Hotel
California

Hollywood insiders spill their secrets and never-before-told tales about
L.A.’s hottest hideout. | By Sam Wasson |

From Paris to Poughkeepsie, every city is in perpetual search of a metaphor for itself, but few are more conflicted about choosing their postcard than Los Angeles. Perhaps that’s because no one—inside the city or out—seems certain if it’s a good idea to have a good time.

By now, after 100 years of Hollywood, what is certain is that you can’t have a spotlight without a shadow. Those ubiquitous postcards of palm trees and the Hollywood sign? They might get top billing on the revolving racks, but they will never tell the whole truth about the myth. That honor is reserved for the Chateau Marmont.

After eight decades of debauchery, decadence and derelict amusement, L.A.’s centerpiece hotel—as elusive an icon as the city itself—has finally landed a starring film role. Opening December 22, Sofia Coppola’s Somewhere, a father/daughter romance starring Stephen Dorff and Elle Fanning, lovingly positions the Chateau at the heart of the myth.

Built above a no-man’s-land stretch of Sunset Boulevard in 1927, the Chateau Marmont was originally perceived as out of the way—too far from Hollywood to be central and too far from Beverly Hills to be convenient. But that’s what made it inviting, at least to Columbia Pictures president Harry Cohn, who rotated his naughtiest stars through suite 24. If you’re going to get in trouble, he told them, “go to the Marmont.” And a myth was born.

All these years later, it’s still getting born. So how, in a city that burns up trends like diesel fuel, has L.A.’s favorite hideout stayed a hideout? Some of the hotel’s most devoted disciples check in for a guess and a story or two.

Phil Pavel (general manager, 2000 to present): When it was built the Chateau was the most expensive apartment complex in the entire city.

Roger Kahn (author, The Boys of Summer): I still remember the number. It was Olfield-6 1010.

Pavel: The original owner, a man by the name of Fred Horowitz, wanted to build something that would make all of the New Yorkers in Hollywood feel comfortable. When you walk in the rooms and see the old tile and the wood, it just feels like an old New York apartment.

Michael Elias (screenwriter, The Jerk): If you were from the east, by going to the Chateau you showed your disdain for the rest of Hollywood.

Menno Meyjes (screenwriter, The Color Purple): When I first got there, it was a dicey kind of place, I guess like...
the Chelsea Hotel [in New York],
but it was the only place where you
could get a suite, which seemed to
us the absolute alpha and omega
of hotel life. It had a living room.
There wasn’t a lot of furniture in
the living room, but…

Kahn: Decorated? Kind of shabby
genteel. Nothing very flashy.
Upholstered furniture; sometimes
a little threadbare.

David Mamet (writer,
Glengarry Glen Ross): The shower
knob came off in my hand and the
shower bar fell down.

Pavel: When André [Balazs]
hired me, there was still this
sort of chenille bedspread that I
remember my grandmother had
at her house. I remember guests,
certain actors, who would have a
business meeting downstairs with
the chenille printed on the side of
their face from taking a nap.

Paul Schrader (writer/director,
American Gigolo): In the early
days, I had to sleep on the sofa next
to the air conditioning because the
AC was so bad. There was a kind of
odor to the place, too.

Elias: It had that smell of, you
know, the ’20s. It’s scores of years
of lemon polish or furniture wax or
whatever they use, and it seeps into
the walls.

Meyjes: A lot of the rooms were
really sun-drenched in that
particularly Southern Californian
way…

Sacha Newley (painter/portraitist):
There’s this extraordinary golden
afternoon light. Certainly in the
cabanas out by the pool, the light
has always been filtered through
the trees and heavy foliage, so it
has that amazing, rich, dappled
feeling to it.

Meyjes: Because the rooms were
so sunlit, you couldn’t really see
if the red light on the phone was
flashing. I remember [writer/
director] Abel Ferrara would put
the phone in the cabinet on top of
the television because you could
close the cabinet doors and that
way you could see if the message
light was burning. So you would
have to sort of peer into the cabinet
to see if someone had actually
called you back.

Schrader: I was lying in bed,
watching TV, and a movie came
on: Abel Ferrara’s Dangerous Game,
with Harvey Keitel and Madonna.
Harvey was in bed with Madonna
in the very room I was in, and the
camera was exactly where the TV
was. So it was like a reflection. I
was looking at the room in the
reflection, only I wasn’t in it;
they were in it. And I thought,
“Wow, they haven’t even changed
the décor. The only thing that’s
changed are the people in the bed.”

André Balazs (owner): It’s, in
a way, a home. Yet at the same time,
it’s absolutely not your home.
Everything that would make
you feel constrained about your
home is eliminated. So a sense of
safety combined with a lack of
familiarity, which has the effect of
freeing you from those limitations
that normally restrict you.

Pavel: Part of it is hiring people who
are unfazed by certain behavior.

Schrader: It’s not a noir hotel. It’s
more of a love hotel, the adulterer’s
haven. It’s where the husband
would move out, stay at the
Chateau, have an affair and then
come back home.  continued...
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Fame and Infamy at the Chateau Marmont

1927 L.A. attorney Fred Horowitz begins construction on what he hopes will be the most fashionable apartment house in Hollywood. For maximum privacy, the Chateau walls will be built of concrete; rents peak at an exorbitant $750 per month.

1933 Jean Harlow, honeymooning with third husband Harold Rosson, enjoys evenings in with Clark Gable. Evenings and mornings.

1948 Dorothy Parker checks in. At the front desk she is overheard declaring, “Life would be a bed of roses if it weren’t filled with pricks.”

1955 James Dean and Natalie Wood meet for the first time, in Bungalow 2, for a read-through of Rebel Without a Cause.

1978 Awaiting his verdict, Roman Polanski disappears into the hotel with Nastassja Kinski. Then he disappears from America.


1990 André Balazs buys and refurbishes the hotel. “There’s no ground zero in L.A.,” he says. “I think for a lot of people the Chateau provides that.”

2004 Famed photographer Helmut Newton dies, possibly of a heart attack, after crashing his car outside the hotel.

2004 Scarlett Johansson and Benicio Del Toro either have or don’t have sex in a hotel elevator.

2007 Britney Spears banned from hotel for (allegedly) playing with her food.

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Balazs: We’ve brought criminal charges against employees who have in any way violated the privacy of the guests.

L.M. Kit Carson (screenwriter, Paris, Texas): There’s a protective feeling to the place.

Balazs: The lobby isn’t on the ground floor. So you don’t see all that foot traffic. That gives it a natural sense of privacy.

David Freeman (author, A Hollywood Education): Should you, in your moment of disrepute, choose to bypass the lobby, you could take the elevator straight up from the garage to your room.

Meyjes: There was this very recalcitrant elevator, and one day it broke down. We were all standing there going, “There’s someone in the elevator! Someone’s in the elevator!” At a certain point they had to open the door with a crowbar and the doors just sort of fell away and [photographer] Helmut Newton was leaning against the elevator wall with a lit cigarette in his mouth and a leather jacket slung over his shoulder—the very picture of insouciance. He hardly glanced down at the people who had freed him, walked on to his convertible, and drove out.

Sofia Coppola (writer/director, Somewhere): I met Helmut Newton in the elevator. He was coming home from the gym in his sweat suit, and I thanked him for a photo he had given me, and we got out and I left. A few hours later I came back and his car had crashed. There was the car with flowers around it.

Jan Sharp (producer, Wide Sargasso Sea): Every year Helmut and [his wife] June would come and throw a party. We used to call it “The Festival of Helmut and June.” Men wore black-tie and we all got dressed up as if it were a Paris party. It was my treat every year—Helmut’s Christmas present to me—to sit next to [director] Billy Wilder, on his good side, because he could only hear out of one ear.

Freeman: Billy Wilder said that when he first got to L.A. he was so broke he had to live in the lounge of the ladies’ bathroom in the Chateau’s lobby. It’s become a part of Hollywood folklore and it may even be true.

Newley: I used to hear about Leonardo DiCaprio and what he would get up to with his friends. He and his entourage were like a pack of wolves with the young girls.

Kahn: When I first came in the ’60s, if you went to a party and decided you had too much to drink, you could call the Chateau garage and they’d send a car with two drivers to pick you up and drive your car back. I know some writers... continued on page XXX...
Pavel: Now there’s a great service where these guys will put a little scooter in the back of your trunk, drive you back and then drive the scooter home.

Kahn: I knew of two writers who began to drink at their hotel room and they drank so much that one of them said to the other, “We can’t drive back. We’re too looped. Let’s call the hotel.” So they pick up the phone and about two minutes into the conversation they discover they’ve been drinking at their own apartment in the Chateau Marmont.

Nigel Williams (author, From Wimbledon to Waco): I went to a party for The Queen there—with Helen Mirren and all—and I saw Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry in the lobby. Stephen and I were off our faces.

Pavel: Let’s just say when I studied Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov and Shaw I never thought I’d become so good at transitioning people into rehab.

Nicholas Kazan (screenwriter, Reversal of Fortune): I’m barely hip enough to have a drink in the garden.

Kahn: I got a legend for you. At first, there was no bar downstairs, but there was a bar across the street at the Garden of Allah, and Robert Benchley, the famous humorist, would stay at the Chateau and when he wanted a drink—he hated to walk—he would call the Chateau desk to get a cab. Because he was too embarrassed to take a cab for one block, he’d have the car detour for about 15 minutes and then pull into the Garden of Allah across the street.

Mejjes: And there were people from all aspects of the performing arts. Not just Hollywood. But also [theater director] Peter Sellars and Malcolm McLaren, who managed the Sex Pistols.