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# CITY OF ANGELS, LAND OF HOTELS

In Los Angeles, a handful of beloved properties—some relative newcomers, others dating back to the glory days of Old Hollywood—are woven so deeply into the social fabric, you couldn't imagine the sprawling city without them.

**Alex Bhattacharji** explores why they're so essential to the way Angelenos live and gather and so endlessly alluring to visitors.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN GUIDO



The Sunset Tower Hotel's Tower Bar is one of the toughest reservations in town.



# I

It's a scene that plays out on Saturday mornings across the land: a line of people winds out the door of a small diner where, all weekend long, athleisure-clad families fill the dozen or so stools that flank a curved counter. As they thumb the papers, linger over partially eaten plates of eggs Benedict and silver-dollar pancakes, and lift their mugs to request refills of joe, they give no inkling that the Fountain Coffee Room is anything but a neighborhood joint, because that is exactly what it is—an institution locals casually refer to as the Counter. You'd never know that Marilyn Monroe loved getting late-night ice cream here or that this is where the members of Guns N' Roses signed their first record deal. And unless you recognized the embroidered crest on the napkins or the wallpaper emblazoned with waving banana-palm leaves or the Chanel-pink doggie bag boxes bearing the Beverly Hills Hotel logo, you'd also have no clue you're in a hotel.

"Of course it's in a hotel," says Alison Werner, a thirtysomething talent booker and SoCal native, when I meet her after breakfast. "This is L.A. Here, we actually hang out in hotels."

This comes as some bit of reassurance to me. In the three years since relocating from New York City, I've found myself hanging out at area hotels with a frequency that I thought might have branded me an outsider. But it's like the writer and cultural critic Fran Lebowitz said: "Los Angeles is a large city-like area surrounding the Beverly Hills Hotel." Except, with all due respect to the consummate New Yorker, her cheeky observation is incomplete. Actually there are a handful of hotels, arrayed in a loose cluster across West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and Bel

Air, that compose the true focal point of the city. Their bars and lobbies, dining rooms and poolsides are the City of Angels' main drags and town squares.

"I always found Los Angeles singular among world-class cities in its lack of a central hub. There's literally no there there, as they say," hotelier André Balazs notes. "A hotel can fill that void." That was the idea when he purchased Chateau Marmont in 1990, understanding that the stately Loire Valley-style château rising above the comedy clubs and nightclubs of the Sunset Strip had long served as a clubhouse for the elite. It's never been alone in that role, though over the years the cast of hotels has changed as the city has. During Tinseltown's Golden Age, the Hollywood Roosevelt played the same part, as did the Beverly Wilshire, which is now staking its claim anew as a Four Seasons. Even as the city is awash in fresh energy, with

*Clockwise from above: Afternoon at Palihouse West Hollywood's Mardi Restaurant; green juice at Mardi; a diner gets a little work done during happy hour at Palihouse Lobby Lounge & Bar.*



ever richer culinary offerings, thriving art and cultural scenes, and the ascendance of Downtown L.A. and Venice, the tradition of treating hotels as hearths has happily endured.

**"A HOTEL, IF DONE CORRECTLY,** serves as a second home," says hotelier and restaurateur Jeff Klein, whose locally landmarked Art Deco Sunset Tower Hotel fills the bill by design, thanks to the dinner destination Tower Bar and the recently renovated pool and terrace. Several other properties—old and new—do the same, each in its own distinct way: the opulent, hidden-in-plain-sight refuge Viceroy L'Ermitage Beverly Hills; the intimate and welcoming Palihouse West Hollywood, which packs boho-chic charm; and the venerable Hotel Bel-Air, a canyon retreat whose faraway feel belies its proximity to West L.A.

For out-of-towners, Los Angeles's hotel-as-hub phenomenon can put an improbable, ironic twist on an itinerary. In most cities, the authentic local experiences visitors crave come from *leaving* the hotel—not blocking out more time there. "In the case of the Chateau," Balazs says, "the same thing that appeals to visitors actually is something of vital necessity to residents of L.A.—a sense of place." The Castle on Sunset, as the Chateau is also known, dates from 1929 and exudes Old Hollywood appeal. Long before the mismatched aesthetic was in vogue, the Chateau embraced eclectic, lounge-worthy furniture that would deliver the comforts of home. Over the



years, many famous figures have taken up full-time residence here, but even lingering for a few hours can act as a salve for the loneliness that tends to afflict Angelenos, isolated in their cars and secluded hillside abodes.

And the Chateau is a celebrity in its own right, steeped in Hollywood history, glamour, and legendary bad behavior. Jean Harlow hosted lovers here during her honeymoon, Jim Morrison swung from the balconies, and John Belushi died of an overdose in one of the bungalows. (The dishy new book *The Castle on Sunset* marks the Chateau's 90th year with a history of its trysts, deals, addictions, and art.) The property may as well be the uncredited lead in Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere*, a film ostensibly about displacement and ennui that also shows the human connection and bonhomie a hotel can provide. It's a love letter to the Chateau's many charms, including the intimate pool and personable waiters and valets, who in real life somehow manage to learn your name and know which car is yours before you can shift into park. These touches add to the Chateau's air of exclusivity, which, while overstated, is

reinforced by the star power on display during seemingly every visit.

While eating dinner on the veranda recently, I see several pop starlets at the tables. During a visit to the bungalow housing Chateau Hanare, Marmont's year-old kaiseki restaurant, the cast of a premium cable show spills out of a private dining room. Over the course of one recent day, Quentin Tarantino sits in the sunken living room writing out notes in longhand on script pages, first on a low chair, then on a higher love seat, before finally settling into an armchair that seems to get his artistic juices flowing. A few days later, the space plays host to music executives lunching before meeting with colleagues and counterparts, taking calls, then wooing a pair of hip-hop artists over a drink—al without changing their location—until it's time to amble a few yards for their dinner reservation.

**CALL THIS DEVOTION** to place enlightened inertia, an increasingly popular approach to efficient planning in this traffic-congested city whose mantra is map twice, drive once. Even established hotels have adapted to become

*Below: Gabé Doppelt, maître d', makes sure the dining area at the Tower Bar is set perfectly before she begins greeting hotel guests and beloved regulars.*



multi-act stopovers, encouraging post-lunch laptop sessions that blend into evening engagements. At the Sunset Tower, which offers nearly every amenity except a sizable lobby, Klein reimagined the pool patio and the terrace, which had long been afterthoughts, adding a sultry new bar area with banquettes and booths for meetings over drinks. They now present a relaxed daytime precursor and nighttime alternative to the elegant and exclusive Tower Bar across the lobby, which has seen its own evolution.

Last year, when Gabé Doppelt, a former fashion editor and onetime acolyte of Anna Wintour, replaced Dimitri Dimitrov as the maître d' at Tower Bar, she assumed the mantle of Hollywood's most empowered host—and de facto social kingmaker. In Los Angeles, this changing of the guard at Tower Bar was treated like a peaceful transfer of power almost on par with a presidential inauguration. While Doppelt has honored traditions (the dress code and the no-photos rule, instituted after an unfortunate J.Lo incident, remain), she has also ushered in changes. In her hands, the Tower Bar's reservation lists and seating chart are constructed less around the entertainment establishment and more with an eye toward contemporary eclecticism. Directing traffic with a trace of a South African accent, Doppelt confidently mixes and matches contrasting crowds, as if continuously curating a highly personalized cocktail party. "Changing the mix

is essential," she says. "It stops us from becoming stale."

Reservations remain as elusive as ever, and some area residents will go so far as booking a hotel room, knowing that it's the best way to score a coveted table. "Guests get preferential treatment in that regard," Klein says of Tower Bar. "If you're an out-of-towner and you're not staying here, it's going to be pretty hard to get in. The truth is, it's 80 percent locals every night."

That kind of client base is a seal of authenticity sought by all hoteliers, precisely because residents are the most discerning returning customers. "One thing that stunned me is how many people live in the area and come here," Doppelt says. "We have one guest, Lev, who's been coming for 12 years, maybe four times a week. He stands in the exact same place at the bar and he knows all our staff. He will even start telling guests about the history of the hotel. He's a neighbor—that's it."

The connection runs both ways. Doppelt also calls Lev part of the family, based on affection for him—not his stature, station, or domestic proximity. "We have guests who, if there's a death in the family," Doppelt adds, "we'll either go to the memorial or the family will come here."

These sort of bonds aren't cemented overnight. "You can't just open a place and become a hub," says Avi Brosh, the CEO and founder of Palisociety. "It takes a long time to become part of the fabric within a community.



*From left: L.A.'s ultimate power-lunch scene is at the Beverly Hills Hotel's Polo Lounge; swanky cabanas flank the hotel's pool.*





From left: The gardens at the Hotel Bel-Air; the hotel's bar; brunch at the Bel-Air's Wolfgang Puck restaurant.

It has to be a friendly neighborhood place. It has to grow on you.” His company opened Palihouse West Hollywood a decade ago, seeking to create “a place that was a little bit less defined, more like a student union.” It was modeled on social-clubs-cum-hotels like Soho House (which opened a West Hollywood location of its members-only club, sans hotel, two years later), with a lobby, bar area, and garden restaurant that flow seamlessly into one another, each inviting like-minded creative types to while away the time. It can feel like a co-working space, a Parisian café, and a cocktail lounge—often all at once. As I perch at the bar, hip young Busy Philipps look-alikes clack away on their laptops, a young foursome toasts, and a spectacled fortysomething professional greets his lunch mate, whom he’s introducing to the place: “My quirky-cool assistant turned me on to it. Small but nice, right?”

**VISITORS HOPING** to drink in L.A.’s glitzy energy sometimes come up dry at the illustrious



and idyllic Hotel Bel-Air—a sprawling, leafy oasis tucked partway up Stone Canyon that feels far, far away from, well, everything. That, of course, is its appeal to area residents. The sense of serenity begins when you cross the footbridge over Swan Lake and the white waterfowl float by. It continues through what feels like a rambling country estate, which is what the property was until the 1930s. At the time, it was centered around a massive stable—vestiges of which remain around the pool, whose oval shape is an outline of the riding ring that preceded it. The hotel’s 103 rooms and suites are housed in multiple buildings scattered across 12 acres, so that even when it’s at capacity, it never feels crowded.

One happy exception: Sunday brunch, a buoyant, Bellini-fueled, open-air affair for which well-heeled denizens from all over the L.A. area descend on the hotel’s Wolfgang Puck restaurant. It’s rarefied enough for Balenciaga pumps but relaxed enough for New Balance running shoes. Some locals combine it with a

trip to the spa, whose monthly memberships are popular among those who live nearby, while others indulge themselves with Bloody Marys and splurge on sturgeon caviar.

The most essential weekday meal, fittingly, is at the Los Angeles area’s most iconic institution. That would be the power lunch at the famed Polo Lounge in the Beverly Hills Hotel. (If you’ve heard that the Ivy is still the “it spot,” you’ve likely heard that from tourists, who now make up a disproportionate percentage of the Ivy’s patrons.) There’s comfort in being a Polo Lounge regular. As I enter, a woman in business attire rushes by the host and asks, “Is he here yet?” The host nods affirmatively as the woman heads in, the host knowing precisely whom the woman is meeting and the woman knowing precisely which table she has. The most desirable spots are the small booths opposite the bar and, outside, the oversize banquettes that ring the garden, where producers and moguls mingle in full display for other diners. But the enduring appeal of the property, which opened in 1912 and later inspired the Eagles’ “Hotel California,” has been tested in recent years. The hotel became the subject of an impassioned boycott in 2014, after the Sultan of Brunei, whose

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## Where Angelenos Gather

This constellation of six luxe hotels dotted around West Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and Bel Air forms Los Angeles’ true city center.

### BEVERLY HILLS HOTEL

Part of the Dorchester Collection, along with its sister property, the Hotel Bel-Air, the iconic retreat houses two of the city’s most popular dining destinations: the brunch favorite Fountain Coffee Room (*entrées \$8–\$27*) and the power-lunch den Polo Lounge (*entrées \$20–\$75*). [beverlyhillshotel.com](http://beverlyhillshotel.com); doubles from \$595.

### CHATEAU MARMONT

Hotelier André Balazs’s hideaway welcomes Angelenos and travelers seeking a respite from the city—whether you’ve come for a leisurely meal at the kaiseki

restaurant Chateau Hanare (*from \$90*) or a stay in one of the legendary bungalows. [chateaumarmont.com](http://chateaumarmont.com); doubles from \$450.

### HOTEL BEL-AIR

Ensnconced in Bel Air’s labyrinthine canyons, this former estate feels ultra-private, thanks to lush gardens and discreet service. Carve out time for brunch at Wolfgang Puck (*\$95 per person*). [hotelbelair.com](http://hotelbelair.com); doubles from \$595.

### PALIHOUSE WEST HOLLYWOOD

This eclectic property blends elements of a boutique hotel and an extended-stay residence to foster a

welcoming vibe, particularly in its Lobby Lounge (*entrées \$29–\$57*), a fashionable spot for after-work drinks. [palisociety.com](http://palisociety.com); doubles from \$335.

### SUNSET TOWER HOTEL

One of the city’s buzziest scenes can be found at the Art Deco landmark’s Tower Bar (*entrées \$32–\$57*), where celebrities and area residents congregate nightly. [sunsettowerhotel.com](http://sunsettowerhotel.com); doubles from \$395.

### VICEROY L’HERMITAGE BEVERLY HILLS

Known for its understated elegance, the hotel draws visitors of all stripes with its 116 spacious suites and the panoramic views of the Hollywood Hills from its rooftop pool. [viceroysandresorts.com](http://viceroysandresorts.com); doubles from \$525.





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sovereign wealth fund owns parent company the Dorchester Collection, instituted aspects of sharia law in his home country. But the opposition gradually lost steam, outweighed by affection for the hotel, its staff, and its role as a headquarters for the neighboring community.

If the Polo Lounge is the place Angelenos go to be seen, L'Ermitage is where they go to be unnoticed. "No one here uses the front door," a greeter says—at the front door. As befits a refuge that prides itself on discretion, a more clandestine entry can be accessed on the parking level—one where the red carpet literally gets rolled out for events during Hollywood's awards season and for visiting dignitaries. (For locals arriving for lunch or a staycation, too.) Once inside the 116-suite hideaway, you're enveloped in peace and quiet, despite its location near Rodeo Drive. Every detail is refined and restrained. If it seems like a perfect place to recover, it is. Soon after the residential condos were converted to a hotel in the 1970s, the owner built an entire wing for healing patients. Today, there's a private floor reserved for postsurgical guests who want to be nursed back in the lap of luxury and away from prying eyes. Michael Jackson often convalesced here for months at a time. Of course, plastic surgery isn't required to pamper oneself at L'Ermitage. Guests will check in to

get primped ahead of galas and weddings, in part because of the renowned full-length triptych mirrors. At every turn, the service is reserved yet highly personal, even for guests who aren't technically people. During lunch at Avec Nous, waiters alert the kitchen staff to prepare their handcrafted dog food as soon as they spot a familiar Great Dane and his owner sitting on the patio.

Ultimately, the human touch hotels provide is what makes them so essential to residents. Like many visitors to Los Angeles, Joe Zee, a fashion stylist, creative director, and television host, used to wonder why friends in L.A. would be so eager to meet him at his hotel. "I get it now that I live here," says Zee, a former New Yorker who has called the Hollywood Hills home for the past three years. "I celebrated my last birthday and New Year's at Tower Bar."

When I meet him there to toast the launch of his new Netflix docuseries *7 Days Out*, we grab drinks, followed by dinner with another friend of Zee's who is in town. "He probably thinks I did it to make it easy for him," he says with a laugh as we raise our glasses. "But I made a reservation here before I knew where he was staying."

As Doppelt glides through the dining room after seating a group of guests, she stops and leans in to chat with Zee and the rest of us. As she stands to leave a few minutes later, she lights up and calls over an anonymous-looking middle-aged man heading toward the bar with a trio of friends. "You must know Lev," she says to us. "Don't you?" ✕

*Alex Bhattacharji is a screenwriter and journalist who followed the Dodgers' migration from his native Flatbush, Brooklyn, to Los Angeles's East Side. He contributes regularly to WSJ Magazine and InStyle.*

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