

CHECK IN

Hollywood Face-Lift

The Hotel Bel-Air gets an expensive new look but retains its exclusive charm

WHEN CARLOS LOPES, THE managing director of the Hotel Bel-Air, asked a breakfasting guest early last year what he thought of the renovations to the suite he was occupying, the guest replied, "Well, it's not my personal taste." Fortunately for an un-nerved Lopes, the man eventually added, "But my wife loves it." It turned out to be a rare bit of negative feedback about the venerable property's \$20 million upgrade, which is now fully complete. "Overwhelmingly, the patrons said the new look was in keeping with the image," he recalls. "So I was able to sleep at night."

Forgive Lopes for being slightly neurotic. The secluded California landmark, set amid 5 hectares of palms, redwoods, primroses and bougainvillea in the canyons abutting Beverly Hills, has been an international icon of luxury since it opened in 1946. Its guest registry has included an assortment of Rocke-



HIGH LIFE: The Chalton Suite, post-makeover; Monroe posing by the pool, inset

COURTESY OF HOTEL BEL-AIR; REX FEATURES

ellers, Marilyn Monroe, Howard Hughes and Grace Kelly, as well as Prince Charles, Oprah Winfrey and Julia Roberts. For many glitterati, the Bel-Air serves as a second home. "I've never managed a hotel where the clientele is so loyal, has such high standards, and feels so proprietary about it," Lopes says.

So when Mobil Travel Guide subtracted one of the five stars from the Bel-Air's rating in 1999, Lopes knew a face-lift to the "dated and tired" design was imperative. He would have to nip and tuck carefully to avoid ranking the hotel's faith-

ful. "I had to update every facet, while preserving the classical elegance that is the Bel-Air's signature," he says.

The dining room underwent one of the biggest—and fastest—makeovers. A floor-to-ceiling fireplace and handblown Italian chandeliers were added, and the dowdy pale-wood seating was updated with buttercream-colored leather banquettes—all in seven days. Meanwhile, the 52 rooms and 39 suites were being



meticulously refurbished, with plush silk tones replacing swirly floral patterns that recalled the 1940s.

One hallmark of the Bel-Air is that each room and suite is unique, and nearly 500 fabrics and 100 paint colors were used to give each space a different feel. Even the desk lamps vary from room to room. Lopes also tailor-made several suites for the guests who use them most often. These personal touches include a hand-painted ceiling design, built-in bookshelves and hardwood flooring. The initial revamp so impressed the Mobil judges that they restored the five-star rating in 2003. Since then, the final touches, such as a semi-enclosed treetop terrace for tastings from the hotel's 40,000-bottle cellar, have helped the Bel-Air keep its top Mobil designation.

Given the massive overhaul, it's surprising that even some frequent guests have to ask what, specifically, has changed. But Lopes isn't distressed. "It pleases me because it tells me that the renovations were done seamlessly and tastefully," he says, "which means we suc-

ceeded." tel: (1-310) 472 1211; hotelbelair.com —By Sonja Steptoe/Los Angeles

LOCAL FARE

UPMARKET DINING

Spitalfields is a London neighborhood with a dual personality. It borders the financial district, but walk 10 minutes to the east and you hit deprived public-housing projects. The area's focal point is Spitalfields market, founded in 1887 and still going strong, in part due to the controversial development of the western side. Under an arching transparent canopy, mainstream shops and restaurants, which moved in over the winter, are now doing a brisk trade alongside the established stalls peddling eclectica. Among the new arrivals, only the restaurant Canteen might appeal to both the bohemian crowd and financial folk. "Is this a chain?" asked my Friday lunch companion. Not yet, but it's



FOOD AND THE CITY: Trendy noshing comes to London's Spitalfields

easy to imagine blond wood and tweedy green-upholstered clones being assembled out of flat packs across the land. Canteen offers freshly executed traditional British fare—macaroni and cheese, meat pies and all-day breakfasts—served with a mission statement that boasts of the kitchen's organic and local sourcing. There is a Fast Service menu for those who can only flee their desk for an hour, but we chose comfort food: a skillet of creamy baked eggs with undyed smoked haddock and spring onion, and a chicken-and-tarragon pie with mashed potatoes, greens and gravy. For dessert, we shared the strangely satisfying chocolate-and-beetroot cake. The service was friendly and efficient. But when I returned on a Sunday, the clientele was dressed down, and the staff moved at a far more leisurely pace. Sure beats the office canteen, though. canteen.co.uk —By Maggie Walker

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