



KING OF THE CASTLE

Portrait by *PHILIP CHEUNG*

Hotelier to the stars, André Balazs is the man who showed LA and London how to party again. Helena de Bertodano checks into the Hollywood legend that is Chateau Marmont

It is 10pm and André Balazs is sitting near the grand piano in the drawing room of the Chateau Marmont, sipping Campari and soda. At the keyboard the virtuoso house pianist Jason Pelsey is playing the 1934 George Gershwin classic, *Summertime*. Balazs's eyes are closed and he taps his hands on the lid in time to the music, completely absorbed in the moment.

It may not be summertime but the livin' is certainly easy at Chateau Marmont, Hollywood's legendary castle, which Balazs bought 35 years ago. And you don't need to close your eyes to be transported back in time: it could still be the 1930s in this beautiful room where Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin and Howard Hughes once partied. The lighting is low. Guests on velvet sofas sip martinis. Arched windows, heavy curtains and exposed beams lend a Gothic glamour.

Even the clientele seems to come from another age. A tall, bearded man in a full-length tapestry dress sashays around the room, gathering up his skirts to tackle the steps. On the other side of the piano is a man wearing a three-piece suit, paisley neckerchief and black trilby – it is he who requested *Summertime*. He carefully lays down a couple of \$20 bills as a tip for Pelsey, who is also an award-winning film composer, drains his cocktail and disappears into the night. Balazs, who knows many of the guests, says he's never seen him before.

A young-looking 68, Balazs is the man behind not only the Chateau (as it is known) but also two of the other coolest hotels in the world: The Mercer in New York, and Chiltern Firehouse in London, which was severely damaged by a fire last month. But it is the castle on the hill, which opened in 1929 and whose earthquake-proof walls harbour some of Hollywood's best-kept secrets, that is the jewel in his crown.

Over the years, the hotel has hosted all sorts of shenanigans. 'If you must get into trouble, do it at the Chateau Marmont,' said Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures in 1939, installing best friends Glenn Ford and William Holden in a penthouse suite. Clark Gable had an affair with Jean Harlow here. The Rolling Stones created havoc when they stayed; Jim Morrison fell two storeys (and survived) while trying to swing from the roof or a balcony, no one can remember which. Bette Davis nearly burnt the place down when she fell asleep with a lit cigarette while watching one of her own films. In 1982 John Belushi died of a drug overdose in one of the bungalows. Johnny Depp claimed to have had sex with Kate Moss in every single one of the Chateau's 63 rooms.

The quintessence of Old Hollywood, the hotel combines a heady mix of style and loucheness – as chronicled in the lavishly illustrated *Hollywood Handbook*, just republished and edited by Balazs. First published in 1996, it includes contributions from many writers who have stayed here. 'The Chateau has been a constant in my life, a kind of club for someone who has never been a joiner,' writes the novelist Jay McInerney. 'When





people are looking very hard for me they eventually call the Chateau.’

In 1926 Fred Horowitz, a lawyer, decided to build a version of the Loire Valley’s medieval Château d’Amboise on a hillside above a scrubby, unpaved road called Sunset Boulevard, adjacent to Marmont Lane. Complete with turrets and a vaulted colonnade, it was conceived as an apartment block, and the first tenants moved in on 1 February 1929. But eight months later the stock market crashed and the apartments were let out to short-term lodgers. And so it morphed into a hotel.

Over the decades, the Chateau went downhill. The ratty brown and orange shag carpets were a joke. The rooms, full of thrift-store furniture, were falling apart. Hell, it didn’t even have a liquor licence. But somehow it retained its cachet.

Visiting in 1990, Balazs bought the property: ‘I learnt that the two partners weren’t getting along and one of them wanted to sell.’ The process of buying was swift. The desire to buy the hotel wasn’t. He was



looking for a sister property for The Mercer, and the Chateau fitted the bill. ‘But what compelled me was I had stayed here five or six times, and I noticed how lonely LA was... I used to land late at night, and even just coming out of the airport, there’s a sense of emptiness... The Chateau fought against that loneliness. It’s an antidote to the loneliness of LA.’

So he was buying somewhere to call home in Los Angeles? ‘That would be a fair way to put it,’ he agrees. It’s a sentiment he shares with many of the guests. ‘There are two people here now, a director and an actor, one who’s lived here four years, the other a year and a half.’

He introduces me to a director who stays here for three or four months each year. ‘Once you’re a part of this community, you tend to stick around,’ says the director. ‘It’s a membership club with no application, no fees. You just subscribe to whatever magic André creates.’

Balazs is far more than just the owner: he is sewn into the fabric of the Chateau, part of the scene, king of the castle if you will. ‘I wouldn’t go that far,’ he says modestly.

Yet, with his suave charisma and string of famous girlfriends (including Courtney Love, Kylie Minogue and Uma Thurman – twice), he is intrinsic to its glamour. When he bought the Chateau, he was married to Katie Ford, former CEO of the Ford Models agency, with whom he has two daughters, Alessandra and Isabel. He also has a son,

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FROM TOP Chateau Marmont habitués Led Zeppelin (1969), Malcolm McClaren (1981), Elton John and Elizabeth Taylor at his surprise birthday party (2000), Helmut and June Newton (1992). BELOW The hotel in 1977



Ivo, now aged seven, with Cosima Vesey, daughter of the 7th Viscount de Vesci.

If there is one golden rule, it is discretion. If you see something, don’t say something. ‘You can feel safe being whoever you are, as quirky as you may be, it’s not going to be exploited or revealed or shared.’

His philosophy is that anything goes, as long as other guests don’t mind: ‘I don’t think anyone’s behaviour is objectionable, except if it disturbs other people. If someone wants to take their clothes off, it’s not a problem for many people. That’s very problematic for others.’

Bookings are lightly filtered. They tend not to take groups or weddings, because they skew the make-up of a small, 63-room hotel. He rarely hears complaints from Chateau guests. ‘I think they’re too intimidated by the reputation that precedes it. It’s either your cup of tea or it’s not.’

The idea of the Chateau as a safe haven dates from the early days, when it would provide rooms for anyone, regardless of sexual orientation or skin colour. During Covid, it offered free rooms for doctors, and now it is advertising free stays for the firefighters tackling some of the worst blazes in Los Angeles history. In fact, the hotel is abuzz with news of the very handsome firefighter staying in one of the bungalows. Of course he’s handsome, it’s the Chateau Marmont.

Three nights before we meet, the Chateau had to be evacuated due to the wildfires, which were visible from the higher windows. Balazs was the last to leave. ‘I would have stayed... but my two daughters and my ex wife were imploring me to leave, they were so freaked out. To make them happy, I left.’ Within an hour, he was back. I get the impression that, like the captain of the *Titanic*, he would have been happy to go down with his castle.

In retrospect, it seems that the Chateau and André Balazs were always destined for each other. Born in 1957, Balazs is the son of Hungarian immigrants who fled to Sweden during the Second World War before settling in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Balazs describes his father, a scientist, as ‘amazingly creative’, and his mother, a psychologist and musician, as ‘fiercely rebellious’.

A maverick as a child, Balazs broke the rules, with his mother’s encouragement. ‘I was very badly behaved,’ he says when we meet the next day for lunch in the Chateau’s sunny garden. ‘Rules were just something I ignored... When I was 10 or 11, they were building a large highway near my home, and it involved filling in part of a lake that we lived on. My mother was incensed at this, and somehow she convinced me and my two buddies to go on these Caterpillar bulldozers that were parked at night and pour bags of sugar into the gas tanks, which would ruin the engines. I thought nothing of it, it was rather like a sport.’

He went to Cornell University, then took a masters in business and journalism at Columbia University. After working briefly in political PR, he and his father formed a biotech company, which made their fortune.

A friend invited him to become an investor in a Manhattan nightclub named MK. And from there it was a short leap into hotels – fuelled partly, he says, by a fascination with sculpture. ‘I found it very frustrating that nobody understood the language of three-dimensional design... I liked the idea of making something out of nothing and have it express something.’

Like many of the guests, Balazs views the Chateau as a character, a movie star in its own right. Sofia Coppola’s 2010 *Somewhere*, filmed at the hotel, captures its dreamy, hypnotic nature. ‘You could argue that a hotel is just a place to sleep,’ says Balazs. ‘And there are hotels like that. [But a good

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hotel] has a certain DNA, a soul, something that draws people.’

A few weeks after buying it, he met the photographer Helmut Newton and his wife, June, in room 49, a suite in which the couple had been living every winter since 1957. ‘Helmut started telling me that I shouldn’t change anything: “Don’t f—k it up,” he told me. And as he was talking, I sat back and the seam of the sofa ripped and the spring literally popped out.’

The hotel had to change, but Balazs made it his mission to make any changes imperceptible. ‘The Japanese have a name for that: *kaizen*, perfecting things without people knowing what you’re doing. It’s a discreet fiddling, so things are better without losing its soul.’



FROM ABOVE LEFT Caroline Polachek (2024), a party for Stella McCartney and Absolut (2002), Quentin Tarantino and Uma Thurman (2004), John Waters (2005)

It worked. Newton continued to stay regularly. ‘I’m so glad you didn’t change anything,’ he would say whenever he saw the hotelier. In the meantime Balazs was quietly changing everything. ‘Not one surface is the same.’

In 2004 Newton died after crashing his Cadillac while suffering a heart attack in the hotel drive. ‘In fact,’ Balazs tells me, ‘you’re staying in his room.’ Is it haunted? ‘Not that I’ve heard,’ says Balazs – in a way that suggests it might be.

Ghosts are part of the Chateau’s mystique. Almost everyone has a ghost story, including Balazs himself: ‘I was alone in one of the bungalows and I suddenly felt this weight in the room, like a physical weight, I could barely move, I slowly opened my eyes, and I saw a naked couple [standing] at the foot of the bed: I felt I was

red Morgan two-door convertible, which Carson abandoned at the hotel in the late 1970s. It is a classic Chateau story. ‘For years I was calling everyone, I couldn’t find him so I thought “F—k it, I’ll start charging him the same rate as everyone else.” [His bill went from] \$120,000 to \$200,000, I didn’t know what to do. One day Griffin Dunne [the actor] calls me from Dallas and says, “Why don’t you pop down. I’m having dinner with Kit Carson tonight.” So I showed up [and said], “I’m André, I have your car.” [And he said] “Yeah, I know, why don’t you just keep it.” So I said, “OK, but any time you’re in town you can drive it.”’

Balazs’s real home – when he is not staying at one of his hotels – is Locusts-on-Hudson, a neo-baroque country manor in New York, which he bought in 2004, also

on a whim, while browsing an estate sale. ‘[Thurman’s] mother loved to go to these sales, and I somehow finagled the address. We drove out and we were driving around the back of the house; the grass was so tall, taller than the car roof and I almost drove into an empty swimming pool. The real-estate broker had placed a sign next to the house so I pulled it out and put it in the trunk of the car. That was on a Saturday, I had bought it by Monday morning.’

He says he views Chateau Marmont as ‘the troubled child’ in his brood: ‘It’s the one that refused to grow up.’ And yet it is not hard to see that it is also his most adored child. ‘It’s been 35 years out of 97, it’s a long time.’ He is meant to be leaving tonight but finds that he cannot. ‘I hate leaving places. I always come up with some excuse [to stay].’ Two days later, he is still in residence.

One night, I am working late in my room, which looks out over Hollywood, a massive billboard of Timothée Chalamet looming in the night sky, which is hazy red from the fires. I hear a crash in the living room. By now I have heard so many stories about ghosts that I almost jump out of my skin. I tiptoe through. All is still. And then I realise it must be the ice bucket. The ice has finally melted and the bottle that was nestled on top has dropped to the bottom. I have to admit that I am almost disappointed. ● *Chateau Marmont: Hollywood Handbook, edited by André Balazs (Rizzoli, £29.95)*