



Capitol Records Tower proclaims the company's business on Wilshire Boulevard



The exclusive, reclusive Casa del Mar



Union Station



Regent Beverly Wilshire

CITY OF ANGLES

Matthew Brace enjoys an architectural tour of Los Angeles and a peep at its historic hotels

CHICAGO may be considered the spiritual home of American architecture, but Los Angeles is its playground. Dazzled by the brilliant California sunshine and abundant space, architects and designers brought their fantasies to life there.

Their legacy is a metropolis made up of many different cities, each with its

The stars still love it: Johnny Depp and Bill Murray often pop in for dinner in the Tower Bar restaurant, which was once gangster Bugsy Siegel's apartment, and Minnie Driver is a regular at the discreet Argyle Spa, which has a private celebrity entrance.

own architectural gems. Hotels, office blocks, government departments, train stations and former banks all add to the rich mix of form and function.

Styles range from Spanish mission to art deco, California bungalow to streamline moderne and space-age futurism, with a thousand hybrids between.

Possibly the most striking landmark of all, and the easiest for international visitors to see, is the Theme building that sits in the middle of Los Angeles international airport. To some it is a symbol of America's futuristic ambition, a building more suited to the moon than Earth. To others it's a giant, white concrete spider squatting between the terminals.

While this is an easy one to spot, seeing all the other wonderful architecture in a place the size of LA is a logistical nightmare, which is where tour guide Laura Massino can help. She's an affable former New Yorker who has called LA home for 20 years and runs Architecture Tours LA. She has a masters degree in architectural history and an undying passion for the city's



Frank Gehry's distinctive Walt Disney Concert Hall

While the Bel-Air and the Sunset Tower are all about discretion and foiling the paparazzi, their antithesis is the Regent Beverly Wilshire, just down the road in Beverly Hills. There, celebrities ride around in the hotel's black Rolls-Royce Phantom and practically beg the paparazzi to snap them carrying their chihuahuas and Rodeo Drive shopping bags.

The edifice of this famous hotel is a rare LA example of French-Italian renaissance architecture; without the brilliant California sunshine it could easily be in Paris. Its exterior has been used in many films, most famously *Pretty Woman*.

Beyond the European portals, the imposing body of the hotel is an E-shaped brick structure dating from the '20s when Beverly Hills was one big bean field. The developer, Walter McCarty, imported the finest Italian marble to make corinthian columns, glass mosaic skylights and connecting roof gardens.

McCarty built a hotel of quality as well as style, as it withstood three earthquakes between 1933 and 1988, and was deemed solid enough to be designated an official air-raid shelter during World War II. On the roof is a stand-alone loft apartment with wraparound views and an adjoining terrace, which served as Elvis Presley's rehearsal rooms and Warren Beatty's bachelor pad. If those walls could talk.

The perfect way to end an LA architecture extravaganza is to hit the beach at Santa Monica. Just south of the pier is the refined and elegant Casa del Mar, former home of

bricks and mortar. She also has a taxi driver's knowledge of the city's labyrinthine grids, and has mastered the art of giving history lessons and pointing out architectural features while negotiating LA's apocalyptic traffic.

"New Yorkers still find it amazing that we have art deco here," Massino tells me as we cruise past the turquoise-tiled Wiltern Theatre in Korea Town. "They're like, 'Deco is east coast, right?'"

Further along Wilshire Boulevard she shows me another art deco monument: a former bank, painted in jet black and gold. Then it is on to the Capitol Records Tower, designed in "programmatically" style to resemble what it sells: a stack of 45s. Later she drives me downtown to see the billowing steel sheets of the Walt Disney Concert Hall designed by Frank Gehry, the Spanish mission facade of Union Station and the elaborate Coca-Cola bottling plant designed like a beached ocean liner, complete with portholes and bridge.

We swing by the superb Department of Water and Power Building, designed in 1965 by Albert Martin Jr. Finally we sweep

the most exclusive of southern California's elite beach clubs in the 1930s.

After a chequered history as a wartime servicemen's rest and recreation stop, and a drug rehab centre, the building reopened as the Casa del Mar in 1999.

The high ceilings and sedate ambience of the lobby lounge make it perfect for falling asleep in the afternoon sunshine under a crumpled copy of The Los Angeles Times. The ground-floor bar is full of overstuffed armchairs and expansive sofas from which to gaze through huge bay windows at the ocean. The view should be interrupted only by a swaying palm tree or Pierce Brosnan gliding by on his way to lunch.

Matthew Brace was a guest of the Hotel Bel-Air, the Regent Beverly Wilshire and Casa del Mar.

- www.architecturetoursla.com
- www.hotelbelair.com
- www.fourseasons.com
- www.hotelcasadelmar.com
- www.sunsettowerhotel.com

Caption:

Beachfront elegance: The exclusive, reclusive Casa del Mar

Platter stack: Capitol Records Tower proclaims the company's business on Wilshire

BoulevardPicture: APL

Mission chic: Union Station Picture: APL

Celebrity central: Regent Beverly Wilshire

Wrapped in steel: Frank Gehry's distinctive Walt Disney Concert Hall

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up the looping back roads of Silverlake to ogle at two streamline moderne houses built side by side by William Kessling and some light-filled box homes by Vienna-born Richard Neutra.

Massino runs six themed tours based on regions but also occasionally focuses on an architect, with Frank Lloyd Wright a firm favourite. She also offers information so guests can repeat the tour on their own time and linger at different hot spots.

Any visitor planning an architecturally flavoured trip around LA will need a suitably stylish hotel to come home to after tramping the streets. For sublime Spanish mission style, look no further than the Hotel Bel-Air. Tucked a couple of kilometres up Stone Canyon in the Hollywood Hills, the Bel-Air offers the wealthy and fabulous an exclusive hideaway in which to lie low.

Managing director Carlos Lopes likens it to a California ranch: "Once they walk over that little bridge at our entrance, guests feel they are entering their own private country estate." That is exactly what the property was when designed and built by

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oil tycoon Alphonzo Bell in the 1920s as part of Bel-Air Estates. Today it is possibly the most expensive real estate in the world, with a vacant 4ha block fetching about \$US10 million to \$US12 million (\$14 million to \$17 million). The hotel offers rooms that resemble mini-haciendas, with red-tiled roofs, courtyards and plunge pools backed by blue and white Andalusian tiles. The estate boasts orange trees, lawns, flowerbeds and even a small lake with swans. There are secret pathways and banks of bushes providing arbours for romantics and solitude for struggling writers trying to finish their film scripts. When it is time to talk business and do deals, Hollywood players and agents meet in the bar, with its walls clad in dark wood panelling like a polite London gentlemen's club. In West Hollywood, among the revellers, paparazzi and Alice Cooper look-alikes on Sunset Boulevard, sits one of the finest examples of art deco on the west coast, the Sunset Tower hotel.

Built as an apartment block in 1929, it was home to Marilyn Monroe,

Howard Hughes and Frank Sinatra. John Wayne lived in the south-facing penthouse and kept a cow on the veranda to satisfy his craving for fresh milk.