



A VERY PARTICULIER PLACE TO GO

A new style of city hotel is offering a home from stately home for guests weary of conventional ideas of luxury, says Julian Allason.

As guests draw up at the entrance, crested gates swing shut behind them, closing out the bustle of the capital. The front door opens to reveal a richly decorated hall furnished with nothing as vulgar as a reception desk. For this is an *hôtel particulier*, and right now it is the place to lay one's head on a city visit. For a century or more these princely homes were the ugly ducklings of European architecture – town houses too large for modern habitation, too small for institutional use. Now the former city residences of noble families in Paris, Rome and across the EU accession states echo with the cries and laughter of privileged occupation.

Their conversion, often from semi-dereliction, into small hotels of discretion and taste but limited facilities, resolves a number of pressing problems. For local authorities into whose hands some of

these houses had fallen following the owners' inability to meet repair and tax bills, it is an especial relief. Even heritage agencies charged with the preservation of listed buildings are for once proving flexible in their approbation of the conversion work necessary to meet modern standards. For it appears that only the hotel industry and the occasional philanthropic magnate can afford the eight-digit costs often involved.

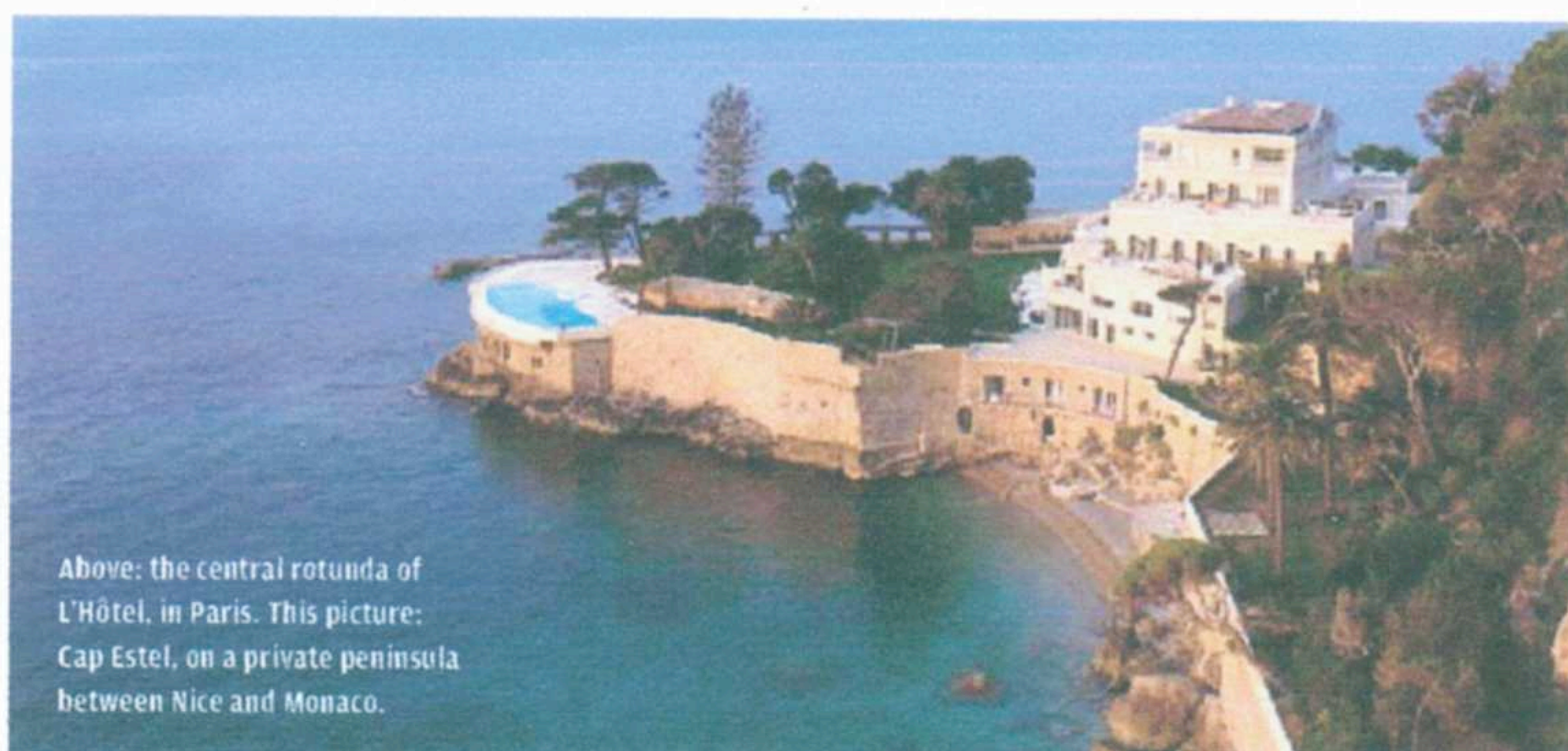
One of the first such mansions to find a new identity was Spencer House in London's St James's, under the tutelage of Jacob Rothschild. The former London home of the Earls Spencer of Althorp, Northamptonshire, since the 18th century, it has now become a magnificent venue for private events with its own full-time catering and service staff, as well as hosting exhibitions open to the public. Its renaissance demonstrated the feasibility of rescue for palatial houses stranded upon the shores of social change. Last November's opening of William Kent House as a banquetting annexe to London's Ritz Hotel provided mathematical proof of concept in the form of virtually continuous bookings of its chambers from day one. What excites the hotel industry even more is the sustainability of elevated rates for the period

apartments overlooking Green Park. "Six-star' residential space supported by the full service of a luxury hotel – it is the ultimate dream of those who don't pay their own travel bills," grins one investment banker.

Nor have such developments gone unnoticed in European property markets, which have experienced a burst of interest in historic properties that had hitherto proved difficult to move. Not only have values risen but property entrepreneurs have joined hoteliers in the race to fulfil a

demand for *belle époque* luxury ignited by energy fortunes and City bonuses. Emigrés returning to Hungary, the Czech Republic and accession countries such as Estonia have brought with them expertise and finance at a time when authorities have been keen to return historic properties to descendants of their rightful noble owners – but only on condition of restoration.

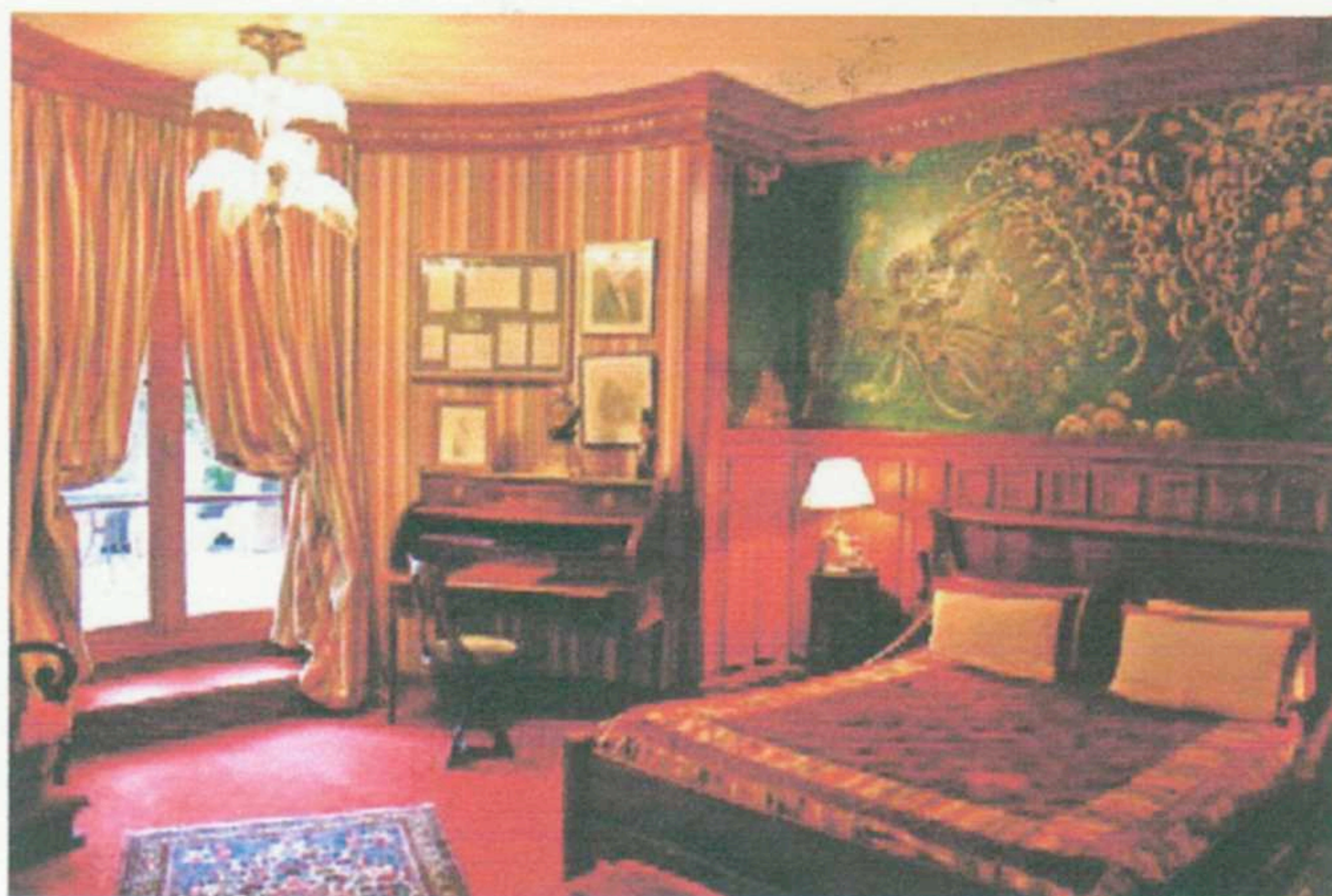
The consequence is a forward calendar filling up with soft openings of *hôtels particuliers*. Several are already receiving



Above: the central rotunda of L'Hôtel, in Paris. This picture: Cap Estel, on a private peninsula between Nice and Monaco.

guests, while some of the earliest conversions are completing elaborate refurbishment to catch the Zeitgeist. After purchasing the faded glory of Paris's cult retreat L'Hôtel in the Left Bank gallery-land near St Germain des Prés, the new co-proprietors Jessica Sainsbury and her husband, the Oxford historian Prince Peter de Frankopan, held a dinner party in January to seek reaction to the first stage of the restoration by designer Jacques Garcia. To their surprise everyone accepted, including such ordinarily anonymous travellers as Jean-Luc Naret, head of *Guides Michelin*, and Herbert Ypma, creator of the *Hip Hotels* books, both men possessed of early-warning radar for new trends.

Room 16, in which Oscar Wilde quipped that he was "dying beyond my means", has been preserved, complete (perhaps rather tactlessly) with the bill which may well have



"We talk to each client to ascertain what they want - from full hotel service to being left completely alone."

precipitated his demise. Other guestrooms and suites have been individually refreshed to showcase the taste and possessions of such past guests as the risqué French actress and singer Mistinguett. This very individual conception of *luxe particulier* is reflected in a service style that owes less to *Upstairs, Downstairs* formality than egalitarian proactivity. "More PA than secretary," as one recent guest put it. L'Hôtel - an establishment so discreet Parisian taxi drivers refer to it as the "hotel with no name" - may have formed as a hangout for affluent bohos such as Salvador Dalí and Talitha Getty, but these days it is alpha celebrities and high net worth individuals upon whom it bestows a welcome cloak of anonymity. Recent guests such as Al Pacino, Johnny Depp and Drew Barrymore have been drawn by the sensual atmosphere that owes as much to its 19th century period as *un pavillon d'amour* as to its noble origins. As such it represents the antithesis of the gilded palaces of the Right Bank that now function as five-star stages for the display of wealth and status.

The *hôtel particulier* is too precise a concept to be scaleable. In the view of Jessica Sainsbury - who also owns Cowley Manor, the contemporary country hotel in Gloucestershire - the model simply does not work above a certain size, namely that of a landed family's city residence. That, and the necessity of conforming with architectural preservation rules, means that many such houses are limited in the space available for public rooms. In consequence, some of the newly converted *hôtels particuliers* have neither restaurants nor formal bars, although guests are unlikely to go hungry or thirsty.

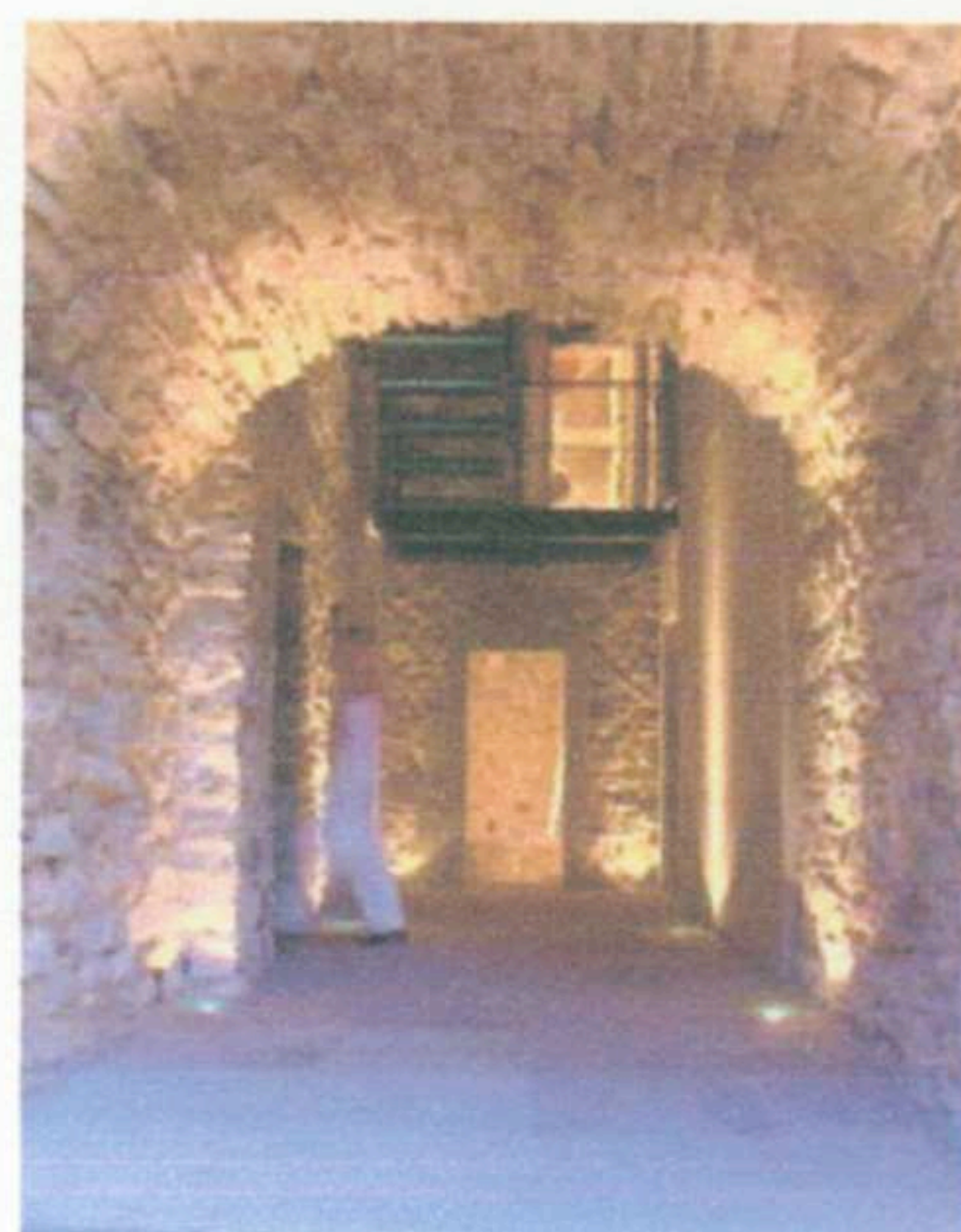
As the ripples spread outward from European capitals, aristocratic houses across the Continent are being remodelled into exclusive establishments that bridge the gap between luxury hotel and grand villa. Cap Estel, off the lower coast road from Nice to Monaco, occupies a private peninsula commanding a panorama of the mountainous littoral. The 19th century dacha of a Russian prince, it has undergone a three-year programme of restoration to create 12 suites and eight guestrooms with all the facilities that a holidaying aristocrat of that period would have enjoyed, combined with absolute privacy. The two topmost apartments

are completely self-contained, with little reason for guests to quit their wraparound balconies but for a swim in the heated saltwater pool or down at the small private beach. Staff from the tiny spa burrowed into the cliff-face also conduct treatments in apartments and suites.

Little wonder that in addition to the Hollywood guests - such as Robert De Niro - who enjoy the private screening room, it has also been adopted by a clientele drawn from the worlds of finance and industry. From the corniche, Cap Estel remains as invisible as the guests who have chosen it.

One rather surprising group to express enthusiasm for the resurrection of the *hôtels particuliers* is comprised of the scions of the original owning families. Tanya Rose, founding director of Mason Rose, who advises many City figures on their holiday arrangements, notes that there are now more aristocrats active in investment banking and fund management than since the days, long gone, when a title decorating the board was considered to confer respectability. "For some of these families this is the first generation to enjoy wealth in a century," she observes. "And they have a hankering to live as their forbears did - but with all mod cons."

From this flows not only a particular style of service, but an inherent resistance to the vulgarity recently adopted by certain



hotel managers in the belief that it appeals to new money, particularly that emanating from the former Soviet empire. At Torre di Moravola, which opened this spring on a mountain ridge enjoying 360-degree views of Umbria's Carpini Valley, designer Seonaid Mackenzie and her husband, the architect Christopher Chong, have eschewed showy features almost to the point of minimalism. A central axis connects pools and gardens to seven tower suites linked by floating steel stairs. "Our aim was to allow the architectural features of this 10th century watchtower to speak for themselves, and to draw inspiration from the way of life enjoyed by the noble family who once owned it," explains Mackenzie.

Although early inquiries have largely been from those interested in renting the entire property for extended-family holidays and celebrations, rooms are also being offered on an individual basis for what is likely to become a shared house party experience. With the mystical Umbrian landscape now readily accessible by both scheduled flights and private jet into nearby Perugia, Torre di Moravola is as practical a long-weekend proposition as Paris or Rome. Having worked extensively in Hong Kong, Mackenzie and Chong have brought to the rapidly evolving *hôtel particulier* concept some novel service ideas. "We talk to each client to ascertain the level they want, from full hotel service to being left completely alone," she explains. Interestingly, most clients prefer a concierge-oriented style, with

arrangements made for private access to galleries and vineyards. Very much, in fact, what one might have experienced as a guest in a notable private house.

Such developments are being monitored with keen interest by members of Relais & Châteaux and Small Luxury Hotels. "There is little doubt that this approach represents the future for properties with noble antecedents," observes one. Membership applications are expected from *hôtels particuliers*, especially in East European states. Small Luxury Hotels has already enrolled in its portfolio the recently converted Liassidi Palace in Venice's Castello sestiere. Guests arriving by Riva speedboat enter the great wooden doors of the 600-year-old palazzo, disembarking into a flower-filled courtyard. The 26 bedrooms and four opulent suites are a triumph of contemporary Italian design over medieval plumbing. Initial feedback is that the guest experience is both more relaxed and intimate than staying in a hotel - closer, in fact, to being the house guest of rather grand, if slightly eccentric aristocrats.

The trend is not confined to France and Italy, nor are its origins exclusively derived from the feudal system from which evolved the *hôtel particulier* as a solution to the necessity of attendance at court. Cortijo Soto Real, on the outskirts of Seville, was the seat of a Moorish prince. The 25 elegant bedrooms and four suites are decorated in the style of a Spanish grandee, and draw guests attracted by the sporting possibilities of the estate, from partridge shooting to expeditions on horseback to the mountains or, for the less energetic, carriage drives around it.

From a wander on foot through the elegant streets of London's Mayfair and St

James's it is all too apparent that a town house considered adequate by an 18th century nobleman would be beyond the needs, perhaps even the means, of

all but the richest oligarch today. Those mansions that survived the Blitz are now gentlemen's clubs, embassies or corporate headquarters. How much more satisfying that here, and across Europe's capitals past and present, some are now being restored to their original purpose as a home from stately home. ♦

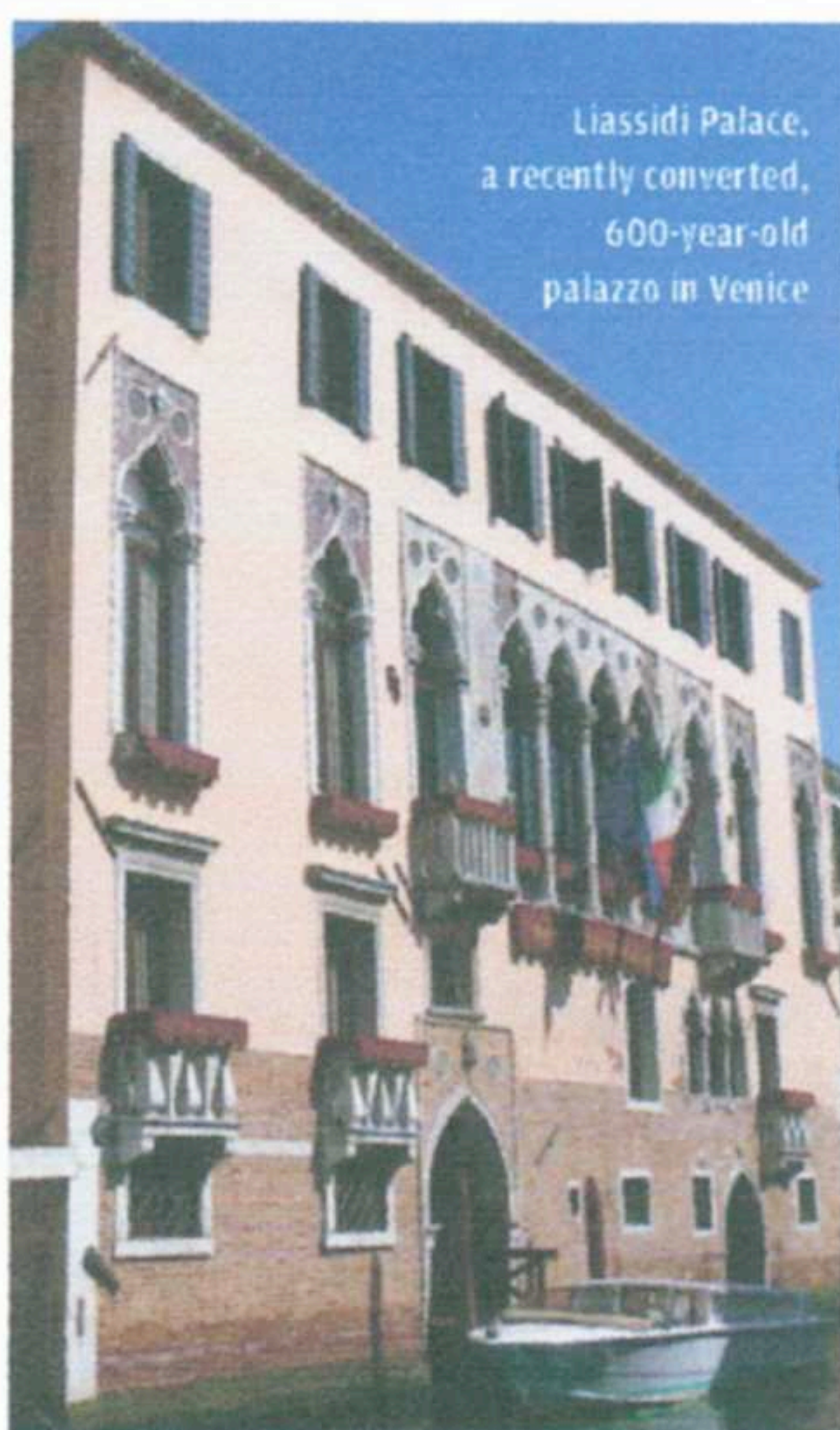
A STately APPROACH

Rates are for a double room B&B midseason.

Julian Allason stayed as a guest of **L'Hôtel**, 13 rue des Beaux Arts, Paris (00331-4441 9900; www.l-hotel.com), from €250 (about £170), and of **Cap Estel**, 1312 Avenue Raymond Poincaré, Eze-Borde-Mer, France (00334-9376 2929; UK reservations 020-7235 3245; www.steinhotels.com/capestel), from about £355. **Eurostar** (08705-186 186; www.eurostar.co.uk) has frequent services to Paris and connections to Nice, from £109 London to Nice.

Cortijo Soto Real, 41730 Las Cabezas de S.J., Seville, Spain (00349-5586 9200; UK reservations 00800-525 48000; www.hotelcortijosotoreal.com), from about £272. **Liassidi Palace**, Castello, Ponte dei Greci 3405, Venice, Italy (003941-520 5658; UK reservations 00800-525 48000; www.liassidipalacehotel.com), from about £190. **Spencer House**, 27 St James's Place, London SW1 (020-7499 8620; www.spencerhouse.co.uk). **The Ritz**, 150 Piccadilly, London W1 (020-7493 8181; www.theritzhotel.co.uk), apartments in William Kent House from £5,875.

Torre di Moravola, Umbria (020-7978 7164; www.torredimoravola.com), from about £156.



Liassidi Palace, a recently converted, 600-year-old palazzo in Venice