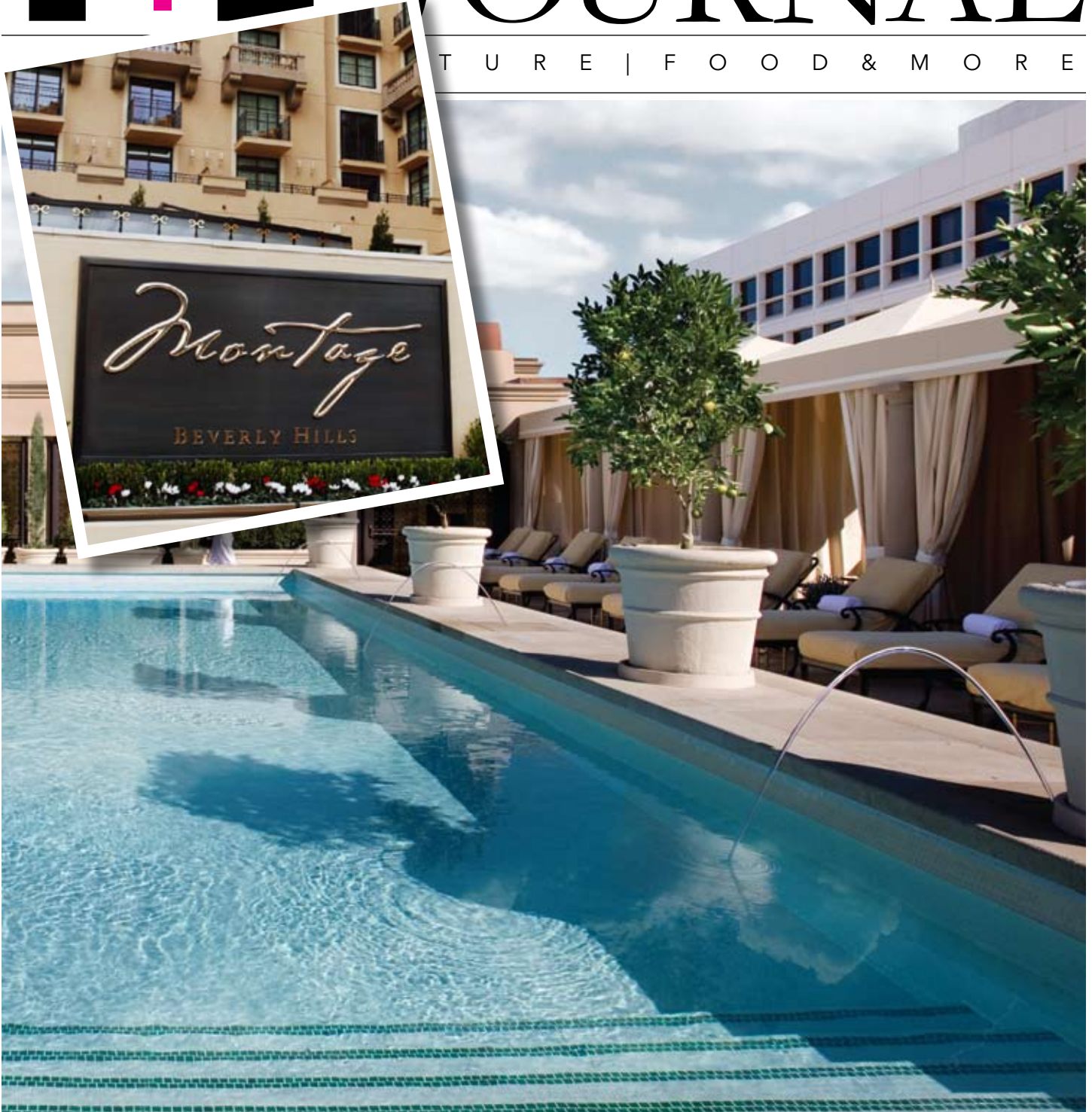


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L.A.'S NEW STAR

Can the Montage Beverly Hills, an upstart hotel company from Orange County, compete with the big boys of Los Angeles? Christopher Petkanas checks into Montage Beverly Hills.



Four currents of opinion were eddying around Montage Beverly Hills long before it opened in mid-November. The first ground-up construction of a hotel in the city since the Peninsula in 1991, Montage is going head-to-head with the area's so-called Big Six (without reading anything into the order, they are: the Beverly Wilshire, Raffles L'Ermitage, the Peninsula, the Beverly Hills, and, even though they are technically over the border in Los Angeles, the Four Seasons and the Bel-Air). It's a grand if not grandiose move, one that could take a young and therefore fragile brand like Montage to the next level—or backfire.

One theory is that the pie is big enough for everyone, and nobody has anything to worry about. Another is that Montage will grow the pie, and nobody has anything to worry about. A third says that although the company's first property, down the coast in Laguna Beach, was a huge hit right out of the gate in 2003, lightning is not going to strike twice, Montage is headed for a sophomore slump, and nobody has anything... The last school of thought about the way things are going to go, voiced with either panic or relish, is that Montage will be a major game-changer and clean up.

Replacing several street-level parking lots, a mothy movie theater, and a branch of the Israel Discount Bank in the "Golden Triangle" formed by Crescent Drive and Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards, Montage certainly doesn't look like any other Beverly Hills hotel, not with its vaulted arcades and terra-cotta-tiled roof. The eight-story, 201-room pile was built in the Spanish-colonial Revival style (since it's a revisitation of a revisitation, Spanish-colonial Revival Revival is probably more correct), a popular choice for residential estates in the neighborhood since the 1920's. The commission was won by HKS Hill Glazier Studio, the architects behind assorted Ritz-Carltons and One & Onlys as well as Montage Laguna Beach. As at Laguna, where HKS played around with Craftsman motifs, the goal in Beverly Hills was to suggest a mood, a feeling, not historical correctness. Interior designer Darrell Schmitt was similarly more concerned with atmosphere than accuracy, both here and at Pelican Hill in Newport Beach, which launched within days of Montage and takes a steroidal look back at the oeuvre of Palladio. In Beverly

Hills, Schmitt cherry-picked from two decorative idioms with deep southern California roots. Mediterranean elements skip from star lanterns and hand-painted tiles to lacy grillwork and brawny furniture with dark wood frames and nailhead trim. Planters and consoles in mottled mirror and pewtered iron channel the flamboyant Hollywood Regency style that William Haines, the actor turned influential decorator, substantially coined, and that by midcentury was in full cry. While the references are too tame and diffuse at Montage to add up to anything that might be called a look, the result is very sumptuous, you might even say voluptuous.

Plush and persuasive as they are, Montage's visuals are not considered to be its sharpest weapon. Neither is the 20,000-square-foot spa, with its sensual whiff of a Moroccan hammam; three restaurants; park by garden-design darling Nancy Goslee Power; or 44-foot rooftop pool, which is attended by eight cabanas and faced with approximately 1.32 million individually hand-set mother-of-pearl mosaic tiles. If the hotel succeeds, says managing director Ali Kasicki, who ran the Peninsula nearly from the beginning before moving down the street, it will come down almost entirely to service.

"The comfort, the luxury, the amenities – these are all givens," says the Turkish-born Kasicki, who hired six of his top former Peninsula lieutenants, including the chef concierge and the man who keeps limousine traffic flowing in the forecourt – a job so important in a Beverly Hills hotel he heads his own department and is part of senior management. "Service," Kasicki adds, "is the only area where we have to prove ourselves."

Montage guests "own" their rooms for 24 hours; the industry norm is 19 to 21 hours. The hotel also offers flexible round-the-clock check-in and checkout, a practice Kasicki is widely credited with introduction in the mid-90's. (One of the things that makes this possible is switching out the regular fleet of Windsor Sensor S12 commercial upright vacuum cleaners for ProTeam's quieter Super Coach Back Pack models when cleaning rooms in the small hours.) Kasicki wants you to start living the Montage dream even before you arrive, booking the transfer from your departure city through the hotel (\$136 from Manhattan to JFK in a Lincoln Town Car) and using an airport expeditor who takes charge of your luggage, check you in, and has relationships



with gate agents that allow you to speed through boarding (\$85). The driver and expediter are well steeped in Montage “mores,” if not quite as steeped as full-fledged employees who have attended the hotel’s orientation program, where the difference between listening “actively,” “empathetically,” and “selfishly” is drilled into them, and which ends in an excruciating go-to-be-me moment of freestyle dancing with fellow trainees. The two big words attached to Montage service culture are gracious and humble. I like the gracious, but a lot of the personnel interpret humble as “fawning.” On the other hand, a lot of people are into being fawned over.

If the hotel’s menu of enhancements seems out of sync with the abstemious times we’re supposed to be living in, they’re not anything it would occur to the average Montage customer to refuse, and frankly they’re not going to break that customer’s bank. In what Kasikci says is a first, on the arrival end you can be met at the airport by two greeters in separate vehicles, one to take you to the hotel (\$142), the other to stay behind and retrieve your bags (\$85). This saves time and eliminates those painful moments of small talk around the luggage carousel when the chauffeur and retriever are the same person. Forty of the 55 suites are billed as being packaged with complimentary Mercedes-Benz (but not a driver). For a \$1,200 corner unit, which comes with a CLK350, that’s a value of \$349 per day. (Of course, to pocket the value, you have to want a car in the first place, and you have to snag it: there’s only one for 16 suites). Instead of a taxi, Kasikci hopes you’ll consider one of his manned Hyundai Genesis sedans. A Beverly Hills cab would cost the same, he says, but they’re famously not so nice – and Montage wouldn’t be controlling the experience.

The competition is doing its best to appear neither too threatened nor too confident. “Sure Montage makes everything more challenging – it’s a wonderful brand,” says Alberto del Hoyo, general manager of the Beverly Hills hotel. “The problem for the company is that people aren’t aware of it – it’s unknown.”

“Given the ultratraditional look Montage has chosen, it probably can’t aspire to trendiness,” say Radha Arora, general manager of the Beverly Wilshire. “My guess is that it will steal clients from each of the hotels – we all have 10 percent of our business that’s up for grabs. But it remains to be seen if the Big Six will become the Big Seven.”

Kasikci would argue that with services like John Lobb – certified shoeshines (the Connaught in London is the only other hotel in the world that provides them), Montage is already in the club. Glazing and refurbishing, which takes 30 minutes – twice as long as the standard complimentary shine – is \$15. Guest relations manager John Macbeth underwent 22 hours of training at Lobb in New York, in turn training his staff.

Offer Nissenbaum, who took Kasikci’s place at the Peninsula, says Montage does not have to wait for any jury: it’s an instant player. “The hotel will definitely give Beverly Hills a boost as a destination,” Nissenbaum says. “I haven’t seen every nook and cranny, but it’s a very good product. Now it has to develop its own DNA.” ✚

Montage Beverly Hills, 225 N. Canon Dr.; (888) 860-0788; montagebeverlyhills.com; doubles from \$495

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