

Living it up in Los Angeles

... while LA's mix of shops, hotels and restaurants will not fail to excite those who prefer the fast pace of city life,

Is there another city as mythologized as the City of Angels? So familiar from the films it produces? And yet so strange? So amorphous? So contrived? Los Angeles' size means it has no real heart to speak of, for it isn't a cohesive city in any conventional sense - more a cluster of semi-autonomous cities that have somehow become fused.

Within recent years the hitherto moribund Downtown area has enjoyed something of a renaissance. Its fabulous Art Deco architecture has been spruced up, not least City Hall. André Balazs' Standard Hotel, the first new hotel in the area for a decade, has given mod-

ish Angelenos a different place to drink. And in 2003, Frank Gehry's sweeping, silvery, steel-clad Walt Disney Concert Hall finally opened its doors, bringing style and glamour to the area.

Nota Bene's choice areas are West Hollywood (perhaps the most obviously attractive), Hollywood, Brentwood, Bel Air and Beverly Hills.

West Hollywood has real atmosphere with its leafy streets, quaint houses, quirky boutiques, and fashionable restaurants. It's almost the only place hereabouts one feels comfortable (rather than freakish) on foot. Bel Air, where the abiding atmosphere is one of old money, has its famous hotel the Bel-Air, and its sister Country Club which attracts a Wasp crowd.

If there's a district that typifies the popular image of LA, it is surely Beverly Hills, with its long palm-lined avenues and exclusive shopping streets and restaurants. South of Santa Monica Boulevard is home to Barneys, Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus. And all the usual designer stores have outlets on Rodeo Drive.

Not unexpectedly, Beverly Hills and its environs are where the best hotels are found: the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Peninsula and the Four Seasons. Given the calibre, wealth and, you might think, discernment of Holly-

wood's film-industry fraternity, it might be assumed that Los Angeles brims with hotels of the very finest order. But we were surprised to find this was not the case. Nowhere we stayed was faultless, extraordinary or truly outstanding.

Hotels

About two miles west of Beverly Hills, the Hotel Bel Air has a reputation for fabulousness. Yes it's the stuff of legend. But some myths are there to be exploded. First, it's reputedly a haven of peace and quiet. Fair enough if you get the right room, but be warned: a number of them back onto Stone Canyon Road and suffer from early morning traffic noise. Second, that it's famously glamorous. Well maybe if pink floral chintz, potted kentia palms and tea cosies work for you. The style is chintzy, precious and rather old fashioned.

However, there's a decent sized oval swimming pool with a terrace where you can take lunch. Good pool service, an abundant supply of towels and the comfort of the loungers are all plus points. An architecturally uninspiring 16-storey tower, with 285 rooms (including 98 suites), the Four Seasons Beverly Hills attracts its fair share of movie people at Oscar time. Rooms are comfortable and well-furnished, if a little ordinary for a Four

Seasons. But you'll appreciate the usual super-comfy beds, video/CD/DVD in all rooms, very good laundry and an alteration service.

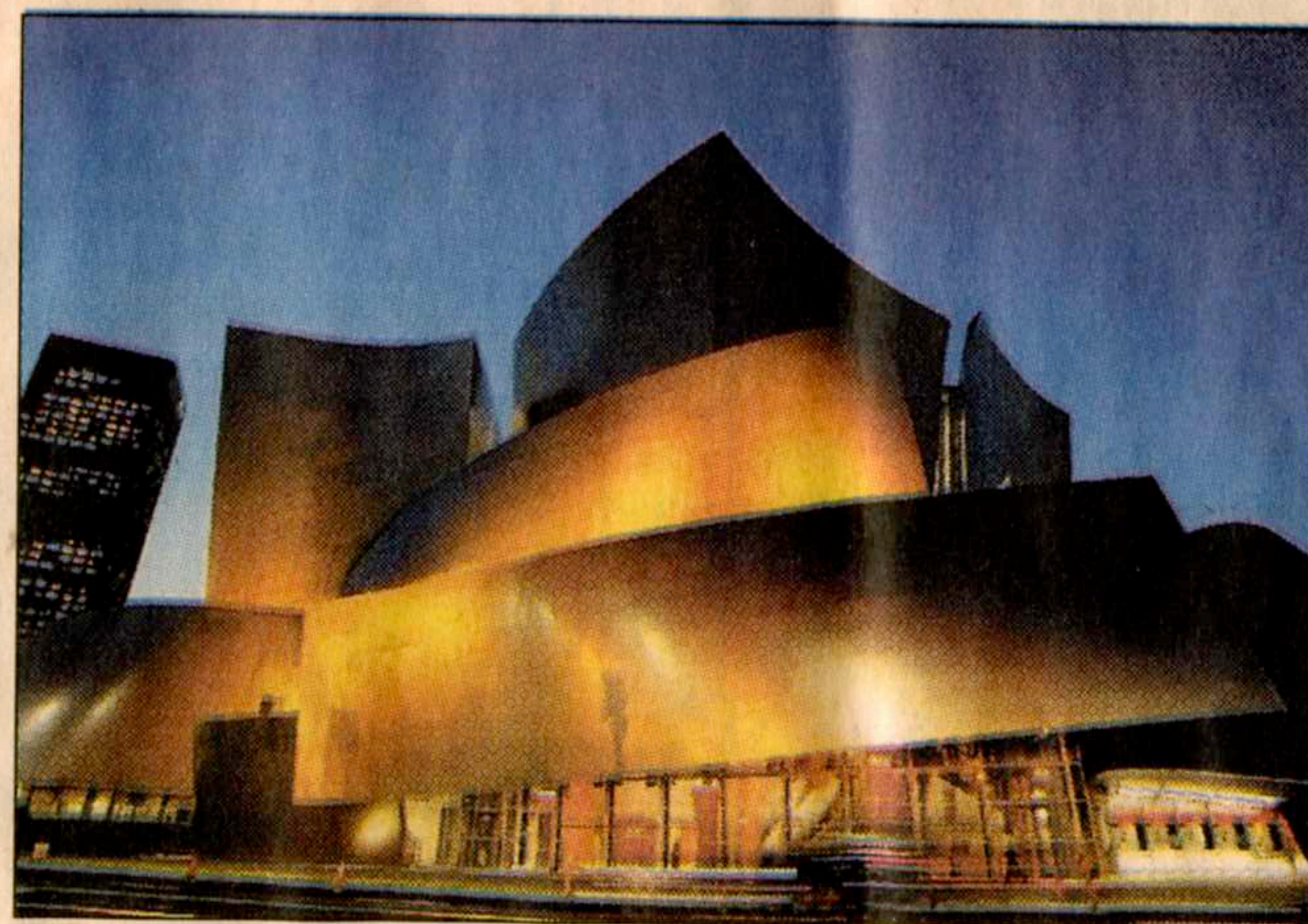
We quite like the deluxes and deluxe executive suites between the 6th and 16th floors. Don't, however, be tempted by the executive suites, in which the bedroom is internal and has no window. One step up, the corner luxury suites on the 11th-16th floors have wrap-around balconies and two bathrooms.

On South Santa Monica Boulevard, the Peninsula under the expert stewardship of Ali Kasikci who made the "24 hour room" a reality has the best location in town if you are here to shop. We also reckon it's the best-run, most appealing hotel in the city.

Smaller and more intimate than the Four Seasons, the stone clad, low-rise Peninsula, with its glamorous, large porticoed entrance attracts a fair share of the industry crowd. Whereas the Four Seasons can seem a little corporate and sober, the Peninsula has the confidence to bridge the gap between a business and resort hotel. And The Belvedere restaurant is "the" place for Sunday brunch.

We prefer the quieter rooms at the rear of the building, directly beneath the rooftop swimming pool. If you want a suite we'd recommend the Superior Corner type, such as 301 or 401 directly above.

If there's a property that typifies the whole Los Angeles ethos then surely it's the legendary Beverly Hills



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say the editors of **Nota Bene**

Hotel with its pink stucco walls, green-domed turrets and 1950s typography.

The most desirable accommodations are the 21 bungalows. Amy Sacco named her most prized New York lounge bar Bungalow 8 after one of the three rented by Howard Hughes.

For us though, many of these are a little on the dark side, so keep that in mind when booking. Otherwise we rather like the view from rooms on the fourth floor in the main building overlooking the gardens.

We still love Chateau Marmont. It's not a world-class hotel by conventional standards, but its atmosphere makes it special. We love the recently added "tiki" style bar on its fabulous outdoor patio. If you can get a seat, it's the place to be.

We're not convinced we'd trade conventional luxury for authentic 1950's style (even though André Balazs does it so well here) but if you want the sunset strip experience and the history and faded glamour of this artsy, trendy, oh-so-cool hostelry you'll love it here. Otherwise a drink at the bar and dinner in the garden is a must.

West along Sunset Boulevard from Chateau Marmont is the Mondrian Hotel. Nothing about the 237 accommodations is distinguished, other than the view south across the city. The Mon-

drian's famous Skybar has been one of LA's leading nightspots for some years now.

The Argyle, a Sunset Strip veteran, will be reopened later this year. We are dying to get into the top floor suites and have great confidence in the project.

Restaurants

Mr Chow is still very much in style. Ago, especially if you can get a table on the patio, remains a real West Hollywood experience: flashy. Noisy. Just don't go on a Friday. AOC is still a winner as is Bastide for a contemporary, casual eatery. We still rate Il Sole on Sunset Boulevard although Dan Tanas is the place to go for celeb spotting.

Lucques, sister to AOC and more sophisticated, remains one of our favourites. Relative new kid on the block is Ashton Kutcher's Dolce. Very trendy but unfortunately only mediocre Italian food.

Ita-Cho, a traditional, authentic Japanese that's always packed with chic Hollywood locals, may not be in the same league as Matsuhisa but its much less expensive and we like it all the same.

Jar is a great new addition to the Los Angeles restaurant scene and serves mostly steaks and chops. Brunch at Campanile is good any day of the week and The Little

Door, a St Tropezienne take in West Hollywood, is utterly romantic and atmospheric. It's a shame the food is so mediocre.

With more than 20 beaches, a benign climate – the sun shines 270 days a year on average – and a range of hotels that run the gamut from boho to blissful (well almost), Los Angeles is an extraordinary and alluring place to spend some time.

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Hotels

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- Beverly Hills Hotel, tel: +1 310-276-2251
- Chateau Marmont, tel: +1 323-656-1010

Restaurants

- Mr Chow, tel: +1 310-278-9911
- Ago, tel: +1 213-655-6333
- Il Sole, tel: +1 310-657-1182
- Dan Tanas, tel: +1 310-275-9444
- Lucques, tel: +1 323-655-6277
- Ita-Cho, tel: +1 213-871-0236
- Matsuhisa, tel: +1 310-659-9639
- Campanile, tel: +1 323-938-1447
- The Hungry Cat, tel: +1 323-462-2155
- The Bar, tel: +1 323-468-9154