



Stick with the

In Southern California, an old resort is new again

By LYDIA GORDON

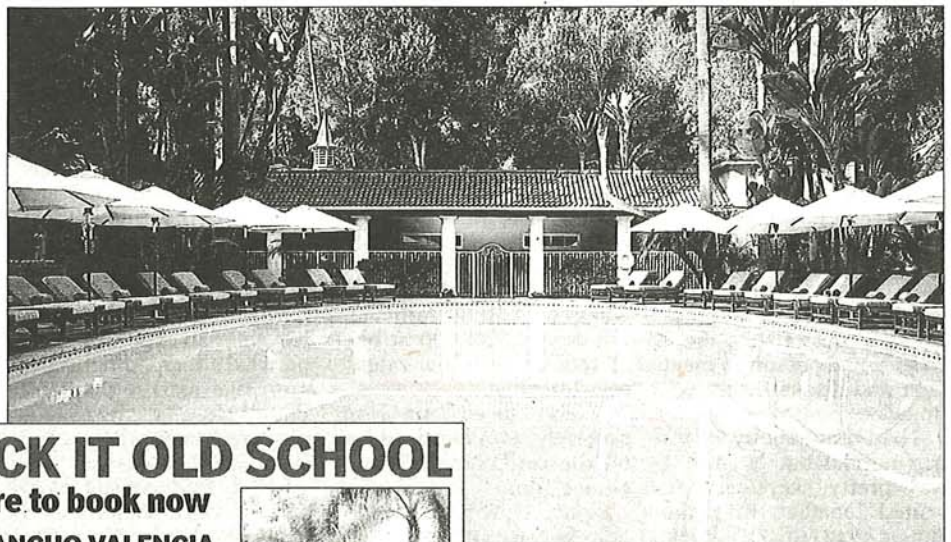
BACK in the summer of 2005, I was dispatched to Southern California to assess the newest of the new on the region's booming resort scene. From the St. Regis in Monarch Beach to the Parker in Palm Springs to the sparkly new Bacara just outside of Santa Barbara, it was a brave new world out there, one of super-sized luxury. Of complimentary Evian spritzers and handsome towel sommeliers. Of rooms with nightly rates as high as the GDP of some small island nations.

It was certainly a good time, driving around in the sunshine, dipping my toes into one gorgeous pool after another, being massaged into oblivion in one spa after another. Along the way, however, I stopped in on one of the West Coast's most classic hotels, just to see how it was keeping up with the times.

THAT WAS THEN The Hotel Bel-Air, tucked away among the trees just north of Sunset Boulevard in one of the most exclusive sections of Los Angeles, had been sequestering Hollywood's brightest stars since the 1940s.

Steeped in history and offering warm and familiar service, its shabbiness had long ago begun outweighing its chic. It had all the right elements: a cloistered location on Stone Canyon Road. It had expertly hosted everyone from the British Royal Family to Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev to Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly and Cary Grant.

It also had a staff that had upgraded me to



KICK IT OLD SCHOOL

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➤ RANCHO VALENCIA Rancho Santa Fe

This little resort (pictured at right) on a hill filled with orange trees near San Diego feels a lot older than its twentysomething years; many people have never heard of it, which is precisely why in-the-know types love it (ranchovalencia.com).



Rancho Valencia

➤ FOUR SEASONS BILTMORE Montecito

This 1927 gift from the hotel gods sits right on pretty Butterfly Beach; you can stroll out of your oddly-designed casita, across the well-coiffed front lawn and directly into the Pacific, should you choose. How many other California resorts can claim this? Surprisingly few. Secret and ultra-luxe it ain't, but still a total must (fourseasons.com).

David Landsel

a garden room and fussed over my unregistered guest sister and her baby with sticky buns and teddy bears. Still, our room in the original wing had, as I noted in a Post review back in 2005, "faulty plumbing and a tub-to-

BACK AND BAD: Poolside at the newly renovated Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles.

shower switch that wouldn't flip, until it popped out and slimed our hand."

We also felt that "their reluctance to part with the time-honored, slightly worn Tavern on the Green-like décor" was charming, but should have meant no nickel-and-diming, such as the \$20 fee to self-park, and a disappointing \$13 Internet fee.

It turns out that the hotel wasn't as reluctant to part with its shabby bits as I'd assumed. It was just waiting patiently for its facelift. In 2009, the hotel, owned by the Sultan of Brunei's Dorchester Collection, underwent a comprehensive multi-million dollar renovation in which nearly every aspect of the hotel was refreshed, at the added massive opportunity cost of being closed for approximately two years. The design services of The Rockwell Group were retained; Wolfgang Puck agreed to rethink the food.

THIS IS NOW I checked into the hotel two weeks ago with a keen sense of anticipation, excited to see how the old had been

classics

made new. I couldn't quite fathom how they were going to accomplish this balancing act of updating while not offending a faithful clientele. I arrived at night to an exterior not so much changed as refreshed, walking over the bridge past the same bucolic swan pond (containing the same birds, now swanning in a filtered and recycled pond that saves 1.5 million gallons per year).

The fusty-elegant lobby has been transformed into hushed lounge, with seats grouped around a convivial fireplace and concierges quietly clickity-clacking on laptops off to the side. Hosts now accompany you to your room, doing away with most of the front desk formalities, and showing you how to use your in-room iPad to remotely operate your room's temperature, lights, and the iPhone to which it's connected (Internet access is now free).

On the way through the pink inside-outside rabbit warren of rooms — which look nearly the same as they always did, surrounded by ever-blooming gardens — you'll pass just a few noticeable changes. The Bar — the hotel's sanctum sanctorum — keeps its familiar wood paneling and grand piano, but has been expanded with three "garden niches" that extend to the outdoors (so you can choose to be seen, or disappear inside).

And once you reach those rooms, what rooms they are. Designer Alexandra Champalimaud has taken the still mostly-compact quarters and replaced tired pinks and mauves with a custom-mixed emblematic green wall and smart black trim. Custom limestone floors and natural wood ceilings are clean and full of light; even my tiny little "deluxe" had a wood-burning fireplace and a fenced in private yard.

THE VERDICT Even with the addition of a new La Prairie spa building (in a Spanish belltower), which includes a workout room and spa suites, one of Bel-Air's most important attributes — its rambling, dreamy layout — hasn't changed.

Sure, there may be iPads and Alexandra Champalimaud, but this is still the same cozy and private escape that cosseted the likes of Grace Kelly, who stayed so many times that a suite was named in her honor.

It still feels like the Bel-Air. Except now — talk about having the last laugh — it once again feels superbly relevant.

READY TO GO? From \$595 through Dec. 29; (800) 648-4097, hotelbelair.com.

Gordon is the hotel critic for The Post.