

Secrets of The Chateau



For nearly 100 years
Chateau Marmont
has been a byword for
Hollywood secrets,
tragedy and excess.
Adam Smith checks in for
a look around

Imagine for a moment you have travelled back in time to Hollywood around 1930. You are standing high up in the hills that surround the Los Angeles Basin. In front of you is the intersection of Sunset Boulevard, then not much more than a dusty, unpaved track, and small winding roads that lead further up the steep, rocky slopes into Laurel Canyon.

You are at the very edge of the youthful city which here begins to bleed into the natural landscape of Southern California. Beyond this point are citrus and avocado farms.

But behind you is a most eccentric building. Seven stories tall, 'earthquake-proof' as the sign outside proudly proclaims, it has pitched roofs, ➤

turrets, towering chimney stacks, and random jutting balconies. It looks like a grand house from the depths of France's Loire Valley has somehow been transported, brick by brick, to sit, surreally, up here in the dusty Hollywood Hills. Its pale cream walls reflect the dazzling sun, and its dark windows already seem to hide secrets.

This is Chateau Marmont. Built in 1929 it was the brainchild of lawyer and businessman Fred Horowitz, who had been inspired by the grand houses he had seen on a trip to the South of France.

Over the following decades, Chateau Marmont became a byword for Hollywood glamour, excess, tragedy and scandal. Among its residents were the hottest young stars and boozy fading legends, penniless writers and bright new literary sensations. It was, it is, Ground Zero for Hollywood at its best, its worst and its strangest.

HOTEL CONFIDENTIAL

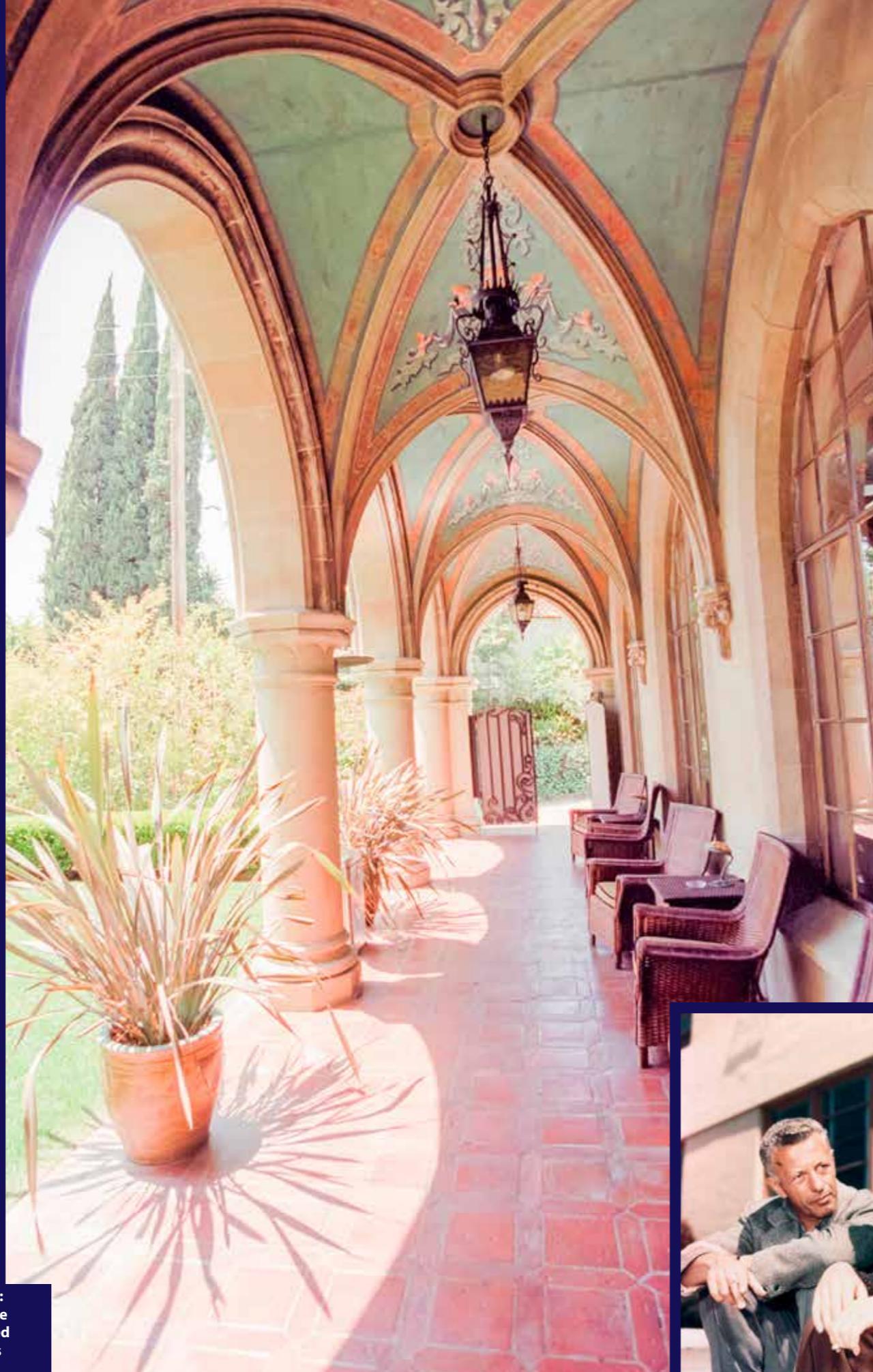
By the late Thirties, the Marmont (just call it 'The Chateau' if you want to fit in) was a magnet for the wilder side of Hollywood. "If you must get into trouble, do it at The Chateau," legendary Columbia head Harry Cohn told stars William Holden and Glenn Ford, a pair of youthful hellraisers whose antics Cohen wanted to keep out of the papers.

Cohn had rented suite 54 permanently for this very purpose, the geography of the hotel being perfect for smuggling in female company unobserved. "It was so very private," Ford would later say. "You would drive into the garage, get into the elevator and nobody would see you. No questions asked."

Regular visitors included David Niven, who decamped to the boys' suite when his housemate, Errol Flynn, was entertaining female company, which was often. John Barrymore would drop by for respite from his third divorce. In 1938 Humphrey Bogart moved his mother into The Chateau, partly to be closer to her, but mostly for an excuse to join the 24-hour party that seemed to be going on in suite 54. (Bogart's mother, Maud, was a dignified, slightly imperious woman, but by now a little dotty, occasionally escaping the hotel and wandering Sunset Strip. "I'm Humphrey Bogart's mother," she would inform bemused passers-by.)



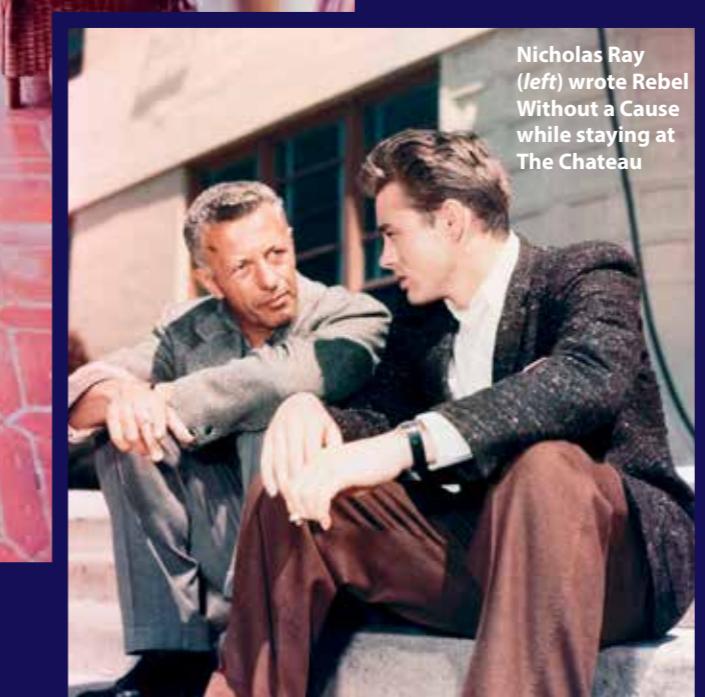
Period feel:
Some of the
mismatched
furniture is
original



A young Austrian screenwriter named Billy Wilder, who was fleeing the Nazis in his native country, checked in in the mid-Thirties and became a regular. On one occasion, when his favourite room wasn't available, staff took pity on him and let him stay in a closet, just off the women's restrooms. "It was a small room but it had six toilets," he would later say in one of his many and varied recitations of the story.

The guest book was a rollcall of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Preston Sturges, Mary Astor, Peter Lorre, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, Bette Davis (who fell asleep while smoking and watching herself on telly and almost burned the place to the ground), all made The Chateau their home at one time or another.

The then-married Paul Newman began an affair with Joanne Woodward at the hotel. Howard Hughes checked in at various points, endlessly calling room service for vast quantities of ice



Nicholas Ray
(left) wrote *Rebel
Without a Cause*
while staying at
The Chateau

cream and deploying a pair of binoculars to spy on the pool. In 1952 director Nicholas Ray, who had just discovered his 13-year-old son in bed with his then-wife Gloria Grahame, moved into one of the bungalows. He would stay for six years, during which he would conceive, write and direct one of Hollywood's greatest achievements: *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

Ray had been struggling with the screenplay until a young unknown by the name of James Dean had been introduced to him (by, of all people, Maila Nurmi, better known as TV's horror hostess Vampira, just one of the set of oddballs who wandered the hotel's corridors). Dean energised the project, and Ray's bungalow became a rehearsal and improvisation room: Dean, Sal Mineo, Dennis Hopper, Frank Mazzola and 16-year-old ingenue Natalie Wood honed the movie there.

DO NOT DISTURB

Adding real tensions to the dramatic ones was the fact that both Hopper and Ray commenced affairs with the underaged Wood, with Hopper finally taking to carrying a gun and threatening to "beat the shit" out of the director. Ray responded by cutting almost every one of Hopper's lines from the film.

The hotel played host to its share of tragedy too. After Montgomery Clift's catastrophic car accident in 1956 he spent months in hospital where surgeons had done their best to repair the devastating damage. The wounded star checked in to The Chateau to recover but what followed was a prolonged nervous breakdown. He drew the curtains, removed the bulbs from the lamps and hung a 'Do not disturb' sign on his suite's door. He occasionally wandered the hotel, sobbing. Once he was found naked on the terrace, screaming into the night.

For others, the hotel was a more joyful retreat. The management's

tolerance for its clientele's quirks made it one of the few safe places for gay Hollywood to play without fear of exposure. Roddy McDowall would often bring male dates there. Anthony Perkins would escort handsome young men, occasionally procured from notorious hustler Scotty Bowers, before he and Tab Hunter began a two-year affair after meeting by the pool.

TRAGEDY & UNPAID BILLS

In the Sixties and Seventies, just as it had been for Hollywood's founders, The Chateau was a magnet for new arrivals, by then mostly serious young men who arrived in Hollywood after the fall of the studio system. They were drawn, as their predecessors had been, by the privacy but also its sense of authenticity, the lack of frilly phoniness.

Dustin Hoffman was an unknown when he moved into a tiny room to work on a film by fellow East coaster Mike Nichols. Strapped for cash he was surely one of the only residents collecting unemployment cheques. A few months later *The Graduate* (1967) would make him one of the biggest stars on the planet. Robert De Niro had a more unhappy experience. On arriving, somewhat dishevelled and asking to see the penthouse, he was ejected from the establishment and called a bum.

A couple of years later a young attractive couple checked in for

one of a series of months-long residences. Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate were then one of Hollywood's most glamorous couples, and Sharon loved The Chateau with its history. "You could sense that the place had had its share of real-life dramas, of slashed wrists and overdoses. And you could almost get stoned from sniffing the haze that seeped through the keyholes," Polanski remembered.

The pair held famous, starry, parties. Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson were regular attendees. But the couple eventually married and finally moved out in February 1969. Months later Sharon was killed, butchered by a homicidal group led by Charles Manson. Polanski avoided the hotel for years after, tormented by his memories of Sharon's love for it. (Later, after being charged with statutory rape, Polanski would overcome the bad vibes and hole up in one of its bungalows to escape the swarming paparazzi.)

But the hotel's most infamous tragedy occurred in the early Eighties. Troubled Blues Brothers star John Belushi had checked in to one of the hotel's bungalows to work on a new screenplay in February 1982. Struggling with a catastrophic drug addiction he had promptly transformed his bungalow into a bomb site. Worse

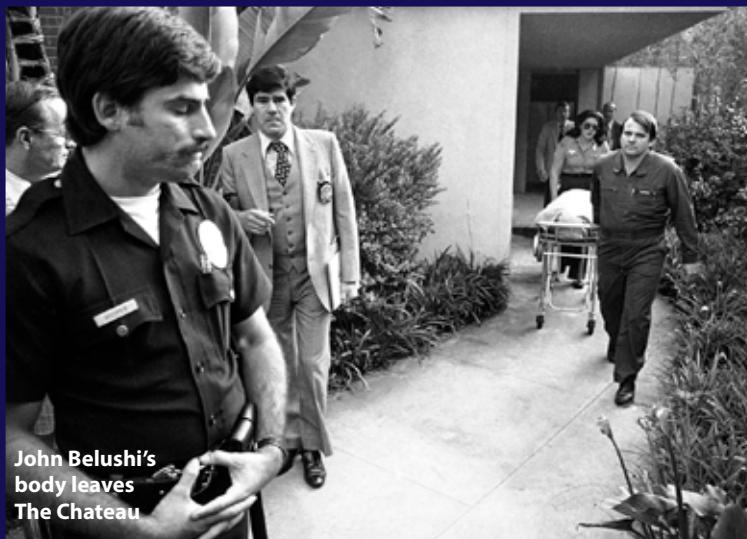
was to come. On March 5 he was discovered dead of a drug overdose.

TOURIST ATTRACTION

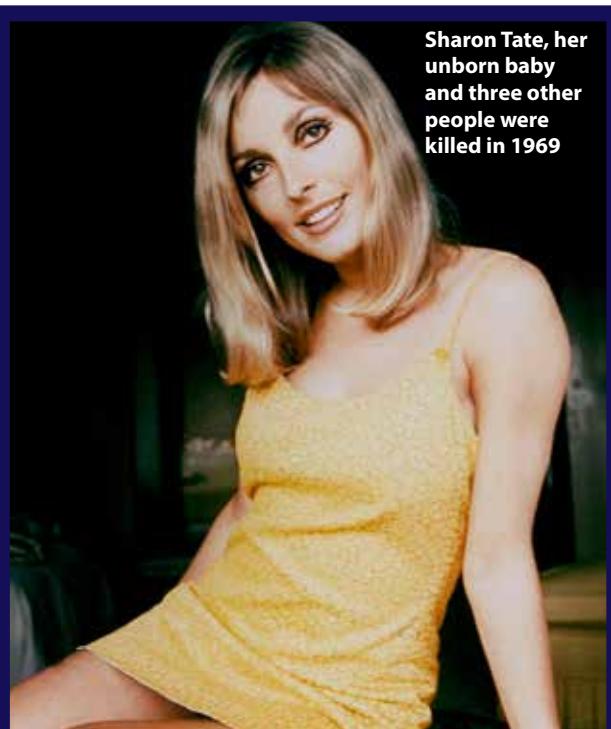
The press attention was stupendous, even by Hollywood standards, thrusting The Chateau into the spotlight. For many, it was the first time they had heard of Hollywood's secret hangout. Suddenly ghoulish Hollywood bus tours started stopping outside the premises.

For years the hotel would never quite regain the air of anonymity that it had so carefully cultivated. But Hollywood moves on. In 2004 designer Helmut Newton died after crashing his car in the driveway due to a heart attack. Courtney Love got banned, James Franco wrote lewd poems about his antics there. Alan Cumming had sex on the piano, Kate Moss and Johnny Depp romped through the hallways, Britney Spears smeared food on her face and got kicked out and Lindsay Lohan caused chaos, ran up a bill of \$46,000 and was finally evicted. All par for the course.

Today the hotel still stands, impassive, a little fortress-like, high above Los Angeles, as it has for nearly a century. And in the city below, Hollywood's best and brightest, its weirdest and wildest, still occasionally turn to each other and say, "Meet you at The Chateau."



John Belushi's body leaves The Chateau



Sharon Tate, her unborn baby and three other people were killed in 1969