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La Valencia

A LAVISH RENOVATION FOR THE STORIED LA JOLLA LANDMARK



The Indians referred to the place as “la hoya,” or “the cave”; civic boosters restyled it La Jolla, bastardized Spanish for “the jewel.” Either designation suits this coastal town just north of downtown San Diego. Occupying a seven-mile stretch of serpentine shoreline, La Jolla is endowed with glittering coves.

From its earliest days as a community, La Jolla assumed the status of a resort town. By the twenties it flourished as a tennis, golf and water sports

mecca. The Jazz Age saw the construction of several fashionable hotels in the area—but none so jazzy as La Valencia Hotel. The brainchild of a couple of local businessmen, it was designed by architect Reginald Johnson in 1926. On a bluff above La Jolla Cove, Johnson conceived a Mediterranean gem—a small palace of pink stucco and terra-cotta tile overlooking terraced gardens and the sea beyond. Its grace notes include courtyard arcades and mosaic fountains outside, hand-painted ceilings and elaborate iron-

work inside. And when a gold-domed tower was added in 1928, La Valencia emerged as a local landmark.

La Jolla had always attracted the rich and famous; La Valencia was an added inducement. The hotel served as a hideaway for Hollywood luminaries in particular, hosting everyone from Chaplin to Pickford to Garbo. The film gods joined mortal notables, with mixed results. After Joan Crawford overheard a couple of local matrons discussing the dimensions of her posterior in La Valencia’s

Whaling Bar & Grill, she stomped across the room and lifted her skirt to give the women a more intimate view of the subject at hand. Gregory Peck, who grew up in La Jolla and launched the illustrious La Jolla Playhouse in 1947, threw opening-night bashes at the bar for cast members such as Ginger Rogers and David Niven.

The Whaling Bar, a timeless domain of brick-red walls and snug leather booths, gets its name from a large painting above the bar depicting a whaling expedition. One of a number of tempera murals tendered by a creative patron as a means of settling his tab, the mural was painted over in the seventies because of its politically incorrect subject matter. But this was only temporary. Prompted by loyal guests, the hotel recruited specialists from the J. Paul Getty Museum to restore the original scene. It’s a telling incident. This is the sort of place where habitués hold out against changing inaccurate floor numbers (misidentified on account of three planned, but unrealized, lower floors), where the luggage carts are still made of brass, and the elevator is manually run by operators reminiscent of characters from a Raymond Chandler novel. (The writer lived

The Spanish Mediterranean-style La Valencia Hotel, in southern California’s La Jolla, just north of San Diego, can be seen for miles down the coastline, thanks to its signature tower, which is topped with gold mosaic tiles. ABOVE: The hotel’s exterior and main entrance.

OPPOSITE: Guests can meet for cocktails and nightly piano entertainment in La Sala. The large window at the end of the room has been the backdrop for numerous weddings. Original chandeliers, dating from 1926, hang from a hand-painted ceiling.

Architecture by Reginald Johnson and SGPA Architecture and Planning
Interior Design by Hank Milam
Text by Peter Haldeman
Photography by Mary E. Nichols



The living room of La Valencia Suite, one of 15 luxury accommodations added to the hotel last year. All villa guests have a butler to meet their every need. Dining chairs and table from the McGuire Company. Sofa and beige club chair fabric from Glant Textiles.

in the neighborhood, and his thriller *Playback* featured a hotel suspiciously similar to La Valencia.)

All the same, “the Pink Lady of La Jolla,” as the hotel is known, was growing a little long in the tooth. Three years

ago La Valencia launched a twelve-million-dollar renovation. “We went in to redo the phone system and found all the original wires still wrapped in paper,” discloses managing director Michael J. Ullman. The phones were rewired to

accommodate dual lines and computer access. And a second, fully automatic elevator was installed. The new elevator descends to the pool at the foot of the hotel, which has been revamped along with all of the rooms—with-

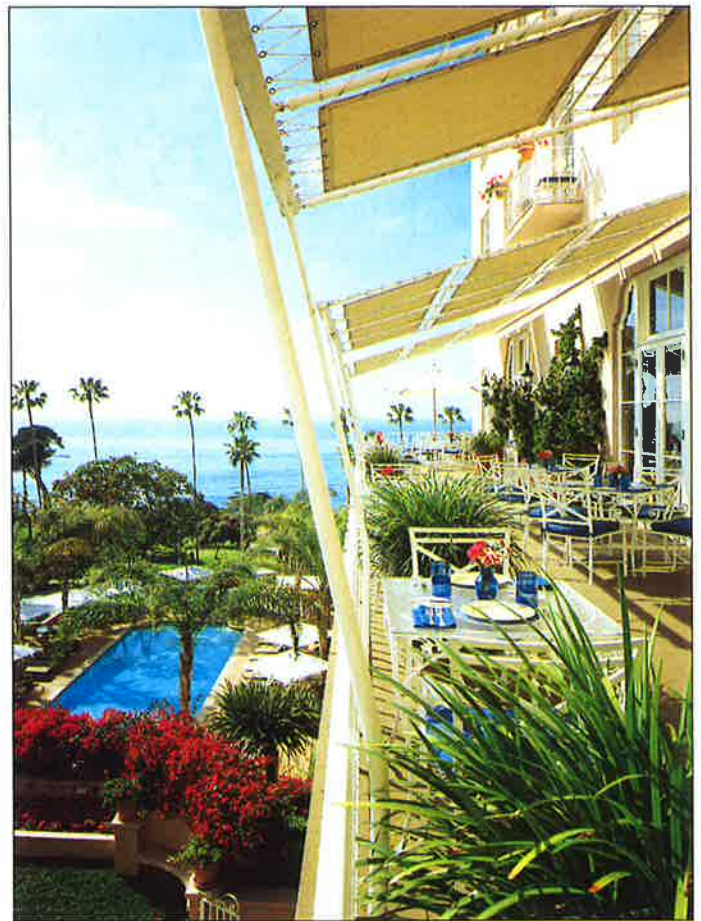


RIGHT: La Sala Terrace, on the seventh floor, at street level, overlooks the main pool and the Pacific. Queen palms and bougainvillea provide shade and color in the pool area. The patio furniture is from Brown Jordan. The market umbrellas are from Santa Barbara Designs.

out laying a finger on La Valencia's classic bones.

The highlight of the makeover is a cluster of new villas. Designed by SGPA Architecture and Planning, they defer to the essential character of the place: clad in stucco and tile, favored with ocean-view terraces and vine-laced arbors. They offer the distinctly southern Californian experience of reading under a canopy of bougainvillea while pausing to take in a palm-fringed tableau of pool and Pacific. At the same time, they maintain a psychic remove from the hotel proper, a distance Ullman attributes to the "decision to build pure luxury."

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RIGHT: The balcony of La Valencia Suite extends to the bedroom, as well as the living and dining rooms and bath, and offers continuous views of the sunset and the Pacific Ocean. A mirror behind the bed creates the illusion of space. Chair fabric from Brunswick & Fils.



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The rooms are airy and unpretentious, harmonious medleys of white-fir beams, plantation shutters and cozy oversize sofas and armchairs. But the amenities are state-of-the-art. Interior designer Hank Milam dressed the beds in plush goose down. He installed digital Lyceum audio systems and televisions that rise from low consoles with the stealth of a periscope. The baths are wrapped in pale marble, equipped with whirlpool tubs, double sinks and steam showers. They're like mini-spas minus the locker keys and attendants.

Or all but one attendant. The heart of villa life is twenty-four-hour private butler service—specifically, a bow-tied young man who introduces himself with the pledge, "I am here to cater to your every whim." If at first it sounds gimmicky, guests get used to it. Provided with their own phones, the butlers serve as personal concierges. They make golf tee times, arrange meals in the glamorous Sky Room, conjure up Cristal and kiwifruit for a romantic picnic. Or not. If you don't pick up the phone, Jeeves is invisible.

According to the hotel management, the villas cater to the discerning of all stripes. There are upscale itinerants from Los Angeles and New York and Europe. There are techies who have been lured by the Salk Institute and the start-ups that have won La Jolla yet another appellation: Telecom Valley. And there is, of course, the latest wave of entertainment worthies. Madonna recently put up in a villa, as did the members of Pearl Jam. "Eddie Vedder used to be a security guard at La Valencia," reveals Ullman. "He was known for always playing his guitar on the job."

La Valencia celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary this December. The Pink Lady may be aging more gracefully than La Jolla itself. The town's once sleepy avenues of art galleries and sidewalk cafés now support high-rises and traffic jams. The area still enjoys a rich design heritage, including numerous projects by the early modernist Irving Gill (his Wilson Acton Hotel, later called Hotel Cabrillo, was adjacent to La Valencia until it was acquired by the hotel in 1956—it now comprises the west wing). And for more leisurely pursuits, there are, as always, the hoyas. □

