

Hollywood's haven

A-list luxury in lush surroundings at Hotel Bel-Air

"The Bel-Air is made by the rain, but it isn't made for the rain." It was clearly a line the bellhop had perfected during one or other of California's catastrophic inclement spells, but for a slick line delivered by a man wearing what they call around these parts a "slicker" and we'd call an alarming yellow poncho, he wasn't wrong.

Around us, as rains lashed Los Angeles, Hotel Bel-Air's verdant lawns and foliant-thick patios drank deep of the deluge. Less invitingly, water sluiced through the canopies that serve to protect its many cloistered walkways and an eerie mushroom cloud of steam hung over the deserted oval pool. But if, right now, it was hard to imagine a worse time to visit southern California, it also dawned on me that there was no better time to visit the Bel-Air.

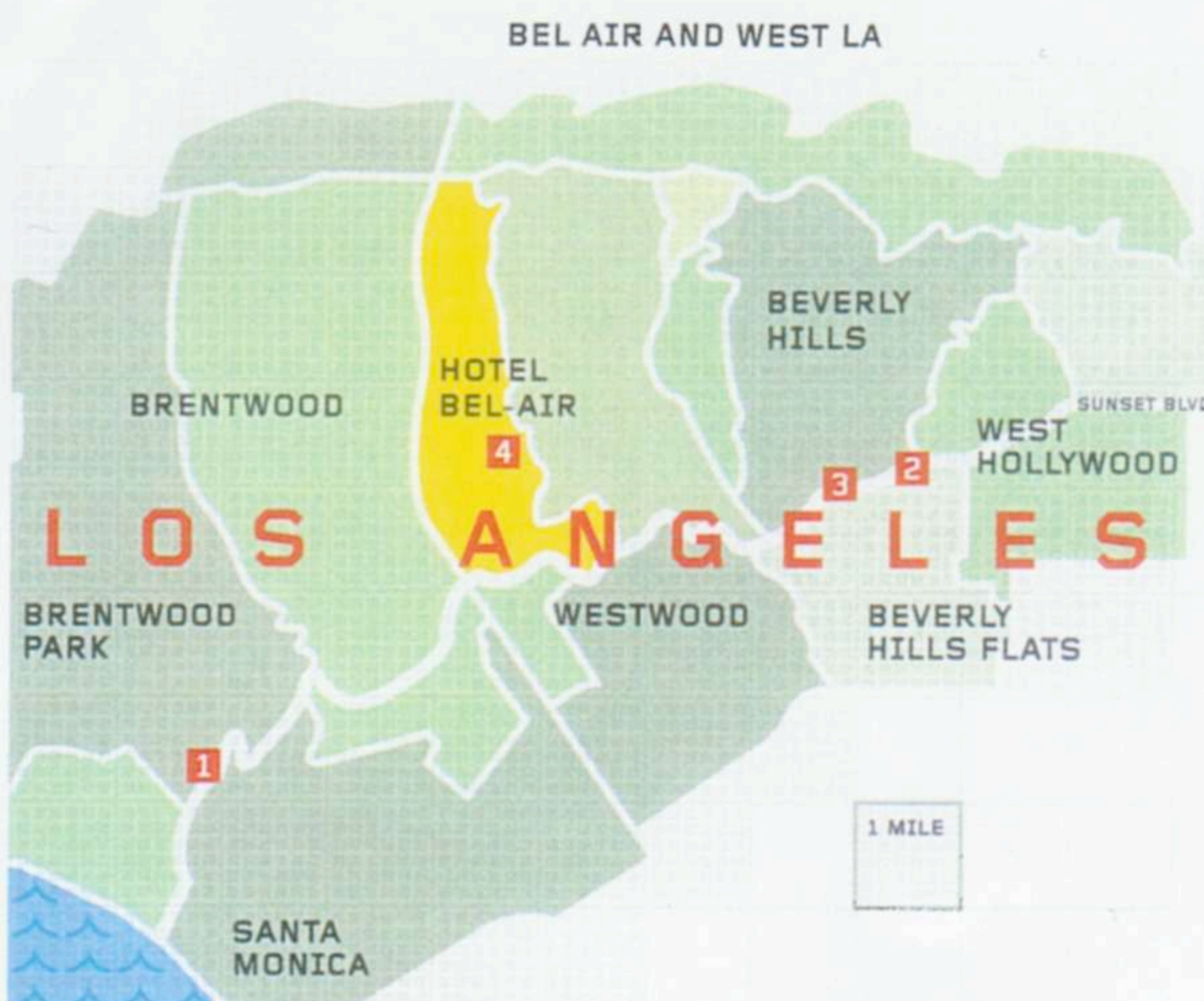
The Bel-Air is one of the world's finest hotels and unlike any other in LA. Lodged in a sylvan nook 1.5 miles back from Sunset Boulevard in the midst of one of LA's most prestigious fiefdoms, its reputation as a discreet, Utopian retreat has been built on a ferocious commitment to service (evidenced by the prompt arrival of herbal tea and fresh-baked biscuits to my suite on this most unseasonably cold day) and the handy proximity of a red carpet's worth of boldface locals who dine at its terrace restaurant and drink in its clubby, wood-lined bar (right).

What the brochures refer to as a mission-style collection of 91 rooms and villas is a flamingo-pink muddle of low, Spanish-style structures laid out deep in the belly of Stone Canyon. Long-term visitors apparently prefer the north end of the property, with its own private access to the road, and that's where *GQ* stayed, in a first-floor suite next door to the room Liz Hurley uses when she's in town. Recently, *GQ* shot Giovanni Ribisi at the Bel-Air, proving it's a favourite of Hollywood's more publicity-phobic stars who prefer its relatively remote setting to the kerb appeal of the Four Seasons or Regent Beverly Wilshire.

Once the sales office for the original Bel Air Estate, which opened in 1922, the Bel-Air became a hotel in 1946. Many of its staff have been with the hotel for decades. The current boss, Carlos Lopes, is currently on his third tour of duty. Since returning as managing director, he's restored the Bel-Air's five-star Mobil rating by investing in the grounds and instigating a room-renovation



LA breeze
Left: Hotel Bel-Air's oval pool. Below: LA's hottest spots all mapped out



WHILE YOU'RE IN THE BEL AREA

1 TAKE... Sunset Boulevard all the way to the beach and avoid the SUV-choked Interstate 10.

2 HEAD... east to the Strip. Check out the Hustler store (8920 Sunset Blvd. 001 310 860 9009), and stock up on books and CDs at Book Soup (8818 Sunset Blvd. 001 310 659 3110, www.booksoup.com) and Tower Records (8801 Sunset Blvd. 001 310 657 7300).

3 DROP... by Mel's Drive-In (8585 Sunset Blvd. 001 310 854 7200, www.melsdrive-in.com). It's a landmark and you can't go wrong with the burger and fries.

4 STAY... at the Hotel Bel-Air. 701 Stone Canyon Road, Los Angeles, CA 90077. 001 310 472 1211, www.hotelbelair.com. Rooms from £205. Suites from £387.

programme that goes beyond the trend for hiring niche interior designers, preferring to hand over the refurb reins to his many long-stay guests. Room 421, for instance, is regularly the home-from-home for a writer, who requested a larger desk and book shelves to house his travelling library. Other regulars have suggested skylights in the bathrooms and more storage space. But whichever you end up in, some suites have wood-burning fires, and all boast unfussy furnishings and Kiehl's bathroom products.

As befits such a reserved and secretive hotel, there are few public spaces. There's a cosy reception area where today local residents, panicked by talk of mudslides, have sought comfort among the hotel staff. But that's about it for see-and-be-seen spots, unless you count the ogler's paradise in front of the hotel, where seemingly every Bentley GT in California jostles for the attentions of the valet parking staff.

But even if you're not staying over, you shouldn't miss out on the bar. Here, if you're lucky, you'll find another stalwart of the Bel-Air's long-serving staff, Gus, mixing martinis, topping up the Tomolives and studiously ignoring the smart-casual Tinseltown types discussing "story arcs" and "plot motors" in just-too-loud voices.

But then again, why go to Hollywood when you can have Hollywood come to you? BP