

ROOM SERVICE

Hotel Bel-Air Los Angeles, US

Marilyn Monroe can be seen delicately balancing a couple of barbells in a photograph on the wall of the fitness room at the Hotel Bel-Air, reminding its exhausted occupants that this – suite 96 – was once the movie goddess's personal cottage.

The idea that the screen siren ever perspired, let alone broke sweat, on a treadmill may be comical but this is Bel Air where anything is possible. In terms of celebrity pedigree, the hotel can have few rivals. Elizabeth Taylor spent her first honeymoon here, Lauren Bacall once flooded her room during the Academy Awards and Prince Charles described it as like "staying at the house of a rich friend".

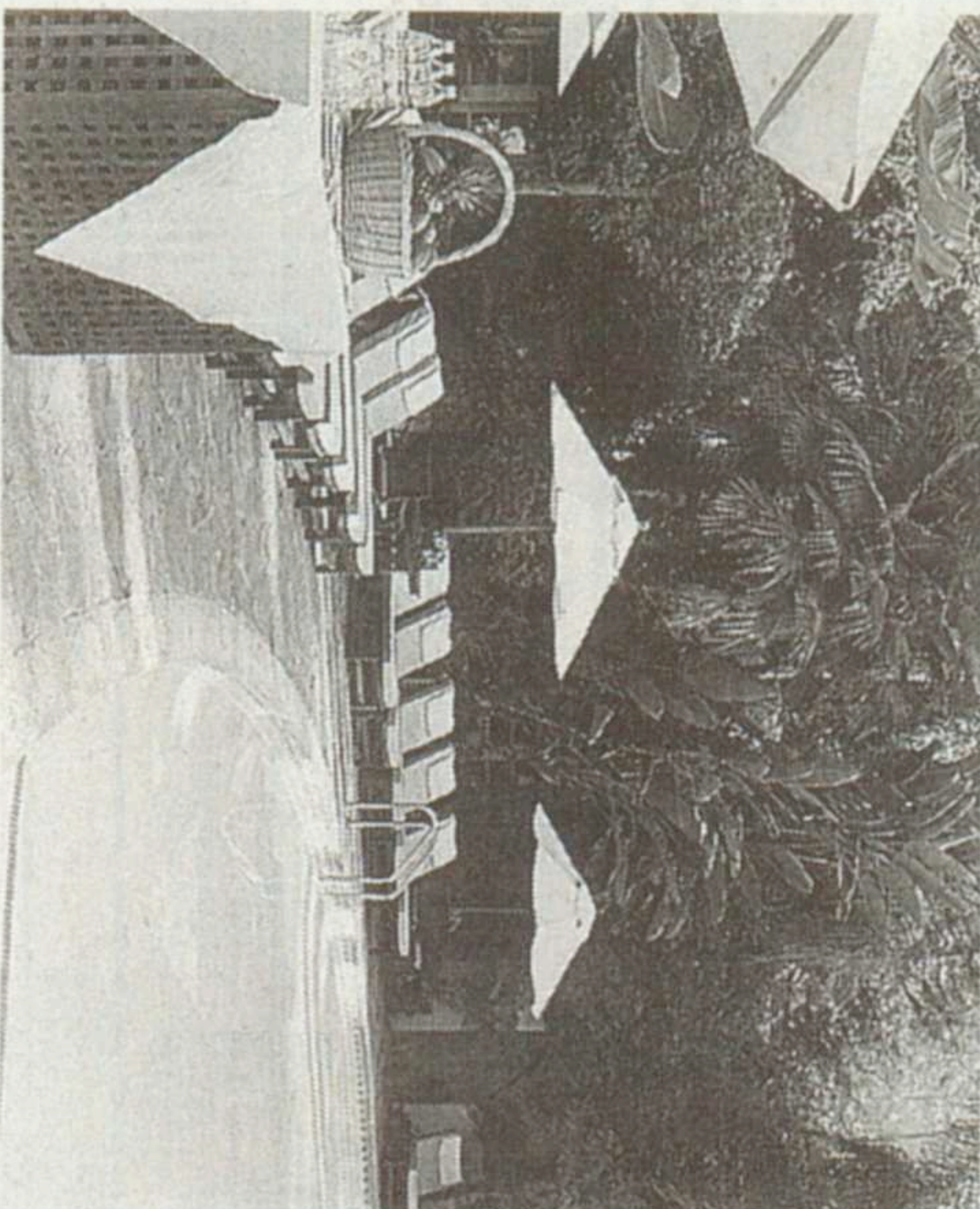
The hotel recently celebrated its 60th birthday with a \$20m dollar revamp but its atmosphere is still reminiscent of old Hollywood. It is a place where movie moguls discuss deals or drift past in towelling robes on their way to the swimming pool.

There is a touch of the faux-English country house about the Bel-Air with its racing green leather and dark wood bar, stacked cream teas by the fire and antique-style decor. But suspend disbelief – or at least British cynicism – for a moment and the result is a charming hotel where staff are so attentive every guest is made to feel like a visiting dignitary.

But perhaps the most enchanting aspect of the Bel Air is the lush bougainvillea, jasmine and orange blossom laden gardens inhabited by humming birds and swans. Slip past fountains, down walkways to quiet courtyards and one can almost imagine Cary Grant languishing nearby, sipping a highball.

LOCATION

Hotel Bel-Air, 701 Stone Canyon Road, Los Angeles, CA (001 310 472 1211; www.hotelbelair.com). Tucked away among the gated homes of the obscenely rich of Bel Air and just minutes from Rodeo Drive or Sunset Boulevard. Time to international airport: the 25-minute limo ride costs \$126 (£74); taxi about \$60 (£35).



COMFORTABLE?

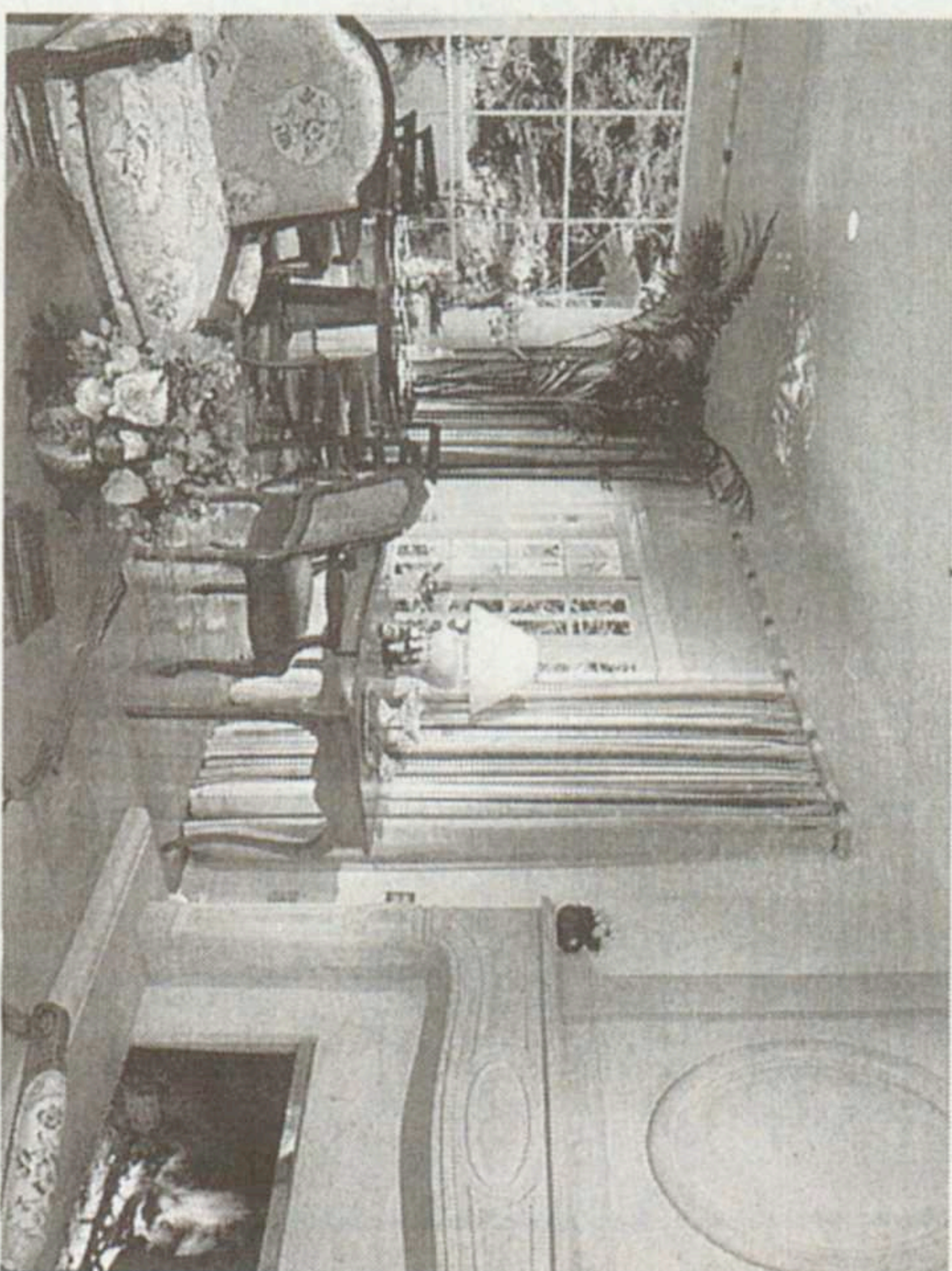
From the Taittinger in your private wine cellar to the caviar on the room service menu, little is left to chance. The bright rooms are sumptuously decorated, with high ceilings and private terraces. Should you require a massage or a yoga session, simply call for your own therapist or instructor. Freebies: Afternoon tea is served upon arrival while marble bathrooms are packed with products from the New York Kiehl's range. A complimentary car will take you anywhere within five miles.

Keeping in touch: TVs, DVDs and CD players in each room along with a cradle for your iPod; high speed internet access and personal laptops upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Doubles from \$450 (£265) excluding breakfast. I'm not paying that: The Standard (001 323 650 9090; www.standardhotel.com) the whimsical "cheap chic" hotel offers rooms from \$285 (£167) excluding breakfast.

TERRI JUDD



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