



Princess of Bel-Air



IN THE PINK: Tess relaxes beside the hotel pool, below, which is never less than 82F



MAKING it in Hollywood is hard, it is said. Well, getting there can have its fair share of problems, too. For example, never, if you can help it, take a wilful, widdlesome toddler on the 11-hour flight to California. Otherwise, oh boy, do you need a holiday by the time you get there.

Even getting in isn't easy. On arrival at immigration we are fingerprinted and

Tess Daly luxuriates at the famous LA hotel where everyone is treated like royalty... and breakfast costs a hundred bucks

mug-shot before finally being freed to wing our way by cab up La Cienega Boulevard towards Hollywood. En route we roll past the numerous shiny glass shop fronts selling everything from fat-burgers to bikini waxes, dwarfed by the 100ft-high billboards screaming for business. It's a sell, sell,

sell assault on the jet-lagged senses that never lets up.

Almost with relief we reach sedate Beverly Hills. You know you've arrived when suddenly, almost without warning, everything is way more upscale – the ultra-green lawns are neatly manicured and all the houses are

mansions, each groomed and ready for its close-up. Beverly Hills oozes money and it's not ashamed to show it.

Finally, we arrive at the Hotel Bel-Air – hotel of choice for assorted Hollywood stars and world dignitaries. Liz Taylor had one of her many weddings here; Sophia Loren, too. More recently,

so did Britney Spears. Relieved that we don't seem to be disrupting any fresh outbreak of Hollywood nuptials, we enter via an enchantingly suspended footbridge and are greeted by a scene that might be signposted picturesque.

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You can picture Ol' Blue Eyes downing a whisky sour with the boys

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Six Bel-Air swans float serenely on their very own Swan Lake, surrounded by orange trees and lush gardens, the very sight enough to send you hurtling into matrimony.

This year the hotel is celebrating its 60th birthday. But, while it's technically a hotel, on arrival it seems as if you are about to stay at a private country estate. This is how it might feel if you sauntered into the Hugh Hefner Playboy Mansion down the road – except, of course, it wouldn't be swans gliding around the Swan Lake but a flock of Playmates.

Like the Bel-Air, we are also celebrating a birthday and are hoping to look up some old friends and enjoy some of that famous southern Californian sunshine.

FROM the off, the hotel staff greet us – that's me, husband Vernon and aforementioned tot – as if we are long-lost relatives arriving to hand them a winning lottery ticket. Our garden suite, number 112, is spacious and quite lovely, with an intimate, flower-filled patio complete with trickling fountain. Yes, that's what you don't get in your room at the Travelodge – a trickling fountain.

The rooms are furnished with pricey-looking works of art hanging over the wood-burning fireplaces – presumably there are cooler Bel-Air evenings but one supposes there aren't many.

In the bathroom there is His and Hers everything – sinks, slippers and wardrobes, very nice too. Suddenly, a smiling waiter appears bearing gifts – a complimentary afternoon tea, a courtesy extended to all arriving guests. The tea is refreshing passion fruit and the white chocolate cookies are home-made. Already I feel the strain of the flight draining away.

The Bel-Air prides itself on being a home from home. There are just 91

rooms and suites – none of them overlooking one another but, nevertheless, you are not alone. Nestled within the trees and bushes throughout the 12-acre gardens are more than 200 security cameras and motion-detectors – a reminder of its high-profile guest list and the importance placed on their privacy.

If these Bel-Air hotel walls could talk, what stories would be told. In their time the likes of Gregory Peck, Audrey Hepburn, Gary Cooper and Lauren Bacall have all stayed here. Judy Garland's favourite room was 118, while Doris Day preferred 150. Marilyn Monroe lived part-time in rooms 133 and 135 during her ill-fated marriage to Joe DiMaggio. Newer A-list converts include Russell Crowe, Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts. Heads of state and world leaders are not averse to a little luxury, either. Those who have signed the guest register include Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Ronald Reagans, the Gerald Fords and the Kennedys.

The attention to detail is impressive. The staff all call you by name. Each night placed on a little white rug by the side of your bed is a pair of fresh slippers thoughtfully positioned so that you can slip in your feet as you take your first step out of bed in the morning. And then there's the wonderful laundry service. My tired old lingerie comes back looking like new – all enticingly gift-wrapped in tissue paper and ribbon. Oh, to be always so spoiled.

It can't be easy living up to the reputation of having the best hotel concierge service in North America, especially in the land where good service is next to godliness and the customer is always right. But here they make it seem effortless. For instance, when asking for help with a hire car I am told: 'Certainly, anything I can do to make your life easier during your stay.'

Now that's what I call service. Later, after being told we were celebrating a birthday, they offer to help with the cake, the decorations, and even secure us a table at one of LA's best restaurants, although it has been fully booked.

At the Bel-Air you are not just buy-



ing a room, you are buying a lifestyle. In the Quentin Tarantino movie *Pulp Fiction* there's a famous scene in which Uma Thurman's character asks a waitress for a five-dollar milkshake as John Travolta looks on in utter disbelief that such an item can possibly cost five whole dollars.

Well how's about this, Johnny? The hundred-dollar breakfast. Yes, that's the roundabout cost for you and your closest starting the day with room service at the Bel-Air.

MIND you, it is quite possibly the best breakfast I have ever eaten. We have a veritable feast of fluffy pancakes with heaps of fresh berries and maple syrup, corned beef hash with a poached egg on top, stacks of toast with preserves, the freshest of squeezed juices and as much coffee as we can drink.

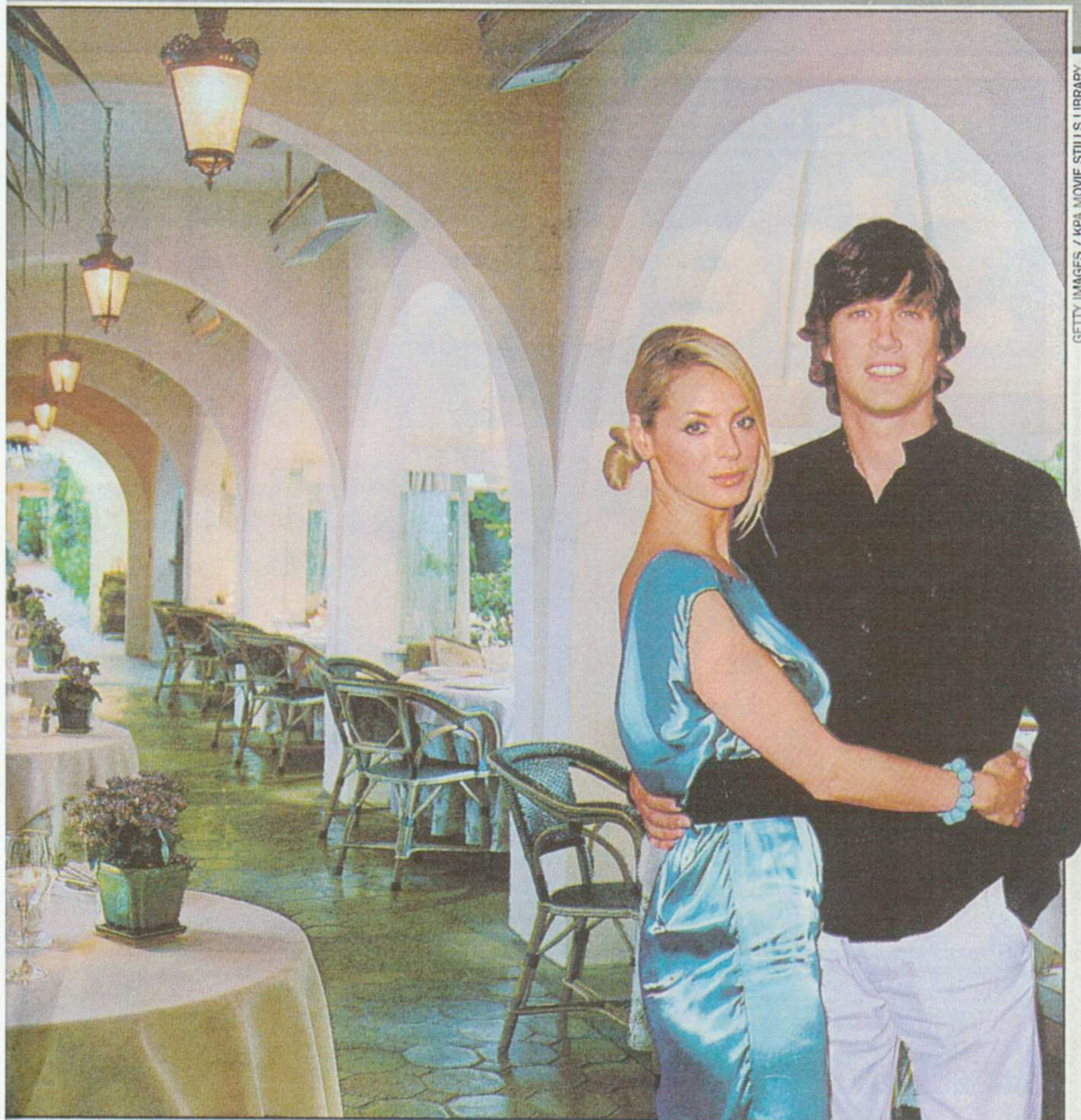
Still on the subject of food, dinner is divine in the bougainvillea-draped alfresco terrace restaurant, recently voted the most romantic in LA.

Another highlight is meeting for pre-dinner drinks in the bar. This has some serious history and has always been a place for Hollywood's hierarchy to meet – studio heads, execs and movie stars. You can just picture



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THIS PLACE HAS SERIOUS HISTORY: The terrace restaurant at the Bel-Air Hotel. Right: Tess with her husband, Vernon Kay

Frank Sinatra downing a whisky sour – Ol' Blue Eyes holding court with his boys by the baby grand piano. If only those wood-panelled walls could talk.

After a bout of unseasonably bad weather (I thought it never rained in southern California) we finally get a sunny morning, so gleefully hit the pool. A haven of tranquillity, surrounded by gently swaying palms, the pool at the Bel-Air never drops below 82F. There's a help-yourself buffet of fresh fruit and iced water and, as you languish on a lounger, the mind wanders, picturing those who have lain here before you – look, over there, where Marilyn posed for photographs by the diving board in her daring swimsuit and Perspex stilettos, smiling coyly for the camera.

Just then, I'm convinced I have had my first star sighting. Fully dressed with his face turned up towards the sun, I could swear that's George Hamilton. On second thoughts perhaps not, this chap is more, I don't know, 'taut', possibly even more tanned than the man himself.

We are reluctant to leave the cocoon-like confines of the pool but nevertheless there are more serious pursuits to tackle. Such as shopping –

and, of course, nearby Beverly Hills is home to some of the best shopping in the world. The hotel will even have a car drive you there if you ask them nicely. Minutes from the hotel there's the retail shrine of Rodeo Drive with its huge collection of designer shops.

Journeying a little further into West Hollywood, I prefer the Beverly Centre – it has all you need conveniently under one roof, be it Bloomingdale's or, for luscious underwear, Victoria's Secret.

WITH a super-strong sterling, shopping is even more fun and a lot more justifiable and, this being Beverly Hills, you never know who might be queueing in front of you at the till. The still-devastatingly handsome Terence Stamp walks by, swinging his shopping and twinkling his baby blues.

But if shopping is not your bag, as it were, you'll hardly be stuck for recreation – after all, this is the entertainment capital of the world!

Within a 30-minute drive of the hotel there are canyons to hike, waves to surf and beachfronts to walk, ride or rollerskate. For the young and young at heart there's the theme park fun of Universal Studios, or perhaps you would prefer the art galleries of Venice.

Whether it's golf, horse-riding or a trip to the spa, Hollywood has it all for the taking, but you will need a car. Everyone drives. If you walk even a half block to the convenience store, drivers honk their horns and people stare at you like you're a crazy person on the loose. A last note on sightseeing – do try to visit Santa

Monica, so charming and right on the beach with its own pier. And don't miss Venice, where at weekends the beach is like a carnival with a parade of characters that has to be seen to be believed.

You can pick up some great art, too. We had been there for the opening of the Applegate Gallery on Main Street, hoping to bag a piece by man of the moment Mark Hopley (rumour has it that when Brad Pitt wanted to add the sexy Showgirl to his own Hopley collection, his then wife and soon-to-be-ex Jennifer Aniston put her foot down).

Alas, all too soon it's our last day and, waiting to check out of the Bel-Air with that hundred-dollar breakfast in mind, I'm bracing myself for the bill. Just in front of me is the super tanned gentleman that I, in a giddy state of star-spotting, almost managed to convince myself was George Hamilton. I mean, really, why on Earth would George Hamilton be sunbathing around a hotel pool when he probably lives just around the corner?

The lady at the front desk is saying something. 'We hope you enjoyed your stay, Mr Hamilton.' Of course, it was him. The Hotel Bel-Air doesn't do imitations.



Getting there

Elegant Resorts offer short breaks to the Hotel Bel-Air from £1,365 for three nights. This includes accommodation, return flights to LA with British Airways and transfers. For reservations ring 01244 897520 or visit www.elegantresorts.co.uk