

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.

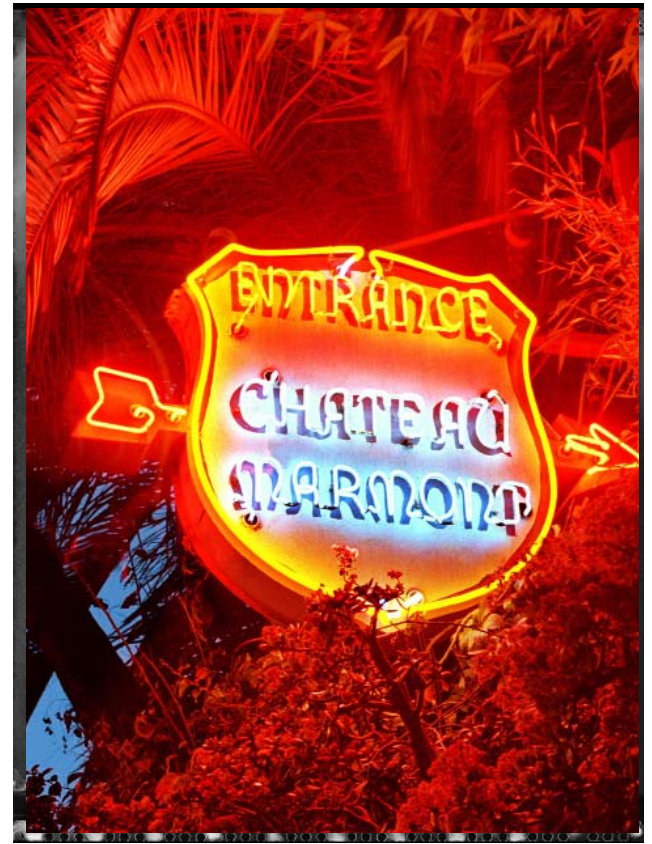
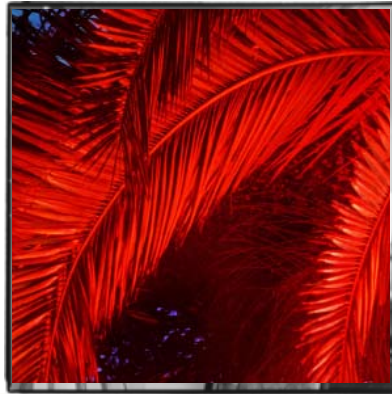
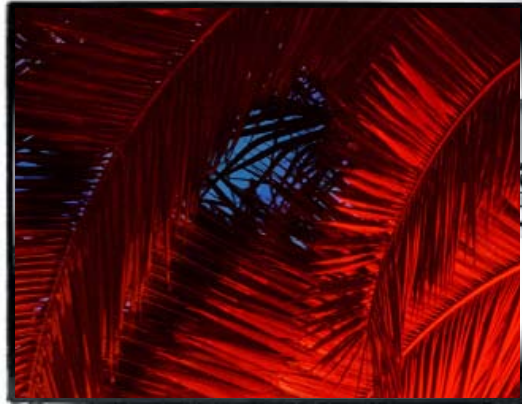
Roger Kahn (*author, The Boys of Summer*): I still remember the number. It was Olfield-6 1010.

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 divey kind of place, I guess like CONTINUED...



FLASHPOINT The Sunset Boulevard entrance of famed Chateau Marmont

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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...



INN-SIDERS Clockwise from top left: The Chateau Marmont has hosted the likes of Jean Harlow, with third husband Harold Rosson, and her parents; Stephen Dorff, pictured here in a scene from director Sofia Coppola's new film, *Somewhere*; Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren; James Dean (seated in front of the television set) and the cast of *Rebel Without a Cause* at a 1955 script reading in Bungalow 2; and portraitist Sacha Newley, who was dispatched to the hotel to paint author Dominick Dunne, a resident during the O.J. Simpson trial.

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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 barely 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



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.

1982 John Belushi dies of drug overdose in Bungalow 3.

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.

"It's the adulterer's haven... the husband would move out, stay at the Chateau, have an affair and then come back home."
—Paul Schrader

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

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...THE RADAR SCOOP CONTINUED FROM PAGE XXX who drank pretty hard, and it was great for them.

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.

Meyjes: 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.

Pavel: I'd see Annie Lennox in the lobby just playing the piano.

Kahn: I was at the desk once and there was a very, very upset Boris Karloff. He had gotten a traffic ticket for parking on Sunset and he was raging. It amused me to see Frankenstein knocked with a parking violation.

Sharp: At one point when we had the [John] Belushi bungalow for very cheap, we had this ongoing Australian party. I don't think there was anyone in the Australian film industry who didn't come and stay with us as a guest. Nicole Kidman lived with us for about six weeks. We'd call the front desk in the evening and they'd bring a pullout. The sitting room was like an army hospital in wartime, I suppose.

Carson: My wife and I were sitting in the lobby one night having coffee and all of a sudden Robert Downey Jr. comes in, wrecked and surveying and scanning the room. He looked like he was thinking, "I'm supposed to be having a meeting but I don't have a clue with who..." So he comes over and sits down beside us and says, "Hey, how about having a meeting? I know I'm supposed to be having a meeting. Can we have a meeting? Let's just start having a meeting!" And we did. Then he left and probably told his agent he had his meeting.

Pavel: I remember one of my earliest memories of the hotel was seeing Iggy Pop walking around the lobby with no shirt, barefoot, with leather pants. And I love it that we had Dominick Dunne walking around in the middle of that.

Newley: The day that I came to paint Dominick was the day of the O.J. verdict. Dominick was appalled and very angry. He was an absolute sweetheart most of the time, but when you got him on a subject he felt passionately about, the animus would kick in and he'd flame. That day at the front desk at the Chateau, I think he received death threats. So he was in a very agitated state. And I came into his

suite where he had been staying for about 18 months, and it was just overwhelmed by books—you know, snowdrifts of papers going up the walls, the fax was spewing new information on the trail.

Schrader: If you were living there, you sort of got to know the other people who were living there. If you went out to the courtyard at night, you'd join whatever was going on.

Kahn: And having all those writers in one place, you could huddle.

Carson: You were able to be friendly and hang around with each other and trade scripts. I traded scripts with David Mamet.

Elias: A writer friend used to call me and say he needed help with his screenplay. When do you have to turn it in? "Tomorrow." What page are you on? "One." I'll be right over. Usually, he would have a secretary, and he would dictate to the secretary. And when the secretary passed out, they would send over another one. And he actually could write the movie in four or five days.

Kahn: My friend [blacklisted screenwriter] Ring Lardner had a room on the third or the fourth floor. Outside the hotel at that time was an ad for a Las Vegas hotel consisting of a monstrously tall showgirl spinning a ball on one foot and wearing a cowboy version of a bikini. This slowed traffic, as you could imagine. I went to see Ring and there he was, working on a screenplay, a portable typewriter on his desk and the venetian blinds drawn. It was a lovely November day. I said, "Ring, why you working with the blinds drawn?" Ring opened the blinds and there in his face was this gigantic, spinning, plastic showgirl. Every 15 seconds these massive plastic boobs came past the window. Ring said, "Makes it hard to work," and he closed the blinds.

Carson: At the Chateau, you can share the spirit of creation instead of what is more common, which is hyperventilating the moment an

idea leaves your mouth, which is closer to the real Hollywood state of mind.

Sharp: In a city that is very hard to make social connections in, the Chateau was like being on a ship—a ship sailing through this desert, really.

Pavel: Three separate psychics have told me that this place was built on an energy vortex. It's become a joke with the staff in the hotel. If it's been a particularly crazy day or week, we'll say, "Oh, the vortex is acting up again."

Carson: Oh yes, there were ghosts. The ghosts would wake me at 3:30 every morning and say, "Go to work."

Mike Figgis (*writer/director*, Leaving Las Vegas): It was about three in the morning and a noise had woken me. It felt like someone was in the room and I was slightly scared. I looked into the living room. On the low table were various magazines and the *The New York Times*. Very slowly, a page of the *Times* turned itself from the right to the left. I stared, fixated, somewhat freaked out and after approximately 30 seconds the next page turned itself. Something was reading the paper. I rationalized the situation: There was a draft and it was just enough to turn the pages of the newspaper one by one. But it was still a disturbing enough image, which to this day is vivid in my mind. I stood by the open window for a moment before closing it—what draft? The air was still.

Schrader: There's not many of them left in L.A. There's Musso and Frank, but Chasen's is gone, The Brown Derby is gone. The Beverly Hills Hotel is still there, but there's not much that has been there in terms of public spaces since the beginning of Hollywood. The Chateau has moved into that rarefied world of being a cultural landmark. ▣