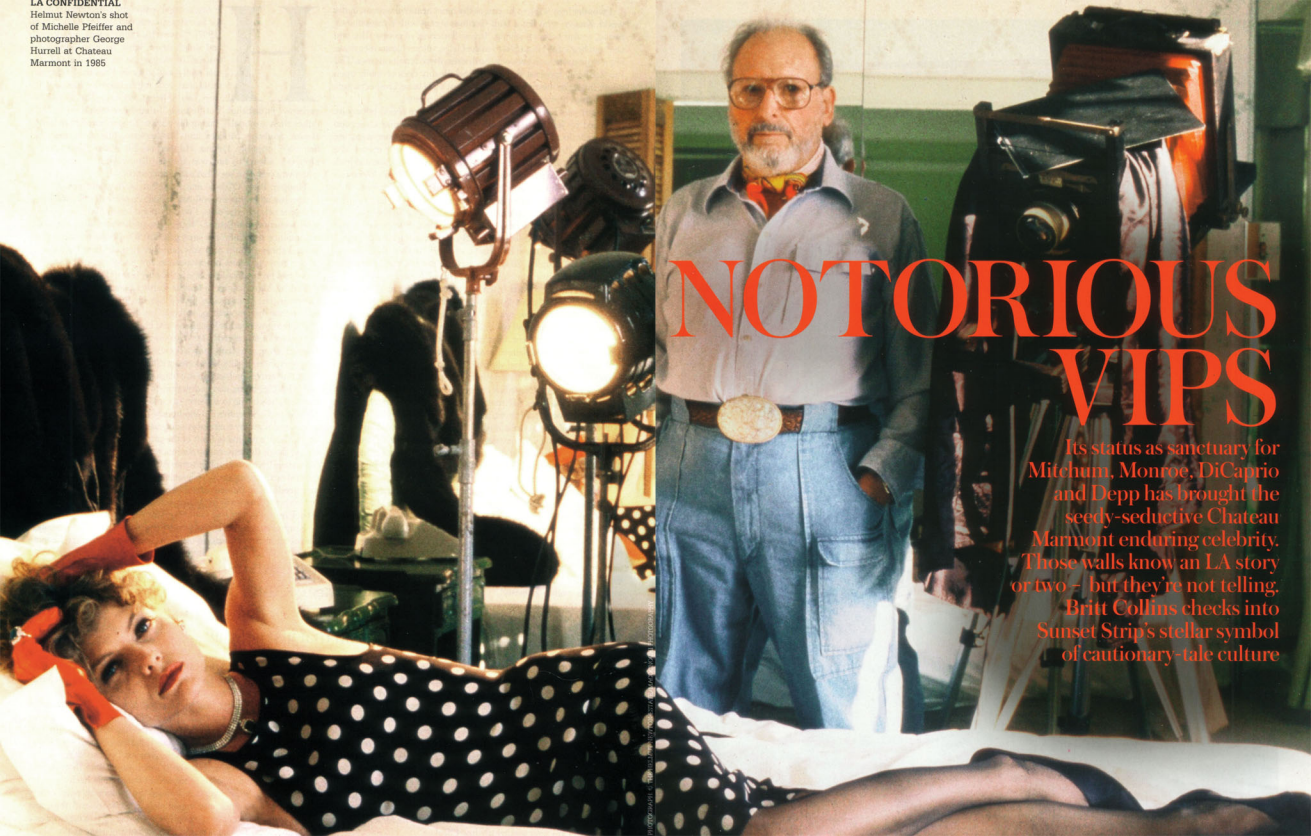


LA CONFIDENTIAL
Heimut Newton's shot
of Michelle Pfeiffer and
photographer George
Hurrell at Chateau
Marmont in 1985

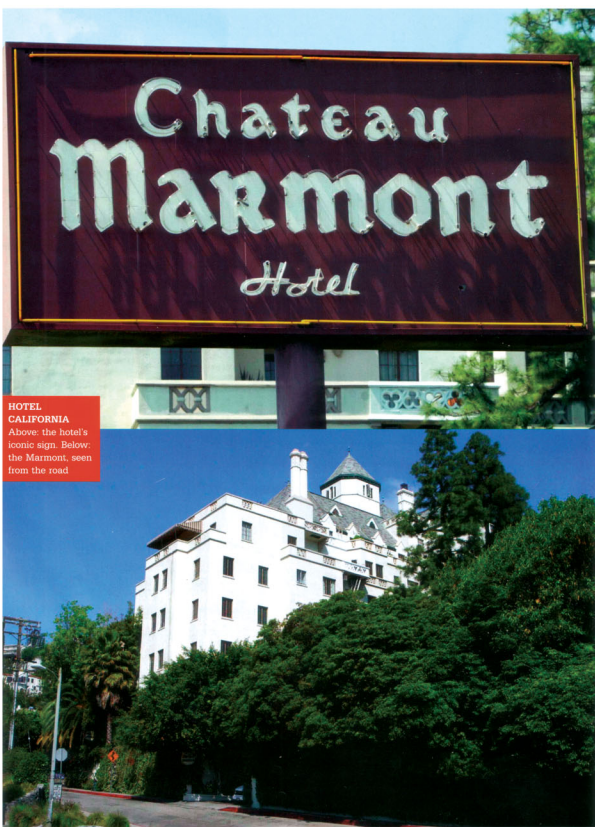


NOTORIOUS VIPS

Its status as sanctuary for
Mitchum, Monroe, DiCaprio
and Depp has brought the
seedy-seductive Chateau
Marmont enduring celebrity.
Those walls know an LA story
or two – but they're not telling.

Britt Collins checks into
Sunset Strip's stellar symbol
of cautionary-tale culture

HOTEL CALIFORNIA
Above: the hotel's iconic sign. Below: the Marmont, seen from the road



Steeped in history, touched by scandal and immortalised in songs, books and films, Hollywood's Chateau Marmont hotel sparkles with old-fashioned glamour. 'You can picture the girl and her gangster boyfriend, the rock star and his groupie, the junkie, the reclusive millionaire. Anything and everything can and does happen here,' says author AM Homes. Celebrating its 75th anniversary, Chateau Marmont is a place of legendary happenings. Romance and scandal have flourished in the moody, bordello-like atmosphere of the retro-chic rooms, soaring trees, gothic gargoyles and koi ponds. Stars led deep and intense lives here, burned brightly – then faded, lost their minds or found themselves.

Rising seven storeys above the Sunset Strip and looming over the lights of Los Angeles like some castellated abbey, it has a grandness and the haunting feel of a bygone era. In this place, you feel 'overdressed in a tie, and underdressed without a cigarette', as Chateau regular Jay McInerney has said. Marilyn Monroe once lived here, and Herb Ritts shot numerous celebrities against an endless backdrop of blue skies, pools and palm-trees.

Christened 'the hanging gardens of Babylon' by F Scott Fitzgerald (before he collapsed with a heart attack buying cigarettes across the road at Schwab's drugstore) the hotel is a hallowed destination for writers. 'I used to live in Beverly Hills for many years, and sometimes my swell friends would come by,' recalls Dominick Dunne, who lived in Room 48 while covering the OJ Simpson and Mendez trials for *Vanity Fair*. 'You know – that thing where the smart folk go to see how the artists live.'

The Day of the Locust, *Sunset Boulevard* and Fitzgerald's unfinished masterpiece *The Last Tycoon* were written here, and the hotel has long been the West Coast outpost for writers such as McInerney, Homes and Gore Vidal. 'Being at the Chateau is like being in a place far, far away,' writes Homes in her recent book *Los Angeles: People, Places and the Castle on the Hill*. 'As soon as you arrive, you feel better. It's hard to know why that is – whether it's the laid-back, low-key staff, the noisier interiors, or the crushed-velvet sofas that seem to seep stories.'

Soon after it opened in 1929, the Chateau Marmont, decorated with rare antiques and Persian rugs scavenged from Depression-struck mansions, became a refuge for artists, drifters and dreamers who came out west to live the Californian dream. Originally built to be 'Hollywood's most fashionable residence and first earthquake-proof building', the 64-room hotel was inspired by the Château Royal d'Amboise, the Loire Valley retreat where Leonardo da Vinci died. The neo-Gothic replica of elegant white stone, fluted pillars and sweeping arches wild with ivy was the creation of Fred Horowitz, a prominent Los Angeles lawyer. Set in lush grounds dripping with bougainvillea and eucalyptus, Chateau Marmont is pure movie set. Within its gardens are a pair of slick, Fifties-style bungalows hidden away on a sloping hillside, and nine Spanish-style 1930s haciendas surround the swimming pool.

'It has an incredibly seductive atmosphere,' says Sandra Bullock of her favourite hotel and hang-out. 'No wonder people come here to have affairs – it's got that air of history, where you know a lot of people did things they weren't supposed to do.'

The original Columbia Pictures boss Harry Cohn told two of his wildest young stars, William Holden and Glenn Ford: 'If you must get in trouble, do it at the Chateau Marmont,' and he rented the

penthouse and bungalows for their three-day-long parties and star-studded events. The eccentric billionaire and Hollywood mogul Howard Hughes resided in one of the larger penthouses during the Fifties, spying on the poolside beauties through his binoculars, before summoning them upstairs for screen tests.

This gloomily romantic French château-style hotel, the West Coast equivalent of New York's Chelsea Hotel, has witnessed more than its share of Hollywood success and scandal, and comes with its own ghosts. Comedian John Belushi left Bungalow 3 in a black body-bag after overdosing on heroin on 5 March 1982. Jim Morrison, flying high on acid, leapt from a ledge into the sky; and Janis Joplin roamed the corridors in the dead of night like a zombie. John Lennon spent much of his year-long 'lost weekend' here, floating through a twilight world of darkened rooms and daytime TV. It was in one of the Chateau's bungalows that actor Robert Mitchum was arrested for smoking 'the devil's weed' (marijuana) in 1948. And the director Roman Polanski spent his last few days in the US holed up here to avoid reporters before fleeing from sentencing for statutory-rape charges, following a sexual encounter with a 13-year-old girl.

'The hotels I love inspire excess in human behaviour,' says André Balazs, a New York-based businessman who also owns hip hang-outs such as the Standard in LA and the Mercer in New York. He bought Chateau Marmont in 1990, and transformed it from a fading Hollywood legend into a swish secret hideaway, just shabby enough to scare off the corporate bores. 'Hotels unleash passions in people. You enter and you leave your past behind, but the mystery comes out of how much the place allows you to indulge in something new. And that has a lot to do with design, and how the environment transports you.'

'The place is dark, mysterious and romantic,' agrees writer Eve Babitz. 'It just has a "Jeanne Moreau committing adultery" edge to it.'

Jean Harlow came here in 1933 to carry on an affair with Clark Gable, while honeymooning with cinematographer Harold Rossen. Harlow went through lovers the way other women went through lingerie. During her time at the Chateau Marmont, she used to leave messages at the front desk that she had 'gone fishin'' whenever she was cruising for men.

Natalie Wood first met James Dean during a script reading of *Rebel Without a Cause* in Bungalow 2 in 1955. 'He looked a sight,' she said, unimpressed, in *Life at the Marmont*, by Fred Basten and former co-owner Raymond Sarlot. 'The rest of us were dressed nicely, but Jimmy wore a dirty shirt and jeans with a safety pin across the front to hold them up.' It was in the Director's Bungalow, as it is now known, that the 17-year-old Wood had an affair with the film's 43-year-old director, Nicholas Ray.

Romance has frequently blossomed at the Chateau Marmont. Paul Newman met his wife Joanne Woodward here, and it was where Johnny Depp hooked up with Winona Ryder in the Nineties. 'The hotel also provided the setting for much of Depp's affair with Kate Moss, and their wildest parties – he once said that he and Kate had probably made love 'in every room there'. And, on the eve of last year's Oscars party, Scarlett Johansson had a steamy encounter with Benicio Del Toro in one of the lifts. After snogging in the lobby in front of amazed onlookers, they disappeared into the lift, where they carried on. 'We were making out or having sex or something,' she revealed, adding primly, 'which I think is very unsanitary.'

The hotel provided the setting for much of Johnny Depp's affair with Kate Moss, and their wildest parties – he once said that he and Kate had probably made love 'in every room there'



GET A ROOM

Star guests at the Chateau Marmont, clockwise from left: Elizabeth Jagger with her boyfriend, March 2003. Colin Farrell, March 2003. Bridget Hall at a Ford agency party, March 1996.



ME AND MY CHATEAU

Above: Hugh Hefner with his girls. Right: Stella McCartney and Demi Moore, circa 2000.



During the Sixties and Seventies, when the Beatles, the Kinks or the Stones came to L.A., they took over the Chateau. Over time, the revolving door of rock stars with their scuttling drug dealers and groupies turned the hotel rather tawdry. In 1968, Polanski remarked: 'You can almost get stoned from sniffing the haze that seeps through the various keyholes.'

'Being stoned was a given,' recalls Eve Babitz. 'I remember one night sitting with friends, high on great grass, looking out over the city, and someone said, "Gee, this is really a trip."'

'This was the age of the hippie and the freak, and that was the ethos which the Chateau subscribed,' says writer and sometime resident Anthony Haden-Guest. 'Older-fashioned movie stars abandoned the place, and it became a haunt of actors, writers and movie-makers who made a point of the fact that they were birds of passage, and that they really lived in New York, London or Rome.'

Early in the Eighties, Jay McInerney came out west to write the screenplay to his cult bestseller *Bright Lights, Big City*. 'You'd expect to see Boris Karloff loom out of the shadows,' he says. 'In a city of bright sunshine this was a dark corner, where it somehow always seemed to be twilight, even at the pool. For that reason, it was home of the night people - New Yorkers, Europeans and rock 'n' rollers; people who deplore the concept of breakfast meetings.'

It was this murky period that inspired the hotel from hell in the Coen brothers' film *Barton Fink* (1991). The recently deceased writer George Plimpton recalled the terrible loneliness of the place, and a feeling that he was the only guest - with the exception of a few vampires he encountered creeping the corridors by night. The clientele's louché lifestyles and outrageous exploits took a toll on the place. But in 1990, the new owner, Balazs, took it on himself to revive the hotel's original cocktail-soused glamour. 'I wanted to evoke the past,' he explains, 'but to make it a bit quirky.' Balazs stripped away the hotel's orange shagpile carpets and threadbare furniture. He introduced an East Coast sophistication and a varied crowd. Through its ornately Gothic lobby and corridors lie groovy vintage furniture and appliances dating from the 1920s to the 1950s. Modern touches, such as the attic gym, have been added, and original features have also been restored: the vaulted ceilings, vintage phone booths - and the lifts where Scarlett Johansson and Benicio Del Toro had sex. 'How they man-



THEY CAPTURED THE CASTLE

Above, from far left: Val Kilmer, October 2002. Owen Wilson with a friend, October 2002. Kirsten Dunst at a Teen Vogue 'Young Hollywood' party, September 2004.

'Those lifts are old, wooden ones. They're small and creak when they are moving. I hate having to use them, let alone to have sex in one...'

The Chateau Marmont still attracts actors and musicians, but gone are the days of the rock flophouse the Eagles immortalised in 'Hotel California', when Led Zeppelin raced motorcycles down the halls. Some former guests seem less than pleased. 'Why the fuck are you asking me about that fucking place? It's pretentious, poncey and overrated, just like everything else in L.A.,' says Shane MacGowan, spitting into the phone with his ragged laugh. 'It's not the Chelsea. It might have been cool once, but now it's full of tossers.'

Although a little more subdued than it once was, it still lures celebrities such as Sofia Coppola, Cate Blanchett, Josh Hartnett, OutKast's Andre 3000, and Beck, who lives on and off for long stretches at a time. Claire Danes sometimes hangs out by the pool with girlfriends because 'it always feels like a vacation.'

The Marmont's lure is its seclusion. Known for its discretion, it has long been favoured by showbiz types, who treasure it for its low-key glamour, secretive ambience and chilled-out staff - but also because it's relatively unknown to the public. That's why reclusive stars such as Greta Garbo came here to disappear. Part of its appeal is that it's easy to come and go - the perfect spot for secret romances or languorous solitude. You can pull off the Strip into the darkness of the underground garage and take the lift straight up to your room, or the back door to your bungalow.

Some guests don't leave their rooms for weeks. Keanu Reeves made it his home during much of the Nineties. Leonardo DiCaprio lives on and off in Suite 54, and Robert De Niro has secluded himself away in one of the penthouses for months.

Whatever Shane MacGowan thinks, others clearly still love the place. It seems that Balazs's restoration of the hotel has been successful. But after all it had been through, there was little alternative.

'I felt I inherited a cultural icon, so I was very cautious at first,' says Balazs. His intention was to refurbish it without violating its spirit. 'I remember sitting with Helmut Newton, who'd been coming here for a long time, and him saying, "Whatever you do, don't

MY MATE, MARMONT

Clockwise from above: Ben Affleck and J.Lo, August 2002. Ashton Kutcher and Brittany Murphy, October 2002. Chloë Sevigny, Steve Martin and Martin Short, October 2002. Simon Le Bon and Gwen Stefani.

